

Luther, Bonhoeffer and Revolution

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Introduction

The collapse of Marxism in Eastern Europe has coincided with reappraisals of post-enlightenment European history. The French Revolution in particular, viewed as a forerunner of Marxism,¹ has been subjected to increasingly negative reappraisals. Some of these have been reviewed in a most interesting article by Conor Cruise O'Brien.² He presents evidence for the thesis that the French Revolution is the forerunner not only of modern Marxism but also of modern National Socialism. In fact O'Brien sees the French Revolution "as the first major effort to construct a secular Utopia, and the model for all subsequent efforts of this kind."³ Such efforts, he says, including both Communism and Nazism, have led to untold misery.

This identification of Nazism as both revolutionary and utopian – and an heir of the French Revolution – runs counter to some contemporary views of Nazism. Although parallels between the two have often been noted, Nazism is usually seen as a phenomenon of the 'extreme right' in contrast to Communism, a phenomenon of the 'extreme left'. With Communism conceived of as revolutionary and utopian, its followers have often been regarded as misguided idealists with good intentions. Nazism, by contrast, is identified as a 'reactionary' movement that appealed to murderous and destructive impulses. The new reappraisals suggest a much more complicated interaction between idealistic and destructive tendencies.

The view of Nazism as a revolutionary heir of the French Revolution was put forward fifty years ago by the German Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer has justly become famous for his courageous theological and political opposition to Nazism, opposition that eventually cost him his life. Less known is Bonhoeffer's analysis of modernity, in which he views Nazism – just as much as Communism – as a revolutionary, utopian movement. Bonhoeffer viewed the triumph of Nazism as a consequence of the widespread acceptance of revolutionary ideology in the west, an ideology inherited from the French Revolution.

In contrast to Bonhoeffer, contemporary views of Luther are often quite negative. In particular Luther has been cited as one of the formative influences in German history that led to antisemitism and National Socialism. In his best selling book about Nazi Germany, William Shirer wrote:

It is difficult to understand the behavior of most German Protestants in the first Nazi years unless one is aware of two things: their history and the influence of Martin Luther. (To avoid any misunderstanding, it might be well to point out here that the author is a Protestant.) The great founder of Protestantism was both a passionate anti-Semite and a ferocious believer in absolute obedience to political authority. . . .

In what was perhaps the only popular revolt in German history, the peasant uprising of 1525, Luther advised the princes to adopt the most ruthless measures against the “mad dogs,” as he called the desperate, downtrodden peasants. Here as in his utterances about the Jews, Luther employed a coarseness and brutality of language unequalled in German history until the Nazi time. The influence of this towering figure extended down the generations in Germany, especially among the Protestants. Among other results was the ease with which German Protestantism became the instrument of royal and princely absolutism...⁴

Although not usually stated this strongly, the image of Luther as a “ferocious believer in absolute obedience to political authority” is wide spread today, especially in relation to the peasant rebellion of 1525. A primary purpose of the present essay is to refute this image of Luther. The emergence and endurance of this image is itself a result of the ascendancy of revolutionary ideology during the last two centuries.

Although Bonhoeffer is popular among contemporary theologians, a very essential aspect of his theology is often obscured by his admirers – namely the extent to which it represents a return to the thought of Martin Luther. Bonhoeffer is particularly admired for his early and persistent opposition to Nazi antisemitism. In fact his biographer Eberhard Bethge believes that this was the main reason for his joining the political opposition to Nazism⁵. Often ignored, however, is the fact that Bonhoeffer based his opposition to Nazism and antisemitism on his understanding of Luther, especially Luther’s teachings about the ‘Two Kingdoms’.

When the Nazis first put forward their antisemitic legislation, Bonhoeffer wrote a protest.⁶ Basing his argument on Luther’s Two Kingdoms teaching, he called on the Church not only to resist the imposition of such laws on baptised Jews within the church, but also to take action on behalf of all Jews, even suggesting disruptive action on behalf of victims “even if they do not belong to the Christian community.” But because his entire argument is based on Luther’s Two Kingdoms teaching, many find it offensive.

Bonhoeffer quoted Luther three times to support his argument. One of these quotes is a sentence taken from Luther’s last sermon. This same sentence has been cited as an illustration of Luther’s antisemitism by a contemporary author, who described Luther as the father of modern German antisemitism and herald of the Germans as “the new Chosen Race of Europe.”⁷ This portrayal, like that of Shirer, is an anachronistic distortion of Luther. A major thesis of this paper is that Bonhoeffer’s opposition to Nazism was so acute precisely because it was grounded in his deep understanding of Luther. Karl Barth stated, shortly before he died, that Bonhoeffer had identified antisemitism as the crucial issue in Nazism much more quickly than he.⁸

Luther and Münzer

The peasant rebellion in Germany in 1525 is rightly seen as the decisive event in crystallizing Luther’s views on Church and State – his ‘Two Kingdoms’ teaching. Modern historians tend to view the leader of the peasant rebellion, Thomas Münzer, in a favorable light. He is described as having “a deep compassion for the sufferings of the vulnerable sections of society.” Münzer is viewed as one who put his faith into action, who believed that “words

of faith had to become deeds; the individual's rebirth through the advent of the Holy Spirit in the soul must be translated into . . . action revealing God's will for the world." Luther, on the other hand, is seen as having reverted to "uncompromising support of secular authority against those whom his words encouraged to demand social and political change."⁹

Münzer belittled Luther's dependence on the Bible and claimed to receive direct revelation "through the living testimony of God," a testimony someone like Luther would not understand "even if he had eaten through a hundred Bibles."¹⁰ For those who did want to understand, "a new Daniel must arise and interpret for you your vision."¹¹ This "new Daniel" of course was none other than Münzer himself.

Münzer ridiculed Luther's idea that religious leaders have no special insight into political matters. To the "new Daniel" the current political situation was "as clear as the sun." He claimed to receive direct revelation from the Holy Spirit who would "arm us with a mighty hand for the avenging of the enemies of God." He would lead the "enraged people" to annihilate "the godless rulers," "especially the priests and monks." He claimed that "the godless have no right to live except as the elect wish to grant it to them."¹²

Luther reacted with alarm to the arguments that Münzer gave to justify this, observing that "it would follow that we are bound to put all non-Christians to death."¹³ Luther saw clearly the totalitarian implications of Münzer's claims, calling Münzer "arrogant" and "imperious." He "wants to enforce faith in an immediate and dictatorial manner." He "sets himself up as if he alone were God's people, and carries on without the command of God or the civil authority ordained by God."¹⁴ Münzer was an advocate, in its most extreme form, of the religious warfare that Luther opposed.

Münzer expressed his ideas in a sermon before the princes of Saxony in July 1524, to which Luther responded the same month. Münzer then responded with an even more violent treatise, one of the most violent religious tracts ever published. It is indicative of the strange relationship between pacifism and violent revolution that the English translation of this tract appeared in a Mennonite publication. The translator has provided a commentary in which he offered justification for Münzer's revolutionary violence. Münzer, he explained, was motivated by the "earnestness of the Law," "which in turn, leads to the gathering of the elect, of those who have taken upon themselves such earnestness."¹⁵

This, it seems to me, is entirely correct, "earnestness of the Law" – self-righteous legalism and perfectionism – are indeed the motivating factors here. The belief that the Law "leads to the gathering of the elect," is precisely what Luther so vehemently rejected. Not only is it wrong theologically, but it has totalitarian political implications. It is the forerunner of the utopian revolutionary ideology that has gained ascendancy in the last two hundred years. Luther's biblical view of the fallen nature of humanity has been rejected today in favor of the view of human perfectability. Our's has been a supremely moralistic century.

Favorable portrayals of Münzer are examples of the widespread acceptance of revolutionary ideology which has helped create the environment for totalitarian leaders, providing sympathy for a person like Münzer who casts himself in the role of 'champion of the oppressed'. From such a position he can delegitimize and undermine all established authority and replace it with his own. Münzer is a genuine forerunner of the modern 'cult of personality'.

Friedrich Engels, the co-worker of Karl Marx, published a treatise about the peasant revolt. He criticized Luther for "his cowardly servility towards the princes" and praised the

“revolutionary energy and decisiveness of Münzer.”¹⁶ He liked about Münzer exactly what Luther opposed. Münzer “demanded the immediate establishment of the kingdom of God, of the prophesied millennium on earth.”¹⁷ Engels quoted with approval Münzer’s calls to “exterminate the ungodly.”¹⁸ According to Engels the original founders of the movement that Münzer was leading “demanded the plundering and extermination of the Jews.”¹⁹ Towards the end of his life, Engels planned a radical reconstruction of his book – “It is going to become a cornerstone of German history.”²⁰

The contemporary German Reformed theologian Jürgen Moltmann has compared Luther and Münzer. He treated Luther much more fairly than did Engels. Nevertheless his sympathies are with Münzer and the peasant rebellion. He endorsed Engels’ comparison of Münzer with modern revolutionaries and quoted approvingly the praise given Münzer by the communist leaders of the German Democratic Republic (the now defunct East Germany). Moltmann, however, criticized the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ which, he claimed, contradicts the legacy of Münzer.²¹

Moltmann’s main point is that “unless a reformation theology leads necessarily to a theology of liberation, it is not a real reformation theology.” This, according to Moltmann, was understood by the Reformed theologians who wrote the Heidelberg Catechism. In fact he saw the military victories won by various Reformed movements as true successors of the “liberation movement” lead by Münzer. But the greatest heir to this legacy, he asserted, is the Enlightenment and the French Revolution which “prepared the way for the realization of the dreams of the oppressed people.”²²

Bonhoeffer on revolution

Although Bonhoeffer wrote almost nothing about Münzer²³, he would have agreed, I believe, with Moltmann’s assessment of the French Revolution as heir to the legacy of Münzer. For Bonhoeffer the French Revolution ushered in the age of revolutionary ideology that has dominated our century. He saw both the Nazis and the Communists as heirs to the legacy of the French Revolution. He was not completely negative about the Enlightenment. He saw as one of its great achievements intellectual honesty, which has “ever since been one of the indispensable moral requirements of western man.”²⁴

The Enlightenment was right, wrote Bonhoeffer, “to oppose a system under which society was divided into privileged and underprivileged sections.” It was wrong only when it went beyond this to make “man himself an abstraction, employing this abstraction as a weapon against all human order in the name of human equality and human dignity.”²⁵ The goal of the Enlightenment was to proclaim “the equality of all men by virtue of their innate universal human reason.” But, “as the history of the past hundred and fifty years has demonstrated clearly enough,” this “has not only not been achieved, but has turned out to be exactly the opposite of what was intended.” Instead it has led to “the complete atomization of human society” and “unlimited subjectivism and individualism.”²⁶

The destructive nature of the French Revolution lies in its “hostility to God.” “It is itself a religion . . . its god is the New Man.”²⁷ To create this ‘New Man’ it was necessary to emancipate people from the repressive coercion of the church, the state and the family.²⁸ This total rejection of the biblical understanding of fallen humanity led the French Revolution to the espousal of complete emancipation. “The French Revolution was the laying bare of the emancipated man in his tremendous power and his most terrible perversity.”²⁹ “The

emancipation of the masses leads to the reign of terror of the guillotine.” “The liberation of man as an absolute ideal leads only to man’s self-destruction.”³⁰

Bonhoeffer was emphatic in identifying nationalism as a revolutionary movement, and the French Revolution as the origin of both modern nationalism and internationalism. He quoted the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen*: ‘The origin of all sovereignty lies in the nation’. Prussia, he insisted, was not the birthplace of modern nationalism:

Nation was a revolutionary concept. It sided with the people against the government . . . Consequently it is one of the most grotesque mistakes the historian can make, if Prussia of all countries is declared to be the birthplace and the typical representative of nationalism. No political unit has ever been more alien and indeed hostile to nationalism than was Prussia. Prussia was a state, but not a nation. Prussia stood for established government . . . Prussia had a sound instinctive sense of the revolutionary implications of the notion of nationhood and refused to accept them. . . . The two [nationalism and internationalism] are equally revolutionary. Prussia wished to be neither nationalistic nor international. . . . But the Revolution had its way.³¹

Bonhoeffer, Barth and Luther

Bonhoeffer’s return to the thought of Luther is so little understood in part because of Bonhoeffer’s association with the Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth. Barth was the leading critic of optimistic liberal protestant theology and an outspoken exponent of a return to biblical theology. He was the major author of the Barmen declaration, the founding document of the Confessing Church in Germany in 1934.

In December 1939 Barth wrote:

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.

[W]hen the war is over . . . it will be imperative to render physically impossible any further developments on the fatal course which leads from Frederick the Great through Bismark to Hitler.³²

Despite Barth’s influence on him, Bonhoeffer held completely different views of Luther and the developments that lead to Nazism. In one of his last letters, where Bonhoeffer attempted to sum up what he had learned about the Christian life by discussing “the profound this-worldliness of Christianity,” he named Luther as his model.³³ Likewise his assessments of Friedrich the Great³⁴ and Bismark³⁵ are the opposite of Barth’s.

Politically Barth was a socialist and Bonhoeffer a Prussian conservative. Barth's analysis of Nazism quoted above shows the influence of Marxism. Although Barth rejected Marxist atheism and totalitarianism, he had a much more favorable attitude toward Communism than Nazism. Against Nazism he advocated uncompromising opposition; against Communism, moderation. "I regard anticommunism as a matter of principle an evil even greater than communism itself."³⁶ He denounced Reinhold Niebuhr for his "primitive anti-communism,"³⁷ and made derogatory references to the anticommunism of the Pope and the Vatican. He regarded Stalin as a "man of stature," not to be compared with such "charlatans as Hitler," and regarded Communism, unlike Nazism, as a movement with laudable social goals.³⁸

The young Barth had been motivated by "the glowing coal in Marxist dogma," namely the revolutionary goal of world transformation. He saw even a "state of laws" as nothing but "organized and systematic coercion by one class against another."³⁹ Although he criticized the tactics of socialists, he insisted that "what they want . . . is what Jesus wanted, too," and that "[r]eal socialism is the real Christianity of our time."⁴⁰ Barth specifically attributed these views to the influence of Zwingli and Calvin. By contrast, the Christians of Germany "to the extent that they stand under the influence of Luther . . . distinguish themselves without exception by a complete failure to understand social democracy."⁴¹

This idea that a program to transform the world, such as socialism, could be "the real Christianity of our time," or, as Bonhoeffer put it, "the idea that the church has at her disposal, in principle, a Christian solution for all worldly problems," was, according to Bonhoeffer, widespread in Anglo-Saxon thought. To the contrary, Bonhoeffer asserted "Perhaps the unsolved state of these problems is of more importance to God than their solution."⁴² He continued,

One of the characteristic features of church life in the Anglo-Saxon countries, and one from which Lutheranism has almost entirely freed itself, is the organized struggle of the Church against some particular worldly evil, . . . It is necessary to free oneself from the way of thinking which sets out from human problems and which asks for the solution on this basis. Such thinking is unbiblical.⁴³

Bonhoeffer held the very same ideas of Luther that have been criticized by Barth and many others: "In his obedience to government the Christian is obedient to Christ."⁴⁴ "According to Holy Scripture, there is no right to revolution."⁴⁵

Government is divinely ordained authority to exercise worldly dominion by divine right. Government is deputyship for God on earth. It can be understood only from above. Government does not proceed from society, but it orders society from above.⁴⁶

In his sustained criticism of Luther's Two Kingdoms teaching, Pastor Paul Kuenning cited with disapproval Luther's assertion that "a worldly kingdom cannot stand unless there is inequality of persons."⁴⁷ Taking up this assertion of Luther, which involves "the disparity between the superior and the inferior," "which is so extremely offensive to modern sensibilities,"⁴⁸ Bonhoeffer wrote:

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 a belief in the commission from 'above', belief in the 'Lord of lords'. This belief alone can exorcize the demonic forces which emerge from below."⁴⁹

Endnotes

¹·For the influence of the French Revolution on Marxism see, for example, Edmund Wilson, *To the Finland Station* (Doubleday: New York, 1940).

²·Conor Cruise O'Brien, "The Decline and Fall of the French Revolution," *The New York Review of Books* (15 February 1990) 46-51.

³·Conor Cruise O'Brien, "Paradise Lost," *The New York Review of Books* (25 April 1991) 52-60.

⁴·William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (Simon and Schuster: New York, 1960) 236.

⁵·Eberhard Bethge, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Jews," in John D. Godsey and Geoffrey B. Kelly eds., *Ethical Responsibility: Bonhoeffer's Legacy to the Churches* (Mellen: New York, 1982) 76.

⁶·Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The Church and the Jewish Question," in *No Rusty Swords*, Edwin H. Robertson ed. (Fontana, 1970) 217-225.

⁷·Paul Lawrence Rose, *Revolutionary Antisemitism in Germany* (Princeton, 1990) 7-8. For a discussion of the charge that Luther was an antisemite see Neelak S. Tjernagel, *Martin Luther and the Jewish People* (Northwestern: Milwaukee, 1985).

⁸·Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Jews, *op.cit.* 58.

⁹·Gordon A Craig, *The Germans* (Putnam: New York, 1982) 85.

¹⁰·Thomas Müntzer, "Sermon Before the Princes," in George Huntston Williams and Angel M. Mergal eds., *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers* (Westminster: Philadelphia) 58.

¹¹·*Ibid.* 64.

¹²·*Ibid.* 69.

¹³·Martin Luther, "Letter to the Princes of Saxony Concerning the Rebellious Spirit," in Conrad Bergendorf and Helmut T. Lehmann eds., *Luther's Works*, volume 40, *Church and Ministry* (Fortress: Philadelphia) 59.

¹⁴·*Ibid.* 51.

¹⁵·Hans J. Hillerbrand, "Thomas Müntzer's Last Tract Against Martin Luther," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* (January 1964) 23-24.

¹⁶·Friedrich Engels, "The Peasant War in Germany," in *The German Revolutions*, Leonard Krieger ed. (University of Chicago: 1967) 52.

¹⁷·*Ibid.* 47.

¹⁸·*Ibid.* 48.

¹⁹·*Ibid.* 56.

²⁰·Introduction to Friedrich Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany* (International: New York, 1926) 8.

²¹. Jürgen Moltmann, “Reformation and Revolution,” in Manfred Hoffmann ed., *Martin Luther and the Modern Mind* (Mellen: New York, 1985) 165-166. I am grateful to the translator of this article, Robert Cornelison, for bringing it to my attention.

²². Ibid. 183-184.

²³. There is mention of the Peasant’s War in a letter to Bethge. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Macmillian: New York, 1972) 123.

²⁴. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (Macmillian: New York, 1965) 97.

²⁵. Ibid. 273.

²⁶. Ibid. 272.

²⁷. Ibid. 102-103.

²⁸. Ibid. 99.

²⁹. Ibid. 97.

³⁰. Ibid. 102.

³¹. Ibid. 100-101.

³². Karl Barth, *A letter to Great Britian from Switzerland* (The Sheldon Press: London, 1941) 36-37.

³³. Letters and Papers from Prison, op.cit. 369.

³⁴. Ethics, op.cit. 101.

³⁵. Ibid. 240.

³⁶. Karl Barth, *How I Changed My Mind* (John Knox: Richmond) 63.

³⁷. Karl Barth and Johannes Hamel, *How to Serve God in a Marxist Land* (Association: New York) 46.

³⁸. Will Herberg, introduction to Karl Barth, *Community, State, and Church* (Peter Smith: Gloucester MA) 62.

³⁹. Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, “Socialism in the Theology of Karl Barth,” in George Hunsinger ed., *Karl Barth and Radical Politics* (Westminister: Philadelphia) 54-55.

⁴⁰. Karl Barth, “Jesus Christ and the Movement for Social Justice,” in George Hunsinger ed., *Karl Barth and Radical Politics* (Westminister: Philadelphia) 36.

⁴¹. Ibid. 34.

⁴². Ethics, op.cit. 355.

⁴³. Ibid. 356.

⁴⁴. Ibid. 347.

⁴⁵. Ibid. 351.

⁴⁶. Ibid. 332.

⁴⁷. Paul P. Kuenning, *Two Kingdoms: Weighed and Found Wanting*, *Lutheran Forum* (Lent 1986) 23.

⁴⁸. Ethics, op.cit. 271-272.

⁴⁹. Ibid. 290-291.