Review of new Bonhoeffer movie by Rev Dr Thomas K Johnson
11/25/2024

As the Bonhoeffer's festival concluded I asked a dear friend who is Jewish, what she thought of it. Her response "why haven't we heard more about this guy? Everyone needs to know his story and be inspired like I am today."

I don't consider myself a Bonhoeffer scholar, but more of a Bonhoeffer evangelist, teaching, preaching and telling whoever would listen to Google Bonhoeffer and be inspired.

The new Bonhoeffer film has sparked plenty of controversy.
The international Bonhoeffer Society and Bonhoeffer's own family members have warned that the movie portrays a Bonhoeffer that advocates for violence, and to label him as an assassin is misconstrued and dangerously misguided.

I tried to keep an open mind as I listened to the interview of the Director (see below) who made it clear he was not influenced by extreme conservative proponents like Metaxas, who has manipulated Bonhoeffer to fit his own agenda.

I've also read recent reviews from notable sources offering insightful and helpful critiques of the movie, especially how it squares with the historical Bonhoeffer and his witness to faith and theology.
(See below)

Clearly, there is plenty of discussion yet to come.

Regardless of your perspective, I would recommend that everyone takes time to see the movie and judge for themselves instead of boycotting it.

After seeing the film, I would like offer three observations that I hope will be helpful in evaluating the importance of this film for us today.

First, it is one man's interpretation of a story that has inspired him for many years (listen to the interview by Tripp Fuller of director/screenplay writer Todd Komarnicki) and like with all "historical dramas" he is bound to get some things right and others things wrong. Still it is an impressive attempt at trying to capture Bonhoeffer's account of standing up for truth, justice and freedom. Yes at times it feels rather contrived at making sure to get in all the popular "sayings" of Bonhoeffer. At times they fit and other times they don't.
Likewise it is clear the director wants to use whatever devices possible to keep us engaged for nearly two hours. The plot to assassinate Hitler and the moral dilemma of its justification draws us in to ask ourselves what would we do? But it does seem to

cross the line when it has Bonhoeffer declaring I am all in and has him arguing that at times violence is the only solution. I wish the Director would've included Bonhoeffer's love for Gandhi, and his desire to got to India and learn from him personally. I don't believe that Bonhoeffer ever gave up on the idea of nonviolent resistance, and its effective power to ultimately change corrupt structures.
One dramatic device that I found to be effective, is introducing us to Bonhoeffer's childhood memories and the significance of his family members, and how he relies upon that love as he confronts the isolation of the prison walls. He expresses this in his Christmas letter and how it is a vital resource for him when he encounters bouts of depression.
There seems to be tension throughout the movie of portraying the humanness of Bonhoeffer vs his noble hero status.

Secondly, it's clear to me the Director is not very familiar with Bonhoeffer as Lutheran theologian, and as a Pastor.
Bonhoeffer was deeply influenced by both by Luther's theology and pastoral example.
It is surprising to me that somewhere in the film there isn't an exchange over Bonhoeffers concern about cheap grace versus costly grace, perhaps at least among the students at Finkenwalde.
Likewise, a discussion on Luther theology of cross versus a theology of glory would have been enlightening especially since this is where Metaxas and other evangelical conservative proponents of Bonhoeffer go astray.
It interesting to hear that the director went to Wheaton College, which is renowned for its conservative Bonhoeffer scholars and explains his evangelical slant. This is bore out when the pastor, Adam Clayton Powell, from the Abyssinian Baptist church in Harlem asks Bonhoeffer when he met Jesus. This question seems strange to Bonhoeffer and it should be since Lutheran theology emphasizes how God meets us right where are and accepts us by grace just the way we are. Even though Bonhoeffer admits that he becomes truly a Christian through his experience of the black church in Harlem is also clear that Bonhoeffer never abandons his Lutheran core values and Theological framework.
Primarily his experience with the black church in Harlem helps him to sort out the difference between religion and Faith.
This point is reinforced throughout the movie.

And finally, although much more could be shared, the last observation is how the movie misses an opportunity to focus on Bonhoeffer as Pastor.
This is how Bonhoeffer saw himself and his calling to pastoral ministry as his top priority.
The movie does depict him in the role as preacher and the importance of being prophetic, and speaking out to the evils affecting his flock.
It was moving to see Bonhoeffer react to perhaps his confirmation students now dressed in the Nazi brown shirts, marching in formation, ignoring him completely. That would be deeply distressing for a pastor who cares for his sheep.
In his book life together Bonhoeffer demonstrates he is even Pastor to his students.
Is identity as Pastor directly influences all the decisions he makes throughout his life.

His constant care for the welfare of his church members could have been expressed more clearly in the movie. One quote I missed was that “the church is not the church unless it exists for others.” His passion to identify with the underside and vulnerable, those who are being oppressed and excluded.
It was exactly this realization that lead him to conclude Christ was to be found in the Jews, who are being “deported” and made the scapegoats for all of society’s problems. This is what Metaxas misses or perhaps intentionally ignores and why he aligns Bonhoeffer so egregiously with trumps policies of deportation of migrants and refugees.
I would like to also seen the film include Bonhoeffer making hospital visits or doing all the funerals that he had to do, and thankfully, we have many of his moving sermons he gave at these funerals. I believe his role as pastor also transformed him from being a rather arrogant, self-centered person to one who lived out his faith with compassion and caring acts.
I was glad to see the movie incorporated, the final communion scene with the prisoners and Bonhoeffer emphasis that all are welcome to the table.
Obviously, it is a monumental task to capture the life and the character in the witness a Bonhoeffer in a two hour movie.
There have been other attempts, such as Agent of grace, which also includes Bonhoeffer relationship to his fiancée Maria.
Which this movie excludes for whatever reason and highlights even more keenly, his decision to return to Germany.
Also, there is Martin Dobelmeier’s docudrama on Bonhoeffers life, which is exceptional in regards to accuracy and first hand testimonials.
In the end, I guess I would push back on so many Bonhoeffer scholars, taking exception to this movie, and its intent.
I don’t see it as a defense for Christian nationalism instead quite the opposite as it offers in about half hour speaks out directly at the evils of idolatry, the worship of country or one man leads to destruction.
Yes, I suppose one could ascertain that it is making a case for Bonhoeffer to be supportive of violence, but to focus only on this misses the overall purpose of the movie and its desire to inspire us by such a profound witness of courage and faithfulness.
But I am writing this review not for the Bonhoeffer scholars, but for the people in the pew and my interfaith friends, who have written to me, asking my opinion on whether or not, they should see the film.
As a pastor myself, these are the ones I come in contact with and care about. Especially these days when they struggle with such profound moral and political challenges.
My utmost concern is to provide inspiration for their faith and give them the resources to have the courage to speak out for those without a voice.
I would not hesitate to recommend this movie as a resource for that inspiration.
And of course, to remind them that it is one person’s interpretation of an exciting story and sometimes they can get it right and sometimes they can get it wrong.
But regardless, with any good story it provides a reflection on our own story, and how are we being faithful and are we aligning ourselves where and with whom we find Christ today?

Rev Dr Thomas K Johnson

There are plenty of other reviews of the film out there (see Christian Century – Reggie Williams and Christianity Today). Here are few articles that express the concern over Metaxas “hijacking” Bonhoeffer for his own right wing agenda
Be sure to listen to the two interviews of the Director of the film.

Sign the Petition
change.org

Slowly but Surely, the Right Is Taking One of My Heroes for Their Own. It’s Very Hard to Watch.
slate.com

Bonhoeffer family and scholars warn against Metaxas and Christian nationalists
baptistnews.com

LISTEN NOW: Director of the New Bonhoeffer Movie!
processthis.substack.com

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ClREpHIZMNc

Preview YouTube video Resistance And Redemption: Todd Komarnicki And Angel Studios Bring Bonhoeffer To The Big Screen




Film by Martin Dobelmeier

Bonhoeffer
google.com

Excellent documentary!

Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Memories And Perspectives (2003) | Full Movie | Oliver Osterberg
youtube.com

There's no such thing as a Bonhoeffer moment
christiancentury.org

FINAL-House-Divided-and-a-World-on-Fire-Facilitator-Scripts-2
PDF Document · 2.1 MB

Excellent film "Bonhoeffer: Agent of Grace"
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2325_APzy6c

Preview YouTube video Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Memories And Perspectives (2003) | Full Movie | Oliver Osterberg




Note from the reviewer

The past 12 years I have organized and hosted a Bonhoeffer festival at Claremont, California.
Also, for 12 years I taught a graduate course entitled
"The role of Prophet and Pastor: An Introduction to Dietrich Bonhoeffer"
at Claremont School of Theology, where I served as the Director for the center of Lutheran Studies for 25 years.
At the same time I served a local Lutheran congregation and have been an ordained Lutheran pastor for 42 years.
I was fortunate to serve as pastor and professor at the same time just like Bonhoeffer.

It has been my joy to introduce Bonhoeffer to so many people over the years, like my Jewish friend above and I doing my part to make more people aware of who Bonhoeffer was and is for us today.
This review is in response to
many requests I have received to offer a review of the new Bonhoeffer movie.