Introduction

The essays in this volume demonstrate Bonhoeffer's significance for reflecting on the social and political dimensions of our contemporary world, which is grappling with questions of social identity and religion. As the title indicates, these essays on Bonhoeffer's social thought are motivated by an anthropological concern: When we consider the rapid scientific advances of genetics and globally recurring human atrocities, does it not become apparent that human dignity requires a transcendent reference point? Yet as a generation justly suspicious of easy metaphysical assumptions, we also ask how any one concept of human dignity can offer the kind of transcendence and dynamic quality that is necessary in order to accommodate cultural and historical developments.

Of course, these questions are not new. They usually arise in the light of conceptual and social challenges to the idea that human life is sacred. The German theologian Helmut Thielicke, for example, raised the question of human nature in light of the Nazis' inhuman reign. He concluded that rather than criminal desire, anthropological assumptions were to blame for its racist ideology: "On good grounds I do not believe that definitely criminal instincts drove the Nazis to eliminate the mentally ill and persecute the Jews. In many people idealism and readiness for self-denial were motives in this dreadful business, perverted though these might have been. What triggered them and set rolling the apocalyptic drama of mass murder was not the subjective disposition of the murderers but their table of anthropological values. For if humanity is defined by its utilizability, the diagnosis of unfitness to live follows as night follows day."[1] This challenge remains with us today; even our supposedly civilized Western society experiences once again a deep uncertainty about what it means to be human. For example, in his book *On the Human Condition*, the French philosopher Dominique Janicaud

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1. Thielicke, *Being Human—Becoming Human*, 8.

argues that in the absence of traditional religious definitions of humanity, and with increasing biotechnical advances in human engineering, Western culture is currently marked by an "unprecedented uncertainty about human identity."[2]

In addition to their role in guarding human dignity, our anthropological presuppositions also shape our view of the individual in relation to society. Too often the pendulum of our social imaginary has swung between the extremes of individualism and collectivism. What conception of human being can provide a via media between these two problematic options? How can we build into our conception of selfhood a simultaneous sense of solidarity with others? And what substantive ethical content is this solidarity to have? Is it merely a solidarity of survival, a sense that we are all in the same earthly boat with equal needs of food, shelter, and love, floating on the ocean of existence without any direction? Or is there a greater map that lends human existence a purpose beyond subsistence and survival? If we follow the question of selfhood in this direction, we find ourselves in the domain of religion.

Recent years have witnessed a renewed openness to the voices of religious traditions within academic discussions regarding society and culture. This openness derives from an epistemological shift in which a positivistic model of truth is increasingly being replaced by a hermeneutical model. Once we understand that reason does not operate *ex nihilo* but in dependence on tradition, this notion of reasoning as fundamentally *situated* and *involved* requires more openness to religious sources of insight than older objectivist epistemologies. In addition, the cultural derivation of those older epistemological models has been exposed and its anthropological premises challenged. This challenge has been especially well developed by the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor. Taylor has done much to debunk the secularist "subtraction narrative," which describes human development as a progression toward maturity that necessitates the demise of religion. For such an interpretive framework (which all too often continues to reign in the sociology of religion), *any* religious conviction is *by definition* a cultural regress into the dark, primordial abysses of our humanity.[3] Yet this irrational fear of religion, based on a certain interpretation of human history—

2. Janicaud, *Human Condition*, 1.

3. Taylor, *Secular Age*, 432ff.

one that has not fulfilled its promise of progress—, is held by a comparatively small intellectual elite in Western culture. Stubbornly, indeed dogmatically clinging to this social imaginary, this secularist circle is dumbfounded by the persistence of religion and remains incapable of advancing fruitful concepts for interreligious or intercultural dialogue. This form of secularist fundamentalism, still retained by the likes of Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, becomes increasingly harder to maintain against mounting sociological and philosophical evidence for the importance of religion to society, ethics, and politics.

All these developments show that the door has been opened wide for theological conceptions of human sociality. Yet there remains a postmodern caution to this renewed space for religious insights. Postmodern aversions to *any* substantive universal concepts also seem to apply to concrete theological claims about human existence that are based on revelation. Convinced by Lyotard's warning against meta-narratives, and inoculated against theological assertions by Derrida's own assertion that only empty, formal notions of justice or the messianic can prevent their colonization by one particular party, postmoderns are fine with religion as long as it remains without particular form. This impulse goes back to the demand for radical ethical transcendence by the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas maintains that even Martin Buber, who rejects objectifying rationalism in favor of the relational "I-Thou" engagement with reality, does not sufficiently guard against our tendency to explain human dignity within some system or some reciprocal relation.[4] In Levinas's view, any such move toward reciprocity already opens the door to rationalize and thus relativize the irreducible human dignity each person inherently possesses.

Yet, however well intended, Levinas's demand for radical otherness becomes itself problematic. His "Other" indeed constitutes the ultimate barrier to any self-satisfied concept of human being, spun in the isolation of our consciousness and then projected onto humanity as a whole; but it also becomes a barrier on which our desire for sociality and reciprocity are easily shipwrecked. Hans Urs von Balthasar clearly recognized the problem with this constellation and thought that

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4. Levinas explains that for Buber, "the [I-Thou] relation is straightaway experienced as reciprocity," while he accentuates the asymmetry of this relation: "the principle thing that separates us is what I call the asymmetry of the I-Thou relation" (Interview with François Poirié in Levinas and Robbins, *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 72).

Christian theology offered a way beyond this impasse: "If one does not want to fall back into Idealism (i.e., collectivistic sociologism), get mired in materialism and hedonism, nor be shattered to smithereens on the barrier of the Thou (the Thou as Hell: Sartre), then Christianity remains the only open path which can assign infinite worth to the human Thou, because God ascribed such value to it in election and death on the cross; this assignation becomes only possible, in turn, if the I-Thou-We relation has itself absolute, divine dignity: in the Trinitarian Being of Love."[5] Balthasar's recommendation of the Christian foundation for human sociality demonstrates the complex, even paradoxical elements any adequate concept of sociality has to accommodate: immanence and transcendence, individuality and collectivity, solidarity and ethical discernment.

We have assembled the essays in this book out of the conviction that Bonhoeffer's social thought successfully addresses these demands. Clearly, sociality forms a dominant theme in Bonhoeffer's work. From the introduction of his dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio*, where he notes "the social intention of all the basic Christian concepts,"[6] to his final writings in prison, where he describes Christian faith as being for others,[7] the theme of sociality runs throughout Bonhoeffer's authorship. An equally persistent accent is the Christological orientation of Bonheoffer's social thought. The phrase "Christ existing as community," which Bonhoeffer coins in his dissertation, captures the ecclesial, communal nature of his anthropology. It has often been remarked that Bonhoeffer is "a Chalcedonian theologian,"[8] which means that his Trinitarian conception of sociality is distinctly incarnational. Thus not only does Bonhoeffer uphold the paradoxical co-existence of individuality and collectivity within the Christian community, but he also extends this picture of sociality to all of humanity. In line with patristic theology, Bonhoeffer regards the incarnation as the recapitulation of humanity, affirmed in the life of Jesus, judged on the cross, and redeemed in the resurrection.

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5. Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit*, 413 (our translation).

6. *DBWE* 1:21.

7. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 381–82.

8. Green, "Human Sociality," 122.

The essays in this volume will begin to think through what all this means for the broad spectrum of social thought. We can already see, however, that what has been called Bonhoeffer's Christian humanism[9] manages to uphold the divine and the human, transcendence and immanence, by emphasizing true humanity as the *kerygma* of the Christian gospel. All the usual concepts of social thought—concepts such as freedom, responsibility, and solidarity—are configured Christologically, which is to say, incarnationally. Being human means *becoming* human in the image of Christ. This dynamic and ethically concrete repristination of the ancient *imago Dei* theme offers a post-metaphysical conception of human being with many possible applications, some of which are explored in this essay collection.

We conclude our introductory comments by noting two important ramifications of Bonhoeffer's Christological sociality. The first is the cruciform understanding of human ontology. This applies most readily to the church as the body of Christ, for "the new human being is the church community, the body of Christ, or Christ himself."[10] After the recapitulation of humanity in Christ and its restoration in Him to the true image of God, being truly human *as* community is ontologically structured in two concrete forms: "being-with-each-other" and "being-for-each-other."[11] Yet Bonhoeffer also insists that participation in the new humanity of Christ extends a link to all of humanity, since humanity in its entirety was taken up by Christ. Bonhoeffer argues that calling the church Christ's body means that "in the body of Christ all humanity is accepted, included, and borne, and that the church-community of believers is to make this known to the world by word and life. This means not being separated from the world, but calling the world into the community [*Gemeinschaft*] of the body of Christ to which the world in truth already belongs."[12] The church, as Bonhoeffer puts it elsewhere, "now bears the form that in truth is meant for all people. The image according to which it is being formed is the image of humanity."[13] And this image defines truly human existence as relational "being-for-the-other."

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9. See John de Gruchy's essay in this volume.

10. *DBWE* 4:219.

11. Green, "Human Sociality," 123.

12. *DBWE* 6:67.

13. Ibid., 97.

Restored to true humanity, and being the true humanity in embryo, the "philanthropy of God is the reason for Christians to love every human being as a brother or sister."[14] Christological sociality thus not only sets the church apart from the world but also sends her back into the world in solidarity with every other human being. Participating in the divinely held true humanity of Christian sociality leads us away from an abstract to a concrete ethic: "We can and should speak not about what the good is, can be, or should be for each and every time, but about *how Christ may take form among us today and here . . .* The concrete Christian ethic stands beyond casuistry and formalism."[15]

The second consequence concerns the accent on interpretation within Bonhoeffer's Christological sociality. He understands that being human in Christ means *becoming* human through implementing God's reconciliation with the world. Christian ethics, as he famously put it, deals not with the ethical problem of "How can I be good," or "How can I do something good," but concerns the entirely different question, "what is the will of God."[16] In describing what doing God's will looks like, Bonhoeffer offers one of the most unique modern theological conceptions by describing the Christian life as living out of what he calls the "ultimate-penultimate" relation. Christian life, says Bonhoeffer, does not mean the adherence to a set of rules, but "Christian life is participation in Christ's encounter with the world."[17] This means two things. First, God has reconciled the world to himself in Christ, who is the eternal Logos through whom all things were made. Hence all of reality is unified as this Christ-reality of reconciliation. Secondly, however, until the final divine renewal of all things, reality is experienced as the tension between the ultimate justifying and reconciling word of God and the penultimate world "preserved and maintained by God for the coming of Christ."[18] This fallen world is still God's good creation; it has been affirmed by Christ, whose redemptive work has confirmed its worth and its relative autonomy—an autonomy that is relative, penultimate,

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14. *DBWE* 4:285.
15. *DBWE* 6:99.
16. Ibid., 47.
17. Ibid., 159.
18. Ibid., 164.

because it is directed toward its ultimate fulfillment in Christ.[19] The upshot of all this is that the Christ-reality of reconciliation has to be enacted by the Christian discerningly within the ultimate-penultimate relation. Christian knowledge and discernment, in other words, follows the pattern of the Incarnation in having to find the sacred in the profane, yet without reducing the sacred to the profane. The Christian life is one of interpretively discerning what action and mode of sociality is most human because Christ died to enable true humanity. How can Christ's image of God, his servanthood for the sake of true humanity, become reality in any given situation? That is the basis for Christian social comportment.[20]

This vital theme of human sociality links Bonhoeffer with contemporary concerns in theology, philosophy, cultural studies, and science, regarding human reason, human nature, and their socio-cultural expressions. In particular, Bonhoeffer's emphasis on the fundamental relationality of human existence, which he defines Christologically as being-for-others, and the theme of a common humanity in his theological ethics contain rich resources for a wide range of topics in contemporary academic research. Consequently, the contributors to this volume examine Bonhoeffer's wealth of resources for thinking about human being, sociality, and religiosity within our contemporary context.

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The essays in this volume fall under three main divisions. Part I examines the humanist orientation of Bonhoeffer's thought. In "Dietrich Bonhoeffer as Christian Humanist," John de Gruchy argues that while Bonhoeffer did not refer to himself specifically as a Christian humanist, his life and work from his early formation through to his prison reflections give us good reason for describing him as such. At the same time, Bonhoeffer's legacy helps us critically retrieve the term in ways that give it greater contemporary value and significance. It is a Christological humanism shaped by a genuine encounter with "the other," fashioned in the struggle for truth and justice against dehumanizing power, deep-

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19. Ibid., 174.
20. Ibid., 74.

ened through suffering, and always affirming human goodness against perversity, hope against despair, and life against death.

Jens Zimmermann, in "Being Human, Becoming Human: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christological Humanism," complements de Gruchy's essay by linking Bonhoeffer's Christian humanism to its patristic roots. According to Zimmermann, humanism, including Renaissance humanism, was originally a Christian affair, deriving from the Christological reflections of the church fathers. Bonhoeffer stands firmly within this tradition, and Zimmermann defends this conception of humanism against philosophical (Luc Ferry) and theological (John Howard Yoder) challenges.

In "Bonhoeffer's Theology and Economic Humanism: An Exploration in Interdisciplinary Sociality," Peter Frick offers an exploratory essay that examines Bonhoeffer's own pronouncement, early in his career, that he is seeking a humanistic theology. On the basis of three of Bonhoeffer's basic theological assumptions (the economic realm is part of the one reality of Christ; the church must address the social issues of society; every life is valuable independent of social utility) Frick argues that theology's task is to critique and comment on economic structures by asking whether they enhance or destroy life. In order to achieve such an objective, theology must itself be critical, similar to the attempts of the Frankfurt School, but go beyond mere criticism and engage in constructive, interdisciplinary dialogue that works toward the emergence of authentic humanistic economies.

The essays in Part II examine Bonhoeffer's ecclesiological concept of sociality. In "Sociality, Discipleship, and Worldly Theology in Bonhoeffer's Christian Humanism," Clifford Green revisits his influential interpretation of Bonhoeffer's theology of sociality, asking to what extent it adequately illuminates the dynamics of his theological development, and whether recent research further clarifies his intellectual pilgrimage through the period of *Discipleship* to the emphasis on "worldliness" in his *Ethics* and prison theology. In the process Green's article sheds light on what "being human" meant for Bonhoeffer as a Christian theologian.

In her essay "Community Turned Inside Out: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Concept of the Church and of Humanity Reconsidered," Kirsten Busch Nielsen focuses on the interdependence of anthropology and ecclesiology in Bonhoeffer's early writings, especially in *Sanctorum Communio*.

Nielsen agrees with the prevailing view that the center of Bonhoeffer's theology lies in Christology, but also argues that Christology is surrounded by an ellipse formed by anthropology and ecclesiology. Bonhoeffer elegantly and provocatively combines the concepts of individuality and sociality in his anthropological discourse, and then examines how these insights shape his interpretation of the doctrines of creation, sin, and reconciliation/church. It is, however, important to recognize that since the relation between individuality and sociality is perverted by sin, we can only consider the community of sinners (the humanity of Adam) a broken one—a non-community. Bonhoeffer's strong concept of sin shapes his combination of anthropology and ecclesiology, thus preserving the dialectic of the *peccatorum communio* and the *sanctorum communio*; it is therefore challenging and should still be considered promising for Protestant ecclesiology.

The theme of ecclesiology also guides Barry Harvey's essay, "The Narrow Path: Sociality, Ecclesiology, and the Polyphony of Life in the Thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer." Harvey argues that ecclesiology is at the heart of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's social thought and is not dependent on a prior theory of sociality per se. The contention of some that Bonhoeffer relaxes the connection between Christ and the church in his later prison correspondence in order to embrace completely and unreservedly a world come of age therefore misses the mark. In a world that compliments itself on having brought the human species to maturity, Bonhoeffer is correct to hold to the centrality of the church in the construction of a coherent and credible theological concept of sociality. The picture of the church that emerges in Bonhoeffer's later works gestures toward an alternative mode of sociality that bears striking similarities to the forms that Jewish life took following the Babylonian Exile.

The contributions in Part III examine the interrelated themes of discipleship, conformation, and responsibility, all of which are important in Bonhoeffer's social thought. In a previously unpublished essay from 1987, "The Christological Presuppositions of Discipleship," John Howard Yoder offers a distinctly Anabaptist and decidedly critical engagement with Bonhoeffer's concept of discipleship. Yoder begins with a genealogy of Anabaptist thought on discipleship and then proceeds to examine the parallels with Bonhoeffer's thought, comparing and contrasting their conceptions of discipleship as "an ethic for which the concrete humanity of Jesus, in his social decisions, provides the model."

Yoder's concern is with concreteness. Regarding the call to discipleship, then, how does the Christological focus of Bonhoeffer's account relate to the lifestyle of the historical man Jesus? Yoder also presses the question of the concrete ethical consequences of discipleship: What is the disciple called to do, in concrete terms? Yoder's recurring criticism is that Bonhoeffer's ethics of discipleship is not yet *concrete enough*—whether it concerns the relation between the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history, the nature of suffering and rejection in the life of discipleship, the interpretation of the Beatitudes, the practice of pacifism, the notion of being conformed to Christ, the doctrine of the mandates, or the relation between church and state. In Yoder's view, despite Bonhoeffer's emphasis on following after Christ he "was not driven either to concreteness about the pre-passion Jesus nor to any abiding challenge to the axioms of Constantinian political ethics."

The theme of discipleship returns in Brian Gregor's "Following-After and Becoming Human: A Study of Bonhoeffer and Kierkegaard." Gregor's essay conducts a dialogue between Bonhoeffer and Kierkegaard—a dialogue that is promising since these two thinkers share several commitments and concerns: a rejection of idealist accounts of subjectivity, in order to take seriously finitude and concreteness in describing human existence; the attempt to retrieve the biblical concept of following-after Christ to correct the cheap grace that had distorted Lutheran Christendom; and a dialectical approach to thinking about the relations between faith and obedience as well as passivity and activity. Gregor closes by arguing that Kierkegaard can enrich Bonhoeffer's thought by offering a deeper understanding of the role of imagination in following after Christ.

Next is Lisa Dahill's "Con-Formation with Jesus Christ: Bonhoeffer, Social Location, and Embodiment." Dahill observes that despite its centrality to human existence and the incarnational heart of Christian faith, the human body—our physical participation in both creation and the life of God—has not until recently been a major focus of Christian theological reflection. Her essay offers a sketch of Bonhoeffer's theology of the human body, tracing five key features of his view: the body's essential goodness, its rights to life and joy, its role as "limit" to others, its centrality in Christian community, and its indwelling by God. The particular focus of her essay is how the body, understood in these ways, participates in the "conformation with Christ" that is central to

Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* and its vision of the Christian life. She explores this question through the lens of the observed experience of Precious Jones, the title character in the 2009 film *Precious*, and asks how Bonhoeffer's theology of the body and his understanding of being *con*-formed, i.e., formed-with Christ, illumine the embodied human experience glimpsed in this film. How do both Precious Jones and Dietrich Bonhoeffer participate bodily in the suffering of their times—and in the incarnation, suffering, and resurrection of Jesus? What do we learn from these two very different human beings about the significance of our own embodiment in Jesus Christ?

Finally, Ulrik Becker Nissen's essay, "Responding to Human Reality: Responsibility and Responsiveness in Bonhoeffer's Ethics," examines the close relation between responsibility and responsiveness. According to Bonhoeffer, moral responsibility arises in the immediate encounter with the other—a view that brings him close to a situation ethics or ethics of proximity, which may be read as an endorsement of conditions of moral responsibility that are universal to all human beings. At the same time, the Christological foundation of Bonhoeffer's ethics also implies a specific approach to human reality, namely, that it is in Christ that the human being realizes true humanity. Nissen argues that this affirmation of humanity and endorsement of its foundation in Christ reflects an underlying Chalcedonian Christology and that this Christological foundation of Bonhoeffer's ethics makes it possible for him to maintain the universal and specific dimensions of Christian ethics at the same time, as exemplified in the notion of responsibility.

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A volume of this nature requires the cooperation of many people, so we would like to thank those who have made it possible: the authors for their excellent contributions; Lise van der Eyk for her careful and tireless editorial assistance; K. C. Hanson, Diane Farley, and the rest of the people at Wipf and Stock who have worked on this project; the generous funding of this project by the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (CRC and SSHRC) and the Ernest Fortin Memorial Foundation; Anne Marie Yoder, Martha Yoder Maust, and the Mennonite Church USA Historical Committee and Archives for their help; and finally, our wives and families.