

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's perspective on racism



Authors:

Daniel Dei¹ Dennis E. Akawobsa² 

Affiliations:

¹Department of Theological Studies, Valley View University, Accra, Ghana

²Department of Theology and Christian Philosophy, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, United States

Corresponding author:

Daniel Dei,
dei.daniel@vuu.edu.gn

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Although Christianity has abundant literature against racism, the menace negatively affects human relationships in contemporary westernised societies. The near silence of most Christian denominations leads to one crucial question: how should Christians deal with racial prejudice in contemporary westernised societies? This article is a social criticism of racism from the perspective of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. As a Christian, Bonhoeffer struggled with the morality of racism, particularly regarding the experience of black people in the United States and Jews in Germany. His reflections and action against racial injustice are a robust framework that could inspire a positive Christian attitude in dealing with racism. This article describes the causes and remedies of racial injustice from his perspective. The central argument is that faithfulness to the communal social character is a significant way to deal with racism in contemporary westernised societies.

Contribution: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's reflections and actions against racial injustice are a robust framework for dealing with racism. The central argument is that faithfulness to the communal social character is a significant way Christians can deal with racism in contemporary westernised societies.

Keywords: civil courage; communal social character; Dietrich Bonhoeffer; social justice; racism.

Introduction

Resources for the proper regard of all persons abound within Christianity. God created all persons equally, endowing each individual with his likeness and image. Each individual bears the blessings that emerge from 'the image of God' (Gn 1:26–28). God charged the Israelites to treat foreigners equally (Dt 10:18–19). Paul was not silent on the equal treatment of all persons. He writes, 'there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Gl 3:28).¹ Revelation 7:9–10 indicates God's acceptance of people from all races.

Several Christian denominations have carved their anti-racial statements from these biblical foundations. The United Methodist Church (2020) regards racism as sinful:

[W]e accept the freedom and power God gives us to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves. We acknowledge the sins of racism and injustice. They are deeply embedded and a reality in our Church and communities. (n.p.)

The American Baptist Church (1994) eschews racism:

[W]e affirm the diversity of races and cultures as distinctive aspects of our denomination. We accept each person as a full participant and each race and each culture as valid expressions within the life and witness of the ABC family. (n.p.)

The Catholic Church (1994) considers racism as contrary to God's design:

[E]very form of social or cultural discrimination in fundamental personal rights on the grounds of sex, race, color, social conditions, language, or religion must be curbed and eradicated as incompatible with God's design. (n.p.)

Similarly, the Presbyterian Church (USA) (2017) states that racism is against God's plan:

[R]acism is the opposite of what God intends for humanity. It is the rejection of the other, which is entirely contrary to the Word of God incarnate in Jesus Christ. Racism is a lie about our fellow human beings, for it says that some are less than others. (n.p.)

1. All scriptural references are from the New American Standard Bible.

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The Seventh-day Adventist Church (2022) points out that racism is both heretical and idolatrous:

[I]n Christ we are a new creation; distinctions of race, culture, learning, and nationality, and differences between high and low, rich and poor, male and female, must not be divisive among us. We are all equal in Christ, who by one Spirit has bonded us into one fellowship with Him and with one another; we are to serve and be served without partiality or reservation. (n.p.)

Strict adherence to these laudable affirmations and recognitions against racism could significantly impact anti-racial attitudes. However, recent social unrest across the globe, particularly in westernised societies, regarding racial injustice and the subsequent silence about it from 'white' Christianity, especially in the United States, is confusing (Jones 2021:11, 13–16, 21, 24). One would expect to hear sermons and public discourses against racism in the churches and on church-sponsored media platforms. However, such anti-racial expressions and teachings are not forthcoming. Nearly a century ago, Dietrich Bonhoeffer expressed a similar concern about how German Christianity was acquainted with hatred for the Jews. He saw racism within Christian communities as a severe theological problem that must be purged at any cost (Bonhoeffer 1995a:47). He thought that Christians with consciences would naturally renounce racism. Unfortunately, such renunciations are not substantive to inspire positive Christian attitudes in dealing with racism.

The apparent silence of the church on racial injustices is seen in the lack of concentrated focus to address factors such as poverty that expose the marginalised to inequitable treatments. Even the virtue of patience often touted by the church appears to dominantly support ongoing disparity in unfavourable social treatments of the marginalised. This feeling re-echoes Elie Wiesel's (see Isaac 2020:174; Wiesel 1986:n.p.) famous statement that 'neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere.'

The few Christian voices against racism raise a more significant concern: how should Christians respond to globalised and institutionalised racism? Against the backdrop that there is a need for an urgent approach to address racial injustice, this article introduces Dietrich Bonhoeffer's views into the discussion. The article describes the causes and remedies of racial injustice from his perspective. It is hoped that his reaction to racial injustice will offer a systematic approach to addressing this threat to social harmony and inclusion in contemporary societies. Examining Dietrich Bonhoeffer's attitude towards racism could contribute to other scholarly efforts to awaken Christian consciousness on the menace of racism in contemporary westernised societies.

The nature of racism

Racism is the attitude of considering one's ethnicity or race superior to others. The superior race dominates other races and enjoys a larger share of society's wealth and status.

Derived from the Italian term *razza*, meaning 'breed, lineage, kind' and borrowed from the French word *race*, the English term 'race' psychologically and physically categorises humanity into preferred and marginalised groups. The tendency to regard one's lineage above others has always been present amongst humanity. For example, Cicero, the Roman statesman, regarded Britons as inferior to Athenians. Similarly, the French aristocrat Arthur de Gobineau expressed a low opinion of Italians, Irish, Germans, French (and others), calling them 'decadent ethnic varieties' (cited in Ingersoll 2005:165).

Racism manifests in individual and social spaces. Individualised antagonism may be 'directed against someone of a different race based on the belief that one's race is superior' (O'Reilly 2021:142). Socially, racism is:

[A]n ideology that prescribes statuses to racial groups based on perceived differences. Racial prejudice, built on fabricated differences, is an immediate effect of racism that brings these perceptions of diversity into reality. (Bhavnani, Mirza & Meeto 2005:28)

Structured or institutionalised racism facilitates systemic racialisation that practically interferes with every aspect of life (Franke 2019). Martin Luther King, Jr. (cited in Roberts 2005) described racism as:

The arrogant assertion that one race is the center of value and object of devotion, before which other races must kneel in submission. It is the absurd dogma that one race is responsible for all the progress of history and alone can assure the progress of the future ... It separates not only bodies but minds and spirits. Inevitably it descends to inflicting spiritual or physical homicide upon the out-group. (p. 44)

Feelings about racial inferiorities began with the works of R. Meade Bache, Robert Yerkes and Carl Brigham, who progressively claimed that the intelligence quotient (IQ) of white people was unmatched amongst humanity. In 1917, Robert Yerkes claimed that genetics influenced the levels of IQs and that the IQ level of white people was higher than that of black people. Despite general scholarly criticism of this conclusion, Arthur Jensen, Carl Brigham and J. Phillip Rushton supported the idea of low black IQ. It appears that future attempts to use psychology to prove racial inferiorities will continue on this line. This is because most concepts and constructs use westernised, Eurocentric patterns to collect, analyse and interpret data. In most cases, minority groups are misrepresented in these studies.

Racism manifests on three key levels – structural, personally enacted and internalised (Apple 2013; DiAngelo 2018; Nimako & Small 2009:223). In structural racism, there is an inequitable distribution of societal resources. Institutional norms grant no or restricted access to the members of marginalised groups in using these resources. In education systems, for example, racism creates segregated schools in which the narrative of performance and expectations affect learners (Araújo 2016; Leonardo & Grubb 2018). The effect is

that learners develop a sense of self-doubt, thereby internalising notions of inferiority about the self and personal accomplishments (Leonardo 2013; Mirza 2018).

Personally enacted racism occurs in two dimensions – overt and covert (Dominelli 2017). In the case of the overt dimension, racism shows through a subtle range of aggression, hate and violence against some groups. Thought patterns and actions may be conscious or unconscious, and marginalised group members can feel this aggression, hatred or violence directly or indirectly (Stone et al. 2016). In the covert dimension, racism operates below the level of the human consciousness. It is instigated mainly by personal commitments to some principles that result in distorted racial relationships (Entman & Rojecki 2010). If structural and personally enacted racism moves from the distinguished group to an inferior group, internalised racism occurs within the stigmatised group members. When they accept negative views about their competencies and determine their identities from stereotyped notions of their attitude, members of the marginalised group internalise the biases against them and operate from such negative perspectives. Consequently, marginalised group members exchange a positive self-image for a negative one, corrupting their sense of self-concept, self-love and self-esteem. Internalised racism induces a victim mentality within the marginalised group members (Aria 2014).

Recently, concern for violence and mistreatment of black people and mixed-race persons exploded into global consciousness through the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 (Bangura 2021). It appears that the Black Lives Matter movement was the ultimate expression against hate and slurs suffered by Asian people, Muslims, Jews and women (Battle 2021; Magonya & Oloo 2021).

Bonhoeffer and racism

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German theologian, was born on 04 February 1906 to Karl Bonhoeffer and Paula von Hase in Wroclaw, Poland. He was trained at the University of Tübingen and Berlin University (Bonhoeffer 2010). His quest to advance in scholarship sent him to America. As a student, his experience at Union Theological Seminary in New York City and connection with the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem plunged him into the feelings of minorities in society (Konz 2021). Dietrich Bonhoeffer's experience with racism could be summed up in the following words: '[r]acism is diabolic, racism is dehumanising. Racism is a sin. Racism is the Berlin Wall of America. Racism is America's "national sin"' (Frick 2017:185).

Adam Clayton Powell, Sr.'s sermons about the 'kingdom of social justice' and Paul Lehmann's quest to integrate the gospel into the community greatly influenced him. In Powell, Bonhoeffer found a practical approach to making the gospel relevant to the experiences of minority groups. Through Lehmann, Bonhoeffer realised the need to relate one's theology to the community. Bonhoeffer's belief that the

church had failed God in being a force to unite all persons led to his theological-ethical standpoint that combined 'the gospel with social activism' (Bonhoeffer 1995a:11). He was convinced that the saving power of Jesus must address injustices in society. For him, the correct gospel must put Christ in the community and respond to the social questions of the day. This approach implied Christians should show interest and offer substantive assistance to people in social crises (Frick 2017:187, 193; Norris 2020:9). He considered the correct form of Christianity to be one that promotes justice and love and uses these virtues as a combined paradigm for accepting people from different ethnic backgrounds (Young 1998:14, 35). He took the standpoint of those on the margins of society and began exploring ways of addressing their concerns from practical Christian perspectives (Bonhoeffer 1995b:6–7). His concern for racial justice was absolute (Williams 2019:384).

According to Williams (2014), the trial of the 'Scottsboro boys' in 1931 was enough to point Bonhoeffer to the plight of black people in American society. Eight of the boys served more than 100 years' jail sentence from the racially motivated verdict given by an all-white jury. Bonhoeffer's reflections on such injustices filled him with a burning desire to make Christianity relevant in society (Williams 2014:29, 32). His encounter with the blossoming Harlem Renaissance offered him a positive starting point (Williams 2014:12). In the Harlem church, he saw an oppressed Christian community who believed that Jesus empathised with their sufferings (Williams 2014:142). Harlem offered Bonhoeffer a tool of theological hermeneutics, couched within the experience of black Americans. He became conscious of how his 'volkish Christianity' used Jesus as a tool to marginalise non-Indo-Europeans (Williams 2014:22–27, 40–51, 139). By the time he left the United States, Bonhoeffer had formulated his 'black dialectical ecclesiology', which considered racism a hindrance to 'authentic Christian discipleship' (Williams 2014:88, 56).

Bonhoeffer taught at the University of Berlin in 1931. However, the fight against racial injustice became his preoccupation after 1933. The Nazi regime was installed and Bonhoeffer could not stand the resultant racial injustice against the Jews (Bonhoeffer 2007). Smith (2011) uses the term 'dehumanisation' to describe the ill-treatment Hitler and the Nazi regime meted out to the Jews:

[T]he Nazis labeled Jews a *Untermenschen* ('subhumans') because they were convinced that, although Jews looked every bit as humans as the average Aryan, this was a facade and that, concealed behind it, Jews were really filthy, parasitic vermin. Of course, Jews did not wear their sub-humanity on their sleeves. They were regarded as insidiously subhuman. Their ostensible humanity was, at best, only skin deep. (pp. 4–5)

Bonhoeffer stood in strict contrast to Nazis' attitude towards the Jews. Hitler combined the 'anti-Semitic' element of Christianity with his political ideology of 'German nationalism to dehumanise the Jews' (Roberts 2005:42). He used disparaging terms such as 'shame culture', 'apes' and

'parasites' to describe Jewish entities, to the extent that the German community attributed all societal evil to the Jews (Roberts 2005:42). Martin Luther's thoughts and writings could probably be blamed for the national hatred against the Jews. He frequently referred to 'Jews as poisoners, ritual murderers, usurers ... devils incarnate and parasites on Christian society' (Luther 2019; Roberts 2005:42).

Bonhoeffer observed that German Christianity followed the same race-inclining theology as in America. God was portrayed as an Indo-European who delighted in the marginalisation of people from non-Indo-European races (Williams 2019). German Christianity was acquainted with state domination, even imbibing the state's racist policies (Bonhoeffer 1995b:30). Bonhoeffer's experience of racism in America made him sensitive to the plight of the marginalised. He used this sensitivity as a weapon to recuse himself from this racialised theology to recognise the threat that racism presented to the Christian community (Williams 2019).

Bonhoeffer had to renounce subtle anti-Semitic thoughts passed on from Martin Luther to him in his training as a Lutheran pastor. He resolved to remain independent of the dominant racialised theology in German Christianity. Instead of showing hatred towards the Jews, he remained sympathetic. Perhaps his encounters with Jews attuned him towards compassion for them. He had Jewish friends, classmates and in-laws. In addition, his grandmother's advocacy for the Jews established a Jewish-favourable legacy within his family (Roberts 2005:43).

Bonhoeffer justified his social activism on this ground:

[I]f a drunken driver drives into a crowd, what is the task of the Christian and the Church? To run along behind to bury dead and bind up the wounded? Or isn't it, if possible, to get the driver out of the driver's seat? (cited in Olson 2017:1)

Rankin (2006) describes him as:

[O]ne of the first as well as one of the bravest witnesses against idolatry. He understood what he chose when he chose resistance ... He was crystal clear in his convictions and young as he was ... he saw the truth and spoke it with a complete absence of fear. (p. 115)

Bonhoeffer openly declared his opposition to Nazism at the beginning of Hitler's rulership (Stern & Sifton 2013). Bonhoeffer cautioned German citizens against supporting a leader who could mislead them on public radio. He called upon the Christian community to oppose Hitler's persecution of the Jews (Marcus 1990). He claimed it was not enough for organised Christianity to 'bandage the victims under the wheel, but [it] must jam a spoke in the wheel itself' (Bonhoeffer 1991:127). Describing his quest for social justice, Mengus (1992) wrote:

He spoke to me about the tragic fate of the German people, whose defects, and values he knew; he said to me that it had cost him a great effort to desire his [country's] defeat but that it was necessary ... He said that as a pastor he considered his duty not only to console or to take care of the victims of exalted men who

drove madly a motor-car in a crowded street, but also to try to stop them ... He said that in this case, he hoped to face death without fear, being convinced it was for the sake of the right and the Christian faith. (p. 37)

This concern underpinned his conception of the nature of humanity expressed in his dissertation *Sanctorum Communio* [Communion of Saints]. His notion of the 'communal-social character' of humanity permeates the *Sanctorum Communio*. He argued that faith and action are inseparable: 'to believe is as much as to say: to find God, his grace and the community of Christ already present. Faith encounters a being which is prior to the act' (Bonhoeffer 2009a:127–128, 132–133). This implies that the individual and other human beings in the community share the same status. The person, community and God are interrelated in this shared status. He wrote:

[T]he person, as a synthesis of act and being, is always two in one: individual and humanity. The concept of the absolute individual is an abstraction with no corresponding reality. (Bonhoeffer 2009a:127–128, 132–133)

Bonhoeffer believed that people actualise themselves in the community. When detached from the community, the person has no means of flourishing. Individuals become self-conscious by recognising the dignity of others in the community. His notion of the communal-social character of the person can be a basis for understanding contemporary racial issues.

Causes of racism

Bonhoeffer thought that racism is the consequence of sin. Sin isolates human beings from the community. It makes individuals think and act in ways that foster their self-interest at the cost of the other. Sin denies cooperative relationship that enhances both individual and collective well-being. He stated that:

[B]ecause he [the sinful human being] is alone, the world is 'his' world, his fellow men have sunk into the world of things, God has become a religious object, but the man himself has become his own creator, his own master, and property. (Bonhoeffer 2009a:156)

'That he should now begin and end with himself in his cognition is only to be expected, for he is utterly by himself in the falsehood of naked self-lordship' (Bonhoeffer 2009b:136). Sin separates the 'I' from the 'Thou', imputing no dignity to the 'thou' (Bonhoeffer 2009b:71–72; cw. Green 1999:93). Individuals get preoccupied with their self-importance and regard others as 'objects'. Recognising the dignity of the 'Thou' is not a human task. It is God who makes both the 'I' and 'Thou' dignified (Bonhoeffer 2009b:163).

Consequently, a genuine 'I' and 'Thou' relationship is created by God and maintained in a relationship with him. Sin dissolves this relationship, breeding voluntary isolation. This isolation creates tensions between the 'I' and 'Thou' (Bonhoeffer 2009b:163). The tension manifests in various ways, including selfishness and affirmation of 'I' and all that

belongs to it, at the cost of the 'Thou', and all that belongs to it (Bonhoeffer 200b:163). Thus, sin is a deprivation of the 'Thouness' of other human beings and all correspondence with the isolated and supra-selfish 'I' (cited in Doyle 2021:78).

Remedy for racial injustice

From Bonhoeffer's perspective, the church has the resources to deal with racial injustice effectively. The church must intensify efforts to reach all the members of the society, regardless of their ethnic background. It must forever seek ways to make the gospel relevant to the marginalised. The evils of isolation have afflicted the marginalised, who crave community bliss. A church founded on the principle of inclusion and fellowship will minister to the needs of the haves in society and address the concerns of the have-nots. He wrote:

[T]here is no modern power that is basically more open to the Christian gospel than the proletariat. The living proletariat knows only one affliction, isolation, and cries out, for one thing, community ... (Bonhoeffer 2009a:202)

In the church, people from different racial backgrounds become 'I' and 'Thou'. The Holy Spirit works in every member to see the other as a moral agent, emphasising the proper 'I-Thou' relationship. Bonhoeffer (2005) claimed:

[G]od does not want me to mold others into the image that seems good to me, that is, into my own image. Instead, in their freedom from me God made other people in God's own image. (p. 95)

Consequently, members from different racial backgrounds become truly 'Thou' because they bear God's image. Bonhoeffer (1995b) believed human dignity resides in God's image:

[T]he "image of God" is universally shared in equal portions by all men ... There is no graded scale of essential worth. Every human being has etched in his personality the indelible stamp of the creator. Every human must be respected because God loves them. (p. 4)

This divine ethos of racial relations can be beneficial for healing the sharp racial divide that continues to plague contemporary societies. Bonhoeffer may not have experienced racial injustice as it is experienced in contemporary society; however, his experiences against hostile racial relations can address racial injustices in contemporary society. His attitude towards racism shows how the Church can utilise religious resources to deal with racial injustices. Bonhoeffer (1995b) thought that grace requires sacrifice:

Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock. Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ ... Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son. (p. 45)

For Bonhoeffer, faithfulness to God must transform social freedom and justice into civil courage to deal with the isolation that creates and sustains racism. Such transformation is the responsibility of each believer. Every believer has the duty of going beyond peaceful vocabularies. Beyond the

discussions, every believer must engage in the righteous action of unseating corrupt socio-economic institutions that cause suffering for the marginalised. Each believer must facilitate transformational sentiments and attitudes towards positive racial relations in society. Bonhoeffer (2012) claimed:

Christianity stands or falls with its revolutionary protest against violence, arbitrariness, and pride of power and with its plea for the weak. Christians are doing too little to make these points clear rather than too much. Christendom adjusts itself far too easily to the worship of power. Christians should give more offense, shock the world far more than they are doing now. Christians should take a stronger stand in favor of the weak rather than considering first the possible right of the strong. (p. 169)

His concern re-echoes the goal of liberation theology – using the Christian faith as an instrument to disengage socio-economic structures that create and sustain poor and violent racial relations and encouraging attitudes that actively engage society to provide equitable socio-economic structures for all persons. Barger (2018) stated that the quest for equitable treatment of all persons emerges from:

[A] heightened awareness of religion's role in perpetuating inequality. The hallowed walls of religious institutions no longer ensconced God ready to sanctify the North American way of life. Under pressing political demands, God's dwelling place had moved to urban slums, consciousness-raising groups, and revolutionary strategy meetings. (p. 13)

Bonhoeffer's life is a demonstration of such righteous action against racism. He contributed to attempts to overthrow the Nazi regime. He considered Hitler and all he stood for as an enemy against a peaceful German society. For him, Hitler represented a societal evil that needed to be eliminated from society. Bonhoeffer believed he would receive a pardon from God for assassinating such a personification of evil in society. His life and works against the Nazi regime suggest the need to use some form of extreme measures to deal with societal evil such as social injustices. The purpose of such moral action is to replace evil social entities and institutions with equitable social structures and entities. Bonhoeffer argued that every Christian is required to create and maintain justice at all costs (Seban 1998).

Racism, anti-Semitism and white racism may be independent terms, but the notion that people should be treated preferentially or otherwise based on their skin colour underpins them (Cone 1999:185). Just as German Christianity became complicit with its racialised communal life, Christianity has become complicit with racism in westernised societies. Most attempts at understanding racism in the Christian communal life explore its reasons rather than placing much-needed emphasis on the fact that that God does not endorse racialised communities. Cone (1999:130) had observed that 'progressive white theologians, with few exceptions, write and teach as if they do not need to address the radical contradiction that racism creates for Christian theology.' Bonhoeffer's approach is to use the correct gospel to interrogate racial paradigms in the Christian community. Indeed, such a task would not be easy, but it must be pursued regardless of the cost (Halbach 2020).

Conclusion

Social injustices from racism continue to distort human relations in contemporary westernised societies. Racism has segregated humans into superior and marginalised races. The superior race wields social and economic powers in society. The marginalised race protests abusive attitudes from the superior race, leading to ongoing racial tensions in westernised societies. The Black Lives Matter global protests against racism summed up the height of such racial tensions in postmodern times.

Racial tensions disrupt social life in unimaginable ways. Accordingly, most Christian denominations renounce racism in their official statements. Generally, these official statements condemn racism for being sinful, heretical, idolatrous and contrary to God's design and plan for humanity. However, the near silence of the Christian community on recent racial tensions in westernised societies raise doubts on effective ways Christians can deal with racism. Verbal condemnation of racism in the strictest sense is good, but a corresponding action that deals with racism is better.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's attitude towards the abusive treatment of black people in the United States of America and Jews in Germany combines verbal condemnation with effective social action to deal with racism. For Bonhoeffer, faith and action cannot be divorced from each other. He claimed that the Christian faith engages Christians in a relationship with God and other humans. The trio's interrelatedness provides a shared status that defines humanity – a communal social character. This communal social character paves the way for individuals to actualise themselves. It sets forth respect for the dignity of other individuals as the sole means to self-consciousness.

Conversely, detaching oneself from the community leads to personal failures. Racism is evil because it isolates the individual from other individuals in the community. It makes the isolated individual feel they are more important than others. Racism distorts God's design, by which all human beings are considered a united family. Bonhoeffer calls on all Christians to transform freedom and faith into civil courage to deal with racism. Every Christian has a moral duty to deal with the isolation that racism imposes on society.

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