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Sexuality and community in the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

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Abstract

This article suggests that the narrative of human community Bonhoeffer described in *Sanctorum Communio*, following the categories of creation, fall and redemption, provides the framework for understanding the various aspects of human sexuality found in *Creation and Fall* and *Ethics*. A comparative study of these texts reveals that marriage and sexuality in Bonhoeffer encapsulates the human drive towards community, preserved from the fall for redemption in Christ. Understanding human sexuality within the structure of this narrative allows for a new way of appropriating and evaluating Bonhoeffer's theological anthropology for contemporary ethical reflection in the Christian community.

Keywords: anthropology, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, creation, ethics, marriage, sexuality

Determining the role of human sexuality in the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer presents a formidable and compelling challenge to readers. Early treatments of Bonhoeffer's work attempting to make sense of his cryptic comments regarding the sexual life of the human creature tended to view his outlook as largely negative. Rosemary Ruether's 1966 article first interpreted Bonhoeffer as reiterating the 'Augustinian position' of linking original sin with sexuality as the means propagating the fall.[1] Terrence Reynolds' study twenty years later argued that Bonhoeffer had a negative view of sexuality (and earthly desires in general) prior to 1939, after which he began to find a more positive vision of creaturely reality.[2] Both Ruether and Reynolds capture the darker nature of human sexuality by emphasising the link with sin, but viewing sexuality as a degraded form of human pleasure or as a means of transferring fallenness does not explain the depth of insight Bonhoeffer expressed regarding human sexuality. Ruether correctly understood that there is a link between sexuality and sin in

[1] Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'A Query to Daniel Sullivan: Bonhoeffer on Sexuality', *Continuum* 4/3 (1966), p. 457.
[2] Terrence Reynolds, 'Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Encouragement of Human Love: A Radical Shift in his Later Theology', *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 41/3–4 (1987), pp. 67–8.

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Bonhoeffer, but she preferred to speak of it primarily as a transference of sin, an understanding that Bonhoeffer himself did not explicitly express. Furthermore, Reynolds' interpretation correctly recognized the tension between Bonhoeffer's positive and negative views of sexuality, but he opted to resolve the conflict by attributing it to an inconsistency on Bonhoeffer's part. Such a stark separation of Bonhoeffer's post-1939 work from his early theology goes against the grain of much scholarship that perceives an underlying consistency in Bonhoeffer's thought.[3]

Both scholars tend to emphasise the negativity of Bonhoeffer's sexual ethics, which prompts readers to ask if there really is anything positive to say about sexuality in Bonhoeffer's mind. An optimistic and a pessimistic stream of thought on human sexual relationships adds to the complexity of his thought, but few scholars have captured the core impulse that holds these two attitudes together. Moving beyond these seemingly divergent directions to pinpoint the centre of Bonhoeffer's sexual ethics requires us to begin looking at sexuality through a different sphere of thought than these treatments suggest – not simply as a form of earthly pleasure or as a vehicle of indwelling corruption of nature, but as a form of human community. Entire new terrain opens up to discover the meaning of human sexuality in Bonhoeffer's theological understanding when sexuality is understood as encapsulating the human drive towards one another. The positive and negative elements of sexuality come together within the narrative of human community that runs from creation to fall to redemption in Christ, a structure of human life in which men and women can discover what it means for them to be sexual creatures.

For the purpose of illuminating this meaning of sexuality, the following essay compares Dietrich Bonhoeffer's description of human community in *Sanctorum Communio* with his statements regarding the male–female relationship in *Creation and Fall*, *Discipleship* and the *Ethics* fragments. The consistency of the latter works with Bonhoeffer's early theology demonstrates that Bonhoeffer's theology of human sexuality is best understood when analysed through his vision of human community as depicted in the biblical narrative from creation to fall to redemption in Jesus Christ. Doing so integrates the positive and negative streams of

[3] While there is a shift in tone and more nuance after the publication of *Discipleship*, there is substantial continuity between the early and later works. For contemporary arguments for Bonhoeffer's consistency, see Stephen Plant, *Bonhoeffer* (New York: Continuum, 2004), pp. 94–6, 104–5; Michael DeJonge, *Bonhoeffer's Theological Formation: Berlin, Barth, and Protestant Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 13–14, 143–6.

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thought in Bonhoeffer's writings on sexuality and provides a framework for understanding the scope of his thought. A corollary conclusion of this study, then, is that a proper understanding of sexuality as reflecting human community demonstrates a continuity in Bonhoeffer's earlier and later theology pertaining to the human person.

Bonhoeffer's early theological anthropology in *Sanctorum Communio*

In 1930 Bonhoeffer published his doctoral dissertation (which had been directed by Reinhold Seeberg) under the title, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*. Bonhoeffer himself defined this piece as a work of theology examining the reality of the church from the vantage point of social philosophy and sociology. Thus, it is first and foremost a theological exposition of the church.[4] Theological anthropology was significant for Bonhoeffer in *Sanctorum Communio*, insofar as the question of 'what is the community' raised the question of 'what is a human being', a question he answered through the use of a relational ontology. When it comes to how we should understand his sexual ethics, the themes and concepts that Bonhoeffer developed in this text are pivotal in laying the groundwork for a Christ-centred human community as the *telos* of sexuality.

Using a philosophy of dialogue as his departure, Bonhoeffer developed a relational definition of the person that led him into a consideration of the theological dynamics of human community. In contrast to a Christian theology of the person, Aristotelian, Stoic, Epicurean and Cartesian philosophy defined personhood by establishing the concrete existence of the object through the immanent reason or spirit of the subject. According to Bonhoeffer, the concept of an immanent spirit does ontological violence to the human other by absorbing the individual into a movement or progression towards unity.[5] Thus, the culprit behind the loss of personhood – the error of ancient Graeco-Roman philosophy, which was reinvigorated in the Enlightenment by Descartes and Kant – is idealism.[6] The universalising, difference-consuming tendency of idealism creates a social and ethical dilemma by excluding the existence of the other to whom the individual is related, and who confronts the individual in ethical responsibility. By

[4] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, vol. 1 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, trans. Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens, ed. Clifford J. Green (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1998), pp. 32–3.

[5] Ibid., p. 42.

[6] Wayne Whitson Floyd Jr., *Theology and the Dialectics of Otherness: On Reading Bonhoeffer and Adorno* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America), pp. 8–9, 24–5.

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defining all reality according to the knowing subject, idealism is unable to establish genuine, objective human otherness.

The Christian concept of the person offers an alternative way of thinking about the person, one that establishes human otherness by reference not to an immanent spirit, but to God himself.[7] For Bonhoeffer, the starting point for a theology of the human person is God: 'The Christian person originates only in the absolute duality of God and humanity; only in experiencing the barrier does the awareness of oneself as ethical person arise.'[8] The importance of God is precisely that the human person encounters in God a real barrier to their own self. 'Limit' or 'barrier' (*Schranke*), 'boundary' (*Grenze*) and 'responsibility' (*Verantwortung*) are central concepts for Bonhoeffer's understanding of personhood, since these realities can only refer to persons encountering other persons. Human beings come to know their personhood by knowing that they are limited by the other, first as encountered in God and subsequently in human-to-human interactions. The You is not immanent to the human I, but remains entirely outside of it, setting a limit for the human subject that establishes the ethical relation. This social ontic-ethical basic-relation (*Grundbeziehungen*) of persons is so fundamental to Christian human ontology that it is impossible for the person to overcome the barrier the other presents for them. For Bonhoeffer, personhood consisted in being related to a You, in whom the person finds their own limit and ethical responsibility.[9]

A relational theological anthropology must return to divine mediation, however, because personalist philosophy simply relocates the problem of otherness in humanity by positing the human other as an unmediated metaphysical concept.[10] Bonhoeffer explains:

> this seems to make one human being the creator of the ethical person of the other, which is an intolerable thought. Can it be avoided? The person-creating efficacy of the You is independent of the personhood of the You. We now add that it is also independent of the will of the human You. One human being cannot of its own accord make another into an I, an ethical person conscious of responsibility.[11]

On the contrary, for Bonhoeffer, the human must be transcended altogether as a ground for self-perception and replaced with a divine foundation. The

[7] Ibid., pp. 27–8.
[8] Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, p. 49.
[9] Ibid., pp. 50–1.
[10] Ibid., p. 54.
[11] Ibid.

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human I only knows the human You through the mediation of the divine You, who constitutes otherness and establishes human existence as a being in community with others.[12]

After laying this groundwork for his theology of the human person, Bonhoeffer goes on to outline the history of humanity from creation and fall to redemption. Community was God's original intent for human beings in the primal state, with human beings existing in an unbroken unity with one another through an unimpeded relationship with God. Bonhoeffer did not wish to elaborate extensively on what community life looked like in the primal state and considered most of what we can say about beginnings to be the result of eschatology. The noetic impacts of sin limit access to the primal state only to revelation, which for Bonhoeffer meant a backwards-projection of the church.[13] In other words, because human beings live in a ruptured and broken history, everything that can be known of the beginning is found only in light of the end in the church. For this reason, Bonhoeffer focuses largely on methodological issues in this section of his argument. He uses sociology and social philosophy to describe how his previous discussion of individual human relationality also applies to larger communities. Important to note here, however, is that Bonhoeffer thinks of community as both an end in itself and a means to an end, or the 'structure of meaning' and the 'structure of purpose', respectively.[14] A structure of purpose may exist, but only within the structure of meaning. Thus, a community exists first and foremost for its own sake, and through this as a means to a certain end.

Despite the goodness of the original community, the disobedience of Adam and Eve corrupted their personal relations so that human beings after the fall experience isolation from one another:

> Whereas the previous spirit-form grew out of love, the fall replaced love with selfishness. This gave rise to the break in immediate community with God, and likewise in human community. With this change of direction the whole spiritual orientation of humanity was altered.[15]

Human communities do not disappear completely, and they continue to bear the evidence of their original design for communion with God and

[12] Thus, Bonhoeffer presented a mediating position between transcendental idealism and a philosophy of dialogue. Charles Marsh, 'The Overabundant Self and the Transcendental Tradition: Dietrich Bonhoeffer on the Self-Reflective Subject', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 60/4 (1992), p. 662.

[13] Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, pp. 58–64.

[14] Ibid., p. 88.

[15] Ibid., p. 107.

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one another; but natural communities become essentially corrupt and share in one another's sinfulness. Moreover, sin has a noetic impact on the community. Due to their falling away from God, the human community has no recollection of their primal unity. The only access that exists to this original unity is found by looking to the future, towards the redemption of the world in Christ.

The hope of the community is in Christ, and in him, '[t]he church is God's new will and purpose for humanity'.[16] God must speak and act to recreate the community, and he does so in Jesus Christ. Since Jesus Christ restores human communion with God, he not only serves as the reconciliation of divine–human community, but also the reconciliation of humanity as the new Adam. The church is realised in Christ and becomes actualised in history through God's revealing of himself in the Holy Spirit, who gathers and maintains the community of faith.[17] Although Christ's redemption of the community is eschatological – the sinful community of the old Adam still exists within the redeemed church in the middle of history, awaiting its final redemption – it is also 'analogous to the basic-relations [*Grundbeziehungen*] established in Adam and their preservation'.[18] From the perspective of the form of life existing in the church, it is possible to find a preserved core of the primal community in Christ's redeemed community in the midst of the destruction brought on by the fall. Christ preserves what is good in the created order and redirects the whole community towards restoration to God and one another, a task completed in the eschaton.

Again, Bonhoeffer's theology of human personhood and community follows a narrative consisting in the general movements of the biblical story from creation (primal state) to fall to redemption in Christ. Despite certain changes in emphasis and tone in his later works, this story of human community is a central feature of his thought that continues to play a role in his subsequent theology. Bonhoeffer's consistency becomes evident when one examines the various statements regarding human sexuality he made in the years following his early theological writings. Comparing these statements with the narrative movements of the human community in *Sanctorum Communio* – creation, fall, redemption – reveals that the unsystematic treatment of human sexuality in Bonhoeffer is coherent with the structure his early theology and the framework of human community.

[16] Ibid., p. 141.
[17] Ibid., pp. 142–4.
[18] Ibid., pp. 143–4.

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Sexuality in the context of human community

In 1932–3, Bonhoeffer delivered a series of lectures at the University of Berlin, later published under the title, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3*. These lectures were Bonhoeffer's first explorations into a theological exegesis of scripture, reading and interpreting the scriptures as a book of the church. True to his earlier approach to the primal state, Bonhoeffer does not presume to speak of the beginning in an unbroken continuity: 'Where the beginning begins, there our thinking stops.'[19] But as a book of the church, the scriptures reveal the beginning by drawing our attention completely to the future of the world in the motion towards Christ.[20] As we will see in the following analysis, Bonhoeffer also draws our attention to Christ when it comes to the matter of human sexuality.

Comparing Bonhoeffer's exegesis of key anthropological texts in Genesis touching on sexuality with his earlier writings yields many similarities. In line with the relational anthropology, Bonhoeffer identifies the first two human beings in *Creation and Fall* as relational creatures, based on account of the image of God found in Genesis 1:27. A core implication of the *imago Dei* is that human beings resemble their creator insofar as they are free, which does not mean independence from the other, but '"being-free-for-the-other", because I am bound to the other. Only by being in relation with the other am I free'.[21] This freedom may be related analogically with the freedom of God, who in his free grace in Jesus Christ binds himself to humanity. God is free for humanity, and humans are by analogy free for God and each other. Therefore, human likeness to God is not based on an *analogia entis* in which human beings share in or reflect the particular being of God, but in an *analogia relationis* that derives from God's own freedom for the other. Bonhoeffer first explained this analogy when it came to the original duality of humankind: 'God created them man and woman. The human being is not alone. Human beings exist in duality, and it is in this dependence on the other that their creatureliness exists.'[22] Thus, the duality of male and female in Genesis 1 is the key to unlocking the ontological truth about humanity: that all human beings exist in freedom for and in relation to one another, after the likeness of their Creator.

[19] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3*, vol. 3 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, trans. Douglas Stephen Bax, ed. John W. de Gruchy (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), p. 25.
[20] Ibid., p. 22.
[21] Ibid., p. 63.
[22] Ibid., p. 64.

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The second creation story provided Bonhoeffer with an opportunity to explain the full meaning of this *analogia relationis* in the context of male and female existence. Adam had a knowledge of his limit before Eve, but only as the boundary that could never be crossed. Without being confronted with his limit, an object of his love, a partner to bear his limit, Adam could not really love his own life or understand his personhood. The paradise that God created for the man was in the limit and life he found in the form of the woman, the first community.[23] Adam and Eve existed fundamentally in relation to one another. This relation is, for Bonhoeffer, the *telos* of human sexuality. Sexuality refers to the inherent belonging-to-one-another of human beings: 'Quite plainly sexuality expresses complementary sides of the matter: that of being an individual and that of being one with the other. Sexuality is nothing but the ultimate possible realization of belonging to each other. It has here as yet no life of is own detached from this, its purpose.'[24]

Sexuality therefore belongs not simply to bodily pleasure, but to the central anthropological category of human community. This text uses terms such as 'limit' and 'boundedness' (*Grenze*) to represent the original meaning of Adam and Eve's relationship, terms that Bonhoeffer also used in *Sanctorum Communio* to describe the basic-relations of human beings.[25] As well, themes such as the divine givenness and mediation of the human other reflect upon Bonhoeffer's earlier theology of personhood. The first marriage is in some sense a scriptural figure revealing the essential relatedness of human beings, so much so that it is the prototypical 'community of love . . . the church in its original form'.[26] Lest it seem like Bonhoeffer has too high of a view of marriage, it is important to note that he qualifies this claim as follows:

> Such statements for us do not mean the glorification of marriage as we know it; instead they point out that at any rate for us the bond between husband and wife does not partake of this unambiguous reality . . . Sexuality has torn the community of love completely to pieces, so that it has turned into an obsessive desire that affirms itself and denies the other as God's creation.[27]

Nevertheless, Bonhoeffer viewed marriage and sexuality as a creaturely good that embodies in some small way a basic truth about who human beings were made to be.

[23] Ibid., pp. 98–9.
[24] Ibid., p. 100.
[25] Clifford J. Green, *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 196.
[26] Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, pp. 100–1.
[27] Ibid., p. 101.

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Bonhoeffer therefore took sexuality in a very unique direction by forging a link between male–female duality and the basic communal nature of humankind. Parallels with his early theology also raise very important questions for Bonhoeffer. While Adam and Eve's sexuality does point towards otherness as foundational for human existence, the function of Adam and Eve's original relation as that between man and woman in particular is unclear in Bonhoeffer's exegesis. This question goes to the deeper issue of the ambiguity of what one might call the original marriage. His explanation of the primal state of marriage is ambiguous, and in leaving it undefined, Bonhoeffer also left certain questions unanswered. For instance, did he consider sexual difference (namely, one's existence as either male or female) to be essential to human ontology? Further, is it essential for the meaning of marriage, or does marriage simply reflect the character of human ontology in general, regardless of gender? Finally, what is the role of procreation or family in the primal state? Such questions are important for contemporary discussions of sexuality, and we will return to them at the end of this essay. At the very least, however, what is clear is that marriage and sexuality for Bonhoeffer embody the primal drive of humanity towards community with one another, and in this respect one could say that sexuality reflects the image of God in humanity. Although Bonhoeffer's view of the fall prevented him from being clear with regard to what primal marriage entails, it is clear that he viewed sexuality as a creaturely good.

Sexuality and human sin

Bonhoeffer's *Discipleship* followed a long history of Western thought on the topic of concupiscence of fallen creatures. In this text Bonhoeffer warns against the dark corruption of human sexuality, an unbelief that lies dormant in the body, 'latent in its desires', which the Christian believer must deny in order to embark on the road of following Christ.[28] While he considered sexuality to be good, Bonhoeffer did not ignore the impacts of the fall upon human sexual existence. Indeed, he went so far as to tie sexuality to the essence of original sin, arguing that such a conclusion 'is not as absurd as Protestants have often declared on the basis of a moralistic naturalism'.[29] Sexuality is strongly connected to sin in Bonhoeffer's theology, and to understand this fact requires the reader to view sexuality as a figure of human community that is destroyed as a result of sin.

[28] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), pp. 131–3.

[29] Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, pp. 124–5.

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Natural forms of community remain intact by the providence of God, but sin undermines human community by altering the direction of the I–You relation. Human relations to both God and one another are corrupt at their core because sin wrenches apart human beings from the other and sets them in animosity to all that is outside themselves: 'Whereas in the primal state the relation among human beings is one of giving, in the sinful state it is purely demanding. Every person exists in complete, voluntary isolation; everyone lives their own life, rather than all living the same life in God.'[30] Sexuality, as all of creation, was affected by the selfish turn of the human heart in Adam. Male–female relationships after the fall are now a sign of division and hostility, with each individual viewing his or her own being over and against the other and seeking to transgress the limit of the other, to claim a right over them. In defining fallen sexuality in terms of an individualistic absorption of the other, it is possible to see again Bonhoeffer's aversion to idealism taking shape in the way he understands human sexuality in a broken community. Relationality still exists as a fundamental key to human ontology; community never disappears completely. However, the desire of fallen sexuality is not for the giving of oneself to the other, but to selfishly consume and destroy the other.[31] Where love disappears and boundlessness (*grenzenlos*) appears, where the I infringes upon the personhood of the other, the I comes to hate their limit and seeks to destroy the other person in revolt against God.[32]

Even here, then, a communal definition of marriage and sexuality explains how human sexuality has been twisted by evil. The brokenness of sexuality after the fall becomes visible in human shame (*Scham*), which is essentially a relational term for Bonhoeffer. Shame is humanity's 'irrepressible memory of disunion [*Entzweiung*] from their origin. It is the pain of this disunion, and the helpless desire to reverse it. Human beings are ashamed because they have lost something that is part of their original nature and their wholeness.'[33] Human beings were created to live in self-giving relation with one other, and shame is the recognition that one continually yearns for but always falls short of this purpose. A dialectic of covering and uncovering runs through Bonhoeffer's reflections on shame; it is a covering for the evil of the other person as well as one's own evil that threatens to

[30] Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, p. 108.

[31] Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, pp. 122–3; cf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, vol. 6 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Scott, ed. Clifford J. Green (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2005), pp. 303–5.

[32] Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, pp. 99–100.

[33] Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 303.

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reopen the wound in the community. Shame is dynamic, and relational in character, demonstrating a relational and communal understanding of sin based upon a relational theological anthropology.[34]

Sexuality in a detached community destroys the community of love because the sign of the primal unity now becomes the sign of division. The sexual relationship is the first to be corrupted by the knowledge of good and evil in Bonhoeffer's theology for an important reason: because the result of humankind's falling away from the Creator is a destruction of interpersonal relationships, of which sexuality is the prime figure. This understanding follows the basic logic of *Sanctorum Communio*, for when the human individual ceases relation with the divine other, the outcome is a subsequent split with the human other. To amend Ruether's interpretation, then, Bonhoeffer certainly did tie sexuality in a distinct way to original sin, a step he recognised many Protestants were hesitant to make. Nevertheless, he did not do so because he viewed sexuality as the means by which corruption was transferred down through the generations, but rather because sexuality encapsulates the relational nature of human beings that is corrupted by sin. Since human beings are relational creatures, made in the image of God, sexuality displays a crucial aspect of what it means to be a human being. Sin is relational in nature, and evil destroys sexuality first because sexuality is the prime figure of the human *telos*.

A final comment on Bonhoeffer's outlook on fallen sexuality concerns the inaccessibility of the primal state of human sexuality. Establishing a view of what may be called 'natural' human sexuality (what sexuality would have looked like before sin) is problematic, since the primal state is lost in the wake of the fall. Human sexuality follows this same narrative as the original creation. To argue for a natural sexuality assumes that the natural, prelapsarian state of the world still exists and can be known, but this state has in fact been rendered unknowable because of sin. Bonhoeffer says: 'The protest that appeals to the natural character of sexuality is unaware of the highly ambivalent character of every so-called "natural aspect" of our world.'[35] Bonhoeffer was thus suspicious of any attempt to discern a naturally ordered sexuality because what rightly ordered sexuality actually looks like assumes an access to the primal state that no longer exists. To be

[34] Christiane Tietz, 'The Mysteries of Knowledge, Sin, and Shame', in Kirsten Busch Nielsen et al. (eds), *Mysteries in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Copenhagen Bonhoeffer Symposium* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), pp. 30–2.

[35] Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, pp. 125–6; Jordan J. Ballor, 'Christ in Creation: Bonhoeffer's Orders of Preservation and Natural Theology', *Journal of Religion* 86/1 (2006), pp. 9–10.

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sure, Bonhoeffer believed a partial return was possible by looking forward towards the restoration of creation in Christ. Sexuality is still a created good. However, given the inaccessibility of the primal state after the fall, coupled with the uncompleted, eschatological nature of the new creation, Bonhoeffer could not assert full confidence in the fallen person's ability to know the natural human sexual life.

At times, Bonhoeffer appears to have a dark view of human sexual relationships; the narrative of *Creation and Fall* certainly moves in this direction. To say, however, that Bonhoeffer had a completely negative view of sexuality would be an overstatement. Despite his belief that human sexuality was severely – even catastrophically – affected by the fall and his occasional reluctance to describe what primal marriage looked like, he did not deny the essential goodness of sexuality. Bonhoeffer held out hope that God's true intention for human life could be fulfilled in the world, preserved for renewal in Christ.

The redemption of sexuality

Perhaps the loftiest elaboration on marriage in Bonhoeffer's writings is found in a letter to Eberhard Bethge from prison in 1943 on the occasion of Bethge's wedding. In this wedding sermon, Bonhoeffer depicted marriage not simply as a confession of the spouses' love, but 'God's holy institution through which God wishes to preserve humanity until the end of time'.[36] Preservation is the key word in the sermon that to a significant degree captures the tenor of his thought on sexuality. The grim reality of sin does not negate the fact that God has rescued humanity in their sexual relationships by sanctifying and redeeming sexuality with a christological reorientation. Although the community is broken, God preserves and reorders it towards new creation in Christ by way of what Bonhoeffer calls 'orders of preservation', or 'divine mandates'.

The providential ordering of marriage comes to expression first in *Creation and Fall*. The great paradox of sexuality is that even a relationship of deadly, selfish passion that consumes the other can give rise to the creation of new life and the propagation of the other. He says that 'the essence of sexuality consists of creating in the midst of destroying, so the dark secret of the nature of humankind, essentially conditioned by original sin, is preserved from generation to generation in the course of continuing procreation'.[37] Sin may

[36] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, vol. 8 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, trans. Isabel Best, Lisa E. Dahill, Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens, ed. John W. de Gruchy (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2010), p. 83.

[37] Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, p. 125.

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have corrupted human sexuality at its core by destroying the community, but God preserves an element of the original sexual relationship through the orders of preservation:

> All orders of our fallen world are God's orders of preservation [*Erhaltungsordungen*] that uphold and preserve us for Christ. They are not orders of creation but orders of preservation. They have no value in themselves; instead they find their end and meaning only through Christ. God's new action with humankind is to uphold and preserve humankind in its fallen world, in its fallen orders for death – for resurrection, for the new creation, for Christ.[38]

God's action now orders and restrains human life after the fall by restraining humanity's passion without abrogating the goodness of sexual life altogether: 'God's way of acting to preserve the world is to affirm the sinful world and to show its limits by means of order.'[39]

The concept of orders has a long history dating back to Martin Luther, whose concept of the estates (*Stände*) was an important feature of his social ethics. According to Luther, marriage is an estate of human life created before the fall, but due to the corruption of sin, he claimed that marriage is a 'hospital', a state preventing human beings from falling into sin by providing a place where sexual desires can be properly expressed.[40] Redescribed using the nineteenth-century language of 'orders of creation', the idea of the estates, understood as concrete ethical forms of human life, became a contested feature of twentieth-century German theology.[41] Perhaps most significantly, Emil Brunner used the language of orders of creation in his ethics, *The Divine Imperative*, to describe fundamental, unalterable structures of human corporate life that unite human beings to one another in definite ways.[42] These orders of creation, he says, are natural to human knowledge: 'The ultimate real meaning of these orders can only be perceived where God

[38] Ibid., p. 140.
[39] Ibid., p. 139.
[40] Martin Luther, 'A Sermon on the Estate of Marriage (1519)', in *Christian in Society I*, vol. 44 of *Luther's Works*, American edn, ed. James Atkinson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), p. 9; Martin Luther, 'The Estate of Marriage (1522)', in *Christian in Society II*, vol. 45 of *Luther's Works*, American edn, ed. Walther I. Brandt (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1962), pp. 45–6.
[41] Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian, Christian, Contemporary*, trans. Eric Mosbacher et al. (London: Collins, 1970), p. 161.
[42] Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative: A Study in Christian Ethics*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1936), p. 210.

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is recognized as Creator and Redeemer, in faith, through His Word. But the orders themselves are the subject of a purely rational knowledge.'[43]

While not unsympathetic to the basic insights behind Luther's thinking, Bonhoeffer ultimately rejects the terminology of 'orders of creation'. In the tumultuous atmosphere of Bonhoeffer's Germany, theologians often used the concept to argue for the German nation and the Nazi state as an order of creation. In this context, Bonhoeffer thought Brunner's concept of the orders of creation led to a form of natural law that would lend support for German nationalism, and instead wanted the orders to be understood along a more christological trajectory that accentuated the effects of the fall and human dependency upon revelation.[44] Despite efforts to revise the concept (namely, by way of the category of 'orders of preservation' in *Creation and Fall*), Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* drops the term 'orders' entirely and continues the idea under the name of divine 'mandates'. Specifically, Bonhoeffer argues that Christian ethics become visible in the four mandates of God: work, the state, the church and marriage. These mandates constitute determinate forms of being that exist by the command of God, grounded in the revelation of Jesus Christ. In these concrete areas of life, divine authority is conferred upon an earthly institution by the commandeering of the earthly reality by the divine command.[45] Thus, while Bonhoeffer was influenced by Luther on these matters, his formulations were shaped in large part by the political and theological context of pre-war Germany and his interactions with other German theologians.

Both the orders of preservation and the divine mandates refer to christologically oriented forms of the natural sphere, 'that form of life preserved (*erhaltene Gestalt des Lebens*) by God for the fallen world that is directed toward justification, salvation, and renewal through Christ'.[46] Elsewhere in the *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer speaks of the eschatological relation of the natural to Christ as the penultimate and the ultimate.[47] Here 'the natural' has an almost

[43] Ibid., p. 220.

[44] Barth and Bonhoeffer both objected to Brunner's use of the concept of orders, on the grounds that they too easily resembled a type of natural law that rested on a universally accessible rationality, distinct from the revelation of God. However, Bonhoeffer did not completely reject every concept of orders and opted to revise the concept in order to maintain the visibility of Christian ethics. Ballor, 'Christ in Creation', pp. 4, 21; Andreas Pangritz, *Karl Barth in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, trans. Barbara and Martin Rumscheidt (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 40–4.

[45] Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, pp. 68–70, 389.

[46] Ibid., p. 174; Barry Harvey, 'Preserving the World for Christ: Toward a Theological Engagement with the "Secular"', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 61/1 (2008), pp. 71–2.

[47] Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 174.

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entirely christological (and thus eschatological) orientation: continuity with the past exists as the natural has reference back to God's creational intent, but the natural simultaneously has reference to what is to come in Christ in the justification and renewal of the world. A core of the original community is preserved by God's preservation, and the natural is that form of created life that is preserved and redirected towards Jesus Christ. It is not a given quality of life, but 'receives its confirmation only through Christ. Christ has entered into natural life. Only by Christ's becoming human does natural life become the penultimate that is directed toward the ultimate. Only through Christ becoming human do we have the right to call people to natural life and to live it ourselves.'[48] The natural is established not by what was in the beginning, but about what is now and what is to come in Jesus Christ.

As stated above, marriage in Bonhoeffer's theology is a divine mandate. As such, it too partakes in the reality of the natural. Marriage constitutes a structural feature of human life that God uses to preserve the sexual relationship so that it may be redeemed by Jesus Christ. Marriage may thus be seen as a creational 'order' that precedes the fall: 'There was human marriage before any other different groupings of humanity came into being. Marriage was given with the creation of the first human beings. It is rooted in the beginnings of humanity.'[49] After the fall, however, sexuality is disordered and oriented towards the destruction of human life; the original form of marriage is inaccessible to us except through that which is preserved and reordered towards Christ in order to fulfil its original purpose. The preserved form of marriage, Bonhoeffer says, is constituted by the twofold ends of marriage: procreation and bodily communion in the conjugal act.[50] Here we find echoes of Bonhoeffer's understanding that community functions as a means to an end as well as an end in itself. Marriage as a community between husband and wife exists as an end in itself, in such a way that this end is distinct but never separate from the purpose of procreation. Both, according to Bonhoeffer, are part of the natural character of marriage. Procreation is a preservative aspect of marriage, but as such it is also linked to the original creation by means of Christ's preservation of the natural.

Marriage must therefore be considered in Bonhoeffer's theology as a figure embodying the primal human drive towards community, reflecting his early theological anthropology as set out in *Sanctorum Communio*. Just as his description of sexuality in *Creation and Fall* adhered to his thoughts on

[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid., p. 204.
[50] Ibid., p. 210.

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the primal state and the fall, Bonhoeffer's theology of marriage in *Ethics* culminates in the redemption of the earthly institution that preserves the male–female relationship for new creation in Christ. Sexuality experiences a redirection towards redemption, and when taken together with some of the darker points of the narrative, a clearer picture emerges of precisely how Bonhoeffer viewed the sexual life of human beings. Similarities with the structure and story of the human community he developed at the beginning of his career make it evident that his early reflections continued to provide the foundation and structure of his sexual ethics that he developed in his subsequent works.

Sexuality in the community of God

At this point, having established the general framework for Bonhoeffer's vision of human sexuality, we can briefly examine the merits and potential problems of his views. The major strength of Bonhoeffer's work is that the discussion of sexuality fits within the narrative framework of scripture, and in particular the place of human community within this tale. Human community in Bonhoeffer's theology follows the arc of the biblical story from creation and fall to redemption. Here one finds that Bonhoeffer integrates many themes that in the modern period have tended to become unravelled, most notably, the connection between sexuality and the human community in general. For this reason, Bonhoeffer's view of marriage and sexuality is helpful for understanding sexual ethics from a conviction that begins our reflection upon the command of God with the reality of the Christian community.

Further, understanding the structure of Bonhoeffer's thought makes it possible to examine other areas of sexuality that his writings did not address. For instance, there is the question of whether sexual difference – the division of human beings into categories of male and female – is essential or non-essential to human ontology. While marriage and sexuality do contain the deepest and most profound expressions of the human desire for community, Bonhoeffer was not clear as to whether being male and female refers to two distinct and complementary ways of being human, or if it is simply a general figure of human relatedness. Perhaps Bonhoeffer did not see it as an important question in his day, or felt that the topic was tangential to the main themes of his theological exegesis of the Genesis text. The topic is significant in current debates, however, regarding same-sex unions, and deserves some comment. Isabel Carter Heyward makes an implicit connection to Bonhoeffer in her book, *The Redemption of God*, when she claims that Bonhoeffer is her 'contemporary patron-saint', providing the inspirations for her reflections on the relational nature of God that logically

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lead her to an affirmation of same-sex love.[51] Furthermore, Christiane Tietz argues that, 'From the perspective of orders of preservation, the criterion for a "Christian partnership" would not be the sexual orientation of the two partners, but the question of whether this order helps to preserve the world for Christ.'[52] According to Tietz, the clear answer is that a homosexual couple could do so, since having natural born children is not a defining value of a Christ-oriented reality. An important question then is how Bonhoeffer defines what is the proper character of a christologically preserved sexual relationship, given the current debates on gender and sexual orientation.

Although Bonhoeffer sought to affirm sexuality as a created good, he was ambiguous on precisely how essential male and female differentiation is to human sexual existence, to a large extent because his hesitancy to speak of the primal state left his explanation of the first marriage undefined. From a pure examination of his idea of personhood, there is nothing in Bonhoeffer's theology that prevents the I–You relation from being applied to a homosexual couple. Perhaps the lack of definition of the primal marriage means that it was non-sexual in nature – that is, not having any essential relation to male–female existence in particular. It would seem, however, that the definition of preserved marriage in Bonhoeffer would mitigate this conclusion. Even though he says that 'Sexuality is not only a means of procreation, but, independent of this purpose, embodies joy within marriage in the love of two people', the purpose of procreation still functions as an essential part of the divine mandate of marriage for Bonhoeffer.[53] He even goes so far as to say that 'Marriage involves acknowledging the right to life that will come into being, but this is not a right that is at the disposal of the married couple. Without the basic acknowledgment of this right, marriage ceases to be a marriage and becomes a relationship.'[54] Bodily communion is 'distinct but never separated from the right to reproduction'.[55] Given the place of procreation as essential to the meaning of marriage as preserved in Christ, it therefore seems unlikely Bonhoeffer would find male–female existence to be merely arbitrary to human existence or to marriage, though his reluctance to speak of the primal

[51] Isabel Carter Heyward, *The Redemption of God: A Theology of Mutual Relation* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1982), pp. 1–2, 8–9, 217–18.

[52] Christiane Tietz, 'The Role of Jesus Christ for Christian Theology', in Michael Mawson and Philip G. Ziegler (eds), *Christ, Church, and World: New Studies in Bonhoeffer's Theology and Ethics* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), p. 23.

[53] Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 188.

[54] Ibid., p. 206.

[55] Ibid., p. 211.

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state prevents him from articulating precisely the role of men, women and children in an overall picture of sexual life.

Therefore, although one might disagree with her on whether same-sex unions fit within a christologically ordered view of marriage, Tietz is certainly correct that there is no way to argue against same-sex unions from a supposed knowledge of what is natural according to Bonhoeffer's thought. His sexual ethics proclaim a warning to all who would seek to develop an understanding of sexuality based on generalities or abstractions. On the one hand, common arguments for same-sex partnerships are often founded upon a general principle or hermeneutic of love and desire, often equating this principle of love with the person of Jesus himself. On the other hand, those on the opposite side of this contentious debate often base their arguments on the flimsy basis of what is natural, usually meaning natural in a prelapsarian, or even biological and anatomical sense. Bonhoeffer challenges us to consider whether we really know what love looks like, or if we really can know what is the natural state of our sexuality. His theology does a service to modern Christians by directing our attention away from abstractions and general speculations and towards the living Christ and his community, looking concretely at the Word made flesh and the eschatological coming of the new world in order to properly discern the meaning of human sexuality.

And finally, as should be clear by now, Bonhoeffer's sexual ethics do not rest upon a dualistic depreciation of the world. Rather, they reflect a cautious affirmation of human sexual life. Bonhoeffer established a much stronger link between sexuality and original sin than is typical in much Protestant theology, and at certain points his descriptions of sexuality become problematic. However, such reflections do not arise out of a denigrated doctrine of creation. The fact that human beings are relational creatures by nature, and that sexuality is the most fitting figure to represent the communal drive of human beings towards one another, is precisely the reason why sin and sexuality were linked in Bonhoeffer's thought. Yet, rather than resigning himself to scepticism, Bonhoeffer sought to understand human life from the future, from the eschatological work of new creation accomplished in Jesus Christ. For this reason, Bonhoeffer's theology provides important resources for constructing a robustly Christian sexual ethic in the community of God.

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