Civil Courage

What really lies behind the lament about the lack of civil courage? In these years we have encountered much bravery and self-sacrifice but civil courage almost nowhere, even among ourselves. Only an altogether naive psychology would trace this deficiency back simply to personal cowardice. The reasons behind this are quite different. In the course of a long history, we Germans have had to learn the need for obedience and the power thereof. We saw the meaning and greatness of our life in the subordination of all personal wishes and ideas under the commission that came to be ours. Our gaze was directed upward, not in slavish fear but in the free trust that beheld a career in the com-mission and a vocation in the career. The readiness to follow an order from “above” rather than one’s own discretion arises from and is part of the justified suspicion about one’s own heart. Who would contest that, in obedience, commission, and career, the German has again and again accomplished the utmost in bravery and life commitment?

But he safeguarded his freedom—where in the world was freedom spoken of more passionately than in Germany, from Luther to the philosophy of idealism?—by seeking to free himself from self-will in order to serve the whole: career and freedom were to him two sides of the same thing. However, in doing so he misjudged the world; he did not reckon with the fact that the readiness to subordinate and commit his life to the commission could be misused in the service of evil. When such misuse occurred, the exercise of the career itself became questionable, and all the basic moral concepts of the Germans were shaken. It became apparent that Germans still lacked one decisive and fundamental idea: that of the need for the free, responsible act, even against career and commission. In its place came the irresponsible lack of scruples, on the one hand, and self-tormenting scruples that never led to action, on the other. But civil courage can grow only from the free responsibility of the free man. Only today are Germans beginning to discover what free responsibility means. It is founded in a God who calls for the free venture of faith to responsible action and who promises forgiveness and consolation to the one who on account of such action becomes a sinner.

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