

***Engaging Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus with Bonhoeffer: Panel Discussion
on Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance Theology and an
Ethic of Resistance, by Reggie Williams***

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ABSTRACT

Bonhoeffer's self-interpretation in relation to Williams' reading of the Harlem Renaissance. Influences of Bonhoeffer's Union Seminary theological discussion group of friends, and the preaching of Adam Clayton Powell Sr. Question: the relative impacts on Bonhoeffer of the Sermon on the Mount and the Harlem Renaissance. Bonhoeffer's newly-found 1934 letter to Gandhi is a development of his 1931 thinking in New York. Reviewing Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus poses questions regarding Bonhoeffer and the proletariat in Germany, and also his theological concept of Stellvertretung. Query: Why no reference to Josiah Young's No Difference in the Fare?

One major thing I learned during my twenty years of work on the Bonhoeffer Works English Edition is this: our *fully* understanding of Dietrich Bonhoeffer is still very much a work in progress. Do we *fully* understand the overall trajectory of his theology from the theology of sociality with the ecclesiology of his dissertation, to the worldly Christianity of the prison letters? Do we *fully* understand the relationship of *Discipleship* to *Ethics*? Do we *fully* understand the degree to which Luther is formative of his theology, and the ways in which Bonhoeffer is a creative innovator in the Lutheran tradition? And have we *fully* digested the complexity of his peace ethic – the so-called pacifism – along with his involvement in the conspiracy to overthrow Hitler, as well as Bonhoeffer's statements about the conditional use of force? I could go on – our full understanding of Bonhoeffer remains a work in progress.

Eberhard Bethge's earliest interpretation of Bonhoeffer's post-doctoral year in New York in his 1967 biography tended to foreground the budding French pacifist Jean Lasserre and his impact on Bonhoeffer's theological and personal faith. In Bethge's narrative, Bonhoeffer's black friend Albert Fisher plays an important role, bringing him to Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, and to Howard University where he met young black leaders. But the spotlight is on Lasserre, no doubt because of Bonhoeffer's reference to him in prison when reflecting back on New York 1931 as a time of decisive change. Without losing sight of Lasserre and Fisher, Reggie Williams proposes we should put the main focus elsewhere. The very title of his book, *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus*, tells us to look to Harlem, to focus on the literature of the Harlem Renaissance and on Abyssinian Baptist Church, particularly the ministry of Adam Clayton Powell Sr. In his summary Chapter Five on *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus in Germany*, headed "*Christ-Centered Empathic Resistance*," Williams opens with a concise statement of his overall thesis.

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“In Harlem Bonhoeffer learned of a black tradition of Jesus that connected faithfulness to God, the recognition of suffering, and the presence of Christ as co-sufferer. The ministries that Bonhoeffer participated in at Abyssinian Baptist Church, coupled with the intellectual interrogation of Jesus within the Harlem Renaissance, provided Bonhoeffer with new resources to filter the nationalism from his Christianity and helped to develop him into an advocate of ecumenism, of peacemaking, and of social justice.”¹ “As a consequence of that black experience with Jesus, his theology became more than conceptual, his Christology became more prominent, and Bonhoeffer became more serious about his faith.”²

I will resume in a moment the story of stages in the development of the narrative of Bonhoeffer in America. However, I must first record here, in brackets as it were, publication of the important book of Josiah Young, *No Difference in the Fare*, published in 1998. It was the first monograph on Bonhoeffer by an African-American theologian, to which I will return.³

Over the years since Bethge's 1967 biography (and, thankfully, Victoria Barnett's revised and unabridged edition in 2000), a more complex narrative has emerged. Hans Pfeifer's paper⁴ on the consequences of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's postdoctoral year in New York City, pointed out that Lasserre was not a fully-fledged pacifist in 1931, that the focus of discussion with Lasserre and others was the Sermon on the Mount and learning faith as discipleship, that the experience with the film “All Quiet on the Western Front,” which Bonhoeffer attended with Lasserre, was quite significant for Bonhoeffer's budding ecumenism, and, framing it all, that Bonhoeffer came to the United States looking for a “cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1); compared to the *Volkskirche* as he knew it in Berlin,⁵ he was seeking authentic Christianity, and he found his witnesses at Abyssinian Baptist Church.

In the Editor's Introduction of DBWE volume 10, *Berlin, Barcelona, New York*, I stressed the importance of the worship at Abyssinian, and the Spirituals, as the emotional and spiritual accompaniment to the discussions with Lasserre and others about the Sermon on the Mount, learning faith, and discipleship. While, up to this point, Harlem had always been part of the narrative, especially in the form of Abyssinian, one could report that the story was a rather Eurocentric story. I diluted that somewhat by suggesting that the group of Union radicals whom Bonhoeffer called friends – White, Dombrowski, Klein, Gordon, Moor⁶ and others who had been neglected by the German editor – might belong in a picture of “the cloud of witnesses.”

Now Reggie Williams also proposes to expand the narrative – or is it to correct and redraft the narrative? -- by centering on “the Harlem Renaissance Theology” as the source of Bonhoeffer's “ethic of resistance.” While I basically applaud this move, I also have some serious questions. To dig deeply into this Harlem literature, assigned in Niebuhr's course on “Ethical Viewpoints on Modern Literature,” is necessary research. And Bonhoeffer himself invites it. He signed up for an educational trip to Harlem as soon as he arrived at Union. He acquired the bibliography on “The Negro” produced by the Harlem Branch of the New York Public Library, and he collected articles about the NAACP, the civil rights struggle, and legal aspects of the race issue. He also purchased Robert Russa Moton's book, *What the Negro Thinks*.⁷

¹ In a methodological statement, Williams says he will “highlight the connections between New York's Harlem Renaissance and Bonhoeffer the Christ-centered Nazi resister” (*Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus* 165, n. 2).

² *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus*, 107. The text quoted is a thesis of the main argument.

³ In 2004, another black theologian, J. Deotis Roberts, published *Bonhoeffer and King: Speaking Truth to Power* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press). Roberts only mentions the Harlem Renaissance in passing, but claims “during the pastorate of Adam Clayton Powell Sr. that Bonhoeffer experienced the powerful witness against racism that informed his theology and ministry” (*Bonhoeffer and King*, 46). Roberts also refers to Young's volume, stating that “it provides more comprehensive coverage of Bonhoeffer's encounter with racism in the United States” than he can provide in his own book (*Ibid.*, 136, n. 18).

⁴ Pfeifer, “Learning Faith and Ethical Commitment in the Context of Spiritual Training Groups. Consequences of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Post-Doctoral Year in New York City, 1930/31.” *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Jahrbuch* 3, 2007/2008, (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2008), 251-279.

⁵ See the satirical description in the literary fragment in Bonhoeffer, *Fiction from Tegel Prison*, DBWE 7, 73-80.

⁶ See DBWE 10: 32-34. Bonhoeffer's “Moor” was actually James K. Morse, whose Union room was opposite Bonhoeffer.

⁷ Published by Doubleday, Doran & Company, Garden City, New York, 1929. This book is in Bonhoeffer's surviving library, and is the only book on the subject of race in America that I know Bonhoeffer purchased. Its title suggests that it is just the sort of book a newcomer would buy to get into the subject. Bonhoeffer would hardly have known when he purchased it that Moton was an ideological ally of Booker T. Washington, a matter he understood in the second semester when reading Washington's *Up from Slavery* alongside *The Souls of Black Folk* by Du Bois.

Above all, for Niebuhr's course Bonhoeffer wrote a paper on "Negro Literature." What better source for his response to the Harlem Renaissance than this text? Here I record a loud lament, one in which I am sure Reggie Williams would join me. This paper is lost. Nobody has ever seen it -- except Niebuhr's tutor who graded it, Jim Dombrowski. Bonhoeffer obviously valued the paper because, after returning home to Germany, he asked Niebuhr in a 1933 letter to remind Dombrowski to return his paper. But we don't have it. Consequently, Reggie Williams is obliged to work with hints and inferences.⁸

This is a very challenging task, and raises the methodological question of discerning historical causes and influences. So let's look at a case study in some detail. Bear with me during some exegesis on the topic of Christology and proletariat in Bonhoeffer.

In his chapter on the effects and consequences of Harlem on Bonhoeffer, Reggie Williams highlights the reference to the proletariat in Bonhoeffer's 1933 Christology lectures, given two years after he returned from New York. Williams cites Bonhoeffer's passage: "The proletariat actually dissociates Jesus from his church and its religion [because 'the church is the stultifying institution that sanctions the capitalist system']. When the proletariat says that Jesus is a good human being, it means more than the bourgeois mean when they say that Jesus is God."⁹ What's the purpose of this citation? The interpretation Williams gives is that "Bonhoeffer describes in his Christology lectures" "the *recovered* Jesus disassociated from oppressive structures," the One "present in the African American tradition of Jesus." Bonhoeffer's experience of "Jesus, embodied in the oppressed community," so the argument runs, both informs the Christology lectures and "stimulated Bonhoeffer's service to Germany's proletariat neighborhoods."¹⁰

Now, Bonhoeffer's attention to the proletariat in the 1933 Christology lectures is not new. It appears six years before his time in Harlem in the section of the dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio*, on "Church and Proletariat."¹¹ This section, by the way, really offended Professor Reinhold Seeberg, the doctoral adviser. His opening comment was: "Does this really belong in the framework of this study?" He followed this in the margins of the next three pages by seventeen more question marks, several 'Reallys?', and finally by "Is this the business of the church?"

Bonhoeffer begins by quoting at length and approvingly the end of Troeltsch's *Social Teachings*.¹² Troeltsch wrote that "the social problem of the present day . . . includes the problem of the capitalist economic period and of the industrial proletariat created by it; and of the growth of militaristic and bureaucratic giant states; of the enormous increase in population, which affects colonial and world policy; [and] of the mechanical production [*Tätigkeit*] that produces enormous masses of material and links up and mobilizes the whole world for purposes of trade, but also treats people and labor like machines."

Bonhoeffer then wrote that, appearances to the contrary, there is "no other force in the present to be fundamentally more open to the Christian proclamation than the proletariat. The living proletariat knows only one affliction, namely its isolation, and only one cry, namely that for community."¹³ Building on the axiom of his doctoral thesis, that the church is "*Christus als Gemeinde existierend*," Christ existing as church-community, Bonhoeffer continues: "The coming church [of this Christocentric community] will not be 'bourgeois'."¹⁴ To bring about this change, [bourgeois] theological students need to be exposed, outside the lecture hall, "to the very specific criticism leveled at their own class,"¹⁵ by the proletariat protesting against the exploitation that Troeltsch described.

⁸ Referring to the lost essay, Williams reasonably concludes that Bonhoeffer must have read the literature because he was "a thorough scholar" (*Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus*, 75). He then infers that "the impact of that literature . . . was undoubtedly transformative for him." This inference, however, is a much more speculative conclusion; see below, as the letter to Elizabeth Zinn reveals. (Seeking the lost Bonhoeffer paper, my research in the Dombrowski archive did not yield any information about its fate. For Bonhoeffer's report on "The Negro Church" in his essay on U.S. Protestantism, see DBWE 15: 456-458.)

⁹ *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus*, 117, citing in note 39, DBWE 12:90; correct citation is DBWE 12:306 which is cited in note 40.

¹⁰ *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus*, 118, italics mine.

¹¹ *Sanctorum Communio*, DBWE 1: 271-274. It is relevant that the subtitle of *Sanctorum Communio* is "A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church."

¹² Troeltsch, *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*, Westminster/John Knox 1992, 1010.

¹³ *Sanctorum Communio*, DBWE 1:272.

¹⁴ DBWE 1:273

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Here we have, then, a Christ-centered view of Christian community, an empathy for the exploitation and dehumanization of the proletariat, and a stance of resistance to the complicity of the bourgeois church in this class exploitation. To be sure, the subject here is class, not race; however, the social analysis is not something Bonhoeffer learned in Harlem.¹⁶

That brings us to the related question of Bonhoeffer's Christology. Just two years after he returned from New York, Bonhoeffer gave his Christology lectures. They were both classically Chalcedonian and Lutheran, and these were the main themes: Jesus is Christ, is God, the God who became human. He is the present Christ who exists only in social relation to us (Christ is *pro me*) in the church-community. Christ is present socially in word and sacrament, present as the humiliated and exalted one. He is the center and mediator of history, nature, and society. Christ is the mediator of new humanity; the human self-enclosed ego is freed to love and serve others, as are ideologically-enclosed communities and nations.

Worth discussion here is the matter of Jesus-language and Christ-language. While Reggie Williams not infrequently uses Christ language, it is Jesus-language that predominates, for example, "Jesus as *Stellvertretung*," "Jesus in the Harlem Renaissance,"¹⁷ "the recovered Jesus dissociated from oppressive structures, as Bonhoeffer describes in his Christology lectures,"¹⁸ and, above all, his book title, *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus*. This seems to echo the broadly Anabaptist tradition of Glen Stassen, the dissertation adviser. Now it is interesting that the main criticism leveled against Bonhoeffer's Christology by the Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder is that Bonhoeffer's Christology is literally that, discourse about Christ, and not "Jesological," i.e. Jesus discourse.

And regarding Bonhoeffer discovering the suffering Jesus in Harlem, it is relevant to recall Luther's frequent reference about God hidden under opposites, in the weak and suffering Jesus, as in the famous Luther saying: "You are to look at this little baby in the crib and this poor man on the cross and say 'This is God'."

To summarize the results of this little case study on proletariat and Christology: the overall question for discussion, I believe, is how the Harlem part of the narrative relates to the other parts. What are the unique impulses that come from the Harlem Renaissance and Abyssinian? Is the reviewer of *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus* accurate with his title,¹⁹ "The African-American Roots of Bonhoeffer's Christianity"? And the formulation of the panelist J. Kameron Carter -- "No blackness, no Bonhoeffer?" -- is this question a correct interpretation of Williams' argument? If so, isn't the story really more complicated than that?

There are several more questions to Reggie Williams which I think are worthy of debate.

1. Regarding the letter to Elisabeth Zinn.

If the book's basic argument can be fairly summarized as follows: Bonhoeffer's immersion in Harlem -- especially the writings of the Harlem Renaissance and the ministry of Abyssinian Baptist Church -- was the decisive, transforming experience of his year in New York, then what are we to make of Bonhoeffer's letter to Elizabeth Zinn in January 1936? In it he wrote of his life being transformed, of "a great liberation," of becoming a Christian, and said "the Bible, especially the Sermon on the Mount"²⁰ was responsible. Further, when he talked about the time in New York and his discussions with Jean Lasserre about learning to have faith,²¹ this again pointed to the Sermon on the Mount.

¹⁶ Of course, race is also a class issue. Bonhoeffer's brother Karl-Friedrich was a socialist (DBWE 7:7), as was Karl Barth, and Bonhoeffer had his research assistant produce a summary of Marx for him. While hedging it around by theological definitions, Bonhoeffer wrote: "Nevertheless there exists . . . a certain 'affinity' between socialism and the Christian idea of the church-community which we must not fail to use" (DBWE 1:274).

¹⁷ *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus*, 53.

¹⁸ *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus*, 118.

¹⁹ Alan Bean, *Baptist News Global Perspective*, October 30, 2015: "The African-American Roots of Bonhoeffer's Christianity," internet review of *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus*.

²⁰ DBWE 14:134. Cf. DBWE 8:358 re one important change in his life, related to his overseas experience. [See more in the Addendum on this topic.]

²¹ DBWE 8:485-486.

2. Regarding *The New Negro* volume.

Bonhoeffer's notes for the class session on Negro Literature show that Niebuhr assigned specific pages of Alain Locke's edited volume, *The New Negro*.²² Locke is mentioned several times by Reggie Williams as a leading intellectual of the Harlem Renaissance. The 1925 first edition was handsomely produced with copious illustrations, including many color portraits of leading Harlem Renaissance figures – men and women. It assembles about 50 entries by all the big names and covers all the major fields of African-American life. Locke, I believe, intended it to be more than an anthology; it is really a manifesto proclaiming to America the arrival of “the New Negro” as a term of proud affirmation.²³ The first edition is now a collector's item selling for hundreds of dollars.

The specific pages assigned by Niebuhr²⁴ are the poetry section. Here we find poems by Langston Hughes (9), Countée Cullen (8), Jean Toomer (2),²⁵ Angelina Grimke (1), James Weldon Johnson (his “Negro Sermon,” *The Creation*), Claude McKay (5) Georgia Douglas Johnson (4),²⁶ Anne Spencer (1), and Lewis Alexander (1). There is no doubt that Bonhoeffer read this assignment, since he singles out for comment both Hughes and Cullen: “The poetry of Langston Hughes and Cullen is often very passionate and satiric in its accusation against the suppression of their race. In Hughes a strong socialistic interpretation of the situation is very obvious.”²⁷ There are other writers of the Harlem Renaissance who should be investigated, for example Langston Hughes' *Not Without Laughter*, Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry*, and Jean Toomer's *Cane* which Prof. Henry Louis Gates of Harvard suggested to me.²⁸

Question: do these poems in *The New Negro* throw any new light on what Bonhoeffer might have learned from the Harlem Renaissance? One notes that this book and its poems by Hughes, Cullen and the others are not discussed in *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus*.

3. Regarding the Union radicals.

Bonhoeffer knew a group of radical students around Reinhold Niebuhr – most of them were practicing socialists and pacifists.²⁹ *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus* mentions a letter from one of them, Myles Horton, reporting Bonhoeffer's emotional account of worship at Abyssinian, and his judgment that only among oppressed blacks could he find authentic Christianity in America. Horton was a founder of Koinonia Farms where Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks trained. Others were James Dombrowski, the Canadian John King Gordon, William Klein, Joe “Moor,” Franklin Fisher³⁰ and two faculty members Gaylord White (urban ministry and community organizing) and Charles Webber, the “radical socialist.”³¹ This group attracts special interest because Bonhoeffer was still asking Paul Lehman about them seven years after he returned home. They were probably some of the most radical Christians Bonhoeffer ever met. Bonhoeffer called

²² *The New Negro* was assigned for the second week of Niebuhr's course on ethics and literature, February 18, 1931.

²³ One name is conspicuously absent, Booker T. Washington.

²⁴ The only time he did so in this course.

²⁵ See note 22.

²⁶ Claude McKay's “The Lynching” and Georgia Douglas Johnson's “Christmas Greetings” are mentioned in *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus* (cf. 62-64), but not the poems of Hughes and Cullen in *The New Negro* that Bonhoeffer refers to.

²⁶ DBWE 10:422.

²⁷ DBWE 10:422.

²⁸ In *The New Negro* there are two passages from Toomer's important novel *Cane*. Henry Louis Gates suggested to me that *Cane* could have been “the excellent novel by a very young Negro” that so impressed Bonhoeffer (see DBWE 10:295). Bonhoeffer wrote: “Here, in contrast to the either cynical or sentimental American literature, I find an extremely productive energy and warmth that always make one want to get to know the man himself” (Ibid.). Another candidate is Langston Hughes's 1930 novel *Not Without Laughter*; Hughes (b. 1902) was a decade younger than Toomer. Another strong young candidate is Wallace Thurman (b. 1902), author in 1929 of *The Blacker the Berry: A Novel of Negro Life*; that book had a year longer to come to the attention of Niebuhr and get in the syllabus; see DBWE 10:295, n. 6. These books should be on the must-read list of any researcher concerned with Bonhoeffer and the Harlem Renaissance

²⁹ “They worked on urban and rural poverty, on racial justice and civil rights, on union organizing, on peacemaking, and at the United Nations” (DBWE 10:34).

³⁰ DBWE 10:33.

³¹ DBWE 10:320.

these people “my friends,” and asked Niebuhr to pass along to them his “hearty greetings.”³² It’s clear that they were counter-cultural Christians, deeply identified with the oppressed and suffering; several started intentional Christian communities.

Question: How important might this group of countercultural radicals be for understanding Bonhoeffer along with the countercultural blacks of the Harlem Renaissance and Abyssinian Church?

4. Regarding Josiah Young’s book.

A troubling omission is the 1998 work of Josiah Ulysses Young, *No Difference in the Fare. Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Problem of Racism*.³³ I am especially curious to hear Reggie Williams’ response to Young’s monograph which is devoted to a thorough analysis of Bonhoeffer’s theological works and concludes that Bonhoeffer presents a thoroughly anti-racist theological anthropology. If Reggie Williams’ theme is ‘what Bonhoeffer learned from Harlem,’ Josiah Young’s is ‘the theology Bonhoeffer brought to Harlem that helped him understand and express solidarity with its people.’

Young argues persuasively that Bonhoeffer, in his complex phenomenology of the “I-You relation,” brought a fundamental doctrine of alterity, respect for the other, indeed the assertion that the “Thou” of the other person is “the divine Thou.”³⁴ Young’s *No Difference in the Fare* is a perceptive, learned, and passionate book with profound insight into the theology of Bonhoeffer which he reads as impressively anti-racist. Young wrote: “Taking Bonhoeffer’s lead [we] learn something about the Other when that Other is freed from the imperial Same,³⁵ when one sees the integrity of the African past as the Thou.”³⁶ I think Reggie Williams would agree. But Bonhoeffer brought that way of theological thinking with him to Harlem, notwithstanding any other baggage that he discarded.

5. Regarding “*Stellvertretung*,” (acting on behalf of another, of others, or even on behalf of a people, a nation or humanity)

As a Christological and anthropological term: if Reggie Williams’ interpretation can be summarized as “incarnational empathy,”³⁷ doesn’t this translation confuse the distinction between “vicarious representative action” and *Menschwerdung* (God’s becoming human)?³⁸ The use of this term, so central to the book, needs plenty of clarification in the argument of *Bonhoeffer’s Black Jesus*.

ADDENDUM³⁹

Two new sets of information warrant this addendum to the panel contribution because they are essential to interpreting Bonhoeffer’s time in New York, 1930-31, at Union Theological Seminary, and at Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. But first let Bonhoeffer’s own words describe his own personal existential and theological issues in New York.

In a letter from Finkenwalde of January 27, 1936 to Elizabeth Zinn, Bonhoeffer confessed his ambition and vanity, his way of working that isolated him from family and friends, his neglect of the Bible and prayer. He was not a Christian, he said, but his own master, one who turned the cause of Christ to the advantage of his own career. But then he reported to her, with relief and gratitude, “the Bible, especially the Sermon on the Mount, freed me from all this, . . . everything has changed, . . . that was a great liberation. It became clear to me that the life of a servant of Jesus Christ must belong to the church.” “Then came the crisis of 1933. This

³² DBWE 12:95.

³³ Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998.

³⁴ *Sanctorum Communio*, DBWE 1:55.

³⁵ That is, the imperialist sameness of racism.

³⁶ *No Difference in the Fare*, 106.

³⁷ For example, cf. *Bonhoeffer’s Black Jesus*, 140: empathic incarnational action on behalf of others. This and similar phrases sound rather like Glen Stassen.

³⁸ While *Menschwerdung* (incarnation) could be seen as an act of God’s *Stellvertretung*, the two German terms make two different points.

³⁹ Written October-November, 2022.

strengthened me in it . . . For me everything now depended on the renewal of the church and the pastorate.⁴⁰ . . . Christian pacifism . . . suddenly came into focus as something utterly self-evident. . . . My vocation stands before me. I do not know what God will make of it.”⁴¹

Bonhoeffer's very important personal interpretation is integral to understanding his experience at Union and Abyssinian, both personal and theological. By the early 1930's the Sermon on the Mount has a solid place and a creative role in Bonhoeffer's theological thinking, leading up to the publication of *Nachfolge* (*Discipleship*) in 1937.⁴²

In accounts of Bonhoeffer at Union Seminary, much attention previously focused on Jean Lasserre and the pacifism debate. While that is not entirely wrong, Eberhard Bethge's biography did introduce three others: Erwin Sutz, Albert 'Frank' Fisher, and Paul Lehmann.⁴³ A Union Seminary photo shows most of them grouped with Bonhoeffer.⁴⁴ I regard this group as helping to lay a major foundation for Bonhoeffer which led to publication of his *Discipleship* – however, not forgetting that Bonhoeffer had met Franz Hildebrandt about 1929 and they became lifetime close friends. Hildebrandt, a Christian theologian of Jewish-descent, was a lifelong pacifist. When Bonhoeffer returned to Germany from New York, he worked with Hildebrandt in 1932 to draft a Lutheran Catechism.⁴⁵ So the initial challenge to Bonhoeffer of the Sermon on the Mount most likely began sooner than New York, not least through the influence of Franz Hildebrandt, his pacifist friend.⁴⁶

Now we must add significant information about the influence of Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church on Bonhoeffer -- a blond, German Lutheran in a black American Baptist church. He was immersed in the congregation with the enthusiasm of its worship, especially the Spirituals, his several teaching roles, and visits to the homes of members. Disappointed with the preaching of white churches, Bonhoeffer found the preaching of Adam Clayton Powell Sr. something else. Powell “taught that enemy-love, nonretaliation, and forgiveness were the very heart of the gospel, and . . . to follow Jesus, Powell urged, one had to take up the costly, fellow-suffering discipleship of the Sermon on the Mount.”⁴⁷ While hearing Powell's sermons on Sunday, in Niebuhr's course Bonhoeffer was studying articles about Gandhi's negotiations for India's independence and peace with colonizing Britain. Powell lionized Gandhian nonviolent resistance to oppression,⁴⁸ and, like Bonhoeffer, held the Spirituals in high regard.

The preaching of Powell -- committed to the Sermon on the Mount, to peace and non-violence, and admiring Gandhi highly -- was working much of the same theological ground that Bonhoeffer and his Union friends were ploughing. Their agendas and commitments overlapped. Hence the preaching of Powell reinforced Bonhoeffer's thinking in the theological discussion with his seminary colleagues.

The second very important piece of new information is Bonhoeffer's 1934 letter to Gandhi.⁴⁹ Only recently located in the Gandhi archives in India, the letter was introduced to scholars at the Stellenbosch International Bonhoeffer Congress of 2020. It is a window into Bonhoeffer's thinking. As one might expect, Bonhoeffer hoped to learn from Gandhi about peacemaking through non-violence. But that was within his larger framework: Europe, and

⁴⁰ *Pfarrerstand*, my translation.

⁴¹ DBW 14, 113; DBWE 14, 134-35. This passage is quoted in *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus*. p. 109.

⁴² See especially the 1932 lecture “Christ and Peace,” DBWE 12, 258-262. See also the numerous references to the Sermon on the Mount during 1931-1937 in DBWE 11, DBWE 12, DBWE 13, and DBWE 14. In 1937 *Discipleship* (DBWE 4) was published with 100 pages devoted to the Sermon on the Mount.

⁴³ A moving expression of the friendship of Bonhoeffer and Fisher was an exchange of gifts. Bonhoeffer gave a lavish art book *Deutschland*, a signed volume of architecture and landscape photographs. Inscription: “To Franklin Fisher – Christmas 1930, your friend Dietrich Bonhoeffer.” Fisher reciprocated with a New Year gift, James Weldon Johnson's edition of *The Book of American Negro Spirituals*. Inscription: “To my friend Dietrich Bonhoeffer with best wishes for the New Year. ‘Frank’ Fisher.” See Clifford Green, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Book inscription for Franklin Fisher.” *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Jahrbuch 5 2011/2012*. Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2012, 19-21; see also Reggie Williams' dissertation information, *Jahrbuch 5*, p. 20, n. 7.

⁴⁴ See *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Life in Pictures*, ed. Renate Bethge and Christian Gremmels, Fortress Press, 2006, p. 48.

⁴⁵ “The church knows nothing of the sanctity of war. . . . The church that prays the Lord's Prayer calls to God only for the cause of peace.” DBWE 11, 262.

⁴⁶ See Clifford Green on Bonhoeffer's peace ethic, *The Oxford Handbook of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. Mawson & Ziegler, Oxford, 2019, p. 346. Indeed, we can also trace the beginning of Bonhoeffer's Gandhi interest back to his student days.

⁴⁷ Gary Dorrien, *The New Abolition. W.E.B. Du Bois and the Black Social Gospel*, 2015, p. 437.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 440.

⁴⁹ Clifford Green, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Letter to Mahatma Gandhi,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 72.1 (January 2021), 113-121.

especially Germany, is in a spiritual crisis, everything seems leading to war in the near future; this will bring spiritual death to Europe. Organized Christianity, Bonhoeffer writes, needs a "fundamental regeneration." "Western Christianity must be reborn on the Sermon on the Mount." And while Karl Barth was teaching anew "the great theological thoughts of the Reformation," Bonhoeffer lamented to Gandhi that "there is no one to show us the way towards a new Christian life in uncompromising accordance with the Sermon on the Mount."⁵⁰ Given his diagnosis of the Western church and culture, and his great admiration for Gandhi, Bonhoeffer mailed his request to visit him in his ashram: "I do not want to accuse myself of having missed the one great occasion in my life to learn the meaning of Christian life, of real community life, of truth and love in reality."⁵¹ An extraordinary request of the Christian Bonhoeffer to the Hindu Gandhi!

By 1934, then, the long-desired visit to Gandhi was welded to Bonhoeffer's thinking about the renewal of the church, the Sermon on the Mount, peace, and anti-colonialism. And one more thing: though he praised Barth's Reformation theology, Bonhoeffer lamented to Gandhi that "there is no-one to show us the way towards a new Christian life in uncompromising accordance with the Sermon on the Mount. It is in this respect that I am looking up to you for help."⁵²

Hence the Sermon on the Mount was central to Bonhoeffer's theology in his letter to Gandhi in 1934.⁵³ At that time Bonhoeffer was advocating nothing less than a regeneration of the church based on the Sermon on the Mount. It is not mere imagination to consider that Bonhoeffer might be thinking about a New Reformation, even as war loomed over the horizon.

One may view Bonhoeffer from varying perspectives. In this addendum I have focused on how Bonhoeffer, occasionally, interpreted himself, and how the Sermon on the Mount became central in his mind and teaching. In 1937 the publication was there for all to see: *Nachfolge* (*discipleship*) as text -- and as Bonhoeffer's personal commitment -- surrounds the Sermon on the Mount exposition in the center of the book.

In February 1938 Hans von Dohnanyi, Bonhoeffer's brother-in-law, arranged his first contacts with resistance leaders. In 1939 an invitation drew him back to New York for six weeks, but he judged it a wrong decision; on July 7 sailed back to Germany from New York with his brother Karl-Friedrich. About April 1940 he began work on his *Ethics* manuscripts. Meanwhile his resistance work with his brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi continued.

To conclude with a "footnote." How did Bonhoeffer explain to Gandhi, with an urgent, extraordinary plea, why he wanted to visit his ashram? He said, as already noted: "I do not want to excuse myself of having missed the one great occasion in my life to learn the meaning of Christian life, of real community life, of truth and love in reality."⁵⁴ Why seek out Gandhi? Answer: "I have been travelling and living all over Europe. *I went to the U.S.A. to find what I was looking for -- but I did not find it.*"⁵⁵ We should not brush off this very definite statement, or try to explain it away.

I propose that we regard Bonhoeffer's "*I did not find it*" as a caution when interpreting Bonhoeffer's time in New York. We must assemble the best historical evidence, including what Bonhoeffer himself provides. And what was Bonhoeffer looking for in the mid-thirties? Should we consider that his purpose is what he told Gandhi: he was seeking "the meaning of Christian life, of real community life, of truth and love in reality"?

To conclude. Reggie Williams has opened up a critical and complex area of Bonhoeffer research, especially raising issues of racism which are as crucial now as they were nearly a century ago. In my AAR presentation here are posed several questions of analysis and interpretation which range from Harlem Renaissance Theology to Bonhoeffer's Christology and the meaning of his theological term *Stellvertretung*. The issues are obvious and do not need repetition here; additional issues in this Addendum are equally obvious. Hopefully they will generate new research, exposition and interpretation.

⁵⁰ Bonhoeffer, letter to Gandhi, 119-120.

⁵¹ Ibid. The mention of Gandhi's ashram is a reminder of Bonhoeffer's interest in communal Christian living. This invites important research.

⁵² Bonhoeffer, letter to Gandhi, 120.

⁵³ See DBWE 14: 270-321, Sessions D and E on *Discipleship*, October 1936 to November 1937, and other frequent references.

⁵⁴ Bonhoeffer, letter to Gandhi, p. 120.

⁵⁵ Ibid., italics mine.