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Essay: "The Younger Generation's Altered View of the Concept of Führer"

*(Radio talk, February 1, 1933, Berliner Funkstunde, 5:30 pm. Bonhoeffer at the time was a student chaplain at the Technical College in Charlottenburg)*

Why all these constant questions about the younger generation, about their thoughts, their hopes, and their strengths? Why these questions at a time when, as never before, it is practical ability, acquired skills, and well qualified knowledge that are important: that is, experienced adults and certainly not youth? Is it the anxious curiosity of insecure parents who want to know how things will continue after they are gone that finds its expression here? Is it the sensationalism of our times, which is as impatient for the "new" associated with the younger generation as it is for the latest in summer fashion? Is it an unnatural basking in their own reflection on the part of youth themselves, made vain by old fools because of their uniqueness and beauty?

Often, indeed normally, it is all of these together, which is why, when there is a hint of such things, these questions should be avoided altogether. They don't ask; they provoke. The younger generation finds it degrading to be simply an object of curiosity. Only where they can assume there is a serious willingness to help them understand their own particular situation, tasks, strengths, and limits will they speak of their concerns, not to satisfy curiosity, but for the sake of their responsibility. It is certainly a healthy sign that the edginess with which these questions were pursued a few years ago has been replaced by a greater sense of calm.

There is a very sound reason for this: the problem of the younger generation, at least in its very provocative form as a "father and son" problem, has been overcome, on the one hand, because this battle has been fought out. On the other hand, however, there has also been a major shift in the entire way of looking at things. Today—in contrast to the period ten years ago—the younger generation is no longer interested in being young and in its right to youthfulness. Instead, they see themselves as included together with their parents in serving a common future, although each in his own way.

Then as today, however, the guarantor for justice, sense, and success is the "Führer." The image of the "leader," as it arose in the youth movement, has undergone considerable transformation in

the recent past, but it has ultimately become the only common denominator for the youth in all their desires, the symbol of the younger generation. The political, ideological, and religious ideas of the younger generation are symbolized in the image of the “Führer,” and its transformation mirrors their emotional and political history.

Where does this particular fire, this brilliance, and this pathos contained in the concept of leader as used by the youth of today come from? Those in their forties can assure us that in their youth such talk of a leader was completely unknown. Does the call for a leader arise from knowledge that the power of things over people has become so great and so destructive and so chaotic that only a great figure would be able to restore order and unity? Or does talk always necessarily turn to a leader when, given the awareness of the political necessity of surrendering the ideal of the individual and the engagement of human beings as a mass, as collective, everything one was forced to surrender is transferred onto the ideal of the leader and is rediscovered in him, magnified immeasurably? What other explanation is there for the peculiar tension between a cult of personality and collectivism? Or is the call for a leader a logical reflection both of our current political situation as well as of a certain youthful way of looking at life in general? That is, is it historically and psychologically necessary? And if this is the case, what are its limits? To what extent is leading and being led healthy and genuine, and when does it become pathological and excessive? Only those who give careful consideration to these questions can understand something of the nature of “the ideology of the ‘Führer’” and something of the behavior of the younger generation. Among today’s youth leaders, almost everything depends on having a good sense of direction, going beyond the vague and fantastic in order to have a clear vision. The health and rectitude of young people are at risk. To this extent, ideal and illusion are close neighbors.

Excerpt from 9. Lecture: “The Führer and the Individual in the Younger Generation”[1 (a longer version of the radio address that was subsequently published), p. 280—this is the page where he writes about the “misleader” who abuses his authority.

Those who expect something else do not see the reality, are dreamers. With their idea of leadership, they are certainly dependent on a historical necessity as well as on a necessity arising from a certain youthful sense of life, and there remains only the final fundamental question of the place that the “leader”—in the most portentous sense of the term—takes in the construction of authority and the place from where the individual comes to that authority. People and especially youth will feel the need to give a leader authority over them as long as they do not feel themselves to be mature, strong, responsible enough to themselves fulfill the demands placed in this authority. The leader will have to be responsibly aware of this clear restriction of authority. If the leader understands his function differently from that thus established, if the leader does not repeatedly provide the led with clear details on the limited nature of the task and on their own responsibility, if the leader tries to become the idol the led are looking for—something the led always hope from their leader—then the image of the leader shifts to one of a misleader, then the leader is acting improperly both toward the led as well as toward himself. The true leader must always be able to disappoint. This, especially, is part of the leader’s responsibility and objectivity. The leader must lead the led from the authority of the leader’s person to a recognition of the true authority of order and office. The leader must lead the led into responsibility toward the social structures of life, toward father, teacher, judge, state. The leader must radically reject the temptation to become an idol, that is, the ultimate authority of the led. In all soberness, the leader must confine himself to the task at hand. The leader serves the order of the state, the community, and the service of the leader can be of incomparable value; indeed it can be essential. This, however, only as long as the leader keeps strictly to the task. The leader temporarily takes decision-making powers from the individual but must always remember that this state is a temporary necessity and must always remind those who are led of this. The leader should accept this self-deprivation of rights, self-incapacitation in order to lead the individuals back to their responsibility.