

Two Atheists, Two Films, and Their Call to Virtue

The 1966 movie [*A Man for All Seasons*](#) depicts the Lord Chancellor of England Thomas More (Paul Scofield) in his final years when he opposed Henry VIII's divorce and refused to take the oath declaring Henry the supreme head of the Church of England. The king imprisoned More in the Tower of London. Tried in court and declared guilty of treason, More was beheaded in 1535.

The 2005 film [*Sophie Scholl: Her Final Day*](#) brings viewers into the 20th century to a Nazi courtroom. The authorities have arrested Sophie Scholl (Julia Jentsch), her brother, and a friend for distributing leaflets denouncing Hitler and the Nazi Party. Like More's trial in *A Man for All Seasons*, this kangaroo court moves swiftly to condemn these three young people for treason, and they are summarily executed by guillotine.

These two powerful and highly honored movies share many commonalities. Both films show the machinations of an oppressive state. Both take us into a courtroom. Both feature individuals who live by their convictions and are willing to die for them, with both Sophie Scholl and Thomas More exhibiting a Christian faith that seems as natural to them as breathing.

One other likeness is much less obvious. Robert Bolt, who wrote both the play and the screenplay for *A Man for All Seasons*, was an atheist. Marc Rothmund, the director of *Sophie Scholl* who also had much input into Fred Breinersdorfer's script, is an atheist. And yet, these movies both show individuals standing up for their Christian morality.

In his book [Beauty Will Save the World](#), Gregory Wolfe writes of *A Man for All Seasons*, “It is a curious fact that the artist who produced the most compelling and accessible version of Christian humanism in the twentieth century was a multiply married, luxury-loving, alcoholic atheist by the name of Robert Bolt.”

In a press kit [interview](#) for *Sophie Scholl*, Rothemund made clear that he is a nonbeliever, stating, “And, of course, as an atheist I ask myself: is it easier to face death as a believer?”

And so we must ask a question as well: How is it possible that two such talented men who deny the existence of God made films that so vividly illustrate the play of faith in the lives of the main characters?

The answer is really quite simple: They gave their viewers the truth. Sophie Scholl and Thomas More were—in a very real sense—Christian martyrs, and Bolt and Rothemund bring them to the screen as such. The two moviemakers make no false steps. They give us these two witnesses to faith without undercutting Scholl or More’s beliefs. The girl executed by the Nazis and the powerful man brought low and executed by his king seem as natural in their religious faith as they must have appeared when living.

In both films, we also find those other two members of that ancient trio: beauty and goodness. The beauty of *A Man for All Seasons* shines in its cinematography, for which the film won an [Academy Award](#), and in Paul Scofield’s portrayal of More. In *Sophie Scholl*, beauty centers itself in Julia Jentsch’s Sophie. Goodness, too, is at the heart of these movies: Scholl and More fight not just for themselves but for the cause of truth.

In America today, these triune virtues are often missing from our public square. Few ordinary citizens, for example, would

favorably compare the arts of the last hundred years with any previous era. We make poetry, music, buildings, and paintings that may appeal to the mind, and more frequently to the flesh, but rarely to the soul. Meanwhile, the crudities and lies uttered daily by everyone from prominent political figures to celebrities to social media commenters have disfigured the face of American virtue beyond recognition.

Walking alongside truth, beauty, and goodness, we often find another trio of companions: faith, hope, and charity. If we bring these theological virtues down from heaven and secularize them, we discover they too have gone absent. Polls show that faith in our [institutions](#) is at low tide. American hopes for the next generation's future and opportunities have [tumbled](#). As for charity, we need only listen to the ugly, divisive snark in Washington, Hollywood, and media to gauge the measure of our love for our fellow man.

In his book, Gregory Wolfe quotes writer Gerald Vann:

Today the old adage, 'Don't preach to the starving, give them bread,' can be given a new application: 'Don't preach divinity to the subhumanized; first give them back their humanity....' We cannot save others from subhumanity if we are subhuman ourselves.

The atheists who gave us *A Man for All Seasons* and *Sophie Scholl: Her Final Days* pointed out the way to virtue and the power of spiritual faith. Most of all, their art gives us heroes whose love of truth and goodness should serve as models for our culture. And until that happens, until we as a people return to those virtues that inspired Sophie Scholl, Thomas More, and so many of our own ancestors, everything else is just dust in the wind.

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