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### **GWU Scholar Investigates Bonhoeffer's Reasons for Conspiring to Assassinate Hitler**

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UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH

# GWU Scholar Investigates Bonhoeffer’s Reasons for Conspiring to Assassinate Hitler

BY OFFICE OF UNIVERSITY COMMUNICATIONS ON OCTOBER 14, 2020



## Hannah O’Brien, ’20, Discovers Theologian’s Different Approach to Christian Ethics

While reading Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s “The Cost of Discipleship,” Hannah O’Brien, ’20, became intrigued. How could theologian and pastor Bonhoeffer, who many considered a pacifist, participate in a plan to assassinate Hitler? She received an Undergraduate Research Scholars grant from Gardner-Webb University to conduct a theological investigation of the ethics of Bonhoeffer’s plot.

O’Brien, of Conover, N.C., was one of 11 students who participated in the Research Scholars program. With assistance from a faculty mentor, the students spent 40 hours a week for five weeks researching their topics. O’Brien’s mentor was Dr. Paula Qualls, professor of religious studies.

“Bonhoeffer once claimed that pacifism had become self-evident to him,” O’Brien remarked. “He also sought nonviolent options of resistance. ‘The Cost of Discipleship’ emphasizes the commands of the Sermon on the Mount. This would cause one to assume that Bonhoeffer was heavily interested in the cause of peace. I wanted to find out how Bonhoeffer could have so heavily emphasized peace but choose to participate in such a violent conspiracy.”

She read through what Bonhoeffer had written about ethics, as well as perused the writings of scholars interpreting Bonhoeffer. “I looked at biographical information to accurately understand his circumstances and actions, his ethical reasoning, and theological viewpoint,” O’Brien offered. “I encountered the challenge of digging through the interpretations of Bonhoeffer’s thinking and finding points of disagreement. It is somewhat uncomfortable to disagree with scholars who have more experience with the subject than I do. This is difficult to sort through in itself, but further there is much disagreement between scholars generally on the subject.”



Qualls encouraged her as she was sorting through the writings of Bonhoeffer and the varied scholars. “When I felt stuck in my research, Dr. Qualls assured me that it was normal to feel uncomfortable not to know everything in such a complicated project,” O’Brien observed. “She told me that it was somewhat of a puzzle that I had to piece together. It certainly felt this way—finding various pieces and how they fit together. Her encouragement was very helpful in this process.”

O’Brien discovered that Bonhoeffer approaches Christian ethics differently than most scholars. “He insists that one must ask what the will of God is rather than how I can be good or how I can make the world good,” she noted. “I believe he would have seen the assassination of Hitler as ‘evil,’ but not unjustified. While one may commit a sin, it may be a necessary sin in the context of one’s situation. The evil that they were fighting against was greater than the sin that Bonhoeffer would incur in his participation in this plot. He does not necessarily justify what he did but saw it as necessary.”

She is confident that working on the project prepared her to continue her education and will benefit her career. A biblical studies major and missiology minor, O’Brien wants to pursue a doctorate in Christian history and/or theology, perhaps further focused on Bonhoeffer. “I hope to become a professor and write on my interest, which is in the connection between history and theology in the Christian tradition,” she asserted. “This experience has allowed me to solidify my passion, and it has been encouraging to enjoy this sort of research.”

[Learn more about the Undergraduate Research Scholars Program.](#) >

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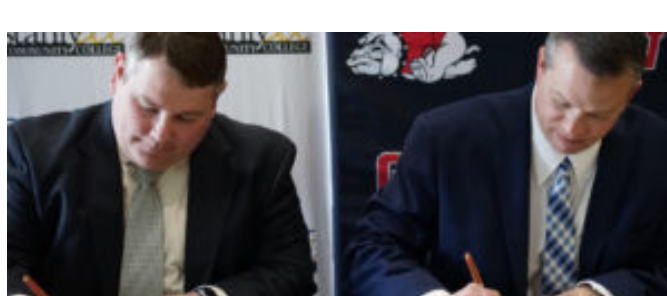


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