



Who in the World Am I? • Evelyn L. Parker

The young pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer was thirty-eight-years-old when he penned the searching poem, “Who Am I?” from the Tegel Prison during Hitler’s Nazi regime.¹ The poem expresses the complexities of identity, asking “Am I then really all that which other men tell of? Or am I only what I myself know of myself?” Bonhoeffer was asking these questions in the summer of 1944.

He had been arrested just one year earlier for his political resistance against Hitler, which included Operation 7, a Jewish rescue action, and a plot to assassinate Hitler. Prior to this activity pastor Bonhoeffer spoke publicly against Hitler’s 1933 appointment as chancellor, warning the German people to avoid idolatry of Hitler. Soon after, pastor Bonhoeffer became involved in the work of the Young Reformers, an anti-Hitler opposition group within the State Church. When the State Church voted the “Aryan Paragraph” into its confession (barring men from the pastorate who were converted Jews, who had Jewish ancestors, or who were married to Jews), Bonhoeffer and other pastors formed a new party within the church, the Pastors’ Emergency League. This group eventually evolved into the “Confessing Church,” an affiliation of German clergy who united strongly against the position of the pro-Aryan, pro-Hitler State Church.²

On another occasion Bonhoeffer wrote: “The important thing today, however, is that people should be able to discern from the fragment of our life how the whole was arranged and planned.”³ Some scholars have argued that he wrote *Who Am I?* as an attempt to weave together the fragments of his life while contemplating the uncertainty of his future. The imminence of death can push one to revisit the central question of our adolescence, “Who Am I?”

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During adolescence, the period between childhood and adulthood, teenagers are confronted with a crisis of identity, just as a person experiences a crisis when death is imminent. I would argue that both experiences are equally intense. Erik Erikson developed a comprehensive theory of identity development that has been expanded by many scholars. One such scholar is James Marcia, who defines a crisis as a period of identity development during which the adolescent chooses among meaningful alternatives. When a choice is made the adolescent commits or shows a personal investment in what he or she is going to do. Marcia developed four statuses of identity that describe how adolescents resolve their identity crisis based on the extent of the adolescent's crisis or commitment.⁴ At the junctures of change as well as life and death the question of identity, "Who am I?" is important.

Bonhoeffer's poem offers a glimpse of the shaping of his religious identity in light of the reality of being a political prisoner. The identity that others gave him was inconsistent with that which he held of himself. Weary of ceaseless prayer that was void of results, he lamented his powerless and hopeless state. Yet, he ultimately placed his trust in God who knows him and to whom he belongs. Bonhoeffer's religious identity was the mooring that held him fast to trust in God during his time of uncertainty.

Religious identity is an important domain in the complex web of identity development among adolescents. They need a milieu of people and experiences to help them answer the questions: Who am I culturally? Politically? Ethnically/racially? Sexually? Spiritually? Religiously? Adolescents long for a community of faith, a church that can help them answer the questions of identity, a church that can help them fashion the fragments of their lives into a whole person. They need a church to help them as they cry out: "Who in the world am I?"

I believe the church that responds to the sociopolitical, sociocultural, socioeconomic, and sociohistorical contexts in which it is situated can help youth form a whole and wholesome identity. Simply stated, young people are looking for a church that is in sync with the realities of its social context. Such churches can help teenagers forge the stream of identity development, particularly in the domains of religious and spiritual identity. Such a church is grounded in and responds out of the passion of God.

A look at the teenagers Dietrich and Sabine Bonhoeffer, primarily through the eyes of his twin sister Sabine, might illuminate my point. One would assume that such a passionate and prolific pastor as Dietrich and his talented

sister were nurtured as adolescents in such a congregation as I have described, a church attuned to the realities of its context. Thereby, the church would have utilized its social context as a resource for facilitating wholesome and holistic identity formation in its youth. However, this was not their experience. I would argue, on the other hand, that they yearned for such a church.

Dietrich and Sabine were born on February 4, 1906. During their childhood Dietrich proudly emphasized the fact that he was born ten minutes before his sister. At age four Dietrich asked his mother, “Does God love the chimney sweep too? And does God, too, sit down to lunch?”⁵ They were the sixth and seventh of nine children in the family. They were born to a privileged German family. Their father, Karl Bonhoeffer, was a professor of psychiatry and neurology, and their mother, Paula, presided over the household. She gave her children their first education. While a youth herself, she had fought for and obtained permission to take the qualifying examination for women teachers. This was no small feat for a young woman of her time. Without the help of textbooks, she offered her children a sizable repertoire of poems, plays, songs, and games. Paula Bonhoeffer also managed a governess for the older children, a nurse for the little ones, a housemaid, a parlourmaid, and a cook, along with two houses—a spacious suburban home in Breslau, and a holiday home in the Harz Mountains.⁶

Eberhard Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s biographer, describes an aspect of schooling in the Bonhoeffer home: “The Christian education Paula had herself received was important to her, and in her own way she saw that it was handed on. The Church did not play a large part in her life, although this altered later when the Confessing Church was the only institution to show any real resistance to the Hitler regime. She made sure, however, that the children knew the Bible and the hymns that she herself cherished.”⁷

Sabine and Dietrich shared a bedroom from ages eight to ten years old. While they reclined on their beds at night they would engage in very serious discussion about death and eternal life. Each night, after the prayers and singing led by their mother, the two would try to comprehend “being dead” and eternal life. Sabine states, “We tried to come closer to eternity each evening by compelling ourselves to think only the word *eternity* and allow no other thought to intrude. Eternity seemed to us endless and uncanny. After a long period of intensive concentration we often felt dizzy. We continued this self-imposed discipline for a long time.”⁸

The twins were both musicians. Sabine learned to play the guitar and Dietrich the piano. Dietrich became so proficient that he was constantly

called upon to accompany his siblings as they performed vocally or played their instruments.

Paula Bonhoeffer modeled the spiritual practice of hospitality before her children as she welcomed neighbors, friends, and family from far and near. Sabine recalls her mother taking in her old nanny who had fled her home, along with her daughter, soon after the initial battles of 1914 in East Prussia.

Dietrich's and Sabine's young lives were bracketed by both World War I and II. They were eight years old when World War I began in 1914. At that time the younger members of the family were at their holiday home. Sabine remembers their governess suddenly dragging them away from the pretty market stalls and the merry-go-round in order to get them home as safely as possible to their parents in Berlin.⁹ When Sabine and Dietrich were ten years old they were sent to school outside their home. Sabine was sent to a prestigious all girls' school. In 1917, when she was eleven years old, a girl of English-Jewish descent was accepted to the school and placed in Sabine's class.

She noticed that some of her classmates wanted to ostracize the girl because of her "long stiff curls and her precocious self-assurance. Sabine recalls: "This made me indignant and I befriended her. My former friends tried to draw me away, but at that time I already thought such conduct very unkind, and after some time I succeeded in bridging the gap between them and this child. The little girl was accepted."¹⁰ Sabine later befriended two other Jewish sisters who were newcomers to her class. Years later on June 24, 1922, Dietrich expressed a similar outrage at what he perceived as injustice. It was the day the assassination of a noted scholar, Walther Rathenau, had taken place. Dietrich heard the shots in his classroom. A fellow classmate recalls the following:

I particularly remember Bonhoeffer on the day of Rathenau's murder. The average age of our form in the Grunewald grammar school was seventeen, but he [Dietrich] and G.S., who ended by committing suicide in exile, were only sixteen. I remember the shots we heard during the lesson, and then, in the playground during the break, we heard what had happened...I still remember my friend Bonhoeffer's passionate indignation, his deep and spontaneous anger...I remember his asking what would become of Germany if its best leaders were killed. I remember it because I was surprised at the time at its being possible to know so exactly where one stood.¹¹

During World War I (1914–1918), young Sabine and Dietrich experienced the death or severe injury of a brother, their cousins, and fathers of their young classmates. Karl-Friedrich and Walter, the two eldest brothers in the Bonhoeffer family, enlisted as volunteers. On April 28, 1917, Walter died from injuries sustained during the war. Klaus, who turned seventeen that same year, was called to serve briefly at the end of the war.

Though the Bonhoeffers were not considered a church family, they could be described as Christian. When their mother turned their schooling over to their governess, she kept the religion lessons for herself, telling the children Bible stories from memory and using the illustrations from Bible story books. Later, young Dietrich began giving religious instruction following the example of his mother.¹² Also, the Bonhoeffers practiced spiritual disciplines that included the children's offering grace before meals and evening prayers at bedtime. On Christmas Eve their mother read the Christmas story from St. Luke, and New Year's Eve ended with Psalm 90 and a special hymn for the New Year.

At age fourteen Sabine and Dietrich went for Confirmation instruction with Pastor Priebe of the Grunewald Church. Though they were separated for the instruction classes, they attended worship together on Sundays and often discussed the sermon after church. On March 14, 1921, the twins went together to the Confirmation.¹³

Dietrich decided to be a minister and a theologian during the time of Confirmation and never wavered from this ambition. Bethge writes:

At home he made no bones about it. When his brothers and sisters refused to take him seriously, it only made him more determined. When he was about fourteen, for instance, they tried to persuade him that he was taking the path of least resistance, and that the church to which he proposed to devote himself was a poor, feeble, boring, petty bourgeois institution, but he confidently replied: 'In that case I shall reform it!'¹⁴

Bethge makes explicit those entities that did not motivate Dietrich's calling to ministry. The impulse was not from the local church or congregation, or from his Confirmation lesson, nor did it come from the admiration of any great religious personality that he knew while a teenager. Perhaps it was the piety his mother practiced in their home, the many days of war, the loss of his

brother and the deep grief of his mother, and his thoughts of death and eternity shared with Sabine.

At age seventeen, Sabine attended Art School in Breslau and Dietrich began to study theology at the University of Tübingen. In 1924 he also studied at the University of Berlin and Sabine became engaged to Gerhard Leibholz and married soon thereafter.

These episodes from the life stories of Sabine and Dietrich Bonhoeffer illustrate the political, historical, cultural, socioeconomic, religious, and spiritual milieu in which they fashioned their identity as adolescents. Their life stories also reveal the impotency of the church of their time, a church clearly failing to connect with them and the events of their social context.

James Garbarino, a Cornell University professor and author of *Lost Boys*, helps us understand how the social context of Sabine and Dietrich influenced their religious and spiritual identity. He argues that social history is more important for adolescents than for all other age groups because it shapes their ideology, the heart of identity formation. Religious and spiritual identity formation, and all other domains of identity, depends on ideologically driven activities of the home, community, and the greater society. Garbarino contends that adolescents encounter social events and culture more directly than do young children. Teens incorporate social events into their repertoire of identity possibilities, eventually using them as resources for forming a coherent identity in early adulthood. Sabine's and Dietrich's religious and spiritual identities were shaped by the social history and the day-to-day character of the infrastructure of their family.¹⁵

Garbarino continues with this line of thinking as he writes:

The openness to social redefinition that accompanies role changes at the heart of normal adolescence makes adolescents acutely susceptible to ideology as an influence on development and identity—and specially able to make use of it as a personal resource and as a source of resilience. This is evident over and over again, as young people are the vehicles for social movements.¹⁶

This phenomena has been evident in the United States, for example, in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, where African American youth and some of their European American peers found personal meaning through social action.¹⁷ Some of these youth were members of congregations that sought to live out their understanding of the Christian ideal of love and

justice by actively participating in the social movement.¹⁸ Also, the Jubilee 2000 effort was a social movement primarily comprising teenagers who sought to “cancel” the enormous debt that developing countries owed to creditors that included the United States, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and private banks such as Citicorp. These are only two examples of sociohistorical events/social movements that influenced the identity of those adolescents who chose to become involved in them. There are many other examples. What remains to be discovered is the extent of involvement of Jubilee 2000 youth in the life of their congregations and the compatibility of the ideology of the church with the social action groups. Where are the youth groups involved in social and political action today? These youth groups and their supporting congregations have seized their sociohistorical, sociopolitical, socioeconomic, and sociocultural milieu and thereby influenced the religious and spiritual identity formation of their teenagers. Fortunately, Sabine and Dietrich Bonhoeffer grew up in a family that provided a religious and spiritual foundation for developing an identity that helped them respond to their social context. Unfortunately, the church did not partner with their family in this process. Perhaps if it had, more seriously dedicated young people might have reacted as the Bonhoeffers did in speaking out against Hitler’s regime.

The current social and historical climate challenges congregations as they seek to foster the spiritual and religious lives of their young people. The war in Iraq, economic instability, the threat of terrorism, and post-9/11 public policy are all aspects of our current social history. On March 20–21, 2003, high school students around the globe led the way in protesting against the war in Iraq. In the United States, high school students in some five hundred cities participated in antiwar protests. In the Washington D.C. area, dozens of schools marched, including about 150 students from the famous TC Williams High School in Alexandria, Virginia, the high school that the movie *Remember the Titans* captured in its struggle for desegregation. Also, more than two thousand students walked out of class at Montgomery Blair High School in protest against the war in Iraq.¹⁹ These national and international events and related social movements have shaped the religious and spiritual identity of our teenagers with or without the church.

A congregation (all age levels included) that is actively involved in issues related to social justice and moral decision making fosters a sense of responsibility, accountability, and efficacy among its youth. In *Helping Teenagers Grow*

Morally, C. Ellis Nelson argues that congregations have a unique opportunity to help teenagers practice making good moral decisions through their participation in a community of faith concerned about the moral lifestyle compatible with Christian beliefs.²⁰ Nelson offers practical ways adults in a congregation can help teenagers become involved in society as well as strategies for discussion of their involvement.

Likewise, the church has the opportunity to connect with teens whose very existence is shaped by social history. Here I speak of biracial and multiracial teenagers whose struggle for identity is a complex and complicated process.

Since 1967, when the Supreme Court overturned the last remaining laws prohibiting interracial marriage of all types, there has been a biracial baby boom. “The number of children living in families where one parent is White and the other Black, Asian, or American Indian has tripled, from fewer than 400,000 in 1970 to 1.5 million in 1990.”²¹ My current research will illustrate the need for the church to address this sociohistorical, sociopolitical, socioeconomic, and sociocultural phenomena.

I wonder how the church is enabling biracial and multiracial teenagers in fashioning their identities, particularly in the domain of spirituality. In my book *Trouble Don't Last Always*, I devoted chapter three, “I’m Mixed: The Politics of Racial Identity,” to some of the struggles of teenagers whose parents are racially/ethnically different from each other.²² These struggles include declaring a racial identity, selecting a racial peer group, resisting stereotypes about teens of color, color consciousness, or colorism. I argued that such struggles often result in shame among biracial/multiracial teens, resulting in a debilitating affect on their spirituality. I challenged the church to empower youth to move beyond the shame of colorism to self-worth.

During my research for the chapter “I’m Mixed,” I realized that much of the literature on this topic was derived from the fields of psychology and sociology. Although some theologians such as Katie Cannon and Emilie Townes have reflected theologically on colorism and class, few have considered the struggles that biracial/multiracial people face with respect to their spirituality.

Colorism is an important concept in relation to theological discussion on the spirituality of biracial/multiracial adolescents. Colorism is defined as an internal bias among people of color who give preference to lighter skin color rather than darker, as well as a preference for thin lips, narrow noses, and other forms of European physicality. During the early twentieth century it was common for black Americans to bar newcomers from church if they didn't

pass the brown paper bag test or the hair comb test. This practice was a result of colorism whereby certain black congregations sought to select members whose physical features were more European. Additionally, this phenomena created silence and shame within the church and caused suffering among all involved, not only biracial people. The classic movie *Imitation of Life* demonstrates the pain experienced in a family when one “passes” for another race. The recent movie *Rabbit Proof Fence* is the biography of an Australian half-cast woman who at the age of thirteen defied the government’s law that all half-caste children be placed in boarding schools with an aim toward eliminating Australian aboriginal dark-skinned people. The recent coming forth of Essie Mae Washington, daughter of Strom Thurmond, related directly to this issue.

Conceptually, my research explores the effects of double and multiple consciousness on the spirituality of biracial/multiracial adolescents. Sociologist W. E. B. DuBois first advanced the notion of Afro-American “double consciousness” in late 1897 in the *Atlantic Monthly*. The term denotes a survival skill whereby people of color are self-aware of dominant hegemonic relations in North American society. This survival skill is derived from negotiating an identity from the perspective of dominant white mainstream culture and that of the African American culture. It is living in two worlds/cultures by being black and American. In his 1903 classic, *The Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois writes:

...the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.²³

An expansion of DuBois’ idea would address people who claim three or more equally significant racial/ethnic identities. Thus, double consciousness is coupled with an investigation of the notion of “multiple consciousness” most

recently advanced by my colleague Edwin Aponte in unpublished lectures at Perkins School of Theology. Multiple consciousness is a survival strategy of persons with multiple racial/ethnic identities as they struggle to live in all the worlds/cultures of their heritage while remaining keenly aware of their relationship with the dominant culture.

However, biracial/multiracial identity is intricately related to issues of class and gender. In "I'm Mixed" I analyzed the connection between notions of colorism and classism citing the life story of Kermit, a young man who resisted stereotypes and labels indicating that his "light" skin color and middle class status were definite characteristics of being biracial. Kermit's experience draws attention to issues of race and class. Literature indicates that teenage girls of color are concerned about their physicality in relationship to the physicality of girls from mainstream white middle class culture. Girls of color often have beliefs about "good and bad" hair, small or big hips, and brown or blue eyes as they make choices about their public persona and care or abuse of their bodies. Concerns about class and gender relate to issues of racial identity among teenagers of color. Research on issues of race, class, and gender and the spirituality of biracial and multiracial adolescents will illuminate the issues I've mentioned. The church is to address these questions of identity from biracial/multiracial youth.

A young fourteen-year-old friend of mine talked of her struggle to understand race relations in the southwest after moving to Dallas from southern California. She pointed out that biracial/multiracial teens in Dallas were reluctant to identify themselves. Her experience was that teens in southern California would identify themselves as mutts or biracial. Remember, Tiger Woods calls himself a Cablinasian, acknowledging all his ethnic heritages of Asian, African American, American Indian, and Caucasian.²⁴ What do these teenagers think about God, themselves, and their place in the world in light of who they are? Do they view themselves in God's vision for the transformation of the world? If so, how? Theological reflection on the spirituality of biracial/multiracial adolescents in light of their struggles with issues of race, class, and gender is virtually absent from theological literature. I hope to contribute to this literature.

In spite of the church's inadequate ministry with Dietrich and Sabine their lives were fashioned as a testament to what the church can become. I believe their young lives bear witness to the essential ingredients of what a church should be if it is to embody the passion of God. Can today's church make a

place for the Sabine and Dietrich Bonhoeffers? Are our churches attuned to their social contexts in such a way that youth are empowered to shape wholesome political, racial/ethnic, sexual, and spiritual identities? Or will teens say as Dietrich Bonhoeffer did: “I shall reform it!”

Notes

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s poem “Who Am I?” was among his *Letters and Papers from Prison*. The version referred to here is from Eberhard Bethge, *Costly Grace: An Illustrated Biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1980).
2. Miles Hodges, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945)*, <http://www.newgenevacenter.org/biography/bonhoeffer2.htm>.
3. Bethge, *Costly Grace*, p. 9.
4. John W. Santrock, *Adolescence* (Madison: Brown and Benchmark, 1996), p. 334.
5. Sabine Leibholz-Bonhoeffer, *The Bonhoeffers: Portrait of a Family* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1971), p. 37.
6. This portrait of the socioeconomic status of the Bonhoeffer family is a combination of Sabine Leibholz-Bonhoeffer’s *The Bonhoeffers: Portrait of a Family*, 3–5 and Eberhard Bethge’s *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1970) pp. 6–8.
7. Bethge, *Costly Grace*, p. 18.
8. Sabine Leibholz-Bonhoeffer, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A glimpse into our childhood” (New York: *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 20 May, 1965), pp. 310–331.
9. Leibholz-Bonhoeffer, *The Bonhoeffers*, 4.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
11. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, p. 19.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
13. Leibholz-Bonhoeffer, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” p. 329.
14. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, p. 22.
15. James Garbarino, “Enhancing Adolescent Development Through Social Policy,” in *Handbook of Clinical Research and Practice with Adolescents*, ed. Patrick H. Tolan and Bertram J. Cohler (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1993).
16. *Ibid.*, p. 481.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Phil Zuckerman, *Invitation to the Sociology of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 1993). Zuckerman argues that Christianity, specifically black Christian ethics, had a powerful influence on the civil rights movement. Among his references are Andrew Billingsley’s *Mighty Like a River: The Black Church and Social Reform* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) and Charles Marsh’s *God’s Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).
19. Natasha Izatt and Norm Dixon, “World: High school students lead the way,” *Green Left Weekly Online Edition*, www.greenleft.org.au/back/2003/531/531p.16.htm.

20. C. Ellis Nelson, *Helping Teenagers Grow Morally* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), pp. 1–9.
21. Beverly Daniel Tatum, “*Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*” (New York: Basic Books, 1997), p. 168.
22. Evelyn L. Parker, “I’m Mixed: The Politics of Racial Identity,” in *Trouble Don’t Last Always: Emancipatory Hope Among African American Adolescent* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2003).
23. W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903; repr., New York: Fawcett, 1961), p. 17.
24. Pearl Gaskins, *What Are You? Voices of Mixed-Race Young People* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1999).