

## Book Review

---

**Dianne Rayson**, *Bonhoeffer and Climate Change: Theology and Ethics for the Anthropocene*. London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2021, pp. 283, ISBN: 978-1-9787-0183-0 (hbk). US\$110.

Dianne Rayson's *Bonhoeffer and Climate Change: Theology and Ethics for the Anthropocene* is a timely book for reckoning with the entanglement of Christianity with colonialist and capitalist views of the Earth's resources as there 'to dominate and ransack' (p. 106). Rayson works with German theologian Dietrick Bonhoeffer's (1906–1945) writings in the context of the German Third Reich; she reads Bonhoeffer's work as 'an entry point for a rejuvenated theology' that can interrogate 'the root problems at work' amidst the climate crisis (pp. 1, 2). This book offers theologically robust alternatives to 'conservative Christian voices aligned with power politics and corporate wealth creation' that utilise theologies of 'domination and mastery' as justifications for extractivist modes of relating to other species and the Earth (pp. xv, xvi). Rayson explores the key themes in Bonhoeffer's theology, and in particular, 'his Christology, for its potential to equip us [readers] with an ecotheological way of thinking and an ecoethical way of acting' (p. 27). Throughout the book, Rayson's re-reading of Bonhoeffer's theology is in conversation with Australian First Nations wisdom about 'the immanence of the creator God and the ontology and responsibility of the human portion of creation' (p. 24), with ecofeminist Christologies of sociality, and with multiple faith traditions and philosophies.

The hermeneutic flexibility of Bonhoeffer's thought and work carries with it the risk of 'misappropriating Bonhoeffer' (p. 26) for diverging political ends. Rayson situates Bonhoeffer's theology in the context of German National Socialism and his critique of the German church's acquiescence and complicity with the state. Rayson addresses the risk of '[m]isrepresenting Bonhoeffer by haphazardly applying his work or reinterpreting him through contemporary lenses' (p. 4) through a 'three-pronged' methodology. This approach involves 'description of the Bonhoefferian text', followed by 'a historical-theological "excavation" of underlying themes' and then 'a reflective critique of the explicit and

implicit theological meanings contained therein, including how they relate to issues relevant to climate change and ecology more broadly' (p. 5).

Rayson's account of Bonhoeffer's theology contributes an expanded conception of Bonhoeffer's notions of sociality, vulnerability, and 'seeing the world from the underside' to encompass 'plants and animals, microbes and ecosystems, the air, the sea, and Earth' (p. 242). Rayson calls this an 'Earthly Christianity', extending Bonhoeffer's encouragement of 'religionless Christianity'. Exploring the Genesis creation account, she tracks the 'misunderstanding of the meaning of dominion' as domination (p. 106) and considers its consequences: 'attempted mastery' is the 'root of the relational problems with Earth' (p. 245). Rayson further argues that notions of 'stewardship' do not go 'far enough to restore reciprocal relationships between humans and the rest of the Earth-community', since stewardship 'still bolsters the place of humans as outside of ecology and outside relationships' (p. 150).

Rayson argues for an 'alternative theological anthropology' not based 'on hierarchy but on relationships', with the resources of Bonhoeffer's Christology and his theology of sociality. For Bonhoeffer, according to Rayson, God, as Trinity, is inherently relational (p. 110) and vulnerable (p. 85), and humans are 'creatures in the image of a relational God' (p. 126). Humans (Adam) are made from *Adamah* (earth), and consequently 'join the entire of the carbon domains (animate and inanimate) and the component systems that comprise Earth' (p. 149); humans and the more-than-human are 'bound together by an intrinsic sociality' (p. 245). Rayson derives from Bonhoeffer's Christology of Christ taking on flesh (*Adamah*), becoming vulnerable, suffering, serving and resurrected, that "'matter matters'" (p. 38). Christ's dominion is in his 'vulnerability and servanthood', more than in his 'triumph and majesty' (p. 113). For Rayson, after Bonhoeffer, Christ is in the centre (*Mitte*) of reality—a reality that is ecologically 'interdependent and interrelated' (p. 221). For Rayson, Christ is the centre of reality, yet present 'within the ambiguity of history, incognito' in 'the form of the suffering other' (p. 53). Rayson argues that Christ presents 'as the beggar, the prisoner, and potentially the climate refugee' (p. 53). She invites the reader to apprehend Christ as mediating 'all other relationships, those between Earth and heaven, and among the community of species here on earth' (p. 57). She encourages the reader to replace 'notions of care and protection, stewardship, and "tilling the garden"' with a theology of sociality that understands humans as 'co-Earthlings with other species, in partnership' (p. 211).

This book is recommended for climate activists of faith, particularly those seeking a systematic theological foundation for climate action led by faith-based communities. For Rayson, Bonhoeffer's theology can be a 'tonic and inspiration for the new relational consciousness we see appearing, especially among young people' (p. xv). For readers of faith, it encourages repentance for the consequences of theologies of domination (p. 242), and a re-imagining of an 'Earthly Christianity' that develops a response to the 'entire ecology' (p. 211), in 'guilty solidarity' (p. 200). This book will also appeal to activists beyond faith traditions and scholars of religion interested in how theological resources (such as Bonhoeffer's) are being taken up to mobilise faith communities towards climate justice advocacy and activism. It may also be of interest to scholars influenced by multivalent strands of posthumanist scholarship, offering a theological account of an 'Earthly Christianity' that is profoundly material, fleshly and relational.

**Dr Eve Mayes**

Research for Educational Impact, Deakin University, Victoria,  
Australia