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BONHOEFFER'S INCARNATIONAL HUMANISM

Introduction

Many of the contributions to this volume on Bonhoeffer's theology, including this essay, were written in commemoration of his death at Flossenbürg seventy years ago, a commemoration under the umbrella of Wrocław's fifth annual Festival of Protestant Culture (April 8–13, 2015). More specifically, the following reflections on Bonhoeffer's theological legacy were conceived for an International Bonhoeffer Conference entitled "Perspectives on Bonhoeffer: Lutheran and Ecumenical" (April 8, 2015). Based on this context, the overarching themes for this volume of papers are *Protestant Culture, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and interpretations of his Lutheran theology in light of ecumenical interests*. This contribution on Bonhoeffer's incarnational humanism addresses these themes by mounting the following argument: while Bonhoeffer's theology was certainly a product of Protestant culture and Lutheran theology, he appropriated his Protestant tradition in a way that transcends his own particular heritage and makes him primarily a *Christian* theologian and therefore truly an ecumenical theologian. What allows Bonhoeffer to transcend the kind of Reformational theology we often—rightly or wrongly—identify as Protestantism is the theological outlook I call "Incarnational Humanism." We will proceed to make this argument by offering a few brief introductory observations on Bonhoeffer and Protestant culture before introducing the idea of incarnational humanism and the relation of Bonhoeffer's theology to this particular interpretation of Christianity.

1. Bonhoeffer and Protestant Culture

In what way is Bonhoeffer's theology the product of Protestantism? How did the Reformation shape the modern culture which shaped Bonhoeffer's intellectual milieu? Posing this question is to wander into a minefield of as yet unsettled issues concerning the nature of the Reformation and its profound shaping influence on modernity. These questions were very much debated in 19th century Lutheranism, and also in Bonhoeffer's own time, and they continue to be debated today. Catholic and Lutheran scholars more or less agree that the Reformation is somehow responsible for many defining features of modernity, such as secularity, autonomous reason, individualism, education, and modern science. Traditionally, protestant scholars, such as Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923) and Karl Holl (1866–1926), have emphasized the positive effects of the Reformation, while Catholics more often followed the example of Jacques Maritain (1882–1973). Maritain interpreted the Reformation as an extension of late medieval nominalist theology and thus blamed Lutheranism in particular for the separation of God and world, faith and reason which in many ways defines the secular outlook of modernity.¹ Bonhoeffer also wrestled with these questions and came to the conclusion that the Reformation's legacy is ambivalent: on the one hand, Protestantism made possible the wholesome Enlightenment emphasis of independent reason and recovered the value of the ordinary, secular world; on the other hand, ongoing secularization also led to unbridled technology, mass movements and nationalism.²

Bonhoeffer is a product of Protestant and Enlightenment culture to the extent that he inherited the values of independent thought, intellectual integrity, and the appreciation of natural science. Moreover, in him these intellectual qualities are coupled with a deep sense of civic responsibility which came with his upbringing among the cultured Prussian bourgeoisie. Along with Bonhoeffer's intellectual horizon, his aesthetic sensibilities were also shaped by Protestant culture. His writings are replete with literary references to Kant, Goethe, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche, and musical allusions to Johann Sebastian Bach, Heinrich Schütz, and Paul Gerhardt—all figures deeply rooted in the Protestant tradition. At the same time,

1 Jacques Maritain, *Antimoderne* (Paris: Edition de la Revue des Jeunes, 1922), 23, 129. More recently, the Catholic Reformation historian Brad Gregory has reiterated Maritain's basic arguments in *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012).

2 Bonhoeffer emphasizes the two-edged nature of the Reformation's heritage: the de-divinization of the world through the Reformation (*Ethik*, DBW 6:104, 114—all translations from the German edition when cited first are my own), liberated human reason, bringing about (not least through the French Revolution) the Enlightenment values of "intellectual honesty in all things, including things of faith," a "noble result" (*das hohe Gut*) of liberated reason and remained ever since "a moral demand of the occidental citizen one ought not to surrender" (DBW 6:106, 115). Human rights are another result of this liberation (DBW 6:108, 117–118). But Bonhoeffer also sees that autonomous reason gave rise to nationalism, mass movements, and unbridled technology. In his mind, the French Revolution plays a leading role in uniting the occident around the new values: "Technik, Massenbewegung und Nationalismus sind das abendländische Erbe der Revolution." He also diagnoses a basic law of cultural history: "the human desire for absolute freedom leads into the deepest slavery" (DBW 6:112).

of course, Bonhoeffer's broadly humanistic spirit remained open to any sources that ennobled humanity, sources that included Catholic writers such as Adalbert Stifter and black spirituality. In fact, it was at least in part his respect for the social and artistic achievements that ennobled human culture which prompted Bonhoeffer, along with other equally motivated conspirators, to oppose the Nazi regime.³

We must not forget, however, that Bonhoeffer always reasoned theologically, and that the mainspring of his theological reasoning was the incarnation as the central mystery of the Christian faith. In a circular Christmas letter dating from December 1939, Bonhoeffer proclaimed that

all Christian theology has its origin in the miracle of all miracles that God became human. [...] *Theologia sacra* – it originates in prayerful kneeling before the mystery of the divine child in the stable. [...] Without that holy night, there is no theology. "God revealed in the flesh," the God-human Jesus Christ, that is the holy mystery which theology was instituted to preserve and protect.⁴

Bonhoeffer retained this incarnational conviction in his letters from prison, when he affirms a this-worldly theology "not in the anthropocentric sense of liberal, mystical, pietistic, ethical theology, but in the biblical sense of creation and the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ."⁵ It is important to note Bonhoeffer's insistence here, and everywhere in his writings, on the integral interdependence of God's becoming human, death on the cross, and resurrection from the dead, combined with his insistence on a "biblical sense of creation." Keeping these three aspects together allows Bonhoeffer to develop a this-worldly theology that neither uncritically affirms creation nor denies its central importance for biblical theology and the Christian life. This emphasis on the incarnation allowed Bonhoeffer to critically appropriate his Reformational inheritance and distance himself from the mainly dualistic Lutheran theology of his day.

One example of this Lutheranism is the church historian Karl Holl, who started a Luther renaissance in Germany, and sought to show the true historical Luther in contrast to the popular conception of the Reformer as the image of Prussian virtues.⁶ Holl's historical Luther preached a "religion of conscience in the fullest

3 See Marion von Dönhoff's description of the conspirators' concern about the Nazi's destruction of cultural and humane values in *Um der Ehre willen. Erinnerungen an die Freunde vom 20. Juli* (Berlin: Siedler Verlag, 1994), 17, 180ff.

4 DBWE 15:528–29. For the original see "Weihnachten. Auf dem verwitterten Antlitz der altchristlichen Christologie liegt Weihnachtlicher Glanz," Rundbrief im Auftrag des pommerschen Bruderrates, Dezember 1939, in DBW 15:538–543.

5 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand und Ergebung*, DBW 8:415, 373.

6 Schlingensiepen lists the images of Luther that Holl sought to correct. These include Luther as "fighter against 'Welsh cunning'" during the Napoleonic era, Luther as "model father and husband" during the Biedermeier period, and Luther the knight of "pure faith" who "rejected any revolt against governing authority," and, finally, the Luther who sanctioned the First World War in the name of nationalism. Ferdinand Schlingensiepen. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906–1945: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 48–49.

sense of this word.”⁷ Essentially bypassing reason, Holl’s Luther recognized God’s presence most immediately in one’s conscience, wherefore Luther also emphasized “personal freedom,” and “personal decision making.”⁸ Bonhoeffer studied under Holl in Berlin for two semesters. He was therefore familiar with Holl’s argument that Luther’s emphasis on individual conscience⁹ brought about the modern concept of personhood, which, according to Holl, in turn has enriched “all areas of modern culture” from education to art, law, and politics.¹⁰ While Bonhoeffer agreed with the importance of the modern idea of personhood, he rejected Holl’s conclusion that Luther’s most important contribution to Protestant thought was an ethic of conscience.¹¹ Holl had concluded his essay “The Cultural Significance of the Reformation” with the assertion that

The convincing power of the Reformation rested on the vigor with which it instilled *ethical* concepts. And this is the area of most serious damage today. Consciences everywhere are confused, especially after the war, also here in Germany. Only when sober reflection returns at this point, may one hope for a renewal of our nation.¹²

Bonhoeffer realized that this conclusion abandoned Luther’s emphasis on the incarnation and made possible the division of reality into an inner spiritual world of conscience and an outer worldly domain of political forces. Holl’s emphasis on conscience, even when regarded as the motivating power for social activism, allowed one to reduce one’s struggle with God to an inner spiritual dimension and no longer ask about God’s sacramental presence in the church or in the world.¹³

Bonhoeffer, by contrast, from the very beginning of his academic theological work, read Luther more faithfully than Holl by emphasizing the incarnation. In Christ, God had become human; God had entered into the world and reconciled it to himself. For this reason, the biblical God and the world, including the modern world, had to be understood in a unified way. There is now only one “Christ-

7 Karl Holl, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte* (Tübingen: Mohr und Paul Siebeck, 1948), 35.

8 *Ibid.*, 37.

9 Karl Holl, *The Cultural Significance of the Reformation*, trans. Barbara Hertz, Karl Hertz and John H. Lichtblau (New York: Meridian Books, 1959), 30.

10 *Ibid.*, 151.

11 Bonhoeffer argued, for example, that in Holl’s view, Christ’s work in the believer renders Christ himself, his being and history, practically superfluous. Thus Holl can allow Luther’s Christology and doctrine of justification “to move into the background” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ökumene, Universität, Pfarramt: 1931–1932*, DBW 11:208). Similarly, Bonhoeffer critiques Holl’s view of Luther’s biblical interpretation as too subjectivistic (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Jugend und Studium 1918–1927*, DBW 9:3156ff). Bonhoeffer scholars, most recently Michael DeJonge, have shown that Bonhoeffer’s negative reaction to Holl’s claim shaped his own theology. See Michael P. DeJonge, *Bonhoeffer’s Theological Formation: Berlin, Barth, and Protestant Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 12–13.

12 Holl, *The Cultural Significance of the Reformation*, 152. I have modified the English translation to correspond better with the German original in Karl Holl, “Die Kulturbedeutung der Reformation,” in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte*, vol. 1: *Luther* (Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 1927), 543.

13 This dualism offered one possible solution to reconcile the mythical account of the Bible with living in a modern, technologically advanced, secular world. In this sense, we can draw a direct theological line from Holl to Bultmann.

-reality" of a reconciled world. Because of the incarnation, God and the world must be thought of together. Bonhoeffer's later depiction of this unity as two aspects which "behave toward each other polemically, and precisely therein witness to their common reality," derived from his own conviction to retrieve Luther's intended teaching of two-kingdoms for his own time from its "pseudo-Lutheran," dualistic distortion.¹⁴

Bonhoeffer's incarnational theology also allowed him to critique Karl Barth, who, besides Luther himself and Adolf Schlatter, was arguably Bonhoeffer's greatest Protestant theological inspiration. Bonhoeffer greatly appreciated Barth's theological inversion: whereas liberal Protestant theology tried to conform God to human reasoning and religious cultural needs, Barth proclaimed the freedom of God to speak concretely through culture. Theology does not talk about God but seeks to let God speak through human words. According to Bonhoeffer, Barth thus effected a desperately needed turn in Protestant theology towards the radical transcendence and freedom of God from cultural expectations of religiosity. Protestantism had become too comfortable by creating God in a certain human, cultural image. Barth reopened the proper way of knowing God; namely, the movement from God himself towards man.¹⁵ Moreover, Barth's Christocentrism resonated with Bonhoeffer's own Lutheran emphasis that God is only known to us in Jesus Christ. Even so, Bonhoeffer also criticized Barth for "tearing apart" God and the world. Barth's emphasis on God's radical transcendence tended to occlude the glorious gift of God's union with creation in Christ, a union Barth still sees in the church but not really in the world which is thus "left to itself."¹⁶

Thus, Bonhoeffer detected in Barth's concept of revelation—with its theological starting point of God's radical freedom from creation—a similar tendency as displayed, albeit from the opposite theological spectrum, by neo-Lutheran piety, namely to separate God and world instead of uniting them. By contrast, Bonhoeffer wants to think more incarnationally, an impulse that leads directly to his idea of "religionless Christianity," and the non-religious interpretations of biblical truths. Karl Barth was the first to critique religion as an unbiblical and reductive concept (invented by Enlightenment thinkers) which trapped divine revelation in a certain cultural mold. Following Barth, Bonhoeffer regarded metaphysical, philosophical, or psychological explanations of Christianity as "religious" distortions. Moreover, in his own world of Lutheran theology, Bonhoeffer had experienced "religious" Christianity as an inner feeling of transcendence and the orientation of world and

14 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, DBWE 6:59ff.

15 DBW 11:204, 235–236.

16 DBW 8:416; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, DBWE 8:373.

culture toward universal truths, the very essence of “cultural Protestantism.”¹⁷ Most tragically, as Bonhoeffer points out in his works *Discipleship* and *Ethics*, the dualistic, pseudo-Lutheran worldview allowed individual conscience to shield itself from the actual demands of political reality. For example, adhering to Kantian duty ethics required, as Bonhoeffer put it, fulfilling one’s duty “finally even to the devil,”¹⁸ or to put it more starkly, the safe way of duty would allow one to join the Brown Shirts and still go to church.

In response to these reductions of Christianity to moralism and politically disengaged forms of inner piety, Bonhoeffer increasingly emphasized the importance of realizing God’s will in this world, appreciating creation, and recognizing the importance of acknowledging God’s presence in truth, beauty and virtue outside the church. God, to summarize Bonhoeffer’s view, must be found not primarily at the limits of human thought or experience, to be smuggled in “at the most secret place” still untouched by scientific progress, but he is found in the midst of life;¹⁹ and he is found not in any one institutionalized form of religion, but as the co-suffering, weak God, who nonetheless retains his sovereign guidance of all things.²⁰

The unity of God and world, that is, of God’s becoming part of the world in order to effect a new creation, is also the basis for Bonhoeffer’s much discussed peace ethic.²¹ For Bonhoeffer, the incarnation required that Jesus’s commands to pursue peace and to love one’s enemy go beyond a mere inner disposition towards grace – they are to be implemented in the actual political world. The Sermon on the Mount, Bonhoeffer wrote in *Discipleship*, “exists in order to be carried out.”²²

Another name for Bonhoeffer’s incarnational response to the various dualistic ways of splitting the world into secular and sacred spheres is “incarnational humanism;” that is, a theology centered on the new humanity made possible by God’s taking human form. This incarnational humanism places Bonhoeffer’s theology within the larger orbit of the Christian tradition and allows us to see his creative appropriation of Lutheranism. In the remainder of this paper, I will briefly outline what I mean by incarnational humanism, then show why Bonhoeffer is an incarnational humanist, and then end with a few remarks on the importance of this incarnational, or Christian, humanism for us today.

17 Eberhard Bethge, “Christlicher Glaube ohne Religion: Hat sich Dietrich Bonhoeffer geirrt?,” in *Am gegebenen Ort. Aufsätze und Reden* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1979), 32–38, 35.

18 DBWE 6:77.

19 DBW 8:510–511.

20 DBW 8:534–535.

21 See Clifford J. Green, “Pacifism and Tyrannicide: Bonhoeffer’s Christian Peace Ethic,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 18.3 (2005), 31–47.

22 “Die Bergpredigt ist dafür da, daß sie getant wird” (DBW 6:329; DBWE 6:326).

The Patristic Roots of Incarnational Humanism

Christian humanism is the Evangel as interpreted by the Christology of the church fathers. Their theology is perhaps best described as Christ-centered realism, a grand, Christological vision of God's relation to the world that interprets God, self, and world through the mystery of the incarnation.²³ For seminal theologians of the early church—such as Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, the Cappadocian fathers (Gregory of Nyssa, St. Basil, Gregory of Naziansus), and even for Augustine—the Gospel is best expressed in Athanasius' pithy statement that "God became a human being so that human beings might become god."²⁴

The Protestant understanding of divinization has been greatly influenced by the rather damning verdict of the church historian Arnold von Harnack, who has largely shaped the still prevalent Protestant prejudice that the Greek fathers Hellenized and thus distorted the biblical message of salvation. Harnack recognized the centrality of incarnation for Orthodoxy's definition of salvation, but he rejected the concept of *theosis* as the illegitimate Christian fulfillment of an old pagan desire for immortality.²⁵ He argues that this oriental desire to attain immortality within Greek conceptual categories necessitated the theological route taken by the fathers: they equated God's eternal word with the *logos* that had become flesh in history so that by participation in this God-man, immortality may be achieved. Harnack considered this teaching "sub-Christian," because *theosis* lacked the kind of moral aspects (*sittliche Momente*) which Harnack himself regarded as central to his own liberal Protestant interpretation of the Gospel.²⁶ Harnack declared the *theotic* concentration on the incarnation, together with the distinctly sacramental flavor of Greek-oriental theology, to be "untenable," because it has little scriptural warrant. Instead, Harnack champions the 19th century Protestant faith, purified from ritual and focused on the cognitive conviction that "God was in Christ," together with the believer's abiding in the love of God.²⁷ Harnack, however, missed the distinctly biblical orientation of patristic *theosis* and therefore failed to see the complete picture of this teaching. As the Swiss-Reformed theologian Dietrich Ritschl has shown, Harnack overlooked the fact that patristic *theosis* aimed at the complete

23 I am using 'incarnation' in the broader meaning still alive in eastern Orthodox theology, as including the entire Christ event of cradle, cross and resurrection.

24 Athanasius, "De incarnatione Verbi," *Patrologia Graeca* 25 (1857), 192B, 54. In many fathers, Latin and Greek, early and late, we find the designation of Christians as gods, who, as Tertullian writes, "have become sons of God by faith," in: *Adversus Praxean*, ANF 3:608.

25 Adolf von Harnack, *Das Wesen des Christentums* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 134.

26 Harnack believed that such moments were present but not in the intrinsic way he thought essential. For *theosis*, moral aspects appeared "tagged on" (*angefügt*) rather than inherent to Christianity (*ibid.*, 133).

27 *Ibid.*, 134.

transformation of human beings into the image of Christ through participation in God, thus *combining* physical and moral transformation.²⁸

The patristic idea of *theosis* or divinization continues to be misunderstood by Western theologians as an illegitimate apotheosis of the creature that erases the creator-creature distinction. Given the potential misunderstandings of the *theopoiesis*, of being “made divine,” it will be helpful for our discussion of incarnational humanism if we translate this ancient formula into language adapted to modern Christians ears, without sacrificing its essential teaching: “God became human so that by being transformed into Christ-likeness, human beings can attain their true humanity.”

Central to this interpretation of Christianity as a form of humanism is a certain interpretation of the biblical teaching that mankind was created in the image of God. Following the apostle Paul’s teaching, these early Christian theologians believed that Jesus Christ was the true image of God, wherefore God’s purpose in creating the human race had always been for us to become, both as individuals and as God’s people, perfect icons or representations of Christ’s own relation with God. God’s becoming human, his death, and resurrection thus had the single purpose of conferring on us new life, the true life that flows from sharing in the divine life of the Trinity. In the God-man Jesus, as the church father Irenaeus famously put it, all of humanity was recapitulated and raised to divine perfection. In short, Christianity *is* the archetypal humanism, because with the central mystery of our faith, the incarnation, God intended the divinization or *theosis* of our humanity. The whole point of being a Christian is “Christification,” that is, to become fully human by becoming refashioned in the image of Christ. Our supernatural destiny has always been, as Gregory of Nyssa put it, “friendship with God,” the kind of intimate filial relation Jesus had with the Father that is characterized by love of God, love of neighbor, and even love of enemies, because our basic relation to reality is no longer one of fear but one of love.

Based on this gift of love, Christian humanism has always had two distinct features, the one epistemic, and the other ethical. First, conscious of living once again in union with the creator of the cosmos, Christian humanists have traditionally espoused the unity of faith and reason and therefore acknowledged truth from all sources. The kind of enmity between knowledge and faith that characterizes our modern culture wars between science and religion, for example, is foreign to Christian humanism. Indeed Christian humanists generally eschewed all dualistic conceptions of reality. Spirit and matter, soul and body are not opposed but belong together and are together transformed into a new incorruptible creation. Secondly,

28 Dietrich Ritschl, *Konzepte: Gesammelte Aufsätze*, vol. 1: *Patristische Studien* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1976), 91.

its Christological foundation endows Christian humanism with an ethic of human solidarity. Aware of sharing the reconciliation of humanity to God and therefore to one another, Christian humanists have traditionally recognized the image of God in every human being, and extended charity to all on account of their connection to Christ.

Bonhoeffer: Christianity as True Humanity

For those familiar with Bonhoeffer's theology, it should by now be fairly obvious how Bonhoeffer's incarnational humanism fits into the greater Christian tradition. We can see, for example, that he goes along with Irenaeus's idea of recapitulation:

In Jesus Christ, in the one who became human, was crucified, and rose from the dead, humanity has been renewed. What happened in Christ, happened to everyone, because he was *the* human being [par excellence]. The new human being is created.²⁹

Christianity, for Bonhoeffer, is participation in this new humanity:

Christian life means being human (*Menschsein*) in the power of Christ's becoming human, being judged, and pardoned in the power of the cross, living a new life in the power of the resurrection.³⁰

Bonhoeffer also fully recognizes the broader social implications of this humanist interpretation of the Gospel when he links the new humanity to the restoration of God's image in every human being through Christ: In his *Discipleship* he affirms the general solidarity with all human beings we regain through Christ's work:

In the becoming human in Christ the entire humanity regains the dignity of being made in the image of God (*Gottesebenbildlichkeit*). Whoever from now on attacks the least of the people attacks Christ, who took on human form and who in himself has restored the image of God for all who bear a human countenance. In community with the incarnate one, we are once again given our true humanity. With it, we are delivered from the isolation caused by sin, and at the same time restored to the whole of humanity. Inasmuch as we participate in Christ, the incarnate one, we also have a part in all of humanity, which is borne by him. Since we know ourselves to be accepted and borne within the humanity of Jesus, our new humanity now also consists in bearing the troubles and the sins of all others. The incarnate one transforms his disciples into brothers and sisters of all human beings.³¹

Like the church fathers, Bonhoeffer also depicts Christian ethics as being shaped into the image of Christ by participation in Christ. We recall the many passages in

²⁹ DBW 6:78; DBWE 6:91.

³⁰ DBW 6:150; DBWE 6:159.

³¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Nachfolge*, DBW 4:301; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, DBWE 4:285. Translation slightly altered to emphasize the "becoming human." The English translation has "incarnation" and "incarnate one."

Discipleship and his *Ethics* which speak about *Ethics* as participating in the reconciliation of the World to God in Christ, and about the formation of Christ's image in every believer and in the church as a whole:

[Christ] formation occurs only by being drawn into the form of Jesus Christ, by *being conformed to the unique form of the one who became human, was crucified, and is risen*. This [happens] [...] ³² as the form of Jesus Christ himself so works on us that it molds us, conforming our form to Christ's own (Gal. 4:9). ³³

In unison with earlier Christian humanists, Bonhoeffer stresses the importance of the sacraments for the Christian life. Christ-formation happens within the church when God becomes present through the sacraments of baptism, Eucharist, and the preaching of the Word.

Finally, we have already seen that Bonhoeffer also shares with earlier Christian humanists the Christologically-based correlation of faith and reason. Following Paul's theology in Colossians, Bonhoeffer insists that for the Christian, reality is grounded and unified as "one Christ-Reality." He expresses the Christological unity of reality in these words:

Christ is the center and power of the Bible, of the church, of theology but also of humanity, reason, justice, and culture. To Christ everything must return; only under Christ's protection can it live. ³⁴

Yet this one Christ-Reality does not imply that Christians enjoy epistemological superiority. Concerning the relation of faith and reason, Bonhoeffer establishes the basic epistemic humility of the Christian based on the incarnation. While Christians can be sure of their participation in God and his revelation in Christ, their knowledge of God must follow the incarnation's own pattern: since God and World are united in the incarnation, the "revelational" is found only in the rational, and the sacred only in the profane. Bonhoeffer writes that "I never experience the reality of God without the reality of the world, nor the reality of the world without the reality of God." ³⁵ Indeed, the central question which motivates Bonhoeffer's theology, the question to which his religionless Christianity in a world come of age forms the answer, is the hermeneutical challenge "of participating in the reality of God and the world in Jesus Christ today." ³⁶ This participation in God's reality, expressed in the question "who is Jesus for us today?" and "what is he saying to us concretely

³² Cut: "[this] does not happen as we strive 'to become like Jesus,' as we customarily say, but" ...

³³ DBWE 6:93; DBW 6:80.

³⁴ DBW 6:341; DBW 6:344.

³⁵ DBW 6:55; DBW 6:40-41.

³⁶ DBW 6:55; DBW 6:40-41.

in our time?" is the fundamental, driving concern which unifies Bonhoeffer's theology and is traceable from his earlier works right up to the prison letters.

Now, at this point a Protestant reader may well wonder whether my reading of Bonhoeffer as a Christian humanist within the tradition of patristic humanism distorts his characteristic Lutheran theology. In aligning Bonhoeffer with the idea of deification, do I not falsely force his theology into a thoroughly un-Lutheran, non-Reformational mold? Is not the classical difference between Eastern theology of deification and the Reformational insistence on justification by faith alone that the church fathers were much more optimistic about human nature? Did not Luther's theology of the cross do away with such theologies of human glorification? And does not Bonhoeffer teach the opposite of patristic deification when he insists that Christ died so that we could become truly human and not divine? Is not Bonhoeffer more faithful to Chalcedon's formulation that Jesus was truly God and truly man, by insisting that Christ restores our "lost created humanity," instead of making us divine?³⁷

The problem with this latter criticism lies in its assumption that *theosis* implies an ontological change from creature to creator, rather than "merely" advocating the biblically sound notion of humans "partaking of" divine nature. However, anyone familiar with patristic theology will know of the fathers' careful observance of God's ontological transcendence, his radical otherness. Christianity, as Basil of Caesarea argued, promises "likeness to God as far as is possible for human nature"³⁸ and not the transformation of human nature into divine nature. The fathers argued precisely for "our lost created humanity," through the mediation of Christ. Only, in contrast to Harnack, they also believed that the resurrected Christ inaugurated and actually displayed the new creation, the eschatological renewal of all things in which humanity shares. This future hope in no way barred patristic writers from acknowledging Christianity as a religion of the cross. Indeed, as Ignatius of Antioch's writings show, perhaps no other theological generation was more familiar with suffering than these early theologians who championed *theosis*.

The answer to this riddle is largely due to our unfamiliarity with patristic theology. By divinization, the fathers meant formation into Christ-likeness; thus what Bonhoeffer describes in *Ethics* as *Christformation*, the fathers would list under divinization. Bonhoeffer's description of ethics as Christ's taking shape in the believer

37 In his introduction to *Ethics* in the English critical edition of Bonhoeffer's works, Clifford Green articulates this perceived difference when he writes that "Bonhoeffer reverses an ancient theological dictum, found in formative theologians such as Athanasius and Augustine, namely, that God became human in order that humans might become divine. Rather, he argues, God became human so that human beings could become truly human, that is, recover their lost created humanity through the mediation of Christ. Human beings do not change their form and become divine; their true dignity is to be truly human—as Jesus, according to the Chalcedonian formula, was truly human" (DBWE 6:6).

38 Basil of Caesarea, *On the Human Condition*, Discourse 1, ed. John Behr, Popular Patristic Series (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2005), 45.

thus provides an ecumenical bridge between Eastern and Western theologies. The origins of this connection go back to Luther himself, who frequently, in fact, referred to *Christformation* as *Vergottung* or divinization in a number of his sermons.³⁹ We have overstated the differences, especially between Luther and the church fathers on this point.

Conclusion

I have tried to show that the label “incarnational humanism” allows us to see Bonhoeffer in the light of the greater Christian tradition, for which the central Gospel message has always been: “Christ died so that we might become like God” in our love for God and humanity. Making this “happy exchange” the focus of what we could call, with C.S. Lewis, “mere Christianity” lends Bonhoeffer’s theology particular relevance in two ways for the central themes of Protestant culture and ecumenism to which this special journal edition is dedicated.

First, this humanistic interpretation of Christianity has great ecumenical value. Christianity is principally not about avoiding Hell, forgiveness of sins, justification by faith alone, or legalistic check lists of moral behavior; rather, Christianity is, as Bonhoeffer put it, “participating in God’s reality as revealed in Christ” and living a truly human life by participating in Christ’s incarnation, death, and resurrection.⁴⁰ Bonhoeffer’s strong sense of Christianity as a mode of being, which he already depicted in *Act and Being* and restated in *Ethics*, properly defines Christianity as participation in a concrete, personal reality, the reality of God in Christ, that sustains and connects all of reality. This reality is defined by God’s love for humankind and the reconciliation of the world to itself. Dogma and creeds are, of course, vitally important for our understanding of God and ourselves. Yet they themselves are sustained by the experienced reality of the church and each believer of their

39 The following passage appears in the context of the question “wie man frum werden und wohl thun soll,” that is, a (perhaps *the*) central question of Luther’s theology. He prepares the way with his usual advice (reminiscent of Kierkegaard’s ‘sickness unto death’) that one should despair of one’s own self and abilities but never despair about or doubt the help of God. But then follows this amazing passage on power of God’s grace: “Dann war ist es, das der mensch mit gnaden beholffen mehr ist dann ein mensch, ja die gnad gottis macht yn gotformig und vergottet yn, das yn auch die schrifft got und gottis tun heist. Also mus der mensch uber flisch und blut außgezogen werden und meher dann mensch werden, soll er frum werden. Das geschicht nu anfenglich, wann der mensch das erkennt, als ym selbs ganz verzweifelt. Darnach aller erst folgen die guten wreck: wann die gnad also erlanget ist, dann hastu ein freyen willen, danthu was in dir ist.” Quoted in “Ein Sermon gepredigt zu Leipzig auf dem Schloß am Tage Petri und Pauli, 1519,” in *Dr. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 2 (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1966), 247–248. Transl. “Because it is true that human beings become more than human with the help of grace, indeed the grace of God makes him god-shaped deifies (*vergottet*) him, which is also why the scriptures call him god and doing god’s work. Therefore man has to be extended beyond flesh and blood and become more than human, if he is to become godly (*frum*). Now this happens initially when the human being recognizes his complete self-despair. Only then follow the good works: thus when you have obtained grace, then you have a free will, then you do what is within you.”

40 DBWE 6:50; see also DBWE 6:134: “The real, the judged, and the renewed human being exists only in the form of Jesus Christ and therefore in being conformed to Christ. Only the person taken on in Christ is the real human being; only the person confronted by the cross of Christ is the judged human being; only the person who participates in the resurrection of Christ is the renewed human being.”

real, existential union with God. Union with God, as the apostle Paul preached tirelessly, should result in union with others, for Christ had taught that oneness with God and one another was the goal of his mission. In these truths, I submit, we find the true basis for ecumenism, and also for Bonhoeffer's proper equation of the gospel with a peace ethic.

Secondly, Bonhoeffer's retrieval of the greater tradition's incarnational humanism in Lutheran terms brilliantly articulates the hermeneutical challenge of Christianity we need to truly make our own. In my view, the trilogy of Bonhoeffer's works *Discipleship*, *Ethics*, and his prison letters, contain one of the most insightful and promising blueprints in modern theology for a Christian understanding of the secular and the uncompromising discernment of given realities for the sake of our common good in Christ. Following Christ in "realistic responsibility," for Bonhoeffer, meant to strive for peace, justice, and human dignity within the aforementioned concrete realities of one's time. For him, the Christian life revolves around the question of how Christ takes form among us in our present times.⁴¹ The real hermeneutic issue for Bonhoeffer was how Christians could discern God's concrete commandment to the church at any given time. For him, "reality is the sacrament of the commandment," and it is the church's task to determine and proclaim God's concrete commandment based on his love for world and humanity.⁴²

Bonhoeffer's years in the resistance, together with his arrest and execution, are a living testimony to his belief in realistic responsibility. Both his affirmation of toppling Hitler's government, involving the *Führer's* assassination, as well as his participation in planning humane social structures for a post-war Germany, flow from the same Christological reasoning and show us what he meant: because Christ died for our true humanity, the Christian works for the common good in society as best as possible under given circumstances. Today, we often hear that religious citizens can be useful to the public when they moderate their beliefs. Secularists prefer a moderate Christian or moderate Muslim in politics. Bonhoeffer was convinced of the opposite truth: based on the incarnation, the full-blooded Christian strives to implement in every area of life the true humanity Christ died for – to live in freedom before God and others, and to help construct a culture that makes such life possible.⁴³

41 DBW 6:87; DBWE 6:99.

42 DBW 11:334.

43 DBW 6:387; DBWE 6:383 – "Das Gebot Gottes erlaubt dem Menschen als Mensch vor Gott zu leben."

Bonhoeffer's Incarnational Humanism

Abstract

Among Bonhoeffer scholars, it is well known that Bonhoeffer regards being and becoming truly human as the goal of his Christ-centered theology. What has been largely overlooked, however, is that this "humanistic" interpretation of the Gospel aligns Bonhoeffer with the incarnational focus of patristic Christology and its central idea of *theosis* or *deification*. In this paper, I argue that Bonhoeffer's focus on God taking human form allowed him to transcend his own particular Lutheran theological context and thus to become a truly ecumenical theologian in the same incarnational humanist tradition that was inaugurated by the church fathers.