

The legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer for ecumenism today

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ABSTRACT

Bonhoeffer's deep commitment to the ecumenical movement from 1931 onwards was founded on his theology of the church as "Christ existing as community", the new humanity. He had no "ecumenical theology" apart from this, writ large. This undergirded both his devotion to the Confessing Church and his call for the churches to embody and proclaim peace in a world bent on war. Bonhoeffer's posthumous influence has been deeply creative in the ecumenical movement since 1945 but the challenge laid down in his prison writings for a Christianity that does not seek privileges but truly identifies with the world has still not been fully answered by the institutional churches and ecumenical bodies. A truly ecumenical church is one, which fully identifies with the *oikoumene*, the whole inhabited earth, its religious and non-religious aspects, and is itself transformed in encountering with the world as much as it seeks to transform the world.

KEYWORDS

Ecumenical, oikoumene, Church, World, Community

TREFWOORDE

Ekumeniese, oikoumene, Kerk, Wêreld, Samelewing

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COMMUNITY

In this paper I will highlight briefly some key features of Bonhoeffer's own ecumenical engagement and then offer some reflections on their significance for the ecumenical movement today. But even before that, a brief remark on what I take the word "ecumenical" to be about. As is well known, the word "ecumenical" comes from the Greek *oikoumene*, "the whole inhabited world". The great councils of the early church such as those at Nicea and Constantinople in the fourth century were "ecumenical councils" because they brought together bishops from the churches throughout the *oikoumene*, the whole inhabited earth as known at that time to the people of the Roman Empire. They saw it as an *oikoumene*, which was being embraced by the purpose of God in Christ. But we should notice that "the inhabited earth" refers in a holistic fashion not just to the inhabitants of the earth, but to the earth they inhabit as well. The root word of *oikoumene* is *oikos*, "house", or "household", denoting a family or community living together under one roof. Furthermore, from the root *oikos* come words, like "economy" and "ecology": the household of humankind and the whole environment. The ecumenical movement, in broadest terms, means being caught up into what St Paul according to the Letter to the Ephesians describes as God's purpose in Christ, "a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." (Eph 1:10). It certainly begins with the church, but it does not end there.

What is distinctive about Dietrich Bonhoeffer is that for him the ecumenical vision as far as it concerned the churches should have most concrete and immediate consequences possible. Looking back in later life to the time when he became actively involved in the ecumenical movement, at about the time of his return to Germany from a year's study as an exchange student in the USA, he said that this was the time when he moved "from the phraseological to the real"; from ideas to concrete action.¹

Bonhoeffer entered into ecumenical engagement in 1931, when at the conference in Cambridge, England, of the World Alliance for Friendship through the Churches he was appointed an honorary Youth Secretary for Europe. The main purpose of the World Alliance, as its name implies, was to work for peace, and it was this, which was the prime attraction of the organisation for Bonhoeffer. For him ecumenism and peace were two sides of the same coin.² The church, being the community of Jesus

1 *DBWE* 8, 358.

2 See K Clements, "Ecumenical Witness for Peace", in JW de Gruchy (Ed.). *Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 154-172.

Christ, was the sign and instrument of God's peace in the world. This was one of the two main foci of Bonhoeffer's ecumenical commitment, which reached its highest point at the ecumenical conference at Fanø, Denmark, in 1934 when he made his most outspoken declaration: "There is no way to peace along the way of safety. For peace must be dared. It is the great venture",³ and called on that meeting to take on the role of a great ecumenical council and challenge to the churches to forbid war. The other focus arose out of the German Church Struggle. Bonhoeffer was not only totally committed to the cause of the Confessing Church within Germany, but pressed the case of the Confessing Church in the international ecumenical movement, insisting that since the Confessing Church was the church which had rejected the heresies of Nazified Christianity in Germany, it and it alone had a right to represent German Protestantism at the international ecumenical table. That posed a mighty challenge to the ecumenical movement itself. Was the ecumenical fellowship just a talking shop for dialogue and cooperation on certain issues, or was it more than that: a body, which could pronounce authoritatively on the issue of truth, and on the concrete course of right action? In fact, as Bonhoeffer asked at least twice during 1934-35, "Is the ecumenical movement church?"⁴ Closely associated with this question was Bonhoeffer's repeated complaint that "There is no theology of the ecumenical movement."⁵ By this he did not mean that there were no theologians attending ecumenical meetings (there were plenty); nor that theological issues were never discussed at meetings either of the World Alliance, or of the Universal Christian Council for Life and Work, or of the Faith and Order movement. Of course they were. But what Bonhoeffer was looking for was a theological understanding of the ecumenical movement itself, its status in relation to the nature and purpose of the church.⁶ Were the ecumenical bodies just functional organisations for promoting theological dialogue and cooperation, or were they a manifestation of the church itself, the church which is the one body of Christ in all nations, and as such a sign and embodiment of the new humanity in Christ? This for him was a choice between phraseology and reality.

In asking whether the ecumenical movement had itself a theological basis, Bonhoeffer was not offering to supply what is often termed an "ecumenical theology" or a

3 *DBWE* 13, 308f.

4 In paper given at Fanø conference 1934 (*DBWE* 13, 304), and 1935 essay "The Confessing Church and the Ecumenical Movement" (*DBWE* 14, 399).

5 See Bonhoeffer's lecture "On the Theological Foundation of the Work of the World Alliance" given to ecumenical youth conference at Ciernohorské Kúpele, 1932 (*DBWE* 11, 355-369).

6 *Ibid*, 356

“theology of ecumenism”. This was for the simple reason that he himself did not have a “theology of ecumenism” apart from his own distinctive theology of the church. His ecumenical theology was just his ecclesiology writ large. In his earliest work, his doctoral thesis of 1927, *Sanctorum Communio*, he had spelled out his understanding of the church as “Christ existing as church-community”⁷, a community of persons in the relationship of being-with and being-for one another under the word of Christ. It is a community manifesting the work of Christ expressed in the term *Stellvertretung*, a peculiar word formerly translated as “deputyship” but which Clifford Green and his colleagues have now rendered us, in *Sanctorum Communio* (and later works of Bonhoeffer where the term occurs as) “vicarious representative action”. We must be grateful to them for both illuminating the meaning of the term, if at the same time grossly violating the elegance of the English language! It means that the church is identified as a community, which, under the word of Christ, comprises relationships of the quality of vicarious representative action and mutual service, stemming from Jesus Christ himself, and therefore at its most profound is found in the forgiveness of sins.⁸ This was of immense ecumenical significance for Bonhoeffer. It means he was prepared to find the authentic church wherever this quality of relational community is found, be it in his own Lutheran parish, in a Roman Catholic confessional, or in the Black Baptist Abyssinian church in Harlem. It is a concept of church, which relativized for him so many of the confessional distinctions of Christendom. It also meant that when the Church Struggle burst in Germany in 1933, he was ready armed with tools to combat the so-called German Christian heresy of a purely German church, a non-Jewish church, a church conforming to the Nazi ideals of authoritarian leadership, the *Führerprinzip*, all of which ran clean counter to his concept of church as a community solely under the word of Christ and formed according to Christ’s pattern of vicarious servanthood. A church, which for example introduced a racial criterion of membership, was no longer the church of Jesus Christ.

But it also meant that he took with him into ecumenical activity a definite concept of what the ecumenical movement should be and how it should behave. A gathering of people from the churches of the world, gathered in service under the word of its common Lord and in solidarity with one another, should regard itself as church in nature, precisely and above all because it was a manifestation of the universality, the catholicity of the church existing in and beyond all national and racial differences. So at the ecumenical meeting of Life and Work and the World Alliance at Fanø in 1934 he could even dare to claim: “The Ecumenical Council is in session; it can

7 *DBWE* 1, 190 etc.

8 *Ibid*, 180-182.

send out to all believers this radical call to peace. The nations are waiting for it in the East and in the West.”⁹ Why is this so? It is because “The World Alliance is a Church so long as its fundamental principles lie in obediently listening to and preaching the Word of God.”¹⁰ If Bonhoeffer was ever challenged as to how he could dare to claim this on behalf of such a motley collection of people, not all of whom had been officially mandated by their churches to act in the way he was calling for, I suspect he might have said something like: “Well, you tell me: where else is anything resembling the Ecumenical Council meeting just now? If we remain silent, and the world is destroyed by war tomorrow, what are we going to say before the judgment seat of God? Are we going to say, ‘Sorry, Lord, but we hadn’t had time to get the truly great Ecumenical Council organised? Won’t the Lord say something like, ‘All right, if you hadn’t got the ideal shouldn’t you have at least tried the next, or second or third best thing however unsatisfactory- just as the servant given only one talent shouldn’t have left it in the ground but done *something* with it in the market?’” Bonhoeffer was always critical of the ecumenical movement for its slowness and hesitancy. But he never gave up on it. In 1935, writing on how the ecumenical movement and the Confessing Church needed each other, he speaks about the hopes for an Ecumenical Council: “It is not an ideal that has been set up but a commandment and a promise – it is not high-handed implementation of one’s own goals that is required but obedience.”¹¹ The promise therefore remains on the ecumenical movement, despite all its often-disappointing outcomes, its ambiguities and seeming failures.

This vision of ecumenism as the manifestation of the new humanity in Christ in the catholicity of the church remained with Bonhoeffer right to the end. His last recorded words, the day before he was executed at Flossenbürg, were a message to his closest and most trusted ecumenical friend, George Bell, bishop of Chichester: “Tell him, that with him I believe in the principle of our universal Christian brotherhood which rises above all national interests, and that our victory is certain.”¹²

Between those earlier statements of 1934-35 and that last statement on the eve of his death, however, certain developments had taken place in Bonhoeffer’s thinking, which do not contradict or replace his earlier thought but reorientate them in significant ways. Particularly in mind here are his prison writings and his call for a “non-religious” interpretation of Christianity with which to address a “world come

9 DBWE 13, 309.

10 Ibid, 304.

11 DBWE 14, 412.

12 See E Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 926f.

of age”. Central to this orientation towards a worldly understanding of Christian faith was a new emphasis in his understanding of the church, summed up in his sentence: “The church is church only when it is there for others.”¹³ I see this as an extension of his earlier ecclesiological understanding of “Christ existing as community”; a community structured by vicarious representative action, *Stellvertretung*, towards a corporate vicarious representative action of the church community for the world in which it is set. I believe that Bonhoeffer, if he had survived Hitler’s revenge, would also want the same extension to be applied to the ecumenical movement – as indeed he had already in effect done so at Fanø in 1934. In relation to this extension, I want to bring in another citation from Bonhoeffer’s prison letters, as when he writes to Eberhard Bethge: “How do we go about being ‘religionless-worldly’ Christians, how can we be εκ-κληία, those who are called out, without understanding ourselves religiously as privileged, but instead seeing ourselves as belonging wholly to the world?”¹⁴ Note that Bonhoeffer connects here religion with “privilege”, targeting the assumed role of churches as guardians of the entrance to another, superior world beyond this one - and therefore claiming privileges in relation to each other also, bearing in mind their competing claims to have identified the heavenly portals of truth. But if the faith they profess to proclaim is not about the correct exit to another world, but the entrance into this world of the kingdom of God in righteousness and peace, then it is not privilege towards which they should be aspiring but authentic discipleship of the crucified and risen anointed one in this very world, the way to authentic humanity.

Bonhoeffer’s posthumous influence on the ecumenical movement has been immense but his rejection of what he calls “privilege” and his advocacy of “belonging wholly to the world” constitute a challenging element of Bonhoeffer’s legacy still to be fully claimed, or perhaps rather faced, by the ecumenical movement today. I would like to point up three issues of current ecumenical concern.

The *first* is the long running debate, virtually as old as the modern ecumenical movement itself, on the relationship between the institutional churches and the movement towards visible Christian unity, and in particular the organisations created to further the movement. This might seem to be a very mundane matter of churchly bureaucracy but in fact has very wide theological ramifications. At root it is about how we theologically evaluate what is happening beyond the boundaries of official church structures. So for a moment the reader is asked to excuse what may seem a somewhat drab piece of ecumenical story-telling.

13 DBWE 8, 503.

14 Ibid, 364.

The WCC was formally constituted at its first assembly in 1948, in Amsterdam. Almost immediately fears were being expressed among some of its member churches that what was coming into being was some kind of “super church” claiming an authority over the churches. In 1950 at its meeting in Toronto, Canada, the WCC Central Committee after lengthy and often heated debate agreed on a statement which allayed such fears and ever since has been regarded almost as the holy writ of ecumenism.¹⁵ According to the Toronto Statement, not only does the WCC claim no authority over its constituent churches, but also membership of the WCC does not commit any church to agree with the ecclesiology of any other member church, and does not imply any ecclesiological preference by the WCC. This certainly met the fears about the imposition of any one theological understanding of the church. But this was at the price of leaving other questions unanswered. For the Toronto Statement can be interpreted in a very minimalist way, to mean that the WCC itself, or indeed any other ecumenical body, is itself devoid of any ecclesial significance whatever: that it is a purely functional mechanism by which churches enter into dialogue with one another and into certain inter-church cooperative projects. This issue underlay the recent discussions in the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC, following the WCC 1998 Harare Assembly. The problem is, if ecclesial reality resides only in the institutional churches and their governing bodies, what actually is happening when their representatives meet together and share common prayer for the Holy Spirit’s guidance, and enter into any kind of joint decision-making? If there is no *ecclesiological* significance here, is there not at least a *pneumatological* reality? Further, how do we come to terms with the fact that vital to the ecumenical movement has been the witness and activity of what might be called para-church movements, especially among the youth and laity? Indeed, that it was largely out of the Christian youth and student movements of the late 19th century that the modern ecumenical movement was born? Bonhoeffer’s point remains: we need a theology which recognises as *significantly church* any place wherever and however the catholicity, the universality, of community in Christ is emerging and being confessed, as a sign of the new humanity in the midst of the old order of division and death, and wherever and whenever a decisive word is spoken to the world for justice, peace and reconciliation. Much is spoken of in various quarters today of the need for the institutional churches to “own” the ecumenical movement. But by “owning” they often mean, “controlling”. This I believe is bound up with

15 See “The Church, the Churches and the World Council of Churches, WCC Central Committee, Toronto, 1950, in M Kinnamon and BE Cope (Eds). *The Ecumenical Movement. An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices* (Geneva: WCC, 1977; and Grand Rapids, WB Eerdmans 1977), 463-468.

a wrongly conceived contemporary obsession with “identity”. So long as churches are unwilling to be pulled out of their isolation and self-sufficiency into a wider movement of belonging, they can never be manifestations of the new humanity in Christ.¹⁶ For this they do not, here and now, need to be in total theological agreement nor structurally or organically one (though it would be better if they were), but at least they need to be counter-signs to the divisions and disintegrating forces running amok in the *oikoumene* at large. To repeat again Bonhoeffer’s view, the ecumenical fellowship is not an ideal but - under God - a commandment and a promise.

Secondly, we are surely all aware that today the ecumenical task has to be negotiated in a multi-faith world, a world moreover which is not only one of religious plurality but of social and political conflicts in which religion is often a factor. Hence the frequent contemporary question: Is inter-religious dialogue the new ecumenism? This is one expression of the basic question, of how any one particular religious tradition can claim a universal significance for the whole human community – and indeed (as Larry Rasmussen has reminded us at this colloquium) for the whole created order on our planet. In fact, awareness of other faiths within the *oikoumene*, and – increasingly – actual dialogue with other faiths - has long been part of the “old” ecumenism. That this has been so, however, is due to the ecumenical movement always taking seriously the *oikoumene* as a whole, of which other faiths are a part. Unfortunately, one thing, which the ecumenical movement, like other human projects, suffers from, is fairly short-term amnesia. Over thirty years ago, the WCC Faith and Order Commission ran a study programme, “The Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human Community”; a study, which appears to be largely forgotten but still, bears on our concerns today.¹⁷ It is about how we maintain the specificity of the church as the body of Christ with the universality of the hope given to the whole *oikoumene*, without playing off one against the other but maintaining the necessary and creative tension between them. A firm consensus emerged in the programme that the church is not itself the kingdom of God but a prophetic sign and instrument of the kingdom. It does not itself realise the kingdom in its fullness, but surrenders itself to God in the power of the Spirit to be a kind of first fruits of that kingdom, a sign of it upon the earth. As such it must manifest in its own life what it means to be a community of mutual acceptance, forgiven and forgiving, free in its

16 Cf the discussions in N Sagovsky, *Ecumenism, Christian Origins and the Practice of Communion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 194-208; K Clements, *Ecumenical Dynamic: living in more than one place at once* (Geneva: WCC, 2013), 194-213.

17 See especially G Limouris (Ed.), *Church Kingdom World. The Church as Mystery and Prophetic Sign*, Faith and Order Paper No 120 (Geneva: WCC, 1986).

diversity and one in all its differentiations. But equally it identifies with the whole of the *oikoumene* without reservation. From my own time on the Faith and Order Commission I especially remember a presentation made to its plenary meeting in Stavanger, Norway, in 1985 by Frieda Haddad, a Lebanese lay theologian of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch. I say “presentation” but in fact she was not herself able to be present in Stavanger - Lebanon was still enmeshed in its terrible civil war, the road to Beirut airport was one of the most dangerous in the world, and so her paper was read on her behalf. It was entitled “The Christian community as sign and instrument for the renewal of human community: a Lebanese perspective.” She described how Lebanon had inherited from both Ottoman and French rule a system of government which preserved the *millet* system, whereby limitations and rights of each religious community were carefully set out, including the proportions to which they were entitled in representative government. This sought to provide checks and balances against any one community becoming either too dominant or too marginalised and oppressed – a precarious balance, as Lebanon’s history shows all too well. But Haddad argued that from her faith perspective this was inadequate for an understanding either of how she understood her church, or what it meant to be a member of Lebanese society. It reduced human “community” to legally defined association. So she asked what does it mean to be “church” in Lebanon, and what does it mean to be Christian in Lebanon. In a powerful and moving way, given the fearful nature of her context there and then, she protests against all thinking in primarily legal and institutional terms, whether of church, society or nation. She goes on:

... [H]e who takes his citizenship seriously works earnestly for the advent of a renewed human community where the “other” lives, for he cannot legitimately share in the communal reality of the body politic without sharing in the reality of the other, he cannot conceive of himself as answerable to state laws without answering at the same time for the other. In simple and direct terms this means, for instance, that the unbearable living conditions of the displaced, no matter what their religious affiliations are, are unbearable to me personally. Their uprooting from their villages and towns is my personal uprooting. This involvement with the other rules out any theological formulations what would consider the other as “unholy”, or as incapable of being hallowed? I cannot look at him as being part of the human community whereas I am part of the “Christian” community. My

life and his life are interwoven in the body politic. My hope of salvation, my way to the infinite passes through the other, through our fulfilled finitude.¹⁸

For Frieda Haddad, then, being church in the awful context of Lebanon meant an unconditional identification with the *whole* of her society as a human community and its crying needs, a commitment transcending all demarcations and assumed tribal loyalties. She wants to speak not so much about “Christian witness and mission” in a majority Muslim society but about social education for the elimination of authoritarian legal structures, a revolution in the understanding of what it means to be human in community. So her conclusion is: “The Christian community is not a minority group seeking to elaborate for itself a defensive standpoint over and against the yearnings of the human community in which it is called to live. It rather seeks to nurture in its bosom a genuine openness to the common heritage that binds Christians and Muslims together.”¹⁹ It takes as its point of reference the whole life of the *polis*, the body politic, the human community, and seeks to discern the signs of hope for its future. She recognises the danger that this might drift just into ethical pragmatism, but she maintains the Godward dimension to the Christian’s responsibility, a responsibility that may include suffering, perhaps a suffering with the body politic but not abandoning him- or herself blindly to any of its movements or ideologies

While Haddad nowhere mentions Bonhoeffer, this I think is a good example of what Bonhoeffer was striving for: a view of church which, without privilege, vicariously exists for the sake of the *oikoumene* before God. Those who stand under and receive the word of Christ, the church-community, are not some separate species from the *oikoumene*, the inhabited world. Says Bonhoeffer in his *Ethics*: “It means that there are human beings who allow themselves to receive what, from God’s perspective, all human beings should actually receive: it means that there are human beings who stand vicariously in the place [*stellvertretend dastehen*] of all other human beings, of the whole world.”²⁰ There is thus an ultimate solidarity here with the whole human family. Our approach to other faiths can only be on this basis: they too are part with us of the *oikoumene* – as too are the people of no faith, no religion. In this respect

18 Frieda Haddad, “The Christian Community as sign and instrument for the renewal of human community: a Lebanese perspective”, in TF best (ed.). *Faith and Renewal. Reports and Documents of the Commission on Faith and Order Stavanger 1985, Norway* (Geneva: WCC, 1986), 187.

19 Ibid, p190.

20 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Volume 6 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 403.

we do well to heed the words of Lesslie Newbigin, speaking of rejoicing in the light wherever we find it:

Here I am thinking ... Not only of the evidences of light in the religious life of non-Christians, the steadfastness and costliness of the devotion which so often puts Christians to shame; I am thinking also of the no less manifest evidences of the shining of the light in the lives of atheists, humanists, Marxists and others who have explicitly rejected the message of the fellowship of the church. "The light" is not to be identified with the religious life of men; religion is in fact too often the sphere of darkness, Christian religion not excluded. The parable of the Good Samaritan is a sharp and constantly needed reminder to the godly of all faiths that the boundary between religion and its absence is by no means to be construed as the boundary between light and darkness.²¹

The *oikoumene* includes, because it is bigger than, other faiths. It would be ironic if our concern for inter-religious dialogue in fact led to a narrowing of our understanding of the *oikoumene*. Inter-religious dialogue must not create another band of privilege, a religious federation over against the non-religious world. But also, as I said at the beginning, the *oikos*, the household of which the *oikoumene* is part, also embraces the whole created order.

This leads to the *third point* where I believe current ecumenism is facing a real challenge, which I would summarise as the need to provide not just calls for action, but a spirituality of action in the world. Recalling what was learnt in the struggle against apartheid, the South African theologian Nico Koopman believes that "Bonhoeffer challenges us to a spirituality and a life of prayer that enhance the dawning of a life of human dignity and human rights",²² and sums up all that Bonhoeffer offers us in inspiration and guidance for responsible living in society: "He shows the way to a threefold action of firstly prayer, which includes spiritual and moral formation, secondly concrete obedience, and lastly active hoping and waiting upon God."²³ Here is where I think the modern ecumenical movement, which rightly claims to be inspired by prayer and spirituality, needs to take a

21 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret. Sketches for a Missionary Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), p198.

22 Nico Koopman, "How Do We Live Responsibly? Bonhoeffer and the Fulfilment of Dignity in Democratic South Africa", in Kirsten Busch Nielsen et al (eds). *A Spoke in the Wheel. The Political in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2013), 429.

23 Ibid, 431.

fresh look at whether it really is resourcing people to engage with the *oikoumene* as the prime object and goal of God's own engagement. In other words, providing a spirituality for true worldliness.

I return to Bonhoeffer's question from prison: "... how can we be ekklesia, those who are called out, without understanding ourselves religiously as privileged, but instead seeing ourselves as belonging wholly to the world?"²⁴ His question has not in fact been adequately answered thus far even in the ecumenical community. There can be much talk about a "worldly" or "world-oriented" or "secular" understanding of mission but Bonhoeffer was asking first not about what Christians and churches should do but what, or who, they are, and to what or where they belong, a sense of self out which their action arises. The most recent ecumenical statement on the church *The Church. Towards a Common Vision*²⁵, building on earlier studies, states well in its final chapter "The Church: In and for the World" the biblical vision of the inclusive purpose of God's love for all people and all creation: "The Church was intended by God, not for its own sake, but to serve the divine plan for the transformation of the world."²⁶ Moreover "The Church does not stand in isolation from the moral struggles of humankind as a whole. Together with the adherents of other religions as well as with all persons of good will, Christians must promote ..."²⁷ Christian communities cannot "stand idly by" in face of human suffering and the plight of creation: "The world that 'God so loved' is scarred with problems and tragedies which cry out for the compassionate engagement of Christians."²⁸ Prophetic engagement with the abuse of power, if necessary to the point of persecution and even martyrdom, is called for.

All this is well and very clearly stated as the conclusion to the whole document, which is set in the perspective of God's purpose being to establish *koinonia* between him and all that he has made. Perhaps however it is the very fact of this being the final chapter of the document, which lends a sense that such statements just have to be made, if not as an afterthought then attached for the sake of completeness and theological correctness. The presupposition of the document seems to be not just that church and world are distinct entities (which of course they are) but that they are related only from one side, that of the church. It is a one-way bridge from church

24 *DBWE* 8, 364.

25 *The Church. Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper No 214 (Geneva: WCC, 2013).

26 *Ibid*, 33.

27 *Ibid*, 35.

28 *Ibid*, 36.

to world. The world is the object of the church's action, it is the world that has to be actively transformed by the church's witness, and it is the world's plight that calls for Christian compassion. In all this still lurks the tendency to what Bonhoeffer calls "privilege" on the part of Christians. It is the church that rides to the rescue of the imperilled world. One recalls the popular ecumenical slogan of the 1960s, "Let the world write the agenda!" which sounds very world-oriented but in fact implies that once the agenda is set out, it will be the church that graciously deals with it and, moreover, always knows in advance what is to be done.²⁹ It is the perspective of the colonial administrators.

Allied to this is the tendency of the statements of churches and ecumenical bodies to paint the plight of the world in ever more luridly apocalyptic colours, inducing a state of utter helplessness and despair unrelieved save for the "hope of the gospel" of which the church is privileged bearer. This is apt to be not so much an exercise in responsible realism about the state of the world as a ploy by the church to secure for itself a superior vantage point over against the world. It is an assault on the world born (as aggression often is) out of insecurity, a prime example of what Bonhoeffer calls an attack on the adulthood of the world.³⁰ It is a simplistic view of the world that ignores the genuine ability of individuals and communities to make a positive difference – in other words under certain conditions to be justifiably optimistic. Writing in the winter of 1942-43, shortly before his arrest, Bonhoeffer defends optimism (all optimism, not just "Christian") as "a power of life, a power of hope when others resign", never to be despised however often it is mistaken:

It is the health of life that the ill dare not infect. There are people who think it frivolous and Christians who think it impious to hope for a better future on earth and to prepare for it. They believe in chaos, disorder, and catastrophe, perceiving it in what is happening now. They withdraw in resignation or pious flight from the world, from the responsibility for on-going life, for building anew, for the coming generations. 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.³¹

Bonhoeffer's question, about how followers of Christ can see themselves not only as "called out" but "belonging wholly to the world" is not really answered simply by

29 See DL Edwards, "Signs of Radicalism in the Ecumenical Movement", in HE Fey (ed.). *The Ecumenical Advance. A History of the Ecumenical Movement Volume 2. 1948-1968* (Geneva: WCC, 197), 373-409, especially 406-409.

30 *DBWE* 8, 427.

31 *DBWE* 8, 51.

constant reiteration of calls for Christians and churches to witness prophetically for justice and peace, to respond compassionately to human need and the plight of the creation. These are right and just so far as they go but left to themselves they do not reach to that point of “belonging wholly” to the world which Bonhoeffer is searching for. They do not reach to that point of profound identification with the world in its strengths as well as weaknesses, its hopes as well as its fears, which Bonhoeffer sees as the logic demanded by discipleship of the incarnate one and which alone enables effective and sustained engagement of the world. On the pastoral level it ignores the need for the spiritual resources required to energise and guide such witness and engagement, and to deal with the consequences for those who undertake them, and so they tend to lapse into cheap statements and fruitless gestures. The result of all authentic witness and engagement is not – one hopes – just the transformation of the world but the transformation of the church and believers too. At the end of *Discipleship*³² and again in *Ethics*³³ Bonhoeffer teaches that it is not as though Christians and the church somehow bear the image of God and then take it into the world and bring it to bear on the lives of others. In Christ, God and world are united and neither God nor the world can be met without the other. It is in that engagement of faith with the world that the image of God in Christ is created in us. It is in sharing the sufferings of God in the world that one *becomes* “a human being, a Christian”³⁴. This is an invitation to be transformed, as much as to transform.

“Belonging wholly to the world” requires a much deeper identification than is usually sought with the human world of which one is a part yet which often one wishes one were not so. It is an identification with the world before God, in all its light and darkness, heights and depths. This is as much a spiritual exercise as one of political and social analysis (which is certainly required). It means that deep, daring and patient solidarity that makes its own the sighs of hope and fear, faith and doubt, of that part of the *oikoumene* whose life it shares. It means allowing people of faith to see *themselves* as part of the world in need of transformation, Rather than rather than trying to make people pretend that they are the ones who can put the world right - a way that leads either to fantasy or disappointment - it is first of all a truly *intercessory* identification of the kind Bonhoeffer himself had exemplified in his

32 DBWE 4, 284f.

33 DBWE 6, 82-87.

34 DBWE 8, 486.

prison poem “Night Voices”³⁵ out of which true witness and engagement is born. Prayer and righteous action, together, are the form of faith in the world come of age. For such spiritual and moral formation we need to be truly ecumenical and to look for resources if necessary well beyond our own traditions. We need to learn from strangers (who may be angels in disguise!) more of what it means to live in Christ, to be a community of the new humanity. How interesting, that it was precisely in the period (1931-35) when he was so very Barthian, so heavily Christocentric in his theology, that Bonhoeffer was so anxious to travel to the East, to India, to visit Gandhi in order to learn about non-violent resistance. In May 1934, on the eve of the Barmen Synod, which effectively founded the Confessing Church, he writes to his grandmother:

... I’m thinking again of going to India. I’ve given a great deal of thought lately to the issues there and believe that there could be important things to be learned. In any case it sometimes seems to me that there’s more Christianity in their “heathenism” than in the whole of the Reich Church. Christianity did in fact come from the East originally, but it has become so westernized and so permeated with civilized thought that, as we can

35 *DBWE* 8, 462-470. Extract

Wide open my ear:

“We, the old, we the young,
 we the sons of every tongue, we the strong, we the weak,
 we the watchful, we who sleep,
 we the rich and we them poor,
 all alike in calamity’s hour,
 we the bad, we the good,
 wheresoever we have stood,
 we whose blood was often shed,
 we witnesses of the dead;
 we the defiant and we the resigned,
 we the innocent and we the maligned,
 tormented by long loneliness in heart and mind.
 Brother, searching and calling are we!
 Brother, can you hear me?”

The poem “The Death of Moses” (*DBWE* 8, 531-541) likewise powerfully exemplifies this intercessory identification with his country’s fate before God.

now see, it is almost lost to us. Unfortunately I have little confidence in the church opposition ...³⁶

Being ecumenical means being willing to travel, in every sense. It means, if I may quote the subtitle of my book *Ecumenical Dynamic*, “living in more than one place at once”.³⁷ But we also need to travel in time as well as in space, looking for the surprising insights, which reach far beyond the times in which they were first voiced. I have for example become more and more impressed by the resonances between Bonhoeffer’s “worldly” theology and the writings of the seventeenth century English priest and poet Thomas Traherne who could write:

You never enjoy the world aright, till the sea itself floweth in your veins, till you are clothed with the heavens, and crowned with the stars; and perceive yourself to be the sole heir of the whole world; and more than so, because men are in it who are every one sole heirs, as well as you.³⁸

Never was anything in this world loved too much, but many things have been loved in a false way: and all in too short a measure.³⁹

Here is a kindred spirit to Bonhoeffer, who can help us extend Bonhoeffer’s concern for a proper worldliness into a worldliness that sees itself as belonging not just to the human world but to the earth itself and all creatures with which we share a common home, a common *oikos*. I am sure that in your context here you will know of avenues of exploration into African traditional religion and its understandings of belonging wholly to the created order.

In summary, Bonhoeffer, we have seen, repeatedly challenged the ecumenical movement to act as the church. When in international session he called it to recognize itself as the universal church of the nations obeying the word of God. From the standpoint of his prison theology we may imagine him now calling for the churches, as before, under the word of Christ to act vicariously towards each other but also, now, to identify with their world in the deepest possible way; to confess that they do not have special privileges but themselves belong to the world in its longing for justice, forgiveness, reconciliation and peace and that they are simply the first hearers of the gospel. That means a fundamental reorientation away from

36 *DBWE* 13, 152.

37 Geneva: WCC, 2013.

38 Version taken from Thomas Traherne, *Poems, Centuries and Three Thanksgivings*, edited by Anne Ridler (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 29. Spelling and orthography modernised by KC.

39 66th of Second Century, from Ridler version (see n32), 244.

themselves to belong the world, the *oikoumene* and through vicarious representative action in the *oikoumene* finding themselves more truly as the body of Christ, and thereby finding their unity. This is truly worldly Christianity and is the ultimate logic of ecumenism.