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Interview — Eric Metaxas — FULL — v1

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Bonhoeffer Revisited

Eric Metaxas, best-selling author

Interview by Paul Schwarz

Pull quote: “Theology is worthless unless we live it.” — Eric Metaxas on what contemporary evangelicals can learn from Dietrich Bonhoeffer

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Any writer who has written for such diverse entities as the New York Times, Chuck Colson and VeggieTales probably deserves some kind of award, but for now Eric Metaxas will have to settle for the 2011 Canterbury Medal awarded by the Becket Fund for Religious Freedom. He won the award for his acclaimed 2010 book Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy, considered by many to be the definitive treatment of the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Eric’s writing résumé also includes a highly regarded biography of William Wilberforce, three apologetics books, and numerous children’s volumes and humor pieces. His next book will be a print adaptation of his Socrates in the City speaker series in Manhattan, where he lives with his wife and daughter.

Managing editor Paul Schwarz caught up with Eric for a conversation about the writing of the Bonhoeffer biography and what Bonhoeffer’s life and death as a leader in the resistance movement in Nazi Germany teach contemporary evangelicals about living out the gospel. This full-length version of the interview also includes Eric’s thoughts on Wilberforce and the parallels between him and Bonhoeffer, as well as the origin of Socrates in the City.

How did you come to write about Bonhoeffer?

In 1988, the summer I came to faith in Christ, the guy leading me in that direction gave me a copy of Bonhoeffer’s *The Cost of Discipleship* and asked me if I’d heard about him. I said I hadn’t, and he told me the basics, and I was shocked, because it was one incredible story. I was further moved because my mother grew up in Germany under Hitler and lost her father in the war. He was an unwilling, reluctant German soldier who would listen to the BBC with his ear literally pressed against the radio because he’d get in trouble. I thought that Bonhoeffer was somebody who spoke for Germans and Jews, most importantly for the Jews of Europe.

After I wrote the Wilberforce book, people kept asking me who I would write about next, and I never thought I’d write one biography, much less two. But I heard that question so often that I eventually thought, *Only one other person has captured me the way Wilberforce did, and that’s Bonhoeffer.*

So I found myself leaping into that. I had no idea whatsoever what I was getting into — that I would write the book I wrote, that I would say anything controversial, that I would find anything new, or that I would find out that Bonhoeffer was such a serious Christian all the way to his execution. I had heard that he had slid off into some sort of post-Christian humanism; to discover that that was completely untrue was a bit of a shock. I was amazed by how much I discovered that was news — to me and a lot of people who thought they knew Bonhoeffer.

What else did you discover that surprised you?

That he came from such a spectacular family. I had no idea that his father was practically world-famous — he was one of the most famous psychiatrists in Germany for the first half of the 20th century. He was a huge figure in scientific and medical circles, well known throughout Europe. So to realize that Bonhoeffer wasn't just this brilliant guy, but the son of this brilliant guy, and that his family was filled with people like this, gives you a picture of the context of his life. And then I realized that he was much more theologically conservative than I had been led to believe.

All that contrasted with what has been presented about him. A group of theologically liberal Bonhoeffer scholars somehow protected their version of his legacy from the disinfectant of sunlight. In fact, they created a slightly different Bonhoeffer, or in some cases a dramatically different Bonhoeffer, than the one I found in Bonhoeffer's own letters and journals.

Can you elaborate on the controversy in what you wrote?

Some of the liberal Bonhoeffer scholars have flipped out because I think they had a good thing going for about five decades, and to have some non-academic come in and write what I did didn't make them very happy. But strangely, some people on the conservative side have bought into the liberal version of Bonhoeffer and don't accept my story about him, seemingly without doing the research on their own. They reject him as being theologically unorthodox.

But if you apply common sense and read what Bonhoeffer wrote himself — and there's tons of it — it's clear what kind of a person he was. Of course, some have accused me of creating my evangelical version of Bonhoeffer. That's ridiculous — I quote him so much that the facts can speak for themselves. Yes, Bonhoeffer is very complex, so you're going to get different ideas from the same information. Nonetheless, by presenting some information that has hitherto been mostly hidden, you get a window into him that you didn't have before.

What about Bonhoeffer's life makes it hard for American evangelicals to understand him?

You have to understand that he was surrounded by theological liberals. In that context he was very conservative. This is not a guy hanging out with modern American evangelical leaders — this is a guy hanging out with brilliant, academic theological liberals. He is disagreeing with them, but he's in that world, so some of the things he says sound different to contemporary ears because of the world in which he existed.

There's enough in my book that you get a picture of him as a very serious Christian who's obviously not theologically liberal. In some ways he's extremely conservative, but not in the way we might expect him to be. He doesn't fit our contemporary conservative evangelical mold, but fair-minded people recognize he's a very serious believer, however you interpret that. Ultimately, this is good because Bonhoeffer challenges us to think more deeply about what we believe and why we believe it.

What else do today's evangelicals learn from Bonhoeffer?

The main thing is to realize that on some level, theology is worthless unless we live it. This is a particular challenge for us as evangelicals — you can say, "I believe this and this," but at some point God says, "If you're not living it, I don't want to hear about it." Sometimes we can worship an idol of theological correctness. It doesn't mean that theology isn't extremely important, and anyone who says it isn't is wrong. At the same time, it's not everything, and

Bonhoeffer challenges to understand that the two have to be one — our life and what we say we believe. You can't fool God with a statement of theology.

There's something in Bonhoeffer that challenges us because he lived it out, wrote about it and preached about it. A lot of people have said the book got them thinking about that, and I'm glad. His life and theology get us thinking about the deeper issue of what it means to follow God.

We're always looking for shortcuts in our broken sinfulness, and sometimes theology can be a shortcut — I can say this and this, as if that justifies me before God. Whereas God would say, "I'm less interested in your theological statement than I am in your heart and those things you can hardly put into words." So Bonhoeffer is a good corrective for us as believers to try to look at things more from God's point of view.

How did you come to write about Wilberforce?

When my first book of apologetics came out, I was being interviewed on CNN, and the interviewer asked me about one page in that book where I mentioned Wilberforce as a man who took the Bible very seriously and consequently changed the world because of it. So I talked about Wilberforce briefly, which led to my being contacted by a book editor who knew that the movie *Amazing Grace* was coming out to celebrate the bicentennial of the abolition of the slave trade in 1807. The editor asked me if I'd like to write a biography of Wilberforce to come out with the movie.

I had no ambition to ever write any biography — it was not a genre I was interested in. But I prayed about it, and actually thought the Lord wanted me to do it, so I did, and it was a very challenging but extraordinary experience. I'm very proud of that book. I never thought I'd write anything like that in my life, but I did. And as I said before, that led me to think about writing a second biography.

What parallels do we draw between the lives of Bonhoeffer and Wilberforce?

These are two men who seem to have believed mostly in the way we believe. We see ourselves in them — they're not obscure figures like St. Augustine or Eusebius or Aeneas. These are Christians who are mostly like us, yet their lives are shining, inspiring, encouraging examples of what it is to be genuinely in this world and not of this world. These are men who walked the walk, were authentic to the bottom, and whose lives and actions reflected what they claimed to believe.

There's something deeply encouraging and inspiring about that, and I believe the Lord Himself wants us to study and consider these lives. It's a way that God speaks to us. That has been the nature of a lot of the feedback I've been getting from readers — they're inspired to think about living their faith more than they have been.

The parallel is also that Wilberforce stood up for the African slaves, and Bonhoeffer stood up for the persecuted Jews of Europe. Here we have two people living their lives to help people very different from themselves; that's a powerful picture of what it is to be a Christian.

How did Socrates in the City come about, and what does it entail?

The genesis of it was a friend asking me if I'd like to do a Bible study for spiritual seekers in Manhattan, and I really wanted to do something along those lines. But I got into a conversation with my friend Os Guinness, and Os said maybe he could come and speak, and then we could have Q&A. That inspired me to think about a speakers series that was not overtly Christian, but challenged people to think more deeply about the big questions.

Obviously, as a Christian, to me that means something that leads people closer to the God of Scripture. But I also wanted to think of it as a New York social event that would challenge people to think more deeply. Because I've had the privilege of knowing so many extraordinary people, I thought of what a tremendous cultural service it would be to secular New York City to bring folks like that to speak.

It caught on. We've been doing it for 11 years, and people love it. We're all over the map — I don't only invite people I agree with. For example, we've had a couple of Jewish speakers. But it's a forum unlike anything else being done in New York City. I think it's seriously, sorely needed. So we've continued to do it, and there's been all kinds of success stories that have come out of it.

What will the format of the Socrates in the City book be like?

It's pretty similar to the format of the evening. First there's my introduction, which is longer than most and with a fair amount of humor and commentary. Then there's a talk, and after that we have a Q&A, and people ask fantastic questions and we get fantastic answers. We transcribed all this with light editing so as to reproduce the feel of actually being there. There are 11 such segments in the book.

To learn more about Eric and his writing, visit www.ericmetexas.com.

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