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Bonhoeffer, Jesus and the Jews: An Entrée into a Deficient Theory of Anti-Nazi Resistance

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A raw nerve in the scholarship on the famous anti-Nazi Protestant theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer has been his stance toward the Jews. On the one hand, Christian theologians and secular historians alike have admired the resistance of a man whom the Nazis executed in April 1945. On the other hand, his essay from twelve years earlier, in April 1933, titled “The Church and the Jewish Question,” contains an anti-Semitic strand. I tackle the tension between these two poles by reframing the question.

My question is this: What did Bonhoeffer’s stance toward Jews show about his theory of anti-Nazi resistance? More specifically, what did it show about the potential in his thinking about opposition to the Nazi state, and the limits to such thinking? Answering these questions helps make new sense of Bonhoeffer’s evolving view toward both the Jews and resistance. While in 1933 he took a critical stance toward Jews who did not convert, he became increasingly disturbed by the Nazi regime’s mistreatment of all Jews. But his Christian theology, which placed Jesus at the center of everything, posed an insurmountable problem: it prevented him from developing a theory of resistance that could treat all people, including Jews, as equals in the political realm. As a result, he could not – and did not – grapple with Nazi anti-Semitism as a political issue of unequal treatment under secular law.

My conclusion is that, ultimately, Bonhoeffer could not reconcile his theology with an approach to political action in a pluralistic society. His form of Christian belief prevented him from developing a theory of resistance that could inspire a fight for a liberal state based on a notion of formal equality – which is crucial for Jews, as well as other minorities, in the modern age.