

Till the Night Be Past: The Life and Times of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Colleagues,

Guest writer for this Thursday's posting is Dr. Kit Kleinhans, Seminex alum, now Chair of the Department of Religion and Philosophy at the ELCA's Wartburg College in Waverly, Iowa. She reviews a Bonhoeffer book written by her father. "That'll be a dicey job," she said, when I asked her to do it, "to wrap my head around it both as scholar and as daughter." Well, she's done it, and I am pleased. Hope you will be too. Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Till the Night Be Past: The Life and Times of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

By Theodore J. Kleinhans

St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002

Paper. 171 pp. \$15.99.

When Dietrich Bonhoeffer was my age, he'd been dead for 3 years.

Hardly a scholarly claim with which to begin a book review! But then this new Bonhoeffer biography is less a scholarly tome than an inspirational introduction to "the life and times" of this fascinating pastor and theologian who was hanged in a Nazi

concentration camp at age 39.

Why another Bonhoeffer biography, especially given the revised and expanded edition of Eberhard Bethge's definitive volume released by Fortress Press in 2000? The answer lies both in the book's prehistory and in its intended audience. The manuscript that would become *Till the Night Be Past* was first drafted in 1974, when its author, my father, was a student in a Master's program in creative writing (with a "creative nonfiction" emphasis) at California State University, Fresno. Originally intended to introduce young adult readers to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the manuscript failed to attract a publisher in the 1970s, when its subject was deemed to have limited market appeal; it was reluctantly consigned to a file drawer at home, alongside the MFA diploma that marked its completion. A quarter of a century later, in my father's retirement and in response to Bonhoeffer's increased visibility, the manuscript was updated modestly and sent out again, not to compete with the wealth of recent Bonhoeffer scholarship but as a basic introduction for interested, non-specialist readers.

Recognizing Kleinhans' authorial vision and engaging style, Concordia Publishing House is marketing the book under the dual heading "Christian Inspiration / Biography." While the history and politics of Nazi Germany may seem far removed from the life of the average reader, Kleinhans' telling of Bonhoeffer's story focuses on the real human questions with which we struggle, each in our own context: How do I discern what God is calling me to do? How can faith and intellect be reconciled? What does it mean to be a Christian? What is the role of the church in the world? Kleinhans' appreciation for Bonhoeffer's ability to inspire Christians today is expressed most clearly in these final sentences of the book: "He contemplated, he struggled, he matured. Those who read him now can better understand their own searchings and conflicts because he experienced them first" (p.

170).

“Creative nonfiction” is clearly Kleinhans’ forte. His writing is characterized by descriptive detail with a strong sensory appeal, making Bonhoeffer’s “life and times” come alive for the reader. Places and scenes are almost painted across the pages of the text: flowering trees, stormy waves, sights, sounds, and even foods are described with a sense of genuine delight in the created world (a delight shared by the author and his subject). Kleinhans’ earlier popular biographies, Martin Luther, Saint and Sinner (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956) and The Music Master: The Story of Johann Sebastian Bach (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962), exhibit the same evocative style.

Yet this creative approach does not obscure the book’s solid historical and theological grounding. Bonhoeffer’s life and work is situated clearly within the context of pre-war Europe and the rise and fall of the Third Reich; Bonhoeffer’s thought is described with specific reference both to his Lutheran heritage and to the emerging theological conversation sparked by Karl Barth. Dr. Wayne Whitson Floyd, Jr., General Editor and Project Director of the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English language translation project, offered this comment on Till the Night Be Past: “the bibliographical material is dated, but it has the compensating virtue of being written by someone with a broad understanding of Protestant theology and 20th century history” (personal e-mail correspondence, 5/15/02).

Like any book, this one has its weaknesses. Judged on its own terms, it is unfortunate that the author’s very knowledge occasionally overshadows his goal of making Bonhoeffer readily accessible to a general readership. While the meaning of German and Latin terms is usually supplied in the text, a few words are unhelpfully left untranslated. Passing references to

theologians such as Gogarten and Tillich are more jarring to the uninitiated reader precisely because Bonhoeffer himself is so often called simply "Dietrich." The foreword by Dr. Werner Klaen of the Lutheran Seminary in Oberursel, Germany reads awkwardly in English; the phrase "instructor of opponent vicars," for example, conveys little or no meaning to someone not already aware of the alternative seminary training associated with the Confessing Church.

Nevertheless, Till the Night Be Past is a welcome addition to the growing corpus of Bonhoeffer literature. It does not break new scholarly ground, nor was that its intent. Readers already well-versed in Bonhoeffer's life and theology may choose not to spend much time with this little book; but it is an engaging introductory text for those relatively new to Bonhoeffer. It serves as a hearty supplement for those whose appetite was first whetted by the PBS film "Bonhoeffer: Agent of Grace." It might make a nice gift for Bonhoeffer scholars to give to friends and relatives whose own interest in Bonhoeffer is more personal ("Who is this guy you're so excited about?") rather than professional. One can also imagine book groups or adult classes using this text as a basis for discussion about what it means to be a Christian amidst the complexities of our global society.

Given the circumstances of Bonhoeffer's life, much of his work was published posthumously. Here, too, the author mirrors his subject. Till the Night Be Past rolled off the presses in mid-March, two weeks after my father's death and two weeks before what would have been his 78th birthday.

Rest eternal grant them, O Lord; and let light perpetual shine upon them.

Reviewed by Kathryn A. Kleinhans

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