

# Christological Foundations for an Ecological Ethic: Learning from Bonhoeffer

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## Abstract

In an age where the church needs to foster moral concern for the environment, some are suggesting that Christian theology itself must be changed to produce this result. This article argues that such emendations are unnecessary because Dietrich Bonhoeffer, working a couple of decades before ecological concern was even seen as necessary, manages to craft a theological and ethical approach which is sensitive to ecological concern while retaining large portions of the Christian tradition. Bonhoeffer's anthropology robustly affirms humanity's connection with the natural environment and does not separate humans from the natural order. In fact, his novel approach to the image of God emphasises the necessity of human physicality and the ethical responsibility for the other, which seems to be extendable to the natural order as well. In addition, Bonhoeffer's interpretation of the command to have dominion sees the injunction as a call to be 'bound' to nature as a servant, not as a lord free to exploit the earth for wanton pleasure. Consequently, Bonhoeffer interprets the industrial revolution as the failure of humans to rule and serve creation well. Finally, his anthropology, unlike many in the tradition, does not extradite humans from the world, but rather situates them entirely within the matrix of interlocking relationships in the natural world. While Christian soteriology has been criticised for shifting Christian concern away from the environment and life in this world, Bonhoeffer's soteriology overcomes this criticism. Bonhoeffer vociferously repudiates two kingdoms theology in favour of a single unified reality of Christ, which unites God's work of creation and redemption into a unified whole. Furthermore, he interprets the incarnation as a robust affirmation of God's creation and thereby life in this present world. Finally, Bonhoeffer posits redemption encompassing the entire world order, rather than seeing humans as its unique constituents. Bonhoeffer's ethics of responsible action shows that humans need to evaluate not just their immediate actions, but also the long-term consequences of their actions, especially when it comes to use of the environment, both for the sake of other humans and for the sake of following Christ. Since disciples of Christ are supposed to be working towards the reality of Christ, one can conclude that Bonhoeffer's thought encourages humans to work towards the harmony that is to typify creation in the eschaton. Thus, Bonhoeffer's

ethics encourages a moral concern for the environment both as a means of neighbourly love and as a means of following Christ.

**Keywords:** Anthropology, Bonhoeffer, christology, ecology, eschatology, ethics.

The ecological crisis has given rise to manifold discussions concerning how Christian theology can be reformulated in order to be more ecologically conscious. After Lynn White's indictment of Christianity – at least in its non-Franciscan forms – as one of the primary causes of the current crisis, theologians have plied their trade in mining the tradition and proposing theological formulations which would vitiate or at least undermine carefree attitudes towards nature.<sup>1</sup> In particular, Christian theologians desiring to retain traditional Christian beliefs have sought to temper aspects of their tradition which have been seen as generating disregard towards non-human creation specifically in the areas of anthropology, soteriology and eschatology.<sup>2</sup> Some theologians, though, have found the normal trajectories of Christian theology insufficient and offer more creative solutions to the ecological problem which compromise traditional aspects of Christian theology. For instance, Thomas Berry suggests that part of the solution to the ecological crisis is temporarily dispensing with Jesus Christ. He writes, 'I sometimes think that we worry too much about Jesus Christ. We have, to my mind, been overly concerned with salvation and the savior personality.'<sup>3</sup> In light of this perceived over-emphasis, he offers a radical suggestion for Christians: 'I suggest we might give up the Bible for awhile, put it on the shelf for perhaps twenty years . . . Excessive concern with the historical Christ is presently just not that helpful.'<sup>4</sup>

While the recent work by theologians trying to remain faithful to traditional Christian theology by minimising potentially harmful aspects of the tradition has been fruitful, some of this same ground had been ploughed decades before Lynn White wrote his essay which initiated the current

<sup>1</sup> Lynn White, 'The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis', in David and Eileen Spring (eds), *Ecology and Religion in History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), pp. 15–31.

<sup>2</sup> For a summary of how issues like anthropology have been ecologically destructive, see Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, trans. Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), pp. 69–71.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Berry, *Befriending the Earth*, ed. Stephen Dunn and Anne Lonergan (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third, 1991), p. 75. Other creative solutions would include something like the radical panentheism of McFague. See Sallie McFague, *The Body of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), pp. 159–95.

<sup>4</sup> Berry, *Earth*, p. 75.

Christian ecological consciousness. Working primarily in the 1930s and 1940s, Dietrich Bonhoeffer had already formulated Christian anthropology, soteriology and eschatology in ways which blunted many of the potentially harmful aspects of the Christian tradition. While Bonhoeffer crafts his theology in an ecologically sensitive direction, he manages to do so while retaining large portions of the Christian tradition and remaining faithful to the biblical texts.<sup>5</sup> What permits Bonhoeffer to uphold the Christian tradition, while making ecologically amenable emendations, is the fact that Bonhoeffer believes God has come uniquely to earth in the person of Jesus Christ, thereby drawing all reality into himself. Thus, Bonhoeffer's theology indicates that seeing Jesus Christ, as God's unique revelation to human beings, is not a cause of the ecological crisis but a helpful part of the solution. For the vast majority of Christians who desire to uphold the Christian tradition, Bonhoeffer's approach is likely to be more persuasive in cultivating an ecological concern among traditional Christians than other approaches which are willing to dispense with Christ or scripture.<sup>6</sup>

In order to demonstrate the manner in which christology can foster a concern for the environment, I will begin by sketching Bonhoeffer's anthropology, particularly adumbrating how he articulates what it means to be made in the image of God, which is informed by Christ himself, and what it means to rule over creation as described in the Genesis accounts. I will then deal with Bonhoeffer's understanding of soteriology and eschatology, demonstrating that soteriology and eschatology point human beings towards earth instead of an ethereal reality. The final section will explicate the ways in which Bonhoeffer's ethics demand ecological concern both as a means of caring for others and as a means of pursuing the entire reality of Christ.

### Bonhoeffer's Anthropology

With the rise of the ecological consciousness, attention to anthropology has increased because the manner in which human beings are defined seems to impact the ways in which they perceive and interact with their surrounding environment. If human beings are completely disconnected

<sup>5</sup> However, some have declared that Bonhoeffer was 'Judaizing Christianity' and therefore making emendations which dramatically altered Christian theology. See Douglas C. Bowman, 'Bonhoeffer and the Possibility of Judaizing Christianity', in A. J. Klassen (ed.), *A Bonhoeffer Legacy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), p. 76. However, his claim has been countered: Robert Vosloo, 'Beyond Spirituality: Bonhoeffer and Responses to the Dejudaization of Christianity', *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 127 (2007), pp. 82–95.

<sup>6</sup> H. Paul Santmire, 'Reflections on the Alleged Ecological Bankruptcy of Western Theology', *Anglican Theological Review* 57/2 (1975), p. 147.

from the created world, then human beings can conceivably act irresponsibly towards nature without suffering any repercussions. Traditional Christian anthropology relies heavily upon the creation accounts of Genesis, which have two components that have drawn criticism from ecologists. The first is the affirmation that human beings alone are created in the image of God.<sup>7</sup> This becomes problematic because human beings seem to be unique among the world's inhabitants, which can lead to the hubristic belief that only humans, and not the rest of the natural world, are recipients of divine concern. Second, the Genesis accounts are also problematic because human beings are explicitly commanded to 'fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth'.<sup>8</sup> At face value, this command ostensibly permits humans to use nature in any way they see fit. When humans are seen as created in God's image and endowed with a special privilege to rule the earth, there seems to be nothing inhibiting the exploitation of nature. While the understanding of the image of God and the command to have dominion varies among Christians, it is important to note how Bonhoeffer constructs his anthropology and deals with these two aspects of the Genesis accounts.

In a series of lectures delivered at the University of Berlin in 1932–3 that is compiled in the book, *Creation and Fall*, Bonhoeffer provides his theological exposition of the opening chapters of Genesis.<sup>9</sup> In his analysis of the second creation story (Gen 2–3), Bonhoeffer strongly emphasises the earthiness of human beings in the following account:

The human being whom God has created . . . is the human being who is taken from earth. Even Darwin and Feuerbach could not use stronger language than is used here. Humankind is derived from a piece of earth. Its bond with the earth belongs to its essential being. The 'earth is its mother'; it comes out of her womb.<sup>10</sup>

For all the capacities that human beings might possess, Bonhoeffer affirms that the earthiness of human beings is 'essential' to being human. To believe anything else is a specious lie. Bonhoeffer's ensuing description of Adam in the creation account corroborates the point; although Adam might be 'a

<sup>7</sup> Gen 1:26.

<sup>8</sup> Gen 1:28. All biblical quotations come from the NRSV.

<sup>9</sup> For information on these lectures see John W. de Gruchy, 'Editor's Introduction to the English Edition', in *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, trans. Douglas Stephen Bax (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), pp. 1–5.

<sup>10</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, p. 76.

most singular and wonderful piece of earth', he is 'still a piece of earth'.<sup>11</sup> Human beings are therefore products of earth. While Bonhoeffer affirms that human beings are made in the image of God, for him the image of God is not distinct from or in addition to the earthly composition of human beings. On the contrary, Bonhoeffer avers that humanity is made in 'the image of God not in spite of but precisely in its bodily form'.<sup>12</sup> Only by being a piece of earth can human beings be in the image of God.

How, then, does Bonhoeffer make human embodiment constitutive of the image of God? Unlike many earlier Christian theologians, Bonhoeffer refuses to identify the *imago dei* with human reason.<sup>13</sup> In a rather unique theological move for his time, Bonhoeffer believes the image of God is not an *analogia entis* (analogy of being) but an *analogia relationis* (analogy of relationship).<sup>14</sup> In other words, the connection between human beings and God cannot be located in similar components of their beings but in their *mode* of being, which is being in relationship. For Bonhoeffer, the *imago dei* has been obfuscated as a result of sin and cannot be discovered through observing human nature in the present. The only way anyone can know the image of God is through Jesus Christ, the true human who lived for others.<sup>15</sup>

According to Bonhoeffer, the *imago dei* which has been demonstrated through Christ is characterised by freedom, which is not an individualistic freedom but a freedom 'for others'.<sup>16</sup> This freedom for others functions both vertically and horizontally. Vertically, this freedom allows human beings to worship God. Horizontally, this freedom allows people to serve their fellow human beings.<sup>17</sup> As a result, freedom is never a private possession but one which arises in the context of encounter with the other. This freedom finds its fullest expression in Christ where God made himself 'free for humankind', even allowing himself to suffer at their hands.<sup>18</sup> By making freedom for others the essence of the *imago dei*, it becomes apparent why embodiment is essential for the *imago dei*: 'In their bodily existence human beings find their brothers and sisters and find the earth'.<sup>19</sup> It is only in their corporeal existence that people are able to engage each other, and hence embody the

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Scott, 'Christ, Nature, Sociality: Dietrich Bonhoeffer for an Ecological Age', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 53 (2000), p. 416, n. 14.

<sup>14</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, p. 65.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

freedom that Christ had for others. In addition, since the *imago dei* requires embodiment, it also means that the *imago dei* entails being related to the rest of the natural world, or as he says, the earth. By extension, then, the freedom for others in the *imago dei* is not merely a freedom for others in the human community, but a freedom to serve the rest of the natural world.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, in Bonhoeffer's understanding of the *imago dei*, Christ reveals that the *imago dei* is a particular way of living with and for others both within and outside the human community.

When it comes to the divine command to have dominion over other creatures, Bonhoeffer follows many Christian interpreters and believes that human beings have been entrusted with some kind of hegemony to 'rule over God's creation'.<sup>21</sup> However, this authority is only a derivative authority for it has been granted by God and does not comprise an unfettered right to exploit the earth. Moreover, although human authority might suggest that humans are removed from the rest of creation in some way, Bonhoeffer argues that human authority actually binds them to the rest of nature because:

this freedom to rule includes being bound to the creatures who are ruled. The ground and the animals over which I am lord constitute the world in which I live, without which I cease to be . . . I am not free from it in any sense of my essential being, my spirit, having no need of nature, as though nature were something alien to the spirit. On the contrary, in my whole being, in my creatureliness, I belong wholly to this world; it bears me, nurtures me, holds me.<sup>22</sup>

For Bonhoeffer, human authority is a service to other creatures since humans are 'bound' to the other creatures. In being 'bound' to other creatures, human

<sup>20</sup> Although at one point Bonhoeffer distinguishes between freedom 'from' creation and freedom for other human beings (*ibid.*, p. 66), at other points he seems to extend this 'freedom for others' to the rest of nature as well: 'For in their bodily nature human beings are related to the earth and to other bodies; they are there for others and are dependent upon others' (*ibid.*, p. 79; my emphasis). In light of this later passage, I think that Bonhoeffer's notion of 'freedom for others' sometimes includes the rest of nature (the earth), and is not just limited to human beings. Cf. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 53. For this reason, I find Scott's assessment of nature in Bonhoeffer – that it is limited to human embodiment – inaccurate, at least in some of his works. In fact, I think Scott finds it so easy to expand Bonhoeffer's sociality to include non-human nature because it is already present in his thought. See Peter Scott, 'Christ, Nature, Sociality', pp. 424–30. It seems to me Scott is much more precise regarding Bonhoeffer's notion of nature in his later work. See Peter Scott, *Anti-Human Theology: Nature, Technology and the Postnatural* (London: SCM, 2010), p. 23.

<sup>21</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, p. 66.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

beings are fully integrated into the complex web of life with the result that human actions towards other creatures have an impact upon human well-being.<sup>23</sup> From what Bonhoeffer says here, it seems clear that human life is fully contingent upon the rest of the world and human 'freedom to rule' turns one towards caring for nature.

Because freedom to rule binds one with nature, Bonhoeffer did not believe the rise of modern industrialism corresponded with the theology of the Genesis accounts. For example, in his 'Outline for a Book' which he sketched in prison, he wanted to devote the first chapter to dealing with the fact that human beings have tried 'to be independent of nature', through solutions like the insurance industry which attempts to immunise people from the effects of natural disasters and accidents.<sup>24</sup> He believed the desire to be free of the capricious aspects of nature had actually enslaved human beings within their own organisational structures, leaving humans with no 'power of the soul' to face the vicissitudes of life.<sup>25</sup> More explicitly, though, Bonhoeffer believed that modern technology and scientific advancement were not ruling in accordance with the Genesis account. In fact, instead of ruling the world, Bonhoeffer asserts that humanity has become 'a prisoner, a slave, of the world'.<sup>26</sup> While human beings might believe they have dominated nature through their innovations, technological advancement only results in slavery because humans use technology to 'seize hold of it [the world] for ourselves'.<sup>27</sup> This subjugating of the world through technology is focused on appropriating nature for oneself, which is antithetical to the *imago dei* revealed by Christ, who was Christ for others. As has already been noted, this freedom for others includes the natural world as its object, and Bonhoeffer suggests that the modern industrial approach to the natural world is no longer the loving service that Christ exemplified but a selfish way of living which reifies the pattern human beings had established at the fall by placing themselves in the centre of the world.

In light of the discussion, it has become clear that Bonhoeffer's anthropology has accomplished two primary things. First, Bonhoeffer has remained dependent upon the biblical texts of Genesis and affirms even the potentially dangerous aspects of the accounts like the human hegemony over the rest of nature and the distinction between human and non-humans via

<sup>23</sup> Perhaps Bonhoeffer here demonstrates a nascent form of the Gaia hypothesis. See Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth Community Earth Ethics* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), p. 298.

<sup>24</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, trans. Isabel Best et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), p. 500.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, p. 67.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

the *imago dei*. Second, instead of allowing these two distinctives to separate humans from the non-human world, Bonhoeffer turns both of these concepts back towards the earth by seeing the *imago dei* as fulfilled in freedom for others. Furthermore, this freedom for others seems to place the natural world in the realm of moral concern because human embodiment means that humans exist in a reciprocal relationship with the rest of the world. What must not be missed in this analysis, moreover, is that Jesus Christ plays a prominent role in defining the *imago dei* as freedom to live for others instead of something which separates them from the rest of the natural world.

### Bonhoeffer's Soteriology, Eschatology and Christ's Unification of Reality

In addition to anthropology, Christian soteriology and eschatology have also been cited as potentially inimical to the environment because they have enchanted Christians with another world, resulting in a dismissal of this material world since it will eventually be destroyed by God's judgement. To compound the issue, salvation and redemption have typically been seen as intended solely for the human soul and not the rest of the natural world, causing Christians to emphasise the salvation of human souls while neglecting the environment.<sup>28</sup> While much of Christian theology has led to an otherworldly approach, Bonhoeffer's soteriology and eschatology retain a strong emphasis upon life in this present world.

The theological foundation that allows Bonhoeffer to construct a soteriology which remains connected to this earth comes from his refusal to believe that the world was divided, as most Christian theology has affirmed, into 'two realms' which 'bump against each other; one divine, holy, supernatural and Christian; the other, worldly, profane, natural and unchristian'.<sup>29</sup> The inherent problem with belief in the two separated realms is that human beings are forced to live in one or the other.<sup>30</sup> Either they proceed to see this life as the only reality, or they see the final redemption as definitive of reality and simply endure life in this world in order to get to the other. Bonhoeffer, however, eschews any notion that the two spheres comprise any kind of static bifurcation. In fact, he argues that this notion of two realms is profoundly unbiblical and contradicts Reformation theology. As Bonhoeffer writes, 'There are not two realities, but only one reality, and that

<sup>28</sup> Michael S. Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), pp. 211–21.

<sup>29</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss, et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), p. 56. See also Charles Marsh, *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: OUP, 1994), pp. 103–4.

<sup>30</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, pp. 57–8.



is God's reality revealed in Christ in the reality of the world'.<sup>31</sup> In Christ, the reality of the world and the reality of God become wedded to each other. Christ therefore constitutes the unity of the two realms because the world cannot be 'independent of God's revelation in Christ'.<sup>32</sup>

The manner in which Christ unifies reality into a single whole is further developed in his discussion of the ultimate and penultimate where he outlines two insufficient approaches to understanding the relation of the Kingdom to this world, which he denotes as the 'radical solution' and the 'compromise solution'.<sup>33</sup> The radical option carries a lopsided emphasis upon redemption and only considers 'the ultimate', namely eschatological salvation divorced from the present world.<sup>34</sup> As one author has noted, such an approach leads to 'an ethics of irresponsibility' and would permit a negligent approach to the natural world.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, the compromise solution elevates this present world, the penultimate, by deleting the ultimate altogether. The problem with the compromise option for Bonhoeffer is that it upholds the current status of the penultimate world without forcing it to reckon with the primacy of redemption.<sup>36</sup>

Bonhoeffer finds neither of these options satisfactory because 'they make the penultimate and the ultimate mutually exclusive', thereby disintegrating 'the very unity of God'.<sup>37</sup> This dissolution of God results from the way in which these approaches only consider an isolated aspect of God's relationship to the world: 'The radical solution approaches things from the end of all things, from God the judge and redeemer; the compromise solution approaches things from the creator and preserver'.<sup>38</sup> Basically, these two approaches pit creation against redemption. Bonhoeffer argues it is necessary to hold these two together because these two realities have been united in Jesus Christ, 'the God who became human'.<sup>39</sup> In his incarnation, Christ affirms the value of God's creation and therefore life in it. At the same

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 58; his emphasis.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> The discussion of radicalism and compromise can be found at *ibid.*, pp. 153–7.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>35</sup> Denis Müller, 'Some Reflections on Bonhoeffer's Ethics', *Modern Churchman* 34/4 (1993), p. 30.

<sup>36</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 154.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 157. In addition, the influence of Bonhoeffer's understanding of Chalcedonian christology should not be missed here. The uniting of Christ and the world reflects the union of the divine and human natures. See John P. Manoussakis, 'At the Recurrent End of the Unending: Bonhoeffer's Eschatology of the Penultimate', in *Bonhoeffer and Continental Thought* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, 2009), p. 228.

time, Christ's incarnation must be held in conjunction with his crucifixion and resurrection, which point to God's redemptive plan for creation. As a result, affirming Christ's work in its entirety means that, on the one hand, God's creation and all of the penultimate is affirmed as that which is loved by God. On the other hand, Christ's redemptive work reminds us that this world will not be left as it is, but is subject to God's redemptive plan. Through seeing Christ's work as bringing creation and God's redemptive plan together, Bonhoeffer's christology both affirms the value of the created order and simultaneously calls it to be something beyond its present form. Believing in Christ, for Bonhoeffer, means loving God's creation and anticipating God's future redemption.

Bonhoeffer's unification of reality into a single whole has caused unease for several theologians.<sup>40</sup> Some have even tried to appropriate Bonhoeffer's theology by reinstating the notion of two kingdoms back into his theology.<sup>41</sup> Granted, there are inherent tensions within Bonhoeffer's unification, and at times the synthesis seems to break apart. However, as Müller has observed, Bonhoeffer's understanding of reality is multifaceted, stemming from the dialectical interchange between 'creation', 'sin' and 'the Kingdom'.<sup>42</sup> In the dialectical interchange, the church and world help each other discover their true identity.<sup>43</sup> It is, after all, the church which reminds the world 'that it is still the world, namely, the world that is loved and reconciled by God'.<sup>44</sup> In spite of the tensions that Bonhoeffer saw in the union of the penultimate and ultimate in Christ, he still affirmed that the ultimate has broken in upon this world, even if it is not here in its fullness.<sup>45</sup> Thus, reality, although bound up in Christ, is not without its tensions which

<sup>40</sup> See e.g. the questions raised in the following: Stephen Plant, *Bonhoeffer* (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 116; Marsh, *Bonhoeffer*, pp. 103–6.

<sup>41</sup> Barry Harvey, 'Preserving the World for Christ', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 61/1 (2008), p. 80.

<sup>42</sup> Müller, 'Reflections', p. 30. The author later makes the insightful observation that Bonhoeffer fails to account for the hermeneutical problem of interpreting the ultimate.

<sup>43</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, pp. 59–60. Here, it seems 'polemical' denotes the relationship between the realms as noted *ibid.*, p. 59, n. 47. Feil also affirms this point by asserting that Bonhoeffer's unification of the ultimate and penultimate should 'not lead one to the erroneous conclusion that what is Christian is already what is of the world'. Ernst Feil, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, trans. Martin Rumscheidt (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), p. 147.

<sup>44</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 63.

<sup>45</sup> 'In *Ethics*, we are presented with penultimacy not simply prior to the ultimate – as if in succession – but as impregnated by the ultimate things-to-come, which, since they are already to be found in the penultimate, that is, in the things-themselves, are not only to-come but also *already* here'. Manoussakis, 'Recurrent End', p. 231.

find their expression in the dialectical interchange occurring between the ultimate and the penultimate.

Despite the inherent problems in Bonhoeffer's unification of reality into Christ, it does allow Bonhoeffer to shape soteriology and eschatology in a way which emphasises life in this present world. For Bonhoeffer, true belief in God's kingdom requires one to 'love the earth'.<sup>46</sup> Believing in God's kingdom does not permit Christians to abscond into some kind of future utopia or into some other world.<sup>47</sup> On the contrary, 'Christ returns him [the human being] to the Earth as its true son'.<sup>48</sup> This redirection of humanity back to earth comprises an important aspect of Bonhoeffer's soteriology. In stark contrast to Athanasius' famous statement that God became human so humans could become God, Bonhoeffer inverts the formula: 'Human beings become human because God became human. But human beings do not become God. They could not and do not accomplish a change in form; God changes God's form into human form in order that human beings can become, not God, but human before God.'<sup>49</sup> The end goal of soteriology is therefore not deification or any kind of extraction into a future world, but fully embracing life on earth as a creature of God.<sup>50</sup> Basically, God saves human beings, so they can be fully human. In accepting one's humanity, one is also accepting the reality that one lives in this natural world in a complex web of relationships, as Bonhoeffer's anthropology has shown. Participating in salvation, therefore, does not permit one to sever these bonds with the natural world; on the contrary, they are strengthened further because this is part of the essence of humanity.

In addition, human beings are not the exclusive recipients of God's salvific work for Bonhoeffer because God's salvation also brings liberation and redemption for the entire natural world as well. In his christology lectures he notes that, because creation was affected in the fall, it also stands to

<sup>46</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Berlin*, ed. Larry L. Rasmussen, trans. Isabel Best and David Higgins (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), pp. 285–6.

<sup>47</sup> One cannot overlook how Bonhoeffer embodied this principle in the last days of his life in a Nazi prison. The day after *Abwehr's* coup attempt failed, sealing Bonhoeffer's fate of execution, he still maintained a resolute 'this worldliness'. See Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, p. 485.

<sup>48</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Berlin*, p. 286. According to Bonhoeffer, when this approach is not taken and one becomes 'otherworldly', then 'One leapfrogs over the present, scorns the Earth; one is better than it; indeed, next to the temporal defeats, one has eternal victories that are so easily achieved'.

<sup>49</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 96. Cf. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, p. 54.

<sup>50</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 94.

participate in Christ's salvation through redemption.<sup>51</sup> In fact, he suggests that creation's longing for the freedom of redemption can be seen in natural disasters wherein creation attempts to emancipate itself in order to create a new world, so to speak. Although the future redemption of creation cannot be proven scientifically, he claims it is demonstrated in the sacraments where, through the use of created elements, the natural elements reveal God's glory and indicate what the eschatological renewal will be like.<sup>52</sup> As a result, Christ is not exclusively the Saviour of human beings, but of all creation as well.

Nevertheless, in light of his desire to expand God's saving work to include creation and his attempt at uniting the penultimate and the ultimate into one reality, there is potential that Bonhoeffer's hope in the future instantiation of the kingdom and renewal of the earth might engender 'otherworldliness' or disregard for the present earth. For example, in his speech 'Thy Kingdom Come!' Bonhoeffer declares, 'God will create a new heaven and a new Earth'.<sup>53</sup> His belief that God will create a new earth feasibly allows human beings to sidestep responsibility for the human-induced ecological problems because God will simply remedy the situation in the eschaton. To be fair to Bonhoeffer, in 'Thy Kingdom Come!' he does make an ostentatious effort later in the speech to emphasise that it will be 'a new Earth'.<sup>54</sup> In the context of his speech it is not clear whether this new earth will be a completely new creation or a renewal of the earth in its present conditions. Despite the omission of this important detail, it seems that Bonhoeffer might have worked under the assumption that it was something like the latter. As he concludes his speech, he makes an important clarification, which supports this conclusion: 'it is not we who must go, but rather . . . God comes to us'.<sup>55</sup> If God comes to human beings, then it seems that this present world has continuity with the earth of the eschaton. The degree of continuity and whether human beings can impact the earth now in such a way that will affect the conditions of the eschatological earth are questions that Bonhoeffer left unanswered, questions whose answers have implications for how the earth is to be treated in the present. While this issue is problematic for Bonhoeffer's contribution to ecological concern, one could still argue that, since the earth

<sup>51</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 67. For another reiteration of this theme in Bonhoeffer, see Larry L. Rasmussen, 'Redemption: An Affair of the Earth', *Living Pulpit* 2/2 (1993), pp. 10–11.

<sup>52</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Christ*, p. 67. It seems here that 'nature' refers to non-human nature as well since 'all creatures' are represented by Christ. Contra Peter Scott, 'Christ, Nature, Sociality', p. 424.

<sup>53</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Berlin*, p. 295.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 297.

is the home of humans now and will be their home in the eschaton, there is no reason to exploit the earth's resources in the interim.

In making Christ the centre of all reality, and the one who brings salvation to all creation – human and non-human – Bonhoeffer establishes Christ as the very one who leads human beings back to an appropriate valuing of this world and nature. This present world is important and cannot be forsaken because it is the world for which God has demonstrated his love in the incarnation and is a recipient of God's saving work alongside human beings.

## Ethics

While many scholars have observed that Bonhoeffer's theology contains ecological concern based upon what has been sketched thus far, distilling how Bonhoeffer might speak to ecological ethics has not been as prevalent. Of course, Bonhoeffer never sketched a purely ecological ethic since most of his ethics focuses on inter-human interactions. However, in light of the fact that Bonhoeffer's immediate concern was confronting the tenacious power of the Third Reich, he can hardly be faulted for concentrating his energies on the pressing issues of his time. Nevertheless, I believe his ethical formulations still have pertinent directives for ecological ethics.

Front and central in Bonhoeffer's ethic is an endeavour to establish a paradigm for acting responsibly in the concrete situations of one's life by taking on the form of Christ. For Bonhoeffer, the form of Christ is the renewed *imago dei* exemplified in Christ who vicariously assumed responsibility for humanity. In order to take on the form of Christ by acting responsibly, Bonhoeffer constructs a system of moral discernment which helps people adjudicate the most responsible course of action in the concrete situations of their lives. The process of moral discernment requires, on the one hand, analysing one's motives and intentions to see if they are truly living 'for others', although this introspection was not to lead one to a fastidious state of paralysis because God's commandment invites human beings to embrace life in its fullness instead of crushing them under an oppressive burden.<sup>56</sup> On the other hand, Bonhoeffer also noted that the content of the action and its foreseeable results needed to accord with being responsible for others; even unintended consequences of an action had to be taken into account. Thus, discerning the correct course of action in any particular situation had to

<sup>56</sup> For the discussion of the various dimensions of responsible action, see Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, pp. 52, 267–8. Regarding the freedom of God's commandment, see *ibid.*, p. 385.

consider intentions, actions and results collectively, for none of these factors could be isolated from the rest without leading to irresponsibility.<sup>57</sup>

Of particular importance for ecological ethics is that Bonhoeffer introduces the future results of one's action into the ethical equation and, in considering the future results, Bonhoeffer was concerned with both the immediate and long-term effects of one's actions. The question of the future and the concern over what would happen if the present state of affairs continued was influential in motivating Bonhoeffer to participate in the subversive *Abwehr* movement, which planned to overthrow Nazi power and rebuild German society. The importance of the future for determining responsible actions can be seen in a renowned letter he wrote to his friends: 'The ultimate responsible question is not how I extricate myself heroically from a situation but [how] a coming generation is to go on living . . . The younger generation will always have the surest sense whether an action is done merely in terms of principle or from living responsibly, for it is their future that is at stake.'<sup>58</sup> It was out of concern for the future generations that Bonhoeffer resisted the Nazi regime. However, the resistance movement was not merely concerned with dismantling the Nazi government but rebuilding German society and culture after the Nazis were removed from power.<sup>59</sup> The well-being of future generations required more than the removal of the menacing evil; it required something to be erected in its place.

While Nazi Germany no longer poses a threat to future generations, scientists have been warning the human community for decades that the way human beings are impacting the environment cannot continue without dire results for human beings and the rest of nature. While some have heeded the dire predictions, most – and unfortunately these seem to be the ones causing the most damage – have not curbed their lifestyles enough to make a significant difference.<sup>60</sup> By introducing the future consequences of one's actions into the ethical equation, Bonhoeffer demands that people evaluate

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., pp. 52, 267–8. Because Bonhoeffer wants to consider all of these factors equally, I find it difficult to follow Burtness in saying that Bonhoeffer is *more* concerned about consequences than motives. See James Burtness, *Shaping the Future* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), p. 16.

<sup>58</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, p. 42.

<sup>59</sup> See Oskar Hammelsbeck, 'In Discussion with Bonhoeffer', in *I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. Wolf-Dieter Zimmerman and Ronald Gregor Smith, trans. Käthe Gregor Smith (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), pp. 182–3.

<sup>60</sup> Thomas N. Gladwin and Edward D. Reiskin, 'Why is the Northern Elite Mind Biased Against Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future?', in Max H. Bazerman et al. (eds), *Environment, Ethics, and Behavior* (San Francisco: New Lexington, 1997), pp. 234–8.

how their current consumption of resources will impact future generations. In light of the stern warnings from the scientific community, it seems difficult to believe that Bonhoeffer's ethics of responsible action would lead one to anything but a sustainable lifestyle, which attempts to satisfy the present needs of the human community while ensuring that the needs of future generations will also be met.<sup>61</sup> The present over-consumption of the earth's resources means that the human community is not considering how future generations will 'go on living' nor are they living responsibly for others as Christ did.

While it is clear that Bonhoeffer would require concern for the environment as a means of being responsible for other human beings both present and future, he also includes the natural world as an object of ethical concern in its own right and not only as a derivative of neighbourly love. At a critical point in *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer clarifies that the 'good' or the reality of Christ which drives Christian ethics demands that humans pursue the good, not only for 'their fellow humans' but also for 'the creation that surrounds them'.<sup>62</sup> In essence, in order for human beings to embody the reality of Christ, they need to behave and live in a way which is good for the entirety of nature and not just themselves, which certainly calls into question human activities that produce acid rain, agricultural pollution, and habitat destruction. Worth noting at this point is the fact that the reason the rest of creation becomes an object of moral concern results from Bonhoeffer's observation that the 'good' can only be good if it is constitutive of the entirety of reality, which has its origin in creation and its culmination in the kingdom of God.<sup>63</sup> To reduce the 'good' to that of the human community alone is to once again dissolve the reality of God. When God pronounced the world as good, he was considering all of creation and not just the human community. Likewise, if human beings are going to participate in the reality of God's work in the world, they must pursue the good of the entire creation and not only their interests.

In making Christ the centre of all reality, Bonhoeffer also makes an important contribution to the perennial ethical imbroglio regarding the conflict between ought and is, by claiming that Christ unites them together.<sup>64</sup> In other words, the reality of Christ becomes both ought and is. The reality found in Christ is that this world, the one in which we are historically

<sup>61</sup> For a circumspect understand of sustainability amidst the complexities of the natural world, see Rasmussen, *Earth Community*, pp. 162–73.

<sup>62</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 53.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

situated, has been created by and reconciled to God. For those desiring to live within this reality and act responsibly, one must discern ‘how the reality in Christ – which has long embraced us and our world within itself – works here and now or, in other words, how life is to be lived in it’.<sup>65</sup> In order to find moral direction then, one looks towards Christ’s work in the world as both ideal and reality. Because Bonhoeffer sees the reality of Christ as the centre of reality, he rejects the pragmatism of Dewey and James because it makes ‘what is at hand’ into reality and therefore defines the nature of the good based upon what is observed in the current world without considering God’s ultimate plan for the world.<sup>66</sup> The flaw that Bonhoeffer sees in Dewey and James is that ‘it does not recognize ultimate reality and so surrenders and destroys the unity of the good’.<sup>67</sup> As a result, pragmatism builds its ethic upon what is observable in the penultimate world, but, to its detriment, it does so without considering how the ultimate calls it to be something different.

By fusing the ultimate and penultimate together in the holistic reality of Christ, Bonhoeffer addresses a particular issue that is at stake in environmental ethics: should the natural world and the myriad of relationships between organisms be preserved as they are or are they called to something more? Consider, for instance, how Ruether – who builds ecological ethics upon how the penultimate is without a view towards ultimate redemption – becomes forced to conclude that, because predation is found throughout the natural world, human beings cannot be prohibited from eating animals for food.<sup>68</sup> Bonhoeffer, on the other hand, by refusing to accept the pragmatic approach which defines the good as solely that which is and works in this world, introduces the ultimate as a valid critique of the status quo and invites human beings to ask if the relationship with the natural world should be different. In other words, if creation shares in the ultimate redemption through God, should not human beings be living in light of this eschatological reality, namely, a world which is reconciled in Christ? Based upon how Bonhoeffer defines the good of ethical reflection as the one reality in Christ, it can be inferred that Bonhoeffer is not merely concerned for maintaining the way things are, but intends Christian ethics to envisage the eschatological realities

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), pp. 223–5. To be fair to Ruether, she does advocate a mostly vegetarian diet because such a diet consumes fewer resources, making food more attainable for the poor. However, because she acknowledges the presence of predation in nature, she is forced to conclude that it cannot be prohibited.



which result from God's reconciliation of this world.<sup>69</sup> This is not to say that Bonhoeffer believed that human beings are responsible for creating the kingdom here on earth, but within their finite capabilities, they are to partake of this reality.<sup>70</sup> While Bonhoeffer does not sketch how this might demand changes in the way humans relate to the natural world, one might be able to infer that changes are demanded, for instance, in the way in which humans use animals as a source of food and for scientific experiments so that they mirror better the expected harmony of the eschaton.<sup>71</sup> Certainly this same principle can be applied to other ways in which humans interact with the natural world. What is important here is that, by introducing the ultimate as constitutive of the 'good' that is to be pursued, Bonhoeffer requires human beings to inhabit the natural world in a way which participates in the eschatological reality, refusing to let 'what is at hand' determine what should be done in any given instance.

At the same time, Bonhoeffer did not believe that introducing the claim of the ultimate into the ethical decision completely overrules the way the world is as the penultimate. On the contrary, in Bonhoeffer's discussion on 'natural life' he explains that the ultimate actually affirms the penultimate because the 'natural is that form of life preserved by God for the fallen world which is directed towards justification, salvation, and renewal through Christ'.<sup>72</sup> The structure of life in the penultimate finds its validation as God's form of preservation for the present world in *via* towards the ultimate. Bonhoeffer believed that these forms of preservation could be discerned through reason and did not require some kind of special revelation. If these structures were not followed, Bonhoeffer warned that violating the natural form of life would 'shatter' the transgressors.<sup>73</sup> While Bonhoeffer's discussion of natural life does not develop how the processes of the natural world establish structures and guidelines which must be lived within, he seems to provide room to move in this direction. For instance, one could therefore use human reason in order to discover ways of living and working with nature for the benefit of human and non-human life. When humans fail to work with nature and

<sup>69</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 53. For a fuller discussion of this eschatological dimension to Bonhoeffer's ethics, see Philip G. Ziegler, 'Dietrich Bonhoeffer – an Ethics of God's Apocalypse?', *Modern Theology* 23/4 (2007), pp. 579–94.

<sup>70</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 267.

<sup>71</sup> See Ryan P. McLaughlin, 'Evidencing the Eschaton: Progressive-Transformative Animal Welfare in the Church Fathers', *Modern Theology* 27 (2011), pp. 121–46.

<sup>72</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 174.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 175–6. While he had in mind the kind of laws that the Nazis were implementing, it seems that this can be just as easily applied to environmental crises as well.

behave as if they are somehow exempt from the laws of nature, they only imperil their own lives and the rest of nature. Although his development of human–nature interaction is lacking, in his discussion of the natural life, he does proceed to argue that human life comes with concomitant rights and duties.<sup>74</sup> The foundation of all human rights rests on what Bonhoeffer calls the ‘right to bodily life’, which means ‘the body has a right to be preserved for the sake of the whole person’.<sup>75</sup> For him, the right to bodily life means that another cannot ‘encroach’ upon one’s body.<sup>76</sup> While he lists the examples of ‘[r]ape, exploitation, torture, and the arbitrary deprivation of physical freedom’ as examples of encroaching on another’s right to bodily life, one can legitimately raise the question of whether polluted drinking water and toxic air quality in certain cities are also encroaching on the bodies of other people.<sup>77</sup> If the degradation and pollution of the planet continues unabated, it seems likely that this can only result in the impingement on another’s right to bodily life by reducing its quality and inducing premature death.

In summary, it appears obvious that Bonhoeffer’s ethics makes the natural world an object of moral concern both for the sake of other human beings who depend upon the natural world and because the natural world is to be valued in its own right as constitutive of the reality of Christ. In addition, Bonhoeffer’s marriage of the ultimate and the penultimate into the reality of Christ means that the structures of the natural world need to be preserved while also calling Christians to think creatively about how the eschatological relations with the environment can be embodied in the present.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 186.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 214. While Rasmussen alludes to these realities, he does not seem to draw the explicit connection that pollution violates another’s body (*Earth Community*, pp. 308–9). I realise that pollution might be part of the law of double-effect in that, in order for certain, beneficial economic activities to occur, pollution is an unintentional byproduct, which means it might not fit Bonhoeffer’s category of ‘arbitrariness’. However, to the degree that people fail to limit pollution in order to enhance profits and personal gain, pollution becomes intentional because the failure to take necessary precautions is deliberate. For how pollution affects the bodily lives of human beings see, among others: Gretchen A. Stevens, Rodrigo H. Dias and Majid Ezzati, ‘The Effects of 3 Environmental Risks on Mortality Disparities across Mexican Communities’, *PNAS* 105/4 (2008), pp. 16860–5; Janice J. Kim, ‘Ambient Air Pollution: Health Hazards to Children’, *Pediatrics* 114/6 (2004), pp. 1699–1707; Douglas W. Dockery et al., ‘An Association between Air Pollution and Mortality in Six U.S. Cities’, *New England Journal of Medicine* 329/24 (1993), pp. 1753–9; Alexander Millman, Deliang Tang and Frederica P. Perara, ‘Air Pollution Threatens the Health of Children in China’, *Pediatrics* 122/3 (2008), pp. 620–8.

## Conclusion

As a result, Bonhoeffer's theology and ethics provide a rather ecologically concerned Christian theology. What is more, he essentially beat the current rush to do so, which suggests that the recent trend to make Christian theology more ecologically friendly is not merely a reaction to Lynn White but a possibility inherent in the tradition which has merely been actualised by the stimulus of recent scientific research. Furthermore, Bonhoeffer manages to construct an ecologically amenable anthropology and soteriology while remaining committed to the tradition and biblical texts, which places a vigorous demand on any theologian. His way through the imbroglio is Christ, the one for others. By putting Christ at the centre of all reality and at the centre of nature, Bonhoeffer makes Christ the impetus behind a Christian ecological ethic wherein humans should preserve nature for future generations (human and non-human). As a result, Christ is no longer a problem but the way forward because Christ provides the form of how human beings are to live for others. Such an outlook precludes any kind of exploitative or carefree attitude towards the natural world; it demands nothing less than sustainability. Moreover, since Christ's redemption extends to the natural world as well, human beings need to preserve the natural world, keeping in mind that it is a fellow-heir to the salvation of Christ.