

From Jim Crow to Bonhoeffer to Holocaust: Lynching, Harlem Renaissance, Holocaust, and Racial Healing

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This paper comes with an audacious title, but nonetheless as a modest proposal. The objective of the paper is to supply an answer to a question asked of me after a trip to Berlin, Terezin ghetto in Czech Republic, Prague, Mauthausen Concentration Camp in Austria, Auschwitz, Krakow Poland, and Berlin, visiting what seemed like a multitude of memorials and museums related to the Holocaust perpetrated by the Nazis on Europe before and during WW II. These memorials focused on many things—besides the obvious. Terezin focused on the Jewish school founded there in the Jewish ghetto during the war. The school children left behind hundreds of drawings and poems and stories. Unfortunately, very few of the children survived the gas chambers of Auschwitz. In Prague, the fabulous Pinkas synagogue includes the names of all Czech Jews lost in the Holocaust. As the Prague travel website states, “The Holocaust Memorial in the Pinkas Synagogue is one long tombstone inscription commemorating those for whom a tombstone could not be erected.”¹ At Mauthausen Concentration Camp in northern Austria, the visitor can find flags of countries of origin of all those interned here, as well as memorabilia given by family members of those who died here. The memorabilia line the walls of the crematorium. Auschwitz cannot be described in a sentence. However, one visiting exhibit lodged itself in our minds. A photographer had visited Auschwitz survivors all over Europe and interviewed and photographed them. Their quotes are moving—both inspirationally and heartbreakingly. One survivor, Shlomo Venezia, said, “I survived, but I wasn’t saved.” Another, Leon Weintraub, said, “As a survivor, it gives me special satisfaction to stand in front of this expression of megalomania. I regard myself not as a victim, but as a victor.” Another, Anna Hyndrakova, concluded, “but they didn’t kill all of us! Life goes on.”² In Berlin, the Holocaust museum is named, “Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe.” It is, indeed, a memorial. It is the story of people—most of whom died in the Holocaust, but it is also the story of some who survived to live on. It is story of so many survivors that prompted the question that later prompted this paper. Why does it seem that most (not all, but most) Jews who survived the Holocaust have been able to leave that history in the past and move forward in life, while in the American experience African-Americans have not moved on as well from slavery and later persecution?

The question intrigued me, and I offered a tentative answer. However, further events during the summer would add to my answer. In July, I participated in a seminar at Rice University that focused on the experience of Black Americans during Jim Crow years. The required reading included a biography of Ida B. Wells and selections from W. E. B. Du Bois. I also had just read *Tears We Cannot Stop: A*

¹ See <http://www.prague.eu/en/event/432/memorial-to-the-jewish-victims-of-the-holocaust-from-bohemia-and-moravia-childrens-drawings-from-terezin-1942-1944>.

² These quotes were part of photographic exhibition at Auschwitz, June 2017. The contents of this exhibition can be found in Stefan Hanke, *Concentration Camp Survivors: Portraits by Stefan Hanke*, trans. Danko Szabo (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2016).

Sermon to White America, by Michael Eric Dyson. Then, I picked up the book, *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance, Theology and an Ethic of Resistance*. These influences—Holocaust sites, Jim Crow, Dyson, and Bonhoeffer—may seem a disparate collection of material. However, my objective in the next few minutes is to weave these sources into a coherent proposal for an answer to the question above.

I will begin with Bonhoeffer because he serves as a hinge for my proposal. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, himself a victim of the Nazis, has an obvious connection to the Holocaust, but perhaps one to Jim Crow and race in America that is just as powerful while not as obvious. In 1930-1931, Bonhoeffer spent an academic year at Union Theological Seminary in New York. While he found the seminary for the most part uninspiring and vapid, he found life-changing inspiration in an unlikely place—Harlem. During his stay in New York, he listened to the preaching of Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., at Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. In his 2005 work, *Bonhoeffer and King: Speaking Truth to Power*, J. Deotis Roberts discusses briefly the impact of Powell on Bonhoeffer, both through his preaching and his introduction to the writings of W. E. B. Dubois, James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, and Countee Cullen.³

From Cullen, he learned of the “Black Christ,” a concept that Williams believed impacted him profoundly, a belief that is supported by his own report on the fellowship in New York.

I heard the gospel preached in the Negro churches. ... In contrast to the often lecturelike character of the “white” sermon, the “black Christ” is preached with captivating passion and vividness. Anyone who has heard and understood the Negro spirituals knows about the strange mixture of reserved melancholy and eruptive joy in the soul of the Negro.⁴

In contrast to the white theology he saw in white churches, Bonhoeffer found a theology of the gospel in Harlem, as well as black churches throughout the southern US.⁵

In his travels through the southern US and Cuba, the treatment of black people struck Bonhoeffer with intense effect. In a letter to his brother, he wrote: I also found it noteworthy that the Spanish population apparently gets along much better with the Negroes than do the Americans. The separation of whites from blacks in the southern states really does make a rather shameful impression. In railways that separation extends to even the tiniest details. ... The way the southerners talk about the Negroes is simply repugnant, and in

³ J. Deotis Roberts, *Bonhoeffer and King: Speaking Truth to Power* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 46.

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, Vol. 10, *Barcelona, Berlin, New York 1928-1931* (Louisville: Fortress Press, 2008), 315.

⁵ Interestingly, Adolf Deissman, who had visited the US in 1929 and read Bonhoeffer's report of his fellowship in New York, wrote a letter to Bonhoeffer, agreeing in general with Bonhoeffer's assessment of American churches, “specifically concerning the Negro churches,” see *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Works*, Vol. 11, 118.

this regard the pastors are no better than the others. ... It is a bit unnerving that in a country with so inordinately many slogans about brotherhood, peace, and so on, such things still continue completely uncorrected.⁶ In this letter, especially the line, “and in this regard the pastors are no better than the others,” the reader can see the early evidence for Bonhoeffer’s theological connection with the cause of the oppressed. As Roberts concluded, “It was in New York that this German Lutheran theologian first began to truly understand the issues of racism and nationalism as serious theological problems.”⁷ He would carry this new understanding of the gospel back to Germany with him.

This new understanding of the gospel was a direct challenge to the German nationalism that had exploded onto the scene with the rise of the Nazis. The German National Church was the ecclesiastical arm of this nationalism. The confessing church of Bonhoeffer and Niemoller, especially after 1933, was a response to these movements. In August, 1932, at an international youth conference, Bonhoeffer chided the German Christians (and other Christians who celebrate their own national identity along with their Christianity).

Has it not become terribly clear, again and again, in all that we have discussed with one another here, that we are no longer obedient to the Bible? We prefer our own thoughts to those of the Bible. We no longer read the Bible seriously. We read it no longer against ourselves but only for ourselves. If this entire conference is to have had a great meaning it would perhaps be to show us that we must read the Bible in an entirely different way by the time we meet again.⁸

What was this “entirely different way” of reading the Bible?

For Bonhoeffer, reading the Bible seems to now focus on the gospel as addressed to the poor, the oppressed, and the weak, rather than the wealthy and powerful. This new way of reading the Bible is expressed poignantly in a sermon preached in Berlin in May 1932. Bonhoeffer challenged the prevailing interpretation of the story of the rich man and Lazarus found in Luke 16. He was decrying the tendency to spiritualize the text so that the wealth, poverty, power, and hunger were spiritual rather than physical.⁹ Bonhoeffer argued that the rich and powerful—who are most of us [those to whom he is speaking]—must see in this text the gospel of Jesus Christ. The responsibility of those with means is to bring about the healing, filling, renewing work of Christ—especially as evidenced in the story of the Good Samaritan.¹⁰ Reggie Williams pointed out that this understanding of the church’s responsibility to relieve suffering was the role of what Powell, pastor of Abyssinian

⁶ *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 10*, 269.

⁷ Roberts, *Bonhoeffer and King*, 47.

⁸ *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 11*, 377-378.

⁹ If only I had time to discuss here my own and a friend’s experience with interpreting this text in an evangelical church in Texas where we formerly served.

¹⁰ *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 11*, 443-450.

Baptist Church, called the “model church.”¹¹ This understanding of the church’s role in society impacted Bonhoeffer in a practical way.

Bonhoeffer came back to Germany and went to work in the poorest neighborhoods of Berlin. In this backdrop he also lectured on Christology. Reggie Williams summarized this new understanding of the gospel and the church and tied it back to Bonhoeffer’s years in New York. Using Bonhoeffer’s terms of bourgeoisie and proletariat for powerful and weak (and rich and poor), Williams summarized:

The bourgeois Jesus is an oppressor’s Jesus, who is removed from his historical context, which would be a truer representation of him, and embedded as theological support within the social ideologies that practice domination. The Jesus-plus-power mixture is lethal for the oppressed and oppressor alike. It disallows Christianity any access to guidance from the life of Christ and reinforces ideologies that maintain the inferiority of proletariat humanity. But the recovered Jesus disassociated from oppressive structures, as Bonhoeffer describes in his Christology lectures, is present in the African American tradition of Jesus that stimulated Bonhoeffer’s service to Germany’s proletariat neighborhoods.¹²

As the Nazis and the German church became totally intertwined through the “Fuhrer principle” and the “Aryan clause,” Williams concludes, “The German Christian movement was a *volkish*¹³ Christian movement, mobilized by a theological worldview that was the German equivalent of American white supremacy.”¹⁴

This conclusion from Williams brings us back to Bonhoeffer’s visit to New York. Exactly what was the America that Bonhoeffer encountered in 1930. First, the migration of southern blacks to northern cities was at a high point. There were push and pull factors in this migration. The push factor was the increasing persecution and oppression of black people in the south. The pull factor was the availability of work in the factories of the north.¹⁵ Second, the beginning of the Great Depression caused employment issues, which led to many problems that are beyond the purpose of this paper. Third, the Harlem Renaissance had begun a cultural, literary, philosophical, and theological rebirth for black culture in America. Fourth, the effects of Jim Crow laws had reached fevered pitch in the south, with little opposition from the north. We will turn now to this latter reality—Jim Crow America.

The experiences of those suffering under Jim Crow Laws is too large a topic for this paper, but a brief description of the treatment of black Americans during these years is necessary. In this brief discussion, I will focus on the writings of Ida B. Wells and W. E. B. Du Bois.

¹¹ Reggie Williams, *Bonhoeffer’s Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance, Theology and an Ethic of Resistance* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014), 93.

¹² Williams, *Bonhoeffer’s Black Jesus*, 117-118.

¹³ In this context, “*volkish*” refers to the focus on the German people as the center of everything under the nationalist Nazi rule.

¹⁴ Williams, *Bonhoeffer’s Black Jesus*, 120.

¹⁵ These were certainly not the only factors contributing to the migration, but they will have to suffice for our purposes.

Ida B. Wells was born a slave in Mississippi in 1862. She was, therefore, the first generation that would grow up after slavery, in the age of reconstruction (generally 1865-1877), when some strides were made for inclusion of black people in the south into the economy and government. These changes would take a severe change after 1877—and I would not want to mislead anyone into thinking that changes were monumental before 1877. With the end of official reconstruction, came the push back in southern states, and the northern states had no fortitude for any further racial wars. The federal Civil Rights Act of 1875 was repealed as unconstitutional in 1883 and *Plessy v. Ferguson* ended hopes of inclusion (let alone equality) when it legalized “separate but equal” in 1896. In her biography of Ida Wells, Mia Bay summarizes the importance of these events. “Until it was overturned in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), *Plessy* ruled over an era of cast-iron segregation under which blacks were required to use not only separate train seats, but separate schools, hospitals, orphanages, insane asylums, poorhouses, and public bathrooms.”¹⁶ By the time of *Plessy*, Wells was a journalist in Memphis, having left Mississippi for reasons that included growing persecution. She would spend most of her career fighting against lynching of black people, mainly in the south.

As Bay points out, lynching is different from other persecution because the lynchers claim “justification and social legitimacy.”¹⁷ Wells, first in Memphis and later in exile in Chicago (after her printing office in Memphis was destroyed and her life threatened), researched and wrote against the evils of lynching. Most lynching victims were black men (often very young) who were generally accused of violence (usually of a sexual nature) against white women. Bay wrote that “Wells was the first journalist, black or white, to research the causes of lynching and amass evidence debunking the rape myth so often used as justification.”¹⁸ In fact, her research (as evidenced throughout Bay’s book) proved that most of the lynching victims were easily exonerated of the charges of rape. As one might suspect, white men suspected of raping black girls were seldom even punished, while black men accused of raping white girls were typically dragged from their jail cells (or the courtroom) and killed. The lynchings typically included hanging the victim (usually for torture and not to kill immediately), various forms of torture that tended to include hot irons, mutilating and then burning of the body (sometimes to cause death and sometimes after death), and finally picking through the remains for souvenirs.¹⁹ Wells researched every case of lynching that she could find reported and found few of the victims were guilty of their crimes, and fewer received any defense or investigation of claimed alibis. Lynching was the creation of a “sexual politic” for the purpose of “subjugating Southern blacks.”²⁰

¹⁶ Mia Bay, *To Tell the Truth Freely: The Life of Ida B. Wells* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009), 56.

¹⁷ Bay, *To Tell the Truth Freely*, 96.

¹⁸ Bay, *To Tell the Truth Freely*, 103.

¹⁹ Bay, *To Tell the Truth Freely*, includes descriptions of several lynchings, for example, see 126-127, 132-134, 173-175.

²⁰ Bay, *To Tell the Truth Freely*, 127.

Wells, like Bonhoeffer, found little objection from the church to this treatment of black Americans. The desire of Christian denominations and organizations for work together nationally required those in the north to accept the mistreatment of black people in the south by their fellow Christians. This led Wells into a vocal condemnation of Christian leaders, such as Dwight L. Moody and Frances Willard, for their failure to speak out against lynching and other atrocities propagated by their southern associates.²¹ We will return to the church and civil rights.

W. E. B. Du Bois was a few years younger than Wells, born in 1868. Du Bois was highly educated, including degrees from Harvard. In 1903, his work *The Souls of Black Folk* was first published. We will look at two foci of the book. First, Du Bois agreed with Wells that any hope for black society in America included activism, not the accommodationism advocated by Booker T. Washington. While Washington believed that black people could achieve recognition and inclusion by remaining segregated but by improving themselves academically and professionally, Du Bois and Wells believed that this accommodationist approach would only maintain subjugation of African-Americans in America. Du Bois led a protracted battle with Washington and his approach, which was, of course, supported by virtually all whites.²² However, unlike Wells, Du Bois developed a sociological foundation for understanding the situation of black people in America.

Du Bois described the black predicament as a “double-consciousness.” Black people, according to Du Bois, were stripped of self-consciousness because they were forced to always look at themselves through the eyes of others. He wrote, “One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”²³ Because of this “double-consciousness,” black people were caught in a vice between who they were, who they were seen to be, and how they were treated—but with no way out of this cycle.

This double-consciousness is a good place to move forward to modern America. With the end of “separate but equal” in 1954 and the subsequent civil rights legislation, has the double-consciousness been removed, or might the remains of this pattern of thinking be a key to understanding the current race issues in America? Let me begin this concluding conversation with a small selection of events to lay a foundation.

First, when Martin Luther King, Jr., went to Birmingham to participate in civil disobedience in support of that city’s black community, he was arrested. The day after he was arrested, a statement from eight white clergy members was published in local newspapers. This statement, while tacitly supporting the cause of equality,

²¹ Bay, *To Tell the Truth Freely*, 184-189.

²² W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1994), 25-35, *passim*.

²³ Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 2.

called MLK's appearance in their city as untimely. What was needed in Birmingham was restraint and the observation of the "principles of law and order and common sense."²⁴ The obvious question in my mind—hindsight, of course—is, "whose common sense?" These are the same arguments faced by Du Bois and Wells decades earlier. Working slowly through proper (read: legal and white) channels will eventually bring about needed change.

Second, in his book *Tears We Cannot Stop*, Michael Eric Dyson described the events after the O. J. Simpson acquittal in 1995. He argued that the black celebration of O. J.'s acquittal was not necessarily a celebration of Simpson's innocence. Rather, he wrote, "you must see that the bitter taste left in your mouths was but a small taste of what black folk have swallowed from our first moments in this nation. ... Not until the Simpson verdict did many of you claim that you were finally awakened to what black folk had to know every day. But if so, you went back to sleep pretty damn quickly."²⁵ Dyson argued that white America was appalled to see a guilty black man acquitted of a crime against white Americans, without considering that black America had watched white Americans go unpunished for crimes against black Americans for centuries.

Third, Edward Gilbreath described his experience as a young black editor, and only black editor, at *Christianity Today*, the flagship evangelical magazine. He describes his experience much like Du Bois a century earlier.

From a young age, many of us have been told that it isn't good enough just to be good. As a black person, you had to be better than whites in order to make it. I think this notion was probably even more true in past years, but there will always be some whites (and even blacks) whose opinions of African Americans are so low that they're just waiting for them to slip up. Oftentimes, whites don't even realize they think this way. It's a reflexive response.²⁶

While many would argue that Dyson and Gilbreath are overreacting or race-baiting (I have heard these claims from many people in my own social circles), their experiences are recounted over and over again by black men in America. The double consciousness of raising black sons with a fear for how they may be treated by police officers or other officials is still present in America. Neither Dyson nor Gilbreath has a reason to make up these stories, nor do my own black friends who have told me similar stories. Yet, both of these men express their experiences of persecution, sometimes overt and sometimes not. Gilbreath, while working in an evangelical publication, even admitted that "whites don't even realize they think this way. It's a reflexive response." These experiences, along with their historical precedents, suggest a culture that has not forgotten or removed itself from its racially charged past, with a clear predisposition toward whites.

²⁴ Edward Gilbreath, *Birmingham Revolution: Martin Luther King Jr.'s Epic Challenge to the Church* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2013), 81.

²⁵ Michael Eric Dyson, *Tears We Cannot Stop: A Sermon to White America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2017), 58-59.

²⁶ P. 86.

These contemporary stories bring me back to the initial question of this paper. These concluding comments should be understood as tentative, personal conclusions, rather than academic conclusions based on expertise and years of research. First, white Americans need to acknowledge that the racial conflicts in American culture have not been resolved. Perhaps Americans could learn a lesson from Germany's responses to the Holocaust (particularly since the reunification of Germany and the end of Communist control of Poland). The Germans have memorialized their mistreatment of the Jews. They have owned it as their nation's sin. However, a common attitude of white Americans is that slavery ended 150 years ago, and no one alive has ever owned a slave, and black people need to take the opportunities that they have today and move forward. The problem is that a national sin never owned has never died. Perhaps instead of fighting the removal of Confederate monuments, white Americans in the south should offer to put up hundreds of monuments to the victims of lynching, which would begin to show that we have owned our public sins.

Second, white Americans need to listen. Black Lives Matter (BLM) is a case in point. Rather than calling those in the BLM movement unpatriotic and anti-police, white Americans need to hear their black fellow Americans. For example, Dyson explains that the tendency to see BLM as unpatriotic is missing the point. Nationalism is supporting the nation "regardless of moral or political virtue, ... summarized in the saying, 'My country right or wrong.'"²⁷ Dyson argues that patriotism loves a country's values enough to challenge the country's leadership if the country strays from those values, values such as "liberty and justice for all." For hundreds of years, white Americans have controlled the conversation. It is time to give over that control—to whatever extent that is possible.

Third, related to Dyson's arguments, white Americans need to acknowledge the anti-black racism that is intertwined with white American culture, even if it is often covert, and sometimes even dormant in modern American culture. When a national identity becomes entangled with a sinful attitude and behavior, that national identity should be called into question, which will require owning the sin and hearing the oppressed and offended. I find Williams's conclusion concerning Bonhoeffer helpful. "The transformation that Bonhoeffer experienced in Harlem, in addition to the crisis of Christian identity in the midst of the Confessing Church movement, became for Bonhoeffer a struggle to disentangle the coupling of Christianity with national identity."²⁸ What I hear Dyson and Gilbreath suggesting is that historic American culture, including the dominant Christianity, is entangled with a racist bias that must be addressed.

In conclusion, I believe that the answer to the question at the beginning of this paper is to own and even memorialize the reality of racial hatred that has characterized much of American history. This will require an admission that American culture, throughout its history, has been entangled with a white

²⁷ Dyson, *Tears We Cannot Stop*, 116.

²⁸ Williams, *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus*, 135.

nationalism that still often pervades American conversations, including political and religious ones. Germany did this after reunification and the fall of Communism, which probably at least partially contributed to the conciliation between Germans and Jews. Like Bonhoeffer, Christian leaders need to see the historic connections between racism and historic American national identity and religion (i.e., American Christianity). Then, like Bonhoeffer, we must commit ourselves to the disentanglement described by Williams. Like Bonhoeffer, those who step into these actions will find that road costly—hopefully less than they cost him.

Chuck Pitts, PhD, was born and raised in Pasadena, TX. As such, he grew up in a bastion of racism in south Texas, unrecognized as such by Pasadenans, but well-known to African-Americans in the Houston area. He attended Houston Baptist University, and later New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, earning a Master of Divinity and PhD degree in Old Testament and Biblical Archaeology. After nine years church-planting in Minnesota, he taught at Houston Graduate School of Theology for 16 years. At this multi-racial seminary, he was first challenged with the racial issues in current American culture. After being a budget casualty, he has now taught history (including a course on the Holocaust) at Sam Houston High School in Houston. At this Title I school, his desire for “justice and liberty for all” has only been further increased. Dr. Pitts has been married for 35 years and has two grown children and three grandchildren.

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