



## Archives de sciences sociales des religions

152 | octobre-décembre 2010  
Bulletin Bibliographique

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### Søren DOSENRODE, (ed.), Christianity and Resistance in the Twentieth Century. From Kaj Munk and Diedrich Bonhoeffer to Desmond Tutu

Leiden-Boston, Brill, coll. "International Studies in Religion and Society", 8, 2009, VII + 290 p.

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#### Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/assr/22606>  
ISSN : 1777-5825

#### Éditeur

Éditions de l'EHESS

#### Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 31 décembre 2010  
Pagination : 9-242  
ISBN : 9782713223013  
ISSN : 0335-5985

#### Référence électronique

Terry Rey, « Søren DOSENRODE, (ed.), Christianity and Resistance in the Twentieth Century. From Kaj Munk and Diedrich Bonhoeffer to Desmond Tutu », *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* [En ligne], 152 | octobre-décembre 2010, document 152-42, mis en ligne le 12 mai 2011, consulté le 01 mai 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/assr/22606>

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## RÉFÉRENCE

Søren DOSENRODE, (ed.), *Christianity and Resistance in the Twentieth Century*. From Kaj Munk and Diedrich Bonhoeffer to Desmond Tutu, Leiden-Boston, Brill, coll. "International Studies in Religion and Society", 8, 2009, VII + 290 p.

- 1 Part of Brill's impressive series in *International Studies in Religion and Society*, *Christianity and Resistance in the Twentieth Century* is a collection of ten essays and a short introduction and an even shorter conclusion that profiles several notable Christian leaders who took stands of resistance or protest to various forms of human rights abuse and state sponsored persecution. Of the eight persons profiled, six were resisters to the evils of Nazi Germany, the others being Oscar Romero and Desmond Tutu. The omission of Martin Luther King from the volume is as glaring as it is disappointing, as is, perhaps more so, the absence of any examples of women resisters. The authors are all Europeans, six of them Danish scholars, and the prevailing academic disciplines at work here are theology, ethics, and biblical studies. The book assumes the existence of God and the inherent worth of Christianity. The editor, Søren Dosenrode, is direct in stating what the book does *not* purport to do, which is to answer the question of whether Christians should or should not engage in active, passive, violent, or non-violent resistance in the face of

oppression. Instead, the collective intention of the volume is to “describe and analyze persons of the 20th century who were placed in a situation where they did not merely ‘turn the other cheek’, but felt that they had to resist a regime; a decision which had consequences for all of them”(3). At this, the book succeeds admirably.

- 2 The first two chapters lend important biblical and historical context for the ensuing eight Christian resistance biographies: Dosenrode’s deft summary of influential positions on violence and resistance in church and Western intellectual history, and Johannes Nissen’s careful analysis of Romans 13 and other relevant biblical texts and related questions in early Christianity. These are both very effective chapters, though I found myself regretting Dosenrode’s mentioning only the American and the French cases in discussing “The Great Revolutions”—one could argue that the Haitian Revolution was even “Greater” than those, and that “to understand the larger history of democracy,” as Laurent Dubois has recently demonstrated, “we must expand our historical vision and incorporate, as a central part of this history, the ideals and actions of those who produced emancipation from within slavery” (*A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2006, 431). In a related vein, I found myself regretting this book’s general lack of consideration of *race*, which is every bit a pressing issue in Christianity as is resistance, the two categories so often impellingly related. Wasn’t Hitler’s “master plan” fundamentally about race, after all? Wasn’t the anti-Semitism at its heart largely the production of Christians? These minor criticisms aside, Chapters One and Two serve well as a background for the ensuing eight biographical chapters. Also helpful are the appendices that feature at the ends of a couple of the contributions and the summary chart that Dosenrode provides in the concluding chapter, which diagrams the eight featured resisters, their rationale for resisting, and their stance on violence.
- 3 The eight resisters portrayed, more or less in chronological order, are Franz Jägerstätter (by Erna Putz), Kaj Munk (by his son, Arne Munk), Henning von Tresckow (by Annette Mertens), Dietrich Bonhoeffer (by Ulrik Nissen), Paul Gerhard Braune (by Ole Hartling), Lajos Ordass (by Enikő Böröcz), Oscar Romero (by Paul Gerhard Schoenborn), and Desmond Tutu (by Peter Lodberg). These portrayals are all informative and theologically oriented. Along the way, much of the substantive material is quite engaging. Among the highlights are the analyses of Jägerstätter’s heart-wrenching correspondence with his wife; Munk’s theological and political vision as reflected in his sermons and plays; Bonhoeffer’s ethical deliberations between pacifism and violence; the Catholic bishops’ failure to act against the Nazi’s euthanasia campaign; excerpts from Romero’s four pastoral letters and the entirety of his 1980 letter imploring US President Jimmy Carter to halt the sale of weapons to the Salvadorian military; and Tutu’s incorporation of the indigenous African philosophical concept of *ubuntu* (“a person is a person through other persons”) in his theological reflections about apartheid and reconciliation.
- 4 Taken together, the essays offer a rich platform from which the important question of Christianity and resistance can be explored. The ethical and theological reflections behind the decisions that cost most of the featured resisters (namely Bonhoeffer, Jägerstätter, Munk, Romero, and Tresckow) their lives are presented carefully and informatively, without exception. As such, the book is a most welcome contribution to one of the most important questions that can be asked of Christians: What does Jesus’ exhortation to “turn the other cheek” mean? Sadly, we live in a world that is rife with human rights violations and thoroughly unjust political practices. Given that one in every

six persons alive today is a Christian, if their collective interpretation of Jesus' exhortation is that one must always be passive, then there is much less a chance of humanity building a better material world. But if their interpretation is balanced with some assertive recollection of Jesus' turning over tables in the Temple, then there is a much better chance. Of course, as the essays in this handsome volume demonstrate resoundingly, there is no single prevailing interpretation of these and related teachings. Or, as Dosenrode puts it in the final chapter "Instead of a Conclusion," "there are no easy answers to the question for those involved. The very few persons analyzed in this book do not allow for any type of generalisation" (277).

- 5 Though several of the offerings in this book are quite elegantly written, there are numerous places where the diction is awkward. This is surely a function of the hegemony of the English language in the academy, which forces scholars in many parts of the world to write in a language that is not their native tongue, quite a challenging task, as any of us who has tried to do so knows. In the present case, it also results in the occasional use of terms that would be considered objectionable in some circles (e.g, "handicapped"; "unlike their Moslem, predominately more martial colleagues"; "the South Africans") and occasional awkwardness in expression that at times makes for bumpy reading. But these shortcomings are more speed bumps than obstacles to the collective narrative's flow, and the excellence of the research behind the book makes it easy to overlook such minor flaws.
- 6 More troublesome, though, is that on a conceptual level and a theoretical level this book's range is rather limited, drawing for its argumentation almost exclusively upon ethics, theology, and biblical studies. It thus misses an exciting opportunity to converse with a rich body of literature in the sub-discipline of "resistance studies." There is a peer-reviewed journal in this sub-discipline, several ample and well conceived and executed volumes, a resistance studies network (based in Scandinavia!), resistance studies sites on Facebook and wikipages, and literally hundreds of important articles and books devoted to the topic. Resistance is at the heart, furthermore, of the intellectual projects of the most influential philosopher of our age, Michel Foucault, and the most influential social scientist, Pierre Bourdieu, not to mention its enjoyment of a central place in postcolonial studies, postmodernism, philosophy, feminist studies, cultural studies, political science, international relations, anthropology, sociology, queer theory, literary theory, subaltern studies, and critical race theory. As Lila Abu-Lughod points out, indeed, the question of resistance has been "one of the central problems in recent years in the human sciences," where, she adds, the subject is too often romanticized, as is sometimes the case in the volume here under consideration ("The Romance of Resistance", 41). But all of this is simply ignored in *Christianity and Resistance in the Twentieth Century*, which is as regrettable as it is unfortunate, and the book offers only a meager definition of the term "resistance": "the opposition to something with which one disagrees, specifically 'the state' or 'the government' (8)." Ensuing distinctions between "legal," "illegal," "passive," and "active" resistance add only very little texture to the discussion, on the whole. Why is the category of resistance important? Who determines its importance? What is its relationship to power? Why do scholars care so much about the subject? Anyone seeking help with these and related important questions will not find much here (for a suggestive contrast, see the excellent introduction by Klaas van Walraven and Jon Abbink in the 2003 edited anthology *Rethinking Resistance: Revolt and Violence in African History*).

- 7 Nevertheless, this remains a good book and a welcome addition to the literature. All of the biographies of resistance that it contains are about heroic and inspirational human beings of great importance, and in each case the biographical chapters could effectively serve well as introductions to the lives in question. “How is the Christian supposed to act when his or her government misbehaves? Is he or she expected to suffer or to resist?” (1). These crucial questions are raised at the very outset of this volume, and though there is admittedly “no conclusion, and no attempt to answer the question of whether Christians should resist or not” (5), there is abundant and intellectually nutritional food for thought here to promote a fuller understanding of these and related issues. The examples of resisters that Dosenrode and his colleagues engagingly discuss are powerfully instructive and in themselves make this book well worth the effort.