

John Anthony Moses. *The Reluctant Revolutionary: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Collision with Prusso-German History.* New York: Berghahn Books, 2009. xxi + 298 pp. \$90.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-84545-531-6.



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Commissioned by Benita Blessing (Oregon State University)

Working from assumptions of the peculiarity of German history and the centrality of "the religious dimension to German history," historian John A. Moses combines his knowledge of history and theology to explain Dietrich Bonhoeffer as "a peculiarly German Lutheran kind of revolutionary" (p. xi). In *The Reluctant Revolutionary: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Collision with Prusso-German History*, Moses hopes to provide "interested people, particularly clergy in the Anglo-Saxon world" with a description of Bonhoeffer's "historic achievement" set in the broader context of modern German political and religious history, including the presence of antisemitism in German society (p. xvii). Moses is particularly concerned to locate Bonhoeffer within the social milieu of the *Bildungsbürgertum*, the educated bourgeoisie (especially professionals and civil servants), keepers of German *Kultur* who "looked to the state as the guarantor of order and progress, trusting more in the tradition of 'reform from above' than in initiatives from below" (p. 1). Though he sees Bonhoeffer as a reluctant revolutionary, Moses argues the

young German theologian was nonetheless a revolutionary for four reasons. He abandoned the traditional Lutheran two-kingdoms doctrine that shaped German Protestant deference to the state. He embraced a "conditional pacifism" that led him to reject war as one of God's instruments of order in creation. He advocated tyrannicide--the assassination of German leader Adolf Hitler--and he abandoned the traditional religious antisemitism of the German churches.

Moses breaks up his analysis of Bonhoeffer's context, achievements, and legacy into nine chapters. The first sets the stage for the rest of the book by explaining the Prussianization of Germany. Dating back to the Reformation wars and reinforced by the philosophy of Hegel, military force was "sanctioned as an expression of divine will for the life of the state" (p. xix). For Moses, this German political tradition reached its apex with Otto von Bismarck's *Realpolitik* and the 1871 unification of Germany. Next, Moses describes Bonhoeffer's upbringing in an upper-class, academic family. As a member of the *Bildungsbürgertum*,

Bonhoeffer was, so Moses argues, shaped by the towering figure of Martin Luther, the idea of the state as God's instrument on earth, the subordination of the German church to the German state, the prestige of the military, and the importance of Prusso-German aggrandizement. Here we see Bonhoeffer gradually escaping the influence of "war theology" and the theology of the orders of creation, thanks to family influences and time spent abroad in Spain and America.

In his third chapter, Moses traces the development of German antisemitism from Luther to Hitler, asserting that "anti-Semitism became paradigmatic for the *Bildungsbürgertum*," in large part due to a "mystical, certainly spiritual, understanding of the [German] racial community" transmitted through the "complex process of *Bildung*," that peculiarly German form of education (pp. 58-61). Despite this, asserts Moses, families like the Bonhoeffers were liberal and not anti-semitic--atypical of their peers in the *Bildungsbürgertum*. Moreover, as Moses argues in chapter 4, Bonhoeffer's experiences outside Germany, his family influences, and his growing theological radicalism "immunized him against the possibility of seduction by Hitler" (p. 74). Moses goes on to describe Bonhoeffer's theological formation, including his experiences at Union Seminary, with pacifism, and with the black churches in New York. Moses also explains Bonhoeffer's entrance into the ecumenical movement and his pastoral ministry among working-class Berliners. In order to argue for Bonhoeffer's uniqueness, Moses delves into Bonhoeffer's early writings, most notably the 1932 Berlin lecture "The Right to Self-Assertion," which Moses describes as "a radical rejection, not only of the Hegelian schema but also of the entire Western capitalist system and the kind of ruthlessly competitive society that it produced" (p. 90).

Chapters 5 through 8 are the heart of the book. In the fifth chapter, Moses delves into Bonhoeffer's role in the German Church Struggle. The

author portrays the Nazi movement as a religion which hoped to co-opt the German churches, tracing "Bonhoeffer's crucial role, to 1937, in trying to purify the German church of [antisemitism] and in opposing the doctrine that Hitler must be regarded, despite his obvious criminality, as a legal head of state" (p. xix). The "evil of Nazism" and the "Jewish question" are taken up through analyses of several well-known Bonhoeffer writings: "The Leader and the Individual in the Younger Generation," "The Church and the Jewish Question," and "The Bethel Confession." Here Moses also describes the pro-Nazi "German Christian Movement" and Bonhoeffer's attempt to have the confessing church recognized by the ecumenical movement. Chapter 6, "The Ethics of Conspiracy," deals with Bonhoeffer's "betrayal of the *Bildungsbürgertum*" through his entrance into the conspiracy against Hitler and his development of an "ethics of responsibility." Moses probes writings like *The Cost of Discipleship* and "After Ten Years" in order to explain how Bonhoeffer embraced a radical, personal discipleship to Jesus Christ, elevating his individual conscience above the values of his social class. Moses then tackles the delicate matter of "Bonhoeffer and the Jewish Question" (chapter 7). He argues that "Bonhoeffer radically revised the traditional anti-Jewish theology of Christian-Jewish relations," adding that Bonhoeffer asserted "the *interdependence* of Christianity and Judaism" and "emphatically refute[d]" the "old supercessionist idea" (pp. xx, 164). For Moses, if Bonhoeffer's advocacy of tyrannicide made him a political revolutionary, his radical openness to Judaism (as expressed in *Ethics*) made him a theological revolutionary as well. In chapter 8, the author shifts his attention to Bonhoeffer's journey into the German Resistance, drawing on "After Ten Years" and *Ethics* to argue for Bonhoeffer as a "uniquely *German Lutheran* revolutionary" who rooted his hopes for a post-Nazi future not in Anglo-Saxon parliamentary democracy but in divinely ordained state authority. In this way he was closely aligned with members of the Freiburg

Circle of the German Resistance, though Moses is careful to argue that Bonhoeffer did not share the Freiburg Circle's traditional attitude toward Jews. *The Reluctant Revolutionary* does not end with Bonhoeffer's death in 1945. Rather, Moses considers Bonhoeffer's ongoing influence on postwar German church leaders as they grappled with the churches' guilt from the Nazi period and (in East Germany) drew on his ideas as they worked out their relationship with a new, communist dictatorship.

Moses's wide-ranging analysis of Bonhoeffer addresses the many important issues that arise out of the theologian's life and work. That said, following Moses through his discussion of these many themes is not an easy task, because the book is badly marred by a very poor job of editing. There are many typos, formatting inconsistencies (German names, foreign terms, italics, biblical references, etc.), and footnoting irregularities, but most disconcerting is the general disorganization of the text, particularly in the central chapters. There are dozens of references forwards and backwards ("as we will see," "as mentioned above," etc.) and various concepts are routinely introduced, dropped, and picked up again—see, for instance, discussions of the German Christian Movement (pp. 106, 108, 117), of the two-kingdoms doctrine (pp. 107, 111, 133), of supercessionism (pp. 115, 151, 166), of the church finding itself "*in statu confessionis*" (pp. 108, 117), of the "spoke in the wheel" (pp. 107, 111), of the Barmen Declaration (pp. 120, 133), and of the Bethel Confession (pp. 114-117, 150-151). At least twice, striking quotations are repeated within pages of each other, as in the case of the long quotation about the Jews as a "mysterious people" (pp. 110, 112) and the case of the *Bildungsbürgertum*, who "lost both their heads and their bibles" (p. 130) and "lost their heads and lost their Bibles" (p. 133).

More substantially, Moses's discussion of *Bildungsbürgertum* and Bonhoeffer's relationship to his class is somewhat changeable. Early in the

book, these educated bourgeoisie are very much the problem, embracing Prusso-German expansionism, military violence, and antisemitism (pp. 1-2, 11, 22). Moses also locates the intellectual Bonhoeffer family in this milieu, identifying them as "members of the upper bourgeoisie and in every sense of the word *Bildungsbürger*" (p. 30). One page later, however, he reverses field, stating: "There is no doubt the Bonhoeffers were a loyal, patriotic, upper-middle-class German family. It would have been impossible to be otherwise. Nevertheless, as will become clear, they did not share the more extreme attitudes of many of their peer group" (p. 31). Several pages later, Moses reiterates the extremism of the professorial class to which the Bonhoeffers belonged: "Prior to the [First World] war, the element of the *Bildungsbürgertum* that was arguably the most decidedly *deutschnational*, that is, the ultra-patriotic and champions of the 'Prussian solution,' was without doubt the professoriate" (p. 35). The reader is left wondering just what the relationship between the Bonhoeffers, the scholarly community, *Bildungsbürgertum*, and political radicalism really was.

This confusion is heightened as Moses tries to explain the antisemitism of the *Bildungsbürger*. Though Moses asserts that "[antisemitism] became paradigmatic for the *Bildungsbürgertum*" (p. 58), he soon counters that: "not all German professors during the era 1871-1933 were openly [antisemitic]. Some Jews even became professors themselves in this period, but comparatively few. As a rule, German professors accepted Jewish students, and some even fostered them because of their ability, and kept their [antisemitic] convictions to themselves. However, not all members of the *Bildungsbürgertum* were so tolerant" (p. 61).

Shortly thereafter, while concluding the chapter on antisemitism, Moses links the class of professionals and civil servants directly to the "inexorable process" that led to the Holocaust, asserting that "the *Bildungsbürgertum* and their values ... contributed to the shaping of German political

will during the Third Reich" (p. 67). When Moses revisits the topic of antisemitism again in chapter 7, he begins by noting how very different Bonhoeffer was from his fellow *Bildungsbürger* on the issue of the Jewish question. The author attributes this difference once more to Bonhoeffer's family, but now in a way that contradicts most of what he has written about the *Bildungsbürger* as a class: "Crucial in explaining [Bonhoeffer's decision to embrace conspiracy and tyrannicide] was Bonhoeffer's family tradition of upper-middle-class liberalism. Certainly, both sides of his family were *Bildungsbürger* imbued with a high sense of decency and justice that included an abhorrence of all manifestations of discrimination and violence against defenceless fellow citizens, including Jews" (p. 160). Later on the same page, however, Moses returns to his negative image of the *Bildungsbürger* when he writes about their "shared guilt" vis-à-vis Nazism. Finally, a few pages later, Moses concludes, "What is patently clear, then, is that Bonhoeffer opposed the Holocaust on both theological and cultural-historical grounds. He was able to transcend his cultural conditioning as a *Bildungsbürger* and oppose not only Hitler and National Socialism but also his unreconstructed coreligionists" (p. 169).

The result of these many shifts back and forth is the dissolution of the explanatory value of Moses's concept of *Bildungsbürgertum*. Most often *Bildungsbürger* were highly nationalistic and antisemitic, but sometimes they were decent and tolerant. Most often the Bonhoeffers were archetypical *Bildungsbürger*, but sometimes they managed to emancipate themselves from the darker side of their social class. It's all too malleable, and along with the very poor editing, detracts from what could otherwise have been a very useful contextualization of Bonhoeffer's life and theology for the general readers Moses is writing to educate.

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