

*ment in the American Lutheran Church, 1960–87.* Taken together, these two volumes provide an ample record of this very significant chapter in American Lutheran history.

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*The Acquittal of God: A Theology for Vietnam Veterans.* By Uwe Siemon-Netto. New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1990. 107 pp. n.p.

I once asked Bob Kerrey, war veteran and now U.S. Senator from Nebraska, if he could explain the continuing discussion of the impact of the Vietnam War, years after the fall of Saigon in 1975. In posing the question, I noted that this discussion has only increased, not diminished, since the war's end. He responded by citing a truth he had learned from Elie Wiesel. "When an event is unspeakable," he said, "it takes a while to learn the right words."

It was a long time coming, but Uwe Siemon-Netto has written a book that introduces, probes, and refines many of the right words. Siemon-Netto was not the first to undertake this project, not even the first to approach the subject from a religious perspective. That honor belongs to three writers: Arthur Egendorf, a psychologist who is thoroughly conversant with the writings of Joseph Campbell and assorted Jungian theorists, whose handbook on war trauma, *Healing From The War*, was published in 1986; John Wheeler, president of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Foundation, who added theological seminary education to his achievements in business and law before writing *Touched With Fire*, published in 1984; and William P. Mahedy, the former Augustinian monk, Vet Center team leader, and current Episcopal chaplain to San Diego students, whose brilliant study, *Out of the Night: The Spiritual Journey of Vietnam Vets*, was issued in 1986. These studies, and others that must be forthcoming, approach the warrior's experience as spiritual experience, and understand that the psychological dimensions of post-traumatic stress carry profound religious implications. Mahedy likens the returning veterans' spiritual state to that described in Christian mystical literature, particularly to "the dark night of the soul" probed, illumined, and described in the writings of St. John of the Cross, and, certainly, as experienced by Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, and (though he

doesn't explore this connection) by Martin Luther in the personal encounter with *Anfechtung*. Each of these studies makes one wonder why more attention has not been given to this subject in the churches and seminaries, particularly when one notes that an estimated forty million Americans have some direct connection to at least one of the 58,175 persons whose names are inscribed on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, and, of course, a much higher proportion have some direct connection to at least one of the four million American men and women who served in Vietnam, and, most assuredly, to at least one of the more than 100,000 Vietnam War veterans who has taken his own life since returning from the combat zone in Indochina.

Within this framework, Siemon-Netto's *The Acquittal of God* represents a powerful voice. Having been in Vietnam as a journalist over a period of five years, Siemon-Netto experienced the war at minutely close range. Home from the war, but profoundly affected by the memories of the war, Siemon-Netto was inspired to study theology, at the age of fifty. Then, into theology, Siemon-Netto was guided by Lutheran School of Theology professors Carl Braaten, Robert Bertram, Philip Hefner, Franklin Sherman and Paul Bauermeister into the relevant literature, within which he discovered the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who, particularly in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, was languishing over the spiritual, psychological and religious implications of the German experience in World War II. Here Siemon-Netto found the connection and the insight he was looking for. Noting that veterans of the war find belief in God enormously problematic, Siemon-Netto, guided by Bonhoeffer, speaks of the God "who has been surmounted and abolished." Noting that veterans of the war discovered the triumphant, ruling deity to have relinquished the throne, Siemon-Netto, guided by Bonhoeffer, writes eloquently of the theology of the cross. Noting that returning warriors have experienced profound loneliness, isolation and disenfranchisement, Siemon-Netto, guided by Bonhoeffer, writes passionately of "suffering with God in a godless world."

As a consequence, *The Acquittal of God* is both recognition that the Vietnam War experience runs counter to triumphalist theological expectations and is a positive affirmation that this counter-experience lies at the heart of Christian faith. "When an event is unspeakable, it does indeed take awhile to learn the right words."

But Uwe Siemon-Netto has discovered some crucial ones, and is pointing both theological discussion and pastoral care to resiliently redemptive resources.

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*Dietrich Bonhoeffer—His Significance for North Americans.* By Larry Rasmussen with Renate Bethge. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990. x - 198 pp. \$12.95.

Larry Rasmussen's book is refreshingly unconventional in what it encompasses: 1) A fascinating chapter in which Renate Bethge, Bonhoeffer's niece, describes the deep roots of her uncle's thought in the cultural values, moral convictions, and intellectual rigor of his family. 2) A penetrating look at Bonhoeffer's theology and social ethics and the restless style of existential engagement with the issues of his place and time which characterized the development of his thought. 3) A comparison of Bonhoeffer's thought with that of three North Americans (Daniel Berrigan, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Irving Greenberg) that gives one the sense of being present at a lively discussion in which some of the most pressing questions of our age are aired and new alternatives are explored, offering hope to those with sufficient sensitivity and courage to think beyond old impasses.

From beginning to end Rasmussen's treatment is infused with his own passionate engagement with the critical issues confronting our own society. His keen sense of the significant differences in time and circumstances between Bonhoeffer's Nazi world and contemporary North America delivers him from the temptation of attempting a direct transfer of meaning. Instead, he demonstrates the abiding significance of the central themes of Bonhoeffer's life (e.g., reality defined as "the form of Christ in the world") and the dynamics of Bonhoeffer's theological method (passionate commitment and engagement as the proper context of theology). The effect of this demonstration is the unmasking of many facile assumptions held by North American Christians as examples of acculturation of the gospel and arrogant nationalism.

By the time one reaches the fourth and final part of the book, entitled "New Paths in Theology," one is prepared to have Ras-



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