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Community Turned Inside Out

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Concept of the Church and of Humanity Reconsidered

Kirsten Busch Nielsen

THE BACKBONE OF DIETRICH BONHOEFFER'S THEOLOGY IS CHRISTOLOGY. If one sees Bonhoeffer's writings as the attempt to unfold, in a contemporary context, the meaning of believing and confessing the lordship of Jesus Christ, undoubtedly one has a good grasp of the core intention of his theology.

But it must be added that more specifically Bonhoeffer—without separating the person of Christ from the work of Christ—lets Christology take its point of departure in soteriology. Paul's words in 2 Corinthians that God reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18–19) play a central role in Bonhoeffer's writings. Bonhoeffer emphasizes that it is God who reconciles the world to himself and that, as a consequence, “[n]ow there is no longer any reality, any world, that is not reconciled with God and at peace. God has done that in the beloved son, Jesus Christ.”¹ That reconciliation *has* taken place and that this must throw light on every part of theology is a strong conviction in Bonhoeffer's own theology, which has Christology as its center.

Further, Christology in Bonhoeffer's theology is surrounded by an ellipse. One focus of this ellipse is anthropology, which must ask: “Who is the human being?” The other focus is ecclesiology, which has to ask: “What is the church?” Bonhoeffer relates these questions and his answers to them to each other. That Bonhoeffer combines his understand-

1. *DBWE* 6:83.

ing of the human being and his understanding of the church should not surprise anyone. Of course theology's interpretation of the human being in creation, fall, and reconciliation must be related to the church as the community of believers.

What is surprising in Bonhoeffer is the very strong interest he has in ecclesiology and the way his understanding of the church is influenced by his anthropology (including his understanding of sin). Historically, Bonhoeffer's doctoral dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio* (1927/1930), marks a milestone in Protestant ecclesiology of the early and mid twentieth century. Bonhoeffer not only aimed at studying the sociology of the church theologically, in itself an innovative step. But at the same time he also claimed that "it would be good for once if a presentation of doctrinal theology were to start not with the doctrine of God but with the doctrine of the church."² In a way, this is how the argument of *Sanctorum Communio* is actually arranged. With its main chapters on "The Primal State and the Problem of Community," "Sin and Broken Community," and "Sanctorum Communio," the concluding part of which is called "Church and Eschatology," the book presents itself as Bonhoeffer's own presentation of doctrinal theology, his own "church dogmatics," in the sense that the book is formed as a brief but comprehensive exposition of Christian doctrine. That this exposition of Christian doctrine is to a large extent specifically an exposition of a theological anthropology is clear already from the wording of the headings, which stress concepts such as "community" and "sin."

Bonhoeffer scholarship has paid extensive attention both to his ecclesiology and to his theological anthropology.³ What I aim at here is to give an account of the relationship between the two. In order not to lose myself in details, I shall restrict myself thematically to a very brief outline of both Bonhoeffer's understanding of church and his understanding of humankind, leaving aside the theological and philosophical complexity of his argument. Furthermore I shall for the sake of clarity limit myself almost exclusively to Bonhoeffer's first book, *Sanctorum Communio*. What I want to focus on is the interrelatedness of the no-

2. DBWE 1:134.

3. See, e.g., Soosten, *Die Sozialität der Kirche*; Gutter, *Innerste Konzentration*; Gerlach, "Bekanntnis und Bekennen der Kirche"; Class, *Der verzweifelte Zugriff*; Nielsen, *Syndens brudte magt*.

tions of church and of humankind in Bonhoeffer's theology as put forward in *Sanctorum Communio*.

In his theological argumentation, Bonhoeffer undertakes a double move. First, we shall see how Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology leads to anthropology; second, how his anthropology leads back to his understanding of church.

From Bonhoeffer's Ecclesiology to His Anthropology

Bonhoeffer's proposal that one should "start with the doctrine of the church" reveals the maximalism (rather than minimalism) of his ecclesiology—as does his conviction that "the church is God's new will and purpose for humanity."⁴ But Bonhoeffer's maximalist ecclesiology is balanced by his strong critique of church and of religion, which shows his profile as both a traditional and a modern Protestant theologian.⁵

This balance (or better perhaps: this tension) in Bonhoeffer's understanding of the church has to do with the relation between what is traditionally considered the church's visibility and its invisibility, a concept also used by Bonhoeffer.⁶ For Bonhoeffer, the "invisible" church *is* at the same time the "visible" church. It is of great theological importance, he thinks, to consider the outward and thus visible form of the church as a necessary part of the church as such. The church as an organization, i.e., "the empirical church," and the church in its being, "the essential church," is inseparable.⁷ This does not mean that the church is not an invisible being, too. As the body of Christ it is invisible: "The church is visible as a corporate social body in worship and in working-for-each-other. It is invisible as an eschatological entity, as the 'body of Christ.'"⁸ And yet, on the other hand, invisibility is too much for the Christian, as Bonhoeffer explains in a letter to a friend in 1931. He nearly sighs, this statement shows, for a not-only-invisible content of faith and theology: "The invisibility is destroying us . . . This crazy, relentless being thrown

4. *DBWE* 1:141.

5. Cf. my article "Critique of Church."

6. Cf. *ibid.*, 330–31. My rather positive assessment of visible-invisible in Bonhoeffer is contradicted by, e.g., Hegstad, *Den virkelige kirke*, 91–93. For a recent discussion of visibility-invisibility as a still promising challenge to ecclesiology, see Grosshans, *One Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church*.

7. *DBWE* 1:217.

8. *Ibid.*, 141.

back to the invisible God himself—no human being can endure that any longer.”⁹

The tension between visible and invisible is the background against which Bonhoeffer explains how he understands the church. Over the years, he describes in slightly differing ways the church as God’s revelation in the world—i.e., as the revelation of Christ—or as the place of God’s revelation in the world. He focuses on baptism, the Word, and the Eucharist (in this very order) as *notae ecclesiae*. He underlines that the church is *sanctorum communio*. Through the notion of vicarious representative action (German: *Stellvertretung*), he ties ecclesiology and Christology so closely to each other that one cannot but consider it an identification—an *asymmetric* identification, but nevertheless an identification.¹⁰ Combining such dogmatic understandings of the church with social philosophy and sociology of the 1920s and applying insights from both Martin Luther and Friedrich Schleiermacher, Bonhoeffer argues that the church more than anything else must be seen as a community. Community is not just inward and invisible. Any theological interpretation of the church as a community, he claims, has to include the actual, empirical, outward, and visible structures of community. The church is neither *just* invisible nor *just* a visible religious community or public organization.

According to Bonhoeffer, the church considers “the fact of Christ, or the ‘Word’” to be constitutive for itself in its self-understanding, namely, as a visible-invisible community.¹¹ The Word establishes “the logical and sociological unity . . . of the essential and the empirical, ‘invisible’ and ‘visible’ church.”¹² Thus, the church is in all of its dimensions created by the Word—the church both as the invisible body of Christ and as a social community. In short, that the church is a community and therefore must be interpreted in the category of sociality is due to the Word. Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology in this way leads to and implies a theory of human sociality as well as an anthropology.

9. Letter to Helmut Rössler, October 10, 1931, in *DBW* 11:32–34; 33 (my translation).

10. Cf. Abraham, “Wort und Sakrament,” 150.

11. *DBWE* 1:126.

12. *Ibid.*, 220–21.

From Bonhoeffer's Anthropology to His Ecclesiology

In his exegesis of the Biblical account of creation and fall and his understanding of humankind as created in the image of God and as fallen (whatever that means) into sin, Bonhoeffer consistently stresses the category of sociality. What it means to be created in the image of God and what it means to be a sinner can, according to Bonhoeffer, most adequately be understood through the category of human sociality.¹³

Bonhoeffer claims not only that human beings are created into community with God and with each other. He also understands these two dimensions of what it means to be human to be simultaneous. Neither one of them precedes the other: "Community with God by definition establishes social community as well. It is not that the community with God subsequently leads to social community; rather, neither exists without the other."¹⁴

This strong underlining of community in Bonhoeffer's anthropology, however, is not at the sacrifice of individuality. On the contrary, Bonhoeffer considers individuality and community as interdependent in the way that being an individual person implies being a person in relation to others and vice versa: "[I]n some way the individual belongs essentially and absolutely with the other, according to God's will."¹⁵ In Christian theology, Bonhoeffer argues, the notion of personhood is not a notion of individual subjectivity, but of intersubjectivity and sociality.¹⁶

This applies not only to Bonhoeffer's account of creation, but also to his account of sin. After the fall, the original relations of creation between "I" and "you" and between "I" and humankind as such are changed. As a consequence of sin or as an expression of sin, love is replaced by egoism. An originally "giving" relation between human beings has been superseded by a "purely demanding" relation.¹⁷ Conscience—which according to Bonhoeffer's negative interpretation belongs more to fallen humankind than to creation—has made its entry.

13. For a detailed account of Bonhoeffer's understanding of sin in both early and late writings, see my *Syndens brudte magt*.

14. *DBWE* 1:63.

15. *Ibid.*, 56.

16. Cf. *ibid.*, 45–46, 50.

17. *Ibid.*, 108.

In many respects, Bonhoeffer's interpretation of creation and sin is quite traditional. Fundamentally, sin is unbelief, Bonhoeffer claims. This notion of sin is one of the constants in Bonhoeffer's theology from *Sanctorum Communio* to *Letters and Papers from Prison*. In the early writings, Bonhoeffer's linking together of sin and unbelief manifests itself in his interpretation in *Act and Being* of Martin Luther's statement "sola fide credendum est nos esse peccatores."¹⁸ With Luther, Bonhoeffer claims that human knowledge of sin is a matter of faith: "Only to faith, in revelation, do we have access to the knowledge that we are sinners in the wholeness of our being."¹⁹ Thus, Bonhoeffer's different definitions of sin are congruent with unbelief in the sense that they have to do with the relation between the human person and God.²⁰ At the same time, these definitions do express the changes and movements in Bonhoeffer's writings through the years. One of these definitions is sin as loneliness and isolation. Bonhoeffer translates his traditional Lutheran understanding of sin into this specific interpretation of sin that is based on his understanding of the human person as a social being, someone whose identity is bound to his or her relation to other human beings.

This train of thought provides the background for Bonhoeffer's effort to understand together "the culpability of the individual and the universality of sin."²¹ According to Bonhoeffer, the conceptual connection between individual guilt and universal sin must, however, also include universal *guilt*, i.e., "the culpability of the human race."²² Not only sin is universal; guilt is, too. The idea that "the individual culpable act and the culpability of the human race"²³ are related to each other is, Bonhoeffer claims, one of Luther's hamartiological convictions. Luther, Bonhoeffer says, "maintains that sin is simultaneously inexcusable and

18. Cf. *DBWE* 2:136–37, 143–44. Cf. Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, 215.

19. *DBWE* 2:137.

20. Without claiming that the list is complete, I would suggest that Bonhoeffer through the years defines sin as unbelief, disobedience, breach of the law, self-justification, idolatry, godlessness, and perversion (cf. *curvatio*)—with unbelief as the most basic definition. Cf. my *Syndens brudte magt*, 159–74.

21. *DBWE* 1:110.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*

universal [. . . whereas] Protestant orthodoxy [. . . did] not succeed in preserving this.”²⁴

The universality of sin and thus its unavoidability has been dealt with in tradition by means of the doctrine of original sin, *peccatum haereditarium* or *peccatum originale/peccatum radicale*—the latter term being the one preferred by Protestant theology because it stresses that sin influences all human beings universally, while also influencing each individual deeply and radically. Bonhoeffer underlines that the universality of sin in the first sense should not excuse or explain the sin and guilt of the individual, i.e., sin in the second sense.

Thus, in order to cover the issue of sin, as Bonhoeffer must do since he designs his ecclesiology in *Sanctorum Communio* as an exposition of Christian doctrine from creation to eschaton, he has to “expose the new social basic-relations between I and You, as well as between I and humanity.”²⁵ The new social relations bring along the perversion or distortion of the original social relations. Community collapses. The individual becomes totally isolated. But since personal sin is both individual and universal, Bonhoeffer must conclude that “recognition of one’s *utter solitude* leads to the other insight, namely the *broadest sense of shared sinfulness*, so that by our very nature the ‘one’ is led to the ‘other.’”²⁶ It is of great importance, then, how the social dimension of human identity is reflected in Bonhoeffer’s notion of individual, personal sin. According to Bonhoeffer, the doctrine of original sin is simply the theological elaboration of “the social significance of sin.”²⁷

Bonhoeffer underlines that “the social element [. . . is] not excluded, but posited simultaneously” with the individuality of the sinner.²⁸ When the individual person turns himself or herself against God in the sinful act, this is simultaneously an unexplainable and inexcusable act of the individual *and* an act of humankind. Humankind is present in the individual. It is, as Bonhoeffer suggests, a matter of representation. This is how the individual, personal guilt and the universality of sin are related to each other. The stronger the presence is of the

24. Ibid., 113.

25. Ibid., 107.

26. Ibid., 109.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid., 114.

individual in the act of guilt, the stronger is also the presence of humankind. It applies to Adam as well as to anybody else that “[w]hen, in the sinful act, the individual spirit rises up against God, thus climbing to the utmost height of spiritual individuality . . . [,] the deed committed is at the same time *the deed of the human race . . . in the individual person.*”²⁹ The individual person’s experience and awareness of oneself as *peccator pessimus* is closely related to his or her “experience of ethical solidarity.”³⁰ Thus, the subject of sin is both the individual and “the human race,”³¹ but the latter only “‘in’ individuals.”³² Just as an individual is a person in the strict sense of the word, a community of subjects, according to Bonhoeffer, can be a person. A people, a married couple, a family, a friendship, and the church can be looked on as a “collective person,” with whom “there is a will of God . . . just as with individuals.”³³ Also humanity in its sinfulness must be regarded as a collective person. This notion, collective person, has to solve the problem that was left unsolved by the doctrine of original sin in its traditional form, namely, how to encompass two points: (1) that sin is universal and (2) that sin, in its universality, is connected with guilt.

One may consider the representation Bonhoeffer aims at here a turned-inside-out-representation. It is a turned-inside-out-representation when the individual sinful person recognizes himself or herself as sinful humanity, a non-community. For one of the consequences of sin is that the individual is isolated from others and that his or her relation to others is perverted. So, one must ask Bonhoeffer, how is it possible that the individual sinful person in his or her loneliness can represent the others, and how is it possible that the community of sinners can be just that: a community? Bonhoeffer has an open eye for this paradox. He does not dissolve the paradox but leaves it as it stands with the following commentary: “The structure of humanity-in-Adam is unique because it is both composed of many isolated individuals and yet is one, as the humanity that has sinned as a whole.”³⁴

29. Ibid., 115.

30. Ibid., 116.

31. Ibid., 118.

32. Ibid., 119.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid., 121.

Humanity-in-Adam is unique because of its self-contradiction: a personal community of isolated individuals.³⁵ Both *because of* and *in spite of* the sinful perversion of human relations and the isolation of the individual, humanity-in-Adam is a collective person. This only makes sense under the circumstance of sin.

Our considerations have come full circle. It is time to turn again to Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology. His interpretation of humanity-in-Adam lays the foundation of the interpretation of the church as "the humanity of the new Adam,"³⁶ i.e., as a new community of human beings. It was God's reconciliation in Christ to himself of the world that brought about this new humanity. What is important to bear in mind is that the humanity-in-Adam lives on in this new humanity of the new Adam. There is a simultaneity, a *simul*, between the humanity-in-Adam and the humanity-in-Christ.

The church as the new humanity is founded or, as Bonhoeffer says, *established* through Christ's vicarious representative action: "In vicarious representative action for all he fulfils the law by love,"³⁷ and the "person of Christ must . . . unite all individuals in himself, and act before God as their vicarious representative."³⁸ Furthermore, the mutual vicarious representative action of the members of the church according to Bonhoeffer *actualizes* the church as a "community of spirit" (German: *Geistgemeinschaft*).³⁹ The close connection between Christology and ecclesiology is still maintained at this point in the argument. Thus, the traditional interpretation of the community and of the church as the body of Christ is echoed. It is as the body of Christ that the community and the church are involved in the representative vicarious action.

35. For a critique of Bonhoeffer's use of the concept of the collective person about humanity-in-Adam, see Brandt, "Christus als Gemeinde existierend?," 173–75. Brandt's specific critique is relevant. But in itself it is also a demonstration of the remarkable and almost self-contradictory character of the sinful humanity-in-Adam; cf. the quotation above about the unique structure of humanity-in-Adam (*DBWE* 1:121). Christiane Tietz-Steiding has mentioned a similar critique of Bonhoeffer's notion of the individual person (Is the *homo peccator* to be considered a *person*?) in *Bonhoeffer's Kritik der verkümmerten Vernunft*, 165, 269.

36. *DBWE* 1:142.

37. *Ibid.*, 148.

38. *Ibid.* For the relation between Christology and ecclesiology, see also Bonhoeffer's Christology lecture in *DBW* 12:239–303, 266–69.

39. *DBWE* 1:178–92, 261.

How Bonhoeffer understands this is evident not only in *Sanctorum Communio* and other early writings, but also in *The Cost of Discipleship* from 1937. Here Bonhoeffer states that “[s]uch vicariously representative action and suffering, which is carried out by the members of the body of Christ, is itself the very life of Christ who seeks to take shape in his members (Gal 4:19).”⁴⁰

Concluding Remarks

One of the challenges or provocations of Bonhoeffer’s theology is that, through his theological ellipse, anthropology and ecclesiology, he makes visible some aspects of Christian theology that are often just assumed and not spoken of and not thought through. Bonhoeffer’s double move has consequences for both anthropology and ecclesiology. In these concluding remarks, however, I shall only focus on ecclesiology.

Bonhoeffer’s understanding of the church is sophisticated and marked by tension. It reflects the twofold idea of the church as *sanctorum* community and *peccatorum* community, both aspects encompassing the so-called visibility as well as the invisibility of the church. And furthermore, it includes Bonhoeffer’s account of the Christian doctrine of man, i.e., his claim that there is an interdependence between the human person’s individuality and his or her sociality, an interdependence that plays a role in creation, sin, and reconciliation and thus in both aspects of the church. Bonhoeffer recognizes, however, that this role is played out in different ways in creation and reconciliation and thus also in different ways in the church as *sanctorum communio* and *peccatorum communio*. Should *peccatorum communio* be thought of as a community or shouldn’t it rather be conceived as a community turned-inside-out? For the sake of clarity I shall venture to sketch the outline of Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology in *Sanctorum Communio* as follows, even if I run the risk of simplifying matters and leaving out of consideration important questions (especially concerning Bonhoeffer’s notion of faith, of knowledge of sin, and of forgiveness of sin):

40. DBWE 4:222.

<i>Sanctorum Communio</i>	<i>Peccatorum Communio</i>
The church as community	The church as community turned-inside-out
The individual person	The sinful individual person
The personality of the individual in interdependence with sociality	Perversion of the relation between individual personality and sociality
Community with other human beings/ community with God in Christ	Isolation from other human beings/ isolation from God
The reconciled individual person/the reconciled humanity, humanity-in-Christ	The turned-inside-out community of sinful individuals as humanity-in-Adam

Any contemporary systematic reflection on the identity and the task of the church must take into account other and more questions and issues than Bonhoeffer does in his writings on the church, including *Sanctorum Communio*, and must of course also choose other philosophical and sociological sources of inspiration than those chosen by Bonhoeffer in the late 1920s. Thus, today, not many will dispute a claim like Bonhoeffer's that the individuality and sociality of the human person are in some way or other interwoven. But, theologically, the possibilities offered by Bonhoeffer's early ecclesiological works are still promising. Bonhoeffer succeeds in putting forward a theory of the church that holds together both negative and affirmative aspects. Retaining the notion of sin that he does, namely, sin as unbelief manifesting itself in the isolation of the individual and thus perverting the relation between individuality and sociality, Bonhoeffer is able to work together in a coherent whole the church in its empirical or visible and its essential or invisible form. Thus, Bonhoeffer does *not simply exclude* from ecclesiology what the church is not or what it should not be (although his theology at the same time does imply such a critique of the church), *nor* does he *simply repeat* the *simul justus et peccator* (which on the other hand certainly is an important part of Bonhoeffer's theological background and horizon). Not many Protestant ecclesiologies are as complex as Bonhoeffer's and thereby as well protected "from inside" against sliding into one-sidedness.