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Misrepresenting the Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

By [Nancy Lukens](#) ^[1] [February 2011](#) ^[2]

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Dietrich Bonhoeffer's writings, his prophetic Christian witness amid criminal abuses of power, racial persecution, terror, and genocide by his own government, and his martyrdom for participating in the coup to overthrow Hitler continue to inspire and provoke important questions and actions. The global following for this German pastor and theologian includes agnostics and atheists, evangelicals and liberal Protestants, Catholics and Jews, and people of many political persuasions, young and old alike.

READ: [11 Bonhoeffer Quotes to Remember a Pastor Who Resisted Evil Unto Death](#) ^[5]

By the same token, Bonhoeffer has been claimed by quite different, indeed opposite, religious groups, individuals, and political leaders to support their purposes. George W. Bush invoked his name before the German parliament in 2002 to justify the invasion of Iraq. Nelson Mandela read him in prison on Robben Island before his release in 1990. East German youth sang verses of his prison poem "By Powers of Good" before the fall of communism, without necessarily knowing he was a Christian.

"[\[Metaxas' book\] is stunningly flawed as a biography.](#)"

The very titles of two biographies of Bonhoeffer that appeared within a few weeks of each other in 2010 suggest the diversity of those who may be drawn to him. While Eric Metaxas' book title, *[Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy, A Righteous Gentile vs. the Third Reich](#)* ^[6] (Thomas Nelson), and his engaging style give his book the accessibility and appeal of a novel, it is stunningly flawed as a biography. Metaxas misleads readers both by his title and by his presentation of Bonhoeffer as a lone heroic figure. Yes, Bonhoeffer's covert position with a military intelligence office gave him the cover needed to travel abroad on behalf of the resistance, but a James-Bond-

like "spy" he was not. Nor does Metaxas ever explain in the book the use of the term "righteous gentile" in the title. This designation is bestowed by Yad Veshem, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority in Jerusalem, to those who aided Jews in the Holocaust. Does Metaxas know that Bonhoeffer has not been given this honor?

By contrast, Ferdinand Schlingensiepen's biography, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906-1945: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance* [7] (T&T Clark International, translated from the German by Isabel Best) focuses, as the title suggests, on Bonhoeffer's thought and his involvement in the resistance to Hitler, for which he was executed. The book is accessible to general readers and scholars alike and provides a long-needed, factually accurate update to the classic biography of Bonhoeffer by his close friend Eberhard Bethge, which was published in 1967 (and in English in 1970). Moreover, its presentation not only of Bonhoeffer, but of the people, issues, and contexts of the period, is clear and vividly illustrated, using a wide variety of current sources.

Metaxas, whose writing credits include *The New York Times*, children's books and screenplays, Charles Colson's *Breakpoint* radio show, and the companion book to the film *Amazing Grace* about William Wilberforce, presents Bonhoeffer as an evangelical Christian in the U.S. sense of the word. The centrality of the gospel of Jesus Christ to Bonhoeffer's work and witness in Nazi Germany is unquestionable; Metaxas and Schlingensiepen present the same Bonhoeffer in this respect. However, the differences between the two accounts of Bonhoeffer's theology and his development as a thinker, his challenge to churches and to all people of conscience in what he calls the "world come of age," particularly in the unique context of a totalitarian regime, are striking indeed.

The Schlingensiepen book, while shorter than Metaxas', demonstrates his personal familiarity not only with Bonhoeffer's surviving contemporaries, but with the 17-volume German edition of Bonhoeffer's works completed in 1999, as well as more recently published correspondence not available in English. Schlingensiepen's book is the result of decades of friendship and close collaboration between the author and Bethge, who had gathered and edited Bonhoeffer's work after the war. Schlingensiepen draws fully and effectively on the whole of Bonhoeffer's works, including discoveries and interpretations that undergird Schlingensiepen's argument that it is dangerous to venerate Bonhoeffer rather than seeking to grasp the unique connection he made between theology and political action.

The biggest problem with Metaxas' book is its structural principle of condemning "liberal" and promoting "evangelical" Christianity, which he constructs as polar opposites.

Metaxas uses solely English-language sources. Because material giving insight into Bonhoeffer continues to be found, and translations are being refined and more fully annotated, a writer working in English will want to seek out good translations of the best available material. But Metaxas makes relatively limited use of the newest Bonhoeffer translations, the 16-volume *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English* edition (*DBWE*), 12 volumes of which were available while he was writing. While he fills pages with quotations from three volumes covering 1918-1935 (Vols. 9, 10, 13), the four volumes of theological books (Vols. 1-4) serve as mere biographical markers in his narrative. Of the four volumes covering Bonhoeffer's reflection on and participation in the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler and his imprisonment (Vols. 6-8, 16), Metaxas quotes only from Vol. 16. Several quotations from other volumes that Metaxas credits to *DBWE* are actually from much earlier translations, some of them flawed.

The biggest problem with Metaxas' book is its structural principle of condemning "liberal" and promoting "evangelical" Christianity, which he constructs as polar opposites. As Clifford Green observes in *Christian Century*, Metaxas condemns liberal Union Seminary in New York, where Bonhoeffer spent 1930-31, implying that Bonhoeffer escaped spiritual starvation there to be fed "real" spiritual food and to be "born again" at the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. While the Harlem experience was truly formative for Bonhoeffer, so was that of Union. From start to finish, while lifting often-correct statements from his sources, Metaxas peppers his colorful and

entertaining narrative with language and judgments that subtly but unfaithfully box Bonhoeffer into categories Bonhoeffer never accepted, creating an anti-"liberal" polemic for today's reader. Green expands upon the intellectual and theological influence of Bonhoeffer's lifelong friendships from Union on his work on the Sermon on the Mount and on his evolving understanding of discipleship and pacifism.

I agree with Victoria Barnett, writing in the International Bonhoeffer Society Newsletter, that a thorough exploration of Bonhoeffer by an evangelical well-versed in the historical and theological context of the German Church Struggle would be an important contribution. However, from the simplistic structure and obvious polemic intent of Metaxas' narrative to his uncritical and unsystematic use of limited sources, he not only fails at this, but does both Bonhoeffer and contemporary readers a gross disservice in implying that evangelicals are immune from the tragic error of merging nationalistic fervor with Christian piety.

One example may suggest how Schlingensiepen's familiarity with new German sources allows him to bring depth to stories Metaxas can only describe in surface detail. Gertrud Staewen, a social worker who attended Bonhoeffer's lectures in Berlin and met him through mutual friends, is mentioned once by Metaxas. His context is a 1933 story, familiar from Bethge's biography, about Bonhoeffer and his friend Franz Hildebrandt in Wittenberg distributing copies of the Pastors' Emergency League manifesto, an early protest against the Nazification of the German churches and their anti-Jewish policies. Metaxas' entertaining description foregrounds Bonhoeffer leaving his Berlin family home accompanied by Staewen and Hildebrandt. Staewen remains unidentified and is never mentioned again. Neither Staewen's crucial role as the Berlin link in Bonhoeffer's Jewish aid work with the Geneva Jewish refugee aid office of Adolf Freudenberg, nor that work itself, warrant Metaxas' attention.

Schlingensiepen, on the other hand, draws on the biography of Staewen and her recently discovered correspondence to unfold the story of her important connections with Bonhoeffer from the early 1930s, including opening his mind to the importance of urban youth work, then risking her life in the process of hiding Berlin Jews and helping others escape deportation.

Schlingensiepen's biography also stands out for other reasons. First, he fills in gaps in the biography by Bethge -- Bethge underplayed his own essential role in Bonhoeffer's intellectual and spiritual journey from 1935 on. Second, people in Schlingensiepen's narrative -- whether Nazi officials, German Christians (pro-Hitler), Confessing Church (illegal) pastors, complicit onlookers and bystanders, or active resisters -- are painted as real people who faced horrific daily situations and choices. They are not polarized and judged as simplistic heroes and villains, Bonhoefferian "evangelicals" and misguided "liberals," as one senses with Metaxas.

I pray that if Metaxas plans to publish his book in Germany, he will seek help from a good evangelical church historian to correct the glaring factual errors, distortions, and omissions that plague his otherwise powerful narrative. Otherwise 60 years of personal discoveries by survivors of the Holocaust and the German resistance and by scholars and laypeople about the dangers of putting figures like Bonhoeffer on a pedestal, or condemning certain threads of thinking through uncritical and selective use of sources for one's own purposes, will be lost for eager readers.

Moreover, Metaxas would, presumably unintentionally, disrespect the very people for whom Bonhoeffer gave his life, and left such a powerful legacy: namely his co-resisters, friends, and loved ones, and those he saw building a post-Hitler Europe from the ashes. Most of these, as we know especially from Bonhoeffer's prison writings, were not religious in the traditional sense, but they would understand what he meant by "costly grace" and by "vicarious responsible action," freely assuming guilt before God for the sake of victims of unspeakable evil done in their names.

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leaders involved in the nonviolent opposition of the 1980s.

More on Dietrich Bonhoeffer

- The *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English* series, 16 volumes of Bonhoeffer's correspondence, essays, sermons, fiction, poetry, and books on ethics and theology, with new scholarly documentation, are being published in their entirety for the first time in English by Fortress Press. Volumes 1-10, 12, 13, and 16 are available. Vol. 15 is due out in fall 2011, Vol. 11 in spring 2012, and Vol. 14 in fall 2012.
- A revised edition of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian, Christian, A Man for His Times, A Biography* [8], by Eberhard Bethge and edited by Victoria J. Barnett, was published by Fortress Press in 2000. Includes sections omitted in the 1970 English edition.
- The documentary *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Pacifist, Nazi Resister*, directed by Martin Doblmeier, includes interviews with Eberhard Bethge and other Bonhoeffer contemporaries. Journey Films

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