

EBERHARD ARNOLD

by

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"Do not let us be a petty generation encountering great things"
"There is no God who sees a man apart from his relationship with other men."
E.A.

In the last August number of Neue Wege [New Ways] Hugo Kramer said in his "Weltrundschau" [World Panorama], that unless there is a fundamental change in the politics of the states, great and small, we are for certain facing a third World War, which as we know, is a threat to all human life.

At the moment when the "Weltrundschau" was written, the new man-made star at the boundary of the earth's atmosphere had not yet been constructed and launched. This event stirs us all up. It makes us feel the shock of leaving the age of the splitting of the atom and of having entered yet another new one. The question put decades ago is now raised all the more urgently: How is it possible in a time when men have seized all power to themselves over what was once called the creation, that a community founded on real faith in God is possible and can continue to exist today? It is one of the puzzles and wonders of history, described only unsatisfactorily by the word revolution, that the strength to do this was put into the heart of a single exceptional man.

It is true, the community founded by him did not arise at this moment. But especially when reading the "Weltrundschau" and considering the most recent event, the tremendous difference between the present time and that after WWI is forced upon us. How different reality looked then--especially German reality! How much was possible then that is no longer conceivable today. Especially in vanquished Germany, in the midst of dreams of hate and revenge (which later became reality) the cry of the blood that had been shed still aroused the conscience of those in whom the vision of a truer life lay dormant. It was the Youth Movement that first tried to find a new way of life after the collapse of the generation from which it sprang. Societies and groups of a social and educational nature came into being and over all these efforts was the flaming slogan--"No more

war!"

But most of these communities were too much like a mass movement because the religious core was lacking. A whole revolution undertaken by pure spirits failed--as each German revolution did--in this case, by failing to recognize the superior strength of the war spirit, which brutally trampled underfoot all will to peace.

Many unforgotten names of that time still ring in my ears, above all those who fell victims to the unsuccessful revolution--men who wanted the best for the whole of humanity, beyond the limits of Germany, and who sacrificed themselves for a world for which they were too good and too believing.

In that turbulent time, an extraordinary man founded a community that has survived all difficulties and attacks because of his faith and love, and it is still spreading today, bringing blessing and peace over the whole earth. These are the Bruderhofs which Eberhard Arnold founded. Although akin in spirit and will to other attempted solutions of those days, they have arisen out of the inmost nature and influence of this one exceptional man, Eberhard Arnold.

It is not easy to express what is truly important about this man. Purely biographical facts cannot make us understand such a life although they can give us an indication. We can only build upon his actions, his own words, and the words of those who were closest to him.

His wife gives us a brief but excellent presentation of his life. Eberhard Arnold was born in Königsberg in 1883. As a boy, he moved with his parents to Breslau where his father was Professor of Theology. "Even in his earliest childhood he disapproved of the inequality among men and made friends with some in the poorest circumstances." From this tendency arose the recognition in his later life: "Mankind lies in agony, and the worst sign of this state of death is property."

Later he wanted to become a doctor--and what a doctor he would have been!--but the study of theology, which his father required of him, also became a blessing in his life because for him it was only a preparation. He did not want to study simply for study's sake; what he recognized he wanted to live. And not only did he want to live it himself, he wanted his fellowmen to live it too. For it was his firm conviction that "the religious element is genuine only when it is active socially." Thus he belonged to Religious Socialism in the strictest sense, taking both social and religious problems serious--yes, with the utmost seriousness. The unforgettable saying of Leonhard Ragaz--"Not a single one may be lost" was the foundation of the constructive work of Eberhard Arnold.

But human life is short--too short to carry out the liberation and redemption of all who are lost. The individual can begin only at the point and moment given him in his own existence. So he is almost bound to fail, owing to the magnitude of his task. The answer to the question: should he throw himself into the life in which he is destined to fail, in order to do at least what is possible for him to do, depends on the firmness of his will, the strength of his faith and the depth of his love. Eberhard Arnold felt this one moment in history given him was willed by God. It would have been impossible for him not to begin to carry out the plan, that he recognized to be his task; and he, as few others, was enabled to succeed in this task. He was a genuine revolutionary in the sense of Religious Socialism, which does not simply expect the kingdom of God and his redemption in the other world

but wants to bring it about on earth, as the prophets of the Old Testament already proclaimed most powerfully. For Eberhard Arnold, this same kingdom of God on earth coincided with the call of primitive Christianity as we know it from the book of Acts. This was communism only in the sense of being a community of life, work, and goods strictly in common. In contrast to present day political communism, it recognized neither the lordship of the state nor of the church.

This community of the Bruderhofs does not want to step out of the world of history but to form historic life in it in a new way. And, as its origin is historically conditioned, it could only arise at this one moment and in this one country--to be scattered by Hitler over the world like the people of Israel barely more than a decade later, and at the same time extended. It is only to be understood therefore, within history and as active within it.

In this sense, the first bruderhof in Germany was founded in 1920 at Sannerz, Kreis Fulda, in the Rhön. Only one man could have been capable of founding such a community--a man in whom the strongest love is combined with the gift of unerring criticism and firmness, and this gift was especially rare in a world in which so many of the highest values had been shattered only shortly before. Not only the war had destroyed all values, human and divine. Among other negative minds, it was especially Nietzsche who, out of a mad will for truth, had already destroyed for western humanity the image of the Christian God, living indestructibly in himself. Nietzsche had proclaimed the power and the will to power of supermen as a substitute for the power of God and the power of Christ. Christoph Blumhardt said Nietzsche was right with regard to the actual behavior of the people of his time, but he did not agree with him. Like Blumhardt, Eberhard Arnold proclaimed the exactly opposite truth--in place of all human power he placed the complete powerlessness of man. Nothing, absolutely nothing, can come from man. He must renounce all his own power. "Should a small power of our own arise anywhere, at the same moment and to the same degree God's Spirit and authority would withdraw." " We are completely powerless, but I believe just that is the sole and deepest reason why God has called us for this service."

How was it possible in a world like ours to make the eternal Name ring out again so naturally that faith did not have to set in motion beside it a great intellectual apparatus like dialectical theology but made the Name of God rise again immediately through his own believing life? It was possible through his perfect humility, which was so genuine because it was never humility before men but always humility before God. Here God is everything and man nothing; and in order to be able to become a brick in the edifice of community he must first be thoroughly hewn, even when he has the will and capacity for community. Here a great strictness is observed--a whole year is required for testing and conforming. So it is unavoidable that many stones, even precious ones, are thrown away.

This was always caused Eberhard Arnold sorrow. He spoke with sadness of the many stones that had to be thrown away; yet he still had hope that they might one day be hewn to shape. But those who were accepted had also still to be worked upon. This was never done by the man, Eberhard Arnold, but always only from the viewpoint of the message with which he was charged. The life that is demanded here is not easy. It depends on its members' readiness for sacrifice.

The Arnolds welcomed all sorts of people. After Eberhard Arnold's death, a friend wrote to

him as if he were still alive, "Your house had an open door and neither of you asked anyone who he might be. You would have received some strange answers!" He made the choice after the strict test as to whether the one in question, no matter who he might be, would fit into the community of brothers. Another friend wrote, "Your devoutness was always cheerful." This cheerfulness certainly sprang from the complete fulfillment of his mission and from the certainty with which he measured the people by his mission. He knew human beings very well and differentiated them with all the discernment of his mind and the unerring purity of his heart--he received them with kindness and strictness and never without humor, which infected his friends, so that one of them could say, "You can cope with the most pigheaded peasant and the most obdurate churchman."

This rare gift of discernment, which did not lessen love, gave this man the strength to found a community, which was different from all the other communities at that time, not only in that it still exists today. It was faith in the mustard seed through which this movement of the Bruderhof has become a plant spread over the whole world. Today there are bruderhofs in England, USA, Paraguay, Uruguay and Argentina. I was exceptionally fortunate in getting to know some members of the Bruderhof personally. Quite a long time ago, a Swiss couple visited me on their way from Paraguay to Germany to help to build up the first bruderhof. Through another brother who was with me a short time ago, I learned that this community, Sinnthal, near Brückenau, is already growing, and is all the more in need of help from outside. Der Pflug, the Bruderhof periodical, gives us news of the bruderhofs and is full of truth and wisdom. It was printed till now in England but reappeared a short time ago in Germany. A unique department of work of this movement is the hospital in Primavera, near Asuncion, the capital of Paraguay. This house, built with the greatest care--doubtless out of the property of richer brothers--with the help especially of the natives, seems to me to be on a par with Lambarene.

Leonard Ragaz, too, had faith for a better community and hope for one. He, too, believed in the kingdom of God for the earth. But his way was different from Eberhard Arnold's. It did not start with a small community but sought to build up a church where the members were not bound together in daily life, work, and community of goods. He, too, began with a small group of faithful followers, but his small flock split fatefully after his death. Both were still men of the time before the splitting of the atom, although division among men, which also split community, had already taken place to a considerable degree through the spirit and evil spirit of the age. Yet neither of them gave up his highest hope.

Neither of them lived an easy life, nor did they require it of men. Both knew the meaning of sacrifice. For no matter how human life may change, the problem of time and eternity, life and death remains the same. Religious Socialism is also a way of shaping the life and death of men more worthily. Between life and death there always stands as the ultimate, that which reconciles God with men--sacrifice. Not only the whole Bible speaks of sacrifice from Abraham to Moses, from Isaiah, God's servant, to Christ, but also every hour of our life lived in earnest.

"The candle must be lit; if one wished to spare it, it would give no light." Eberhard Arnold and Leonhard Ragaz did not spare themselves. And so we see them as two figures standing together

like candles on one candle holder, giving light to their age and to ours--sending their light out into the darkness, expecting the kingdom of God, "which has the same earthly ring and the same clay color as the lost paradise."

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