

Was Dietrich Bonhoeffer gay? A new biography raises questions

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NEW YORK (RNS) A new biography is raising questions about the life and relationships of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, an anti-Nazi dissident whose theological writings remain widely influential among Christians.

Both left-leaning and right-leaning Christians herald the life and writings of Bonhoeffer, who was hanged for his involvement in the unsuccessful plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler in 1944. Bonhoeffer was engaged to a woman at the time of his execution, observing that he had lived a full life even though he would die a virgin.

The new biography, *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, from University of Virginia religious studies professor Charles Marsh, implies that Bonhoeffer may have had a same-sex attraction to his student, friend and later biographer Eberhard Bethge.

"There will be blood among American evangelicals over Mr. Marsh's claim," Christian Wiman, who teaches at the Yale Institute of Sacred Music, wrote in a review for *The Wall Street Journal*. But there's been no bloodbath yet, at least considering a few initial reviews.

"Marsh makes a convincing case that Bonhoeffer harbored feelings for Bethge that extended beyond friendship," writes Timothy Larsen, a professor of Christian thought at evangelical Wheaton College, in a book review for *Christianity Today*. "Those feelings were unrequited, and Bonhoeffer probably did not consciously acknowledge them. Still, Marsh notes, he was possessive and smothering in his attention."

Bonhoeffer and Bethge shared a bank account, gave gifts under both of their names and slept by warm fires, read books, traveled, and played the piano together, Marsh

writes. “Bonhoeffer’s relationship with Bethge had always strained toward the achievement of a romantic love,” Marsh writes, “one ever chaste but complete in its complex aspirations.”

Marsh suggests Bonhoeffer’s engagement to Maria von Wedemeyer as an imitation of Bethge’s engagement to Bonhoeffer’s niece in an effort to remain close to his “soul mate.” Bonhoeffer left his fiancée a memento of her choosing from his belongings, while Bethge received most everything else, including his car, clothes, books, music, and money.

Though Marsh does not use the labels “gay” or “homosexuality,” Bonhoeffer is portrayed as the suitor while Bethge wants to remain friends. Many of the evangelical reviews downplay but don’t dismiss the connections Marsh makes between the two.

“It fascinated me at first, but I grew tired of Marsh directing the camera angle of every scene so as to rather heavy-handedly keep it in view,” Larsen wrote.

In a book review for The Gospel Coalition, a network of Reformed evangelicals, B&H publishing editor Devin Maddox praises *Strange Glory* for its theological nuance and historical context but also finds Marsh’s focus on Bonhoeffer’s attractions to be distracting, comparing him to another another popular 20th century author, C.S. Lewis.

“Similar to speculation regarding the nature of C.S. Lewis’s relationship with Jane Moore, the nature of Bonhoeffer’s friendship with Bethge will serve as a distracting conversation point for the foreseeable future,” Maddox wrote. A review in *First Things* suggests similar frustration but cautious admiration for the book.

Frank Schaeffer, son of the late evangelical leader Francis Schaeffer, wrote a provocative post titled “Dietrich Bonhoeffer Was Flamingly Gay—Deal With It.” In a response at *World* magazine, Janie Cheaney seemed skeptical but accepting of the idea that Bonhoeffer may have been gay.

“The firestorm Schaeffer is expecting from evangelicals has yet to ignite, either because few of us have heard of *Strange Glory* or because the general evangelical attitude toward homosexuals is not quite as hateful as he thinks,” Cheaney wrote.

Marsh, who grew up Southern Baptist and says he has “evangelical sensibilities,” described the reception from other evangelicals as surprising, thinking they might be more dismissive of the biography. In contrast, he has not heard anything from more left-leaning groups and institutions, including Union Seminary, the progressive seminary where Bonhoeffer studied under famed theologian Reinhold Niebuhr during his time in the U.S.

“I think theologians are often terrified of what we’ll discover when we go more deeply into human character if we say that a person had very complicated relationships with character, psychology, formation, and sexuality,” Marsh said. “There’s a fear that if we probe too closely the biographical origins of theological and religious conviction that we’ll be inclined to say these ideas that we thought were objective are systematically precise descriptions of God and expressions of character.”

The idea that Bonhoeffer may have been gay or had same-sex attractions regularly comes up at Bonhoeffer conferences, Marsh said. But out of respect for Bethge and family members, no one had formally broached the subject. Many Germans who were gay were persecuted under Hitler’s regime.

“It was not my intention to sensationalize this, but to capture this relationship, this partnership, with as much respect and honesty and artful attention as I could,” Marsh said.

Several scholars who also study Bonhoeffer praised Marsh’s work overall, but some were concerned about the conclusions drawn about Bonhoeffer and Bethge.

“As a general rule of thumb, it’s safer not to speculate on someone’s sexuality unless they tell you,” said Reggie Williams, assistant professor of Christian ethics at McCormick Theological Seminary, who is working on a forthcoming book about Bonhoeffer’s time at Union. “We’re reading that from our current context of gay rights, but I think that does injustice to his own context and understanding of masculinity in an era that doesn’t correspond with our own.”

Marsh’s biography comes on the heels of a popularized biography of Bonhoeffer by Eric Metaxas, a writer and speaker based in Manhattan. Metaxas’ 600-page biography, published in 2011, took off among evangelicals, selling more than 600,000 copies.

Since its release, Metaxas' book has sometimes received criticism for connecting Bonhoeffer's Holocaust situation to modern-day America. A *Christian Century* review, for instance, [suggested Metaxas hijacked Bonhoeffer](#) for his own purposes.

The two biographers focus on Bonhoeffer's affections differently. Marsh wrote that Bonhoeffer had never had a girlfriend before his engagement. "A long-distance friendship ten years earlier with a student named Elizabeth Zinn had dissolved in confusion," he wrote.

Metaxas, on the other hand, writes more about Zinn, quoting from Bonhoeffer's letter to von Wedemeyer where he writes that he was once in love with another girl.

Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship* and *Life Together* are staples in some Christian homes, and many Christians point to his story to illustrate bravery in the face of hardship or persecution. But too many Christians have tried to turn Bonhoeffer into a saint, said Nancy Duff, a professor of Christian ethics at Princeton Theological Seminary.

"It's highly problematic that we have a difficult time viewing Bonhoeffer as a real human being who had weaknesses and strengths," Duff said.