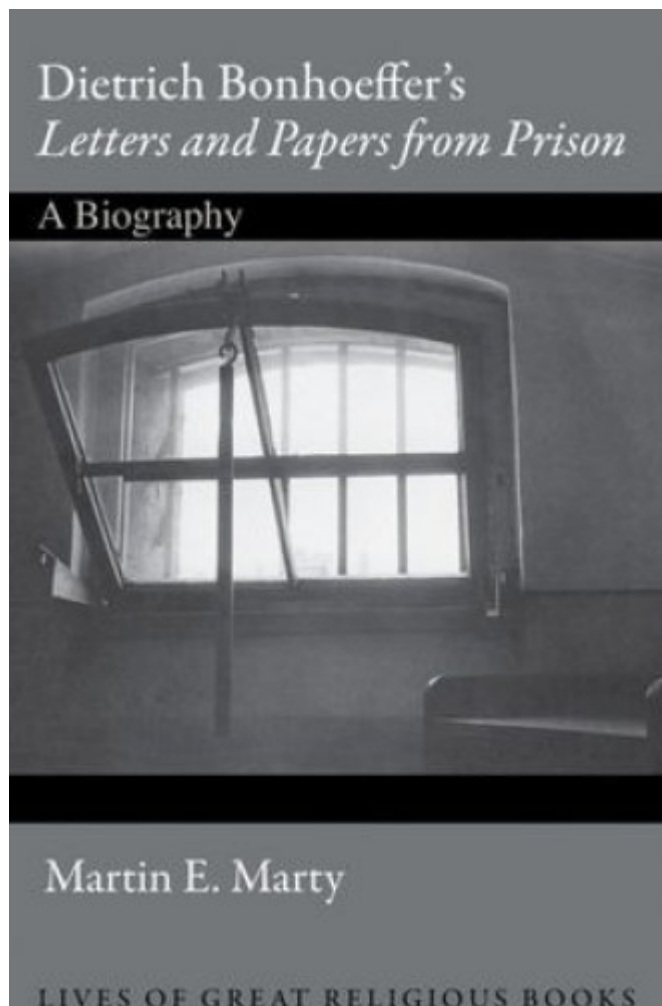


Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Letters and Papers from Prison, by Martin E. Marty

by [Barry Harvey](#) in the [Dec 27, 2011](#) issue

In Review



Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Letters and Papers from Prison

By Martin E. Marty
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Though some of his admirers may find it difficult to believe now, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was not widely known in the years immediately following World War II, save perhaps as one of a band of courageous pastors and theologians in Germany who resisted the Nazi regime of Adolf Hitler. His relative anonymity came to an end virtually overnight with the publication of a collection of his letters and other papers that had been smuggled out of the prison where he had been confined on suspicion of crimes against the state. This correspondence contained a series of provocative notions about the world and the church that generated wave after wave of enthusiastic response, conferring on their author a celebrity (or, for some, a notoriety) that had not been his during his relatively short lifetime. Today, 60 years after the first edition of *Letters and Papers from Prison* appeared, this unusual book, written by an unusual kind of theologian, continues to fascinate new generations of readers.

Thanks to Martin Marty and the Lives of Great Religious Books series published by Princeton University Press, the story of the origin, interpretation and influence of *Letters and Papers from Prison*, long familiar to Bonhoeffer specialists, is now available to a wider public.

As Marty carefully documents, what caught the attention of readers were Bonhoeffer's radical thoughts about the future of Christianity in the postwar world, which appear late in the book. A world come of age that no longer needs the hypothesis of "God," religionless Christianity, and a this-worldly faith capable of living fully in the world *etis deus non daretur*—even if there were no God—these ideas captivated the attention of many for whom the old ideas and institutions of the church no longer seemed adequate. Combined with Bonhoeffer's struggle against tyranny and his tragic death, they earned for the book its status as a classic theological text of the 20th century.

Do these ideas indicate a clear breach in Bonhoeffer's thought, such that late in his life he jettisoned virtually everything that he had previously affirmed and confessed as a Christian? Or is there a continuity between these radical concepts and what he had believed and written before about discipleship, Christology, life together in the church and so on? These questions, which are still widely debated both at academic conferences and in informal settings, justly constitute the main plot of Marty's "biography" of *Letters and Papers*.

The story begins with the extraordinary circumstances of the book's conception and birth. In spite of his imprisonment and at no small risk to himself and the people to whom he wrote, Bonhoeffer managed to maintain a lively correspondence with a number of people, above all with his best friend, Eberhard Bethge. Bethge carefully preserved most of what he received (he was forced to burn the last few pages just before his own arrest), collected additional materials from others after the war, circulated the letters and papers among a small circle of colleagues to see if they merited wider distribution, and only then, after much deliberation and encouragement, published the first edition in 1951, followed by an English language edition the next year.

Marty notes that Bethge only gradually came to the conclusion that these scattered and seemingly random scraps should be published. Though it sounds strange to American ears now, in postwar Germany there were still many who considered Bonhoeffer a traitor because of his participation in the conspiracy against Hitler. Bethge also worried that professional theologians might not take this work seriously, given that Bonhoeffer did not occupy a proper academic post. In addition, he was concerned about the esoteric nature of the book and the fragmentary character of the later letters. The book overcame these obstacles and now stands as a landmark of theology.

After a time Bethge also came to see that *Letters and Papers* was a dangerous book, its unguarded and undeveloped ruminations (intended as trial balloons for his own eyes and maybe a few others') susceptible to multiple and often extreme interpretations. These "creative misuses," as one scholar called them, quickly defined the boundaries within which the book was received, but they also gave to its author a level of visibility that heretofore he had not known. Marty expertly discusses the handful of theologians—among them Hanfried Müller in communist East Germany, John A. T. Robinson in England and Harvey Cox and William Hamilton in this country—who latched on to isolated comments, most having to do with the end of religion and living in a godless world, and used them to great effect to advance their own theological agendas.

More seasoned interpreters of Bonhoeffer, including Bethge, offered corrections to these one-sided interpretations, providing context, filling in lacunae and demonstrating to the satisfaction of most readers that though these fragmentary reflections did represent genuine development in Bonhoeffer's thought, they were nonetheless in line with what he had said and written previously. The various

responses did not dampen interest in the book; as Marty amply demonstrates, the volume continues to attract readers from many traditions, including Roman Catholics and American evangelicals (though the latter typically focus on texts that predate his imprisonment).

Marty also tracks the ways that *Letters and Papers* has found receptive audiences in South Africa, Latin America and Asia and among black theologians in the United States. This reception has not been uncritical, but many continue to discover in the book ideas that resonate with the quest for freedom and civil rights. According to theologian Josiah Young, for example, Bonhoeffer's writings retained marks of the privilege, paternalism and Eurocentrism he inherited from his upper-middle-class formation, but his contention that it is not the religious act but participation in the suffering of God that marks the Christian in the world is still pertinent to the context of the beaten-down African other.

Marty's biography of *Letters and Papers from Prison* is timely, for though we seldom encounter the kind of blatant poaching of Bonhoeffer's statements that occurred in the 1950s and '60s, the fragmentary character of the prison correspondence still invites individuals from a wide variety of ideological positions to conscript his last theological testament for their peculiar causes. Marty's work suffers from no such flaw; if anything, he errs on the opposite side. Other than coming down on the side of continuity with what Bonhoeffer had written previously (which, given the scholarly work done in this regard, is to be expected), he is reticent to hazard an interpretation of the late letters.

Biography can be a powerful genre for theology, as Bethge's classic biography of Bonhoeffer demonstrates. Both the casual fan and the serious scholar should commend Marty for his fine account of Bonhoeffer's most famous and most enigmatic book.