

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

CONSCIENTIOUS PARTICIPATOR

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The followers of Jesus have been called to peace. When he called them they found their peace, for he is their peace. But now they are told that they must not only have peace but make it. And to that end they renounce all violence and tumult. In the cause of Christ nothing is to be gained by such methods. His kingdom is one of peace, and the mutual greeting of his flock is a greeting of peace. His disciples keep the peace by choosing to endure suffering themselves rather than inflict it on others. They maintain fellowship where others would break it off. They renounce all self-assertion, and quietly suffer in the face of hatred and wrong. In so doing they overcome evil with good, and establish the peace of God in the midst of a world of war and hate. But nowhere will that peace be more manifest than where they meet the wicked in peace and are ready to suffer at their hands. The peacemakers will carry the cross with their Lord, for it was on the cross that peace was made. Now that they are partners in Christ's work of reconciliation, they are called the sons of God as he is the Son of God.¹

Statements like this by Dietrich Bonhoeffer have often resulted in the assumption that he is a pacifist. Other evidence in his writings could be gathered to present a good case in support of this assumption. This would not, however, be the first time a false assumption has been supported by mounds of evidence pointing to its validity. A thorough reading of the works of Bonhoeffer will show that, although his attitude may have been one of pacifism, that is, nonviolence, Bonhoeffer was not a pacifist.

Dr. Larry Rasmussen offers a definition of a pacifist in his book, Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance: "the pacifist is one who always views the use of violent coercion as an evil and who rules out war even as a necessary evil."² Even though viewing violent force as an evil,

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1959, pp. 126-127.

² Larry L. Rasmussen, Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance (New York: Abingdon Press, 1972) p. 95.

Bonhoeffer nevertheless regarded it as a necessary evil at times, and, as such, "...a sign of God's gracious rule as preserver."³

It is the statement on war given in the Barcelona lecture of 1929 that sheds light on Bonhoeffer's stance toward war and participation in that war. These excerpts from the lecture will serve to clarify Bonhoeffer's position at this time:

...it stands clear and plain in the New Testament, and all the twisting of meanings possible doesn't help: "Do not resist one who is evil"; "Thou shalt not kill." Does anyone still dare somehow or another justify war from a Christian point of view? Millions of Christian men do go to war, and not only out of constraint but because they confess the will of God. They hold services and dare draw the holy names of God and Jesus Christ into this dreadful murder. War is nothing other than murder. War is a crime. No Christian can go to war. The argument appears perfectly clear and incisive. And yet it is faulty at the most important point: it is not concrete and as a consequence does not take in the depths of Christian decision....for me the love commandment extends at least as much to the protection of that which is mine as it does to the prohibition against killing the enemy. It would surely be a complete perversion of ethical consciousness were I to mean it is now my first duty to love the enemy, and, in order to do that, sacrifice him who is my neighbor in a concrete sense.... Rather I stand in the concrete situation of abandoning either my brother or my enemy to destruction....

With that the situation appears clear to me. In such a case there remains for me no longer the choice between good and evil. The decision, as it must be made, will stain me with the world and its laws. I will raise the weapon in the awful knowledge of doing something atrocious, but being unable to do anything else. I will protect my brother, my mother, my Volk and nevertheless know that this can only be done through the shedding of blood. Yet love for my Volk will sanctify murder, will sanctify war....⁴

A quote of this length is necessary at this point. This statement set the stage for what was to happen later in Bonhoeffer's life. It was this statement which became, perhaps, the normative statement for Bonhoeffer's "pacifism." Contained in its words are the knowledge that violence and

³ Ibid., p. 115.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 96-97

war are evil and yet, at the same time, necessary in certain instances. This statement explains both the reluctance to bear arms for Germany and the willingness to resist, violently if necessary, the ruler of the state. With this in mind, it is this last matter with which we will deal – Bonhoeffer’s active participation in a movement to assassinate Adolf Hitler. Before getting to the details of this, however, it would be more appropriate to explore the general nature of war and resistance as Bonhoeffer saw it.

The first thing to notice in the Barcelona lecture is that theory is to be abandoned when the reality of the situation makes it a principle that does not allow a true Christian decision to be made. Such would be the case if all the biblical commands to non-resistance and non-violence were adhered to and our organic units, our Volk, were allowed to be destroyed. In other words, there is no principle that can be applied the same way always and everywhere. Rather, true Christian decision making takes place at each event, in each new situation. From this, it is not difficult to see the provisional or contextual nature of Bonhoeffer’s “pacifism.” It is the concrete now of Christ’s command that is important and is to be considered. The test of the pacifist occurs “...when war is declared for me, i.e. in that moment when I go to war or do not go....If I suddenly stand before the dreadful decision of either exposing my own brother or my mother to the hand of the attacker or instead raising my hand against the enemy, then the immediate situation will surely tell me which of these two is and must be my neighbor, even in God’s eyes.”⁵

Such a statement adds to the discussion a new dimension – that of participation in a just war. There is a difference between pacifism and conscientious objection to participation in a violent conflict. Pacifism cannot allow war – war is evil. Conscientious objection is the conscious refusal to participate in a particular war which is judged to be unjust. This position can be taken by either a pacifist or a nonpacifist. In the specific case involving Bonhoeffer, “he viewed the launching of war

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

against Hitler as the launching of a just war, and he refused to serve Hitler because the justice lay with victory by the ‘enemy.’”⁶ Thus a just war is assumed to be possible. Whether Bonhoeffer’s decision was one of “agonized participation” in the war or conscientious objection, it is not a decision made through the eyes of an absolute pacifism. The idea of just war and pacifism are not synonymous.

Bonhoeffer is quick to assert, however, that participation in a war, no matter how “just” the war may be considered, is still evil. War itself is an unmitigated evil. “War is a crime,” as the Barcelona lecture states. Bonhoeffer holds fast to the conviction that “I will raise the weapon in the terrible knowledge of doing something atrocious, but also being able to do nothing else.” The Christian can never take part in an unjust war, but even in taking up a weapon in a just war, the Christian must continually call to God for the forgiveness of sin and peace.

It is the last phrase of that quote from the Barcelona lecture which, more than anything else, offers us the key, not to Bonhoeffer’s pacifism, but to his resistance: “...but being unable to do anything else.” War is a matter of last resort. It is not and cannot be considered a part of the normal state of affairs. War can be only as an extraordinary and abnormal necessity. In such a situation, appeal to law is of no consequence. This is the time of necessità. Bonhoeffer explains necessità as the time when “...responsible and pertinent action leaves behind it the domain of principle and convention, the domain of the normal and regular, and is confronted by the extraordinary situation of ultimate necessities, a situation which no law can control.”⁷ These necessities do exist. To deny them is to deny reality. Being beyond the control of law, these necessities call to the free responsibility of an agent. They leave few courses open to human reason, but confront it with the

⁶ Ibid., p. 108.

⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Ethics, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1955), p. 238.

ultima ratio – irrational action. War is ultima ratio. War is violence, and in the time of necessità, violence is allowed as ultima ratio.

It must be emphasized, however, that necessità is extraordinary, not normative. Ultima ratio action can occur only during necessità. “Baldwin was right when he said that there was only one greater evil than violence and that this was violence as a principle, as a law and a standard.”⁸ There are times when violence is demanded as ultima ratio action, but such use of violence must not be made the standard for other times. When Bonhoeffer writes, “The ultima ratio lies beyond the laws of reason, it is irrational action,”⁹ he is speaking out of a heritage which understands necessità as a temporary time with a virtual suspension of rights. “The German designation is: ‘Ausnahmezustand,’ translated most often as the ‘state of emergency.’ But a literal translation better expresses the heritage Bonhoeffer drew upon: the ‘condition of exception’ or the ‘exceptional state of affairs.’”¹⁰ With this heritage, Bonhoeffer responds in terms of “must” rather than “may” in the push to oppose Hitler. The weight of the responsibility fell on the duty of resistance, not the right. To Bonhoeffer, the right did not exist. The argument for Bonhoeffer’s resistance pivots on the extraordinariness of the situation, the necessità, the “being unable to do anything else.” It is when the norms became suspended that extraordinary action became necessary so that a situation could be created in which the suspended norms would once again become operative.

In citing a case of necessità, Bonhoeffer employed this word picture which has become famous: “...He stated that, as a pastor, it was his duty, not only to comfort the victims of the man who drove in a busy street like a maniac, but also to try to stop him.”¹¹ This is illustrative of the Christology of “being-for-others” characteristic of Bonhoeffer. It includes the concepts of

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 239.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 239.

¹⁰ *Reality and Resistance*, p. 146.

¹¹ Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage*, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1970), p. 755.

deputyship, responsibility, and the acceptance of guilt, and most definitely abandons the idea, common in The Cost of Discipleship, of an attitude of asceticism towards the world (at this time in Bonhoeffer's theology, Christianity and the world were two distinct spheres; this idea was dropped in Ethics). Absolute pacifism for the Christian gives way to the possibility of violence as ultima ratio. It was this opening that aided Bonhoeffer's approval of tyrannicide in the 1940's.

The test to justify the ultima ratio action is in the end that the action serves and the acknowledgment of the guilt incurred in the attempt to attain that end. "It must be the breaking of law for the sole purpose of restoring the Rule of Law."¹² War is a crime. War must never be blessed. And yet, in some instances, war may be allowed, perhaps even commanded as a necessary evil. The consideration, however, is that all this is done in order prepare for community.

Thus, in summary, participation in war is possible, even for a person of pacifistic tendencies, if these minimal conditions are met: war is the last resort, the ultima ratio of the necessità; participation in war is recognized as evil and the guilt of such participation is acknowledged; and the end of war is to reestablish the Rule of Law which has been suspended. With this general overview of Bonhoeffer's attitude towards participation in armed conflicts, it should now be possible to move into his situation as a resister of Hitler's tyranny with a bit more understanding. Bonhoeffer does very little of a serious nature without giving these matters much thought and study. He knew what was involved in a resistance movement that has as its primary purpose the assassination of Adolf Hitler. He knew the consequences of his own personal involvement in the attempt. The reasons for such involvement, then, must have been extremely concrete and convincing. The thoughts and the guidelines supporting this decision to risk life and well-being will occupy the remainder of this discussion.

¹² Reality and Resistance, p. 112.

Tyrannicide is most definitely a form of war. It is not a type of passive resistance designed to cause confusion on a small scale. It is a deliberate and aggressive attempt to topple, not just a person, but the structure of government. For such a drastic step, Bonhoeffer needed a firm ethical base. He felt he had it. Although the move against Hitler was concrete and specific, there were several guidelines for the case of tyrannicide in general. Karl Barth reconstructs the case of Bonhoeffer, but does it in such a way that a general outline of tyrannicide is put forth:

...The life of a national community may be threatened from within as well as from without, particularly by an evil individual thrust or thrusting himself into the limelight under the pretense and pretext of being an instrument of lawful government. This man may perhaps have climbed to the top and gained control over the means of power in the state illegitimately, or he may have done so legitimately, only to make illegitimate, corrupt and perhaps even criminal use of these means. And his action is calculated not only to curtail and suppress the rights of many or perhaps even all the subjects of the state...but to do possibly irreparable harm to the state as a whole and all its members. Now let us suppose that there are no constitutional or legal means to put an end to his evil work, or to remove him from a position in which he has now become a universal danger. Let us suppose that all power is now tyrannically concentrated in the hands of this one man, and he perpetually causes might to triumph over right. Let us suppose that the next highest or nearest responsible authorities which can and should take the initiative in restoring law and order as now broken at the highest level are unable and unwilling to do so. May not someone from the lower ranks of the political hierarchy, or even from outside it, take up the obviously abandoned cause of the state on his own responsibility for the salvation of the whole, and, since all other ways are barred, proceed at the risk of his own life to the elimination, i.e., the killing of this publicly dangerous person? Is this really murder, or is it an act of loyalty commanded in extremis, and therefore not murder? Might it not be that on occasion certain men not only may but must undertake it?¹³

This description of a case where tyrannicide was deemed necessary for the welfare of the people is certainly a description of the situation in Bonhoeffer's day. The life of the national community was endangered both from outside forces and from inside forces. An evil individual had gained power

¹³ Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961), III/IV, pp. 443-449, quoted in Reality and Resistance.

legitimately, only to turn that power to illegitimate uses. There was evidence on a large scale to support such accusations. Bonhoeffer was convinced of the abuse of the power of the state by Hitler and underlings from an early date. The evil threatened possibly irreparable harm to the state and its members. Hitler's regime was bent on destruction. It was a revolution of nihilism that was sure to damage the state beyond repair the moment that the Nazis obtained the means to conform those who would conform or eliminate those who would not conform. This totalitarian power combined with such moral corruption Bonhoeffer saw as tyranny. It could only end in widespread criminality and harm to the state.

Bonhoeffer saw in Hitler a menace to the world that would destroy civilized society throughout the world. Such can be seen by the following quote from *Ethics*:

...Fear he calls responsibility. Desire he calls keenness. Irresolution becomes solidarity. Brutality becomes masterfulness. Human weaknesses are played upon with unchaste seductiveness, so that meanness and baseness are reproduced and multiplied ever anew. The vilest contempt for mankind goes about its sinister business with the holiest of protestations of devotion to the human cause. And, as the bas man grows baser, he becomes an ever more willing and adaptable tool in the hand of the tyrant. The small band of the upright are reviled. Their braver is called insubordination; their self-control is called pharisaism; their independence arbitrariness and their masterfulness arrogance. For the tyrannical despiser of men popularity is the token of the highest love of mankind. His secret profound mistrust for all human beings he conceals behind words stolen from a true community. In the presence of the crowd he professes to be one of their number, and at the same time he sings his own praises with the most revolting vanity and scorns the rights of every individual. He thinks people stupid, and they become stupid. He thinks them weak, and they become weak. He thinks them criminal, and they become criminal. His most sacred earnestness is a frivolous game. His hearty and worthy solicitude is the most impudent cynicism. In his profound contempt for his fellow-men he seeks the favour [sic] of those whom he despises, and the more he does so the more certainly he promotes the deification of his own person by the mob. Contempt for man and idolization of man are close neighbors.¹⁴

¹⁴ *Ethics*, p. 73.

Bonhoeffer's participation in the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler was a personal attempt to liberate those genuine moral energies that were still left in Germany but which had been kept silent by the totalitarian regimentation of life. The only way to do this was to end the power of the Nazis along with their cynicism and nihilism. Thus, Bonhoeffer was participating in what he considered a just war, one in which the last resort had been reached and whose purpose was to restore to the people and the land the rightful Rule of Law.

This, then, is Bonhoeffer's first operative guideline for the case of tyrannicide. There must be sufficient evidence of gross misrule showing the possibility of irreparable harm to the state and its citizens.

Following Barth's sketch, but still continuing with Bonhoeffer's case, the second major guideline is to respect political responsibility. Where there are constitutional or legal means to remove a tyrant, use them. Where there are not such means, allow those of the political hierarchy who are able and willing to handle the responsibility of removing the tyrant. Where there are not these sort of people, the responsibility rests on those in the lower ranks of the government or those outside the government who will take on the responsibility once it is abdicated by those in higher places. There was no legal means of removing Hitler from office, and those in positions of high responsibility were either unwilling or not able to take the power out of Hitler's hands. The responsibility, then, came to rest on the shoulders of responsible people other than the high government authorities. Bonhoeffer, it must be noted, was not in favor of acts of conspiracy and active resistance until the forms of legal and non-violent resistance were known to be unavailing. It was not until the sequence stated above was completed that Bonhoeffer volunteered to become "someone from the lower ranks." Bonhoeffer made his position clear as to the responsibility he felt towards the political sphere:

Is there a political responsibility on the part of individual Christians? Certainly the individual Christian cannot be made responsible for the action of government, and he must not make himself responsible for it; but because of faith and his charity he is responsible for his own calling and for the sphere of his own personal life, however large or however small it may be. If this responsibility is fulfilled in faith, it is effectual for the whole of the polis. According to Holy Scripture, there is no right to revolution; but there is a responsibility of every individual for preserving the purity of his office and mission in the polis.¹⁵

The third guideline for tyrannicide is the reasonable assurance that such drastic action can be successfully executed. The most important point here is that the act of assassination must be coordinated with the plans of a group, the members of which are capable of quickly occupying or remaining in key positions of the arms of power in the totalitarian state. A key note of clarification is offered here. Tyrannicide is more than the assassination of the tyrant. It is the successful take-over of the major points of power within the structure of the government set up by that tyrant. If this is not accomplished soon after a successful assassination, the totalitarian government may remain in power and the situation will be the same if not worse. It is for this reason that tyrannicide has only a reasonable chance of success. Even a reasonable chance must be taken, however, when the welfare and common good of the people is at stake.

The fourth guideline in Bonhoeffer's case for tyrannicide is that only such force and violence as is absolutely necessary to abolish the government of misrule is allowable. For Bonhoeffer, revenge is not an act of justice. Here, he remembers the words of Baldwin concerning violence. He is reminding himself and others that force as prima ratio is what is being resisted. It must not overcome the use of force as ultima ratio which is being used to reestablish morality, not to allow the further spread of immorality.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 350-351.

The fifth guideline is that active resistance generally and tyrannicide particularly are to be turned to as a last resort – only after nonviolent and legal means have been tried and found to be inadequate. Tyrannicide has a unique character in that it is a violation of divine law. This exceptional character must be emphasized because appeal to justification of any kind is not possible from a legal standpoint. The only justification available is that gained from necessità. Being for this case the necessity of the state, tyrannicide is justifiable by the fact that this totalitarian dictatorship is no longer a state. “Whenever the state becomes the executor of all the vital and cultural activities of man, it forfeits its own proper dignity, its specific authority as government.”¹⁶

A brief summary of Bonhoeffer’s guidelines is as follows:

- 1) Evidence of gross misrule, showing possibly irreparable harm to citizenry, must be clear.
- 2) Active resistance and tyrannicide must respect political hierarchy and responsibility.
- 3) There must be reasonable assurance that the tyrannicide can be executed successfully.
- 4) Only necessary force is to be used to abolish misrule.
- 5) Active resistance and tyrannicide should be turned to as a last.¹⁷

This summary, it will be noticed, is not in contradiction to that on pages six and seven. The act of resistance is done as a last resort, evil and guilt are acknowledged, and the sole purpose of such resistance is to restore the Rule of Law which has been suspended.

Even though Bonhoeffer’s participation in the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler involved no personal acts of violence, he was a voluntary member of the group plotting this revolt, he approved of the actions of the group, and he worked as a member of this group. This, however, does not change the case for moral reflection on tyrannicide by Bonhoeffer. He was a part of the group and know that, as such, he may have to pay the consequences for failing at the attempt to overthrow the government. Always preferring forms of non-violent resistance to violent resistance, the approval of violence against Hitler by Bonhoeffer came about as the response to the massive misrule of the

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 334-335

¹⁷ Reality and Resistance, p. 145.

Nazis. Order had been destroyed on a large scale by the arbitrary rule by the Nazis. Active resistance seemed to be the last of the last resorts. Bonhoeffer participated in it. Certainly not an act of pacificism, perhaps his involvement can be labeled “conscientious participation.” Bonhoeffer saw in these circumstances his own personal responsibility, and true to this conviction, he acted. On April 9, 1945 Dietrich Bonhoeffer suffered the consequences of his actions when he was executed for being a member of a group of conspirators who tried but failed to kill Adolf Hitler.

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