

may use the image of a scale, Bonhoeffer's concepts of the penultimate and the natural in *Ethics* Chapter IV would be the fulcrum. The evangelistic plea for faith in Chapter III is in one pan; the affirmation of a world come of age in the best of the culture that he knew, is in the other. Where the weight must come down will depend on the world's balance in any given time and place.

III. GROUND: ORDER AND WHOLENESS

This brings us to the second level of Bonhoeffer's sociality: the role of order and wholeness in an interpersonal world. In *The Communion of Saints* he draws on the sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies to distinguish two forms of this order: *Gesellschaft* (society) and *Gemeinschaft* (community). The choice was not felicitous. It oversimplified the variety of social structures and relations, and fitted too easily the dichotomy between liberal individualist and conservative romantic concepts of politics. In places Bonhoeffer seemed to fall into this dichotomy. With one part of his being he yearned for *Gemeinschaft* and described it in terms that border on transcending secularity altogether.

A community is a concrete unity. Its members must not be thought of as individual: the center of action does not lie in each member, but in all together.¹⁸ It is a collective person "in the eyes of God, the all-embracing person."¹⁹ Its existence furthermore does not depend on human purpose.

A community is permeated with value as history is, and as value itself, lies beyond intramundane limitations. Communities of blood, such as family and race--historical communities, such as the people and the nation--communities of destiny, such as marriage and

18. CS, 51.

19. CS, 52.

friendship--in their nature as communities they are all from God to God.²⁰

On the other hand Bonhoeffer knew even in those early years that community in this sense is an ideal. His next step, for which the ground was already laid in *The Communion of Saints*, was to move beyond idealism, precisely in its seductive Hegelian form that had so permeated German culture, to a more penultimate sense of the socially real. There was no way open for him toward pragmatism and empiricism. Here his cultural ground differed fundamentally from that of an American for whom this would be the basic social experience and temptation. He could never have developed Tönnies' concept of *Gesellschaft* into a theory of social harmony in the style of Adam Smith and his followers, or into a concept of political order through constitutionally regulated balance of power such as that of American democracy. Instead he introduces the idea of authority (*Herrschaft*) in contrast to power (*Gewalt*), as a way of directing human wills toward social order. In power there is a mechanical domination of one will by another. In authority

there is presupposed an understanding of the command by the one who obeys. This is sociologically significant in so far as in an association of power there can be no community, whereas in one of genuine authority community is not only present, but for the most part realized.²¹

With this the seed was planted. The plant, however, had to be drastically pruned. The events of the next few years revealed vividly the demons hidden in community ideals based on race, people and nation. At the same time a grotesque distortion arose in Nazism of Bonhoeffer's picture of authority-based community. It made him clarify both the aristocratic base and the penultimate character of

20. CS, 61.

21. CS, 58-59.

authority. In his radio talk of 1933 he drew a sharp contrast between the "messianic concept of the Leader" and the "originally matter-of-fact (sachlich) idea of political authority (Autorität)."²² The Leader's authority grew out of the yearning of the people for an authority-based community and their failure to seek it in the objective realities of function and office, orders and institutions by which society lives, and in the knowledge, ability, and experience appropriate to these offices. The Leader's authority is entirely from below, from the concentrated will of the people who transfer their rights to him, and therefore his authority rests on a wrong foundation. It has no structural limits and therefore seeks to transcend the penultimate in its messianic claims. True authority is not delegated but recognized. It adheres in the offices which express the orders of life, and the person is the steward of authority in serving the office--such as parent, teacher, judge or official.

Two important shifts have happened here. The orders of society are no longer seen as communal in their ground of being. No longer do they express a collective personality which acts as a subject in I-Thou relations. They have instead become part of the structure of a penultimate world, the objects of maintenance and cultivation by those called to office in them. Co-ordinately, then, the concept of authority--functional, responsible, sachlich and limited, exercised by those called and qualified for it--is greatly strengthened.

From here it is only a step to the wonderfully open and unfinished thoughts on the subject in the *Ethics*. Theologically the way had been prepared in 1932 before Hitler came to power when Bonhoeffer joined Karl Barth and others in an attack on the nineteenth century doctrine of "orders of creation." "Every human order," he wrote, "is an order of the fallen world and not of creation." Only in Christ who has fulfilled the law, who brings and promises a new world, can we learn what we are to do.

Therefore we are completely directed to Christ.

22. NRS, 199.

Therefore we also understand the whole world order of fallen creation as directed toward Christ and the new creation. What was for us dark and hidden comes into a new light. Not that we suddenly know from Jesus Christ which conditions we are to regard as orders of creation and which not, but that we know that *all* orders of the world only subsist in that they are directed toward Christ. They all are preserved by God as long as they are still open for Christ, they are *orders of preservation* not orders of creation.... (They) are functional forms against sin and in the direction of the Gospel. *Every order*, be it the oldest and most holy, *can and must be broken up* when it grows hardened and self-enclosed and no longer allows the proclamation of revelation to come in.²³

In a later lecture the same year he described one order of preservation, the state, as, with the church, a vehicle for the kingdom of God on earth.

The kingdom of God assumed form in the state insofar as here the orders of existing communities are maintained with authority and responsibility. Lest mankind fall apart through the desires of individuals who want simply to go their own way, the state takes the responsibility in a world under the curse for the preservation of the orders of communities, such as marriage, family and nation.²⁴

But it does this only in continual openness to the divine miracle

23. "Zur theologischen Begründung der Weltbundarbeit," a lecture given to a youth peace conference in Czechoslovakia, July 1932 (GS I, 150-151). Cf. also Clifford Green's discussion, SCH, 247-249.

24. "Dein Reich komme," public lecture in Potsdam-Hermannswerder, November 1932. Tr. in John Godsey, *Preface to Bonhoeffer: The Man and Two of His Shorter Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 42.

proclaimed in the church that breaks through all human order and sin with new life in Christ. In this tension, for Bonhoeffer in 1932, the world lives and hopes: "The kingdom is always divided in this way: miracle as breaking through all order, and order as preservation in preparation for the miracle; but also miracle completely veiled in the world of orders, and order enduring completely by virtue of its being limited by miracle."²⁵

The *Ethics* moves decisively beyond this. Powerfully assisted, if the historical critics are right, by Barth's exposition of "The Command of God",²⁶ the ontological foundation of supra-personal social orders is swept away and a Christ-centered understanding of mandate is put in its place. Mandates are "divinely imposed tasks," not "determinations of being."²⁷ They are commissions to human beings based on "the claiming, the seizure and the formation of a definite earthly domain by the divine commandment." They "are dependent solely on the *one* commandment of God as it is revealed in Jesus Christ."²⁸ The whole realm of ordered wholeness in the various areas of human life on earth (even, it should be noted, the order of the church which is one of the mandates) becomes not an ordained structure, but a divine calling and a human secular responsibility. Only the "domains" are presupposed, not how they shall be ordered. The ground under our feet is not orders of economic life, marriage and family, state, church or culture, but human relations justified and

25. Ibid., 40.

26. *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, Ch. VIII, "The Command of God." Cf. Larry Rasmussen's article in this volume for details. Bonhoeffer's indebtedness to Barth at this point is somewhat modified by the fact that his first treatment of the mandates in *E*, Ch. V, was probably written before his trip to Switzerland in May 1942 when he had a chance to read Barth's volume. Barth also, in later work, had some criticism of Bonhoeffer's concept of mandate (*Church Dogmatics* III/4, 14). The openness of the mandates to interpersonal formation under the command of God is, however, the profound common theme.

27. *E*, 207.

28. *E*, 287-292.

illuminated by Christ, in all of these spheres, and beyond them.

Thus, a new approach to the forming of the common life radically relativized all tradition. Once again we do not know how Bonhoeffer would have proceeded to flesh out these mandates "with, for and against one another,"²⁹ and perhaps he did not either. There is some evidence--in his section on the mandate of the church and in his wedding sermon from prison--that the results would have been more traditional than his theology suggests.³⁰ If so, one reason could be found in the third element which defined his world: his sense of aristocracy.

IV. GROUND: THE RESPONSIBLE ELITE

The style and values of the family and culture in which Bonhoeffer grew up were aristocratic. It was an aristocracy of education, intellect and social status, strongly represented in the leadership of German society in the first decades of the century. But all of this was not an object of much reflection in those years, until it was brought into sharp relief by the barbarity of the Nazi movement. This is reflected in Bonhoeffer's thought. In *The Communion of Saints* his reference to authority is impersonal and almost casual. By contrast with the Nazi concept of leadership, he defined it more clearly. But it is the *Ethics* that states it most urgently and sharply.³¹ With the disappearance of idealistic illusions about the spirit of community and with the battering of traditional social structures by what Bonhoeffer and his colleagues described as a revolt from the baser forces of human nature and society, everything came to depend on a faithful elite who would accept and carry out the mandates of God. In the world there are not orders of being, but there is an order

29. *E*, 291-292.

30. *E*, Ch. VII, 292-302; LPP, 41-47.

31. *E*, Ch. VII, 289-292, 293.



of relationships whereby certain people are called to be above and some to be below in the context of certain mandates. This is a personal relationship. It binds and limits both those who are in charge and those who follow in a common submission to God and a common responsibility. It is not determined by earthly power; in fact it may correct and challenge this power, for its essence is mutual service and sacrifice. The ultimate authority over these relationships is Christ himself, and all authority in the mandates derives from him and shares the form of his ministry and passion. He is the ultimate aristocrat. But in his name and under his commission, leaders are called to penultimate authority and others are called to follow.

Who then are these leaders and how is their calling validated in the world? Here is where Bonhoeffer found himself in continual reconsideration, at the very end of his life. It took two related forms.

First, there was a continual tension between the principle that the elite should be determined by certain qualities of "sacrifice, courage and a clear sense of duty to oneself and society" which may come from all social classes, and the fact that these qualities had been taught and learned in the context of a particular class. Renate Bethge describes this interaction beautifully in her article on "Elite and Silence in Bonhoeffer's Person and Thought."³² An old elite--that of Bonhoeffer's family and their associates--was being purged and deepened. A new elite--from all circles of society--was being called together in the struggle against Hitler. This was a worldly change in community, a shift in earthly ground, a new discovery of penultimate goodness in the world.

Second, there was the more profound tension between the elite and those who, for whatever reason, are at a disadvantage in the personal relations, the interplay of wills, and the give and take of life. The figure of Christoph in the *Fiction from Prison*, especially in his encounter with Heinrich, the alienated man without "ground under his feet" in the drama, reflects a haunting question to the calling and the

32. ER, Ch. X.

actions of the aristocrat. The world of history, culture and responsible personal relations in the context of respect for the integrity of others bears a promise. We are nourished by mother earth. It is good to have social ground under our feet. But how are we related in Christ to those who are not so endowed? It is time to move to the second thesis.

V. THE FRAGILITY OF THE WORLD

Eberhard Bethge writes in his biography about Bonhoeffer's spiritual development:

He set out on the path to theology from an essentially worldly base. First of all there was the "call" that came to him in his youthful vanity to do something special in life. The intellectual curiosity plunged him into theology as a branch of knowledge. Only later did the church come into his field of vision. Unlike theologians who have come from church and theological families and have discovered the existence of the "world" only later, Bonhoeffer set out on his journey and eventually discovered the church.³³

True, but what cut the path that led this scion of a worldly family to become so completely a church theologian? On the evidence of Bethge's own account, it was not the search for religious answers to worldly questions. It was not the drive for personal wholeness or ultimate security. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was never religious in the metaphysical and individualistic sense he described in his letter from prison.³⁴ The path in fact is more an exploration of the relational field than a journey from place to place: the relation between divine action and human response in this good but fragile and

33. DB, 28.

34. LPP, 285-286.

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EDITED BY

William J. Peck

CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS:

Clifford J. Green

Robin W. Lovin

Larry L. Rasmussen

William J. Peck

Gerard Th. Rothuizen

John D. Godsey

Charles C. West



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