

Scholars and family: Stop taking Bonhoeffer's name in vain

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(RNS)—In recent years, author and radio host Eric Metaxas and other conservative Christian supporters of Donald Trump have compared themselves to the famed German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was put to death for taking part in a plan to assassinate Adolph Hitler.



Eric Metaxas speaks at Judson University's annual Constitution Day chapel service on Sept. 26, 2018, in Elgin, Il., near Chicago. (RNS File Photo / Emily McFarlan Miller)

In a recent interview on Flashpoint, a Christian television talk show on the Victory network, both Metaxas—author of a bestselling biography of Bonhoeffer—and the show's host called the current election a “Bonhoeffer moment” and urged Christians to rise up and oppose evil.

That evil, in Metaxas' eyes, is the Democrats, who, he has argued, stole the 2020 election and whom he often compares to Nazis. For him, if Democrats win the next election, it could mean the end of America as we know it.

Metaxas has argued and has claimed in the past Trump is God's chosen candidate and those who oppose him oppose God.

His newest book, *Religionless Christianity*—a phrase used by

Bonhoeffer—describes America’s current politics as a spiritual war and sign of the end times.

‘Dangerous misuse of Bonhoeffer’s life and lessons’

A group of Bonhoeffer scholars and the theologian’s descendants have had enough.

In a statement issued Oct. 18, members of the International Bonhoeffer Society called on Metaxas and others to stop comparing the current election to the rise of the Nazis. The statement, in particular, called out Metaxas for social media posts featuring a gun and a Bible and his support of Jan. 6 rioters.

“This portrayal glorifies violence and draws inappropriate analogies between our political system and that of Nazi Germany,” the scholars said in a statement, which has been signed by more than 800 Bonhoeffer scholars and other Christian leaders. “It is a dangerous misuse of Bonhoeffer’s life and lessons, particularly in this election season in the United States.”

The scholars and relatives of Bonhoeffer also objected to the mention of Bonhoeffer’s work in Project 2025, a controversial plan from the Heritage Foundation and other Trump supporters, which has been criticized for promoting Christian nationalism.

“From Project 2025 to violent political rhetoric, the legacy of German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer is being invoked this election season on behalf of Christian Nationalism,” the scholars said in their statement. “It is a dangerous and grievous misuse of his theology and life.”

New Bonhoeffer biopic released in November

The statement was prompted in part by the upcoming release of a new Bonhoeffer biopic, which will be out in theaters in late November. One of the posters for the film shows Bonhoeffer with a gun, and a trailer for the film shows his involvement in the plot to kill Hitler.



Movie poster for a new Bonhoeffer biopic. (Angel Studios)

Some of the early social media tweets about the film included messages about the “battle against tyranny” and a line from the trailer, “My country was invaded from within.”

During Metaxas’ Victory Channel interview, the trailer for the movie—which is being distributed by Angel Studios, the studio behind the hit film *Sound of Freedom*, was shown. After the trailer, Metaxas and other guests urged Christians to wake up to the evil of their political enemies.

In an interview for a German news publication, relatives of Bonhoeffer criticized that depiction of the theologian. Relatives also released a statement rejecting the idea that Bonhoeffer would have embraced Christian nationalism.

“He would never have seen himself anywhere near the right-wing extremist, violent movements that are trying to appropriate him today,” family members said in a statement passed on by Bonhoeffer scholars. “On the contrary, he would have criticized these very attitudes.”

Metaxas' press contact did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Lori Brandt Hale, professor of religion at Augsburg University and president of the English language section of the International Bonhoeffer Society, said scholars understand filmmakers need to take artistic license, and they do not believe the filmmakers intend to send Christian nationalist messages.

'Strongly oppose' any call for political violence



Lori Brandt Hale
(International
Bonhoeffer Society
Photo)

Hale, who has seen the film, said the movie—and, even more so, the marketing material—exaggerates the theologian's role in the conspiracy against Hitler and plays up the idea of him being an “assassin.”

She and other scholars worry that may give viewers the wrong message—especially if they already hold Christian nationalist views or are sympathetic to Metaxas' claims—and they may use Bonhoeffer's opposition to Hitler to justify political violence.

Hale said Bonhoeffer's theological and ethical reflections in the face of the evils of the Nazis are distorted by American Christian nationalists. In America's current politics, she fears Christian nationalists miss the real comparisons with Nazi Germany, including “threats to political enemies, the free press, and the Constitution, and calls to dehumanize certain

groups of people, especially immigrants and refugees.”

“The people who make comparisons with Nazi Germany and contemporary realities, they are just not doing the work,” she said.

The statement from the Bonhoeffer Society makes a similar point.

“Any attempt to invoke Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his resistance against Hitler as a reason to engage in political violence in our contemporary context must be strongly opposed,” it says. “Moreover, while Bonhoeffer supported the coup, he refused to offer a Christian or theological justification for it. He understood the dangers of such a rationale.”

The promotional site for the film includes a call to reject racism and antisemitism and calls on supporters to practice civil discourse and peacemaking. A “Bonhoeffer Declaration” linked to the site also calls for fans to “stand with Israel” and is endorsed by a number of Christian pastors, including some with Christian nationalist ties.

‘A singular voice of love, grace, justice and courage’

Makers of the new Bonhoeffer biography reject the idea that the film has a Christian nationalist message.

Jared Geesey, chief distribution officer of Angel, said the film is being released at a time when antisemitism is on the rise and that the film calls audiences “to stand up against evil and love our neighbor—no matter who that neighbor is.” He also downplayed any connection to Metaxas and defended the poster promoting the film.

“The film is not based on the Eric Metaxas book, even though the titles may look similar,” he said. “The movie poster is simply a representation of the

film. This is a spy thriller, and we believe the artwork captures the tension inherent in the story.”

Todd Komarnicki, writer and director of the Bonhoeffer movie, said he “could not be further from being a Christian nationalist.”

“The fact is, Bonhoeffer doesn’t belong to any group,” he said. “He is a singular voice of love, grace, justice and courage, and his voice is just as clarion now as it was during WWII.

“We should be listening to him (which our movie does) and not to all the voices trying to steal him for their own cultural grievances.”