

A deafening silence

reviewed by [John Petrakis](#) in the [April 19, 2003](#) issue

When are religious leaders obligated to speak out against tyranny and atrocities? When is it prudent for them to keep silent so they can fight another day? These are two of the timely questions raised by a pair of small films making the independent circuit: *Amen*, by celebrated filmmaker Constantin Costa-Gavras (*Z* and *Missing*), and *Bonhoeffer*, a documentary by Martin Doblmeier.

Both films use real-life stories and both succeed, to a point, in convincing us that spiritual and physical sacrifices must be made in the battle against evil.

*Amen* tells the true tale of Kurt Gerstein (Ulrich Tukur), a renowned German chemist who is enlisted in the Nazi SS to help purify drinking water for German troops. Little does he know that the Nazis are using Zyklon B pellets—which Gerstein himself helped develop—to kill Jews at concentration camps. When Gerstein finds out (in a powerful scene that involves little more than Gerstein peering through a death camp peephole and reacting with horror), he immediately makes it his mission to reveal these atrocities to the rest of the world. He seeks help from the Swedish consulate, Protestant church leaders, and finally Pope Pius XII.

He thinks publicizing the facts can make a difference, since earlier in the war (and in the film) various church leaders spoke out effectively against the Nazi policy of euthanasia, which exterminated "undesirables" who suffered mental and physical maladies. Faced with a storm of protest, the Nazis backed off the program. But Gerstein soon discovers that saving the "undesirables" was one thing, saving Jews another.

Of course, the religious leaders who refused to speak up had a rationale for staying silent. The pope believed that Hitler, for all his faults, was keeping Stalin (and godless communism) at bay. He was also afraid that if he condemned the Nazis, they would invade the Vatican.

Protestant leaders believed that Gerstein's resignation from the SS in protest was a sufficient response. They didn't want to cause too much trouble for their congregations and parishioners. Better to keep working at trying to convert Jews to

Christianity. (Not that that saved anyone; the Nazis gassed Jewish converts too.)

Costa-Gavras and his co-screenwriter, Jean-Claude Grumberg, manipulate the past a bit by including a fictitious character, Father Riccardo (Mathieu Kassovitz), an idealistic young Jesuit at the Vatican who keeps pestering the pope to save the Jews. When he realizes that the Holy Father plans to stay silent on the issue (the pope doesn't even mention the Jews in his Christmas Eve message), Father Riccardo makes a Christlike gesture: he sews a yellow star onto his cassock and joins the Jews as they go "up the chimney" (an ugly phrase used by a cynical Nazi doctor character, who is modeled after Josef Mengele).

Costa-Gavras is known for his mastery of suspense, and he follows the same genre here. Instead of focusing only on questions of morality, he turns Gerstein's search for allies into a race-against-the-clock story, punctuated by shots of empty freight trains, their doors open and waiting, hurtling through Europe. This approach may minimize the ethical impact, but it lends a sense of urgency to the story: with every day that passes, thousands more are being exterminated.

A different sense of urgency permeates the documentary on Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian whose sense of responsibility in the fight against evil led him to participate in a plot to assassinate Hitler. That involvement led to his execution in a concentration camp during the last days of World War II. The urgency in this film has to do with Bonhoeffer's intense reflection on individual responsibility. The film does an admirable job of showing how his ideas developed, and how shame (over his refusal to officiate at a memorial service for a Jewish in-law) and guilt (over his visit to the U.S. at a time when other German pastors were being jailed) led him to become more involved in the resistance.

The film's strengths include remarkable footage of Hitler addressing God during speeches spewing hate, and thoughtful, understated interviews with historians, former students and Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu.