

Is Eric Metaxas the next Chuck Colson?

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NEW YORK (RNS) Before evangelical leader Chuck Colson fell ill at a conference last year, crumbling at the podium and later dying at the hospital, it was Eric Metaxas who introduced him.

At the time, Metaxas seemed primed and ready to become the next Colson — a key leader in the evangelical movement, known for his prison ministry, but also credited with keeping Christians engaged in politics and culture through books, radio and other outlets.

Metaxas took over some of Colson's roles, including co-host of BreakPoint, a radio show Metaxas wrote for in the late '90s. He took Colson's place on the board of the Manhattan Declaration, a movement Colson helped found to focus Christians' attention on life, marriage and religious freedom issues.

And like Colson, Metaxas took to the Christian conference circuit, speaking on the issues that were near and dear to Colson's interests.

But comparisons to Colson only go so far, Metaxas said.

"I'll always want to follow in Chuck's footsteps, but I'm a humorist, I write poetry and children's books," said Metaxas, whose most recent book, "Seven Men" came out this spring. "Chuck was a lawyer."

But like Colson, the Nixon adviser who converted to Christianity after serving time for his involvement in the Watergate scandal, Metaxas rose to evangelical fame later in life.

For years, Metaxas struggled financially as a writer living in Manhattan, contributing to VeggieTales, writing children's books, apologetics books and then biographies.

But then Metaxas' 2011 600-page biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German theologian who was executed for his involvement in a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler, took off, selling more than 600,000 copies.

The book led to an hourlong meeting with former President George W. Bush, who gave him high praise for the book.

"It was the honor of my life," Metaxas said. A letter from Bush hangs in Metaxas' Upper East Side apartment where he lives with his wife, 14-year-old daughter, and 4-pound Yorkshire terrier/Maltese named George. In another room, a framed letter from Woody Allen to Metaxas sits propped up on a stack of books. Allen called Metaxas' humor pieces "quite funny."

The Bonhoeffer biography led to an invitation to speak at the 2012 National Prayer Breakfast. During his speech, he said former President George W. Bush had read "Bonhoeffer." He then handed a copy to Obama and said, "No pressure." Obama nearly left the breakfast without the book but went back to his table to grab it.

Metaxas seemed surprised by the prayer breakfast's effect.

"It somehow did something to how people saw me as a voice in the culture," he said.

At 5 feet 8 inches, with Harry Potter-like glasses, Metaxas does not fit stereotypes easily. He speaks quickly with energy and quick wit, but he suffers from chronic fatigue, something he manages by running regularly.

Born in Queens to a Greek father and a German mother, Metaxas grew up in Danbury, Conn., and graduated from Yale. He was raised in a Greek Orthodox home and still visits every Easter, singing the Divine Liturgy in the choir with his father.

An interdenominational evangelical, Metaxas has jumped around the church scene in New York. He attended David Wilkerson's Times Square Church before shifting to Tim Keller's Redeemer Presbyterian Church.

Since 2001, his family has attended Calvary-St. George's Episcopal Church. Metaxas says he attends his church because of the theologically conservative leadership in

spite of national leadership, “which has like Wile E. Coyote sped off the cliff with single-mindedness and speed.”

Before “Bonhoeffer,” Metaxas wrote a biography of William Wilberforce, an 18th-century English leader in the movement to abolish the slave trade. He said he had never thought about writing a biography.

“It’s a genre I was looking forward to skipping,” he said.

The summer after he became a Christian at 25 years old (a conversion he wrote about for Christianity Today magazine earlier this year), someone gave him Bonhoeffer’s “The Cost of Discipleship,” considered a Christian classic. Because his mother is German, he decided to explore Bonhoeffer’s story.

“Wilberforce, because of his faith, stood up for African slaves,” Metaxas said. “Bonhoeffer, because of his faith, stood up for Jews. That’s Christianity to me.”

The “Bonhoeffer” biography almost died before publication, though. HarperOne wanted to publish a third of the book and delay publication, so Metaxas gave back the advance, a painful decision as he and his family struggled to continue to live in Manhattan. An editor from Thomas Nelson agreed to publish the book, which slowly picked up steam as endorsements rolled in.

“Six-hundred-page biographies of German theologians aren’t known to fly off the shelves,” Metaxas said. “That Thomas Nelson was willing to publish it as I had written it was almost miraculous, if not actually miraculous.”

He sometimes receives criticism for connecting Bonhoeffer’s Hitler situation to modern-day America. A Christian Century review suggested Metaxas hijacked Bonhoeffer for his own purposes. For instance, Metaxas will compare the Holocaust to abortions in the U.S. His wife, Susanne Metaxas, directs the Midtown Pregnancy Support Center in Manhattan.

“At times, he tends to overdo things,” said John Wilson, editor of Books and Culture, an admirer of Metaxas who sees a grain of truth in the critiques. “It would be misleading to say he has simply framed ‘Bonhoeffer’ in a way that plays to current culture war conflict. That’s not true, but that’s part of it. That’s one thing that he’s going to have to wrestle with in the next stage of what he does.”

Metaxas responds to his critics by suggesting they had “bitter animosity toward evangelicals and conservatives.”

So if a comparison to Colson doesn't work for Metaxas, who does?

William F. Buckley, founder of National Review, Metaxas suggested. Buckley wrote novels, edited a magazine, had a TV show, and played the harpsichord.

“I've given myself permission to be broad,” Metaxas said.

Metaxas has captured the attention of some Catholic leaders, including Philadelphia Archbishop Charles Chaput.

“Eric disarms people with three qualities: a quick mind, a vivid sense of humor and a genuine zeal about his faith,” Chaput said. “He knows how to move an audience and reach across denominational divides.”

In 2000, Metaxas founded a series called “Socrates in the City” where he interviews leaders, mostly Christians, on the culture. Tickets originally started at \$12 but have gone up to \$35. The most recent gathering was a gala on Metaxas' 50th birthday. Tickets ran from \$250 per individual to \$10,000 for a table of 10 at the Union League Club, a private social club in Manhattan. Metaxas knows how to keep an audience's interest, weaving cultural and political references together, his friends say.

“He has this amazing ability to get you laughing and then on the turn of a dime say something devastatingly important and serious and insightful from a theological perspective,” said Greg Thornbury, the new president of The King's College in Manhattan.

For now, Metaxas begins work on “Seven Women,” a book that will have short biographies of seven Christian women. In addition, he's developing a mainstream TV talk show but said negotiations are still underway.

“I tease him that he has multiple personalities,” said Wilson. “I told him his bad doppelganger had taken over his Twitter feed when he tweeted positive things about Rick Santorum. He's not this one-sided predictable figure. The same is true of evangelicals as a whole.”