

## Review

Zimmermann, Jens, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christian Humanism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018), 364pp.

By Archie J. Spencer, ThD

As a theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer stands with a select few significant Protestants, doing their work during a time that some describe as a “Copernican revolution” in theology. The years between the start of WWI and the end of WWII saw the passing away of the Weimar Republic and its Liberal-Protestant theological heritage. The question of what would replace Liberal-Protestantism was much on the minds of Bonhoeffer, his teachers and associates. Indeed, Eduard Thurneysen once wrote to his friend, Karl Barth, in 1915 that, in the light of the biblical, theological and ethical failure of Liberal-Protestant theology, a “wholly other” basis for theology must now be sought. Little did he know how seriously Barth would take this *totaliter aliter*. It was only a few years after, in 1919, that the revolution in theology would land “on the playground of theologians like a bomb,” with the publication of Barth’s first edition of *Der Römerbrief*. Though the theological light cast by Bonhoeffer during these turbulent years was often overshadowed by his erstwhile teacher, Karl Barth, it is Bonhoeffer’s theological contribution that may well stand the test of time. If the writings that Bonhoeffer left attest to anything, it is his capacity to place Christian theology on a wholly new footing, one more suited for a late-modern age. This fact has been confirmed by the massive amount of Bonhoeffer scholarship published in the last few decades. We may add to that list a work that will no doubt become a standard for a theological understanding of Bonhoeffer’s Christology and theological anthropology. Jen’s Zimmermann’s treatment of *Bonhoeffer as a Christian Humanist* will become a ‘must-read’ in the field of Bonhoeffer studies. Furthermore, it makes an excellent *entrée* for Zimmermann’s approaching formal initiation into a theological career, as the newly minted James I. Packer Professor of Theology at Regent College, Vancouver, BC.

In this review of Zimmermann’s book I am not wishing to be polemical and/or oppositional, though I have some methodological questions that give me cause to hesitate. Over all, I find myself in substantial agreement with Zimmermann’s basic thesis that Bonhoeffer’s theological anthropology represents an incarnational/ Christological humanism in one of the very best and most creative ways. Whatever we may wish to call it, ‘Christformation,’ ‘glorification,’ ‘deification,’ (*theosis*), or ‘incarnational Christian humanism,’ there is no question that Bonhoeffer is drawing upon the best sources in the history of theology to shape a

theological anthropology of the most humanizing form possible; that is, from a theological point of view.

What is most remarkable about Zimmermann's work is his capacity to draw together the somewhat disparate thoughts and formulations of Bonhoeffer's theological anthropology in general and Christian humanism in particular, into a coherent and substantial 'theological anthropology.' His connecting of Bonhoeffer to patristic theological anthropology is one of the features of the book that makes for a compelling argument. The phrase "Christian/incarnational humanism" should be taken, after all, as a sub-species of the broader category, "theological anthropology." Offered as it is in other works by Zimmermann, I take "incarnational humanism" as a direct product of a Christian theological view of the human creature, as opposed to some philosophical and/or secular conception of an elevated *humanum* without reference to God. At the end of the day, even such secular conceptions owe something of their original framing to Christianity in a theological and philosophical sense. Zimmermann has done an excellent job of situating himself and Bonhoeffer properly, in relation to some contemporary Catholic and/or secular conceptions of "humanism." I would also agree that, despite all the misunderstanding of the phrase, "Christian humanism," in some Protestant theology, including Bonhoeffer himself, the phrase gains a new cache when refracted through Bonhoeffer's theological anthropology. The three full chapters (2-4) on Bonhoeffer's theological anthropology, and the resultant Christian humanism that emerges, make an ironclad case for this understanding of humanism as Christologically incarnational, participatory, and therefore thoroughly Christian. This is what Bonhoeffer is about anthropologically. These chapters are perhaps the most singular contribution the author makes to Bonhoeffer scholarship. For instance, I can think of no treatment of Bonhoeffer's conception of the *imago dei* that comes anywhere near Zimmermann's thoroughness in this regard.

If the book were to end here, with a merely descriptive treatment of Bonhoeffer's theological anthropology and resulting Christian humanism, it would already be a unique contribution to the field. However, Zimmermann is only half finished at that point. He follows this treatment of Bonhoeffer's theological anthropology with an equally robust assessment of what Bonhoeffer's "Christoformative humanism" meant for Bonhoeffer, ethically, hermeneutically, biblically, politically, and, in contemporary terms, what it means for us. Space does not permit an elaboration here of Zimmermann's most substantive proposals for Bonhoeffer's relevance to contemporary Christian conceptions of what it means to be truly human, but I take the following citation to be summative of the most important moves made between chapters 5-7. Near the beginning of these chapters, Zimmermann poses the ultimate question as to the relevance of Bonhoeffer's fully hermeneutical and biblical Christian humanism as follows:

What does participation in the new humanity established by Christ look like? How should Christians live truly human lives in a world unified by its reconciliation to God, a modern world that is highly complex and full of perplexing problems, whose cross-pressures threaten to fragment the holistic existence promised by God's recapitulation of all things in Christ? How does one combine ecclesial and public existence, church life and civic responsibility? In short, how does a Christian humanist, one who is being renewed in the divine image by God, understand reality and engage life? (p. 183)

Zimmermann recognizes that the answer to these questions can never be straightforward in the complex world we are called to live in as Christian humanists.

However, as per Bonhoeffer, so Zimmermann surmises, the answer looks something like the following:

Becoming human is indeed discipleship, a life characterized by active passivity. Faith, as Bonhoeffer puts it, 'is allowing something to happen and only thereby an activity, and yet neither term sufficiently expresses the mystery' of faith being simultaneously active and passive. In the same way, ethics is both participation in the world reconciled to God in Christ and yet the active realization of this reality. Bonhoeffer called this comportment 'realistic responsible action.' Christian ethics, even though framed by God's creational structures, entails therefore a fundamentally interpretive mode of life, requiring discernment of God's will, involving personal risk to the point of becoming implicated in the messiness of reality's ambiguities. (p. 234)

This answer is not too far off the "command of God" ethics espoused by Karl Barth and is no doubt somewhat indebted to his conception of the momentariness of movement from passivity to activity, depending upon the demands that confront us as Christians in our daily lives and as we encounter Christ. This seems to be confirmed, in my opinion, when in his conclusion, Zimmermann writes:

Based on this Christological ontology, Bonhoeffer is able to guard God's transcendence while asserting the integrity and relative autonomy of creation. Neither simply condoning cultural developments nor automatically suspecting human achievements, joys, and pleasures as undermining godliness, the Christian must live with discernment, pursuing a course of action that most resembles the humanity revealed in Christ. (p. 335)

As I have demonstrated in my own study of Barth's ethics, this "living with discernment," in the light of the Christological grounding of the human is precisely the "space for human action" that marks out authentic Christian humanism. On this score, the student does not stray too far from the master, so that what Zimmermann notes with respect to Barth's influence on Bonhoeffer's biblical and theological hermeneutics also applies to his ethics and, I would say, based on letters that they wrote to one another, to Bonhoeffer's political theology as well.

That the question of Sacrament, and the sacramental nature of the Christological determination of humanity in Bonhoeffer marks their difference in the end does not annul Barth's considerable contribution to Bonhoeffer's theological development. Were one to compare Barth's Christological determination of the human in his doctrine of election with Bonhoeffer's determination of it in terms of an incarnational, sacramental ontology, one would realize that Zimmermann and I would disagree, especially on the relative substance and respective "deepening" of their Christologically driven theological anthropologies and the roots from which they come. I shall not attempt to detail that here. More could be said regarding this achievement on the part of Professor Zimmermann; however, we shall finish by simply noting a few serious hesitations I had while reading the book. These touch on matters methodological and do not, in my opinion, detract from the over-all argument with respect to Bonhoeffer's "Christian Humanism," as Zimmermann describes it, except to say that they might unduly embellish the case for Bonhoeffer's Christian humanism. I will not attempt to describe these hesitations at length but will simply pose them as questions that the author should consider, in terms of the way he makes his argument. I will mention only three.

First, should one hesitate to read the patristic tradition as relatively unified with respect to Irenaeus' "Christologically" conceived, second Adam grounded, conception of recapitulation (*ca.* 177 AD), as the basis for all subsequent developments in patristic theology, up to and including Augustine's anti-Pelagian works, (*ca.* 425 AD)? For many reasons, I would certainly hesitate to say that this is the case. In fact, I would tend to deny that it is so. To be fair, Zimmermann does at one point say that similarity between east and west on *theosis* is not to be read as identification, but he sometimes argues as if it were so. He privileges Irenaeus' theological anthropology in respect even to that of Augustine, whose theological anthropology is decidedly different than that of Irenaeus and certainly more determinative of subsequent theological developments in that respect. I suspect Zimmermann will run afoul of patristic and Augustinian scholars on this score. The differences between Augustine and Irenaeus on anthropology are substantial, his few citations from Augustine to substantiate a *theosis* reading of his theological anthropology notwithstanding, Zimmermann would need to offer a much more

substantial treatment of Augustine to make this case. I suspect he would find that such a case cannot in the end be sustained.

Second, with regard to the question of *theosis*, I would hesitate to describe the Protestant reaction to it as “misguided” and that eastern theological anthropology “wrongly attributes deification” to the human creature “as a share in God’s single essence.” Protestants reject the use of *theosis* on two counts. It is only referred to once in Scripture (II Pet. 1:14), and therefore does not provide adequate biblical grounds as a doctrinal descriptor for Christian perfection. To be sure, one could argue that other doctrines, such as the Trinity, do not receive direct reference in Scripture as well; nevertheless, one certainly can argue that these doctrines pervade the Scriptures in a substantial way. The doctrine of *theosis* does not. Assuredly a doctrine of Christian perfection does, but it is almost everywhere referred to in Scripture as either “sanctification” or “glorification.”

Additionally, the term “deification” as a translation of “*theosis*,” Protestants think, risks confusing the subjects, humanity and God, whether or not they are distinguished adequately in Eastern theology. The term is not rejected because it teaches a human share in the single divine essence, in actuality; it is rejected as running the risk of being misunderstood or unnecessarily tending that way. The terms “sanctification” and “glorification” have served both Catholics and Protestants as adequate descriptors of the process of being transformed into the image of Christ, vis à vie, his humanity. Why should we prefer “*theosis*” when these terms seem to suffice? So thinks the Protestant.

By and large I find myself in general agreement with Zimmermann’s treatment of Bonhoeffer, even as I think he overstates the case and is methodologically out of step here and there.

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