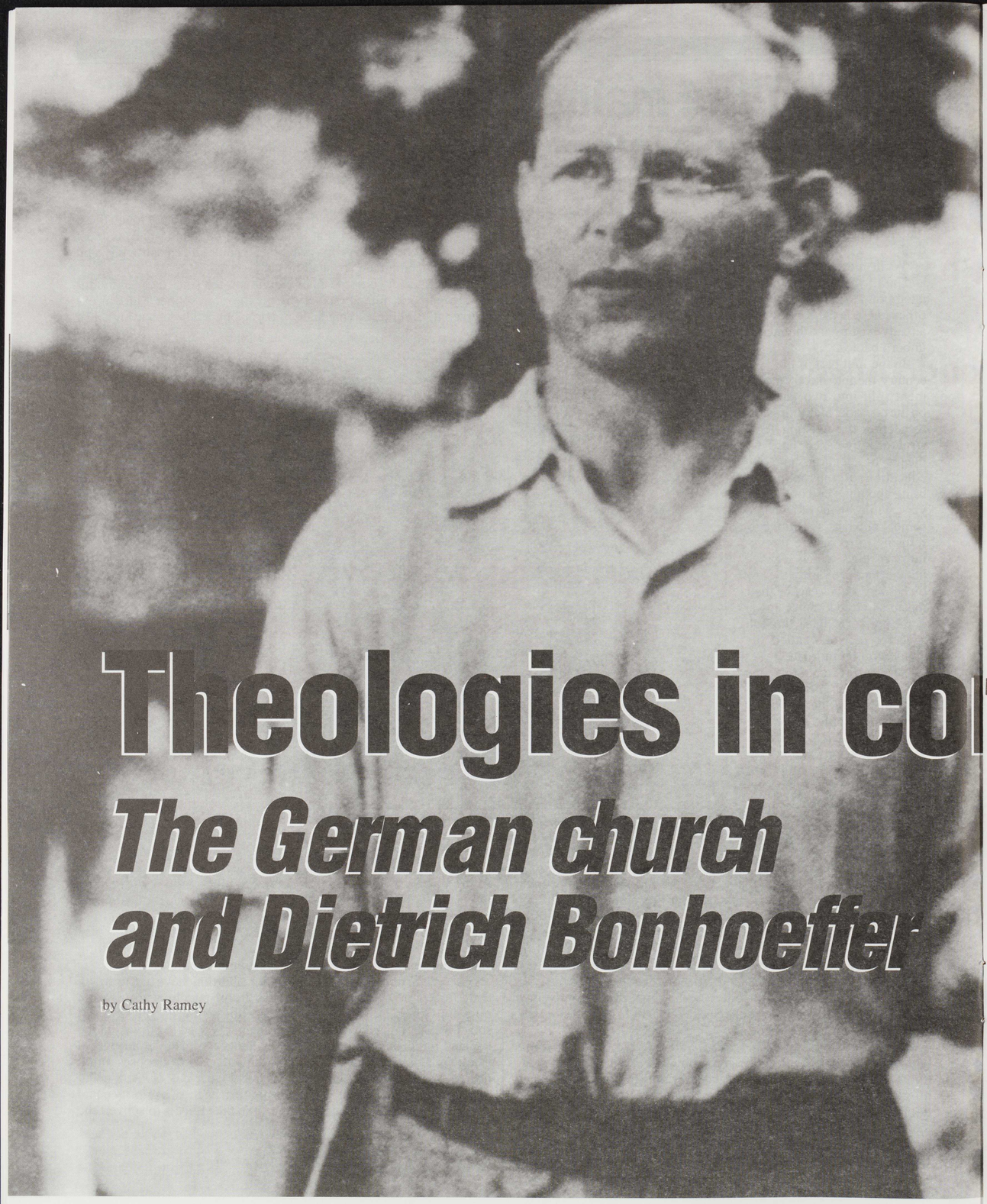

Theologies in conflict

The German church and Dietrich Bonhoeffer

by Cathy Ramey

It was spring, with flowers beginning to break through the ground and the sun rising early, when three men were ordered from their cells. Each wore thin prison garb despite the lingering cold of winter, and one of the prisoners, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, had only just been issued his uniform the night before. Now, after walking to a remote area of the Flossenburg prison yard he was ordered to remove the pants and jacket, fold them neatly, and move on with the other two men toward a gallows.

A physician associated with the prison camp observed the execution and wrote of it several years later.

"Through the half-opened door of a room in the barracks," he recalled, "I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer, before taking off his prison uniform, kneeling in fervent prayer to his Lord God. The devoted manner and faithful certainty that characterized the praying of this extraordinarily likable man shook me to the depths of my being."

The prisoners mounted the wooden steps rough and gray with age, and the camp physician continued to watch the pastor with interest.

"Even at the place of execution itself," the doctor noted with amazement, "he said another short prayer and then courageously and calmly climbed the steps to the gallows."

As a rope was pulled over his head and brought to rest around his neck, Dietrich Bonhoeffer slowly raised his hands toward his face. He removed the simple wire-framed glasses anchored at the bridge of his nose and handed them off to the guard. Only moments later, the trap door was loosed and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's body was suddenly suspended between heaven and earth.

"He died within a few seconds. In my nearly fifteen years as a doctor I hardly ever saw a man die so devoted to God," the man wrote.[1]

Dietrich Bonhoeffer died at the age of 39 after spending two full years imprisoned on charges of treason during the final grim days of Germany's war against the world. Despite having written two books and many sermons before his arrest and imprisonment, at the time of his death he was not seen as a great contributor to Christian thought and theology. True, he was greatly respected and viewed as having much potential for contributing. But when hanged most saw him merely as a man cut off before being allowed to live up to that potential.

Later, as poems, letters, and essays surfaced from among his various correspondents — communications smuggled out from the prison itself — it became apparent that Dietrich Bonhoeffer died leaving a wealth of valuable insight into the Christian life during times of crisis. His writings often seem difficult and obscure to the average reader, and indeed, if studied apart from the historical context in which they were written they can appear to be almost anti-theological.

Bonhoeffer was hung on a gallows like the one above.

The rejection of religion

Germany, even at the time of Bonhoeffer's birth in 1906, was becoming increasingly matriarchal, increasingly rejecting of religion.

In 1907 Sigmund Freud released a paper, "Compulsive Acts and Religious Exercises," stating that religion was born of a "fear of the