

“To Know the Real One”
Christological Promeity in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

by

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Declaration

By submitting this thesis, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own, original work, that I am the authorship owner thereof (unless to the extent explicitly otherwise stated) and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

Signed: J. Patrick Dunn

Date: March 2016

Abstract

The theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer will be examined for its potential to address the problem of God and world, i.e. to provide a conception of the transcendent God's immanence in reality faithful to the revelation of God in Christ. Promeity is developed as the description of a pattern of thought in Bonhoeffer's work originating in his christological commitment to the priority of *Christus praesens*. The pattern of Bonhoeffer's usage forms a preliminary definition for promeity not only as a christological axiom, but as a theological method, as the repeated attempt to return our theological language to its origin in the revelation of God in Christ while taking seriously Christ's freedom to define his own being as given to reality. Promeity as method is refined by comparing and contrasting it with various other interpretive attempts since the 1960's to develop a Bonhoefferian approach to the God-world problem. The logic of promeity is further developed by considering its radical claim to subordinate all definitions to the priority of the Incarnate God-human. The manifestations of this claim in Bonhoeffer's 1933 Christology lectures and *Ethics* manuscript are explored. Finally, the logic of promeity will be further extended and supplemented with additional resources in Bonhoeffer's work to consider its implications for the problem of God and world in its ontological, epistemological, and ethical aspects.

Opsomming

Hierdie studie verken die potensiaal van Dietrich Bonhoeffer se teologie om die sogenaamde “God-wêreld probleem” aan te spreek. Laasgenoemde verwys na die uitdaging om die transendente God se immanensie in die werklikheid só te konseptualiseer dat dit getrou bly aan die openbaring van God in Christus. Met hierdie doel voor oë word die term, “promeïteit” (*promevity*, van die Latyn *pro me*, “vir my”) aangewend om ’n spesifieke denkpatroon in Bonhoeffer se Christologiese werk te beskryf. Die bron van hierdie patroon of logika lê gesetel in die prioriteit wat Bonhoeffer deurlopend aan *Christus praesens* skenk. ’n Werkende definisie van promeïteit begin in Bonhoeffer se gebruik daarvan vorm aanneem – nie net as ’n Christologiese grondstelling nie – maar as ’n teologiese metodologie; of anders gestel, as die voortdurende poging om ons teologiese taal te herlei na haar bron: die openbaring van God in Christus, terwyl Christus se vryheid om sy eie sinswyse as ’n gegewe te definieer deurlopend ernstig opgeneem word. Promeïteit word vêrder as metode verskerp deur dit met verskeie ander interpretatiewe pogings wat sedert die 1960’s tot stand gekom het te vergelyk en te kontrasteer, om sodoende ’n benadering tot die God-wêreld probleem te ontwikkel wat eiesoortig aan Bonhoeffer se teologie beskou kon word. Die logika van promeïteit word hiervandaan verder ontwikkel deur die radikale stelling, naamlik, dat alle definisies ondergeskik aan die vleesgeworde God-mens behoort te wees, van nader te beskou. Verskeie verskynsels van hierdie oortuiging word in Bonhoeffer se Christologie-lesings asook sy *Etiëk* manuskrip verken. Laastens, word die logika van promeïteit verder uitgebrei en toegevoeg deur addisionele bronne in Bonhoeffer se werk op die ontologiese, epistemologiese en etiese aspekte van die God-wêreld probleem in aanraking te bring.

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Abbreviations

Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works

DBWE 1	<i>Sanctorum Communio</i>
DBWE 2	<i>Act and Being</i>
DBWE 3	<i>Creation and Fall</i>
DBWE 4	<i>Discipleship</i>
DBWE 5	<i>Life Together</i>
DBWE 6	<i>Ethics</i>
DBWE 8	<i>Letters and Papers from Prison</i>
DBWE 9	<i>The Young Bonhoeffer: 1918-1927</i>
DBWE 10	<i>Barcelona, Berlin, New York: 1928-1931</i>
DBWE 11	<i>Ecumenical, Academic, and Pastoral Work: 1931-1932</i>
DBWE 12	<i>Berlin: 1933</i>
DBWE 13	<i>London: 1933-1935</i>
DBWE 14	<i>Theological Education at Finkenwalde: 1935-1937</i>
DBWE 15	<i>Theological Education Underground: 1937-1940</i>
DBWE 16	<i>Conspiracy and Imprisonment: 1940-1945</i>

Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke

DBW 8	<i>Widerstand und Ergebung</i>
DBW 9	<i>Jugend und Studium: 1918-1927</i>

. . .Destruction of all things on which
that reflection fed,
of vegetable and bird;
erosion of all rocks
from the holiest mountain
to the least stone;
evaporation of all seas,
the extinction of heavenly bodies—
until, at last, offense
was not to be found
in that silence without bound.

Only then was I fit for human society.

-Derek Mahon, “Matthew 5 v. 29-30”

Chapter 1

God, World, and Christological Promeity

1.1 Introduction

This thesis proposes to take the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer's christological claim—that God's self-disclosure in Christ immediately reveals the *pro-me* structure of Christ's being—as the starting point for an inquiry into God's relationship to the world. Promeity will thus be treated not only as a claim about Christ, but as a method for theological thought containing its own logical movement. Applied to the problem of God and world, the revelation of the Incarnate God-human as “the Real One”¹ forms the basis not only for definitions of ‘God’ and ‘world,’ but for all concepts. As such, the intention is to define promeity as a method by following the sequence of Bonhoeffer's own thought, but then to turn this same sequence towards other questions, specifically, the ontological, epistemological, and ethical aspects of the transcendent God's immanence in reality. This thesis will explore various other attempts to make sense of God and world following after Bonhoeffer, but only for the sake of more carefully illuminating the trail set by the promeity of revelation. The ultimate aim of this thesis is to extend a Bonhoefferian logic beyond the specific concerns of Bonhoeffer's own writing in order to consider the theological and philosophical implications of a commitment to christological promeity.

1.2 The God-world problem

In the early 21st century, metaphysics has been dead for so long that no one can now seem to recall where the body is buried. Philosophy is left with conjecture and rumours of rumours—perhaps metaphysics is properly mouldering in a forgotten grave, perhaps it never died, perhaps it goes now by another name or—just perhaps—it has stepped out of its tomb. Any one of these possibilities and its variants has implications for a philosophical conception of God, divinity, or spirit as remote, above, in, behind, or simply never there in relation to the world. For philosophy, metaphysics was relatively easy to discard when it was conceived of as a self-evident ontotheology—as an abstract inquiry into the essence of being and God—

¹ *DBWE* 6, 263.

precisely because it has turned out to be less self-evident than previously supposed.² The current ambiguous state of metaphysics is at least partly due, however, to the fact that the ramifications of its demise were not limited to philosophical theology. Anthropology also had to be rethought. The loss of metaphysics cost us the notion of “man as microcosm . . . as the world in miniature,” man as a participant in “every stratum of being in the cosmos,” in Wolfhart Pannenberg’s words.³ Without metaphysics, anthropology finds a clear self-conception also ambiguously absent, leaving room for something new. It is not yet clear whether this new conception should be desired or feared. With the reanimation of a half-dead metaphysics, philosophy may mitigate the worst of what is feared, but it cannot easily regain the confidence possessed by a pre-modern anthropology.

Theology would be wise neither to dismiss these philosophical developments, nor allow itself to be utterly shaken by them. Instead, they should be received gratefully, as an immensely useful reminder to re-examine the integrity of theology’s own seemingly self-evident foundations. Of course, upon reflection, theology may find itself far too indebted to an ossified metaphysical hierarchy. This is problematic—not to the extent that it is unfashionable—but to the extent that it turns out to be unfaithful to the God whom theology serves. Theology inevitably finds itself making use of words carrying certain presuppositions about God, humanity, the world, and their relation. Where should these notions come from, in a theological account, and how should they interrelate?

This essay sets out to examine the problem of God and world, which refers broadly to the attempt to develop a theologically faithful account of the Creator God’s relationship to creation. Put in one way, what we are seeking is an ontological account of the transcendent God’s immanence in reality which can fund an understanding of humanity’s own being in relation to God, one another, and the world. What we are asking about is divine alterity and divine familiarity, difference and analogy, distance and closeness, the insurmountable Kantian barrier between noumena and phenomena versus the Hegelian unfolding of the Absolute in history. Put another way, however, we are simply asking what it means to live faithfully as Christians worshipping God while living in the world, to allow our preaching and action to

² For an excellent work on the nature and critique of ontotheology from a philosophical perspective useful to theology, see Merold Westphal, *Overcoming Onto-Theology: Toward a Post-Modern Christian Faith* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001).

³ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *What is Man? Contemporary Anthropology in Contemporary Perspective*, trans. Duane A. Priebe (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1962), 2.

draw from an answer to the question, “Who is Christ actually for us today?”⁴ This thesis seeks a fundamental ontology which takes this question as seriously as possible.⁵

1.3 Bonhoeffer’s contribution

This question—who is Christ actually for us today?—famously belongs to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose theological contribution to the problem of God and world will be considered in this thesis. Bonhoeffer is somewhat uniquely positioned to contribute to this question, as individual strands of his thought can be woven into a wide variety of answers, as we shall see.

No attempt will be made in this essay to examine or even elucidate the theology of Karl Barth, although, inevitably, he will emerge as a point of comparison and contrast. This essay will explicitly take for granted what Bonhoeffer’s theology implicitly takes for granted—an immediate theological landscape permanently altered by Barth’s theology of crisis and, more broadly, altered by what can be termed dialectical theology. Fuller and better-considered accounts of Bonhoeffer’s relation to Barth have already been written.⁶ Still, it is unavoidable that Barth—as the only thinker whose “every word” Bonhoeffer claimed to have read⁷—will be frequently mentioned insofar as the comparison highlights Bonhoeffer’s commitments, while nonetheless remaining unexamined.

⁴ *DBWE* 8, 362.

⁵ There are various ways to understand what the descriptive ‘fundamental’ might entail for ontology. Bonhoeffer’s own approach to the nature of being bears some resemblance—as we shall see—to Heidegger’s question about the meaning of being in opposition to the traditional question of codifying being by interrogating that which is versus that which is not. (For more on this distinction, see Taylor Carman, *Heidegger’s Analytic: Interpretation, Discourse, and Authenticity in Being and Time*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.) This Heideggerian approach, however, cannot be separated in Bonhoeffer’s thought from the revelation of God in Christ. Therefore, a fundamental ontology in a Bonhoefferian sense is an account of what divine and human being means in light of the revelation that Christ firstly *is*.

⁶ The most thorough account of Bonhoeffer’s relationship to Barth is found in Andreas Pangritz, *Karl Barth in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, trans. Barbara Rumscheidt and Martin Rumscheidt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000). Other scholars who consider the personal and theological relationship between Barth and Bonhoeffer in detail include John Godsey, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (London: SCM Press, 1960) and Charles Marsh, *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer: The Promise of His Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

⁷ Bonhoeffer’s claim to have read every word of Barth’s was made to his friend Wilhelm Rott. See Wilhelm Rott, “Something Always Occurred to Him,” in *I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reminiscences of his Friends*, eds. Wolf-Dieter Zimmerman and Ronald G. Smith, trans. Kathe G. Smith (London: Collins, 1966), 133. Although unproven, it is interesting to note that, besides Barth, the only other candidate for such an honour—i.e. whose every word Bonhoeffer may have read—is most likely Friedrich Nietzsche. See Peter Frick, “Friedrich Nietzsche’s Aphorisms and Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Theology,” in *Bonhoeffer’s Intellectual Formation: Theology and Philosophy in His Thought*, ed. Peter Frick (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 176.

If Barth is arguably the greatest influence on Bonhoeffer, it is worth considering one of Bonhoeffer's earliest silent protests against him. Barth's *Die christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf* was published in 1927 as Bonhoeffer prepared for his doctoral examinations. While reading the third chapter on "Holy Scripture," Bonhoeffer noted that Barth characterised "oral and written human communication" as "only an accident of the word of God."⁸ Bonhoeffer could not restrain himself from immediately interjecting in his notes, "Does not make sense! The church exists only in this way."⁹

There—captured in an instinctive reaction—is the abiding tension between Bonhoeffer's admiration for dialectical theology's disruptive potential and his simultaneous desire to account for the praxis of Christian life in its messy particularity. A variety of questions are embedded in these twin impulses—each question caught up in both the very foundations of theology and the very ordinary reality of everyday Christians. How do we preserve the words our tradition speaks about God without giving them priority over God's own speech? How can we act decisively as Christians without pre-empting God's infinite freedom to act ahead of us in surprising ways? How does the hidden God enter our social and ethical existence truly and concretely or, inversely, how do we speak authoritatively about enculturated Christian existence without suddenly realising we have been praying to a golden calf all along? How can we point to God's revelation objectively without turning God into mere object?

As we shall see, Bonhoeffer does take up the problem of God and world in its philosophical and theological dimensions. Ultimately, however, his own approach to the question of the transcendent God's immanence in reality is rooted in questions that are more like these practical considerations. Given the transcendent priority of God's revelation in Christ, how do we nonetheless make sense of God's immanence in Christian life, in the fellowship of the church, in preaching, in the assemblies of synods and ecumenical councils, in Christian action and witness? Later, in *Act and Being*, Bonhoeffer articulates his initial hesitation about Barth's theology in terms of a confusion about "how the religious act of human beings and God's action in faith are to be thought . . . without suspending either the subjectivity of God or the fact that human beings were encountered in their existence."¹⁰ That God's radical otherness should nonetheless be concretely understood as abiding in our midst, bringing its

⁸ *DBWE* 9, 437.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *DBWE* 2, 93.

transformative weight to bear on empirical existence—this serves as a basic agenda for a Bonhoefferian approach to the problem of God and world. In Bonhoeffer’s work, a variety of ideas orbit these central questions. Inevitably, however, each of these secondary ideas inhabits a perspective from one side of the divide between God’s eternal subjectivity and God’s freely-given objectivity, and so each idea finds itself bound to a seeming antithesis: grace and law, act and being, freedom and responsibility, individual and community, kerygma and receptivity, resistance and formation, confession and *confessio*.

1.4 Recent developments in Bonhoeffer interpretation

Bonhoeffer’s final contribution to an understanding of transcendence and immanence is muddled for a variety of reasons—the breadth of his interests, his deep attentiveness to particular circumstances, and, of course, the sudden abbreviation of his untimely death. Furthermore, the best way to extend Bonhoeffer’s contribution remains muddled, in part because the theoretical background and underpinnings which gave rise to his insights remain disputed. Bonhoeffer’s theology is, depending on one’s perspective, fundamentally closest to Brunner¹¹, or closest to Barth¹² or to Bultmann¹³ or to a perfect middle between the two;¹⁴ he has been described as Hegelian¹⁵ and Heideggerian¹⁶ and “proto-postmodern.”¹⁷ All of these claims are, at least in some limited sense, true. Recent Bonhoeffer scholarship has shown an increasing interest since the 1990’s on the various theological and philosophical influences which contributed to Bonhoeffer’s intellectual formation. A man widely-read and perpetually curious, Bonhoeffer’s work bears the marks of seminal German thinkers—from Kant and Hegel to 19th century historiographers like Ernst Troeltsch and Wilhelm Dilthey—and even more disparate influences from Augustine of Hippo to Thomas à Kempis. Recent scholarship has only begun to unearth the full range of these influences on Bonhoeffer’s own

¹¹ Robin W Lovin, *Christian Faith and Public Choices: The Social Ethics of Barth, Brunner, and Bonhoeffer* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 133.

¹² Hans Pfeifer, “The Forms of Justification: On the Question of the Structure in Bonhoeffer’s Theology,” in *A Bonhoeffer Legacy: Essays in Understanding*, ed. A. J. Klassen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 17.

¹³ John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 25.

¹⁴ André Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian of Reality*, trans. R.M. Brown (London: SCM Press, 1971), 18.

¹⁵ Marsh, *Reclaiming Bonhoeffer*, 80.

¹⁶ This characterisation comes from Wilhelm Lütgert, who supervised Bonhoeffer’s *habilitationsschrift*. In a 1933 letter recommending Bonhoeffer for the pastorate, Lütgert commented in passing that—after writing his doctorate under the direction of Reinhold Seeberg—Bonhoeffer “developed his own independent thinking under Heidegger’s influence” (*DBWE 12*, 154).

¹⁷ Wayne Floyd, “Encounter with an Other: Immanuel Kant and G.W.F. Hegel in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” in *Bonhoeffer’s Intellectual Formation*, 116.

development.¹⁸ Furthermore, however, attentiveness to Bonhoeffer's intellectual formation has only highlighted the depth of Bonhoeffer's engagement with the philosophical problems of his day, and so recent scholarship has also taken an interest in comparing and contrasting Bonhoeffer's work with 20th century continental philosophers like Martin Heidegger, Theodor Adorno, and Emmanuel Levinas.¹⁹

Broadly, this thesis fits into the larger trend of interest in Bonhoeffer's intellectual formation and the dialogues—both internal and literal—he carried on with his various influences. There is great merit to placing Bonhoeffer in conversation with these thinkers, and Bonhoeffer's theological and philosophical astuteness is easily overlooked in the portrait of him as a martyr and political hero. Even in the throes of the *Kirchenkampf* he was attuned to the implications which battles fought in mud could effect in the theological stratosphere, and vice versa. This thesis shares an interest in the ideas made manifest in Bonhoeffer's action, rather than the circumstances which gave rise to his ideas. While bearing in mind the forces which formed Bonhoeffer's intellect, the greater emphasis here is on delineating the actual form Bonhoeffer's intellect took. Thus, in a sense, none of these affinities with other thinkers will be able to fully capture Bonhoeffer's contribution to any debate. In part, this is a credit to Bonhoeffer's uniqueness as a thinker, but also a credit to his reluctance to be defined as merely a thinker. His inclination was always towards concretion rather than abstraction, away from mental exercises and towards the intersection of theology and lived existence. Franklin Littell's early assessment of Bonhoeffer has only been reinforced by subsequent interpretations: "From the beginning he was stubbornly opposed to mere abstraction, to Christian principles, ideals, or proclamations separated from a community of witness, divorced from the concrete realities of the historical situation."²⁰ Bonhoeffer's desire—

¹⁸ Much of the scholarship on Bonhoeffer's theological and philosophical influences has been gathered together in the aforementioned volume: Peter Frick, ed., *Bonhoeffer's Intellectual Formation: Theology and Philosophy in His Thought* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008).

¹⁹ Recent volumes considering these intersections include: Brian Gregor and Jens Zimmerman, eds., *Bonhoeffer and Continental Thought: Cruciform Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009); Adam C. Clark and Michael Mawson, eds., *Ontology and Ethics: Bonhoeffer and Contemporary Scholarship* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2013); Ralf K. Wüstenberg and Jens Zimmerman, eds., *God Speaks to Us: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Biblical Hermeneutics* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2013); Jens Zimmerman and Brian Gregor, eds., *Being Human, Becoming Human: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Social Thought* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2010). Earlier individual essays on relevant philosophers include Robert R. Vosloo, "The Feeling of Time: Bonhoeffer on Temporality and the Fully Human Life," *Scriptura: International Journal of Bible, Religion, and Theology in Southern Africa* 99 (2008): 337-349; Elias Bongmba, "The Priority of the Other: Ethics in Africa, Perspectives from Bonhoeffer and Levinas," in *Bonhoeffer for a New Day: Theology in a Time of Transition*, ed. John W. de Gruchy (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 190-208; Wayne W. Floyd, "Style and the Critique of Metaphysics: The Letter as Form in Bonhoeffer and Adorno," in *Theology and the Practice of Responsibility: Essays on Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, eds. Wayne W. Floyd and Charles Marsh (Valley Forge: Trinity Press, 1994), 239-251.

²⁰ Franklin H. Littell, "The Question: Who is Christ for Us Today?" in *The Place of Bonhoeffer: Problems and Possibilities in His Thought*, ed. Martin E. Marty (New York: Association Press, 1962), 28.

expressed in his *Ethics* manuscript—for a theology that could supply “concrete speech to concrete human beings” could well serve as a manifesto writ small for his entire theological enterprise.²¹ As preface to this thesis, it is worth pausing for a moment to clarify what this bias towards concretion means and does not mean.

1.5 Concretion and idealism

Concretion and idealism emerge as contrasting terms across Bonhoeffer’s work, although he neither fully defines them nor explicitly places them at odds with one another. It is important to hazard some definition now, however, as he uses each in a significant and slightly unexpected way. In Bonhoeffer’s hands, these two labels emerge not as mere qualities of thought, nor as descriptions of philosophical schools, but as two entirely different habitus—concretion being the form of consciousness interrupted by revelation, idealism the form of consciousness left to its own devices.

We would misunderstand Bonhoeffer if we allowed concretion to merely signify some privilege accorded to the immediate experience of the human self. It should not be understood as an assumption that the appearance of the empirical world should be prior to our ethical or philosophical reflection. It is not a bias in favour of mere at-handedness, nor in favour of practice over theory, nor in favour of simplicity over complexity. Rather, concretion demands that every idea, no matter how theoretical, must become sufficiently sharp and precise that it can adequately address the reality of the world without subjecting it to some other burdensome delusion. Given the inescapable influence of Barth in Bonhoeffer’s theology, we should understand concretion forming at the point where existence becomes subject to revelation. In the words of Philip Ziegler, assessing Bonhoeffer’s conviction: “Christian theology attains to the concreteness demanded of it by acknowledging the prevenient dynamism of God’s self-giving in Christ.”²² Concretion in theology only gives primacy to our lived understanding of the world insofar as theology is for the sake of this world—the scalpel which wounds our understanding even as it heals this reality. As such, Bonhoeffer is not attempting to write a theology that sings a fully human song, but to write a theology that articulates not only the melody of God’s song, but the power of this melody to stir vibrations in lived existence. Concretion is the moment when revelation’s note induces a kind of

²¹ *DBWE* 6, 378.

²² Philip Ziegler, “Christ For Us Today: Promeity in the Christologies of Bonhoeffer and Kierkegaard,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 15.1 (2013): 28-29.

harmonic resonance in the world, and thus reveals a more fully-human tune than we could have composed ourselves.

Concretion become clearer when juxtaposed with another concern central in Bonhoeffer's work. The menacing adversary to his theology is idealism, which ought to be understood as related but categorically broader than the 19th century German philosophy of the same name. Certainly, philosophical Idealism introduced to Bonhoeffer an argument that subordinated reality to the unfolding and self-producing consciousness. This characterisation is most accurately applied to Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, whose dictum "the self posits itself" served for Bonhoeffer as the origin and, in a sense, the nadir of Idealist philosophy.²³ Bonhoeffer, however, repeatedly applies the 'idealist' label to Hegel and most post-Hegelian philosophy, which seems to gloss over the clear differences between Hegel and Fichte. Wayne Floyd has argued that this is a function of Bonhoeffer's limited reading of Hegel in the years of his early dissertations, with Bonhoeffer's appreciation of Hegel's nuance growing with time and familiarity.²⁴ This is likely true, and yet Bonhoeffer continued to classify Hegel as an idealist, even to the extent that he showed some modicum of respect for Hegelianism.²⁵

Rather than interpreting Bonhoeffer's critique of idealism as narrowly aimed at German Idealism, and then disputing Bonhoeffer's casual inclusion of Hegel in this school, the position taken here is that 'idealism' is a fairly expansive term in Bonhoeffer's vocabulary, equally encompassing not only Fichte and Hegel, but nominalism, cultural romanticism, political historicism, and even Comtean positivism. Philosophically, then, Bonhoeffer's usage seems ill-attuned to a number of important distinctions. But Bonhoeffer's antagonism towards 'idealism' is first theological. Idealism is not problematic because it is derived from some fallacious premise, but because it appears as the philosophical manifestation of Adam's sin. Christiane Tietz echoes Bonhoeffer when she writes that "sin starts with the wish to gain an autonomous knowledge about God."²⁶ Before the Fall, "Adam has life in the unity of unbroken obedience to the Creator—has life just because Adam lives from the center of life,

²³ *DBWE 1*, 42ff. For the original quote, see Johann G. Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, eds. and trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 97.

²⁴ Floyd, "Encounter with an Other," 112. In Floyd's understanding, it is Bonhoeffer's very opposition to idealism which eventually takes on a Hegelian form, thus mimicking Hegel's subversion of Fichte which Bonhoeffer never entirely appreciated.

²⁵ Consider, as example, Bonhoeffer's assertion as late as 1944 that "the concept of history as a continuum" remains "idealistic" because it "comes basically from Hegel, who saw the whole course of history as culminating in 'modernity,' that is, in his own philosophical system" (*DBWE 8*, 321).

²⁶ Christiane Tietz, "The Mysteries of Knowledge, Sin, and Shame," in *Mysteries in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Copenhagen Bonhoeffer Symposium*, eds. Kirsten B. Nielsen, Ulrik Nissen, and Christiane Tietz (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 28.

and is oriented toward the center of life, without placing Adam's own life at the center."²⁷

What the serpent offers, however, is

somehow to know about the depths of the true God beyond this given word of God—about the true God who is so badly misrepresented in this human word. He claims to know more about God than the human being who depends on God's word alone.²⁸

Here lies the origin of idealism, in Bonhoeffer's usage. It covers any attempt to usurp God as the rightful "center of life" by making the human logos into its own locus of autonomous understanding. At core, it is simply a way of describing human thought before it has been confronted by revelation, and thus human thought when it continues on its own course, trapped within the boundaries of its self-generated representations. These representations may be understood as internal creations or external perceptions, but so long as they orbit the human centre, they are illusions symptomatic of the *cor curvum in se*. After taking the serpent's bait, Bonhoeffer writes, "humankind stands in the middle . . . living from its own resources and no longer from the center."²⁹ The original limiting factor is the prohibition on eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, a restriction which is liberating and makes "even the threat of death" into "yet another gift of God."³⁰ Idealism is thought surpassing this prohibition and thus, in Hans Pfeifer's reading of Bonhoeffer, "idealism was the prime example of thought in sin."³¹ German Idealism is relevant as the paradigmatic case of this broader notion of idealism, but it is important to ground Bonhoeffer's response to the 19th-century philosophical school. Bonhoeffer disputes it not because it is first logically suspect, but because it is philosophy's manifestation of the forbidden fruit. Standing east of Eden, Bonhoeffer sees in Fichte's declaration—"That I exist for myself, is a fact"³²—not a liberated self-confidence, but the absolute despair arising from humanity under sin.

The specific temptations associated with idealism will appear frequently throughout this thesis, and it will benefit the reader to understand them not as references to philosophical axioms, but as the opposite of concretion, as the helpless confusion of existence apart from

²⁷ *DBWE* 3, 84.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 106.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 115.

³⁰ Niels 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*, 148.

³¹ Pfeifer, "Forms of Justification," 22.

³² Fichte, *Science of Knowledge*, 35.

revelation, as the fantastical result of humanity's attempt to generate perception, meaning, and knowledge for itself. It is integral to Bonhoeffer's theology that thought's self-proclaimed mastery of truth must be confronted by the being of revelation. All attempts to extrapolate universals from within the domain of consciousness are doomed to fail, as "God is something entirely different from so-called eternal truth. The latter is still merely our own self-conceived, desired understanding of eternity."³³

1.6 The problem of continuity in Bonhoeffer's work

Admittedly, in speaking of 'Bonhoeffer's theology,' we have already taken for granted that there is a system of thought easily captured by that label. Asking about the contribution of Bonhoeffer's theology to the problem of God and world means first asking what this label denotes. What can be said of Bonhoeffer's theology in sum, especially as it relates to immanence? Faced with the choice, is Bonhoeffer's instinct to preserve God's transcendent aseity, or to preserve the loving God's immanent givenness to reality? Superficially, on the one hand, Bonhoeffer's Barthian background seems to suggest the former. Equally superficially, on the other hand, Bonhoeffer's prison-era correspondence—which first brought him to a larger audience—suggests the latter.

The prison letters leave us with a series of provocative phrases built around the hunch that "God is being increasingly pushed out of a world come of age."³⁴ The instinct of the church might be to "mov[e] against this self-confidence,"³⁵ yet Bonhoeffer sees instead an opportunity to be yet more faithful to "the suffering God"³⁶ in embracing the demise of the metaphysical God-as-concept—the "stopgap for our embarrassments"³⁷—and instead finding God at humanity's "center, not in weakness but in strength,"³⁸ opening up the possibility of living as "'religionless-worldly' Christians."³⁹ These concepts—striking in their originality and freshness—are of course a significant part of what raises the issue of continuity in the first place. At first glance, they appear at odds with Bonhoeffer's earlier, orthodox, deeply ecclesial formulations. It is tempting, then, to believe that—ever since the publication of the prison letters—"the crucial question became the degree of continuity in Bonhoeffer's

³³ *DBWE 14*, 168.

³⁴ *DBWE 8*, 450.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 425.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 479.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 500.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 366.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 365.

thought.”⁴⁰ John Godsey speaks on behalf of many of Bonhoeffer’s readers when he writes: “The problem of Bonhoeffer’s theology lies in its development during the final period . . . Are the fragmentary insights of the third period continuous or discontinuous with the development of his theology up to that time?”⁴¹

In terms of content—in the bare usage of words and the concerns which informed them—it is simultaneously difficult to point to any stark rupture in Bonhoeffer’s thought and yet also hard to avoid the impression that his agenda shifted over time, perhaps quite significantly. On the one hand, those formulations which supposedly erupt in the prison letters are present in Bonhoeffer’s writing from the earliest days. For instance, Bonhoeffer critiques “religion” as a category as early as his congregational lectures in Barcelona late in 1928,⁴² sympathising with the ordinary secular humans he meets “far from the masquerade of the ‘Christian world,’”⁴³ finding them “more under grace than under wrath” while “it is precisely the Christian world that stands more under wrath than under grace.”⁴⁴ Words that serve very much as counterpart to the prison letters arise in his Barcelona lectures,

We are twentieth-century people and, like it or not, must come to terms with that fact; indeed, even more, we should have so much love for this contemporary world of ours, for our fellow human beings, that we should declare our solidarity with it in its crisis as well as in its hope.⁴⁵

Suffice to say that, while these are small examples, there is very little in Bonhoeffer’s prison letters which is not foreshadowed somewhere in his earlier writings. The general trajectory of

⁴⁰ Stephen R. Haynes, *The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon: Portraits of a Protestant Saint* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 21.

⁴¹ Godsey, *Theology of Bonhoeffer*, 260. The “third period” here refers to the common way of dividing Bonhoeffer’s intellectual life into three phases: the first incorporating his early studies and interest in philosophical theology, c. 1923-31; the second incorporating his involvement in the German church struggle as academic, pastor, and director at the Finkenwalde preachers’ seminary, c. 1932-1939; the third incorporating his decreased public writing, his increased involvement in the political struggle against Hitler’s regime, and his subsequent imprisonment, c. 1940-1945. This way of dividing Bonhoeffer’s life finds its origin in the structure of Eberhard Bethge’s authoritative biography. See Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian, Christian, Contemporary*, 4th ed., trans. Eric Mosbacher, et al. (London: Collins, 1985).

⁴² “To be religious means to recognize that one can never be religious; to have God means to realize that human beings can never have God” (*DBWE 10*, 336).

⁴³ *DBWE 10*, 126.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 325-6.

Bonhoeffer scholarship since the 1960's has moved in this direction, affirming "that there is remarkable continuity in Bonhoeffer's theology from beginning to end."⁴⁶

On the other hand, one cannot avoid Bonhoeffer's own estimation that his theology evolved through various phases during his lifetime. One self-acknowledged shift, for instance, occurs after his trip to Union Theological Seminary, his encounter with Jean Lasserre⁴⁷ and the "great liberation" of his intense focus on the Sermon on the Mount beginning in 1931.⁴⁸ The immediate practical effect of this shift was to turn Bonhoeffer away from academia, first towards the pastorate, then towards the dream of a "Protestant monastic community" which could ground a renewal of Christian witness in unsettled times.⁴⁹ This new understanding of the theological task led directly to his involvement with the preachers' seminary at Finkenwalde, his experiment with communal living and his fervent insistence on discipleship—interests which largely shaped his life and work between 1933 and 1939. Years later, while in prison—writing on July 21, 1944, the day after the failed attempt on Hitler's life sealed his fate—Bonhoeffer reflected again on Lasserre and the Finkenwalde experiment.⁵⁰ Looking backward through the lens of his participation in the conspiracy, Bonhoeffer seems to understand his early 1930's shift also giving way to another, more recent movement towards "the profound this-worldliness of Christianity."⁵¹ These phases are simultaneously continuous in Bonhoeffer's mind as alternating experiments in "learn[ing] to have faith" and yet discontinuous in their methods: the 1930's characterised by a quasi-monastic reformation of the *sanctorum communio's* inner life; the 1940's by an effort *extra muros* at "living fully in the midst of life's tasks."⁵² Consequently, the Bonhoeffer of 1944 says of his Finkenwalde-era devotional writing in *Cost of Discipleship*: "I clearly see the dangers of that book, though I still stand by it."⁵³

⁴⁶ John W. De Gruchy, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Witness to Jesus Christ* (London: Collins, 1988), 37. The movement in favour of Bonhoeffer's continuity has largely been motivated by an increasing sense that individual themes can be read across his entire corpus. For examples of those interests which transcend a particular phase of his life, see Part Two of John W. de Gruchy, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁴⁷ For more on Bonhoeffer's relationship to Jean Lasserre, see Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 112. As influential as Lasserre was during Bonhoeffer's period at Union, the seeds of Bonhoeffer's theological shift may have been equally planted during that same time by his friendship with Frank Fischer, which then exposed him to the life and worship of Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church. See Reggie L. Williams, *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance Theology and an Ethic of Resistance* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014).

⁴⁸ *DBWE* 14, 134.

⁴⁹ *DBWE* 12, 172.

⁵⁰ *DBWE* 8, 485.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 486.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

The ambiguity of Bonhoeffer's own prison-era reflection is precisely the interpreter's puzzle. Asking whether Bonhoeffer's thought is continuous or not only throws us further back to the question of what it means for any person's thought to be continuous over time. What manner or degree of change would constitute discontinuity? Added to this is the inherently fragmentary and occasional nature of Bonhoeffer's total corpus. Further complicating the issue is Bonhoeffer's own manner of addressing the circumstances at hand with urgent attentiveness, and thus with a kind of guileless shrug at his own previous writings. There is a grain of truth in the comments of one early German commentator when he says that,

The attempt to systematize Bonhoeffer's thought and then to work out its application is doomed from the start to failure, for his ideas were impulsive reactions to a peculiar set of circumstances. They are so impetuous and so conditioned by the situation in which Bonhoeffer found himself that one could almost speak of them as prophetic oracles.⁵⁴

An even further complication, which only reinforces Bonhoeffer's prophetic tenor, is a stylistic tendency in his theological writing towards immensely creative, coiled, counter-intuitive proclamations—each sentence a compelling epigram inside of which an entire argument could unfold, each paragraph bursting forward into a new line of thought like a chain of explosions, each clause at once easy to quote and easy to misconstrue, difficult to contextualise even when the context is at hand. One can see in his writing the habit of a man—as his friend Gerhard Jacobi described him—with “the most divergent thoughts.”⁵⁵ After Bonhoeffer's death, Jacobi remembered the provocative, almost experimental way Bonhoeffer “would express opinions that were both interesting and odd, then abandon them when it could be proved from biblical passages that the New Testament as a whole followed a different line of thought on this particular question.”⁵⁶ The map of Bonhoeffer's mental topography is not improved by his tendency to leap from one peak to the next. One sympathises with André Dumas' lament:

Bonhoeffer observes certain partial truths in reality, each of which he discusses in depth. And when he has done so, he virtually forgets them in his concern for what comes next. When he re-reads what he wrote earlier,

⁵⁴ From a 1961 lecture by Eckhard Minthe, as quoted in David H. Hopper, *A Dissent on Bonhoeffer* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 26.

⁵⁵ Gerhard Jacobi, “Drawn Towards Suffering,” in *I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 71.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 72.

his words sometimes seem to him to be truths with dangerous consequences, without however ceasing to have been, and in a real sense to remain, necessary truths.⁵⁷

Perhaps, then, we have no choice but to agree with Barth's later assessment: "very softly I venture to doubt whether theological systematics . . . was [Bonhoeffer's] real strength."⁵⁸ Or, perhaps it is the fragmentary nature of Bonhoeffer's thought which is his greatest consistency—the borderless mosaic of his ideas a counter-idealist subversion of systematic theology's totalising pretensions.⁵⁹ Either way, there is no end to the creative possibilities for unifying Bonhoeffer's theology thematically. "Everyone works the vein that enriches his own understanding of his issues;"⁶⁰ every interpreter will find herself trying to draw a preferred line-of-best-fit through the plot of Bonhoeffer's scattered interests.

With respect to the problem of God and world, however, this hasty intellectual sketch is used to measure the two bases which anyone trying to join the unfinished arch of Bonhoeffer's thought will have to build from. There is the Barthian impulse towards the freedom and priority of God's revelation in Christ. There is equally the expectation that the most whole-hearted Christian commitment to the world is a mere shadow of Christ's prior, deeper, perhaps even logically and ontologically necessary givenness to the world. Bonhoeffer's own approach to the problem of God and world is better understood by Dumas' helpful formulation: "What kind of relationship is possible between a theology of the Word and a theology of ontological presence?"⁶¹

1.7 The methodology and argument of this study

While acknowledging that continuity represents a serious and important question for Bonhoeffer scholarship, it is nonetheless a question I will treat with a certain "benign neglect" in this present thesis.⁶² The question of which theme best reveals the dialectical movement in

⁵⁷ Dumas, *Theologian of Reality*, 138.

⁵⁸ Barth expressed this sentiment in a 1967 letter to Eberhard Bethge after reading Bethge's biography of Bonhoeffer. See Karl Barth, *Letters, 1961-1968*, eds. Jürgen Fangmeier and Hinrich Stoevesandt, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 252.

⁵⁹ Floyd, "Encounter with an Other," 111.

⁶⁰ Dumas, *Theologian of Reality*, 15.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁶² This phrase originally belongs to Richard Rorty as a way of describing the attitude towards prior theories necessary for generating new answers to old questions. It was brought to my attention, however, by Charles Marsh as his description of Barth's opinion of the way theology should treat its philosophical counterparts. See Marsh, *Reclaiming Bonhoeffer*, 52.

Bonhoeffer's thought or which phase of his theological development ought to be considered his true and sacrosanct position will suffer the same neglect. Although there may well be broader hermeneutical implications for this thesis' treatment of Bonhoeffer, it is not primarily intended to be an argument in favour of a particular best way of reading his work. Furthermore, there will be very little consideration of Bonhoeffer's biography. Instead, the intention is to examine the heuristic patterns of his thought, the recurring ways of framing and resolving questions which Bonhoeffer applies to a variety of theological arguments. In this sense, the goal is to step slightly back from Bonhoeffer's circumstances, not ignoring his context, but not being overly concerned with reconciling disparate usages of particular words or particular content in his theology.

Instead, I will attempt to examine the theological method he uses to arrive at particular insights, focusing especially on the methods used to address the specific issues surrounding God's immanence in reality. In this way, I hope to take seriously the continuity of Bonhoeffer the man, whatever continuity may be lacking in his vocabulary over time. This thesis is thus an attempt to truly think alongside Bonhoeffer, to put on his theological habitus, and thus to consider what it would look like to imitate his manner of thinking with respect to the ongoing questions of God's relationship to reality. As a result, it is not Bonhoeffer's specific answers to the dilemmas of transcendence and immanence which are of greatest interest here—answers I believe remain, at any rate, incomplete at the time of his death—rather, the focus will be on the presumptions and inductive patterns he used to approach these questions. The hope is not to distort Bonhoeffer's theology, but to appropriate something of use for the present, though hopefully in a way he would approve. It may indeed turn out “that our apparent going beyond Bonhoeffer is simply catching up with him.”⁶³

Chief among the patterns of thought we will examine—as the title of this thesis suggests—is promeity. Immediately, this claim should seem slightly odd. The use of 'promeity' here is not primarily referring to a christological belief or doctrine, which might be most obviously the sense in which Bonhoeffer intends it in the 1933 Christology lectures. *Instead, this thesis will try to understand the implications of promeity as the description of a method, as the repeated attempt to let our own language be dashed to pieces by the revelation of God in Christ while taking seriously Christ's freedom to define for us the givenness of his own being to reality.*

⁶³ John W. de Gruchy, “With Bonhoeffer, Beyond Bonhoeffer: Transmitting Bonhoeffer's Legacy,” in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Theology Today: A Way between Fundamentalism and Secularism?*, eds. John W. de Gruchy, Stephen Plant, and Christiane Tietz (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2009), 404.

This thesis aims to develop this method and inquire as to the implications of applying it to the problem of God and world.⁶⁴

Furthermore, in the Bonhoefferian spirit of concretion, this thesis will attempt to develop Bonhoeffer's insights with greater clarity and precision using resources from within his own thought. To set the agenda, precision immediately requires us to recognise that the problem of God's relationship to the world takes on three aspects. First, it takes on an ontological aspect: How should God's own being be understood in relation to the being of the created world? Second, it takes on an epistemological aspect: If God bears some relation to the world, how can we know where and in what way God is disclosed, and what does this say about the possibilities and problems of all knowledge? Finally, the problem of God and world takes on an ethical aspect: How can we—facing very particular decisions—act according to the intention of this invisible God? Precision further requires acknowledging that these questions have implications for one another and yet are sufficiently distinct that certainty in one area does not necessarily guarantee certainty in the others. Bonhoeffer ruminated independently on all of these questions in some form and at some length. As we shall see, others have endeavoured to expand on these ruminations. This thesis is certainly not the first to take up a Bonhoefferian approach to the relation between God and world. But our central agenda here is to consider this variety of interpretations with the intention of refining what has been said and projecting forward into fresh possibilities for even further refinement.

Bearing this agenda in mind, this thesis will proceed as follows. Promeity will be described as a method entailing four stages. Chapter 2 will offer a preliminary definition of promeity by briefly considering the first three stages of the method. First, promeity requires beginning all over again with the priority of Christ, manifest in the present encounter with the Incarnate God-human. This encounter necessarily entails the next two steps: second, that Christ addresses us as transcendent 'who'-ness, and therefore as free person, exterior to the epistemological ego. Third, that precisely in addressing us, this personal 'who'-ness is present, revealing himself as ontologically given to be *pro-me*, and therefore as abiding presence. In this sense, steps two and three will turn out not to be sequential stages at all, but an inseparable pair of facts which ground all further reflection.

⁶⁴ Where necessary, I have tried to distinguish my usage of 'promeity' from Bonhoeffer's usage of 'promeity' by referring to 'promeity as method' as the centre of this thesis' inquiry.

Chapter 3 will consider three different strategies which have been taken up by Bonhoeffer's interpreters to extend a Bonhoefferian account of God's relationship to the world. All three, in their own way, acknowledge the precedence of promise and make their own attempt to reconcile the first three steps of our method. The first strategy, which will be called the *immanentist strategy*, encapsulates the efforts of some of Bonhoeffer's earliest interpreters. The second strategy, which will be developed only briefly, will be called the *dialectical strategy*, hinted at in the early days of Bonhoeffer reception as a preliminary response to the immanentist strategy. The third strategy represents the most thorough response to the immanentist strategy, and will be developed at great length, as it seems to offer the most promising Bonhoefferian resolution to the problem of God and world. This third strategy will be referred to as the *social-anthropological strategy*.

Ultimately, however, each of the three strategies explored in Chapter 3 will be unable to fully accommodate promise as method, as each, in their own way, fail to take seriously the preliminary stages described in Chapter 2. This will provoke a return to the logic of promise in Chapter 4, looking at the ways in which Bonhoeffer radically extends the method with a fourth step: redefining all theological and philosophical definitions in the *a priori* unity of the present, personal Christ-Reality. A closer reading of the 1933 Christology lectures and *Ethics* will explore the seriousness with which Bonhoeffer understands, in Charles Marsh's words, revelation as "its own donor, its own knowing, and its own being."⁶⁵

As conclusion, Chapter 5 will consider three additional patterns in Bonhoeffer's thought, distinct from the pattern of promise. These three additional patterns will be brought to bear in a probing attempt to refine answers to the ontological, epistemological, and ethical aspects of the God-world problem mentioned above. First, we will consider the Lutheran/Heideggerian pattern in Bonhoeffer's thought of using the language of justification to define human existence 'in-reference-to'. Second, we will consider the pattern of Bonhoeffer's reflections on eternity and futurity as a means of concretely resolving the epistemological aspect of the God-world problem. Third, we will consider the pattern of Bonhoeffer's mimetic understanding of ethical existence.

Bonhoeffer presents a paradox. It would be difficult to imagine someone whose work is more contextually rooted and simultaneously out of sync with the *Geist* of his own era. This paradox makes Bonhoeffer seem unusually attentive to the concerns of his day and yet

⁶⁵ Marsh, *Reclaiming Bonhoeffer*, 8.

startlingly modern. It presses those who read him to consider our own moment, and yet to do so from the same vantage provided by the radical conviction that Christ is at work in the present. The best service to reality is not to repeat Bonhoeffer, but to apply the movement of his thought to understand our world truly, to speak to it precisely, and to love it sacrificially exactly as we find ourselves at all points preceded in these efforts by Christ.

Chapter 2

Marking Promeity's Initial Steps

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will offer a brief preliminary definition of promeity by considering the first three steps of the encounter with revelation, as Bonhoeffer understands it. These first three steps contain a kind of logical sequence, and yet should be understood as one instantaneous and unified response to the Incarnation. In that respect, they are not truly stages at all, but an undifferentiated *actus directus* originating in the 'who' of revelation as the ground of all thought. Thus, while considered reflectively as a sequence, promeity is perhaps more accurately understood as an encounter with revelation bearing three immediate implications: that revelation can begin with nothing other than the Incarnation, that revelation must be acknowledged as person, and that, simultaneously, revelation must be acknowledged as abiding presence. A full understanding of promeity as an intellectual method—in the way this thesis understands it—will not be possible until we consider in Chapter 4 the application of promeity's consequences beyond Christology. The first three implications of promeity presented in this chapter, however, are sufficient for a basic understanding of how promeity arises in Bonhoeffer's Christology and how it begins to form the shape of a method. This will permit us, in Chapter 3, to compare and contrast promeity's commitments with various other interpretative strategies for understanding a Bonhoefferian approach to the problem of God and world.

2.2 Beginning again with revelation

The pattern of thought which provides a prolegomenon to Bonhoeffer's theology is his deeply Protestant willingness to repeatedly return *ad fontes*, to "continually begin again at the beginning in every point," in Barth's words.¹ It is a trait that overlaps with both the dialectical and the liberal qualities of his theology. It makes him open to the sudden emergence of a

¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/2, The Doctrine of the Word of God*, eds. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. George T. Thomson and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1980), 868.

radical antithesis, to see in the ‘not-God’ which follows after ‘God’ less a reversal than a fresh possibility. Yet it also gives him a liberal wariness of dialectics as an end unto itself, alert to the danger that dialectics becomes mere rhetorical play rather than a teleological excavation of the ground for all knowledge. Bonhoeffer owes enough to Barth that, for him as well, returning to the beginning means starting with God’s self-revelation, which necessarily means starting again with Christ. Yet, it’s also a measure of Bonhoeffer’s independence that—as we will see more clearly in Chapter 5—he refuses to allow even Barth, who so clearly articulated for Bonhoeffer the priority of revelation in his commentary on Romans, to categorically define the nature and scope of revelation.

Moreover, Bonhoeffer’s willingness to start over again with Christ means refusing even to allow his own prior theology to set the agenda. Instead, only Christ himself can be expected to define the content and form of revelation. One finds the young Bonhoeffer placing the priority of God’s revelation in Christ before his congregation, asking “whether in our own day Christ still stands in the place where decisions are made concerning the most profound matters we are facing,” chastising himself and the church for not properly attending to Christ, instead allowing that “Christ, instead of being the center of our lives, has become a thing of the church, or of the religiosity of a group of people.”² Yet, fifteen years later, among the last few surviving letters from prison, one finds the older Bonhoeffer revisiting the priority of Christ all over again:

I think everything depends on the words ‘in Him.’ Everything we may with some good reason expect or beg of God is to be found in Jesus Christ. What we imagine a God could and should do—the God of Jesus Christ has nothing to do with all that. We must immerse ourselves again and again, for a long time and quite calmly, in Jesus’s life, his sayings, actions, suffering, and dying in order to recognize what God promises and fulfils.³

The unusual, unrelenting christocentricity of Bonhoeffer’s theology has been noticed and remarked upon since the earliest days of his reception. Christology has been described as “the center of his concern and the *terminus a quo* of his thinking,”⁴ as the “cantus firmus”⁵ of his

² *DBWE* 10, 342.

³ *DBWE* 8, 515.

⁴ Godsey, *Theology of Bonhoeffer*, 17.

⁵ Christiane Tietz, “Bonhoeffer on the Ontological Structure of the Church,” in *Ontology and Ethics*, 32.

theology, as “the golden thread which ties his works from first to last.”⁶ Different interpreters—trying to make sense of the shifting foci of Bonhoeffer’s interests—have argued that Christology arises as a concern only in the middle period of his theology, following on his early theses in ecclesiology,⁷ or that Christology cedes ground to anthropology in his later thought.⁸ Others, while acknowledging the centrality of Christology in Bonhoeffer’s theology, argue that Bonhoeffer’s own understanding of the doctrine changes over time, perhaps in such a way to make his later views inherently incompatible with his earlier views.⁹ Nonetheless, virtually all paths in Bonhoeffer’s theology eventually wind their way back to an implicit doctrine of Christ. Every rough or polished facet of his theology is lit christologically, no matter how refracted or dispersed the colours appear in the final image. The first step to take in following Bonhoeffer’s theological method, then, is to begin again with Christ.

Any attempt to understand the contribution of “the most uncompromising christological theologian” to the question of God’s relationship to the world really begins as a question about his understanding of the Incarnation.¹⁰ If one of the abiding questions of Bonhoeffer’s theology is whether he “turns out to be a Hegelian by default,”¹¹ then that resemblance begins here. For Bonhoeffer, as for Hegel, it will be the Incarnation that provides the basis for any discussion of the interplay between divine and human, of God’s immanence in history. It is for this reason that Ernst Feil, for instance, writes that “Bonhoeffer’s understanding of the world can only be legitimately apprehended within the framework of his Christology.”¹²

2.3 The Incarnation as *concretissimum*

What does it mean, then, to start over again with the Incarnate God-human? The answer is not immediately self-evident. And, indeed, it ought not to be self-evident if we take seriously Bonhoeffer’s claim that starting with Christ means starting with a “who” rather than a “how.”¹³ The Christology lectures famously begin with this distinction. The ‘how’ questions are symptomatic of the voracious human consciousness consuming all that is other to it,

⁶ James W. Woelfel, *Bonhoeffer’s Theology: Classical and Revolutionary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970), 134.

⁷ John W. de Gruchy, “Editor’s Introduction to the English Edition,” in *DBWE* 3, 10.

⁸ Hopper, *Dissent*, 145.

⁹ John A. Phillips, *Christ for Us in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 28.

¹⁰ Eberhard Bethge, “The Challenge of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Life and Theology,” in *World Come of Age*, ed. Ronald G. Smith (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 75.

¹¹ Marsh, *Reclaiming Bonhoeffer*, 80.

¹² Ernst Feil, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, trans. Martin Rumscheidt (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), xxi.

¹³ *DBWE* 12, 303.

turning revelation into an object and thereby into something that can be “defined, recognized, and understood by means of its possibilities, by means of its ‘how,’ by the immanent logos of human beings.”¹⁴ Revelation is the “counter Logos,” negatively delimiting the bounds of the human logos while positively meeting the inquiring human self from the outside, as a transcendent “who,” as “Being.”¹⁵ It is in this positive sense that Christology finds its grounds—“only after the self-revelation of the other to whom one puts the question has already taken place.”¹⁶ To assume, then, that beginning with Christ leads self-evidently to a particular starting point is to already have in mind a method for discerning ‘how’ Christ is incarnate. But the ‘who’ question resists assimilation into the “human logos.”¹⁷ Indeed, the ‘who’ question cannot even be asked at all until “the self-revelation of the other to whom one puts the question has already taken place.”¹⁸ In the words of Russel Botman: “Christology is about the person, it is known to us by revelation as a personal-ethical and not as an epistemological concept.”¹⁹ Insofar as it can be described as a method, promeity thus begins as the anti-method, the manner of attempting to free the ‘who’ of revelation from any prior method at all.

What can be said—attempting to clarify what it means to start with Christ—is that, for Bonhoeffer, the force of the Incarnation lies in its having happened in Jesus of Nazareth. “Everything,” he says in the Christology lectures, “depends on Jesus’s existence in history.”²⁰ This fact precedes all reflection, even the reflection of Christian theology. “It is wrong to derive the God’s becoming human from an idea,” even from a seeming fundament of Christian theology “such as the idea of the Trinity.”²¹ This specificity means that the actual content—not merely the form—of God becoming human is Bonhoeffer’s starting point. The Incarnation, for Bonhoeffer, does not establish in theory a particular notion of divine immanence, such that God becomes human “out of necessity” as “the realization of some human principle.”²² One cannot extract from it a dogmatic statement locating God in respect to creation, history, society, or the individual. The Incarnation is the bodily existence of Christ, the God-human, who establishes the definition not only of ‘incarnate’ as the description of one person, but of ‘divine’ and ‘human’ as the description of two natures. All

¹⁴ *DBWE 12*, 302.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 303.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 302.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 303.

¹⁹ H. Russel Botman, “Discipleship as Transformation? Towards a Theology of Transformation” (PhD diss., University of the Western Cape, 1993), 83.

²⁰ *DBWE 12*, 336.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 355.

²² *Ibid.*, 338.

other starting points are caught up in the boundless pretensions of the epistemological subject, the all-knowing, all-consuming I which is the epitome of the *cor curvum in se*.²³ Counter to this danger, the “once-ness” of God’s appearing in history “is always anew a challenge” to idealism, preventing Christology from being subsumed into a “system of ideas.”²⁴ Bonhoeffer’s attentiveness to the *concretissimum* of the Incarnation also explains why—for such a major feature of his theology—he rarely engages in the actual dogmatic work of Christology in the vein of creedal or doctrinal debates. Across his works, in place of extended reflection on the categories of traditional Christology, one finds instead a great deal of reflection on Christ. This is fully appropriate to his anti-method. Even orthodox Christology—as a hermeneutical mode of reflecting on the ‘how’ of the Incarnation even for the sake of the ‘who’—perpetually risks over-reach, attempting to sneak “behind” the Incarnation to concepts it assumes to be more fundamental.²⁵ Even doctors of the church, it seems, must find themselves confronted over and over again by the ‘who’ of revelation.

To start with Christ means to start with the ‘once-ness’ of the historical Christ. And yet, for Bonhoeffer, it is significant that this ‘once-ness’ is both historical and yet not temporally limited. To start with the ‘who’ of revelation is not to start with a past historical figure, but to be confronted from outside oneself by a present person, by the “counter Logos”²⁶ which “rises up to meet its murderers and rushes at them again, appearing as the Resurrected One.”²⁷ In this sense, ‘once-ness’ is an expression of logical priority rather than historical completion. This is Bonhoeffer’s starkest contrast with his own liberal heritage, that beginning with Christ does not forever place theology in the position of trailing after the historical Christ, refining again and again its understanding of a particular Galilean’s bodily life. The Incarnation happened once, and yet the history of this one event does not end with the Crucifixion or even the Ascension—we live today alongside the “ongoing presence of the synoptic Jesus Christ.”²⁸ Hence, Bonhoeffer returns constantly to the language of *Christus praesens*. The church-community is most frequently—but not uniquely—designated as the location of Christ’s presence today, not as “ideal but rather reality.”²⁹ Bonhoeffer insists in *Sanctorum Communio*: “The church is the presence of Christ in the same way that Christ is the presence

²³ *DBWE 10*, 399.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 457.

²⁵ *DBWE 12*, 313.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 302.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 305.

²⁸ *DBWE 4*, 206.

²⁹ *DBWE 11*, 328.

of God.”³⁰ This is not an affirmation in virtue of any quality of the empirical church, Bonhoeffer clarifies in *Act and Being*, but only because “God reveals the divine self in the church as person.”³¹ Later, in the early days of the church struggle, Bonhoeffer asks and answers a pressing question: “By which authority does the church speak? Because the church is *Christus praesens*.”³² Lecturing to his students at Finkenwalde on the kingdom of God, he tells them that since the Ascension, “now [Christ] is the Almighty and All-Present One who invites us into his kingdom.”³³ Bonhoeffer’s limited affirmation of Hegelianism to Theodor Litt in 1939 is focused on this point, that it represents the “greatest secularization precisely of this Christian truth,” namely, “the doctrine of Christ’s real presence.”³⁴ In section 3.5.1 we will revisit the variety of language Bonhoeffer uses in connection to the presence of Christ and attempt to clarify it with respect to ecclesiology. For now, however, the significant matter is to simply note the persistence of Bonhoeffer’s assumption that the counter Logos is both entirely synonymous with the Christ of history and nonetheless present between Ascension and *parousia*.

Even this assumption, however, does not precede the Incarnation. The language of *Christus praesens* is valuable in the context of a preliminary definition of promise, not because it provides background to Bonhoeffer’s christological method, but because it is one of the most direct and frequent manifestations of Christ’s ontological promise as Bonhoeffer understands it in the 1933 Christology lectures. *Christus praesens* is the most obvious implication of having been addressed by the ‘who’ of revelation in our present existence: “It is the Christ of history, the whole Christ, whom we ask and who answers.”³⁵ But to understand how promise grounds even the language of *Christus praesens*, we must turn to Bonhoeffer’s most explicit writings on dogmatic Christology.

2.4 Promise as the disclosure of Christ’s being

“As the Crucified and Risen One,” Bonhoeffer says in the 1933 Christology lectures, “Jesus is at the same time the Christ who is present now.”³⁶ This statement, so significant in its application to the rest of Bonhoeffer’s theology, is presented in the 1933 lectures as but one

³⁰ *DBWE 1*, 140-1.

³¹ *DBWE 2*, 112.

³² *DBWE 11*, 370.

³³ *DBWE 14*, 634.

³⁴ *DBWE 15*, 112.

³⁵ *DBWE 12*, 310.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

implication of an even deeper commitment. Intrinsic to revelation itself—to the very act of God’s self-giving to humanity in the Incarnation—is the assurance that Christ is *pro nobis*, the one for us. To truly start with Christ—to truly permit the Incarnation the freedom of its own self-definition—means seeing here more than an expression of God’s good will. Christ is for me—*pro me*—a statement which in other hands might be mere sentimentality. For Bonhoeffer, however, it is “fundamentally ontological,” something which “properly characterizes Christ’s very person.”³⁷

That Christ’s promise should function as an ontological category is not immediately intuitive—it would be natural to presume that existence precedes action—but it is the necessary implication of locating the definition of Christ’s ontology in the priority of revelation, i.e. the Incarnation. It is in this sense that Bonhoeffer will speak of Christ’s “*pro-me* structure.”³⁸ Promise has become not merely a description of Christ’s being, but the foundational substance of Christ’s being from which all other qualities will arise. “The presence of Christ as the *pro-me*,” Bonhoeffer writes, “is his real being-for-me.”³⁹ To speak of Christ is immediately to speak of Christ *pro-me*. As such, promise is a measure not only of Christ’s intention to be for us, but of his givenness to us. Because of his ontological promise, Bonhoeffer says, “I can never think of Jesus Christ in his being-in-himself, but only in his relatedness to me.”⁴⁰ Promise takes seriously that Christ’s very nature is to be vicariously representative of humanity, “he takes their place and stands in their stead before God.”⁴¹ For this to be truly definitive of Christ’s being, it cannot function as a merely soteriological description, but as a real description of Christ’s intrinsic relatedness to the existence of “new humanity.”⁴²

As an argument untimely born, the assumptions resulting from promise appear in the early dissertations, even though Bonhoeffer does not speak explicitly about promise until the 1933 lectures. Indeed, it is because Bonhoeffer intuitively grasps Christ’s *pro-me* structure that it even makes sense to ask—as his habilitation thesis does—about “the problem of act and being within the concept of revelation.”⁴³ Bonhoeffer writes in *Act and Being*:

³⁷ Ziegler, “Christ For Us Today,” 29.

³⁸ *DBWE* 12, 315.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 314.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 315.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *DBWE* 2, 79.

In revelation it is not so much a question of the freedom of God—eternally remaining within the divine self, aseity—on the other side of revelation, as it is of God’s coming out of God’s own self in revelation . . . It is a question of the freedom of God, which finds its strongest evidence precisely in that God freely chose to be bound to historical human beings and to be placed at the disposal of human beings. God is free not from human beings but for them. . . God is present, that is, not in eternal nonobjectivity but—to put it quite provisionally for now—‘haveable’, graspable in the Word within the church.⁴⁴

From the perspective of revelation, ontological promiseity is precisely what holds out the possibility of God’s being “‘haveable’, graspable” rather than residing behind the neo-Kantian barrier in “eternal nonobjectivity.”⁴⁵ It is thus promiseity which makes it possible to hope for a reconciling “synthesis” between God’s revelation in act and God’s revelation in being.⁴⁶ As much as the radical actualism of Barth’s early work influenced Bonhoeffer’s christocentrism and his interest in Christ’s unfettered action in history, it is at the same time the continuity of Christ the “historical figure” and Christ “the Risen One”⁴⁷ guaranteed by promiseity which makes Bonhoeffer uneasy with Barth’s “supratemporal”⁴⁸ relation of eternity to history. Permitting the Incarnate God-human to define Christ’s being means acknowledging the ontological promiseity of Christ, and promiseity means allowing Christ to determine the nature of his own givenness to history, guaranteeing that “the Christ who is present today is the historical Christ.”⁴⁹

There is far more to say about the implications of promiseity in Bonhoeffer’s Christology, which we will revisit at greater length in Chapter 4. The relevant point for the moment, however, is that a preliminary definition of promiseity as a method means taking seriously the priority of Christ’s presence. This presence retains freedom, including the freedom to define his own being. Promiseity thus acknowledges that Christ’s self-definition describes an ontological givenness to the world. This givenness is ontological not only in the sense that it describes Christ’s very being, but in the sense that it entails some measure of connection

⁴⁴ *DBWE* 2, 90-1.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁴⁷ *DBWE* 12, 331.

⁴⁸ *DBWE* 2, 84.

⁴⁹ *DBWE* 12, 328.

between Christ—whose “nature” it is “to be in the center”—and reality.⁵⁰ Furthermore, it suggests that this immanence—as a description of Christ’s own being—has risen from mere contingency into necessity.

2.5 Language of immanence in Bonhoeffer’s theology

This latter emphasis—Christ as the centre of reality—is most often associated with Bonhoeffer’s later theology. Certainly, the givenness of Christ to reality is a theme which recurs often in Bonhoeffer’s writing during the 1940’s. “I’d like to speak of God not at the boundaries but in the center,” he writes from prison, “not in weakness but in strength, thus not in death and guilt but in human life and human goodness. . . . God’s ‘beyond’ is not what is beyond our cognition! . . . God is the beyond in the midst of our lives.”⁵¹ In Robert Vosloo’s words, “Bonhoeffer has no interest in supporting the edifice of theism that separates vague and abstract notions of God’s attributes from Christological embodiment.”⁵² As Bonhoeffer wrestles with the full extent to which beyond-ness has entered our midst, he goes so far as to suggest a level of epistemological access to Christ through the empirical world, that God could be “grasped by us not in unsolved questions but in those that have been solved.”⁵³ This, he suggests, “is true of the relation between God and scientific knowledge, but it is also true of the universal human questions about death, suffering, and guilt.”⁵⁴

At its depths, promise suggests that Christ is so fully given to reality that to follow Christ means that “we must really live in that godless world and not try to cover up or transfigure its godlessness somehow with religion.”⁵⁵ Reality does not require Christ to strike from the outside. He is ontologically committed to it, and so its eschatological end is a movement back to itself, an acknowledgement that, “The spirit and goal of Christ’s dominion is not to Christianize the worldly order or turn it into a church but to liberate it for genuine worldliness.”⁵⁶

This kind of language, however, does not emerge *ex nihilo* in Bonhoeffer’s later work. The seriousness with which Bonhoeffer explores the implications of Christ’s promise in the

⁵⁰ *DBWE* 12, 324.

⁵¹ *DBWE* 8, 366-7.

⁵² Robert Vosloo, “Bonhoeffer, Transcendence, and the ‘Turn to Religion,’” in *Culture and Transcendence: A Typology of Transcendence*, eds. Wessel Stoker and W. L. van der Merwe (Leuven: Peeters, 2012), 52.

⁵³ *DBWE* 8, 406.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 480.

⁵⁶ *DBWE* 16, 549.

prison letters is equally matched by his early lectures, even prior to 1933. In his early vocation as a lecturer, Bonhoeffer's students record him elaborating on revelation's inherent worldliness. It is precisely because of Christ's promise that "the gospel and the commandment must engage the concrete contemporary situation. Otherwise it would not be the word of Christ *praesens*."⁵⁷ Earlier, Bonhoeffer affirms that "the proclamation [of revelation] must be a 'present' one,"⁵⁸ and this commitment manifests to his students as an admonition that those who preach must understand "the fact that the proclamation of the commandment becomes concrete through the deepest realization of reality."⁵⁹ Thus, kerygma "must include the respective situation within the form of the commandment, so that the commandment is relevant to the real situation."⁶⁰ Revelation which is not present to reality cannot find its origin in the Christ who is *pro me*.

The superficial difference between these early and later formulations of Christ's givenness to reality is the primacy of ecclesiology in Bonhoeffer's early work, with the church as "the center of the world."⁶¹ Yet, with respect to the broader problem of God and world, this difference is not as significant as it might seem. Even when Bonhoeffer appears to possess the highest degree of confidence that "Christ is present in his church today," he nonetheless wrestles with the relationship of this affirmation to the plain and broken existence of the empirical church.⁶² "[The] worldliness of the church," he immediately admits, "is real, not only illusion."⁶³ Just as Bonhoeffer's later theology struggles to more precisely locate Christ ontologically with respect to the world, so his early theology attempts the same task with respect to the church. In this respect, they are parallel manifestations of the same basic question. As an example, the language of *Kirche* and *Gemeinde* serves this struggle in *Sanctorum Communio*, with Bonhoeffer qualifying that it is only the "*Kirche* in which the word is preached and the sacraments celebrated" which God has made "to be God's own *Gemeinde*" and, properly speaking, it is the *Gemeinde* rather than the *Kirche* which "is the body of Christ, Christ's presence in the world."⁶⁴ Asserting that the church is Christ's presence in the world does not spare us from further reflection on the extent of Christ's givenness to reality as we perceive it.

⁵⁷ *DBWE 11*, 370, emphasis in original.

⁵⁸ *DBWE 2*, 110.

⁵⁹ *DBWE 11*, 371.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 360.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 281.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 328.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *DBWE 1*, 280.

The point here is twofold. First, Bonhoeffer's early theology shares with his late theology an ongoing struggle to speak of Christ's presence objectively in the world. Whether the struggle is locating *Christus praesens* in relation to the empirical church or to the empirical world makes little difference ontologically. Both the empirical church and the empirical world find themselves—to borrow Lessing's phrase—on the same side of the 'ugly broad ditch' separating historical contingency from the thing-in-itself. Christ's presence to the *Kirche* requires no less accommodation of immanence than his presence to all of reality.

The second point is that, even for Bonhoeffer's early theology, the implication of Christ's *pro-me* structure presses revelation into a necessary rather than contingent relationship to reality. Thus, from another angle, church and world once again find themselves in the same camp, but this time as equal recipients of Christ's intention to be present to them, unified in God's "embrac[ing] the whole reality of the world in this narrow space [of the church] and reveal[ing] its ultimate foundations."⁶⁵ So Bonhoeffer in 1932 can exclaim in his lecture series on "The Nature of the Church" that "God penetrates the entire everyday reality and must be felt in everything!"⁶⁶ just as Bonhoeffer in his *Ethics* manuscript can assert that, "In Jesus Christ, the Real One, all reality is taken on and summed up; Christ is its origin, essence, and goal."⁶⁷ Bonhoeffer in 1932 can urge the church to a "renunciation of purity, a return to solidarity with the sinful world!"⁶⁸ while Bonhoeffer in 1940 can advise that "what is Christian cannot be had otherwise than in what is worldly, the 'supernatural' only in the natural, the holy only in the profane, the revelational only in the rational."⁶⁹ The nature of Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology will be revisited at greater length in Chapters 3 and 4. Suffice to say that, as far as a Bonhoefferian approach to God and world is concerned, the empirical *Kirche* is not sufficiently distinct from the rest of reality that it can easily provide a location for *Christus praesens* without quickly raising wider implications.

As a preliminary definition, then, promeity as a strategy for speaking about God and world requires beginning all over again with a foundation which appears at first to be a twofold conviction: 1) that God is transcendentally free not only in self-disclosure, but in defining the very terms and meaning of what self-disclosure entails and 2) that God's revelation in the Incarnation of Christ discloses an abiding immanence that binds God necessarily rather than

⁶⁵ *DBWE* 6, 63.

⁶⁶ *DBWE* 11, 281.

⁶⁷ *DBWE* 6, 263.

⁶⁸ *DBWE* 11, 329.

⁶⁹ *DBWE* 6, 59.

contingently to reality, not subordinating God to a pre-existing necessity, but simply acknowledging that God has disclosed God's being in no other way. Furthermore, however, promiseity requires seeing these two statements not as paradoxical facts, indeed, not even as separate facts at all, but as one face of God's revelation in Christ—the presence who is person and the person who is present. To the extent that these statements might be regarded as contradictory, promiseity requires a re-evaluation of the very terms we might be inclined to see in opposition to one another, a point which will be further elaborated in Chapter 4.

This brief preliminary sketch of promiseity leaves us with numerous unanswered questions and a portrait of God's relationship to the world which is far too vague to be of any real benefit. It does not nearly do justice to the full complexity of Bonhoeffer's writings, yet it does sketch the basic shape of the problem. Such is Bonhoeffer's elusiveness that the wider landscape of his thought is captured in a mural no less impressionistic than this miniature. We are left, confusingly, with a God who is independently free enough to reveal God's self as ontologically bound. We are left, ambiguously, with a reality granted some necessary but still imprecise relationship to the divine. What guideposts does Bonhoeffer's legacy leave us for thinking about the relationship of the transcendent God to reality? How can we also answer "the question as to how revelation becomes concrete?"⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Joachim von Soosten, "Editor's Afterword to the German Edition," in *DBWE I*, 302.

Chapter 3

Strategies for a Bonhoefferian Approach to the God-World Problem

3.1 Introduction

Most of Bonhoeffer's interpreters have recognised to some degree the significance of christological promise in Bonhoeffer's work, or at least acknowledged that the christocentric impulses explicitly expressed in promise are manifest in his thinking at every stage. In attempting to extend this christological insight into a more fundamental conception of God's being in relation to the world, the history of Bonhoeffer's reception is understood in two phases. The first wave of Bonhoeffer's interpreters in the English-speaking world—from the 1960's through the early 1980's—found themselves provoked by the formulations of the prison letters, their subsequent interpretations weighted by the need to articulate Christ's immanence in “a world come of age.” The second wave, beginning in the 1980's, turned its attention more fully upon the scope of Bonhoeffer's works, drawing especially from his early theses to establish a more comprehensive interpretive framework.

Classifying Bonhoeffer's interpreters so simply does not capture the full nuance and variety of their work. The purpose for this thesis, however, is to consider the way these two broad movements can fund various strategies for extending a Bonhoefferian understanding of transcendence and immanence. Three strategies will be discussed in this chapter. The *immanentist strategy* and the *dialectical strategy* will be considered as contrasting possibilities arising from the first wave of interpretation. The *social-anthropological strategy* arises as a possibility arising from the second wave of interpretation. All three will be explored, with the bulk of the chapter considering the strong potential of the social-anthropological strategy at great length, incorporating a close reading of the early dissertations to refine a set of Bonhoefferian concerns with respect to transcendence and immanence.

None of these three strategies is dominated by a single thinker. The purpose of considering them as strategies is to draw from the best instincts of a number of different interpreters to consider the overall shape of a fundamental ontology that might draw from related works. In this respect, the intention is not to reject these thinkers, indeed, the intention is not even to articulate the full range of their interests. Nor is the intention, *per se*, to prove or disprove the merits of the strategies drawn from their work. Instead, the focus remains on developing *promeity* as method, contrasted against the slightly diverging interests of each strategy. It is important to note, then, that the very central standard for evaluation in this chapter is not whether each strategy is right or wrong—either with respect to theology or with respect to interpreting Bonhoeffer—but to consider how each stands with or against the sketch of *promeity* offered in Chapter 2. Considering the lines of questioning—however slender—left unaddressed by each strategy, or their contradictions—however subtle—with respect to the commitments of Christ *pro-me* will serve to set the angle at which *promeity* diverges. This trajectory informs the path down which *promeity* leads the God-world problem, a path further advanced in Chapters 4 and 5 in the spirit of greater concretion.

3.2 The immanentist strategy

3.2.1 Bonhoeffer and the death of God

The English-speaking theological world of the 1960's quickly embraced *promeity*'s implications for God's givenness to reality, recognising that Bonhoeffer had described the necessary union between "the two-fold reality of God and of the world, which is given to us in the unity of Christ."¹ What Bonhoeffer truly offered, in this reading, was a "theology of secular culture," a theology in which the union of Christ and reality was total, a theology which immersed the transcendent claims of traditional Christian belief fully into the world's secularity.² So total was the collapse of *Christus praesens* into the empirical world that any notion of God *a se* vanished entirely at the distant horizon. This appropriation of Bonhoeffer by so-called 'death-of-God' theology—most famously in John Robinson's seminal *Honest to God*³—has been called a "creative misuse"⁴ and a "distortion"⁵ of Bonhoeffer's legacy.

¹ Ronald G. Smith, "Introduction," in *World Come of Age*, 20.

² William Hamilton, "'The Letters are a particular Thorn,'" in *World Come of Age*, 159.

³ Robinson, *Honest to God*.

⁴ de Gruchy, *Witness to Jesus Christ*, 36.

⁵ Paul L Lehmann, "Faith and Worldliness in Bonhoeffer's Thought," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 23.1 (1967): 32.

Robinson's appropriation of Bonhoeffer, while roundly criticised, did capture the post-religious and post-metaphysical sensibility of the prison letters. By summoning Bonhoeffer as a tacit endorser of his project, however, Robinson excluded two important elements of Bonhoeffer's thought. The first is that Bonhoeffer, even in the prison letters, was never fully post-mythological nor post-supernatural in Robinson's sense,⁶ as evidenced by Bonhoeffer's prison-era critique of Bultmann's de-mythologising project as going "not far enough."⁷ To take an empirical experience of the world as *a priori*—and, presumptively, to therefore be most 'honest' about the world—is not actually to benefit the world. For Bonhoeffer, what is beyond is still necessary precisely because "what is beyond this world is meant, in the gospel, to be there *for* this world."⁸ This leads to the second, broader point that Robinson's appropriation glosses over: Bonhoeffer's understanding of empiricism as functionally idealist, as not merely an honest assessment of 'what is', but as an ideologically-bounded projection of the self-centred human ego. For Bonhoeffer, we are most faithful to the world when our understanding is transcended, when we do not merely start with what seems most obvious to us. It is in this sense in which Bultmann has not gone far enough, in not fully admitting that the critical faculties we use against mythology generate their own internal mythos which must be transcended. We are faithful to the world when we see it not as it is, but as it ought to be and therefore as it will be in light of revelation.

While it is true that Robinson and his cohort were guilty of an excessively narrow reading of the prison letters, it should be acknowledged that even later interpreters—remaining open to the complexity of Bonhoeffer's thought—nonetheless believed that promise implied a fundamental correlation between empirical existence and the content of revelation. This first strategy for extending Bonhoeffer's understanding of God and world is what will be referred to as the *immanentist strategy*. The immanentist strategy is distinct from the death-of-God interpretation in its attempt to be more strictly faithful to Bonhoeffer. The two bear a relation in emphasising Bonhoeffer's late post-metaphysical inclinations, but the immanentist readings more accurately retain some of the counter-idealist concerns which Robinson tended to ignore. In the immanentist reading, Christ's ontological promise is a declaration of the essential divinity located in empirical reality, even while averring that divinity may not be fully exhausted in empirical reality. Further reflection on the nature of *Christus praesens* must begin with the assumption that Christ *pro-me* has already revealed the underlying unity of his

⁶ For more on this emphasis in Robinson's thought, see Robinson, *Honest to God*, 29-35.

⁷ *DBWE* 8, 372.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 373, emphasis in original.

being with the being of empirical existence. Christ, in this reading, is the skeletal support beneath the world's flesh and blood. Broadly, this is a strategy associated with some of the later theologians who could still be considered among the first generation of Bonhoeffer's interpreters.

3.2.2 Dumas, Rasmussen, and the epistemological dilemma

André Dumas is exemplary of this view in all respects, both as representative of its potential and as a model for a thorough and reasoned engagement with Bonhoeffer's major themes. To be sure, few interpreters have more carefully drawn readers' attention to Bonhoeffer's recurring usage of the word *Gestalt* and its variants. Keenly aware of the primacy of the Incarnation, Dumas understands Bonhoeffer's Christology as "the fulfilment of the 'great promise' to which Barth refers . . . that God and reality are united in Jesus Christ through the incarnation."⁹ Reading Bonhoeffer with the structuralism of Claude Levi-Strauss in mind,¹⁰ Dumas understands "structuring (*Gestaltung*)" to be the "formal principle" of this union.¹¹ Thus, the logic of ontological promise locates Christ as "the center and the responsible structure of reality . . . neither beyond the world nor in the depths of being, but at the center of the empirical world."¹² The Incarnation as Christ's ontological self-definition becomes an ontological definition of all reality—this is merely "the application of the Chalcedonian formula about the person of Christ to reality."¹³ Thus, God's givenness to reality in christological promise is such that as soon as one speaks of the world, one is speaking of "a world already inhabited by the incarnate Christ."¹⁴ Therefore, "Bonhoeffer's central theme—Christ present—thus stands for the presence of God in reality and the presence of reality to God."¹⁵ One follows after the logic of promise by sharing in Bonhoeffer's "one concern: to hold onto the world around him, since God is found in the concrete."¹⁶

In the formal principle of divine immanence, Dumas sees Hegel as the philosophical Virgil to Bonhoeffer's theological Dante. This is not to confuse Bonhoeffer with Hegel, but to recognise that Bonhoeffer's antipathy to Kantian transcendentalism necessarily leads him

⁹ Dumas, *Theologian of Reality*, 83.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 221.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹² *Ibid.*, 30-31. There is the potential for confusion in this sentence. Dumas's structural account of promise does locate Christ in the "depths of being" ontologically-speaking. His reference here is that Christ will not be located in the "depths of being" existentially-speaking, echoing Bonhoeffer's prison-era critique of "psychotherapy or existential philosophy" which limits Christianity to private inwardness. "God," Bonhoeffer insists, "should not be smuggled in somewhere, in the very last, secret place that is left" (*DBWE* 8, 457).

¹³ Dumas, *Theologian of Reality*, 16.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 215.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

down the epistemological path after Hegel.¹⁷ This, for Dumas, is the fundamental contrast between Bonhoeffer and Barth. Barth “started from the transcendentalism of Kant and Kierkegaard” while Bonhoeffer’s “ontology of the everyday world” which he “drew from Hegel” served “as the formal model for his Christology, ecclesiology, and ethics.”¹⁸ It is thus difficult to reconcile Barth and Bonhoeffer, in Dumas’ reading, because Bonhoeffer’s main target is precisely “the metaphysical dualism . . . the temptation to divide existence into two worlds” which underlies “a theology stressing act.”¹⁹

Starting with the Incarnation means asserting the structural unity of Christ and reality. This resolves the ontological aspect of the God-world divide, in Dumas’ mind. But with regard to the epistemological aspect, it also immediately throws us on to Hegel’s branch of epistemology’s family tree. Thus, for Dumas, “the difficult task of finding ways to recognize God’s presence in the midst of the world” is not fully resolved, yet a strategy which follows after Bonhoeffer will take a Hegelian trajectory.²⁰ Dumas reads *Ethics* as a cycle of various attempts to resolve this “difficult task,” to recognise divinity in “the doctrine of the four mandates, the structures of the responsible life, and the relationship between the ultimate and the penultimate.”²¹ A mandate, for example, “is a structure in the ‘middle’ of earthly reality that summons the human will and shows it right here and now what the creator demands of his creatures.”²² Christ as the structure of empirical reality gives us hope that there are places in which the divine is permanently accessible, “in the structure of freedom,” for instance, in which God “can be truly seen.”²³

At this degree of immanence which begins to take epistemic form in the world, Dumas seems ambivalent about Bonhoeffer’s legacy. As much as he praises Bonhoeffer as a fresh theological voice, he remains wary of “a Lutheran emphasis in Bonhoeffer (similar to that found in Hegel) that troubles us here, in which the incarnation is in danger of ceasing to be the word of revelation to reality and of being transformed into the ongoing structure of reality.”²⁴ There is good reason, in Dumas’ view, to appropriate Bonhoeffer’s structural immanentism as a counterweight to Barth’s transcendental actualism. But even as he presses

¹⁷ Dumas, *Theologian of Reality*, 31. The depth of Bonhoeffer’s opposition to Kant—which Dumas assumes—does not stand up well to close scrutiny, as will be evidenced by the work of Wayne Floyd. See section 3.4.5, below.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 112.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 156.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 149.

²³ *Ibid.*, 148.

²⁴ Dumas, *Theologian of Reality*, 234-5.

Bonhoeffer into a structuralist mould, Dumas clearly recognises the inherent problem of using structuralist language. It can quickly lead to a death-of-God-type collapse of Christ into reality which Dumas wants to resist. In this sense, Dumas should be understood as advocating an interpretation of Bonhoeffer which he finds useful and yet with which he is not prepared to fully agree.

Dumas' caution gestures toward the inherent problem with the immanentist strategy. Locating Christ's being as a static quiddity undergirding the existence of empirical reality is an appealing way to resolve the ontological aspect of the God-world dilemma. But it immediately becomes difficult to place limits on the implication that Christ is epistemologically available via the empirical world. How can we extricate the post-metaphysical insight from the empiricist's web?

One tempting possibility is to shift the grounds of the question from epistemology to ethics. In ethical terms, establishing "some human path to God"²⁵ is not immediately troubling for some of Bonhoeffer's interpreters. Indeed, it may be the firstfruits of pomeity. Larry Rasmussen serves as an example of someone who embraces this implication. "Because the coherence of God's reality and the world's reality in Christ is ontological," he writes, "the form of Christ in the world, the real, is ultimately open to apprehension and acknowledgement by every man."²⁶ This givenness can ground a Bonhoefferian contextual ethic—"contextual because the manifestations of Christ's form in the world are always revealed and apprehended within the context of the concrete, ever-changing dynamic of the historical process."²⁷ In this reading, Bonhoeffer's contribution to the God-world debate is to make the reality of Christ fully haveable even if not yet fully "realized."²⁸ The realisation of this unity is equally as possible through attentiveness to empirical reality as through attentiveness to revelation, opening the way for the non-Christian as well as the Christian to imitate God. Each is able to locate divine existence through their respective methodologies because these methodologies are essentially "identical because of Bonhoeffer's identification of the world-in-Christ with reality."²⁹ Thus, even the ethical tack of the immanentist strategy cannot avoid positivist epistemological commitments. The epistemological distance between the human subject and the hidden God is resolved on the side of empirical reality, not intending to be at the expense

²⁵ *DBWE 10*, 354.

²⁶ Larry L. Rasmussen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976), 23.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

of God but precisely in faithfulness to the God whose being is fully aligned with the world's being. Christ in his promise has so fully given himself over to reality that "the ontological-cosmological reality of the world is already endowed with a universal Christological character."³⁰

3.2.3 *A response to the immanentist strategy*

There is a great deal of merit to the immanentist approach, especially insofar as it insists that the Incarnation reveals the essential unity of the real. The union of God and world in the space of reality can no longer permit us to divide what is real against itself. It will not permit a "metaphysical dualism" which limits our understanding of Christ to a mere "grasping" which thereby "minimize[s] the being of presence."³¹ In this respect, the immanentist strategy foreshadows some of the concerns which will be taken up in a fuller definition of promise in Chapter 4.

However, in another respect, the immanentist strategy has already run afoul of promise as we have defined it thus far. The immanentist strategy agrees that the Incarnation is the starting point for thinking about God and world. Moreover, it reminds us that the Incarnation should be free to define the scope and nature of its own givenness to reality. But with respect to ontological promise in Bonhoeffer's understanding, the immanentist strategy forgets that the Incarnation is precisely that which contemporaneously confronts us in the 'who' of revelation, in the appearance of the counter Logos. Indeed, it is impossible to draw any conclusions about the Incarnation—impossible even to ask the question "Who are you?"—until after the force of the Incarnation's self-disclosure has sprung upon "horrified, dethroned human reason."³²

The immanentist strategy—quite unintentionally, in some cases; perhaps even attempting to be faithful to the 'who' of revelation—quickly graduates from 'who'-ness to 'that'-ness, from person to principle. By speaking about "christocratic structure"³³ as the quiescent pillars supporting empirical reality, the immanentist strategy betrays itself. When it speaks of incarnation, it means a notion conceptually derived from something other than the Incarnate God-human. This is the sense in which Dumas's anxiety about losing "the word of revelation to reality" is appropriate—not because structural language might violate some notion of Christian orthodoxy, but because it claims to start with revelation as transcendent act, then

³⁰ Rasmussen, *Reality and Resistance*, 23.

³¹ Dumas, *Theologian of Reality*, 113.

³² *DBWE 12*, 302.

³³ Rasmussen, *Reality and Resistance*, 16.

immediately loses the possibility of a revealer acting unexpectedly and thus freely, transcendently. This is the limit of Dumas' interpretation of Bonhoeffer: that as much as he sees Bonhoeffer as a critic of transcendentalism, he cannot retain the sense in which transcendentalism perpetually intrigues Bonhoeffer—as a barrier resistant to the assimilating impulses of the epistemological subject. The human subject who takes the empirical world as 'path from man to God' lacks a confrontation with anything outside of her epistemological purview, and therefore with anything outside of herself at all.

The irony of the immanentist strategy is that, precisely in trying to be faithful to the *concretissimum* of empirical reality, it loses the particular for the abstract. This is a critique which Bonhoeffer himself makes in his 1935 lecture, "Contemporization of the New Testament." It is not the one perpetually beginning again with *Christus praesens* who risks losing track of real life, but rather the one who begins with a particular reading of empirical reality. The contextualist wants to attend to the present, but actually subjects reality to a universalising hermeneutic, a set of "eternal standards" to which only the "interpreters themselves have access a priori."³⁴ It is the one who begins with the facticity of empirical reality who begins not with "history," "the accidental," or the "individual," but with the "eternal," the "necessary," and "universal meaning."³⁵ This "eternal element" is a symptom of the epistemological subject run rampant.³⁶ Instead, the interpreter truly faithful to reality must move "seemingly away from the present in order to move away from the false present to the authentic present."³⁷ This authentic present is found where we attend to the reality of presence, to "the presupposition that the present can be found only where Christ and the Holy Spirit speak."³⁸

The logic of this argument is entirely applicable to the immanentist strategy. The one who—wanting to affirm the autonomous value of empirical existence—speaks of the congruence between the being of Christ and the being of the world ultimately loses reality to the abstraction of a universal principle. The immanentist looks behind the particularity of the abiding Incarnation to a prior norm, and thus misses the actuality of the present.

³⁴ *DBWE 14*, 420.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 419.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 420.

³⁷ *DBWE 12*, 418.

³⁸ *DBWE 14*, 419.

Whether this critique would truly bother those who pursue this strategy is beside the point. For the purposes of refining a definition of promise as method, however, the immanentist strategy usefully reminds us that beginning with the Incarnation means taking seriously the person of revelation as fully given over to presence *pro-me*. At the same time, however, the immanentist strategy forgets that this presence *pro-me* remains person. Promise as method means beginning over again with the revelation of God in Christ. Being confronted anew by the ‘who’ of the Incarnation necessarily allows for the possibility of this ‘who’ confronting us again and again.

3.3 The dialectical strategy

The second strategy gleaned from Bonhoeffer’s insights about God and world will be referred to as the *dialectical strategy*. This possibility can only be treated briefly, as it has only ever been hinted at, but never fully developed.

Against the early appropriation of Bonhoeffer by death-of-God theologies, some of the theologians who knew him personally—Eberhard Bethge, Paul Lehmann, Helmut Gollwitzer—suggested that a dialectical approach to Bonhoeffer’s theology would bear more fruit. The immediate context for this claim was the concern that death-of-God theologians had condensed Bonhoeffer’s theological contribution to a few of the most provocative assertions from the prison letters. These phrases had been then “expropriate[ed] . . . for purposes alien to the intimate connection between Bonhoeffer’s own faith and spirit as a Christian and his theological concerns.”³⁹ In this way, Bonhoeffer had been treated as “the apostle of Christian atheism.”⁴⁰ A dialectical approach offered to reclaim not only the full breadth of his work, but also the more ecumenical faith with which he lived. Doing so exposed Bonhoeffer’s work to the possibility of self-contradiction, but also more accurately rendered the character of the man as these theologians knew him. Bethge, for instance, cautioned against reading the phases of Bonhoeffer’s development such that “a later one neatly replaces an earlier one.”⁴¹ Better to let these disparate thoughts remain suspended in tension than to force an artificial synthesis upon them. “To accept the witness of one period and to stay with it,” Bethge writes, “might become the means to escape from the challenge and make the living Christ a mere object of our religious desires.”⁴²

³⁹ Lehmann, “Faith and Worldliness,” 32.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁴¹ Bethge, “The Challenge of Bonhoeffer,” 24.

⁴² *Ibid.*

The language of dialectic at first suggested a hermeneutic for interpreting Bonhoeffer's work as a whole. Over time, however, it was applied not only to the form but also to the content of his theology. Dialectic could be used to describe "the relation between faith and worldliness in Bonhoeffer's thought" as well as "the relation between God and the world come of age, between Christology and religionless Christianity, between church and humanity, theology and ethics, forgiveness and love, hiddenness and openness in the life of discipleship."⁴³ Bonhoeffer's Christology could itself be understood dialectically, moving between a traditional notion of transcendence and Christ's "being and revelatory presence to the world."⁴⁴ This is true, in the words of James Woelfel, not only as a final summation of Bonhoeffer's theology, but at all points, such that "both poles in Bonhoeffer's christological dialectic remain in fruitful relationship and tension throughout all his writings."⁴⁵

While acknowledging that there might be merit to reading the whole movement of Bonhoeffer's work dialectically, the more relevant question for the moment is how this might be understood as a strategy for addressing the problem of God and world. What might it mean to think of God's revelation in act in dialectical tension with God's revelation in being? What might it mean for reality itself to result from the dialectical movement of God to world and back?

Two possibilities emerge. The first essentially returns Bonhoeffer's thought captive to the Hegelian stable. This is the possibility hinted at, for instance, by Hanfried Müller while interpreting Bonhoeffer's understanding of reality's indebtedness to the "visibility and tangibility" of the transcendent God's "historical power."⁴⁶ Müller believes that, in Bonhoeffer's work, this definition of reality's dependence on the free actualism of Christ "is very carefully broken through dialectically and is finally dissolved by reality itself, with its demand for realism and relevance."⁴⁷ This first possibility, then, is really just a Hegelian kind of immanentism, with the movement between God *a se* and the world inexorably resolving itself in history, inescapably conditioned by the priority of reason, however much this synthesis might represent "a higher level of subjective fulfillment."⁴⁸

⁴³ Lehmann, "Faith and Worldliness," 36.

⁴⁴ Woelfel, *Classical and Revolutionary*, 281.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 282.

⁴⁶ Hanfried Müller, "The Problem of the Reception and Interpretation of Dietrich Bonhoeffer," in *World Come of Age*, 192.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Floyd, "Encounter with an Other," 99.

The second possibility is to leave God and world as two realities held together in a permanent suspension without resolution. This possibility instinctively gestures at the desire to preserve the sociality of God and world in their true otherness to one another. In this kind of reading,

Bonhoeffer's wrestling with Kant's Ding an sich, and the constant threat of the Hegelian dialectic to close off all interplay between self and anything genuinely 'other,' needs to be heard as a sort of proto-postmodern plea for a philosophy and theology of radical hospitality.⁴⁹

This notion, derived from a human-to-human ethic, can be applied even to the God-world dilemma to the extent that Bonhoeffer is understood as intending to preserve the autonomous integrity of Creator and created. Reality in this case would emerge as the very dialogical "betweenness"⁵⁰ resulting from the interplay of divinity and the empirical world. Interpreted in this way, Bonhoeffer's understanding of this taut interstice would call to mind Rowan Williams' formulation: "the exchanges of conversation and negotiation *are* the essence of what is going on."⁵¹ Perhaps Bonhoeffer joins Theodor Adorno and Franz Rosenzweig as early adopters of "metaphors of multi-voiced, contrapuntal strands being woven together into harmonic diversity in order to try to subvert the pretensions of the system."⁵² The dialectical strategy suggests that it would be a mistake to seek anything more precise in Bonhoeffer's legacy. Rather, we should permit him to serve as an early dialogical contextualist, not seeking to resolve the location of *Christus praesens*, but happy that it should serve as a kind of endless, indefinable goad, the nearly invisible needle pricking our comfortable sense of certitude and closed-ness.

In the end, this may be correct. Perhaps this is the best we can ever say of Bonhoeffer's theological contribution. It is difficult, however, to argue that this was Bonhoeffer's intention. Merely as a matter of temperament, the dialectical suspension of otherness does not seem to suit Bonhoeffer's longing for concretion. That aspect of Bonhoeffer's thought which allowed him to famously declare, "Whoever knowingly separates himself from the Confessing Church

⁴⁹ Floyd, "Encounter with an Other," 116-7.

⁵⁰ This formulation arises in the context of Wayne Floyd's work, although his discussion of 'betweenness' is distinct from the way it is being used here in the context of the dialectical strategy. See Wayne W. Floyd, *Theology and the Dialectics of Otherness: On Reading Bonhoeffer and Adorno* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988), 134.

⁵¹ Rowan D. Williams, "Interiority and Epiphany: A Reading in New Testament Ethics," *Modern Theology* 13.1 (1997), 30, emphasis in original.

⁵² Floyd, "Encounter with an Other," 114.

in Germany separates himself from salvation,”⁵³ does not—either ethically or ontologically—sit comfortably with an interpretation of his thought as an unresolved dialogical dance. However much it may benefit our hermeneutic to read the corpus of Bonhoeffer’s theology dialectically, it is hard to argue that the final content of his theology would have looked dialogically postmodern had he survived the war.

Fidelity to Bonhoeffer is one issue. The more important problem with respect to promise, however, is pointed out by Hans Schmidt. The dialectical strategy places us close to a quasi-Kierkegaardian “absolute paradox” which requires us to deny what is most significantly given in the notion of promise, namely, that “the reality of God in Jesus Christ actually *entered into* the reality of this world.”⁵⁴ The result, for our discussion of promise, is that the dialectical strategy does not permit the hypostatic union of the Incarnation to be true union, to be a single ‘who’ preceding the question.

The dialectical strategy is loosely sketched here in part because it is never more than loosely sketched among any of Bonhoeffer’s interpreters. For the purposes of refining a definition of promise as method, however, the dialectical strategy is useful as contrast. Neither dialectical possibility can fit within promise as method, each for the same reason: promise begins with the essential unity of God and world in the Incarnation as a prerequisite to further reflection. To speak in terms of dialectic, then—no matter how assured the final unity—is actually to speak of the unfolding dynamic of two realities when the unity of one is already given. This unity of God and world in the Incarnation is not the foretaste of a movement to be accomplished in the eschaton, but foregrounds the very possibility of interrogating the God-world problem. It is the ‘who’ of revelation confronting us, and this encounter cannot be acknowledged without simultaneously acknowledging it as *pro me*.

Therefore, to summarise thus far: promise as the description of a method requires beginning again with Christ, not as idea but in the particular once-ness of the Incarnate *Christus praesens*. Beginning with this ‘who’ of revelation means acknowledging *a priori* the essential unity of the act of personhood and the being of presence. Whatever further implications which might be explored for the question of God and world, the Incarnate God-human must be both prior to and fully self-descriptive of God’s immanence in history, without substituting a principle of immanence for the concrete particularity of this revelation.

⁵³ *DBWE 14*, 675.

⁵⁴ Hans Schmidt, “The Cross of Reality?” in *World Come of Age*, 230.

Both the immanentist and dialectical strategies take Bonhoeffer's concerns seriously, and attempt to draw from them an approach to speaking of *Christus praesens* more precisely, befitting their origin in the mind of a man "stubbornly opposed to mere abstraction."⁵⁵ As we shall see, however, they both remain trapped within the typology of transcendence and idealism which Bonhoeffer sketched in *Act and Being*. Neither fundamentally offers a way of thinking about God and world which Bonhoeffer had not already anticipated and rejected. What is required then, is a third strategy which returns to Bonhoeffer's early dissertations, engaging his claim to have found there a way of unifying theologies of act with theologies of being. It is to this third strategy we will turn next.

3.4 The social-anthropological strategy

3.4.1 Introduction

The immanentist strategy tended to locate the force of Bonhoeffer's theological potential in his 1940's-era writings. The dialectical strategy advocated for a fuller reading of Bonhoeffer's work, satisfied that the internal tensions need not be resolved. A third strategy, to be developed at length in this section, places the weight on his earlier theology, confident that the themes developed there can capture the essential logic of his later ideas. From the perspective of the debate concerning continuity, the advantage of this third strategy is that it most clearly makes sense of Bonhoeffer's theology as a unified whole, neither broken nor in tension with itself, rejecting the suggestion that the prison letters constitute a sudden and radical departure.

This third strategy starts with Bonhoeffer's dissertation, published as *Sanctorum Communio*, and his habilitation thesis, published as *Act and Being*, as revealing the very formative concerns and ideas which shape the rest of his theological development. The early theses concern themselves with ecclesiology and its relation to sociology (in the case of *Sanctorum Communio*) and epistemology (in the case of *Act and Being*). The phrase 'Christ existing as church-community' originates in these works as a description of the church in its relation to revelation. For the advocates of the third strategy, this phrase becomes decisive. The church is the form of *Christus praesens*. In this view, if Bonhoeffer's later theology discards anything, it is not God's transcendence, nor God's presence in the church, but rather a strong notion of

⁵⁵ Littell, "Question," 28.

the church's exclusivity vis-à-vis the world. Articulating this more precisely means articulating how Bonhoeffer's early theses understand the church as apotheosis of community generally, and the implications of this for human existence as social relatedness. Hence, we will refer to this third strategy as the *social-anthropological* strategy.

The social-anthropological strategy for making sense of Bonhoeffer's contribution to the question of God and world emphasises Bonhoeffer's basic proximity to a Barthian understanding of revelation. In this understanding, a kind of Barthian actualism still undergirds Bonhoeffer's understanding of revelation. The givenness of promise is thus a description of where in this empirical world Christ has chosen to freely abide, to eternally elect to give himself over to reality time and again. Contrary to the immanentist strategy, then, the question is not how the reality of empirical existence finds its necessary relation to God. Instead, the starting point remains God's free aseity, and so the issue is how best to understand—to borrow a phrase from David Law—“the relation between the punctiliar and the linear, the vertical and the horizontal.”⁵⁶ While acknowledging the centrality of *Christus praesens* in Bonhoeffer's thought, the social-anthropological strategy tries to understand this presence as abiding while still leaving it grounded in the free, irruptive Word of revelation. How and where can we speak of Christ choosing to make himself available with a consistency and concreteness than could be called ‘presence?’

The work of Clifford Green, Wayne Floyd, and Charles Marsh informs the shape of the social-anthropological strategy. None of the three are primarily interested in the God-world problem, although the implications of their work trace the outline of a Bonhoefferian solution. While the work of each should be understood apart from the rest, their differences in emphasis merely serve to refine the nature of their similarities. All three understand the young Bonhoeffer's indebtedness to Barth, and so understand that ecclesiology and epistemology are “no substitute for the truth of revelation.”⁵⁷ They likewise understand the concretion of revelation in the Incarnation of Christ. What the truth of revelation has provided, for all three, is an intrinsically social self-disclosure, “not an idea, a past historical happening, a doctrine, or an entity” but rather “a person, and since person and community are inseparable, the revelation of Christ is present in a personal-communal form.”⁵⁸ Properly understanding this

⁵⁶ David R Law, “Redeeming the Penultimate: Discipleship and Church in the Thought of Søren Kierkegaard and Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 11.1 (2011): 20.

⁵⁷ Floyd, *Dialectics of Otherness*, 275.

⁵⁸ Clifford J. Green, *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 53.

connection between revelation and sociality first requires a brief overview of Bonhoeffer's first publication, *Sanctorum Communio*.

3.4.2 *The barrier of otherness in Sanctorum Communio*

Over five chapters, *Sanctorum Communio* undertakes an analysis of social philosophy to be “carried out on the foundation of Christian theology.”⁵⁹ The first chapter serves as a prolegomenon to the study, defining ‘sociology’ and ‘social philosophy’ as distinct modes of analysis in the German academic landscape. Bonhoeffer, writing in 1927, lives in the overlap of two eras—towards the end of the 19th century post-Hegelian fascination with social entities as metaphysical constructs giving rise to “a full-blown social mythology,”⁶⁰ and at the beginning of the empiricist era that characterises modern sociology as a scientific discipline. A fully modern definition of sociology remains just out of Bonhoeffer's reach at this stage—even empirical sociology attempts, in his understanding, “to trace the many complex interactions back to certain constitutive acts of spirit,” a phrasing which places Bonhoeffer closer to early-20th century structuralism than late-20th century social science.⁶¹ In this sense, sociology of religion's aim is “to research phenomenologically the structural distinctiveness of religious communities.”⁶² This places it apart from social philosophy, which “is the study of the primordial mode-of-being of sociality” as a theoretical discipline prior to empirical investigation.⁶³ Bonhoeffer's interest in *Sanctorum Communio* is to take up a theological exercise which uses “insights that derive purely from social philosophy and sociology”⁶⁴ as a means for refining a theological understanding of “the structure of the given reality of the church of Christ.”⁶⁵

The interaction of these modes of thought—the sociological and the theological—becomes more evident in the second chapter, as Bonhoeffer sets a Christian concept of person at odds with prevailing philosophical definitions of personhood. This contrast occurs within the context of a major concern of Bonhoeffer's early theology—articulating a personalist philosophical theology that can stand against 19th-century German Idealism. Idealism at this stage in Bonhoeffer's thought primarily encapsulates Hegel and Fichte, to whom he attributes an epistemology which places the human subject at the centre of the universe, such that all

⁵⁹ *DBWE 1*, 32.

⁶⁰ Peter Berger, “The Social Character of the Question Concerning Jesus Christ,” in *The Place of Bonhoeffer*, 76.

⁶¹ *DBWE 1*, 30.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 31.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

reality not only refers back to but is in some sense dependent upon the perceiving I.⁶⁶ In Bonhoeffer's understanding, idealism is simply incompatible with the Christian doctrine of revelation, and has quite a number of deleterious effects in theology and philosophy. One of the most pernicious consequences is that idealism excludes the possibility of real sociality, permitting the subject's intellect to be "dominant, exclusively claiming universal validity," such that all the distinguishing characteristics which make the You uniquely other are "conceived as immanent to my intellect."⁶⁷ The consequence, for the idealist subject, is to find oneself not really "in the social sphere" at all, interacting not with others as they are, but with others as one projects them to be in one's own consciousness.⁶⁸ What is needed is "some fundamental barrier" which can truly draw the subject out of the fortress of its own knowing and into a true acknowledgement of the other, thereby permitting real sociality.⁶⁹

For Bonhoeffer, at this early stage, the philosophical tools needed to construct such a barrier are found in a hesitant return to Kant. Without fully endorsing Kantian thought, Bonhoeffer does wish to appropriate Kant's emphasis on the "absoluteness of the ethical demand" which places the person into "a state of responsibility."⁷⁰ This is precisely the point of starkest contrast with idealism. Idealism fails at the point of its encounter with "the concept of reality" which it "did not think through thoroughly, and therefore did not think through at all."⁷¹ As mentioned earlier, Bonhoeffer at this stage somewhat naïvely equates Idealism with Hegel, and his critique of Hegelianism is thus a kind of quasi-Kierkegaardian concern, that Hegel has subordinated actual existence to the plodding pull of spirit and history, with human reason firmly holding the reins. "Hegel," Bonhoeffer will later argue in *Act and Being*, "wrote a philosophy of angels, but not of human beings as *Dasein*."⁷² In contrast then, Bonhoeffer wants to reassert the priority of *Dasein*, of the being of humans as they already find themselves existing in actuality. The human subject who takes reality seriously therefore takes seriously the existence of someone outside oneself, someone to whom ethical responsibility is owed. It is by virtue of this ethical demand that the other transcends the subject, placing a "real barrier" before "the movement of the dialectic of mind," a barrier which forces us to acknowledge the concrete rather than losing ourselves in the "abstract and

⁶⁶ Floyd, "Encounter with an Other," 86.

⁶⁷ *DBWE 1*, 45.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁷² *DBWE 2*, 42.

metaphysical.”⁷³ The Kantian barrier which we run against is the ethical decision presented to us by the undeniable existence of the other.

This barrier begins as a response to the ethical question posed by the encounter with otherness, but its value is not only relevant to ethics. The demand imposed from without serves a philosophical function. It is instrumental—if not fully determinative—of Bonhoeffer’s theological understanding of personhood. In virtue of what, exactly, is the You able to place the I into ethical responsibility? The answer, from the perspective of Christian theology, must be the You’s intrinsic relatedness to God. It is God, after all—the ultimate, “impenetrable You”—who places an ethical demand upon humans, an ethical demand that truly comes from without.⁷⁴ Consequently, for a Christian understanding of the person, it is the You-ness of God, imparted to the “concrete You” which truly makes the “the other become a You to me.”⁷⁵ The otherness of the stranger who places the human subject into responsibility can only be the radical otherness of God made manifest, the one to whom humanity’s final obligations are due. This obligation carries real epistemological and ontological weight, creating an obstacle to the universalising tendency of human reason, the temptation to sublimate all otherness to the self. As a result, You-ness not only corrals the individual, it can thus be said to create the individual. “The I comes into being only in relation to the You” as the You delimits and structures the I.⁷⁶ The You stands as the hard shore absorbing the waves’ crash, turning the borderless abyss of the idealist mind into a defined entity, a self.

The third chapter of *Sanctorum Communio* turns from personhood toward the question of community, asked from the perspective of revelation. Here, Bonhoeffer inquires about the nature of human community “within an intrinsically broken history,” after the Fall of Adam.⁷⁷ Theologically, then, any sociological description of the church must simultaneously take into account its fallen being-in-Adam. This fallenness immediately implies a supralapsarian “community with God.”⁷⁸ Furthermore, the very possibility of corporate responsibility—that “in Adam, all die” (1 Cor. 15:22)⁷⁹—suggests “that human beings, as spirit, are necessarily

⁷³ *DBWE 1*, 49.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 54-5.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁷⁹ All scriptural references in this thesis are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

created in a community.”⁸⁰ Bonhoeffer recognises—and spends the rest of the third chapter delineating—the fact that the intrinsic inter-relatedness of humans appears to contradict the necessity of an insurmountable You to stand against the subject’s I. In the end, Bonhoeffer argues that the true unity of a community “must exist absolutely in the willing of the community.”⁸¹ This unity of wills is different from any “mystical fusion” of persons, such that community not only permits but requires “the inner separateness of I and You” so as to create persons capable of uniting their individual wills into a community.⁸² For Bonhoeffer’s purposes in *Sanctorum Communio*, this definition is sufficient.

The fourth chapter of *Sanctorum Communio* briefly turns to the issue of humanity’s collective guilt in Adam. Permitting revelation the right of definition means not only accepting humanity’s collective guilt, but actually taking culpability as prior to the empirical human, thus creating “a Christian-ethical concept of the species.”⁸³ Sociologically, this is only resolved in the “ethical personality of collective persons;”⁸⁴ theologically, in “the structure of humanity-in-Adam . . . both composed of many isolated individuals and yet . . . humanity that has sinned as a whole.”⁸⁵ In this sense, the fourth chapter reiterates the relation of community and individual—humanity as “a collective person, yet infinitely fragmented”⁸⁶—and establishes the condition which the new humanity of Christ will reverse.

The fifth and final chapter of *Sanctorum Communio* is its true centre both figuratively and literally—the chapter takes up more than half of the book. The fifth chapter does not negate any of the previous insights, but neither does it take them to be foundational. Rather, it seeks to redefine the earlier insights—however much they may relate to categories of sociological debate—as properly arising from the church, the *sanctorum communion*, established by God’s revelation in Christ. “Only from this vantage point,” Bonhoeffer writes, “are we justified to integrate philosophical considerations into the theological framework.”⁸⁷ What unites the disparate concerns addressed in the fifth chapter is Bonhoeffer’s desire to articulate a

⁸⁰ *DBWE 1*, 65.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 123.

definition of the church-community in the reality of Christ which can take on board the insights of sociology.⁸⁸

In fact, the fifth chapter reads as a kind of beginning-again in its own right. Each of the issues addressed in the first four chapters—ethical responsibility, community, collective personhood—is readdressed from the perspective of revelation, for “only the concept of revelation can lead to the Christian concept of the church.”⁸⁹ God’s revelation in Christ yields the truth that the church has been simultaneously founded and “already completed” in Christ.⁹⁰ The wills of the church’s individual members find themselves gathered and maintained in unity by the Holy Spirit.⁹¹ The revelation in Christ of “God’s own heart” creates both the possibility of human community founded in love and the possibility that this community can be united with God’s will.⁹² In the kerygmatic advance of the Word of God in the world, “the actualized church-community is also present,” demonstrating the intrinsic connection between church and Word.⁹³ The love of God which enters a person allows them not only to receive the ethical demand of the other, but to actually respond selflessly: “Thus the You is to the I no longer law but gospel, and hence an object of love.”⁹⁴ The Other is the occasion for a decision to be made—will I receive the stranger with hospitality or indifference, with respectful restraint or over-bearing compulsion? Under the logic of revelation, Christ creates and enters into the midst of this “moment of being addressed.”⁹⁵ He creates this moment by turning the Other’s existence from morally neutral fact into ethical demand. Then, by first being-free-for the Christian, Christ enters into the midst of decision by transforming the Christian’s existence into a true being-free-for the Other, an approach in love which governs both the hospitality and the restraint with which the stranger is accommodated. This love, manifest in the social existence of the church, could be characterised as Christ’s very presence on earth.

3.4.3 *Green and sociality as ontological category*

Clifford Green initiated the engagement with this aspect of Bonhoeffer’s theology in his 1972 work *The Sociality of Christ and Humanity*, later revised, expanded, and published in 1999

⁸⁸ It is worth noting that this desire already carries within it an explicit critique of religion. “We see a decisive difference,” Bonhoeffer writes, “between the community as the guardian of Christian tradition and the Christian church-community.” (*DBWE I*, 130.)

⁸⁹ *DBWE I*, 134.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 145.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

under the title *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality*. Green's interest in this work is to re-evaluate the assumption which would understand the early works merely "under the rubric of ecclesiology."⁹⁶ Despite *Sanctorum Communio*'s obvious interest in the church, Green wants to focus attention on something even more foundational, namely, Bonhoeffer's interest in a theological anthropology of sociality which provides a context for the church's existence. In this sense, Green also wants to begin with the priority of revelation, "The freedom of God in revelation is a sine qua non. However, this freedom must not be understood formally and abstractly."⁹⁷ The immanent concretion which God has freely revealed to us in promise is the "Personstruktur of the present Christ in the Gestalt of Word, sacrament, and Gemeinde."⁹⁸ It is Green's understanding of this *Personstruktur* which is relevant to the social-anthropological method. In Green's reading, the *pro-me* of Christ implies relatedness between Christ and human, and hence,

Revelation is a social reality. God cannot be understood in isolation from humanity, and human beings cannot be understood individualistically. . . In reality, human beings, precisely as individual persons, are always in human communities. Revelation, likewise, is and occurs communally, that is, in the church.⁹⁹

But Green's reading of the early dissertations makes it clear that the social form of revelation is inter-personal even before it is ecclesial. In this respect, he draws heavily on *Sanctorum Communio*'s insight that "The socio-ethical relation to the human 'other' is precisely the form in which people encounter the divine 'Other.'"¹⁰⁰ Green understands revelation as prior to and providing a grounds for the very inter-connectedness of free individuals. "Human sociality," he writes, "is grounded in the social being and activity of God as seen in the revelation in Christ."¹⁰¹

With respect to the present question of God and world, Green's work sketches the outline of the social-anthropological method for interpreting Bonhoeffer. Humanity in its social dimension is not the recipient of God's free revelation, but is itself created in the act of God's revealing. While retaining God's aseity, here is a point where we can speak about the

⁹⁶ Green, *Theology of Sociality*, 19.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 237.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 63.

verticality of the transcendent God freely abiding with the horizontal plane of humanity. The consequences of his reading, Green writes, “means the form of transcendence is defined by Bonhoeffer’s socio-ethical understanding of person.”¹⁰² Christ’s givenness to reality is a real givenness in the possibility of community among otherwise isolated strangers. “Transcendence,” Green writes, “is not God’s otherness beyond humanity and above the world; the holy, creating, sustaining, and reconciling love of God which is revealed in Christ is God’s lordship in the world among human beings.”¹⁰³ The revelation of God in Christ freely binds him to the embracing love of communality. Where one finds sociality, one already finds a condition established by Christ. Where one sees individuals united in collective personhood, one glimpses the *Personstruktur* of Christ. Where one sees communities sharing in genuine *agape*, one can be assured of *Christus praesens*. Green is careful to distinguish this from any immanentist reduction. “To be sure,” he writes, “Bonhoeffer is never in danger of identifying God and humanity, any more than of confusing Christ and the church. But that relational duality which characterizes the life of human persons is a reflection of God’s relatedness to humanity.”¹⁰⁴ Here Green’s work contains implications for a broader engagement with the God-world dilemma, even while his focus remains on human sociality. The first movement of the social-anthropological strategy is to see interpersonal relatedness as that feature of reality able to receive the immanence of Christ’s promise.

Although Green’s analysis covers all of Bonhoeffer’s major works, his interpretation of Bonhoeffer’s total legacy relies heavily on the personalist vocabulary of *Sanctorum Communio*. “Bonhoeffer’s early theology must be understood as a ‘theology of sociality,’”¹⁰⁵ he writes, but even Bonhoeffer’s later theology “gains indispensable illumination when seen in the light of his theology of sociality.”¹⁰⁶ Even as Bonhoeffer moves away from strictly ecclesial language and begins to speak more about the transcendent God’s immanence in reality, the same underlying logic of sociality applies. The later language of secularity is—just as much the language about the church-community—best understood when related to Christ manifest positively in the care and unity implicit in human sociality. For Green, this is the fruit of Bonhoeffer’s *analogia relationis*, briefly mentioned in *Creation and Fall*. Green argues that “since God’s freedom is relational, in being free for humanity, so human beings

¹⁰² Green, *Theology of Sociality*, 59.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 247.

are the image and likeness of God in being in relations of freedom.”¹⁰⁷ This is not to merely sanctify the mode of human existence, but to suggest that:

It is a particular relationship which constitutes *imago*: just as the true Lordship of the Creator is God’s being free for the creation, so the true humanity of God’s creatures is co-humanity in being free for others on the basis of their freedom for God through Christ.¹⁰⁸

Here is a refinement of the social-anthropological strategy which locates *Christus praesens* in Christ’s free decision, but permits this presence to be located even in secularity. Anyone who is truly free-for-others finds themselves, whether they know it or not, participating in the *imago Dei* by acknowledging the ethical demand of the Other and responding in the unconscious imitation of Christ’s own freedom to be for the Other. This, then, appears as the promising first step of the social-anthropological method—acknowledging the person of presence while locating the person as truly present.

Shortly after writing *Sanctorum Communio*, however, Bonhoeffer begins to doubt that a conception of otherness manifest in the ethical demand is really strong enough to provide a proper barrier to the self. As Wayne Floyd and Charles Marsh have both pointed out, this doubt is written across Bonhoeffer’s habilitation thesis, *Act and Being*, in which he drops much of *Sanctorum Communio*’s I-You language in favour of a deeper engagement with the epistemology of subjecthood.¹⁰⁹

3.4.4 *Act, being, and the epistemological ego*

Act and Being represents Bonhoeffer’s most explicitly theoretical engagement with precisely the questions of God and world which this present essay aims to examine. It is best read, however, neither as a resolution to the question, nor even as an argument for why Christ-existing-as-community is the best locus for a resolution. Instead, it should be read as a kind of respectful exchange between philosophy and a theology of revelation. The problem of act and being poses questions to both philosophy and theology. For philosophy, it is a question of how to relate human reason to ultimate reality—the Kantian *Ding-an-sich*, the thing in itself. Does ultimate reality lie on the other side of an epistemic wall, obscured from direct view, able to be glimpsed indirectly in transcendental apperception’s acts of “pure intentionality,

¹⁰⁷ Green, *Theology of Sociality*, 191.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 191-2.

¹⁰⁹ Floyd, *Dialectics of Otherness*, 94-95; Marsh, *Reclaiming Bonhoeffer*, 72.

alien to being”?¹¹⁰ Or is ultimate reality fully available to human reason or even, potentially, a product of human reason? Is the being of ultimate reality exposed to us, available in “continuity” for our examination and perusal?¹¹¹ And how does the being of ultimate reality relate to *Dasein*, our own being as humans finding ourselves already thrown into a lived situation? The first part of *Act and Being* engages philosophy precisely because “Kant and idealism” have taken up these questions in a way that ought to alert theology to the questions’ significance.¹¹²

The first half of this respectful exchange is that philosophy’s attempts to answer these questions “are said to make a contribution to the understanding of the problem of act and being within the concept of revelation.”¹¹³ As we will see in a moment, philosophy provides a set of parameters, a kind of checklist which theology can use to consider whether its own conception of revelation has tacitly slipped into problematic modes of idealist thought. Theology may use this checklist *a posteriori* as a means for self-evaluation, but it cannot start by attempting to fulfil philosophy’s requirements. Theology must begin with revelation, and so the second half of the mutual exchange is for a theology of revelation to disclose to philosophy that only in Christ can the problem of act and being be resolved. It is “only from within revelation,” Bonhoeffer writes, that “the untruth of human self-understanding is made clear.”¹¹⁴ In this way, it is philosophy which finds itself interrogated, its unresolved aporias surpassed in revelation. *Act and Being* is thus an exploration down the path of revelation’s logic, never doubting that revelation supplies both theology’s origin and destination, yet nonetheless allowing philosophy to post warning signs for unexpected cliffs along the way. As a whole, then, *Act and Being* serves less to fully answer the question of God and world than to map out the terrain which an answer will have to cover.

Idealism remains Bonhoeffer’s primary antagonist as he engages with philosophy in *Act and Being*. What has changed since *Sanctorum Communio* is Bonhoeffer’s awareness of the subtle ways in which “idealism’s affirmative ontology inevitably creeps back into the method of theology as well as philosophy.”¹¹⁵ *Sanctorum Communio*’s ethical demand, found in the concreteness of the You, had been Bonhoeffer’s first attempt to erect a barrier against idealism. The problem, however, is that if the barrier of otherness is merely ethical demand, it

¹¹⁰ *DBWE* 2, 28.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 27.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹¹⁵ Floyd, *Dialectics of Otherness*, 95.

does not truly constrain the human subject's desire to correlate all otherness to its own experience. There is no way of navigating the *Ich-Du* relationship that does not inevitably condition the existence of the You for the I's self-understanding, thereby assimilating even the You into the I's epistemological project. However much the You might place an ethical demand upon the I, it does not fundamentally change the fact that the I understands the You's existence as significant only insofar as it effects a change to the I, insofar as it creates the occasion for an ethical choice. Fundamentally, this gives the I perpetual epistemic priority, subordinating even the difference of the Other to the subjective I's acknowledgement of that difference. Idealism seeps into the dialogical language of *Ich und Du* until the You—even the divine You—becomes “a function of the I's own consciousness.”¹¹⁶ What was intended to be a relation between two equals has instead become a relation between myself and a mere extension of my own cognition. *Act and Being*, therefore, implicitly acknowledges the difficulty of drawing I-You language away from the pull of idealism's maelstrom.¹¹⁷ What is needed is more than the barrier of an ethical demand, but a truly epistemic barrier, an encounter which not only provides the occasion to love, but the occasion to respectfully halt. Without losing “Christ existing as church-community,”¹¹⁸ what is gained in *Act and Being* is a greater appreciation for the fact that *Christus praesens* must function as a true barrier, as the radical alterity of otherness which can save the subject “from the delusion of being at its own disposal.”¹¹⁹

In the first half of *Act and Being*'s respectful exchange, Bonhoeffer remains alert to the lessons philosophy has learned in its search for “pure limiting concepts.”¹²⁰ Transcendentalism offers useful boundaries for the thinking subject. Thought—properly-defined—always finds itself happening in relation to something beyond itself, either “retrospectively or prospectively.”¹²¹ Retrospectively, thinking finds itself looking backward, already beholden to a symbolic community it did not create. Prospectively, thinking finds itself looking forward into the future, considering objects of which it has no experience. Transcendentalism establishes limits such that, “in knowing, human Dasein knows itself to be suspended between two poles that transcend it.”¹²² But to say this is to resolve philosophy's questions in favour of “the pure act,” such that true thinking occurs in the moments when the

¹¹⁶ *DBWE* 2, 50.

¹¹⁷ Floyd, *Dialectics of Otherness*, 112.

¹¹⁸ *DBWE* 2, 112.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 35.

subject finds itself confronted by transcendence.¹²³ The subject's own being collapses into these fragmentary moments, insofar as these acts provide the only basis by which the I may "understand itself."¹²⁴

This epistemology of act, however, inevitably finds its own inadequacies exposed by the mere existence of *Dasein*. "The I is being-already-there"—the thought can only occur to a thinker—and so the being of the human must precede even the act of thinking.¹²⁵ This creates a dilemma, as the human subject finds itself always already being, yet needing to suspend its own thinking between transcendence in order to understand itself properly. It may well refuse to accept this suspension and so give in to idealism, "the great temptation for all genuine philosophy."¹²⁶ In doing so, thought "raise[s] itself to the position of lord over what is non-objective by taking the process of attainment, the I, into itself in the act of thinking."¹²⁷ Alternatively, thinking may agree to abide by the limits of transcendence. But, precisely in giving itself power to set its own limitations, it has revealed itself as idealism in disguise. Thinking has not submitted at all, but merely condescended to show token respect to transcendence, thereby taking for granted its own seat on the throne "as that which makes the separation possible at all."¹²⁸ Whatever transcends the human subject must be more than static concept; it must possess some personal capacity to enforce the barriers demanded by its own otherness. Here there is room, even in philosophy, for God "in existence as condition, possibility, always in process and never completed."¹²⁹ God, in this conception, would function as transcendence with agency, a transcendence which does not ask the human subject to acknowledge its limitations, but imposes them. Even this conception, however, while appealing, cannot easily evade idealist pretensions. For what does it even mean to speak of this God-as-term in the equation of transcendentalism? Either we are able to conceive of this transcendent God, in which case thought has already surmounted the very barriers God was needed to reinforce, or else we are unable to conceive of God, in which case there is no point of contact between God and our existence at all. "God is no longer accessible even to the reflection of consciousness on itself" and so vanishes away into virtual non-existence.¹³⁰

¹²³ *DBWE* 2, 36.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 54.

What transcendentalism can offer as a guidepost to theology is a reminder that thought must always occur “‘in reference to’ transcendence.”¹³¹ This notion of human existence as being defined by its reference to transcendence will be of great significance later, in Chapter 5. But, for now, what is worth noting is why transcendentalism nonetheless fails, in Bonhoeffer’s mind. It fails, firstly, because it easily falls captive to idealism, as we have just noted. But even to the extent that it resists this collapse and remains pure actualism, transcendentalism struggles, secondly, to account for *Dasein*, for the priority of the being-already-there of the human. It struggles in two ways: first, to acknowledge the real being of humans prior to thought; second, to account for the continuity of self-identity in between individual acts of transcendental apperception.¹³²

Bonhoeffer contrasts transcendentalism—as a philosophy of act—with various philosophies of being in order to further flesh out philosophy’s total contribution to a theology of revelation. These various ontologies are not concerned with an account of true thought, but with an account of true being. The phenomenological method—as an attempt to “demonstrate the primacy of being over against consciousness”¹³³—deeply informs Bonhoeffer’s appropriation of ontology. Thinking, from this perspective, is a mere tool “to uncover or ‘clear the way’ to this being.”¹³⁴ Bonhoeffer examines a number of options in brief. Among these options, his greatest affinity is for the work of Martin Heidegger, who “has succeeded in forcing together act and being in the concept of *Dasein*.”¹³⁵ It is worth considering for a moment what appeals to Bonhoeffer about Heidegger’s philosophy.

Heidegger, in Bonhoeffer’s reading, prioritises being without subordinating it to “timeless essences and values.”¹³⁶ Rather, Heidegger takes the priority of *Dasein* seriously. Thought is immediately subordinated, unable to “produce its world for itself. Rather, it finds itself, as *Dasein*, in the world; in every instance, it is already in a world just as, in every instance, it is already itself.”¹³⁷ The reality and continuity of personhood are established *a priori*, not haphazardly assembled from a jumble of transcendental acts. Yet, *Sein* resists objectification. It is not the case that Heidegger merely “opens being itself up to viewing.”¹³⁸ *Sein* is both constitutive of *Dasein*, and yet not fully constitutive, as *Dasein* retains a self-determining

¹³¹ *DBWE* 2, 60.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 47.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 61.

capacity by its free decision in a moment. Being likewise “cannot be statically comprehended as something that exists” and so resists the pretensions of the subject.¹³⁹ Yet, at the same time, Being must be “interpreted in reference to the understanding of being, and thereby drawn into the movement of decision-making existence.”¹⁴⁰

In a very brief interaction, Bonhoeffer sees in Heidegger a number of concerns which parallel his own: (a) an understanding of reality which resists idealist thought, (b) an understanding of *Dasein* which places it in necessary relation to ultimate reality, yet, (c) without collapsing ultimate reality into human existence, which both (d) permits *Dasein*'s self-understanding and continuity through time while also (e) requiring it to be defined in reference to something beyond itself. The only reason why Bonhoeffer cannot recommend theology's wholesale adoption of Heidegger is because, in subjecting even time to *Dasein*, Heidegger comprehends temporality as “primordially finite.”¹⁴¹ Thus all of history, even God's history, finds itself enclosed by finitude. To begin with Heidegger, therefore, is impossible, as “no room has been left for the concept of revelation.”¹⁴² Yet it becomes clear that what Bonhoeffer hopes for is to start with revelation and nonetheless explore its possibilities along the trail marked by exactly the priorities which Heidegger has articulated. Act, being, and *Dasein* serve as the three legs to the stool Bonhoeffer is building. Revelation must preserve its transcendence in act, yet abide in the continuity of being, and in both regards must address itself to the real existence of *Dasein*, such that humans can understand their actual, continuous being as truly acted upon.

Philosophy's engagement with the problem of act and being thus leaves theology with two broad markers to keep it from falling into idealism: “that not only are human beings pure act ‘in reference to’ but also that thought is ontologically ‘suspended’ in being.”¹⁴³ In other words, human existence must always find itself defined from without, by the act of a transcendent Other, and yet this very act which makes self-understanding possible cannot be fully constitutive of the self, as it is always preceded by the fact of an already-existing human being. The challenge is to see the very fact of temporal human existence as constituting and being constituted by a perpetual relatedness to a truly other, truly free transcendence.

¹³⁹ *DBWE* 2, 71.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 71-2.

¹⁴¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 379.

¹⁴² *DBWE* 2, 73.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 79.

In the spirit of beginning again with revelation, Part B of *Act and Being* turns to theology, explicating an understanding of God and human existence based on revelation that can also avoid the pitfalls of idealism marked by philosophy. Where philosophy plays a particularly useful critical function, for Bonhoeffer, is in helping to identify where the theology of his distant mentor, Barth, has gone astray. In attempting to preserve God's freedom in aseity, Barth conceives of revelation as moving from eternity into history, but never belonging to history, "with the result that the act cannot be grasped in conceptual form or become part of systematic thought."¹⁴⁴ This neo-Kantian sensibility erects a barrier that human reason cannot surmount, and therefore prevents the ravenous subject from merely using human vocabulary to consume God's reality. But it also leaves open the question of where revelation actually encounters human existence, as Barth takes it as given that "God's freedom and the act of faith are essentially supratemporal."¹⁴⁵ Indeed, any further attempt by Barth to conceive of revelation perduring between revelatory acts "is bound to fail" as long as Barth holds that "no historical moment is capax infiniti."¹⁴⁶ Bonhoeffer takes this to be the moment when Barth has inadvertently fallen into the worst habits of transcendental idealism, preserving actualism in such a way that "God recedes into the non-objective, into what is beyond our disposition."¹⁴⁷ Bonhoeffer also wants to preserve the priority and freedom of revelation, but intends to do so while also permitting it a being that perdures in relation to human existence, not as mere object for human examination, but as transcendent presence.

To get nearer this notion, Bonhoeffer attempts to reframe the issue such that "in revelation it is not so much a question of the freedom of God . . . as it is of God's coming out of God's own self."¹⁴⁸ Here we find the logic of promise, long before the Christology lectures. Thinking about God's coming from God's own self towards humanity nonetheless respects God's freedom, Bonhoeffer argues, precisely because it allows that "God freely chose to be bound to historical human beings and to be placed at the disposal of human beings. God is free not from human beings but for them."¹⁴⁹ What is the nature and location of this binding? That is exactly where further reflection on promise leads. For now, Bonhoeffer hazards a tentative answer: "God is present . . . to put it quite provisionally for now—'haveable', graspable in the Word within the church."¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁴ *DBWE* 2, 84.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 90-1.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 91.

Theologies with a stronger notion of God's abiding self-disclosure are equally prone to falling over the idealist cliffs which philosophy has indicated. Bonhoeffer identifies three possibilities: "Revelation can be understood (1) as doctrine, (2) as a psychic experience, and (3) as an institution."¹⁵¹ All three, however, quickly run aground in ways parallel to philosophical ontologies. Revelation conceived of as doctrine is little different from transcendental actualism, as it "makes for no encounter with the existence of human beings."¹⁵² Revelation existing in religious experience turns God's free speech into mere object.¹⁵³ Revelation as structurally attached to the institutional church cannot accommodate *Dasein*, placing the human being "entirely in the transsubjective," able to account for humans insofar as they exist in holy communion as sanctified Christians, but "not capable of encountering the existence of human beings qua sinful experience."¹⁵⁴ All three methods treat revelation as merely something that exists, and "something that exists, is not able to encounter the existence of human beings," in other words, is not able to effect a real change to the human subject, because it will always find itself captive to the subject's thinking, encircled by the *cor curvum in se*.¹⁵⁵ The outline of Bonhoeffer's basic concerns emerge here as clearly as in the previous section. What form of God's presence can be real presence without giving itself so far over to human reason that it can no longer stand as barrier to the subjective ego?

Bonhoeffer's answer comes around to the church-community, but via a far more indirect route than one might expect, lest we in any way confuse Christ-existing-as-church-community with a notion of revelation as ecclesial structure. He is in search of a "genuine ontology" which will both place knowledge in service to and have an actual effect on *Dasein*, "the existence of human beings."¹⁵⁶ Simultaneously, this genuine being must not merely be another part of the world, another facet of experience for idealism to subsume. Rather, authentic being "in a genuine sense 'stands over against' the I, in such a way that it challenges and limits its manner of existence."¹⁵⁷ If this ontology intends to engage with *Dasein*, it must do so in two ways: "(1) The existence of human beings must be affected; and (2) it must be possible to think of being in continuity."¹⁵⁸ A theology of revelation provides us with just such an

¹⁵¹ *DBWE* 2, 103.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 104-5.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 106.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 108.

ontology as “an act of God that draws human beings into the occurrence of revelation,” transforming the existence of the subject from being-in-Adam to being-in-Christ.¹⁵⁹

Despite the radical disjuncture in the life of someone encountered by revelation, the continuity of the person is maintained insofar as their true personhood has always been borne—even unwittingly—by its external relatedness. Every human being is “always part of a community” whether they find themselves amidst the body of those “in ‘Adam’ or in ‘Christ’.”¹⁶⁰ To the extent that even humans in Adam find themselves in community, they exist “in social context.”¹⁶¹ To exist in the sociality of *Dasein* is to find oneself, by definition, already encountered by something outside of oneself. This true outside can only be transcendent otherness, and thus can only be God, such that, “Encountered existence is existence in social context, existence in reference to Christ.”¹⁶² Even the human in Adam who knows nothing of Christ nonetheless finds her existence defined in reference to Christ, “rejected and accepted in its historical totality. Existence, therefore, ‘is’ only as sinful and as pardoned.”¹⁶³ The “historically whole human being”¹⁶⁴ is already “the synthesis of act and being”¹⁶⁵ insofar as she is both an individual determined by transcendental apperception in her historical existence and as she is always a part of the human community, borne along in a being established by revelation which she did not choose. Here is the closest Bonhoeffer comes in *Act and Being* to re-appropriating the insights of *Sanctorum Communio*. There is no escaping the *Kollektivpersonen* of community—to belong to Adam is to find that “I myself am Adam . . . In me humanity falls. As I am Adam, so is every individual.”¹⁶⁶

The transition to being in Christ, then, does nothing to change the definition of existence as being-in-reference-to-Christ. And in this respect, the identity of the individual is preserved. What does change for the Christian is that one comes “to know myself borne. I am borne, therefore I am, therefore I believe.”¹⁶⁷ To know oneself as borne—i.e. to know one’s being in reference to transcendence—is to know oneself as being in Christ. And being in Christ is synonymous with being in the church.¹⁶⁸ It is worth noting that this is a claim which Bonhoeffer feels no need to defend. It is simply a fact which has been given in revelation. To

¹⁵⁹ *DBWE* 2, 110.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 116.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 120.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 146.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 108.

find oneself included in Christ is to find oneself included in the church as Christ's body. "Thus in faith is disclosed a new sphere of knowledge and objects, that of existence in social reference," Bonhoeffer writes.¹⁶⁹ In Christ, the new human sees herself now existing in relation to the church-community and acknowledges, for the first time, her previous existence in the community of sinful humanity.

A theology of revelation thus starts with Christ as the one who encounters me, placing me into community and defining my existence. In the words of Michael DeJonge, "The freedom and transcendence of a personal God depend not on supra-temporality, but on the structure of personhood. A person, unlike an object, enters history while retaining its freedom."¹⁷⁰ While this means that "the being-of-revelation is 'person', hovering in the tension between the objective and non-objective," it does not precisely give further clarity about the being of this person.¹⁷¹ This leaves Bonhoeffer attempting to say two things about revelation simultaneously, that it is "the revealed person of God and the personal community that is founded on God's person."¹⁷² In the first approach, these two things should be understood distinctly. Christ is free in self-disclosure logically prior to the community. It is "only where the living Christ approaches us" that "self-understanding is possible."¹⁷³ To understand ourselves moving from sinful in Adam to pardoned in Christ cannot be comprehended "unless Christ himself in person speaks to us his new word, the word that creates our Dasein again and again."¹⁷⁴ Yet quickly following after this first approach, a second look reveals that this self-disclosure of Christ is also the affront of the Other, thereby immediately placing us into community. And so the formation of a community of those who live in relation to Christ—and therefore live in relation to Christ in one another—follows closely on the heels of revelation. Indeed, it becomes the locus for the being of revelation.¹⁷⁵ The person of Christ is both prior to community and yet intrinsically bound to the disclosure of life together. The second half of the exchange between philosophy and theology is thus complete, for theology has returned to philosophy a caution that "the existence of human beings can be encountered only through the community of faith. It is from the person of Christ that every other person first acquires for other human beings the character of personhood."¹⁷⁶

¹⁶⁹ *DBWE* 2, 127.

¹⁷⁰ Michael DeJonge, "Between Fundamentalism and Secularism: Bonhoeffer's Negotiation of Oppositional Pairs in *Ethics* and its Precedent in *Act and Being*," in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Theology Today*, 88.

¹⁷¹ *DBWE* 2, 122.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 142-4.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 132.

¹⁷⁵ See section 3.5.2 below for further consideration of the relation between revelation and sociality.

¹⁷⁶ *DBWE* 2, 114.

3.4.5 *Floyd and the resistance of true alterity*

Just as a reading of *Sanctorum Communio* must be supplemented with a reading of *Act and Being*, so we should supplement Clifford Green's approach to sociality with the critical reserve of Wayne Floyd. Green understands how much human community requires the distinctiveness of the individual; there is no suggestion in Green that community demands homogeneity. Nonetheless, the logic of sociality too easily surmounts the real resistance of personhood in order to embrace the possibilities of love and unity in human togetherness. Wayne Floyd's work draws us back to the first step, to not assume that individuals can easily be united in community without erasing some of their differences, and to reflect again on the markers pointed out to us by the philosophy of transcendence, to the "function of the 'resistance to subjectivity par excellence'—Kant's infamous thing-in-itself."¹⁷⁷ In this respect, Floyd urges us to be wary of a smiling totalitarianism, cheerfully and obliviously smothering dissent in the name of community. We are too often caught unaware by the fact that our unified togetherness has actually dismissed, excluded, or subsumed the otherness of the marginal in favour of the homogeneity of the majority. It is in this sense that Bonhoeffer's use of transcendentalism plays an ethical function, in questioning "the manner of our ethical valuation of and response to that 'object'" of otherness.¹⁷⁸ As much as Bonhoeffer is interested in community, it must be a community of true persons, their identities permitted to stand in dignified autonomy, unimpeded by the encroaching presumptions of another.

Floyd interprets Bonhoeffer's epistemology through this ethical lens, arguing that Bonhoeffer "was searching for an enriched conception of human rationality, taking significant clues from epistemology, which would be adequate to the social and ethical theological vision which inspired him."¹⁷⁹ This epistemology thus amounts to "a form of thinking that takes seriously philosophy's own attempt to surmount its intrinsic tendencies towards system, towards totality."¹⁸⁰ Floyd understands this demand, articulated by philosophy, as pressing upon theology the need to "demonstrate its ability to articulate meaningfully its own claims for heterogeneity and otherness, all the while resisting falling back into the very dualistic metaphysics against which idealism and liberal theology had so courageously fought."¹⁸¹ In

¹⁷⁷ Floyd, *Dialectics of Otherness*, 1.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

this respect, Floyd understands Bonhoeffer's appropriation of personalist language as "both more and less radical than many other exponents of personalism might suppose."¹⁸²

It is more radical in the sense that otherness cannot simply be an occasion for an ethical decision, but must originate from a true other, not someone who is merely received empathetically on the basis of a perceived congruency between *Ich und Du*. "In the moment of the encounter," Floyd explains, "'I and Thou are not just interchangeable concepts,' and thus the relationship between them is not that of 'like' to 'like.' For the address of the Thou and its being-suffered by the I 'is' an unlikeness."¹⁸³ Personalist language does not go far enough to preserve genuine alterity. Within the personalist framework, true alterity is only possible at such a remove from the I that it might as well not exist. As Floyd highlights, Bonhoeffer is sensitive to the fact that "every attempt to portray a more 'concrete' other, a more determinate limit, had to defend itself against the idealist/systematic-ontological presumption that any 'other' which is heterogeneous to the subject, and vice versa, is so marginal that finally it 'is' not at all."¹⁸⁴

At the same time, however, Floyd understands Bonhoeffer as reaching for something he can never quite grasp, which is an ethical-epistemological account of otherness which can truly be free of idealism. It is in this respect that Bonhoeffer is "less radical" than personalism. There are two insurmountable problems which Bonhoeffer cannot get around. In Floyd's words, "The first is not being able to conceptualize 'other persons' in a manner which 'epistemologically' can allow the other to 'be' at all. The second is not being able to let the other be encountered receptively as 'ontologically' that-which-I-am-not-and-cannot-be."¹⁸⁵ It is in this respect that Floyd sees a growing affinity between Bonhoeffer and Hegel over time. Faced with the same problem, Hegel chooses not to relentlessly preserve transcendental otherness, but sublates it in a way that does not require a totalising unity.¹⁸⁶ There is a resemblance here with Bonhoeffer's movement yet, we should add, in the way a palindrome resembles itself. There is something deeply Hegelian about Bonhoeffer's thought, were it to be understood, however, as applied in reverse, so to speak. Promeity, as we shall see in the next chapter, does not reconcile God and world so much as it ultimately moves behind the

¹⁸² Floyd, *Dialectics of Otherness*, 129.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 132.

¹⁸⁶ Floyd, "Encounter with an Other," 99.

problem itself to a unity preserving otherness which precedes any reflection on spirit and world.

For the purposes of articulating a social-anthropological strategy for extending Bonhoeffer, Floyd's work serves as a useful caution against an overly simplistic equation of *Christus praesens* with sociality, lest we inadvertently call Christ to hand as a restrictive and totalising homogeneity. To do so would be both unfaithful to Christ and neglectful of Bonhoeffer's concerns in *Act and Being*. Floyd's only weakness, if anything, is that he overemphasises the extent to which Bonhoeffer is concerned with the protection of otherness. Floyd, for example, interprets Bonhoeffer as insisting that "a genuinely dialectical form of thinking is possible only to the extent that it sustains the reality of authentic Otherness."¹⁸⁷ In such formulations, Floyd gives otherness a basic priority in Bonhoeffer's thought which it does not entirely deserve. The purpose of Bonhoeffer's notion of an epistemic barrier is not principally to safeguard otherness, although that is an immediate benefit. Instead, the primary purpose of a real barrier is first to confront the individual subject, to draw the self out of the *cor curvum in se*. Bonhoeffer's base concern is not with the loss of otherness, per se, but with the unlimited appetite of the human subject. What is required is an epistemology which adequately limits the human Logos. Otherness arises as one expression of that limit. "Whether the limits are rational or ethical in kind," they must not permit humans to "understand themselves, in the last resort, not from the transcendent but from themselves, from reason."¹⁸⁸ Ethical limits set by the Other are one version of an epistemic barrier, but not the only possibility. What motivates Bonhoeffer's concern with sociality is not the status of the You, but the status of the I in sin, the Adamic self standing outside of the garden, bereft, faced with the horror of total self-dependence. As he says in *Creation and Fall*, describing the effects of sin:

Now humankind stands in the middle, with no limit. Standing in the middle means living from its own resources and no longer from the center. Having no limit means being alone. To be in the center and to be alone means to be sicut deus.¹⁸⁹

To locate otherness as the fountainhead of Bonhoeffer's concern is to slightly miss his deeper attack on idealism for the sake of the self. An ethical concern for otherness is not the necessary condition for a Bonhoefferian epistemology, but one implication of it. In this

¹⁸⁷ Floyd, "Editor's Introduction to the English Edition," in *DBWE* 2, 10.

¹⁸⁸ *DBWE* 2, 36.

¹⁸⁹ *DBWE* 3, 115.

regard, Bonhoeffer affirms Barth's "energetic attack against Idealism. Here the ego is found as not only the interpreting but even a creative ego; it creates its world itself."¹⁹⁰ Bonhoeffer's concern would be less accurately characterised as proto-postmodern than as neo-Lutheran. It is the human ego which must be rescued for the debilitating effects of sin, not the You which must be rescued from the I. Thus, Bonhoeffer again affirms Barth's attack on idealism in the context of Reformation theology:

Barth sees in the essential boundlessness of thinking, in its claim a closed system, in its egocentricity a philosophical affirmation of the theological insight of the Reformers, which they expressed in terms of *cor curvum in se*, *corruptio mentis*. Man in *statu corruptionis* is indeed alone, he is his own creator and Lord, he is indeed the center of his world of sin.¹⁹¹

At this stage, the potential application of the social-anthropological strategy to the problem of God and word has reached a crossroads. Green's work on sociality correctly draws our attention to Bonhoeffer's interest in the communality of the church. Applied to the God-world dilemma, it suggests the possibility that the agapeic expanse of love which enfolds community is the proper location of Christ's immanence in reality. Floyd, however, serves as a reminder that the embrace of communality can—even unintentionally—impose a suffocating, un-Christian uniformity. Applied to the God-world dilemma, this presents an alternative: perhaps *Christus praesens* should properly be understood as disguised, obliquely immanent in the mystery of otherness. This caution is both useful and unsatisfying. It highlights Bonhoeffer's interest in preserving alterity, but at the expense of never returning to the true communality which motivates his ecclesiology. Otherness has been preserved, but what of the *sanctorum communio*? Is the church a true unity, or merely an association of impenetrable monads—the inter-dependent limbs of an organic body, or the bolted-together gears of a serviceable automaton?

Where, then, does one find *Christus praesens* in reality, properly speaking? Positively—available in the abundant, perceivable, agapeic unity of the spiritual family? Or negatively—hidden, veiled in the insoluble transcendence of the brother who remains a mystery? The social-anthropological strategy advances by not permitting this dichotomy to stand

¹⁹⁰ *DBWE 10*, 470-1.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 472-3.

unchallenged. What is required is a conception of true communality truly dependent on the preservation of otherness.

3.4.6 Marsh and agapeic togetherness

The way forward is provided by Charles Marsh, who stands with Bonhoeffer's early theses in asserting that the act of revelation is God's self-giving to be present in and with the church. Marsh unites the claims of community and alterity by calling upon the philosopher Michael Theunissen's understanding of "the dialogical self-becoming of the individual I."¹⁹² This understanding promises to maintain both otherness and community by understanding self-identity in terms of "the I's movement to the other."¹⁹³ Rather than enclosing the Other within the I, the I is pulled "out of itself into social relation."¹⁹⁴ Translated into the theology of revelation, this allows Marsh to propose that Bonhoeffer could be interpreted as advocating a social-ontology that understands the human self as truly becoming itself in its relation to Christ-existing-as-church-community. The true identity of the I is not found in its self-enclosedness, but in its becoming more than an I, "remain[ing], as an extended self, always with the other."¹⁹⁵ In this way it is actually becoming more like itself: "Through the grounding of the self upon Christ existing as community, the person discovers that Christ is the basis of the capacity for self-being and being with others."¹⁹⁶ This movement is not only true for the human I as subject, but for the divine subject as well, such that God is also becoming more like God's self in the movement of *agape* towards the beloved other of humanity.¹⁹⁷ It is not only humanity, but the whole of creation which is the recipient of this self-giving love which re-centres both God and world. "As community," Marsh writes, "Christ precedes both I and other as their source and mediation, engendering a new ontology of relation based on the coming of God into worldly experience."¹⁹⁸

This movement finds its origin in the Incarnation and thus in the prior activity of God's revelation in Christ. Marsh argues that:

The surpassing of otherness and totality in Christ is possible only if revelation is the event for which God is active subject; only if God is subject

¹⁹² Marsh, *Reclaiming Bonhoeffer*, 78.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 155.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 93.

of the knowing of revelation and is thereby understood as the divine I who at once stands against and embraces the human subject in the provenience of his knowing.¹⁹⁹

Rather than continuing to stand at a distance, proclaiming, God's self-giveness to community not only abides in presence, but leaves a lasting and real change on the being of the human subject. Revelation "actively refigures the self in faith such that openness to and life for the other become the new ontological description of being-in Christ."²⁰⁰ It is this refigured self—transformed into its true identity only in contact with true otherness—which is properly in Christ and hence capable of joining in true unity with the body of Christ.

Marsh is therefore a useful corrective to Floyd's tendency to overemphasise otherness. Marsh captures Bonhoeffer's desire to return to a proper definition of community, in the sense that the ultimate aim of Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology is to achieve a true unity with an adequate respect for otherness. In this respect, Marsh understands that identity is not inviolable, but that breaking through the wall of self can be a means to becoming more like ourselves, more fully human:

Therefore, according to Bonhoeffer, the claim of the other that fractures the infrastructural totality of the system and intrudes into the presumed continuities of self-identity qua self-mediation does not incite the disappearance of the self . . . Life together establishes and restores our genuine humanity as individual persons, even as our individuality attains authenticity only in life with others. In losing ourselves we find ourselves; and in finding ourselves we lose ourselves.²⁰¹

What Bonhoeffer leaves us with is a notion of community that is not built on individuality, but which is building true individuality:

The promise of Bonhoeffer's christological explication of the self for others is precisely its capacity to illustrate in an exquisitely nuanced way a conception of life together that originates in the identity of the subject and

¹⁹⁹ Marsh, *Reclaiming Bonhoeffer*, 99-100.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 94.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 141.

yet requires the movement of and to the outside to achieve its completed end.²⁰²

For the purposes of this thesis, the social-anthropological strategy should be understood as the application of this “promise” to the problem of God and world. It is an extension of Bonhoeffer’s social insights into ontology rather than an extension of Bonhoeffer’s own ontological insights. With respect to the latter, Marsh, like Floyd, recognises that christological promise places Bonhoeffer on a Hegelian trajectory. This trajectory is nonetheless distinct from Hegel’s own philosophy, insofar as the social-anthropological strategy understands Bonhoeffer as principally indebted to Barth. Christ as the ‘who’ giving rise to promise is the anchor preventing the social-anthropological strategy from slipping into mere immanentism. Marsh writes:

What distinguishes Bonhoeffer’s description from Hegel’s is not so much the emphasis on divine embodiment but his sweeping, uncompromising christocentrism. God as the ‘ultimate reality’ is no other than the one who ‘shows forth, manifests, and reveals Himself, that is to say, God in Jesus Christ.’ In Jesus Christ the reality of God entered the reality of the world, as a result of which the reality of God and the reality of the world are explicated by the name Jesus Christ.²⁰³

Thus, the social-anthropological strategy implicitly fixes Bonhoeffer’s theology to a Barthian notion of revelation, with the transcendent God given to reality at the point of sociality. With respect to Bonhoeffer’s own christological ontology, however, Marsh acknowledges Bonhoeffer’s ever-increasing use of the language of immanence. Marsh’s limited critique of Bonhoeffer is located precisely here, where “Bonhoeffer seems to push too far his emphasis on Christ as the center of the real.”²⁰⁴ This is not to admit that Bonhoeffer gives way to a death-of-God shift in thinking, but to admit that Bonhoeffer’s eager insistence on immanence does not sit easily alongside even the later Barth’s theology of Word. Marsh restrains Bonhoeffer from the total collapse of an “extreme kenotic position” by pointing out the places where the later Bonhoeffer retains a Barthian sensibility, for instance in *Ethics* when Bonhoeffer “argu[es] that the togetherness of Christ with the world always preserves the

²⁰² Marsh, *Reclaiming Bonhoeffer*, 142.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 103.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

provenience of God's grace and thus the difference of God and the world."²⁰⁵ What remains outside the frame of the social-anthropological strategy's consideration, however, is the possibility that Bonhoeffer did not begin with precisely the same understanding of revelation as Barth, despite their shared christocentrism. This possibility will be revisited in the next section and again in Chapter 5 as a way of proposing a truly Bonhoefferian notion of divine immanence which is neither immanentist nor exclusively Barthian.

For now, however, let us sum up the fruit of the social-anthropological strategy with respect to the problem of God and world. In this argument, God emerges out of transcendence in the Incarnation, and establishes his presence in Christ-existing-as-church-community. This movement towards the world opens God up to becoming, to being even more like himself in loving the other. Simultaneously, however, Christ "activates the living consciousness of the other as neighbour."²⁰⁶ This draws humanity into the church-community, which equally draws humanity out of ourselves and into relationship with others. Properly understood in light of revelation, this entry into relationship can actually be seen as an entry into relationship with Christ. The human self is reconfigured as a compassionate, "overabundant I", becoming more like a true individual as she shares in the love of the community.²⁰⁷ Thus, *Christus praesens* is epistemologically available in the togetherness of Christian community without being exhaustively disclosed in it. This epistemological aspect of God's immanence in reality quickly embraces ethical implications, as agapeic togetherness reshapes the relation of the community to all otherness exterior to it. Marsh depicts this movement beautifully, as "the love of Christ overflow[ing] the new being of the self" such that "love is that event in which an I no longer exists for itself but exists in connection to an other person on the way toward becoming a we, and in this sense the I becomes truly an I."²⁰⁸

3.5 A response to the social-anthropological strategy

3.5.1 Bonhoeffer's language of presence

Neither Green, nor Floyd, nor Marsh understands himself to be offering a comprehensive guide to Bonhoeffer's thoughts on the God-world problem. Insofar as their work extends our understanding of Bonhoeffer's interest in sociality, ecclesiology, and theological anthropology, it should be entirely commended. Such is the merit of their work, however, that

²⁰⁵ Marsh, *Reclaiming Bonhoeffer*, 105.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 157.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 156.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

it carries further implications for a very promising interpretative resolution to the nature and form of *Christus praesens* in the world. As mentioned, the social-anthropological strategy sketches a fundamental ontology that is not extracted, per se, from Bonhoeffer's own limited engagement with ontology. Instead, it is projected outward from Bonhoeffer's engagement with ecclesiology, lightly engaging Bonhoeffer's own writings on Christ's being. The social-anthropological strategy is entirely within its rights to diverge from Bonhoeffer himself in this regard, although it would be worth considering for a moment in what way Bonhoeffer's christological promise leads to the very language of immanence which the social-anthropological strategy is most likely to dismiss. In this way, the hope is to clarify how promise as a method stands in distinction to the social-anthropological strategy. This is not to suggest that the social-anthropological strategy is inherently flawed, but that there are worthwhile considerations which it does not fully address. The argument of this section is that promise as method forms an even more foundational layer to Bonhoeffer's thought than his interest in sociality. In this way, it incorporates and therefore permits all of Green, Floyd, and Marsh's insights on community to stand while still accommodating a Bonhoefferian language of Christ's immanence in reality. In other words, agapeic togetherness is properly understood as one manifestation of *Christus praesens*, but it is not the sum of *Christus praesens*, and therefore we are directed to search for a deeper logic.

First, we begin with a rather simple point: over the course of his lifetime, Bonhoeffer refers to *Christus praesens* in connection with many facets of Christian life and reality. At various moments, he explicitly connects the reality of divine presence to:

- a) *The Word, generally*—"God is only there where he speaks his Word, not where I look for him."²⁰⁹
- b) *The Bible*—"In the word Christ is present;"²¹⁰ "Wherever God is present in the divine word, there one has the present;"²¹¹ "What we want is to encounter Christ in his own word;"²¹² "He is present today, in bodily form and with his word."²¹³
- c) *Kerygma*—"The word of the sermon is in fact this Christ who bears human nature;"²¹⁴ "In the proclaimed word, Christ steps into the congregation;"²¹⁵ In the context of a

²⁰⁹ *DBWE 12*, 193.

²¹⁰ *DBWE 9*, 294.

²¹¹ *DBWE 14*, 417.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 932.

²¹³ *DBWE 4*, 201.

²¹⁴ *DBWE 14*, 510.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 513.

sermon: “we ourselves do not want to believe that God is really here among us;”²¹⁶
 “How does this body become visible? First, in the preaching of the word.”²¹⁷

- d) *The sacraments*—“There are sacraments because Christ is present in his body.”²¹⁸
- e) *Prayer*—“the Psalter is capable of being simultaneously prayer to God and yet God’s own Word, precisely because the praying Christ encounters us here . . . they pray only insofar as Christ prays within them.”²¹⁹
- f) *The Holy Spirit*— “Always have . . . Christ’s proximity in the Holy Spirit.”²²⁰
- g) *The ‘call to discipleship’*—“The call to discipleship here has no other content than Jesus Christ himself;”²²¹ “Christ’s call, Christ himself, is required for that better righteousness.”²²²
- h) *The commandments*—“We are encountered by a You, not an It, an idea, in the commandments.”²²³
- i) *The otherness of the neighbour*—“Jesus Christ also encounters us in every step we take, in every person we meet;”²²⁴ “Christ walks the earth as long as there are people, as your neighbour.”²²⁵
- j) *Suffering*—“The form of Christ on earth is the form of the death of the crucified one;”²²⁶ “It is by Christians’ being publicly disgraced, having to suffer and being put to death for the sake of Christ, that Christ himself attains visible form within his community.”²²⁷
- k) *The church-community, generally*— “The church is the present Christ himself;”²²⁸ “The risen and exalted Christ has closed in on the world . . . in the form of the church-community;”²²⁹ “Church is the presence of God in the world.”²³⁰
- l) *The ‘space’ or ‘place’ of the church*—“What is the proper place of the church? . . . [It is the] place of the present Christ in the world;”²³¹ “It is Christ, the Crucified and Resurrected, who determines the living space of the church-community.”²³²

²¹⁶ DBWE 13, 324.

²¹⁷ DBWE 4, 226.

²¹⁸ DBWE 14, 818.

²¹⁹ DBWE 5, 55.

²²⁰ DBWE 14, 379.

²²¹ DBWE 4, 74.

²²² Ibid., 116.

²²³ DBWE 15, 505.

²²⁴ DBWE 10, 495.

²²⁵ Ibid., 545.

²²⁶ DBWE 4, 285.

²²⁷ Ibid., 286.

²²⁸ DBWE 4, 218.

²²⁹ Ibid., 238.

²³⁰ DBWE 12, 263.

²³¹ DBWE 11, 278.

- m) *The institutional structure of the church*— “This whole, structured, visible body is the present Christ. Wherever one differentiates between this structuring and the body itself, one surrenders faith in Christ.”²³³
- n) *The ‘law’ of the church-community*—“The law of the church-community is not a collection of legal regulations but rather Christ himself.”²³⁴
- o) *The church’s request*—“The community of Jesus believes that its Lord desires to be present wherever it asks him to be present.”²³⁵

This list is a mere sample of Bonhoeffer’s explicit usage, and does not include the many moments when the logic of presence is implied but not mentioned. The simplest and most appropriate deduction to make from this wide variety of expression is that—in keeping with the method of ontological promise—the reality of *Christus praesens* asserts itself prior to any attempt to systematise it under an existing theological rubric. Bonhoeffer’s conviction—antecedent to other commitments—is that Christ is present. Whenever Bonhoeffer wants to highlight the real influence revelation applies to lived existence, he appeals to the language of presence. In Bonhoeffer’s mind, it is imperative that theology account for *Christus praesens*, even if he himself struggles to systematise the logic and meaning of this fact.

3.5.2 *The sociality of revelation in the social-anthropological strategy*

Attempts to extend Bonhoeffer’s logic by applying a systematic framework to the language of presence can take one of two paths. The first is the alluring but elusive hope that these different ways of speaking can be separated and classified as belonging to different eras of his life, with each phase undergirded by its own distinct set of interests, rationales, and applications. The extensive and varied references to *Christus praesens* across his work resist such a classification, however. Bonhoeffer’s interest in presence is one of a few themes in his corpus that cannot be attached to a particular, limited circumstance.

Rather than classifying these various usages chronologically, the alternative is to group them under the logic of the most central themes. Broadly, the social-anthropological strategy offers the best attempt to do precisely this. More specifically, it attempts to assimilate these various strands of thought into the mutual relationship of two fundamental categories: Word and church-community. Word captures the proclamation of the gospel in its various forms: kerygma, Bible, Eucharist, baptism, etc. Bonhoeffer read Barth’s early work as giving Word

²³² *DBWE 14*, 471.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 463.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 473.

²³⁵ *DBWE 5*, 72-3.

priority over church, with church merely designating that community of people gathered around the proclaimed Word, whatever relationship that community might have to the visible structures of the church. Bonhoeffer was certainly struck by this vision and incorporated it into his own work at times. One hears strong echoes of Barth when Bonhoeffer writes, for instance, that “where the word breaks in, there is the church . . . there the church as a whole is Christianity, insofar as it hears God’s word over all reality.”²³⁶ Yet as much as Bonhoeffer was sympathetic to this understanding, his instinctive reaction when reading *Christian Dogmatics in Outline*, as mentioned in Chapter 1, was to attempt to reclaim some measure of priority for the actual existence of the empirical church.

The social-anthropological strategy offers a way to navigate between these dual convictions by insisting on the inherent sociality of revelation. Revelation in its kerygmatic dimension always falls on a people rather than an individual or, more accurately, creates a people where once there were only mere individuals. It does not make sense, then, to ask whether Word takes priority over church. The Word is always received by a church-community precisely because it simultaneously creates receptivity even as it gives the Word. As Bonhoeffer was noted as saying in a lecture: “[The] church is constituted through [the] word of God in Christ’s redemptive act. The word, and nothing else, is constitutive! [The] church is always already there. . . The church is always already included when we talk about the word.”²³⁷ Therefore, it is plausible that even the wide variety of Bonhoeffer’s language regarding *Christus praesens* could fit under the twofold typology of Word and church-community united in the social dimension of revelation.

At first glance, the intrinsic sociality of revelation also fits neatly with Bonhoeffer’s larger point, that what is required for revelation to impact our lived existence is an encounter with the Other, an encounter which imposes and therefore reveals our limits. Word creates church-community insofar as Word is spoken to us and thus implies an encounter with another person. This encounter in Word is the encounter with the divine Other which happens along with and for the encounter with many others in the *Gemeinde*. In this respect, the social-anthropological strategy appears perfectly faithful to Bonhoeffer’s conviction in *Act and Being* that:

²³⁶ *DBWE 11*, 281.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 310.

Only through the person of Christ can the existence of human beings be encountered, placed into truth, and transposed into a new manner of existence. But as the person of Christ has been revealed in the community of faith, the existence of human beings can be encountered only through the community of faith.²³⁸

In the spirit of greater concretion, however, a question must be put to the social-anthropological method. Is it—to be more precise—the encounter with Christ which liberates the isolated self? Or is it the encounter with the other human, which God has bound God's self to in such a way that to name the other is also to speak of the true Other? Is agapeic togetherness initiated by an encounter with Christ himself, or by an encounter with the other in whom Christ has elected to make divine alterity manifest? Marsh seems inclined towards the latter view, and in this respect he defaults to a Barthian protection of God's aseity. It is not divine being we encounter, *per se*, but the being of community which the transcendent God has made to act as the being of Christ for us. Marsh's own language is ambiguous. He writes, for instance, rather unhelpfully, that "Christ exists as the luminescence of agapeic togetherness."²³⁹ Pressing into that metaphor, it appears to be community which generates the light—the otherness of fellow humans which is substantively encountered—while Christ's own being is present as the quality of that light at its most brilliant. The metaphor may not be able to bear such close attention, but that interpretation generally coincides with Marsh's language about Christ's own being. "For Bonhoeffer," he writes, "it is the presence of Christ as community that enacts the metanoia of the new being."²⁴⁰ This does not necessarily clarify the question, either, except to note that Christ's presence is immediately qualified as a predicate of community. Marsh uses this same kind of construction later: "Jesus Christ as life together activates the living consciousness of the other as neighbour."²⁴¹ Here the relation seems clearer. The Word of Christ calls to the I in the transcendent act, initiating a proper awareness of another being. This other being is not Christ himself, but the neighbour whose otherness Christ has made to serve as a lifeline emerging from eternity to pull the ego from the whirlpool of self. It is in this relatively limited sense—in its ultimately socialising effect—that the encounter with otherness should be understood as an encounter with Christ, and thus as the immanence of God in Christ-existing-as-church-community..

²³⁸ *DBWE* 2, 114.

²³⁹ Marsh, *Reclaiming Bonhoeffer*, 151.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 153.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 157.

3.5.3 Revelation as the self-Christ encounter

At this point, in a very subtle way, the social-anthropological strategy begins to diverge from promeity as method. The logic of promeity begins with an encounter which forces the acknowledgement that this ‘who’ is present, and thus *pro me*. It is, by definition—prior to reflection—the person who is properly present, not the person who has appended the effects of his presence to the presence of a human other. This distinction is very slight, but nonetheless significant. As an example of this divergence, Marsh tends to be rather dismissive of the role that ‘encounter’ between God and human plays in Bonhoeffer’s theology. Marsh notes one early example of this language, from a 1928 lecture Bonhoeffer gave to his congregation in Barcelona: “Only through God’s call do I become this ‘self,’ isolated from all other people, called to account by God, confronted, alone, by eternity.”²⁴² Marsh brushes aside this kind of rhetoric as a feature of Bonhoeffer’s early thought which he quickly moved past. “Theologically,” Marsh writes, “he grew to distrust his Kierkegaardian and existentialist description of the self-God encounter.”²⁴³

Insofar as this quotation from Bonhoeffer’s early days emphasises the encounter with God as one which creates isolation instead of community, then Marsh is correct that Bonhoeffer discards that element of the claim. But the language of the individual self encountering Christ in revelation is one of a few themes that can truly be identified across Bonhoeffer’s entire body of work. Finkenwalde’s meditative discipline, for instance, was entirely grounded on the hope that attentiveness to scripture could lead one to encounter Christ afresh. “What we want,” Bonhoeffer writes in the guide to meditation given to his students, “is to encounter Christ in his own word . . . Each day see to it that you meet Christ before you meet other people.”²⁴⁴ The immediacy of this encounter is what shapes scripture into command, and command into a call to discipleship. Bonhoeffer writes in *Cost of Discipleship* of “The Christ who is present with us is . . . the incarnate, crucified, risen, and glorified Christ . . . he encounters us in his word.”²⁴⁵ In the *Ethics* manuscript it becomes slightly clearer that Bonhoeffer has left behind the notion of revelation inducing absolute solitude, but nonetheless still describes it as the encounter between person and Christ: “In encounter with Jesus Christ, a person experiences God’s call, and in it the calling to a life in community with Jesus Christ.”²⁴⁶ Note the construction, which seems to invert the logic of the social-anthropological

²⁴² DBWE 10, 367.

²⁴³ Marsh, *Reclaiming Bonhoeffer*, 140.

²⁴⁴ DBWE 14, 932.

²⁴⁵ DBWE 4, 206.

²⁴⁶ DBWE 6, 290.

argument. It is the encounter with Christ which leads to community, not the encounter with otherness which the transcendent God has made into a vehicle for encountering the *agape* love of Christ. Even from the later prison papers, one finds in fragmentary notes Bonhoeffer returning to this theme as an essential ingredient of real faith: “Christianity arises out of the encounter with a concrete human being: Jesus.”²⁴⁷ Below this line, Bonhoeffer likely carries on with a related thought, writing “Experience of transcendence,” the implication being that encounter with Christ is what constitutes the true experience of transcendence.²⁴⁸ Rather than speaking of entry into the communality of the church as the true encounter, Bonhoeffer embraces the Apostle Paul’s Damascus Road experience as the *ne plus ultra* of encounter with presence, not in terms of its ecstatic character, but in terms of its capacity to effect a real change on the lived existence of a human being. He writes to Bethge in 1944:

When Jesus made sinners whole, they were real sinners, but Jesus didn’t begin by making every person into a sinner. He called people from their sin, not into it. Certainly the encounter with Jesus turned all human values upside down. This is what happened at Paul’s conversion, but his encounter with Jesus preceded the recognition of his sins.²⁴⁹

Note the immediate significance of the encounter with Christ as a justifying event, a theme which we will return to in Chapter 5. For now, the point is that the language of encounter between individual self and God pervades Bonhoeffer’s writing, and this encounter is properly with the *pro-me* Christ, not with mere sociality. Despite its best intentions to the contrary, there is a perpetual risk that the social-anthropological strategy falls into the trap Bonhoeffer associates with Friedrich Gogarten, absolutising community “in such a way that in place of the encounter of human beings with the absolute, with God, stands the encounter with the You of the neighbour.”²⁵⁰

This is not to dismiss the significance of sociality or ecclesiology, even as a location of *Christus praesens*. Instead, the real problem with the social-anthropological strategy is not that it limits God’s self-disclosure to sociality, but that it actually does not have anything to say about God’s ontology at all. It has plenty to say about the being of *Dasein*, but it leaves Christ’s ontology hidden behind a neo-Kantian wall. Simply saying that otherness is the form

²⁴⁷ *DBWE* 8, 490.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 450-1.

²⁵⁰ *DBWE* 2, 88.

in which Christ exists is actually to say nothing of significance about Christ's ontological givenness to reality. The being of the God-human remains shrouded in the immanent Trinity. The nature of this being is revealed only in its qualified resemblance to the *agape* of fellowship.

In this respect, the social-anthropological strategy's problem is a mirror image of the immanentist strategy's problem. The immanentist strategy eagerly explicated the ontological aspect of the God-world problem, but then struggled to articulate the epistemological aspect without collapsing God into empirical reality. The social-anthropological strategy reverses this problem. Epistemologically, we are given a strong sense of how we can know where Christ is present—any place where we see self-giving, sacrificial love that respects individuality while gathering the lonely and rejected into embracing community. This may be entirely accurate, and yet the social-anthropological strategy remains relatively silent on the implications of this epistemology for the God-human's ontology, precisely because it uses a Barthian definition of revelation in order to preserve the Kierkegaardian 'infinite qualitative difference' necessary, in its understanding, to initiate agapeic togetherness.

In its dependence on a definition of revelation wholly owned by Barth, the social-anthropological strategy can never fully accommodate Bonhoeffer's concerns expressed in *Act and Being*. The difference between Barth and Bonhoeffer was alluded to in section 3.4 and will be explored at greater length in section 5.2, but suffice to say that the kerygmatic paradigm of Barth's theology of Word perpetually leaves revelation to be resolved in the intellect. Certainly, the human intellect itself is not affirmed by the revelatory Word, but the fallen intellect's abolition and restoration does nothing to change the fact that the Word is revelation in virtue of its content. It is a linguistic, sermonic metaphor for Christ, resolved in the eventual acceptance of its propositional truth. This resolution occurs in understanding, even as much as this redeemed intellect may require the illumination of new being.

But more than the content of revelation, it is exactly this new human being which is Bonhoeffer's greater concern—*Dasein* "transposed" by the "encounter" with Christ which only then creates the condition for the comprehension of Word, self, and other.²⁵¹ Bonhoeffer is dissatisfied with the presumption that this new existence can be created by revelation, insofar as revelation is predominately understood through the paradigm of kerygmatic Word. As proclamation, as truth, the Word must be heard and understood. This understanding must

²⁵¹ *DBWE* 2, 114.

be achieved in consciousness, and thus, in principle, there is nothing to prevent its casual absorption by the unruffled idealist self. What is required to liberate the *cor curvum in se* is not mere revelatory act captured by intellect, but the emergence of revelation's being over and against the being of self. What is required is a real act in being, a real sense of the Incarnate Christ as present in the world, rather than emerging from aseity to latch on to a particular facet of reality—a connection which can be merely comprehended rather than encountered. It is on precisely this point that Bonhoeffer is most critical of the neo-Kantian vestiges in Barth's theology. Bonhoeffer writes in *Act and Being* of Barth's actualism:

It must seem strange at first that the relation between God and human beings should dissolve into pure acts precisely where, at the outset, the transcendence of consciousness on the part of revelation is unequivocally asserted. The consequent assumption is confirmed, namely that transcendentalism is lurking here.²⁵²

Marsh recognises the significance of the event transposing *Dasein* in Bonhoeffer's theology, but places it firmly back under the rubric of a classical Lutheran notion of kerygma. In Marsh's interpretation of Bonhoeffer, it is "in the hearing of the Word" that "the inner person is called out of itself in kerygmatic proclamation."²⁵³ This call is what disrupts the interiorised self, opening it up to the outside world, it is "the reconstitution of the interior I as turned outward."²⁵⁴ Insofar as the Word is understood as mere 'call', however, it does not sufficiently address Bonhoeffer's concerns. No matter the power contained within this call to initiate, distinguish, unite, or transform, it remains, by its very nature, an act resolved in consciousness and thus exposed to precisely the transcendentalist paradoxes which *Act and Being* names and rejects. In this respect, the social-anthropological understanding of Christ's givenness reduces promeity to what Bonhoeffer critiques in the Christology lectures as mere "ideational power" emanating at a great distance from Christ's heavenly throne.²⁵⁵ Even as much as the social-anthropological strategy intends to speak about *Christus praesens*, it needs to be reminded of the other side to Bonhoeffer's Lutheran inheritance—as he quotes directly from Luther, "It is one thing if God is present, and another if he is present in you."²⁵⁶

²⁵² *DBWE* 2, 83.

²⁵³ Marsh, *Reclaiming Bonhoeffer*, 152.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 153.

²⁵⁵ *DBWE* 12, 311.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 314.

None of this is intended to diminish Bonhoeffer's interest in Christ-existing-as-church-community, but to point out that even this assertion cannot, by itself, easily resolve the problem of God and world even within Bonhoeffer's own thought. Instead, it presses us to consider a deeper logic which can incorporate a truly transcendent and yet truly ontological Christology which undergirds not only sociality, but ecclesiology, ethics, and more. The route towards this deeper logic is the method of promeity. Christological promeity presses us to take with utter seriousness the priority of the 'who' of revelation, and further presses us to re-orient our understanding of the God-world problem in the face of this personal presence. As such, promeity reminds the dialectical strategy that the hypostatic union of God and human is not eschatologically achievable but already accomplished. Promeity reminds the immanentist strategy that this presence remains free person. And, finally, we can add that promeity reminds the social-anthropological strategy that this person is true presence. When we assert that Christ is for us, we are not merely describing the transcendent Christ's intention, nor even describing an epistemic vantage from which we glimpse something of Christ's being. Instead, we are allowing that Christ has graciously revealed his own self as *pro me* before all else, in no other way and to no other end. In this sense, we must speak about Christ's real being in its necessary relationship to reality, even while we are perpetually reminded that this being is Jesus of Nazareth and none other.

3.5.4 Conclusion

There is something ingeniously untidy about Bonhoeffer's early dissertations, like the cluttered workshop of an eccentric inventor. A superfluity of ideas is left in piles on the floor, resisting an easy reconstruction of Bonhoeffer's thoughts, however neatly catalogued they might have been in the author's mind. Every retelling of Bonhoeffer's early theology is a stylised narrative. With that in mind, any number of loose leaves have been set aside for the purposes of highlighting a few significant traits which emerge in Bonhoeffer's thought. These concerns, expressed philosophically in the early theses, nonetheless appear over and over again in very practical ways across his work. Any theology which follows in the footsteps of Bonhoeffer must consider these concerns, not out of mere fidelity to Bonhoeffer, but because they indicate progress over the difficult terrain of questions already considered.

First, as has been repeatedly noted, theology's chief antagonist is idealism in the broadest sense, as the Adamic temptation to claim utter self-sufficiency, to reflect all reality back through one's self, and thus to usurp the place of God. Second, existence can only understand itself in reference to that which transcends it, always finding its own being in relatedness to

another. Third, that which is transcendent cannot be mere act, but must be real being, able to retain its alterity while exerting a compassionate limitation on the epistemological ego. Fourth, this being must encounter *Dasein*; it must exert its influence exactly in the encounter with already existing humans in their empirical reality. Fifth, this encounter with *Dasein* must form the condition for the human subject to be transformed—socially, ethically, epistemologically, existentially, soteriologically, and, ultimately, at the very ground of the self's being.

These five features should not be understood as philosophical boundaries around theology, but actually as philosophical manifestations of revelation's demand. They are not additions or limitations to promise; they are rather the implications of a commitment to christological promise for notions of act, being, and *Dasein*. This may not be immediately self-evident. Chapter 5 will indirectly return to these five features in light of a fuller portrait of promise. There, the attempt will be to extend promise's implications more concretely with respect to ontology, epistemology, and ethics. Before that, however, Chapter 4 will begin again with the revelation of God in Christ, returning to promise's source to consider the sharp grace of its radical demands and thus elaborate on its method in light of the loose threads still dangling from the various strategies mentioned in this chapter.

Chapter 4

Extending Bonhoeffer's Christology: Promeity as Method

4.1 Introduction

Promeity, as we have seen, is the ontological grounding of *Christus praesens*. We find ourselves encountered by the contemporary presence of the personal 'who' of revelation. This revelation both permits and provokes a further articulation of God's relationship to the world. This is the sense in which Bonhoeffer uses promeity—as a statement, as a christological axiom on which we can build. Yet, it is the claim of this thesis that promeity describes not only an axiom, but a method. Understanding promeity as a method requires us to see the way in which the axiom of promeity actually entails a logical movement of its own. Chapter 2 began to sketch the contours of this movement in three steps, suggesting that promeity requires first returning again to the Incarnation, not as idea, but as the person of Christ. Second, promeity guarantees the freedom of the Incarnation to stand as the grounds for all further reflection. The person of revelation is free as person and cannot be objectified and therefore placed onto a list of universals constructed by the totalising subject. Third, however, promeity requires acknowledging the person of revelation as presence. Permitting Christ to define his own self-disclosure means accepting that his being *pro me* is no contingent fact of the moment, but is his own ontological self-constitution. Chapter 2 ended by acknowledging the difficulty, even for Bonhoeffer, of concretely articulating these three commitments simultaneously.

Bonhoeffer's ambiguity in this regard creates an opening for his readers to construct their own way of extending his thought to more clearly define the relationship between God and world. Chapter 3 examined three interpretive strategies for making of sense of Bonhoeffer's commitments. The argument of Chapter 3, however, was that each strategy, in its own way, ran afoul of precisely those commitments sketched in Chapter 2 which ought to ground a reading of Bonhoeffer's Christology. The dialectical strategy could not understand with

sufficient seriousness that beginning with the Incarnation means taking the union of divine and human as already defined and established. The immanentist strategy took seriously the extent to which divine presence has been established as necessary and abiding, but could not retain the other half of promiseity's commitment, that this presence remains free person. The social-anthropological strategy took seriously the free aseity of Christ's personhood, and made a robust attempt to also define Christ's presence in the relatedness of Christ to sociality and the construction of human personhood. Yet, the social-anthropological method could not go far enough in understanding presence as a self-description of Christ's real being. Even to the extent that the social-anthropological method took Christ's presence seriously, it nonetheless could not fully take seriously that the *pro-me* Christ has revealed presence as constitutive of his very being. Being present, for the social-anthropological strategy, is something the person of Christ *does*, not a description of what Christ's personhood actually *is*. In this respect, even the social-anthropological strategy diverges from the path of promiseity.

All three interpretive strategies are faithful to Bonhoeffer insofar as they try to imitate his own desire to speak with greater precision about the nature and location of *Christus praesens*. All three strategies, however, are built on the premise that locating *Christus praesens* in reality is just another way of describing the attempt to locate the transcendent God in the created world. In Bonhoeffer's mind, however, these are two very different tasks, and taking the first task seriously in fact dissolves the second task entirely, as we shall see. In this respect, then, all three strategies do not sufficiently understand the radical intensity of Bonhoeffer's commitment.

It is the purpose of Chapter 4 to articulate this degree of intensity by returning to a closer reading of Bonhoeffer's christological language. The result will be to add a fourth step to the three steps of promiseity mentioned above: that beginning again with the revelation of Incarnation means not only allowing Christ to define his own being, but to define all of our theological language and, ultimately, our entire description of reality. This is the point at which promiseity truly becomes a method. The recurring pattern of promiseity's movement is the pilgrimage to place perceived aporia before the Incarnation, only to discover that some of the ideas we hold in tension are equally grounded and already united in Christ. Our attempts to hold one idea over another—or even to resolve them in a dialectical movement—actually deny their pre-existing unity in revelation which ought to precede not only our reflection, but our very definitions. We do not need to relate reality to God, but to redefine our own conception of reality to fit its *a priori* relatedness to God. This means, in the same breath, that

we must redefine our language of divinity to fit God's *a priori* relatedness to the world. Refining this thought requires appropriating promise as a cognitive and rhetorical pattern which we can extend beyond the scope of dogmatic christological questions in order to apply it to contemporary issues, including the questions of a fundamental ontology. But before we can be prepared for that final leap, it is important to engage in a closer reading of Bonhoeffer's christological commitments.

4.2 The doctrinal pillars provided by promise

"Death and Christmas have moved very close to each other," Bonhoeffer wrote to the alumni of Finkenwalde during Advent, 1939, after reporting the accidental death of a brother during military service.¹ Earlier in the year, Bonhoeffer had fled military conscription by travelling to America. Agonised by the distance from friends and family at this most dire hour, however, Bonhoeffer hastily returned as Germany moved towards war, which broke out in September. By December, at least sixteen of Bonhoeffer's former Finkenwalde students had already been drafted into the army, and one former Confessing Church pastor from Pomerania had already been killed in action.² For anyone unfamiliar with Bonhoeffer's ethos, it would seem a strange time for an extended meditation on doctrine. Yet, amidst the pastoral letters of care and concern sent to his former students and their families, Bonhoeffer continued to circulate theological briefs to the pastors of the Confessing Church in Pomerania. Rather than distract him, the bleak shadow of war only seemed to intensify Bonhoeffer's resolve to interrogate life theologically, to bring the full force of revelation to bear on existence amidst horror, courage, and sacrifice. In faithfulness to the Real One, this theological interrogation of life could not be separated from a lived interrogation of theology, a determined examination of the possibilities inherent in ancient dogmatic debates.

Consequently, shortly after writing the aforementioned letter, Bonhoeffer wrote his first formal engagement with Christology in its doctrinal aspects since the 1933 lectures. Circulated among the Pomeranian pastors during December, 1939 as a meditation on Christmas, Bonhoeffer considered anew the implications of God born in a manger. In terms of content, there is little fresh ground broken or new insights which were not already included in the 1933 lectures. Little about Bonhoeffer's Christology appears to have changed in the intervening six years. Nonetheless, this brief reflection is worth attending to because it gives

¹ *DBWE* 15, 288.

² *Ibid.*, 273.

us an insight into the particular aspects of Christology Bonhoeffer considered worth highlighting in a condensed format. As we shall see, the claims he mentions in 1939 are also the very doctrinal pillars which arise out of promeity.

There are three points which Bonhoeffer chooses to highlight in 1939. First, in becoming human, God took on human “nature, being, flesh of all human beings” and in taking on human nature took on “the epitome of all human possibilities altogether.”³ As much as this is a statement about the comprehensive effect of the Incarnation, it is equally a statement about the priority of Christ to define the human. The confession that “God become human by taking on human nature,” stands in contrast to the alternative, that God took “on a single human being.”⁴ God did not select a human existence from among many, but took on humanity as a whole to transform and redefine it. This provides hope not only of our acceptance, but also the proximity and priority of *Christus praesens*: “where Jesus Christ is, we are, whether we know it or not.”⁵

Secondly, in 1939, Bonhoeffer reiterates a major motif from the 1933 lectures which we will discuss in greater detail below. This is the assertion that the hypostatic union precedes reflection on the Incarnation, excludes the *extra Calvinisticum*, and so “the divine nature is hidden in the manger” but “is nonetheless present; it is hidden for our sake, it is present for our sake.”⁶ When one is encountered by the person of Christ, one finds oneself addressed not by the human form or aspect of divinity, but by the already united “human and divine nature joined in the person of the Son of God.”⁷ The implications of this claim will run very deep, as we shall see.

Thirdly, in 1939, Bonhoeffer highlights something which is easily overlooked as a mere technical point of Lutheran dogmatic minutiae. This is the doctrine of the *genus majesticum*, “that is, the impartation during the incarnation of the attributes of the divine nature to the human nature.”⁸ This is a provocative point with immense implications which Bonhoeffer does not revisit as thoroughly as he did in 1933. Suffice to say that, in the 1939 reflection, the *genus majesticum* serves as a reminder of “the deepest and ultimate union of God with the

³ *DBWE 15*, 530.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 531.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 532.

human being.”⁹ This, Bonhoeffer reminds us, provides the basis for a sacramental theology. To take the *genus majesticum* seriously is to take Christ’s *hoc est corpus meum* seriously, and vice versa.

The doctrinal questions of Christology are still very much alive for Bonhoeffer in 1939, even in a world craving violence, careless of the answers. As we revisit the core ideas of the 1933 lectures, it is worth bearing in mind the 1939 meditation. The three ideas mentioned above will not only shape our appropriation of the 1933 lectures, but will also prove, in the end, to be the theological bridge linking traditional doctrine with Bonhoeffer’s christological innovations of the 1940’s, manifest particularly in his *Ethics* manuscript. Whatever seems dichotomous between Bonhoeffer’s middle and late theology—transcendence versus immanence, church versus world, faith versus autonomy, religion versus secularity—finds a shared conceptual starting point in the Christology of 1939. It is therefore worth considering the origin of these ideas in the 1933 lectures, before considering the destination of these ideas in *Ethics*.

4.3 Promeity in a dogmatic frame

As a hermeneutical problem, attention has been and should be given to the issue of what it means to extract Bonhoeffer’s theological claims from his lectures, insofar as they are also attempts to instruct his students on the breadth of doctrine.¹⁰ The 1933 Christology lectures range over a wide of variety of topics. Though there is a legitimate argument to be made that the whole series represents Bonhoeffer’s own convictions, the highlights arising from the 1939 meditation will not only serve to focus our attention, but to limit our inquiry to those claims which are most explicitly Bonhoeffer’s own.

As noted in chapter 2, the Christology lectures begin with the ‘who’ of revelation serving as barrier to the egocentric pretensions of idealist philosophy. This ‘who’ is available, it confronts us, and precisely in confronting us reveals itself to be the *pro-me* person of Christ. To acknowledge Christ as *pro me* is simultaneously to acknowledge him as person and as presence. In this respect promeity is an ontological statement; it describes Christ’s own way of being. As person, Christ retains the power to act. As presence, Christ has made himself present to us, and done so in a way that abides. In abiding, he discloses being, *Christus*

⁹ *DBWE 15*, 533.

¹⁰ See Larry L. Rasmussen, “Editor’s Introduction to the English Edition,” in *DBWE 12*, 37ff., as well as p. 299 for a discussion of issues surrounding the reconstruction and translation of the Christology lectures.

praesens. Promeity as method means not only starting with the fact of Christ's revelation, but then recognising that the incarnate Christ discloses himself as act and being, as a unity which resists division into contrasting aspects.

To begin with the *pro-me* 'who' is to acknowledge that the one revealed to us is already "the human-God Jesus."¹¹ This is simultaneously to take seriously *Dasein*, to begin our reflection from our own historical situatedness with respect to the issue. As mere humans, our access to the divine is entirely given to us in revelation, and if this revelation is Christ, then our thinking is very much circumscribed by the definitions and possibilities inherent to the Incarnation. What we are left with, in Bonhoeffer's words, is the fact that "I cannot know who the human Christ is if I do not simultaneously think of the God-Christ and vice versa."¹² This description of the 'who' precedes our reflection just as surely as the 'who' itself precedes our reflection.

This raises three questions which need to be addressed. First, and most importantly, what are the implications for theological thought of asserting that it is the God-human who confronts us, and therefore that divinity and humanity belong together despite our many attempts to think of them separately? Second, then, what are the implications for our understanding of divinity if we locate its definition in the revelation of the incarnate God-human? What, for instance, does it say about God to assert that it is not only Christ's physical humanity but his divinity which has taken form in time and space? Third, there is the converse question, i.e. what are the implications for our understanding of humanity if we locate its definition in the revelation of the incarnate God-human? What, for instance, are the implications of asserting that it is Christ the historical human who is still temporally present despite his physical body having been put to death some two thousand year ago? The three christological doctrines manifest in the 1939 reflection are the pillars erected by promeity precisely because, as we shall see, they correspond to the answer to these three questions.

Let us begin with the first question: what are the theological implications of being encountered by the God-human of the Incarnation? The implications, for Bonhoeffer, are both simple and far-reaching. It immediately shifts the grounds of all christological debate. It is this point which Bonhoeffer hints at in his second statement from the 1939 reflection. If the driving force behind classical dogmatic debates has been the attempt to articulate the relation

¹¹ *DBWE 12*, 313.

¹² *Ibid.*

of human and divine in the person of Christ, then that entire debate has been set aside. Bonhoeffer's insight is that there is no way of even engaging that debate without taking a definition of human or divine as prior to the reality of the Incarnation, and therefore subsuming the Incarnation under the pre-existing definitions of our language.

Instead of the Incarnation representing a mere datum which can be analysed through the categories of divinity and humanity, Bonhoeffer understands that what has been given in revelation is already the hypostatic union of both, together. The Incarnation is the definition of human and divine independently, while also defining the two as hypostatically one in the person of Christ. The Chalcedonian formula, in Bonhoeffer's mind, is less *actus reflectus* than *actus directus*. It is not a solution to a problem puzzled out by the early church; it is rather a response to the bare facticity of the Incarnation. The Chalcedonian formula serves a negative function, it is the sentinel guarding the mystery of the *actus purus*, reminding us "that all options for thinking of all this [the relation of the two natures] together and in juxtaposition are represented as impossible and forbidden options."¹³ Beyond acknowledging the union of human and divine as the content of revelation, there can be no further elaboration on the underlying mechanics. Nor can there be a kind of reflection that focuses on one without the other, as if one can, in Bonhoeffer's language, "get behind Christ's claim" to an understanding of either facet without the other.¹⁴

With one blow, Bonhoeffer cuts through the Gordian knot of much traditional christological debate. There is no need for further inquiry into the relation of the two natures. What is required, however, is further reflection on a very different dichotomy—the relation between the incarnate God-human and his veiled appearance to us in the *homo ioma sarkos*, the likeness of flesh.¹⁵ Again, the *homo ioma sarkos* should not be understood as the human form of Christ's divinity, but as the shroud in which "the whole God-human is hidden."¹⁶ The "stumbling block" of the *homo ioma sarkos* tempts us to separate *pneuma* from *sarx*, to separate exalted, impassable divinity from humiliated, crucified flesh. But the *homo ioma sarkos* should be understood, in a sense, as external to the mystery of the Incarnation rather than internal. It does nothing to modify the nature of the underlying union which Chalcedon confesses. Whatever subsequent reflection we make concerning the Incarnation, we always

¹³ *DBWE* 12, 342.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 304.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 313.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

find ourselves making reference to “Jesus Christ as the already existing God-human.”¹⁷ Therefore, it is the total God-human who is present and available; it is the total God-human who is veiled in eternal mystery.

What makes the *homo ioma sarkos* a stumbling block is that the empirical Christ who walked in our midst has been crucified. In both life and death, he appears to us in humiliation precisely when we anticipate that the true God-human would be revealed in exaltation. This again refines the christological concern. It is not the fact that God would appear as a human which should give us pause. To the extent that it does give us pause, it only demonstrates how beholden we are to pre-existing expectations of divine and human. Instead, what should give us pause is that the God-human would appear as *this* human, as the wandering, rejected, and executed Lamb of God. It is for this reason that, in Bonhoeffer’s Christology, “the doctrine of God who became human and the humiliation of Christ must be kept radically separate.”¹⁸ To speak of Christ’s becoming flesh as divine condescension is once again to attempt to ‘get behind’ the Incarnation to a pure divinity which precedes the hypostatic union.

One implication of this argument is manifest in Bonhoeffer’s hard opposition to the *extra Calvinisticum*, the Reformed notion that there is a second person of the Trinity *a se*— some surplus of Logos which exists prior to or beyond Jesus of Nazareth.¹⁹ To speak of God’s condescension, therefore, is not to speak of God’s free decision to become human, but to speak of the God-human’s free decision to be clothed in humiliation, to reveal God’s self in a manger, on a cross, with “nowhere to lay his head” (Matt. 8:20). The juxtaposition of the essential glory of the God-human with his empirical appearance as the crucified God-human is what “blind[s] the mind of unbelievers” (2 Cor. 4:4). It is easier to reconcile Christ’s glory with his appearance after the resurrection, but the prior unity of the God-human must remind us that the ‘who’ of revelation will always be “the presence of the God-human as the Resurrected One, that is, the Exalted One” and “at the same time the presence of the humiliated Christ.”²⁰ Therefore, “to speak of Jesus’s being humiliated is not to put any limit on his divinity.”²¹ The humiliated God-human is not the final or summary form of the divine, but it is inextricably united with the exaltation of the God-human.

¹⁷ *DBWE* 12, 313.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 356.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 346.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 314.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 355.

It is only as Bonhoeffer begins to discuss the three-fold *Gestalt* of Christ in word, sacrament, and church-community that promise begins to emerge as a pattern. As word, Christ is neither a word spoken by the Father, nor the speaker of many commands, but Christ “is the Word in the form of the living Word to humankind.”²² As such, Christ is the union of speaker and spoken, linguistic person and presence in one. As person, the Word transcends mere idea which “the [human] person needs only take possession of.”²³ As presence, the Word is always “a word spoken to us”²⁴ and thus we can say that “Christ is by nature, as God’s Word spoken to me, *pro-me*.”²⁵ The challenge is not to locate God’s words with respect to human words. Both find their origin in the *pro-me* Christ, the Word of God. The challenge is ensuring that we find the actual words we speak caught up in this union of divine and human Word. For Bonhoeffer, true kerygma is the place where our commonplace word finds itself united with the Word.²⁶ Importantly, however, this is to say that in the true sermon—when the words we speak find themselves caught up in the Word—we find our words not only emerging as divine words, but as *more human words*. Hence, the Word “does not mean Christ as timeless truth, but rather as truth breaking into a concrete moment.”²⁷

This is Bonhoeffer’s formulation in the 1933 lectures, but it echoes a very persistent theme in his understanding of kerygma which had emerged most clearly as he began to wrestle with the possibility of the church giving an explicit command of God’s will, such as “fight this war, or do not fight this war.”²⁸ As true kerygma:

the commandment needs concretion in content through the one who proclaims it; the commandment: ‘Love thy neighbor’ is as such so general that it requires the strongest concretion if I am to hear what it means for me here and today. And only as such a concrete word to is it God’s word. He who proclaims the word must therefore be aware that he must include the respective situation within the form of the commandment, so that the commandment is relevant to the real situation.²⁹

²² *DBWE 12*, 316.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 317.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *DBWE 11*, 360.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

Notice the distinction here: not all kerygma is Word, but that which is Word will find itself at the nexus of God's will and the particular circumstances of the moment. It is only in this respect that it can manifest the pre-existing unity of divine and human, of eternity and history, at the *kairos* when the Word of God speaks.

As sacrament, the same underlying logic announces *Christus praesens* in the bread and wine. In light of the history of Protestant debate on the nature of Christ's presence in the sacrament, Bonhoeffer follows the Lutheran argument on this point—that Christ's words of institution, "this is my body," are the first and last statement on the matter.³⁰ Bonhoeffer, while agreeing with Luther in this respect, does not use this foundation as a reason to re-engage in a 16th-century polemic. Instead, the logic of promise once again cuts through the debate. Even Luther's arguments about the relation of Christ to the substance of the elements are, for Bonhoeffer, "impossible metaphysical hypostatizations. In each of them, one element of the reality has been isolated and made into a system."³¹ What is given in Christ's *hoc est corpus meum* is that "the God-human is present now in the sacrament."³² With this established, there is no need for further reflection on the metaphysics of substance and accidents, indeed, such reflection is made impossible. We cannot speak of the meeting of God and reality in the Eucharist, because to do so would be to act as if we can speak of either in isolation. We can only speak of the God-reality, the God-human.

The sacrament is Bonhoeffer's new christological challenge made manifest. Rather than debating the relation of Christ to reality, we require further reflection on the relation of the exalted Christ-reality to its appearance for us as a bit of crumbly bread and a sip of wine. The latter is Christ's form in "his being humiliated in the present."³³ It is this confession that the God-human's glory can be reconciled with the lowly appearance of a simple meal which is "the stumbling block" manifest in the sacrament.³⁴

Finally, in the church-community, the same pattern of thought applies. The Incarnation reveals to us Christ "as the new humanity," and therefore as the true humanity in its relatedness to the divine.³⁵ In this way, revelation "creates the form of the church-

³⁰ *DBWE* 12, 320.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 321.

³² *Ibid.*, 319.

³³ *Ibid.*, 322.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 320.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 323.

community” and so “the church-community is the body of Christ.”³⁶ As before, this fact exists prior to reflection, in the givenness of the *pro-me* Christ’s presence. The real problem for ecclesiology is understanding how the reality of Christ-existing-as-*Gemeinde* can be reconciled with the church as “it still lives in the aeon of sin.”³⁷ By the light of revelation’s reality, “Insofar as the church-community is the church-community, it no longer sins.”³⁸ Clearly, however, the church-community does sin, and by implication distinguishes itself from its true nature as the church-community. This, then, is “the stumbling block” as it relates to the church-community.³⁹ The challenge is to understand even the sinful church as *Christus praesens*, but in his humiliated form, standing at some perceptual distance from the God-human in his exalted form, and thus at some distance from the true body of the church-community.

Let this serve as a concluding word, then, with respect to the social-anthropological strategy for interpreting Bonhoeffer described in Chapter 3. For all of its promise, it was ultimately an attempt to understand the social possibilities of the church as a place where the transcendent Christ has chosen to disclose his presence. We are in agreement that Christ-existing-as-church-community is not only a formula for understanding ecclesiology, but a location for understanding sociology and even anthropology. We are in agreement, furthermore, that it is enormously significant to Bonhoeffer’s project. The disagreement is that, in the attempt to articulate the transcendent Christ’s presence in the social existence of the new humanity, the social-anthropological strategy implicitly understands the first in isolation from the second. The critique of the social-anthropological method here very much parallels Bonhoeffer’s critique of Luther’s sacramentology. The attempt to refine the ‘how’ of God’s relation to sociality is actually subjecting the Incarnation to prior definitions of both God and sociality. What the Incarnation presents to us is the prior union of human sociology and the divine in the social existence of Christ. The real question is not how to articulate Christ’s relationship to a social-anthropology, but how to understand the exalted social life of the new humanity in relation to the humiliated form of our broken, isolating, possessive, disconnected relating to one another. In this respect, there is much to commend the work of scholars like Green, Floyd, and Marsh as an attempt to refine and resolve the second question. But the second question reveals the mistaken presumptions inherent in the first question, and therefore the work of the social-anthropological strategy—for all of its potential application to social

³⁶ *DBWE 12*, 323.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

existence—cannot serve as an adequate resolution for the interest which occupies this essay, i.e. implementing promise as a method for addressing the problem of God and world.

In Bonhoeffer's application of the Incarnation to word, sacrament, and church, we begin to truly see promise emerging as a pattern of a thought. Beginning again with the Incarnation drives us back to consider the *pro-me* Christ who has encountered us. Acknowledging his priority means permitting him the freedom of self-definition. Acknowledging his radical otherness as person means admitting that definitions derived from any experience outside of Christ cannot be applied to Christ. The Incarnation supplies its own definitions. This means acknowledging that the person, in his being presently manifest, defines his own being for us in terms of presence. Moreover, however, promise as a method means returning all of our definitions to the Incarnation as the true source of knowledge, as the Logos which confronts and limits the human logos.

The first words which will have to be redefined upon encounter with the incarnate Christ are the very words we take to be constitutive of Christology: 'divine' and 'human.' A new definition of each arises from Bonhoeffer's Christology precisely from the points raised in his 1939 Christmas reflection. What are the implications for 'divinity' of acknowledging the already-there God-human? What are the implications for 'humanity'? The first and third Lutheran points of emphasis which were highlighted in the 1939 reflection are clearly present in the 1933 lectures as answers to these questions.

First, "God . . . became human as we became human. He is completely human. Nothing human is foreign to him."⁴⁰ This is not to subject God to a prior definition of humanity, such "that we already knew beforehand who God is," but to locate 'divinity' in its proper definition in Christ.⁴¹ Moreover, God has taken on not only the form of a man, but "the whole nature of humankind."⁴² At its limit, this leads Bonhoeffer to critique the doctrine of enhypostasia—an argument for holding together the hypostatic union and Christ's full humanity without also attributing to him sinfulness. Even the formulation of the human hypostasis "existing enhypostatically in the divine hypostasis,"—carefully calibrated to preserve the fundamental unity of Christ—contains within it a pre-conceived notion of distinct divine-ness and human-ness.⁴³ Consequently, it is "an ultimately concealed form of docetism."⁴⁴ It betrays our

⁴⁰ *DBWE 12*, 353.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, 334.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 335.

willingness to continually pit Christ's glory against the degraded fallenness of humanity. But, for Bonhoeffer, "God glorifies himself in the human" and therefore, "God's self-glorification in the human is thus the glorification of the human."⁴⁵ We must rid ourselves "conclusively with the attempt to unite two isolated existing realities. We believe that Jesus the human being is God, and that he is so as *the* human being, not in spite of his humanity or beyond his humanity."⁴⁶

Christ is sinless—a dogmatic assertion which Bonhoeffer affirms. This assertion is not affirmed, however, as a judgment of Christ's actions. It "is not a judgment within a moral system but rather a recognition, through the eyes of faith, of the One who does these things."⁴⁷ In this respect, Bonhoeffer is not concerned with justifying the goodness of Christ's actions, understanding that it is exactly Christ's entry into the humiliated form of the *homo ioma sarkos* which veils all human action in "the ambiguity of good and evil."⁴⁸ Christ's holiness is not an assessment after the fact, but a presupposition revealed by the present 'who'. His glory, therefore, is not the spotlessness of his holiness, but precisely the fact that this Holy One would be humiliated in the likeness of flesh. Bonhoeffer, while affirming Christ's perfection, seems perpetually more opposed to erecting an insurmountable wall between Christ and humanity's sinfulness than fearful that Christ's perfection might become tainted by sin.

A definition of divinity which begins with the *pro-me* Christ therefore finds its glory not in isolated purity, but in the love required to enter the state of humiliation. In terms of the way Bonhoeffer's Christology informs his broader theological project, it is worth noting the implications here for his critique of docetism. The early church reacted against docetism out of soteriological concerns—human flesh could only be redeemed to the extent that Christ had assumed it and therefore atoned for it. Bonhoeffer agrees with this critique, but as a secondary matter. More fundamental is the problem that docetism is motivated by "an abstract idea of God, a doctrine of God that prefers to leave the human element to one side."⁴⁹ This is less a soteriological concern than an ontological concern—docetism does not properly begin with Christ *pro nobis*. Its origin "lies in the antithesis between idea and appearance" which Bonhoeffer attributes to "Greek" and "pagan" thought rather than the "Jewish thinking" of

⁴⁴ *DBWE* 12, 335.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 355.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 354, emphasis in original.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 357.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 333.

scripture.⁵⁰ Bonhoeffer's presumption is that a more biblically-faithful understanding would presume the unity of idea and appearance. This is clearly not the same as saying that the idea is merely extrapolated from appearances, but that the idea is made manifest precisely in its appearance. Any apparent contradiction between the two is not a reason to adjust the idea, nor to dismiss the appearance, but to call the capacities of human observation into question. Applied to Christology, the apparent paradox between our notion of God *a se* and God appearing in the manger lies in our own limitations rather than in any inherent contradiction between the two.

It is Bonhoeffer's boldness to assert the presence of divinity in union with its broken appearance—at the moment when we are most tempted to perceive a divide—that holds together the radicalism of promeity's method. Ethically and politically, it informs his later work, even down to the very practical decision to participate in the conspiracy to overthrow Hitler, thereby imitating Christ by “acting in vicarious representative responsibility and entering out of love for the real human being into the guilt of the world.”⁵¹ In one sense, it can be understood in the context of a Lutheran *theologia crucis*, the logical consequence of truly “unit[ing] both justification and Christology into an inextricable whole, so that it is not possible to think of God without the world, or of forgiveness of sins without Christ.”⁵² Admittedly, however—in the context of historical theology and ecumenical conversation—Bonhoeffer's Christology occupies a fairly radical position on this point. Pressed to its limits, it can make Bonhoeffer appear even more Lutheran than Luther. It is for this reason that the Lutheran Jaroslav Pelikan, in an early reading of Bonhoeffer, found himself worrying over whether Bonhoeffer “barely extricates himself from the Ebionite heresy.”⁵³

A re-definition of humanity in response to the Incarnation takes seriously the last point highlighted in the 1939 Christmas reflection—Bonhoeffer's expansive appropriation of the *communicatio idiomatum*. The dogmatic doctrine of the interaction between the divine and human natures in the one person of Christ receives a distinctively Bonhoefferian spin. For Bonhoeffer, the interaction of the two cannot be limited to Christ's person; it must describe not only their relatedness in the Incarnation, but the origin of their intrinsic relatedness through Christ. The *communicatio idiomatum* includes the *genus majesticum*, which

⁵⁰ *DBWE* 12, 333.

⁵¹ *DBWE* 6, 238.

⁵² H. Gaylon Barker, *The Cross of Reality: Luther's Theologia Crucis and Bonhoeffer's Christology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 97-8.

⁵³ Jaroslav Pelikan, “The Early Answer to the Question Concerning Jesus Christ,” in *The Place of Bonhoeffer*, 164.

“asserts that the attributes of the divine nature can and must be expressed by the human nature.”⁵⁴ The *pro-me* structure of Christ leads immediately to this doctrine. As the encounter of presence, we understand that, “The body of Christ is not bound by its bodily nature but is present everywhere simultaneously as the genus majestaticum.”⁵⁵ Because “Jesus is ever-present” and always the God-human, one cannot look to God without seeing the human.⁵⁶ In Christ is a glimpse not only of redeemed humanity, but of humanity in its truest sense, a humanity abandoned by *homo sapiens* in the Fall.

It is important to clarify that the re-definition of language in the Incarnation, for Bonhoeffer, does not permit us to treat the person of Christ as mere idea. We are not supplied with a new vocabulary—a meaning for terms that can be extricated from their origin in Christ and then broadly applied in other contexts to other debates. Even in their other uses and applications, these terms must retain their Christ-relatedness—it is the first clause of their definition. It is along these lines on which Bonhoeffer accuses Hegel of docetism.⁵⁷ Hegel, in Bonhoeffer’s eyes, turned the Incarnation from an act of decision into an act of necessity—“the taking shape of the idea” of the God-human.⁵⁸ This docetic turn is not redeemed simply by locating its origin in God’s free decision. Whether the principle of incarnation precedes or follows after Christ’s Incarnation, it is nonetheless an idea which fails to attend to the real and immediate appearance of *Christus praesens*. In a similar vein, the Incarnation’s renewed definition of humanity does not give us a set of markers for living as new humans in compassion and self-sacrifice. For Bonhoeffer, the Incarnation gives us Christ. ‘Humanity’ and ‘divinity’ must be understood as related to Christ even before they are understood as related to one another.

In this spirit, Bonhoeffer reflects in the 1933 lectures on Christ “as the center of human existence, of history, and of nature.”⁵⁹ In short sketches, Bonhoeffer hints at the logic of promeity applied to these three phenomena of reality. Bonhoeffer’s preference is to speak about the way Christ defines “the boundary and the centre” of all three.⁶⁰ This terminology is likely more confusing than helpful, however. It gives the appearance that Bonhoeffer is describing Christ’s relationship to each phenomenon in two ways, when it would be more

⁵⁴ *DBWE* 12, 345.

⁵⁵ *DBWE* 12, 320.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 345.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 337.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 324.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 325.

accurate to say that Bonhoeffer is describing each phenomenon as possessing two distinctive natures, with Christ related differently to each nature.

With respect to human existence, for instance, Christ is not the centre of our present existence, but the centre of our true existence “before God.”⁶¹ In this respect, “Christ is not the center that we can see here but rather the centre according to our faith.”⁶² Christ is thus the centre of the new humanity—of humanity as it ought to be in its restored relationship to God—but also the limit of the old humanity—the boundary against which our fallen logos crashes.⁶³ In this respect, Christ is the centre of true humanity—the new humanity—without losing his relatedness to the false, inauthentic humanity of the empirical human condition.

With respect to history, Christ is the centre as “the meaning of history,” and the “promise” toward which “history lives.”⁶⁴ In this respect, Christ is the centre of true history, the narrative of God’s redeeming work in the world. And yet, Christ is also the limit of “every other claim that history might make.”⁶⁵ Any other false narrative of historical movement which does not account for Christ finds itself “swallowed up in an event that takes place in the deepest desolation of human life, on the cross.”⁶⁶ Here, one can reach back to Bonhoeffer’s definition from *Sanctorum Communio*, that “history in the proper sense only begins with sin, since we intrinsically associate the fact of mortality, which makes ‘history’ possible for us in the first place, with sin.”⁶⁷ The inauthentic empirical history which we annotate and interrogate finds its origin in the Fall, as the moment when the social life of humanity becomes a proper movement, first away from God, then into itself in the cycles of death and destruction, then at odds with itself as the perpetually restless and ultimately ill-fated attempts at self-generated reconciliation. Christ’s appearance—when “God’s word became history”⁶⁸—announces the limit of this shadow history in the simultaneous proclamation of a “messianic history”⁶⁹ which is the true story of the world.

This same troubled search of existence for its true self is manifest in nature, for “what are natural catastrophes if not nature’s dim desire to free itself, to make itself into a new

⁶¹ *DBWE 12*, 324.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 325.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *DBWE 1*, 59.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁶⁹ *DBWE 12*, 325.

creation?”⁷⁰ Christ as “the firstborn of all creation” (Col. 1:15) consequently “makes all other creatures into the old creation.”⁷¹ Christ is centre in his relatedness to creation as it is redeemed before God, and therefore the centre of creation, properly speaking. This is not the same as the fallen creation of our present experience, yet Christ abides in relationship to this fallen creation as well, as the boundary which announces its limit. In his relatedness to human existence, history, and creation, Christ “is the judgment and the justification.”⁷² He appears as the limiting judgment against fallen reality by simultaneously appearing as the centre of justified reality.

As we have seen, the 1933 lectures alone provide a pattern of redefinition that establishes promeity as a method. God, humanity, Word, church, Eucharist, existence, history, and nature are subjected to the same basic methodology. Promeity demands their redefinition in the Incarnation, in the person who is presence. Locating these concepts in the Incarnation means taking Christ’s revealed reality as prior to our reflection, and shifts into view a new object for our consideration: the relation of these phenomena in their empirical existence to their true existence in Christ, or, put another way, the relation of the Real One’s presence veiled in humiliation to the same presence revealed in exaltation. The true ontological centre of each facet of reality is hypostatically united with Christ. That which is empirically available to us, however, is no less defined by its relation to Christ. The difference is one of humiliation to exaltation, of judgment to justification, of stumbling block to revealed glory. Spelling this out more concretely will be the concern of Chapter 5.

For now, the central conceit of this thesis is that promeity as method is Bonhoeffer’s chief contribution to the problem of God and world. Promeity must be applied with utter seriousness not only to ecclesiology and anthropology, but to a fundamental ontology. Transcendence and immanence are yet further vocabulary which must submit to the logic of promeity. Thus, Bonhoeffer’s contribution to the problem of God and world is not to answer the question, but to abolish it entirely. Any attempt to reconcile God to world is bound to fail precisely because it implicitly treats the two in isolation, and thereby finds itself speaking from some other ground than the given unity of the Incarnation. What should trouble us is not God’s relationship to reality, but the Christ-Reality’s relation to our empirical existence. Being itself is not related to Christ, being *is* Christ insofar as we acknowledge the prior unity of the universal and the *Dasein* in Christ. A Bonhoefferian fundamental ontology refuses to

⁷⁰ *DBWE* 12, 327.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*, 325.

acknowledge prior definitions of either God or reality, and thus refuses to acknowledge the basic dichotomy which makes the God-world problem so troubling.

Refining this insight requires first grappling with Bonhoeffer's own fragmentary attempts to explicate it fully in his later work. As much as it can be a challenge to read Bonhoeffer's later theology in continuity with his earlier, it can be a challenge even to read *Ethics* in continuity with itself. Written in short bursts at intervals between 1940 and 1943, *Ethics*, as its title suggests, is principally concerned with the problem of God and world in its ethical aspect, i.e. how do we act in accord with God's self-revelation?⁷³ Given the overlap with Bonhoeffer's decision to join the anti-Hitler conspiracy, *Ethics* is obviously no mere academic exercise. The desire to not only understand a Christian ethic but motivate the church to act in accord with God's work lends *Ethics* its intensely focused and forceful urgency. As such, Bonhoeffer's own understanding of ontology is available only by inference, working backwards from his express interest in a Christian ethic that can meet the demands of the moment.

4.4 Promeity, Christ-Reality, and *Ethics*

The earliest portion of *Ethics*, a section entitled "Christ, Reality, and the Good," is the place where the ontological issues rise closest to the surface. While Christology is not addressed in *Ethics* in relation to any dogmatic categories, nonetheless it quickly becomes apparent that Christology is central to Bonhoeffer's attempt to create a properly Christian definition of the good. Bonhoeffer clearly retains the basic sensibility of promeity—that God must be allowed to define God's self—and so God must be allowed to speak first about what is good or, more precisely, to reveal God's self as goodness. This is an affirmation of God as Creator and consequently as grounds for the world properly understood. "Where God is known by faith to be the ultimate reality," Bonhoeffer writes, "the source of my ethical concern will be that God be known as the good."⁷⁴ In further keeping with the method of promeity, to speak of God is first to speak of Christ, "as ultimate reality is no other than the self-announcing, self-witnessing, self-revealing God in Jesus Christ."⁷⁵ Furthermore, however, in fidelity to his earlier Christological insights, to speak of Christ is to acknowledge the God-human, the two natures in one person prior to any reflection. And so to speak of God's ultimate reality is to

⁷³ For a reconstruction of the timeline of Bonhoeffer's work on the *Ethics* manuscript, see *DBWE* 6, 471.

⁷⁴ *DBWE* 6, 48.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

acknowledge that, “There are not two realities, but only one reality, and that is God’s reality revealed in Christ in the reality of the world.”⁷⁶

Precisely in this formulation, however, the subtle ambiguity of *Ethics* is present. A great deal hinges on how exactly we read what Bonhoeffer means by “the reality of the world” in which “God’s reality” is revealed. If God’s reality is in some way generally available in the empirical reality of the world, then perhaps Bonhoeffer’s later theology is best characterised by an immanentist type move towards the collapse of divinity into the empirical world. This, then, would be the final result of “the christocratic character of reality,” in Larry Rasmussen’s words.⁷⁷ Indeed, this is how Rasmussen reads *Ethics*, as the place “where Bonhoeffer states vividly that Christ’s taking up the world into himself in the Incarnation established an ‘ontological coherence’ of God’s reality with the reality of the world.”⁷⁸

Bonhoeffer fails in *Ethics* to articulate the relation between Christ-Reality and reality as clearly as he establishes the relation between Christ as the centre of the new and the limit of the old in the 1933 lectures. There is no further discussion of the *homo ioma sarkos*, of Christ’s presence behind the veil of humiliation. Bonhoeffer’s usage of the world ‘reality’ refers at times to empirical existence and at times to the Christ-Reality, without sufficient distinction. Precisely this ambiguity permits the interpretation that there is no difference here—that empirical reality has become the sum and extent of the Christ-Reality. Yet there are also moments of forceful clarity in *Ethics* in which the distinction is maintained. This permits an equally plausible interpretation, that Bonhoeffer’s later fundamental ontology remains congruent with his earlier Christology, and the ambiguity in his usage owes less to an immanentist shift in his thought than it does to the unguarded urgency of his writing, unmodulated by any final attempt to gather *Ethics* into a systematic and publishable whole.

This latter interpretation of *Ethics*—that Bonhoeffer maintains a distinction between Christ-Reality and empirical reality—emerges at intervals over the course of the manuscript. For example, Bonhoeffer writes in the section “Christ, Reality, and the Good”:

The unity of the reality of God and the reality of the world established in Christ (repeats itself, or, more exactly) realizes itself again and again in human beings, Still, that which is Christian is not identical with the worldly

⁷⁶ *DBWE* 6, 58.

⁷⁷ Rasmussen, *Reality and Resistance*, 16.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

. . . Rather, the unity that exists between them is given only in the Christ-reality, and that means only as accepted by faith in this ultimate reality.⁷⁹

The language in the distinction between the “the reality of God” and “the reality of the world” very much parallels the insights of the 1933 lectures. The two are united, but only insofar as the Christ-Reality establishes a new centre for both or, more properly, reveals itself as the place where both are rightly understood as one. This unity “realizes itself again and again in human beings,” suggesting that the Christ-Reality advances on humanity in its real existence, but nonetheless stands over *Dasein* as the true essence which existence is unable to realize in itself.

Tracing back over the outline of this same logic, Bonhoeffer writes that “the place that in all other ethics is marked by the antithesis between ought and is, idea and realization, motive and work, is occupied in Christian ethics by the relation between reality and becoming real.”⁸⁰ In this parallel construction, “reality” falls on the side of “ought,” and “becoming real” on the side of what “is.” In this way, Bonhoeffer attributes true real-ness to the ought, to that which is not empirically immediate, but which is nonetheless even more real in virtue of its revealing a world reconciled to God. Meanwhile, that which is—the empirical and historical facts of the matter in the present—are tasked with “becoming real” and therefore are not only distinct from but implicitly less real than reality itself. This “becoming real”—or, to use the earlier construction, this God-world unity “realizing itself”—is the movement of the *ought-to-be* into the *is*, the agential encroachment of the Christ-Reality on the dominion of factual existence.

Echoing the 1933 distinction between idea and appearance, Bonhoeffer writes that, “Neither the idea of a pure Christianity as such nor the idea of the human being as such is serious, but only God’s reality and human reality as they have become one in Jesus Christ.”⁸¹ Any understanding of humanity or divinity in isolation is a subjection of the Incarnation to pagan ideation; an ethical understanding which attends to the Christ-Reality pressing upon us is both more faithful to Christ and more faithful to the concretion of the moment.

⁷⁹ *DBWE* 6, 59.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 155.

Counter-intuitively, at first glance, this places empirical, observable reality on the side of an abstract idea rather than concrete appearance. However, in the context of Bonhoeffer's concern from his earliest days about the boundless egoism of the idealist subject, this claim crystallises. An understanding of reality which places the perceiving I at the centre—as empirical observation necessarily must—is ultimately groundless and ephemeral. What is required in order to root any understanding—including an ethical understanding—in the *concretissimum* of the moment is an encounter with a truly insurmountable Other, an act which our being finds itself defined in reference to. In this respect, it is the Christ-Reality which is more real, and therefore less subject to idealism, than the world as it appears to the human subject. Bonhoeffer picks up on precisely this point later in *Ethics*, in a section entitled “History and Good,” when he critiques the attempt to turn the biblical Christ's activity into mere principle:

Such an ‘ethic of Jesus’ does not lead to concrete historical responsibility. . . . What dominates this perspective is the notion of a self-sufficient, ‘autonomous’ historical reality, upon which a Christian ethic, which in its origin and nature is foreign to reality, is then to be forcefully imposed. However, what is overlooked here is the decisive fact from which alone the structure of what is real can be understood, namely, God's becoming human, God's entering history, taking on historical reality in the reality of Jesus Christ.⁸²

Here again we see the double feature of Bonhoeffer's understanding. At one and the same time a Christian ethic should be neither understood as distinct from reality—and therefore as something which must be “forcefully imposed” upon reality—nor as wholly defined by empirical reality. According to the method of promeity, it is the Incarnation which serves as grounds for a Christian ethic, not as principle but as Christ-Reality. A truly Christian ethical existence is related not to life as circumscribed in our own definitions, but to life as it is in Christ, and therefore to existence in the truest sense. Echoing the logic regarding the ‘who’ of revelation from the 1933 lectures, Bonhoeffer writes:

Ever since Jesus Christ said of himself, ‘I am the life,’ (John 14:6; 11:27), no Christian thinking or indeed philosophical reflection can any longer ignore this claim and the reality it contains . . . No question about life can

⁸² *DBWE* 6, 230-1.

reach behind this ‘I am.’ The question of what life is changes here into the answer of who life is. Life is not a thing, an essence, or a concept, but a person—more specifically, a particular and unique person. This particular and unique person is life, not in possessing life among other attributes, but as an I, the I of Jesus . . . By proclaiming this fact, Jesus says that he not only is the life, in the sense of some sort of metaphysical entity that might perhaps affect me, but that he is precisely my life, our life.⁸³

Permitting the ‘who’ of revelation the freedom of definition means discovering that Christ has not stopped after defining his own being, but has comprehensively defined what can truly be described as life. Picking up on the language of the earliest theses, Bonhoeffer insists that:

The statement that our life is outside ourselves and in Jesus Christ is in no way the result of our own self-understanding. Instead, it is a claim that encounters us from outside, which we either believe or contradict. When we are struck by the word—which is the purpose for which it is spoken—we recognize that we have fallen from life, from our life.⁸⁴

Humanity’s fallenness places us at a remove from life, even while we are alive. The same basic construction of Christ as the centre of the Real and the limit of our self-enclosed, illusory experience informs Bonhoeffer’s ethical theory just as it informs his understanding of church and nature, sacrament and history.

The question of ethics is really about “how the reality in Christ—which has long embraced us and our world within itself—works here and now or, in other words, how life is to be lived in it.”⁸⁵ This formulation both fits our description according to the method of promeity, and yet retains the ambiguity which makes *Ethics* an unsettled, unfinished effort. Clearly distinguished here is “the reality in Christ” and “our world,” yet the former somehow embraces the latter within itself. The argument here is that this relation is best understood in parallel to the shifted christological concerns of 1933. The Incarnation has dissolved the question of what Christian life has to do with the world. The ‘who’ of revelation will not permit Christian discipleship to be thought of apart from an ethical life in and for the world. It is in this respect that the problem has shifted. No longer is the problem determining whether

⁸³ *DBWE* 6, 249-50.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 250.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

God would have the Christian act, but instead locating the true action of Reality in relation to our fearful and tentative gestures of pious goodwill. When Bonhoeffer writes—provocatively, albeit rather unhelpfully—that “only in Christ is the world what it is,” this is best read as an affirmation of the true reality of the world in its ought-ness, hidden in God’s reality, present yet veiled in the *homo ioma sarkos*.⁸⁶ Bonhoeffer’s affirmation that “God and world are enclosed” in the name of Jesus does not indicate a simplistic equivalency which collapses God into the empirical world for the sake of Christ, though it could indeed be read that way.⁸⁷ Instead, it ought to be read alongside Bonhoeffer’s admission, following shortly thereafter, that “Jesus Christ cannot be identified either with an ideal, a norm, or with what exists.”⁸⁸ Hence, “to speak of the world without speaking of Christ is pure abstraction.”⁸⁹

As a preliminary suggestion, Reality, for Bonhoeffer, appears as a kind of *tertium quid*, a layer between God and the world in which both find themselves united. This third layer can simultaneously be conceived of as mediating between God and humanity, as revealing the true essence of both God and humanity, and as providing a transcendent boundary beyond which the empirical experience of humanity cannot pass of its own accord. Bonhoeffer unites these descriptions when he writes, “The figure of the reconciler, of the God-man Jesus Christ, steps into the middle between God and the world, into the center of all that happens. In this figure is disclosed the mystery of the world, just as the mystery of God is revealed in it.”⁹⁰ It is not difficult to trace the continuity of this language with Bonhoeffer’s earlier theology. It is prefigured, for instance, in Bonhoeffer’s description in *Cost of Discipleship* of “something which comes between persons called by Christ and the given circumstances of their natural lives.”⁹¹ As presence, this something is a real description of new existence in Christ. As person, this something:

is Christ himself. In becoming human, he put himself between me and the given circumstances of the world. I cannot go back. He is in the middle. He has deprived those whom he has called of every immediate connection to those given realities. He wants to be the medium; everything should happen only through him. He stands not only between me and God, he also stands between me and the world, between me and other people and things. He is

⁸⁶ *DBWE* 6, 67.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁹¹ *DBWE* 4, 94.

the mediator, not only between God and human persons, but also between person and person, and between person and reality. . . . Since Christ there has been no more unmediated relationship for the human person, neither to God nor to the world.⁹²

Read superficially, this passage represents Bonhoeffer at his most otherworldly, speaking negatively about reality as something from which “Christ has untied the person’s immediate connections” and extricated the believing Christian.⁹³ Outside of the broader movement of promise, this passage seems to suggest not only distance between the Christian and reality, but a distinctly lesser significance given to reality in the Christian’s concern. Understood in this way, *Cost of Discipleship* stands in stark contrast with what seems like a more positive statement in *Ethics*: “There are not two realms, but only the one realm of the Christ-reality.”⁹⁴

The argument of this thesis, however, is that the method of promise equally encompasses both movements in Bonhoeffer’s work. The reality of *Ethics* is the Christ-Reality to which empirical reality bears a necessary but not identical relation. Reality, as Christ-Reality, is in this sense even more real than our factual existence; it is the truest essence of our factual existence. To Bonhoeffer’s testimony—“only in Christ is the world what it is”—we can add an earlier affirmation—“only before God does the human being become what he is.”⁹⁵ The Christian therefore cannot ignore Reality any more than she can ignore Christ.

In the same way, *Cost of Discipleship* should be understood as suggesting precisely this disjuncture between the Christian and empirical reality, not in favour of quietist disengagement, but in favour of a real participation in the Christ-Reality, and therefore an even greater participation in reality than was ever possible before. Empirical existence fools us; its “illusion is immediacy.”⁹⁶ Christ sanctifies the real, not as it appears to us in its immediacy, but as it ought to be. Thereby, Christ simultaneously divorces the Christian from an interpretation of reality which is mere abstract, self-centred idealism and forces her into a concrete engagement with the Christ-Reality, a participation in the agapeic restoration of reality to its own true identity. It is in this sense that promise begins again with the person of Christ, but then must immediately and simultaneously attend to Reality, as the abiding

⁹² *DBWE* 4, 94.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁹⁴ *DBWE* 6, 58.

⁹⁵ *DBWE* 12, 281.

⁹⁶ *DBWE* 4, 94.

transcendent presence of Christ. “In Jesus Christ, the Real One,” Bonhoeffer writes, “all reality is taken on and summed up; Christ is its origin, essence, and goal.”⁹⁷

One would be forgiven for seeing in *Ethics*’ various claims something immensely provocative and yet unfinished, the ragged edges overlapping in unsystematic and occasionally uncomfortable ways. In the eagerness of his vision and the ferocity of his polemic, Bonhoeffer was prone to stretching each argument to its breaking point. Consequently, there are moments in *Cost of Discipleship* where it does seem as if Bonhoeffer is advocating the Christian’s disengagement from the world. There are moments in his later theology where it does seem as if Christ has fully immersed his identity not merely in the *tertium quid* of the Christ-Reality, but in empirical reality as we have it at hand. Rather than taking these extremes as indicative of fundamental shifts in Bonhoeffer’s theology, this essay argues that such extremes are a by-product of the superabundance of his thought, of his tendency to provoke and only later (if at all) to reconcile or ameliorate these provocations.

The interpretive claim here is not that promiseity is manifestly central to Bonhoeffer’s later theology, but that understanding the movement of promiseity as a method yields a fruitful reading of Bonhoeffer’s work at all stages. Promiseity as an ontological claim, as a claim which has already rejected the very grounds on which the God-world question is asked, is a persistent impulse in Bonhoeffer’s theology and the simplest way of drawing together seemingly contradictory statements. It finds its origin in his Christology, and remains present in all his work as a kind of syllogistic instinct, but is never developed as fully or coherently as it could have been.

As a contribution to the question of God and world, however, the hermeneutical argument about interpreting Bonhoeffer is actually a secondary matter. Unfilled gaps or overlapping excess around the perimeter of Bonhoeffer’s thought should not distract us from its overall shape—that taking promiseity seriously means taking the God-world problem not as resolved, but as impossible to even ask in the first place. Promiseity as a pattern of thought takes on a life of its own as a method which can be applied to a variety of theological problems, but which also needs to be sharpened with respect to the question of transcendence and immanence.

A few interpreters—Ernst Feil, Heinrich Ott, and Christiane Tietz—have already noticed this feature of Bonhoeffer’s fundamental ontology, although none have seemed to know quite

⁹⁷ *DBWE* 6, 263.

what it means or where it leads. It is useful, however, to consider the paths their thinking has taken in order to explore promise's potential and dangers with respect to articulating a Bonhoefferian fundamental ontology.

4.5 Feil and the principle of concretion

Ernst Feil's work acknowledges that Bonhoeffer's theology finds its centre in his Christology and his Christology finds its centre in the *a priori* 'who' of revelation. Referring to the 1933 lectures, Feil writes that "it was evident that he set out from the reality of Christ present now."⁹⁸ In this respect, "Bonhoeffer sought God as the concretissimum; to him God was both concrete reality and the mystery that is close to us."⁹⁹ This concrete reality is not to be confused with "a positivistic-empirical concept of reality that comprehends no mystery."¹⁰⁰ Therefore, we find the same *Cost of Discipleship*-era wedge driven between reality as it is constructed by the idealist empirical ego and Reality as it is hypostatically united with Christ. "The understanding of reality that we alone regard as valid in our unmysterious lives," Feil admonishes, "is an illusion and, therefore, represents the loss of actual reality. Our illusionary reality cannot be corrected by actual reality."¹⁰¹ The transcendent God is not otherworldly, but "is true reality" yet remains transcendent in virtue of "transcend[ing] what is alleged to be reality understood positivistically."¹⁰² Feil adds a sweeping conclusion: "All reality which deserves to be called concrete, and therefore genuine, reality depends on this concrete reality of God."¹⁰³

Thus far, Feil's analysis captures exactly what is essential about the movement of promise back to the pre-existing union of God and reality in the Incarnation, re-orienting our reflection towards an understanding of the relation of this exalted God-Reality to the humiliated God-Reality of our experience. Where Feil's interpretation runs into trouble, however, is in the way he begins to extract from this movement a generalised notion of concretion. He writes:

The concept 'concrete' may serve, therefore, as a guide through Bonhoeffer's theology. Concrete reality, as represented by the concrete real God, the concrete historical incarnation of God's word in Jesus Christ, the

⁹⁸ Feil, *Theology of Bonhoeffer*, 19.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

concrete empirical church, and the concrete reality of the world made real in and for Christ, is in every instance the basis on which theology makes its deliberation.¹⁰⁴

As Feil's analysis progresses, it is this attentiveness to "the concept 'concrete'" which informs his study more than an analysis of the *concretissimum*—the Christ-Reality. The earlier insights about the nature of true reality drop away, replaced by the extrapolation of concretion as a principle for the trajectory of Bonhoeffer's thought. Perhaps the best that can be said is that Feil assumes this hermeneutic to be faithful to what he believes are Bonhoeffer's underlying impulses. The broad assumption about Bonhoeffer as a man interested in speaking to the concretion of the moment is an entirely plausible reading of Bonhoeffer's personal makeup, but can mistakenly motivate an interpretation of his theology which makes empirical reality the non-negotiable feature in his thought. Thus, Feil begins his study with the comment that Bonhoeffer "wanted to concede the status of given reality and to regard it seriously."¹⁰⁵ This sentence conflates two separate ideas. Certainly, Bonhoeffer wanted to take empirical reality with utter seriousness. But a serious approach to any concept—most especially 'reality' or the 'concrete'—must permit the Incarnation the freedom of definition, and therefore must contest the status of given reality rather than concede it. With this presupposition in mind, however, the only result of Feil's otherwise admirable reading of Bonhoeffer's Christology is to motivate a theological justification for this attention to the principle of concretion.

The best response to Feil's interpretation comes from Bonhoeffer himself. In a 1932 review of Karl Heim's *Glaube und Denken*, Bonhoeffer takes up Heim's critique of Karl Barth. According to Heim, "it is Barth's ultimate, perhaps not conscious, intention to speak of God in the sphere of abstraction to protect himself from God *in concreto*."¹⁰⁶ Heim's evidence for this claim is Barth's seeming indifference to ethics—Barth's failure to "provide a specific answer to the question of what I should do."¹⁰⁷ Heim's accusation contains a degree of common sense—surely the theology which yields a specific resolution to a tangible problem is more concrete than a theology which continues to articulate first principles? Yet, for Bonhoeffer, this is an appeal to concretion in its most naïve sense. The desire for a quick and

¹⁰⁴ Feil, *Theology of Bonhoeffer*, 45.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁰⁶ *DBWE 12*, 255.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.* It is worth noting that Bonhoeffer is also troubled by what he perceives as the church's ethical abstention in Barth's theology. Bonhoeffer, however, comes at this problem from a very different angle than Heim, an angle which we will explore further in Chapter 5.

comprehensible resolution is insufficiently wary of the self-serving whispers of the *cor curvum in se*. Bonhoeffer moves to defend Barth on this point, arguing that Barth “knows that the *concretissimum* can only be spoken by the Holy Spirit and that every *concretum* of human words remains an *abstractum* when the Holy Spirit has not said them.”¹⁰⁸ As background, one should again infer Bonhoeffer’s persistent anxiety about idealist abstraction. The seemingly ethereal Word, for Bonhoeffer, turns out to be more concrete than the empirical reasoning of embodied humans. This is only true, however, because of its concretion in the Incarnation. The perpetual temptation of idealism is to turn this concretion into mere concept. As Bonhoeffer writes earlier, in his 1931 essay “Concerning the Christian Idea of God”:

The idealistic philosophy conceives of history as of the realization of ideas, values, etc. History becomes ‘symbol,’ transparent to the eternal spirit. The essence of single historical facts is that they mean something general, but not that they really are something. . . The earnestness of ontological consideration is weakened through reinterpretation of axiological judgments. Jesus becomes here the symbol of God’s love, his cross means forgiveness, and in the very moment that we know all that means we could, theoretically, forget the facts forever. The fact being only the transient bearer of eternal values and ideas—that is to say, Jesus being only the transient bearer of the general new truth taught by him according to the will of God. In short, idealistic philosophy does not take seriously the ontological category in history. Which means that it does not take history seriously.¹⁰⁹

This passage serves as both a response to Feil and a reminder of the narrow ridge promiseity as method will have to traverse. With respect to Feil, promiseity is not justification for attributing to Bonhoeffer the same kind of naïve interest in concretion for which Bonhoeffer criticised Karl Heim. Christ is not an exemplar of concretion, Christ is the concrete itself. To borrow the words of Eberhard Bethge, “Concreteness is to be understood not as an addition or second activity but as a genuine attribute of revelation itself.”¹¹⁰ With respect to the broader project of this essay, there is a forceful reminder about the temptation to extract mere concepts from the personal presence of the Incarnation. All theological thought must feel threatened by promiseity insofar as theology takes itself to be a systematic or comprehensive word. The

¹⁰⁸ *DBWE 12*, 255

¹⁰⁹ *DBWE 10*, 457.

¹¹⁰ Bethge, “Challenge of Bonhoeffer,” 33.

return to *Christus praesens* threatens the very vocabulary we take to be necessary for the *actus reflectus*.

It should be noted that Bonhoeffer himself does not stand apart from this temptation to conceptualise. To the extent that Feil is guilty of turning the concrete into mere principle, it can be argued that he is only attempting to remain faithful to Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer's own language slips, at times, into a casual totalising that makes it easy to confuse his true agenda. When Bonhoeffer writes in *Ethics*, for instance, that "In Christ we are invited to participate in the reality of God and the reality of the world at the same time, the one not without the other," there is a sense in which Bonhoeffer is submitting to the dualistic language of idealism even as he tries to defend the unity of God and world.¹¹¹ Such is the challenge of truly extending the logic of promise. Even in arguing for the union of divinity and humanity in the God-human, there is a perpetual reference back to autonomous definitions of "divine" and "human"—precisely the ideas which promise calls into question.

Feil's appropriation of promise provides a useful warning. It was earlier proposed that we might conceive of the Christ-Reality as a kind of *tertium quid*—a layer of reality existing between God and world. Rather than clarifying the issue, however, this conception only serves to lend the old problem of God and world a new vocabulary. As long as we begin with the dualistic language of transcendence and immanence, we are perpetually at risk of either collapsing the Christ-Reality into the static structure of empirical existence, or else holding the Christ-Reality at a distance, as if it constitutes some second, slightly reduced mode of transcendence. The challenge for promise is to truly make the language of autonomous divinity and humanity impossible in light of the personal presence of the incarnate Christ. A new vocabulary which takes the 'who' of revelation seriously can neither accept the claim that Christ-Reality is mere givenness of God's self over to humanity's conceptual categories, nor the claim that empirical reality is merely the recipient of the Christ-Reality's punctiliar actualism. The same challenges discussed in Chapter 3 emerge all over again. As person, the Christ-Reality cannot be conceived as mere fixed quiddity of empirical reality. As presence, the Christ-Reality cannot be conceived as possessing a merely contingent relationship to empirical reality. This is the new problem of God and world after the Bonhoefferian Christological shift. It is no longer the question of reality's relationship to God, but of understanding the way in which our experience of reality is both obstructive illusion and potential intersection with respect to the active presence of the Christ-Reality.

¹¹¹ *DBWE* 6, 55.

4.6 Ott and Christ-Reality's ethical demand

Few interpreters of Bonhoeffer have better understood what is at stake in his Christology than Barth's successor on the faculty at Basel, Heinrich Ott. Ott realises both the problems and the possibilities of a Bonhoefferian ontology which asserts that "the personal confrontation of God is a component which essentially determines the situation of my existence."¹¹² In the spirit of promise, Ott analysis acknowledges that "the presence of Jesus Christ was never a question for Bonhoeffer; it was the *beginning* of his questioning."¹¹³

In his own appropriation of Bonhoeffer's Christology, Ott understands the initial encounter with *Christus praesens* beginning in the kerygma, yet acknowledges that this encounter is with the real being of Christ such that "the personal nature of God belongs to the essential structure of the Kerygma."¹¹⁴ Crucially, however, this presence remains person, such that "surrendering 'theism' or the personal nature of God means, not only renouncing a certain religious or metaphysical representation, but becoming blind to an active element or dimension of existence."¹¹⁵ To the extent that Bonhoeffer's theology represents an abolition of metaphysics, this turns out to mean less a materialist reduction than an accusation that neither materiality nor traditional theological categories give sufficient regard to Reality. Our empirical experience, while physical, is nonetheless the meta-level abstraction. In ontological promise, as Ott understands it, "what Bonhoeffer sought was to structure the ontology of all that is real as Christology, or in other words, to develop Christology as the ontology of all that is real."¹¹⁶ This places all of our definitions in the docks, and forces a return to the *concretissimum* of the Incarnation in order to understand Reality. "All concepts of reality which do not take account of Christ are abstraction," Ott writes, "that does not mean simply that they would be false, but that they do not express the whole, final and intrinsic nature of reality."¹¹⁷ This is manifest in Bonhoeffer's theology as the claim that "Jesus Christ equals reality. But this surely implies that he is not only real, that he is not only one reality besides others, but that he is that reality itself, which or who is the truly real in all that is real."¹¹⁸ To

¹¹² Heinrich Ott, *Reality and Faith: The Theological Legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1971), 50.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 167, emphasis in original.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 170.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 167.

maintain the distinction clearly, Ott adds, “the real is not simply the factual, the empirically verifiable; it has in addition a new dimension of depth.”¹¹⁹

The potential for confusion, however, is already present as the *in* of “the truly real *in* all that is real” as well as the *addition* of “in addition a new dimension of depth.” What does this *in* and this *addition* give us in terms of a description of Christ-Reality’s relation to empirical reality? The first formulation suggests that empirical reality is the superabundance—the spatial container within which Christ is revealed. The second formulation suggests that Christ-Reality is the superabundance—an extension of empirical reality into a transcendent beyond. Both formulae are potentially problematic, but Ott makes a useful effort at articulating this relationship more clearly.

For Ott, a tentative answer begins by reference to a “theology of the Holy Spirit” which then gives force to Bonhoeffer’s ethical concerns.¹²⁰ At minimum, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit has at least “showed us the ‘*extra nos*’ of God as at the same time the true ‘*in nobis*’, which showed that the personal and suprapersonal God is in no way some transcendent anthropomorphic ‘object’.”¹²¹ The traditional doctrine of the Holy Spirit, in a sense, already describes the work of the Christ-Reality in its personal component. Furthermore, living *in nobis*, the Holy Spirit is also presence, although a presence more descriptive of Christian existence than of a fundamental ontological givenness. Ott hopes to capture some sense of a broader givenness, however, in the ethical component of existence. “As he who is nearer to us than we are ourselves,” Ott writes, “he is the constitutive moment giving form to our real existential situation.”¹²² This “constitutive moment” is an allusion back to Bonhoeffer’s “moment of ethical decision” from *Sanctorum Communio*. In Ott’s reading, the proper location of Reality emerges from “the ethical point of attack.”¹²³ The ethical demand of the moment calls us to act in accord with Reality, and thus functions as the location of Reality, properly understood, as “the real presence of God at any given time in the ethical situation.”¹²⁴ This serves as a potential resolution to the question of empirical reality’s relation to the Christ-Reality after Bonhoeffer’s Christological shift. How is the Christ-Reality necessarily present to empirical reality, without being structurally beholden to it? In virtue of its being the persistent, transcendent ethical command to act in accord with Reality. The

¹¹⁹ Ott, *Reality and Faith*, 174-5.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 171.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 181.

decision whether to abide by this command is foisted upon us by our empirical situation, yet there is nothing about the empirical situation which will demand action, or even inform us of the best course of action. Ott writes:

My duty as one who exists responsibly is not to ask myself how I can effect something in the world and on the world and on myself, but to surrender myself to the fact that God is already there as the unsurpassable reality, already present in the very things which are the subject and sphere of my responsible decisions and my ethical existence in a given situation, that God is already there in the ethical situation in which a claim is made upon my responsibility, and in a sense is waiting there for me.¹²⁵

The call of Christian discipleship is thus an attentiveness to Christ's command in Reality's demand, which can only be manifest through our empirical situation. We remain alert, prepared to take on our ethical responsibility, for "wherever we come up against reality, it can be Christ encountering us unawares."¹²⁶ This is not to re-imprison theological and ethical reasoning within the walls of the subjective I, but to press Reality upon *Dasein* as the being of the truly untameable Other—"To speak of Jesus Christ as the real in all reality will have precisely the effect of opening our eyes to the unplumbable depths in the real."¹²⁷

Ott clearly understands what promise requires and uses ethics as a promising entry into a further clarification of the relation between Christ-Reality and reality. Two problems present themselves rather quickly, however. The first is that, as someone appropriating Bonhoeffer's theology, Ott feels beholden to the course and limits of Bonhoeffer's work. In this respect, the unfinished *Ethics* does not seem to Ott to yield enough clarity to refine the point further. At best, Bonhoeffer was only able to give "an indication" of "the real presence of God in the ethical situation."¹²⁸ In this way, Bonhoeffer's work serves as "a signal, calls us to go on to finish the task, to a venture of seeing and hearing," but offers nothing more.¹²⁹ Thus, as Ott readily admits, "the manner of the real presence of Christ in all reality . . . is not yet solved.

¹²⁵ Ott, *Reality and Faith*, 173.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 167.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 374.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 181.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

Bonhoeffer himself has not answered the question.”¹³⁰ Bonhoeffer’s legacy leaves us with only the fragments of “a few concrete indications” of the future shape of such a solution.¹³¹

Ott’s own best attempt at “extending [Bonhoeffer’s] lines” is to pursue a more concrete definition of Christ’s presence in the ethical situation.¹³² Here, Ott picks up the notion of formation from *Ethics*. The moment of ethical decision is also our encounter with Christ, and also the moment of our Christian formation, insofar as “conformation means being drawn into the reality and form of Jesus Christ, who is the Incarnate, Crucified and Risen.”¹³³ These three descriptors—Incarnate, Crucified, Risen—“are the three essential and constitutive components of the one reality of Jesus Christ.”¹³⁴ Ott quotes at length from *Ethics* on this point and deems “precisely these three components as the essential ones in the encounter with Christ.”¹³⁵ While all three are constitutive of the Christ encounter, Ott takes the Crucified component of the Christ-Reality to be the most promising way of finding Reality in the real. This more concretely locates “the Messianic suffering of Christ, the suffering of God in the world,” as “a deep dimension of the omnipresence of Christ, and moreover, the specific present-day one.”¹³⁶ At this point Ott brings Bonhoeffer into conversation with Teilhard de Chardin as another thinker “concerned with the presence of God who is completely other in the reality with which we meet.”¹³⁷ The two share a common interest, in Ott’s reading, though Teilhard’s engagement with God’s presence was expansive, occurring at the level “of the universe” while “for Bonhoeffer the basic experience of reality was that of humanity.”¹³⁸ This mutual conversation leads Ott to consider Christ role as Mediator in the theology of Bonhoeffer. With Christ’s Crucified aspect in mind, Ott attempts to read Christ as Mediator into Bonhoeffer’s notion of Christ’s vicarious representation in suffering. Perhaps suffering as an existential category, we can surmise, is the place where Christ mediates reality for us.

Unfortunately, Ott’s analysis, while provocative, is problematic precisely because the deeper he presses into the Teilhardian logic of mediation, the harder it is to hold this vocabulary together with Bonhoeffer’s commitment to ontological promise. This is the second problem with Ott’s analysis: he cannot fully extricate himself from the dualistic, autonomous language

¹³⁰ Ott, *Reality and Faith*, 189.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*, 181.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 183.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 373.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 377.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 375.

of God and world, and mediation only exacerbates this tendency rather than diminishing it. Ott himself calls into question whether “it is enough to understand the being of Jesus Christ the Mediator in terms of the relation between God and man, as if we knew exactly in advance what these two concepts mean.”¹³⁹ Thus, the problem persists. How can we understand Christ as Mediator between God and humanity without submitting to prior definitions of divine and human? How can we truly allow the Incarnation to “get behind” our understanding of God and humanity, rather than vice versa? This is the problem which Ott is never able to surmount, by his own admission. The language of Christ as Mediator is potentially useful, but not if it necessarily suggests two autonomous realities which Christ is somehow responsible for negotiating. Ott is left, at the last, to shrug apologetically on his own behalf and Bonhoeffer’s:

Certainly it appears much more difficult in comparison to work out concretely in our thought the definition of the Mediator as constituting a new and universal reality, and the reality, moreover, in which we already live. Bonhoeffer also, as we have seen, has not gone further on his journey than the first few steps.¹⁴⁰

As Ott demonstrates, our challenge in appropriating the pattern of promise is first one of language. The separate language of God and world does not disclose its own origins. Whatever its utility, the Bonhoefferian concern is that our unspoken and unacknowledged assumptions, bound up in the traditional language of metaphysics, cannot be traced back to the Incarnation. So inadequate is our language to the task of describing the Christ-Reality that even our attempts to explain it in contrast to other conceptions of God and world cannot escape the priority of these alternate assumptions. When Ott writes, for instance, that “Jesus Christ is the true reality in all that is real,” we cannot help but conceptually locate even this dichotomy between “true reality” and “all that is real” under the old rubrics of metaphysical dualism.¹⁴¹ In this respect, promise not only calls into question every conception of God’s relationship to the world, but abolishes the necessary assumptions needed to assert the problem in the first place. Taken seriously, promise does not permit the question of God and world to even be conceived, much less asked. As such, the problem after the Bonhoefferian Christological shift—locating the Christ-Reality with respect to empirical reality—cannot, however much it wanders, return to the fleshpots of transcendence and immanence as

¹³⁹ Ott, *Reality and Faith*, 392.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 393-4.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 185.

conceptual forms indebted to idealist abstraction. Thus, as much as Ott grasps Bonhoeffer's ontological implications, even as much as he valiantly attempts to extend them, his answer falls back on "the immanence of God in the ethical situation" and thus Christ-Reality becomes mere understudy for God in the same old dramatic dialogue of metaphysical dualism.¹⁴²

4.7 The challenge of a language adequate to Christ-Reality

Given this challenge, is there theological or philosophical language available which could adequately parallel promise's relation between Christ-Reality and empirical reality? More recently, Christiane Tietz has hinted at borrowing the language of *Sein* and *Seiendes*, which has the advantage of being language that Bonhoeffer himself borrowed from Martin Heidegger. Tietz has made this suggestion in the context of trying to more adequately conceptualise Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology. Insofar as I have argued in Chapter 3, however, that Christ-existing-as-church-community should be interpreted as merely one implication of the broader movement of promise, Tietz's language may prove useful for a more fundamental ontology. She writes of "a third mode of being beyond *Seiendes* and *Nichtseiendes*. It is this third ontological mode that maintains revelation in its continuity and existentiality."¹⁴³ In this way, she recognizes Bonhoeffer's broader concern as it relates to epistemology—to find a way of speaking of *Christus praesens* objectively without turning Christ into mere object. The "genuine objectivity" which the church possesses "differs from the ordinary objectivity and of course from the non-objectivity" and "pertains solely to the person of Christ."¹⁴⁴ This third thing, for Tietz, remains a vague intuition for the moment, but she is properly moving down the path of promise, attempting to locate this Christ-Reality with respect to empirically existing beings. "Christ encounters us in *Seiendem*," she writes, "but is not himself *Seiendes*. However, because he encounters us in *Seiendem*, he is also not *Nichtseiendes*. Christ is neither act nor being, but, rather belongs to this third ontological category."¹⁴⁵

While Tietz does not develop "this third ontological category," her intuition does suggest a philosophical language that might help us relate the Christ-Reality to the empirically real. Is Christ-Reality the *Sein* to reality's *Seiendem*? The essence to reality's existence? The substance to reality's accidents? All of these formulations remain potentially useful and potentially problematic. The Heideggerian language misses the radical alterity of the Christ-

¹⁴² Ott, *Reality and Faith*, 173.

¹⁴³ Tietz, "Ontological Structure," 42.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

Reality—for Bonhoeffer, the being of Christ impinges on the finitude of *Seiendem* in a way that radically calls into question and therefore alters *Dasein*. The Thomistic language misses the free personhood of the Christ-Reality.¹⁴⁶ To the extent that essence or substance implies a fixed quiddity to which reality can always refer back, they miss the implication of Bonhoeffer's *genus majesticum*. It is not only Christ but Christ-Reality which retains the freedom to define itself anew.

As summary to this point, let us consider again what promise offers. The Incarnate Christ as the revelation of God demands that theology attend again and again to the 'who' of *Christus praesens*, to the encounter that takes *Christus* and *praesens* equally seriously. As the Logos which threatens human logos, the Incarnation retains the priority to define knowledge. The dissolution of the traditional christological debates in the prior God-human establishes a pattern in which various aporias find their terms called into question by revelation. In Bonhoeffer's appropriation of a Lutheran Christology, Christ's taking on human nature and human nature sharing in divine attributes indicates that the Incarnation will not stop at self-definition, but offers a re-definition of hypostatically united divinity and humanity. The Incarnation does not stop here, either, and so the whole of the human logos must seek its proper grounds in revelation's disclosure. Ecclesiology, anthropology, sociality, ethics, hermeneutics, homiletics—all find themselves redefined as sites where the *a priori* God-human may reveal himself in humiliated form. Jens Zimmerman has suggested "one dominant motif to describe Bonhoeffer's Christological hermeneutics . . . the motif *presencing*—presencing of the Christreality in the Christian life."¹⁴⁷ This motif, however, refuses to be restricted to biblical hermeneutics—it is the central theme which emerges across Bonhoeffer's various commitments or, more accurately, it is the central theme from which Bonhoeffer's theology emerges.

¹⁴⁶ This is not to say that Bonhoeffer's understanding of Christ-Reality closes him off to all possibilities associated with the *analogia entis*. Indeed, from one perspective, promise may be the door to a fuller conversation between Catholic dogma and the type of quasi-Barthian position which Bonhoeffer represents. The perpetual challenge, however, is Bonhoeffer's desire to attribute Reality itself to the God-human and not to any potential inherent in a notion of being apart from the Incarnation. Hans Urs von Balthasar agrees, for example, that "there was never a time when the subject was not already disclosed to the world and the world to it" (Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic, Volume I: Truth of the World*, trans. Adrian J. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000, 78). Empirical representations of the world "are nothing but surface without depth" (Ibid., 133). Nevertheless, "subject and object are primarily disclosed to each other . . . in the world of images" (Ibid., 132). Bonhoeffer's notion of Christ-Reality seems quite amenable to the insubstantial illusoriness of representations, yet without suggesting any epistemologically-available mutual disclosure that is not first predicated on the personal freedom of Reality, rather than on some necessity. Nonetheless, there may be openings for a fruitful conversation here, especially as we develop a more concrete notion of an epistemology of Christ-Reality in section 5.3, below.

¹⁴⁷ Jens Zimmerman, "Finitum Capax Infiniti or The Presencing of Christ: A Response to Stephen Plant and Robert Steiner," in *God Speaks to Us: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Biblical Hermeneutics*, eds. Ralf K. Wüstenberg and Jens Zimmerman (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2013), 86.

The ever-present danger, however, is the idealist temptation—to abstract from the Incarnation’s definitions, failing to understand that the person of the ‘who’ remains integral to the definition. Christ cannot be turned into mere idea, even if the intention is to shape an idea in the image of Christ. At the same time, however, Christ cannot be understood as ‘above’ our world or even our thinking, as if at a distance. Instead, God is closer to reality than reality is to itself. In this sense, Christ has disclosed himself as ontologically given to the world, as Christ-Reality. As the union of act and being, Christ-Reality is the Absolute—not in final form, but as already given—acting in reality in such a way that his real being presses upon the isolated self, freeing us in the encounter with true alterity. This encounter is not otherworldly, not the irruption of the divine into a historical moment, but is transcendent presence, as Reality which reveals the shallowness of our mere experience. At all points we are seeking a renewed vocabulary, we are seeking words that can make proper reference to Reality, without subjecting it to the illusions of the human ego. Bonhoeffer’s contribution to a fundamental ontology, then, does not resolve the problem of immanence and transcendence so much as it nullifies the very question, revealing that our problem is merely a collision of false semantic distinctions, distinctions which only arise when we have not properly rooted our language in the given Reality of the Incarnation.

In Chapter 1, we mentioned that the problem of God and world contained three aspects. There is an ontological aspect—how can we understand God’s being in relation to the being of existing things? There is an epistemological aspect—how can we know about the divine in the midst of our human existence? There is an ethical aspect—how can we, as humans, act in accord with the intention of God? Thus far, these questions have not been answered. They have merely taken on a new light. There remains an ontological question—what does revelation give us in order to understand the ontological distinction and connection between Christ-Reality and reality? There remains an epistemological question—how are we to know where the Christ-Reality is revealed in our experience, in other words, how do we distinguish between Christ’s presence as the Humiliated One and mere humiliation, mere suffering and degradation in this fallen world? Finally, there remains an ethical question—how are we to act in accord with the Real?

Chapter 5 will suggest Bonhoefferian approaches to each of these questions. Promeity as a pattern of thought has led us to this point, pointing toward what is required. But further resources are needed to resolve these questions more concretely. As such, there are additional

patterns of thought in Bonhoeffer's work beyond promeity, additional methodologies which might lend some guidance to our answers. Chapter 5 will briefly take up three of these further patterns, hoping to answer ever more concretely the question, "Who is Christ actually for us today?"

Chapter 5

Following Promeity Towards Concretion

5.1 Introduction

Recall that our engagement with Bonhoeffer's early dissertations left us, at the end of Chapter 3, with a set of five features that a Bonhoefferian approach to transcendence and immanence would have to take into consideration. Those five features are best understood as having their conceptual origin in promeity. Together, they sketch the philosophical implications of the basic relation between revelation's freedom in act and its presence in being, such that revelation forms both the necessary condition for thought and the dynamic agency able to exert a transformative influence on *Dasein*. These philosophical facets arise from Bonhoeffer's commitment to the Incarnation, which—in Rainer Mayer's words—"neither treats revelation wholly as an entity nor volatilizes revelation into non-entity."¹ Although these commitments will not be revisited explicitly, they form the necessary background for the discussion in Chapter 5. The aim of this chapter is to take cues from these expressions of promeity's philosophical commitments to extend a Bonhoefferian understanding of Christ-Reality forward into greater concretion.

In that spirit, this chapter will revisit the three aspects of the problem of God and world mentioned in section 1.7: the ontological, the epistemological, and the ethical. Now, however, in light of promeity as developed in Chapter 4, these three aspects will have to be reframed. The problem is no longer the relatedness of God to world, but the problem of Christ-Reality's relatedness to empirical existence. Still, however, this problem retains three aspects. Ontologically, how can we create an account of the free but necessary relation of Christ-Reality's being to the being of empirical existence? Epistemologically, how can we know how, where, and in what way to locate the emergence of our empirical experience onto the plane of Christ-Reality? Can we expect to see Christ-Reality and, if so, how will we know it when we do? Ethically, how then are we to know how and when to act in such a way that our action conforms to the free action of the present Christ-Reality?

¹ Rainer Mayer, "Christology: The Genuine Form of Transcendence," in *A Bonhoeffer Legacy*, 185.

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to fully resolve these questions, but the present chapter will attempt to trace the way forward which promise suggests, drawing from further resources in Bonhoeffer's theology. The three aspects of the problem will be addressed one at a time, and each will be addressed in concert with a further pattern of thought that emerges in Bonhoeffer's work. These additional patterns are dependent on promise as method, but not identical with it. They represent theological modes of problem-solving which Bonhoeffer returns to more than once in his work, using them to address different kinds of issues. These three patterns will include Bonhoeffer's habit of using a Lutheran language of justification in concert with a Heideggerian language of being-in-reference-to, his habit of using temporal language to express revelation's freedom as both eternal and future, and his habit of describing discipleship as a pre-reflective mode of imitation which grounds its own ethic and, ultimately, its own epistemology.

5.2 Judgment and reconciliation—the ontological problem

On a postcard from Bonn, dated July 10, 1931 and addressed to Paul Lehmann, Bonhoeffer marked the exact time of a personally momentous occasion: "this morning at 7 o'clock for the first time I heard K Barth."² What had previously been a silent, internal dialogue with Barth was now to become a real conversation. A few days into Barth's lectures series at the university, Bonhoeffer began joining other students at evening discussions presided over by the Swiss theologian. In a letter to his friend, Erwin Sutz, Bonhoeffer revelled in the opportunity these discussions afforded him "to see how Barth still stands beyond his books."³ Bonhoeffer left deeply "impressed by [Barth's] discussion even more than by his writing and lectures," entranced by the intensity of a man "really fully present."⁴

Despite this positive impression, it did not take Bonhoeffer long to set before Barth his own concerns about the eminent man's theology, especially as it regarded what Bonhoeffer referred to as "the ethical problem."⁵ At an ecumenical conference the following year, he summarised this concern thusly: "Is the church able to proclaim the commandments of God with the same certainty with which it proclaims the gospel?"⁶ Barth's theology, in Bonhoeffer's reading, gave full voice to the church's proclamation of God in Christ, but could

² *DBWE 11*, 32.

³ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 360.

it also sustain a more specific word about God's will for the moment? Given the obvious economic and political turmoil engulfing Germany in 1931, Bonhoeffer's ethical concern felt especially urgent. If "God's commandment demands something absolutely particular from us now," on what basis should we expect the church's proclamation to reveal the content of this particular command?⁷ Bonhoeffer's longing for concretion ran deep, even to the hope that the church might be able to say definitively, "fight this war or do not fight this war."⁸

In one sense, Bonhoeffer himself understood that this longing for a concrete command from the church—a longing which Barth initially seemed not to share—was born of their contrasting ecclesiologies. Interpreted in this way, his "ethical concern" was a mere extension of the critique *Act and Being* had laid against Barth's actualism. Bonhoeffer highlights this in his 1932 lectures on "The Nature of the Church." There, he characterises Barth as "seemingly speaki[ng] only of claims and see[ing] therein the essential nature of the church. (The church is an actus.)"⁹ In contrast, Bonhoeffer insists, "One must speak of the being and act of the church together . . . Locating the church as the place of God in the world!"¹⁰ For Bonhoeffer, God's granting to the church the capacity to speak a command was a further function of promise: "God, in one place . . . as 'God for us.'"¹¹ If the *pro-me* Christ has ontologically given himself to the church, should we not expect that the church will be able to speak authoritatively on Christ's behalf? Barth, perpetually uneasy about humanity's eagerness to sanctify its own words, seemed reticent to rule definitively. In conversation at Bonn in 1931, his own commitments at this middle stage of his development only extended far enough to direct Bonhoeffer's attention to "many other little lights" drawing their luminescence from "the one great light in the night."¹² Bonhoeffer found this unhelpfully vague, while Barth found the younger theologian unhelpfully demanding a certainty not provided, "making grace into a principle and . . . bludgeoning everyone else to death with it."¹³ Read through the lens of ecclesiology, the difference is clear. Bonhoeffer—concerned with articulating the fullness of Christ's ontological commitment to the church-community—was eager to press further into the free autonomy given to Christ's body to bear and proclaim God's commandment. Barth—concerned with preserving the freedom and integrity of the Word from human manipulation—

⁷ *DBWE 11*, 360.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 274.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 274-5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 275.

¹² *Ibid.*, 38.

¹³ *Ibid.*

urged the church to draw its ethic and thus its very identity from the recurring revelatory act of gospel proclamation.

The argument of this section, however, begins with a slight reframing of this distinction between Bonhoeffer and Barth. It is not differing ecclesiologies which form the basis for their disagreement, but differing understandings of revelation, prior to the development of their respective understandings of the church. Independently, they conceive of the moment of God's revelatory act in related but ultimately distinct ways. For Bonhoeffer, the dominant paradigm for understanding the content of the revelatory moment is a Lutheran doctrine of justification. For Barth, on the other hand, the dominant paradigm for that moment is a Reformed doctrine of kerygma. For Bonhoeffer, the encounter with Christ is first justifying—it launches the believer into a new existence, a new mode of being, even before it imparts a new Word. For Barth, the encounter with Christ is a Word, a proclamation that shatters all prior content with its own exclamation.¹⁴ This is not to say that, for Barth, the Word does not justify, nor is it to say that, for Bonhoeffer, justification has nothing to do with kerygma. Instead, this difference is a mere matter of emphasis that, while small, widens into a broader implication for a fundamental ontology.

Bonhoeffer's way of articulating his own emphasis on revelation's justifying effect is through the early theses' language of being-in-Adam and being-in-Christ. More implicit than explicit in *Sanctorum Communio*, the primacy Bonhoeffer assumes for the doctrine of justification nevertheless shapes the very categories he uses to interrogate sociality. The "primal state" of *Sanctorum Communio*'s third chapter,¹⁵ the "world of sin" as "the world of 'Adam', the old humanity" in the fourth chapter,¹⁶ the "new life" of the *sanctorum communio* in the fifth chapter¹⁷—all draw their logic from the *a priori* assumption that God's revelation is first a soteriological act affecting real existence. The underlying logic of Bonhoeffer's dissertation is that a social anthropology can be constructed from "the ontic basic-relatedness of human beings to one another as persons."¹⁸ But this claim is only made in light of what Bonhoeffer takes to be a given, that humans who were once properly and corporately described as "in

¹⁴ It is in this limited respect there is merit to John Godsey's distinction between Barth as a Reformed advocate of *finitum non capax infiniti* versus Bonhoeffer as a Lutheran advocate of *finitum capax infiniti* (John Godsey, "Barth and Bonhoeffer: The Basic Difference," *Quarterly Review*, 7.1, 1987: 9-27). Fundamentally, the difference is not about the ability of the human *capax*, but about the nature of *infiniti*. For Barth, aseity suggests the priority of alterity in virtue of ontological and epistemological distance; for Bonhoeffer it suggests the priority of alterity even as presence.

¹⁵ *DBWE 1*, 58.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Adam” can—after their encounter with revelation—be properly and corporately described as “in Christ.” This fact obtains despite both their individuality and their ongoing sinfulness, indeed, this seeming contradiction defines the challenge for *Sanctorum Communio*’s fifth chapter, to articulate the unity and reality of the *sanctorum communio* without either overriding individuality or dismissing the lingering reality of the *peccatorum communio*, in other words, to understand the sociality of “those who have been justified” as yet “hidden in God.”¹⁹ The various sociological and anthropological trees in *Sanctorum Communio* should not distract the reader from the soteriological shape of the forest, fenced by Bonhoeffer’s presumption that “the essence and structure of the new humanity ‘in Christ’ can only be understood in contrast to humanity ‘in Adam’.”²⁰ This is the given of revelation and its primary function, that it turns the *Dasein* of humanity from sinful exile into an existence in Christ. To the extent that revelation can be understood as kerygma, its content does not effectuate, per se, but testifies to the good news of “the will of God to create from the old humanity of Adam a new humanity of Christ.”²¹

What was largely implicit in *Sanctorum Communio* becomes more explicit in *Act and Being* and Bonhoeffer’s various subsequent lectures amplifying his habilitation’s argument. What is particularly noteworthy, for the sake of this essay’s agenda, is the way that Bonhoeffer’s theological language of Adam and Christ becomes integrated with a Heideggerian language of being-in-reference-to. Recall *Act and Being*’s agenda to take from philosophy the warning signs along theology’s path; Bonhoeffer takes from philosophical ontologies a reminder “that the existence of human beings is always already a ‘being in . . . ’”²² This is “the only correct aspect” of philosophical ontologies and also, theologically, “that which a genuine interpretation of the being of revelation also demands.”²³ What theology returns as a counter-warning over and against philosophy is an essential prerequisite, that “concepts of being, insofar as they are acquired from revelation, are always determined by the concepts of sin and grace, ‘Adam’ and Christ.”²⁴ In combination, then, these two insights yield fundamental categories for human ontology. The mode of an individual human’s being is either a being-in-Adam or a being-in-Christ; the shift from the former to the latter is the first fruit of revelation. The most fundamental designation that can be given to *Dasein* is its relatedness to Christ. “This is what furnishes the theological concept of existence,” Bonhoeffer writes, “existence is

¹⁹ *DBWE 1*, 124.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 62.

²² *DBWE 2*, 108.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

envisaged in reference to revelation as an existence touched or not touched by revelation.”²⁵ There is no human ontology which is not first understood by way of its referral to Christ, no raw there-ness which does not already find itself caught up in Adam or in Christ.

Touched or untouched by revelation; in Christ or in Adam—these distinctions provide the essential logic of *Act and Being*'s final, and often-neglected, Part C. Remember Bonhoeffer's desire, articulated in Chapter 3 of this essay, for the being of revelation to exert a real influence upon human existence. Revelation as justification satisfies this requirement, insofar as it is “an act of God that draws human beings into the occurrence of revelation.”²⁶ Notice even in this sentence the very slight distinction between the “act of God” and the “occurrence of revelation.” Even insofar as Bonhoeffer understands revelation as a God's self-revealing, he is even more concerned with the illumination of the human consciousness required to receive revelation, to the existential shift necessary to receive a word from God. Both are an act of God, both belong to revelation. This is true for Barth, as well, but again, the difference is a matter of emphasis. For Bonhoeffer, the emphasis is on the way

Dasein is determined by transcendence . . . it 'is' 'amidst' transcendence. Christ, by being the one who creates within me the act of faith by granting me the Holy Spirit who hears and believes within me, thereby proves to be also the free lord of my existence.²⁷

Bonhoeffer is entirely open to this existential shift coinciding with the proclaimed Word. What is essential, however, is that we understand the proclamation of this Word emerging from a real encounter with being, as “Christ himself in person speak[ing] to us his new word,” thus revealing this Word as a real, existentially pressing, transcendent ‘who’-ness “that creates our Dasein again and again.”²⁸ In this way gospel word becomes Word, “the general assertion becomes a living occurrence.”²⁹ Despite their extensive engagement with sociality, careful attention to the early theses reveals that their social-ontology of the Christian church-community is merely one implication of revelation as justification. The transposition of the self from being-in-Adam to being-in-Christ precedes the turn to the neighbour. “One finds

²⁵ *DBWE* 2, 82.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 110.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 128.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 132.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

oneself in Christ, because already one is in Christ, in that one seeks oneself there in Christ.”³⁰
 Only then is the self-seeking I truly “delivered from the attempt to remain alone.”³¹

Interestingly, Bonhoeffer’s immediate post-habilitation lectures and essays highlight precisely this aspect of his thought, moving slightly beyond the concerns of transcendental subjecthood which dominated *Act and Being*. A close engagement with Heidegger features prominently in Bonhoeffer’s inaugural lecture, delivered upon his appointment at Berlin University after defending *Act and Being*. Here, Bonhoeffer recognises that if he wants to use relatedness-to-Christ as a defining mode of human ontology, he immediately faces a challenge. Given not only two possible modes of being—in Adam or in Christ—but the possibility of transitioning from the former to the latter, how is the continuity of *Dasein* to be conceived? The answer pushes us even further backwards, to an even more fundamental conception: being-in-relation-to-God. Bonhoeffer insists that “the human being understands himself only by his act-of-relating to God, which only God can establish.”³² This being-in-Adam or being-in-Christ is “grounded in God’s word . . . a word whose content is judgment and grace” such that the human’s essence “is determined by the statements ‘You are under sin,’ or ‘You are under grace.’”³³ Both the human in Adam, as the recipient of judgment, and the human in Christ, as the recipient of grace, find their existence imparted in virtue of a deeper being-in-relation-to-God. Revelation’s first function is that it “initiates” the Christian “into the death and resurrection of Christ” and so reveals their being as already suspended between the poles of transcendence, the “future, which is Christ alone” but also the past, “which is Adam and which must ever and again be given over to the death of Christ.”³⁴ Revelation is thus justifying; it separates the new self from the old self, but cannot separate either self from its suspension between judgment and grace, death and life, between a once-dead-in-sin and a made-alive-in-Christ.

Bonhoeffer returns to this idea in an essay written during his stay at Union Theological Seminary entitled “Concerning the Christian Idea of God.” He writes of the moment of justification:

³⁰ *DBWE* 2, 150.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *DBWE* 10, 405.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 406.

It is just here that the personalities of God and of man come in contact with each other. Here God himself transcends his transcendence, giving himself to man as Holy Spirit. Yet, being personality, he remains in absolute transcendence; the immanence of God means that man hears God's own word, which is spoken in absolute self-revelation, always anew.³⁵

The kerygmatic Word, unified in the moment with the act of faith—an act also given by the Holy Spirit—“believes that God's word in Christ is valid for itself,” but this is simply to say that this moment is “in other words, the act of justification.”³⁶ Consequently,

Faith is primarily directed toward the authority of God, not to the content of his word . . . when we come to interpret the content of the self-revelation of God, we will see that this content is only the explication of the fact of the absolute self-revelation and authority of God.³⁷

This justifying Word is the manifestation of God's authority insofar as it is the manifestation of God, where “God reveals himself through Christ to me.”³⁸ This self-manifestation of God is the transcendent being which disrupts the idealist self by imposing a barrier which cannot be crossed. “There,” Bonhoeffer writes, “at the very limits of man, stands God, and when man can do nothing more, then God does all. The justification of the sinner—this is the self-proof of the sole authority of God.”³⁹ This encounter establishes limits, and it is precisely limits which are the first act of justification, the essential unity of judgment and reconciliation, as Bonhoeffer explains in another essay from *Union* entitled “The Theology of Crisis.” There, he writes:

This act of limiting man is God's judgment and grace in one; for the limited man is the judged man and at the same time the limited man giving all righteousness and glory to God is so justified by God's work and grace alone.⁴⁰

³⁵ *DBWE 10*, 459.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 460.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 459-60.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 459.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 461.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 466-7.

In summary, the Lutheran/Heideggerian language of being-in-relation-to-God presents us with a Bonhoefferian strategy for understanding the effect of revelation. Revelation can be understood as a transcendent Word emerging from alterity. But precisely in this way, the Word reveals itself not as a mere word, but as person, as the graciously intruding being of the present God-human, encountering the human being in the midst of life. The God-human's being is a real being-in-the-world, and yet is also transcendence itself, thereby initiating an act whereby *Dasein* discovers itself to be suspended in transcendence, and therefore discovers itself truly for the first time. The being of revelation initiates a real transformation by establishing, once and for all, a true boundary around the unlimited aspirations of the human ego. Precisely in this limitation is true freedom—the first real otherness the *cor curvum in se* has ever encountered draws us out of ourselves. The infinite self, it turns out, was the lonely self. The God-human is thus revealed as the first exteriority truly capable of storming the fortress holding the isolated ego. This encounter transforms the human from being-in-Adam to being-in-Christ. This new being-in-Christ, as the transcendent appearance of futurity, is also the first moment when the human recognises that she has unknowingly been in Adam all along. Being-in-Christ is genuine participation in Christ's being, and thus means the death of the old self. At the same time, it reveals an even deeper fact which has always been true and remains unchanged, that human existence is a being-in-relation-to-God. This being-in-relation-to-God remains stable before and after justification; what changes in Christ is the soteriological implication of this fact. The being-in-relation-to-God which once meant judgment now means grace.

Bonhoeffer's understanding of revelation as justification places a slightly new interpretation on his relatively mild dispute with Barth over ethics during the 1930's. Barth—conceiving of revelation kerygmatically—struggles to find the assurance needed to identify a particular command as Christ's command. For him, the essential element is the content of the proclamation, which raises the question of how we can be certain that we have truly spoken Christ's Word. Better to repeatedly proclaim the Word we already know is true and let this Word have its effect than deceive ourselves by eagerly trying to extrapolate from its content. For Bonhoeffer, however, the issue is entirely different, and is soteriological even before it is ecclesiological. In his case, the essential element is less the conformity of the word spoken to Christ's Word than it is the conformity of the self speaking to Christ's being. A true commandment from the church is not attempting to give voice to the untouchable, epiphanic alterity of the Word from heaven. It is trying to speak from the grounds of a justified being-in-

relation-to-God, having found itself thrown into new existence in Christ, speaking of and in Reality.

This distinction between revelation as Word and revelation as moment of justification further helps to explain the disconnect between Barth and Bonhoeffer over the meditative disciplines of Finkenwalde. Bonhoeffer, in a personal letter to Barth, claimed that he and his students at the preachers' seminary were pursuing "a life defined by morning and evening reflection on the word and by fixed times of prayer" which Bonhoeffer characterised as "merely one result of what you yourself articulated so clearly with regard to Anselm," referring to Barth's book, *Fides Quaerens Intellectum*.⁴¹ Barth, however, had procured a copy of Finkenwalde's guide to meditation, "read it attentively," and replied:

I cannot really say that I was pleased by what I read. I just cannot go along with the kind of fundamental distinction between theological work, on the one hand, and edifying reflection, on the other, such as emerges in this piece of writing and in your letter. I was also bothered in this piece by the smell—one rather difficult to articulate—of monastic eros and pathos, for which I for now have neither the appropriate sensorium nor any real use.⁴²

Bonhoeffer did not seem to take this critique to heart, instead lamenting that Barth had misunderstood Finkenwalde as a mere attempt at pietist renewal following in "the whole line from Ragaz to Buchmann."⁴³

It is worth considering, however, that this disagreement was no mere miscommunication. In what sense would Bonhoeffer have understood Finkenwalde as an experiment in keeping with the spirit of *Fides Quaerens Intellectum*? In it, Barth writes that understanding the Word "require[s] . . . a pure heart, eyes that have been opened, child-like obedience, a life in the Spirit, rich nourishment from the Holy Scripture."⁴⁴ This is "the effect of the Word . . . invariably, that both the Word and the event of hearing the Word are understood together."⁴⁵ Bonhoeffer appears to have interpreted this as an indication that revelation initiates new existence, an existence precipitated by encounter, giving hope that the disciplined Christian

⁴¹ *DBWE 14*, 254.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 268.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 272.

⁴⁴ Karl Barth, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum* trans. Ian W. Robertson (Eugene: Pickwick Press, 1975), 34.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

might again “encounter Christ in his own word,” to use the phrasing of the guide to meditation.⁴⁶ Barth, however, had still conceived this existential effect within a kerygmatic paradigm, as “Faith comes by hearing and hearing comes by preaching.”⁴⁷ In this respect, Barth maintained that revelation would eventually be appropriated by the intellect in virtue of its content. Hence, there was nothing to be gained from meditatively anticipating the approach of Christ that could not be better gained from the careful study of the Word, approaching with a faithful intellect prepared to receive propositional content. For Bonhoeffer, however—even as much as the disciplines of Finkenwalde were scripturally focused—revelation was not a matter of mere semantic content, but of an encroaching being, one that had already moved upon the justified self and would move again.

As much as Bonhoeffer falls within Barth’s theological lineage, then, what Bonhoeffer takes from Barth’s transcendental actualism is not the priority of revelation as defined in its kerygmatic capacity. What he takes away is not a statement about verticality intersecting horizontality. Instead, what he takes away is that existence must understand itself constantly in reference to transcendence, thus “know[ing] itself placed into the truth by Christ in judgment and grace.”⁴⁸ What is transcendent is not the radical alterity of act, but the otherness of being which limits the human self in encounter. Even to the extent that word is a vehicle for revelation’s being, in Bonhoeffer’s mind, the emphasis is nonetheless on its power to alter *Dasein*, not its bare content:

The word that confronts us, seizes us, takes us captive, binds us fast, does not come from the depth of our souls. It is the foreign, the unfamiliar, unexpected, forceful, overpowering word of the Lord that calls into his service whomsoever and whenever God chooses.⁴⁹

Revelation is the being of Christ-Reality confronting the human self, justifying humans in the transition from being-in-Adam to being-in-Christ. The best that can be said about Barth’s approach, for Bonhoeffer, is that it forces us to acknowledge ourselves in relation to exteriority, set in an existence we could not create and cannot understand without assistance from outside ourselves. “The original transcendental approach,” Bonhoeffer writes, “comes

⁴⁶ *DBWE 14*, 932.

⁴⁷ Barth, *Anselm*, 22.

⁴⁸ *DBWE 2*, 96.

⁴⁹ *DBWE 13*, 350.

into its own in the indissoluble and exclusive reference of existence to revelation.”⁵⁰ What transcends us in revelation is not a message received from within the mystery of the hidden God, but the hidden God himself approaching as personal presence.

Although there may be further room to press this distinction between Bonhoeffer’s understanding of revelation as justification and Barth’s kerygmatic actualism, this is not the central point of the present thesis.⁵¹ The contrast with Barth has been raised primarily to highlight the depth and nature of Bonhoeffer’s interest in revelation’s ontological consequences vis-à-vis justification. The essential issue is not where Bonhoeffer stands with respect to Barth, per se—there may indeed be resources in Barth’s theology to accommodate and even extend Bonhoeffer’s presumptions. The essential issue, for the moment, is whether Bonhoeffer’s pattern of speaking about human ontology as relatedness-to-God can provide resources for extending a Bonhoefferian answer to the ontological aspect of the God-world problem, as redefined after promeity, i.e. how do we understand the ontological relation of empirical reality to Christ-Reality?

Given the landscape of the Christ-Reality, as described in Chapter 4, two issues emerge that have to be kept in mind. The first is avoiding the pitfall of the social-anthropological strategy: a fundamental ontology must make a real statement about Christ’s ontological givenness, not as a transcendent actor who merely makes use of empirical existence, but as one who has revealed himself as structurally *pro-me*, truly present. The second is avoiding the pitfall of subsuming all empirical existence into God’s being, such that beings possess no autonomous existence at all.

Read with these warnings in mind, the ontological implications of Bonhoeffer’s understanding of justification can propose a possible way forward. In Bonhoeffer’s thought, *Dasein* finds itself at the intersection of two disjunctures. First, there is the disjuncture between past and future, between being-in-Adam and being-in-Christ, before and after the irruptive break caused by the act of encounter with revelation’s being. Second, there is also the present disjuncture between *sanctorum* and *peccatorum*, the seeming contradiction at the

⁵⁰ *DBWE* 2, 97.

⁵¹ Briefly, however, this implies a slightly different reading of Bonhoeffer’s accusation against Barth of “*Offenbarungspositivismus*” (*DBW* 9, 404) than has previously been considered. Interpreted according to the distinction made here, Bonhoeffer’s concern is not about *the way* Barth or Barthians have treated the content of revelation, but about the simple fact that Barth has treated revelation *as mere content*, thus occluding the real force of revelation to have an unfolding personal history of its own, moving through reality to confront the self-satisfied human ego.

centre of *simul iustus et peccator*, the true reality of the justified self “hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3) versus the empirical reality of the perpetual sinner.

What Bonhoeffer’s take on Lutheran theology seems to offer, however, is not only a resolution to these disjunctures, but a way of understanding them as essential to one another. *Act and Being* establishes that being can only understand itself in reference to something which transcends it, as all other grounds collapse into the sinkhole of the isolated self, providing no room to distinguish reality from idealist delusion. Hence, the self encountering Christ *is*, concretely, for the first time, having emerged from fantasy into reality. At the same time, however, thinking can only gain this understanding by simultaneously finding itself suspended between poles of transcendence. These poles, to use Bonhoeffer’s framework, are retrospective and prospective: the awareness of being-in-Adam only in the moment when that existence is dead and vanished; the awareness of being-in-Christ only insofar as that existence encounters us as true alterity. This being-in-reference-to is fundamentally continuous as a being-in-relation to God, yet discontinuous as a shift from being-in-sin to being-in-grace in virtue of now being-in-Christ. To be in Christ in one’s Real self is yet precisely to be both justified and sinful in one’s empirical self, insofar as neither state is comprehensively true of our lived experience. In this way, our present existence is properly determined by its being-in-reference-to both; it is real *Dasein* only as it is suspended between poles of transcendence.

Understood through this lens, Bonhoeffer suggests the potential of extending the logic of *simul iustus et peccator* not only to humans, but to all beings. The existence of empirical beings finds them caught in the same pair of disjunctures. Empirical reality can only be understood as itself after and in light of the Incarnation, as Christ-Reality. Yet, insofar as an understanding of its true identity is possible at all, this identity appears at once in suspension between its retrospective and prospective poles, grasping at a vacant notion of an autonomous existence apart from Christ, yet unable to subsume the Christ-Reality which transcends it. In this respect, empirical reality, like the empirical *Dasein*, perpetually retains its own independent being, yet always finds this being already established as a being-in-relation-to-God. For individual beings, this being-in-relation-to-God indicates the possibility of existing either under sin or grace, judgment or reconciliation. As with the justified sinner, the true Reality of empirical beings is a hidden one. As with the justified sinner, reality finds its present always confronted by the Christ-Reality that is its future, and yet always defined in reference to the fallen being-in-Adam that is its past, and therefore always at the point of its dying under judgment. Yet, as with the justified sinner, the true existence of reality is not an

impossibly remote idea awaiting its realisation at the eschaton. Precisely as person, the Christ-Reality is free and able to bring reality's distant self suddenly close to hand, even if unaccompanied by trumpets and effulgent light.

There will be Real, justified places and—perhaps more importantly—Real, justified moments. In these moments available to us, with or without our knowledge, reality's existence is a being-in-reconciliation with God. This is to say, in the same breath, that it is also the very personal presence of the Christ-Reality itself. These justified moments, as moments, do not persist longitudinally—as if a particular place or action has been permanently transformed—but do persist orthogonally, into eternity, as the irreversible transformation of that moment into its true self. As a whole, empirical reality awaits the emergence of its true self. Yet, not unlike the individual Christian, a real yet hidden encounter with the Incarnate Christ-Reality has transposed reality's true existence into a being-in-Christ.

With respect to a statement about Christ's own ontology, Bonhoeffer's language of justification extends the basic equality between the Exalted One and the Humiliated One. Promeity has established Christ-Reality as the *a priori* necessity for our further reflection. It is the Christ-Reality *a se* which is exalted, which is the glory of resurrection, the reconciliation between God and flesh. Yet this does not establish the Christ-Reality as a slightly lesser form of transcendence, hovering over the deep. Instead, it demands the Christ-Reality's intrinsic relatedness to empirical reality. Empirical reality's own being-in-relation-to God also entails a being-under-judgment. This judgment is the measure of the distance between the empirical self and the true self, between reality and Christ-Reality. This judgment, however, is also Christ-Reality, as the veiled form of the Humiliated One who reveals, prior to our definitions, the essential unity of Judge and Judged. Metaphors of nearness and farness collapse—what remains is that even the state of being-under-judgment belongs to the Christ-Reality, which is its essential givenness in humiliation to empirical reality.

With respect to ontological considerations, Bonhoeffer's Lutheran/Heideggerian language stands as a potential opportunity to further elaborate on the nature of Christ-Reality. The idealist temptation of the transcendental subject, however, is to rush through even this opportunity and press quickly on to epistemological considerations. It is well and good to articulate the Christ-Reality's relation to empirical existence, but how will we distinguish a particular moment that is-in-reconciliation from a particular moment that is-under-judgment? Is that not the more interesting question? Perhaps, although we should already be circumspect

about a Bonhoefferian answer. The general trajectory of Bonhoeffer's thought has been to establish the *pro-me* Incarnation as the ground of all thought, and yet to insist on its transcendent alterity even in our midst. These two impulses are inseparable, as if one only notices presence in the dust cloud left by the person's vanishing. We are bereft without the transcendence of the God-human, and bereft in attempting to appropriate the God-human. We have only thought to ask the question because the very thing needed to answer it has slipped our grasp. Nonetheless, it is to this epistemological problem that we will tentatively turn in the next section.

5.3 Presence and futurity—the epistemological problem

Above the door to his prison cell at Tegel, Bonhoeffer found a previous occupant had scribbled a cryptic reminder, full of hope and despair in equal measure. “In a hundred years,” the graffiti read, “everything will be over.”⁵² Bonhoeffer interpreted this adage as the former prisoner's “attempt to cope with this experience of empty time,” an experience which had very much become his own.⁵³ Bonhoeffer reflected often on the nature and phenomenology of time, never more so than during the lonely hours of his early days at Tegel, separated from his family and his new fiancée, awaiting a trial that never seemed to arrive, smoking cigarettes, “passing time—killing time,” combing his memories and finding himself alternately filled with gratitude, remorse, and self-pity.⁵⁴ He wrote brief notes for “a small study on the ‘sense of time’” he planned to write but never completed.⁵⁵

Raised in a German epoch very much convinced of its own historical significance, Bonhoeffer could not help but weave his theology together with temporal categories like ‘history,’ ‘past,’ and ‘future’. These categories were no mere abstractions; their real psychological effects were manifest in the surrounding culture—in the nationalist romanticism surrounding the propaganda of a pre-Christian Germanic past and the millenarian promise of a Thousand-Year Reich.⁵⁶ In a very practical sense, the ambiguous meaning of the single statement on his cell wall carried within it the twin temptations Bonhoeffer feared—either losing hope in the face

⁵² *DBWE* 8, 80.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 71-2.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁵⁶ For further exposition on the intellectual forces at work in Bonhoeffer's context, see Fritz K. Ringer, *The Decline of the German Mandarins: The German Academic Community, 1890-1933*, 2nd ed. (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1990). For further reading on the popular understandings of history current during the same era, see George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1964).

of history's uncaring march or retreating into an eschatological fantasy disconnected from the present.⁵⁷ Rejecting both, Bonhoeffer opted for what has been described as a "timeful understanding of the Christian life."⁵⁸ Immersed in the present moment, Bonhoeffer sought "the very narrow path . . . of taking each day as if it were the last and yet living it faithfully and responsibly as if there were yet to be a great future."⁵⁹

Among the themes that recur across Bonhoeffer's corpus, his understanding of time is one of the most difficult to systematise. It surfaces often, even at times playing a seemingly critical role in his thought, yet its final form remains ambiguous. Rather than attempt to look at Bonhoeffer's understanding of time comprehensively, this section will take a few hints from his language with a view to considering how temporality might inform an understanding of the Christ-Reality's epistemological availability in the present.

Even prior to writing *Sanctorum Communio*, the young Bonhoeffer wrestled with the question of eternity's relationship to history. Although the precise genealogy is uncertain, some combination of influences from Luther, Kierkegaard, and 19th-century post-Hegelian debates about the nature of history informed Bonhoeffer's understanding of time. As early as 1925, Bonhoeffer wondered whether "Luther develop[ed] an independent dualistic view of history," meaning a view of salvation history that placed it in distinct parallel with the history of the empirical world.⁶⁰ Bonhoeffer understood Luther as having done so and soon took on this view as his own.⁶¹ Bonhoeffer's understanding of this 'dualism', however, did not imply that God's history ran forever at a distance from the world's history. God's history was irruptive, piercing empirical history in the Kierkegaardian *øjeblik*—the decisive moment of eternity's appearing in experience. Consequently, eternity retained autonomy, such that "God's kingdom does not grow organically before our eyes," and yet "at every moment the judgment of God is present in history through the word of God."⁶² Curiously, Bonhoeffer attributed this latter insight to the 19th-century historian Leopold von Ranke, who had famously argued in an 1854 lecture that "*jede Epoche ist unmittelbar zu Gott.*"⁶³ Bonhoeffer includes this quote in a 1925 paper written under the direction of Reinhold Seeberg.⁶⁴ As a testament to his own commitments, however, Bonhoeffer immediately adds, "*und das heißt doch auch: jeder*

⁵⁷ *DBWE* 8, 50.

⁵⁸ Vosloo, "Feeling of Time," 338.

⁵⁹ *DBWE* 8, 50.

⁶⁰ *DBWE* 9, 145.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 320.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *DBW* 9, 349.

⁶⁴ *DBWE* 9, 320.

Augenblick.”⁶⁵ In that addendum, Ranke’s original intention—to make a post-Hegelian claim about the necessary relationship of each age’s *Geist* to the appearance of the Absolute—falls away, replaced by a Bonhoefferian claim about God’s relationship to the moment.⁶⁶ In this respect, Bonhoeffer follows Kierkegaard’s line of critique against the broad post-Hegelian trend, the former pair choosing to locate the substance of history in the temporality of *Dasein* rather than in the preeminence of a metaphysical category. Bonhoeffer admits this affinity with Kierkegaard in *Sanctorum Communio*, with the caveat that he rejects Kierkegaard’s notion that the concretion of the *Augenblick* “is an act of the self-establishing I.”⁶⁷ Bonhoeffer desires to hold together the God-human’s freedom to create the decisive moment alongside the conviction that it must be a real moment of empirical temporality, not an infinitely receding, “supratemporal” flash of eternity, an accusation leveled against Barth, as previously noted.⁶⁸

Here again we see the pattern of two disjunctures emerging in Bonhoeffer’s thought. There is the disjuncture between past and future, with the past already captured by the empirical experience of idealist self and the future retaining the free alterity of truly unknown transcendence. There is also, however, the disjuncture between eternity and empirical history or, more accurately, between true history—the temporal life of Christ-Reality—and our experience of history-under-judgment. At first glance, these two disjunctures appear to be separate spectra along which Bonhoeffer is trying to locate his understanding of time—historical past versus historical future, eternity versus temporality.

As his thought on this point develops, however, what emerges, unsurprisingly, is a redefinition of time according to the method of promeity. This does not become fully evident until his aforementioned 1935 lecture “Contemporizing New Testament Texts.” Permitting the God-human freedom of definition means allowing that “God posits the present.”⁶⁹ Bonhoeffer argues:

Wherever Christ is expressed in the word of the New Testament, one has contemporization. Not where the present registers its own claims before Christ but

⁶⁵ *DBW 9*, p. 349.

⁶⁶ So thoroughly does Bonhoeffer re-appropriate Ranke’s insight that he will at times ‘quote’ Ranke while intentionally or unintentionally replacing Ranke’s words with his own. See, for instance, a 1928 sermon in which Bonhoeffer claims, “‘Every moment is in direct relationship with God,’ a great historian wrote.” (*DBWE 10*, 528.)

⁶⁷ *DBWE 1*, 57.

⁶⁸ *DBWE 2*, 84. See p. 57, above.

⁶⁹ *DBWE 14*, 417.

rather where the present itself stands before the claims of Christ—*there one has the present. For:* The concept of the present is not a temporal determination; instead it is [determined] through the word of Christ as the word of God. The present is not some temporal feeling, temporal interpretation, or *zeitgeist*; instead, the present is solely the Holy Spirit. Wherever God is present in the divine word, there one has the present.⁷⁰

Even the experience of the now is not a given prior to revelation, but finds itself defined by Christ-Reality. The moment of Christ's being present to us is true present; all other experiences of now-ness are an empty husk. Bonhoeffer extends this logic by playing on the root of *Gegenwart*. The present requires something that "is 'present' or situated 'toward' [*entgegen*] with respect to us—waits there before us."⁷¹ The very quiddity of the temporal moment finds itself as a being-in-reference-to-God, a being defined in relation to transcendence. As such, "*the present is determined externally* rather than internally, cannot be determined by us, is determined instead by that which approaches us externally, by that which approaches, by the future."⁷² To be clear, "this future is Christ."⁷³

Here again, what first appears to be two different axes of concern cutting across one another turns out to be two linked expressions of a single logic. The true villain lurking obscurely in the background, yet again, is the pretensions of the unchecked epistemological ego. A definition of temporality which finds its origin in the *pro-me* Christ will unsurprisingly stand askew from any prior definition indebted to a mere idea. In this respect, historical futurity and eternity serve a similar purpose in Bonhoeffer's understanding. Empirical history—as a mere object for critical examination—is easily entrapped by the idealist self. Likewise, the past—as the sum of events experienced in a single consciousness—is equally subordinate to the meanings imparted by the *cor curvum in se*. Contrary to mere temporality, then, the *Augenblick* of eternity—as the being of Christ appearing in real temporality—retains the freedom of self-definition. And, contrary to the past, the future—as unknown experience, as the immersive flow of the encountering presence and presencing encounter of Christ-Reality—retains true alterity.

⁷⁰ *DBWE 14*, 417, emphasis in original.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 418.

⁷² *Ibid.*, emphasis in original.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

Eternity and historical futurity therefore emerge as equally related to the personal freedom of Christ-Reality. As illustration, this mutual relation appears, if somewhat obliquely, in the opening pages of *Creation and Fall*. Reflecting on the words ‘In the beginning, God’, Bonhoeffer uses the logic of eternity and historical origin interchangeably. The mysterious *tohu wa bohu* preceding God’s creative act lies outside of human cognition, and in this respect, “between the beginning and now there lies the same breach as between now and the end.”⁷⁴ Keeping the prologue of John’s gospel in mind, this mysterious eternity which both precedes and succeeds historical temporality is Christ, “the beginning, the new, the end of our whole world.”⁷⁵ Our mere awareness of this beginning depends on Christ, and yet it also encounters *Dasein*, and in this sense it also requires our own already-having-begun. Revelation only encounters humans in the middle of our existence, thereby taking for granted that, at some point, we began. Consequently, the temporal past of *Dasein* must stretch back to the very same beginning which appears at first glance to be independent, supratemporal. “In the beginning—God,” Bonhoeffer writes, can only be true

if by this word God comes alive for us here in the middle, not as a distant, eternal being in repose but as the Creator. We can know about the beginning in the true sense only by hearing of the beginning while we ourselves are in the middle, between the beginning and the end; otherwise it would not be the beginning in the absolute sense which is also our beginning.⁷⁶

The beginning must carry two interrelated senses. On one hand it is the absolute beginning which is not only independent of humanity but independent of our empirical notions of causality. It must be so if we are to acknowledge the beginning as true beginning, as prior and independent of all other ideas and reflection. “The relation between Creator and creature,” Bonhoeffer insists, “can never be interpreted in terms of cause and effect, because between the Creator and the creature there stands no law of thought or law of effect or anything else.”⁷⁷ Therefore, we cannot allow ourselves to describe God even according to the seemingly self-evident language of a ‘first cause,’ because we thereby subordinate God to thought. Causality, however much we take it for granted, finds its origin in the epistemological subject. The simple appeal it makes to supposedly bare experience is actually the Hegelian temptation endlessly whispered in the ear of theologians and philosophers everywhere, to take

⁷⁴ *DBWE* 3, 22.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

“the bold and violent action of enthroning reason in the place of God.”⁷⁸ Absolute beginning must be free even from the notion inherent to the word ‘beginning’, that God is disposed to be the ‘uncaused cause’, the first link in the physical chain.

On the other hand, human existence has begun. This is the given of *Dasein*. And so, however mysteriously, this absolute beginning has launched our own existence. The fact that the beginning is also our beginning should neither be conceived in contradiction nor in combination with its absoluteness. Rather, according to the Bonhoefferian method of promeity, our own understanding must shift to accommodate the unity of these facts, facts which cannot even be described dualistically as separate facts. We are unable to even ask the questions properly so long as we make use of our old categories, since we are helpless to conceive of the “infinite”, which by definition “has no beginning,” as a beginning nonetheless.⁷⁹ Thus, our causal language of beginning must be reconfigured, “not to be thought of in temporal terms” because “we can always go back behind a temporal beginning.”⁸⁰ The absolute beginning can only be described as a ‘beginning’ “in a qualitative sense,” insofar as it denotes “something utterly unique,” something that “simply cannot be repeated, that . . . is completely free.”⁸¹

Although it lies beyond the purview of *Creation and Fall* to consider the implications of this logic for the future, it is worth considering how the same logic of the prior unity of eternity and true historical temporality might be applied to a theological notion of the eschaton. What Bonhoeffer appears to be suggesting is that the priority of the Incarnation establishes temporality as a feature of reality only insofar as the God-human himself has a personal history, moving through time. In this sense, it is Christ who is ‘timeful’. Rather than centring our reflection on existing objects—bearers of identity across time with perdurance as one feature of their existence—it is the *Augenblick* of justification which properly perdures into eternity, vertically, as it were, as if it a right angle from our own linear progression. It is the identity of existing objects which is a mere feature of the moment, and the moment which finds its own existence bearing the real being of Christ-Reality. When the Christ-Reality acts, it is the moment becoming its true self into eternity, moving towards an utterly free end which is therefore not properly an end at all. From the perspective of empirical experience, then, what may appear to be mere actualism—the unstable, occasional, flickering appearance of a

⁷⁸ *DBWE* 3, 27.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 25-26.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

Real Word to our justified selves in the midst of empirical existence—is actually undergirded by the stable relatedness of time to the Incarnation, the present endlessly finding itself confronted by eternity, judged or reconciled in its relation to Christ-Reality. Bonhoeffer writes in *Ethics*:

God's Yes and God's No to history, as we understand it in the incarnation and crucifixion of Jesus Christ, bring a lasting and irremovable tension into every historical moment. Through the life and death of Jesus Christ, history becomes not the transient bearer of eternal values but, for the first time, thoroughly temporal. Precisely in its temporality, it is history affirmed by God.⁸²

In places such as this, Bonhoeffer can sound nearly presentist in his concern for the moment, but he is not ultimately suggesting that it is only the present which exists. Rather, he is suggesting that each moment only becomes itself insofar as it displays the personal history of Christ-Reality. It is Christ who is truly historical, and therefore Christ who is truly in the present. This is the best way to make sense of Bonhoeffer's claim that "history in the proper sense only begins with sin."⁸³ Our empirical experience of history is, in Bonhoeffer's mind, a kind of pseudo-history, a collection of disparate events fragmented by our inability to see them in their relation to Christ.

Insofar as we still worry about our own identity perduring through time—as Bonhoeffer clearly does, particularly in *Act and Being*—we will not be able to resolve the unity of our identity by mere longitudinal observation. There may or may not be anything consistent or organic about our own movement through empirical history. We find ourselves as *Dasein*, and therefore already in the middle, looking ahead to the end-which-is-no-end and backwards to the beginning-which-is-no-beginning.

In the moment's relation to Christ, however, it is not only the transcendent Christ but the historical Christ-Reality itself which makes a claim on us. Christ-Reality may well be revealed not in ecstatic revelation but in the pressing Reality of the moment, if we are able to attend to it. Only insofar as we attend to Christ-Reality can we truly be contemporaneous to the historical moment, "only where we perceive the claims of history" and are challenged to

⁸² *DBWE* 6, 104.

⁸³ *DBWE* 1, 59.

“accept or reject those claims and allow ourselves to be touched by them in our most profound existence.”⁸⁴ This is the *Augenblick* in the Bonhoefferian sense—a kind of reversal of Kierkegaard’s concern—the moment in which Reality has actualised us. In the Bonhoefferian sense we find ourselves transcended by the moment itself, our own security hung in the balance by the decisive moment’s offer of judgment or reconciliation. It is in this respect, alluding to the true history of Christ-Reality, that Bonhoeffer observes:

Christianity brings a new interpretation of history. History in its essence does not enter our system of ideas and values. On the contrary, it sets for us our limitations. History in its essence is to be interpreted ontologically. The true attitude of man toward history is not interpretative, but that of refusing or acknowledging, that is to say, deciding. History is the place of decision, nothing else. Decision in its most inward sense is possible only as a decision for or against God. This decision is executed in facing Christ. Within the world of ideas there is no such thing as decision because I always bear already within myself the possibilities of understanding these ideas.⁸⁵

Only now can it properly be said that “we are already eternal here in the midst of time itself, bearing eternity within our breast.”⁸⁶ The moment stands outside of us, beckoning us. Yet, at the same time, our identity is never separable from the moment. It is in the moment that we find ourselves being-in-reconciliation or being-under-judgment. In this sense, the moment is also a glimpse of the future of our historical lives, a future, however, that is no mere finality, but is the encounter with transcendent eternity.

Robert Scharlemann has grasped this aspect of Bonhoeffer’s understanding of futurity with exceptional clarity. He writes that,

The idea of God for Bonhoeffer’s analysis is, of course, not simply the idea of the unconditioned; it is, rather, the event in which the divine-human reality shows itself in the context of human history and makes real a possibility not there otherwise.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ *DBWE 10*, 346.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 458.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 520.

⁸⁷ Robert P. Scharlemann, “Authenticity and Encounter: Bonhoeffer’s Appropriation of Ontology,” in *Theology and the Practice of Responsibility*, 255.

In this he captures not only the priority of the Christ-Reality, but the free personhood of presence which reminds us that Christ-Reality is “not at our disposal but accessible only to the extent that it makes itself known in the deed or event that is real as revelation.”⁸⁸ The only caveat to Scharlemann’s analysis is that he—like many others—presumes Bonhoeffer’s definition of revelation is identical to Barth’s, and so conceives of the manifestation of this “divine-human reality” kerygmatically, as “the idea that is the event of revelation.”⁸⁹ Consequently, he writes that:

The future is incorporated in the relation of the hearer to reality; the reality comes to the hearer, it is *Zu-kunft* that never becomes an objective thing but remains in the *Zukunftigkeit*, the adventivity, of what is proclaimed. In the proclamation something comes to the listening self purely from outside, apart from all structured connections.⁹⁰

There is a great deal that is useful even within this passage: the agency of reality, the alterity of revelation, the being of transcendence—all are hinted at in these words. In returning the focus to proclamation, however, Scharlemann has no choice but to preserve the aloof subjectivity of revelation in *Zukunftigkeit* in order to prevent it from becoming “an objective thing.” The question remains whether this is not precisely the token gesture towards transcendence which is actually the self-restraint of the conscious ego, thus unmasking itself as idealism in disguise—the very thing which Bonhoeffer critiqued in *Act and Being*.⁹¹ By instead speaking about the being of revelation, Bonhoeffer *is permitting* revelation to become “an objective thing” for the justified conscience—this is precisely what gives us hope that there will be an epistemological answer to our problem, that we can indeed recognise Christ-Reality for what it is. As long as the kerygmatic paradigm dominates our conception of revelation, however, forcing us to resolve transcendence in thought, then there can be no distinction between Christ-Reality’s objectivity and Christ-Reality as object. Therefore, we can find not sufficient barrier to idealism, and so Christ-Reality’s being must remain in *Zukunftigkeit*. What is needed is a real being of transcendence, a true presence, which is able to be “an objective thing” without subordinating itself to human reason and thereby becoming mere object. The being of revelation is such a thing, in Bonhoeffer’s mind. It does not request

⁸⁸ Scharlemann, “Authenticity and Encounter,” 255.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 263.

⁹¹ See p. 54, above.

that the human mind acknowledge its alterity. As other person, it is able to impose this alterity even while being fully present.

What Scharlemann leads us toward, however, is the important issue for the moment. What resources might this language of futurity and eternity offer us for the problem of our own epistemology? How are we to look at empirical reality and know anything of this Christ-Reality? What Bonhoeffer's temporal language suggests is that Christ-Reality has a history of its own, which is the Reality of our own history. True history, for Bonhoeffer, is a "qualifier to designate God's actions in time or the events that give a certain concreteness to revelation."⁹² It is both absolute end and the end of our present temporality, it "takes its meaning . . . from its poles of creation and eschatology."⁹³ This raises the possibility that we can identify the intersection of Christ-Reality's history in our experience, as the moment when the world becomes for us what it truly it is, which is also to say, what it will be, as reconciled or judged by God. The appearance of history's future in our midst is equally the appearance of eternal transcendence. Bonhoeffer's logic holds out the possibility that we can see the sick healed, the poor fed, the outsider embraced, the sinner forgiven, the prophecy proclaimed and identify this as Reality, and therefore as the personal work and presence of Christ. Those moments which already are what they will be are nothing short of the empirical appearance of the Christ-Reality's own historical self.

In saying this, we must immediately bear in mind, however, Christ-Reality's twofold appearing in exaltation and humiliation. The possibility of a given moment's appearing as eschatological wholeness must be held together with the possibility of a given moment's appearing as crucified dying. This is one way to make sense of Bonhoeffer's interest in "the powerlessness and the suffering of God,"⁹⁴ even as he also wants to locate God "in the midst of our lives . . . in health and strength and not only in suffering."⁹⁵ The moment of the innocent's suffering is also a moment that has become what it will be, a moment revealed as evil, an eternally damned moment, and therefore a moment incorporated into the Christ-Reality's personal history of suffering. The moment when the prophetic word exposes evil as itself, the moment when the weight of oppression on the shoulders of the guiltless becomes apparent, the moment when righteousness is truly humiliated—in these moments the suffering Christ-Reality is no less accurately manifest than in exalted moments of joy and fulfilment.

⁹² Geoffrey B. Kelly, "Bonhoeffer's Theology of History and Revelation," in *A Bonhoeffer Legacy*, 90.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁹⁴ *DBWE* 8, 479.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 406.

This does not imply that, in either humiliation or exaltation, there is any necessary reason why this appearing will always be obvious to us. Quite the opposite, it is essential to understand that continuity persists as being-in-relation-God, but this being contains within it the possibility of either being-in-reconciliation or being-under-judgment. The empirical moment in which Christ-Reality appears is no less related to Christ-Reality than the moment in which he is hidden. The first is a being-in-reconciliation, the second a being-under-judgment, but both are a being-in-relation-to. Recall Bonhoeffer's notion of limitation—that, against the totalising self, God's first gracious act is to limit in order to set the self free from its infinite solitude. In one breath, this limitation is judgment—God holding us at a distance—and the first step of reconciliation—an opening to loving fellowship with an Other. Applied to reality, Bonhoeffer reminds us that, in the future, some things will be redeemed precisely because some things are rejected. This notion must be retained against too facile of an assumption that the Resurrection's reconciling work will incorporate all of empirical reality into Christ-Reality. As an example, Heinrich Ott, once again, has done as well as any of Bonhoeffer's interpreters in grasping Bonhoeffer's language of temporality, but he also provides an example of sliding too quickly into the language of reconciliation. Bearing in mind the centrality he places on ethics, we find Ott writing that:

If we speak of God as the final reality to which the responsible existence of the Christian has to surrender itself, what is meant by that is not simply that beyond this reality which we know is the God who is real in a final and absolute sense. Bonhoeffer's thought is in no way 'other-worldly'. Rather this assertion is to be understood in a strictly ontological way, that God as the finally real is the true reality in the reality of this world which we know. And this again is not to be understood pantheistically, but in the sense of reconciliation.⁹⁶

There is much to commend this interpretation, but our understanding of Christ-Reality slips towards mere immanentism if we understand reality's being-in-relation-to-God only in terms of reconciliation. Ott wants to avoid conflating Christ with given, empirical existence. But by exclusively emphasising reconciliation, Ott lends to empirical reality the assumption of Christ's tacit approval, even if he does not strictly give empirical reality the authority to dictate Christ's form. In Ott's defence, his language slips in this way precisely because Bonhoeffer's later writings placed such heavy emphasis on "the reality of the world

⁹⁶ Ott, *Reality and Faith*, 173.

reconciled with God in Jesus Christ.”⁹⁷ As a strategy for extending Bonhoeffer’s logic, however, this later language should not be read as a final summation but as a cautionary word against those Confessing Christians of the early 1940’s who found it quite easy to condemn the world under a totalising judgment and quite difficult to watch for the work of Christ-Reality in the midst of chaos. Read as another pattern in Bonhoeffer’s language, however, the movement of eternity and futurity tells us that the moment-under-judgment is equally related to Christ-Reality as the moment-in-reconciliation. One cannot simply watch for the appearance of Christ by looking to reality in the barest sense, anticipating that reality will be affirmed in reconciliation. If this had truly been Bonhoeffer’s logic, after all, he would have been merely another theologian of the Nazi state. Yet, at the same time, one cannot give in to the pietist’s presumption, only expecting to find Christ standing in perpetual contrast to the world. Instead, it is Christ-Reality which beckons, Reality which makes the moment its true self by making it into Christ’s history.

What confidence we have about identifying any particular fact in any particular moment as Christ-Reality is only given in the crucifixion and resurrection. On the map of empirical history’s timeline, the future is not entirely blank. For Bonhoeffer, both the crucifixion and the resurrection are the future which has miraculously become a part of the past, as judgment and reconciliation, as paradigmatic moments in the history of Christ-Reality’s humiliation and exaltation. The moment which suddenly appears as it will be can be identified by its congruence with these events, by sharing some formal similarity with what we already know about the historical future based on the past Incarnation. The moment becoming itself is Christ-Reality, is the present history of the same God-human, *Christus praesens pro me*. We look for the places where the future is present. But this future is not abstract hope; it is the shape of the Christ-Reality as Crucified One, as Resurrected One, a shape “we have heard, we have seen with our eyes, we have looked upon and touched with our hands” (1 John 1:1).

This notion of the justification of the *Augenblick*—as the present moment existing in relation to God, but merging into Christ-Reality in becoming what it will be under grace or judgment—provides us with both an epistemological grounds to actively look for Christ-Reality as well as a caution about our eagerness. We are also predicates of the moment. We do not stand outside the moment’s relatedness to God. Judgment and reconciliation affect our own understanding; we do not stand beyond them. We may fail to understand even the Reality in front of us insofar as our own understanding is at risk of judgment. Nor can we expect our

⁹⁷ *DBWE* 6, 82.

eager observation to be aided by the perdurance across time of Christ-Reality's appearance. Christ-Reality's appearance is the moment becoming itself; it cannot perdure into the next moment, precisely because it is properly a moment. Therefore, we are prevented from thinking of Christ's givenness to empirical existence as in some way permanently imparted to or possessed by people, objects, ideologies, or institutions. We ought to find—with respect to powers, principalities, and our own selves—that “there is no real epistemological conflict between a hermeneutic of suspicion and our sociopolitical usefulness.”⁹⁸ Each moment will occasion its own decision. If this leaves us unsettled about our own continuity, it is only because we desire to possess for ourselves what properly belongs to Reality. Even death—the most seemingly obvious disjuncture between being and nonbeing—cannot separate us from relatedness-to-God, for existence as being-related-to-God “overarches being and nonbeing.”⁹⁹ We are fully and permanently reconciled to God in Reality, but the experience of our empirical lives includes the suspension of our being in transcendence. We are properly defined by a Christ-Reality we cannot possess. The continuity of our empirical selves is owed to this fundamental definition, and is manifest in our own perceived distance or nearness to God as the experience of judgment or reconciliation, experiences which are equally related to God. Christ-Reality appearing in the decision of the moment transcends us; it calls us to action that may be utterly beyond us, utterly self-denying. Whether or not this moment becomes itself in justification does not call into question our own relatedness-to-God, which by grace affirms the futurity of our own reconciliation. It does, however, confront our empirical selves with the choice of whether or not to be our true selves.

This raises the last of our problems to be considered: the logic of promeity in its ethical aspect. On one hand, this can be conceived as merely another kind of epistemological question: how are we to know what we ought to do in order to act in accord with Christ-Reality? What will become clear in the next section, however, is that this epistemological way of putting the question finds itself inverted by Bonhoeffer's ethical interests. Bonhoeffer is eager to act in accord with Christ-Reality; he is much less concerned with our demand for knowledge, for a self-justifying certainty. Acting rightly is important, acting assuredly is not, nor is proving one's own righteousness either before or after the act. Thus, it is to this narrower question we will thus turn: how can we act in accord with Christ-Reality?

⁹⁸ H. Russel Botman, “Is Bonhoeffer Still of Any Use in South Africa?” in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer for a New Day*, 372.

⁹⁹ *DBWE* 12, 221.

5.4 Mystery and commandment—the ethical problem

Andreas Pangritz has helpfully pointed out the affinities between Bonhoeffer and the Jewish theologian Leo Baeck's work on "the dialectical confrontation of mystery and commandment."¹⁰⁰ In these two words, Baeck locates a duality that could also be described "as that of humanity's relationship with God and with the world, of faith and ethics."¹⁰¹ The essence of Judaism, for Baeck, is "that these two experiences have become one, and are experienced as one, in a perfect unity."¹⁰² Pangritz hears a resonance in these words with Bonhoeffer's famous dictum from *Cost of Discipleship*: "Only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes."¹⁰³

Pangritz is correct to see in Bonhoeffer's work this fundamental unity and yet, Pangritz's work also reveals the difficulty of truly treating two such concepts not as dialectical duality, but as real unity. Pangritz sees the application of Baeck's logic to Bonhoeffer's work in the latter's notion of the "arcane discipline" from the prison letters.¹⁰⁴ Pangritz portrays arcane discipline as "a commitment of divine mystery that makes 'true worldliness' possible in the first place."¹⁰⁵ In attempting to spell this out more clearly, Pangritz quotes Bonhoeffer's assertion from the prison letters, "Our being Christians today will be limited to two things: prayer and righteous action among men."¹⁰⁶ Pangritz does not elaborate further, but the implication of applying Baeck's vocabulary to Bonhoeffer is that prayer and righteous action should be understood in parallel to mystery and commandment, faith and ethics, obedience and belief, responsibility to God and responsibility to world. This reading tacitly accepts two spheres of the Christian life—attentiveness on the one hand to the esoterica of devotion guarded within the arcane discipline, and on the other hand to righteous collaboration with the welfare of the world.

There are two problems here. The first is that it is difficult to know what Bonhoeffer means by his spare references to "arcane discipline" and even more difficult to portray it as a necessary prerequisite to true worldliness in the way Pangritz suggests.¹⁰⁷ Secondly, and more importantly, Bonhoeffer does seem to advocate the true unity of mystery and commandment,

¹⁰⁰ Andreas Pangritz, "'Mystery and Commandment' in Leo Baeck and Dietrich Bonhoeffer," *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe*, 30.2 (1997): 48.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Cf. *DBWE* 8, 365 & 373.

but it is precisely this unity which prevents us from speaking of them dualistically. Whatever importance we may give prayer in the formation of righteous action (or vice versa), we still conceive them as separable. In contrast, a more Bonhoefferian approach would be to begin again with the Incarnation. There we discover that mystery and commandment are intrinsically inseparable. “Because the Son of God became a human being,” Bonhoeffer writes, “service to God in worship can no longer be detached from service to sisters and brothers.”¹⁰⁸ True mystery is the alterity of Christ-Reality which emerges in the decisive moment. True commandment is the transcendence which stands outside of us and calls us into question. Bonhoeffer preaches in a sermon:

The blissful notion that God once again dwells among human beings, that God once again lends meaning to human life, that the world is full of God, this notion becomes threatening and frightening precisely because it demands responsibility.¹⁰⁹

There is no awareness of Christ-Reality that is not mysterious exactly as the barrier of our cognition, and no Christ-Reality that does not present us with the chance to join with it or work against it. Consequently, there can be no separation of inner and outer, private and public, ritual and resistance. Everything that can truly be called prayer will drive us to action, because “prayer immediately leads to action” even if only “at the place where it is needed the most, myself.”¹¹⁰ Every action in accord with Reality cannot help but be an offering back to God of what is already God’s own, as truly ethical action “recognizes itself ultimately as being God’s action, the purest activity as passivity to God.”¹¹¹

Here we return to Bonhoeffer’s confession that the personal God-human is the true actor—the one who possesses a personal history as Christ-Reality—and thus the agent and arbiter of what is good. In this light, it can properly be said that “the subject matter of a Christian ethic is God’s reality revealed in Christ becoming real among God’s creatures.”¹¹² This perspective is most often associated with Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics* manuscript, but it equally grounds *Cost of Discipleship*. There, Bonhoeffer emphasises the disconnect between disciples of Christ and the empirical world, not as a rejection of the world, but precisely in order to be more for the

¹⁰⁸ *DBWE* 4, 124.

¹⁰⁹ *DBWE* 10, 494.

¹¹⁰ *DBWE* 15, 506.

¹¹¹ *DBWE* 6, 226.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 49.

world than the world is for itself. These disciples are not pulled from the empirical world into a halo of light, disdaining reality, because what separates them is not “some law of piety,” “unhappily contemptuous of life.”¹¹³ What separates their action from the course of empirical history is “life and the gospel itself; it is Christ itself,” the union of life and Christ as Christ-Reality. Here is where the language of Christ as Mediator finds its full voice in Bonhoeffer’s work. “In becoming human,” Bonhoeffer writes, Christ “put himself between me and the given circumstances of the world. I cannot go back. He is in the middle.”¹¹⁴ Christ’s mediating function is not to serve as a tenuous connection between divine and human, uniquely able to translate one reality into the language of another. There are not separate realities, but one in Christ, and thus Christ-Reality’s mediating function is to separate us from the course of normal existence, pointing out the division between Reality and mere appearances. In this sense, Christ’s mediation is disruptive rather than communicative; it is a between-ness, a transcendent immanence which brings Reality to us by blocking our path to mere empirical reality. “He has deprived those whom he has called of every immediate connection to those given realities.”¹¹⁵ This mediated deprivation is not merely obstructive, it is reconciling, but reconciling as first limiting, restricting the human ego from its assumed mastery of heaven and earth, and only in this way can we say that “he stands not only between me and God, he also stands between me and the world, between me and other people and things.”¹¹⁶ In the words of Dirkie Smit, “we shall have to become people who can learn to live with strangers,”¹¹⁷ and—it might be added—with strangeness, precisely as we find that the limitation of immediate transcendence frees us for hospitality.

While it is true that *Cost of Discipleship* places more emphasis on “the testimony of scripture,”¹¹⁸ and “the preaching and sacrament of the church” as “the place where Jesus Christ is present,”¹¹⁹ it is nonetheless undergirded by the same assumption that the *pro-me* Christ is real being in the world. “Christ is not dead but alive,” Bonhoeffer writes, “He is present today, in bodily form and with his word.”¹²⁰ With respect to an ethical programme, then, *Cost of Discipleship* joins *Ethics* in suggesting that the good is conformity to and imitation of the *Gestalt* of Christ-Reality. *Cost of Discipleship* focuses on that aspect of this form which is already known to us in the historical Christ’s commandments; *Ethics* focuses

¹¹³ *DBWE* 4, 94.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Dirkie Smit, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer and ‘The Other’,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 93 (1995): 15.

¹¹⁸ *DBWE* 4, 201.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 202.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 201.

more on the form of Christ acting freely in the present. The point is the same, however. The historical commandments of Christ are nonetheless present because Christ is present. “The Christ who is present with us,” Bonhoeffer writes, “is the Christ to whom the whole of scripture testifies. He is the incarnate, crucified, risen, and glorified Christ; and he encounters us in his word.”¹²¹ The present activity of the Christ-Reality is nonetheless in keeping with the identity of the Incarnation, and so

the action of the Christian instead springs from the unity of God and world brought about in Jesus Christ. However, this unity must not be understood as a principle. That would ruin everything. Instead, this unity exists solely in the person of Jesus Christ, in whom God became human.¹²²

From the perspective of the ethical subject, obedience to the shape of the historical Christ’s action and conformity to the shape of the present Christ-Reality are no different. The way of being exemplified by the Sermon on the Mount, for instance, is history’s “hidden life,” thought only “visible [in] Christ alone.”¹²³ *Cost of Discipleship* thus presses the disciple towards imitative action, not “interpreting the Sermon on the Mount,” but following after Jesus, who “knows only one possibility: simply go and obey.”¹²⁴ In doing so, the disciple “walk[s] behind Jesus.”¹²⁵ *Ethics* presses humans to become properly human in imitating Christ, for “to be conformed to the one who has become human—that is what being really human means.”¹²⁶ The notion that Christ-Reality possesses its own history, and is free to carve its own path through the world, is integral in connecting the ‘discipleship’ of this middle period to the ‘responsible action’ of the later period.

The connection is evident in an easily over-looked document that bridges these two phases of Bonhoeffer’s theology. His meditation on Psalm 119 was written over the winter of 1939-40, a few months into the war, during a time when Bonhoeffer was clearly beginning to wrestle with what implications discipleship would have for political action.¹²⁷ Reflecting on Psalm 119:1,¹²⁸ Bonhoeffer conceives of Christian life as an imitative journey: “We are to learn to understand ourselves as people who have been placed on the path and now cannot do

¹²¹ *DBWE* 4, 206.

¹²² *DBWE* 6, 238.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 236.

¹²⁴ *DBWE* 4, 181.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹²⁶ *DBWE* 6, 94.

¹²⁷ *DBWE* 15, 496-527.

¹²⁸ “Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord.”

otherwise than walk the path as well.”¹²⁹ This path is not circumscribed for us by boundaries, but is evident as the footprints in which our own steps must fall. “God’s ways are the ways that he has tread before and that we are to walk with him now”—lest we take even these footprints as merely ancient rules for a good life. These are fresh impressions in the ground, left by the immediately preceding Christ-Reality who is also our guide. “God does not allow us to walk a path that he has not walked before and on which he would not precede us.”¹³⁰ The language of the early church in Acts reaches fruition here: “the entire gospel message of salvation can be called simply ‘the way.’”¹³¹ As this way is the way of Reality, and thus of the Good, there need be no fear that the path itself is fallen, rather, “whoever is on this way, whoever is in Jesus Christ, does no evil.”¹³²

Immediately, of course, there is the danger of defining this Christian good over and against the world. The path of Christ-Reality leads to Reality, and therefore to the world’s true self, not to some higher plane of existence. “Life is a benefaction from God,” Bonhoeffer reminds us, “Life is not a means to an end but is fulfillment in itself. God created us so that we may live.”¹³³ If we allow the notion of a path to become fixed, if we lose a sense of its being actively and presently walked and therefore established by Christ-Reality, then we once again risk subordinating the actual Incarnation to an idea. Nothing could be further from the desire of Christ-Reality, who “does not want to see the triumph of ideas over a devastated field of corpses. Ideas exist for the sake of life, not life for the sake of ideas.”¹³⁴ Hence, Christ as Mediator disrupts our connection to empirical reality, not in order to extract us from it, but in order to more faithfully serve Reality, and therefore to aid empirical reality in becoming its true self. “When God’s word first encountered me,” Bonhoeffer writes, “it made me a stranger on this earth.”¹³⁵ And yet this separation still finds me on earth, not as its owner but as its guest, and “as a guest, I need to submit to the laws of my shelter. The earth that feeds me has a right to my work and my strength. It is not my prerogative to despise the earth that sustains my life.”¹³⁶ The path we walk is necessarily for the sake of reality, as it is set by the very movement of Reality.

¹²⁹ *DBWE 15*, 498.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 504.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*, 505.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 519.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 521.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 522.

The meditation on Psalm 119 sets the stage both for the later Bonhoeffer's understanding of responsible action as well as for—perhaps unexpectedly—his critique of religion. It serves as a reminder that, in the same way that there is a danger of losing the personal freedom of Christ-Reality in an excessive immanence in empirical reality, there is the same danger in an excessive immanence in religious praxis. Subordinating Christ-Reality to the life of righteous piety is no less egocentric idealism than subordinating him to experiential knowledge. “Are we praising human sanctity and piety?” Bonhoeffer asks rhetorically, “Are we preoccupied with ourselves and our faultlessness?”¹³⁷ This cannot be permitted, as praise must only be given to God, “No other praise can count here.”¹³⁸ Consequently, a Christian ethic is the subversion and ultimate inversion of our epistemological desire to know what must be done. The short horizon of our vision is “Jesus Christ walking ahead of me, step by step.”¹³⁹ This is the extent of our knowledge. “Either one moves ahead or one is not with God. God knows the entire way; we only know the next step and the final goal.”¹⁴⁰ The route cannot be mapped; the fixed point of certainty is only the terminus of this history revealed in the Resurrection and the dust rising from the feet of the one ahead. In this respect, “the life of whoever has set his foot on this path, has become a wandering,” even if it is also guided.¹⁴¹

The path is in one sense narrow, but in another sense it is pluriform: “It is the life under the word of God in its utter multitude of forms, in its richness, in its inexhaustible fullness of knowledge and experiences.”¹⁴² The path finds its origin in the free action of the beginning-which-is-no-beginning and its destination in the reconciled end-which-is-no-end. In between it is a manifold, boundless, and unexpected wandering. Echoing the logic of the early theses and the language of the Christology lectures, “there is only one danger on this path, namely, to want to step back behind this beginning or to lose sight of the goal, which is the same thing. In that moment the path ceases to be a path of grace and of faith. It ceases to be God's own path.”¹⁴³ The path, as person, does not yield up its own internal logic for our perusal, and in exactly the moment when we believe we are able to epistemologically extrapolate what must be done, we find ourselves moving off to the side, loitering at a human signpost while Christ-Reality vanishes ahead.

¹³⁷ *DBWE 15*, 514.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ *DBWE 4*, 176.

¹⁴⁰ *DBWE 15*, 504.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 497.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

Actual ethics therefore subverts our epistemology of ethics. Our normal standards are subordinate to the “praxis-logic” of discipleship in the shadow of Christ-Reality.¹⁴⁴ Even the steps of Christ-Reality may not be obvious to our own intellect under judgment. These moments of blind uncertainty can be a “severe trial . . . But if I permit God himself to show me the way, then I am completely dependent on the grace that either reveals or denies itself to me.”¹⁴⁵ Dependence is the one certainty, that “I remain bound wholly to grace in all my ways and decisions.”¹⁴⁶ Any ethic which presents itself as more certain than this is a “false security” attempting to “beguile me out of the living community with God.”¹⁴⁷ We are unable to guarantee what lies ahead, and equally unable to evaluate what lies behind. Reflection is the not the task for the moment, but obedience. Our evaluation of the past easily strays into a congratulatory “reflection on our extraordinariness.”¹⁴⁸ In this sense, faithfully attending to the righteousness of Christ-Reality means no longer attending to any forward-looking extrapolation or backwards-looking summation of righteousness as an idea. “Our paying attention to our righteousness,” *Cost of Discipleship* reminds us, “is supposed to support our not paying attention to our righteousness.”¹⁴⁹ Our discipleship can attend to nothing other than Christ-Reality, to the appearing in our midst of the personal presence of reality’s true self. All other avenues are closed—abstract principles, philosophical speculation, religious obligation, the causal connection of our own action to any particular result, the description of our work as righteous or not, the summation of our own natures as good or evil. Nothing can provide a ground more fundamental than the personal presence of the Incarnation’s history. “Nothing but God makes human action in history good,” Bonhoeffer writes, “God incorporates it into God’s own hidden plan that pursues the goal of history as it has been revealed in Christ.”¹⁵⁰

As early as 1929, Bonhoeffer already had in mind the very practical consequences of this ethical approach. “All we can do,” he writes,

is examine the concrete situation of decision and point out one of the possibilities for decision that emerges there. The decision demanded in

¹⁴⁴ Botman, “Discipleship as Transformation,” 108.

¹⁴⁵ *DBWE 15*, 523.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ *DBWE 4*, 149.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ *DBWE 6*, 226-7.

reality, however, must be made in freedom in the concrete situation by the individual involved.¹⁵¹

The aim of a Christian ethic is to act in accord with Christ-Reality, to respond in obedience to the appearing of exalted or humiliated history in the moment.¹⁵² As explained in the previous section, this appearing may not be obvious to us and, even when it is, we may not understand its connection to the empirical future or the deeper movement of Christ-Reality. “To what extent a human action serves the divine goal of history and thus actualizes good in history,” Bonhoeffer admits, “is something we cannot know with ultimate certainty.”¹⁵³ In principle, there can be no *a priori* reason to ascribe Christ-Reality to a particular *Gestalt*. For example, despite the temptation to read Bonhoeffer’s Finkenwalde years as a stark contrast to his later participation in conspiratorial resistance—the first an inward, pious, ecclesial phase, the second a public, secularised, political phase—there is no *a priori* reason to dismiss either as unresponsive to Christ-Reality. Reality may equally be as manifest in a meditative retreat as in a coup d’état—to assume otherwise is to subordinate Christ-Reality to mere idea. In a decisive moment, either may be needed, as “God often demands fast and immediate action, yet he also demands silence and contemplation.”¹⁵⁴ The moment may demand something deeply personal or deeply political, something religious or something secular, something traditional or something iconoclastic, something praised or something criminalised—there is no way to exclude any option in advance on the basis of a supposed fidelity to the meaning of God or the world. “What is important,” Bonhoeffer reminds us, “is not that God is a spectator and participant in our life today, but that we are attentive listeners and participants in God’s action in the sacred story, the story of Christ on earth.”¹⁵⁵

Therefore, what remains for the one wanting to be truly human is to live truly in Reality. This Reality is Christ, and as such has a form and yet, as person, this form is present, agential,

¹⁵¹ *DBWE* 10, 369.

¹⁵² It is this context in which Bonhoeffer’s *analogia relationis* should be understood. It is a substitute for neither the *analogia entis* nor Barth’s *analogia fides*, insofar as it is not actually attempting to accomplish what they intend to accomplish. The latter pair are analogical ladders upon which truth can be pursued. Bonhoeffer’s *analogia* is an analogy along which life can be lived in accordance with Reality, even if the truth about ends and means are not properly understood. It is “the likeness . . . of humankind to God . . . a given relation, a relation in which they are set, a justitia passiva! And it is in this relation in which they are set that freedom is given” (*DBWE* 3, 65). Given the possibility of being-free-for-others, the analogy only guides us insofar as it points us toward the imitation of Christ, the one truly free-for-others. In this respect, the *analogia relationis* provides no real fodder for the intellect, but the physical shape for action and the hope that we may be released into enough existential space for that action to be mimicked.

¹⁵³ *DBWE* 6, 227.

¹⁵⁴ *DBWE* 15, 517.

¹⁵⁵ *DBWE* 5, 62.

appearing in the places we least expect, always redeeming us by transcending us, refusing mere conceptualisation. A truly free, truly responsible action in the world will make its best effort to imitate the historical Christ, but fully, not merely in what appears to us as his most ethically relevant actions—not only as the one who suffers with the oppressed and condemns the tyrannical, but as the one who worships, prays, forms community, interprets scripture, preaches good news, celebrates the sacraments. We respond to the appearing of this same historical Christ in Reality not with philosophising, but with obedience grounded in humility, trusting that both our best and our worst find their fundamental continuity in grace.

As a final word for future consideration, however, a Bonhoefferian ethic not only subverts the epistemology of ethics, but also inverts it, returning a very different set of parameters which may well challenge a fundamental epistemology. “I can know God only if I can effect an act,” Bonhoeffer writes, “an act which make me transcend the limits of myself . . . While it is obvious that I myself cannot effect such an act, there is, nevertheless, such an act, which is executed by God himself, and which is called ‘faith.’”¹⁵⁶ For Bonhoeffer, discipleship is an epistemological category. Imitation precedes reflection, and discipleship provides its own ground for thought. “Following Christ means taking certain steps,” he writes in *Cost of Discipleship*, “The first step, which responds to the call, separates the followers from their previous existence. A call to discipleship thus immediately creates a new situation.”¹⁵⁷ This new situation is a condition for belief, it is the “concrete commandment [that] has to be obeyed, in order to come to believe.”¹⁵⁸ In 1932, as a young lecturer, Bonhoeffer found himself asking, “how can I recognize as truth that of which Christian proclamation speaks?”¹⁵⁹ Even at that point he believed the answer would not fall among the normal semantic interplay of premises and conclusions. Instead, the answer would come:

solely through the free attempt to base one’s life for once completely on the word of Christ; for once to live totally with him, to live by following him, to hear him, to obey him. Only the one who has completely dedicated his life in this way can judge whether Christ speaks and is the truth. And Christ gives the promise: Whoever once dares to do that will know the truth. Only in living does one know the truth. Only in battle can one test weapons.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁶ *DBWE 10*, 459.

¹⁵⁷ *DBWE 4*, 61-2.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁵⁹ *DBWE 11*, 434.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

More than merely an affirmation of discipleship's centrality to Christian life, Bonhoeffer's logic of imitation raises a challenge to the assumption of philosophy post-Wittgenstein that identity and existence are hermeneutical at their core. Bonhoeffer's ethical inversion of epistemology raises a deeper question about the mimetic origins of knowledge, as a set of actions taken up and only subsequently given meaning within a hermeneutical frame. Bonhoeffer's understanding of discipleship as an epistemological category is pre-reflective, pre-linguistic; it is the pursuit of the most unmediated imitation possible. In this sense, mimesis is still communicative, but not of semantic meaning, principally. Indeed, for Bonhoeffer, meaning is a secondary addition which is fraught with the dangers of philosophical idealism and—at any rate—is irrespective of conformity to Christ-Reality. Potentially, a truly Bonhoefferian epistemology finds itself dependent on ethics, not as moral evaluation, but as an action in imitation of some first creative agent or another which only later yields anything that can be called knowledge.

5.5 Conclusion

Moved by the histories of those who influenced him the most, the teenaged Bonhoeffer attempted to capture in a paper for Karl Holl's seminar a sense of what distinguished extraordinary persons:

One can classify people according to the perspectives listed below. . . The first type of person—and these are in the majority—live out their years. . . Others have a life history. This means that they have lived and experienced with conviction and a sense of direction. Looking back, they see a history that defines the center of their lives. The third type, however, is the person of history. . . These are people with a concrete calling. Among them, religious individuals are unique. . . All of their thoughts and actions are aligned with their work, as they feel it should be.¹⁶¹

As the focus of this thesis has been on broader patterns of thought which cut across Bonhoeffer's writings, little attention has been paid to the circumstances of his biography. It is impossible, however, not to notice the extraordinary way in which his own thoughts and

¹⁶¹ *DBWE* 9, 257.

actions aligned with his work. Perhaps the best case to be made for Bonhoeffer's understanding of Christ-Reality is found not in the sum of his christological arguments, but in his relentless regard for the moment, not accepting the simplest interpretation of events, but pressing back against his context with a confidence borne of an even deeper encounter with Reality.

Writing from the stifling emptiness of prison life, however, Bonhoeffer questioned whether his action and work truly revolved around a central meaning, "whether one still sees, in this fragment of life that we have, what the whole was intended and designed to be."¹⁶² But even this doubt fits Bonhoeffer's attentiveness to the present Christ-Reality, in his unwillingness to issue a final judgment until the personal history of the Incarnation reaches its own summation. Bonhoeffer took action in advance of any final analysis, and thus made his best effort to act ethically, in accord with Reality, uncertain of what judgment would be made against him, yet determined to accept "coresponsibility for the course of history, knowing that it is God who placed it upon him" and thus to "find a fruitful relation to the events of history."¹⁶³ It is difficult—and appeared to be difficult for Bonhoeffer even as he chose it—to reconcile the violent assassination of another human with action according to the personal history of Christ-Reality. It is not difficult, however, to see the form of the Incarnate God-human in the life of a man resisting evil totally and relentlessly, even to the point of execution at the hands of his enemy. Bonhoeffer intended to be a successful revolutionary, and quite unintentionally found himself a martyr. He could never have been the latter had he not intended the former, and thus found himself borne along towards a witness he did not choose. He desired to act in accord with Christ-Reality, and this desire was consummated in the final testimony of his life, whether or not he ever understood this completeness while on earth.

Perhaps, however, it would not have surprised Bonhoeffer to find his personal intentions transcended by a meaning he never sought. Such was his faith that, even as he lamented the fragmentary nature of his own life, he held out hope that "the various themes gradually accumulate and harmonize with one another" so that "the great counterpoint is sustained from beginning to end."¹⁶⁴ In the end, then, "it is not for us, either, to complain about this fragmentary life of ours, but rather even to be glad of it."¹⁶⁵ The glad hope of the prison letters is that this counterpoint may gather to itself the whole history of the world. It is entirely

¹⁶² *DBWE* 8, 306.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 306.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

possible that the so-called secular world, of its own right, will find itself singing a haunting echo of the *cantus firmus*, perhaps nearer at times to Reality than even those who call themselves Christians. In the modern era, when mystery is associated with religion and factuality with empiricism, Bonhoeffer reveals the underlying mistake. Christ is the great unveiler, the one who presses us relentlessly towards himself, which is equally to say towards Reality. To neglect Reality by retreat into religiosity is mere naïveté, an ethically gross superstitionism. At the same time, though, to assume that Reality is fully ours, that it can be fully exhausted in our own perceptions and opinions, to assume that the ultimate answer is anything other than infinitely approaching, overwhelming the narrow scope of our limited view—this is an even greater illusion punctured by Reality. What seems like esoteric mystery has nothing to do with faith; what presents itself as bald-faced reality is far more illusory than we allow. What is Real turns out to be far more elusive than our common usage suggests, precisely because it is a person exterior to ourselves, the Real One.

The limitations upon us—and thus the transcendence at the centre of our empirical lives—manifests in various ways: from the mystery of sacraments to the encounter with a stranger; from our emotionally fragmented confusion to our helpless inability to render a final verdict on our natures; from the pressing responsibility of the moment tearing our gaze from abstraction to the divine command crashing into our ethical reflection, calling us to a suffering we would never choose. These limits remind us—contrary to the serpent’s temptation to enthrone ourselves—that we are not God.

Our limitations ought to immediately caution all of us—Christian or otherwise—not to summarise the history of Reality while it is still living, not to judge before the time is ripe. To speak of Christ at work in the world is perfectly in keeping with the ‘who’ of the Incarnation. To speak of Christ’s work as one’s own, however, is to have surpassed the barrier of transcendence. Until all is disclosed, the imitation of the God-human’s history, both past and future, is—ethically and epistemologically—the grounds from which we must proceed. It is our only hope for being able to properly see the world as it will be, to not only be justified in fact, but to be awakened in consciousness to the comfort or wrath against a particular moment. Ontologically, the revelation of Christ gives us grounds to believe this is possible, but only insofar as we attend all over again to this encounter. Our task is to acknowledge a history beyond ourselves, more descriptive of our future than the best laid plans of our timeline, and to act in freedom for the purpose of making this world truly itself. “It may be

that the day of judgment will dawn tomorrow; only then and no earlier will we readily lay down our work for a better future.”¹⁶⁶

This thesis has been an attempt to lay the groundwork for an understanding of God and world which can lead us to this point, to take this Christ-Reality as seriously as possible. The path taken to reach this point has been referred to as the method of promeity. The theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer has fuelled this inquiry, providing it force and shape. Originating in Bonhoeffer’s central christological claim, applied by Bonhoeffer to various theological concepts, and then eventually applied to a fundamental ontology, promeity serves as the motivation and method to renew all our concepts by returning them to the revelation of the Incarnate God-human. Encountered by this ‘who’ rushing towards us, we acknowledge it as both person given to be for us, and thus abiding in presence. Applied to the much-disputed question of God’s relationship to the world, promeity leads us to acknowledge the *a priori* unity of the God-human, and thus to redefine ourselves, our world, and our worship according to Christ’s own self-disclosure. Promeity, as the methodology of an anti-method, can only return us again and again to the beginning, urging us to take this self-disclosure more seriously at every point in our theorising. Thus, for one last time, we are left to agree with Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

Here at the end we stand again where we stood in the beginning; and that cannot be otherwise; for *everything* is included in God’s revelation in Christ, in the justification of the sinner by faith and grace alone. And must not the solution of *everything* be there, where *God himself* is?¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ *DBWE* 8, 51.

¹⁶⁷ *DBWE* 10, 476, emphasis in original.

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