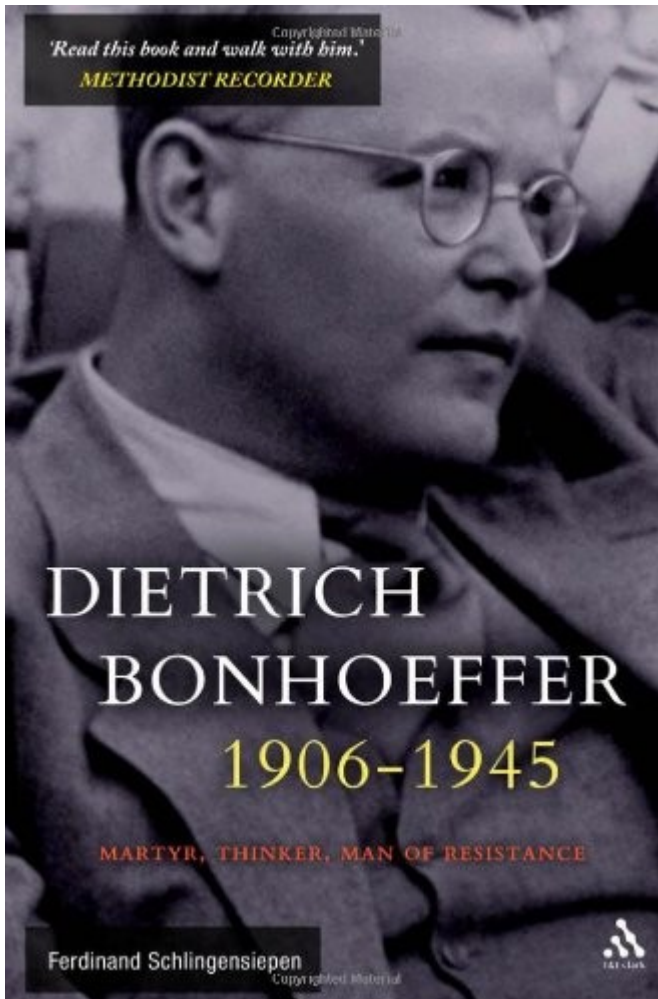


Bonhoeffer demythologized

By [Robert Cornwall](#)

October 21, 2010

In Review



Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906-1945

by Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, trans. Isabel Best
T & T Clark

Dietrich Bonhoeffer has become an almost mythical being, whose legacy everyone seems intent on claiming. From death-of-God theologians to evangelicals to radical antiabortionists, partisans of all stripes have remade Bonhoeffer in their own image.

His life story and theology, however, are more complex than each of these efforts, taken separately, would suggest. The papers and letters that emerged from his time in prison indicate that at the time of his death he had entered into one of the most theologically creative and provocative stages of any theologian in history. The musings of this period have proven fruitful for several generations of theological work.

Bonhoeffer's story has been told most fully by his friend and student, Eberhard Bethge, but Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, who is a theologian, a founder of the International Bonhoeffer Society and was a close friend of Bethge, has provided a new and definitive biography that is full, fair, respectful and theologically sophisticated. Schlingensiepen tells Bonhoeffer's story without [claiming Bonhoeffer for a particular contemporary ideological party or movement](#). He shows Bonhoeffer's life in all of its complexity and makes good use of Bonhoeffer's collected works.

We learn a lot about Bonhoeffer's theological formation. His early focus was on ecclesiology, and although much of his later work was practical in nature, it flowed from this commitment to the study of the church. His involvement in the church struggle of the '30s and then the struggle against Hitler in the '40s pushed him into reconceiving theology for a new age. More than most theologians of his day, Bonhoeffer realized that the old ways of being church and doing theology had begun to collapse—and that something new needed to replace it.

Schlingensiepen's biography honors a man whose legacy remains powerful by demythologizing Bonhoeffer and letting the person behind the myth shine. I would suggest that readers also turn to John Moses's *The Reluctant Revolutionary* (read [my review](#)), which delves more deeply into Bonhoeffer's challenge to the ideological roots of German

nationalism and anti-Semitism, and his postwar reception. Together, the two books give a full-orbed picture of one of the most intriguing figures of modern history and theology.