

NO QUESTIONS ASKED

by

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TO THOSE for whom belief in a divine being comes easily, God knows we are here and vice versa. But matters of faith never *begin* easily — no witticism or glib expression can be expected to substitute for the difficult climb made by those for whom faith has, however briefly, been elusive. Still more difficult, surely, is the experience of those who have suffered, justly or otherwise, at the hands of their fellows, in this world at times so filled with cruelty. I have wondered how such a tested and tempered soul regards his relationship with the divine. It may be that pain, so taken to heart, neither ennobles, nor emboldens — but estranges. Similarly, though certainly on a reduced scale, those who witness suffering may find themselves confronting the underpinnings of their own faith. We humans are frail; events of which we are only a part, set into motion by others, bring us to doubt our ability to sustain what we call faith.

Traditional western religion places God and man in a fundamentally recognizable relationship. Notions of contract pervade these attempts to focus our understanding of the divine, how the divine influences our actions, and to a limited extent, how (and if) we believe.

Neither the covenant announced at the foot of Mt. Sinai 3,000 years ago nor the covenant proclaimed at a Passover supper more than a 1,000 years later, is exceedingly difficult to understand in what is expected of man. And what is guaranteed in return, that is, some manner of relationship with God which will decrease the distance between God and man, and bring them closer is only slightly more difficult to comprehend. But we live in the world, and a promise of what is to come in another plane of existence poses some difficulty for even those possessed of great faith. Even more difficult, then, is obtaining the reassurance — the feedback, if you will — that the con-

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tract is still being observed, that the relationship is still intact and that the bargain is still being kept on both sides.

Poets can offer plentiful examples of God's continuing good intentions in every sunrise, in a child's smile, and even in the rainbow—said to be the recurring symbol of God's promise to Noah that the destruction of the world by flood would never be repeated. Still more plentiful signs abound, too numerous to catalogue. But each is capable of different interpretation by skeptics, as springing from so-called natural sources, unaided by a divine intelligence or sentient moving force. So the problem comes down to this: Why, in the face of pain and misfortune do some men cling to their faith, when logic would not be surprised or offended if that faith were to be abandoned? I can suggest only this much as an answer: in many there resides transcendent faith, which recognizes that neither belief, nor good works, nor actions of any kind are sufficient to manipulate God. It is a faith which can sustain itself, while, perhaps, believing that although God answers all prayers, sometimes the answer is "No."

Literature abounds with exhortations to faith such as this and many writers have explored notions of faith amidst pain. C. S. Lewis sums up the inquiry by asking why evil is permitted to exist:

It is men, not God, who have produced racks, whips, prisons, slavery, guns, bayonets and bombs; it is by human avarice or human stupidity, not by the churlishness of nature, that we have poverty and overwork. But there remains, nonetheless, much suffering which cannot thus be traced to ourselves. Even if all suffering were man-made, we should like to know the reason for the enormous permission to torture their fellows which God gives to the worst of men.¹

Lewis offers several views on the existence and necessity of evil in the world, noting, among other things, that evil is part and parcel of the dynamics of human life, that its absence is logically possible only where human desires do not conflict; in short, only where life itself is impossible. He finally makes the observation, in which I concur, that although man may be inclined to evil practices, his nature is never very far from the good, and that he is capable, at length, of complete spiritual satisfaction.

Much of this apologetic literature outlines why, in the prevailing views, evil can exist with God's acquiescence, and urges the necessity of accepting

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evil, and its product, pain, as an inevitable feature of a morally imperfect world. This may or may not be good theology but it is unsatisfying because it is incomplete. We know that the mountain is there and that we should climb it, regardless of the obstacles. But why do we do it, when, on that rare occasion we do manage to lay aside the doubt? We frequently do not do as we ought, and that is scarce cause for surprise, but what is there about that quality of transcendent faith that does surprise us?

The Holocaust experience of European Jews represents one of the most horrifying and complete tests of faith imaginable. And yet, seemingly reliable studies of belief patterns of Holocaust survivors² tell us that something approaching *two-thirds* of the surviving community either had their religious conviction *unaffected*, or *strengthened* by their wartime experiences. Perhaps that astounding figure (if accurate) demonstrates the resiliency of the Jewish community as a group bent on retaining its own unique identity, more than anything else. Or perhaps it is only more evidence of things unseen, that is, faith.

Faith and experience are frequently at odds with one another. Faith allows us to employ a somewhat more sanguine view of humanity than might otherwise be reasonable if the raw data of human experience were the sole determinant. Faith gives men the benefit of the doubt and sees in even the most difficult trial some hint of a plan, some suggestion of an overall purpose, or a conviction that all will be right in the end, wherever that "end" may be.

Experience, on the other hand, is impatient and nearsighted. Depending upon the particular creed to which one may subscribe, the present is either devalued as being a bothersome prelude to a greater glory and which, therefore, is something to be merely tolerated, or it is viewed as a spiritual proving ground, where an individual's desire to approach the divine may be demonstrated, or it is viewed as a combination of the two. Experience is the mirror into which faith must look; only extraordinary faith can do this and still see an accurate, complete and undistorted image. Truly extraordinary faith can stand up to experience while recognizing that the present interlude is exceedingly real, that its demands must be met, not merely endured. Most important, it recognizes that the ethical demands of strong faith never presume to dictate to others as to how their particular quality of experience should be treated. Faith can at times dictate heroic behavior, but that "heroism" is always bound to the anguish of doubt. . . ."³

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Such faith is undoubtedly rare, and yet it surely exists. But to what end? Why do we value it as we do, if we do at all? It is possible to suggest an answer to this composite question in two ways. First, because our own faith sees in it something worthy of emulation. Second, because, from an objective, utilitarian standpoint, it tends to produce good, useful, and important results. On a social basis, those with faith tend to subscribe to the behavioral standards which, according to experience, tend to foster civilization: cooperation, non-interference, peaceability, respect for life and property, and over-all efficiency.

But is there another side to the coin? Are there any drawbacks? Again, from a strictly social standpoint, excessive reliance on faith—reliance that tends to devalue human experience—might lead to some variation of the “let George do it” malaise, with God cast in the role of “George.” Man has a role to play in God’s work, but first man must perceive that he does have a part to play, and only then can he act.

The resulting synthesis, then, displays enough faith from which to derive guidance in creative, efficient living, and shows conscious effort to actively intervene in the world. The combination is forceful and intelligent; guided action is the result.

Some of us may have been fortunate enough to have seen this dynamic combination at work in people we know. I have seen it, I believe, in two examples from the history of Europe during World War II.

The name of Dietrich Bonhoeffer first emerged in a footnote, or perhaps some similar off-hand reference, in a larger now-forgotten context. At first I knew him only as a German theologian who was executed, in a German prison, only hours before the war ended. What little I have learned about him since then is at once uplifting and more than a little frightening; uplifting because of the powerful translation of faith into action, frightening because of the difficult standard his life and experience represent.

Bonhoeffer’s life exhibited courage. Not the kind of which legends are made, but the special courage needed to make tough choices, what we might call “civil courage.”

Actuated by his faith, Bonhoeffer opposed Hitler. The history of that opposition began not long after Hitler was elected to political office in Germany in the early part of 1933. From Bonhoeffer’s vantage point as a fledgling pastor, the fateful first steps he took were probably not momentous or even very significant. To us, though, they seem quite different. Consider, for

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example, Bonhoeffer's first appearance on Berlin radio—an address on his concept of the leader, given two days after Hitler seized power. An excerpt:

If the leader allows himself to be persuaded by those he leads who want to turn him into an idol—and those who are led will always hope for this—then the image of the leader will degenerate into that of the 'misleader.' The Leader who makes an idol of himself and his office makes a mockery of God.

This was also Bonhoeffer's last radio appearance. This event, a "beginning" only in the historical sense, viewed from nearly 50 years' distance, is nevertheless a good introduction into an understanding of Bonhoeffer's courage, born of this faith.

Shortly after Bonhoeffer's mass-media debut, there came an opportunity for him to register his protest against what has come to be known as "the war against the Jews." Shortly after the non-aryan law of April 7, 1933 was declared (it barred Jews from civil service), he prepared a six-point paper on the subject and presented it at a meeting of ministers, some of whom left in protest. But the paper was eventually published, and he had registered two noteworthy points: (1) the Church has an obligation to what Bonhoeffer called "victims of any social order" and (2) the Church has an obligation not simply to "bind the wounds of the victims beneath the wheel, but also to put a spoke in the wheel itself."⁵ This theme of creative intervention in the world appears again and again in Bonhoeffer's life and, as much as anything else, characterizes his particular brand of faith.

As events progressed, and the established German Church and the government moved closer together, Bonhoeffer and a relatively small group of like-minded theologians saw the necessity of leaving a church structure which they perceived had crossed the line into heresy.

Apparently temporarily frustrated by events at home, Bonhoeffer briefly took a post in England. While there, he corresponded with a theologian he respected, Karl Barth, telling him of the struggle he saw himself in, and confessed some powerlessness in knowing how to deal with it first hand. Barth's reply scolded Bonhoeffer to return to Germany, and there to take up his duties. But he did not do so immediately, and so, missed the birth of what came to be known as the Confessing Church,⁶ at a synod of delegates held in May 1934, where representatives of regional churches declared their opposition to what they saw as the false teachings of the increasingly centralized German Church.

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Although he viewed these events from a safe distance, Bonhoeffer sensed where they might ultimately lead—to resistance, even to death. For the time, though, he heard the call of the nascent Confessing Church, and returned home to serve in one of its seminaries. It was during this time, the late 1930's, that he saw and developed great concern for the gradual dissolution of church resistance to Hitler. The situation reached a crisis in 1938 when the church government decreed that all pastors swear personal allegiance to Hitler. Although Bonhoeffer urged against the oath (he was on no official list of pastors and was not asked to take it) the Confessing Synod agreed to it.

At about the same time, Bonhoeffer's resistance took on a more definite and more resolutely worldly character. Through his brother-in-law, Bonhoeffer became privy to a plan to overthrow Hitler. The knowledge that he had reached a cross-roads—he could either become a part of the plan, or back away—led him to withdraw from the scene briefly, again to England, and then to America. Although he briefly considered staying in America, in the mid-summer of 1939 he chose the path of greater resistance and returned home, having once again chosen the path of creative intervention.

With the war underway, Bonhoeffer was, in effect, "hired" by German Army internal security, through the connivance of a high ranking military officer, himself a member of the resistance. In his new role, he had relative freedom of movement on the continent. His involvement in the opposition grew steadily until his eventual arrest on April 5, 1943, leading up to his execution two years later. Bonhoeffer had, again, made an active, creative, choice, which, for what it is worth, also encompassed treason to the Reich. Seeing his alternative as supporting the opposition and taking the risk that this might mean military defeat for Germany on the one hand versus inaction and the certain destruction of civilization on the other, he chose intervention.

However you may wish to judge the wisdom of his choice, it took courage, what Bonhoeffer himself called "civil courage," which he defined as a particular type of courage which "can grow only out of the free responsibility of free men."

Bonhoeffer's final chapter is written in prison, in a reflective time, in enforced, restrictive leisure. There he was interrogated at great length, concerning his involvement in the security police, in smuggling a small group of Jews into Switzerland, and other activities conducted at the periphery of

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the small resistance effort. Conditions for Bonhoeffer were not harsh; he was incarcerated in a military prison, run by a distant cousin, and which was staffed by friendly guards who were, for the most part, soldiers no longer suited for battle. The relative ease abruptly stopped on July 20, 1944, the date of the unsuccessful attempt on Hitler's life. Although many were executed at first, at the expense of further information about the conspiracy, many, thought to be relatively unimportant, including Bonhoeffer, were spared immediate execution and were questioned further. Bonhoeffer and a group of others were ultimately transferred to Buchenwald, and later evacuated from there, under the onslaught of the Allied advance, to Flossenbürg, and it was there that Bonhoeffer was hanged on April 9, 1945. So ends his final chapter.

What any of us is able to learn from this depends upon our own patterns of belief. But Bonhoeffer's own words are of great value here. In a letter he wrote after the attempt on Hitler's life failed, he reflected on a conversation he had years before in which he had first realized that his life's ambition was "to learn to have faith."⁷

The discovery and experience in this world is the *process* which Bonhoeffer believed enabled him to discover his own faith. From prison, again:

I'm still discovering right up to this moment, that it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith. One must completely abandon any attempt to make something of oneself, whether it be a saint, or a converted sinner, or a church-man (a so-called 'priestly-type') a righteous man or an unrighteous one, a sick man or a healthy one. By this-worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God. . . . That, I think, is faith. . . .⁸

Faith lives in this world, frequently amid tremendous doubt. Bonhoeffer lived his life in this world with the courage to make those choices which free men may make. Often those choices were difficult, and the product of extended reflection.

At about the same time that Dietrich Bonhoeffer was traversing the European continent in furtherance of Hitler's overthrow, inhabitants of the French village of LeChambon were exhibiting the kind of civil courage on a scale Bonhoeffer was never fortunate enough to have witnessed first-hand.

In this tiny Huguenot village, the laws imposed by the Vichy regime

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were generally observed, except in one significant aspect: Jewish refugees were routinely given shelter, led by a Protestant Pastor, André Trocmé, his family, and several colleagues, this tiny village became a "city of refuge"⁹ and facing the commands set down by civil authority on one hand and the Golden Rule on the other, chose the latter. In the Pastor's home, and in those of other villagers, Jewish refugees, who had fled from parts of France where deportations had already commenced, and from other countries, as well, were hidden and sheltered from the Vichy regime's dastardly inclinations.

In LeChambon, the ethical underpinning for this rare war-time approach to civil disobedience was not the theological debate, philosophical analysis, nor was it the product of keen political awareness. It was not at all subtle but, in fact, was inscribed above the main entrance of the Protestant Temple of LeChambon: "Love one another." Somehow, the population of this tiny village shared a common duty not to betray their fellow men who had sought and been granted refuge from irrationally evil persecution. They saw this duty,—and that which came before—the duty to grant shelter —through to the end and did so at virtually every opportunity.

When local authorities attempted to take a census of Jews in the area, none came forward; all had been warned by the villagers that it would have been a prelude to deportation. When Pastor Trocmé was directly confronted by the police and ordered to reveal the names and locations of his "guests," he dissembled, only a bit, and shortly thereafter managed to disperse them through the countryside where they could hide, in sites previously selected in case of such an emergency, until the threat passed. Even to the point of arrest and incarceration, the village resisted.

While in prison, Pastor Trocmé and his colleague, Edouard Theis, were given a chance for freedom if they would only sign an oath pledging unflinching allegiance to Marshal Pétain. They refused, saying that they could not endorse the practice of delivering Jews to the Germans, and thus to death, as they would have had to by signing the oath. When they returned to the barracks, their fellow prisoners, reacting to swift, but inaccurate, prison rumor, exulted "You're free! You're free!" The ministers quickly told of their refusal, and Pastor Trocmé later confessed to a flash of fear; perhaps they had doomed themselves. But the next morning, they were mysteriously freed, with no further mention of the oath. And a few days later, their fellow prisoners were transported to the East.¹⁰

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Pastor Trocmé and his neighbors were, indeed, free, both before, during and after their incarceration, as were all the inhabitants of LeChambon. Their freedom was real since it pervaded their lives and gave them the courage to make the tough choices. If the courage of the Chambonnais seems more dramatic than that of Bonhoeffer it is no real accident of interpretation. Their actions seem more courageous because their opportunities for action were more plentiful and because the products of their conscious choices were more readily observable. But the similarities are overpowering and suggest that faith is to be found, if at all, right here, right now, in the world.

These "standards" embodied in the Chambonnais and in Bonhoeffer suggest wholesome and worthwhile models which more of us might be willing and indeed able to emulate if we realize that it does not take pious intonations and longing skyward gazes to see and experience faith. Our natural tendency is to pursue our worldly goals with only occasional consideration of the demands of faith. But perhaps in so doing we are closer to faith than we might think. All that is needed, in addition to the realistic understanding that what we do is in God's service, is trust.

There is the story of the missionary who could not translate the concept of "trust" into the language spoken by the natives of the area in which he served. But one day he hit on an idea by accident. His assistant happened to sit heavily in his chair with a great sigh of relief. "What word would you use for what you just did?" the missionary asked. The word roughly translated into "place all your weight on." The missionary's communication problem was thus solved; the obtuse "Trust" became more readily understandable.

When creative living does this, faith results, and the answer becomes plain: Life itself is the surest path to faith. For those to whom life remains a mystery, it is likely to remain one. For those who believe, no proof is needed; for those who do not, none is sufficient. The answer is revealed to those who do not strain to find it, to those who do not ask. When I see how some have lived, when I see how some have perhaps unconsciously laid aside their doubt long enough to take the kind of action God might have approved, I have my answer.

NOTES

¹C. S. Lewis, *The Problems of Pain*, McMillan Publishing Company, New York, 1962, p. 89.

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²E.G., R. R. Brenner, *The Faith and Doubt of Holocaust Survivors*, The Free Press, New York, 1980.

³P. Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1966, p. 59.

⁴From Bonhoeffer's unpublished notebooks, cited in E. Bethge, *Costly Grace*, Harper & Row, San Francisco, 1979, pp. 60-61.

⁵*Id.*, at 62.

⁶R. Grunberger, *The 12-Year Reich*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1971, p. 453.

⁷D. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, SCM Press, London/New York, 1971, p. 160.

⁸*Id.*

⁹Deuteronomy, 19:10.

¹⁰P. Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*, Harper & Row, New York, 1979, pp. 38-44.