

## INTRODUCTION

# Communal Receptions and Constructive Readings for the Twenty-First Century

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In the city of Atlanta, a mile and a half down Freedom Parkway from the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site, the Open Door Community gathers in their dining-hall worship space every Sunday evening for song, scripture, prayer, and celebration around the Eucharist table. This ecumenical, intentionally interracial, residential community shares “life together” in a fragile expression of “beloved community,” to combine key phrases of Bonhoeffer and King. They are ordained ministers, former inmates, retirees, scholars-turned-activists, persons formerly homeless, seminarians, and seasonal volunteers. Together they enact a “costly discipleship” comprised of voluntary poverty, works of mercy and hospitality on behalf of the homeless, and struggles for justice—particularly with and for their friends on the streets and in prison. They gather for worship and dinner in preparation for a week of soup kitchens, showers, and clothing exchange, foot care at their free clinic, fellowship in the front yard and on the streets, prison visits, peace vigils, anti-death-penalty protests, and, when necessary, civil disobedience.

All of these practices serve as acts of resistance to forces of death and dehumanization. They reflect the Open Door’s conviction that, in the words of Bonhoeffer, “God . . . waits for and answers sincere prayers and responsible actions.”<sup>1</sup> So with their friends (those living on the streets, nonresident volunteers, partners in prison work, and various visitors drawn to their witness), they pray as their Savior Jesus taught them,

Our Beloved Friend  
 Outside the Domination System  
 May your Holy Name be honored  
 By the way we live our lives.

Your Beloved Community come.  
 Guide us to:  
 Walk your Walk  
 Talk your Talk  
 Sit your Silence  
 Inside the courtroom, on the streets, in the jailhouses  
 As they are on the margins of resistance.

Give us this day everything we need.  
 Forgive us our wrongs  
 As we forgive those who have wronged us.  
 Do not bring us to hard testing,  
 But keep us safe from the Evil One.

For Thine is:  
 The Beloved Community,  
 the power and  
 the glory  
 forever and ever. Amen.

Friends like me, who commute from privileged places such as the academy, park our cars in the gravel lot behind the Open Door and enter the two-story brick building from the rear. The first image that greets those who arrive through the back entrance is Dietrich Bonhoeffer's, and appropriately so. For, under the framed picture of the German theologian are his now-famous words from "After Ten Years," summarized in the prophetic call of Open Door cofounders, Ed Loring and Murphy Davis, to "reduce the distance" between those whom society privileges and those whom society oppresses.<sup>2</sup> It reads, "We have for once learnt to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled—in short, from the perspective of those who suffer."<sup>3</sup> Turning an immediate corner, one approaches a mural with Dorothy Day's face sketched at one end and Martin Luther King Jr.'s at the other. Between them are the faces of Daniel Berrigan, Fannie Lou Hamer, César Chávez, and Jeff Dietrich and Catherine Morris of the Los Angeles Catholic Worker. Another quick turn places one in an extensive hallway lined with

poster art depicting slave religion and the black freedom struggle; guest rooms named “Ella Baker,” “Gandhi,” and “Septima Clark”; flyers announcing peace and justice rallies around the world; and most importantly, under the words, “No, no, no, they are not numbers, they are names!,” the one hundred-plus pictures of the Community’s homeless friends, whom Ed Loring refers to as his “central teachers.”

As this visual cloud of witnesses attests, the Open Door’s theological influences are many. In addition to those who show up on the walls, they include friend and fellow Georgian Clarence Jordan, with his original vision of Koinonia Farm, as well as the liberation theologies and action-reflection hermeneutic arising from the base communities of Central and South America. Among this great cloud, Ed Loring and Murphy Davis consider the lives, writings, and witnesses of King and Bonhoeffer to be crucial. Each man’s interconnected life and thought were foundational to the start of the Open Door and to the ecclesial work preceding it in the late 1970s, and their witnesses remain central to the Community’s theological praxis: Bonhoeffer’s call to “costly discipleship” undergirds the work as a whole and King’s influence guides the Community’s methods of social analysis and strategies of nonviolence. The pervasive influence of King is symbolically expressed not only in the mural by the back door but also in an eight-foot Martin Luther King Day banner hanging in the front entrance way. His is the first face seen by friends who enter directly off the streets.<sup>4</sup>

## **The Open Door as Communal Reception of Bonhoeffer and King**

I offer this snapshot of the Open Door Community for two reasons. First, to articulate what may be obvious to this book’s primary audience and all those whose interest in religion and public life emerges from social and political struggle: The legacies of Bonhoeffer and King demand action. This anthology receives their legacies for Christian social thought, aware that “thought” for Bonhoeffer and King remained incomplete without courageous, constructive, redemptive social engagement.

Second, the cloud of witnesses depicted in the hallway of the Open Door raises an important question: Why devote a book only to Bonhoeffer and King? Why not include Dorothy Day and Fannie Lou Hamer? Although Bonhoeffer and King are foundational to the Open Door, Loring says he “can’t have King without Dorothy Day or someone like that who lived out her life in a community of hospitality informed by a particular set of daily practices.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed,

why focus on individuals at all when making sense of legacies constructed by movements and communities?

The conversation in this book forms in *response* to the many scholars, students, practitioners, and pastors who have begun to consider these two men's lives and writings together when deliberating over basic questions in Christian social thought. Across and because of the significant differences in their historic, sociopolitical contexts, Bonhoeffer and King have become touchstones for many Christian conversations about peace and violence, love and justice, church and world, and faith and public life. This anthology offers a resource to those discussions by presenting careful, informed, and focused reflections from contemporary social thinkers who have wrestled with their legacies—sometimes in quite different ways.

The contributors to this volume share my concern that Christian social thought work in the service of transformative action, and readers will be challenged in these pages not to curtail the difficult and necessary task of social analysis by simplistic or static appeals to Bonhoeffer and King as theological authorities. As Emilie Townes argues in the opening chapter, we appropriate the insights of King or Bonhoeffer respectfully when we reciprocate with our own labor—when we construct, as Steve Haynes's essay urges, not "monuments" that enshrine these figures and their thought, but a "better world." The Open Door exemplifies how the legacies of Bonhoeffer and King may inhabit contemporary communities seeking to do just that.<sup>6</sup> As we receive the legacies of these two men for Christian social thought, the work and witness of the Open Door awakens our moral imaginations to what is possible, to the kind of concrete engagement that may result from such deliberate reception.

Among the insights the Open Door appropriates are the methods driving King's and Bonhoeffer's social and theological analyses. From Bonhoeffer, the Open Door learns to stay vigilant to the trajectories of state or public actions that masquerade under the guise of reason or respectability yet actually reflect what Bonhoeffer calls "contempt for humanity." The city of Atlanta expressed contempt for "the real human being"<sup>7</sup> whom God loves—indeed, for Bonhoeffer, who God became—when it spent hundreds of thousands of dollars jailing (and thus banishing from sight) homeless people caught in the humiliating act of public urination or defecation but refused, until recently, to spend a fraction of that amount on public toilets in its municipal parks. The city now has installed a few public toilets in some of its parks,<sup>8</sup> yet it continues to express contempt for the real human being in its refusal to make decent and affordable housing a priority. That which causes the Open Door concern, be it in the form of public policies or city planning initiatives, the Community announces

in shouts of protest. From King, the Open Door has learned the centrality of the streets in these protests and that “the beloved community is not formed apart from the streets because,” says Loring, “the streets are a primary place to meet the stranger and love the enemy.”<sup>9</sup> They also learn from King to develop their social analysis around the theological question, What are the obstacles barring beloved community from being realized today in this place?

The Open Door answers this question by participating in the civil rights movement’s unfinished agenda of racial and economic justice. Still, the Community knows firsthand that persevering in this work does not necessarily entail steady movement forward. Our cities have yet to achieve justice in the form of decent and accessible housing for all, and contemporary society’s basic answer to this civil rights demand has been blatant consent to a subculture of homelessness. Murphy Davis says, “American citizens essentially have said, ‘You want to talk about housing? Okay, how about this: No housing.’ Well, no one had even thought of that in the ’60s.” The Open Door’s attempts to dismantle obstacles barring the achievement of beloved community also lead to protests against the “criminal control system.” Research on southern prisons and decades of ministry in them have taught Davis and the Open Door that there is historical continuity between chattel and penal slavery, a link constitutionally sanctioned by the thirteenth amendment, which did not abolish slavery completely but, rather, allows it as “punishment for crime.” A trajectory of racial domination runs from antebellum plantations to the post-Reconstruction convict lease system and Jim Crow segregation to the staggering growth of the prison industry over the last forty years. “We think we defeat forms of oppression,” Davis says, “but they just kind of go underground. You’ve got to watch for where they’re going to come up again.”<sup>10</sup>

The Open Door illustrates that there is not only continuity but also discontinuity in resistance work and in the forces of oppression we identify. Previous conceptions of the powers fueling oppression prove to be incomplete, and so the Open Door focuses in ways that Bonhoeffer and King did not on the web of destructive forces that entangles racism and classism with heterosexism and sexism, an issue explored in this volume in Rachel Muers’s feminist rereading of Bonhoeffer and King. Nevertheless, as these two men write and speak out of their particular times and contexts, they “strike a chord of universality,” says Davis, which enables “their writings to become living texts in the same way that Scripture becomes a living text.” Living texts invite conversation and the mutual indwelling of worlds. Most North American Christians, however, are not able to relate to the sociohistorical world of Jesus, and Davis argues that this is not primarily a matter of “now being different from then” but a matter

of “the world of the privileged being different from the world of the poor.” She says that “the Gospels cannot have the meaning of the time unless you see decaying flesh or hear the cries of the victims of domination. . . . When you engage human history in ways that are similar to how King engaged history and how Bonhoeffer engaged history, then the gospel is alive, and so are their texts. . . . then the discipleship movement and the beloved community reach back in time. We become companions of Martin King and Dietrich Bonhoeffer and of all the resisters, and they become companions of ours.”<sup>11</sup>

With Bonhoeffer and King as our companions, the chapters that follow seek to broaden and sharpen our theological imaginations for the struggles for justice and peace that claim us, in the words of King, in “the fierce urgency of now.”<sup>12</sup> “What are we waiting for?” Bonhoeffer asks in a 1934 international, ecumenical speech, “The time is late.”<sup>13</sup>

## Entering the Conversation

This anthology examines Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King Jr. in relation to basic questions in Christian social thought and, by doing so, asks what place their theologically resonant, politically contested legacies have come to occupy in the twenty-first century. How might reading and teaching them together facilitate our understandings of each and influence the ways various communities appropriate their legacies? How might such a reading assist communities in the larger project of constructing theologies that meet the demands of the social and political realities they face? What distortions and projections have their legacies absorbed, and what new distortions and confluences are made inadvertently by treating them together? In what directions do their distinct and often ambiguous ideas propel us when interpreted in light of specific social issues? What emphases come into focus again and again? What insights are conveyed that we might have neglected had we not heard the polyphony of their voices?

The chapters in this volume address a range of topics and may be read independently of one another. Each essay reaches beyond itself, though, serving as an entry point to the subject matter rather than a comprehensive and conclusive reading. In this way, the chapters mirror the fragmentary, unfinished, and open character of Bonhoeffer and King’s own writings. With some exceptions, the Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Works and *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.* are filled with unsystematic material such as sermons, letters, and other occasional pieces, which reflect that, for these men, theology did not—and perhaps could not—speak the dynamic word of God as a tidy system.

The fragmentary form creates space for God's living word to speak concretely into the contemporary moment and facilitates the continual unfolding of fresh theological insight.<sup>14</sup> As with the writings of Bonhoeffer and King, the chapters in this text invite readers to extend the lines of thinking begun here, and many of the authors suggest avenues for doing so.

The essays reach beyond themselves in another sense as well, in that they hold conversation with one another. Themes embedded in the thought of these two men (such as community, peace, Jesus Christ) are interwoven throughout these essays. Readers will discover, for example, important insights into Bonhoeffer's and King's Christologies not only in Gary Simpson's chapter on Jesus and social ethics but also in Shawn Copeland's chapter on Catholic social thought and Josiah Young's on race. Likewise, the reader will find substantial discussions on peace and the nature of violence not only in part 4, "Practices of Peace," but also in Larry Rasmussen's essay on the social ecologies of Bonhoeffer and King and in Craig Slane's essay on martyrs. Readers are invited to delve into the interpretive work themselves, noting points where themes converge, where contributors agree or disagree, and where the legacies seem to point in other directions. The sections of this anthology suggest one path through the volume, as they are organized around lessons learned from collectively reading Bonhoeffer and King together in the twenty-first century.

Part 1, on gaining "Critical Distance," equips readers for the interpretive task. Emilie Townes's essay on appropriation and reciprocity and Stephen Haynes's essay on the use and misuse of contested legacies draw our attention to methods of appropriation and patterns of thinking that inevitably distort the lives and thought of inspiring figures yet remain a constant temptation for their admirers. We can easily place Bonhoeffer and King beyond criticism, commodify their stories to bolster a contemporary argument or agenda, and depend on their witness instead of our own to speak prophetically and act justly. When we do so, we presume a false immediacy between them and us.<sup>15</sup> Rachel Muers's essay, "Bonhoeffer, King, and Feminism: Problems and Possibilities," models the kind of critical and constructive engagement that avoids such temptations. She neither "exonerate[s]" nor "condemn[s]" these figures on account of their being "complicit in the evil of sexism." Rather, Muers's appraisal leads her to deepen these men's insights about community and to raise broader questions about the ecclesiologies that shape the study of Christian social movements. Finally, while examining "Political Order, Political Violence, and Ethical Limits," Jean Bethke Elshtain alerts readers to substantial differences in the sociopolitical contexts in which Bonhoeffer and King lived. She highlights the distance between the two figures by examining how these

contexts influenced both the questions each man asked and the manner in which they each understood political possibility.

The topics in part 2—social ecology (Rasmussen), racism (Young), Catholic social thought (Copeland), church/world relations and political agape (Jackson), and martyrdom (Slane)—demonstrate from a number of different angles the first lesson learned from reading Bonhoeffer and King together: receiving their legacies compels Christians to attend to the interconnection of all of humanity in creation, sin, and redemption and thus to consider human mutuality and partnership across difference as intrinsic to biblical faith and essential for Christian social thought and action. Part 2, “Shared Humanity,” illuminates Bonhoeffer’s and King’s theological grounding for solidarity, resistance work, and human rights, as well as their rejection of what Timothy Jackson describes as any social or metaphysical privileging of “us” over “them.” Larry Rasmussen’s chapter on social ecology sets the stage by arguing that, after Bonhoeffer’s and King, solidarity, resistance, and rights may no longer be relegated to the margins but belong at the center of Christian concern. The theological basis for human interconnection is perhaps most evident in King’s *imago Dei* anthropology and in Bonhoeffer’s Christology, yet collectively the essays in this section suggest the need for further reflection on the correlation between anthropology and Christology within and between each thinker. Whether their thinking is based on a view of God as Creator, God as Reconciler, or some combination thereof, Bonhoeffer and King each affirm human and cosmic mutuality, what King calls “the inescapable network of mutuality” and “the interrelated structure of reality” and Bonhoeffer, “Christ reality.”<sup>16</sup> While the essays of Rasmussen, Young, Copeland, and Jackson regard a profound commitment to our shared humanity as definitive for Christian faith and practice, Craig Slane’s essay, “The Cross and Its Victims,” further demonstrates the theological foundation and promise of such a conviction by constructing a theology of the cross based on Bonhoeffer’s and King’s cruciform lives. Slane argues that these men each model human mutuality through a “decision against distance, a decision for a new hermeneutic” that emerges “in proximity to violence and its victims” in order to resist forces of evil, identify with victims, and love enemy-oppressors.

If a Christian commitment to our shared humanity leads to a “decision against distance,” a decision for solidarity and human rights—if it leads, in the words of the Open Door Community, to a decision to “reduce the distance” between society’s beneficiaries and victims—then this *movement toward* places of violence and dehumanization simultaneously will prepare the way for peace and justice by carving out new spaces that invite redemption. Part 3, “Spaces

of Redemption,” expresses the second lesson learned from reading Bonhoeffer and King together: Preparing the way for peace and justice requires creating, cultivating, and legitimating nontraditional vocational and communal spaces. Charles Marsh’s “Bonhoeffer on the Road to King: “Turning from the Phraseological to the Real,” Richard Wills’s “Interpreting Pastors as Activists,” and Raphael Warnock’s “The Ministry of Preaching and Prophetic Witness” examine how Bonhoeffer and King lived out their vocations as theologians and pastors. These essays argue that receiving their legacies disrupts familiar, static notions of the academic theologian, parish pastor, and preacher, respectively. Together the lives of Bonhoeffer and King announce a dynamic vocational reconfiguration that weaves together elements of all three roles. Thus, their lives and thought raise vital questions for us about institutional structures in the academy and in churches that impede sustained and concrete connection between theological reflection, pastoral ministry, and social activism.

Stephen Ray’s essay, “Embodying Redemption: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Engagement of Social Sin,” focuses on the need to cultivate new communal spaces for redemption at that same intersection of theology, ministry, and activism. Ray argues that King responded to structural and social sin through practical ministry that envisioned the beloved community as the “creation of . . . new publics” whose purpose was to redeem American society. Although Ray’s essay focuses on King, he argues that Bonhoeffer and King “understood communal vocation in the face of social evil in the same way” as “cruciform communalism.” Both men thought that the requisite response to social evil was the formation of communities of resistance that embodied Christ. Andre Willis’s essay, “Culture in Bonhoeffer and King: Deweyan Naturalism in Action,” argues that both men cultivated communal space for redemption, understood in a different sense, through their savvy use of culture. Their cultural work included the aesthetic appeal of their writings, speeches, and sermons, which, to varying degrees, destabilized and reoriented traditional modes of thought dominating society.

The new communal spaces that Ray refers to as cruciform communities invite and empower redemption specifically through intentional practices of peace. Part 4, “Practices of Peace,” is organized around the third and final lesson learned from collectively reading Bonhoeffer and King together: receiving their legacies occasions serious attention to the Sermon on the Mount in the sociopolitical realm. Glen Stassen’s essay on peacemaking, Geoffrey Kelly’s on spirituality, and Gary Simpson’s on images of Jesus each argue that Bonhoeffer and King understood the Sermon on the Mount as a gospel mandate—a nonnegotiable command to *make* peace amidst hatred and violence. Whereas

dominant traditions in Christian social thought have deemed the Sermon on the Mount politically unrealistic or even irresponsible, Bonhoeffer and King disclose the Sermon's deep, abiding realism as each man "views reality anew," says Kelly, "from the perspective of Jesus' teachings." Viewing political reality and social responsibility from the perspective of the Sermon on the Mount requires proactive courage and creativity, strategy, and discipline. For, it is not immediately apparent how forgiveness, love of enemy, forbearance, and reconciliation can overcome entrenched hatred and violence. Furthermore, Jesus' peace ethic—as shown through Bonhoeffer's and King's distinct and divergent lives—requires commitment to peace as a way of life, obedient submission to the "commanding Christ," as Simpson says, and, as Kelly argues, conformation to Christ's life, death, and resurrection. Stassen's essay demonstrates how this ethic may be understood in the twenty-first century through the emerging paradigm of "just peacemaking," which he argues is "christologically grounded," "empirically effective," and characteristic of the kind of peace ethic Bonhoeffer and King each sought.

Finally, Michael Battle's essay on reconciliation connects the practice of peace to communal worship. Battle argues that by undervaluing communal spirituality, Western Christians have neglected to see that true worship unfurls in struggles for justice and peace that transform society. Through an analysis of Desmond Tutu's reception of Bonhoeffer and King in South Africa, Battle demonstrates how the legacies of these two men may simultaneously reinforce, critique, and complicate one another.

The anthology as a whole demonstrates the complementing and complicating dynamic at play when considering Bonhoeffer and King together in the twenty-first century. Inheriting their legacies is a critical undertaking requiring that, like the Open Door Community, those who identify intentionally with their work and witness must continually assess how contemporary realities problematize their appropriation. Just as the Open Door awakens our imaginations to the possibilities of a constructive reception of these legacies, the studies that follow intend to challenge, prod, disrupt, and deepen previous understandings of Bonhoeffer and King for students, scholars, practitioners, and communities who must live within the tensions and ambiguities of our own historical moments.