

Bonhoeffer did not provide simplistic answers in response to his searching questions. He opened up new perspectives and thus invites us, as he did Bethge, to enter into a conversation that helps us to go with him but also to go beyond him. Take, for example, his comments on holding on to Christ in order to experience the polyphony of life in its fullness. Or his reflections on recovering “aesthetic existence” within the church as a sphere of freedom within which art, education, friendship and play are encouraged and developed. Or on overcoming the dualisms that threaten our existence through a renewed vision of what it means to be both Christian and human. I do not have to stress how significant these and many other insights are in a world where religious fundamentalism vies with secularism and scientism to capture hearts and minds, and where economic injustice continues to threaten social stability.

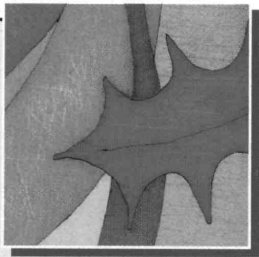
There is a further reason for the enduring significance of *Letters and Papers from Prison*, the clue to which is found in an essay Bonhoeffer wrote as a Christmas present for his friends at the end of 1942, shortly before his arrest. Published in *Letters and Papers* as a prelude and linking his prison writings to his previous work on ethics (volume 6 of the Dietrich

Bonhoeffer Works), the essay contains Bonhoeffer’s reflections on the previous ten years of life under Hitler’s rule. One passage is particularly challenging for those of us who, like Bonhoeffer, come from more privileged backgrounds and seek to be of some use in serving the needs of the world. Bonhoeffer wrote: “We have for once learned to see the great events of

Bonhoeffer’s concern was for the future of humanity, beset by oppression and war.

world history from below, from the perspective of the outcasts, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed and reviled, in short from the perspective of the suffering.”

Seeing things “from below” not only helps to explain why Bonhoeffer became involved in the plot against Hitler but also indicates how he understood the future of the church. This becomes clear in “Outline for a Book,” where he wrote:



Emilie M. Townes 5 picks Essential theology books of the past 25 years

***Katie’s Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community.* By Katie Geneva Cannon.** (Continuum, 192 pp., \$24.95 paperback.) Cannon’s collection of essays serves as an excellent introduction to womanist ethics and theology. Readers are treated to literary criticism and social commentary as Cannon looks at the nature of theological reflection through the lens of black women’s lives and witness.

***Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion.* By Charles H. Long.** (Davies Group, 246 pp., \$24.00 paperback.) Long challenges us to think through the categories we use in our understanding of religion and to consider the role that theology can play in religious reflection. This tough read is well worth the effort, as Long helps expand our theological imagination with his thorough exploration of the methods used in religious studies.

***The Spirituality of African Peoples: The Search for a Common Moral Discourse.* By Peter J. Paris.** (Fortress, 208 pp., \$19.00 paperback.) Paris focuses on African spirituality to explore the religious and moral values of traditional African religious worldviews. He then shows how these values were retained and modified in African-American moral and theo-

logical reflection. This is a must read for those who are seeking to understand how religious values travel from one continent to another.

***Earth Community, Earth Ethics.* By Larry L. Rasmussen.** (Orbis, 376 pp., \$30.00 paperback.) Rasmussen’s volume is one of the first books to bring together religion and ecology. He ably synthesizes religion, ethics and environmental science to help us see the ways in which caring for the earth and all that live on it is a deeply theological charge we must keep.

***Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology.* By Kathryn Tanner.** (Fortress, 152 pp., \$17.00 paperback.) Tanner provides us with a historically informed systematic theology to help us explore the meaning of Christian faith in our lives. She makes accessible complex trinitarian language to explore the Christology, methodology, anthropology and eschatology that challenge academicians and laity.

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