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Carolyn R. Dupont
Eastern Kentucky University

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CAROLYN R. DUPONT

CHRISTIAN FAITH AND STRUGGLES FOR JUSTICE (A REPLY TO METAXAS)

As part of the ECU Chautauqua Lecture Series, author Eric Metaxas came to Central Kentucky to speak about his newly published book, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*. The book garnered glowing reviews in some circles and continued to sell briskly after reaching the top slot on the *New York Times* bestseller list in September 2011. Engaging and openly evangelical, Metaxas tells a compelling story of the life and ultimate end of the German pastor who opposed the Nazi regime, joined a plot to kill Hitler and paid with his life. Audiences leave his presentations as if under a spell.

In the book as well as his public presentations on it, Metaxas argues that something about the slain pastor's faith set him apart from the millions of German Christians who put their Christianity in the direct service of the Third Reich or who complied passively while their government unleashed horrifying brutality. Though deeply steeped in the Christian tradition, Germans' religion seems utterly to have failed them when they needed it most. Only a small remnant of believers, with Bonhoeffer a leader among them, nurtured a faith that opposed evil, rather than abetted and facilitated it. Metaxas' thesis thus promises to speak to central and compelling human dilemmas: what mechanism so twists an entire society's moral compass that it pursues evil as a national goal? How can an individual preserve his or her own moral vision in a climate where wrong appears right and vice-versa? A corollary conundrum besets the serious Christian: why have the most zealous practitioners of this tradition often served as perpetrators of the worst human evils? The Crusades of the Middle Ages and American slavery come quickly to mind. If we accept Metaxas' claims about Bonhoeffer, a faith like the German pastor's offers hope for redemption from our own worst proclivities. The promise to unveil Bonhoeffer—his understanding of the Scripture, his precise theology, his approach to ethics—beckons with the possibility that each of us might react with similar redemptive heroism to the evils, small and great, that confront us. To deliver on this promise, Metaxas must show us in detail the contours of Bonhoeffer's faith.

Yet disappointingly, in my view, the author's mostly narrative account fails adequately to probe this most crucial and foundational aspect of the story. Instead, Metaxas draws a straight and uncomplicated line from what he terms "real Christianity" to Bonhoeffer's courageous resistance, never adequately explaining exactly how the pastor's faith differed from the ostensibly counterfeit versions that cooperated with the Nazis' evil. Given that perhaps thousands of versions of Christianity—both past and present—have claimed the title of "real" or "authentic," the omission renders Metaxas' bulging biography a good story that leaves the most important stones unturned. Perhaps even more troubling, this vagueness about the particulars of Bonhoeffer's theology allows Metaxas to present him as the close theological kinsman of contemporary American evangelicals. The portrait badly distorts both the German pastor's theological identity and the historical record about the kinds of Christian faith that have most effectively challenged social evils.

Metaxas' telling reduces all expressions of Christianity to two kinds: the conservative evangelical sort that takes the Bible seriously as the Word of God and the "liberal" version that rejects the inerrancy of scripture. He describes Bonhoeffer as a conservative, arguing that his commitment to classic and orthodox views enabled him to oppose the Nazis. In a facile juxtaposition and with only thinly veiled scorn, Metaxas depicts "liberal" Christians as the evil anti-Bonhoeffers who swallowed the Nazi line because they had jettisoned the Bible as their foundation for faith. But the neat categories of "conservative" and "liberal" that define America's twenty-first century culture wars bear little resemblance to the German religious and political landscape in the inter-war and Nazi years. Metaxas' neatly drawn dichotomies do a grave injustice to the many rich and varied expressions of Christian faith that defy these narrow boxes.

Bonhoeffer worked at the highest echelons of theology, and understanding his thought requires wading into these heady and admittedly difficult waters. Scholars have traced the influence of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche on his writings, and he was a serious disciple of Karl Barth, a sophisticated theologian whom many American evangelicals have decried as dangerously apostate. But not only does Metaxas fail to deal with this complexity, he declines to even acknowledge that it exists. Metaxas limits his discussion of theology to useless clichés like "the God behind the text" and "loving Jesus." Such

phrases will play well with Metaxas' evangelical readers, but this abortive analysis produces a badly truncated counterfeit of a true theological giant. Those who push beyond the copious but highly selective quotes in Metaxas' biography and read the German pastor for themselves quickly encounter a more complex and often contradictory corpus. Though, indeed, some of Bonhoeffer's writings seem straight-forward enough, much of his work breathes paradox and profundity, arriving at places few American evangelicals would recognize.

Most problematic in Metaxas' fluffy treatment of Bonhoeffer's thought, he studiously avoids any real elaboration of Bonhoeffer's approach to biblical interpretation. He contends only that he held a "very high view of Scripture" and rejected "liberal" theology; on this breezy basis he tries to squeeze the German pastor into the contemporary American evangelical mold. Yet liberal theology, as then understood in German academic circles, referenced a specific school of hermeneutics, and Bonhoeffer's rejection of it did not render him a "God said it, I believe it, that settles it," sort of Christian. The German pastor fully embraced the importance of textual criticism, and he did not espouse the Bible as a sound basis for science or historical accuracy. His view of the Bible as the Word of God relied on a dialectical approach and drew on sophisticated notions of myth.¹ Bonhoeffer believed that God revealed himself in the Word of God, but he did not consider that revelation synonymous with God himself, a position far removed from the biblio-idolatry of many conservative American believers. Indeed, Metaxas' assertion that "[t]he whole point of studying the text was to get to the God behind the text," captures a truth about Bonhoeffer, but when glibly asserted with no elaboration, it contributes little to our understanding of his wider religious thought.

This failure to address Bonhoeffer's approach to biblical interpretation matters a great deal, for Christians often cite a proper understanding of Scripture as the key to maintaining a true moral compass. Indeed, no other topic so divides American believers or so frustrates sincere folks who would discern the will of God. Unfortunately, the Bible fails to offer a clear message or a unified voice on many subjects, and those who look to

¹Richard Weikart, "Scripture and Myth in Dietrich Bonhoeffer," *Fides et Historia* 25, 1 (1993): 12-25. <http://www.csustan.edu/history/faculty/weikart/Scripture-and-Myth-in-Dietrich-Bonhoeffer.pdf>

it for clarity in the midst of moral confusion often find their distress only heightened. Compounding matters, thoughtful people recognize how easily believers can read their own immoral political or personal interests into the text. For example, in the Apostle Paul's injunction from the Epistle to the Romans, chapter thirteen, German Christians would have a perfect biblical basis for supporting the Nazis: "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves (New International Version)." A conservative reading of this scripture would suggest that Bonhoeffer erred profoundly in joining the plot to kill Hitler; yet Metaxas never explains how Bonhoeffer found his way to an understanding of the Word of God that sanctioned the assassination of a national leader. A similar problem beset the Christian opponents of slavery in the nineteenth century. Some believers regarded the institution as profoundly inhumane, but the Bible actually offered stronger support for the practitioners of human bondage. The famous abolitionist, William Lloyd Garrison, rejected the notion of biblical infallibility for this very reason, arguing "[t]o discard a portion of scripture is not necessarily to reject the truth, but may be the highest evidence that one can give of his love of truth."² Thus, while conservative Christians caution that discarding the Scripture as a moral guide opens the door for "almost anything," unfortunately the same problem plagues those who rely too heavily on the Bible. Almost "anything goes" as surely for the literalists as for the "liberals."

Importantly, Metaxas wants to draw clear distinctions between the "real" (by which he means "conservative") Christianity of folks like Bonhoeffer who resist social evil and the false (by which he means "liberal") faith of those who have complied in history's worst atrocities, but these clean lines simply don't exist. This dichotomy forms the implicit spine of his argument about Bonhoeffer, but he recently made it explicit in an interview on the Glenn Beck show, asserting "if you are a serious Christian... you are

² William Lloyd Garrison, quoted in Mark Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 32.

going to see the injustice in slavery.”³ Hardly. As the author of a work about the British anti-slavery activist William Wilberforce, Metaxas should be acquainted with the abundant scholarly literature that documents slaveholders’ enthusiastic commitments to conservative evangelicalism and close readings of the Bible. William Lloyd Garrison estimated that nine out of ten American evangelical ministers failed to oppose slaveholding because they believed the Bible sanctioned it. In 1845, Southern Baptists separated from their northern brethren because they insisted on their missionaries’ Christian right to keep slaves. As America’s civil war erupted a decade and a half later, the religious leaders who defended slavery as an institution designed by God relied quite heavily on the Bible to make their case. Metaxas might, of course, argue that the good folk cited above were not “real Christians,” but then he’d be left with the central problem identified early in this essay: what *exactly* makes a real Christian and renders one able to identify evil, especially when the entire cultural *milieu* depicts this evil as a good?

Moreover, and again contrary to Metaxas’ claims, those Christians with more “liberal” theology—that is, a broader approach to the biblical text and an understanding of the Gospel that embraced dimensions beyond personal salvation—have more consistently served as the champions of ameliorative social change than their more conservative counterparts. When anti-slavery advocates first emerged from white American communities of faith, they came from the Quakers—a group identified at the time as the radical fringe of American religion, known for their reliance on the “inner light” as opposed to rigid Bible readings. Hicksite Quakers, who worked at the forefront of several important social movements, including antislavery and women’s equality, espoused beliefs considered even more unorthodox. When white evangelicals engaged a lively debate about the Christian foundations of slavery on the eve of the American Civil War, those with the closest and most conservative readings of the Bible tended to champion institutionalized human bondage, while Christian critics of slavery relied on broader, holistic readings of scripture to make their case. And in the modern civil rights

³ “Glenn Beck—Eric Metaxas on Bonhoeffer” December 4, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T3HOstgH5L4>. In the quote, Metaxas referenced the eighteenth-century revivalist George Whitfield as one who saw the injustice in slavery, but in fact Whitfield was himself a slave owner and campaigned for the legalization of the practice in the colony of Georgia.

era, African Americans' staunchest allies among white religious folk came from the "liberals" within their denominations, while religious conservatives—those dedicated to conservative scriptural interpretation and a personal experience of salvation—fought them tooth and nail.

One wonders exactly what Metaxas' hefty Bonhoeffer tome contributes, given that it fails to deliver on its promise and so completely misses the mark in its analysis. Bonhoeffer has been well-known among Christians—conservative and liberal—for decades, and every version of Christian faith has sought to claim him as its own. An abundant scholarly literature already documents his life and probes some of the theological questions that Metaxas leaves untouched. Indeed, a quick search brought up 45 titles on Bonhoeffer in ECU's own library. In a highly polarized America, it seems Metaxas' *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Prophet, Martyr, Spy* only serves as a renewed effort to plunder the past for validation of a present political perspective.

A final point undermines Metaxas' argument that *only* "real Christianity" can help us identify and oppose evil: thousands of people with little or no religious faith at all have fervently worked against great injustice. Such folks fill Metaxas' own book, though he fails to pursue their stories. Much of Bonhoeffer's own family shared his opposition to Hitler, though they did not all share his faith. The plot to kill Hitler that ultimately brought Bonhoeffer's demise extended widely. According to William H. Shirer, the Gestapo recorded 7,000 arrests associated with the plot, and 4,980 executions.⁴ What evidence indicates that these forgotten heroes chose this path because of Christian faith? Quite possibly, only reason and basic human compassion told them that assassinating the Fuhrer offered the best hope for Germany's redemption. As a student of mine once said: "you don't always need religion to tell you that what is right and what is wrong."

⁴ William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), 1072.