

Dietrich Bonhoeffer on Authority

Charles E. Ford

4 January 2004

The 20th century witnessed such extreme examples of the exercise of total authority that a new phrase has been coined to identify it, totalitarianism. The most dramatic, though not the only, examples of this phenomenon are instances of revolutionary socialism, including both communism and national socialism. The German Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906 - 1945) is well known as a determined opponent of national socialism. He was executed shortly before the end of World War II for his involvement in the German resistance movement, which attempted to assassinate Hitler and replace the Nazi regime in Germany.

It may come as a surprise to learn of Bonhoeffer's analysis of the situation that led to the Nazi rise to power in Germany. He described it not in terms of an excess of authority but rather as a loss of authority and a plunge into nihilism. In particular, he saw national socialism as a revolutionary phenomena, a break with German tradition. His analysis differs decisively from many that have become widespread. One example is the view put forward by William L. Shirer in his 1960 book "The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich." He claimed that one can not understand the Nazi rise to power without understanding the role of Martin Luther, who "was both a passionate anti-Semite and a ferocious believer in absolute obedience to political authority." This view suggests that national socialism took these two tendencies in Luther and carried them to their logical extremes.

Another example is the view put forward in a December 1939 article by the famous Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth (1888 - 1968). Barth was one of the most prestigious theologians of the past century and a leading figure in the church struggle against national socialism in Germany. Here is a quote from his article.

the German people suffer from the heritage of a paganism that is mystical and that is in consequence unrestrained, unwise and illusory. And it suffers, too, from the heritage of the greatest Christian of Germany, from Martin Luther's error on the relation between Law and Gospel, between the temporal and the spiritual order and power. This error has established, confirmed and idealized the natural paganism of the German people, instead of limiting and restraining it. . . . Hitlerism is the present evil dream of the German pagan who first became christianized in a Lutheran form.

Interpretations like this tend to see national socialism as an outgrowth of the Prussian political and military traditions, with their supposed absolutism and militarism deriving from Luther. Barth did not support the German Resistance movement, in part because of the many military figures involved.

Barth had a great influence on Bonhoeffer throughout his adult life. They were particularly closely aligned during the period of the creation of the Confessing Church in 1934. In spite of this they differed over several issues, including some that have historically divided Lutheran and Reformed. Above all, Bonhoeffer rejected Barth's views on the origins of national socialism. Bonhoeffer's experience heading a seminary in Finkenwalde in rural

Prussia gave him first hand experience with traditional Prussia and its resistance to national socialism.

Composing his *Ethics* in 1940, Bonhoeffer offered a quite different analysis of the origins of national socialism. He labeled as “the most grotesque mistake the historian can make” [page 101] the claim that the origins of national socialism can be found in Prussia. Bonhoeffer believed that national socialism came from the same root as communism, namely the French Revolution and its antecedent, the enlightenment. The remainder of this article consists primarily of quotes giving some of this analysis. The quotes, with page numbers in square brackets, are from *Ethics*, the First Touchstone Edition, published in 1995.

Although enlightenment thought held out the promise of the liberation of the masses, the result was quite different.

The emancipation of the masses leads to the reign of terror and the guillotine. . . . The liberation of man as an absolute ideal leads only to man’s self-destruction. At the end of the path which was first troden in the French Revolution there is nihilism. [102-103]

Bonhoeffer’s analysis is not completely negative about the enlightenment but is based on Luther’s understanding of established order. Indeed a significant component of *Ethics* is devoted to his elaboration of Luther’s ideas on “estates” and “orders,” although he used the word “mandate” instead of either of these terms of Luther.

No one can confer upon himself the warrant for ethical discourse. It is imparted to a man, it is assigned to him, . . . upon the old man and not upon the young one, upon the father and not the child, the master and not the servant, the teacher and not the pupil, the judge and not the accused, the ruler and not the subject, the preacher and not the parishoner. What finds expression here is that disparity which is so extremely offensive to modern sensibilities but which is inherent and essential in the ethical, namely, the disparity between the superior and the inferior. Without the objective subordination of the lower to the higher, and without that courage to accept the superiority which modern man has so completely lost, ethical discourse is dissipated in generalities, it lacks an object and its essential character is destroyed.

. . . These assertions are in direct contradiction to the interpretation . . . which implies the invalidation of . . . all relations of subordination and authority, and which proclaims the equality of all men by virtue of their innate universal human reason. . . . the history of the past hundred and fifty years [i.e. since the French Revolution] has demonstrated . . . that the actual goal of this new conception of the ethical, which was to establish a universal union of mankind in place of a fossilized form of society characterized by the antagonism of privileged and unprivileged members, has not only not been achieved but has turned out to be exactly the opposite of what was intended.

. . . the Enlightenment . . . [was] right to oppose a system under which society was divided into privileged and unprivileged sections. . . . it was wrong only when it . . . made man himself an abstraction, employing this abstraction as a weapon against all human order. [267-269]

. . .

The bearers of the mandate do not receive their commission from below; their task is not to expound and execute desires of the human will, but in a strict and unalterable sense they hold their commission from God, they are deputies and representatives of God. . . . In this way, by virtue of the divine warrant, there is established in the sphere of the mandate an unalterable relation of superiority and inferiority.

. . . this superiority and inferiority . . . is not identical with an earthly relation of superior and inferior power. The stronger can certainly not without further ado claim for himself the authority of the divine mandate vis-a-vis the weaker. On the contrary, it is characteristic of the divine mandate that it corrects and regulates the earthly relations of superior and inferior power in its own way. . . . it is a relation between those persons who, whether they be superior or inferior, submit to the commission of God and to it alone. The master, too, has a Master, and this fact alone establishes his right to be master and authorizes and legitimates his relation to the servant. Master and servant owe to one another the honor which arises from any particular act of participation in the mandate of God. There may be abuse of superiority to the detriment of the inferior, but at the same time there may also be abuse of inferiority, . . . abuse of both superiority and inferiority is inevitable whenever it is no longer recognized that both have their foundation in the mandate of God. In such a case superiority is thought of as a fortuitous favor of fortune; is seized upon and exploited without compunction, and, in return inferiority is thought of as an unjust disadvantage, which necessarily gives rise to indignation and rebellion. . . . In the horror which is aroused by the violence of this rebellion the fact that there was ever the possibility of a genuine institutional order established from above can only appear as a miracle, and so, in reality, it is. The genuine order of superior and inferior draws its life from belief in the commission from "above," belief in the "Lord of lords." This belief alone can exorcise the demonic forces which emerge from below. [284-286]