

Dietrich Bonhoeffer & Willem A. Visser 't Hooft - The Church and the New Order in Europe - August 1941

World Council of Churches, Geneva

MEMORANDUM

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had been written
first draft by Godefrin in German. This is
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(See file on Godefrin)

Van Dusen gave this to
Hoyle. (See his letter 27/11/41)

THE CHURCH AND THE NEW ORDER IN EUROPE

The following reflections about the problem of the post-war order in Europe represent the thinking of two Continental Christians from two nations which are on opposite sides in this war. They have read William Paton's "The Church and the New Order" with deep interest and desire to express their admiration and gratitude for this fine witness rendered in a truly ecumenical spirit. They have also studied the recent issues of the Christian News Letter which deal with post-war problems.

1. Some basic considerations.

The insecurity of life and the tremendous upheavals have made Continental Christians acutely conscious of the fact that the future is in God's hands and that no human planning, however intelligent and however well intentioned, can make men masters of their own fate. There is, therefore in Continental Churches to-day a strongly apocalyptic trend. This trend may lead to an attitude of pure otherworldliness, but it may also have the more salutary effect of making us realise that the Kingdom of God has its own history which does not depend upon political events, and that the Life of the Church has its own God-given laws which are different from those which govern the life of the world. We are, therefore, glad that Paton emphasises so strongly that the life of the Church does not depend upon victory in the war.

But this does not mean that Continental Christians are indifferent as to the problem of the post-war order. Many who had previously considered that the Church had nothing to do with such secular problems have come to see in these last years that the Church is truly the salt of the earth and that the discarding of God's commandments means death for nations as well as individuals.

There is very especially a new recognition of the implications of the New Testament faith; that Christ is the King to whom all powers are subjected. Because the world is created 'unto Him' (Col. i. 16), we dare not consider it as a domain which lives by itself quite apart from God's plan.

The commandments of God indicate the limits which dare not be transgressed if Christ is to be Lord. And the Church is to remind the world of these limits. For a long time it has not exercised this ministry, but more recently it has again begun to do so, as in different countries it has taken a strong stand against the violation of God's commandments in political life.

Now the task of the Church in relation to the 'new order' is to be seen in the light of this ministry. The Church cannot and should not elaborate detailed plans of post-war reconstruction, but it should remind the nations of the abiding commandments and realities which must be taken seriously if the new order is to be a true order, and if we are to avoid another judgment of God such as this present war.

We are deeply grateful that there has grown up a community of Christians of different nations which can undertake this task as a common task. We have good reason to hope that the community will come out of this war as an even more united body than it was before the war. Those who are conscious of their membership in ~~their~~ fellowship are as yet a small group, but they are nevertheless not unimportant, because they are practically the only international community which remains united in spite of war and conflict.

2. Why Peace Aims ?

We agree with Patron as to the urgency of a clear statement of peace aims. But, as far as the Continent is concerned, we would say that this is especially necessary in view of the situation in Germany. The occupied countries have become sufficiently aware of the true character of the National-Socialist regime and are acutely conscious of the fact that their future depends on a British victory. There is therefore, remarkably little criticism of the British blockade in these countries. But the situation in Germany is entirely different. In that country the attitude of the considerable groups who are against the regime, but who are at the same time good patriots, depends on the answer which is given to the question: how will Germany be treated if it loses the war? A positive statement of peace aims may have a very strong influence in strengthening the hands of this group. It is clear that recent events have created a psychological situation in which they have an opportunity such as they have not had since 1933. There is, therefore, reason to give very great prominence to this aspect of the whole question.

Now it is clear that the very strong emphasis on the military disarmament of Germany in recent statements (and in the radio) has had an unfavorable effect on this development. The only group which can take action against the regime is the army (revolutionary action from other quarters would be suppressed by the S.S.). Now the opposition groups in the army are not likely to act unless they have reason to believe that there is a prospect of a more or less tolerable peace. In these circumstances statements about the future (and very especially the propaganda by radio) should at least give the opposition in Germany some basis of action.

We understand that the disarmament of Germany will have to be demanded. But it should certainly not be mentioned as the main peace aim, as is being done too often. It should rather be mentioned as part of a much wider program, which would include the giving of a certain amount of political and economic security to a disarmed Germany, and the acceptance by all nations of a certain supra-rational control of their armaments. In any case, far wider use should be made in all propaganda (especially in broadcasts to Germany) of all that is being thought out in the realm of economic reconstruction and social change. Such documents as the Malvern report have made a deep impression in opposition circles in Germany. Why does the B.B.C. say so little about these things ?

3. 'The Chaos behind the War'.

There is an important point which Paton has not mentioned in his description of the chaos behind the war. The deepest reason for the moral confusion in Germany and to some extent in Europe as a whole is not merely the opposition against Christian ethical convictions (for this by itself might have created clear fronts rather than 'chaos') but rather the ability of National-Socialism to present its injustice as true justice. The railway wagon of Compiègne is as it were the symbol of this masking of injustice. There was just enough relative justice in some of Germany's claims to make it possible for Hitler to present himself as a prophet who came to re-establish justice. This is the main source of the present moral confusion. And it should not be forgotten that by making concessions to Hitler which had been refused to his predecessors, the statesmen of other nations, became the supporters of Hitler against the opposition groups in Germany. In this way it is explicable that it has become increasingly difficult for the German nation to understand the true character of the regime, and that relatively few have remained unshaken in their conviction that it represented Satan masquerading as an Angel of Light.

4. 'Guiding Principles'.

We consider it very important that Paton seeks the basis of the new order, not in any particular form of government, but in certain fundamental principles concerning the life of the state^{and} of society. For it must be said with great emphasis that in a number of European countries an immediate return to full-fledged democracy and parliamentarism would create even greater disorder than that which obtained before the era of authoritarianism. In these countries (Germany, France, Italy) where all centres of political creativeness and order have been discredited or destroyed there will be for a considerable time to come a need of strong centralised authority. Democracy can only grow in a soil which has been prepared by a long spiritual tradition. Such a tradition exists in the smaller nations (Scandinavia, Holland, Switzerland) but not in most other nations of Europe.

But this does not mean that we must continue to accept forms of state-absolutism. The minimum which must be required of every state and which must be guaranteed internationally (we now know that political regimes are not merely the affair of the nation concerned!), is that the state shall be limited by law, that is to say that it shall recognise certain binding obligations to its citizens and to other states.

The Anglo-Saxon world summarises the struggle against the omnipotence of the State in the word "freedom". And Paton gives us a charter of human 'rights and liberties' which are to provide the norm of action by the state. But these expressions must, as Paton indicates, 'be translated into terms which relate them more closely to the life of other peoples'. For freedom is too negative a word to be used in a situation where all order has been destroyed. And liberties are not enough when men seek first of all for some minimum security. These words remind too much of the old liberalism which because of its failures is itself largely responsible for the development toward state-absolutism.

This is partly a quarrel of words, for the realities which lie behind such expressions as 'civil and religious liberties', 'freedom of speech' or 'equality of all before the law' must certainly be safeguarded in the new order. But it is also much more than a matter of words. For the whole orientation of the post-war states will depend on this ideological question. Now we believe that the conception of order limited by law and responsibility, an order which is not an aim in itself, but which recognises commandments which transcend the state, has more spiritual substance and solidity than the emphasis on the rights of individual men.

Thus it is certainly true - as Paton indicates - that in a country like Germany it will be impossible to introduce all the various forms of democratic liberties. But it will be possible in that, as in other countries, to do away with all forms of National-Socialist terrorism, to make law once more the impartial arbiter, not only between citizens but also between the citizens and the state, and to give full freedom to the Church. If then safeguards are formulated concerning the regime of countries which have been totalitarian (will Russia be included among these?), they should be couched not so much in terms of individual rights, but in terms of norms which the state must recognise in all its actions.

5. 'The Ideal and the next Steps'

We agree wholeheartedly with the conception of international order which is given in Paton's chapter on the ideal and the next steps. We are especially glad, that he makes it clear that this order cannot be a mere restoration of the pre-war political and economic system.

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For it has become clear on the Continent (and is understood by many who did not understand this a few years ago) that there must come drastic changes in these two domains. In the political domain there must be effective limitation of national sovereignty. In the economic domain there must be limitation of economic individualism, in other words, planning for economic security of the masses.

But, as Paton says, 'the ultimate settlement is bound to be influenced profoundly by the nature of the temporary measures which are taken in the interim period, and upon the proper shaping of those measures the future may depend'. Now we do not believe that Paton's book throws yet sufficient light on this problem. And we do not believe that the solution of this problem which is presented in the Christian News Letter of August 20 (Dr Oldham's summary of a P.E.P. report, which he considers to be 'entirely right' in its approach to the problem) is adequate.

We do not deny that Great Britain has the right to demand safeguards against a return of National-Socialism in one form or another, and that it may therefore have to take far-reaching military measures against Germany. But we feel that for the sake of the future these unavoidable measures must be counterbalanced by a positive policy. Now it is recognised in England and America that this time there must not be a repetition of the economic clauses of the Versailles treaty, and that is indeed an important insight. But that is not enough. There remains the question as to how Germany may find its way back to a system of government which is acceptable to the Germans and which is an orderly member of the family of nations. Now this question is not answered by the total occupation of Germany (though such occupation may prove necessary). On the contrary, the total disarmament and the occupation of Germany will make it exceptionally difficult, if not impossible, to create a new German government. Would a government which accepted such conditions not be regarded as a mere quelling affair? Would not these groups which are definitely anti-Nazi feel that even Hitler was better than this complete collapse of German integrity? Would this not lead to an even wilder form of German nationalism?

The question which must then be faced is whether it is not possible to offer such terms of peace to Germany that a new government composed of non-Nazi German leaders who are ready for international collaboration may not be discredited from the outset in the eyes of their own people. Or to put it the other way round: the question must be faced whether a German government which makes a complete break with Hitler and all he stands for, can hope to get such terms of peace that it has so a change to survive. If such a government would be formed, if it would make a genuine peace offer (evacuation of all occupied territories, casting of all Nazi leaders, willingness to disarm) and if then this offer would be rejected - there is a danger that Germans of all sections and groups

would be thrown into the nationalist opposition, and that for a very long time to come no German government worthy of that name can be formed.

It is clear that the answering of this question is a matter of urgency, since the attitude of opposition groups in Germany depends upon the answer given. Realism demands that the world should be safeguarded against a return of National-Socialism, but realism demands also that we should safeguard the world against a repetition of the psychological process which has taken place in Germany between 1918 and 1933. We believe that it is possible to find men in Germany who have shown by their attitude during these last years that they are not infected with National-Socialist ideas, and who can be counted upon as loyal collaborators in a European community of nations. And we believe that they should be given a chance for the sake not only of Germany, but for Europe as a whole.

6. The Russian Problem

It is understandable that in the present situation the problem of the relation of Russia to the future international order is not being treated as thoroughly as the problem of Germany. There is so much uncertainty as to the forces which are at work in Russia today and as to the effect which the war will have upon them, that it is almost impossible to visualise just what its place will be. But as Christians we dare not let ourselves be carried away by momentary reactions. Even though we may consider the British-Russian alliance a justifiable and unavoidable political decision, we must not minimise the danger which Russia still represents for all that we hold dear. Unless the war calls forth very fundamental changes in the structure of the Russian state, Bolshevism may well become a tremendous menace to all countries which have been betting on the wrong horse and which will find their Fascist system discredited by a German defeat. This is then another very strong confirmation of the necessity for authoritarian, though non-Fascist, regimes in the post-war era, and also of the necessity of strengthening the hands of those non-Nazi elements in Germany which would be able to form a new government in that country. There is, furthermore, the very difficult question as to whether the Baltic States, the Bukovina, Karelia, Bessarabia, shall go back to a Russia which recognises civil and religious liberties just as little as do the Nazis.
