

"On Stupidity"

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theory explains much of contemporary politics and culture.



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By JOHN LEAKE



In 1943, the Lutheran pastor and member of the German resistance, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was arrested and incarcerated in Tegel Prison. There he meditated on the question of why the German people—in spite of their vast education, culture, and intellectual achievements—had fallen so far from reason and morality. He concluded that they, as a people, had been afflicted with collective stupidity (German: *Dummheit*).

He was not being flippant or sarcastic, and he made it clear that stupidity is not the opposite of native intellect. On the contrary, the events in Germany between 1933 and 1943 had shown him that perfectly intelligent people were, under the pressure of political power and propaganda, rendered stupid—that is, incapable of critical reasoning. As he put it:

Stupidity is a more dangerous enemy of the good than wickedness. Evil can be protested against, exposed, and, if necessary, it can be prevented by force. Evil always harbors the germ of self-destruction by inducing at least some uneasiness in people. We are defenseless against stupidity. Nothing can be done to oppose it, neither with protests nor with violence. Reasons cannot prevail. Facts that contradict one's prejudice simply don't need to be believed, and when they are inescapable, they can simply be brushed aside as meaningless, isolated cases.

In contrast to evil, the stupid person is completely satisfied with himself. When irritated, he becomes dangerous and may even go on the attack. More caution is therefore required when dealing with the stupid than with the wicked. Never try to convince the stupid with reasons; it's pointless and dangerous.

To understand how to deal with stupidity, we must try to understand its nature. This much is certain: it is not essentially an intellectual, but a human defect. There are people who are intellectually agile who are stupid, while intellectually inept people may be anything but stupid. We discover this to our surprise in certain situations.

One gets the impression that stupidity is often not an innate defect, but one that emerges under certain circumstances in which people are made stupid or allow themselves to be made stupid. We also observe that isolated and solitary people exhibit this defect less frequently than socializing groups of people. Thus, perhaps stupidity is less a psychological than a sociological problem. It is a special manifestation of the influence of historical circumstances on man—a psychological side effect of certain external conditions.

A closer look reveals that the strong exertion of external power, be it political or religious, strikes a large part of the people with stupidity. Yes, it seems as if this is a sociological-psychological law. The power of some requires the stupidity of others. Under this influence, human abilities suddenly wither or fail, robbing people of their inner independence, which they—more or less unconsciously—renounce to adapt their behavior to the prevailing situation.

The fact that stupid people are often stubborn should not hide the fact that they are not independent. When talking to him, one feels that one is not dealing with him personally, but with catchphrases, slogans, etc. that have taken possession of him. He is under a spell; he is blinded; he is abused in his own being.

Having become an instrument without an independent will, the fool will also be capable of all evil, and at the same time, unable to recognize it as evil. Here lies the danger of diabolical abuse. Through this, a people can be ruined forever.

But it is also quite clear here that it is not an act of instruction, but only an act of liberation that can overcome stupidity. In doing so, one will have to accept the fact that, in most cases, real inner liberation is only possible after outer liberation has taken place. Until then we will have to refrain from all attempts to convince the stupid. In this state of affairs, we try in vain to know what "the people" actually think."

The Bible states that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. Thus, the inner liberation of man begins by living responsibly before God. Only then may stupidity be overcome.

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. "Von der Dummheit": *Widerstand und Ergebung. Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft*. S. 17–20. Muenchen, Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1951.

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Yerg999 Feb 24

This paragraph really hit home with me. I know many who fall into this description.

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Mel Feb 24

This really resonated with me today, so thank you! A cousin just told me day before yesterday that I am no longer allowed to discuss either "Covid or politics" around he and his wife. I am an independent, if I vote, and I was a Democrat for most of my younger life. He is my age, in his 60s, and what we can call a "Blue Anon"- a rabid, angry, Dem who wants to censor people, thinks Twitter "should have that right because it's a private company" and other rubbish. I of course told him, I won't be able to never talk about "Covid or politics" in his presence again- that this was censoring and no way to treat a friend or a family member. Plus, he talks politics nearly nonstop. He then wrote back that I am a "classic narcissist" and that he "doesn't hate me, but" that he is "walking away from me permanently." All because he had first sent me a puff piece on how "great a president Biden is" and I had had the temerity to simply disagree. These "shit-libs" as Jimmy Dore calls them, are really out of hand. Funny too that at Thanksgiving, he and his wife caught Covid and I had given them HCQ and ivermectin to take for five days each and they recovered rapidly.... Wonders never cease!

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