

THE GERMAN SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA

Friday Film Fest Series



Albert Schweitzer: Ein Leben für Afrika

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Film, Food & Discussion

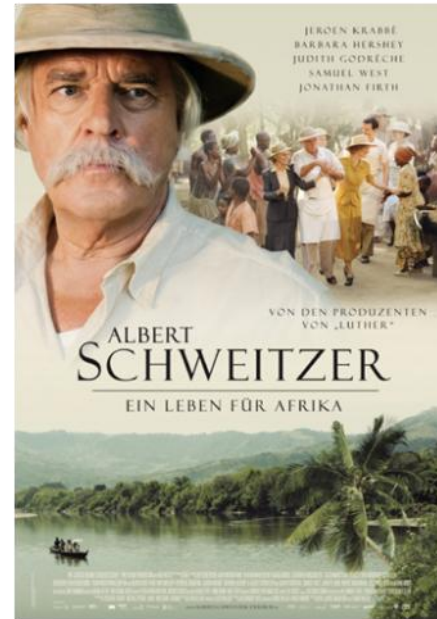
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The German Society of PA

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By the late forties and early fifties his stature around the world can only be described as monumental. He was termed “the greatest soul in Christendom”, ranked alongside Goethe and Leonardo da Vinci as a universal genius, and finally labeled by Life Magazine as “The Greatest Man In The World.” For those who share the viewpoint of Millar and Thies, this massive fame and admiration was the very thing they believe stoked the fears of the US government.



Policy makers and political leaders feared that Schweitzer and other famous people who shared his outspoken views such as Albert Einstein and Bertrand Russell, could actually mold public opinion to the extent of crystallizing a powerful anti-bomb movement. They believed that such a movement could lead to the eventual proscription of the prevailing doctrine (peace and security through massive armed deterrence) and the eventual abandonment of nuclear weapons altogether.

As the thesis goes, this threat to the ideological status quo was something that the military industrial complex and the political establishment of the nineteen fifties was not willing to tolerate. Hence, as the conspiratorial thesis proceeds, if it was deemed necessary to take down the reputation of a luminary such as Albert Schweitzer, it would be done with no qualms.

Given the growing distrust of government in recent decades, if not the downright cynicism of the public about the ways and means of those in power, Millar and Thies’ movie doesn’t necessarily seem as fanciful as it once might have. It is necessary however to factor in the work of journalists such as James Cameron and John Gunther, each of whom had by the mid-fifties begun to write and talk about Schweitzer in less than hagiographic terms after visiting him in Lambarene. In fact, in some aspects, they were fairly critical. Moreover, there were other critics of Schweitzer as well in what some called the growing anti-myth movement, and it is unlikely that all of them were in cahoots with the government.

Yet the person who seemed to care the least about both the Schweitzer myth and the Schweitzer anti-myth was Albert Schweitzer. He had never believed in either, and didn’t seem ultimately concerned about what governments might or might not be trying to do to him. He just kept going, making “... his life his argument...” until he died in Lambarene in his 90th year.

He had never claimed to be a good or great man, only one faithful to his vision of what being a disciple of Jesus meant, however unorthodox that might have been considered by some traditionalists. And toward the end of his life, he imparted to his granddaughter a basic lesson about discipleship. When she indicated that she wanted to come to his jungle hospital to work with him, he told her: “You can have your Lambarene anywhere.”

Albert Schweitzer: Ein Leben für Afrika

Director: Gavin Millar

Producer: Alexander Thies

Script: James Brabazon, Gavin Millar, David Howard

Cinematography: Cinders Forshaw

Cast: Jeroen Krabbe (Albert Schweitzer); Barbara Hershey (Helene Schweitzer); Judith Godreche (Therese Bourdin); Samuel West (Phil Figgis); Jeanette Hain (Rhena Schweitzer); Patrice Naiambana (Louis NGouta); Jonathan Firth (Dr. David Fuller); Armin Rohde (Albert Einstein);

(Commentary: A. Krumm)

Lambarene Anywhere

In coming to terms with Jesus, Albert Schweitzer did have one thing in common with today's flock of dispensational evangelicals. Like them, he tended to get a bit fixated on eschatology. Other than that he resided utterly outside of their theological pale. Schweitzer never seemed to harbor any fear of being left behind when the rapture occurred. In fact, he didn't seem to think there was going to be any such snatching away.

Therefore propagating angst of this sort has quite properly devolved upon right reverend luminaries such as Tim LaHaye and Hal Lindsay. But Schweitzer certainly was convinced that his particular hermeneutics concerning Jesus' eschatological outlook was the key to understanding everything about Jesus. In this regard, he was indeed much like Messrs. LaHaye and Lindsay.

There has been to date no scholarly analysis of the interpretive principles of Tim LaHaye, but in the case of Schweitzer, his own work, not to mention the work of those who have studied him, reveals the extremely large dosage of 18th and 19th century higher criticism he imbibed when attending university during the 1890s. In that time such thinking was the reigning paradigm and like all reigning paradigms it must have seemed unimpeachable and irrefutable.

Schweitzer soaked up a lot of it, beginning with the writings of Hermann Reimarus and subsequently with the ruminations of a long line of "scientifically" oriented, idealistic academics who were quite certain Jesus must have been a liberal idealist very much like themselves. But unlike these fellows, who made their erudition and methodologies serve as their very arguments, Schweitzer was different in one key respect. Early on, he determined, as one of his biographers put it "... to make his life his argument."

Given his very this-world oriented theology, we should not feel the least bit presumptuous in proclaiming Schweitzer a secular saint. And why not? This is no downgrade. Secular saints are prized commodities in modern societies, functioning like precious metals to provide a store of value among the fluctuating fiat currencies comprising the rest of us. Schweitzer ranks high among the elite of secular saints.

His CV would silence Donald Trump. He was a polymath and a seemingly superhuman consumer of life, saving lives during the day and grooving on Bach at night when not penning theological and philosophical tomes. Doubtless being Albert Schweitzer tended to leave him with few free evenings but apparently he liked it that way.

His aphorisms and apothegms, overflowing with unimpeachably universal appeal, serve as proof texts for right thinking and well intentioned folks all across the ideological spectrum. Even the most virulent post-modernist would have a hard time casting a hermeneutic of suspicion on "Ehrfurcht vor dem Leben" or philosophically nitpicking about "Ich bin Leben, das leben will, inmitten von Leben, das leben will."

His decision to become a medical missionary in Africa might be construed as a sort of Entschädigung variety of the white man's burden. Europeans had been thoroughly nasty to Africans and someone had to provide some compensation, if only as an example. Schweitzer had his epiphany about what constituted real discipleship while chugging up a jungle river and it certainly puts to shame all the health and wealth gospel messages emanating from today's realm of televangelism.

The human race was utterly botching things up in regards to being properly human, and needed some universal guiding principle applicable to all humans in all times and places. The guiding principle was of course "Ehrfurcht vor dem Leben". With this conviction as a foundation, Schweitzer determined "... to make his life his argument." And he did. To an astounding extent, with amazing perseverance, spending over fifty of his ninety years building and working in his Urwaldkrankenhaus in Lambarene in West Africa (now Gabon).

But even saints, secular or sacred, sometimes get no respect, and sometimes saints, orthodox or otherwise, fall prey to the machinations of the military industrial complex and its minions. According to Gavin Millar's telling of the tale, Schweitzer's opposition to nuclear weapons elicits subterfuge and sabotage from the CIA, FBI and assorted sappers of the intelligence community, including that quintessential figure of cinema, a cynical journalist.

Both director Millar and producer Alexander Thies view this period in Schweitzer's life as a piece of history that was either never known or too quickly forgotten by most people. Maybe they are onto something here. It is probably a safe bet that much of history is unknown and an even safer bet that most of the rest is quickly forgotten.

Did the US government engage in a deliberate attempt to smear and discredit Schweitzer? Given the research and revelations that have occurred since Schweitzer's death in 1965, this is no longer something that can be easily dismissed. Schweitzer was one of the most prominent spokesmen for the international movement to halt nuclear weapons testing and eventually ban the development of nuclear weapons altogether.

