

The stereotyping of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

A response to Dennis Clauss concerning the film
Bonhoeffer: Agent of Grace

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Introduction

Let me begin by acknowledging the graciousness that Dennis Clauss has shown in his letter and in his handling of my critical review of the film *Bonhoeffer: Agent of Grace*. A copy of my review was sent to his office in early July 2000. He must have forwarded it to Berlin because copies were already circulating there when I arrived in August for a meeting of the International Bonhoeffer Society. There I met more people involved in making the film who were equally gracious, discussing my concerns and inviting me to a reception at the Berlin opening of the film, where I was allowed to circulate copies of my review. It is appropriate that Mr. Clauss describes the difficult process that AAL had to follow in order to see the completion of this film. This can help us understand some of the reasons for shortcomings in the film that Mr. Clauss acknowledges.

He has not, however, addressed the essential features of my criticism. He asserts that I have failed to present “the uniquely different purposes of the Bethge book and the AAL sponsored film,” which, he claims, “belies a serious lack of information and a healthy dose of cultural naivete.” It is true that my review is described as a comparison of the film with the Bethge biography. In no way, however, do I criticize the film for lacking the qualities of a 1,000 page book. Each of my criticisms is explicitly directed to the film *as a film*. Mr. Clauss emphasizes the difficulty in “balancing historical integrity, religious themes, and entertainment value.” He seems to imply that departures from historical integrity or omissions of religious themes were made for the sake of increasing the entertainment value of the film. In my review, however, I never criticize a departure from historical integrity if it makes the story more compelling, dramatic, and entertaining. Just the opposite. I criticize several departures from historical integrity precisely because their effect is to reduce the drama and power of the film.

Despite Mr. Clauss’ suggestion that “historical integrity” may have been traded for “entertainment value,” the film is, in fact, full of historically accurate details that serve to heighten the drama: the “chronicle” that Dohnanyi kept, hiding it in Zossen, its discovery by the authorities, the arrest of Eberhard Bethge, the attempt by Maria to find Dietrich in Flossenburg, and many more. Nearly every character with even a small speaking part in the film is a real historical character. The rural scenes near the end include many historically accurate details, not only for major figures like Payne Best and Vassily Kokorin, but also for the prisoner Raucher, the guard Sippach, and the Gestapo agent Bader, who comes to take the prisoners from Sippach. I would not be surprised

to learn that the names of those being rescued in the U-7 operation, read aloud by the Dohnanyi character in the film, are, in fact, historically accurate names. Careful historical research was done to find or verify all these details.

Stereotypes

According to Mr. Clauss, the development team was convinced that “the emotional power of Bonhoeffer’s story lends itself especially well to a dramatic presentation.” My criticism is that the screenplay, by systematically distorting the personality of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, has significantly reduced that “emotional power.” Mr. Clauss acknowledges my criticism that the film “fails to portray any coherent picture of Bonhoeffer’s theology,” fails to depict him “as a serious confessional Lutheran theologian.” This was not possible, he suggests, in an 85 minute film intended for a mass audience. I contend however, that the screenplay does in fact present a coherent image of Bonhoeffer as a pastor and an academic theologian but this image conforms mostly to contemporary stereotypes, not to the real Bonhoeffer.

Let me illustrate by recalling the one scene in the screenplay that is most faithful to Bonhoeffer. It is the scene of Dietrich praying with the young man in a neighboring cell in Tegel prison. Although there is, as far as I am aware, no specific historical basis for this scene, I praised it in my review and consider it one of the best scenes in the film. The words are Bonhoeffer’s own. They show his theology and indicate the profound influence of Luther on him. Regrettably, this is practically the only such scene in the film.

In contrast to this scene, most of the screenplay distorts the image of Bonhoeffer in a way that reflects stereotypes about academic theologians. For example, Bonhoeffer is consistently misportrayed as having the passive, unexpressive personality expected of a sophisticated academic theologian. The relationship between Dietrich and his fiancée Maria is misrepresented to portray Maria as the initiator and driving force behind the relationship, whereas it was, in reality, initiated and directed by Dietrich. That it would take an assertive, expressive female to break through the shell of this passive, unexpressive academic pastor is a typical romantic stereotype.

Breaking from this pattern of portraying Bonhoeffer as passive, the screenplay has one scene in which he acts decisively. This is the fabricated scene in which Roeder offers Bonhoeffer a chance to save the lives of his family, his fiancée, and himself by assisting the Nazis in negotiations with the Allies. Bonhoeffer responds with an emphatic no. This scene fits with contemporary stereotypes of resistance – one stands on principle and openly rejects compromise regardless of consequences. The problem is that it completely misrepresents Bonhoeffer’s activities in the resistance, especially after his arrest, when he did everything he could to secure his own survival and that of family and friends. Bonhoeffer acted decisively in the resistance but completely avoided such open, futile confrontation.

That Dietrich knew very well what he was getting into by returning to Germany and that he became involved in the resistance without hesitation are completely absent in the screenplay. Instead Dietrich is shown as indecisive about the resistance. (I should

add here that I am grateful that the film did not go the other, even more inappropriate, extreme and portray Bonhoeffer as a liberation theologian ready to promote revolution.) His relationship to the resistance is distorted by a series of fabricated conflicts between Dietrich and Hans, the central resistance figure. Through these conflicts, Hans attempts to force Dietrich to face the realities of Nazism. That Dietrich would need such prodding conforms to stereotypes that academically oriented pastors are out of touch with the “real world.”

More seriously, this absence deprives the film of one of the most powerful aspects of Bonhoeffer’s life, one that perfectly illustrates his identification with Luther. Luther contended that freedom consisted not, as we think of freedom today, in having lots of choices. Instead, freedom comes from discerning and accepting the will of God. It was precisely such discernment that Bonhoeffer had experienced in New York, as he wrote to Reinhold Niebuhr: “God’s will for me [has been] clarified.” This freedom gave Bonhoeffer’s return to Germany a powerful impact on his students and colleagues, as expressed in the long quote from Helmut Traub. In his “free” decision to return to Germany, in accordance with the will of God, Bonhoeffer wrote that his life had been “given a clear direction, an inner continuity and a firm security . . . freedom from the fear of decision, freedom from the fear to act, . . . certainty, quietude, confidence, balance, and peace.” The absence of every one of these qualities in the screenplay eliminates this most Luther-like aspect of Bonhoeffer’s actions.

His involvement in the African-American Church, on which the film spends a great deal of time, is another situation in which Bonhoeffer’s Lutheran character is ignored. A press release says that the film shows Bonhoeffer “exploring the spiritual vitality of the African-American church.” The screenwriters have made these scenes the only point in the entire film in which Bonhoeffer shows any really joyful emotions, in line with stereotypes that it takes this African-American style of “spiritual vitality” to enable a proper German Lutheran pastor to express joy. Worse yet, these scenes promote the stereotype that the strength of African-American christianity is its emotional expressiveness. Bonhoeffer himself saw past this stereotype. He saw something more theological and profound in the African-American Church. He saw the foundation on which this “spiritual vitality” was based: “here the gospel of Jesus Christ, the savior of the sinner, is really preached and accepted with great welcome and visible emotion.”

Criticizing mainline religiosity

It was specifically the social gospel emphasis at Union Theological Seminary and the consequent failure to preach the gospel of “Jesus Christ, the savior of the sinner” that made the Lutheran Bonhoeffer so critical of mainline American religiosity. Two days before making his decision to return to Germany, Bonhoeffer attended services at the Riverside Church next to Union Seminary. He recorded his impressions in his diary.

Service in Riverside Church. Quite unbearable. . . .

The whole thing was a respectable, self-indulgent, self-satisfied religious celebration. This sort of idolatrous religion stirs up the flesh, which is accustomed to being

kept in check by the Word of God. Such sermons make for libertinism, egoism, indifference. Do people not know that one can get on well, even better, without ‘religion’ . . . Perhaps the Anglo-Saxons are really more religious than we are, but they are certainly not more Christian, at least, if they still have sermons like that. . . .

– Now the day has had a good ending. I went to church again. As long as there are lonely Christians there will always be services. It is a great help after a couple of quite lonely days to go into church and there pray together, sing together, listen together. The sermon was astonishing (Broadway Presbyterian Church, Dr. McComb) on ‘our likeness with Christ’. A completely biblical sermon – the sections on ‘we are *blameless* like Christ’, ‘we are *tempted* like Christ’ were particularly good. This will one day be a center of resistance when Riverside Church has long since become a temple of Baal. I was very glad about this sermon.

Bonhoeffer’s use of the word “religious” here, especially his contrasting it to “Christian,” expresses some of the ideas that led to his later criticisms of “religion” and his attempts to formulate a “non-religious language” for Christianity. These writings are, among other things, directed against the social gospel movement and its neglect of “the gospel of Jesus Christ, the savior of the sinner.” The statement about “a center of resistance” is a reference to the churches in Germany that had resisted Nazi influence. Bonhoeffer believed that it was not churches like Riverside, which marginalized the gospel in order to emphasize ‘socially relevant’ issues of the day, that would be able to offer resistance to totalitarian political movements, but rather churches like Broadway Presbyterian that were centered in that gospel. Such unequivocal criticism of mainline Christianity has not prevented Bonhoeffer’s writings about a “non-religious language” from being repeatedly abused to make him seem like an exponent of the social gospel movement or of other movements that marginalize the real gospel.

The screenwriters have continued this abuse with their portrayal of Bonhoeffer’s last sermon, delivered just before he was taken away for execution. They do so by substituting his words about a “non-religious language” for Christianity in place of his last sermon. Their sermon prefaces these words with platitudes about the “purpose of religion” and “We need more than just religion in the formal sense.” Such phrases are alien to Bonhoeffer and serve to undermine and trivialize what he intended to convey in his writings about “non-religious language.” The effect is to make him sound like another adherent of the social gospel movement, which, in fact, he strongly criticized.

This is particularly questionable because Bonhoeffer’s writings on “non-religious language” were intended for those who were already thoroughly familiar with his work. It makes no sense to place them into a film that is explicitly directed at a wide audience of people who are unfamiliar with Bonhoeffer, especially when the film has otherwise presented hardly any of his theology. It is the more inappropriate because we know the actual Bible readings that Bonhoeffer read for that sermon and that his remarks on these readings “reached the hearts of all.” One can only wonder why these dramatically powerful readings were ignored. They apply directly to Bonhoeffer’s circumstances at that moment and are the actual readings appointed for that Sunday, the last of his life.

Conclusions

Mr. Clauss describes the success the film has achieved. This is not surprising. Competent acting, directing, editing, and – above all – the dramatic outline of Bonhoeffer’s life story itself, virtually assured success. Presenting a German pastor who was martyred by the Nazis to a large audience of people who know nothing about such martyrs is a genuine accomplishment of this film. What people also learn from the film, however, is that this martyr was really just the kind of person we expected him to be. There is no opportunity to let the real Dietrich Bonhoeffer challenge conventional sensibilities and stereotypes. Action films generally try to introduce elements of plot and personality (usually contrived) that are not expected by the viewer. The character of the real Bonhoeffer and the circumstances of his life are full of such unexpected elements. I believe that, had the screenplay not systematically obscured his theology and deflated his extraordinarily gifted and powerful personality, it would have been even more successful *as a film*.

As stated in my review, its primary purpose is to “offer an accurate and coherent presentation of some of the central features of Bonhoeffer’s life.” Renate Bethge, who circulated copies to the family, told me in Berlin that she considers it the best written analysis of the film. As Bonhoeffer himself knew from his visits to America, Lutheran theology is alien to much of American religiosity. A presentation of Lutheran theology in the powerful form that it took in Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s life could make a significant impact, not least on Lutherans themselves.

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