

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

By 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.

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Editorial Review

Review
"Reggie William's *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance Theology and an Ethic of Resistance* is one of the best books I've read in years. I highly recommend it to any reader, particularly students, pastors, and professors."?Michael Spalione, *Philomythois*

"Reggie Williams' *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus*breaks new ground in offering a detailed and vibrant portrait of the Harlem Renaissance that was in full blossom during Bonhoeffer's time in New York."?Victoria J. Barnett, *Contemporary Church History Quarterly*

"This study of Bonhoeffer and the black Christ is a revelation, an unveiling that illumines the deep places of Bonhoeffer's life and thought. Moreover, Reggie Williams' presentation and writing are exemplary, within reach of any audience serious about Bonhoeffer."?Larry Rasmussen, Reinhold Niebuhr Professor Emeritus of Social Ethics, Union Theological Seminary, New York City

"*Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus* is destined to transform Bonhoeffer studies. Previously scholars have focused on Bonhoeffer's experience that year at Union Theological Seminary, but Williams makes a plausible case that his experiences in neighboring Harlem were far more decisive in shaping the man who returned to Germany to take on the Nazis and the Nazifying Protestant churches."?David P. Gushee, Distinguished University Professor of Christian Ethics Director, Center for Theology and Public Life, Mercer University

"In recent years, scholars have begun to name Bonhoeffer's experience in Harlem as central to his development, but no one until now has provided such a rich analysis of the embedded cultural thinking he had to shed and the degree and manner in which he did so. *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus* not only will ignite new discussions on Bonhoeffer and race, but also will guide readers into more honest reflection on the entrenched nature of racism and the deliberative thinking and action necessary for resistance."?Jennifer M. McBride, Regents Chair of Ethics, Wartburg College

"*Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus* is a compelling study of Bonhoeffer's encounter with the Christianity he found alive in the streets of Harlem and the sanctuary of Abyssinian Baptist Church. These formative experiences inspired Bonhoeffer's efforts to undermine the false connection between White imperialist identity and Jesus. The Black Christ that Williams finds in Bonhoeffer challenges all of us to live more authentically and fully into the call to do justice. *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus* is a must read."?Emilie M. Townes, E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Professor of Womanist Ethics and Society, Vanderbilt Divinity School

"Williams is wholly at home with Bonhoeffer's life and thought"?Larry Rasmussen, Reinhold Niebuhr Professor Emeritus of Social Ethics, Union Theological Seminary, *International Bonhoeffer Society Newsletter*

"*Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus* stands as a turning point in Bonhoeffer scholarship while offering a fresh and constructive approach to theological ethics in its vision for empathic resistance and solidarity with the oppressed."?Timothy Dwight Davis, *Anglican Theological Review*

"Williams' exploration is a welcome journey into a domain of praxiological substance in a contemporary age where vain ideologies, boisterous pathologies, and impotent philosophies have become normative impersonations of meaningful commitment. His historical framing is invaluable, as he refreshingly covers the development and depth of Bonhoeffer's thought."?Kevin Dudley, *Journal of Lutheran Ethics*

"...What should the reflective life of a *global Christian* look like? Williams' Bonhoeffer brings us close and paves the way for deeper reflection on the impact of Bonhoeffer's global ministry on his theology."?William Young, *Black Theology: An International Journal*

"Williams' prose is enthralling, and he successfully engages in meaningful dialog with earlier literature in ethics, theology, and black studies. His book is a welcome effort to bridge our understanding of Bonhoeffer's actions in Germany with motivations inherited from Black America. It might be useful in both undergraduate and graduate settings."?Paul Hillmer, *Lutheran Quarterly*

"a highly significant study of Bonhoeffer's powerfully formative theological development inside the crucible and sublime beauty of Harlem. It is required reading for anyone seeking a more complex, constructive, and provocative view of Bonhoeffer, especially as it provides a dark-hued and somewhat contested thesis that will surely establish a new benchmark for the vigorous discussions and debates to come regarding Bonhoeffer's Christological and ethical embrace of racial alterity and Christian identity."?James S. Logan, *Modern Theology*

"In addition to the exploration of Bonhoeffer's time in Harlem, this book raises important considerations about scholarship and pedagogy that would benefit a broad audience. Williams, using Bonhoeffer's own words, emphasizes that his early theology had been a demonstration of intellect rather than an expression of faith."?Courtney H. Davis, St. Bernard's School of Theology and Ministry, *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*

About the Author
Reggie L. Williams is Assistant Professor of Christian Ethics at McCormick Theological Seminary. He is a member of the International Dietrich Bonhoeffer Society, as well as the Society for the Study of Black Religion, and a founding member of the Society for the Study of Race, Ethnicity and Religion.

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