

## Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Liberalism

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In his article “The Liberalism of John Paul II” (*First Things* May 1997) Fr. Richard John Neuhaus has articulated the idea that liberalism, properly understood, is both compatible with and, to some extent, an outgrowth of, Christian thought. This idea was further elaborated in the article “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity” (*First Things* October 1997), and in other writings in *First Things*. In “The Public Square,” in November 1997, Fr. Neuhaus engages in an extended discussion of the origins pluralism and democracy, calling them “children” of the Church. “The Church acknowledges these children as her own, even if some of the midwives involved the delivery were less than friendly to the Church.”

The purpose of the present article is illustrate that the idea that liberal values are “children” of the Church was a very important conception in the thought of the German Lutheran Theologian DIetrich Bonhoeffer (1906 – 1945). As many may be aware, Bonhoeffer was a leading figure in the struggle within the Protestant Church in Germany against National Socialism. This struggle led Bonhoeffer into the circle of the German resistance, where his brother-in-law, Hans von Dohnanyi was a central figure. This activity eventually led the the arrest of Bonhoeffer and Donhanyi on 5 April 1943 and their execution on 9 April 1945.

In fact, it was precisely the experience of Bonhoeffer with resistance figures like Dohnanyi and others (including other members of his family) that led Bonhoeffer to a particularly striking recognition and affirmation of the the filial relationship between liberal values and the Church. He wrote about it in his last organized work, his *Ehtics*, written mostly between 1940 and 1943, following his entry into the resistance following his return to Germany in 1939, up to the time of his arrest. What follows is taken from the opening paragraph of Part I, Chapter II, *The Church and the World*. Bonhoeffer begins with a description of the liberal opposition to National Socialism.

We begin this section by referring to one of our most astonishing experiences during the years when everything Christian was sorely oppressed. The deification of the irrational, of blood and instinct, of the beast of prey in man could be countered with the appeal to reason; arbitrary action could be countered with the written law; barbarity with the appeal to culture and humanity; the violent maltreatment of persons with the appeal to freedom, tolerance and the rights of man; the subordination of science, art and the rest to political purposes with the appeal to the autonomy of the various different fields of human activity.

Until very recently, the defenders of liberal values had come to see themselves as completely disconnected from the Church. In fact they saw the Church as the primary obstacle to be overcome. This changed completely with the advent of National Socialism.

In each case this was sufficient to awaken the consciousness of a kind of al-

liance and comradeship between the defenders of these endangered values and the Christians. Reason, culture, humanity, tolerance and self-determination, all these concepts which until very recently had served as battle slogans against the Church, against Christianity, against Jesus Christ Himself, had now, suddenly and surprisingly, come very near indeed to the Christian standpoint.

This sudden turn of liberal values toward Christianity did not occur because Christianity had compromised its message in order to seek the approval of liberal values. Quite the opposite. It was precisely the uncompromised message of Christianity to which liberal values were drawn.

This took place at a time when . . . the cardinal principles of Christian belief were displayed in their hardest and most uncompromising form, in the form which could give the greatest offence to all reason, culture, humanity and tolerance. . . . It was clear that it was not the Church that was seeking the protection and the alliance of these concepts; but on the contrary, it was the concepts that had somehow become homeless and now sought refuge in the Christian sphere, in the shadow of the Christian Church.

These “homesick humanists,” in the phrase of Robert Bertram, were not simply engaging in some sort of tactical alliance with the Church. Rather, in a profound and fundamental way they had experienced a recognition of their origin. As children of the Church, they were returning to their mother.

It would not correspond at all to the real situation if we were to interpret this experience simply as a purely tactical move, as an alliance of expediency which would be dissolved as soon as the struggle was at an end. What is decisive is rather the fact that there took place a return to the origin. The children of the Church, who had become independent and gone their own ways, now in the hour of danger returned to their mother. During the time of their estrangement their appearance and their language had altered a great deal, and yet at the crucial moment the mother and the children once again recognized one another. Reason, justice, culture, humanity and all the kindred concepts sought and found a new purpose and a new power in their origin.

This origin is Jesus Christ.

Although they had learned to speak the name of Jesus Christ, “only with hesitation and embarrassment,” nevertheless this name alone gives meaning and power to these values.

It is an experience of our days that the spoken name of Jesus alone exercises an unforeseen power; and the effort it costs to speak this name is perhaps connected with some faint apprehension of the power which is inherent in it. Wherever the name of Jesus Christ is spoken it is a protection and a claim. This is the case with all those who in their struggle for justice, truth, humanity and freedom have learnt once again to speak the name of Jesus Christ, even though it is often with hesitation and with genuine fear. This name gives

protection to them and to the high values for which they stand; and it is at the same time the claim to these men and to these values.

Although we Americans do not live under anything resembling National Socialism, we may nevertheless recognize something of the experience Bonhoeffer described for the resistance. This experience is, in any case, important as we seek for the origin of liberal values.

... injured justice, oppressed truth, vilified humanity and violated freedom all sought for her, or rather for her Master, Jesus Christ.

It was not metaphysical speculation ... but it was the concrete suffering of injustice, of the organized lie, of hostility to mankind and of violence, it was the persecution of lawfulness, truth, humanity and freedom which impelled the men who held these values dear to seek the protection of Jesus Christ and therefore to become subject to his claim, and it was through this that the Church of Jesus Christ learned of the wide extent of her responsibility.

We may perceive that the attack on liberal values has occurred not only by direct attack upon them, as Bonhoeffer described here, but also by their *misuse*. In either case we may still be able to accept this description of the claim that the Church makes on them.

It is not Christ who must justify Himself before the world by acknowledgement of the values of justice, truth and freedom, but it is these values which have come to need justification, and their justification can only be Jesus Christ. It is not that a "Christian culture" must make the name of Jesus Christ acceptable to the world; but the crucified Christ has become the refuge and the justification, the protection and the claim for the higher values and their defenders that have fallen victim to suffering. It is with the Christ who is persecuted and who suffers in His Church that justice, truth, humanity and freedom now seek refuge; it is with the Christ who found no shelter in the world, the Christ who was cast out from the world, the Christ of the crib and the cross, under whose protection they now seek sanctuary, and who thereby for the first time displays the full extent of His power.

This situation described here occurred not only under national socialism, but under communism as well. It is complicated, however, by the fact that the defenders of liberal values may have been more readily deceived into thinking that communism, in contrast to national socialism, would advance those values. This is the situation described by Cardinal Lustiger in relation to the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity when he says "the abuse of these words by those responsible for the unspeakable horrors of this century may lead us to disown the ideals themselves."

In his November 1997 reflections, Fr. Neuhaus dates to the thirteenth century the emergence, in Western, Christian thought, of "an understanding of the integrity and even autonomy of politics." It is to the same century that Bonhoeffer dated the origin of human autonomy of the "world come of age," a concept that remained rather incompletely developed in his writings from prison.