

In this volume, Weimer offers a helpful contribution to our understanding of early New England religious history. Previous works studied the wider apocalyptic interest of that era, and this singular focus on martyrdom gives further insight into the formation of religious identity in New England. This volume is worth considering for those interested in understanding the history of early New England in the context of religious thought.

**JEFFREY K. JUE**

Provost and Executive Vice President  
Westminster Theological Seminary  
Philadelphia, PA

---

Eric Metaxas. *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy: A Righteous Gentile vs. the Third Reich*. Nashville: Nelson, 2010.

Years ago, someone said of a Broadway musical, only a little tongue-in-cheek, “nobody liked it but the audience!” Apparently it had received considerably negative reviews from the theater critics and other professionals, but the spectators had loved it. Something like this could be said about Eric Metaxas’s book about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, not that all who praise the book are laypeople. And it has received numerous prestigious awards. But many of those most qualified to evaluate it have been quite negative. There are two possibilities. The critics could be wrong, as they sometimes are. Or, the winsome prose of the book camouflages the errors.

Because of that, this book is difficult to review. It is indeed beautifully written, smooth and engaging. The subject is of considerable importance. Dietrich Bonhoeffer made a profound mark on the twentieth century, not only because of his leadership in the resistance against the Nazis, but because of his theological views and writings. Books such as *The Cost of Discipleship* and *Life Together* are still being read at seminaries and in churches. The difficulty is to know how much of the Metaxas book is hagiography, and how much it is trying to make Bonhoeffer into someone he was not. My answer is that it is a bit of both.

There is no rule against hagiography, as long as it does not conceal serious inaccuracies. The fact is, several people have tried to label Bonhoeffer and garner him for their cause. Rather as they do with C. S. Lewis, many want to claim him as their hero. The charge against Eric Metaxas is that he has made Bonhoeffer into more of an evangelical (in the American sense) than he was. For example, Clifford Green asserts that Eric Metaxas has “hijacked” Bonhoeffer for the evangelicals (whereas Metaxas says or implies that it is liberals who have in fact hijacked him). Green has credibility as he is the

executive director of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*. It is worth reading Green's review, as well as the long thread of comments that follow.<sup>1</sup> The question is legitimate: Is Bonhoeffer a close ally of modern evangelicals, or, if they really knew him, would he be too radical for their comfort? *Christianity Today*, in many ways the conservative opposite number to *The Christian Century*, wants to settle the debate by calling him, "a liberal with some evangelical sympathies or leanings."<sup>2</sup>

No doubt this kind of debate has its place. Bonhoeffer was not an aggressive liberal, at least in the sense of the disputes between "modernists" and "fundamentalists" in the early twentieth century in the United States. He did share certain views with European liberal theologians. He not only studied with but became friends with Adolf von Harnack in Berlin (1924–1927). Harnack, a noted liberal, who, with many colleagues, taught biblical higher criticism, questioned the authorship of John, and urged people to think of the New Testament less as a *norm* and more as a *source* for the Christian faith. He nevertheless urged students to achieve a piety that was authentically theirs and not dependent on creeds and traditions. Something of this dichotomy can be seen in Bonhoeffer's so-called "religionless Christianity." No doubt his greatest mentor was not a liberal at all, but Karl Barth, the leader of "neo-orthodoxy," known in Europe as "crisis theology" or "dialectical theology." Though a fierce critic of liberalism, Barth nevertheless was comfortable with biblical criticism. Bonhoeffer's admiration for Barth stemmed from his appeals to faith without tying it to rational or historical verification. They both detested what they believed to be Christian apologetics. Bonhoeffer clearly cannot be claimed by American evangelicals who hold to the doctrine of "inerrancy." In his 1933 treatise of the creation and the fall, he states that the traditional view of verbal inspiration is flawed, and that the author(s) of Genesis were limited by their times. Yet at the same time, his writings are full of biblical allusions. He followed the typical strategy of neo-orthodoxy by relegating historical and textual issues to the "lower storey" or *Historie*, reserving the use and authority of Scripture to the "upper storey" or *Heilsgeschichte*. In my view this split is ultimately fatal, and yet did not at first prevent its adherents from a certain deep, authentic piety.

I have worked through several of Bonhoeffer's works a number of times, and am always enriched by his use of Scripture. But they do raise important questions. Was he a pacifist? Not in the Anabaptist fashion, though he did

---

<sup>1</sup> In *The Christian Century*, Oct. 5, 2010: <http://www.christiancentury.org/reviews/2010-09/hijacking-bonhoeffer>.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/februaryweb-only/redeemingbonhoeffer.html>.

plead for peace and peace-making, based on his understanding of the Sermon of the Mount. His *Ethics* (1940–1943) advocates doing everything possible to achieve peace, yet admits of exceptions, such as wars of necessity. Many questions remain about his involvement with the plot to assassinate Hitler. But it is clear that he was not opposed to such an extreme measure. Metaxas rather poignantly describes Bonhoeffer's resolve in the midst of an extreme situation.

What were his views on Scripture and inspiration? In the end, Metaxas does not spend much time elucidating Bonhoeffer's views on Scripture. If that is the reader's major interest this is not the book to satisfy it. It does not intend to be. Rather, it is far more concerned with Bonhoeffer's piety, and his bravery when facing the increasingly hostile Nazi régime. Although Karl Barth was the primary author of the *Barmen Declaration* (1934), the document that would call for a return to traditional Lutheranism and to resist the growing darkness of a tyrannical government, Bonhoeffer was deeply involved. Here Metaxas has a thorough treatment of the declaration, of the creation of the Confessing Church and Bonhoeffer's role in the growing resistance to Hitler.

Another charge against Metaxas is his unfamiliarity with the history of Bonhoeffer's times. This ignorance is said to deprive him of the ability to understand Bonhoeffer's theology more fully, since so much of it was shaped by his interaction with people and events of his day. Such a criticism is leveled, for example, by Victoria J. Barnett. She too has considerable credibility since she is the General Editor of the English Edition of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Works*, as well as the Director of Church Relations at the U. S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. Her assessment is that Metaxas is guilty of "oversimplification of the battle lines and the complexities of the church struggle." She takes issue with what she believes to be Metaxas's view, and answers, "The failure of the German Evangelical Church under Nazism was not that it was filled with formalistic, legalistic Lutherans who just needed to form a personal relationship to Jesus, but that it was filled with Christians whose understanding of their faith had so converged with German national culture that it tainted both their politics and their theology."<sup>3</sup> I am not convinced this is fair to Metaxas. There is much more in his recommendation of Bonhoeffer than an appeal to a personal relationship to Jesus, though without doubt that is present. And to say that the problem in the church was not formalism simply denies one of the facts about the German

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://contemporarychurchhistory.org/2010/09/review-of-eric-metaxas-bonhoeffer-pastor-martyr-prophet-spy-a-righteous-gentile-vs-the-third-reich/>.

church in the period between the wars. *Barmen* can be read, among other things, as an admonition against formalism. It is indeed full of appeals to putting Jesus Christ first, in order to combat any spirit of compromise.

To be sure, Metaxas does not approach his subject as a social historian. Another book may be needed to compare people and events with Bonhoeffer's theological evolution. Yet this one does not abstract him from his times. Quite the contrary, it is full of quotes from correspondence, full of biographical details, and the recounting of historical events. Even his critics admit that the book is a great read, although some of them rather resent it, because they feel the reader will be unwittingly drawn-in. I share some of their reservations about his theological assessment of Bonhoeffer, but I find the criticism over the top. One of the greatest virtues of the book is to make you *feel* as though you were right there, rejoicing or suffering along with Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church. We feel we actually know his fiancée, brother and sister, and his friends. We live with him through his visits to the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem with Adam Clayton Powell at the pulpit. We sense the agony of several major choices in his life. We are oppressed at the Flossenbürg and Buchenwald prisons. That is what good historians do.

Metaxas's Bonhoeffer is a hero, and someone who, in his own words, "is ready to sacrifice all ... when he is called to obedient and responsible action in faith and exclusive allegiance to God ..." (p. 446). While fully acknowledging the legitimacy of the questions raised by his critics (Is he an evangelical, and were his views shaped by the history of his times?), the take-away for me is his example of Christian heroism. Bonhoeffer advocated constantly for a full devotion to Jesus Christ, whatever the cost. He gave his life for his Lord. We must be ready to do the same, whether literally, or in our daily decisions to follow Christ.

**WILLIAM EDGAR**

Professor of Apologetics  
John Boyer Chair of Evangelism and Culture  
Westminster Theological Seminary  
Philadelphia, PA

EDITORIAL NOTE

*Since writing this review Bill Edgar suffered a cardiac attack on August 18. The editors join with me in wishing our friend and colleague a complete return to health and activity and assuring him and his family of our prayers at this time.*  
—Paul Wells