

Book reviews

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A Year With Dietrich Bonhoeffer Edited by Carla Barnhill, (HarperSanFrancisco)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was one of the authentic heroes of World War II.

A German Protestant theologian who spoke out fearlessly against Hitler and participated in an assassination plot against him, Bonhoeffer was hanged on Hitler's orders three weeks before the Nazi dictator committed suicide on the eve of Germany's surrender in April 1945.

Bonhoeffer's fame today rests perhaps more on his political courage than on his theological views. In *A Year With Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, one of a series of books drawing on the writings of significant thinkers, editor Carla Barnhill arranges spiritual exhortations from Bonhoeffer's work into a kind of Christian religious almanac, offering one item for each day of the year.

The dark and tragic political events in which Bonhoeffer was involved are kept largely offstage, alluded to only when useful for making some spiritual point. Under appropriate dates, the reader finds laconic footnotes marking the author's arrest and imprisonment and other pertinent events, but further commentary mainly is left to progressive evangelical minister Jim Wallis, who contributes an insightful introduction.

All sorts of topics are considered in this bite-sized format—the nature of sin and evil, love, peace, forgiveness, Christian community, authority,

judgment and prayer. The tone is elevated and didactic, often highly abstract and somewhat ecumenical in tone.

Taken one daily page at a time, the book doubtless will have more impact than when read straight through over a week or so. It offers a kind of secular breviary for the religiously inclined lay Christian.

Some of Bonhoeffer's bedrock personal religious convictions recur like themes in a musical work—the need for Christians to live their faith actively in the world by tackling its toughest problems, for example. He is contemptuous of those who merely talk a good game.

Perhaps Bonhoeffer's most famous religious coinage, the term “cheap grace,” is the theme for several dates. It means simply praying and going through the Christian motions; “no contrition is required, still less any real desire to be delivered from sin.”

Bonhoeffer showed his contempt for “cheap grace” in the most extreme way when he passed up a post abroad to return to Hitler's Germany, well aware he probably was signing his own death warrant.

He plunged into work with the underground anti-Nazi “Confessing Church” and joined in a failed plot to kill Hitler—surely an extreme act for a man otherwise committed to Christian nonviolence.

But then, he once had written, “It is an evil time when the world lets injustice happen silently,” so he knew what he had to do. A lesser man might have dodged the issue to save his skin.

The 100th anniversary of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's birth passed in February largely unnoticed. He was hanged in the Flossenburg prison camp, just a couple of months after his 39th birthday.

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