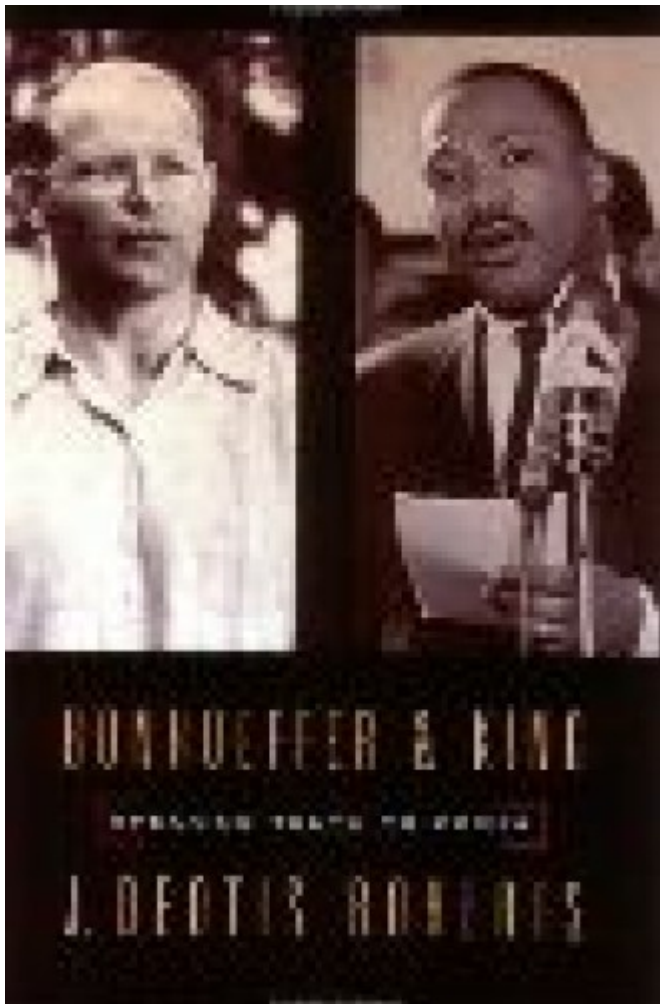


Bonhoeffer and King

reviewed by [Willis Jenkins](#) in the [December 11, 2007](#) issue

In Review



Bonhoeffer and King: Speaking Truth to Power

J. Deotis Roberts

Westminster John Knox

In his comparative study of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King Jr., Deotis Robert presents striking parallels in the biographies and theological commitments of

the two activist-theologians. Each gave his life in a resistance movement led by a dissenting church struggling against a racist regime. Each critiqued the Protestant liberalism of his seminary teachers because of his concern for transformative Christian witness. Each eventually found his gospel commitments propelling him into collaborations well beyond the conventional church. Both were martyred at age 39.

It is especially fitting that Roberts should pursue this discussion, for he participated in civil rights work, attended to the emergence of black theology after the King years, and taught about the reception of Bonhoeffer by liberation theologians. Roberts can therefore narrate his own experience as he brings together Bonhoeffer and King and interprets their legacy for Christian social thought. It makes sense also that Roberts locates the most important point of continuity between the two in their politically charged views of church experience. Bonhoeffer rooted political resistance in the social church first described in his *Sanctorum Communio*, says Roberts, while King developed a resistance movement from the social experience of the black church. For both, a politically embodied church empowered them to speak truth to violent powers.

As Roberts puts Bonhoeffer and King in contemporary context by reflecting on his own theological journey, he makes the case for reading Bonhoeffer in order to better understand King. Roberts recounts as a personal inheritance the reception of King in black theologies and the importance of Bonhoeffer for liberation theology. Both perspectives, says Roberts, direct contemporary readers to discern God's presence as they confront human powers.

For example, Roberts uses Bonhoeffer's role in the anti-Hitler conspiracy to pose questions to King from later black theology: How is suffering politically constructive? How can redemptive passivity actively do justice? Without entirely vindicating Bonhoeffer's choice to "put a spoke in the wheel," Roberts suggests that Bonhoeffer's theological ethics may help interpret the full promise of King's nonviolent practical action where the movement's lived theology seems to outpace his homiletic explanations. And in turn, Roberts uses King's lived theology to interrogate Bonhoeffer's turn from pacifism to an assassination plot: Why abandon nonviolence? What practical form does the church's liberating praxis assume?

Bonhoeffer and King sometimes reads like a compilation of lecture notes; some allusive paragraphs seem to anticipate more expansive classroom discussions. Roberts lets the mutual interpretation occur mainly by juxtaposition, and his

presentation invites a range of further analyses.

Any joining of Bonhoeffer and King must wrestle with a glaring difference: Bonhoeffer's commitment to the social church moved him from pacifism toward violence, while King's commitment moved him from gun owning to creative nonviolence. Knowing how to make sense of that apparently divergent movement would help us better understand the two figures' enduring commitment to Christian peacemaking and political witness. Unfortunately, Roberts is silent about the conversion-like experiences that both Bonhoeffer and King had at decisive moments.

Articulation of the theological relationship between the two versions of Christian peacemaking would in turn aid in establishing a clearer relationship between Bonhoeffer's confessing church and King's movement church. Roberts never claims outright that King's practical action should be read as an embodied instance of Bonhoeffer's "religionless Christianity," but his comments suggest the hypothesis. Perhaps the civil rights movement can be seen as a lived instance of Bonhoeffer's final vision, which he wrote about while in prison, of an arcane, worldly church.

And then there is a more general question about the church experience that Roberts finds at the center of each leader's resistance theology. Bonhoeffer and King maintained their church-driven political hopes even as they grew increasingly frustrated with complicit institutional churches. Both were killed on the margins of the public church, yet both continued to speak as if from the center. How did the social crises in Germany and the United States press them to revise or intensify their respective understandings of church? In the face of these martyrdoms on the margins, where should contemporary Christians look for the political experience of the witnessing church?

Deotis Roberts has done both academy and church a great service by initiating formal study of the connections between two lives whose resonance has informed so many private conversations.

Willis Jenkins is editing an anthology of essays on Bonhoeffer and King (forthcoming from Fortress).