

## **Dietrich Bonhoeffer**

a discussion of the film

### **Bonhoeffer: Agent of Grace**

compared with the book

### **Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography**

Charles E. Ford

Friday, 28 July 2000

In memoriam

Eberhard Bethge is the inspiration for this article. Born on 28 August 1909, he died 18 March 2000. May he rest in the peace of Jesus until the final day.

An edited version of this article appeared in *Lutheran Forum*, **35**(1) (Spring 2001) 12-18.

An unedited translation into German appeared in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Jahrbuch 2003*, Christian Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlaghaus, 129-151.

#### Introduction

On 14 June 2000 the film *Bonhoeffer: Agent of Grace* aired nationwide on Public Broadcasting stations. This 85-minute film covers the life of the German Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) during the years 1939-1945. The *Aid Association for Lutherans* provided funding for the film. It was directed by Eric Till. The screenplay was written by Gareth Jones and Eric Till.

This spring also saw the publication of a new edition of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, the monumental biography written by Eberhard Bethge, student, friend, and relative (by marriage) of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It is an unabridged translation of the 1967 German original, incorporating corrections and augmented with many new notes. It replaces the 1970 abridged translation which has long been out of print. All people interested in Dietrich Bonhoeffer are indebted to Eberhard Bethge. In addition to the biography, Bethge has been an inspiration behind the new 17 volume collected works, which are currently being translated into English. The biography has proven to be the most comprehensive and reliable single source for information on Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Both the film and this new edition of the biography may serve to spark interest in this remarkable theologian in the English speaking world.

The film covers the period from the time of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's brief visit to the USA from 12 June to 8 July 1939 up to his execution in Germany on 9 April 1945. It focuses on Bonhoeffer's involvement in the German resistance movement. The source materials for my analysis of the film come primarily from Eberhard Bethge's biography and Bonhoeffer's published works, as well as the writings of others who knew him.

*Bonhoeffer: Agent of Grace* is not a documentary. It is a Hollywood style biography. Though the PBS airing gave the film a wide audience, it presents a distorted view of Bonhoeffer. The deficiencies of the film make the new edition of the biography all the more timely.

The significance of Bonhoeffer's resistance as a Christian pastor to the Nazi regime as well

as his subsequent martyrdom are seriously undermined by this film. His identity as a Christian theologian is obscured by the film in a variety of ways. Here are two examples. The film makes Gandhi the subject of the only seminary lecture by Bonhoeffer that it portrays. It draws on some tentative and incomplete formulations about a “nonreligious language” for Christianity for the only scene resembling a sermon by Bonhoeffer that it portrays. Little of Bonhoeffer’s Christian theology comes through in the film.

More seriously, the film almost completely undermines the role of Bonhoeffer in the resistance. It portrays him as uninformed about the realities of both the Nazi regime and resistance and, at best, indecisive toward the latter. Time and again, the film portrays Bonhoeffer being shocked and dismayed by resistance activities, not wanting even to be told about them. In fact, Bonhoeffer knew all about things of which he is portrayed as ignorant and approved of things of which he is portrayed as not wanting even to be told. Indeed, the importance of Bonhoeffer to the resistance was his ability to help them make precisely the decisions which the film portrays as so shocking to him. As portrayed in the film, it is because of his Christianity that Bonhoeffer is out of touch with and shocked by the activities of the resistance, whereas, in reality, it was his understanding of the “this-worldliness” of Christianity that made him so important to the resistance.

#### Film themes

The film focuses particularly on the involvement of Bonhoeffer family members in the resistance. This is, indeed, one of the most remarkable families of the twentieth century. The parents, Karl and Paula Bonhoeffer, had eight children. The second oldest, Walter, was killed in the First World War. Of the remaining seven all except Dietrich were married. Two of the sons and two of the sons-in-law were executed in April 1945. All four executions are portrayed in the film.

In addition to the parents, the film includes five of the surviving children, all except the oldest and the youngest, listed here in descending order of age: Klaus, Ursula and her husband Rüdiger Schleicher, Christine (Christel) and her husband Hans von Dohnanyi, Dietrich and his fiancée Maria, and Sabine (Dietrich’s twin) and her husband Gerhard Leibholz. Also portrayed are a granddaughter, Renate Schleicher, and her husband Eberhard Bethge. The leading resistance figure, as is portrayed in the film, is Dietrich’s brother-in-law, Hans von Dohnanyi.

In addition to specific members of the Bonhoeffer family, the film accurately includes some of the central figures and most important activities of the resistance. Aside from some excellent documentaries, I can think of no film that portrays activities of the German resistance as carefully as does this film. This aspect alone makes the film worth watching.

Here are some informative features of the film. Participation in the resistance involved deception and raised questions about “telling the truth.” The film presents some of Bonhoeffer’s ideas on this question. The resistance engaged in a rescue action titled “Operation 7.” The film offers a coherent, if somewhat overdramatized, presentation of it. During the interrogation of Bonhoeffer the film gives an appropriate portrayal of how interrogators attempted to use this rescue action against the resistance. Ruth von Kleist-Retzow, one of the more exceptional figures of the resistance, is portrayed. She could be the object of an entire film herself. The film does not inject scenes of Nazi parades, Hitler speeches, concentration camps, or warfare in an attempt to portray the fanaticism and violence of the period.

Despite these (and other) strong points, the film gives a fundamentally flawed portrayal of

Dietrich Bonhoeffer. We begin now with a discussion of some of the main shortcomings of the film. We then analyze six stages in Bonhoeffer's life, following the narrative progression of the film: his decision to return to Germany, his relationship to seminarians, to the family, to the resistance, imprisonment and interrogation, and his final journey. Finally, we focus on Bonhoeffer as a theologian and, in concluding remarks, discuss the screenwriters' omission of the two theological figures most central in his life. Although inadequacies of the film are discussed, our main purpose here is to offer an accurate and coherent presentation of some of the central features of Bonhoeffer's life during this period.

### Bonhoeffer: Ineffectual agent of grace?

A principal shortcoming of the film is its portrayal of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's personality as passive and ineffectual. This is apparently due to the screenwriters' (mis)understanding of their subject. In one interview, director Eric Till refers to Bonhoeffer's "passivity" and in another to his "docility." Neither of these terms accurately describe Bonhoeffer's personality. He was reserved, but far from passive. Indeed, his reserved demeanor often drew people to him. In certain circumstances he was submissive; submissive to the will of God, never simply to the will of other people. In an excellent recent article, the Lutheran pastor Phillip Max Johnson offered a strikingly different, and far more accurate, portrayal of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's character.

Bonhoeffer himself was an extraordinarily gifted and powerful personality. According to all who knew him, the combination of intellect, emotional warmth, aristocratic breeding, and strength of character could dominate almost any circle he entered.

This almost never comes through in the film. Bonhoeffer rarely seems to dominate any situation. Instead, he is portrayed as a passive personality usually reacting to situations and rarely affecting the course of events. He often seems unprepared for situations and unable to respond effectively. We see this particularly in the portrayal of his relationships with his family, with the resistance, and with his fiancée Maria.

The film seriously misrepresents Dietrich's participation in the resistance movement. In an interview, director Eric Till describes Dietrich's growing involvement in the resistance in the following terms. "The conflict between practical necessity and Christian ideals plunges Bonhoeffer into a personal crisis." This false image of a "personal crisis" has found expression in dramatizations of Bonhoeffer's life going back at least to Elizabeth Berryhill's 1958 play *A Cup of Trembling*, which was published before the appearance of Eberhard Bethge's biography. As we shall see, the biography shows that this "personal crisis" image has no basis in fact. Nevertheless, despite the appearance of the biography, this image continues to persist. Because of it, the screenplay of Jones and Till, like the Berryhill play, contains a series of fabricated conflicts between Dietrich and his brother-in-law and sister, Hans and Christine, that fundamentally distort the picture of Dietrich's involvement in the resistance.

The screenplay repeatedly portrays Dietrich as unprepared for and even shocked by resistance activities. Hans, and even Christine, find it necessary to overcome supposed scruples that Dietrich is presumed to have as a pastor. In fact, far from being unprepared and shocked, Dietrich was fully aware of the nature of the resistance and, with his powerful personality and theological insight, was able to help resistance figures like Hans come to decisions on questions that they faced. This relationship of Dietrich and Hans, one of the most compelling stories of the resistance, is systematically misrepresented in this film.

## The decision to return

The film opens in New York in 1939 with Dietrich standing in the midst of an African-American congregation in Harlem, clapping along with the congregation as they sing gospel music. Dietrich is accompanied by Frank Fisher, an African-American seminarian at Union Theological Seminary, through whom he had come to be involved in this congregation. After Frank and Dietrich have been together for some time, we learn that Dietrich is determined to return to Germany.

The screenwriters use Frank Fisher and the Harlem church to portray this time in the USA, even though all of Bonhoeffer's contact with them actually occurred during the year that he spent at Union Seminary in 1930-1931. His experiences in the Harlem church did indeed make a strong impression on Bonhoeffer, but he had no contact with the congregation or Frank Fisher in 1939. Such anachronisms are often used to move a story line along. In this case, however, the considerable amount of film time devoted to these scenes has done nothing to provided a context for or insight into Dietrich's decision to return.

In June 1939, Dietrich Bonhoeffer left Germany with plans to spend at least a year in the USA. He was, in effect, escaping from Nazi Germany. Just eight days after his arrival in New York, he surprised everyone (including himself) by abruptly announcing a decision to return to Germany. This decision was the major turning point of his life. The film never explains why Bonhoeffer returned to Germany. Some of his reasons appear in his famous letter explaining his decision to Reinhold Niebuhr.

... I have had time to think and to pray about my situation and that of my nation and to have God's will for me clarified. I have come to the conclusion that I made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people. ... Christians in Germany will face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilisation may survive, or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilisation. I know which of these alternatives I must choose, but I cannot make that choice in security ...

These sentences offer a picture of the thinking behind the decision to return, particularly in their suggestion of his intent to become involved in the resistance ("willing the defeat of their nation," "I know which ... I must choose"). They do not, however, fully convey the nature of his decision. In his diary, on the second day after his arrival, he described being "almost overcome by the short prayer" that his hosts offered for the German brethren. The following day he described how he could not "stop thinking of Germany," how he was "dreadfully homesick," and how it was "almost unbearable" and "quite intolerable" simply to think about the brethren in Germany. Finally, after making the decision to return, he wrote the following.

Today, by chance, I read II Tim 4.21 'Do your best to come before winter' – Paul's request to Timothy. Timothy is to share the sufferings of the Apostle and not to be ashamed. 'Do your best to come before winter' – otherwise it might be too late. That has been in my ears all day. We are just like soldiers ... [away on leave, who return to the front] ... because we leave our life behind, we destroy it, if we are not back there. There is nothing pious about it, but something almost vital. But God acts not only through pious emotions, but also through

these vital ones. ‘Do your best to come before winter’ – It is not a misuse of Scripture if I take that to be said to *me*. If God gives me grace to do it.

These personal, emotional, relational, even theological aspects of Dietrich’s decision to return to Germany play no part in this screenplay.

### The seminarians

Concern for his seminarians impelled Bonhoeffer to return to Germany. Three scenes in the film just after his return to Germany portray Bonhoeffer with his seminarians. The first opens in a Church in Berlin where Bonhoeffer appeals to seminarians not to take the loyalty oath to Hitler. A military prosecutor, Manfred Roeder, walks in and announces that the seminarians must pronounce the loyalty oath or be arrested. They take the oath.

A subsequent scene has Bonhoeffer addressing the seminarians in class, talking about Gandhi as a role model. A third scene has Bonhoeffer walking up to the seminary grounds in rural Pomerania, east of Berlin, and viewing the vandalized and boarded up seminary. He is greeted by a good friend, Ruth von Kleist-Retzow, who tells him that the seminary has been closed by the Gestapo. He asks about the seminarians, whether they are safe. She replies that they were drafted, except for a few who refused and were arrested.

I know of no factual basis in Bethge’s biography or any other source for these incidents. Roeder, who would later arrest and interrogate Bonhoeffer, had no contact with him at this time. This would not be a problem if the scene furthered the story. The problem is that it gives the impression that the military or police had imposed the oath on the seminarians, whereas, in fact, it was initially imposed by the state church authorities.

The address to seminarians about Gandhi, like the church in Harlem at the opening of the film, is out of place and offers no insight into the situation that Bonhoeffer and his seminarians faced in 1939. Bonhoeffer spent two years in England in 1933-1935 and during this time very much wanted to visit Gandhi. He even received a personal invitation from Gandhi, but could not find the time for the trip to India. In the collected works, however, no references to Gandhi appear after 1935.

The third scene presumably tries to tell the fate of the seminarians by using dialogue. However, having Bonhoeffer ask about his own seminarians gives the misleading impression that he did not know what was going on with them.

On the contrary, Bethge’s biography describes him as intimately involved in the lives of his students. When Bonhoeffer arrived back in Germany in late July, he resumed his role at the seminary. When he realized that war was imminent, he broke off summer classes on 23 August 1939. His successor at the seminary has described the impact of Bonhoeffer’s return.

And then one day, after a short message that he was returning, Bonhoeffer stood before us. This was quite unexpected – indeed there was always something extraordinary about him, even when the circumstances were quite ordinary. I was immediately up in arms, blurting out how could he come back after it had cost so much trouble to get him into safety – safety for us for our cause; here everything was lost anyway. He very calmly lit a cigarette. Then he said that he had made a mistake in going to America. He did not himself understand now why he had ever done it. . . . It is this fact – that he abandoned in all clarity many great possibilities for his own development in the free countries, that he returned to dismal slavery and

a dark future, but also to his own reality – which gave to everything he told us then a strong and joyful firmness, such as only arises out of realized freedom. . . . He gave us two reasons for his return. First, simply his thought of the Confessing Church, which meant for him all the many young brethren, had not given him any rest. He could not stay away from them, he must not leave them. This meant – and this was his second reason – that he could not watch Germany’s fate from outside and have no part in it. . . . Only he could help, he said, who would bear what was coming and see it through. I objected, saying did he not realize that all was lost; that whatever happened, hardly any one of us would survive? Yes, he saw that in precisely the same way; but for that reason – and this was his real answer – each one of us had to become quite clear about the fact that he was facing a decision: if he wanted Germany’s victory he also wanted the end of its freedom and of Christianity in it. The possibility of freedom for Germany and of Christianity in Germany was only given in its defeat. . . . And then he named his [final] reason for coming back, the decisive one, speaking calmly, smoking his cigarette, as if he was not saying anything special: I know what I have chosen.

The next morning, after the quiet time of meditation, Bonhoeffer made us stop work. With his young men he drove to the beach on the Baltic. Once again he wanted them to feel the sun, to feel what it is like to be free.

### The family

Bonhoeffer was drawn back to Germany by bonds to his close knit family. The film does not adequately portray these family bonds. It introduces conflicts that never existed and neglects relationships that did exist between family members.

One example occurs early in the film, soon after the return to Germany. Dietrich’s twin Sabine was married to Gerhard Leibholz, of Jewish origin, although a baptized Christian. The screenplay has family members discuss whether the Leibholz family should emigrate. Gerhard appears feisty and spirited and opposed to leaving. Hans tries to convince him to emigrate, citing increasing hostility and threats to Jews. As Dietrich joins the argument in support of Hans, Gerhard turns to Dietrich and says: “Afraid of having a Jew in the family, the way you refused to speak at my father’s funeral?”

This scene misrepresents the situation in two ways. First, unlike the screenplay, Gerhard was not feisty and spirited. Sabine later wrote that he was almost paralyzed when facing the decision to emigrate. Second, Gerhard never protested Dietrich’s refusal to conduct his father’s funeral service. According to Bethge’s biography, Dietrich wrote Gerhard a letter after the funeral in which he apologized for this refusal. The letter explicitly notes that Gerhard had never said anything to Dietrich about it. Suggesting that Dietrich was “Afraid of having a Jew in the family” attributes an anti-Semitic tendency which in fact Dietrich never had. As both the biography and Sabine’s account make clear, Gerhard and Dietrich had very early developed a close relationship that lasted to the end of Dietrich’s life. Moreover, the question of conducting the funeral of Gerhard’s father was not so simple. Unlike Gerhard, the biography states that his father had never been baptized. Thus Dietrich faced the question not of conducting the funeral of a Christian of Jewish origin – on that he would never have hesitated – but rather of conducting the funeral of one who was not, at least formally, a Christian.

Once the question of the Leibholz’s emigration had been decided, Dietrich played an especially supportive role. Sabine and Gerhard drove to Berlin. Dietrich and Eberhard Bethge ac-

accompanied them back to Göttingen to pick up their two children, then drove with them part of the way to Switzerland.

Later in the film, the family is made to appear not only uninformed, but even confused and panicky at the arrest of Dietrich. Mother Paula asks “Why are they arresting people?” and Dietrich responds “I wish I knew, mother.” The parents then exhort Dietrich to flee. This is not at all how the family behaved. According to the biography Hans was arrested first. When Dietrich, then living at his parents’ home, called the home of Hans and Christine and a strange voice answered, he understood that their home was being searched. He went next door to his sister Ursula Schleicher, who quickly prepared him a good meal. He then returned home to make sure his desk was in order and then went back to the Schleicher home to wait until the officers arrived.

The film portrays both the family and the resistance in a constant state of tension. Perhaps this is a device intended to convey the danger of the situation. As a result, however, the film never portrays either the family or the resistance in a situation of calm, much less celebration. It never provides a scene like that described by a friend from Switzerland when he visited Bonhoeffer and fellow conspirators, mainly family and friends, on a trip to Germany in autumn 1942.

They had that calmness and simplicity which at first sight indicates a man who has nothing to fear, either from others or from himself, and whose life runs along smoothly, without remarkable events, in a peaceful country. But this calmness and simplicity created a zone of light and freedom such as I have never experienced before or since.

This freedom, the same word that was used in the description of the impact of Dietrich’s return on his seminarians, is something that we do not see in the film. It was central to Bonhoeffer’s understanding of his return to Germany.

### The resistance

Hans von Dohnanyi was the spearhead of the German resistance. After joining the Ministry of Justice in May 1933, he began collecting a “chronicle” of evidence of Nazi activities. At the special request of its head, Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, Dohnanyi joined the Abwehr, military counter intelligence, on 25 August 1939, where he was given, together with General Hans Oster, the task of organizing the replacement of the Nazi regime by a responsible regime.

The screenplay creates a series of fictitious encounters between Dietrich and Hans concerning the resistance which have Dietrich reacting with a combination of ignorance, shock, horror, and protest. At first, in the spring of 1940, he seems not to be aware of the existence of the resistance. Then he protests against being told about it. When, for example, Hans tells Dietrich that General Oster has leaked the invasion plans to Holland and Belgium, Dietrich responds “You shouldn’t be telling me this Hans.” Dietrich is portrayed as reacting with horror at the suggestion of assassinating Hitler and being convinced to join the conspiracy only when shown evidence from the “chronicle” of Nazi atrocities. Three years later, shortly before his arrest, he is still portrayed as reacting in horror to assassination attempts and, when asked for a blessing on one, only offers it reluctantly. He is upset even when asked to produce a false document, which finally prompts his sister Christine to express her exasperation: “Dietrich, put your scruples aside.”

There is, as far as I am aware, not a shred of evidence for any of this. Dietrich did not need to be persuaded to join the resistance. Bethge reported that Dietrich made a special effort to be

kept well informed on political developments from the very beginning of the Nazi accession to power. As Hans moved into resistance activities, Dietrich followed his activities carefully. He had been participating in meetings of the conspirators since the fall of 1939. When told that Oster would inform the Dutch of the impending attack, Dietrich approved. Far from needing Hans to confront him with evidence of Nazi activities, Dietrich had a thorough knowledge of what Hitler and his followers were doing.

Indeed, the conspirators, especially Hans, were attracted to Dietrich. His extraordinary personality helped them come to decisions on questions that they faced. Eberhard Bethge gave the following description of the close relationship that developed between Hans and Dietrich after his return to Germany.

Perhaps [Hans] was annoyed by Klaus Bonhoeffer's slight difficulty in making decisions. As a lawyer, Klaus constantly had new ideas and visions of the possibilities in any given situation; Hans von Dohnanyi found this more a hindrance than a help. But he felt that in Dietrich, even Dietrich the theologian, he found a stronger sense of reality; and in fact, Dietrich possessed an unusual capacity to help other people arrive at decisions.

Thus Dohnanyi confided in no one more during this period than in Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Almost everyone else commented on Dohnanyi's abrupt and reserved manner, but Dietrich Bonhoeffer met his brother-in-law as often as possible when he was in Berlin. Dohnanyi introduced him at a relatively early point to the inner circle of conspirators, and asked Bonhoeffer one evening what he thought about the New Testament passage "all who take the sword will perish by the sword" (Matthew 26:52). Bonhoeffer replied that this held true for their circle as well. They would have to accept that they were subject to that judgment, but there was now a need for such people who would take the responsibility for deciding its validity for themselves.

### Imprisonment and interrogation

Dietrich was arrested on 5 April 1943 and imprisoned in Tegel, a military prison in Berlin. In the film, the military prosecutor Manfred Roeder is portrayed as dominating the interrogation sessions while Bonhoeffer appears defensive and silent. According to the biography, however, Bonhoeffer actively responded to the interrogation and skillfully misled Roeder. We know this in part because Bonhoeffer, after interrogation sessions, wrote extensive responses to Roeder which have survived. Though the film does not show Roeder achieving anything through his interrogation, Bonhoeffer's accomplishment is not adequately conveyed. It seems to me that the screenplay is not able to portray the menace posed by the interrogation. Roeder is portrayed as a skillful but not terribly menacing figure, despite the warning about him given to Maria by Knobloch, the Tegel prison guard. Indeed, Roeder appears as an almost benign figure in the totally implausible scene of Maria's second visit, when she is portrayed as whispering conspiratorial information to Dietrich in Roeder's presence. A later scene, in which Maria is portrayed pleading with Bonhoeffer to follow through on the planned escape while Roeder stands in the background, is even more implausible. As far as I am aware both of these scenes are fictional.

Knobloch, the Tegel guard who began to assist Bonhoeffer, seems, in the film, to respond more out of pity than respect. At one point in the film, after a visit by Maria, he asks Dietrich "Tell me, what does a girl like that see in you." Indeed, the question is invited by the film's portrayal of Dietrich. We hardly see the powerful influence that Dietrich had not only on Knobloch,

but on many of the Tegel guards. In reality, the entire atmosphere of the prison benefited from Dietrich's presence. He became the center of attention, with all sorts of people, both prisoners and guards, finding their way to be with him. He actively helped prisoners sentenced to death to defend themselves successfully. He was able to initiate reforms in the administration of the prison.

In October 1944, Dietrich was transferred to a much stricter prison (not portrayed in the film), where the guards were S.S. men rather than Wehrmacht soldiers like Knobloch. His new jailers threatened him with torture and he described his interrogations as "repulsive." A fellow conspirator later recounted how, even in these conditions, Dietrich was able to command respect from the guards, "so that to my surprise, within a short time, he had won over his warders, who were not always kindly disposed." This fellow also described Dietrich's calming influence on other prisoners. When the shelter appeared about to collapse during an air raid, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer showed his mettle. He remained quite calm, he did not move a muscle, but stood motionless and relaxed as if nothing had happened." During air raids, it was not his caressing hands, as portrayed in the film, but rather his calm example that encouraged others.

The relationship between Dietrich and Maria particularly exemplifies the screenwriters' failure to depict the strength of Dietrich's personality. Both the biography and the correspondence between Dietrich and Maria reveal a very different relationship from that presented in the film. While the screenplay makes Maria the initiator and driving force behind the relationship, it was in fact initiated and dominated by Dietrich. In his letters, Dietrich repeatedly expressed not only his love for Maria, but also the joy it brought him. The screenplay has Dietrich express his love only once. This is placed just after he had decided that he could not go through with the escape plan, in a fictitious and implausible scene which has Maria protesting: "Don't do this to me." Only then is Dietrich portrayed as explicitly declaring his love for her, though more in desperation than joy.

The screenplay includes a poem, *Who am I?*, which describes Dietrich's appearance to others in the prison as "confident," "calm," "cheerful," "smiling," "proud," "like one accustomed to win." Yet we rarely see him exhibit any of this in the film. He is almost always portrayed looking pensive, worried, or sad. Except for the opening scenes of him singing in Harlem, Dietrich never has a real smile on his face. Even with Maria his smile is half-hearted. He never exhibits, for example, the incredible joy he so readily expressed in his letters over his engagement. Nor does he appear "visibly shaken," as Maria later described him, when she was presented to him unexpectedly for the first time after his imprisonment. In general, the film's Bonhoeffer is unexpressive and displays an exceedingly narrow range of emotions.

Eberhard Bethge reported that Roeder was taken off Bonhoeffer's case in February 1944. Thus all appearances of him after this date are fictitious. For dramatic purposes his continuing presence could be acceptable if used to promote the story line appropriately. Such, however, is not the case. The screenplay has Roeder receive information from the the Abwehr files discovered in Zossen in September 1944 and then confront Bonhoeffer with having lied. In reality, Bonhoeffer was so confronted only on the night before his execution. Just before he is transported away from Berlin, the screenplay has Roeder offer Bonhoeffer freedom for himself and his family, including Maria, in return for assistance in negotiations with the Allies. Bonhoeffer never received such an offer. If he had, it is likely that he would not have rejected it, as depicted in the film, but used it in an attempt to preserve the lives of family and resistance members, and probably others as well.

## The final journey

In the spring of 1945, when Dietrich was being transported in a rural setting, he established friendships with two captured officers, the Englishman Payne Best and the Russian Vasily Kokorin. Payne Best, unlike the *bon vivant* portrayal in the film, was twenty years older than Bonhoeffer and quite the proper British officer. His post-war account is a primary source for these events. According to it, the prisoner Rascher had indeed, as indicated in the screenplay, taken part in the concentration camp system and in medical experiments on prisoners. But, unlike the screenplay, Best did not confront Rascher about this and Bonhoeffer did not embrace Rascher. By word and example, however, Bonhoeffer did do a great deal to keep people from depression and anxiety and instill hope and courage.

Because of his commanding presence and inspiring words, Bonhoeffer was asked to conduct a Sunday service. It was not at all like the casual scene in the screenplay in which Payne Best off-handedly asks the “padre” for “a word or two.” In fact Bonhoeffer was approached with a request to perform a Sunday service, which he did when everybody agreed, including Kokorin. His words in the film, a combination of commonplace statements like “We need more than just religion in the formal sense” with words about “nonreligious language,” give little indication of what a sermon by Bonhoeffer was like. According to the biography Bonhoeffer’s presentation was quite different. He read and commented on the texts appointed for the first Sunday after Easter. Here is Payne Best’s description.

The following day, Sunday, 8 April 1945, Pastor Bonhoeffer held a little service and spoke to us in a manner which reached the hearts of all, finding just the right words to express the spirit of our imprisonment and the thoughts and resolutions which it had brought. He had hardly finished his last prayer when the door opened and two evil looking men in civilian clothes came in and said:

“Prisoner Bonhoeffer. Get ready to come with us.” Those words “Come with us” – for all prisoners they had come to mean one thing only – the scaffold.

We bade him goodbye – he drew me aside – “This is the end,” he said. “For me the beginning of life,” and then he gave me a message to give, if I could, to the Bishop of Chichester, a friend to all evangelical pastors in Germany.

Next day, at Flossenberg, he was hanged.

This strikes me as a scene filled with drama. Immediately after conducting his last service Bonhoeffer was confronted with the harbinger of his death. In words to a fellow prisoner he accepted his impending death and connected it with the resurrection. The film postpones his recognition of his death to the following morning and then, through a fictitious appearance of Roeder at the site of execution, replaces Bonhoeffer’s message to Best with an exchange prompted by Roeder (“So is this the end?” “No”).

Although we do not know Dietrich’s remarks on that last Sunday, we do know which lessons he read. “With his wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5) and “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3). Surely having Dietrich read these verses, about atonement, mercy, new birth, and resurrection, just before being taken away to execution would provide an historically accurate and dramatic climax to the film.

The relationship between Dietrich and Hans extended to their deaths. Hans was hanged

in Sachsenhausen, near Berlin, on the same day that Dietrich was hanged in Flossenberg. The prosecutor who came to take Hans back to Sachsenhausen from a hospital told the doctor “We know that he was the mastermind behind the 20 July plot.” The leading conspirators were deliberately executed by being hanged, which is more degrading than being shot. The screenplay presents Hans being shot in a scene that seems almost incidental. A film about Bonhoeffer would benefit by following his close relationship with Hans, the “mastermind” of the resistance, all the way to the end.

### Dietrich the theologian

One particular scene created by Jones and Till illustrates a flaw that runs throughout their screenplay. The scene, just before his first meeting with Hans, paints Dietrich completely at a loss about what to do now that he is back in Germany. An implausible line has been created for Eberhard Bethge at this point, the only line he gets in the entire film. “There’s sure to be something you can do.” This leads in to a thoroughly inappropriate line for Dietrich. “Maybe it was a mistake coming back to Germany.” Such a statement is completely at odds with everything Dietrich said and did after his return to Germany. He did not regret his decision even for a *moment*, as he insisted in one of his prison letters. “I haven’t for a moment regretted coming back in 1939 – nor any of the consequences either.” This is one of at least a half-dozen such statements, just in the prison letters alone, in which Bonhoeffer affirmed his decision to return to Germany in 1939. This flaw is of a piece with the failure to convey the sense of call that Bonhoeffer expressed to Niebuhr in deciding to return to Germany (“God’s will for me [has been] clarified”) and with subsequent scenes of confusion and irresolution that belie his statement upon return to the seminary (“I know what I have chosen”).

Two of the better scenes in the film come when Dietrich is shown speaking his own mature, scriptural, theological words. The first is a prayer that he recites to a young man in a neighboring cell who has been condemned to death, an event that makes a strong impression on Knobloch. This is taken from Bonhoeffer’s *Prayers for fellow prisoners*, written in Tegel. The second is the recitation of his Tegel poem *Who am I?* Conversely, one of the worst scenes is Bonhoeffer’s address at the church on the last Sunday, the closest thing to a sermon in the film. It is a contradictory blend of statements about the “purpose of religion” with statements about a future Christianity expressed in “nonreligious language.” Bonhoeffer did not talk about the “purpose of religion,” especially in the context of a “nonreligious language” for Christianity. It fails to provide any coherent picture of Bonhoeffer’s theology.

The attempt by Bonhoeffer to find “religionless interpretations” for Christian concepts grew out of his experience with the resistance, especially with his brothers and brothers-in-law, who began to find themselves drawn to the figure of Jesus Christ. Though perhaps formally members of the Church, they had long come to regard it as an irrelevant bourgeois institution. Then the Nazis came to power. “The children of the Church, who had become independent and gone their own ways, now in the hour of danger returned to their mother.” Calling it a “most astonishing experience,” Bonhoeffer described how members of the resistance had begun to “speak the name of Jesus Christ,” although with “hesitation and embarrassment” or even “genuine fear.” Thus, describing the situation of the resistance approaching the Church, he wrote “there gathered around her men who came from very far away, and men to whom she could not refuse her fellowship and her protection.” It was in this context of not refusing Church fellowship to the resistance that Dietrich began to seek “nonreligious interpretations.”

The image of the resistance attracted to Jesus Christ must have suggested a parallel with the attraction of gentiles to the early Church. The Apostle Paul had analyzed this situation by examining for the people of Israel the relationship between the promises of the Father and the ceremonial law, especially circumcision. They were a “guardian” for Israel in her youth until she actually received what was already hers by promise. With the advent of Jesus Christ, Israel had reached maturity and the “guardian” of circumcision and the ceremonial law were set aside.

Though the analogy is imperfect, Bonhoeffer cited the Apostle Paul’s understanding of circumcision as his model. He began to look for evidence of a coming of maturity in the Western world, which he described as “a world come of age.” He also looked for aspects of Christianity that had served as “guardians” of the West during its immature stages. These he categorized as “religion.” Just as Paul had announced the replacement of the “religious” rite of circumcision with “real circumcision [which] is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal” (Romans 2:29), Bonhoeffer began to look for “nonreligious interpretations” for Christian concepts. Having begun this task only at the end of April 1944, however, Bonhoeffer had not been able to get very far, at least in any of his writings that survive, as he himself acknowledged.

“While Bonhoeffer developed his ideas on the nonreligious interpretation of Christianity in a world come of age, he never considered abandoning his connection with the traditional words and customs of the church.” This statement by Bethge is confirmed in Bonhoeffer’s writings by the continued use of traditional scriptural language, especially after the failure of the assassination attempt. These last writings are, in my opinion, among his clearest. Here is one of several statements from that last period, formulated in traditional Christian language.

I am so sure of God’s guiding hand that I hope I shall always be kept in that certainty. You must never doubt that I’m traveling with gratitude and cheerfulness along the road where I’m being led. My past life is brim-full of God’s goodness and my sins are covered by the forgiving love of Christ crucified. I’m most thankful for the people I have met, and I only hope that they never have to grieve about me, but that they, too, will always be certain of, and thankful for, God’s mercy and forgiveness.

It is language like this that made a powerful impact on the people who knew Bonhoeffer, and on the many who have read his writings. Jones and Till have included very little of this language in their screenplay. As a result, the film fails to portray of the power of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Christian witness and martyrdom.

## Conclusion

Although they were important to him in the early 1930s, in Bonhoeffer’s collected works there are fewer than 10 references to Frank Fisher and the Harlem church and fewer than 20 to Gandhi. At the other end of the scale are the two people with the greatest number of references in Bonhoeffer’s writings, with more than 600 each – Eberhard Bethge and Martin Luther. One plays little, the other no role in the film. Frank Fisher, whom Dietrich knew as a seminarian in the USA in 1930-1931, is the only theological figure in the film with whom Dietrich converses. The film presents no theological interaction with Eberhard Bethge, the individual who was personally the most important figure in Dietrich’s theological life. Dietrich is presented as making almost as many references to Gandhi as to Jesus Christ. No other theological figure is even mentioned. In particular, the film makes no mention of Martin Luther, the theologian who had the greatest impact on Bonhoeffer.

Eberhard Bethge was Dietrich's closest friend, student, and future biographer. He appears in the film a few times but speaks just a single, inappropriate line. In reality, Dietrich's relationship with Eberhard was at least as important as his relationship with his fiancée Maria, which occupies a large portion of the film. Eberhard had become Dietrich's closest theological collaborator, the one with whom he would first share his theological formulations and who received much of Dietrich's correspondence from prison. Making Eberhard Bethge a more prominent character would have allowed the screenwriters to deal more substantially with Bonhoeffer's theology.

Martin Luther, despite more than 600 references in Bonhoeffer's works, is never mentioned in the film. This is the more remarkable since it was sponsored by a major Lutheran organization. One of my brothers upon seeing the film said: "If you didn't already know that Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran theologian, you would never guess it from this film." This is most unfortunate, for the depth of Luther's influence on Bonhoeffer is not well known. While Luther had always been central to Bonhoeffer's thought, he became even more so as Bonhoeffer moved into the resistance. Bonhoeffer specifically cited Luther in his remarkable letter, written the day after the failure of the attempt to assassinate Hitler on 20 July 1944, as a model for understanding the "this-worldliness" of Christianity. The omission of Luther from this film can only reinforce the impression that there was not much connection between them.

This film joins other popular presentations that give an inadequate or misleading presentation of Bonhoeffer and his theology. Dietrich Bonhoeffer is one of the most widely respected religious figures in the USA, attracting the attention of a remarkably broad range of people. Lutherans in the USA have by and large been slow to take a serious interest in him. This is due, at least in part, to the fact that some of those attracted to him have claimed to find in him things that would not attract serious Christians. The "death of God" movement in the 1960s, which claimed his "religionless" Christianity as its inspiration, is perhaps the most infamous example. But there has been a continuous stream of admirers who have expressed interest in his "religionless" Christianity because they see it as an alternative to "doctrinal," "confessional," or "sacramental" Christianity. A reading of Bethge's biography, or Bonhoeffer's writings, will dispell this misperception, but the very phrase "religionless" Christianity lends itself to this abuse. A popular presentation on Bonhoeffer that shows him as a serious, confessional, Lutheran theologian could be influential in drawing the attention of many, in the Lutheran community and elsewhere, to him.

A film sponsored by the *Aid Association for Lutherans* might have been expected to offer such a presentation. This, unfortunately, is not the case. *Bonhoeffer: Agent of Grace* has virtues, but presenting an adequate picture of Dietrich Bonhoeffer is not one of them.