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TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF THE EARTH WITH DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

Introduction

Dietrich Bonhoeffer did many things during his short life. One of the things he did not do was to write a systematic theology of the earth, much less what we would call today an eco-theology. Nevertheless, throughout his life the earth was a subject of major concern to him. This short paper aims to introduce his thoughts regarding human life on this earth, and to consider their relevance and usefulness for us today. Bonhoeffer's own thoughts on this subject are scattered throughout the corpus of his writing, from his early days as a student of theology to his final yet still penultimate musings in Tegel prison. Yet the theme is recurrent. Bonhoeffer scholar Larry Rasmussen goes so far as to declare that:

Bonhoeffer's theological and cultural analysis [...] contain a profoundly Earth-honoring theology, exactly the kind required for our own "great work" or "historical process." That work is, in the words of Thomas Berry, "to carry out the transition from a period of human devastation of the earth to a period when humans would be present to the planet in a mutually beneficial manner."¹

As Rasmussen points out, Bonhoeffer did not write in a vacuum. He developed his own theology of nature against the twin backdrop of Teutonic "blood and soil" romantic theology, as it became yoked in service

¹ L. Rasmussen, *Bonhoeffer: Ecological Theologian*. In: *Bonhoeffer and Interpretive History: Essays on Methods and Understanding*. Ed. P. Frick. Frankfurt 2013, p. 250.

to fascist and Nazi ideology, and to the “orders of creation” theology of his day, which in the case of many prominent theologians took on a “pious, patriarchal and racist (anti-Semitic) Christian twist.”² Although the seeds of what Rasmussen calls Bonhoeffer’s “Earth-honoring theology” were present in his writings from the start, that theology did not appear in mature form in Bonhoeffer’s early writings. Perhaps more clearly than in many other areas, a survey of his thought regarding the Earth, in particular its relationship to humanity and to its Creator, reveals both continuity and development.³ More importantly, such a survey hints at directions we might pursue in order to take Bonhoeffer’s thought beyond where he himself was able to go during his all-too-short life.

Two Images

Bonhoeffer has two images of the earth that are particularly poignant. This first is what he referred to as the search for “solid ground.” Bonhoeffer’s lifelong search for solid ground on which to make a stand against the crisis of modernity, as exemplified in his day by the National Socialist regime of the Third Reich, let him in the end to conclude that there is “no solid ground under our feet.” Or rather, as the world he was born into came crashing down around his feet, he surveyed the scorched landscape and declared that the ground on which we stand is the living person of Jesus Christ. Bonhoeffer did not understand Christ as a foundation on which to build, but rather as a milieu – or more specifically a relationship – in which to live daily, which includes our relationship to God, to our own self, to others, and to all creation. He experienced the reality of God, as revealed in the historical person of Jesus Christ, as dynamic rather than static. According to this vision the very nature of God can perhaps be best understood as an ecstatic dance (*perichōrēsis*) of beauty, love and creativity. The same is true for all creation, including human beings created in God’s image, who are invited by the Triune God to join the dance.

Bonhoeffer’s image of no solid ground under our feet can be recast as learning to sail. Much like the Mariner in *Waterworld*, our natural habitat has become the ocean, and even if we could find the mythical “dryland” many still seek, we would still be called to live on the open sea. Once we accept the dynamic nature of God’s own reality, and give up the illusion of finding solid ground, we are able to embrace the dynamic nature

² *Ibidem*, p. 256.

³ For a recent, broad-reaching study of Bonhoeffer and environmental ethics: cf. S. van den Heuvel, *Bonhoeffer’s Christocentric Theology and Fundamental Debates in Environmental Ethics*. Eugene 2017.

of what Bonhoeffer calls “Christ-reality.” For Bonhoeffer, Christ-reality means that the world has been reconciled with God through Jesus Christ. This is not merely a theological concept, but a spiritual reality, which he experienced as a form of practical mysticism that entails participating in God’s reconciling work in the world. To revisit the concept of *perichōrēsis*, our true home and destination is a place, or rather state, in which our life as human beings becomes a divine dance, and the divine dance becomes our earthly life as human beings.

Bonhoeffer’s second image employs the mythical story of Antaeus, the son of Poseidon and of Gaea, the earth Goddess and Mother of all. According to the old myths, Antaeus’ strength came from the ground, and he was invincible as long as he could touch the earth. In the end Heracles defeated him by lifting him off the ground and crushing him to death. Somewhat surprisingly, Antaeus appears several times in Bonhoeffer’s writings. In his Barcelona address of February 9th, 1928, entitled *Basic Questions of a Christian Ethic*, he wrote:

An ancient and profound legend tells us about the giant Antaeus, who was stronger than all the men of the world. No one could defeat him until during one battle his adversary lifted him up off the ground, whereupon the giant lost the power that had flowed into him only from his contact with the earth. Those who would abandon the earth, who would flee the crisis of the present, will lose all the power still sustaining them by means of eternal, mysterious powers. The earth remains our mother just as God remains our father, and only those who remain true to the mother are placed by her into the father’s arms. Earth and its distress — that is the Christian’s Song of Songs.⁴

Bonhoeffer reprised this thought in his sermon in Barcelona of September 23rd, 1928, in which he declared:

This legend of the giant Antaeus is profound. Only those standing with both feet on the ground, who are and remain wholly children of the earth, who do not undertake hopeless attempts to flee to unreachable heights, who make do with what they have and gratefully hold fast to it, who have the full strength of human existence — those are the ones who serve time and thus also eternity.⁵

⁴ D. Bonhoeffer, *Barcelona, Berlin, New York: 1928–1931*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, English Edition [further DBWE] 10. Ed. C.J. Green. Trans. D.W. Stott. Minneapolis 2008, p. 377–378.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 531.

Bonhoeffer employed the story of Antaeus to illustrate the need to live earthly life fully and concretely, in the here and now. He argued that we lose strength for our daily life whenever we lose touch with earthly reality, when we seek to escape this world by focusing on the after-life, when we choose to live with illusions. As he wrote in this same sermon:

Be human beings with your own wills, with your own passions and your own concerns, your happiness and your distress, your seriousness and your frivolity, your jubilation and your misery. God wants to see human beings, not ghosts who shun the earth itself. God loved the earth and made us from that earth; God made the earth our mother, God, who is our Father. We were created not as angels but as children of the earth with guilt and passion, strength and weakness, but as children of the earth whom God loves, children loved by God precisely in our weaknesses, in our passions, in our guilt. Precisely in our defiant position on earth – within time, within our own time – God loves us; precisely in holding fast to our Mother Earth and to what she has given us, in solidarity with the human race, even where it is weak, in kinship with our own, small, weak times – God wants us, and something of eternity that destroys all time shines into our hearts.⁶

The story of Antaeus illustrates how Bonhoeffer adopted Nietzsche's critic of Christianity and turned it on its head, by picturing the Christian not as weak but as strong. As Fritz de Lange has expressed it, Bonhoeffer made a Christian out to be a "Nietzschean hero, who creates his own tablet of the law in his God-given freedom."⁷ Bonhoeffer writes in his sermon of July 24th, 1928, "The human being who loves is the most revolutionary human being on earth. He is the subversion of all values, the dynamite of human society, the most dangerous human being."⁸ As the editors of the German edition of Bonhoeffer's works write:

In the symbol of Antaeus, Bonhoeffer appropriates Nietzsche's insistence that we develop in ourselves the kind of loyalty to the earth so characteristic of antiquity; he then develops that symbol into an understanding of a Christianity that is itself bound to the earth, a Christianity that orients itself toward the incarnation of the God of the Christians and thence comes

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 530–531.

⁷ F. de Lange, *Aristocratic Christendom: On Bonhoeffer and Nietzsche*. In: *Bonhoeffer and Continental Thought: Cruciform Philosophy*. Eds. B. Gregor, J. Zimmermann. Bloomington – Indianapolis 2009, p. 77–78.

⁸ D. Bonhoeffer, cited in: *ibidem*, p. 78. Orig.: idem, *Ecumenical, Academic, and Pastoral Work: 1931–1932*. DBWE 11. Eds. V.J. Barnett, M. Brocker, M.B. Lukens. Trans. I. Best, N.S. Humphrey, M. Pauck, A. Schmidt-Lange, D.W. Stott. Minneapolis 2010, p. 461.

to an understanding of reality in the larger sense. The symbol of Antaeus will accompany Bonhoeffer even into his very last conversations concerning the ethics of this-worldly responsibility.⁹

Now it is time to turn our attention from Bonhoeffer's images to his vision of Christ the Center.

Christ the Center of All Creation

In his Christology lectures of 1933, Bonhoeffer moves beyond the ecclesiological focus of *Sanctorum communio* and *Akt und Sein* to make Christ the center of all reality. As recorded in his students' notes (his personal lecture notes were not preserved), he writes:

The One who is in the center is the same One who is present in the church as Word and sacrament. [...] Christ, as the one who is being-there *pro-me*, is the mediator. That is Christ's nature and way of existing. Being in the center means a threefold being-there:

- (1) being-there for humankind,
- (2) being-there for history,
- (3) being-there for nature.

This is the Christ *pro-me* translated into the "where structure." Christ's status as mediator must be proven in that he can [be] seen as the center of human existence, of history, and of nature.¹⁰

Asking "where" Christ stands in history, Bonhoeffer answers firmly: He stands *pro me*. This *pro me* is related in time and space to all created reality; Christ is the center in three ways: in being-there for human beings, in being-there for history and in being-there for nature. As G. Clarke Chapman puts it: "The Mediator (*Mittler*) is the center (*Mitte*) of every part of existence [...]"¹¹ Perhaps Bonhoeffer would have developed this sweeping vision of Christ the Mediator in his planned lectures the following semester on positive Christology, which unfortunately were canceled when he refused to sign a loyalty oath to Hitler. Perhaps we are allowed for a moment to speculate how he might have proceeded.

⁹ R. Staats, *Editor's Afterword to the German Edition*. In: D. Bonhoeffer, *Berlin, New York: 1928–1931*, p. 627–628.

¹⁰ D. Bonhoeffer, *Berlin: 1932–1933*. DBWE 12. Ed. L.L. Rasmussen. Trans. I. Best, D. Higgins, D.W. Stott. Minneapolis 2009, p. 324.

¹¹ G.C. Chapman, *Bonhoeffer, Liberation Theology, and the 1990's*. In: *Reflections on Bonhoeffer: Essays in Honor of F. Burton Nelson*. Eds. G.B. Kelly, J.C. Weborg. Chicago 1999, p. 301.

Christ as the center of human existence neither replaces a person's personality nor occupies their entire consciousness. Rather, Christ's centrality to human beings relates to "the persons we are before God." Interpreting his theology of sociality Christologically, Bonhoeffer states that human beings cannot fulfill the law, which constitutes a boundary at the center of human existence that defines humanity individually and corporately. As the new creation Christ, having fulfilled the law, himself now stands in the center as the boundary between the old and the new "I," between judgment and justification.¹² Bonhoeffer goes on to interpret history eschatologically, in light of the promise of Messiah. Just as the individual cannot fulfill the law, so history cannot fulfill the messianic promise, though it continually tries to do so "by glorifying itself in the messiah."¹³

By analogy, creation now also exists as "creation before God." Christ stands as the boundary between old creation (including humanity) and new creation, which eschatologically includes everything as reconciled to God in Christ. Human beings, both individually and corporately, no longer relate to creation directly but indirectly, through Christ; Christ is the center, both of human existence and of creation. Humanity once again is called to fulfill God's plan to be-there for nature, just as Christ is there for nature. This makes the question of responsibility of "being-there for the earth" an eschatological reality; we are called to realize now, in part and penultimately, what God will ultimately fulfill completely in the *eschaton*. As Bonhoeffer writes, "Christ as the mediator is precisely the end of the old, fallen world and the beginning of the new world of God."¹⁴

Although Bonhoeffer's comments here regarding nature are brief and less than satisfying, nevertheless they foreshadow his reflections in *Ethics*.

Creation vis-à-vis Ultimate and Penultimate Reality

In the *Ethics'* manuscript entitled *Ultimate and Penultimate Things*, Bonhoeffer first describes the ultimate, i.e. the word of God, the good news of justification,¹⁵ before moving on to discuss the penultimate. Here he rejects both radicalism, which believes in God the Judge and Redeemer, and the compromise solution, which focuses on God as Creator and Preserver. He considers both positions extreme, because they "make the penultimate

¹² D. Bonhoeffer, *Berlin: 1932–1933*, p. 324. This is a reformulation of the Lutheran dialectic of law and grace, and Luther's paradox of *simul iustus et peccator*.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 325.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 327.

¹⁵ D. Bonhoeffer, *Ultimate and Penultimate Things*. In: *Ethics*. DBWE 6. Ed. C.J. Green. Trans. R. Krauss, D.W. Stott, Ch.C. West. Minneapolis 2005, p. 146–150.

and the ultimate mutually exclusive," absolutizing either the idea of God's ultimate reality or of human penultimate reality, instead of affirming their unity in Jesus Christ.¹⁶ Bonhoeffer argues that an ethic built on only one Christ-event would end in compromise (incarnation), radicalism (crucifixion) or enthusiasm (resurrection),¹⁷ and summarizes with this claim: "Christian life means being human 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. [...] Christian life is participation in Christ's encounter with the world."¹⁸

We could wish that Bonhoeffer had developed said participation with the world in the spirit of his earlier statement describing Christ as the center of human existence, of history, and of nature. Alas (for the purpose of this paper), in "preparing of the way" he focuses more narrowly on soteriology and the doctrine of reconciliation. As a result, the earth fades quickly from view, for it is not in need of reconciliation but rather restoration. Even the following manuscript, which bears the promising title of *The Natural*, focuses on anthropology. Nevertheless, if it is true regarding human salvation that the penultimate must be "preserved for the sake of the ultimate," and that Christ's followers are called to remove obstacles to the preaching of the gospel and establish conditions that foster its reception,¹⁹ then by extension the present creation must be preserved for the sake of the eschatological new creation, and Christians are called to take part as well in this aspect of "Christ's encounter with the world." Niels Henrik Gregersen argues that this is indeed a promising approach, and one which is consistent with Bonhoeffer's developing thought.

In his *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer's focus is clearly on the human participation in the reality of Christ. Christ being both the center *and* the limit of creation means that Christ is at once in the midst of worldly affairs, but is there as the self-identical one, who continues to call the creatures to attune themselves to the comprehensive reality of Christ. Construed in this way, Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* consistently transcends the contrastive thought patterns that we identified in several passages in *Creation and Fall*. Christ is not only different from the world by virtue of freedom, but is also different from the world by virtue of embracing the world in a self-communicating love. Accordingly, the power of Christ is no longer depicted as an overpowering

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 154–155.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 157.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 159.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 160–162.

of human nature, but as the empowering of human beings to become what they are destined to become: icons of Jesus Christ.²⁰

Gregersen argues that the boundaries of Bonhoeffer's thought have expanded. Or to put it differently, for Bonhoeffer the walls between Church and World have fallen: "The Word of God continuously addresses the community of the Church while constituting its limit, and the world from the outset stands under the promise of divine acceptance and reconciliation at its very center." The distinction between Church and World is thus a penultimate matter, while their reconciliation to God and to each other is ultimate. Furthermore, the same process of tearing down the old walls applies to humanity and the rest of creation. "The new creation (*creatio nova*) is now seen as emerging out of the old creation (*creatio nova ex vetere*), for also the fallen creation is both preserved, accepted and reconciled in the comprehensive reality of Jesus Christ."²¹

In the limited space left in this brief article, we now turn our attention to the question of Christian ecological praxis.

Christ the Center of All Creation and Christian Praxis

Peter M. Scott, in his article subtitled *The Mystery of Reconciliation in Creation*, refers to three senses of mystery. The first two spring from Bonhoeffer's writings: "the mystery of reconciliation: God's saving action in Jesus Christ," and "the mystery of living from centre and boundary, and the place of non-human nature in that, the mystery of participation in a common realm." The third sense of mystery, which takes us beyond Bonhoeffer (at least in the area of eco-theology), is "the mystery of post-natural reconciling work or activity in the shared realm of humanity and nature."²² But how, according to Scott, can we call on Bonhoeffer to arrive at such praxis?

In Bonhoeffer's truncated discussion of the Mandates, he moves inexorably towards moral concretization. While applauding this move, Scott nevertheless draws attention to what he calls "the Christological over-determination of Bonhoeffer's anthropology."²³ Christ shares freedom with human beings, and this is what distinguishes human beings from non-hu-

²⁰ N.H. Gregersen, *The Mysteries of Christ and Creation: "Center" and "Limit" in Bonhoeffer's Creation and Fall and Christology Lectures*. In: *Mysteries in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Eds. K. Busch Nielsen, Ch. Tietz, U. Nissen. Göttingen 2007, p. 156.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² P.M. Scott, *Postnatural Humanity? Bonhoeffer, Creaturely Freedom and the Mystery of Reconciliation in Creation*. In: *Mysteries in the Theology...*, p. 112.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 129.

man creation. Could a restatement of anthropology lead us in a more earth-friendly direction, towards a concept of nature that focuses on what human and non-human life share in common? Could this then become the basis for community between humanity and nature, where human beings are “over-against, with and in-dependence-upon nature” just as they are “over-against-one-another, with-one-another and in-dependence-upon-one-another”? Here Scott suggests the way forward is a “fuller conversation with the concept of God: a threefold/trinitarian anthropology of citizen, representative and agitator.”²⁴

Drawing on Bonhoeffer’s concept of *die Stellvertretung*,²⁵ Scott argues that its essence is representative action, i.e. “acting for the other or representing them.”²⁶ He then moves on to explore the concept of creaturehood by way of Bonhoeffer’s *analogia relationis*, not however in relationship to reconciliation but rather to creation. Is there is a sense in which human beings share a nature with non-human creatures/creation, so they could act as representatives? Scott finds this common nature in the Genesis account of “the interdependence of the human and the non-human,” where human beings as *imago dei* participate as citizens in God’s commonwealth of creation.²⁷ Although the distinction between the human and non-human remains, humanity and the rest of creation are not pitted against each other, nor is humanity called to gain independence from or mastery over creation; rather, humanity and the non-human exist in relation to each other (Bonhoeffer’s concept of sociality). “Humanity and nature may thereby be understood as citizens in a common realm.”²⁸ Scott’s final move is to address the theme of redemption, and to identify human beings as “agitators,” who as fellow citizens of creation speak and act on behalf of nature, as nature’s representative. He writes:

The mystery of reconciliation is therefore coincident with the mystery of praxis. The mystery of reconciliation identifies us as nature’s representatives and therefore as ecological citizens and thereby as agitators (to agitate whenever citizenship is denied). The hiddenness of the mystery of the reconciling God in creation *etsi Deus non daretur* is not the evacuation of Christian meanings but the attempt to re-relate these afresh in the inhospitable

²⁴ *Ibidem*. Gregersen too argues that what he considers “theological shortcomings” in Bonhoeffer’s doctrine of creation stem from “an over-use of Christological concepts and a corresponding under-use of Trinitarian resources,” N.H. Gregersen, *The Mysteries of Christ and Creation...*, p. 139.

²⁵ Translated in DBWE as ‘vicarious representative action.’

²⁶ P.M. Scott, *Postnatural Humanity?...*, p. 130.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 130–131.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 131–132.

circumstances of modernity – that is, to develop a moral/practical position – towards a threefold anthropology. Reconciliation does not mean here a “realistic” acceptance of what is [nor] resignation to our present social order therefore. Instead, being reconciled means the attempt to act as nature’s representative in order to defend a common citizenry and to agitate whenever such citizenry is obscured or threatened.²⁹

It is perhaps this final mystery, which is furthest from Bonhoeffer’s actual written texts, that is truest to his essential insight regarding the nature of reality and our participation as humans in what Scott calls “the reconciling work of God for others,” and which realizes most fully Bonhoeffer’s conviction that what matters is “participating in the reality of God and the world of Jesus Christ,” and that these are one and the same.

Keywords:

Bonhoeffer, Antaeus, no solid ground, Christ-reality, practical mysticism, Christ the Center, ultimate and penultimate, praxis

Towards a Theology of the Earth with Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Abstract

Bonhoeffer has two images of the earth that are particularly poignant. His lifelong search for “solid ground” on which to make a stand against the crisis of modernity (as exemplified by the Third Reich) let him conclude that there is not solid ground, save for the person of Jesus Christ. Yet Bonhoeffer did not understand Christ as a static foundation on which we build, but rather as a dynamic reality in which we live. Once we give up the illusion of finding “solid ground under our feet,” we are able to embrace the dynamic nature of what Bonhoeffer calls “Christ-reality,” i.e. for that the world has been reconciled with God through Jesus Christ. Bonhoeffer experienced this reality a form of practical mysticism that participates in God’s reconciling work in the world.

The second image, and the focus of this paper, is that of Antaeus, the son of Poseidon and Gaea. Antaeus’ strength came from the ground, and he was invincible as long as he could touch the earth. Heracles defeated him by lifting him off the ground and crushing him to death. Bonhoeffer used Antaeus to illustrate the need to live life fully, concretely, in the here and now. He argued that we lose strength for daily life whenever we lose touch with earthly reality, when we seek to escape this world by focusing on the after-life, when we choose to live with illusions.

This article explores selected resources Bonhoeffer offers for an earth-friendly theology in *Creation and Fall*, his *Christology* lectures and *Ethics*, leading towards Christian praxis in which human beings, as citizens in the commonwealth of God’s creation, act as representatives of non-human creation whenever our common citizenship is denied.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 132.