



# **Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance Theology and an Ethic of Resistance**

*Reggie L. Williams*

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Dietrich Bonhoeffer publicly confronted Nazism and anti-Semitic racism in Hitler's Germany. The Reich's political ideology, when mixed with theology of the German Christian movement, turned Jesus into a divine representation of the ideal, racially pure Aryan and allowed race-hate to become part of Germany's religious life. Bonhoeffer provided a Christian response to Nazi atrocities.

In this book author Reggie L. Williams follows Bonhoeffer as he defies Germany with Harlem's black Jesus. The Christology Bonhoeffer learned in Harlem's churches featured a black Christ who suffered with African Americans in their struggle against systemic injustice and racial violence--and then resisted. In the pews of the Abyssinian Baptist Church, under the leadership of Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., Bonhoeffer absorbed the Christianity of the Harlem Renaissance. This Christianity included a Jesus who stands with the oppressed rather than joins the oppressors and a theology that challenges the way God can be used to underwrite a union of race and religion.

*Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus* argues that the black American narrative led Dietrich Bonhoeffer to the truth that obedience to Jesus requires concrete historical action. This ethic of resistance not only indicted the church of the German Volk, but also continues to shape the nature of Christian discipleship today.

## **Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance Theology and an Ethic of Resistance Details**

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# **From Reader Review Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance Theology and an Ethic of Resistance for online ebook**

## **Thomas Christianson says**

I've never identified with a book more strongly than this one.

As a white man whom God has prompted to learn about Black American culture in order to (I hope) be part of cultural reconciliation within the Body of Christ, this was powerfully inspiring.

Then to also learn a bit more about Bonhoeffer's transition from academic Christian to transformed disciple of Christ...well, it resonated deeply with me.

I'm glad I read Metaxas' biography of Bonhoeffer first, so that I could better understand and appreciate this deep dive on a particularly important component of Bonhoeffer's spiritual/theological development from his time in Harlem.

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## **Adam says**

This book tells of how Bonhoeffer's faith was radically transformed by the time that he spent in the African American church in Harlem while he was studying at Union Seminary. By reading this book you will gain insight into the life and faith of the oppressed and marginalized. That understanding will make you a better Christians and human. It's easy to see how Bonhoeffer's experience in Harlem allowed him to speak out against and see the dangers of the Nazis in before others in Germany. Bonhoeffer would write from prison, "the church is the church only when its there for others." This book points out that those types of words would likely not be spoken from Bonhoeffer if he never spent time in Harlem.

This book shows how our privilege can get in the way from truly understanding those from a different culture than ourselves. Reggie Williams states, "privileges that guard some Christians from experiencing oppression may also keep them from seeing oppression or suffering as matters within the scope of Christian moral responsibility."

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## **Luke Magnuson says**

A great example of how exposure to and identification with the margins of society allows one to see injustices that one would otherwise be blind to. In this case, how Bonhoeffer's time spent with the African-American church in Harlem allowed him to see the injustices of the Nazi regime clearly, while his contemporaries missed it entirely (or at the very least missed the magnitude of it). Bonhoeffer writes:

"It remains an experience of incomparable value that we have for once learned to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcasts, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, and the reviled, in short from the perspective of the suffering . . . that we come to see matters

great and small, happiness and misfortune, strength and weakness with new eyes; that our sense for greatness, humanness, justice, and mercy has grown clearer, freer, more incorruptible; that we learn, indeed, that personal suffering is a more useful key, a more fruitful principle than personal happiness for exploring the meaning of the world in contemplation and action."

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### **Philip Barbier says**

The majority of this book presents the African American theology that Dietrich Bonhoeffer experienced during his time in Harlem (and at Abyssinian Baptist Church) in 1930-31. If you are unfamiliar with this Harlem Renaissance theology, this book is worth the read for that alone.

The remainder of this book explains how the Harlem Renaissance theology impacted Bonhoeffer's understanding of Christ and what it meant to be a Christian in a world impacted by racism and oppression. In showing how Bonhoeffer's Harlem experiences led to his leadership in the anti-Nazi Confessing Church in Germany (and subsequent martyrdom), this book becomes a fantastic read.

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### **Andy Brock says**

#### **Intriguing read on Bonhoeffer's time in New York**

Very intriguing required read for a class on Contextual Theology. Surprised by its power and depth. Even without having read Bonhoeffer someone could find the book interesting and lead them to reading Bonhoeffer.

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### **Ruth says**

A slim but important book connecting what Bonhoeffer learned from the Black community during his time in Harlem (particularly at Abyssinian Baptist Church) with his prophetic resistance to the Nazification of German Christianity in the 1930s and 40s. Recommended! Note: I came to this book having already read some of Bonhoeffer's work as well as a few general Bonhoeffer biographies. Not sure how this read would go for someone lacking a working knowledge of the people, the history, and the theology of the time.

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### **Michael Nichols says**

Just a fantastic book. Williams homes in on the years just before, during, and after Bonhoeffer's stint in NYC in 1931. He convincingly demonstrates Bonhoeffer's time at Abyssinian Baptist Church was incredibly formative in his theological development. Chapter four, on the dynamics and tensions that animate African American churches in America, is worth the price of the book alone. Williams shows how and why theology and social life cooperate, and generally don't get distinguished in AA churches. It was incredibly illuminating.

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### **Drew Rosiles says**

Insightful, interesting and an inspiring look at Bonhoeffer's time in Harlem's churches.

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### **Cory says**

I loved this book! It has been incredibly challenging and inspiring for my faith. It has reminded me that as Christ is present and suffers with and for the marginalized and downtrodden so should his followers. This book has also confirmed for me, as the author notes, that our Christian identity transcends any national identity. Truly a book for our time.

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### **Egregious Philbin says**

Simply the most important book on Bonhoeffer I've ever read. Williams gives a succinct description of Bonhoeffer before Harlem, then steps back to survey the whole of African-American Christian theology, before delivering a towering and masterful portrait of a changed Bonhoeffer and the tragic conclusion with its implicit call to urgent action. This should be required reading for every Lutheran, whether in seminary or in the suburbs, especially with the forces of racism and nativism currently on the rise in the United States and around the world. Learn from Bonhoeffer to listen and be changed by the view from underneath, where Christ beckons the believer to come and die alongside Him.

Read this book.

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### **Dwight Davis says**

This is an important, vital book on Bonhoeffer that offers an exciting new perspective through which to interpret his later theology. See my full review in *Anglican Theological Review* (forthcoming).

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### **John says**

Fascinating and rich! Bonhoeffer's experience with Harlem Black community opened his eyes to what he was experiencing in Germany. A must read!

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### **Jim says**

For years, I have been a casual student of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life and theology. This work added detail to a period of his life that I knew about, but only in general terms. Williams adds details to the year in the early

1930s that Bonhoeffer spent on a fellowship at Union Seminary in New York. While there, he became involved with the Abyssinian Baptist Church and embedded in the African American community. There, as he witnessed first hand the oppression, races, and suffering of that community, he began that process that took his theology from his head to his heart and his hands. Upon return to Germany, he worked with poor boys in a rough section of East Berlin, and even contemplated leaving the academy for the parish. The development of his understanding of the theology of the cross, begun at Abyssinian Baptist Church would lead him to his break with the German National Church and his vocal and action-oriented position of solidarity with the Jews in Nazi Germany.

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