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## Bonhoeffer on the Interaction of Theology and Philosophy: Christological Redescription

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*BONHOEFFER ON THE INTERACTION OF THEOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY:  
CHRISTOLOGICAL REDESCRIPTION*

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by  
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## Introduction

Dietrich Bonhoeffer is remarkable for a variety of reasons; his Christology, biography, ecclesiology, and originality draw people toward his life and theological writings. One of Bonhoeffer's most remarkable talents, however, is his ability to *theologically* use philosophy. While Bonhoeffer demonstrated close familiarity and even reliance upon philosophers (e.g., Hegel, Leibniz, and Heidegger), he always exercised theological skepticism toward their systems. Especially evident in *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer recognized certain philosophical concepts to be helpful aids and instructional points for the Church; yet, these lessons for Christianity are brought into full clarity only in relation to Christ. This paper will give an account of Bonhoeffer's (1) critique of philosophy and his (2) positive use of philosophy as a creative tool for Christians—by articulating Bonhoeffer's paradigmatic theological use of philosophy, this essay also offers a viable position on the relationship between theology and philosophy.

### Bonhoeffer's Critique of Enclosed Philosophical Systems

Beginning in *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer's first dissertation, and extending through his other works (especially in *Ethics*), Bonhoeffer's usage of philosophy demonstrates a remarkable familiarity with the continental tradition. For example, Bonhoeffer spends time discussing alternative philosophical accounts of personhood at the beginning of *Sanctorum Communio*, and he concludes that they cannot offer a Christian paradigm for personhood, as they either are too atomistic (e.g., Stoicism and Epicureanism) or subsume any "You" into the subjective "I" (e.g., Cartesian and Kantian views).<sup>1</sup> Bonhoeffer even uses Aristotelian logic to

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, eds. Clifford J. Green and Joachim Von Soosten, trans. Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens (Vol. 1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 36-46.

identify the categorical fallacy of deriving a concept of social personhood from epistemology.<sup>2</sup> These examples give a small picture of Bonhoeffer's creative use of philosophy. Alongside his use of philosophy, however, he always includes a critique of philosophy.<sup>3</sup> The following three sections will explain a few of the primary reasons for Bonhoeffer's theological critique of philosophical systems.

### The Myth of Neutrality

In *Sanctorum Communio*, before he enters into his analysis of the primal state of humanity and community (i.e., the state of humanity before the fall),<sup>4</sup> which heavily involves social theory and philosophy, he argues that only from revelation are "social-philosophical" discussions of the primal state helpful for a theological sociology of the Church.<sup>5</sup> Bonhoeffer explains, "Every aspect helpful to its [i.e., the primal state's] comprehension is imparted through revelation. Nothing about it can be ascertained by pure speculation. It cannot speak of the essence of human being, of nature, or of history in general terms, but only in the context of

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<sup>2</sup> Bonhoeffer rejects basing personhood in epistemology because it is a μετάβασις εἰς ἄλλο γένος (i.e., a change to a different category). Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 45.

<sup>3</sup> This is evident from the beginning of *Sanctorum Communio*. When discussing the Christian concept of the human person, for example, Bonhoeffer writes, "For Christian philosophy, the human person originates only in relation to the divine; the divine person transcends the human person . . . Idealist individualism's notion of spirit as being-for-itself [Fürsichsein] is unchristian, as it involves attributing to the human spirit absolute value that can only be ascribed to diving spirit." Ibid., 49.

<sup>4</sup> Discussing the primal state is significant because it is the first step in three states of salvation history that Bonhoeffer discusses in *Sanctorum Communio*: primal state, fallen state, and reconciled state. Bonhoeffer explains the significance of understanding each state. He writes, "The doctrine of the primal state is hope projected backward. Its value is twofold. [1] It forces the methodological clarification of the structure of theology as a whole; [2] then it renders concrete and vivid the real course of things from unity [i.e., the primal state] through break [i.e., the fallen state] to unity [i.e., the reconciled state]. Thus, the concepts of person and community, for example, are understood only within an intrinsically broken history, as conveyed in the concepts of primal state, sin, and reconciliation." Thus, the topics of Bonhoeffer's study (i.e., personhood, community, and the Church) are understood only in the theological history of primal state, fallen state, and reconciled state. Ibid., 60-62. Michael Mawson, "Theology and Social Theory—Reevaluating Bonhoeffer's Approach," *Theology Today* (71, no. 1 (April 2014): <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040573613518549>), 76.

<sup>5</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 62-65.

revelation that has been heard.”<sup>6</sup> Bonhoeffer makes these nuanced claims because philosophy tries to belong to the primal state alone; in other words, philosophy operates as if there has only ever been a primal state of humanity that is untainted by sin. Yet, as Bonhoeffer observes, every human being is marred by sin in their loves and knowledge—thus, there can be no neutral, completely objective inquiry from philosophy.<sup>7</sup>

In *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer extends his critique of philosophical neutrality further, based on his development of Christology. In his first chapter, “Christ, Reality, and Good,” he defines all of reality as being the Christ-reality.<sup>8</sup> There are not two realms of world and God; rather, world and God are one in Christ, whose incarnation unites these two realities into one reality.<sup>9</sup> Moving himself away from the Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms, Bonhoeffer writes, “There are not two realities, but *only one reality*, and that is God’s reality revealed in Christ in the reality of the world.”<sup>10</sup> Only in the Church, where the Christ-reality is fully realized, can a human be truly human and have proper understanding.<sup>11</sup> In this way, Bonhoeffer rejects any objective, neutral attempt to understand reality. For instance, when discussing the Enlightenment and the French

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<sup>6</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 59-60.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 64-65, 107-117.

<sup>8</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, eds. Ilse Tödt, Clifford J. Green, Ernst Feil, and Heinz Tödt, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott (Vol. 6. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 58.

<sup>9</sup> Bonhoeffer argues, “This thinking [i.e., understanding reality to be a duality of world and God] fails to recognize the original unity of these opposites in the Christ-reality and, as an after-thought, replaces this with a forced unity provided by a sacred or profane system [i.e., a philosophical system] that overarches them . . . Things work out quite differently when the reality of God and the reality of the world are recognized in Christ . . . Just as the reality of God has entered the reality of the world in Christ, 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.” *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 233, 242. Christiane Tietz, “Bonhoeffer on the Ontological Structure of the Church,” in *Ontology and Ethics: Bonhoeffer and Contemporary Scholarship*, eds. Adam Clark and Michael Mawson (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 44-46.

Revolution, Bonhoeffer makes this very point, that every system of belief ultimately has a religious basis. He writes, “The new unity that the French Revolution brought about in Europe, and whose crisis we experience today, is *Western godlessness* . . . . It is not the theoretical denial of the existence of God. Instead, it is itself religion, a religion of enmity toward God . . . . Its God is *the new human being*.”<sup>12</sup> For Bonhoeffer, even the most recent attempt (i.e., the Enlightenment) at shaking humanity from its tradition and contingency ultimately fails to be neutral and irreligious. Thus, in *Sanctorum Communio* and *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer gives theological arguments for the impossibility of complete philosophical neutrality.<sup>13</sup>

### Idolatrous Foundations

Bonhoeffer not only sees pure philosophy as problematic because it fails to meet its own claims of neutrality, but he also critiques philosophy because of its idolatrous foundations. For Bonhoeffer, Christ must always be Lord over any theoretical formulation—this places theology in tension with much of philosophy, which becomes idolatrous in self-enclosed systems. Bonhoeffer scholar Charles Marsh writes, “So sharp is Bonhoeffer’s suspicions of system, so decisive is the preeminence of revelation, that not even the most rigorously critical philosophical scheme can speak truthfully about meaning and existence on its own terms.”<sup>14</sup> Even at the start

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<sup>12</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 122.

<sup>13</sup> Barry Harvey, a Bonhoeffer Scholar, discusses this very theme of Bonhoeffer’s theology. Harvey argues that postmodernism is an ally for Bonhoeffer’s theological pushback against modernism’s myth of neutrality. Harvey writes, “Postmodern thought also reinforces something that Bonhoeffer emphasizes throughout his career, beginning with *Sanctorum Communio*, which is that who we are as persons is not something that we are inwardly and privately, which is the presumption of radical reflexivity. Who we are as individual persons is caught up in the complex of power relations and interactions with others . . . . There is no safe haven of meaning, no substantial ‘self’ immune from the particularities of history and its contingent networks of power, no transcendental or idealist *a priori* that supplies a foundational identity and purpose to our contingent existence.” Barry Harvey, *Taking Hold of the Real: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Profound Worldliness of Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), 116-117.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Marsh, *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer: The Promise of His Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 58.

of his academic career in *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer eschewed the use of social philosophy that relied on normative claims about reality; for theological reasons, Bonhoeffer avoided the historical approaches of Weber and Troeltsch, preferring the older formal approaches to sociology that did not import a unified account of reality into its findings.<sup>15</sup> In these ways, Bonhoeffer is skeptical of unified philosophical systems because they do not begin with the revelation of Christ;<sup>16</sup> without submitting to the revelatory lordship of Christ, these philosophical systems inevitably become idolatrous.

### The Christ-Reality

Behind his aversion to idolatrous philosophy and his critique of neutrality, Bonhoeffer's fundamental critique of philosophy is that it lacks Christology. True philosophy must be animated by, focused on, and cognizant of the Christ-reality. Significantly, after claiming that the ethical concept of *the good* is necessarily connected to human life (i.e., *the good* is not abstractable, but always found in the concreteness of life),<sup>17</sup> 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. This statement of Jesus about himself declares every attempt to formulate the essence of life in itself as futile and doomed from the start . . . . We can only live life, but not define it. The saying of Jesus binds every thought about life to his own person. I am the life. No question about life can 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

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<sup>15</sup> Mawson, "Theology and Social Theory—Reevaluating Bonhoeffer's Approach," 79.

<sup>16</sup> Tietz, "Bonhoeffer on the Ontological Structure of the Church," 35-37, 39-42.

<sup>17</sup> Bonhoeffer argues, "We ask about the good not in abstraction from life, but precisely by immersing ourselves in it. The question about the good is itself part of our life, just as our life is part of the question about the good. The question about the good is asked and decided in the midst of a situation of our life that is both determined in a particular way and yet still incomplete, unique and yet already in transition; it happens in the midst of our living bonds to people, things, institutions, and powers, that is, in the midst of our historical existence. The question about the good can no longer be separated from the question of life, of history." Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 246-247.



. . . . Jesus posits this I in sharpest contrast to all thoughts, concepts, and approaches that claim to capture the essence of life.<sup>18</sup>

In this passage, Bonhoeffer theologically explains why any claim made about *the good* must position itself within the revelation of Christ, who is *the good* of life. Life is, in fact, held within and originates from the person of Christ. This emphasis on the personhood of Christ reveals the continual development of Bonhoeffer's theology from *Sanctorum Communio*, in which Bonhoeffer defines one of Christ's modes of existence to be the Church-community—the living body and ontological reality of Christ on earth.<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, because all reality is held in Christ,<sup>20</sup> philosophy itself must be based on the Christ-reality, which is most intense within the Church. This theoretical priority of Christ creates Bonhoeffer's aversion to philosophical systems that are self-enclosed. Yet, he still finds positive engagement with philosophy (more than many theologians!) by Christologically redescribing philosophical concepts.

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<sup>18</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 249.

<sup>19</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 140-141, 145-153, 182, 192-193.

<sup>20</sup> Bonhoeffer's definition of reality as the Christ-reality may sound strange to modern Christians, but theologically, it is not a faulty position. Two theologians help elucidate this point. First, Charles Marsh addresses the seeming monism of Bonhoeffer's Christology, writing, "I take Bonhoeffer to be saying in *Ethics* that the Christian message of reconciliation cannot help but speak of the redemption work of Christ in language that (at least initially) sounds monistic." This is the case because Christ has united the opposition of two spheres, the worldly and transcendent. Bonhoeffer's language, according to Marsh, derives from the apostle Paul and St. Irenaeus. Paul's language in Colossians and Ephesians as well as Irenaeus' concept of divine recapitulation are likely influences on Bonhoeffer. Marsh, *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 104. Second, Saint Athanasius' Christology in *On the Incarnation* offers an orthodox account similar to Bonhoeffer's Christology. When discussing how humans can have knowledge of God and the reasons for the incarnation, St. Athanasius writes, "But, what is most marvelous, being the Word, he [i.e., Christ] was not contained by anyone, but rather himself contained everything. And, as being in all creation, he is in essence outside everything by his own power, arranging everything, and unfolding his own providence in everything to all things, and giving life to each thing and to all things together . . . . So also, being in the human body, and himself giving it life, he properly gives life to the universe also." In this and other passages in *On the Incarnation*, Athanasius offers an inchoate form of Bonhoeffer's claim that all of reality is contained in the Christ-reality. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation: Greek Original and English Translation*, trans. John Behr (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011), 85-87.

## The Creativity of Philosophy

When reading Bonhoeffer's books, the preceding critique of philosophy stands out, but Bonhoeffer's frequent use of philosophy is also glaringly evident. He finds the truths of revelation affirmed by certain philosophical views, yet, he always approaches philosophy *from* theology. This section will outline some significant ways that Bonhoeffer theologically engages with philosophy in his writings.

### General Engagements with Philosophy in *Sanctorum Communio* and *Ethics*

Bonhoeffer's opening to *Sanctorum Communio* reveals his interest in the creative insights of social philosophy, which he uses in the service of theology. Bonhoeffer explains, "In order to avoid misunderstandings, it should be noted that this study of the sanctorum communio does not properly belong to the sociology of religion, but to theology. It will be carried out on the foundation of Christian theology and will make fruitful for theology the fundamental insights that derive purely from social philosophy and sociology."<sup>21</sup> Here, Bonhoeffer reveals his paradigmatic view of theology and philosophy: theology should utilize the creativity of philosophy, but only based on its own terms and doctrines. Moreover, Bonhoeffer adds to this qualification that only those within the Church can understand the *Sanctorum Communio*.<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, he finds theological benefits by studying the Church "from two, or even three, directions: theology, social philosophy, and sociology."<sup>23</sup> In this way, even in his early thought, Bonhoeffer theologically utilized philosophy.

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<sup>21</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 31-32.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

While his stance toward philosophy is mostly critical in *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer does recognize that so-called “worldly” developments within the unity of Christ<sup>24</sup> are of great benefit to the Church. He makes this point in reference to the political heritage of the West, not specifically in reference to philosophy. Bonhoeffer writes, “Jesus Christ has made the West into a historical unit . . . . The unity of the West is not an idea, but a historical reality whose only foundation is Christ. The great intellectual movements from then on belong to the whole of the West.”<sup>25</sup> Here, Bonhoeffer is appreciating the historical flourishing that the Western world has experienced due to Christ—both the political and the intellectual achievements have not been realized based on purely human efforts. Rather, Western flourishing was only possible within the unity of Christ, the assumed reality that Jesus is the preeminent Lord of all. This point relates to philosophy because it demonstrates that Bonhoeffer considers certain “secular” developments in history and philosophy to originate within the Christ-reality. Indeed, for Bonhoeffer, any philosophy that operates based on the assumption that Christ is Lord and the regenerator of creation can be a useful philosophy for the Church.

#### Kierkegaard

One example of such a Christological philosophy is found in Soren Kierkegaard, whose influence is evident in *Discipleship*. Concerned about the privatized faith of Lutheran Christians during his life, Bonhoeffer used Kierkegaard’s philosophy and interpretation of Luther in order

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<sup>24</sup> Bonhoeffer explains this unity as an agreement between communities that Christ is Lord of all and the son of God in accordance with orthodox Christianity. He explains, “The unity of the West through the form of Christ is the heritage that we have received from the early times of our history. Pope and emperor struggled over the formation of this unity. Uncontested was Jesus Christ, the ultimate unity that stood above them both.” Bonhoeffer is simply making the point that, for quite some time in history, there was a political unity in the reality of Christ. This unity was unintentionally shattered by Martin Luther in the Reformation. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 110-111.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

to reaffirm costly grace and critique the prevalent acceptance of cheap grace.<sup>26</sup> Theologian Matthew Kirkpatrick details how Kierkegaard significantly impacted Bonhoeffer in the majority of Bonhoeffer's writings.<sup>27</sup> Kirkpatrick helpfully explains:

Like Kierkegaard, Bonhoeffer sets up the dichotomy between the ethical principles of systematic thought, and the obedience of the individual to God's direct and momentary commands. With this affirmation of the individual, the overcoming of the ethical principles, and the absolute obedience to God, it can further be argued that the teleological suspension of the ethical rests at the foundation of his [i.e., Bonhoeffer's] ethics—even his 'communitarian' ethic.<sup>28</sup>

In this passage, Kirkpatrick identifies just a few ways that Bonhoeffer utilized Kierkegaard's philosophy, which helped Bonhoeffer develop his own critique of ethical systems and his understanding of simple-minded obedience to God.<sup>29</sup> Relying on Kierkegaard's Lutheran-philosophical development of faith and obedience, Bonhoeffer articulated a rich theology of discipleship for his fellow Germans.<sup>30</sup>

### Hegel

From Hegel, Bonhoeffer receives a more distinctly philosophical influence. Once again, in *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer reveals his method of theological critique and Christological redescription when engaging with Hegel. Bonhoeffer Scholar Jeff Nowers

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<sup>26</sup> Geoffrey Kelly and John Godsey, "Editors' Introduction to the English Edition," in *Discipleship*, eds. Martin Kuske, Ilse Todt, Geffey Kelly, and John Godsey, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss (Vol. 4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 10-16.

<sup>27</sup> Matthew Kirkpatrick, "Bonhoeffer, Kierkegaard, and the Teleological Suspension of the Ethical: The Beginning or End of Ethics?" in *Ontology and Ethics: Bonhoeffer and Contemporary Scholarship*, eds. Adam Clark and Michael Mawson (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 90-94.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>29</sup> In a few passages in *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer seems to theologically develop concepts that are very similar to Kierkegaard's own philosophy. Specifically, Bonhoeffer's articulations of *simple obedience* and Abraham's individualist example of faith mirror Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, eds. Martin Kuske, Ilse Todt, Geffey Kelly, and John Godsey, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss (Vol. 4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 80-83, 96-99.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 61-81.

contends that Hegel's concept of objective *Geist* may be the central focus of *Sanctorum Communio*.<sup>31</sup> Nowers explains how Hegel's concept of historical *Geist* develops in three stages: (1) subjective *Geist* (i.e., an individual's consciousness), (2) objective *Geist* (i.e., collective, social spirit), and (3) absolute *Geist* (i.e., movement into the disciplines of art and philosophy).<sup>32</sup> Bonhoeffer primarily develops the second movement, objective *Geist*. Bonhoeffer utilizes Hegel's concept when explicating the reality of human community and the I-You relation; Nowers comments, "Indeed, the I-You dialectic is constitutive of sociality, just as sociality is presupposed in any I-You relation. For this reason, Bonhoeffer understands individual *Geist* and objective *Geist* as correlative."<sup>33</sup> In other words, Bonhoeffer views personhood as being dependent upon objective *Geist*—the social spirit (or perhaps social imaginary) of one's community. Bonhoeffer explains:

*Objective spirit is thus to be regarded as the connection between historical and communal meaning, between the temporal and spatial intentions of a community. Objective spirit is will exerting itself effectively on the members of the community. It has individual form. It leads an individual life 'beyond' the individual person, and yet it is real only through them. The more alive the individual persons, the more powerful the objective spirit. It interacts reciprocally with each individual and with them all. To withdraw from it is to withdraw from the community.*<sup>34</sup>

Here, Bonhoeffer is certainly relying upon Hegelian concepts, but in this passage, he is merely establishing the primal state of humanity (i.e., the state prior to the fall). In Chapter four of *Sanctorum Communio* (the next chapter), Bonhoeffer subjects Hegel's objective spirit to hamartiology. Bonhoeffer argues, "Whereas in the primal state the relation among human beings

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<sup>31</sup> Jeff Nowers, "Hegel, Bonhoeffer, and Objective *Geist*: An Architectonic Exegesis of *Sanctorum Communio*," in *Ontology and Ethics: Bonhoeffer and Contemporary Scholarship*, eds. Adam Clark and Michael Mawson, (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 48.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>34</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 99-100.

is one of giving, in the sinful state it is purely demanding . . . . With sin, ethical atomism enters history. This applies essentially to the spirit-form. All natural forms of community remain, but they are corrupt in their inmost core.”<sup>35</sup> Once again, Bonhoeffer holds the doctrines of Christianity to be the necessary interpretations of any philosophy. In conclusion, Charles Marsh insightfully summarizes Bonhoeffer’s relation to Hegel, writing, “Bonhoeffer’s appropriation of Hegelian themes is always one of creative and critical redescription in light of his Christological axiom.”<sup>36</sup>

### Leibniz

While Bonhoeffer is starkly influenced by Hegel in *Sanctorum Communio*, he also relies on Leibniz’s monadic philosophy when establishing his social philosophy. After discussing the concept of collective persons,<sup>37</sup> Bonhoeffer nuances his position so that it does not fall into one of the same problems that Hegel’s philosophy does: the subsuming of individuals into unity. After affirming the necessary condition of a “net of sociality” that people depend upon, Bonhoeffer writes, “Clearly, Leibniz’s *image of the monad* may serve to clarify these social basic-relations. This is an image of individual beings who are completely self-contained . . . and yet conceiving, mirroring, and individually shaping all of reality, and, in doing so, discovering their being.”<sup>38</sup> One of Bonhoeffer’s goals in this dissertation is to show the necessity of objective

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<sup>35</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 108.

<sup>36</sup> Marsh, *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 83.

<sup>37</sup> Bonhoeffer writes, “*We maintain that community can be interpreted as a collective person with the same structure as the individual person.* Since Plato, the tradition has been to think of community as a large-scale human being . . . with the aim of completely subordinating the individual to the whole. This subordination must be rejected as contrary to the equal weight of personal and social being . . . . *A community is a concrete unity.* Its members must not be viewed as separate individuals, for the center of activity lies not in each member, but in all of them together. This unity must be the starting point for a concept of community, for there is no way from the many to the one . . . . [T]he person comes into being only when embedded in sociality, and the collective person comes into being together with the individual person.” Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 77-78.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

spirit for personhood while simultaneously holding to the non-subsumable nature of each individual.<sup>39</sup> Bonhoeffer, then, is seemingly placing Leibniz and Hegel in conversation in order to produce a more balanced approach to personhood and social relations. While Leibniz may seem like an unlikely aid in developing a sociology of the Church, it seems that Bonhoeffer recognized in Leibniz's monadic philosophy not an atomistic social theory,<sup>40</sup> but a significant way of conceiving the interconnectedness of humanity.<sup>41</sup> Thus, just as he theologically utilizes Hegel and Kierkegaard, Bonhoeffer theologically utilizes Leibniz's philosophy in service to the Church—a repeating feature in Bonhoeffer's theology that will now be explicated.

### **Christological Redescription: A Model for Christian Philosophy**

This articulation of Bonhoeffer's paradigmatic use of philosophy will frame itself based on two general steps: theological (1) antithesis and (2) affirmation. While Bonhoeffer's engagement with philosophy is multi-faceted, it can be understood generally in these two actions of antithesis and affirmation. In addition, Bonhoeffer's paradigm is not a full description of a theology of philosophy; rather, his engagement with philosophy can offer some hints at the right direction for a full description of philosophical theology. These following points are drawn from the proceeding observations of Bonhoeffer's theological use of philosophy.

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<sup>39</sup> Marsh, *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 67-71.

<sup>40</sup> In yet another passage, Bonhoeffer discusses how the "monadic image of social life" gains its full richness through the concept of collective persons—the unity of individuals. Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 103.

<sup>41</sup> Leibniz' concepts of (1) monadic folds (i.e., the process of monadic unfolding that realizes potentials over time) and (2) the connectedness of the universe could be resources for some of Bonhoeffer's concepts. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *The Monadology*, in *Discourse on Metaphysics and Other Essays*, eds. Daniel Garber and Roger Ariew (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1991), 70, 73-75, 77. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Preface to the New Essays*, in *Discourse on Metaphysics and Other Essays*, eds. Daniel Garber and Roger Ariew (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1991), 54-55, 58, 64-65.

## Antithesis

First, Bonhoeffer seems to take a stance of antithesis when discussing philosophy. He makes it clear that theology is his primary focus and locus from which he explores issues. *Sanctorum Communio* exemplifies this point. Bonhoeffer begins by positioning his study in the Church-community and within the discipline of theology.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, Bonhoeffer Scholar Michael Mawson also observes that Bonhoeffer decides to engage with the older, formal approach to sociology (e.g., Georg Simmel and Ferdinand Tönnies) rather than the newer, historical approach because formal sociology intentionally worked to simply provide structural observations of social entities, rather than a unified account of the world, which the historical approaches of Weber, Durkheim, and Marx strive to do.<sup>43</sup> In this way, Bonhoeffer's early stance in *Sanctorum Communio* demonstrates his initial antithesis toward enclosed philosophies that attempt to make a unified account of existence. For Bonhoeffer, the "principal problem of philosophy, then, involves its totalizing claims."<sup>44</sup> Accordingly, Bonhoeffer first extends critical antithesis toward philosophy before affirming any of its claims.

## Affirmation

After a critical evaluation of a philosophical position, however, Bonhoeffer happily affirms its useful features in order to better display a theological reality. He appreciates the energizing creativity that many philosophers offer. Marsh explains:

Bonhoeffer asserts that even though revelation demonstrates the insufficiency of all self-enclosed systems of thought, ontological and transcendental theses are not to be rejected en masse without careful consideration . . . [W]ithin the circumference of revelation's new social space—"Christ existing as community"—certain contributions from 'genuine' transcendentalism and ontology are serviceable to theology. The important qualification

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<sup>42</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 24-33.

<sup>43</sup> Mawson, "Theology and Social Theory—Reevaluating Bonhoeffer's Approach," 73-75.

<sup>44</sup> Marsh, *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 57.



is that in the course of theological redescription philosophical themes will no doubt be construed in a ‘wholly new guise.’<sup>45</sup>

Indeed, Bonhoeffer found philosophy useful and a creative aid in theological arguments. Once a philosophical position undergoes the critique of theology, its themes that find their ultimate fulfilment in Christ can be included in theological doctrines. Sometimes, philosophy may even make explicit the truths that are implicit in revelation. By practicing this form of theological engagement, Bonhoeffer acknowledges the ability of non-Christian philosophers to formulate genuine truth-claims that are in accord with revelation. In this manner, Bonhoeffer is not *against* philosophy so much as he is *for* God’s revelation in Christ—as a Christian, Bonhoeffer necessarily interprets philosophy theologically.

#### Christological Centering

This dialectic of antithesis and affirmation is established upon and extends from Christology. Bonhoeffer understands his engagement with philosophy to be Christologically based because (1) Christ contains all reality and (2) Christ engages with it from his communal body, that is, the Church. When discussing modern philosophy of time, for example, Bonhoeffer exemplifies his Christocentric theology. Harvey explains the Christ-centered emphasis in Bonhoeffer’s theology: “The social technologies that reorganize time operate in stark contrast to the way that divine revelation orders it within the communion of the body of Christ. Revelation is not limited to a record . . . . The church thus rightly perceives revelation in the form of the present Christ, ‘Christ existing as community.’”<sup>46</sup> Within the Church, the past and future are bridged—time is fully defined.<sup>47</sup> Many other similar examples could be given, and they all

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<sup>45</sup> Marsh, *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 55-56.

<sup>46</sup> Harvey, *Taking Hold of the Real*, 110.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

describe Bonhoeffer's Christological basis for theology. Only from the Christ-reality can philosophy make meaningful claims.

### **Conclusion**

When engaging a philosophical position, Bonhoeffer typically develops (1) a theological critique and follows this critique with (2) an affirmation of the specific view's creative features that support theological insights. Such a paradigmatic engagement with philosophy *from theology* can aid theologians today who may be confused by the interaction of these two disciplines. With Christ at the center, theologians can wade into the complex dialogue between theology and philosophy, a historically extended conversation to which each discipline must be attuned. Following in Bonhoeffer's footsteps, theologians can confidently and fruitfully interact with philosophy.

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