

## THE FUZZY BOUNDARY BETWEEN CHURCH AND STATE

Scripture Reading: Romans 13:1-7, RSV

In the March 1977 issue of *Spectrum*, the journal of the Association of Adventist Forums, there were two articles concerning Adventists during Hitler's regime in Germany. One was entitled "Adventists and the Nazi Temptation" by Erwin Sicher of Southwestern Adventist College in Keene, Texas, and the other was "Living in a Time of Trouble: German Adventists Under Nazi Rule" by Jack M. Patt.

Both articles took a look at what happened to the church under an evil, totalitarian government, not to focus on the horror stories but to determine how Adventists responded to a state that was ideologically and then politically hostile to the church—a state which did not respect the so-called "wall of separation" between the church and the state. In the general Christian community of Germany at that time, one group of Christians tried to harmonize the principles of National Socialism with Christianity, while the so-called "Confessional Church" was another group who would not compromise with the Nazis.

In the case of Adventist believers, they were split over how to relate to the regulations of the government. Some attended school on Saturday, others refused. Some joined the Hitler Youth Movement or the Nazi party itself, hoping for favorable treatment in employment, while others did not. Some served in the military, carrying arms, while others refused. Their refusal meant concentration camps without trial, insane asylums or, in a few cases, execution.

Government agents regularly observed church meetings and councils and the general policy was to keep quiet and cooperate as much as possible. There is a background to this that goes back to Imperial Germany during World War I. In that conflict Adventist leaders in Germany

allowed most members to espouse extreme nationalism and active military collaboration even on Sabbath. They sincerely believed that such an attitude was neither against conscience nor against the Bible. An Adventist author wrote in 1915 that "the Bible teaches first, that participation in war is not against the sixth commandment; second, that fighting on the Sabbath is no transgression of the fourth law." (*Spectrum*, March 1977, p. 12)

On January 2, 1923, German church leaders met with the General Conference leadership and confessed the error of their policies. Sicher notes that as far as he can tell from reading Adventist German publications of the period, Adventist values were those of the German middle class. This meant they reflected the dominant political views as well.

When Hitler began to come into power, Adventists were perplexed, not sure whether he was demonic or benevolent. They were also permeated with the mystique of the Fuhrer. Even our journals reflected anti-Semitic statements. Most urged caution and silence.

When Hitler finally became Chancellor of Germany, most Germans, including Adventists, welcomed him as the one who would cause a rebirth in Germany. One Adventist leader counseled his people that

Under no circumstances did any Adventist have the right to resist the government, even if the government prevented him from exercising his faith. Resistance would be unfortunate, because

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it would mark Adventists as opponents of the new state, a situation that should be prevented.  
(ibid., p. 15.)

Repeatedly Adventists adjusted to the situation and by so doing assisted the government in its purposes. Sicher says that these developments raise serious questions about the moral strength of Seventh-day Adventism in a totalitarian environment. Never at any time was there an active, official opposition to the Nazi regime. Individual protests, yes, but no official ones.

I refer to these articles not to embarrass our fellow believers in Germany but because their experience makes it clear that we as Adventists are not sure which way we are to go when the church must deal with a non-democratic state. More and more Adventists in various parts of the world are having to live their faith in a totalitarian environment and the question of their responsibilities has never been seriously studied. In such situations the boundary between church and state is very fuzzy.

In the January 2, 1981, issue of *Christianity Today*, an item appeared about the meeting in Madrid to review the Helsinki meeting on human rights. One of the most important documents studied at the conference was an 863-page report on the persecution, of a group called the "True and Free Seventh-day Adventists" in the Soviet Union. According to the article, this group has

consistently refused to compromise with what it regards as the unacceptable demands of an atheist state: to register its congregations, to bear arms, to work on Saturday. Its leader, V. A. Shelkov, died in a Soviet labor camp earlier this year at age 84. (p. 60.)

This group of Adventists has decided that it must take a much more aggressive approach to the state than many other Russian Adventists. It has amounted to a split among Adventists in Russia over this issue. Similar problems exist in other Eastern European states within the Soviet bloc. What happened in Germany is happening again.

If prophecy is correct, sooner or later we will all be faced with this predicament. My concern is that we not be split over these issues. Some splits may be inevitable but I think we should be concerned over our positions and study how to be prepared to make decisions at such a time.

Over the centuries Christians have looked to our Scripture Reading from Romans 13 for guidance on the relationship between church and state. Most commentators agree that in Romans 13 the Christian owes obedience to the state as such, to authority and to government, but that one must be careful to distinguish the state as such from a particular form of the state such as Nazism or American democracy.

It is clear, however, that we cannot give absolute obedience to the state. Even in the New Testament period the apostles broke the law and defied both Jewish and Roman authorities when they believed principles were at stake. Jesus said that we were to "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's" (Matt. 22:21).

That is precisely the point: Not everything is Caesar's. The saying in Matthew 5:39, "Resist not evil," if isolated from the rest of the New Testament, can have equally fateful results for political ethics and for our responsibilities. If absolutely obeyed it would mean that no Christian would ever say anything

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against the state regardless of its crimes.

As you are all well aware resistance is legal today only in a democracy. That is why the importance of this issue has escaped those of us who live in the Western democratic world. We regard the “opposition” as a necessary element in the balancing of power. We insist on freedom to dissent. We demand that individuals be allowed to worship according to their consciences (providing this worship does not violate the rights of others).

Totalitarian regimes are much different. Opposition is illegal. Rights granted the citizenry are only tactical in nature—as long as they serve the ideology or the purposes of the ruler, they are honored.

What, then, are the options for the Christian?

IV. *Revolution.* Some radical groups, including some clergy, do advocate violent revolution in today's world. One difficulty with this approach is that it means we must be prepared to enter into borderline situations that are extremely complex. Overthrowing a government involves deception, the weaving of a gigantic web of lies. Compromises are required. In fact,

One may say that the worse the system the greater the need for such questionable conduct, for the worst system is that which exercises the most rigorous control, is most totalitarian in form, and consequently requires extreme forms of deception. (Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, Vol. 2, p. 335.)

One must be prepared to assume enormous guilt in that kind of decision. The small group, including Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who plotted the assassination of Hitler, understood the ethical complexity of their act. They believed that it was an emergency measure which could not ever be fully “justified”: therefore, they had to accept whatever guilt murdering Hitler entailed. They believed that the alternative was the handing of a whole nation over to a maniac who would eventually cause the moral and physical collapse of the state.

You then have the problem of restoring order after a revolution—as we have seen in Iran—and that too requires many ethical compromises. The disturbing fact is that borderline situations force people to get involved in actions that cause them to violate their Christian ethics.

Many theologians believe that the church as an institution must never be involved in a revolution—it is not a potential government. On the contrary it is claimed,

the thrust of the church's witness vis-à-vis the totalitarian state must consist rather in its willingness to suffer...It must make its confession by naming and condemning what is corrupt, and by then being willing to suffer in all weakness, content simply to bear its Father's name written on its forehead (Rev. 14:1). (*Ibid.*, p. 345.)

There is a clear distinction here between the church as a *witness* against a totalitarian state and revolutionary resistance.

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The incident connected with the July 20 attempt on Hitler's life illustrates this. A theologian who had taken part, not an official of the church, acting as a citizen,

was twice led out to execution and each time recalled at the last moment for a new hearing. On both occasions, at the foot of the gallows, he uttered as his last words, "I die as a traitor, not as a pastor." He wanted to distinguish between his spiritual witness and his political resistance. (*Ibid.*, p. 345.)

There is one other point to be made: For the Christian to be true to his conscience, there is no way in any totalitarian state that he can completely avoid coming into conflict with his state.

- II. *Doing Nothing.* An alternative to revolution is to try to do nothing. Unfortunately this position also calls for ethical compromise—your silence in effect supports the state. In the 1980 issue of the *Liberty Sentinel*, there was a statement by Martin Niemoller, a Protestant clergyman, that I would like to quote,

"In Germany, the Nazis came for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I was not a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak up because I was not a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. "Then they came for the Catholics, and I was a Protestant, so I didn't speak up. Then they came for me...by that time there was no one to speak up for anyone."

- III. *Limited Resistance.* We are not talking about violence now, but using pen, voice, influence and prayer as a witness against the state. The problem in a totalitarian state is that its whole ideology is opposed to Christian faith. There is almost no point at which the Christian can be supportive.

We are not left with complete passivity either. There are ways in which we can resist:

1. We can resist by preventing the state from totally eliminating the church—a goal which it would like to achieve. This necessarily involves deception and sometimes means a dubious cooperation entered into knowingly.

We have seen this phenomenon in China where church meetings have been held secretly; this involves deception of authorities. Bibles have been smuggled in. We should try as much as possible to cooperate with government but making sure one knows where one is drawing the line with respect to being a witness for the faith.

2. Our protest is to be specific, not wholesale opposition, but against specific measures of the state. Nowhere in communism are churches offering wholesale resistance to the state, but leaders are picking issues and incidents. This is not weakness but the result of theological reflection.

It is important for totalitarian ideologies to understand that a Christian is not opposing because he has a different political or social ideology but because of a spiritual view. Opposition to specific actions

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should emerge out of a particular understanding of reality. Trying to destroy all the Jews or the physically unfit would be opposed because the doctrine from which it springs is antichristian. Christians wouldn't be opposing a theory of state and society, an ideology, but a concept of reality, man and God. This transcends politics and rulers must understand that. Often they fail to see this and view the church as a counter political force, not a spiritual one.

Following this form of protest will involve patient suffering, not necessarily active physical resistance.

Many of you have read the book *Flee the Captor*, the story of a Seventh-day Adventist who successfully smuggled condemned Jews out of Nazi Europe into Switzerland during World War II. Some years ago Brother Weidener came to Atlantic Union College to tell his story. While he never lied in response to a direct question, it was obvious that his work depended on deception. Passports and papers had to be forged, etc.

After the meeting one of my colleagues was visibly upset and said: "How can we approve immoral means to accomplish a moral end? How can we justify lying and deception to save lives?"

It is never possible in those boundary situations to deal in absolute terms—you are dealing with borderline questions. Maybe he was wrong but he had no official church policy to follow because the church had not addressed the issue. Even if the church had studied the question, I am not sure we could have come up with a pat solution. But the fact that the church would take the time to study the issue and present suggestions and recommendations may some day help us if we face similar circumstances.

- IV. *Prayer*. Most of all the church must pray for its brethren and sisters in those-places where the state recognizes no limits to its powers over the church. We must pray that God will comfort and guide them and strengthen them to suffer patiently and by that suffering, be Christ's light to the world. May we all be as faithful as they.