The influence of pastor Jean Lasserre on the evolution of Dietrich Bonhoeffer philosophy on pacifism has been pointed out many times but has never been the subject of an in depth historical and theological study. Frédéric ROGNON endeavours to that here, in a two-part study, by retracing their steps and by discerning the modalities/methodologies and challenges. This first part is focused on the reconstitution of factual data and their two biographies. The second part (to follow) will tackle the question of how to interpret the theological implications.

In order to understand Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s ethical and political foundations, the sources must be identified. Among these, the monumental biography by Eberhard Bethge mentions Jean Lasserre’s thinking and credits his thinking as having a decisive impact on Bonhoeffer from 1930 onwards. However, he never mentions the French pastor after 1934, the account suggests that the communication between the two men was interrupted the day after the ecumenical conference of Fanø and never resumed. Equally, during a conference in September 2002 focused on The Relevance of Dietrich Bonhoeffer on Latin Europe, Renate Wind highlights his interest when presenting research on how Bonhoeffer benefitted from knowing Lassarre and the influence it had on Bonhoeffer “from their first meeting in New York until Fanø”. Félix Moser and Henry Mottu confirm this but specifiy, however, that “it could be suggestive to study Bonhoeffer’s ‘conversion’ to pacifism by attempting to account for his own evolution at the heart of the conjuration3.” This article will therefore look at the impact Jean Lasserre had on Dietrich Bonhoeffer which was exercised well beyond 1934, and was undoubtedly neither purely mimetic nor even unilateral. It is the crossing of paths of the two men, and their views on pacifism and tyranny, which should be revisited using sparse data, some of which has never been published before.

Before suggesting any interpretation of the theological implications of the relationship between Jean Lasserre and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, it is important to place their in the framework of historical facts, through events, words and written works. The most successful methodology option consists of re-examining the relationship between the two men in order to measure the tenure of the German theologian’s “conversion” to pacifism, before then following the chronology of the facts and the texts.