

**Bonhoeffer's Theory on Stupidity
Close of 1932-1942**

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In December 1942, around Christmas, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a theologian and pastor of the German Lutheran and Confessing Churches, sent to his brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi, close friend Eberhard Bethge and Major General Hans Oster a collection of 17 short observations, entitled AFTER TEN YEARS. The four had been trying to understand how Germany came to be what it was from the close of 1932 to the end of 1942. They had become resisters and conspirators with others to overthrow Adolph Hitler and the Third Reich, and they also were trying to understand themselves and justify what they had become. Under the title, “On Stupidity,” or “Of Folly” as it is also translated, Bonhoeffer writes about how stupidity contributed to these years of Nazi rule and he begins by saying, “Stupidity,” or folly, “is a more dangerous enemy of the good than malice.”¹

Bonhoeffer then goes on to differentiate malice from stupidity by observing that evil can be “protested against,” “exposed,” and “prevented,”² because something within it betrays its maliciousness and makes persons suspicious of it. Stupidity, on the other hand, does not betray itself and, thus, resists anything that opposes it, leaving the stupid person smug, blind to the truth and subject to becoming annoyed, angry and even hostile and violent. Consequently, he determines more caution is required with a stupid person than a malicious one and writes, “Never again will we try to persuade the stupid person with reasons, for it is senseless and dangerous.”³

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *“After Ten Years” Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Our Times*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 22.

² Ibid. 22.

³ Ibid. 22.

Bonhoeffer digs into the nature of stupidity or folly, saying it is “not an intellectual defect but a human one....is not so much...a congenital defect, but that under certain circumstances, people are *made* stupid or that they allow this to happen to them.”⁴. Because Bonhoeffer observed that this happens less to those who live more solitary lives, he writes:

upon closer observation it becomes apparent that every strong upsurge of power in the public sphere, be it of a political or a religious nature, infects a large part of humankind with stupidity, *seemingly making it* virtually a sociological-psychological law. The power of the one needs the stupidity of the other.⁵

Thus, according to Bonhoeffer, stupidity is caused by a loss of a person’s “inner independence”⁶ to hold onto his or her own convictions and ability to reason. Talking with such a person, Bonhoeffer says, “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....Having thus become a mindless tool,”⁷ who can do evil without realizing it. This can so entrap persons that an external liberator like the wisdom of God is needed to free them. Therefore, without such interventions first, it is virtually impossible to know what stupid persons are thinking and convince them otherwise.

Stupidity, Bonhoeffer discerns, can happen to anyone, no matter how bright or dull they may be. And being stupid about one thing does not mean a person is stupid about everything. Therefore, he ends this section in *AFTER TEN YEARS*, saying, “forbid us to consider the majority of people to be stupid in every circumstance. It

⁴ Ibid. 22.

⁵ Ibid. 23.

⁶ Ibid. 23.

⁷ Ibid. 23.

really will depend on whether those in power expect more from people's stupidity than from their inner independence and wisdom."⁸

Sadly, Hitler led and forced many of his people to become part of his folly and, thus, played out to the detriment of the world what Bonhoeffer called stupidity's sociological-psychological law, killing an estimated 70 to 85 million people, mostly civilians with the Holocaust, mass killings, executions, military action, war crimes and war related deaths.

Grievance played a major part in Hitler's folly and the German people's stupidity in following him. The Germans resented their nation's political chaos, the economic burden of the Great Depression, their high levels of unemployment and poverty, the stigma Germany had from losing WW I, and the Versailles Treaty, which forced Germany to accept full responsibility for the war, pay massive reparations, lose about ten percent of its territory and restrict its military. Hitler promised to rid them of their grievances and many foolishly believed he could.

The Bonhoeffer family never put any stock in Hitler and his promises. Instead, they lamented his rise in popularity and supported the Weimar Republic, Germany's democratic government from 1919 to 1933. Though the Republic suffered from its unstable economy and polarizing political parties, it flourished in the arts and sciences, which the Bonhoeffer family—being of the time's Christian, humanitarian and liberal tradition—were prominent members.

Dietrich was born on February 4, 1906. He was one of eight children born to Karl Bonhoeffer, a prominent neurologist and psychiatrist, and Paula (von Hase)

⁸ Ibid. 23.

Bonhoeffer, who studied to be a teacher. The children's privileged life opened the door for them to pursue their interests. At 14, Dietrich surprised his non-churchgoing family, saying he wanted to study theology and in 1923, he started his studies at Tübingen and earned his Doctor of Theology degree in 1927 from Humboldt University of Berlin.

Bonhoeffer's university years opened his eyes to the world's realities. His doctoral dissertation was "A Theological Study on the Sociology of the Church," and when in Rome, he became interested in Roman Catholicism and saw the importance of the church.⁹ In 1928, he was an intern at a church in Barcelona and became deeply involved in pastoral ministry. Ministering to the rich and poor, he experienced everything from caring for a family grieving over a suicide to teaching little children. In his September 23rd sermon, he said, "If you wish for God to hold fast to the world...if you want to find eternity you must serve the times."¹⁰ For the rest of his life, he held fast to these words and lived by them.

In 1929, he returned to the University of Berlin, started his post-doctoral thesis and became an assistant pastor. In 1930, the year the Nazis went from 12 to 107 seats in the German legislative assembly (Reichstag), Bonhoeffer was a Sloane Fellow at Union Theological Seminary in New York. There he and Albert F. Fisher, an African American student, befriended each other. Fisher invited Bonhoeffer to Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem and Bonhoeffer immersed himself in the Social Gospel; thus, holding fast to the world and serving the times.

In 1931, Bonhoeffer returned to Berlin and became a lecturer in theology at the University of Berlin, attended the World Alliance Conference of Churches in Cambridge,

⁹ Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000, 65.

¹⁰ Ibid. 114.

became its Youth Secretary, was ordained and became a student pastor at the Technical College in Berlin.

The University of Berlin was a site of anti-Judaism and in 1931, the majority of its 1,000 theology students leaned towards Hitler's party. By the time President Paul von Hindenburg appointed Adolph Hitler to be Chancellor of Germany on January 30, 1933, throngs of Germans were chanting, "One People, One Empire, One Leader."¹¹ Swastika flags were placed around the altar of the Magdeburg Cathedral and its dean, Ernst Martin, proclaimed from the pulpit they were "symbols of hope."¹¹

Bonhoeffer once empathized with the Germans' grievances, but when Hitler became Chancellor, he agreed with his brother-in-law, Rüdiger Schleicher, that it meant war.¹² Two days after Hitler became Chancellor, on February 1, 1933, Bonhoeffer spoke on the radio against the "unnatural narcissism of...the youth made vain by old fools,"¹³ and went on to say, "Führers or offices which set themselves up as gods mock God."¹⁴ He was cut off the air before finishing.

Hitler moved fast. He convinced Hindenburg to enact on February 23, 1933, an emergency decree which repealed the German constitution, suspended civil liberties, allowed for the arrest of political opponents, house searches and confiscation of property, and replaced democracy by giving the Führer absolute rule over the state.

On April 7, 1933, the Aryan paragraph was officially enacted in Germany with The Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service. The paragraph had been

¹¹ Ibid. 257.

¹² Ibid. 257.

¹³ Ibid. 259.

¹⁴ Ibid. 260..

a part of German culture and legislation since the 19th century. It excluded non-Aryans (mostly Jews, but also other groups of people and persons with disabilities) from full participation in German life. This law and a series of similar ones culminated in the Nuremberg Race Laws of September 1935, and they paved the way for the Holocaust. Like “mindless tools” possessed by catch phrases like “Free Germany from the Jews,” most Germans and their legislators extolled these laws.

Bonhoeffer likened the plight of the Jews to that of the African-Americans in America and he wrote against the Nazi Aryan clause and disassociated himself with church officials who accepted it. Discrimination against non-Aryans was the straw that broke the camel’s back for Bonhoeffer, but opposition to it did not come quickly.

Intellectually gifted theologians like Martin Niemöller, who, in September 1933, helped organize the 3,000 member Pastors’ Emergency League to oppose the state’s interference in church matters, and Karl Barth, who was the primary author of the Barmen Declaration, were cautious about speaking against it.

Unable to know how the Germans could support Hitler’s immoral acts against the Jews and others, Bonhoeffer left Germany on October 14, 1933, to serve two congregations in London. There, he persuaded persons to engage in the church’s struggle against Nazism and found in George Bell, Bishop of Chichester and leader of the Ecumenical Movement, a strong ally and friend.

In May 1934, representatives from Germany’s Protestant regional churches met in Barmen. Bonhoeffer attended. He was a leading spokesperson for the Confessing Church. At the meeting, the Barmen Declaration was adopted and it became the foundational document for the Confessing Church, which declared itself to be

Germany's true Evangelical Church and opposed the false doctrines of the Third Reich's Evangelical Church. By the end of 1934 in Dahlem, it passed an "emergency law," saying that the true church in Germany accepts the Barmen Declaration and its only authority is God and the Bible. Even though there is no specific mention of the Aryan Paragraph in the declaration and its members differed over it, the Confessing Church opposed it.

On April 17, 1935, Bonhoeffer returned to Germany to head one of the five seminaries of the Confessing Church. At Finkenwalde, Bonhoeffer structured it to address a person's whole being and, thus, focused not just on theology, but also on Scripture, prayer and church confessions to employ Bonhoeffer's conviction that Christianity needed to be a lived faith that addressed life's public and personal realities.

Bonhoeffer wrote, "Christianity means community through and in Jesus Christ."¹⁵ And at Finkenwalde, the seminarians lived as a community, which began each day with devotions that included reading Scripture, singing spiritual songs and prayers to strengthen their faith and bear their cross.

Finkenwalde and the other Confessing Church seminaries were declared illegal by the state's Evangelical Church in December 1935 and in September 1937, Finkenwalde was shut down by the Gestapo. Twenty-seven of Bonhoeffer's students were arrested, many were conscripted into the Nazi army and most never made it to

¹⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community*. New York: Harper One, Harper Collins, 1944, 21.

pastoral ministry.¹⁶ By the end of 1937, 804 members of the Confessing Church were arrested and imprisoned.¹⁷

Refusing to obey the Nazis and submit to stupidity, Bonhoeffer continued to teach many of the illegal pastors secretly. All clergy In April 1938 were required to pledge allegiance to the Führer. Bonhoeffer put together a visitation ministry for the minority that did not, providing them, their families and parishioners pastoral care.

Following the advice of persons who feared for his life, Bonhoeffer left Germany in March of 1939 for four months, first to England and then the United States. In July, Bonhoeffer wrote Niebuhr, saying, “I have made a mistake....I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people.”¹⁸

Bonhoeffer returned to Germany on July 27, 1939. Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. By 1940, the Third Reich had become an even greater threat to the world and Bonhoeffer decided to never again try to persuade the Nazis with reason, deeming it was senseless and dangerous. Instead, he became a spy for the resistance movement by working for the German intelligence service (Abwehr) and traveled to Switzerland, Norway and Sweden, where he met with Protestant leaders, and eventually became involved with a plot to assassinate Hitler.

On January 17, 1943, Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s engagement to Marie von Wedemeyer was made public. On April 5, 1943, his house was searched and he was

¹⁶ Stephen Nichols, “Seminary in Nazi Germany, Bible and Theology.” U.S. Edition: *The Gospel Coalition*, August 7, 2013. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/seminary-in-nazi-germany>,

¹⁷ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, A Biography*, 577.

¹⁸ Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010, 321.

sent to Tegel prison. On April 29, a warrant was issued, charging him with “subversion of the armed forces” and then later for his ties to the July 20, 1944, attempt to assassinate Hitler. After being incarcerated in several places Bonhoeffer, Dohnanyi and Oster were hung on April 9, 1945, 28 days before Germany surrendered to the Allies on May 7th.

In Tegel prison, between 1940 and 1943, Bonhoeffer began writing ETHICS, his “ethical theology,”¹⁹ that Bethge finished after Bonhoeffer’s death. Being a teleologist, Bonhoeffer believed that ethical decisions must be made on real situations in the “here and now” for the good of the next generation in the “there and then,” because they will have to live with them.²⁰ He said that we should not ask “How can I be good?” and “How can I do good?,” but rather “What is the will of God?”²¹ Therefore, we are to look at the reality of each situation, consider the prescribed divine and natural laws and do what might best benefit the upcoming generation. Consequently, we are not bound to always obey the laws. Nor are we to disregard them. Instead, God frees us to follow or not follow them according to how that might affect the next generation.

But who can make ethical decisions based on a future that we cannot foresee with certainty and, thus, confirm God’s will, which Christians believe is to save the world? Bonhoeffer says we can, because by God’s grace, Jesus has already saved the world by bearing his cross and God is in the reality of the world to bring justice and peace, love, hope and joy.

¹⁹ James Burtress, *Shaping the Future: The Ethics of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985, 25.

²⁰ Ibid. 16.

²¹ Ibid. 15.

The church's part in this, then, is to live up to its call to proclaim God's will and be our support and guide, our check and balance if you will. Though, it too has limited foresight and does not always live in the image of God, God is still with it, as God is still with us, to confirm God's will by addressing the world's realities.

The purpose of ethical theology is not to justify us, nor supplant divine and natural laws with what we do. "Nothing is more dangerous than to draw theological conclusions by generalizing from single particular experiences,"²² says Bonhoeffer. And according to him, "The dominion of Christ over all government does not by any means imply the dominion of the Church over government"²³....*Nor* that government should pursue Christian policy, enact Christian laws, etc."²⁴ Instead, our objective is to be in touch with reality and God's will to use our "inner independence" for the present and future good; thus, being as Pastor Jeff Hawkins asks to be, "a good ancestor."²⁵

Bonhoeffer struggled deeply with making ethical decisions, but once he made them, he stuck by them. He turned to the Psalms, which he called the prayer book of the Bible; the Sermon on the Mount; scientific, philosophic and theological writings; literature, music and the arts; along with following his daily practices at Finkenwalde to find the direction and peace he needed to live according to God's will and be the spiritual advisor he became to everyone from his parishioners and students, to fellow pastors and conspirators, to prisoners and even concentration camp guards.

²² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965, 351.

²³ Ibid. 346.

²⁴ Ibid. 347.

²⁵ Jeff Hawkins, "Hawkins Family Farm." Fort Wayne: Fort Wayne Cinema Center, 2025.

So, how might we be trustworthy advisors to those around us and not give into stupidity? After ten years, from the end of 2015 to the end of 2025—the closing years of President Barack Obama’s second term, President Donald Trump, President Joe Biden and the first year of President Donald Trump’s second term—our nation has become even more polarized. Has stupidity or folly played a part in this national polarization and if so, what is behind it and how can we address it?

James Davison Hunter traces the history of the United States’ culture in his book, *DEMOCRACY AND SOLIDARITY*. He says that our democracy is in crisis, because its current cultural source is failing to unite us. Since America’s inception, Hunter says that its cultural source has been a hybrid-Enlightenment that has synchronized over the years and been anchored in the standards of truth, justice and rationality, but also in “a religious imaginary” that saw America as “a nation existing under the guidance of Providence and moving toward the millennial hope of a world made new.”²⁶

Up to a point and until now, the cultural logics of the hybrid-Enlightenment has been able to deal with conflicting cultural values, like racism and slavery, to move us along under our national motto, *E Pluribus Unum* (Out of Many, One). But now it seems to have given way to the “cultural logics of nihilism,”²⁷ which has divided us into enemies and brought about identity groups that have fostered “*ressentiment*,” the living and reliving of real or perceived grievances and/or injustices to the point that they are never resolved, but instead are used to maintain the group’s solidarity. This has come

²⁶ James Hunter, *Democracy and Solidarity: On the Cultural Roots of America’s Political Crisis*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024, 75.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 326.

at the expense of developing a common national solidarity that would acknowledge and correct what divides us.²⁸ It keeps us from addressing the cultural things that are at the heart of all our differences—things like “ideas,..beliefs...tastes,..arguments,”²⁹ and “informal boundaries of acceptability...mores, customs, codes, traditions” that if broken may penalize individuals and groups with everything from “shunning...to torture and death.”³⁰

Cultural matters like these need to be addressed for everyone to be heard and treated with respect and dignity, so that everyone’s humanity is acknowledged and constructive conversation and understanding can take place.

Frank Bruni attributes much of America’s polarization and its prevailing resentment to grievances in his book, *THE AGE of GRIEVANCE*. He writes that there is a place for grievance in that it “has been the precursor of justices, the prelude to enlightenment” and “in our country, the engine of morally urgent change.”³¹ But he also says that there is “a quickness to grievance...among many... to identify themselves and interpret events in terms of past, current, and looming hurts.”³² James Kimmel, Jr. wrote that neuroscience studies show grievances can activate the anterior insula, “causing dopamine to flood your brain” and make it look like it is “on drugs....*that* if not controlled...can turn into a deadly addiction.”³³

²⁸ Ibid. 333-335.

²⁹ Ibid. 9

³⁰ Ibid. 23.

³¹ Frank Bruni, *The Age of Grievance*. New York: Avid Reader Press, 2024, 23.

³² Ibid. 16.

³³ James Kimmel, Jr., Why it’s Time to Start Treating Revenge as the Potential Deadly Addiction that it Is,” *New York Post*, May 31,2025. <https://nypost.com>

Grievance contributed to the rise of Nazi Germany and grievance in America has been a factor in our nation's polarization. Can that grievance be tempered by grace, so that everyone's humanity is valued and our national motto, *E Pluribus Unum*, does not exclude persons like it has in its history?

In May of 2023, Pete Buttigieg said the United States stands as:

the most important democracy,...because it introduced representative, republican democracy to the world....If, 250 years later, we could do the same thing for inclusive democracy that's as big a contribution to humanity and as novel *one* as anything we achieved out of the Revolution.³⁴

Could that be the new millennium, the new world, for which we strive and can that unite us with a common purpose? To do so, we need to act with wisdom and grace, to not be stupid and to make sure our cultural resources align with that hope.

James Hunter says sociology and culture entails answering five questions that have to do with Metaphysics, Epistemology, Anthropology, Ethics and Teleology and they are: "What is reality? How do we know it? Who is a person? How do we treat others? and What is it for?"³⁵ Therefore, he says addressing America's culture will take:

the moral imagination to envision a public life that transcends the present warring binaries...a fresh vocabulary with which to talk about and pragmatically address the genuine problems....a renewed ethical vision for the re-formation of public life, the institutions that sustain it, and for the citizens who put it into practice.... *and* a mythos that doesn't deny the story of America, but reframes it toward what it could yet be.³⁶

³⁴ Ibid. 161 and 162.

³⁵ "Democracy and Solidarity with James Davidson Hunter and David Brooks," Host, Cherie Harder. Washington D. C.: *The Trinity Forum*, October 8, 2024. <http://www.TTF.org> and <https://www.youtube.com>.

³⁶ Hunter. *Democracy and Solidarity*, 378.

It took until 1933 for Bonhoeffer to speak out publicly against Hitler and Nazism and since examining and upholding our cultural resources probably will always be a work in progress, the confession Bonhoeffer wrote elsewhere in *AFTER TEN YEARS* to Dohnanyi, Bethge and Oster may be one for us to also confess. He said:

We have been silent witnesses of evil deeds....Are we still of any use?... Will our inner strength to resist what has been forced on us have remained strong enough, and our honesty with ourselves blunt enough, to find our way back to simplicity and honesty?³⁷

By God's grace, I think, I hope, I believe it and, thus, we will.

³⁷ Bonhoeffer. *After Ten Years*, 30.

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