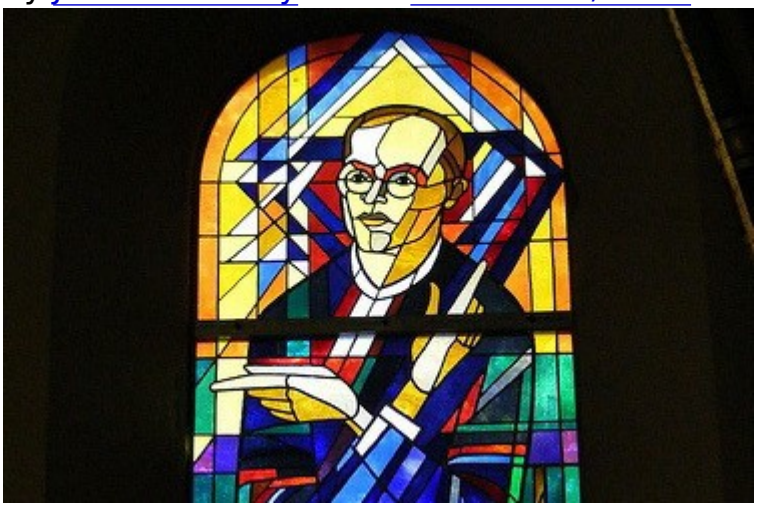
Theology for dark times: Rereading Letters and Papers

by John de Gruchy in the October 19, 2010 issue



St. Johannes Basilikum, Berlin. Image by Flickr user Felix O, licensed under Creative Commons.

I first read Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison* in 1960 while completing my theological studies in South Africa. That edition, the first in English translation, was published in 1953, and because it immediately aroused widespread interest, it was reissued in 1959. I still have my copy, its tattered condition bearing testimony to its frequent use. There have been several subsequent English editions since then, each an improvement on the one before. The most widely known, the expanded edition of 1971, is now regarded as a classic; my copy of it is beyond repair.

Now before me lies the brand-new English translation published by Fortress Press as volume 8 in the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works series. Little did I dream when I first read *Letters and Papers from Prison* that I would one day become its editor, a task that has taken five years with the help of a remarkable team of translators as well as the knowledge and skill of the general editor of the series, Victoria Barnett, and the support of the chair of the editorial board, Clifford Green.

Based on the new German critical edition and weighing in at 750 pages, the eighth volume of the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works is 300 pages longer than the already expanded 1971 edition of *Letters and Papers from Prison.* In addition to new primary material, there are extensive editorial notes, bibliographies and appendices reflecting the greater knowledge we now have of Bonhoeffer's legacy, his family and the historical context in which the letters, papers and poems were written. Two other volumes of the Works provide additional background and collateral reading. Volume 16, *Conspiracy and Imprisonment: 1940-1945,* shows that the prison letters between Bonhoeffer and his friend Eberhard Bethge were part of an extensive correspondence that began well before Bonhoeffer's imprisonment, while volume 7, *Fiction from Tegel Prison,* contains a drama, a novel and fragments of a story that Bonhoeffer wrote in prison.

Those who are already familiar with *Letters and Papers from Prison* know that it is an intensely personal collection. I vividly recall how tears welled up in my eyes as I worked through the last of the letters Bonhoeffer wrote to his parents and those they wrote in return that were never received. I knew, of course, how the story would end—how Karl and Paula Bonhoeffer would lose not only Dietrich but also their son Klaus and sons-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi and Rüdiger Schleicher, all murdered on Hitler's orders shortly before the end of the war. At this time I can hardly read those letters, struggling as I am to come to terms with the death of my own son, Steve, a theologian and scholar in his own right, who tragically drowned at the age of 48 last February.

So the reader of volume 8 of the Works must know in advance that *Letters and Papers from Prison* is no ordinary theological text or compilation of letters and papers. It is a deeply human record of the life of the extended Bonhoeffer family during the final 18 months of the Third Reich, when Berlin was subjected to Allied bombing daily and increasingly threatened by the advancing Russian army. While some members of the family were incarcerated, interrogated and tortured, others struggled to cope with daily life, celebrate family events in the absence of loved ones, live in hope amid the increasingly dire circumstances of the times—and write thoughtful letters about matters both ordinary and extraordinary.

Woven into this story is the subtext of Dietrich's poignant relationship with his fiancée Maria von Wedemeyer, his stimulating discussions with his elder brother, the scientist Karl Friedrich, and his extensive correspondence with Bethge, who would later become his biographer and interpreter-in-chief, as well as custodian and editor

of his literary legacy, of which the *Letters and Papers from Prison* are such a significant part.

I have returned again and again to the pages of *Letters and Papers* in its different formats in search of insight into what it means to do theology today, especially in my own South African context. Whether my interest and inquiry has focused on theological issues, on the renewal of the church and its public responsibility or on history, literature, art and aesthetics, this remarkable collection has always provided food for thought and much practical wisdom for people living in tough and uncertain times. Not all of it comes from Bonhoeffer's own pen, though his voice is clearly the dominant one. And by no means is it all confined to theological matters, though there are scattered references of theological interest throughout.

The unsuspecting reader, like the first recipient, will be taken by surprise on reading Bonhoeffer's April 30, 1944, letter to Bethge, then a soldier on the Italian front. Written just two months before the fateful day on which the attempt to assassinate Hitler failed and Bonhoeffer's fate as a coconspirator was virtually sealed, it is the first of the so-called theological letters that follow each other in rapid succession over the next few months. This is also the period in which Bonhoeffer turned to writing poetry as a way to express more existentially his personal feelings and theological struggles. Perhaps it is this combination of personal struggle and theological reflection that draws the reader into the pages of *Letters and Papers* and speaks to us so powerfully even today in our post-Bonhoeffer world.

What bothered Bonhoeffer as he put pen to paper to test out his theological reflections in his letters to Bethge was the future of Christianity in a post-Christendom Western world disenchanted with religion. These fragmentary reflections were in anticipation of a short book that he was in the process of drafting, an outline of which is in *Letters and Papers.*

Bonhoeffer had in mind those who had turned away from Christianity and from the church because of its intellectual ineptitude and failure to take a stand against Nazism. "Heavily burdened by difficult, traditional ideas," the church was making "no impact on the broader masses." Instead of "being there for others" as Jesus was, it was defending itself, afraid to take any risks for the sake of telling the truth, pursuing justice and standing in solidarity with social and political victims. In short, "Jesus had disappeared from view."

In responding to this situation Bonhoeffer raised several key questions: Who is Jesus Christ for us today? Do we have to be religious in order to be Christian? What is the responsibility of the church in a "world come of age," and how does this affect its structure and liturgical life? As Bonhoeffer pondered such questions, daily reflecting on scripture and praying the Psalms, he also considered afresh the connection between prayer and the struggle for justice, between action and the spiritual disciplines that enable Christians to live fully in the world as free and responsible human beings.

Bonhoeffer's "theological letters" have caused controversy since they were first published, and for good reason. They were labeled radical by some and were misused by others for their own agendas. Readers may ask whether these theological fragments remain as relevant today as they were 60 years ago. It could be argued that the lively debates about hermeneutics that engrossed many in the 1960s and '70s have become relics of a previous generation's theological formation, though anyone familiar with the current "God debate" will likely think otherwise. In any case, Bonhoeffer's ideas have somehow seeped deeply into much contemporary Christian thinking outside of the fundamentalist world, and what appeared radical in his day is now widely accepted. It might also be concluded that Bonhoeffer's inquiry about religion in a "world come of age" is passé in a postmodern global context, where religion has made a remarkable comeback and religious pluralism is, for many, a theological sine qua non.

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 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: "The church is church only when it is there for others." To become such a church, it must learn to serve others, not dominate them; it must confront the vices of hubris and the worship of power, and it must learn to speak in ways that are authentic and genuinely human in the sense that Jesus was truly human.

Earlier Bonhoeffer wrote from prison in a sermon for the baptism of his godson Dietrich Bethge that the church "has become incapable of bringing the word of reconciliation and redemption to humankind and to the world. So the words we used before must lose their power, be silenced, and we can be Christians today in only two ways, through prayer and doing justice among human beings." This, he insisted, required a fundamental reorientation on the part of the church, a metanoia that would lead to vicarious solidarity with a suffering world and would enable the church to proclaim the fullness of life in Christ.

Though written in a historical context that is different from our own, Bonhoeffer's prison writings speak loudly and clearly to our times. Once you probe beneath the surface of the historically situated issues that Bonhoeffer wrestled with in prison, you discover that these issues are perennial to the human condition, and that dealing with them is critical for the future of both Christianity and humanity as a whole.

In one of the letters newly included in this edition of *Letters and Papers,* written to his nephew Hans-Walter Schleicher, dated June 2, 1944, Bonhoeffer wrote that "the most important question for the future is how we are going to find a basis for living

together with other people, what spiritual realities and rules we honor as the foundations for a meaningful human life." That is why his question about the significance of Jesus Christ for us today inevitably led Bonhoeffer to speak of Christ as the "human being for others" and, concomitantly, of the church as existing only for others.

Bonhoeffer did not design his emerging theological project to discover how to preserve Christianity for its own sake, or even to answer his own theological and existential questions, important as they were for him and are for us. His concern was the future of a humanity beset by oppression, violence and war; his desire was that the next generation would inherit not only a more faithful and relevant church but also a more humane and just world.