

NO RUSTY SWORDS by Dietrich Bonhoeffer; Letters, Lectures and Notes. Edited and introduced by Edwin Robertson. Selections translated by Edwin Robertson and John Bowden. *Collins, 36s.*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*, available for some time now in paperback, is one of the most disturbing Christian documents of our time. Several of his more conventional theological and spiritual writings have also been translated into English: *Sanctorum Communio*, *Act and Being*, *The Cost of Discipleship*, *Ethics*, and others. The references to him by the Bishop of Woolwich have no doubt sharpened interest in his work, but it has been a major focus in Protestant theology, in Germany and latterly in the United States, for some time.

The book under review, with its somewhat arcane title, is the first of two volumes selected from the massive four-volume German edition of Bonhoeffer's collected letters, lectures and notes. We are indebted to Edwin H. Robertson, for making and introducing this selection, and also to John Bowden, who worked with him on the translation. The book is beautifully produced and none of the material (in this volume at least) has appeared before in English. The first item is a letter to Harnack, Bonhoeffer's teacher and an old family friend (July 1928); and the last in date, except for one or two documents which proved more illuminating in this volume though they should really have been in the next, is a letter which reveals Bonhoeffer's painful involvement in the spiritual crisis within German Protestantism at the time (January 1936).

Mr Robertson insists that we should recollect how young Bonhoeffer was (he was thirty-nine when he died). His theological ideas were still in course of development and we should not see any definite orientations even in his final writings. This is surely true. On the other hand, Mr Robertson would also have us see the ideas of the final writings as already present in some form even in the earliest writings – in *Sanctorum Communio*, for example, his doctorate thesis (accepted when he was twenty-one!), and in some of the material published in *No Rusty Swords*. In some form, and in retrospect, no doubt; but does this not tend to make too little of the novelty and strangeness of

the last letters? Surely that slim paperback stirs and absorbs the theologian far more than the rest of Bonhoeffer's work put together?

This is not to deny that Bonhoeffer was always an impressive 'conventional' theologian. It is simply to say that his originality did not really emerge until the end. Moreover, interesting though some of it is, this new material adds nothing to his stature even as a 'conventional' theologian. You have to care a good deal about his theology already before you can find this very exciting. By far the most important aspect of *No Rusty Swords* is surely its contribution to the history of Christianity in recent times.

Bonhoeffer had famous men as his professors (Schlatter, Deissmann, Harnack, Seeberg), but the greatest influence on him was undoubtedly Karl Barth (though he never studied under him). We get a glimpse of a hectic fortnight with Barth in Bonn in 1931, and then of course the two stood together in the church crisis later on. But Bonhoeffer managed to travel a great deal (Mr Robertson: 'Travel is almost as important as study for the making of a theologian'), and some of the most interesting items here have to do with his experiences in America. He spent the academic year 1930–31 at Union Theological Seminary and he was in the United States in August 1939 when he decided to go back to Berlin. It is not so much his assessments that interest one ('American theology and the American church as a whole have never been able to understand the meaning of "criticism" by the Word of God and all that signifies. Right to the last they do not understand that God's "criticism" touches even religion, the Christianity of the churches and the sanctification of Christians, and that God has founded his church beyond religion and beyond ethics'), but the enormous difference they reflect between American and German Protestantism ('between Protestantism without Reformation and the churches of the Reformation'). He says that the young German minister preaches his theology while the young American preaches his religious

experience ('a ready recital of his own religious experiences'); but the sermon he himself preached on several occasions to American congregations contains very little theology indeed: it is one of the most pathetic witnesses to the state of mind of a young German in 1930 that I have ever read.

Bonhoeffer's active participation in ecumenical work began at Cambridge in 1931. The letters and reports evoked by his responsibilities in this field add to our understanding of the growth of ecumenism in the 'thirties. This work was soon inter-related with the struggle to clarify the conscience of German Protestantism in face of the temptation of Nazism. Many Christians believed that it would be best to join the Nazis and to leaven the movement from the inside. Bonhoeffer did wonder at one point (1931) whether 'bolshevism' would be any worse than 'a liberal compromise'; but he denounced the *führerprinzip* in a broadcast two days after Hitler became chancellor (and got cut off before the end). He was never in doubt about the nature of Nazism. In October 1933 he accepted the post of pastor to two German congregations in London. He wrote somewhat anxiously to Barth to justify this – after he was already in England; and received a devastating letter in reply

('think of only one thing, that you are a German, that the house of your church is on fire, that you know enough and can say what you know well enough to be able to help and that you must return to your post by the next ship'). Bonhoeffer stayed on more than a year in London, but it is hard to think that these words of his old mentor were not in his mind when he chose to go back to Germany for the duration of the war: 'Such a decision each man must make for himself. Christians in Germany will face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilisation may survive, or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose; *but I cannot make that choice in security*' (letter to Reinhold Niebuhr, July 1939).

That refusal of security was not silly heroics. It was entirely consonant with Bonhoeffer's understanding of faith as participation in the existence of Jesus. Surely too, it was only in the purifying light of that decision that he came to develop the anti-religious Christocentrism which is his theological originality. Perhaps Mr Robertson's second volume will help us to understand that.

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PAUL TILLICH IN CATHOLIC THOUGHT edited by Thomas A. O'Meara, O.P., and Celestin D. Weisser, O.P. *Chicago: Priory Press, \$5.59, paperback, \$2.95.*

In this age of oversimplifying, distorting popularizations (an almost inevitable outcome of our domination by the mass media) it is a pleasure to find a truly scholarly work such as the one under review which at the same time is not at all stodgy or uninteresting.

The editors are to be complimented on having achieved a true synthesis in this collection of essays, most of which were not written originally with this end in view. All the essays without exception are of a high standard of theological scholarship and there is surprisingly little overlapping, rare qualities indeed in a collection such as this.

The work is arranged within the general framework of Paul Tillich's *Systematic Theology*. Dedicated to the memory of Fr Gustave Weigel, S.J., it fittingly begins with a brilliant survey by this author both of the importance (for Protestants and Catholics alike) and of the meaning of Tillich's theological system, an essay showing the deep insight we had come to expect from this sadly missed theologian. The substantial objectivity of this survey is confirmed by Tillich himself. The other fourteen essays which follow are all by well-known Catholic theologians and represent most valuable critical appreciations (critical while being fully appreciative and vice versa) of the