

SOME REFLECTIONS ON
STUPIDITY, IN DIALOGUE
WITH DIETRICH
BONHOEFFER (1906-1945)

AN ACCOUNT AT THE TURN OF THE YEAR 1942-1943



AFTER TEN YEARS

- “In the following pages I want to try to give an accounting of some of the shared experience and insight that have been forced upon us in these times, not personal experiences, nothing systematically organized, not arguments and theories, but conclusions about human experience—lined up side by side, connected only by concrete experience—that have been reached together in a circle of like-minded people.”

WITHOUT GROUND UNDER ONE'S FEET

- “Have there ever been people in history who in their time, like us, had so little ground under their feet, people to whom every possible alternative open to them at the time appeared equally unbearable, senseless, and contrary to life?” (38)

WHO STANDS FIRM?

- “The huge masquerade of evil has thrown all ethical concepts into confusion. **That evil should appear in the form of light, good deeds, historical necessity, social justice is absolutely bewildering for the one coming from the world of ethical concepts that we have received.** For the Christian who lives by the Bible, it is the very confirmation of the abysmal wickedness of evil.” (38)

WHO STANDS FIRM? (CONTINUED)

- “There is the one who determines to take a stand in the world by acting on his own *freedom*. He values the necessary action more highly than an untarnished conscience and reputation. **He is prepared to sacrifice a barren principle to a fruitful compromise or a barren wisdom of mediocrity to a fruitful radicalism.**” (40)

WHO STANDS FIRM (CONTINUED)

- “Who stands firm? One the one whose ultimate standard is not his reason, his principles, conscience, freedom, or virtue; only the one who is prepared to sacrifice all of these when, in faith and in relationship to God alone, **he is called to obedient and responsible action**. Such a person is the responsible one, whose life is to be nothing but a response to God’s question and call. Where are the responsible ones?” (40)

ON STUPIDITY

- “Stupidity is a more dangerous enemy of the good than malice. One may protest against evil; it can be exposed and, if need be, prevented by use of force. **Against stupidity we are defenseless.** Neither protests nor the use of force accomplish anything here; reasons fall on deaf ears; facts that contradict one’s prejudgment simply need not be believed—in such moments the stupid person even becomes critical—and when facts are irrefutable they are just pushed aside as inconsequential, as incidental.” (43)

ON STUPIDITY

- “If we want to know how to get the better of stupidity, we must seek to understand its nature. This much is certain, that it is in essence not an intellectual defect but a human one. . . . The impression one gains is not so much that stupidity is a congenital defect but that, under certain circumstances, **people are *made* stupid or that they allow this to happen to them.**” (43)

ON STUPIDITY

- “Upon closer observation, it becomes apparent that every strong upsurge of power in the public sphere, be it of a political or religious nature, infects a large part of humankind with stupidity. It would even seem that this is virtually a sociological-psychological law. **The power of the one needs the stupidity of the other.**” (43)

ON STUPIDITY

- “In conversation with him [the stupid person], one virtually feels that one is dealing not at all with him as a person, but with slogans, catchwords, and the like that have taken possession of him. He is under a spell, blinded, misused, and abused in his very being. **Having thus become a mindless tool, the stupid person will also be capable of any evil and at the same time incapable of seeing that it is evil.**” (44)

ON STUPIDITY

- “Yet at this very point it becomes quite clear that only **an act of liberation, not instruction, can overcome stupidity**. Here we must come to terms with the fact that in most cases a genuine internal liberation becomes possible only when external liberation has preceded it.” (44)

ON STUPIDITY

- **“The word of the Bible that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom declares that the internal liberation of human beings to live the responsible life before God is the only genuine way to overcome stupidity.” (44)**

ON STUPIDITY

- “But these thoughts about stupidity also offer consolation in that they utterly forbid us to consider the majority of people to be stupid in every circumstance. It really will depend on whether those in power expect more from peoples’ stupidity than from their inner independence and wisdom.” (44)

CONTEMPT FOR HUMANITY

- “The only fruitful relation to human beings—particularly to the weak among them—is love, that is, **the will to enter into and to keep community with them. God did not hold human beings in contempt but became human for their sake.**” (45)

IMMANENT JUSTICE

- “It is one of the most astonishing experiences and also one of the most incontrovertible that evil—often in a surprisingly short span of time—**proves itself to be stupid and impractical.**” (45)
- “History’s immanent justice rewards and punishes the deed only, but the eternal justice of God tries and judges the hearts.” (46)

SOME STATEMENTS OF FAITH ON GOD'S ACTION IN HISTORY

- “I believe that God is no timeless fate **but waits for and responds to** sincere prayer and responsible actions.” (46)

TRUST

- **“The air in which we live is so poisoned with mistrust that we almost die from it. But where we broke through the layer of mistrust, we were allowed to experience a trust hitherto utterly undreamed of.” (46)**

THE SENSE OF QUALITY

- **“Culturally the experience of quality signals a return from the newspaper and radio to the book, from haste to leisure and stillness, from distraction to composure, from the sensational to reflection, from the idol of virtuosity to art, from snobbery to modesty, from extravagance to moderation. Quantities compete for space; qualities complement one another.” (48)**

SYMPATHY

- “We are not lords but instruments in the hands of the Lord of history; we can truly share only in a limited measure in the suffering of others. **We are not Christ, but if we want to be Christians it means that we are to take part in Christ’s greatness of heart,** in the responsible action that in freedom lays hold of the hour and faces the danger, and in the true sympathy that springs froth not from fear but from Christ’s freeing and redeeming love for all who suffer.” (49)

PRESENT AND FUTURE

- **“What remains for us is only the very narrow path, sometimes barely discernible, of taking each day as if it were the last and yet living it faithfully and responsibly as if there were yet to be a great future.”**
(50)

OPTIMISM

- “In its essence optimism is not a way of looking at the present situation but a power of life, a power of hope when other resign, **a power to hold our heads high when all seems to have come to naught, a power to tolerate setbacks, a power that never abandons the future to the opponent but lays claim to it.**” (50-51)

PERIL AND DEATH

- “After what we have experienced in the war, we hardly dare acknowledge our wish that Death will find us completely engaged in the fullness of life, rather than by accident, suddenly, away from what really matters.” (51)

ARE WE STILL OF ANY USE?

- “We will not need geniuses, cynics, people who have contempt for others, or cunning tacticians, **but simple, uncomplicated, and honest human beings.**” (52)

THE VIEW FROM BELOW

- “It remains an experience of incomparable value that we have for once learned to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcasts, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed and reviled, in short from the perspective of the suffering.” (52)