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Revealing the Theologian Who Plotted to Kill Hitler

REVIEW

*** **BONHOEFFER** (U): Strong, inspiring profile of the valiant and enigmatic World War II-era Protestant theologian, a pacifist who joined in the plots to kill Hitler. With the voice of Klaus Maria Brandauer as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and appearances by Eberhard Bethge, Desmond Tutu, Ruth Alice von Bismarck. Directed and narrated by Martin Doblmeier. 1.30. In English and German with English subtitles. At the Quad Cinema, 13th Street between Fifth and Sixth avenues, Manhattan.

By John Anderson
STAFF WRITER

We're aware from the opening moments of "Bonhoeffer" that we are in the presence — however, separated by time, space and cinema — of one of the more remarkable men of the 20th century. Pronouncedly bespectacled, intellectually austere, Dietrich Bonhoeffer would have remained a well-known name in theological circles regardless of whether he'd ever become embroiled in Germany's politics of genocide. That he actually joined in plots to assassinate Adolf Hitler before eventually being executed himself (three weeks before the end of the war) makes him as much theological enigma as martyred Christian.

If the Crucifixion means anything — and after the Resurrection, it's the most important event in Christian thought — it is the transcendence of this tem-

poral world. Despite the evil of the Third Reich, was Bonhoeffer religiously justified in plotting murder, even against Hitler?

Director Martin Doblmeier, who also narrates, has made several documentaries with religious themes that have aired internationally, and he does an admirable job of trying to explain the inexplicable. Bonhoeffer is heard in his own words; his close friend and fellow theologian Eber-

both to Harlem's influential Abyssinian Baptist Church and the abysmal state of race relations in the United States. These influences affected his own thinking about German racial politics, and he returned to Germany — the return itself has something of a death knell about it — where he began the anti-Nazi Confessing Church, the only church to actively oppose Hitler's policies, and ultimately got involved in the

unsuccessful conspiracies against Hitler himself.

Doblmeier is earnest, perhaps overly. He is also limited by the materials available; Klaus Maria Brandauer does a fine job of providing Bonhoeffer's voice, but there's nothing

available on the theologian half as electrifying as the footage Doblmeier has of the fuhrer — praying to God to help his cause and the German people.

Ultimately, however, the subject matter shores up the unsteady imagery of "Bonhoeffer," which is, in the end, a movie of ideas, not of pictures. ■



Journey Films

In "Bonhoeffer," Hitler with Ludwig Muller, his bishop of the Reich's Protestant Church

hard Bethge weighs in, as does Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Alice von Bismarck, the sister of Bonhoeffer's wife. The mystery, however, ultimately remains.

There's no mystery, though, about either the courage or theological credentials of Bonhoeffer, who came not from a family of churchmen, but doctors: His father was the renowned psychiatrist Karl Bonhoeffer. It was while on a fellowship to Union Theological Seminary in New York in 1930-31 that Bonhoeffer was introduced