

The Black Church's Influence on Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Dr. E. Forrest Harris, Sr.

Director of Kelly Miller Smith Institute on the Black Church
Vanderbilt Divinity School
and President, American Baptist College
Nashville, Tennessee

Because of today's cultural and global conflict, the Christian activist who seeks to understand God's presence and action in the world would benefit from some theological reflection on the life and times of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Emeritus Professor J. Deotis Roberts, an esteemed theologian on the Black Theology movement in the United States, has taken up a comparative study of the theology of Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King in his recently published book *Bonhoeffer and King: Speaking Truth to Power*. Roberts studies the Christian activism and theological legacies of Bonhoeffer and King, illustrating how these men spoke meaningfully of God in their respective worlds of German Nazism and anti-Semitism and American racism and segregation. Both men were theological activists whose radical commitment to Christian love and justice brought a tragic end to their lives, both at the early age of 39. Bonhoeffer's life came to an end on April 9, 1945 in the extermination camp of Flossenburg, Germany. The life of Martin Luther King, Jr. was ended by an assassin's bullet on the balcony of the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis Tennessee on April 4, 1968.

Bonhoeffer's theology provides an understanding of how activism and faith can be lived out in a world beset by the fear of differences. Fear of differences is called *xenophobia*, the cultural condition that characterized the era of Nazism in Germany and the Civil Rights movement in America. Today we are experiencing one of the most critical moments in modern time principally because of the conflict between Muslims and Christians, Jews and Palestinians, and Eastern and Western worldviews. The global problems resulting from these conflicts have turned into war and terrorism, leaving people in a chaotic maze of nationalism based on the religious ideologies of clans and tribes.

The plight of blacks in Jim Crow America and Jews in Nazi Germany are the clear results of xenophobia. Racism and anti-Semitism are social evils with a long history. Blacks suffered in the shadow of the Atlantic slave trade that goes back nearly 400 years. Anti-Semitism is a collective evil that followed Christianity on both sides of the Atlantic; it was ingrained in the economic and political systems of America. Hitler merged the anti-Semitism prevalent in Christianity with German nationalism to dehumanize and murder millions of Jews. The racist philosophy in America that insisted that black people were less human than whites provided cover for centuries of brutal slavery, where lynching and legalized segregation resulted in massive death and poverty for countless black citizens.

Every Christian faces the theological task of forging a coherent world view that overcomes racial and cultural barriers blocking freedom, justice and love in the human community. When Dietrich Bonhoeffer came to the United States in 1930 as a postgraduate fellow at Union Theological Seminary he was absorbed in this theological task. He was deeply concerned about religious ideologies supporting Nazism and the theological implications for anti-Semitism for the Christian church in Germany. Bonhoeffer was in New York during the height of the Harlem Renaissance in literature and music. This renaissance in turn gave voice to the diverse experiences of black suffering in America.

Bonhoeffer discovered in the black church that theology is autobiographical in character, expressed in preaching, singing and worship. These art forms of Christian expression were celebrations of stories that united the secular and the sacred in black people's quest for God's justice. Bonhoeffer saw this when he visited the historic Abyssinian Baptist Church, under the leadership of Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. Located in the richness of New York's black Harlem community, Abyssinian provided Bonhoeffer a rare view of the liberating qualities of black religion. The stories and songs of the black church gave voice to the struggle for justice in America. The ethos of the black church so impressed him and so deepened his understanding of the Christian church that he later referred to his experiences there as a movement of "great liberation."

Bonhoeffer saw the black church as a true expression of his concept of *sanctorum communio*, a Christian fellowship of love in action, of people existing for others. Through his encounter with the everyday existence of black people in Harlem, Bonhoeffer became a sensitive critic of American racism. This deepened his resistance to German anti-Semitism. He returned to Germany with the black church in his heart as brothers and sisters in the communion of saints.

What lessons can we glean from Bonhoeffer's theological legacy? The following list is not comprehensive but it attempts to provide points of emphasis, particularly with regard to the influence of the black church on Bonhoeffer.

1. Love of self and love of others are ultimately grounded in the love of God. The church misinterprets God's love when it thinks it is merely for individual self-interest. God's presence in our lives should turn us into Christian disciples for an alternative world.
2. Christian discipleship is love in the service of justice. Love must be in the service of justice. When considering the depth and breadth of social injustice and collective evil in the world, the relationship between love and justice must be taken seriously by the Christian church.
3. Ideologies of racial superiority are forms of idolatry and are matters for theological reflection. The fear of differences driven by social insecurities and hate encourages the abuse of power. Xenophobia breeds violence. The right use of power builds community. God is the power of life and love that will lead to what Bonhoeffer calls *sanctorum communio*, the community of holiness. When religious ideology joins with notions of nationalism and imperialism it breeds violence and war. We have only to consider the ways in which religious ideologies fueled by racial superiority have contributed to colonization, anti-Semitism, genocide and ethnic wars.

4. Bonhoeffer declared that God is not free of man, but free for man. God binds God's self to the suffering of human beings.

This is the faith of the black church Bonhoeffer encountered in Harlem; it is the core of Christian faith. God binds God's self to the suffering of beings in Christ. The essence of Christian discipleship is a radical commitment to God's presence and action in the world and toward the Kingdom of God.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What do you think the author means when he says "theology is autobiographical in character"?
2. What were some of the liberating qualities Bonhoeffer saw at Abyssinian Baptist Church?
3. How do you understand the statement, "Love of self and love of others are ultimately grounded in the love of God"?
4. What might Bonhoeffer meant when he said God is not free of man but free for man?
5. Toward the end of his life, Bonhoeffer said "The will of God may lie deeply concealed beneath a great number of possibilities." Have you ever felt that way?

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