

## Reviews

**Jens Zimmerman and Brian Gregor (Eds.). *Being Human, Becoming Human: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Social Thought*. Eugene, OR.: Pickwick, 2010. (235 pp) [ISBN 978-1-60899-420-5]**

Promptly within introducing this particular collection of essays published in the *Princeton Theological Monograph Series*, a provocative question is posed: ‘Does it not become apparent that human dignity requires a transcendent reference point?’ (p. xi). This question is a central one, which serves as the conditioning question to explore the social and political thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Indeed, the proliferation of wonder and worry as the world wrestles to delimit answers to questions of life, meaning, and flourishing are in response to the panoply of scientific advancement and persisting global atrocities that either constrain or perhaps undermine current conceptions of human being (becoming). Yet, the authors in this compilation are somewhat hopeful that the ‘renewed openness to the voices of religious traditions within academic discussions regarding society and culture’ (xii) will afford the opportunity for Bonhoeffer’s humanistic orientation to not only bear fruit in relation to but also radically reconstruct a vision of responsibility toward the other—‘affirm[ing] human dignity through a recovery of classical culture and ... in harmony with Christian faith’ (p. 3).

The collection of essays is ordered in three sections, which respectively address Bonhoeffer’s humanist orientation, ecclesial concept of sociality, and interrelated themes of discipleship, conformation, and responsibility. These three sections represent a pattern of thought moving the reader through the basis of Bonhoeffer’s humanism through the application of such thought and speech. The question, however, that I asked throughout the

reading is: have the essayists adequately anchored the particular Christian humanism of Bonhoeffer in a theological ground or have they mistakenly relied upon some sort of ambiguous principle or abstract philosophical conceptual tool? My response to this question is positive.

Take for example the first section, 'Bonhoeffer's Humanism', John W. de Gruchy does a masterful job at weaving together Bonhoeffer's Christology and his 'affirmation of life in its fullness amidst struggle and suffering' (p. 17). Indeed, in this first chapter, human dignity takes centre stage, though that stage is built upon the Incarnation and Cross. In this place, one is directed toward God's 'No' which is known only in light of God's 'Yes' that surrounds it, in Jesus Christ. Here, De Gruchy affirms Bonhoeffer's humanism is rightly and richly constructed from this pattern where the Divine 'Yes,' affords an understanding of creation, becoming, honour and flourishing in contrast to and in opposition against death, suffering, degradation and resignation (p. 18). As de Gruchy concludes, the pattern of this peculiar theological foundation has profound implications for it has the capacity to fashion a *Christian* humanism that may 'struggle for truth and justice against dehumanizing power, ... always affirming human goodness against perversity, hope against despair, and life against death' (p. 24).

Jens Zimmerman, confirming de Gruchy but moving beyond, argues that such interpretations of Christian humanism '[are] not just useful but *needed*' (p. 26) Pulling for a return to Patristic thought, which 'could be summed up as an all-embracing humanism,' (p. 27) Zimmerman considers the significance of the Incarnation. He reveals Bonhoeffer's sensitivity to this doctrine as vital in its capacity to 'define God's relation to the world and the Christian's being in the world' (p. 30). Accordingly, Bonhoeffer writes, '[Jesus] is not *a* human being, but *the* human being. What happened to him happens to human beings. It happens to all and therefore to us' (p. 31). Consequently, Zimmerman explores the concept of *participation* or the *ethical* which extends from this confessions to both those in and those out of the Christian community, for 'Christ [is] the ontological center of humanity, who

thus links the new and old human self and therefore also church and world' (p. 33).

Accordingly, what began with a rigorous survey of the theological foundation of Bonhoeffer's humanism turned quickly toward application—an application seeking to illumine the connection between church and world. The essence of the following essays may be considered as a reiteration of the above: from Christ everything has its being, and to Christ everything will return, including the becoming human who, in participation with Christ living with and for others, may become *truly human* (p. 26). That task, therefore, is to, as humans, 'belong together—irrevocably and undividedly,' thus, 'the proclamation of [Gospel] goes hand in hand with social activism for those in need' (p. 64).

The focus of the second section, 'Bonhoeffer on Sociality and the Church', follows well from the previous, now focusing on the gathering of the whole - forming the church in and for the world. Essential to Bonhoeffer's sociality, as Clifford J. Green indicates, is the assertion that 'it is in communities that range from family to humanity-as-a-whole that human persons, individuals to be sure, come into being and flourish' (p. 73). Accordingly, sociality demands humility, as one encounters another who ought not to be conceived as 'the other' to be opposed but as the one whom we are commissioned, in participation with Christ, to lived with and for. Such a notion is not just isolated to individuals but also to the whole of the cosmos. After all, 'reconciliation *has* taken place and ... this must throw light on every part of theology' (p. 91).

Here, as Kirsten Busch Nielsen argues, the delimitation of Bonhoeffer's sociality is bound to no abstract ideal concerning institutions and relationships but to Incarnation—'Bonhoeffer emphasizes that it is God who reconciles the world to himself' (p. 91). This reconciliation is the *reason* for sociality and responsibility. This reality may be understood in its actuality 'from the standpoint of the gospel and of Christ' (p. 104), rather as one assesses the claims of the church community, which, as Barry Harvey writes, 'forms an alternative mode of human sociality, that is, a distinctive condition or social context that gives rise to a set of institutions and relationships within and through which a group of people are

formed (or more precisely, within and through which Christ takes form in them)' (p. 115). Indeed, the second section of this book is critical to understand what Bonhoeffer's humanism may lead to, rather whom may be formed by the truly human, Christ.

The final section, 'Discipleship, Conformation, and Responsibility', may be summed up with Brian Gregor's words, 'Faith is not merely cognitive relation of assent to correct doctrine but is rather a whole-person response ... of following after Christ in concrete, everyday existence' (p. 153). Indeed, this is key to the whole of the work. The essays included in this section, as well as the whole, are hinged upon this call for obedient response to Christ—for 'an existential *collision*' resulting in becoming that which we are not at the outset, truly human (p. 161). So, here, this section turns to the ethics of following, which is the real consequence of the encounter with Christ. This ethics, that is such embodied following, results in a conformation with the crucified Christ that may reorient one's vision, ones very being-in-action, 'toward the actual lives and needs of [the other]' (p. 188).

Such an orientation considers the responsibility to follow after Christ comes with a simultaneous responsibility to be one for the other. As Ulrick Becker Nissen writes, quoting Clifford J. Green, 'accepting this responsibility for other human beings or for entire communities or group of communities' (p. 196). Such responsibility, however, cannot resort to simply considering the question and pursuing an answer to *doing* good. Rather, responsibility, as indicated by Bonhoeffer's *other-ly* ethics, is about responding with thanksgiving to the will, or reality, of God—'represent[ing] Christ before human beings, but at the same time [representing] human beings before Christ' (p. 201). This is such a profound and liberating ethics, not hinging upon the adjudication of abstract ideas/principles but *Verantwortung* [accountable] to the Other—God and humanity. Nissen, quoting John Howard Yoder, comments, 'This is not about some legalistic approach to copying Jesus, but rather about participating in Christ. We are already part of his body; we do not become so through following him. Following Jesus is the result, not the means, of our fellowship with

Christ. It is the form of Christian freedom and now a new law' (p. 207).

Though I may have erred on the side of a positive review for this book, I am convinced the few shortcomings may be carefully overlooked. As noted earlier, I began reading this book with a particular question in mind: have the essayists adequately anchored the particular Christian humanism of Bonhoeffer in a theological ground or have they mistakenly relied upon some sort of ambiguous principle or abstract philosophical conceptual tool? I strongly believe the authors have carefully considered Bonhoeffer's own commitment to a Christ-focused theology, which not only forms the basis of an anthropology that liberates such consideration from any static reduction of being but also constructs a vision of human action that embraces a particular becoming in concert with Christ. Ultimately, this is an important selection of essays for any one interested in the writings and vision of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Moreover, it is a vital work for those who may want to better understand the meaning and implication of *participation in Christ*.

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***Tributes to John Calvin: A Celebration of His Quincentenary.*** The Calvin 500 Series. Edited by David W. Hall. Phillipsburg, NJ.: P & R Publishing, 2010. (xxii + 566 pp.) [ISBN: 978-1-59638-096-7]

Throughout 2009 Christians around the world celebrated the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of the Genevan Reformer, John Calvin. Alongside such celebrations were the requisite publishing ventures. The closest thing to an official celebration of the quincentenary was the Calvin500 Project, an international, interdenominational, and interdisciplinary celebration of John Calvin's life, theology, and significance. The Calvin500 Project hosted two concurrent conferences in Geneva and commissioned an eight volume series of books entitled 'The Calvin 500 Series.' The conferences were directed by Dr David Hall, senior pastor of Midway Presbyterian