

**RENATE WIND**  
**DIETRICH BONHOEFFER: A SPOKE IN THE WHEEL**

**3. The Nazi Rise to Power**

*On 30<sup>th</sup> January 1933, Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany. Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) was not long in making his protest. He did this in a broadcast on 1<sup>st</sup> February, and it took the line of the dangers inherent in the 'Leadership principle'. The authorities recognised the subversive nature of this broadcast shortly after it started and it was cut off before he had ended.*

*The attack on the 'Leadership principle' was not simply an attack on Adolf Hitler as 'der Fuhrer'; it was even more concerned with the introduction of this principle into the leadership of the church. The 'German Christians', a steadily growing party within the Protestant churches of Germany, had imitated the Nazis in this as in so many other things. In November 1932 they had gained one third of the seats in the government of the Church of the Old Prussian Union. As the Nazis rose to power, the German Christians increased their hold on the churches. In March 1933 Bonhoeffer again spoke on the 'Leadership principle' in a lecture he gave to the 'German High School for Politics'.*

**The Leader and the Individual in the Younger Generation**

Three brothers, of whom the eldest was born in 1900, the second in 1905 and the third in 1910, who are thus now 33, 28, and 23 respectively, today embody three different generations. Yet they all belong to what is usually called 'the younger generation'; the eldest came to intellectual maturity while the war was still on, the second under the influence of the years after the collapse, and the third in the years of an age which we cannot yet describe, shall we say since 1926. The speed of historical events has accelerated [p. 191→] the rate of change of generations almost tenfold. Today a space of from three to five years separates the generations. We must speak of a change of generation when a group of young men of the same age together refer to an event characteristic of their whole spiritual and intellectual attitude and feel themselves to be, in contrast to their elders, an independent group rooted in this special unity of experience, while the older people have already begun themselves to clarify their own attitude to life and their intellectual and spiritual position. The great difficulties of the present spiritual and intellectual discussion with and within the younger generation is based on a lack of this inner unity.

The first group is of men who have seen death, who have as it were daily emerged afresh from death to life, who have come to know life as risk and gain and who therefore still command a quite peculiar breadth of thought. They have an attitude of almost destructive hardness towards their own lives and the lives of others and yet also a strong affirmation of life and responsibility for the lives of others. This generation of young warriors presents closed ranks to its younger brothers. Its whole attitude, consciously or not, is an expression of inaccessible

superiority over those younger than itself; there is something like scorn on the faces of these men, marked by life and death, scorn at those who are completely inexperienced, who live without knowing what life really means. There is an invisible but impenetrable line dividing those who were in the war from those, only slightly younger, who grew up and became mature at the time of the collapse. This is felt more strongly by the younger men than by the older ones. For the first post-war generation there is nothing more impressive than the fact that there in their midst and alongside them are these men, alive, who have escaped from the world of death. There is something worrying, disquieting, terrifying in this recognition. And the strange dumbness which lay over this world in the first post-war years, and only much later gave way to a forced volubility, strengthens their consciousness of the inaccessibility of this world to anyone else [p. 192→]

The younger ones grew up under the influence of this generation of men who served in the war. They are characterised by two things. First, in the realm of ideas, they have adopted the insights that their older brothers gained in their own bodies, and thus their lives have become confused by questions and doubts. And yet this confusion is different from that of the older men, who experienced it in the thick of a responsible situation. The younger men were not responsibly involved in their complex of problems, which was radical precisely for that reason. They therefore pressed on to create the responsible situation in which this complex of problems might be experienced. Thus, precisely as a result of this encounter with their older brothers, the younger men were led to become creative; not so much to tolerate and maintain in responsible fashion what already existed, as to create, as a result of radical criticism, their own form of life.

At the same time the second group of young men took over responsibility in professional life, the present younger generations grew up. Without being conscious of it, they know that life cannot be lived in the light of this radical complex of problems. While they are not without problems, as people have often said—they have the heritage of their older brothers too deeply in their blood for that—the focus of their problems has changed, indeed one might almost say that the problems have become divided. In conscious opposition to the volubility of the earlier generation in such matters, the ultimate questions of life are answered with silence. While one can hardly say that this silence is a silence of the grave, a dumb involvement with reality in sport, travel, work and politics deters curiosity and sensation. On the other hand, the conditions of the time result in the problem of life becoming quite definite, hardened into the question of political action. And in this respect it should be made clear that the sense of reality among this youth has and will become a metaphysic of reality. They do not see reality as it is, they do not even reflect on what it can be, but see it as it should be. They naively regard it as capable of any development and transformation and they see in [p. 193→] it the elements of a kingdom of God on earth now in process of realisation. Where this metaphysic of reality is allied with a recognition of concrete political needs, there emerges the political-chilastic thought which is so largely characteristic of the youngest generation of today.

We can now see why the state of the intellectual and spiritual battlefield on which an older generation is engaged as well as these three young ones, on which therefore four generations are engaged in combat, should be as confused as it is today. But if we are to understand the decisive cultural and political questions of

today and the other problems associated with them, it is necessary that we keep in view this spontaneous division, determined by the course of history.

It is, however, also possible to say something at this point which takes in the younger generation as a whole. The younger generation has grown up in a period of history in which the previously established world of the west has been rocked on its foundations, a period of war, the aftermath of war, and crisis. Thus the nearest task which fell to it could only be that of avoiding involvement in a complete collapse, of attempting to find some support which made possible further existence. A threefold impulse gave rise to the search for this support: first, men recognised in the collapse which they had experienced the triumph of things over men, of the machine over its inventor. The techniques intended to dominate nature had now been turned against mankind, defenceless in the face of them, and thus deprived of essential meaning. Secondly, the powerlessness of all previous political, philosophical and religious ideologies seemed to have been clearly demonstrated. Thirdly, the millions killed in the World War, the revolutionary masses of the post-war period, the host of millions of unemployed at the time of the crisis must have given the young men an overwhelming impression of the insignificance and complete solitude of the individual and of the dull power of the mass. The mass and dead things seemed as though they would emerge triumphant from this [p. 194→] collapse. But in neither could the young man find the support which might be capable of sustaining his life in this chaos. The significance of the individual and the significance of real community seemed to have been completely destroyed. The individually formed, autonomous personality and the idea divorced from reality seemed to have gone bankrupt. And from this need there now arose the passionate call for a new authority, for association, for community. One can see the common concern of the younger generation as a whole as opposed to the old or in its opposition to an unreal individualism and the attempt at a new, meaningful community life. The extent to which an unreal individualism is here set over against an equally unreal collectivism will be discussed later. A quite simple fact of experience first led to this opposition, namely that the learned men at the turn of the century and later were not in a position to cope with the decisive problems of life, either public or personal. The lost war made a latent crisis manifest. Germany broke apart inwardly. And the younger generation found itself to some extent left alone and thrown back on itself. The problem of the spiritual-historical significance of the lost war was now taken up, discussed and answered to the effect that the basic concern was the overcoming of the lack of community among the German people and that the lost war must lead to a new ordering of society, to a new authoritative association. This was put forward against the older generation with considerable justice and considerable injustice. The concepts were naturally over-simply schematised; individualism, liberalism, personality became smear words for an often completely misunderstood cause which was itself being furthered by those who were the accusers, but under another name. But the are natural tendencies, which are not to be taken too seriously. Behind these words was hidden a serious intent, which was to lead from solitude to community, from isolation to association, from lack of authority to a new authority. Now this new authority could only be conceived of as realised in the new man, not divorced from the reality of life, carried along by [p. 195→] a new idea of life, and overcoming man's solitariness. And in this way the ideal of the Leader was sketched out. 'Authority in the figure

of the Leader!' with this rallying cry the younger generation freed itself from the burden which had been laid upon it.

The concept of the leader in its new form has for the first time been spread throughout Germany with the post-war youth movement. That was its first creative action, with which it also stirred up its older brethren; the younger ones were creative for the older ones. Of course there have always been leaders. Where there is community there is leadership. But we are concerned here only with the strange form which the concept of 'the Leader' had assumed in the younger generation. One thing is above all characteristic of this new form: whereas earlier leadership was expressed in the position of the teacher, the statesman, the father, in other words in given orders and offices, now the Leader has become an independent figure. The Leader is completely divorced from any office; he is essentially and only the Leader. What does that signify? Whereas leadership earlier rested on commitment, now it rests on choice. That is understandable, because precisely those commitments from which at some earlier time leadership might derive, had become nonexistent. And as a result, the problem of leadership, which is as old as any problem of society, specifically became the problem of the Leader. With both parties concerned, leadership remained something neutral, not to say objective; the Leader involves the persons of both parties concerned. Leading comes about through superiority in something neutral, through office, knowledge, ability; in the case of the Leader, the essential thing is the supremacy of his person. In both cases a power-relationship is involved; in leadership the important thing is the superiority of something neutral and objective, in the case of the Leader it is the superiority of his person. It is therefore self-evident that leadership is more capable of rational judgement than the Leader. It is virtually impossible to give a rational basis for the nature of the [p. 196→] Leader. That is its strength and at the same time its limitation. Leadership is essentially concerned with the object, the Leader with the person; the focus of leadership is the person being led, the line of vision goes from above downwards, while the focus of the Leader is the Leader himself and the line of vision goes from below upwards. Hence a new and sociologically interesting phenomenon had entered the structure of authority. The Leader as an independent figure has his own peculiar sociological standing. And our line of thought will come to an end in defining systematically the sociological position of the Leader in the modern sense of the word. The concept of the Leader has been subject to essential changes above all in the historical development of the past decade, and we will have to examine these.

The Leader as understood by the youth movement emerged from a small group. He was not someone set over it; he was chosen by the group. It was the good man, the inwardly noble man who was to be raised and commissioned by the group in this way. The group is the womb of the Leader. It gives him everything, even his authority. It is his person to which all the authority, all the honour and all the glory of the group is transferred. The Leader holds no office independent of the group. The group which produced him now sees him already bathed completely in the light of its ideals. It sees him, not in his reality but in his vocation. It is essential for the image of the Leader that the group does not see the face of the one who goes before, but sees him only from behind as the figure stepping gout ahead. His humanity is veiled in his Leader's form.

Now this Leader in the youth movement should be really man; support and fulfilment for disintegrating personal life is sought in his ideal humanity. The Leader should at the same time be the loved and honoured friend for whom everything has been sacrificed. He should be what has been sought in vain in the father [p. 197→] and in the teacher. This is already to mention the two factors with which any concept of the Leader has to compete, the teacher and the father, in this case the given, already existing offices. The problem symptomatic of the youth movement was the father and son problem. It was here that the inflammable matter exploded time and again. The father was replaced by the Leader, the authority of the father was denied for the sake of the authority of the Leader; the Leader was set above the father; the father can only have authority if he himself becomes the young man's Leader. Thus the individual is freed from his ties to the given order, he becomes free to make his own choice, free for himself. The leader now becomes — and in the youth movement became in a very special way—the Leader of his own, hitherto undiscovered, better self. In choosing a Leader the individual freed himself for himself. Being led he now saw in the Leader his own, ideal, human ego. In the youth movement the group and the Leader are basically still no more than extensions of the personal ego; all seeking for community and authority is essentially a matter of the person's own soul, which now immerses itself in what it considers the other person and yet everywhere finds only a mirror image of itself. The sociological categories of the individual in his unsurmountable, invincible, eternal solitude and the sociological categories of the father, i.e. of the existing order, are by the discovery of the idea of the Leader entangled in a widespread, extended new individualism. Hence the concepts of responsibility and order are dissolved into those of the free individual, who is a law unto himself. In the whole of the youth movement, it may be said today that the basic concern is simply that for a new, individual soul; the Leader of the youth movement was the Leader in fulfilling the soul and the humanity of the individual. And precisely through this vocation the fate of the Leader again and again became tragedy. Men continually wanted to see the Leader, with all his ideal humanity, face to face. They did not want to be able only to see his back as he went forward. But now, when the Leader is to be Leader in the total human [p. 198→] sense and when he himself understands his task as purely personal, and not objective, it cannot be long before both Leader and led realise the illusion of such unbounded Leadership. The secret of his authority is revealed and destroyed, and Leader and led separated into naked humanity. Authority collapses, and with it, faithfulness and allegiance. There remains only a romantic recollection.

The youth movement in which the war and post-war generation was involved was divorced from the third, at present the youngest, generation at the time when its members had to enter civil professions. These young men, originally endowed with a stronger sense of reality than their older brothers and full of a greater sense of purpose, saw the lack of meaning and the lack of outlook for their own future and that of their own fellow-countrymen exclusively in the political crisis. Thus the aim of this new youth group was essentially more definitely and more sharply outlined than that of the older men, and now the lack of authority in political thought and action is felt more strongly than before to be the final cause of all misfortunes. But even here, in view of the apparent complete failure of all previous orders and institutions, the call for political authority had to become the call for the great man, for the political Leader. And in this call the difference

between generations among the youth all at once disappeared completely, indeed the 'father and son problem', which was a point of prime importance for the youth movement, moved completely into the background; men no longer boasted of their differences, but of their common duty. The figure of the political leader was stripped of his familiarity, comradeship took the place of friendship, obedience the place of sacrifice. The individualistic remnants of the youth movement have been done away with. Or rather we must say that a remarkable transfer of individualistic forces has taken place. The individual knows that he is committed to the Leader in unconditional obedience. He really obliterates himself, he is an instrument in the hands of the Leader, it is not he, but the Leader, who is responsible, and in his [p. 199→] faith in the Leader he surrenders ultimate responsibility completely to him in the same way as for the Catholic faith in his church includes faith in the justice of its commandments and in its claims on his obedience. Individualism is indeed really done away with in this subjection, this exclusion of the individual, but yet it now breaks out again in this form of transference. Everything which the individual must renounce is now transferred by every individual together to the figure of the one who is the Leader. The individual abdicates for the sake of the Leader. The Leader is what no other person can be, an individual, a personality. The relationship between those led and their Leader is that the former transfer their own rights to him. It is this one form of collectivism which turns into intensified individualism. For that reason, the true concept of community, which rests on responsibility one to another, finds no fulfilment here.

But we have still to complete the description of this concept of the Leader. The Leader is set at a tremendous distance from those whom he leads, but — and this is the decisive factor — he is Leader only as the one chosen by those whom he leads; as the one who has grown from among them, he receives his authority only from his followers, from below, from the people. The spirit of the people — so one imagines — summons the Leader from its metaphysical depths and raises him to the heights. This Leader, deriving from the concentrated will of the people, now appears as longingly awaited by the people, the one who is to fulfil their capabilities and their potentialities. Thus the originally matter-of-fact idea of political authority has become the political, messianic concept of the Leader as we know it today. Into it there also streams all the religious thought of its adherents. Where the spirit of the people is a divine, metaphysical factor, the Leader who embodies this spirit has religious functions, and is in the proper sense the messiah. With his appearance the fulfilment of the last hope has dawned. With the kingdom which he must bring with him the eternal kingdom has already drawn [p. 200→] near. Could one ally the religious attitude of the group towards its Leader in the youth movement with the pietistic ideal of community, the political, messianic idea of the leader would lie in the line of the ideal of a universal kingdom of God on earth as it was striven for in the religious movements summed up under the title 'Enthusiasm', and in the French Revolution, and later take up again and again.

But precisely this idea is decisively rejected quite widely among the younger generation. Despite all the agreement in the call for political authority, the deepest opposition opens up when this authority comes to be defined more closely. This opposition can be summed up in the question, 'The authority of the leader or the authority of an office?' And here we have reached the burning question of the present day. The Leader has authority from below, from those whom he leads,

while the office has authority from above; the authority of the Leader depends on his person, the authority of an office is suprapersonal; authority from below is the self-justification of the people, authority of an office is a recognition of the appointed limits; authority from below is borrowed authority, authority of an office is original authority. The slogan of the authority of the Leader is 'The Reich', the slogan of the authority of an office is 'the state'. For the problem of the individual, this implies: In the authority of an office, the individual feels the restrictions which always stand in the way of his own will, his place in the world with well-defined areas over which he has no control. He knows that he himself is controlled, he feels his limitations, and at the same time he feels his responsibility towards this position which has fallen on him. The authority of an office implies the curbing of the individual in his freedom as an individual, his restriction, the need to be aware of other people, of reality. The authority of the Leader means for the individual the free choice of obedience, radical renunciation of his right as an individual and yet immeasurable, boundless freedom of the individual in accordance with the law of transference. But of course neither the limited [p. 201→] nor the limitless individual is as such the individual in his indestructible unity and responsibility, and neither obedience towards a father nor subjection to the Leader can lay the foundations of a community in which the I and the Thou have a genuine relationship one to the other. Neither the office nor the Leader are as such the ultimate factor.

The following must, however, be said about this dispute. The concept of 'authority' implies its derivation from the concept of 'authorship'. Authority is more original than the one for whom it is authority. I can therefore only recognise authority as an authority set over me. The authority which I accord to another person over me is ultimately only my own authority. Therefore the one is genuine, limited authority while the other is borrowed and in danger of becoming unlimited authority. Therefore in the one authority I am subdued, in the other I merely free myself afresh, set myself up in authority. There is a decisive difference between the authority of the father, the teacher, the judge and the statesman on the one hand, and the authority of the leader on the other. The former have authority by virtue of their office and by virtue of that office alone; the Leader has authority by virtue of his person. The authority of the former can be attacked and maimed, but it still remains; the authority of the Leader is utterly at the risk of every moment; it is in the hands of his followers. I choose my Leader, but I cannot choose my father and my teacher. I subordinate myself to the authority of the Leader, I stand under the authority of father and teacher. The father, the teacher and the statesman are not leaders by nature, but stewards of their office. Anyone who expects otherwise is not looking at reality, he is dreaming.

Now without doubt the concept of the Leader points to a historical necessity, to a necessity which is felt particularly by the youth. There remains only the ultimate, basic question, that of the place which the 'Leader' — in the pregnant sense of the word — occupies in the structure of authority, and of the place which as a result is occupied by the individual. Men, and [p. 202→] particularly young men, will feel the need to give a Leader authority over them so long as they themselves do not feel mature, strong, responsible enough themselves to realise the claim misplaced in this authority. The Leader will have to be conscious of this clear limitation of his authority. If he understands his function in any other way than as it is rooted in fact, if he does not continually tell his followers quite clearly

of the limited nature of his task and of their own responsibility, if he allows himself to surrender to the wishes of his followers, who would always make him their idol — then the image of the Leader will pass over into the image of the misleader, and he will be acting in a criminal way not only towards those he leads, but also towards himself. The true Leader must always be able to disillusion. It is just this that is his responsibility and his real object. He must lead his following away from the authority of his person to the recognition of the real authority of orders and of offices. The Leader must lead his followers towards a responsibility to the orders of life, a responsibility to father, teacher, judge, state. He must radically refuse to become the appeal, the idol, i.e. the ultimate authority of those whom he leads. He must limit himself to his task with all soberness. He serves the order of the state, of the community, and his service can be of incomparable value. But only so long as he keeps strictly in his place. Temporarily, the Leader takes over responsibility from the individual, but he must always understand this as being temporary, and must always draw the attention of his followers to this. He may accept this self-disenfranchising, self-submission of the individual only on the realisation that he has to lead the individual into his own maturity. Now a feature of man's maturity is responsibility towards other people, towards existing orders. He must let himself be controlled, ordered, restricted. It is thus really the case that the Leader takes over the responsibility which his followers are incapable of bringing to the orders and offices of life, and discharges it for them. Whereas those who are led think and wish that their Leader is simply the autonomous man, the master-man, [p. 203→] who is completely free, the Leader must know that he is most deeply committed to his followers, most heavily laden with responsibility towards the orders of life, in fact quite simply a servant. It is quite clear that here neither the idea of the community nor the idea of the individual reach their fulfilment, but that here they stand in a historically and psychologically necessary, but nevertheless penultimate stage of their development. The Leader serves his office. But this service of his office is itself only penultimate. The individual experiences in the authority of an office his commitments, his restrictions, but at the same time his responsibility. Even here, however, man is not yet seen as he is. Only when a man sees that office is penultimate authority in the face of an ultimate, indescribable authority, in the face of the authority of God, has the real situation been reached. And before this authority the individual knows himself to be completely alone. The individual is responsible before God. And this solitude of man's position before God, this subjection to an ultimate authority, is destroyed when the authority of the Leader or of the office is seen as ultimate authority. The irrefutable sign of man's individuality is that he must die alone, that he must bear his body for himself, that he must bear his suffering and his guilt as an individual. Alone before God, man becomes what he is, free and committed in responsibility at the same time. He becomes an individual. And this individual now knows himself to be set under other individuals, he knows himself to be committed to them, he knows himself to be in community. Community is between individuals, with no blurring of the boundaries of I and Thou, with the strictest separation from and therefore strictest responsibility for one another. Community is only where a man becomes an individual before God, and men; it is a community of suffering, of guilt, of death and of life. The fearful danger of the present time is that above the cry for authority, be it of the Leader or of an office, we forget that man stands alone before the

ultimate authority and that anyone who lays violent hands on man here is infringing eternal laws and **[p. 204→]** taking upon himself superhuman authority which will eventually crush him. The eternal law that the individual stands alone before God takes fearful vengeance where it is attacked and distorted. Thus the Leader points to the office, but Leader and office together point to the final authority itself, before which Reich or state are penultimate authorities. Leaders or offices which set themselves up as gods mock God and the individual who stands alone before him, and must perish. Only the Leader who himself serves the penultimate and the ultimate authority can find faithfulness.

— END —