

God's Revolution

Justice, Community, and the Coming Kingdom

Eberhard Arnold

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Introduction

Emmy Arnold stood outside her husband Eberhard's study, ready to face the Gestapo. Eberhard lay on the couch, his broken leg in a cast, watching his sister-in-law burn potentially incriminating papers in the stove. Meanwhile, 140 Nazi storm troopers and secret police were searching the little community in the Rhön hills for nonexistent arms and anti-Nazi literature. It was eight o'clock in the morning of November 16, 1933, in Hitler's Germany. Late that evening one of the Gestapo's big cars drove off full of books and papers.

We commemorate today the living legacy of a man whose work seemed smashed at fifty. Eberhard Arnold was crippled by a leg injury from which he never was to recover (his death came two years later from the complications of attempted corrective surgery). His ambitious publishing program was ended in midstream by the seizure of his office and the tightening coils of Nazi censorship. His energies in those last two years were to be drained by shepherding his refugee household into Switzerland, Liechtenstein, England...

But that was not the end. The Bruderhof movement, though decapitated, cut down, and scattered, did not wither away but grew up again, and again, in England, in Paraguay, in the United States...

That 1933 was not the end, but only the middle of a story, we owe not to the man but to his living witness. It is that witness which this book documents by gathering and ordering fragments, mostly previously unpublished, from his writing and teaching.

An introduction could seek to summarize what follows in the book; I shall not do that. An introduction could seek to explain why what follows is important, or why it is true. That I shall not do either. I shall attempt rather to locate Arnold, to put him on the map; to make understandable to American readers today what the causes and the cultural currents were which, in 1899 or 1907, in 1919 or 1932, fed into the new global vision which the following texts in this book exposit. Other narratives of the life of Eberhard Arnold himself and that of the Bruderhof are already available. We seek here only to recount enough so that the reader unfamiliar with their story can understand the world from which and into which Arnold came and identify the issues to which these texts originally spoke.

Eberhard Arnold saw himself as servant of a vision which he did not invent, herald of a cause incommensurably greater than his service to it. That vision had come together from many sources borne toward him by many people and movements. The reader who is less interested in backgrounds and origins may prefer to read Arnold directly, as he himself seeks to read the Gospel with unvarnished immediacy.

From before the First World War into the late 1920s, Arnold was a popular figure on the lecture circuit in Germany, serving universities, the Youth Movement world, and the student Christian world. Notes or outlines of many of these talks have been preserved in rough form. From early 1920 until his death in 1935 Arnold was regularly presenting teaching sessions for the members and the guests of his community. From many of these talks as well, rough notes have been retained. It is from these sources that most of the following materials have been drawn. The talks have been reconstituted and translated by the labors of the archive workers at Woodcrest, selected (with the advice of many others in the community) with a view to their not overlapping with the already available writings of Arnold and yet presenting an independently coherent picture of his teachings. In this process I have aided as “editor” only in an *a posteriori* and honorific sense, reviewing with

the Woodcrest staff their decisions as to which fragments to retain and as to what explanation is needed.

The texts we have before us are not the preferred point of entrance to the devotional or spiritual guidance of Arnold. That would be his *Inner Land*, written in the face of the spiritual crisis which Germany faced in World War I and expanded since then in several editions until his death. Nor are the following texts all the heart of his message. That, Arnold himself would probably have said, was his *Salt and Light*, his interpretation on the Sermon on the Mount, not because of any great originality but because of its simplicity and because he was convinced that his movement had its heart not in himself but in the person and teaching of Jesus. Nor can it be a survey of the breadth of things he taught and wrote about, which extended from secular philosophy, ancient and modern, into political economy and the arts.

What we have here is rather a selection of those dominant strands of Arnold's instruction which will most faithfully and adequately portray to the reader the source and rationale of the life of the community which has survived him for half a century by listening attentively to his both simple and prophetic pastoral instruction. That the selection is fitting for that purpose is guaranteed by the means used to prepare it. The initial choice of passages to reproduce was done by a wide consultation involving most of the senior members of the Woodcrest community. At least a half-dozen community members shared in the task of translating those fragments which had not already appeared in English. At least fifteen couples contributed to the process of choosing which texts they thought most distinctive and representative. The passages chosen were then honed and ordered by the team of several workers who -devote part of their time to the community archives. The resulting collections have also been reread in plenary assemblies. Thus while every word is from Eberhard's teaching or writing and over a half-century old, the text is also the living witness of the Bruderhof communities.

The topic choices and the judgments as to how much of which texts belonged in which place were made in that internal discipline of the community's own

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memory bank. An outsider might have selected other fragments as more original, or less familiar, or farther from the awareness of the reader. That selection would not have spoken in the same way of the living memory which is sustained by and which sustains the witness of the Bruderhof as organism.

My responsibility as editorial consultant has not included reaching back into the original texts, nor finding other texts in the untranslated sources which might be more interesting. I have merely reviewed some of the final stages of selection and translation, in order to help the original thrust of a text come through as adequately as possible. We have sought to have the voice be that of Arnold himself and not of his disciples a half-century later: yet we recognize that distinction to be intrinsically impossible. It is the people still living in the life which he founded who are most able to be custodians of his memory, even if the guardianship itself may unavoidably and usually unconsciously soften the differences between founder and followers. Such a telescoping of a man into his memory, as sustained by his followers' followers, happened to Jesus and St. Francis: my concern as editorial observer has not been to keep it from happening to Arnold.

Teenage Convert: 1899

Our picture of the religious heritage of most of Germany for centuries was of unrelieved established Lutheran orthodoxy, allying university, pulpit, government, and bourgeoisie in unchanging and uninteresting fidelity. That was all there, but it was not all there was. There was the heritage of the frontier American revival movement of Charles G. Finney, under whose impact Eberhard's great-grandfather John Arnold had come, resulting in Eberhard's grandparents, Franklin Luther and Maria Arnold, née Ramsauer, being sent from America to Africa as missionaries. For the sake of education Eberhard's father Carl Franklin was taken as a boy into an upper class home in Bremen, where the devotional heritage of pietist pastors Collenbusch and Menken was

honored. In young Eberhard's world in Breslau, the city to whose university his father was called as professor of Church history, there was the Salvation Army, whose workers' involvement with the poor struck him as more morally authentic than his family's social life. There was his "uncle" (husband of his mother's cousin) Ernst Ferdinand Klein, who as Lutheran pastor in a working-class community had sided with the workers of the weaving industry, in such a way that his critics had prevailed upon the church administration to transfer him to a small town in the outskirts of Berlin. There were members of the Moravian pietist tradition and of the new "fellowship movement" putting their fingers on the need for personal conversion.

From the outset, spiritual authenticity was linked in Eberhard's mind with awareness of economic injustice. His earliest memory of this linkage was his discomfort at his own confirmation ceremony; it struck him that he and the other youths of his class had beautiful new clothing for the occasion, while others had to wear their weekday best.

The seeds for a desperate struggle to find the living Christ were laid during a summer vacation at Uncle Ernst's home. It was here that Eberhard began reading the Gospels with the same excitement and fascination that had formerly been provided by Karl May's adventure novels. He needed to know who this Jesus really was. Back home in Breslau, he sought out a young pastor for guidance and was given the advice not to rest until he had found the answer.

Eberhard knew that there were areas in his life that were not Christ-like. It was a struggle for him to recognize Christ as Lord of everything: his superficial relationships with fellow students, among whom he had played a somewhat prominent role; his disrespect for teachers; and not least the newly aroused physical passions that assaulted him.

It was October 1899 when the sixteen-year-old, praying alone in the comfortable family parlor, reached both the inner assurance of God's forgiving grace toward him and the resolve outwardly to confess his new faith and

joy. Both the overtness of his piety and the bluntness of his social concern caused tension even within his own family. Most memorable was his daring to reprimand his parents for the partying which belonged to the duties of their class:

Father, I hear that the food and drink for this party costs more than two hundred marks. Those invited are almost all richer than we are. They all have enough to eat at home. They will invite you again and will offer you wine, roast meat, and ices, which are just as costly. I know of poor innocent families in the east end of the city, who have not enough money to provide their little children with sufficient milk. You know what Jesus said, "When you give a feast, do not invite your acquaintances and friends, who in turn can invite you; but rather go out on the streets and invite the poorest people who cannot invite you." You go to Church and hold morning prayers; but is this unjust life from God or from the Devil? (*Seeking for the Kingdom*, p. 27)

Decisive Commitments: 1907

Since the 1520s the agenda of spiritual renewal in Protestantism had seldom avoided surfacing the issue of baptism upon confession of faith. In the sixteenth century, the people who renewed the practice of linking baptism with the conversion or adult personal faith of the candidate were called "Anabaptists." Usually such action meant the creation of new church bodies, as had been the case for the "Ana-baptists" of the continental sixteenth century or the "Baptists" of the British seventeenth century. It however happened more recently in the context of pietistic revival preaching and pastoring that persons of solidly religious background and upbringing came to the conviction that they needed, as adults, to express the wholeness and joy of their newfound faith by requesting baptism, without creating a new Church body. They felt that the faith they had now come to know was of an utterly new quality contrasted to the way in which their "Christening" as products of established Christianity had made them participants in a culture but not in a faith.

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Eberhard was prepared along both of these lines to face the issue of baptism as a young adult. His father had already spoken to him of the sixteenth-century Anabaptist movement, whose nearly buried traces in Protestant history were just beginning to be rediscovered by historians. Eberhard met as well the representatives of the other strand: the lawyer-evangelist Ludwig von Gerdtehl (1872–1954, founder of the European Evangelistic Society), arguing that it is proper to express one's adult Christian commitment in the act of baptism upon confession of faith without intending that act to mean sectarian separation.

Middle-class circles in the city of Halle, where Eberhard had studied theology, were being shaken by von Gerdtehl's lectures and stirred by Bible study meetings held in homes. There Eberhard met the sisters Else and Emmy von Hollander, daughters of a professor of law who had moved to Halle from Riga to escape the Russification of the Baltic nations. Within a month Emmy and Eberhard were engaged to marry.

Eberhard was a frequent speaker in those Bible study circles. To the step of baptism upon confession of faith first Else, and then Eberhard and Emmy were led in 1908. That did not make them Baptists; even less did it make them Mennonites or Hutterites. It did not make them members of any local church. It simply committed them to a life of discipleship whose meaning in detail they would have been the first to say they were in no position to predict. Three quarters of a century later, with the perspective of Eberhard's further estrangement from established Protestantism and rapprochement to the heirs of the Anabaptist movement, we can speak in one way of these baptisms in 1908 as the first step on that path. Yet if the three young friends had been told that it was that, would they have taken it?

Eberhard was told formally, before his baptism, that it would disqualify him for the theological degree and pastoral office toward which he had been studying. He studied instead for a philosophical doctorate. His dissertation on the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche was accepted in November 1909, and

in December he and Emmy were married. He worked as freelance lecturer for the Fellowship Movement.

The Student Christian Movement

The Anglo-Saxon revival movement of which the American Dwight L. Moody was a major spokesman soon found a new form of organization befitting its social level and its world mission. Taking off from the similar “non-church” foundation laid by the Young Men’s Christian Association (German CVJM organized on a national level in 1883), the Student Christian Movement was able, thanks to its special social location, to avoid both antagonizing the established churches and being roped in by them. John R. Mott (1865–1955), the worldwide ambassador of the Moody revival, which had broken into the student world at Northfield (Massachusetts) in 1886, had visited Germany’s university cities in 1898. Its stated goals of “deepening Christian life through common prayer and Bible study as well as the fostering of Christian work among its members and other students” were pursued without direct attention to church structures.

The SCM was the context of young Dr. Arnold’s first public notoriety. As freelance lecturer he spoke at campuses on such themes as “Early Christianity in the Present” and “Jesus As He Really Was” – presaging his lifelong focus upon the Gospels and the earliest Christians. In 1915 he became editor of *The Furrow*, the periodical (soon a publishing house) of the SCM. World War I called the SCM into relief services and special publications in the interest of soldiers. Called to military service but discharged for health reasons after a few weeks’ service as a quartermaster corps wagon driver, Arnold had seen enough of war to begin moving toward what soon became a convinced Christian pacifism. It was his pastoral talks with soldiers in hospital that convinced him that war could not be right.

The SCM provided the constituency, the mix of spiritual simplicity and

intellectual seriousness, the meld of flexibility and organizational sobriety, which were to launch Arnold into the 1920s.

The “Religious-Social Movement”

It is not clear when Arnold came in touch with this most important stream of renewal concern within German Protestantism. At least by the end of the First World War he had become fully acquainted with its contribution. It had represented in the last quarter of the nineteenth century a set of dramatic new beginnings, some of which fed into the revitalization of the mainline churches, but several of which were not satisfied with that objective.

The movement represents a most unique synthesis of components which in the Anglo-Saxon experience are often not held together: pietism and social concern. By “pietism” here is meant minimally the readiness to use that term as a self-designation, or to accept it from others. This located the people I shall be describing within a two-centuries-old stream of minority renewal concern. More substantially, the term identifies the conviction that there is a dimension of reality in the encounter with the living God in prayer, guidance, and miracle, which can and must be affirmed rather than outgrown as we build community.

The ministry of Johann Christoph Blumhardt (1805–1880) had begun when as a young pastor he was participant, to his own surprise, in an event of exorcism which freed a young woman from a depressive possession. Under the motto “Jesus is victor” Blumhardt developed over the next half century a ministry of pastoral care to individuals coming from all over the country, in which he was succeeded by his son, Christoph Friedrich. Yet (in a way quite distinct from the individualistic or internalistic turn which such deliverance ministries can take) the proclamation of Christ’s lordship meant for the Blumhardts a claim laid upon all of life including the social and political. Christoph in fact became a member of the social democratic party and for one term a member of Württemberg’s parliament.

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The spiritual and intellectual successors of the Blum-hardts arose not in Germany but in Switzerland; in a small circle of theologians calling themselves “social-religious”: Leonhard Ragaz (1868–1945), Hermann Kutter (1863–1931), and Karl Barth (1886–1968). These men differed among themselves – later they differed bitterly – about just how to connect Gospel faith and Christian social commitment; but for all three the link was essential, a matter of the Kingdom of God and not merely of debatable social analysis. Kutter was the first of the three to become known, with books like his *Justice: An Old Word to Modern Christendom* (1905). Arnold later said that the first half of his spiritual pilgrimage had led him “from Luther to Kutter.”

The Youth Movement

The collapse of a culture’s hallowed values is for no one more upsetting than for youth. What lost the war for Germany in 1918 was not just an imperial dynasty and a military command structure; it was a civilization, the proud self-confidence of middle-class urbanity. Their elders, though defeated and demoralized, went on living; but what should youth be looking forward to? Some turned to nihilism, some to political radicality of left or right; but a broad current of German youth took another path; they went walking. The movement was not a new invention; it had begun at the turn of the century under such names as “Birds of Passage” (*Wandervögel*) and “Free Youth”; they had taken on causes from anti-alcoholism to school reform. Thus by 1918 there was a backlog of “adults” waiting from the prewar movement and a new pool of thousands looking for new answers. What arose with a surge of new energy in the immediate postwar period, coming to be called simply “the Youth Movement,” was a new joy in nature, folk singing and dancing, walking and camping, non-politicized and non-eroticized friendships, and clean fun, overcoming class disparities through simplicity linked with disrespect for materialism and social stuffiness. Half a century later, American youth were

to call something like this “the spirit of Woodstock”; but there was in the German movement no generational anger, and no drugs. A decade later the movement was vulnerable to co-option in the Nazi “national renewal”; but there was none of that racist nationalism in the beginnings. Within the Youth Movement the specifically Christian witness of the fellowship movements found an open audience, whereas established parish religion (what Arnold was now calling the “world church”) had lost their respect.

Synthesis

What happened in 1919–1921 was the flowing together of “all the above” in a powerful new mixture, with Eberhard Arnold in the middle of it all. The first postwar Pentecost regional conference of the SCM was held at Marburg, June 13–15, 1919, dominated by Arnold’s charismatically clear and urgent expositions of the Sermon on the Mount and by his “Communism: Summons to Christianity”. A participant at the Marburg conference reported:

The focus of all that was said and thought was Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. Eberhard Arnold burned it into our hearts with a passionate spirituality, hammered it into our wills with prophetic power and the tremendous mobile force of his whole personality. This was the Sermon on the Mount in the full force of its impact, in its absolute and undiminished relevance, its unconditional absoluteness (Erwin Wissman, quoted in *Salt and Light*, p. xiii).

That fall (September 22–25) saw at Tambach in Thuringia an encounter with the leadership of the Swiss “religious social” movement: Karl Barth was the most prominent of the Swiss speakers. Arnold became editor of the movement’s journal *Das neue Werk* whose subtitle, “The Christian in the People’s State,” expressed the vision that not only piety but also society would be swept into the Kingdom movement. The next Pentecost conference (May 21, 1920 at Schlüchtern, northeast of Frankfurt) multiplied the momentum, and by the following fall it was reported that “Schlüchtern fellowships” were forming in the major cities and universities.

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In addition to his traveling ministry of public speeches and his editing of movement periodicals, Arnold initiated an ambitious project of the republication of Christian sources, representing the vision of renewal over the centuries. Volumes were published from the writings of Tertullian, Augustine, Francis of Assisi, Jacob Böhme, Zinzendorf, Søren Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, among others. Additional projects that included Bernard of Clairvaux, the early Anabaptists, Martin Luther, George Fox, John Bunyan, Fénelon, William and Catherine Booth, and Pascal, could not be completed. Arnold's own collection of testimonies from "the early Christians after the death of the apostles" (published 1926) was one of his major projects.

As is natural in such times of fermentation, institutional changes were rapid. Publications were initiated, renamed, divided. The leadership of the Student Christian Movement and its publication arm, *The Furrow*, divided. Old friendships were strained and new alliances sealed, some to break again.

Antithesis

Before there was time to be comfortable amidst this new power and popularity, Arnold was led to his next step, the creation of economic and residential community. The first nucleus began moving to Sannerz, near Schlüchtern, late in 1920. By mid-1922, when it faced its first internal crisis, the commune had grown to forty members, not all of whom were as convinced as Arnold of the possibility of complete community. Not all were ready with him to see "faith" as meaning not only current sharing but trusting that God would provide for all future needs. Again the publishing work was split up; again old friendships were strained. From that crisis came the Bruderhof life form which has since undergone no substantial change. Arnold had begun his second major shift, which he categorized as "from Kutter to Hutter."

Continuity

Already when Arnold was young his father had spoken to him about the radical Protestants of earlier European history who on the one hand, the father thought, were the only true Christians, and yet had been discredited by the fact that God had not blessed them with prosperity but had permitted their cause almost to die out. That had been Eberhard's introduction to the fact that there had been within Protestant history an undercurrent of more committed Protestantism than the one dominating Germany. In the Hutterian communities of the American prairie states and provinces Arnold found the descendants of those ancient movements.

The so-called "Anabaptist" movement of the sixteenth century had radicalized the biblical renewal vision of Luther and Zwingli to the point of rejecting religious establishment, warfare, and infant baptism. This movement had survived through the sixteenth century especially in the upper Rhine basin (there are Mennonites in Switzerland, Alsace, and Württemberg to this day) and in the Netherlands. From there, their descendants had migrated in the eighteenth century to America and to Russia. A third center survived even more effectively in Moravia, where the so-called Hutterian brethren created the commune pattern called Bruderhof. It was the heirs of this third group, all of whom emigrated from imperial Russia in the 1870s, that Arnold sought out in Western Canada in 1930, in order to ally his new beginnings with the heirs of the oldest beginnings.

Other radical Reformation phenomena also were known to Arnold. He in fact published new editions of the writings of some of them and planned to publish more. But the Czech Brethren of the fifteenth century had been wiped out in the seventeenth. The heirs of the Waldensians from the twelfth century had made their peace with Calvinism in 1534. It was therefore with the Hutterian movement that it seemed most fitting for the alliance of old and new disciples to be concluded.

Arnold spent a year in 1930–31 establishing that connection, visiting all

Bruderhof colonies existing at that time in the United States and Canada. In December 1930 at Macleod, Alberta, he was welcomed into their membership and commissioned as their missionary to Europe.

The commonality between the old and the new Bruderhof went beyond the basic Anabaptist convictions of believers' baptism and non-resistance and beyond the communal economic pattern of the Bruderhof. The Hutterian Brethren of the sixteenth century had been pioneers in the creation of elementary schools for all children; likewise Arnold's movement had since the beginnings at Sannerz taken advantage of the facilities offered by communal residence to operate an alternative school, not only for their own offspring but also for needy children to whom the Bruderhof provided foster care, and for others whose parents preferred such a familial and religiously oriented schooling. The Bruderhof regularly counted on members with qualification for teaching. Numerous of Arnold's writings (represented only minimally in this collection) were devoted to the values of familially based holistic education. They help refute the notion, current in some sociological circles, that Anabaptism is not concerned for culture.

Transition

The story begins to end where our account began. There was no chance that Nazism could tolerate the Bruderhof. After the Gestapo break-in of November 16, 1933, steps were taken to remove all children to Switzerland, so that when a new Nazi schoolteacher arrived in January 1934 there were no Bruderhof children for him to teach. Arnold contacted Mennonites in the Netherlands and Friends in England; some English members joined the Bruderhof, and the groundwork was laid for an English colony to be formed in 1936. But Arnold's shepherd-teacher ministry was ending. The near-daily devotional Bible studies and the discussions, from the records of which many of the fragments in this collection come, were coming to an end, as his wide-ranging popular lecturing had a decade before. The foundation had been laid.

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From His Time to Ours

At times it seems hard to see how this world can go on. -Despite the end of the Cold War, the threat of nuclear catastrophe remains ever-present, even if unacknowledged. Technological “progress” continues, but each new threshold that is crossed opens not only new possibilities, but new potential dangers. Within each culture tensions between generations, sexes, ethnic groups are exacerbated. Again loud voices advocate desperate measures which are not solutions: violent insurrection, self-sufficient “survival,” suicide.

Then we remember how it was the collapse of national cultural self-confidence which freed German youth in 1919–21 to be seized in an unprecedented way by the power of Jesus’ Kingdom message. We remember how it was the collapse of democracy and the rise of Hitler which set in bold relief how different and how powerful is the corporate quality of spiritual resistance. We remember that it was in the desperation of the late first century that the Apostle John was given visions of how God’s saving purposes for the world are not thwarted but enhanced by that setting. Thus our discerning more frankly the wounds and the wars of our present world, which Arnold could not foresee, may once again set in relief the pertinence, and the promised power of the Kingdom way, the course already set for us, which the following texts so simply and so authentically interpret.

John Howard Yoder