

‘A CAUTIOUS EMBRACE’

**A christian-Jewish Conference reflecting on the discipleship and legacy of
Dietrich Bonhoeffer**

St Joseph’s Spirituality and Education Centre

Kincumber NSW

28-29 November 2008

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

Bruce Kaye

Your Excellency, Friends. It is my very great pleasure to welcome you all to this, the fourth annual Bonhoeffer Conference which is an initiative of the University of Newcastle and the Anglican diocese of Newcastle. May I especially welcome the Governor of New South Wales, Her Excellency :Professor Marie Bashir. It is a great pleasure and a very distinct privilege to have with us as our Governor one of the truly outstanding people in our nation. May I say on my own account that it is a peculiar and happy providence to have as the governor of a former convict settlement a woman of such humane and generous commitment to others, especially the weak and disadvantaged.

We have an excellent team of speakers for this conference and you yourselves will make the conference even better as you contribute to the discussions here in the sessions and also in the break times of the programme.

The theme of the conference is both startling, sombre and important. It focuses on a Lutheran theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It encompasses what John Lukacs once described as the key representative event of the twentieth century, namely the rise of Adolf Hitler set between the two great world wars. These great wars presented for Christians severe challenges to the way they could understand the providential role of the God whom they worshipped. For Jews The Second World War had a particular

and devastating significance because of the mass murder by the Nazi regime of millions of their fellow Jews.

The First World War came as a thunderbolt for christian theologians and caused the most fundamental shift in theology since the sixteenth century. The nations of Europe sustained cultures and institutions which has been shaped by centuries of christian faith and practice, yet these nations engaged in a war amongst themselves of the most horrendous brutality and pursued means of engagements which were not only futile but displayed behaviour and mentalities which were galaxies away from the notions of the sermon on the mount. This juxtaposition was the more acute for theology. The nineteenth century had seen huge developments in theological scholarship. In German speaking Europe theology had produced enormous wonders of research and scholarship, the fruits of which we still use today. In combination with the new learning of the enlightenment German theology had shaped a way of seeing human culture in benign and positive terms. All this was destroyed in the trenches of the war.

Hostilities broke out again in 1939 in what Winston Churchill regarded as a resumption of the earlier war. But this time it was global in scope. The atheistic enlightenment of the Soviet Union and the militarism of Japan created new horrors. But this time for Christians the horror lay within a nation that was strongly influenced by christian traditions and was highly cultivated in the arena of christian theology. Born in the heartland of Roman Catholic Bavaria and nurtured in the Luther lands in the north the Nazi German state perpetrated horrors previously thought to be beyond the imagination of human evil. How could the christian churches of Germany have so failed in the face of the unmitigated mass murder of the holocaust of the Jewish people? Where was God to be found in this? Later, christian theologians have had to come to terms also with the mass killings caused by the carpet bombing of European cities which was started by the western allies.

Jewish theologians have had to face their own version of this extreme form of evil against a people seen to be the chosen people of God. Where was God to be found in this?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a reasonably standard run bright theologian but whose life was transformed by a new encounter with God. His fresh engagement with the christian gospel turned him to a form of pacifism and a fresh discovery of the nature of the christian community. Yet this young man committed himself to his homeland and to witnessing to the crucified Jesus in that desperate land. The pacifist became a collaborator in an attempt to assassinate the architect of the evil and paid for that engagement with his life.

Bonhoeffer came to symbolise total commitment to the neighbour in their suffering and of suffering as key to the engagements of the Christian with evil. The Jews as neighbour, Germany as his place of belonging and confronting evil were the realities in which his theology flourished and for which his theology existed.

Bonhoeffer presents the problem of evil in the human condition and within the church and the suffering of the neighbour are raised as fundamental living theological issues for Christians. The problem of evil in the historic vocation for the Jewish people provides a point of contact in relations between Jews and Christians and in that relationship aspects of Bonhoeffer's work can provide a footbridge of connection. I hope that this short conference will provide the opportunity for some traffic across this bridge.

In order to set us on our way in our conference it is my very great pleasure to invite Her Excellency Professor Marie Bashir, Governor of New South Wales and Patron of the New South Wales Council of Christians and Jews to officially open this conference.