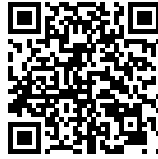




# ALFRED DELP: RESISTANCE AND THEOLOGY

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Is there a connection between Alfred Delp's theology and his resistance, between his thought and his martyrdom?

I would like to address this question by comparing key statements of pro-Nazi Catholic theologians with Alfred Delp's [theological and philosophical reflections](#). This raises, however, another question: was Delp a "modern" or a "traditional" theologian? For it was precisely the "moderns" among German theologians, those who sought a contemporary theology, who wanted a reform of the liturgy, and wanted to strengthen the position of the laity in the church, who were likely to justify Nazism and theological and practical collaboration. Among them were, for example, Karl Adam, Joseph Lortz and Michael Schmaus, whose approaches left their mark on Catholic theology long after 1945. They did not appreciate the reactionary or traditionalist elements of National Socialism, but saw in it an enormous potential for innovation that they wanted to use for their [reform projects in church and theology](#).

An understanding of Delp's history is fundamental to the explanations that follow; this is followed by the theological themes of "Nature and Grace" and "Image of the Church and Understanding of the Church," complemented by a presentation of the effects of the heroic ideal in theology. Each of these three points begins with a brief presentation of the statements of pro-Nazi theologians, among whom Karl Adam is especially prominent.

## 1. Delp's Conception of History

The basis of Delp's conception of history is [his confrontation](#) with Heidegger's work *Sein und Zeit* ([Being and Time](#)), which he was one of the first to conduct within the Catholic Church. After the war, when a Catholic Heideggerian school was formed with famous representatives, Delp's criticism of Heidegger was laughed at and rejected—he did really understand Heidegger and argued not philosophically, but according to his worldview. In particular, the interpretation as heroic tragedy was a misinterpretation. In view of the recent and still difficult discussion about Heidegger's relation to National Socialism or about the relation of his philosophy to National Socialism, Delp's criticism takes on a new acuity. However, I do not wish to discuss here whether *Sein und Zeit* already contains traces of Heidegger's [later adherence](#) to National Socialism, but only to present Delp's analysis and critique and the importance both acquired for his understanding of man and history.

In *Sein und Zeit*, Heidegger wants to question being and its meaning without restriction, without

committing himself to anything from the outset. The question of being presupposes something that has an understanding of being; this is what Heidegger calls the *Da-Sein* (= the subject that asks the question). The latter notes that both the questioning of being and the understanding of being are part of itself. The Dasein must therefore only look at itself in order to be able to answer the question about being. This is done with the help of the phenomenological method as description and interpretation of the facts of consciousness. Heidegger calls this the existential analysis of Dasein—it serves to describe and unfold Dasein's understanding of itself. Dasein thus interprets itself—and the explanation of this interpretation is, for Heidegger, ontology, the doctrine of being. Metaphysics is thus less a doctrine on Dasein than the event of the self-interpretation of Dasein. Now, for Heidegger, the essence of Dasein lies in existence.

The analysis of Dasein leads to the recognition that being means being in the world; that is to say being active in the sense of "being concerned." The subject is confronted with an object; but the world cannot be grasped from the objects, it must be understood from the subject: the active being-in-the-world is thus the foundation of knowledge.

An important part of being-in-the-world is the existential of sensibility, which means the mood or the being-tuned. Dasein learns there that it is and must be—its origin, however, remains hidden from it. Heidegger speaks here of the being-ness of Dasein.

Heidegger then asks whether there is a state of being that makes being manifest as a unity, and finds the answer in anguish. This anguish prevents Dasein from being completely absorbed in its being-activity and directs the gaze towards the whole, towards the extreme that awaits Dasein: death. Dasein is being-to-death; this shows to Dasein that it goes towards nothingness and that it comes from nothingness.

Thus, Dasein is radically temporal and finite, thus also being as such is finite. Time is the last determinateness of being. The meaning of being is that it becomes. Now, when the radical contingency of Dasein appears, Dasein decides on its destiny and is "determined" to perform its task. From the confrontation with nothingness, Dasein jumps back into a positive conception of life. It becomes its own lawgiver; it gives itself a meaning beyond being-to-death: the mastery of life. This "determination" is for Heidegger the revelation of the inner absoluteness and divinity of Dasein.

It is precisely this, says Delp, this proclamation of courage, strength, and determination, that Heidegger

carried to the hearts of young people, because it supposedly took them out of insecurity and existential angst and into a heroic existence.

Delp's philosophical critique starts at this turn from the experience of nothingness into determination. This turn is a leap, not only in real life, but also in thinking, because there is nothing in the being of Dasein that could provide the reason for such determination. Delp calls this courage to live a great deception, because it is without content and without reason, i.e., also ultimately without meaning. Moreover, this "heroism of finitude" becomes dangerous because of its aesthetics: "Over all these analyses of sorrow: contingency, thrownness, determination, last crash into nothingness, death—over all this lies a somber beauty" (II, 121).

The tragedy of this philosophy, he argues, is that it sought to gain the meaning of being, but can only point to the lifelong preoccupation with mastering life. Moreover, it shows a striking resemblance to the Germanic myth, interpreted in a folk-religious way, of the hero who faces the struggle with full commitment and determination, even if his downfall is sealed—a resemblance that the representatives of the Catholic Heidegger school did not notice or did not want to notice.

At this point, Delp now brings his worldview argument into the field. Heidegger's claim to make ultimate statements about being cannot be free of worldview, because in the claim to ultimate validity metaphysics and worldview touch each other. Heidegger presents a closed system of a world view, which also implies a certain understanding of man. This understanding is characterized by an ideal of existence, namely the heroic existence, which is carried by the decision to master life.

Delp himself is fascinated by this philosophy of decision, as well as by its departure from finitude and from man—but in the propagation of a total finitude it is for him a myth, dogged immanence that cannot look beyond the world. Delp criticizes Heidegger for not even remaining faithful to this principle of finitude, but for making man absolute in his determination; for this, after all, reveals the divinity of Dasein.

"Where finitude would become practical, one prefers to remain infinite and autonomous. There one puts, on one's own authority, over this 'nothing,' a self-made ideal. The determination, the heroicity of nothingness, is nothing but a denial of the finitude that one had previously emphasized with so much pathos" (II, 137).

[John May, in his commentary in the online edition of [\*theologie.geschichte\*](#), points out an interesting parallel that has come to light in the Christian-Buddhist dialogue. The absolutization of finitude in Heidegger can be compared to the re-ontologization of nothingness in Buddhist philosophy. Nothingness, which was understood as the place where non-self becomes True Self (Kyoto School), where non-self means self-forgetfulness and selflessness, becomes in the wider reception a "something" inherent in every being - the Buddha-nature, which is considered the highest realization of nothingness. Just as Heidegger's absolutization of finitude represents a denial of finitude for Delp, so Buddha-nature as reontologized nothingness can be understood as a denial of nothingness. See also John D'Arcy May, [\*Transcendence and Violence. The Encounter of Buddhist, Christian and Primal Traditions\*](#).]

Delp's judgment, then, for all its fascination, is clear: Heidegger's philosophy cannot be interpreted or assimilated to Christianity in its consequences. It is not a propaedeutic of Christianity. Nevertheless, this does not prevent him from receiving the concept of Dasein's decision to master its task in life for his conception of man and his understanding of history. However, he is careful not to transfer any of it to God or Jesus Christ. This area of transcendence, of the supernatural of the Christ-revelation, is determined for him by tradition, revelation and its interpretation. On this basis, his theological critique of Heidegger's radical concept of the finitude of being is also articulated. The critique of the lack of justification of the leap into determination and of the conflation of philosophy and worldview, on the other hand, is a philosophical critique that could also have been formulated by a follower of critical rationalism.

[Cf. the so-called Münchhausen trilemma, according to which the attempt of an ultimate justification leads either to a regressus in infinitum, a circular reasoning or a dogmatic positing.]

Delp's engagement with Heidegger left a lasting mark on his understanding of history. The question of the meaning of history and the historicity of man occupied him until his death, and the answers he gives in his more theoretical writings are reflected in his sermons and spiritual writings and ultimately in his fate in imprisonment and death. [See Delp's *Folgenden Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschichte* (*Following World History and Salvation History*) (1941); *Der Mensch und die Geschichte* (*Man and History*) (1943); *Das Rätsel der Geschichte* (*The Riddle of History*) (Bequest); *Die Welt als Lebensraum des Menschen* (*The World as Man's Habitat*) (Bequest); *Der Mensch vor sich selbst* (*Man before Himself*) (Bequest), in [\*Gesammelte Schriften\*](#), II, 321-557].

The question of history arises from the subjective experience of history. This can be the turning point or the solidification of a condition caused by an act or event. In the experience of history, the becoming character of the world is revealed. This change of history results in the decision of man, whether he is a maker of history or one who must endure and master it. History thus constantly reminds people of their responsibility, refers them to their conscience.

The question now is, does history have a meaning at all? Does it run according to a plan? It is not the final place of man's perfection; its meaning is not man's salvation. Also, God is not to be experienced directly in history; God does not intervene constantly in the history. On the other hand, history has a plan from creation; namely, the task of being the image and re-enactment of the Absolute. The meaning of history is the unfolding of the "order of imagery." In this sense, there is a development of history—it goes towards a final state; but it also finally has an end, because it does not itself represent salvation.

People are bound by ethical orders as well as by substantive orders. The former imply a direct commitment to God; the latter to the real itself. On both levels people are required to decide; and on both levels they can fall short—in the ethical decision or in the factual one. The former misconduct is sin; the latter disregard and abuse of being, caused by error, sloppiness, arrogance, or the like.

History places humans into always "new situations," in which they are to prove themselves. Independently of the supernatural order, history has a double meaning—it is to realize the image that God had of it in creation; that is, to fulfill the order of imagery; and it is the place of probation for man; the probation of faithfulness to God and of factual competence and readiness for responsibility.

Are salvation and salvation history now on a completely different level than world history?

Independently of the meaning of history discussed so far, there is for Delp a second word of God that brings about an immediacy of God within history that history does not have of itself. This is the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. In the incarnation, God once again breaks through the order of history and establishes the order of Christ. This is superhistorical, but historically effective; it has its beginning in the election of Israel and the proclamation of the prophets. However, the Christ order does not suspend the "normal" order of history; it is not another level apart from worldly history. Thus, in addition to its double natural sense, history acquires a third—that of being a space for the encounter with God in the Christ order. Natural and supernatural order, however, remain separate in the medium of history. As John May aptly puts it in his commentary: the Christ order works itself out in history and not as history.

Is not the idea of a progressive realization of the "order of imagery" much too optimistic in view of the supremacy and fertility of evil? The ethical decision of man is always demanded even under these circumstances; every historical hour is suitable for it. But there are also historical situations or constellations which must be recognized and tracked down as such, in which the signs of the times must be recognized. In these situations, both the morally good and the factually appropriate decision must be made. Now the fruitfulness of evil often stems from the fact that those who do not shy away from the ethical wrong decision, that is, those who are prepared to take the greater risk, are often "more clear-sighted and finer-nerved" in identifying such situations.

"There may be many reasons to understand, but few to excuse. And this then is the most seductive mask and the most demonic power of evil, that it tackles the posed problems, represents (and corrupts) genuine progress, and in the name of the genuine also and profoundly does, and demands, the unreal. Only this brings about the always occurring confusion of heads and hearts, through which evil rules and remains in regency. Evil is so fruitful in history not because it is more historical or more historically real than good, or because all history is of the devil; it is fruitful because good is so barren, because it misunderstands tradition as conservative sleepiness and habit, because it trivializes ethical neatness into Biedermeier bravado and carelessness; because it so often places the probation of life not in the space of life but beside it" (II, 412).

This is a relatively clear critique of National Socialism, addressing precisely its innovative or perceived innovative character. But Delp exposes this as spurious, as a pretense of progress that spoils real progress. At the same time, it is a harsh criticism of the Church and of Christian piety, which have not recognized that what is decisive is probation in this life and in this history.

For Delp, evil is not something superhuman or superhistorical, but comes from the highest reality of man—from his freedom. It becomes effective only through man himself—that is why its combat must also be done through man's engagement in this history. Even the suffering of history must be something active:

"Where man strives for this [ethical orderliness—LS] solely by bypassing the bond to the historical probationary space, he misunderstands himself, misses history, leaves it unilaterally to the uninhibited and unopposed forces of the other, possibly erroneous view; violates the law of imagery, and endangers even transcendent faithfulness. Man is just not only there to stand in history or to suffer history. Even this must still be an active engagement, a conscious consummation. Man must make

history" (II, 416f).

Therefore, people must not turn away from history, even when it is far from what God intended for them. But they must not sacrifice to it their transcendent bond and their conscience.

"When history or one of its moments of reality degenerates, then the hour has come in which man must not betray history, but in which he must also not sacrifice to it the freedom and God immediacy of his being. If the two directional indicators of his life no longer coincide but cross each other, man must take them both as his cross. Neither the flight into the 'eternal' nor the betrayal in history will save him; but only the tremendous effort to hold both together at least in his own will and commitment. This is the first law of human freedom, and to this law freedom must stand, even at the price of personal-historical catastrophe" (II, 381).

Heidegger's traces are thus unmistakable in Delp's understanding of history. The human being thrown into existence is determined by his historicity; he is faced with the decision to prove himself; he accepts his finitude. But as a Christian, unlike the tragic hero in Heidegger or in Germanic myth, he knows why he is doing this. It is about the realization of God's plan of creation and about his salvation, which he cannot find beside history or past history.

Delp is equally "contemporary" and "traditional" in his understanding of world history and salvation history. He receives the most modern philosophy for his anthropology, but remains in more traditional waters with regard to the relationship between nature and grace. "Modern" is his synopsis of world history and salvation history—for him there are no parallel levels of history, but only one; and the order of salvation does not override the natural order of history. At the same time, the traditional Neo-Scholastic distinction between nature and supernature shines through; and ideas of natural law also play a role. With regard to his ethical decision, man is bound not only to the biblical revelation, here the Decalogue, but also to the natural law, which here is not to be understood in natural scientific terms, but as natural law.

Even if some of Delp's writings at the beginning of Nazi rule betray a certain fascination with the new things that were on the move there, in his later writings on history he is resistant to understanding National Socialism as an innovative force and wanting to use it to drive changes in theology and the church. It is precisely this impression of progress that he exposes as a dangerous and demonic mask of evil.



[This concerns above all Delp's book project *Der Aufbau. Die Existenzmächte des deutschen Menschen* (*The Construction. The Existential Powers of the German Man*), the draft of which is found in [I, 195-202](#), and also the texts under the title, *Männerapostolat: Die Katholische Aktion des Mannes* (Men's Apostolate The Catholic Action of Man), in: [I, 69-109](#).]

## 2. The Relationship of Nature and Grace

By nature, Neo-Scholasticism understood the creative endowment of a being with all that is necessary for its natural development and destiny; but it completely disregarded man's relationship with God. Grace was strictly separated from this nature in order to preserve the gift character of grace. God was not allowed to be presented as someone obligated to grace because human nature demanded it.

Nature in this context is a philosophical term that does not contain any biological meaning; nor does it correspond to the colloquial use of the word "nature."

In contrast to Neo-Scholasticism, pro-national socialist theologians regarded nature and grace as belonging together, and organically assigned the two to each other. Becoming a Christian was regarded by them as a synthesis of nature and supernature—therefore grace needed an empirically tangible basis. The carrier of this synthesis was human nature, specifically German nature. For nature never existed abstractly, but always in a specific imprint through "blood and soil." There is an intimate connection between German nature and grace, so that the life of grace is formed according to the German national character. Piety and theology, for example, were always *völkisch* for Adam; and he vehemently opposed all attempts from the Catholic side to deny this connection. The general human was secondary compared to man's belonging to a certain community of blood and destiny. A universalistic or humanistic view could only find his derision. Adam went so far as to say that if German blood is the basis of grace, then the bond between people of the same blood is also stronger than that between Christians of different blood.

But what happens to the concept of nature in this interpretation? A purely philosophical concept that refers to the nature of a living being is biologized and racially charged. Purely externally, the concept of nature has not changed in this transformation process. Therefore, Adam could keep the scheme of the togetherness of nature and grace unchanged after 1945. He only had to disguise the *völkisch* and racist interpretation.

Delp, on the other hand, emphasizes the twofold revelation through creation and through grace. [Cf. *Kirche in der Zeitenwende* (*Church at the Crossroads*), III. Offenbarung (Revelation), in: [I, 126-13](#).]. In these two orders God speaks to man. In the order of creation, people recognize God through created things; in the order of grace, God breaks through the narrow confines of nature and places himself in a personal relationship with people. The order of nature includes the division of people into peoples, whereas the order of grace transcends time and history, and is—as Delp says—“*übevölkisch*.”

This distinction between nature and grace is a classical (new) scholastic argumentation. By way of it, Delp attests to *völkisch* religiosity that it remains purely in the realm of the natural; that is, it can at best be a kind of true natural religion, which it also fails to be due to wrong starting points. Supernatural religion does not come into view at all in the *völkisch* religiosity.

Delp applies the relation of nature and supernature also to the question whether the ecclesiastical and the “*völkisch*” man are necessarily in contradiction to each other—and here his interest seems to be rather to bring the two areas together. This is done in the context of a series of sermons on the contemporary service of the German man in the years after 1933, in which Delp reflects on the signs of the times and the foundations of Catholicism in order to give Catholic men help for their current lives in the context of the male apostolate.

The problem of “*völkischer Mensch—kirchlicher Mensch*” was ultimately the problem of the relationship between nature and supernature. The *völkisch* man stemmed from creation; the ecclesiastical man from the new creation in Jesus Christ. The natural possibilities of man were decisively weakened by the Fall, but not completely abolished—the traditional Catholic position. Thus, the natural man could no longer accomplish what he actually could by his nature and what he was obliged to do.

The ecclesiastical man had never left creation, the world, the people, because the order of grace did not abolish nature and history. The natural world is elevated in it to the new creation. This means that the “*völkische*” man can actually realize himself fully only in the ecclesiastical. Only from the supernature can a pure nature be lived. But if the “*völkisch*” man does not want to go beyond nature, and limits himself to it, then, however, ecclesiastical and “*völkisch*” man would not come together; which means doom for the latter and his people from Delp's perspective.

Delp does not seem to be completely uninterested in the *völkisch* idea. His diction is also quite alienating in parts. Jörg Seiler interprets this in his commentary in such a way that Delp tried to explain

the power of the Christian message in the understanding horizon of his time—a closeness to the *völkisch* thinking should not be attested to the writing about the male apostolate. In the end, national thinking is absorbed by the bond between man and supernature, which does not allow any one-sidedness on the level of nature. Delp makes no secret of the fact that the strength of the ecclesiastical man for the service to the people comes from the Church and not from the blood. Service to the people without leading the people back to God would not be true service to the people for Delp. This means that everything Delp says about the "people," which may be reminiscent of *völkisch* thinking, is determined by the binding of the natural order to the supernatural one.

In that this bond is the decisive thing, Seiler is absolutely right. But in my estimation, a certain fascination of Delp with the "new age" cannot be denied. Delp emphasizes the readiness of the will, which now—unlike before—is to be found everywhere: a readiness to think and act beyond one's own ego. That Delp does not understand this in a "national-monistic, *völkisch* or collectivistic" (Seiler) way is to be admitted, but he considers it possible to build on this attitude, which others, after all, interpret precisely in a *völkisch* and collectivistic way. Thus, there is something about the "new age" that lends itself to building the Christian message on it, but then also setting it apart from it. This is similar to Delp's treatment of Heidegger's thought, which he fundamentally criticizes, but also accepts in one crucial point: in the topos of man, who is called into the decision to master his life. This human being, however, does not stand in a meaningless space, as in Heidegger, but is—like the "*völkische Mensch*"—bound to the supernatural order. The fact that Delp sees the possibility of a connection at certain points is certainly also connected with his assessment of modern times and modernity in comparison to the Middle Ages, in which "ecclesiastical and *völkisch* man" still formed a unity for him.

However, Delp also draws clear boundaries. When he brings nature and supernature together, he is not concerned, like Karl Adam, with creating a *völkisch*-racist basis of theology, i.e., a particularistic theology, but with asserting and defending the greater right of supernature. That he does not want to create a particularistic theology, for which the German national is closer to the German Catholic than the baptized foreigner, becomes clear from the fact that he emphasizes the universal character of the order of grace and, based on natural law and the doctrine of creation, speaks of universal human rights. The latter in particular is beautifully demonstrated in the sermons for the feast of St. Elizabeth and for All Saints' Day in 1941, both of which address the topic of "euthanasia."

For Delp, St. Elizabeth, who is, after all, a princess, reveals a message of the meaning of "the noble man." This meaning consists in the bond between power and right: the bearer of power is at the service

of right and must guarantee right to men. Elizabeth recognizes, in Delp's words, that man is in possession of rights which no prince or ruler may touch. Further, power must be understood as service to all. Elizabeth's diaconal activity is not a personal quirk, but a lived worldview.

"Those that gathered around Elizabeth were not the people who stepped forth with important, these were not the people with blazing eyes and the straight backs, these were not the people of great positions, these were the cripples and the sick and the brooding and the poor and the outcasts of life and of existence" (III, 291f).

Even in these people, despite all misery and decrepitude, the image of God becomes visible as something worthy of promotion and protection. Delp thus connects the idea of human rights with the image of God. In this, he articulates a serious message to the German people:

"And who would take it upon himself to destroy an image and likeness, a thought, a will, a love of the Lord God! ...Woe to him upon whom a human being was destroyed, upon whom an image of God was desecrated, even if it was in its last throes and even if it was only a memory of a human being!" (III, 292)

The All Saints Sermon takes up the content of the [1941] propaganda film about euthanasia entitled, *Ich klage an (I Accuse)*. The title stems from the fact that in this film a legal system is to be indicted that forces man to live under all circumstances, and thus indirectly a God who allows such a thing. Delp bluntly calls the statements of the film a threefold lie. First, the pure happiness of the couple and the continuing success that prevailed before the wife's illness is completely unrealistic and pretends that without the illness everything would have remained the same. Furthermore, the appeal to the tear glands and the resulting pity lulls the audience and prevents a rational discussion. Thirdly, the eternal talk of love and redemption is a distraction from the harshness of existence which only seeks to seduce to a more comfortable solution.

Delp interprets the basic message of this film as an escape from the harshness of suffering and from the responsibility of caring. Man remains man even in the worst condition, and he remains an appeal to the ability to love and the power of sacrifice of his environment. Man is deprived of the chance of probation, because suffering is also a place of historical probation. This may seem cynical to some of today's advocates of active euthanasia, but it means taking man and his responsibility radically seriously. Delp does not stop there, but calls euthanasia not only a lie and an escape, but also a rebellion against God and an encroachment on the inviolable rights of man.

"That people will die who let man die, whether it be man in the very extreme situation. It is indignation against man, who by his birth and existence alone has rights which no one can take from him and which no one may touch without desecrating man and desecrating himself and despising himself" ([III, 268f](#)).

That churchmen stand up for human rights may seem natural to us after the pontificate of John Paul II, but at that time it was tantamount to a revolution, since until then the Catholic Church had condemned the French Revolution and the Declaration of the Rights of Man. As far as I know, a positive appreciation of human rights within the Catholic Church appears for the first time in 1941, in the context of [the Catholic resistance](#), especially the Committee for Religious Affairs, with whose members Father Augustin Rösch and Father Lothar König Delp were in [close contact](#). On the one hand, Delp gives a religious legitimization of human rights by invoking the image of God, but he also speaks of the fact that these rights come to man by birth; that is, as human beings. This high regard for human rights was obviously easier in National Socialist Germany for those theologians who, because of their Neo-Scholastic orientation, held to natural law.

[The Kreisau Circle used the term "ius nativum" to circumvent or overcome controversial theological problems regarding natural law; cf. Michael Pope, [Alfred Delp S.J. im Kreisauer Kreis](#), 185-193, esp. 189-193.]

The reflections on the *Immaculata*, the Immaculate Conception of Mary, also belong to the theme of "nature and grace." For Karl Adam, they belong to the context of the myth of the Aryan Jesus and form the climax of his racist transformation of the concept of nature. Adam did not go so far as to deny Jesus' Jewishness altogether, but he did qualify it to the extent that Jesus could not have been a Judean full-blooded Jew, but certainly had some drops of other blood in him because he came from the "racially mixed" Galilee. Also, Jesus' "racial" independence from Judaism then was due to his mother. Adam interpreted Mary's liberation from original sin as the endowment of Mary with the noblest hereditary traits. Therefore, he said, Catholics need not worry about the question of Jesus' Jewish ancestry.

"It is personally an uplifting thought to me that in the genetic stock, in the hereditary mass, which Mary transmitted to her divine Son, there were alive, thanks to a mysterious guidance of God supervising the development of her race, the best, noblest dispositions and powers which the human race had at its disposal. This view is based on the truth of faith that Mary was conceived without original sin—'without original sin,' that is, also without the consequences of original sin, that is, in perfect purity and beauty, that is, with the noblest dispositions and powers. It is this dogma of Mary's immaculata conceptio which

makes all those malicious questions and complaints, as if we had to recognize in Jesus, in spite of all his merits, a 'Jew-stemming,' a completely absurd question from the Catholic point of view. For it testifies to us that Jesus' mother Mary had no physical or moral connection whatsoever with those ugly dispositions and forces which we condemn in the full-blooded Jew. She is, by God's miracle of grace, beyond those Jewish hereditary traits, a super-Jewish figure. And what is true of the mother is all the more true of the human nature of her son." [Karl Adam, "Jesus der Christus und wir Deutsche" (Jesus and us Germans), in *Wissenschaft und Weisheit* 10 (1943) 73-103, here: 91.]

God thus appears as a planned eugenicist; salvation history as a process of "grafting" hereditary traits. This conflation of dogmatic teachings of the Catholic Church with Nazi racial ideology was not contained in some private paper of Adam's, but appeared in 1943 in a theological journal, the Franciscan *Wissenschaft und Weisheit* (*Science and Wisdom*).

On the other hand, Alfred Delp's reflections on the Immaculata in his homily of December 8, 1941, are very different. The Immaculate Conception exemplifies in a human being the exaltation of man in grace ["Immaculata" (1941), in [III, 36-45](#)]. The *Sitz im Leben* for the proclamation of this dogma was, in Delp's perspective, the struggle against the absolute materialism and naturalism of the 19th century (the dogma was defined in 1854). The Immaculata, in Delp's eyes, stands against the law of a biologicistic order, against the judgment of a person's worth by his blood, against the law of the collective that tests people for their usefulness and eliminates them if they fail. She is an I, a person accepted by God, blessed by God and overcomer of everything demonic. In her has happened exemplarily what grace intends for all people—they only have to let themselves be blessed.

Another spiritual address of Delp about Mary, which he probably held on the eve of a Marian feast in a community of Jesuits—the exact date is not known—has a different character ["Maria," in [III, 215-219](#)]. Here Delp does not foreground the commonality of people with Mary, but on the contrary emphasizes the gap between the Immaculata and the guilty people standing before her, who are members of a great community of guilt—by this community is meant the German people. "Thus, we stand in this hour before the high woman, before the world of holy divine order: in everything her weak, destroyed counter-image" ([III, 218](#)).

In this context, Delp makes an allusion to Mary being Jewish, which seems almost like the reverse image of Adam's utterances:

"Wherever Mary is venerated today, she is called by the word that concludes all her greatness and glory in itself: Immaculata! ...Whatever may seem beautiful and high and desirable to men is fulfilled in her. Natural nobility, down to the most biological sense of the word: King's daughter from the house of David" (III, 216).

So, no preservation of Mary from Jewish hereditary traits, but conscious naming of her Jewish descent. If now the impression arises that Delp does here the same as Adam only under reversed conditions, one must make clear what he actually says here. According to the testimony of the Gospels, Mary did not come from the house and lineage of David at all, but her husband Joseph; and it is very unlikely that Delp was not aware of this. If, nevertheless, he uses here the most "biological" sense of the word, and if we consider this in the context of the recognition of the great guilt of the German people, who are facing Mary, then it can really only be a matter here of making clear that Mary is a Jew (and therefore, of course, Jesus is also a Jew), and of drawing attention to the guilt of the German people, which consists in the persecution and extermination of the Jews. However, this statement remains very coded.

### 3. The Understanding of Church

The view of the Church as a community and the orientation to experience and encounter became important for a theology that affirmed National Socialism. However, the roots of these concepts go back further.

Even before the time of National Socialism, "community" was the defining idea of ecclesiology for Karl Adam. In the first editions of his famous book, *Das Wesen des Katholizismus* (*The Spirit of Catholicism*), he interpreted the nature of the Church as a community. For him, the divine becomes real in the Church, but only insofar as the Church is community. In the mystery of the Incarnation of Jesus, the Church was already given as an organic community. Adam took up the community ideology of the Weimar period in his doctrine of the Church. This ideology expressed dissatisfaction with the Weimar Republic and democracy and attacked the parliamentary system, rationalism and liberalism. In the background was the communitarianism of the youth movement, and especially the war experience of World War I.

Democracy and pluralism were not seen as an opportunity for a better life, but as the cause of conflict and disunity. Therefore, such a diffuse concept as "community" could become a counter-model to parliamentary democracy. This promised the solution to all problems by pretending to resolve all

antagonisms in a higher third. This was the basis of the attractiveness of the concept of community for theologians who wanted to abolish the conflictual opposites of nature and grace, but also of laity and clergy, of local and universal Church. This concept allowed them to leave behind both the Neo-Scholastic individualism of salvation and the view of the Church as an institution of salvation. At the same time, it created the conditions for cooperation with National Socialism.

Closely connected with the concept of "community" was the idea of "experiencing" this community and of a community-creating primordial experience. The community thinking of the Weimar period, which continued in National Socialism, was rooted in the war experience of the First World War. Adam was also deeply influenced by it. Like many others, he interpreted the beginning of the war in August 1914 as an overwhelming experience of the unity and community of the German people. This community abolished all political, social, and confessional barriers. "Experience" and "Encounter" became at the same time an epistemological instrument. With its help, Adam rejected the claim of Neo-Scholasticism to justify faith with the help of natural reason. Adam now grounded faith in the irrational, in the encounter. This, however, was not understood as something purely subjective, but as an event that transcended individuality, within a community shaped by authority and hierarchy.

I would like to present Alfred Delp's understanding of the Church primarily with the help of a text he wrote in prison at the end of 1944 or the beginning of 1945. ["Reflexionen über die Zukunft" (Reflections on the Future), "[IV. Das Schicksal der Kirchen](#)" (Fate of the Churches), in [IV, 318-323](#)]. It is a clear-sighted look into the future of the Church. The fate of the Church would not depend on the political-tactical skill of its leaders, but on its turning to the real need of people in all areas of life. Thus, for Delp, the Church is essentially a diaconal Church. It has to return to its basic function of *diakonia*.

"No man will believe in the message of salvation and of the Savior until we have bloodied ourselves in the service of man who is physically, psychologically, socially, economically, morally, or otherwise sick" ([IV, 319](#)).

This may sound as self-evident as the commitment to human rights, but it is just as little so. For Karl Adam, the self-executions of the Church included dogma, cultus, and morality, i.e., preaching, administering the sacraments, and educational activity, but not diaconal commitment. Adam did propagate the unity of the truth of faith and the life of faith, but he sought it in "experience" and not in [the encounter], in turning to the world and the needs of people. The fact that Adam almost completely omitted the diaconal character of the Church from his ecclesiology enabled him to propagate a church



of the strong and healthy and to dream of a Catholic "master man."

As an example, on the other hand, let us mention Pius XII. He adhered to the traditional image of the Church as an institution of salvation, which must provide everything for the salvation of the individual soul. This means that here, too, diaconal commitment was not in the foreground. It was more important to ensure the continued existence of Church pastoral care and the administration of the sacraments through political cleverness—for it was a matter of eternal salvation—than to protest against the persecution of the Jews.

One can see, then, the importance that Delp's determination of the Church's task had. From its diaconal mission and self-execution, the Church must recognize the signs of the times; hear and answer "the calls of longing and of the times, of ferment and of new departures," and not merely file away "the concerns of each new age and generation in the filing cabinets" (IV, 318). It must also do a reappraisal of its past, i.e., self-critically explore what it itself has contributed to the history of injustice in its 2000-year history.

"A coming honest cultural and intellectual history will have to write bitter chapters about the churches' contributions to the emergence of mass man, collectivism, dictatorial forms of rule, etc." (IV, 319).

To secular man, the Church must not meet with presumption; the lost and erring man it must pursue; it must be concerned about human dignity and human rights. "It makes no sense to be content to leave humanity to its fate with a preaching and religious license, with a pastor's and prelate's salary" (IV, 23).

The Church must not want to compensate for its real loss of political and social power with alliances of throne and altar of whatever kind.

By the end of these thoughts, which Delp wrote in prison with his hands tied, there are only fragmentary, but all the more forceful, sentences. The Church must turn to the world, must be the sacrament of the world, not the goal of the world. But neither must she dissolve herself in any worldly order and abandon her transcendent reference: "The force of the Church's immanent mission depends on the seriousness of her transcendent devotion and adoration" (IV, 323).

Thus, Delp's understanding of the Church reflects his conception of the human being—fully turned

towards the world and committed to history; but always living from the transcendent reference. That he calls the Church to a return to one of its fundamental self-fulfillments, *diakonia*, is thus on the one hand the best tradition of the Church, but also results from his conception of man, which is shaped by modern philosophy. The fact that this view of the Church is also groundbreaking from an inner-Church point of view is something I would like to mention here only briefly and take up again at the end.

#### 4. The Heroic Ideal

Karl Adam emphasized in his Christ books the humanity of Jesus [*Christus unser Bruder* (*Christ our Brother*) Regensburg 1926; *Jesus Christus* (Jesus Christ) Augsburg 1933]., but carried this out in such a way that he projected onto the earthly Jesus a heroic ideal of masculinity and sought to combine this with the traditional Christian virtues, which stereotypically appear as feminine. The product was the physically and psychologically perfect man. With the help of this favoring of the "strong" and "healthy," Christianity was not to appear as the morbid religion of the weak, born of resentment. Christology is thus functionalized for a church of the "strong and healthy." The fact that Adam also emphasized the "maternal" traits of Jesus may soften this impression, but in their clichéd nature ("tender, caring and ready for sacrifice") these cannot relativize the heroic motif.

Delp, like probably most men of his time, was by no means indifferent to the heroic ideal. His youthful dream was to become a soldier and officer. But the First World War also brought a change in this respect. To his provincial, Father Augustin Rösch, he wrote before his ordination in 1937:

"Yesterday, I gave in to a secret childhood love and once again looked at soldiers on parade on the fairgrounds. As you know, I told you once in Feldkirch, I would have loved to become a soldier for my life. My godfather, who was only a few years older than me, was already a cadet and I dreamed of it. Then the war shattered everything. My godfather fell in '14 as a young cadet just 17 years old. And after the war everything was different. In the meantime, the divine eagle picked up the foundling and carried it to its eyrie. And now it should get the big wings... That just came to my mind during the 'heightened combat readiness' that was also practiced yesterday" ([V, 91](#)).

Delp never completely let go of this youthful desire: in 1939 he made intensive efforts to be drafted into field chaplaincy. When his rather impetuous approach to this question led to irritation, he justified himself by saying that he wanted to follow in the footsteps of the men in his family.

"The fact that I was so hasty in seeking my war assignment stems from the fact that I wanted to become an officer before my conversion and that I am ashamed to sit at home, while all but one of the male members of my family are in the field. Besides, precisely as a priest and Jesuit, I wanted to prove that the concerns and worries of my people are always a serious duty to me" ([V, 106](#)). Delp wrote to Vicar General Georg Werthmann on September 28, 1939.

Given this fascination with the military, it is all the more significant that Delp was completely immune to certain forms of glorification of war and combat, such as we find in Ernst Jünger or Max Scheler. Delp read Scheler's work *Der Genius des Krieges* (*The Genius of War*) and Jünger's *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis* (*War as Inner Experience*) as an inner experience and rejected Jünger's assertions that war is a law of nature and that it does not matter why and for what one fights, but only how, as well as Scheler's automatism of purification through war, independent of moral considerations and decisions. Above all, Delp is far from "glorifying war as the ideal state of male life" (II, 247); but he calls for coping with it and mastering it. In this 1940 article from *Stimmen der Zeit* (Voices of the Time), entitled, "Der Krieg als geistige Leistung" (War as a Spiritual Achievement) [[II, 239-248](#)], Delp does not grapple with the question of just war or the moral permissibility of a war of extermination, although it seems between the lines that he is aware of this issue. For the sake of fairness, however, it must be said that positively uplifting articles about the war were required by the Reichsschrifttumskammer (Reich Chamber of Culture) at this time, and direct criticism of the war would not have been tolerated.

Delp had already dealt with the concept of honor and the ideal of the heroic man in the context of his critique of *völkisch* religiosity. ["Kirche in der Zeitenwende" (Church at the Crossroads), "VIII. Der Mensch der Ehre im Christentum" (Man and Honor in Christianity), "IX. Der heldische Mensch" (Heroic Man), in [I, 165-182](#)].

In the *völkisch* religious myth, honor is a central concept—honor, however, not understood as an external reputation or good reputation, but as the innermost core of man. Honor then means self-realization and loyalty to the inner self, which gives itself its own laws. This law of honor is considered the highest norm and does not tolerate any other highest value next to it, neither Christian love nor secular humanity. From this results the reproach of dishonor to the Christians; and this reproach Delp wanted to refute and to work out the true meaning of the concept of honor.

The Christian is also obliged to realize himself, to be true to himself, to listen to his innermost voice. This happens when he listens to his conscience. For Delp, the central value of Christianity is man's likeness

to God (through creation) and sonship to God (through grace)—therefore, honor is inconceivable without love. Christian life is thus compatible with the concept of honor; but Christians can have nothing in common with people whose honor does not extend beyond themselves.

The heroic person in the *völkisch*-religious ideology is the one who lives according to the law of honor. The heroic ideal is a fighting one. The struggle is for its own sake, not for a goal. Only by fighting does the hero realize himself, even if this means his downfall. Certainly, there is no goal that goes beyond man and the earthly world. This absolute world immanence is without goal and for Delp therefore senseless. We have here the same judgment as with Heidegger's concept of the decision of Dasein to itself. Moreover, this senselessness, Delp criticizes, is not named as such, but concealed as tragedy.

"Thus, self-realization becomes a self-destruction; the march of hammering life a train to abysmal death. This human being must fight, must dare, and yet in the end must not ask what for. He feels the insufficiency of his personal disposition, but this is exactly supposed to constitute his heroism; that it nevertheless pulls unquestioningly and wordlessly into the twilight darkness and perishes in it. Finally, he declares the senseless and the groundless to be the meaning and reason of his commitment; he stands before the new lie of tragedy" (I, 177).

Christian heroism, for Delp, is no less achievement, spirit, and readiness to fight. But there is a great difference between the heroism of the time and the heroism of the Christian. The Christian is committed to a task which is to be accomplished in the world, but which transcends this world. Man does not give himself his goal—here the hero is quite powerless—but he must let God give him that goal.

"To the man of 'autonomous heroism' no other result is valid than tragedy. He must finally admit to himself that he knows no answer to the question, why and to what end. Thus, he proclaims the struggle without aim and without sense; the march without direction. The living, honest man defends himself against this worst deception, which was ever tried on people. The Christian, however, is full of certainty and confidence; that he is committed to an effort that holds out the prospect of hardship and toil and wounding and death, and yet is meaningful and productive of results—before God" (I, 180f).

Delp thus takes up, not only for tactical reasons, but out of inner affinity, the motif of the heroic, which is encountered in *völkisch* religiosity and Nazi ideology, and gives it an entirely different meaning: not the law of honor, not the struggle as an end in itself, not the downfall as a tragedy count; but radical commitment to the world, on the sure ground of God's grace. Man cannot redeem himself. Any

presumed autonomy on this point and any resulting tragedy would be lies.

Delp is also far from projecting the heroic ideal onto Jesus Christ. This goes hand in hand with a very traditional descendent Christology. Karl Adam fascinated many of his contemporaries, and especially young men, by his emphasis on the humanity of Jesus, and by describing this human Jesus as strong, healthy and attractive—a dream of a man. That was modern, innovative, carried people away. Delp, on the other hand, appears here, as Karl Rahner acknowledges about him in the preface to Volume I, actually rather old-fashioned ["Einleitung zu den Texten" (Introduction of the Texts, Karl Rahner), in [I, 43-50](#); [here, 46](#)]. For him, Christ is the preexistent Word of God who became man, who descended into the lowliness of human existence—not a strong, tough of will, vigorous, male hero. Delp's Christology is a kenotic one, a divestment Christology.

Here too, then, it is evident that he takes up and reinterprets contemporary currents, but applies them only to the situation of man, not to God or Jesus Christ.

## 5. Conclusion

The question of the coherence of Delp's theology and his resistance can be clearly answered in the affirmative. In his philosophical and theological reflections on man and history, as well as in his spiritual writings, Delp foresaw what he later actively suffered and was forced to master. He not only thought of the Christian's responsibility in history and for history, but also realized it. The fact that he did not give in to the Gestapo's efforts to get him to resign from the Jesuit Order, even though that would probably have saved his life, but took his last vows on December 8, 1944, in Tegel Prison, was an outward expression of his decision to remain faithful both to history and to his transcendent goal.

Closely related to his resistance continue to be his diaconal understanding of the church, his commitment to human rights, and his resistance to communal ideology.

Neo-Scholastic theologians in National Socialist Germany found it easier to refer to human rights because they affirmed God-given human rights from natural law thinking and were more universalist-oriented than "*völkisch*" and racist theologians. This does not mean, however, that all Neo-Scholastics were by definition resisters or even affirmed human rights. In Vichy France, for example, we find the commitment to human rights more among the so-called modern theologians.

For all his interest in orders of a natural or supernatural nature and in the sociality of man, Delp repeatedly emphasized conscience, personal decision, and the responsibility of the individual for history. On the one hand, this may still reflect the Neo-Scholastic individualism of salvation, for Delp is always concerned with the question of salvation in this context, but perhaps even more strongly the reception of Heidegger's *Being and Time*, to which Jürgen Habermas ascribes a critical moment, namely that which is contained in the individualistic heritage of existential philosophy. [After 1929, [according to Habermas](#), this critical moment disappeared in Heidegger, and "historical humanity" and "collective destiny" took its place]. Delp, however, retained it; and possibly this made him resistant to the prevailing ideology of community.

Was Delp's theology a modern, contemporary one, or a more traditional Neo-Scholastic one?

There is no single answer here. Delp was driven by a concern to engage with contemporary thought and to incorporate what he recognized as positive into Christian theology. There is, however, a clear boundary here—as long as it is a matter of illuminating the situation of man and understanding history, he was inspired, for example, by Heidegger or the heroic ideal; but even so, in determining the double meaning of history he opposed traditionally shaped views, even more so when it came to Jesus Christ or God. Delp would probably never have had the idea—not even after the notorious "Kehre"—to transfer Heidegger's concept of being to God. With regard to Jesus Christ, he remained within the framework of a classical descendent Christology and did not go along with the fashionable trend of putting the humanity of Jesus particularly in the foreground.

Delp's understanding of nature and grace is also rather Neo-Scholastic. He did not want to tear the two apart; but he does see them as two realms. In the understanding of history, this is shown by the distinction between a natural order of history and the order of Christ. Also, by nature, history has a goal: namely, to become what God intended in creation. These thoughts are more in the Neo-Scholastic discourse; the concept of the unity of world history and salvation history, on the other hand, is modern. However, Seiler has made it convincingly clear in his commentary that the category of history functions as a link between traditionality and modernity in Delp's thought. Nature is tied to supernature in a historical way. Consequently, nature and supernature, though two separate realms, are linked by history. The same is true of Christology—the mystery of the Hypostatic Union has made visible a new order of nature, and with it a new dimension of history: being the place of man's encounter with God in the order of Christ. Everything that is human is embraced by the Christ order. According to Seiler, no Neo-Scholastic thinks in this way. In this respect, Seiler says that Delp's understanding of nature and

grace and Christology is modern in its Neo-Scholastic character.

Absolutely groundbreaking is Delp's understanding of the Church. Here he had already overtaken the so-called modern theologians of his time, who adhered to the ideology of community. That the Church is a sacrament, i.e., a sign and instrument of the union of man with God and of men among themselves, is the core principle of the Church constitution of the Second Vatican Council. Church as sacrament means first of all service to the world. The sacramental interpretation does not point the Church inward, to a self-sufficient liturgical community, or to the piety of inner circles, but outward to the needs of the world. Whoever had such an understanding of the Church could not dream of a Church of the strong and healthy, or want to push through a Church reform with the help of National Socialism, at a time when millions had already been killed in the death camps and in the war.

Finally, let Alfred Delp himself be given the last say—with a quotation that makes it clear that Christians' commitment to history is a matter of life and death:

"History, within its order and possibilities, is placed on the testimony and decision of men. It is, from man's point of view, an agonal event; whoever did not fight for history should not be surprised if he lost it and if it forgot him" (II, 417f.).

Alfred Delp fought for history and lost his life—history did not forget him.

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*Featured image: Father Alfred Delp.*

