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*The Finkenwalde Years (1935-1937):  
Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Response to Racism in Nazi Germany*

ABSTRACT: *This article explores Dietrich Bonhoeffer's response to racism during his time as head of the Finkenwalde seminary (1935-1937). The author argues that Bonhoeffer's rejection of hero worship, a form of nationalism promoted by Nazi-supporting Christians, guarded against twisted theology and racist assumptions. Ultimately, the seminary's position against hero worship was grounded in its christological understanding.*

KEYWORDS: *modern history; Germany; National Socialism; Finkenwalde seminary; German Christians; Dietrich Bonhoeffer; racism; hero worship; Christology; lectures*

*Introduction*

The rise of National Socialism in 1920s Germany fostered racial prejudices that soon infiltrated the country's Protestant church. Using rhetoric and, since 1933, legislation to revive nationalism on a large scale, the Nazi party encouraged racism in all its forms. Obedience to the government caused many churches to join the Nazis in rejecting certain groups of people, particularly Jews, and the pressure exerted by the state on church leaders led to the promotion of racial discrimination in communities of faith. While various Christian groups supported the Nazis' vision for their country's future, there were pastors who registered their objections, among them the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) who heavily criticized the church in Germany for its acceptance of Nazi ideology. Bonhoeffer had been aware of the Nazis' racial prejudices long before the 1935 Nuremberg Laws arrived on the scene, and he viewed the state's actions against the Jews as a direct threat to the church's integrity. Not only did Bonhoeffer speak out against the acceptance of Nazi ideology in the church, he taught aspiring pastors and young theologians how to do the same.

In 1930, Bonhoeffer studied abroad at Union Theological Seminary in New York. During this year, his views on race, nationalism, and the person of Christ evolved dramatically. Yet, it was not his academic training at Union that changed his ideological and theological perspectives, but rather his solidarity with the African American community in Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church which he attended regularly. In *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance, Theology, and an Ethic of Resistance* (2014), Christian Ethics scholar Reggie L. Williams details the impact of Harlem on Bonhoeffer's Christology: "Bonhoeffer found that black Christians identified black suffering with Jesus's suffering."<sup>1</sup> Williams's work recognizes Harlem as the catalyst that centralized Bonhoeffer's thought and convictions around a theology of Christ standing in the midst of the suffering—a theology of the broken, a theology of the cross. Along with seeing Christ standing

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<sup>1</sup> Reggie L. Williams, *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance, Theology, and an Ethic of Resistance* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014), 25.

among the oppressed, Bonhoeffer's experience in Harlem "gave him unique insight into nationalism as the racialized mixture of God and country embodied in idealized Aryan humanity."<sup>2</sup> Williams previews Bonhoeffer's rejection of racism in Germany but remains focused on 1930 Harlem and does not follow Bonhoeffer's understanding of Christ and racism into the context of Nazi Germany.

Major works in American scholarship address Bonhoeffer's take on racism<sup>3</sup> but do not analyze the specific periods in Bonhoeffer's life when he explicitly confronted issues of racism in Germany. One such time period were the Finkenwalde years. Between 1935 and 1940, Bonhoeffer lived in Finkenwalde, a small town outside of Stettin and near the Baltic coast. He first moved to Finkenwalde to teach at an underground theological seminary, in operation from 1935 until 1937, and he remained there until 1940. Theologian Peter Frick, in his monograph *Understanding Bonhoeffer* (2017),<sup>4</sup> includes two statements that justify this present article. Frick asserts, firstly, that, "during his time in Berlin, London, and Finkenwalde, Bonhoeffer was able to recognize with utmost clarity that anti-Semitic legislation by the Nazi government had grave theological consequences for the church."<sup>5</sup> Thus, in the context of his broader discussion on Bonhoeffer and racism, Frick alludes to the idea that Bonhoeffer understood the problem of Nazi racism while he was at Finkenwalde. Frick concedes, though, that "this is not the place to discuss the details of this phase of Bonhoeffer's life and struggles."<sup>6</sup> Frick claims, secondly, that "Bonhoeffer scholars have largely neglected the 'Finkenwalde Bonhoeffer'."<sup>7</sup> While many of Bonhoeffer's writings have received increasing attention, his primary writings from the Finkenwalde years, volumes fourteen and fifteen of the Bonhoeffer corpus, have drawn comparatively less interest. Frick states that the "neglect" of these volumes is "colossal,"<sup>8</sup> especially considering that together they make up twenty-two percent of the primary sources pertaining to Bonhoeffer's life.<sup>9</sup>

This article is a product of my ongoing research project which surveys and analyzes Bonhoeffer's response to racism in the church during his time at the Finkenwalde seminary between 1935 and 1937. It is my aim to shed light on Bonhoeffer's own theological and ethical development in response to racism

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<sup>2</sup> Williams, *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus*, 139.

<sup>3</sup> Williams, *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus*, and Josiah Ulysses Young III, *No Difference in the Fare: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Problem of Racism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), are two of the most recognized works on Bonhoeffer and racism in American scholarship.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Frick, *Understanding Bonhoeffer* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017; Waco: Baylor University Press, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> Frick, *Understanding Bonhoeffer*, 192.

<sup>6</sup> Frick, *Understanding Bonhoeffer*, 192.

<sup>7</sup> Frick, *Understanding Bonhoeffer*, 47.

<sup>8</sup> Frick, *Understanding Bonhoeffer*, 47.

<sup>9</sup> Frick, *Understanding Bonhoeffer*, 47-48.

during this time period. Practically speaking, identifying the key theological underpinnings in Bonhoeffer's worldview may help the church today adopt similar perspectives that may produce positive social outcomes. Drawing from over five-hundred pages of Bonhoeffer's Finkenwalde lecture materials, it is my objective to explore how Bonhoeffer understood racism and how he taught his students to theologically reject racist assumptions. To show the significance of Bonhoeffer's doctrinal rejection of racism during this time, I place the theology of the Finkenwalde seminary in dialogue with the theology of Nazi-supporting Christians who promoted racist sentiment. I argue that Bonhoeffer's rejection of hero worship, a form of nationalism promoted by Nazi-supporting Christians, guarded against twisted theology and racist assumptions. Ultimately, the seminary's position against hero worship was grounded in its Christology which emphasized the suffering savior as the only one truly worthy of worship.

### *I. Confronting Hero Worship*

Two years after his return home from studying abroad in New York, Bonhoeffer witnessed the establishment of the Nazi state. In 1933, Adolf Hitler became Germany's chancellor, and he envisioned a thousand-year *Reich* (empire) that would restore the glory of the German nation after the conclusion of World War I and the humiliating Treaty of Versailles. National Socialism was Hitler's vehicle to achieve this glorified Germany, with blood/race (*Blut/Rasse*) and soil/living space (*Boden/Lebensraum*) as its central ideals. To achieve this, all of Germany had to be unified under the National Socialist worldview. Hitler aggressively pursued this end through the systematic process of focusing all levels of German society on National Socialism. Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's *Reich* Minister of Propaganda, masterminded this process known as *Gleichschaltung*, namely, the switching of German society into the same gear as National Socialism.<sup>10</sup> Newspapers, education, music, art, and all other forms of German culture were brought under the influence of Nazi ideology. This had direct implications for the church.

It is likely that Hitler himself anticipated a national church united under the banners of blood and soil.<sup>11</sup> He took active steps to transform the nature of the church by endorsing a group of Nazi-supporting Christians known as the "German Christians" or the German Christian Faith Movement.<sup>12</sup> This minority group gained extensive political influence and quickly began to change the structure of the church. Even though they were supporters of the Nazi state, the German Christians had their own views about racism, Christ, and the church, all of which existed independently from their desire to achieve recognition from Nazi leaders. Holocaust historian Doris L. Bergen suggests that "the notion of race as

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<sup>10</sup> Victoria Barnett, *For the Soul of the People: Protestant Protest against Hitler* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992; reprinted 1998), 30.

<sup>11</sup> Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich in Power, 1933-1939* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 223.

<sup>12</sup> All further mentions of "German Christians" refer to this specific group of Christians who supported the Nazis and do not refer to other Germans who were Christians during this time.

the fundamental truth of human life played a role for German Christians comparable to that of the Bible in traditional Christian teaching.”<sup>13</sup> National Socialism’s racist sentiments and hatred of the Jews was deeply embedded in the German Christians even before the rise of the Nazi state. Theologian Mary M. Solberg argues that “ideologically, the German Christians outdid the Nazis.”<sup>14</sup> By merging Nazi thought with their distorted theology, they placed the God of the universe in direct opposition to the Jews. By the mid-1930s, their twisted doctrine was infiltrating Germany’s theological training grounds – the university.

For those of Germany’s aspiring pastors who saw Nazi ideology as problematic and the mixing of National Socialism and Christian doctrine as categorically impossible, there were few resources to which they could turn. In response to the Nazi-tainted theology taught in the universities, as well as the need for theological and pastoral training unaffected by Nazi ideology, the “Confessing Church” (*Bekennende Kirche*), a rival group of the German Christians, established five preachers’ seminaries, including Bonhoeffer’s seminary at Finkenwalde. These seminaries allowed aspiring pastors to receive theological education and ministry training that was dissociated from the state-mandated theology taught in the universities. Eberhard Bethge (1909-2000), a student at Finkenwalde who developed a close relationship with Bonhoeffer, recalls that, “protected by their relative obscurity, the new seminaries were able to turn themselves into remarkable power centers of theology.”<sup>15</sup> Although the Finkenwalde seminary was situated in a remote location, far away from the Nazi regime’s constant propaganda, it had no desire to abandon the troubles of the time. Rather, it was to train pastors how to respond to issues in the church and in society.

In its historical context, the Finkenwalde seminary was far more than an alternative theological training ground. It was active resistance against the state’s mission to bring the church under the banners of nation and race. In the words of the former president of the International Bonhoeffer Society, H. Gaylon Barker, “Finkenwalde was envisioned as an alternative community prepared to withstand the temptations of Nazi ideology. It was a deliberate act to preserve the church and its proclamation.”<sup>16</sup> Not only was it a place of preservation, it actively engaged

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<sup>13</sup> Doris L. Bergen, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 23.

<sup>14</sup> Mary M. Solberg, in *A Church Undone: Documents from the German Christian Faith Movement, 1932-1940*, ed. and trans. Mary M. Solberg (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 41.

<sup>15</sup> Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography: Theologian, Christian, Man for His Times*, trans. Eric Mosbacher, Peter and Betty Ross, Frank Clarke, and William Glen-Doepel, ed. Edwin Robertson, revised and ed. Victoria Barnett (Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2000; first published in German: 1967), 420.

<sup>16</sup> H. Gaylon Barker, “Editor’s Introduction to the English Edition,” in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 14: Theological Education at Finkenwalde: 1935-1937*, trans. from the German ed. (ed. Otto Dudzus and Jürgen Henkys, in collaboration with Sabine Bobert-Stützel, Dirk Schulz, and Ilse Tödt), ed. H. Gaylon Barker and Mark S. Brouck, trans. Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: Fortress

against the positions and ideals of the German Christians. As Bethge recalls in his monumental Bonhoeffer biography, “during the 1935 summer term Bonhoeffer began by considering a few of the general problems that were central to the controversy of that time, going on to demonstrate that the decisions against the German Christians and their neutral henchmen were grounded in the confessional writings. Today it is difficult to convey the excitement of those classes.”<sup>17</sup> Bethge’s comment shows that these classes were more than educational. The students questioned the Nazi state and the teachings of the German Christians, and continued their educational pursuits even after the seminaries were declared illegal. The very existence of the Finkenwalde seminary was an act of rebellion. It was a rebellion against the German Christians, the *Gleichschaltung* of the Nazi state, and Hitler’s race and space policies. Not only that, it was a rebellion against the hero worship of the German Christians, the foundation of their religious racism.

To the modern reader, Bonhoeffer’s response to racism at Finkenwalde may not be entirely obvious. However, understanding Bonhoeffer’s view on the relationship between racism and nationalism may facilitate this. In his “Essay on the Confessing Church and the Ecumenical Movement,” Bonhoeffer emphasizes that the church must go beyond the dividing lines of nations and races:

That no distinction was made here between the political and the ecclesiastical spheres merely proves the unprecedented absence of independent thinking on the part of the church. The fact, to which both the New Testament and the confessional writings attest to the fullest, namely, that the church of Christ transcends rather than stops at national and racial boundaries, has been much too easily forgotten and disowned under the onslaught of recent nationalism.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to his critique of the church marching in lockstep with state ideals, Bonhoeffer’s comment on racism is directly tied to Nazi nationalism. Bonhoeffer perceived that racism in the church was a direct result of the nationalism propagated by the Nazi state. This suggests that Bonhoeffer’s understanding and rejection of racism was bound to his understanding and rejection of nationalism promoted in Nazi Germany and accepted by the German Christians. Hero worship was central to the German Christians’ nationalist worldview and, by extension, the root cause of their racism. The hero worship of the German Christians was categorically rejected by the Finkenwalde seminary.

Bonhoeffer’s and his students’ response to racism is best understood when we place the Finkenwalde seminary and the German Christians in a dialogue over the issue of hero worship which was the foundation of the German Christian’s racism. The concept of hero worship or hero praise is mentioned several times in the Finkenwalde lectures, but the most explicit discussion occurs in a specific lecture,

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Press, 2013; first published in German: Gütersloh: Kaiser Verlag/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1996), 1-46, here 34.

<sup>17</sup> Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 444.

<sup>18</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Essay on the Confessing Church and the Ecumenical Movement,” in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 14: Theological Education at Finkenwalde: 1935-1937*, ed. Barker and Brouck, trans. Stott, 393-412, here 395.

a consideration of the appropriate themes to be preached on the *Volkstrauertag*, the German Memorial Day (observed in mid-November on the second Sunday before Advent). In this lecture, Bonhoeffer states, “we owe it to Christ not to place human heroism and human sacrifice side by side with Christ. We owe it to those who were killed in action not to turn them into idols, which God would then zealously shatter.”<sup>19</sup> The seminarians understood the problem of placing competing heroes side by side with Christ. This lecture emphasizes the damaging consequences of placing human heroism next to Christ; accordingly, Christians should never place human heroes, or any heroes, on the same level as Christ.

The German Christians, however, were lifting up cultural heroes, placing them on a pedestal, and promoting their worship and praise. This ultimately distorted their view of Christ. The German Christians’ hero worship was directed toward three distinct saviors that were interconnected: hero worship of their land—Germany—which they saw as a salvific land; hero worship of the people of their race—the German *Volk*—which would be used by God to redeem the world; and hero worship of their leader—the *Führer* Adolf Hitler—who, to them, stood as the mediator between Germany and the God of the universe. These three forms of the German Christians’ hero worship helped establish their racist views. Bonhoeffer refuted this racism by teaching his seminarians to theologically reject the German Christians’ underlying forms of hero worship. The implications of this theological struggle are revealed in the first object of hero worship: the land.

The German Christians praised the land of the German nation as a special land, one with a divine purpose and plan. Perhaps this was influenced by the concept of the *Sonderweg*, Germany’s special path in history. Even though this was an influential idea across the German nation, the German Christians ratcheted it up and took it to extremes. Some German Christians saw the place of Germany as divinely imbued with a power to rescue the world. In 1935, Julius Leutheuser, a German Christian pastor, completed a work titled “The German Community of Christ: The Path to the German National Church” (*Die Christusgemeinde der Deutschen: Der Weg zur deutschen Nationalkirche*),<sup>20</sup> which states that

we felt that the battle for the rebirth of Germany was a battle for the rebirth of the whole world. We could believe again that Germany is the heart of the world and that the destruction of Germany would mean the destruction of the world, and the salvation of Germany, the salvation of the world.<sup>21</sup>

For the German Christians, Germany, the place, the land, was more than merely a location, it was the central point of God’s salvation for the world. The world would

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<sup>19</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “On Memorial Day [Volkstrauertag] on Reminiscere Sunday, and on John 15:13–14 and Romans 5:6–8, 10a,” in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 14: Theological Education at Finkenwalde: 1935–1937*, ed. Barker and Bocker, trans. Stott, 760–766, here 765.

<sup>20</sup> Julius Leutheuser, “The German Community of Christ: The Path to the German National Church,” in *Church Undone*, ed. and trans. Solberg, 321–335.

<sup>21</sup> Leutheuser, “German Community of Christ,” 333.

be redeemed by this place. For the world to succeed, Germany had to succeed. Hope for Germany was hope for the world. The land was more than a location, it was a hero, it was a savior. For anyone to criticize the land was a great ill. Meanwhile, the seminarians at Finkenwalde conceptualized their relationship to the German land differently, and it was grounded in their theology.

To Bonhoeffer and the students at Finkenwalde, the land had little importance. This can be seen in Bonhoeffer's lecture, "The Space of the Pastoral Offices and Gifts and of Christian Life." Bonhoeffer provides a definition of the church community in the world: "the church community is the living space of a colony of foreigners."<sup>22</sup> He elaborates that, while "as a colony they do indeed participate in the same earth, in the same earthly laws of life, this earth does not belong to them; they are not as much at home there as are the natives."<sup>23</sup> The church community, according to Bonhoeffer, "can never be bound by the world."<sup>24</sup> The Finkenwalde seminary taught the theological assumption that the church was not ultimately made for the world. Although the church participated in the world, the world was not the church's inheritance. The notion that the land of Germany had an inherent heroic ability to "save the world" had no place at the seminary.

Not only did the German Christians elevate the land, they also praised the people of the land, the Aryan Germans, the *Volk*, as those divinely ordained to bring about God's plan and purpose on the earth. The German *Volk* was seen as a special people. The writings of the German Christian pastor Leutheuser contend that "the Lord of the nations has fashioned our people out of soil, blood, and destiny, to mature and become the people of the revelation of the triumph of his kingdom on earth."<sup>25</sup> To Leutheuser, the Aryan Germans were God's "salvation-people" who "will carry on his Son's struggle, the struggle of the eternal Christ, the struggle of light, the struggle for the rebirth of the world out of faith in the Heavenly Father and his kingdom, until the end of the world."<sup>26</sup> German Christians viewed themselves as members of a "salvation people," a heroic people called by God to bring about his divine plan and further his heavenly decrees. The Finkenwalde seminary countered this argument.

In one of Bonhoeffer's lectures on homiletics (i.e., sermon writing), this notion of the Germans as special people, defined by their race and blood, is refuted. Bonhoeffer argues that "the appropriate form of existence for the church, a form commensurate with the truth of the sermon, is not solidarity with the people [*Volksverbundenheit*], but discipleship, obedience to the commandments of Jesus

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<sup>22</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The Space of the Pastoral Offices and Gifts and of Christian Life," in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 14: Theological Education at Finkenwalde: 1935-1937*, ed. Barker and Brocker, trans. Stott, 464-474, here 472.

<sup>23</sup> Bonhoeffer, "Space of the Pastoral Offices," 472.

<sup>24</sup> Bonhoeffer, "Space of the Pastoral Offices," 473.

<sup>25</sup> Leutheuser, "German Community of Christ," 335.

<sup>26</sup> Leutheuser, "German Community of Christ," 335.

Christ.”<sup>27</sup> While the German Christians claimed that God had made (them) a special people, the seminary responded that the church was not to concern itself with such claims but rather focus on obedience and discipleship. Bonhoeffer, in the same lecture, emphasized that the church “is not at all expected to find its existence in the ethnonationalistic [*völkisch*] element or any other such entities.”<sup>28</sup> According to Bonhoeffer, the church community found its identity, purpose, and mission in obedience and discipleship, not in the cultural, racial, or national context in which it happened to reside. For Bonhoeffer and his students, obedience belonged to the “Word” (i.e., God). People were never to be elevated. As Bonhoeffer put it: “what [the church] must emphasize is not its proximity to the *Volk* but its alien character in this world.”<sup>29</sup> It was not for the church to derive its identity, purpose, and mission from the world or the people—the *Volk*—of the world. Rather, the church was a community of foreigners, of aliens, in this world.

In addition to praising their own land and people as elements in God’s plan of salvation, the German Christians elevated the *Führer* to the status of a hero. They praised Hitler as the savior of the German nation and the German people. In his 1935 book “Christ in Germany’s Third Reich: The Nature, the Path, and the Goal of the German Christian Church Movement” (*Christus im Dritten Reich der Deutschen: Wesen, Weg und Ziel der Kirchenbewegung Deutsche Christen*), the German Christian theologian Siegfried Leffler showed his awareness of the accusations that the German Christians were venerating Hitler.<sup>30</sup> Leffler admitted, “people have often criticized us, accusing us of idolizing Hitler, saying that for us ‘he has taken the place of Christ.’ That has never crossed our minds.”<sup>31</sup> Even though Leffler claimed that Hitler had not replaced Christ, Hitler was serving as a second mediator: just like Christ was the mediator between God and humanity, so Hitler was the mediator between Christ and the German nation. Leffler maintained, “through [Hitler] we were able to see the Savior in the history of the Germans. Hitler stood there like a rock in a broad wilderness, like an island in an endless sea.”<sup>32</sup> To the German Christians, Hitler was the one who had revealed Christ in the history of the Germans; Hitler was the one who had shown the German nation that National Socialism was God’s tool to fulfill his plan on earth; and Hitler had saved the soul of the German people. Thus, the German Christians had Christ through Hitler, Christ and Hitler, but not Christ without Hitler. But perhaps Hitler

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<sup>27</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Lecture on Homiletics,” in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 14: Theological Education at Finkenwalde: 1935-1937*, ed. Barker and Brocker, trans. Stott, 487-509, here 491.

<sup>28</sup> Bonhoeffer, “Lecture on Homiletics,” 491.

<sup>29</sup> Bonhoeffer, “Lecture on Homiletics,” 492.

<sup>30</sup> Siegfried Leffler, “Christ in Germany’s Third Reich: The Nature, the Path, and the Goal of the German Christian Church Movement,” in *Church Undone*, ed. and trans. Solberg, 339-364.

<sup>31</sup> Leffler, “Christ in Germany’s Third Reich,” 346-347.

<sup>32</sup> Leffler, “Christ in Germany’s Third Reich,” 347.

without the Bible? According to Leffler, Hitler “calls us from worship of words, from the cult of the Pharisees, and the Levites, to the holy service of the Samaritan.”<sup>33</sup> To the German Christians, the “Word of God” (i.e., the Bible) was limiting: it did not fully display God’s work in Germany’s past, present, and future. Thus, instead of looking to the Bible, Leffler looked to Germany. There he saw “Christ,” standing among the German people, aiding in their holy crusade to purify Germany from the corrupt races and tainted blood. Germany was being rescued by Hitler, not by the Christ found in Scripture but by a Christ who could be placed into Germany’s history and legacy. The German Christians, according to Leffler, were being rescued by their faithful leader, their hero, Adolf Hitler.

This elevation of a human leader to the level of a heroic figure who could rescue the German nation was also refuted by the Confessing Church’s seminary students at Finkenwalde. “Bonhoeffer’s Lecture Concept for Confirmation Instruction” posed this question: “What is the church-community’s position regarding the worldly authorities?”<sup>34</sup> The response: “[I]n worldly matters, the church-community is subject to the worldly authorities in God’s stead, just as a foreigner is subject to the laws of the host country. But the church-community knows only one Lord whom it obeys in and above all things, Jesus Christ.”<sup>35</sup> The lecture then asked: “[W]hat is the church-community’s position toward unjust authorities?”<sup>36</sup> The response: “[T]he church-community performs without fear the work to which the Lord has commissioned it. It obeys God more than it does human beings. It willingly suffers all punishment and prays for its persecutors.”<sup>37</sup> This question-answer confirmation instruction completely set aside the German Christian’s acceptance of Hitler as a salvific figure. Based on biblical precepts, the Finkenwalde seminary taught that allegiance did not belong to any one earthly leader, but exclusively to a divine leader, the person of Christ.

## II. Bonhoeffer’s Christology

Racism in the German Christian Faith Movement was partially based on the issue of competing heroes, which shaped their Christology. To the German Christians, Doris Bergen asserts, “Jesus was not a Jew [...], and the essence of the Gospel’s message was hatred toward Jews.”<sup>38</sup> This was the “good news” of National Socialism, this was the gospel of the German land, people, and leader. Through this message, through these heroes that they enthusiastically praised and applauded, the German Christians’ teachings about the person of Christ became

<sup>33</sup> Leffler, “Christ in Germany’s Third Reich,” 346.

<sup>34</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Bonhoeffer’s Lecture Concept for Confirmation Instruction,” in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 14: Theological Education at Finkenwalde: 1935-1937*, ed. Barker and Brouck, trans. Stott, 782-814, here 809.

<sup>35</sup> Bonhoeffer, “Lecture Concept for Confirmation Instruction,” 809.

<sup>36</sup> Bonhoeffer, “Lecture Concept for Confirmation Instruction,” 810.

<sup>37</sup> Bonhoeffer, “Lecture Concept for Confirmation Instruction,” 810.

<sup>38</sup> Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 154.

distorted: Christ became the Germanized Christ, the Aryanized Christ, the racialized Christ. To the German Christians, Bergen tells us, Jesus “could not have been a Jew because he opposed the Jews. That argument formed the core of their Christology and allowed them to preserve the figure of Jesus in their anti-Jewish Christianity.”<sup>39</sup> Through the heroes of their day, they constructed an image of Christ that suited their desires and needs. It was a Christ that helped them justify their cause and explain their mission. If they hated races that differed from theirs then “their” Christ could be fashioned to do the same.

It is here that the Finkenwalde seminary’s strongest argument against the German Christians’ hero worship comes to the fore. Bonhoeffer’s Christology definitively rejects racism as a form of hero worship. He and his seminarians viewed Christ as the only one truly worthy of worship. The seminary’s confirmation instructions ask: “[H]ow does Jesus differ from other great persons and heroes?”<sup>40</sup> This question appears to frame Christ as a person or hero who is just different from other great persons and heroes. Yet, the Finkenwalde seminarians’ understanding of Christ does not at all coincide with the heroic Christ described by the German Christians. According to Bonhoeffer, “all heroes come from lowliness and want to be great, while Jesus comes from the heights and wants to be humble. All heroes are human beings and want to be like God, while Christ is God and wants to be a human being. All heroes are born of the earth; Christ is born of God.”<sup>41</sup> Thus, while humans fight for glory, honor, and to be in the place of God, Christ, who is one with God, becomes human. He takes on humanity, while humans strive to take on divinity. Christ is not only humble, he is the suffering savior, the God of the oppressed. And yet, he is God.

This is the seminary’s defining point: Christ, the suffering savior. Christ is portrayed in this light throughout the seminary’s documentation. The confirmation instructions ask: “[W]hat does Scripture say about the suffering and death of Jesus Christ?”<sup>42</sup> The response: “Jesus’s entire life was suffering (hatred, persecution, privation). In this suffering, Jesus bore and suffered God’s curse on our sin.”<sup>43</sup> Christ is the suffering savior. He stands among the suffering, and he acts as a representative who can always relate to anyone who is suffering. He suffers alongside the oppressed, but he also calls the church to suffer with the oppressed and the outcasts. In another lecture, “On Hebrews 4:15-16,” Bonhoeffer states about Christ that, “[w]e have a high priest. The cross is his altar; he himself the sacrifice. He himself offers it up; he himself graciously accepts the sacrifice. He is there for your benefit in everything. He is the co-suffering and the help. He is

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<sup>39</sup> Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 156.

<sup>40</sup> Bonhoeffer, “Lecture Concept for Confirmation Instruction,” 800.

<sup>41</sup> Bonhoeffer, “Lecture Concept for Confirmation Instruction,” 800.

<sup>42</sup> Bonhoeffer, “Lecture Concept for Confirmation Instruction,” 803.

<sup>43</sup> Bonhoeffer, “Lecture Concept for Confirmation Instruction,” 803.

the priest for whom you are searching.”<sup>44</sup> Bonhoeffer continues: “[F]rom his priesthood learn that you, too, are called to priesthood in the church-community. [Cross], that is true co-suffering. Thus does the cross become help.”<sup>45</sup> It is the cross, the suffering savior, the sacrificed Christ that brings comfort to the suffering, and it calls all who stand beneath the cross to also act as co-sufferers with those who are persecuted. This is central to addressing the problem of racism in the church. Christ is not like any human hero or person. The Greek word *ἥρως* (*heros*) denotes human heroes and, at best, demigod heroes, but it cannot denote the only one who is both fully human and fully divine: Christ. Christ transcends heroes. His suffering is that of God suffering in the form of a human servant. Christ’s suffering, as Bonhoeffer emphasizes, “brings comfort to the suffering” and calls the church to follow his example by engaging in “true co-suffering.” “True co-suffering” alongside those who are neglected or persecuted is a direct response to any and all forms of racism.

This Christology was central to the Finkenwalde seminary, and it was the grounding theme that allowed their rejection of racism in the context of their time. H. Gaylon Barker has explored Bonhoeffer’s Christology in great detail, and he argues that “in the sermons Bonhoeffer preached during [Finkenwalde], there is a thoroughgoing christocentric orientation to his message.”<sup>46</sup> But this is not just the case for Bonhoeffer’s sermons at Finkenwalde: according to Barker,

[w]hen Bonhoeffer turns to his lectures, we see the same theology in operation. His focus is not turned to other matters, but remains narrowly defined by the presence of Christ, the theme that had its foundations and origins in *Sanctorum Communio*. Whatever the subject, it is viewed through the lens of Jesus Christ. In both his approach to homiletics and pastoral care, for example, there is a christological focus, providing both the orientation for and content of his remarks.<sup>47</sup>

Bonhoeffer’s Christology as taught at the Finkenwalde seminary reveals the importance of how the person of Christ is interpreted. Not only that, it shows that this Christology was the strongest form of resistance to the Nazis’ ideological and racist views. The Christology of Finkenwalde was the foundation of the seminarians’ rebellion, their rejection of the Nazi state, and their theological response to the German Christians. Their view of the person of Christ resisted the heroes of their day and guarded against a distorted view of Christ.

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<sup>44</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “On Hebrews 4:15–16,” in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 14: Theological Education at Finkenwalde: 1935–1937*, ed. Barker and Brocker, trans. Stott, 364–366, here 366.

<sup>45</sup> Bonhoeffer, “On Hebrews 4:15–16,” 366.

<sup>46</sup> H. Gaylon Barker, “The Cross of Reality: The Role of Luther’s *Theologia Crucis* in the Development of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Christology” (PhD diss., Drew University, 2004), 286. Barker’s dissertation has been published as *The Cross of Reality: Luther’s Theologia Crucis and Bonhoeffer’s Christology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015).

<sup>47</sup> Barker, “Cross of Reality,” 288.

### Conclusion

The Finkenwalde seminary's rejection of racism was based on its teaching of Christ as the suffering savior among the suffering, the only one truly worthy of worship. This view of Christ differed greatly from that of the German Christians. In this historical time in the 1930s, "the church had come perilously close to transforming itself into a national church that honored the Teutonic gods of blood, soil, and conquest."<sup>48</sup> While the German Christians publicly promoted their racist theology, praising their national heroes—*Reich*, *Volk*, and *Führer*—without question, the seminary at Finkenwalde stood up against worshipping these heroes. Bonhoeffer's rejection of racism at the seminary was not complex. As Reggie Williams has put it: "Bonhoeffer did not advocate that disciples perform miracles of healing, but that they recognize Christ hidden in suffering as the concrete nature of the Gospel's good news."<sup>49</sup> The single most important issue that the modern church must confront in response to racism is not the level of diversity in its congregations, nor its ability to speak out against racial injustice in the community. Though these are vital, the modern church must first assess its christological understanding and decide whether it wants to follow heroes—or Christ.

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<sup>48</sup> Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey, "Editors' Introduction to the English Edition," in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 4: Discipleship*, trans. from the German ed. (ed. Martin Kuske and Ilse Tödt), ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001; reprinted 2003; first published in German: Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1989), 1-36, here 9.

<sup>49</sup> Reggie L. Williams, "Developing a *Theologia Crucis*: Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the Harlem Renaissance," *Theology Today* 71, no. 1 (2014): 43-57, here 57.