

Bonhoeffer and the future of Public Theology in South Africa. The on-going quest for life together.

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the meaning of the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer for Public Theology in South Africa. It specifically discusses the meaning of Bonhoeffer for the public quest for life together in churches and a society that hunger for a joint journey towards a life of dignity for all, justice for all, freedom for all. Bonhoeffer's own emphasis on life together is discussed with reference to his emphasis on life together as a Trinitarian gift, and his Christological and ecclesiological understanding of human beings and life together. Directives for the concrete practice of life together are inferred from Bonhoeffer's work by specifically discussing his own commitment to a life of interpathy, and his thinking about morally acceptable compromises in our quest to advance life together.

KEYWORDS

Bonhoeffer, Public Theology, Life Together, Anthropology, Christology, Interpathy

TREFWOORDE

Bonhoeffer, Publieke Teologie, Lewe saam, Antropologie, Christologie, Interpatie

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1. INTRODUCTION

This contribution reflects upon the contribution of Dietrich Bonhoeffer to the future of Public Theology in South Africa. This essay is structured as follows. In a first round the on-going plea for life together in South Africa and in other parts of the world is discussed. In a second round the light that the theology of Bonhoeffer sheds on the central task of Public Theology, namely to advance life together in unity, justice and reconciliation, is discussed. This is done by attending to Bonhoeffer's portrayal of life together as a trinitarian creation and gift, and to his Christological and ecclesiological anthropology of relationality. In a last round some directives for life together are distilled from the discussion of Bonhoeffer's work, specifically his perspectives on the themes of interpathy and moral compromise, and communion for dignity, justice and freedom.

2. A PLEA FOR LIFE TOGETHER – NEAR AND FAR

a. Steve De Gruchy¹ wrote an important chapter in the commemoration edition of the book of his father John, *The church struggle in South Africa*. He argued that the church struggle had been replaced by various struggles. He then identified various struggles, amongst others poverty, human sexuality and gender justice, plurality in a secular state, and the promise and peril of globalisation. The first one which he mentioned, and which he viewed as the central one that would be crucial to address the other struggles, is the struggle for national reconciliation, for life together, for joint attention to the various challenges. Steve De Gruchy pleaded for life together in South Africa.

Russel Botman, former rector and vice-chancellor of Stellenbosch University, dedicated his life to this quest for life together. He spoke about this life together in terms of the dignity of all humans and all creatures. On basis of the Confession of Belhar he identified three dignity discourses in South Africa, namely the discourses about unity, reconciliation and justice. Together we search for a life together of dignity, i.e. for a life together of unity, justice and reconciliation.

Dirkie Smit, decades ago described this life together as indispensable for achieving reconciliation and justice. Life together, life in unity, paves the way for a communal quest for reconciliation and justice. According to Smit² article 1 of Belhar about

1 S De Gruchy, From church struggle to church struggles, in J de Gruchy. *The church struggle in South Africa, 25th Anniversary Edition* (London: SCM Press, 2004), 223-260.

2 See DJ Smit "... op 'n besondere wyse die God van die noodlydende, die arme en die veronregte ...", in GD Cloete en DJ Smit (eds), *'n Oomblik van Waarheid*

the unity of the church helps churches to discover and confess that their continued disunity presents a stumbling block to the quest for reconciliation and justice. This disunity implies the separation of people from different socio-economic groups, with different levels of privilege, training, skills, participation and influence in society. Disunity constitutes the perpetuation of classism and the refusal to be involved with less privileged brothers and sisters. Smit is of opinion that these socio-economic factors were the real cause of the original church divisions within the so-called Dutch Reformed Church family. The theological rationale for separate churches was developed only later. He writes remarkably about the way in which the situation of separate churches and disunity prevents Christians from showing justice and compassion towards each other. "Christians are denied the opportunity to get to know each other and to love and serve each other. Consequently it becomes more difficult – and mostly almost impossible – to know and to carry each other's burdens."³

Life together, life in, what I like to call, constructive proximity, is indispensable for building a society of reconciliation, justice, dignity and freedom.

The quest for life together did not diminish in South Africa after twenty years of democracy. On the contrary, we nowadays hear more pleas for the dawning of this life together. The levels of polarization in our country are still very high. Public trust remains a big challenge. We still hunger for higher levels of inclusive social solidarity, liberating social cohesion, and that dignifying social capital, which include relationships of trust, dialogue and cooperation across various boundaries.

Churches and theologians are called upon to take-up this challenge, and to give servant-leadership in the quest to awaken and materialise the dream in the hearts of South Africans to become a country of unity, justice and reconciliation. Rectors of universities, like Jonathan Jansen of Free state University and Russel Botman of Stellenbosch University wrestled with the reality that on weekdays they prepare and equip their students on university campuses for life together, but on Sundays churches to a high degree still nurture them in mono-ethnic and mono-cultural, separatist churches and congregations.

The on-going vibrancy of Ubuntu discourses in South Africa also reveals the hunger among South Africans for this life together. Ubuntu as African anthropology and worldview that seeks a life of humaneness, of communion, of togetherness, of

(Kaaipstad:Tafelberg Uitgewers, 1982), 60-62.

3 See DJ Smit, "... in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged, in GD Cloete en DJ Smit (eds). *Moment of Truth: The confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1984), p. 62.

inclusive solidarity, of social cohesion and compassion, remains a hunger in the hearts of millions of South Africans.

b. The hunger for life together is expressed with renewed energy and urgency all over the globe. In a magisterial work Larry Rasmussen⁴ decades ago unmasked the fragmentation of life together and its impact on our moral living together. He argues that the state and the market cannot adequately serve as moral proxies, and pleads for the rebuilding of communities of life together, of moral living together in churches and the rest of civil society.

In two very helpful, more recent, publications chief rabbi Jonathan Sacks and sociologist Richard Sennett, plead for life together. In his *The home we build together* Sacks pleads for new covenants that would facilitate life together in contexts of diversity and plurality, conflict and needs. Sacks⁵ argues as follows:

Covenants – because they are relational, not ontological – are inherently pluralistic. I have one kind of relationship with my parents, another with my spouse, others with my children, yet others with friends, neighbours, members of my faith, fellow citizens of my country, and with human beings wherever they suffer and need my help. None of these is exclusive. It is of the nature of real life, as opposed to philosophical abstraction, that we have many commitments and that they may, at times, conflict. But that is not inherently tragic, though it may give rise to regret, even grief. Pluralism is a form of hope, because it is founded in the understanding that precisely because we are different, each of us has something unique to contribute to the shared project of which we are a part. In the short term our desires and needs may clash; but the very realization that difference is a source of blessing leads us to seek mediation, conflict resolution, conciliation and peace – the peace that is predicated on diversity, not on uniformity.

This plea for covenant is also reflected in the social covenant discourse that the World Economic Forum has recently embarked upon.

Sennett serves us with a helpful publication with the simple and striking title, *Together*. In this book he identifies the ills and skills for life together. He identifies three sets of ills. He⁶ firstly identifies socio-economic inequality as a major threat

4 L Rasmussen, *Moral fragments and moral community. A proposal for church in society* (Minneapolis: Fortress press, 1993).

5 J Sacks, *The dignity of difference. How to avoid the clash of civilizations* (London/New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2002 – repr. 2011), 203.

6 R Sennett, *Together. The rituals, pleasures and politics of cooperation* (London: Penguin Books, 2012/repr.2013), 133-147, especially 144-147.

to life together, to inclusion, to the building of healthy social relationships and cooperation. He argues that although this was not the original intention of social media, like Facebook, it is currently employed to reflect and advance structural inequality, exclusion, comparison and competition, instead of equilibrium and cooperation. He argues that societies in the USA with higher levels of inequality than European societies, is less capable of providing institutions that would enable children to relate and cooperate more deeply.

Sennett⁷ secondly refers to the fragmentation and destruction of the so-called social triangle in the modern workplace in the context of the development of new forms of labour, especially after the financial crash of 2008. The triangle refers firstly to the mutual earned authority and respect of employees and employers, secondly to the loyal cooperation and sacrifice on behalf of colleagues and the company, and thirdly the extra efforts of workers when the company experiences crises. This life together in the workplace has deteriorated and has made place for bitter distrust, comparison, competition and disloyalty.

Sennett⁸ explains that the breakdown of life together reaches its lowest point in the psychological outcome of both structural inequality and new forms of labour, namely the creation of the uncooperative self who is a character type that cannot manage demanding, complex forms of social engagement, and who consequently withdraws from involvement and cooperation, and who functions with anxiety, narcissism and complacency.

In the South African context Fanie du Toit⁹, Director of the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, identifies the following stumbling blocks to this life together: past and present estrangement, socio-economic inequality, racial prejudice, and a culture of violence. One could add factors like prejudices related to class, gender, sexual orientation, age, levels of disability and nationality. Ecocide can also be added to this list of prejudices.

3. BONHOEFFER AND LIFE TOGETHER

Bonhoeffer offers various directives for Public Theology in South Africa. What Allan Boesak wrote about him decades ago, still rings true today. He described the role of

7 R Sennett, *Together*, 148-178.

8 R Sennett, *Together*, 179-190.

9 F du Toit, *Learning to live together. Practices of social reconciliation* (Cape Town: Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, 2003), 49-137.

this so-called white upper class European male for fulfilling our personal and public responsibilities as follows:

From Bonhoeffer I learned that it is not so much the freedom of religion that matters and that should be fought for, but what really counts is the freedom of the Word of God, that freedom to speak and to act as the Gospel compels us to do. I learned from him that we must not recoil from doing what has to be done and what should be done for others. I learned from him that we should not excuse ourselves by saying nothing can be done without doing our analysis first. And, at the same time, learning from him that what we are called to do is precisely proper and right analysis so that we will not be dreaming and romanticize about the realities of this world, or the ethical relevance of success, or failure. From him we learn that we should know not to deny our broken past, but to accept it and, in so doing, to respond to the demands of the present. We learn from him that we should take the risk of doing and that we should not wait until we have the certainties of complete analysis, which may never come. We must make the decision and we must take upon ourselves the consequences of that decision.”¹⁰

Bonhoeffer is one of the much-read theologians in South Africa. This was the case during apartheid as well as in democratic South Africa. No one has strived to spell out the meaning of Bonhoeffer for South Africa more than John de Gruchy. Decades ago he referred with affirmation to Paul Lehmann’s view in reflecting upon Bonhoeffer’s experience with black people in the USA, that Bonhoeffer could have become a bridge builder between black and white theologies, a credible interpreter of black theology.¹¹ De Gruchy describes how Bonhoeffer’s theology that developed in the context of a *status confessionis* was relevant for the *status confessionis* in apartheid South Africa.¹² Various other South Africans like Dirkie Smit, Russel Botman, Johan Botha, Carl Anthonissen, Robert Vosloo and an increasing number of younger theologians continue drinking from the wells of Bonhoeffer. Recently I attempted to demonstrate how Bonhoeffer could assist us in developing a Public Theology of responsibility.¹³

10 A Boesak, What Dietrich Bonhoeffer has meant to me, in G Carter et al. (eds). *Bonhoeffer’s ethics. Old Europe and new frontiers* (Kampen: Kok, 1991), 21-29.

11 J De Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer in South Africa. Theology in dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 75.

12 J De Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer in South Africa*, 123-143.

13 N Koopman, How Do We Live Responsibly? Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Fulfillment of Dignity in democratic South Africa, in H Zimmerman et al. (eds.), *A Spoke in the Wheel: The Political in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2013), 415-431.

In this essay I discuss Bonhoeffer's significance for the future of Public Theology in South Africa by attempting to investigate the potential in Bonhoeffer's theology for building an ethos of life together. I investigate his Christological thinking, and especially so his Christological and ecclesiological anthropology, in an attempt to find directives for an ethos of life together.

(In celebrating John De Gruchy I also attempt to show how De Gruchy drinks from the wells of Bonhoeffer in developing his own constructive theological parameters for life together, as expressed especially in his famous book, *Reconciling. Justice.*)

3.1 Life together as Trinitarian gift

Bonhoeffer explains that Jesus Christ Himself is our peace, our unity and the foundation of our life together. "We have access to one another, joy in one another, community with one another through Christ alone."¹⁴ The life together of Christians is created by God in and through Jesus Christ. The community is not an ideal that we have to realize, but it is a reality created by God in which we may participate. It is not a psychic and emotional, but a spiritual reality, i.e. it is created by the Spirit.¹⁵ The communion of Christians is not a communion of immediacy that is dependent upon sinful human beings, but it is a communion that is always mediated by Christ.¹⁶ Full communion with the other is only found in Christ who binds us together.¹⁷ Where the most vulnerable is excluded from the communion of Christians, Christ Himself is excluded.¹⁸ We should guard against our own idealized views of the Christian community, which might be in conflict with these features of Christian community. "Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest, and sacrificial."¹⁹ Our participation in life together is based in the alien righteousness of Jesus Christ. Those who participate in life together had been chosen in Christ from eternity, accepted in time, and united for eternity.²⁰ Life together is a physical sign of the presence of the triune God. In the presence of other Christians we experience the

14 D Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (DBWE), Vol 5. Life Together. Prayer Book of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 47.

15 *DBWE*, Vol 5, 38-39.

16 *DBWE*, Vol 5, 41.

17 *DBWE*, Vol 5, 44.

18 *DBWE*, Vol 5, 45-46.

19 *DBWE*, Vol 5, 36

20 *DBWE*, Vol 5, 31-32.

presence of the Creator, the Reconciler and the Redeemer, of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.²¹

These Trinitarian foundations of Christian community and of the plausibility and possibility of life together is crucial in a country coming from an apartheid past, where the pseudo-gospel was proclaimed that the rich diversity of South Africans were by nature not reconcilable, and that even the person and work of Christ was not good enough to actualize the life together in unity, reconciliation and justice, of this diversity of people. It is crucial to be reminded of these theological convictions in a country where we struggle to actualize life together in the context of diversity, plurality and complexity. It is crucial to hear the gospel of reconciliation in Jesus Christ in a time where the disturbing voices are heard ever more frequently that the apartheid theologians might have been right all the time, that it is perhaps not possible to bring the diversity of South Africans to the party for life together in the quest for dignity, justice and freedom for all – and that it might after all be better to go separate ways. It even disturbs one if you hear these same voices in some European countries that were renowned for their high levels of tolerance, but who seem to loose those noble values now that they are becoming more diverse and pluralistic, especially pluralistic with regard to a variety of religious worldviews.

3.2 A Christological and ecclesiological anthropology for life together

Bonhoeffer's Christological and ecclesiological understanding of human beings provide directives for life together.

Bonhoeffer emphasises the communal character of humanity. His anthropology can indeed be described as a relational anthropology. Bonhoeffer scholar, Clifford Green, argues that the notion of sociality is central to not only Bonhoeffer's anthropology, but in fact to his whole theological thinking: '...we have to regard it (sociality – NK) as formative for his whole theology'.²²

Bonhoeffer outlines his anthropological thinking in various works. In his doctoral dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio*, he develops his relational anthropology by way of theological, sociological and philosophical analyses. Bonhoeffer²³ states

21 *DBWE*, Vol 5, 29.

22 C Green, Human sociality and Christian community, in J De Gruchy (ed.). *The Cambridge companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 113-133. See also C Green, *Bonhoeffer. A theology of sociality* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1999), where Green gives an extensive outline of this thesis of sociality.

23 D Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (DBWE), Vol.1, Sanctorum Communio. A theological study of the sociology of the church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 54-57.

that the individual exists only through others. The individual is not solitary. For the individual to exist, others must also exist. The other is not an unreachable, far-off being, but one that is met in ethical encounter. In these ethical encounters the identity of people is formed.

Bonhoeffer's anthropology is theologically, more specifically Christocentrically, based.

He firstly bases his relational anthropology in the image of God. On basis of Genesis 1:26 and also Genesis 5:1-2 he explains that image of God does not refer to an attribute that an individual possesses. It rather refers to the freedom of people. This freedom is not something that we possess, that we receive or that we can give to others. Freedom is a relationship. "Being free means 'being-free-for-the-other', because I am bound to the other. Only by being in relationship with the other am I free".²⁴ This freedom of humans for the other, according to Bonhoeffer,²⁵ corresponds with God's freedom for humanity in Jesus Christ. In fact, our analogy with our Creator is an analogy of relationship, i.e. *analogia relationis*. God's freedom is not a freedom from humans, but for humans. He gives Himself to us. He is with us and for us. He shows solidarity to us. Bonhoeffer states that community with God is not an exclusive individualistic possibility, but it includes community with other humans.²⁶

Bonhoeffer mainly provides a Christological foundation for his anthropology. The freedom of God for us is a freedom in love and more specifically it is a freedom that is manifested in the incarnation and resurrection of Christ.²⁷ The freedom for the other implies sacrifice. As Christ was willing to sacrifice, so do we sacrifice for the sake of the other, especially the subjugated other. This notion of sacrifice in Bonhoeffer's thinking is well articulated in his understanding of discipleship. Bonhoeffer emphasizes that following Christ implies understanding grace as costly grace. In his days the Protestant principles of faith alone, Scripture alone and glory to God alone have merely become religious formalism and legalism. He therefore rejects cheap grace and pleads for costly grace.

His Christological anthropology implies that we live with discipleship, which makes no room for cheap grace, but which knows that true grace is costly grace. Cheap

24 D Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (DBWE)*, Vol. 3, *Creation and Fall. A theological exposition of Genesis 1-3* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 62-63.

25 D Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (DBWE)*, Vol. 2, *Act and being. Transcendental philosophy and ontology in systematic theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 90.

26 D Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 139.

27 D Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 63-65.

grace is that grace which implies that I can be comforted and secured without having to follow Christ. Costly grace calls us to be disciples, to follow Christ.

Bonhoeffer does not only describe image of God in terms of Christ, but the development of his anthropology in terms of community, specifically in terms of the church, as well as in terms of sin, also has a Christocentric focus. Last-mentioned statement is verified in the following paragraphs.

It can be argued that he motivates his anthropology ecclesialogically. He argues that to be human is to be part of a community.²⁸ Communities range from small circles like marriages, families and friendships to larger circles like peoples, nations and the whole church. The whole humankind constitutes a community. By using Ferdinand Tonnies' distinction between *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* he states that these communities, unlike societies, are ends in themselves. They give meaning to our lives. Specifically in the church the true nature of humans is manifested. This ecclesial understanding of humanity, i.e. that in the community of Christians, in the church we discover who we are to be, has a Christocentric focus. Bonhoeffer describes this focus in the formulation that the church is Christ existing as community, *Christus als Gemeinde existierend*.²⁹ Revelation, Christ's person, exists in social form, in the church.

This Christological and ecclesiological understanding of humans and of human communities prevent any idea of exclusivism and discrimination in terms of categories like ethnicity, nationality, gender and socio-economic class.

Bonhoeffer's emphasis on communality does not imply that he does not make room for individuality. He articulates it like this.

We recognize, then, that only as we stand within the community can we be alone, and only those who are alone can live in the community. Both belong together. Only in the community do we learn to be properly alone (*allein*); and only in being alone (*Alleinsein*) do we learn to live properly in the community. It is not as if the one preceded the other; rather both begin at the same time, namely with the call of Jesus Christ.³⁰

It is also important to note that Bonhoeffer identifies sin as a crucial category in trying to understand what humanity entails.³¹ He describes sin in terms of his

28 D Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 80-96.

29 D Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 141.

30 D Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (DBWE)*, Vol. 5, 83.

31 D Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 107-121.

relational anthropology. Sin is the opposite of appropriate self-assertion. It entails a form of self-assertion that denies the other. Sin implies the distortion and end of community. Sin is witnessed in modernity's notion of the autonomy of the self that is actually pride, i.e. an endeavour to become like God. According to Bonhoeffer sin constitutes the distortion of both personal relationships and social and institutional relationships. Not only does sin imply distortion of micro communities like marriages, friendships and families, but also macro communities like ethnic groups, nations and communities in the spheres of the economy, military and academy. Sin also has an alienating and selfish nature.

Awareness and recognition of our sin is not the only word. Through our unity in Christ we become the *sanctorum communio*.³² Our redemption, according to Bonhoeffer, is the work of the Triune God. The *sanctorum communio* is established by God's action. These new relationships are established in Christ, not ideally, but in reality. The Holy Spirit actualizes the church that is not only potentially real in Christ, but that is completely established in Christ as a reality. Bonhoeffer views humans, therefore, not only in terms of sin, but more so in terms of salvation by the triune God.

Drawing upon Bonhoeffer John de Gruchy³³ emphasizes this point. He argues that life together, specifically life together in the space of the church, exists for the sake of restoring justice, reconciliation and peace. He refers to Bonhoeffer's idea that Christ is Christ for others, and that the church is church for others. The essence of life together in the church resides in the practice to embrace the other and the outsider.

4. DIRECTIVES FOR LIFE TOGETHER

This brief and cursory analysis of the Christological and ecclesial anthropology of relationality and communion of Bonhoeffer teaches some lessons for life together. We learn that life together can be contaminated and hindered by sin. We learn that the work of Jesus Christ is sufficient for life together. We learn that life together is a gift of the triune God. We learn about the indispensable role of the church, as the place where Christ is manifested today, in this quest for life together. We learn that life together is a life in search of the actualization of dignity and unity, reconciliation and justice, freedom and peace. One important skill for life together would, therefore, be to remember and drink from these Trinitarian, Christological, soteriological and ecclesiological wells for life together.

32 D Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 122-134.

33 J de Gruchy, *Reconciliation. Restoring justice* (London: SCM Press, 2002), 94.

Three more specific “skills” for life together, perhaps, also need to be emphasized. Bonhoeffer practiced an ethos of interpathy himself. This means he could think with, feel with and eventually identify with people from other cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, as well as with people with whom the groups that he belonged to, were in conflict. That ethos of interpathy impacted upon his theological reflections, and his theological reflections informed and enriched this ethos. He, one might say, embodied the classic Christian motto about the interdependence of the *lex orandi*, *lex credendi* and *lex (con-) vivendi*. This living with interpathy was witnessed to in his identification with black people in Harlem in New York, and with oppressed and persecuted Jewish people in Germany. For building life together we need theologians and pastors and church people who engage in practices of communal sympathy, empathy and interpathy.³⁴

Bonhoeffer’s thinking also equips us with the skill to deal faithfully with unavoidable compromises in the context of plurality and ambiguity, duality and paradoxality, tragedy and *aporia*. He opposes compromises. In the area of concrete decision-making the tension between the ultimate, the last things, and the penultimate, the things before the last things, surface. He rejects two responses to this tension, namely radicalism and compromise.

The radical solution sees only the ultimate and rejects the penultimate. For the radical the choice is simply between two categories, for Christ or against Christ. The penultimate is viewed in negative terms as sinful and in denial of Christ. This world is of no consequence. It should perish. No responsibility should be taken for it.³⁵

The compromiser overvalues the penultimate and the human responsibility for its completion. The ultimate is limited to the far side of the everyday. In a compromise the ultimate is reduced to an eternal justification of things as they are, and a metaphysical purification for the wrongful in things as they are. Bonhoeffer³⁶ even says compromises spring from a hatred of the ultimate, of justification by faith alone.

Radicalism hates time. Compromise hates eternity. Radicalism hates patience. Compromise hates decision. Radicalism hates wisdom. Compromise hates simplicity.

34 For a discussion of the notions of sympathy, empathy and interpathy, and for a portrayal of the late Steve de Gruchy as a theologian of interpathy, see my “A Theology of interpathy and dignity”, in JR Cochrane, E Bongmba & I Phiri (eds.), *Essays in honour of Steve de Gruchy. Activist & Theologian* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2013), 128-138.

35 D Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (DBWE)*, Vol. 6, *Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 145-151.

36 D Bonhoeffer, *DBWE*, vol.6, 158.

Radicalism hates measure. Compromise hates the immeasurable. Radicalism hates the real. Compromise hates the word.³⁷

I reckon churches need to make compromises sometimes. I find some support for this approach in, amongst others, the Christian realism approach of theologians like Reinhold Niebuhr, and even in the middle axiom approach of J.H. Oldham.³⁸ These compromises should, however reckon with the imaginative visionary possibilities of the ultimate, with eternity and the immeasurable, and they should not inhibit responsible decisions.

South Africa's peaceful political transition of almost two decades ago is attributed to a compromise between groups who lived in enmity before. This compromise is today questioned by a growing number of people. This compromise seems to entail that political power has shifted to the black majority, but that economic power and privilege has remained in the hands of mainly the white minority, and a small rich black elite. The market-economy that was opted for also does not deliver the so-called trickle-down effect that is supposed to bring economic wellbeing for all.

In this context we need to draw afresh upon Bonhoeffer and revisit the compromise that had been made more than two decades ago during our negotiation process, and the on-going compromises that we have to make to survive in a global context where global market processes exercise almost imperial power. The danger of our South African compromises is perhaps that we are taken captive by the idea that there is no alternative to current economic approaches and arrangements, which ask for as much as possible freedom, and for minimalistic and consequently inadequate state involvement.

Bonhoeffer's opposition to compromises does not mean that he is not open to choices and actions that are morally and theologically dubious. He acknowledges that we cannot keep ourselves pure from the contamination arising from responsible action in exclusive allegiance to God and in answering to the question and call of God.³⁹

Maybe there is room for morally acceptable compromises if it entails that we accept that we sometimes need to make a choice for less than the ideal in order to move closer to the ideal. John De Gruchy mentions that a compromise was indeed unavoidable in order to get the transition process going in South Africa. But we

37 D Bonhoeffer, *DBWE*, vol.6, 156.

38 For a discussion of compromise, middle axioms and Christian realism, see my "Churches and public policy discourses in South Africa", in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 136, March 2010, 41-56.

39 D Bonhoeffer, *DBWE*, Vol.8, 40.

need to go beyond that step. We need “a process in which there is a mutual attempt to heal and overcome enmities, build trust and relationships, and develop a shared commitment to the common good.”⁴⁰ Life together in complex contexts, and in contexts where people who were once alienated from each other, seek new ways of being together, often require morally acceptable compromises that do not reject the ultimate and absolutise the penultimate, that do not overestimate human capacities and underestimate the triune God.

5. CONCLUSION

Bonhoeffer has so much to offer for Public Theology in South Africa. This contribution merely attempted to demonstrate what potential his work might have for our quest for life together, life together in search of dignity, justice and freedom. For the sake of the future, for the sake of coming generations, we need to accept the triune gift of life together, and live as humans who are disciples of Christ, and as humans who, as individuals and communal beings, constitute his church in which He reveals Himself. The work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer might encourage and assist us to be agents of life together by being recipients of the triune gift of life together.

40 J de Gruchy, *Reconciliation*, 15.