

“RELIGION AND THE LIMITS OF CRITIQUE:
BONHOEFFER’S THEOLOGICAL SOCIOLOGY”

By

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For Caroline,
Whose firmness makes my circle just.

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In the canon of modern Christian theologians, Dietrich Bonhoeffer has earned a unique place. His treatment of Christian ethics and cryptic (or archaic) project of a ‘religionless Christianity’ continue to provoke debate. Karl Barth called his dissertation a “theological miracle.” *Nachfolge*, usually translated as *The Cost of Discipleship*, remains something of an evangelical classic. Biographies, novels, plays and prayer guides memorialize his discipline and courage. Pilgrims sojourn to his childhood home and place of execution. Stephen Haynes has spoken properly of the “Bonhoeffer Phenomenon.” In the academy and church alike, the man himself is colored with differing hues of partisan admiration. Even among Bonhoeffer scholars there is often something of an exclusive preoccupation bordering on devotion, an occasional tendency perhaps to exaggerate his significance by lack of serious comparison. The fact that Bonhoeffer’s first expert interpreter was also his best friend might account for this personal element in what are otherwise ordinarily detached circles (Haynes has spoken, too, of the “Bethge effect”).

Prior to researching this essay, I had only a little knowledge of Bonhoeffer as a scholar or a Christian. At the outset, I did not expect his work to hold any direct solutions to outstanding theological or social problems. As the essay began to wind down, I was not much more optimistic, but the passage of a few months has helped me see the sources of that skepticism more clearly and opened up unforeseen possibilities. Nonetheless, my concerns here are not systematic but historical and are summarized best in the conclusion.

The fact that I have a conclusion to mention at all has involved me in several

debts, and although thanks always implicates its recipients, the reader may rest assured that any deficiencies here are very much my own. For discipline in the exercise of intellectual history, I must first thank my advisor, Paul DeHart. He has consistently modeled the clarity, precision and charity that I hoped to demonstrate in my own writing and has brought the present work nearer to that goal. Doug Meeks has also made me a better version of myself, constantly redirecting me to the church, and to our United Methodist Church in particular. Any good I do in that department will owe to his influence. Although we agree more on the problems of theology than probable solutions, Ellen Armour has provided a kind counterpoint to this project and to many other thoughts along the way. She has also laughed at some of my jokes, which is its own sort of kindness. Ted Smith has, more than any other teacher, changed my mind. To take an *Unpolitischen* of Kentucky stock and give him a bad conscience is no small thing. I will decide later if I am grateful for this, but for his efforts and advice, thanks are overdue.

Other teachers deserve mention as well. The questions behind this essay developed in seminars at Emory University with Luke Timothy Johnson, Steffen Loesel, and David Pacini. The late John Cobb and Larry McGehee reignited my love of learning long before those questions entered my mind. My parents, Larry and Holly Hayden, are my first and best teachers. My mother taught me to read good books, especially the Bible, and to love reading. My father taught me the work ethic and sheer stubbornness without which I would never have seen to completion a project so long on effort and short on rewards. My brother, Seth, and sister, Heather, continuously teach me about the priority of family. My friends in Kentucky continuously teach me that I am not as smart as someone apparently told me. For encouragement and sympathy in the journey, I

should also thank ‘Team Awesome,’ Andrew Smith, Gerald Liu, Rich Voelz, Daryl Ellis, Lauren White, and Chris Corbin. Chris Benda was a constant, friendly presence in the VDS library. Without Marie McEntire, I would surely and long ago have drowned in my own administrative incompetence. To all of you, I give heartfelt thanks.

Deepest thanks is reserved for my wife and children. It has been a tremendous joy to let Luke, Kellen, and Emery take over my life. The choice between work and family is easy enough, but they have made it all the more pleasant and rewarding. My wife, Caroline, is still my best friend and has helped me along this journey in all sorts of ways. The dedication page is a pitiful token of thanks, but if it means having full-time husband again, perhaps that is a small consolation.

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EDITORIAL NOTE

The English translation of the *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke* (DBW) is nearly complete, and most citations below draw from this standard edition. In several cases, however, I have not hesitated to alter translations or to provide my own. For the sake of brevity and simplicity, citations have been placed in the body rather than footnoted and include only a Roman numeral corresponding to the volume of the DBW(E). So citations from *Sanctorum Communio*, for example, appear in the form of (I, 23), etc., and the reader may refer to the bibliography for full citation. References to Bonhoeffer's main writings are also abbreviated according to the familiar title (*SC* for *Sanctorum Communio*, *AB* for *Act and Being*, *LPP* for *Letters and Papers from Prison*, and so forth).

I have also noted instances where different volumes of the DBWE diverge in translating important German concepts. Only the Hegelian term *Aufhebung* and its variants warrants mention here. I have used the less common translation "suspension," since it best approximates, in my view, the intention of Barth and Bonhoeffer, and similar translations seemed too vague ("sublation") or misleading ("negation," "abolition," etc.).

Other difficulties presented by translation should become clear in the course of the argument. Bonhoeffer's use of "community" (*Gemeinschaft*) to designate both a specific sociological type and any human collective is confusing, but the German language and its sociological tradition left him with few alternatives. I have chosen to capitalize Community (also Society) when the specialized meaning is intended. Similar strategies are repeated where necessary and are sufficiently self-explanatory.

INTRODUCTION

A casual observer of contemporary theology might notice two countervailing tendencies. On the one hand, a number of philosophers and theologians speak obliquely of a “return to religion” in intellectual life, most often in the form of quasi-secular appropriations of the Christian legacy. So the return to “religion” more resembles the admission of an historically or psychologically repressed past on the part of secularism, an admission of its own insufficiency, than a full embrace of Christian faith, much less Christian life. On the other hand, and more to the mainstream of current Christian theology, there is a renewed interest in the church not as one *topoi* among others, but as the place from and for which theology speaks, unapologetically, as it were. To anyone with a worn copy of Bonhoeffer’s prison writings, the situation may ring familiar, echoing the 1960s dispute over his legacy between dialectical and death-of-God theologies. Not surprisingly, (questionable) appropriations of Bonhoeffer appear on both sides of the aforementioned divide, though it may not be the only or the most important one, theologically speaking. Gianni Vattimo’s appeal to “religionless Christianity” and Stanley Hauerwas’ commentary on Bonhoeffer’s “faithful performance” of non-violence will suffice as examples. Assuming that academic currents follow deeper cultural currents, Bonhoeffer may be worth another look.

With respect to the history of Bonhoeffer-interpretation and reception, at any rate, the time is ripe for a renewed investigation of his early theology. Of the half dozen or so significant attempts at a complete exposition of Bonhoeffer’s thought, serious

problems with method or content limit their effectiveness.¹ Clifford Green's important study, published in a second edition in 1999, identified the pivotal methodological shortcoming, that all previous approaches were thematic, rather than historical, and did not take sufficient account of Bonhoeffer's political and personal contexts.² Yet Green himself commits the same error by forcing the theological concerns of 1927-1933 under the theme of "sociality." This results not only in a chronological-thematic (rather than historical) interpretation but a distortion of key texts, particularly *Act and Being*.

Similarly, the biographical and political elements in Green's study appear as addenda to the treatment of intellectual developments, without clear and organic connection to the inner motivations of Bonhoeffer's theological project. So while he has taken methodological steps in the right direction, Green's work does not go far enough. In none of these readings do the minor texts, such as sermons, letters, student papers, lectures and essays play a considered role in locating innovations and developments. The result is a sometimes exaggerated or indistinct view of Bonhoeffer's contribution to a crucial 'constellation' in German theology. That contribution consists above all in the appropriation of sociological categories to reconcile dialectical and liberal theologies, or as it so often said, to get 'between Barth and Troeltsch.' The two dissertations together lay the groundwork of this mediation.

Unfortunately, the unity of the dissertations and the thought-form (*Denkform*) that underlies them has gone largely unnoticed, prohibiting a thoroughly historical perspective

¹ John Godsey, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960). Hans Müller, *Von der Kirche zur Welte*. (Leipzig: Köhler & Amelang, 1961). John A. Phillips, *The Form of Christ in the World. A Study of Bonhoeffer's Christology*. (London: Collins, 1967). Heinrich Ott, *Faith and Reality*. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972). André Dumás, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian of Reality*. (NY: McMillan, 1971). Ernst Feil, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. (Philadelphia, 1985).

² Clifford Green, *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

on his theology. The contest for Bonhoeffer's legacy between the death-of-God and dialectical theologians kept attention from his dissertations, and the polemics of appropriation skewed attempts at historical understanding until very recently. Moreover, historical studies in general, as opposed to topical or practical ones, have appeared less frequently until the last decade or so.³ Since the 1990s, the swelling tide of secondary literature breaks into two tributaries. The first includes biographical or historical studies that correct the penchant for hagiography among Bonhoeffer scholars. The most important of these aim specifically at his relation to Judaism.⁴ At the same time, a series of more systematic and analytical interpretations of pillars in the Bonhoeffer corpus have emerged. *Act and Being* has earned some much deserved interest of late, but its relation to *Sanctorum Communio* has still not been the object of a systematic historical study. On both fronts, then, theological and personal-political, we are finally in the midst of a "quest for the historical Bonhoeffer."⁵ The horizon of that historical recovery stretches

³ Ernst Feil's (synchronic) analysis divides the German secondary literature under these headings. See Ernst Feil, ed., *International Bibliography On Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser, Gütersloh Verlagshaus, 1998). Ralf Wustenberg's diachronic study of English and German literature suggests the following taxonomy: biography (1950s), secularity (1960s), philosophical roots (1970s), and a still emerging period (1980-90s), which seems to me primarily historical and can be subdivided according to its content. For a review and extension of Wustenberg's essay, see John de Gruchy, "The Reception of Bonhoeffer's Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999).

⁴ See, for example: Stephen Haynes, *The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon: Portraits of a Protestant Saint*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2004) and *The Bonhoeffer Legacy: Post-Holocaust Perspectives*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2006). For less critical trends in biography, see: John Moses, *The Reluctant Revolutionary. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Collision with Prusso-German History*, (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2009). Friederich Schliengensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906-1945: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance*, (NY: Continuum, 2010).

⁵ R. E. Huldshiner, "The Quest for the Historical Bonhoeffer," *Lutheran Forum* 3 (September 1969): 12-13. For other relevant collections, see: Peter Frick, ed. *Bonhoeffer's Intellectual Formation*, (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008). Andreas Pangritz, *Karl Barth in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000). John de Gruchy, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999). Bonhoeffer has also begun to feature in surveys of early twentieth century theology—a relatively new trend in narrating that period and its significance. See John Wilson, *Modern Theology: Trajectories in the German Tradition*, (Philadelphia: WJK, 2007). Hans Schwarz, *Theology in a Global Context: The Last 200 Year*, (London: SCM, 2005).

between the increasingly isolated poles of his dogmatic theology and his intervention in the anti-Semitic policies of 1933. I intend only to clarify the theological pole here.

Among the historical expositions of the habilitation essay, *Act and Being*, two deserve mention. Christine Tietz-Steidung's *Bonhoeffer's Kritik der verkrümmten Vernunft* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999) offers a careful reading of the structure of *Act and Being* with reference to its philosophical background and *Sanctorum Communio*, while Jürgen Boomgaarden's *Das Verständnis der Wirklichkeit* (Gutersloh: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1999) narrows in on the Idealist, Neo-Kantian and phenomenological philosophies to which Bonhoeffer is indebted. Neither study touches upon the real unity of the dissertations as two sides of a single argument regarding revelation. The same is true of a forthcoming study by Michael DeJonge.⁶ In isolating *Act and Being* from *Sanctorum Communio*, each fails to grasp the pattern of thought which is worked out in the two together and carries over into Bonhoeffer's other writings. This claim holds less weight against the excellent volume by Charles Marsh, who reads the early Bonhoeffer's whole project as a response to Karl Barth's doctrine of revelation. Marsh intentionally veers towards constructive ("reclaiming") interests and away from historical ones, moves back and forth between historical and thematic modes of analysis, and applies reflections from different periods to the same problems. While I have learned a great deal from each of these studies, none perceives the inner unity of Bonhoeffer's thinking on its path from

⁶ Michael P. DeJonge, *Bonhoeffer's Theological Formation: Barth, Berlin and Protestant Theology*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012). DeJonge was kind enough to share his dissertation, but I was unable to give it full consideration. The present study is broader in scope.

his student years to the habilitation essay. I will identify that unifying thought-form, its elaboration and alteration between 1918 and 1930.⁷

A Heuristic: The 'Triple Circle' of Knowledge, History and Ethics.

The question of revelation as Bonhoeffer understands it is really composed of three distinct but inseparable problems, the entwinement of which goes back to the period of classical German philosophy and runs throughout the nineteenth century. In a lecture on the history of recent theology, Bonhoeffer describes these as three interlocking “circles,” or the problems of knowledge, history and ethics (XI, 224). The tensions between *faith and knowledge*, *Christ and history*, *ethics and metaphysics* set the boundaries for theological reflection after Kant. The conjunction or disjunction of these terms depended on the meaning of knowledge, framed as a question of *self-consciousness* or subjectivity. Knowledge is first self-knowledge. A generic description of the problem of knowledge as one finds it in Kant, Hegel, Schleiermacher and their heirs is really quite impossible, and their divergences reshape the entire structure of the ‘triple circle.’ Those divergences amount to different theories of self-consciousness, coordinated with a particular understanding of the relation between thought and being, mind and world.

⁷ Clifford Green’s study claims to have already accomplished this, but I am skeptical of its success for three basic reasons, each rejecting one of Green’s enumerated questions and theses (Green, 33ff). First, the theme of *Sanctorum Communio* is not ‘sociality’ *per se*, but revelation, approached from the angle of its concrete historical mediation; sociality only supplies the form of revelation (*Offenbarungsform*). Second, the theme of *Act and Being* is not anthropology but, again, revelation, approached this time from the perspective of human knowledge. Anthropology is central for the simple reason that here the subject paradigm of modern philosophy is operative. Put differently, *Sanctorum Communio* focuses upon the manner of God’s *immanence* in historical community, while *Act and Being* begins with God’s *transcendence* to human knowledge. Both take up from different angles an immanent transcendence, a “transcendence in the midst of life.” Third, sociality is not the embracing category of Bonhoeffer’s theology but instead revelation, insofar as its problematic involves a complex structure described below.

Hegel, for example, imagines that everything, including the transcendent, can be grasped in concepts, since ultimate reality itself is the structure of the ‘Idea.’ Kant and Schleiermacher allow no cognitive access to the transcendent but find their way to it through moral or affective awareness respectively. The relation between self-consciousness and transcendence they collectively refer to as ‘religion,’ and the triple circle undergoes a further renovation in the hands of Karl Barth, who deposes religion with revelation. Bonhoeffer again modifies Barth’s version of this thought-form.

But are there any essential connections between the iterations of this pattern, or are we looking merely at historical contingencies? Is the return of so many theologians and philosophers between Kant and Barth to these same themes evidence of a common and underlying problem or intellectual lockstep? This would seem to be determined in part by the connections between the problems which make up the thought-form as a whole. Do the tensions between faith and knowledge, Christ and history, ethics and metaphysics amount to an intelligible problem with multiple dimensions and malleable expressions (a thought-form), or are they discrete, combined by accidental interest? Given the enormous historical and dogmatic complexity of this question, I will resist a definite answer. I do think that at least one version of this thought-form, as it appears in Barth and Bonhoeffer, possesses that kind of coherence and therefore a strong heuristic value for the following historical inquiry. Let me sketch its historical genesis very briefly before elucidating its systematic structure.

The consequences of Kant’s critical philosophy for knowledge of God are familiar enough. Cognition is restricted to the limits of the “conditions of possible experience,” where experience (*Erlebnis*) is defined by the coordination of sensibility and

understanding. By empirically confining the range of concepts, Kant simply dissolves the questions of metaphysics: God is unknowable because knowledge in principle excludes anything other than objects. If the 'known' is that conditioned by concepts or categories of the understanding, the unconditioned (the transcendent) comes to awareness not in cognition but in morality, through the maxim of conscience to 'do unto others.' With the operating range of concepts legally restricted, ethics now performs the labor once allotted to metaphysics by bringing the hidden world to mind.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, theologians faced two further problems, in addition to Kant. Not only had historical criticism seemingly placed in doubt the biblical picture and even existence of Jesus, but scientific naturalism, which surely underwrote those doubts, threatened human freedom in general. Albrecht Ritschl and Wilhelm Herrmann seized upon Kant's philosophy as an escape from both predicaments. Their shared solution was a relatively simple one, seeking to route the immediacy of moral awareness through Jesus' preaching of the Kingdom of God. This effectively lifted Jesus' significance, in the form of an absolute moral claim manifesting the transcendent (God), above history and nature. That immediate awareness they called faith. Faith without knowledge, Christ without history, ethics without metaphysics. This was the strategy adopted from Herrmann by Karl Barth, whose basic framework Bonhoeffer never abandons.

By speaking of a 'strategy,' I aim to differentiate Barth's path from two others which dominated the nineteenth century, or what Bonhoeffer refers to as "metaphysics" and "inwardness." Both identify religion with some feature of human self-consciousness. The *metaphysical* strategy, typified by Hegel, unites finite and infinite in the structure of

thought itself. Being is thinking, divine spirit and human spirit are one. The strategy of *inwardness*, typified by Schleiermacher and Herrmann, correlates the meaning of Christian faith to a non-conceptual aspect of consciousness, be it affective or moral. In displacing religion with revelation, Barth no longer looked for an intersection of divine and human, in thought or experience, and this leads him to a strategy one may call *phenomenological*. The inner structure of his thought-form has been noted implicitly by Graham Ward in comparison with Levinas. Ward speaks of a “trinodal operation” that structures the thinking of Barth and Levinas and corresponds rather directly to Bonhoeffer’s “three circles.”⁸ According to Ward, both thinkers begin with an “ethical encounter” prior to thought or being that calls into question all judgments of the self upon others, an “ethics beyond ontology” (160). The absence of any “third term” between God and humanity then raises the problem of mediation, “of a transcendence entering into, constituting the reality of and yet not being domesticated by the immanent...essentially concealed and yet an eternal demand” (165). This is the question of the Word, of Christ and history in other terms. It is also the question of analogy, of a likeness in the knowing and being of God and creatures, so finally also of the relation between faith and knowledge, which Ward describes as a reconstitution of the subject-object relation.

What is Ward driving at in this comparison? Certainly not just “similarity in the structures of their thinking” or “repetition or permanence...of certain fundamental schemes,” but the “grammar of signification itself” as a “triadic economy” that is unavoidably theological (176). Leaving aside Ward’s aggressive framing of Barth and Levinas in conventionally “postmodern” terms, he has nonetheless touched upon the

⁸ Graham Ward, “The Revelation of the Holy Other as the Wholly Other: Between Barth’s Theology of the Word and Levinas’s Philosophy of Saying,” *Modern Theology* 9:2 April (1993), 159-180.

heart of the matter, namely, the ‘structure’ of appearance or phenomenality as it overcomes the subject-object dichotomy. In the end, however, Ward is not much interested in talk about revelation but rather signification, an absorption of the Barthian problematic into a poststructuralist idiom. Not in ‘radical orthodoxy’ but in ‘new phenomenology’ do we find a revived interest in the theme of revelation. Here the question is raised in connection with the basic tasks of phenomenology itself, as an entailment of the questions of appearance and being. Jean-Luc Marion and Michel Henry have pursued this course with particular rigor. Barth and Bonhoeffer would readily affirm, in spirit at least, the latter’s claim that “the truth of Christianity has precisely no relation whatsoever to the truth that arises from the analysis of texts or their historical study.”⁹ Henry also turns to the concept of “self-revelation” to designate a “revelation whose phenomenality is the phenomenalization of phenomenality itself” or “the self-phenomenalization of pure phenomenality” (ibid, 25, 27). The reflexive language of ‘phenomenality itself’ carries more than a little Hegelian residue, just as Barth and Bonhoeffer embark upon a post-metaphysical refurbishing of the concept of “suspension” (*Aufhebung*).¹⁰

Any attempt to hitch dialectical theology too closely to the new phenomenology, much less poststructuralism, must address the seriousness with which Barth and

⁹ Michel Henry, *I Am the Truth: Toward a Philosophy of Christianity*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2003), p. 3.

¹⁰ Compare with Henry, 66. “To give testimony to the truth means that it is truth that gives testimony to itself. And it does so since it is Life, and Life is self-revelation, that which originally reveals itself to itself—or in Johannine language, that which testifies to itself.” In Hegel’s concept of self-revelation, the I “reveals itself to itself” in the dialectic of the Concept. Hegel’s understanding of self-revelation also evolved from a concept of “life” as an internally self-differentiated structure, as found in his *Jungchriften* on Christianity. The difference between his metaphysical approach and the phenomenological ones of Henry, Barth and Bonhoeffer is obvious: for Hegel the entire process of self-revelation can be grasped objectively, reflexively, whereas it phenomenologically ‘ruptures’ the subject-object relation and is inaccessible to reflection. This is the basic thesis of *Act and Being*.

Bonhoeffer took Kant's philosophy, thereby refusing to vanquish 'the subject.' Neither, I think, really warrant postmodern affiliation but stand nearer to Levinas, who retains the concept of the subject as one who is 'placed beneath' an ethical claim. In doing so, Levinas goes behind Heidegger's disposal of the paradoxes of self-consciousness—his replacement of sub-ject with *Da-sein*—without merely returning to Kant's model of subjectivity. Bonhoeffer makes a similar turn, overturning the "epistemological category" of subject-object relations with the "sociological category," according to which the self is constituted in a "basic relation" (*Grundverhältnisse, Grundbeziehung*) to the concrete other made possible by the divine Other. The inclusion of the concrete other marks his break with Karl Barth, whereby he attempts to think revelation not individualistically but in "sociality."

With this term, also drawn from the Hegelian lexicon, the distinctiveness of Bonhoeffer's thought is most evident. Like Barth, he finds an escape from the prison of self-consciousness only in the "*suspension*" of knowledge in faith through the freedom of a divine act and encounter. Like Levinas, he locates the constitution of the self in *ethical* relations with concrete others, the neighbor, and not God alone. Like other social theorists, for example, Habermas, he understands the intersubjective constitution of the self as mediated by language, which he even grants a priority over thought. Yet again like Hegel, he does not view this priority in exclusion of the dialectics of self-consciousness but as ingredient to the irreducibly social nature of "spirit." The whole of his early theology struggles to reconcile these insights with Barth's theological "presupposition" (*Ansatz*), and therefore to overcome the tension between revelation and history.

Outline of Argument

It is not the purpose of this study to place Bonhoeffer's theology in view of contemporary concerns or figures, or at least not directly. The historical question of how his theology took shape is distinct in principle from its ongoing validity or relevance. Comparisons, for example, with Levinas, enter into consideration only to the extent that they cast light upon the structure and direction of Bonhoeffer's own thinking in its historical setting. Judgments on the intelligibility of his theology are rendered only for the sake of making it intelligible. Despite the concentration of this essay on ideas, some reference to social history is also necessary to clarify 'how the words run.'

The first chapter therefore examines the *social* function of the concept of "religious community" in German philosophy and theology during the nineteenth century. Conceived as the coupling of finite and infinite in a sequence of progressively unfolding historical and social forms, religion provided for the unity of knowledge as well as the unity of a German culture fragmented by political, religious and class divisions. The idea of religion could exercise this function only as part of more complex cultural ideal with broad conceptual and social dimensions (*Bildung*). Against this backdrop, the second part of chapter one turns to Karl Barth's attack on 'religion,' developing his continuities and discontinuities with the nineteenth century. By outlining the "trinodal" structure of his thinking and its dependence on the Hegelian figure of "suspension," the immanent tensions of his thought-form come into view, so that

Bonhoeffer's own project becomes comprehensible as both an 'immanent critique' of the Barthian pattern and a synthesis with aspects of the liberal-Protestant heritage.

The key to this synthesis is the concept of "sociality" and its antecedents, such as the "voluntary form of spirit," which appear in Bonhoeffer's student essays and correspondence. By 1925, his conversion to Barth is already cemented, but other trends precede his transition from liberal to dialectical theology, including a fascination not so much with the concept of the church as its living congregational reality, awakened during a trip to Rome. A reexamination of Bonhoeffer's critique of Barth shows why he then fixed upon the concept of the church as the historical presence of God, "Jesus Christ existing as community." By conceiving God on the model of the *subject*, Barth's understanding of revelation is both formalistic, lacking in historical reality, and individualistic, thus incapable of touching human beings in their whole historical and social existence. The dualism that separates God's being and revelation from history invades the human being as well. Although the full design of Bonhoeffer's appeal to the church becomes visible only in his 1927 dissertation, his student essays foreshadow its concerns by softening Barth's dualism between time and eternity through the presence of the Holy Spirit "in us." Bonhoeffer now conceives God as will rather than mind, as *person* rather than subject. The epistemic, historical, and ethical circles as aligned by Barth demand reconfiguration.

Chapter three and four offer close readings of Bonhoeffer's dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio* (Ch. 3) and habilitation essay *Act and Being* (Ch. 4), and chapter five draws together the threads of this study to demonstrate how these two texts together exemplify a unified thought-form. The distinctiveness of Bonhoeffer's position and the

unity of his thought-form lies in the interweaving of *two dialectics*. In the theological dialectic, God “suspends” the subject-object relation of knowledge in the Trinitarian relations of God’s own self-knowledge. So God is present, God ‘is,’ only in the act of faith. Barth and Bonhoeffer are in agreement on these points. Bonhoeffer moves beyond Barth by adding a second, namely, *sociological or historical dialectic*. The intersubjective constitution of human beings in “sociality” means that the ‘canceling’ and ‘taking up’ of their knowledge affects them in their social existence. The contrasting modes of human life before and after revelation are social, knowledge and being in two forms of *community*, broken and reconciled. Where human beings are by nature “woven into sociality,” God’s freedom has “woven itself into the personlike community of faith.” The church is for Bonhoeffer the visible communion of divine and human freedom, “the revelation of loving hearts.”

CHAPTER I

RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY AND REVELATION: FROM *BILDUNG* TO BARTH

The era of Protestant orthodox theology in Germanic countries came to a close with Kant's critique of rationalist metaphysics in the vein of Christian Wolff. By this time, pietism had thoroughly penetrated the culture, including many of the universities, but had declined in influence and vigor for half a century. The German enlightenment (*Aufklärung*) birthed a new thinking about religion in distinction from the 'rational religion' of the metaphysicists and the 'heart religion' of the 'enthusiasts.' It was in fact from the weakened language and cultural forms of pietism that a powerful new cultural vision emerged, epitomized in the humanistic ideal of *Bildung*. Borrowed directly from the pietist understanding of the "image of God" (*Gottesbild*), *Bildung* traded upon the rhetoric of "inwardness" and "feeling" popularized by the bands, molding it into a bourgeois value achieved through education. Against the "cold heart" of the prior century's hunger for autonomy and individualism, *Bildung* counseled a return to "community" and "religious community" in particular. The morphology of religious communions served as the index of progress in a philosophy of history which amounted to a domestication of pietist chiliasm. The most developed religious community (German Protestant, of course) represented the Kingdom of God in history. Some variation of these ideas guided the luminaries of German society for over a century.

The commanding continuity of this cultural heritage shattered in the first World War, and its view of historical progress earned special rebuke. Among the beleaguered

theology faculties, it was a young Swiss pastor who dropped the decisive ‘bombshell.’ Karl Barth set the Kingdom of God and history, time and eternity, in contradiction rather than continuity. God is above not within humanity. Revelation replaces religion. Bonhoeffer accepts Barth’s critique of religion, but tries to reinsert the concept of community, not only to correct a theoretical difficulty but to open the possibility of redemption for the cultural pattern that concept signifies. The first half of this chapter develops that pattern in broad-brush fashion, while the second closes in on the structure of Barth’s early theology. From this twofold standpoint, one may survey the practical and theoretical tensions Bonhoeffer felt it necessary to reconcile.

I. The German Paradigm: Religion and Community Across the Long Nineteenth Century

The concept of ‘religion’ is not one among others in nineteenth century Germany. In its several variants, it defines an entire intellectual paradigm that is at once and perhaps uniquely a *cultural* paradigm. The German enlightenment turned from the geometrical to the historical, from the abstract or negative to the concrete and positive. Religion was no exception to this trend. The ‘rational religion’ of the eighteenth century gave way to a renewed emphasis on ‘revealed religion,’ particularly in the form of developmental historical schemes as an apology for the superiority of Christianity. ‘Religion’ served as the engine and index of an upward historical process in which ‘higher’ religions attained a greater clarity regarding human nature. Philosophy could answer in this way the crisis

generated by consciousness of its own history, but the turn to ‘positive religion’ in classical German philosophy met a specifically German (and not solely philosophical) need as well.

While France and Britain took on the structure of politically, economically and militarily unified nation-states, ‘Germany’ remained a collective of petty princedoms, led by the dominant powers of Protestant Prussia and Catholic Austria. Fearing ‘encirclement’ by Franco-British forces, and with Russia looming to the east, German unification seemed a political necessity and a strategic impossibility, facing the restrictions of religious division and ossified, miniature absolutism. As Helmut Smith has remarked, under such circumstances, Germany had to be imagined before it could be established.¹ Pietism provided the raw materials, and classical German philosophy, Idealist and especially Romantic, wrought a partial secularization of its themes into a spiritual, cultural, and political ideal, *Bildung*. Weighed as a late or even final fruit of providential history, *Bildung* captured the essence of religion and the essence of German humanity in a single breath. I shall consider its full semantic range in a moment, but a provisional word on its social range is necessary first.

Bildung belongs to the social world of the German middle class or *Bürgertum*. Emerging from the bureaucratization of the monarchical government during the eighteenth century, the *Bürgertum* included not only the ‘educated middle class’ (*Bildungsbürgertum*) of lawyers, clergy, and above all academics, but the entrepreneurial upper middle class (*Besietzbürgertum*) and lower middle class of trade professionals

¹ Helmut W. Smith, *The Continuities of German History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008).

(*Kleinbürgertum*).² The alliance of these variegated *Bürger* identities aggregated enough social, political, and economic capital to assert reforms via bureaucracy ‘from above,’ having no taste for revolution ‘from below,’ in the French fashion. German liberalism, in the main, distinguished itself from its French, British, and American counterparts by prioritizing the whole over the part, the community over the individual, opting for an ‘enlightened absolutism’ or constitutional monarchy. With its center of power and vision in the university, the educated middle class initially aimed at a ‘classless society’ in which a demoted aristocracy and elevated peasantry would eventually pursue the goods of *Bildung*.

As the architects of the new cultural vision, these academes or “German mandarins,” exercised tremendous influence over the mind of modern Germany, composing a spiritual symphony of classical, modern and mythic sources and orchestrating its public reception in salons, liturgies and festivals. Their “new mythology” named the social program of *Bildung*.³ Fritz Ringer has summarized the “mandarin type” and its precarious dependence on specific social conditions.⁴ As a social elite based on educational achievement rather than hereditary title, they assume a set of economic conditions after the decline of absolutism but prior to democratization, serving as the *officium* of a heavily bureaucratized and politically weakened monarchy. The humanistic goal of self-cultivation demands a culture of classical rather than technical

² Jonathan Sperber, “Bürger, Bürgertum, Bürgerlichkeit, Bürgerliche Gesellschaft: Studies of the German (Upper) Middle Class and Its Sociocultural World,” *JMH* 69 (June 1997), pp. 271-297. ² David Blackbourn, “The German bourgeoisie: an introduction,” in David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984).

³ On the concept of a “new mythology,” compare George S. Williamson, *The Longing for Myth in Germany: Religion and Aesthetic Culture From Romanticism to Nietzsche*, (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2004).

⁴ Fritz Ringer, *Decline of the German Mandarins*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1969), pp. 4-12.

learning and calls for a rationalized government led by the educated, rather than the arbitrariness of monarchy or masses. The legitimacy of such a government rests on the people (*Volk*) it creates, a ‘cultured state’ (*Bildungsstaat*), spiritually regulated by the intelligentsia.

Although Ringer speaks of the mandarin ‘type,’ appealing to the sociology of Max Weber, the *Bildungsbürgertum* (to which Weber belonged) are perhaps better understood through Pierre Bourdieu’s conception of a class “position” within the total “economy” of a society.⁵ The main advantage of Bourdieu’s sociology in this instance is that permits a more dexterous connection between theory and practice. Into the educated middle class position is concentrated a specific measure and brand of social, political, fiscal and symbolic capital, the cumulative availability and arrangement of which shapes the German economy for over a century. The stability of the theoretic or symbolic capital depends on the collective stability of the other forms. *Bildung* presupposes *Bürgertum*. The difficulties of German liberalism reside in the middle-class’s deficiencies in these latter capital forms. If the symbolic capital concentrated into *Bildung* drew upon a number of historical and cultural resources, it assumed the fiscal capital to permit leisure for self-cultivation, the social capital to secure institutional channels for learning, and the political capital to directly effect legislation protecting them. These four capital streams flowed into the economic subject position *Bildungsbürgertum*, where *Bildung* marks the “social imaginary” directing the flow of capitals.⁶

⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1977).

⁶ On the concept of a “social imaginary,” see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007), 171ff. For Taylor’s use of Bourdieu, see his essay, “To Follow a Rule,” in *Philosophical Arguments*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997)

Since the shape of Germany's 'economy,' along with the rest of Europe's, alters dramatically over the course of the nineteenth century, generalizations about *Bildung* prove risky. Its valences shift as the educated middle class position dissolves between the pressures of monarchical reassertion, industrialization, democratization, and monetary inflation. The advent of the Weimar Republic (1918-1933) coincided roughly with mandarin division into reactionary "orthodox" and more democratically accommodating "modern" camps.⁷ The moderns occupied the University of Berlin, one of the most prestigious educational institutions in the world, and counted among their ranks leading intellectuals such as Max Weber, Frederick Meinecke, Ferdinand Tönnies, Hans Delbrück, Ernst Troeltsch and Adolf von Harnack. Bonhoeffer's father was part of their circle in Berlin, and we may trace the deterioration of his legacy in five stages.

Religious Community in the Historical Paradigm: Five Phases

Since nothing resembling an accurate 'history' of Germany in the nineteenth century is possible in the space allotted here, two sorts of observations will have to suffice. I want to note, first, some mutations in the concept of 'religious community' as the core of the mandarin imaginary, and then, second, the coincidence of those mutations with the repositioning of capital forms. Before doing so, it may be useful to describe briefly the wider cultural pattern which embraces the concept of "religious community," namely, *Bildung*, the semantic of range of which I would now like to expand. As the cultural ideal of the educated middle class, *Bildung* is of largely Romantic vintage,

⁷ Ringer, *Decline*, 181ff.

drawing from at least three wells of influence. Again, it is fundamentally a partial secularization of the *pietist* habitus, with its insistence on inwardness, communal feeling, and the formation of the soul in the image of God. Herder was the first to envision a cultural and educational program along these lines. Within this Protestant vision the Romantics sought to recapture the *medieval* sense of cosmic politic-religious harmony in a modern and specifically German idiom. Coupled to these Christian elements is a *Greco-German paganism*, a mythology of German origins and identity. *Bildung* combines philosophical, cultural and political ideals from these sources.

The concept itself has a wide semantic halo, which, while largely stable, shifts over the course of the nineteenth century as it functions in the various contexts of Germany's struggle for unification. We might depict the web of semantic relations in a series of concentric circles, in which the significance of the outermost is concentrated and fulfilled in the innermost: a people (*Volk*) emerges in the context of a specific language (*Sprache*) and history (*Geschichte*), giving rise to their unique spirit (*Geist*) and culture (*Kultur*), grasped through a unified 'scientific' knowledge (*Wissenschaft*) and towards the expansion and fulfillment of aesthetic and religious capacities (*Kunst/religion*).⁸ However consistent this vocabulary, the semantics of *Bildung* varies intensely between figures, movements, and periods, with perhaps one exception. German philosophy and politics (in that order) generally framed their designs with a unique concept of history, so much so that we might speak here of the 'historical paradigm.' Not that the Romantics, Idealists and Neo-Kantians shared a single theory of history—their differences were several and significant. Nonetheless, one may properly point to the outlines of a 'German

⁸ Raymond Geuss, "Kultur, Bildung, Geist," in *Morality, Culture and History: Essays on German Philosophy*, (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge UP, 1999), 29-50.

idea of history,' which unfolds the logic of religious inwardness and national community.⁹ After tracing the transformation of these connections through five phases of the historical paradigm (preparatory, foundational, revisionary, reactionary, reparative), I will return to a few cumulative remarks about the content of *Bildung*.

The first and *preparatory stage* (1774-1789) grows out of a comparative deficit in all capital forms, as 'Germany' lagged politically, economically and culturally behind France and England (Helmut Plessner would later write of his 'delayed nation').¹⁰ The emerging middle class had confronted something of a vicious capital circle on an international scale. The political capital required to secure fiscal and social freedom (capitalism and constitutional government) presupposed a degree of social capital sufficient to accomplish political change in the first place. Revolution was certainly one way out of that circle but not one palatable to the orderly and deferential Germans, who soon witnessed the French revolution with considerable horror and distaste. The 'bourgeois public sphere' (*bürgerliche Öffentlichkeit*) and its *Publikum* were first constructed as *reading* publics in the German equivalent of French salons, often as outgrowths of the university. As Benjamin Redekop observes, "in the Germanies the general trend was towards overcoming the isolation borne of the diversity of German life with a more coherent, unified, and enlightened public."¹¹ From the *Aufklärung* forward,

⁹ The phrasing here is that of Georg G. Iggers, *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present*, (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1968). Iggers' study focuses more on the principles of historiography, e.g., von Humboldt and Ranke. I have in mind the philosophical conceptions underpinning those principles, as well as their vaguer political counterparts.

¹⁰ For an overview of the historical background, see David Blackbourne, *The Long Nineteenth Century: A History of Germany, 1780-1918*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998).

¹¹ Benjamin Redekop, *Enlightenment and Community: Lessing, Abbt, Herder, and the Quest for a German Public*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 2000), p. 12.

the unity of that public depended heavily in the minds of its architects on a shared language that could bridge regional, religious and class boundaries.

Herder programmatically explored the theme of language in connection with German history, origins and mythology, and forged a more explicit and theoretically sophisticated bond between public, nation and *Volk*.¹² His *Idea for a Philosophy of Human History* (1784-91), along with Kant's *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View* (1784) and Lessing's *Education of the Human Race* (1774/8), indicates two tensile tendencies in this earliest phase. On the one hand, these works shared in the cosmopolitanism, the universal humanism, of the entire era, and despite their conflicts are joined by an interest in the common history of humanity without the forms of universalism plied by the rationalists. So on the other hand, the German conception of history increasingly emphasized the healthy competition of unique national spirits. Lessing more than Kant supposed the value of positive religion and moved towards a universal history in which the history of religions bridged somewhat the "wide ugly ditch" between "necessary truths of reason" and "accidental truths of history."¹³ Herder advanced a step further by advocating an organic relation between the language, landscape, religion and politics appropriate to a given people in the "garden of nations." The merger of the organic with the historical rendered the garden of human spirits a garden of the divine spirit as well, and religion opened up the possibility of a "community of nations" with the integrity of individual nations.

¹² Ibid, 170ff.

¹³ Ibid, 104ff.

In the *foundational stage* (1789-1848) a critical mass of capital accumulates to the middle class and German philosophy enters its classical period. The sharp contrast between Herder and Fichte's *Speeches to the German Nation*, while not exactly characteristic of this stage, still exemplifies its basic trajectory from the articulation of a German essence to its universal self-assertion. That trend finds two gentler expressions, far more subtle and influential, in Schleiermacher and Hegel, and in both cases we find a comparable definition of religion as the unity of finite and infinite, humanity and God (Lessing had already ventured a similar view). Despite their considerable philosophical differences, the two shared three basic convictions: that history was to be understood as a process of upward development in which the human spirit achieved greater likeness to the divine spirit; that nature served as a substrate of this process through an organic grounding of human spiritual achievement in national identities, languages and environs; that the fusion of art and religion marked the telos of this process of human formation.¹⁴

Interests of a broadly liberal nature gained momentum from the convergence of these capital forms until the revolutions of 1848, when the failure of the Frankfurt Assembly reversed their fortunes. In a third and *revisionary stage* (1848-1918), the synthesis of capitals presupposed by the economic position *Bildungsbürgertum* destabilizes. Where political and symbolic capital had been decisive in the preparatory and foundational stages, industrialization lent weight and volatility to social and fiscal capitals. Not only did the gap between middle and lower class Germans increase dramatically, but the wealth of government officials and upper class entrepreneurs, as

¹⁴ These generalizations apply only loosely to the range of positions encompassed by 'Idealism' and 'Romanticism.' Hegel, for example, considered art and religion ante/penultimate, whereas the Romantics granted it ultimacy. Similarly, the early and late Romantics differed in their attitudes towards the German state, its form and finality, as well as the desirable form of Christianity.

well as the fragility of trade professions, slowly unraveled the former burger alliances. If socio-economic conditions thwarted mandarin ambitions from below, the reassertion of the monarchy and the policies of Bismarck cut them off from above. Moreover, the modest success of the constitutional program backfired on university elites when the party system opened the door for Social Democrats to siphon off their religious support base and popularize Marxist ideology against vulgarized Romanticism, which was then eventually coopted by the National Socialists.¹⁵

Under these circumstances, a socially and intellectually integrative program made little sense, and the mandarins settled for a mediating and therefore necessarily conservative posture between the monarchy and boiling workers' parties. A renovated Kantianism served admirably in this capacity, with its mild skepticism, cool objectivity, and dutiful ethics. Their sense of society was forced to distance itself somewhat from the metaphysical confidence of Hegel, and in this climate the science of sociology emerged.¹⁶ Despite the success of the Ritschlian school, with its anti-historicist tendencies, Troeltsch genuinely captured the self-image of protestant theology during the founding of the Reich. The German idea of history carried the day.

Yet significant strain preceded the 'Great War.' The German economy could not support the burden of military expenditures, save on the promise of victor's spoils. Defeat and the Treaty of Versailles awarded them instead with calamitous war debts, accumulating under the clouds of a global financial depression. Intellectual and aesthetic

¹⁵ Langewiesche has stated the fateful attachment of German liberals to the concept of the nation state succinctly: "in the vain hope of being able to influence nationalism, [liberals] followed it on its path to the right." Dieter Langewiesche, *Liberalism in Germany*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1999), p. iv.

¹⁶ Woodruff Smith, *Politics and the Sciences of Culture in Germany*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991). Ringer, *Decline*, 161ff.

forces resistant to the prevailing mandarin ideology gained in potency and freedom during the Weimar era, as did a variety of revolutionary social movements, including workers and students, women and Jews. In the fourth and *reactionary phase* of the historical paradigm (1918-1945), the German spirit undergoes an apocalyptic inversion. Inflation lent a phantasmagoric absurdity to the exchanges of everyday life and threatened the population with poverty and violent discontent. With the Kaiser banished and power in the hands of Social Democrats and Catholics, the mandarin majority opted for what Peter Gay once called “public careers of honorable impotence,” if they did not finally throw in with right wing assaults on the Republic.¹⁷ The idea of history underwent its own sort of inversion, its axis shifting from the horizontal (progress) to the vertical (crisis). This vertical historicism came in many forms with just as many political agendas, encompassing the *Krisenliteratur* of the Weimar era.¹⁸ In the young Karl Barth, the two fiercest children of the “reactionary decade,” Marx and Kierkegaard, return in a single voice, attacking from both sides the invisible compound joining ‘culture’ to ‘protestantism’ (*Kulturprotestantismus*). Bonhoeffer was clearly impressed with the Kierkegaardian gesture, much less so with Barth’s socialism, already on the wane in the mid-twenties. The question was what could be salvaged of *Bildung* from the overall wreck of the war.

Dimensions of Bildung: Philosophy, Culture, Politics.

¹⁷ Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: The Insider as Outsider*, (NY: Norton, 2001), p. 23

¹⁸ Gunther Wenz, “Historicismus und Antihistoricismus,” in *Offenbarung*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2009), 180ff. .

We must keep this arc of depreciation in view when generalizing about the meaning of *Bildung*, but perhaps one can see why the philosophical element achieved such a peculiar priority. After all, the German philosophers presumed their insights to be the ripest fruit providence had yet produced. The problems of history, nature, culture and knowledge converged in a single principle which came to define German thought down to the World Wars: “inwardness” (*Innerlichkeit*). Against the mechanism of the empiricist Enlightenments in France and England, several strands of German thought pointed away from the mere givenness of observable, calculable nature to its inner potency and *perfectibility*. The notion of a perfectible finite nature stretched back to the beginning of German pietism, but appeared more systematically (and independently) in the philosophy of Leibniz, in the emerging biological sciences, in the German idea of history, and in the new aesthetic movements from *Sturm und Drang* to Romanticism.¹⁹ Each in their own way observed that nature, as a whole and in its parts, possessed a telos, a destiny, whose form and fulfillment were not predetermined. *Bildung* named both the process and the final product of that freely attained form or perfection.

A pantheistic leaning always accompanied this conception after the foundational stage of the historical paradigm, with its desire for a system of ‘Spinozism plus freedom.’²⁰ In conscious life, the spiritual ground (*Grund*) of nature achieves a breakthrough to self-direction, so that the problem of knowledge was simultaneously a problem of ethics, a question of how to reconcile the determinate and free aspects of our being in the sphere of creative power (culture). The self embedded in nature thus

¹⁹ Peter Reill, *The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism*, (Berkeley, CA: UCP, 1975).

²⁰ Dieter Henrich, *Between Kant and Hegel: Lectures on German Idealism*, ed. David Pacini, (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2004), 98ff.

mediated its own identity, created itself, through its cultural productions. The organic metaphor provided the metaphysical tissues linking nature to landscape, language, nation and culture. And because the self stood in a relation not of abstract, atomistic, preformed observation but of ‘dialectic’ or ‘interpenetration’ (*Auseinandersetzung*), its individuality was to be built up, like its knowledge, out of fragments. A whole knowledge and a whole self, smoothly integrated through the process of education, was the primary meaning of perfection or being ‘cultured’ (*gebildet*).

If the balance of part and whole informed the desired pattern of German inwardness, as knowledge and as individuality, and if that inwardness mediated itself through the cultural environment, then it demanded a *cultural* as well as a political ideal. A unity of art and religion (*Kunstreligion*) marked the ideal of culture as an open totality.

²¹ Yet while the religious sensibility clearly derived from Lutheran pietism, and even the Romantics never abandoned a Christian coloring to the form (*Bild*) of *Bildung*, the aesthetic ideal owed as much to the revival of interest in Greek culture as to Christianity, and the coupling of Christ with Dionysius and Apollo became a persistent theme from Novalis to Nietzsche. Romantic fascination with Dante’s vision of a complete scientific, political and religious reality (an ‘encyclopedia’) rendered poetically merged with such pagan themes as eternal recurrence. The taming or complete immanence of the ideal of the Kingdom of God (*Gottesreich*) cleared the space for an Athenian secularization of Christianity under the sign of the Beautiful.²²

²¹ Again, there were fairly serious disagreements on the nature of ‘completeness’ (*Vollendung*) between Hegel and Schleiermacher, for example.

²² “Above all, the Germans admired the Greeks because the Greeks admired, cultivated, and exemplified the beautiful...the ancient Hebrews could not offer the sorts of visual representations of the ‘natural’ world that fired the antibaroque aesthetic imagination and complemented the secular, utopian politics of the

With this, the individuality of the ‘inner man’ attained a kind of universality, a modern humanization of the eternal form prized by ancient Greece.²³ Refracted through the organic metaphor, the renewal of ancient values took on new significance. Such terms as ‘unity’ (*Einheit*), ‘simplicity’ (*Einfach*), ‘purity’ (*Reinheit*), ‘naturalness’ or ‘authenticity’ (*Eigentlichkeit, Eigentätigkeit*), and ‘harmony’ (*Harmonie*) aimed at recapitulations of Greek aesthetic ideals, though within the historicist, organic framework, they typically pointed to an ‘unfolding,’ a simplicity and unity not of static eternity but of free and dynamic growth into inner potentiality.²⁴ Given the pantheistic overtones applied to the concept of nature as inward, spiritual reality and the explicitly religious vision of history as progress towards the Kingdom of God, it is not surprising that the Germans looked upon the outer manifestations of culture, arising from the wells of spirit, as revelation (*Offenbarung*) or ‘objective spirit’ (*objektiv Geist*). The divine embraced the complete context of thinking and being. The concern for organic inwardness therefore gives way to a consuming interest in harmony, expressed in the “symphonic analogy” of parts ordered under a whole whose meaning is only recognized in its temporal completion.²⁵

In the aesthetic-religious ideal, the *political* implications of *Bildung* are already evident. In the part-whole relation, the accent falls squarely on the whole. Although the concept of the nation-state always prioritized the collective over the individual in

late Enlightenment.” Susan Marchand, *Down From Olympus: Archaeology and Philhellenism in Germany, 1750-1970* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2003) pp. 3, 5.

²³ Humboldt: ‘The content of *Bildung* is *Mensch*.’ Cited in Marchand, 28.

²⁴ Unfortunately, there is still a lack of comprehensive research on the origins and character of the German aesthetic ideal, that is, the blending of ideas from German myth, Greek philosophy, Lutheran pietism, and the Enlightenment. No single study has managed to combine a coherent account of the historical, social, philosophical and theological dimensions at play.

²⁵ Fritz Ringer, *Fields of Knowledge*, 100ff.

nineteenth century Germany, the desire for a harmonious, organic whole grew acute in the Weimar era and expressed itself increasingly in the language of ‘community’ (*Gemeinschaft*). As with the individual, the character of a nation and its political order must grow out of its own resources and history. Troeltsch admirably encapsulated these opinions in 1922:

[The individual] is a particular concretion of the divine spirit in unique persons and in suprapersonal communal [*gemeinschaftlich*] organizations...The state and society are not created from the individual by way of contract and utilitarian rationality, but from the suprapersonal spiritual forces which emanate from the most important creative individuals, the spirit of the people or the religious idea.²⁶

What he here terms ‘state mysticism’ (*Staatsmystik*) is elsewhere pitted against the “whole mathematical-mechanistic West-European scientific spirit.”²⁷

The oddity, and ultimately the tragedy, of this political conception and its humanistic foundation lay in its ‘unpolitical’ (*unpolitischen*) bias, its ‘disinterest’ (*Zwecklosigkeit*) towards the outer, mundane, and material, set below and against the inner, other-worldly, and spiritual. The liberalizing of pietistic chiliasm became the excuse for indulging in philosophical and religious eccentricity. The triumph of the material through industrialization and the threat of ‘the masses’ through democratization spelled the end of the culture-state and of those mandarin institutions without which their mode of life was impossible. Weimar thus inspired a climate of ‘cultural despair’ or ‘politicized nostalgia’ among the academic elite.²⁸ Anti-western sentiments had escalated since the founding of the Reich, but Weimar sent them into overdrive. An arsenal of

²⁶ Cited in Ringer, *Fields of Knowledge*, 100. Troeltsch continues that humanity is “not the ultimate union of fundamentally equal human beings in a rationally organized total humanity, but the fullness of contending national spirits....All [cultures] together in mutual complementation represent the totality of life.”

²⁷ Cited in Ringer, 99.

²⁸ George Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: The Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich*, (NY: Howard Fertig, 1999), Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair*, (Berkeley: UCP, 1974).

critique taking aim at everything scientific, western, industrial, and socialistic reproduced itself in university circles. “Positivism” was but the most prominent epithet, associated with terms like ‘psychologism’ and ‘subjectivism,’ describing epistemological or methodological dispositions with cultural and political consequences.²⁹

The usually vague thrust of these terms was threefold, mirroring the constitution of *Bildung*. First, they involved an epistemic confusion of the mental and the material, of subject and object, of free and rule-bound, ideal and empirical. *Bildung* presented a free, organic, dialectical interpenetration of subjective and objective, self and culture. Second, the cultural consequence of that confusion was to promote the learning of ‘things’ over spiritual realities, natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*) over human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*), and the fragmenting of understanding into isolated fields of information. *Bildung* promoted wholeness, totality and integration. Finally, the net political result was an individualistic, atheistic materialism, robbed of religious depth and social duty. *Bildung*, by contrast, was essentially religious, opening the inner depths of self, rooting the self in the Volk and Volk in divine history and purpose. When the Treaty of Versailles stipulated a ‘western-style democracy,’ the Germans took it as insult added to injury. That the socialists and Catholics led this “unnatural” imposition was only fitting in the mandarin mind.

The German paradigm thus presupposed not merely a *religious* but a protestant center, which, for all its talk of inwardness, served to secure the priority of the *community* over the individual, the whole over the part. The controversy over ‘religious community’

²⁹ “The revulsion against positivism and the Enlightenment was most pronounced in Germany, where neither positivism nor the Enlightenment had ever been popular.” Ringer, *Decline*, 263ff.

in each phase of the historical paradigm played a crucial role in both the philosophical and social questions, entwined as they were with the German idea of history. Karl Barth uncoupled God from history and society by excising their point of contact in religion.

II. Barth Against Berlin: Critical Transformation of the German Paradigm

The disagreement between Barth and Bonhoeffer stems less from this uncoupling than what happens to the leftovers, particularly to the role of the church in dogmatics. The preceding account of the ‘historical paradigm’ has sketched the confusion of religious community with national community, or how ‘religious community’ functioned in the social imaginary of the German economy in its struggle for integration and equilibrium. That confusion was implicated in the church’s status as a metadoctrine for German theology, how it *functioned* as the very basis of thinking about doctrine.³⁰ In Hegel’s philosophy, the church as community represented the self-recognition and culmination of Spirit, to be superseded only by the German state as the final outworking of the divine Dialectic. For Schleiermacher as well the religious community preceded any particular doctrine as the context of those religious affections to which doctrine gave expression. In a less direct way the same could be said of Ritschl and Herrmann, both of whom presupposed the church community as the place where Christ could be perceived as the datum of moral experience.

³⁰ For a thorough exploration of this claim, see Trutz Rendtorff, *Church and Theology: The Systematic Function of the Concept of Church in Modern Theology*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971).

The central epistemological function allotted to the concept of religious community meant that the social problem was usually digested in highly theoretical terms, as a function of epistemological problems. This partly resulted from the unique position mandarins occupied in regulating the German economy, a position determined by the path of German unification. If Germany had to be imagined first, then philosophical decisions really did have massive social consequences. Barth's seemingly obtuse declaration that Bultmann's (at times minor) difference of opinion should have led to Nazism makes a little more sense in this light. The "social question" (*Sozialfrage*) and the philosophical one concerned the problem of *mediation*. The social question arose from the pre-industrial ideal of a "classless" or "civil society" but was exacerbated by the class conflict that accompanied industrialization. In both cases the problem was the same: how could the middle class unify Germany around itself, mediating between the aristocracy and the peasantry? As a vital mandarin institution, the church could serve this mediating capacity, with certain ideological renovations. Schleiermacher was instrumental in the promotion of a "national liturgy" to this end, part of an "attempt to infuse the public sphere with mythical meaning."³¹ The 'new mythology' was primarily a myth of German identity.

As Bonhoeffer himself recognized, the priority of the whole over the part was a distinguishing feature of the German social ideal, being at once an end in oneself and a means to the whole. The idea of religious community gave this a metaphysical justification by theorizing the mediation of the infinite through the finite, a mediation following one of two strategies which Bonhoeffer eventually describes as "metaphysics"

³¹ Williamson, *Longing for Myth*, pp 12ff, 49ff.

and “inwardness” (VIII, 344, 348). For both, religion is a “mediating concept” (*Vermittlungsbegriff*) in the sense that it stands between the positive content of Christian faith and a general conception of humanity or reality. As an essential feature of self-consciousness, religion “mediates” in a way that corresponds to the structure of self-awareness. If consciousness can discover the order of its own operations, if reason can ground itself in its own activity, then metaphysics really is possible and the mind has found its way back into the super-sensible. That is the path of absolute Idealism, typified in Hegel. If this path is cut off, either by an explicit acknowledgment of the Kantian limit (Ritschl) or by the dependence of the mind upon a ground which it cannot access reflexively and conceptually (Schleiermacher), then the invisible must manifest itself in some non-conceptual way, either through moral experience (Ritschl) or affective awareness that the ordering of the mind is not self-sufficient (Schleiermacher). Troeltsch called this the “agnostic theology of mediation”—‘agnostic’ because God remains unknowable, ‘mediating’ or ‘correlating’ because it locates the meaning of positive religions in some immediate aspect of consciousness.

Barth protested the reduction of Christianity to religion (defined anthropologically as a feature of self-consciousness), but his break with the nineteenth century was not so clean as once suggested. Christophe Chalamet has established his continuity with Herrmann in terms of the functions and concepts of dialectical thinking, but Chalamet has not recognized the underlying structure of the three circles, much less its potential for variation while retaining its basic form.³² After responding to a few interpretive issues surrounding Barth, I will trace the genesis of that structure from Kant through Herrmann

³² Christophe Chalamet, *Dialectical Theologians: Wilhelm Herrmann, Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann*, (Zürich: TVZ, 2005).

to Barth and then analyze the systematic structure of *Romans II* in terms of the epistemic, historical and ethical circles. The oscillation between diachronic and synchronic analysis, genesis and structure, will recur throughout the study.

Approaching Barth: Interpretive Issues

Bonhoeffer always placed himself within the camp of dialectical theology, and his intellectual development follows very closely that of Karl Barth. So some perspective on Barth's own development is necessary. Bruce McCormack has outlined four stages in Barth's career, dating the first from 1915 to January 1920, the second to May 1924, the third to September 1936, and the fourth until the end of Barth's career.³³ Each stage, he argues, is marked by shifts in Barth's thinking on the relation between the Kingdom of God and history, or the "dialectic of veiling and unveiling." Contrary to those interpreters who see two major breaks in Barth's theology (a turn *from* liberalism and later *to* the doctrine of analogy), McCormack sees a fundamental continuity after his departure from liberalism. The dialectic of "veiling and unveiling" describes how God becomes 'visible' without becoming a 'thing,' how God becomes an 'object' without ceasing to be 'Subject.' This underlying dialectic displaces 'religion' or self-consciousness as the center of Barth's thinking in 1920, and it remains the foundation of his theology until the end.

McCormack's contribution was to show that this dialectic undergoes several iterations, while maintaining its basic character. In the second stage (1920-May 1924), the dialectic of veiling and unveiling is expressed as the "dialectic of time and eternity." The eschatological framework appears first as a "process" (1919) and then a "consistent"

³³ McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998)

(1922) eschatology. In the former, Barth draws upon the pietists' organic imagery of the Kingdom growing in time; in the latter, he sets history and the Kingdom in a disjunctive dualism. McCormack also describes this as a move from "supplementary" to "complementary" dialectics, from 'both/and' to 'either/or.' The common denominator of the last two stages is their concentration not in eschatology but in Christology, which allows Barth to "conceptualize how revelation can be fully present in history without becoming a predicate of history" (ibid, 21). In the third stage, Barth focuses on the Holy Spirit and the present recognition of the revelation event; in the fourth, upon the event of the Incarnation itself. We are concerned here with the second stage and the beginning of the third, the point where Bonhoeffer encounters Barth.

McCormack convincingly argues that these three latter stages are the unfolding of a single material insight—that the changes in Barth's theology result from his struggle to clearly articulate the subject matter (*Sache*) of theology and not from methodological or philosophical commitments. The "dialectic of veiling and unveiling" names that subject matter. In making this claim, McCormack repudiates the thesis (originating with von Balthasar) that Barth moves from dialectic to analogy as his determining thought-form. Among the several criticisms he mounts against the older account of Barth's development, three will suffice here (and not all possess equal weight against von Balthasar's complex reading). First, "dialectic" has several meanings for Barth, so a transition from 'dialectic' to analogy is too vague to be heuristically useful. Second, Barth's mature form of analogy (*analogia fides*) is itself dialectical, grounded in the act of "veiling and unveiling." The analogy occurs not in "being" (*analogia entis*) but in act, and specifically in the act of knowing, when God graciously permits the creature's

knowledge of God in faith to resemble God's own self-knowledge. Third and finally, the dialectical 'method' of *Romans II* does give way to a dogmatic one (*Göttingen Dogmatics, Church Dogmatics*), but both are grounded in the dialectic of veiling and unveiling.

McCormack insists that the dialectic of veiling and unveiling, with its 'actualistic' and epistemic character, is nonetheless real—a *Realdialektik*.³⁴ For this reason, Bonhoeffer (and not him only) accused Barth's dialectic of being "formal rather than real" and sought to unify "act" and "being" in revelation. The chief differences between Barth and Bonhoeffer, I suggest, lie primarily in how each views the role of the church in theology and revelation. Barth's dogmatic theology returns to the church as authority, as the locus of creed and confession. "We are not floating heads, but baptized Christians," he barked at Tillich. Dogmatics explicates dogma, dogma belongs to the church. Bonhoeffer instead linked the church to theology as the 'living community' in which the Word speaks, "Jesus Christ existing as community." Since Bonhoeffer sees this as an extension of Barth's early theology, we need to identify the generative tensions in Barth that he exploits.

The question here is what it means to know God and how Barth understood the very precarious term 'knowledge.' Early on, he followed Herrmann in separating faith from knowledge, such that faith is an "experience of God [*Gotteslebnis*], an immediate awareness of the presence and efficacy of the power of life" conditioned by the "inner personality" of Jesus, present through the church and in the piety of the biblical authors.³⁵

³⁴ As we will see in a moment, the claim that Barth's dialectic is not real implicitly turns on the formalization of the 'real' presupposed by the Kantian framework.

³⁵ Wilhelm Herrmann, *The Communion of the Christian With God*, Trans. J. Stanyon, (NY: Putnam, 1906)

But in August 1914, the Reich declared war for the expressed purpose of national expansion and the annexation of foreign lands, a declaration vigorously supported by several of Barth's teachers. In a letter to Herrmann, Barth lamented that "[from you] we learned to acknowledge 'experience' as the constitutive principle of knowing and doing in the domain of religion...[but the German Christians] 'experience' their war as a holy war."³⁶ When his friend Martin Rade defended German 'self-assertion,' Barth was unmoved: "Something of the deep respect which I felt within myself for the German character is forever destroyed...because I see how your philosophy and your Christianity breaks into pieces in this war psychosis."³⁷ Despite a lingering desire to affirm the worldly ambitions of religious socialism, Barth wrote again to Rade that the "world, as the totality of our life's conditions, is godless" (ibid). The profound division of God and world turned Barth emphatically against religion as the point where, for the nineteenth century, the two intersected and even attained identity. McCormack summarizes the conclusion of these early trends: "Barth had no real interest in the question of the locus of revelation in religious subjectivity from this point on. On the contrary, he would do everything in his power to safeguard the distinction between an objectively real Self-revealing God in human consciousness."³⁸

This statement of the problem, faithful to Barth's concern, is significant for several reasons. First, and most importantly, the question of revelation is here a matter of how God can enter into the constructive field of human consciousness without being subjected to its rules, becoming an 'object.' Second, this way of posing the matter has a

³⁶ Cited in McCormack, 113.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid, 135.

negative consequence for any attempt to rest theology in individual religious experience. Third, the individual is nonetheless the one for whom revelation ‘happens.’ In the first edition of his commentary on Romans, Barth does distinguish sharply between “real” and “so-called” history, or between the Kingdom of God and human history, but the dualism is relieved by an organic growth of the Kingdom in time; the two histories coincide at ‘the right time’ (*Jenseits*) but are never directly identical.³⁹ In *Romans II*, the opposition is sharpened to the point of contradiction, without any real coincidence. Eliminating the last vestiges of the organic metaphor, with its links to pietist and socialist views of the religious community, effectively cut Barth’s ties to the direction of protestant theology in the previous century. Religion signified the inward-communal pattern of *Bildung*, the creative individual and the priority of the state. In Kierkegaard, he found an antidote to religion, the judgment of humanity before God and a pitting of the disciple against the state. Yet far more than Kierkegaard, he was concerned with establishing the ‘content’ that makes a disciple, beginning with Kant’s subject-object dichotomy as the straightjacket from which theology must escape.

In this respect, and with a mild correction to McCormack, Barth is perhaps best understood as combining dominant themes from the thought of Kant and Kierkegaard. The primary template is Kantian: the dialectic of veiling and unveiling presupposes the clear distinction between known and unknown, between reality conditioned by the categories of the understanding and ‘things in themselves.’ The relation of priority between the two is of course entirely reversed—the unknown is the Real which relativizes the operation of human understanding and its self-assurance. So beneath the

³⁹ Ibid, 141.

stormy expressionism of *Romans II*, there is a kind of systematic structure, borrowed from Herrmann and modified to Barth's own ends. Upon the Kantian distinction of known and unknown Barth imposes the Kierkegaardian distinction of time and eternity, finite and infinite, world and God. I now turn to a diachronic view of Barth's thought-form

From Kant to Barth: Knowledge, History, Ethics.

Kant's philosophy is motivated by two problems: metaphysics and freedom. How is metaphysics, as knowledge of the supersensible (God, the soul, immortality), possible as a science on par with mathematical physics? How is freedom possible when physics teaches, with mathematical certainty, that the world is wholly determined by laws, and how is philosophy to serve the cause of freedom? Kant attempts to resolve both issues through an analysis of self-consciousness. Metaphysics is not possible because cognition cannot extend beyond the limits of the conditions of possible experience, where 'experience' (*Erlebnis*) is limited to the sensual. The definition of knowledge contains within itself the exclusion of metaphysics but also resolves the question of freedom by placing the inflexible laws which order the world within the mind. That is, the patterning rules of the mind, the "categories of the understanding," account for the apparently rule-bound character of the world. 'The world' is simply a product of those mental rules which govern perception.

Kant's transcendental thought project asks what kind of a self could produce representations such as those experienced in a reflective self-consciousness like mine. As

Dieter Henrich has suggested in one of his many studies on Kant, a self of this sort has at least three distinctive qualities.⁴⁰ First, it must be a *unity*, otherwise the stream of experience would break into an incoherent series of tributaries. There is a constancy to its character, apart from any given thought or sensation, else “I would have as multi-colored and diverse a self as I have impressions.”⁴¹ Second, every thought must be incorporated into the overall order of my awareness and does not assimilate itself of its own accord. Consciousness therefore has an active character, is constituted by *acts* that provide for its unity. Finally, both the unity and the activity of the self point to the fact that no single thought or representation necessarily belongs to my conscious life; my mind is, in a sense, *empty*, capable of combining infinite possible representations. Unity means a shared form to my experience; activity means the molding of that experience by my mind; emptiness means the freedom from any particular experience.

The empty self is thus the *formal* self or the self defined by the mental rules for ordering experience. Abstracted from concrete experience, what remains is a logical pattern or *form* of the mind, which Kant describes in a table of categories. Because we have no access to things apart from these rules (‘things in themselves’), to say that something “is” is merely to define it with reference to the purely formal, empty categories of the understanding, i.e., with reference to an act of consciousness. This link between a merely formal act and ‘being’ will become a bone of contention for many of Barth’s critics. As for Kant, let us add two other observations that follow from his interpretation of subjectivity. If the self has no access to the perceived world apart from

⁴⁰ Dieter Henrich, *Between Kant and Hegel: Lectures on German Idealism*, (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2004), 32ff.

⁴¹ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), B §17.

the categories governing cognition—the categories which prescribe the world in terms of rules—it can only ‘know’ itself, paradoxically, through these categories, hence as rule-bound and unfree. The line which separates the phenomenal and noumenal worlds runs straight through the self, leaving a cleavage in the soul (a fact which did not particularly worry Kant but which his students were bent on eliminating). Without some factor to join these two independent worlds, Kant’s whole system seemed rather arbitrary. After all, what is the point of an invisible world which in no way manifests itself? But it does. For Kant, the invisible, undetermined, realm of freedom manifests itself in the moral domain. The ‘categorical imperative’—the unconditional, universal law of conscience to love thy neighbor as thyself—reveals the reality of the hidden, noumenal self as free. It thus serves as the “keystone” in the “vault of reason.”⁴²

Kant’s successors looked for the unity of reason elsewhere, seeking to ground reason in itself (Hegel) or in the pre-rational, mystical identity of self and nature (Romanticism). When these more comprehensive gestures tired after 1848, theologians followed the cry of ‘back to Kant.’ Neo-Kantianism departed widely from Kant’s original design, but these changes were less significant for Ritschl and his school than for Troeltsch and those thinkers still devoted to a metaphysical interpretation of historical development. By the time Herrmann began to adapt Ritschl’s ideas, several new challenges were set before theology, perhaps most importantly the decline of confidence in the biblical picture of Jesus and a certain rigidity in the *Weltanschauung* of physics, psychology and other natural-scientific disciplines. In order to escape the sharp edge of this skepticism, Ritschl and Herrmann both set out to separate faith from knowledge,

⁴² Henrich, *Between Kant and Hegel*, 46ff.

Christ from history and freedom from nature. Kant provided the template for their solutions.

Distinguishing between faith and knowledge as an theological strategy had good precedent in Schleiermacher, who placed religion in the sphere of feeling rather than knowledge (Hegel) or morality (Kant). Ritschl and Herrmann turned back to morality, still distinct from conceptual knowledge. From this perspective, the epistemic, historical and ethical questions interlock in very a particular way. If there can be no metaphysical, conceptual knowledge of God (Kant's limit is acknowledged), how can one 'know' God at all? Said Herrmann, "God makes Himself known to us, so that we may recognize Him, through a fact, on the strength of which we are able to believe in Him...No doctrine can bring it about that there shall arise in our hearts the full certainty that God actually exists for us; only a fact can inspire such confidence within us."⁴³ This 'fact' is Jesus and his appearance in history, though not the actual figure of Jesus living in Jerusalem during the first century A.D. 'Jesus' means the living "Inner Personality" communicated by scripture and the community of faith, and 'history' means the historical immediacy of our relationships with others in community. The character of that relation and of Jesus' "personality" is the same: unconditional moral demand. Such an "unconditional" moral claim alone has the authority of a "fact." "Above all," writes Herrmann,

the knowledge that we are bound to unconditional obedience can never die away into sloth...So that when we are faced by something that wants to force itself on us as Power over our entire life, the doubt arises in our minds whether in it we really find something we can be conscientiously willing to obey unconditionally...Therefore, the only God that can reveal Himself to us is the one who shows Himself to us in our moral struggle as the Power to which our souls really are subject. This is what is vouchsafed to us in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.⁴⁴

⁴³Herrmann, *Communion*, 59.

⁴⁴Ibid, 63.

The thought-form displayed here is relatively simple. First, Herrmann consents to Kant's critique of metaphysics and separation of known and unknown. For Ritschl and Herrmann, this was the prerequisite for defending theology from the false God of rationalist metaphysics, as well as escaping the rising tides of scientific determinism. If God evades cognition through concepts, then 'knowledge' must be deferred to another sphere, in this case, morality or ethics, which does a double duty. Not only does it announce the Unconditioned (God), but by linking that awareness to Jesus' preaching of the Kingdom of God, it lifts Christ's significance above the vicissitudes of historical research. The immediacy of moral consciousness translates into anti-historicism. The transcendent manifests itself in moral consciousness, and moral consciousness manifests itself in and provides the meaning of Jesus' 'personality.' The question of the historical Jesus is simply by-passed.

As a student of Herrmann's, Barth inherits directly this pattern of thought, its statement of the problems as well as the solutions. In his earliest writings, he affirms the Kantian division of known and unknown and looks to conscience awakened by the inner experience of Jesus' person and preaching as the locus of theological understanding. The disjunctions of faith and knowledge, Christ and history, ethics and metaphysics are all acknowledged by Barth and survive his break with liberalism. Three factors altered Barth's theology in route to *Romans II*. The first was his continued struggle with the Swiss religious socialists and the problem of social democracy. Here his sense of the righteousness of God as a theological reality deepened beyond its moral expediency found in Herrmann. The second was the support of the German war declaration by his

theology professors, particularly Herrmann. In this, the sense of God's righteousness was darkened into wrath, as judgment against the presumption of religion. The inability of his teachers to separate the inner experience of God from German experience forced Barth to set God over against religion as moral or aesthetic experience, as he had already done with metaphysics. The third factor was the discovery of the several conceptual resources through which he expressed this disjunction, including Plato, Kant, Overbeck, Kierkegaard and Dostoyevsky. Kant and Kierkegaard together provide the substance for his new position.

Kant is the more influential figure, insofar as the question of revelation is determined by a vaguely Kantian description of known and unknown, phenomenal and noumenal. Kierkegaard was not concerned (principally, at any rate) with how God could enter into human consciousness, categorically defined. That is a Kantian question, and it is Barth's fundamental question from *Romans* to the *Church Dogmatics*. At the same time, Barth utterly overturns the character of that distinction by mapping Kierkegaard's 'infinite qualitative distinction' between time and eternity onto the Kantian distinction between known and unknown. What served to establish *human autonomy* for Kant is enlisted for the sake of *divine autonomy* by Barth, since the Kierkegaardian paradox completely reverses the relation of priority between subject and transcendence in Kant. He thereby realigns the epistemic, historical and ethical circles without abandoning them.

In comparison with Herrmann, then, the more pronounced divergences occur in the historical and ethical problems, even if the formal structure is very similar. The line between known and unknown remains; the reality of Christ still transcends history; the relation of ethical immediacy in revelation continues to support the entire edifice. The

key differences we may attribute to the Kierkegaardian paradox. First, the ‘unknown’ is no longer a regulative idea, a blank no-thing, but Reality itself, Eternity, God. The accent no longer falls on the limit of our cognitive abilities defined from within (thus a negative definition of the unknown) but rather on the supremacy, the “infinite qualitative difference,” of God from humanity, Unknown from known—or in a formulation Bonhoeffer wrestles time and again, the ‘incapacity of the finite for the infinite’ (*finitum incapax infiniti*). The hermeneutical paradox arising from this incommensurability between God and creatures is what Barth describes as the “inner dialectic of the subject matter and the recognition of it in the wording of the text” or the “connection of the words to the Word within the word.”⁴⁵ The reality manifest in revelation, and in proper reading of the Bible, is nothing other than the reality of God, which remains ‘wholly other’ from any finite reality. The veil of the finite, the known, the concrete, must be ‘seen through’ by an illumination which cannot arise from within ordinary cognitive functioning.

This is the meaning of those three salient images in *Romans II*, the tangent striking the circle, the impact crater of the bombshell, and the prisoner become watchman.⁴⁶ The circle illustrates the self-enclosure of consciousness and knowledge. Anything which enters the circle becomes its creation and captive, and God touches it only as a tangent, a contact without entry, along a single point. The image of the impact crater adds depth to the structural character of this first image, as it concerns the relation between ‘form’ and ‘content.’ The known is “empty” and “concave,” lacking in content,

⁴⁵ Karl Barth, “Critical and Positive Paradox,” in *The Beginnings of Dialectical Theology*, ed. J. Robinson, (Philadelphia: WJK, 1968), 93-94.

⁴⁶ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1968), 30ff; 29, 36, 65; 38, 41, 43, 156, 267.

like Kant's categories. Yet the reality of revelation leaves a visible, tangible trace in the sphere of the known. The impact crater has its own form of concreteness—just not the concreteness of the reality to which it points. Finally, the image of the prisoner become watchman colors fully the ethical and theological dimensions implicit in the circle/tangent and impact crater. Consciousness closes humanity in upon itself and apart from God, involving us in the illusion of our freedom and autonomy, the illusion that there is no 'outside.' The precondition for freedom is that someone alerts us to our condition, a feat we cannot accomplish on our own. Only then can the prisoner wait for release and the barred door become a way of escape. The paradox, then, is that a prisoner *as a prisoner* becomes free, and this change of state is what Barth means by justification and faith, the subjective and objective sides of the event of revelation. Only God can bring about the recognition of Godself.

Whereas Herrmann found Jesus' meaning in his ethical relevance, his similitude, to the present, the significance of Jesus for Barth lies in his contradiction of the present. Further, where Herrmann sought this experience of Jesus in the conscience of the believer awakened by ethical relations with the community of faith, Barth places it entirely outside the sphere of experience, including all communally shared moral or aesthetic feelings. He refuses any 'point of contact,' and a two-sided predicament emerges from this solution at the poles of knower and known. Given the formally Kantian standpoint of Barth's thinking, the poles of knower and known are naturally bound up with each other. The priority goes to God as both subject and object of revelation. Christ is the tangent, the bombshell, the way of escape, the crossing of eternity at the edge of time: "And out of what abyss arises our knowledge of these last, unknown things, by which everything is

measured, this shattering knowledge of the invisible Judge in whose hands lies our condemnation?” (ibid, 83). It is not, says Barth, “a point among other points,” but rather that “Jesus Christ is the point at which it can be seen that all other points form one line of supreme significance” (ibid, 96).

This dualism, which is really the duality of time and eternity concentrated into Christ, has a parallel in its human perception and acceptance, expressed by the Pauline phrases “in Adam” and “in Christ” (ibid, 165ff.). Barth’s way of treating these two modes of subjectivity conflates the epistemic, historical, and ethical circles, for the obvious reason that there is no mediation of the unknown within the known, of Christ (God) within history, and this makes parsing out the layering of the ‘circles’ difficult. Nonetheless, we may discuss the epistemic in terms of the Adam/Christ typology, the historical in terms of how Christ’s death and resurrection creates this dualistic awareness, and the ethical in terms of the “imperative” conjoined to this “indicative” (ibid, 224). A final component of Barth’s theology in *Romans II*, which stretches across all three circles and is of great importance for understanding Bonhoeffer, is the relation between the Church, history and community. I will discuss each in in turn.

The Substructure of Romans II

The Epistemic Circle: Adam and Christ

In some of the most intensely tangled pages of *Romans II*, Barth treats the nature of theological knowledge in the language of two ‘subjects,’ Adam and Christ (ibid, 167ff, 181ff.). ‘Adam’ represents (more or less) the Kantian subject. He is “transcendental”

and “has no existence on the plane of history and psychological analysis” (ibid, 170). The transcendental subject has no place ‘in’ the world because ‘the world’ is what it constitutes through the operation of its sense-organizing apparatus. This is perhaps the best way to understand Barth’s claim that “the world is our whole existence, as it has been, and is, conditioned by sin... That is to say, there is a world ‘without us’ which has broken loose from the world ‘within us’ and what is in us is mirrored again in what is without us” (ibid, 168). In short, ‘the world’ as we know it is a product of ‘the Fall,’ which occurs “behind” time, and this “invisible operation of the old world is illustrated in observable facts,” just as the transcendental subject is known only indirectly through the appearances it generates (ibid, 172). As subject, Christ is also transcendental, a new subject “from above” or the “invisible and nonhistorical power” of faith, which, as Spirit, “provides faith with content which is not a thing in time... a void and negation” (ibid, 151, 158). Righteousness and sin alike are “timeless and transcendental” (ibid, 171).

If two subjects now occupy the transcendental sphere, how are they related? “Dialectically” or by “negation” or “dissolution” (*Aufhebung*) is Barth’s difficult refrain (ibid, 188). He insists that the two do not stand “side by side” and are “utterly separated” by their “content” (ibid, 176). The “existence” of one is the “non-existence” of the other, and Adam has “no separate, positive existence” (ibid, 165, 171). If the new subject corresponds to a new object, for which Adam has no capacity, which the transcendental subject cannot cognize and create from its own resources, how does this transition occur? With this question we move from the subjective dimension of the Adam/Christ typology to the objective side of Christ’s death and resurrection, and then back to the subjective decision of God in election and justification, the site of ‘ethics’ in *Romans II*.

The Historical Circle: The Paradox of the Cross

Revelation for Barth means the breaking open (the “crisis”) of the circle of knowledge established in self-consciousness. But because the Eternal never becomes the temporal, the Unknown known, this event can only occur through a specific kind of medium. Neither Hegel nor Schleiermacher, Troeltsch nor Herrmann, doubted that revelation was mediated, but rather than suturing together time and eternity, the world and God with feeling or morality or a general category of being, Barth drives them apart, and that division, expressed as the ‘righteousness of God,’ is what comes to light in Christ. Consequently, Barth has to explain how something worldly (Jesus) can reveal what is unworldly (God). The death of Christ upon the cross is the catalyst for the event of revelation, Barth claims, to the extent that we comprehend in it our distance from God: “When we recognize in suffering and brokenness it is God whom we encounter, that we have been cast up against him...” (ibid, 157). It is those “rare but nevertheless possible cases which crop up, where one person dies for another; a mother during childbirth, a man from occupational exhaustion, a doctor or missionary in service, a soldier on the battlefield. Certainly, the death of Jesus as a historically effective event and as the object of such experiences (‘martyrdom’) also belongs to this series of directly communicating self-sacrifices” (ibid 138, 263).

Even so, such events, including the cross, have no theological self-evidence. How is their ‘eternal’ parabolic meaning discovered? Barth presses a contrast between Christ and the self as “unobservable positive x, contrasted with the death of Christ on my behalf which I die with him, is the hinge upon which, and by which, the supreme movement from old to new turns and is effected.” But how is it that the hinge finally turns? By

inference or deduction? “The invisible constitution of this world, if the minus sign be changed into plus, is the constitution of the new world.” How is it that the cross moves us to the negation which is affirmation? How is it that a person sees themselves in Christ so as to see also the righteousness of God?

Barth’s dilemma is apparent. He wants the phenomenon to bear its own meaning—that is the burden of every appeal to immediacy. Yet he cannot allow any direct identification of the content (*Sache*) with the medium in its historical appearance. If he cannot appeal to an immediate identification of the medium with the reality it signifies, nor to a prior grasp of the content which is then correlated to the medium—the *Kulturprotestant* strategies of ‘metaphysics’ and ‘inwardness’—then all that remains is a subjective principle of recognition foreign to the human subject. Enter the Holy Spirit. With this recourse to an extra-subjective non-objective principle, Barth has sealed fast the three circles and the problem of mediation into a closed circle of a different sort:

The Holy Spirit is the operation of God in faith, the creative and redemptive power of the Kingdom of Heaven, which is nigh at hand...He provides faith with content which is not a thing in time; if it were a thing, it be nothing but a void and a negation...He is invisible, outside the continuity of the visible human subject and beyond all psychological analysis...He is the subject of faith (ibid, 158).

The relating of a “new subject” to a “new object” thus occurs by an act conditioning our consciousness which coincides with but is not of itself our act of consciousness. Apart from this, neither the subject nor the object are real. Their reality, which is the reality of revelation, “exists” only in the act of faith, which is an act of the Holy Spirit.

This, roughly speaking, is what critics described as Barth’s “actualism,” sometimes phrased as “decisionism.” “Actualism” covers a wider sweep of conceptual connections and problems, including divine as well as human being, and the kind of

knowing that ‘corresponds’ to that being. “Decisionism” by contrast points narrowly to the epistemic paradox that the human act (decision) of faith seems to create its own objects—that it ‘chooses’ for a reality to which it has no access prior to that leap of faith. For Barth, so far from confusing God and humanity, actualism secures divine sovereignty in revelation, a fact which brings us to the final structural element of his early theology: election and ethics. The event of revelation occurs because God elects to reveal Godself, to constitute ‘new subjects.’ “Grace is the power of obedience; it is theory and practice, conception and birth; it is the indicative which carries with it a categorical imperative” (ibid, 207).

The Ethical Circle: Election

This link between “indicative” and “imperative” solidifies Barth’s interpretation of the basic pattern inherited from Herrmann and relies upon the personalist nature of revelation: that God is not an object but a person, that revelation is not “fact” but commandment. The true commandment, “Love the Lord Thy God,” is a demand for repentance and a negation, since it asks what is impossible for humanity—“Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” As the primary ethical act, it is “intellectual” and “formal” only, thus “invisible.” It is the “negative possibility” of worship. From this, and from it alone, flows the “positive possibility” and second commandment, “Love Thy Neighbor.” The meaning of this charity also lies in its “form” rather than its “content,” in the fact of ‘giving over’ and ‘giving away’ which echoes the primary act of repentance (ibid, 459). Ethics as command (Love!) coincides with the act of election and the gift of

faith so as to give the event its real content. In the suffering of Jesus, one hears by faith the whole of the law, is set under judgment and freed.

Herrmann circumvented the historical problem by collapsing the historical circle into the epistemic and ethical ones, letting moral awareness provide the criterion for Jesus' significance (ethics overcomes history) and the content of the divine (ethics overcomes metaphysics). Barth replaces the human subjective pole of moral awareness with the divine subjective pole of the Holy Spirit. Ethics as the 'great negation' gives the meaning of the cross (it overcomes history) and the free, hidden word of God (it overcomes metaphysics). Herrmann's method assumes intersection, God within humanity as conscience; Barth's assumes disjunction, consciousness as prison to humanity and a fortress against God. Structurally, the combination of Kant and Kierkegaard could scarcely have led to another conclusion.

It is this particular combination that breeds the difficulties besetting *Romans II*, above all the charge that Barth had shortchanged the incarnation.⁴⁷ By way of summary, I want to detail briefly how this accusation might arise and also how it might lead to a position like Bonhoeffer's. Recall Bonhoeffer's (1927) critique: "the 'dialectic' of dialectical theology is formal rather than real and risks neglecting the historicity of Jesus" (IX, 441). We have seen that Barth's structuring of the 'dialectic of veiling and unveiling,' according to the tropes of circle/tangent, impact crater, and prison, depend upon the *activity* and *emptiness* of consciousness as theorized by Kant. In doing so, Barth also accepts Kant's formalism, i.e., the denial of substantial reality to the world and the affirmation of its 'as if' character. The result, contrary to those senses of mediation

⁴⁷ Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (Louisville: WJK, 1960), p. 43.

from which German liberalism set out, is a rather complete denial of mediation: cognitively, ontologically, socially. God is unknown. God does not enter ‘the world.’ All ‘social-religious’ claims to the Kingdom are void.

Lest we side too quickly with Bonhoeffer’s gripe that this dialectic is “formal rather than real,” what keeps Barth from sliding into theological skepticism is the Kierkegaardian supplement to his Kantian ground-clearing, an ‘existential’ presupposition (*Ansatz*) of the “superior being” of God, whose being is in act. This vital presupposition affords Barth the theological realism distinguishing him from both forms of liberal mediation—the cumulative effect of the reversal of priority between thought and reality wrought by his use of Kierkegaard. Nonetheless, Barth eventually admits that he emphasized God’s transcendence at the expense of the incarnation. To style the dialectic of veiling and unveiling in terms of the dialectic of time and eternity—to impose Kierkegaard’s existential distinction on top of Kant’s epistemic one—could only have yielded this result, since ‘existence’ really belongs only to God. The ‘as if’ character of the ‘world’ or ‘objects’ in Kant is converted into a virtual denial of the world’s reality: “All that stands between beginning and end is excluded for us.”⁴⁸ When consciousness is conceived as pure act, being is reduced to ‘being for’ such a consciousness. Actualism in this sense leads to formalism, and the problem is only compounded when a divine actualism is mapped over it through a revised doctrine of election. As Bonhoeffer will later argue, act seems to require the complement of being.

The Being of Christ: From Individual to Gemeinschaft.

⁴⁸ Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, p. 314.

Finally, we should note the extent to which Barth's portrayal of the problem amounts to a kind of thoroughgoing individualism. The act he begins with is the act of the transcendental self in its loneliness. The 'methodological' forsaking of mediation forces an exclusion of 'history,' of 'world,' of 'pen- and ante-ultimate,' of 'religion,' even, perhaps, of 'church' and 'sacrament.' The eschatological dualism of Adam and Christ translates into a similar ecclesiological dualism, the 'church of Esau' and the 'church of Jacob,' the church in time and the true church in eternity, between which there is only disjunction (ibid, 340ff.). The visible church is identified with "Israel," "law" and "religion," with human attempts to fabricate God. Here too, there is a "dissolution" (*Aufhebung*) of sorts, a passage from above: "The Church is the fellowship of MEN who proclaim the Word of God and hear it...for the Church is condemned by that which establishes it, and is broken to pieces upon its foundation" (ibid, 341). Its movement is analogous to the movement of 'repentance' and 'worship,' and insofar as it fulfills this vocation, it echoes to the world the awakening which Christ first thrusts upon the church. By the same movement of judgment which divides the individual, the church is not only divided into hidden and visible communions, but its visible communion is shattered, "broken into pieces upon its foundation."

In the later chapters of *Romans*, Barth's protests against the political totality, the Romantic whole, are constant and pungent. In an exemplary passage, he writes

It must be Fellowship (*Gemeinschaft*) which is encountered in the community (*Gemeinde*): but this means an encountering of the OTHER in the full existentiality of his OTHERNESS. In the neighbor it must be the ONE who is disclosed. Thus understood, Fellowship is not an aggregate of individuals, nor is it an organism. In fact, Fellowship is no concrete thing at all...Fellowship is the ONE which lies behind every 'other... Fellowship is *communio*—*sanctorum*! There is no other *communio*; and there are no other *sancti*. (ibid, 443).

Barth's attack on the church, its 'tribulation,' becomes an attack on all visible forms of community in that they implicitly or explicitly claim for themselves a false legitimacy, a righteousness of their own. Only in Christ is there real community. "As Fellowship, the community is constituted by Christ, the One, the INDIVIDUAL" (*Das Individuum, der Eine, Christus konstituiert die Gemeinde als Gemeinschaft*) (ibid, 444). The dualism of time and eternity forces this community into non-existence, or into a true existence leaving over no earthly remainder. The absence of any real mediation, which is the consequence of the actualistic-formalistic strategy, reduces the neighbor to a cipher for a divine immediacy, ethics to an 'intellectual' act ("repentance") rather than a concrete commandment, and seems to eliminate any traditional sense of sacrament ('real presence').

All of this results from the broadly Kantian account of the subject-object dichotomy which frames the dialectic of veiling and veiling. By drawing on the category of "sociality" and existential phenomenology rather than neo-Kantianism, Bonhoeffer aims at a real mediation of revelation in the category of the church and a concrete ethics focused in the sacrament, sanctification in addition to justification and election. In a revision of Hegel's phrase, he identifies the church—the concrete, living *sanctorum communio*—and revelation with "Jesus Christ existing as community." Barth's dualism of two subjects (Adam and Christ) and two churches (Esau and Jacob) is partially overcome in this way. For Bonhoeffer, in the *Gemeinde* the *Gemeinschaft* becomes concrete and visible and real. Christ, the 'Individual,' does not merely 'constitute' the community but *exists* as the community. At the intersection of Barth's formalism and individualism, Bonhoeffer began to seize upon an alternative. The eschatological or

eternal location of the new subject, of Christ, of the church and of ethical commandment leaves the world untouched. Barth has removed religion but given no concrete direction to the church lost in the world. Bonhoeffer aims to supply it.

CHAPTER II

BEYOND BARTH AND BERLIN: REVELATION AND THE ‘VOLUNTARY-FORM’ OF SPIRIT.

Barth intended a complete and final divorce of Christ from culture. Bonhoeffer accepted the break but not its terms, fearing that the world vacated by Barth’s God was the bourgeois German world. Not only were Luther’s children left out in the cold, but the incarnation itself seemed void. If Barth hammered at the mandarin house from the outside, Bonhoeffer did not wish it to come down on his own head. The cultural border between the Swiss teacher and his German pupil tracks with other significant distinctions, especially that between Reformed and Lutheran sensibilities. It will become clear that Bonhoeffer’s ‘Lutheran’ arguments, much like Barth’s appeals to Calvin, are means of organizing deeper theological decisions and political motivations. I will turn to those theological decisions in a moment, but a further word on political motivation is first in order. The integrity of politics and theory in the German university at this time has already been discussed. Bonhoeffer’s mandarin outlook never faded entirely, and he later relied on his family’s *Bürgerlich* credentials as a defense against accusations of “subverting the people (*Volk*).”¹

Like many in the modernist mandarin minority, his parents were ambivalent about the War, as well as the Republic and its general disorder. His father supported Stresemann and Brüning but tolerated the SDP affiliation of Karl-Friedrich, the eldest

¹ Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906-1945: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance*, (NY: T&T Clark, 2010), p.2.

son. The second eldest, Walter, likewise flirted with socialism but settled into the more moderate German Democratic Party (DDP). If, in Dietrich's words, the war had created "four spiritual generations" within Germany, the revolutionary fervor seemed to cool with each subsequent generation, at least in their family, whose relation to both Kaiser and Republic remained tenuous (X, 361). The Bonhoeffers mourned the defeat of Germany and were outraged at the stipulations of the Treaty of Versailles, yet none "shed a tear" for the banished Wilhelm II.² Dietrich wrote to his parents that "I hardly believe one can accept [the terms of peace] in their present form" (IX, 29). Certainly, his participation in the Youth Movement, with its militarism and nationalism, may have dampened sympathies for the Republic.³ On the other hand, he vented indignation at the assassination of Rathenau, and the "right-wing Bolshevik scoundrels" among his peers (IX, 49). The radicalism of the Youth Movement and his fraternity eventually forced Bonhoeffer to sever ties with both.

Maturing under a variety of social and personal pressures made for his unique personality, too liberal for Kaiser or radical right and too conservative for Social Democracy, nationalist enough for the *Reichswehr* but not for the Youth Movement. As the youngest son, he proved too obedient to defy his father's politics but fiercely independent enough to pursue a career that perplexed the patriarch and annoyed his brothers. Where his father and brothers inclined to science, he was a lover of literature and music, and the impress of *Bildung* is evident early on. Even in the brief span between his last years in the Gymnasium (1922) and the dissertation at Berlin (1927), that

² Schlingensiepen, 14.

³ "According to the Treaty of Versailles, Germany only had the right to an army of a hundred thousand, which was not sufficiently equipped to deal with civil war. Thus even democratically minded groups were in favour of such training for students...Bonhoeffer was as conservative and nationalist as the great majority of his fellow students." Schlingensiepen, 20.

spiritual pattern undergoes three decisive transitions. The first concerns the philosophical idiom of *Bildung*, as he turns from a more ‘subjective’ or Romantic to an ‘objective’ and Idealist disposition. Despite revising his epistemological framework, Bonhoeffer’s mandarin aesthetic continued to inform his political and theological perception in vital ways. From this emerges a second significant transition, in which aesthetics provides the generative context for his “discovery” of the church (Bethge). Without these two prior changes, it would be difficult to imagine the third, a transition from liberal to dialectical theology under the influence of Karl Barth. After tracing these three broad tendencies in Bonhoeffer’s early formation (I), I will turn to his criticism of Barth (II) and finally to the rudiments of his distinctive position as it emerges in student essays, sermon and correspondence (III).

I. Three Trends in Bonhoeffer’s Early Development

As the preceding analysis of the German paradigm highlights, there were at least two acceptable idioms for the values concentrated into *Bildung*, one Romantic, the other Idealist, and both laden with heavy political and social bearings. Despite their massive intellectual differences, Schleiermacher and Hegel were but variations on a cultural theme. While Kant’s philosophy returned to favor after 1848, Neo-Kantianism was thoroughly suffused with Romantic and Idealist elements and operated in a climate charged with the political and aesthetic aims of the prerevolutionary period, however disappointed and chastened. By the 1920s, many academics looked back on the

resurgence of Kantianism as a shallow accommodation to the scientific, industrial impulse pervading the last decades of the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, transcendental Idealism offered an alternative expression for mandarin identity well into Weimar's adulthood. The first transition in Bonhoeffer's thinking amounts to a movement from Romantic to Idealist philosophy, from subjective to objective emphases. Given Barth's consistent commitment to a broadly Kantian framework, we can see how this prepares the way for his appreciation of dialectical theology.

'Great Sentiments Alone Remain Eternal': From Romantic Subjectivism to Idealist Objectivity.

His attraction to Kant seems to have a single impetus in coursework at Tübingen during 1923, where Bonhoeffer studied with Karl Heim and took a seminar on Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* with Karl Groos. A different emphasis appears in his 1918 matriculation essay, which reflects a popular opposition between two types of personalities, implicitly associated with Romantic and Idealist, subjective and objective, educated and lower middle class. Here the Romantic and subjective are prized; when he enrolls at Berlin, Kant and objectivity have moved to the forefront. It is tempting, given the rather abrupt change in disposition and its dating (1922/3), to identify Bonhoeffer's first transition with the "New Objectivity" (*Neue Sachlichkeit*) arising around the time of 'relative stabilization,' but this seems unlikely for at least two reasons. First, the positions of Heim and Groos—the evident influences on Bonhoeffer—were quite distant from the innovations of the *Bauhaus*, Paul Klee, or the German theatre. Second, if the New Objectivity was principally an artistic movement, Bonhoeffer's aesthetic sensibility

remained characteristically Romantic, as we will see in a moment.⁴ A comparison of the matriculation essay with correspondence from his Tübingen years illustrates the shift.

The matriculation essay (dated January 1923) on the Latin poetry of Horace and Catullus begins with a methodological assertion: “Even if we valiantly attempt to be objective, in truth we can only offer subjective opinions” (IX, 198). Catullus possesses this subjective orientation, Horace its opposite, and Bonhoeffer quickly sides with the former. In true mandarin fashion, epistemological dispositions are imbued with class values. The “unemotional” and “contemplative” Horace was raised the son of a freedman, who by economic success managed to send one child to the better Roman schools. Catullus, who “oscillates from one extreme to the other,” was born into a privileged family and highly educated from birth (IX, 199). Bonhoeffer does seem to appreciate Horace’s sense of humor but places the two at the extremes of a continuum, marking two “completely different types of souls” from which everything in their poetry follows. “One is revolutionary; the other is conservative,” and they “respond to the world” in utterly different ways (IX, 200). Bonhoeffer sides with the revolutionary and emotional over the conservative and contemplative.

In comparing their poetic styles, he may as well have written an essay on Kant and Schleiermacher. Horace “assumes a vantage point that is external to the space” and permits the “domination of the Ego” (IX, 201). Catullus poetically conceives in the “midst of a vital point of life that is suddenly illuminated,” limiting himself to a part and “absorbing it fully and creatively” through an “inner melding” of the poet and the subject matter (IX, 201). Like Kant’s transcendental ‘I,’ Horace stands outside the world and

⁴ Even so, we need not deny the possibility of ‘homologies’ (Bourdieu) between these transitions, reflecting the wider cultural mood. On the New Objectivity, see Gay, *Weimar Culture: The Insider as Outsider*, (NY: W.W. Norton, 1968) and Ebehard Kolb, *The Weimar Republic*, (NY: Routledge, 2005).

constitutes it as an object by “selecting, sorting and comparing” in a “reflective method” (ibid). In a dramatic description of the ‘thing in itself,’ Bonhoeffer complains that Horace “relegates experience to the backdrop of a stage” and hides that which “gives rise” to the work (IX, 202). For him, nothing comes from the “moment of life” which remains a “concealed backdrop,” colored with clear thoughts but lacking temperament, emotion and “sentimentality” (ibid).

The organic analogy is expressed powerfully in the account of Catullus. In contrast to the “broad and shallow” lyric of Horace, which Bonhoeffer likens to painting, Catullus exemplifies the “depth” and “assimilation” to reality consistent with sculpture or the “simplicity” (*Einfachheit*) of an “emotional method” for which aesthetic experience is “mirrored in the soul,” so that “the poem is a necessary immediate sequel to the experience” (IX, 203). His passion “approaches madness,” and the “disintegration of his entire inner life” follows the “separation after union.”⁵ Romantic organicism bleeds through in effusive flourishes as the essay wears on, piling praise on Catullus’ attention to irony, friendship, travel and, most importantly, nature. “Nature is personified” (IX, 206). Individuality shows through, “but the ‘I’ never does,” for nature is the actor, and the ego “dissolves into nature and becomes one with it” (ibid). Organicity, naturalness, simplicity, unity, feeling, immediacy and depth are all quintessentially Romantic tropes, in distinction from Idealism.

The political edge of these aesthetic values also peers through Bonhoeffer’s evaluation. Horace’s “pathetic fantasies” of a “poetic crown” are judged “French like,” and linked to his ordering of subject matter prior to its composition (IX, 212). With

⁵ “All people can restrain their passion and shut themselves off from it, but to struggle through all that is beautiful and terrifying and not be afraid takes an enormous amount of emotional power. At the end of this struggle Catullus has mastered it and was victorious...He was not crushed by his passion.” IX, 206.

Catullus, the “order arises organically” in the process of composition. Horace longs for Rome’s lost power and importance and for the education of the people. Catullus “writes because he must,” for friends rather than posterity, forgetting “themes of the state” and the education of the people—he “lived for himself and was then destroyed” (IX, 213). Writing after the defeat of the Reich and under a government of foreign design, the air of mandarin despair and nostalgia could not be more transparent. Bonhoeffer’s concluding analysis is exemplary: “On a purely emotional level, I find contemplative poetry like Horace’s to be an absurdity and an attempt at cultivating later culture. Reflections have never conquered the world, but emotions have. The most impressive thoughts fade away, but great emotions remain eternal” (IX, 214). The truth of that statement perhaps became visible only in 1933.

In the meantime, philosophy came to the center of his attention. A seminar on Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* with Groos (winter 1923) seems to have withered the rhetoric of subjectivism, and in a note taken on Schleiermacher’s *Speeches* around the same time, emotion already recedes in the interest of ‘truth,’ although even here truth concerns “individual determination” and not merely the existence of universally valid judgments (IX, 215). Between the summer of 1923 and April 1924, Bonhoeffer studied in Tübingen, taking courses from other prominent figures there such as Adolf Schlatter. From this point forward, the Romantic aesthetic of the matriculation essay is wedded to an interest in objectivity, the character of which I will explore more completely under his transition from liberal to dialectical theology. For the moment, we may observe that after a year of college, he has taken up with Horace.

'Immersed in Antiquity': Bourgeois Aesthetics and the Discovery of the Church.

During the second semester at Tübingen, amid tremendous political turmoil, Bonhoeffer planned a trip to Rome and departed on April 3. In a comment foreshadowing the future direction of his theology, his Rome diary notes, "I think I'm beginning to understand the concept of 'church'" (IX, 89). The light of that discovery was hardly the philosophy of Kant or Heim, but rather the mandarin aesthetic already pronounced in his youth. "Antiquity is not completely dead" (IX, 84). Nor, he mused, were its gods. The air of Romantic melancholy is sometimes amusing: "I spent an hour sitting on an overturned pillar...[and was] transplanted into the classical world" (IX, 87). Bonhoeffer consistently expresses a range of aesthetic values, including "naturalness," the "absence of reconstruction," "uniformity" and "wholeness," which are ideally fulfilled by Rome itself, "the Rome of antiquity, the Rome of the Middle Ages, and equally the Rome of the present...the fulcrum of European culture and European life" (IX, 99-100). And "Rome as a whole" is "epitomized" in St. Peter's (ibid). The church crystallizes Romantic vision.

Bonhoeffer's perception of 'the church' was surely colored by a pallet of values common among educated Germans. A cross reference of his response to various pieces of art and architecture (the context of his 'discovery' of the church) with Baedeker's tour guide would help to draw these connections more fully, but that is a needlessly intensive task.⁶ At any rate, the form of the church in its universality was not the only attraction for Bonhoeffer. Of the St. Maria Maggiore he writes, "I will probably come to this

⁶ Karl Baedeker, *Southern Italy and Sicily, with excursions to Sardinia, Malta, and Cordu: a Handbook for Travelers*, (New York: Scribners, 1912).

church more often to observe the life of the church rather than to look at it from an artistic standpoint, even though it is among the most beautiful churches” (IX, 90). The “life” he has in mind here centers around confession as the “concretization of the idea of the church” and “a way for primitive people to talk about God” (IX, 89). Similarly, his debate with a local priest concerns the issue of sacrifice in the mass. He objects to the “symbolization” and “spiritualization”—and thus “falsification”—of those ‘objective’ theological facts incomprehensible to modern humanity (IX, 91).⁷ Protestantism, he claims, at least has the advantage of “letting the symbols fall away.” Presumably, Bonhoeffer is talking about what is at stake in both confession and mass, the mystery of guilt and justification. In this way, “Catholic dogma veils every ideal thing in Catholicism, without knowing what it is doing. There is a huge difference between confession and dogmatic teachings about confession—unfortunately also between ‘church’ and the ‘church’ in dogmatics” (IX, 93).

This judgment follows his rebuke of the priest for falling into the “vicious circle” of Catholic reasoning that “confuses logical and faith-based knowledge” (ibid). Kant provides his sure defense, and he confidently rejects the appeal to teleology as a theological proof. So in the end Kantian objectivity does have its part to play in Bonhoeffer’s discovery of the church, but only in the sense that it prohibits a total embrace of Catholicism. Specifically, it drives him towards a sense of immediacy, reality and authenticity. He frowns upon what he perceives to be the rehearsed, ritualized shell of Catholicism, as well as the bureaucratic deadlock of the Protestant state churches (*Landeskirchen*). His attitude toward theological matters is reflected in his aesthetic

⁷ Is this a foreshadowing of the negative gesture behind his ‘non-religious interpretation of biblical concepts’?

sensibilities. The groundless assertions of art historians are judged as unnecessary and misguided: “When one doesn’t have to interpret, one should just leave it alone...One either intuitively [*intuitiv*] sees the right thing or one doesn’t” (IX, 103). This either/or provides a further touchstone for his reception of Barth.

“Acceptably Reactionary”: From Liberal to Dialectical Theology

Tübingen and Rome left a permanent stamp on Bonhoeffer, the first tempering his Romanticism with philosophical objectivity, the second illuminating the church. However significant these developments are in retrospect, they pale in comparison to his first year at Berlin, beginning in the summer of 1924. Bonhoeffer now found himself at home again, but without a decisive intellectual orientation. His preference for systematic theology had been somewhat disappointed at Tübingen, and in Berlin he looked forward to a combination of systematic and historical thinking in von Harnack, Holl and Seeberg. During the summer semester he took courses with von Harnack (History of Dogma) and Holl (Church History, Protestant Confessions), but aside from a dogmatics course with Titius, Bonhoeffer did not study theology in earnest until the summer of 1925. In what we may judge to be his most significant semester, he took two courses with Holl, two with Seeberg, and one with von Harnack. At the same time, he had become acquainted with the theology of Karl Barth, whose impression was to remain deep and long-lasting. In that case, we must speak of a transition from liberal to dialectical theology with some reserve, since his attraction to Barth preceded any thoroughgoing methodological or dogmatic commitments. Marking that transition is complicated by the fact that we have only one essay from before his summer 1925 turn to Barth, written for Harnack’s seminar

on the topic of “The Jewish Element in First Clement.” Even then Bonhoeffer possessed notes on Barth from a friend in Göttingen and had read the commentary on Romans (1922) and some recent essays (*The Word of God and Theology*, 1924) during a bout of influenza over the winter months. What can we infer about his theological commitments prior to the summer semester of 1925?

Very little is to be gathered from his time at Tübingen, although two basic attitudes come across with some consistency, and a third is at least in evidence. These spell out further that initial transition to ‘objectivity’ and the shape of his early liberalism. First, he regards the distinction of faith and knowledge as appropriately Protestant, while, secondly, insisting on objectivity and the primacy of historical objectivity in particular. Finally, he expresses a few opinions regarding the church, that the Protestant church should have remained a “large sect,” and that Catholicism falsifies the reality of the church through its mediations. Taken together and within the general ideological frame of mandarin identity, there is a vague coherence to these thoughts, sharpened in Berlin.

The differentiation of faith and knowledge is the governing perspective, underwritten by a broadly Kantian epistemology. An exchange with his student colleague, Wilhelm Dreier, hints at the flavor of Bonhoeffer’s theological position. He apparently regarded faith as “only something that is nonexistent, purely negative” and thought “that the self-revelation of God is out of the question” (IX, 132).⁸ There is no way of determining exactly what Bonhoeffer was rejecting in the concept of self-revelation, but he is, in any case, standing his Kantian ground. What is significant from the standpoint of Bonhoeffer’s mature theology is the scheme which foregrounds the

⁸ Dreier questions this assumption but concedes. He also discusses Tillich and Dostoyevsky on the ‘problem of being an Ich.’

productive power of consciousness and connects it “with its opposite, injustice, or grace with sin” (IX, 134). He will offer a phenomenological interpretation of that problem later under the categories of ‘sociality,’ ‘act’ and ‘being’ and in concert with the central concept of self-revelation. Here, however, that concept is denied and the categorical scheme transfigured into a theory of religion as a “universal value” that prioritizes the “logical sphere” (over will or feeling, for example) (ibid). God seems to be confused with the categorical scheme itself, and Dreier can even ask whether God’s existence is really necessary in Bonhoeffer’s solution.

It would be interesting to trace these attitudes back to Bonhoeffer’s professors, to Groos, Maier or Heim, but by 1925 his liberal ideas have come decisively under the influence of Karl Barth.⁹ Given the absence of essays from Tübingen or his other courses in 1924, the essay for von Harnack can at best signal for us another set of theological orientations and not a clue as to his total framework. Bonhoeffer certainly seems to be working within von Harnack’s own systematic and historical presuppositions, however.

As Bethge reports, Bonhoeffer experienced in his first reading of Barth a “liberation” from the liberal theology of his professors.¹⁰ In what did that liberation consist, and what path did this exodus take over the next few years? First, Bonhoeffer’s theology reflects a wholesale reorientation towards the theological categories of the ‘Word of God’ and divine self-revelation, as Barth developed them between 1922 and 1925. The essay on the spiritual reading of scripture from his summer 1925 seminar with Seeberg offers a striking example. At the same time, Bonhoeffer was quick to register a

⁹ Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 73ff. For a more sustained review of Bonhoeffer’s relation to Barth, see Andreas Pangritz, *Karl Barth in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

¹⁰ Bethge, 74.

fundamental criticism of Barth's emerging dogmatic position, evident in the Göttingen lectures, which to the Lutheran theologian's mind signaled a "relapse into servitude" (IX, 154). Similar language appears years later in the famous accusation that Barth had sunk into a "positivism of revelation," rather than completing the revolution he inaugurated. Was this diagnosis present, perhaps only in the bud, from the beginning? Although the road is far from straight, the basic terms of Bonhoeffer's relation to Barth's theology are laid down in the earliest reception and guide him through both dissertations to Finkenwalde and Tegel. In both the prison writings and in his dissertations we find a similar halo of critical terminology associated with the indictment of 'positivism' (e.g., 'formalism' or 'psychologism'). Clarifying this contentious issue will go a long way towards revealing the unity of the dissertations and their argumentative structure.

II. Bonhoeffer's Critique of Barth

Bonhoeffer clearly positioned himself alongside Barth while attempting to salvage something of the Berlin spirit, but his initial reaction to Barth was not instant and unflinching devotion. After his summer 1925 encounter with Barth, Bonhoeffer mounted a sharp criticism that echoed throughout the rest of his writings and personal dealings with the Swiss theologian. Two factors complicate any attempt to decipher the meaning of this critique. First, we have few direct references to Barth in Bonhoeffer's writings prior to the 1927 dissertation and licentiate theses, even though Barth's influence is apparent on nearly every page after 1925. One might be inclined then to simply forgo

speculative reconstruction of this early work and begin with the dissertations. I have already suggested the risks in this approach and hope to show that the student writings can contribute decisively to an historical understanding of Bonhoeffer's theology. Assuming that this is the case, one might go directly to the textual sources where Bonhoeffer's critique of Barth *is* clear and work back from there. Here we face a second and considerable obstacle, for such references are few before (and after) 1930. It is no exaggeration to say that Bonhoeffer's criticism of Barth, if not his relation to Barth quite generally, remains clouded by longstanding disagreement over that ominous phrase, 'positivism of revelation,' coined just before his death in 1944.

If Bonhoeffer is renovating the Barthian 'thought-space,' we must grasp the demolitions as well as the additions, and the history of attempts to cope with the interpretive problems indicates that no plain blueprint is in our possession. We proceed in a rough and indirect fashion. The correspondence with Richard Widmann from 1926 offers the best insight into Bonhoeffer's mindset at the time. After teasing out his position from Widmann's responses (only the responses survive), I will turn to the 1944 letters as a foil for his early critique. This will lead directly to the student essays, which begin to revise Barth's thought-form.

Correspondence With Richard Widmann

During his years at Berlin, Bonhoeffer struck up a number of revealing conversations in letters to friends, and he discusses Barth at some length in a few of them, after his cousin, Christoph von Hase, spoke electrically of the lecture cycle in Göttingen

(1924-25). His exchange with Richard Widmann is especially interesting and concerns both Barth and the eventual content of Bonhoeffer's dissertation. Three features of these letters, dated to Spring (February, March, April) 1926, deserve mention: the mutual criticism of Barth's 'dogmatic' method, Bonhoeffer's denial of any "sociological prerequisites" for faith (as Widmann puts it), and a rather technical dispute over the identity and subjectivity of Christ, Church and Ego (*Ich*).

Widmann and Bonhoeffer met at Berlin in the summer of 1925, shortly after von Hase had delivered transcriptions of Barth's Göttingen lectures, which marked a new phase in Barth's theological development. The principle innovation in these lectures is the shift to an 'anhypostatic-enhypostatic' Christology, concentrating the 'dialectic of time and eternity' into the person of Christ, so that "the time-eternity dialectic could now gradually be dispensed with at no loss of the critical distance between God and human which that dialectic had once secured."¹¹ This, in Barth's view, provided for the incarnation where the dualism of the Romans commentary seemed to prohibit it. Accompanying this new focus in substance is also a new method, the kernel of both culled from the handbooks of Heppe and Schmid. In a January 1924 letter to Brunner, Barth had considered several possible approaches to his first lectures in theology, preferring a mixture of commentary on the confessions with a "prophetic" trailblazing in the manner of Calvin.¹² Such a method was to be both "churchly" and "scientific," occurring in the "highly concrete situation" of preaching. With this turn to confession and preaching, he developed his doctrine of the threefold word for the first time, exclaiming later that "here I found myself visibly in the realm of the Church." It is this

¹¹ McCormack, 328ff.

¹² Ibid, 334ff.

meta-doctrinal (but still ‘dogmatic’) employment of the church as a rigid confessional standard to which Bonhoeffer so vehemently objects and seeks an alternative.

The letters make it abundantly clear that neither party cares for Barth’s dogmatic turn. Widmann acknowledges that “things are said better and more clearly here,” that the dogmatics is “more objective” and lacks the “sensationalism and journalism” of *Romans II* (IX, 154). He even approves of Barth’s desire to “make connections with the past,” whereas Bonhoeffer, according to Widmann, protested “the slavery that Barth has fallen into in this *Dogmatics*—that he anxiously guards himself, walking in the footsteps of the old dogmaticians.”¹³ *Romans II*, Widmann agrees, was “less reactionary” and that connections should be sought with the future as well as the past in order to suspend the “reactionary crutches,” the “depending on the old ones,” that make the *Dogmatics* a “step backward” (ibid). Bonhoeffer, in his own words, ascribed to both a “tactical purpose,” but his sympathies lie clearly with the “formulations” of *Romans II* and its “basic dialectical relationship between time and eternity” (ibid). All of this amounts to a rejection of the dogmatic *method*, whereby the authority of the church secures the hermeneutical circle of revelation.

At another point, however, the interlocutors diverge sharply, and here Bonhoeffer sides with Barth. Widmann complains that Barth’s theology has “certain sociological prerequisites,” that it has “grown up in the soil of the modern world” and is thus “inappropriate” to the ordinary church (IX, 156). As a pastor trained in the university, he

¹³ Translation mine. The DBWE reads: “that [Barth] timidly guards himself against wading in the footsteps of the old dogmaticians” (IX, 154). But the “against” is without grammatical warrant and represents a theological emendation. The German leads in the opposite direction: “daß er sich ängstlich hütet, in den Fußstapfen der alten Dogmatiker zu wandeln” (G IX, 160). Barth “guards himself” precisely by “walking in the footsteps of the old dogmaticians.” The other references in the letters to “reactionary crutches” and “dependence on the old ones” reinforce the point.

feels the impossibility of speaking to the church-goer: “the sermon is after all a dialogue, but a dialogue between an intellectual and a middle class person or farmer is impossible” (ibid). Bonhoeffer counters that “ultimately” what Widmann describes as “historical and psychological factors” are irrelevant to the “decision” of faith. Admitting that he has perhaps “drawn nondialectical consequences” from Barth’s work, Widmann still presses repeatedly a single point, that “penultimate and anteultimate things do make a difference,” that “in the end” they can “cause a vocational existence to fall apart” (158). “At some point,” he asks, “can the sociological dialectic become so critical that even the theological dialectic cannot be any assistance?...For once, take the church as a sociological reality seriously and draw the consequences from it” (ibid). Bonhoeffer of course thought he was doing just that, and it is striking how much Widmann sounds like Bonhoeffer’s dissertation or even the prison letters, which demand a “nonreligious” Christianity for the “religionless worker” to whom Barth’s theology “has nothing to say.”

Even more surprising is Widmann’s suggested answer to a “second problem” pertaining to the church as a “homogeneous subject” (the phrase is Bonhoeffer’s) in *Romans II* and Barth’s second lecture cycle in Göttingen (IX, 159). Given the general tone of these passages, it is difficult to tell where Widmann is summarizing Barth or possibly even Bonhoeffer and where he is criticizing them and making original claims. It seems that both are reworking Barth’s remarks on the *sanctorum communio* (cited above) in *Romans II*, insofar as it concerns the unity or identity of Christ with the Church and the individual ego (*Ich*).¹⁴ A second interest is the relation of the visible and invisible churches, with reference to “*Dogmatics II*,” although which passages remains unclear.

¹⁴ See above, 52, and Barth, *Romans*, 442ff.

Finally, Widmann deals with the topic of ethics and how the call of Christ in the neighbor as ‘other’ and ‘Thou’ (*Du*) “holds [one] in obedient service...by one link in the chain.” He also distinguishes between the ‘Thou’ as a “reflexive condition” and the individual as an “immediate condition.” “The ‘You’ is given-over (*Aufgegebene*); individuality is the given (*Gegebene*)”

These letters present a potential difficulty, since Widmann is anticipating many of themes, even the specific phrasing, of Bonhoeffer’s dissertation. Is it possible that he helped chart the course for *Sanctorum Communio*? Nor should we miss the fact that the basic theme of *Act and Being* (Being in Adam/Christ, reflection and immediacy) is already in play here as well. Lastly, Widmann’s three concise paragraphs on these topics treat the three ‘circles’ (epistemology or subjectivity, history or mediation, and ethics) as discrete questions, supporting our thesis of a complex thought-form inherited from Barth and molded to new purposes. Only further examination of the student essays can clarify these matters, but it is noteworthy that Bonhoeffer decided on his dissertation topic the previous Fall, in a November 1925 letter to Seeberg. We know that Bonhoeffer was critical of Barth from the beginning, but in what capacity? An excursus here will clear the ground for a deeper analysis of pre-dissertation work, illuminating his distance from and dependence upon Barth’s conceptions.

Bonhoeffer’s Barthkritik

To understand Bonhoeffer is to understand his relation to Karl Barth, a task complicated by the expansive and subtly shifting vision of the latter, the “impulsivity” of

the former (as Barth later put it), and by the controversial reception of Bonhoeffer's writings. The cloud of that controversy gathered straightway around a single terminological thunderhead, a phrase whose monumental opacity casts its shadow over the interpretation of Bonhoeffer right down to the present: "positivism of revelation" (*Offenbarungspositivismus*). The phrase itself does not appear until 1944, but Regin Prenter, in one of the earliest expositions of the problem, suggested a similar critique was perhaps present from the beginning. Prenter elected to avoid this rabbit hole, and the majority of attempts to deal with the problem have followed suit by remaining within the confines of the letters and a few additional documents.

A recent exception to this trend is Ralf Wustenberg's essay on religionless Christianity. Noting that "religionless Christianity" or the "non-religious interpretation of biblical concepts" is the antidote to Barth's positivism of revelation, he proposes that *Offenbarungspositivismus* concerns not revelation itself but Barth's attitude towards religion: "We see that with the *Church Dogmatics*, the critique of religion issues into a revelatory positive view of religion, instead of, as Bonhoeffer expected, into a non-religious interpretation. Instead of the non-religious interpretation of biblical concepts, Barth offers a revelatory positive interpretation of religion."¹⁵ In other words, rather than maintain the opposition between religion and revelation put forward in *Romans II*, Barth evaluates religion 'positively' in light of revelation, allowing it to be "suspended" (*aufgehoben*) in the event of revelation.¹⁶

¹⁵ Ralf Wustenberg, *A Theology of Life: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Religionless Christianity*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 60ff.

¹⁶ Wustenberg's interpretation seems to depend on a semantic peculiarity, correlating 'positivism' to the negative in 'non-religious,' as if it meant a 'positive' rather than 'negative' rendering of religion. Positivism simply has nothing to do with this sense of 'positive.'

Wustenberg draws this conclusion from the three letters (Apr 30, May 4, June 8 1944) mentioning “religionlessness” and “positivism,” all of which “exhibit the same structure: Bonhoeffer first engages in a critique of religion, acknowledges Barth as having begun the critique, and then criticizes him with the questionable expression [positivism] and deduces for himself the non-religious interpretation.”¹⁷ Now Wustenberg persuasively argues that §17 of *Church Dogmatics* (“God’s Revelation as the Suspension (*Aufhebung*) of Religion”), published in 1938, is the target of criticism, but his larger thesis is unconvincing for three reasons. First, he simply neglects the primacy of revelation for both Barth and Bonhoeffer. Are we really to believe that “positivism of revelation” is not in fact about revelation but rather religion? Second, he ignores contrary evidence in the letters to just this effect. Third, he does not adequately treat the history of the term or its substantive, ‘positivism.’ Working through these objections will sharpen our perspective on both the later and early criticism of Barth.

The most obvious problem with Wustenberg’s thesis is the paradoxical claim that ‘positivism of revelation’ targets Barth’s conception of religion rather than revelation. In a limited sense, he is correct: Bonhoeffer objects to the notion that religion is now given a place within and through revelation. He is wrong that this is primarily a difference of opinion regarding religion, in and of itself, and not a difference regarding revelation insofar as it relates to the reality of religion, to which Barth initially opposed it. As Wustenberg himself acknowledges, “the charge of revelatory positivism is directly associated with the Barthian critique of religion, and cannot be explained substantively from the perspective of the doctrine of revelation in and for itself, but from the

¹⁷ Wustenberg, 60.

revelatory-theological understanding of religion.”¹⁸ Put differently, Bonhoeffer refuses Barth’s reaffirmation of religion from the perspective of revelation and the consequences that a ‘suspension’ of religion has for the relation between God and humanity in revelation, particularly religious individualism. Each of the three letters points in this direction.

As in its mandarin coinage, ‘positivism’ describes an epistemological problem with ethical and social consequences, and Bonhoeffer intends for the term to cut in both directions. Barth’s critical epistemology suspends religion within revelation, but in so doing is “negatively determined” by it, erecting the church in the place of religion, on the “periphery” of the world (VIII, 430-431). We may schematize the options as follows. If religion is *anthropocentric* and *otherworldly*, Barth is *theocentric* but still *otherworldly*.¹⁹ Revelation rightly ‘cancels’ religion but wrongly ‘takes up’ its otherworldly locus. Thus Bonhoeffer’s appreciation for the critical gesture against religion in *Romans II* (“with all its neo-Kantian eggshells”) and his rejection of its ‘suspension’ in CD I/2. In contrast to Barth and liberal theology, the correct path would be both *theocentric* and *worldly*. Yet such a criticism would really hold, if at all, only against CD I/2 and could not be transferred to their first encounter, unless one recalls that the dogmatic method and a parallel conception of Trinity and revelation appeared as early as 1925. The full breadth of Bonhoeffer’s critique becomes evident upon further examination of the phrase *Offenbarungspositivismus* and its context in the letters and papers of 1944-5.

¹⁸ Wustenberg, 67.

¹⁹ Wustenberg corroborates this claim indirectly with his comprehensive interpretation of ‘religion’ in Bonhoeffer’s writings as ‘inward’ and ‘individualistic.’

‘Positivism’ generally connoted both a confusion of ‘givens’ (*positiva*) with products of mental activity and a loss of totality, wholeness and integration. Both meanings are evident in its theological appropriation. Wustenberg simply follows Andreas Pangritz’ claim that the term was coined by Erich Seeberg in his 1929 book on Luther and held currency among the Berlin faculty during the 1920s and 30s. Pangritz assesses that Seeberg “seems to have meant something like this: in ‘positivism of revelation’ the word of God revealed in Jesus Christ is accepted as something positively given...as a truth of faith natural reason cannot analyze or question...in juxtaposition to a ‘natural’ knowledge of God.”²⁰ The Berlin faculty of the 1920s did utilize the phrase, but it predates them considerably, appearing at least as early as 1855 in opposition to the anti-Hegelian, Stahl.²¹ Stahl’s failure lay, predictably enough, in an appeal to immediacy, an original grasp (*Uerrinerung*) of the human essence (*Wesen*) that mistakes the dialectical for the given, the mediated for the immediate. By the 1920s, the specific term *Offenbarungs-positivismus* seems to have been applied almost exclusively against the Ritschlians as a way of describing their rejection of natural theology and any positive relation between reason and revelation.²² Given the disjunction of faith and reason by Ritschl and Hermann, and Barth’s appropriation of the same, the extension of the criticism to Barth might not be surprising, had Bonhoeffer not taken a similar stance. So *Offenbarungspositivismus* must entail something more.

²⁰ Pangritz, 71.

²¹ Stahl was a proponent of Schelling and a political-ecclesiastical conservative, called to Berlin one year before Schelling himself in 1840 to exterminate the Hegelian left. The reference appears in F.H.T. Allihn’s *Die Umkehr der Wissenschaft in Presseu* (Berlin, 1855), p. 153.

²² See, for example, Erich Stange, *Religionwissenschaft der Gegenwart in Selbstdarstellung*, Bd. 2 (1926), p. 55. Two additional instances appear in *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, Bd. 44 (1936), pp. 172, 179, also targeting the rejection of natural theology. Bonhoeffer knew Stange’s work firsthand. Compare *Sanctorum Communio*, pp. 257, 285.

Recall that ‘positivism’ belonged to a small but flexible lexical armory, including vague synonyms such as ‘subjectivism,’ ‘psychologism’ and ‘formalism.’ All describe a faulty view of subject-object relations. Psychologism broadly referred to a conflation of ‘natural’ laws with ‘logical’ ones (which is to say, psycho-logical, insofar as ‘logic’ meant the functional rules of the mind). ‘Formalism’ involved a similar charge that the logical ‘form’ of the mind overran its objects, reducing them to shadows of mental form. This semantic web gives a thin ledge to move between Bonhoeffer’s 1944 allegation of positivism and a parallel claim in his 1927 licentiate theses, that “the dialectic of dialectical theology has a formal rather than real character, and is in danger of neglecting the historicity of Jesus.” Assuming for the moment that ‘real’ and ‘historical’ belong on a semantic plane with ‘worldly,’ a line of sight from which to compare the early and late *Barthkritiks* opens to view.

In his prison writings, Bonhoeffer follows a trope established in *Romans II* by linking “religion” to “circumcision” (VIII, 365ff., 430). For Barth, the pairing invokes that human ‘work’ which governs the visible, known world, at whose “boundary” (*Grenze*) and “periphery” stands God (as a tangent striking a circle, etc.). For Bonhoeffer, the metaphor of circumcision underscores the “otherworldly” character of religion, its attempts to find a place for God “in a world come of age” through the twin strategies of “metaphysics” and “inwardness” (VIII, 362ff). The metaphysical solution imposes itself on science, the sphere of knowledge, so that God is retained as a “stop gap,” a “working hypothesis,” and a “*deus ex machina*” (VIII, 405; 478-9, 500; 366, 450, 479). The solution of inwardness arises in the sphere of morality and feeling, where God answers to the “last things” of human frailty, guilt, and death. Religion fails because the

boundaries of the world are always receding, even to the point that guilt and death no longer represent real limits. Against scrambling for what Schleiermacher called a “mess of metaphysical and ethical crumbs” (we should add, ‘affective’!), Bonhoeffer raises an epistemological and social protest. “Epistemological transcendence has nothing to do with the transcendence of God. God is the beyond in the midst of our lives” (VIII, 367). Similarly, the form of this ‘in the midst’ is the form of the church as “being for others,” the true form of divine “weakness” that is “called out (*ek-klesia*)...without being favored” or ‘set apart’ from the world (VIII, 364).

Barth and Berlin are in his crosshairs here. The May 5 letter asserts that “what is *above* the world is meant *for* the world in the sense of the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Christ,” and from there Bonhoeffer launches his most sustained volley against Barth in the *LPP*.

Barth was the first theologian to begin criticism of religion, and that remains his really great merit; but he put in its place a positivist doctrine of revelation which says, in effect, ‘Like it or lump it’: virgin birth, Trinity, or anything else; each is an equally significant and necessary part of the whole, which must simply be swallowed as a whole or not at all. That isn’t biblical. There are degrees of knowledge and degrees of significance; that means that a secret discipline must be restored whereby the mysteries of the Christian faith are protected against profanation. The positivism of revelation makes it too easy for itself, by setting up, as it does in the last analysis, a law of faith, and so mutilates what is—by Christ’s incarnation!—a gift for us. In the place of religion there now stands the church—that is biblical in itself—but the world is in some degree made to depend on itself and left to its own devices, and that’s the mistake.

I’m thinking about how we can reinterpret in a ‘worldly’ sense—in the sense of the Old Testament and of John 1.14—the concepts of repentance, faith, justification, rebirth and sanctification. (VIII, 373)

The gibe of ‘positivism’ encompasses three closely related but distinct elements. The first is epistemological and cites Barth for misconstruing the relation between the parts of theological knowledge (virgin birth, Trinity, etc.) and their whole, forcing faith into an ‘all or nothing’ situation. The second is social and derides Barth for ‘leaving the world to

itself' by setting up the church on the site of religion. The third aspect is theologically constructive, recommending instead a 'worldly' or 'non-religious' (the two are synonyms) interpretation of biblical concepts. How are these three related, and what can they tell us about the earlier language of "formalism" and "servitude" to "the old ones"?

The tropes of "circumcision" and "law" tie the epistemic and social dimensions together. The "law of faith" denies "degrees of knowledge and significance." In a book outline (July/Aug 1944), Bonhoeffer writes that Barth "encourages us to entrench ourselves behind the faith of the church without asking the honest question of what is our real and personal belief," and then remarks that "dialectical theology says we have no control over our own faith" (VIII, 495). Cumulatively, these references depict uneasiness with the wedding of Barth's *actualism* to a dogmatic *method*. By 'actualism' I have in mind here his dictum that the event of revelation proceeds, as it were, 'vertically, from above.' As an event, it stands entirely outside human capacities and brings the reality of its object wholly of its own accord; this is no less true of *Romans II* than of *CD*. Two meanings of 'positivism' are implicated in this formulation. First, the impossibility of differentiating subject and object in the event of revelation, or rather finding any legitimate role for human subjectivity within the 'unabolishable subjectivity of God in His revelation,' lends itself to the charge of positivism as a confusion of subject and object, given and constructed. Second, the given is encountered as an undifferentiated objective mass, *en bloc*. Both aspects could be described as 'undialectical.' The dogmatic method reinforces this by deducing everything from the sole 'presupposition' (*Ansatz*) or 'axiom' of the incarnation, unfolded in creed and

confession.²³ The ‘impersonal’ aspect derives from the *actualistic* form of revelation in league with its *authoritarian* medium in church dogma.

If the epistemic worry is directed against the marginalization of humanity in the event of revelation, its social parallel concerns the marginalization of the world. Now in what sense does this ‘law of faith’ “mutilate” the world, which has been made a “gift” by the incarnation? The connotation of “mutilate” is crucial, for it implies ‘circumcision,’ or the erroneous separation of world and God committed by liberalism and Barth alike.²⁴ Bonhoeffer seeks a correction in the church as ‘called out’ (*ek-klesia*) but not ‘set apart.’ In this, the church only follows the incarnation, which makes its form of worldliness possible in the first place. By way of implication, Barth denies the incarnation, and that is just what Bonhoeffer had said in 1927: that “the dialectic of dialectical theology is formal rather than real and is in danger of neglecting the historicity of Jesus.” Did Barth himself not eventually admit as much, believing that he had since righted his course?²⁵

Summing up, we can say that a compelling parallel exists between the accusations of “formalism” (1927) and “positivism” (1944), even if the two terms target different texts (*Romans II* (1922) and *CD I/2* (1938), respectively). Formalism neglects ‘reality’ and the ‘historicity of Jesus,’ just as positivism neglects the world; both speak to a neglect of the incarnation. The parallel is strengthened by Bonhoeffer’s solutions to the problems represented by formalism and positivism. If the answer to positivism is a non-religious or worldly Christianity, understood as a mode of *ec-clesiality*, the answer to

²³ For a helpful account of Barth’s method in light of Bonhoeffer’s critique, see Heinrich Ott, *Faith and Reality: The Theological Legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1972), 129ff.

²⁴ It is worth observing that Bonhoeffer frequently turns to the Old Testament as a model for such ‘worldly’ faith, balancing somewhat his use of Jewish images to signify the deficit of otherworldliness and religion.

²⁵ Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God*, (Louisville: WJK, 1960), p. 43.

formalism is the church-community (*sanctorum communio*), understood as a mode of *sociality*. Between 1927 and 1944, the *direction* and *emphasis* of Bonhoeffer's theology changes, but not its fundamental structure. The young academic sees the sociological category as the solution to the problem of revelation, and the category of the church as the solution to the problem of social mediation between part and whole. His emphasis falls upon formulating a clear conception of the church. The man come of age sees—if one can put it this way—worldliness as the solution to the problem of being a Christian, and a non-religious interpretation as the solution to the problem of understanding. A comparison of two vital passages from 1944 (*LPP*) and 1927 (*SC*) is illustrative:

I am thinking about how the concepts of faith, justification, rebirth and sanctification should be reinterpreted in a 'worldly' way.

The more this investigation has considered the significance of the sociological category for theology, the more clearly has emerged the social intention of all the basic Christian concepts. 'Person,' 'primal state,' 'sin,' and 'revelation' can be fully comprehended only in reference to sociality.

Sociality and worldliness are two distinct but structurally cognate responses to a complex epistemic-social problem that drives Bonhoeffer's theology from beginning to end. His formulations change with intellectual insight and social context, but the basic theme, in my opinion, does not. His middle period only deepens the Christological center from which he could arrive at the new vistas of his late work.

So Widmann's language of "reactionary crutches" and "relapse into servitude," with which Bonhoeffer seems to have sympathized in 1925, has a neat analogue in the prison writings ("entrenching ourselves behind the faith of the church," etc.). The flow of his exchange with Widmann, and the shape of Bonhoeffer's early theology as a whole, suggests that both students find the answer to this problem in the church as the "body of Christ." I have already shown how Widmann's identification of Christ and the

sanctorum communio directly revises Barth's "homogeneous subject." Two final comments will bring this analysis full circle. First, the one other critical reference to Barth in his student writings attacks the same problem with the phrase "heavenly double." Quoting from the passages in *Romans II* dealing with the two "subjects" of revelation/election, Bonhoeffer counters that "it is after all not the Holy Spirit *in me* but instead a second self that has been separated off, and this one lives in heaven far away from here. It is a 'heavenly double' of my earthly self! But this should just not be."²⁶ The April 1926 letter and this essay (Feb 22, 1926) both attack the residual effects of Barth's *dualism*—the dualism of time and eternity, known and unknown, God and world, bisects the self as well, robbing it of its "concreteness" (*Gegebene*) in Christ, its sanctification. As I demonstrated in the last chapter, this dualism is of a piece with Barth's *actualism* and *formalism*, both derived from his reliance upon Kant, for whom 'act' is the *act* of the mind in its *formal* categorical operation.²⁷ Second, then, we can see that "formalism" is the reverse side of this charge.²⁸ It fractures the knowing subject into temporal and eternal, but also fractures the 'object' of faith in the incarnation; Christ never enters history. To mend this fracture, Bonhoeffer locates Christ "in me" through the will, the incarnation in the church-community; voluntarism replaces intellectualism, sociality replaces individualism. These coordinates guide the student essays and sermons.

²⁶ IX, 343. The quotation by Barth is from *Romans*, 158ff. "...the invisible...new subject of the person who stands and exists upright before God,...who can be comprehended and understood...only as not given."

²⁷ One might better express 'formalism' as 'intellectualism,' if it communicated the proper sense of 'intellect.' When Barth speaks of repentance as an "intellectual act," this is what we have in mind. "Intellectual" means "formal," or concerned only with the dialectic of visible/invisible, known/unknown, defined in Kantian terms.

²⁸ Such a reversibility is built into the terms of the discussion: the object is the 'backside' of the subject.

III. Beyond Barth and Berlin: A New Theology Emerges (1925-1927)

Between the summer of 1925 and winter of 1926/7, Bonhoeffer wrote about a dozen seminar essays, mostly for seminars in theology and history with Karl Holl, Adolf von Harnack, and Reinhold Seeberg, who later advised his dissertation. The essays cover a variety of topics, usually related to the content of the seminar, and it was not unusual for the professor to assign a topic related to his own research. So the titles do not necessarily reflect Bonhoeffer's interests or a 'direction' to his theology. Moreover, his enthusiasm for Barth is sometimes muted by deference to his professors, none of whom cared for Barth, and though the references to Barth are spare, his influence is pervasive. A good deal of reading between the lines is required to get at the emerging pattern of Bonhoeffer's theology.

If the indirectness with which Bonhoeffer is working out his own theology in these essays curtails strong claims about development, a few distinctive changes are nonetheless perceptible. Barth's eschatological 'dualism,' or the dialectic of time and eternity, seems to frame every thought, but with growing resistance. The phrase "in me" becomes a salient note across the essays as he approaches the dissertation and sums up his emendation to Barth. Through the themes of will, church-community and Holy Spirit, Bonhoeffer softens Barth's dualism without falling back into the confusion of God and humanity which it corrected in the first place. This explains his growing preoccupation with the third article of the creed. Finally, he increasingly expresses these emphases in a Lutheran idiom, opposing the sharper dualism of Barth's Reformed tendencies (*extra*

Calvinisticum, 'superformal principle,' etc.). The remainder of this chapter traces the rough outline of that renovated pattern, piecing together its structure from evidence sometimes direct and sometimes oblique. Bonhoeffer's critique of Barth naturally forces him to refigure the epistemic and especially the historical circles—a problem of mediation—and he only takes up the ethical question after his habilitation essay.

The Epistemic Circle

In a May 1925 letter to Walter Dreß, Bonhoeffer mentions that he must submit a paper for Holl (whose seminar is "not very stimulating") on 'Luther's Feelings About His Work.' He asks if Luther "developed an independent dualistic view of history," rooted in his experience of grace and calling, or if it depended on the scholastic tradition (IX, 144-145). Already here he is seeking a Lutheran counterpart to Barth's Reformed dualism. In the essay itself, he poses a similar question: "Are we standing before a dualistic understanding of history, a conflict between the God of light and of the darkness, or are we confronted with a superstition of Luther that arises from the medieval belief in demons and the devil?" (IX, 264-265). The point is that "the absolute division between [Luther's] person and his work" results from an essential theological insight into the division between his frailty of self-understanding and God's election (ibid). The dialectic of veiling and unveiling, God's self-revelation, is localized in Luther's vocation and the dis/continuity of divine and human purposes.

This concern appears in another essay from the same semester, written for Seeberg on the topic of historical and pneumatological interpretation of scripture:

“Christian religion stands or falls with the belief in a historical and perceptibly real divine revelation, a revelation that those who have eyes to see can see...[and] it raises the question we take up here, the relation between history and the Spirit” (IX, 285). Bonhoeffer invokes Barth’s *incapax* and the distinction between the scriptural medium and the “subject matter” of revelation, concluding that in the circle of theological understanding, “object must become Subject, God must become the Holy Spirit.”²⁹ Faith understands this subject matter “out of itself,” not out of the ‘I’ or *a priori*, and “the question of genesis can never touch the other question—of the thing itself” (IX, 295). More concretely, the historical critic “can contest the image of Jesus as religious leader...but never as *God’s Son*” (ibid). All of this is in keeping with the dualism of *Romans II* and its antipathy for historical criticism, but then Bonhoeffer adds that “God wished to become manifest *in history*...All other interpretations [that place the resurrection outside the realm of faith and revelation] seek to remove the decisive characteristic of *God within history*” (IX, 296). The accenting of ‘within history’ represents a departure from Barth (Seeberg applauds in the margin) as to the character of the ‘content’ (*Sache*) of revelation. The content is what “drives towards Christ” (Luther), and “what the content of revelation does not have is not canonical” (IX, 297). The Reformed scripture principle as “repristinated” by Barth places canon above content, and Bonhoeffer concludes by describing the Word as the sole norm of theology and of the empirical church congregation (ibid).

The critical distance from Barth seems to increase as Bonhoeffer further considers the Holy Spirit as the presence of God “in” the believer, requiring a rehabilitation of

²⁹IX, 290. “The solution lies in the fact that God opens human eyes to receive revelation in certain indescribable and undetermined moments and words.”

‘experience’ and ‘conscience’ for theology: “Thus the conscience becomes the place where the Holy Spirit is truly *experienced* by humanity...not every conscience is the voice of the Holy Spirit, but the voice of the Holy Spirit is *felt* only in the conscience” (IX, 333). The ‘within’ is not the ‘inwardness’ of religion because the ‘experience’ is pure gift, and “there is no direct path from the wrath of God to grace” but only a “rupture” (IX, 336). The Trinity “immediately” creates a “holy circle” of faith and revelation as a divine act, based on the reciprocal relation of Spirit and Son.³⁰ “Christ is in us through the fact that the Spirit is in us...Christ is in us in the same way as our faith is in us, that he is in us, lives, is raised, etc.” (IX, 339, 338). Circumincision reunites the ‘heavenly double’ by way of an identification between Christ and the Spirit, the Spirit and the human person:

Thus the Holy Spirit *in me*, Christ *in me*, *I* believe. It is of critical importance to preserve this ‘in me.’ My sin called forth God’s wrath. The Holy Spirit annihilated me. Therefore I must be helped. My guilt must be blotted out. What confronts this is the fact that the Holy Spirit is in me, and it must always remain subject, or especially in faith as [gift], because it establishes the holy circle...It is of critical importance that both things remain a reality...If I am not the subject of faith, what is the meaning of the conversation about my faith?...In faith the Holy Spirit creates a new person, a new self, a new will, a new heart...not externally but instead inwardly, in the ‘I.’ Now freedom and action are no longer opposed to each other. Instead, they are the same content [*Sache*] seen from two perspectives. It is truly the *Holy Spirit* who gives [*geschenkt*] to the human being; and it is truly the *human being* [*Mensch*] to whom the Holy Spirit is given [*geschenkt wird*]. (IX, 341-342)

The *volitional* mode of the “in me” is clearly articulated here for the first time as the transformation of the will. Avoiding ‘presence’ as presence-to-thought allows Bonhoeffer to bypass the disjunction between God and world created by Barth’s formalist-intellectualist actualism, that is, the ‘heavenly double,’ rejected directly after this passage. “It corresponds to the Spirit’s holiness also to sanctify the human being in this world of sin...to allow the human being to feel [*spüren*] the beginning of new life, to

³⁰ “This somewhat difficult dialectic grew for Luther out of his experience of faith.” IX, 339.

extend its action from the perceptible into the imperceptible” (IX, 343). With these measures he intends to overcome the pitfall of impersonal faith and authority that accompanies Barth’s dogmatic method.

Spirit and faith are not “poured out substantially, quiescently into us, but instead faith is active and alive...and is a gift [*Geschenk*] according to its content” (IX, 343). The preference for ‘action’ over ‘substance’ corresponds to the preference of will over intellect, and Bonhoeffer even speaks of a “voluntary form of the concept of Spirit” which permits a union with humanity, despite the fact that the “concrete person [*die konkrete Mensch*]...stands in the midst of the sinful world” (IX, 344). A lengthy excursus on the relation between the divine and human wills leads back to the paradoxical conclusion that “God is, at the same time, the subject and the object of faith, and yet in full freedom the person believes in saying yes and no” (IX, 358). From here, Bonhoeffer returns to the problems of scriptural interpretation, preaching, theology, and the church community “here in the world” (IX, 367).

One last pair of distinctions fills out his revision of the epistemic circle. In his paper on “Grace and Spirit in Franke,” we find several familiar ideas, for example, that God “creates the organ of knowledge,” that the ‘I’ and the Holy Spirit equally say ‘yes’ in the event of revelation, and the two are connected not “substantially” but “functionally” (IX, 417). Up to this point, Bonhoeffer has not identified with much precision the difference between the Spirit and Christ, insofar as they are related to the I, except by the phrase “in me.” He now adds a distinction crucial to his dissertation. Christ “generates” the new I, the Spirit “actualizes” it; Christ brings “judgment,” the Spirit “power”; Christ “justifies,” the Spirit “sanctifies” (ibid). It will become clearer in

the dissertation that the “voluntary form” of the Spirit related not merely to renewal of the will, but to the “form” it takes in concrete, empirical communities. The Spirit mediates Christ’s historical presence in the Church.

The Historical Circle: Christ, Spirit, Church

The themes of eschatological dualism and the Spirit’s efficacy reappear in close connection to the church in an essay on “Church and Eschatology” (January 1926). Almost immediately he contradicts Barth, arguing that the idea of the Kingdom of God “presupposes that social and historical elements act as complements within human experience,” and this means that “it is not so much the faithful individual who is the counterpart of the concept of the Kingdom of God, but more so the concepts of church, then state, humanity and all of history” (IX, 311). As in his analysis of Luther, the “battle” between the Kingdoms of God and Satan takes place in the will and through the Spirit, and the Kingdom is itself defined by the “sovereign will of the Father [*Herrschaftswille*], the redeeming and judging will of the Son [*Erlösung- und Gerichtswille*], and the love forming will of the Holy Spirit for the spiritual community [*Gemeinschaft*]...realized in complete unity” (IX, 311). The forms of willing and their “bonds” will recur at length in the dissertation, but here Bonhoeffer is preoccupied with the relation between the Kingdom of God and the Church, or how Christ is “temporally present.”

The eschatological reality of the Kingdom is “the goal and end to which everything must be related,” a “community of redeemed persons” (IX, 312). It is “always

complete” and “consummated,” whereas the church “grows in time.” The church is “restricted to a portion of history,” while the Kingdom “encompasses the entire unfolding world” (IX, 314). The distinction between “generation” and “actualization” above is refined here by several new pairs of concepts. “Actualization” appears alongside “realization” and “consummation” (*Vollendung*), as it will *Sanctorum Communio*. The Kingdom corresponds to the “essential [*wesentlich*] church” or the “so-called invisible church,” which is “essentially the entity predetermined...in eternal election” (IX, 315). Unlike Barth, however, the elect have a counterpart in “Christ’s continued spiritual work” in history (IX, 312). This is the “visible” and “empirical church,” harboring the non-elect as the mixed field of wheat and weeds or the catch of fish. Nonetheless, the two are “conceptually identical in purpose and constitution” (IX, 315). The vocabulary employed here, abstract in itself, attempts to represent the biblical tension between ‘already’ and ‘not yet.’ ‘Real’ and ‘actual’ or ‘essential’ and ‘empirical’ convey its substance with difficulty, formally designating a primary reality with a secondary manifestation. So the more concrete distinction of “gift” (*Gabe*) and “task” (*Aufgabe*) really does justice to Bonhoeffer’s intent, highlighting the active role of the church in the “task” of proclamation and forgiveness of sins, through which the visible church is the “instrument” of God with the Word as its “weapon” (*Kampfmittel*) (IX, 313, 324). The ‘completeness’ of election and justification is expressed in the gift of the sacrament, the task in the ‘struggle’ of the church for sanctification. Bonhoeffer put this beautifully in a children’s sermon: “before God commands, God gives” (IX, 463). We will return to this in connection with the problem of ethics.

He also rejects several ‘confusions’ of the church with the Kingdom, such as Catholicism, sectarianism, pietism, and idealism, and the last receives special attention. Idealism rightly understands the church as a “community of ethically and spiritually liberated personalities,” but the true ideas of “community and election are missing” (IX, 318). Election and justification drive a temporal wedge between church and Kingdom, so that the “state of grace” must be “taken up” (*aufgehoben*) into the “state of perfection” (ibid). Because that ‘taking up’ is now directed to the will, the church stands in a “double position in relation to the bustle of this world,” as “leaven” in addition to “judgment” (IX, 319). In contrast to Barth, the church is “the actual place where struggles take place and from where power and all other life relationships radiate,” even if the church is the “sole signpost in the midst of the world” pointing to the Kingdom (IX, 320). Barth left the world unleavened in *Romans II*, but the young Bonhoeffer finds it only in the church. For the student, the “world exists for the sake of the invisible church, not the other way around,” whereas for the prisoner “what is beyond this world is meant...*for the world*” (IX, 321; VIII, 373). His concern for the world already shows itself in this early stage but without the strength and the openness of his later writings.

Bonhoeffer’s attitude towards the world and the mediation of God’s presence in the church also turns up in an essay on Paul and John (alluded to in the previous one) and in his commemoration speech for von Harnack on the theme of “joy” in the New Testament. The essay on Paul and John, written for Deißmann’s seminar in summer 1926, focuses again on the “in me” of Christ’s eschatological presence by comparing Paul’s “being in one body” with John’s “remaining in Christ.” One is tempted to say that Bonhoeffer’s habit of typologizing has once more overrun the text, as John is reduced to

a foil for Paul and demonstrates most of the characteristics elsewhere ascribed to “religion.” Where Paul’s center is in the “moral” and “anthropological dualism” of sin and justification, law and gospel, Adam and Christ, history and eschatology, John’s lies in a “cosmological dualism” that borders on “nature mysticism” and distorts the relation between church, kingdom and world (IX, 402, 398). John’s community is in the world (*kosmos*) but also “chosen out” (*exelexamen*) of the world as “an entity that is radically opposed to the self-revealing God” (IX, 402). Paul sees the world as “not fundamentally evil” and as “reconciled through Christ,” which would be “impossible for John” (ibid). John’s antipathy for the world seems to be indirectly rooted in the fact that he “thinks individualistically” where Paul thinks “collectively” (IX, 396).

The speech for von Harnack (May 1926) also paints John as “impractical” and “contemplative,” with a “quiet, supraworldly emphasis,” lacking Paul’s “ethical dualism” (IX, 380). John’s joy derives from “individual” interests, Paul’s from a sense of “mission” that flows from the church as the hope of the parousia. The link between the church and ethics as ‘task’ and ‘mission’ brings us to the final circle.

The Ethical Circle: Election, Spirit, Sanctification

Bonhoeffer’s volitional and communal understanding of how revelation is mediated through the church clearly has ethical implications, but he is less concerned to spell them out in these early essays and really turns to the problem at length only after working out both the historical and epistemic circles in more detail. Traces of his ethical position are of course present, and we find an exemplary passage in the exegesis for a

(July 1926) sermon on James. Arguing that the ‘yes’ given in response to election must “remain truly *our* yes” and that faith and obedience are inseparable, Bonhoeffer comments that the

relationship between the indicative and the imperative in Christian ethics can in principle not be abolished (*unaufhebbares*) but simply points to an observation from two different perspectives. From God’s perspective every ethical coming-into-being is an organic occurrence (tree, fruit, the field!). From a human perspective it is something occurs in starts and fits, and that means in the dialectical imperative mood. (IX, 495)

The single reference to ‘indicative/imperative’ refers to Barth’s lone usage of the same terms in *Romans II*. A comparison with Barth evinces again Bonhoeffer’s new direction:

Grace is the power of obedience; it is theory and practice, conception and birth; it is the indicative which carries with it a categorical imperative; it is the call, the command, the order, which cannot be disobeyed. Grace has the force of a downright conclusion; it is the knowledge which requires no act of will to translate it into action, as though the will were a second factor side by side with knowledge. Grace is knowledge of the will of God and as such it is the willing of the will of God...the knowledge that...their existence...is beyond all concrete things, beyond the being and course of this world. (*Romans*, 207ff).

The rejection of any strict identification or “suspension” of will and knowledge is part and parcel of Bonhoeffer’s whole protest against Barth’s formalism, his placing the new existence ‘beyond all concrete things.’ To equate commandment (imperative) and obedience (indicative) in this way requires either transforming concrete life into the Kingdom of God or evacuating it altogether. Barth takes the latter route. Bonhoeffer distinguishes will from reason in order to allow for ‘struggle’ of the will in the real world where it is experienced as threatened by humans, as victorious by God.

The simultaneity of victory and struggle arises from the dialectic of Law and Gospel. The encounter with grace is first an encounter with Law, an ethical encounter with the commandment of God whose judgment is experienced as “an effective moral will with all its consequences,” a “personal and demanding will,” one “totally opposed” to mine and effecting my “inner being...my heart, my conscience” (IX, 255, 330). The

ethical and epistemic circles are joined by the event of election, for which the word is a “temporal expression.” The manner of its comprehension differs greatly from Barth, however.

The human being can hear and understand it intellectually, because it is certainly said in words. However, the human being can grasp it and relate to it only through a means that is analogous to the divine will. Like can only be known by like...It must therefore be personally created...through the Holy Spirit, which is given to us as a gift (*donum*) ‘in’ faith...The object of faith, however, is God, not God’s absolute being...but gift and ability, and this means Christ. This means Christ has been brought to us as a gift through the Holy Spirit. In faith, which is the action of the Holy Spirit, we grasp the pro nobis of his death and his resurrection. We not only see historical events objectively; we recognize that he died for our sins and was raised for our justification. In that we grasp this, we possess Christ as a gift...So faith from the Spirit, Christ in faith, Spirit from Christ, and therefore in faith Christ gives the Spirit. This is the essential interrelationship (IX, 338-9).

This passage nicely summarizes the role of the ethical circle in the event of revelation.

The manner of ‘grasping’ the content of faith is spiritual and volitional (1), but is nonetheless mediated through the preached word which in turn presupposes the whole community of faith (2) for which the word is both law and gospel, imperative and indicative, justification and sanctification (3). Much of what will later appear under the topic of ethics, even as early as the dissertation, does not surface in the student essays. In these first excursions beyond the frontier cut by Barth, Bonhoeffer’s interest was in how revelation is mediated, its worldly presence. Everything else relates to this, but the conceptual links forged here only converge fully for the first time in his dissertation, to which we now turn.

CHAPTER III

SANCTORUM COMMUNIO: THE PROBLEM OF CHURCH-COMMUNITY RESOLVED IN REVELATION

The path of Bonhoeffer's theology during his student years seems largely determined by a two-sided response to Karl Barth. On the one hand, he applauded the critical diastasis supplanting religion with revelation, expressed as the "dialectic of time and eternity." On the other, he perceived in this dualism a failure to take seriously God's 'real presence' in history through the incarnation. Against Barth, the young Lutheran asserted the reality of that presence "in me" through volitional and ecclesiological mediations, and the full design of these threads becomes visible only in his doctoral dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio: A Dogmatic Study*, written in 1927 and published in 1930.¹ The systematic structure or 'triple circle' underlying the student essays is operative here as well, so that the fundamental epistemic question of revelation expresses itself also in matters of history and ethics. For Herrmann, ethical immediacy resolved both the problem of epistemological transcendence and that of Jesus' historical significance. Barth replaced the ethical *a priori* with the Holy Spirit and Herrmann's "inner personality" with the "superior reality" of the divine Word. Bonhoeffer chided

¹ The 1927 dissertation (*Sanctorum Communio: Eine dogmatik Untersuchung*) was published in 1930 under the slightly altered title, *Sanctorum Communio: Eine dogmatic Untersuchung zur Soziologie der Kirche*. At the request of Seeberg, whose foundation paid for the publication, Bonhoeffer cut around twenty percent of the original text. This raises a question about how to interpret the two editions in the course of his theological development. The revisions, in my opinion, only slightly effect the content, and even then by way of omissions rather than alterations in substance. I argue as if the two were in essential agreement and lift quotations accordingly.

Barth for omitting the human person from the event of revelation, for reducing revelation to a formal or intellectual, rather than real and volitional event.

The introduction of this volitional element entails a revision of the human being for whom revelation occurs. The Kantian *subject* presupposed in *Romans II* is replaced by a *person* whose consciousness is essentially generated from ethical (volitional) relations or “sociality” (*Sozialität*). The “sociological category” thereby realigns the epistemic, historical and ethical circles. The human subject of revelation takes on the “voluntary form” of *community*; the historical reality of revelation takes on a parallel communal form as *church*; *concrete* ethical relations are constitutive for both but actual only in the ‘community of saints.’ These departures from Barth in substance have methodological consequences, permitting Bonhoeffer to speak of “Christian social philosophy” and “Christian sociology” within the ambit of dogmatics. On this score, his cousin Christoph von Hase was surely correct: “There will not be many who understand it, the Barthians won’t because of the sociology, and the sociologists won’t because of Barth.” To clarify what neither Barth nor the sociologists could comprehend, we must distinguish the methodological procedure(s) of *SC* from its conceptual strata, showing how the sociological dialectic of primal, broken and reconciled community emerges from the theological dialectic of revelation.

The ‘method’ of the dissertation is roughly synonymous with its theme: revelation. Under this concept the usually proposed themes of ecclesiology and sociality are subsumed. The church is the historical reality or medium of revelation; sociality is the anthropological medium of the church. Sociality is restored by revelation in the form of the church, and revelation (God) manifests itself in sociality. So far from a tangent

striking a circle, revelation ‘intersects’ the world in the church, “Jesus Christ existing as community.” The so-called thesis of *Sanctorum Communio* explicitly equates church with revelation in the sequence of chapter headings: “The more this investigation has considered the significance of the sociological category for theology, the more clearly has emerged the social intention of all basic Christian concepts. ‘Person,’ ‘primal state,’ ‘sin,’ and ‘revelation’ can be fully comprehended only in reference to sociality” (I, 21). The list of “basic concepts” is identical to the contents of chapters two through five, with the exception that “revelation” replaces “*sanctorum communio*.” This identification is repeated throughout the book, frequently formulated as “the church, or the revelation which we have heard” (I, 65). This stands in marked contrast to Barth’s declaration that “the individual, the solitary ‘I’ is the first to be addressed.” The ‘we’ designates the manner in which dogmatics presupposes the church, as context of *life* rather than *authority*, or as the authority of obligation to the *neighbor* rather than to *confession*. Sociality serves as the reference point for all theological concepts because it is the historical form of revelation and is recognized only in the event of revelation.² Without the ‘suspension’ (*Aufhebung*) effected by revelation, there is no standpoint from which to grasp its significance or even its reality but only the isolation of broken community. That suspension or ‘taking up’ is the method which “sets in motion” and orders the concepts of person, primal state, sin and church.

I. Method and Concepts.

² The original preface states the matter more directly: “Only when one comprehends the Christian basic-relation of I and You can one understand the idea of the church as the revelation of loving hearts” (I, 22). Sociality (the ‘basic-relation’) serves the understanding of revelation. Only in this sense is Bonhoeffer developing a ‘theology of sociality.’

Barth's dialectical method in *Romans II* allied Kant and Kierkegaard for an 'expressionistic' subversion of the human subject's priority in the event of revelation. Underlying the dialectical method was the *Realdialektik* of veiling and unveiling expressed as the dialectic of time and eternity. The basic dialectic of revelation was in principle separable from any particular idiom with regard to *method* or *substance*. Only in this way could Barth exchange the dialectical method for a *dogmatic* one and the dialectic of time and eternity for the concentration in *Christology*. The kernel of continuity in that 'real dialectic' derives less from Kant or Kierkegaard than from Hegel, whose concept of "suspension" (*Aufhebung*) describes the core dialectic from *Romans II* to *Church Dogmatics*. The subject-object relation of consciousness, inescapable in itself, is 'taken up' into the divine self-relation. 'Knowledge' becomes 'faith' as grace creates an analogy between human knowledge of God and God's own self-knowledge, as the old humanity 'in Adam' is raised up into the new humanity 'in Christ.' Bonhoeffer keeps the 'method' of suspension but trades the epistemological for the sociological category. The two subjects of 'Adam' and 'Christ' are now *two communities*, one broken and one reconciled, one in sin and the other in faith. Where Barth's "suspension" split the human subject in half, creating a "heavenly double," Bonhoeffer locates the continuity and concreteness of the new self in real, volitional relations of the church community, and this is the key to comprehending both the methodological structure of the dissertation and the concepts situated within it.

I.a. Methodological Unity and Plurality: Theology, Social Philosophy, and Sociology.

To speak of a single ‘method’ in *Sanctorum Communio* seems misleading, since there are in fact two or three methods or “directions of approach,” a theological approach “from above” and social-philosophical and sociological approaches “from below” (I, 33). The unity of the essay consists in its theological method, which incorporates social philosophy and sociology by compounding the *revealed form* of the church with the *phenomenological form* of human spirit and the *empirical form* of community. Insofar as “form” (*Form, Gestalt*) or “structure” (*Struktur*) or “essence” (*Wesen*) links all three levels of analysis and Bonhoeffer relies upon the methods of formal phenomenology borrowed from Scheler, the whole approach could be described as phenomenological. The theological method cannot, strictly speaking, merit the title since it exceeds the limits of formal phenomenology through the suspension of what is ‘given,’ and while both social-philosophical and sociological methods are described explicitly as “phenomenological,” the phenomenological character of sociology depends upon its philosophical presuppositions. I will therefore refer to the three methods as theological, phenomenological or philosophical, and empirical or sociological.

Before setting forth the content and procedure of each, two difficulties deserve mention, one concerning the *argument* of the dissertation, the other its order of *exposition*. As to the argument, *Sanctorum Communio* presents itself as an essay in ecclesiology, an attempt to understand the church from two perspectives as a sociological and a theological reality, as “religious community” and “community of saints.” That Bonhoeffer argues as if he were trying to *understand the church* as a “reality of revelation” rather than *understanding revelation* through the reality of the church does not discredit my basic thesis that the dissertations, and his entire course of thought, is

about revelation. He is simply approaching revelation from its worldly face in the church; the theological method of the book proves as much. Now as to *exposition*, it is just the theological method which the sequence of concepts obscures, or rather the theological method covers its own tracks. To understand the church as a religious community (sociologically) and as revealed (theologically) means that the sociological aspect is viewed “from above” or “from within,” only in light of reconciled community (I, 33). The church has *noetic priority*. *Logically* and *ontologically*, however, the church is *anterior* to the “primal state” and the “broken community” of sin. This “reversed logic” risks hiding the very frame of reference—revelation—that makes it possible (I, 65).

The illusion that the order of knowledge and the order of being are the same (rather than crossing along inverted paths) arises from the structural symmetry of the chapters or concepts, a symmetry ordered by the perspectives of social philosophy and sociology. If the primal state, sin, and church all include 1) “social basic relations” underlying 2) those “constitutive acts” which generate 3) empirical social “structures,” then social philosophy treats *relations* while sociology deals with *structures* and *acts*. The *formal* symmetry of relations, acts and structures explains the *external* methodological unity of the essay. The fact that reconciled, broken and original community are all composed of relations, acts and structures permits the comparative elucidation of the church’s unique form. As Bonhoeffer remarks in the original preface, the church is a “unity composed of several layers of problems (*Problemschichten*),” and his goal is to “separate out these distinct (*verschiedenen*) layers and grasp their fitting together in the concept of the church” (I, 22 A). The “layers” are those “basic Christian

concepts” of primal state, sin and church (I, 21). They can form a ‘unity in the concept of the church’ because each is determined by its own configuration of relations, acts and structures. After explaining these terms, the theological method becomes more intelligible.

I.a.1. Social Philosophy and Sociology: Relations, Acts, and Structures.

Bonhoeffer devotes his first chapter to the distinction between social philosophy and sociology and advances the discussion sporadically throughout the rest of the essay. Sociology always builds on the foundation laid by social philosophy, since the “intrinsic connection of sociality and spirit” issues in “constitutive acts of spirit that comprise distinctive structures” (I, 28, 30). Only in the circuitous course of the essay is it clear that the “acts” sociology investigates are *acts of will* and that its “structures” are *social patterns of willing* with “essential” (*wesentlich*) or formal qualities. Among them is the manner in which a structure combines the plurality, community and unity of persons. The character of a structure’s unity defines its “objective spirit,” for example, as a “collective person.” That all of these terms belong to sociology emerges slowly over several chapters, and below I will give a more composite presentation of Bonhoeffer’s sociological vocabulary, but first we must look at social philosophy.

The crucial difference between Barth and Bonhoeffer comes down to the idea that human beings are constituted in social relationships; thus revelation is social and has an historical presence. Social philosophy studies this “primordial mode-of-being of sociality *per se*” or the “social basic relation,” which has two basic forms, *social-ethical* and

metaphysical (I, 29, 59ff.). The metaphysical cannot properly be called *social* but exists as a relation between subject and object, between a knower and the thing known.

Metaphysical relations always fail in one of two directions, atomism or idealism, neither of which can balance the plurality of individuals with community and its unity. Atomism sacrifices community to the individual by denying their inherent sociality; idealism sacrifices community to unity by dissolving the individual into an ultimate unity.

Bonhoeffer concerns himself more with idealism than atomism, and Kant's "epistemological concept of person" (another way of saying 'metaphysical') takes most of his criticism: "the synthesis of transcendental apperception resolves the opposition of subject and object as well as I-You relations in the higher unity of spirit, of intellectual intuition" (I, 40).³ He also refers to the 'metaphysical' or 'epistemological' relation as "immanent spirit," which for Kant is the "highest formal principle that encompasses and overcomes everything material, so that the universal and spirit become identical" (I, 42). The result is an "ethical formalism" undermining any material (concrete) ethic, and his critique of Kant echoes his critique of Barth: "One is like the other...*It is the destiny of the human species to be absorbed into the realm of reason, to form a realm of completely similar and harmonious persons...*and so one sees that the subject-object schema can never lead to a *sociological category*" (I, 43).

The sociological category is the "sphere" of ethical or genuinely social basic relations. Unlike idealism, it understands that there "is no cognitive way to reach [the other], just as there is no cognitive way to reach God" (I, 45). Epistemological immanence must be abandoned for "ethical transcendence," "cognition" (*Erkenntnis*) for

³ Kant of course denied any notion of intellectual intuition, which entered idealist philosophy with Fichte and was read back into Kant by the Neo-Kantians.

“recognition” (*Anerkenntnis*), the formal for the concrete other who confronts the I as barrier, a ‘You’ in relation to whom the I first becomes an ‘I’ (I, 46). The ethical basic relation constitutes *Persons*, where the metaphysical leaves over mere “individuals” or atomized “spirit.” Bonhoeffer can also speak of “ethical individuals” or “original spirit,” since the individual is never lost in sociality, whether restored (as ethical *Persons*) or original (as primal *Spirit*). In both original and restored sociality, the individual, God and neighbor belong together. God’s presence in and to the neighbor explains how one moves from the epistemological to the sociological sphere, from metaphysical to ethical relations.

“Social basic relation” (*Sozialgrundbeziehung*) refers to the essentially intersubjective dependence of my ‘I’ upon a ‘You,’ in original, broken and restored forms. Those relations underwrite all sociological types, divisible into categories according to the acts of will that hold them together. Like social philosophy, sociology is a “phenomenological” and “systematic” rather than “genetic” discipline, delimiting the *patterns of willing* characteristic of social arrangements or communities (I, 30ff.). Sociological types are determined by the “direction” or “goal” (*Zweck*) or “content” (*Inhalt*) of willing (I, 86ff.). If a group wills a particular content *against* one another, no social form results at all, and if they will *beside* one another, no community results but only the “mass” (*Masse*), a kind of mindless lockstep. Only if a group wills *together* (*Miteinander*) is there community, either in the form of Society (*Gesellschaft*) or Community (*Gemeinschaft*). Society is willed as a means to an end, as a “rational purposive will” (I, 88). Community is an end in itself and involves a “will to meaning” (*ibid*).

Acts of willing towards Society or Community configure the “plurality” of individuals into a “community” guided by some factor of “unity,” manifested in “objective spirit” (I, 97ff.). Bonhoeffer never explicitly defines the general categories of plurality, community and unity, despite their obvious significance for determining social structure. The concepts of plurality and community are relatively obvious: a *community* is a *plurality* of individuals with a purpose. *Unity* as a third formal characteristic indicates something more substantial than just a shared idea of what the collective is ‘up to.’ If the cooperative will of individuals defines a community, it has a fundamentally *active* character, but there remains a *passive* relation as well, an inheriting of the social whole out of which the individual acts, so that plurality, community and unity stand in a circular relation. As we will see below, ‘sociality’ consists in this passive-active relation to the whole. Hegel certainly saw the matter this way, and a less logically overdetermined Hegelianism is transparently at work here, as Bonhoeffer’s use of “objective spirit” makes clear.

In objective spirit individuals are confronted with the “concrete totality” or “objectified selves” of the community, combining temporal (historical) and spatial (social) dimensions, and leading the individual beyond themselves to a new concreteness nonetheless possible only through them (I, 98-99). Both Community and Society have objective spirit. Where Community necessarily takes up its objective spirit as an end itself, the Society may abandon it like a mollusk shell, as a dead husk with form but no life, concreteness but no purpose. Consequently, a Society cannot project itself symbolically beyond time and is bound by time (*zeitbegrenzt*), but the “temporal intention” of a Community is towards the boundary of time itself (*grenzzeitlich*) (I, 101).

The most important difference between Community and Society is that the objective spirit of the former can take on personal form as a “collective person” with its own “center of activity,” self-consciousness and spontaneity (I, 102). Society cannot produce collective persons because a person is never a means to end, and the volitional, temporal and impersonal limits of Society mean that church only appears as a form of Community.

The “principle” of the church-community is a unique social basic relation that unites the social forms of Community and Society through the “vicarious representative action” of Christ in what Bonhoeffer calls the “community of love” (*Liebengemeinschaft*) or “community of Spirit” (*Geistgemeinschaft*) (I, 105). It resembles the volitional form of a Society by willing what is beyond itself, the will of God; but in willing God’s will, it takes on the volitional form of Community because the church is the ultimate object of God’s creative will. In willing God’s will it wills itself. I will explicate the content of this social basic relation in greater detail below, but only its methodological implications are significant for the moment. What is true of the basic relations here holds true for the structure of the essay in general: revelation “transcends” and “incorporates” not only the acts of will associated with Community and Society but the full pattern of original and broken community (I, 262). This double movement “from above” follows Barth’s appropriation of Hegel, ‘canceling’ and ‘taking up’ the relations and structures of sin into a relation that can only be “given” and never “deduced” (I, 127, 206). Within that movement, the other methods and concepts find their place.

I.a.2 Theological Method: Suspension (Aufhebung).

The theological method of *Sanctorum Communio* often appears alongside the sociological as one of two “perspectives” (*Seiten*) (above/below, inside/outside, etc.), but its real significance is first explained in connection with the doctrine of the primal state, which “forces a methodological clarification of the structure of dogmatics as a whole (*Aufbaus der Gesamtdogmatik*)” (I, 62). The primal state also “renders concrete and vivid the real course of things from unity through break to unity” (ibid). ‘Method’ speaks to the order of knowing, the ‘course of things’ to the order of being, and their inversion gives the dissertation its complex structure:

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. Neither concept can be understood theologically ‘in itself,’ but only within a real historical dialectic—not a dialectic of concepts. In this respect we differ fundamentally from idealism, for which origin and telos stand in real, unbroken connection...(I, 62-63).

The *order of being*, the ‘real course of things’ from the unity of the primal state through the break of sin to the unity of reconciliation, is only visible from the eschatological standpoint of reconciliation. The *order of knowing* “projects backwards” the light of reconciliation so as to gain the perspective on the order of being, the alteration of basic relations and empirical structures.

That these conceptual ‘layers’ stack up symmetrically owes to the coordinates provided by social philosophy and sociology, but *how* they form a unity cannot be explained “from below.” If it were, the study would proceed *synthetically*, deducing the “essence” of the church from the forms of original and broken community, but Bonhoeffer insists that “methodologically, all statements are possible only on the basis of our concept of the church, i.e., from the revelation we have heard” (I, 64-5). The relations and structures of sin and the primal state are visible from the perspective of the

church, “which only appears to emerge” out of the prior concepts of creation and sin (ibid). This “reversed logic of the theological system” gives the “method” its “theological character” (ibid). Social philosophy and sociology enter into an investigation of the church not because they “can be proven generally on the basis of creation but because they are presupposed and included in revelation” (ibid). So the study proceeds *analytically*, “separating out” what is only grasped as a unity ‘from above’ (ibid).

The method of *Sanctorum Communio* includes the sociological and philosophical methods within the theological. In the overarching theological design, the phenomenologically apprehended form of broken community is suspended in the new relations and sociological forms of the church. With this structure in view, we can determine the placement and significance of the guiding concepts.

I.b Basic Concepts: Person, Primal State, Sin, Church.

After distinguishing sociology from social philosophy in the first chapter (so as to foreground the dogmatic method of the study), Bonhoeffer turns in the next four chapters to the respective concepts mentioned in reference to sociality in the preface. The sequence is not a ‘logical’ one in the sense that later concepts are ‘deduced’ or ‘derived’ from the earlier. Just the opposite is the case. The church has noetic priority, even if it bears ontic and logical anteriority. Because the primal state and sin precede redemption as “concrete states,” they precede it in the conceptual presentation. By expanding upon these concepts, we expand upon the whole course of the study.

I.b.1 Person: Revealed Relations as Heuristic

Given that the ('Christian' and 'revealed') concept of Person both derives from the *dogmatic* concept of the Church and presupposes the *philosophical* concept of the primal state, it is initially unclear why it should stand on its own and prior to the primal state. It is abstracted from the "concrete course of things" and offers no methodological elucidation. Why is it here? The simplest solution here, since Bonhoeffer does not explain the role of this chapter directly, is that the Person encapsulates all of the "basic relations" in the *Sanctorum Communio* and by anticipating its full content throws into relief from the beginning what could only be apparent from the standpoint of the final chapter. Its abstraction from the concrete sequence makes the sequence itself legible. In this sense, it does offer a 'methodological' elucidation by displacing the "epistemological category" with the sociological one.

The epistemological category names the 'subject paradigm' of philosophy from Descartes to Idealism, with its attempt to ground all knowledge in reason by first reflexively grounding reason in itself. Bonhoeffer contrasts the theory of a self comprehended sufficiently "out of itself" with one defined by the "basic relation" (*Grundbeziehung*), a relation with social, ontic, and ethical dimensions. As *social*, the relation between 'I and You' has an essential character; neither pole survives apart from the relation. This grants it *ontic* status, for the being of both depends upon the relation, and 'basic' (*Grund*) carries something of this connotation. Most importantly, the relation is *ethical* in that it involves an other who can never be reached through thought but only through moral demand, experienced not as an "object" but as a "barrier" (*Schranke*) and "limit" (*Grenze*) to the I as a whole (I, 45ff.). "It is impossible to reach the real existence

of other subjects by way of the purely transcendental category of the universal” (ibid). The ethical opens up a “sphere” completely different from that of epistemology or subject-object relations. Where Kant defined reality (*Wirklichkeit*) as the logical function of the mind’s own categories, Bonhoeffer understands it as the unassimilated You. The moral self-legislation of this “self-knowing, self-acting spirit...divides the human being down the middle” because the “boundary between ‘ought’ and ‘is’ does not coincide with the boundary of the person as a whole” (I, 46). Reminiscent of his attack on Barth’s “heavenly double”—for which Kant supplied the template—Bonhoeffer’s concern here is *concreteness* and *history*. The *whole* person is addressed.

The ‘basic relation’ leads directly to the problem of *time*. If the transcendental subject is merely “formal” and “inconcrete,” it construes time as a “pure form of the mind’s intuition...[an] essentially timeless thinking,” or a “mechanically conceived atom,” the smallest measurable unit of time (I, 47). The ethical Person experiences time as “value-related” (*weltbeziehend*) or as a “moment” (*Augenblick*) of “responsibility” (*Verantwortung*), much like the “now time” (*Jenseits*) of Barth in which one stands “answerable” (*verant-wort-lich*) to the Word (*Wort*) (I, 48). Such “time related to God” is, however, not elevated above history, not “inconcrete” or “not given” and “transcendental,” as for Barth in *Romans II*, but occurs as “concrete time” (ibid). At stake here are two *anthropologies*, one social and the other atomistic, one ethical and the other “metaphysical,” one temporal and the other transcendental, one “dynamic” and the other “static,” one “concrete” and the other “abstract” (ibid). In the second, conscience governs a rational will that ‘can’ because it ‘ought.’ In the first, conscience battles with an “anxious” will facing “endless decision” and “movement” (*Bewegung*) (I, 49).

To be moved one must encounter an other, and for the Christian concept of Person, the primary other is God: “For Christian philosophy, the human person originates only in relation to the divine; the divine person transcends the human person” (ibid). The difference between God and humans is “absolute,” but its ethical exigency deepens with the awareness that one must “answer” (*verantworten*) to the barrier before them. If the barrier is so “decisive,” what is its “form” (I, 50)? Here Bonhoeffer returns to a set of earlier distinctions by contrasting the Person with the Individual, where ‘individual’ is “metaphysical” and “immediately determined” (*Unmittelbarbestimmung*) or determined “through itself” (ibid). Its reality does not depend on anything exterior. The Person is “ethical-social” and “reflexively determined” (*Reflexivbestimmung*) or determined “through others” (ibid). The usage of ‘reflection’ and ‘immediacy’ may seem peculiar in that ‘reflection’ ordinarily summons up the image of consciousness ‘turning back’ upon itself or mediating everything through itself conceptually, so that the world is its ‘mirror.’ Bonhoeffer’s transposition of the terms is at least partially justified by their migration from the epistemological to the ethical sphere.

The You of the ‘basic relation’ up to this point has been God, but now clearly concerns the “concrete You,” the neighbor. If God is known through the concrete other, how are the two related? This is distinct but inseparable from a second question as to how one enters the ethical sphere in the first place. The limit of knowledge in the epistemological (*Erkenntnistheorie*) and ethical-social spheres differs according to the way one perceives the ‘other.’ Knowledge (*Erkenntnis*) sees another ‘I’ like unto the self (a determined object), recognition (*Anerkennung*) sees a ‘You’ whose meaning is hidden (a free subject). The subject has no “direct experience” of this ‘I’ as a ‘You’ if grasped in

the “general sense of self-consciousness,” so one has to distinguish between the other as an “object form” and a “reality form” (*Wirklichkeitsform*) (I, 51). The You is never thinkable or “immanent to my mind as a subject,” nor can it be “deduced” (ibid). Bonhoeffer’s point is familiar enough to contemporary philosophy—I cannot *think* my way to the other. “The transcendence of the You says nothing at all about epistemological transcendence,” and its form is “purely ethical...experienced only by those facing a decision” (I, 52).⁴ One enters the ethical sphere through interdependence of self, other and God, an axiom earlier introduced (with minimal defense) as constitutive of the basic relation. The ethical sphere opens, and God and neighbor are found together, in faith: “one person can’t know the other but can only recognize and ‘believe’ in the other” (I, 54). *The circle of faith now includes the neighbor, and in doing so has become historical and concrete.*

The Holy Spirit creates this circle, its subject and its object, by “joining” to the concrete You “from whom my I arises” (ibid). The concrete You appears as “an image of the divine You,” is “real and absolute and holy...[and] its claim to holiness rests in God alone” (I, 55). As an object of God’s creative will, Persons stand forth in “concrete vitality (*Lebendigkeit*), wholeness (*Ganzenheit*), and uniqueness (*Einzigkeit*),” just the opposite of Barth’s “heavenly double” (ibid). The ‘taking up’ of the whole person in their sociality has consequences for revelation as well:

The other person presents us with the same challenge to our knowing as God. My real relationship to another person is oriented to my relationship to God. *But since I know God’s ‘I’ only in the revelation of God’s love, so too with the other person; here the concept of the church comes into play.* Then it will become clear that the Christian person achieves his or her essential

⁴ A near identical statement occurs in the prison letters: “The transcendence of God has nothing to do with epistemological transcendence” (VIII, 367).

nature only when God does not encounter the person as *You*, but 'enters into' the person as *I*. (I, 56)

That God's 'I' is known in the concrete *You* of the church means that 'Person' is a revealed self and that revelation has a concrete, historical form in the church. It also implies that community and recognition of others becomes real only in the church, and we will have to ask later if Bonhoeffer thought that only Christians *are* Persons. This seems to follow from the negative opposition between Person and Spirit as two completely disconnected spheres, traversed only by grace. The doctrine of the Primal State shows in what sense Spirit is "an indispensable presupposition in order for the ethical person to come to be," presenting Spirit in the original integrity of its sociality (I, 57).

1.b.2 Primal State as Original Community

Having already disavowed any 'speculative' or 'idealist' knowledge of Spirit and Person in their "essence," Bonhoeffer adds that "essence, nature and history" cannot be thought "in general terms" but only in the context of revelation (I, 60). Human essence is therefore thinkable, and philosophy possible, in light of revelation. The essence of humanity is fulfilled in the Christian Person, true philosophy is Christian philosophy. One could conclude that humanity and reason are void in themselves, that creation and Fall are identical or that the Fall leaves no remainder. If the Person belongs to the ethical sphere of revelation and reconciliation, then the individual belongs to the unreconciled sphere of sin. Does sin exhaust the essence of humanity apart from revelation?

The Primal State offers a philosophy of Spirit prior to the Fall, and although we have no experience of it, Bonhoeffer insists on its reality and concreteness, its place in the “inner historical dialectic” or “inner history” of the church, which he once more contrasts with ‘idealist’ philosophies of history as “unilinear” (I, 58-9 A). A philosophy of Spirit includes not only its essential structure, its combination of individuality and sociality, but also the “essential acts of willing” that belong to that structure and the types or forms of community they produce. These are the “pure” social-philosophical and sociological aspects of the essay.

Spirit as the negative reflection of Person appeared as atomistic and asocial, but now “Spirit in general” appears as “woven into a web of sociality,” which originates in its “structural openness” and “closure” (I, 65). These descriptions belong neither to ethical nor to the epistemological sphere and beg the question of self-consciousness. Self-consciousness is the defining feature of Spirit, but if Spirit is constitutively social, then self-consciousness must originate in sociality (we might say ‘intersubjectivity’). Phenomenology discovers that “material spirituality [*materielle Geistigkeit*] is personally bound together in *self-consciousness (Selbstbewußtsein) and self-determination (Selbstbestimmung) as documenting its structural unity, formally determinative [formal bestimmbar]* as the principle of receptivity and activity” (I, 67). The inner core of Spirit includes a double dialectic, first between self-consciousness and self-determination, and from this the dialectic between structural openness and closure. For the sake of simplicity, let us call these the primary and secondary *spiritual (geistig)* dialectics respectively, in order to differentiate them from the theological and sociological dialectics (“suspension” and the “concrete course of things”). Upon the dialectic of

openness and closure are founded those various spiritual acts underlying the volitional acts and empirical forms of sociology.

The secondary spiritual dialectic is constructed to avoid collapsing the social into the individual or the individual into the social. Openness establishes the basic sociality of Spirit as coming to self-awareness through others; closure establishes the individuality of Spirit as irreducible to impersonal social processes. Structural openness and closure, sociality and individuality, are balanced in the concept of a collective person, or the 'personal' character of the social whole (objective spirit). In the course of elaborating these concepts, Bonhoeffer relies on a philosophical vocabulary of his own tailoring, and the seams are not always well aligned. We will have to take care in defining the terms here so that the systematic analysis below judges his pattern correctly.

The several distinctions just mentioned contain further distinctions of their own, and definitions are not always forthcoming. The primary spiritual dialectic of 1) self-consciousness and self-determination is 2) the "principle" of activity and receptivity, which manifest their potentiality 3) in acts (partly passive) of thinking, willing and feeling, and these in turn 4) arise only from a sociality rooted 5) in the secondary spiritual dialectic of openness and closure. Let us untangle these elements in turn. Self-consciousness is the inner awareness I have of myself as a unity and includes a volitional element (intentionality), and this is what he means by self-determination. To say that the two stand in a dialectical relation is to say that one is irreducible to the other, self-consciousness is not purely will, anymore than self-determination is a pure mode of knowledge. Ernst Tugendhat has expressed the matter well:

The relation in which we speak of self-determination appears somehow to be founded as a higher level upon this relation to ourselves [i.e., self-consciousness] that we have in doing and wanting something. We have the possibility to disengage ourselves from what we do and want and from the intersubjective roles in which we function, and to ask ourselves, Who am I in all of this? And this means, of course, What do I myself want? What does the talk of 'I' and 'self' signify here? It obviously has something to do with the autonomy and self-determination of the agent...opposed to the expectations of others, to existing intersubjective norms and to one's own instinctual drives.⁵

As Tugendhat points out later (vis-à-vis Heidegger), self-consciousness (1) is never the kind of stale, formal relation that Descartes or Kant imagined but rather a disposing of oneself, a directing of the being extant in awareness towards an end. The two are dialectically related but self-consciousness always retains a certain primacy over the self-determination it exercises and over the 'doing and wanting' (2, 3) that belong to myself as well as (4) the 'intersubjective roles' in which those interior acts occur (without reduction to their processes).

Like Tugendhat, Bonhoeffer wants to distinguish between a basic or primary sense of self in distinction from any specific act (of doing, wanting, thinking, willing, or feeling) and the sociality in which the self is embedded. Like Tugendhat, he also sees language as the medium of sociality and self-consciousness but does not go so far as to reduce self-consciousness to a propositional structure (he also develops no theory of language). This leads Bonhoeffer to talk about activity and passivity, thinking, willing and feeling, even though he admits the terms are "outdated" (I, 67). Activity and passivity only refer to the spontaneity of the self and its simultaneous dependence on an exterior, determined abstractly or in principle by the primary spiritual dialectic in that self-consciousness is presupposed by both. The linguistic mediation of self-consciousness threatens to wash the self out into a "great sea of Spirit" but is protected by

⁵ Ernst Tugendhat, *Selbstbewußtsein und Selbstbestimmung*, trans. Paul Stern, *Self-Consciousness and Self-Preservation*, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1986), p. 21.

a further distinction between “structure” and “intention” (ibid). “Structure” corresponds to the “bond” of self-consciousness and self-preservation that gives Spirit its “structural unity,” while “intention” encompasses the range of “actions” associated with receptivity and activity which are “only real in sociality” (ibid). As the primary spiritual dialectic is the “principle” of activity/receptivity, structure “becomes visible only in the individual intentions to action, but in principle is independent of them” (ibid). These internal acts are further differentiated from the “will to community” (*Gemeinschaftswille*) as having an “indirect” relation to community. Where the latter takes “empirical community” as its “content,” the former is “purely ontological” and thus within the perspective of social philosophy (ibid).

The primary spiritual dialectic maintains the individuality of the self as it moves within the “stream of spirit” whose current is driven by *language*, for every individual and every “intellectual act” assumes the possibility of “understanding, expressing themselves, and being understood” (I, 68). Bonhoeffer even approves Hamann’s thesis that language precedes thought, so that “with language a system of social spirit has been built into the human being... ‘objective spirit’ has become effective in history” (I, 70). Language depends on the “objective intention of meaning,” on will in the “purely phenomenological-structural sense,” but intention is bound to language and therefore depends on sociality (I, 69). His conclusion, that “there would be no self-consciousness without community” and that the two arise “concurrently,” is balanced by the caveat that reflexive access to the “genesis” of self-consciousness is impossible (I, 70ff.). But this flatly contradicts his attempts to demonstrate the structural interdependence of

subjectivity in “intention” and “recognition”—to show how self-consciousness originates in social interaction.

Nonetheless, Bonhoeffer is not attached to any particular theory of self-consciousness, so long as it maintains both the individuality and sociality of Spirit. What his project in the dissertation does require is a *volitional* focus to secure the threads of argument, and he follows Scheler by depicting self-consciousness as generated from a contest of wills within a community, from “resistance” (*Widerstände*) or “strife” (*Kampf*) (I, 72). The particular combination of volitional and intellectual acts defines the structural openness of spirit, its essential relatedness or sociality.

Spirit is also structurally closed, not only a “passive receptacle” but an active “bearer” of the “great social nexus” (I, 73). So conceived, intersubjectivity would be meaningless without subjectivity (an ‘I’ must persist in the I-You relation), but the balance is difficult to maintain for reasons already suggested. “One cannot speak of the priority of either personal or social being” but must also admit that the “structural unity of the I is given as an experience already in the experience of the You...[and] cannot be constituted by acts” (I, 75). Hegel rightly saw “that there is an objective spirit, the spirit of sociality, which is distinct in itself from all individual spirit,” but he destroyed the individual by submerging it in the impersonal unity of Absolute Spirit (I, 74).

Bonhoeffer’s solution, following Scheler, is to construe the objective spirit of the community as *personal*, as a “collective person” or a “corporate individual” with the “same structure as an individual person” (I, 77). This is much more than metaphor. The collective person has its own will, spontaneity and even self-consciousness, and by participating in a personal unity the personal character of the individual is strengthened

rather than abolished. I will try to show the intelligibility of this concept below, along with Bonhoeffer's illustration of the Leibnizian monad. The real point for now is that the community itself is personal and therefore "concrete." In the collective person of the church, revelation attains its concrete historical form.

I have already mentioned the sociological concepts presented in the methodological discussion raised in connection with the primal state (*Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft*, the "bond" (*Verband*) of wills, its "direction" and "strength," etc.). I also noted that objective spirit communicates the "concrete totality" of a community in the *temporal* dialectic of "being moved" and "being objectified" (I, 99). But these are *ethical* categories, and *time* in the sense of "being moved" belongs *after* the Fall, to the 'knowledge of good and evil' that is the making of *history*. Yet the primal state aims to represent Spirit in its original integrity. Two trains of thought collide here. All sociological and social-philosophical principles should derive from revelation. There can be no 'general' account of humanity in its social relations and structures, save one warped by sin, and speculation proves a dead end in this respect. Even so, the primal state should paint a portrait of humanity prior to sin and in light of the true humanity revealed in Christ. The contradiction appears when the terms of revelation are transferred to the primal state alongside a sociological vocabulary of other provenance. Social-theoretical concepts should be cut only from the 'real dialectic' in which they operate, and so Bonhoeffer elaborates his theoretical vocabulary piecemeal throughout the essay. But the concepts obviously stand on their own in many cases as part of general social-theoretical framework taken from formal sociology and phenomenology. Again, a full

consideration of the problem waits below. Similar but less disruptive questions confront his treatment of sin.

I.b.3. Sin as Broken Community

Sin has its own unique basic relation, “demanding” rather than “giving,” “selfish” rather than “loving” (I, 108, 107). “Isolation” now replaces shared life in God, and the law of conscience, which enters only after the Fall, throws each person back upon their own culpability. Still, sociality is not lost but distorted, and humans remain aware of their essential relation to others. The “natural forms of community” (marriage, family, government) remain but are “corrupted in their inmost core” and “emptied of their content” (I, 108). Individuals no longer will a shared vision and each other as ends in themselves, but now will only themselves and everything as a “means to one’s own end” (ibid). This self-will defines the corrupted basic relation of “solitude,” the awareness of separation from God and from others before God. It remains social in the sense that the individual is nonetheless aware of being one among many cast into solitude, a ‘person of unclean lips, surrounded by a people of unclean lips.’ Sin takes on the paradoxical form of solitude as a consciously shared state.

As before, Bonhoeffer interprets theological concepts through sociological ones, in this case replacing the “biological” notion of sin with a “Christian-ethical” understanding of its universality and transmission (I, 111, 112). By “Christian-ethical” he has in mind a focus on volition or action and goes so far as to say that the definition of the human species should be limited to persons of responsible action (deliberately

excluding children and apparently the “mentally deficient”). The theological problems of universality and transmission, the double aspect of ‘original sin,’ converge in the sociological problem of how the *act of the whole* is present in the *act of the individual*, which necessarily leads Bonhoeffer back to the concept of a collective person.

In their rebellion against God, individuals become aware that in them the whole has risen up against God, and the knowledge of this mutual failure of personal and universal vocation generates an “experience of common sinfulness,” being one of many sinners before God, without excuse (I, 116). This awareness of the whole revolting in the individual is asserted without further reflection and serves as the basis for the rest of Bonhoeffer’s deliberations on sin. It is perhaps partially substantiated by the observation that the consciousness of isolation does not create sociality, which is “independent” of and “preexists” it, but is a reflex of its destruction (ibid). The “ontic-ethical separateness of persons” is preserved “in a sinful way [i.e., isolation], whose ‘overcoming’ [*Aufhebung*] is only possible in the concept of the church” (I, 117). The “experience of common sinfulness” must also, then, preserve a form of *community* (or I-You relations) that does not completely degenerate into a mere *plurality* but remains a *unity* (an elementary feature of all Spirit in its sociality).

The sociological unity of sinful or ‘Adamic’ humanity (*Adamsmenschheit*) is, claims Bonhoeffer, an ethical collective person in the “concrete situation of being addressed by a You” (I, 118).⁶ God calls not only or primarily individuals but also communities, and so the call comes to the ethical collective person of the community, not

⁶ His question whether the collective person is also ‘ethical’ suggests that a collective person could exist which is *not* ethical, but this violates the definition of ‘person.’

the individual. Communities as well as individuals face judgment and grace, as does the church, the “community which is from God and to God” (I, 101). In the individual the “one conscience” that is simultaneously the conscience of the community is addressed by God, so that each individual is an “integrated being” struggling for an “integrated decision,” not a structural duality with “two layers” of sociality and inward intentions (I, 120).⁷ But a fundamental duality *does* mark the “universal community” (*Gesamtgemeinschaft*) of ‘Adam,’ in that its unity is the unity of solitude, a “collective person yet infinitely fragmented,” a humanity with “one heart” stained by infinite and reciprocal selfishness (I, 121).

Even granting the validity of the concept of a “collective person,” this portrayal of the solidarity of ‘original sin’ still faces at least one obstacle on its own terms. Recall that only Communities can produce the forms of objective spirit proper to collective persons and that Communities are constituted by the willing of a common ‘content’ central to the Community, so that the Community becomes end in itself. The *peccatorum communio* clearly fails on these criteria. Adamic humanity is not willed as an end in itself, since self-will destroys all will to community. At best, one could argue that ‘self-will’ somehow aims at a shared content (each individual self), but it is still external to the community and would constitute a Society, not a Community. In either case, no ‘collective person’ is here possible by its own definition, but a collective person is required if the duality of sinful humanity is to be “superseded (*aufgehoben*) through the unity of the new humanity in Christ,” the Church (I, 121).

⁷ On structure and intention, see above, p. 108.

I.b.4 The Church as Reconciled Community

Sin remains in the church and remains real. Grace has overcome sin and overcome it in reality. The reality of grace and the reality of sin stand alongside one another in the church as an object of revelation and hope, for Christ replaces Adam “only eschatologically” (I, 124). In this way the “lines of thought pursued thus far [person, primal state, sin] converge...are carried to their logical conclusion and transcended in both senses of ‘sublation’ [*aufgehoben*]” (I, 124 A). The “old ontic relations” of sin are not “radically abolished” (*radikal aufgehoben*), so what is “unprecedentedly novel” in the church is the “necessary bond between the basic relations and the empirical form of community,” which “constitutes the essence of the church” (I, 125). Not only the *basic relation* itself but its *bond* with the *empirical structure* sets the church apart from all other communities. Bonhoeffer’s interpretation of the church is founded on these three elements: Christ’s vicarious representative action as establishing a new basic relation, the Holy Spirit as the bond between that relation and the empirical structure, and the elements of that structure in the cultus.

The basic relation forged in the “vicarious representative action” of Christ exists in conflict with the basic relations of sin, or rather in a *double relation* according to which the church is already “realized” and “consummated” (*Vollendung*) in eternity but also “actualized” or becoming in time, as *ecclesia triumphans* and *ecclesia militans*. This corresponds to the aforementioned distinction between “gift” (*Gabe*) and “task” (*Aufgabe*) and to a series of other conceptual pairs, including the “essential” and “empirical” church, “invisible” and “visible,” the “Realm of God” and the “Rule of God.” Each expresses in some form the Pauline tension between ‘already’ and ‘not yet,’ a

tension that can be released on the side of historical immanence or eschatological transcendence. According to Bonhoeffer, liberal theology characteristically falls to the side of immanence, Barth to the side of transcendence. He confusingly refers to these as “historicizing” and “religious” tendencies, but only the former has anything to do with “religion” in the sense Barth and Bonhoeffer ordinarily use the word (I, 125). The “religious” error in fact catches both sides in the debate between Barth and Eric Petersen, so that “historicity is either objectified and deified, as in Catholicism, or simply regarded as accidental...circumventing God’s will that all God’s revelation, both in Christ and in the Church, be concealed under the form of historical life...[rather] it loses its real character and becomes formalistic” (I, 125-6).⁸ Only when the Word is properly understood, from within, as the principle of the community can the relation and structure of the church come into view.

In an excursus on the concept of the church in the New Testament, Bonhoeffer begins to spell out the meaning of the Word as fulcrum between the two communities. Christ is “foundation” and “completion,” part and whole; “being in Christ” and “being in the church community” (*Gemeinde*) are the same; the church is a collective person; it is the presence of Christ, as Christ is the presence of God; the church is the “form of revelation, Jesus Christ existing as community,” and is “visible” only as a social body in worship and mission, “invisible” in its full eschatological reality (I, 134-141).⁹ These ideas drawn from the NT are reducible to two basic theses, that 1) the reality of the church in Christ is caught between its temporal and eternal poles and 2) its temporal pole is the personal presence of divine revelation, “Jesus Christ existing as church-

⁸ Recalling the licentiate thesis regarding the ‘dialectic of dialectical theology.’

⁹ Note the correspondence to several of his licentiate theses.

community.” They correspond loosely to the themes of “realization” and “actualization,” to the extent that the former concerns the eternal foundation of the church in Christ and the latter its temporal ‘building up’ in the Spirit.

Bonhoeffer’s systematic discussion of the church is structured according to three concepts or problems: realization in Christ, actualization in the Spirit, and the relation between Holy Spirit and human spirit. The first deals with *basic relations* (social philosophy), the third with *empirical structures* (sociology). The second establishes that “necessary relation” between relations and structures distinguishing the essence of the church community from all others:

The church does not first become real when it assumes empirical form, when the Holy Spirit does God’s work. The reality of the church of the Holy Spirit is just as much a revelational reality; the only thing that matters is to believe this revelational reality in the empirical form. As Christ and the new humanity now necessarily belong together, so the Holy Spirit must now be understood as being at work only in this new humanity. It is evidently a mistake, therefore, to attempt to reflect on the objective work of the Holy Spirit independently of the church-community. The Spirit is only in the church-community, and the church-community is only in the Spirit. (I, 144)

The actualizing work of the Spirit links the basic relations made real in Christ with the empirical, objective form of the church. The ‘necessity’ that binds them is the necessity of *faith*, the Spirit’s *act* “in me” creating the whole event of revelation, subject and object, election and sanctification. The Spirit can no more be separated from the prior realization of the church in Christ than from the empirical form of the community which is its exclusive province.¹⁰ An overview of these concepts (*realization* of basic relations in Christ, their *actualization* in the Spirit, and the *empirical forms* of human spirit in grace) will complete the exposition of *Sanctorum Communio* and prepare us to place it in a broader analytic and genetic context.

¹⁰ So much for Green’s claim that Bonhoeffer “offers the most catholic of ecclesiologies” Green, *Bonhoeffer*, 52.

The “realization” of the church in eternity is the event of election and divine decision and is therefore “completed” (*vollendet*). The “foundation stone” is laid and the “head” established, while the edifice is “built up” and the body grows in time rooted in the “life principle of the new basic relations of social existence... analogous to the basic relations established in Adam and their preservation [*Aufhebung*]” (I, 142, 143-4). God decision goes out not primarily to individuals but to a community, called together around the Word as the “temporal, clear expression of the supratemporality of election” (IX, 312). The Word greets humanity as a whole, a collective person:

Now since in the individual guilty act it is precisely the humanity of human beings that has been affirmed, humanity has to be considered a community. As such it is also a collective person, but a collective person that has the same nature as each of its members. In Christ this tension between isolation from, and bondage to, each other is abolished [*aufgehoben*] in reality. The cord between God and human beings that was cut by the first Adam is tied anew by God, by revealing God’s own love in Christ, but no longer approaching us in demand and summons, purely as You, but instead by *giving God’s own self as an I, opening God’s own heart. The church is founded on the revelation of God’s heart.* (I, 145)

To say that God ‘reties the knot’ of love between God and humans is to say that a new basic relation has been created. Through his vicarious representative action (love), the “history of Christ” overcomes the history of sin, and the eternity of Christ overcomes the time of Adam, issuing in the new time of the church, a time *actualized* in the Holy Spirit in the form of renewed social basic relationships. To understand the *realization* of the church in Christ according to Bonhoeffer, we need to see in what sense vicarious representative action is *representative* of all, how it ‘*suspends*’ time as a mode of isolation, and how it leads to *new social basic relations* in time.

The new humanity is a unity in Christ, concentrated in a “single point” and established “once for all” by his vicarious representative action; representative function is bound up with finality (I, 146). Christ “represents the whole of humanity in his historical

life” because that life gathers up history into itself and because the personal message of Jesus places him in opposition to—in solitude before—the whole of humanity (ibid). The ‘historical life’ of Christ has these two senses, the individual life testified to in the Gospels and the ‘real dialectic’ (of Adam and Christ) that encompasses the divided courses of history, and their real meaning and unity is inaccessible apart from the Word. Bonhoeffer interprets the personal history of Jesus through a more or less standard Lutheran version of the relation between Law and Gospel. Christ places himself ‘under the Law’ in order to turn the Law back on Israel, condemning all in shared solitude, so that Israel is part of Adam. In his preaching of the Kingdom and repentance, Christ “reveals God’s ultimate claim,” and the recognition of our failure makes way for Christ’s gift (I, 149). For all who acknowledge their solitude, “hear and believe,” God creates a new community from the cross, whose curse Christ bears because of his singular obedience. In accepting the punishment for our sins (Bonhoeffer points to Luther here), Christ stands in our place, is our vicarious representative. Christ ‘represents the whole of humanity in his historical life’ in that he is rejected by all, Jew and Greek, and sent to the cross.

The retrospective of the resurrection brings the full meaning of his personal history into view as part of the ‘real historical dialectic’ in which Christ overcomes the broken history of sin. In the resurrection, Christ’s ‘body’ is realized “only insofar as it has now run the dialectical course of its history,” taking up the broken world into itself (I, 152). One enters this history only by the Word, in being addressed as a sinner, found in solitude, and restored to community through faith—in short, by being “suspended” or “overcome” as a child of Adam.

To enter Christ is to leave the form of time and history “constituted by sin and death,” in which past and future are set against one another. Unfortunately, Bonhoeffer does not much elaborate his understanding of time and history, but *isolation* is the distinguishing feature of time in sin. A ‘history’ in which one has no real community or relations is a history of atomized moments—a sense of time, as Bonhoeffer says earlier, more fit to the physicist than the musician. With these thoughts he has come near to Augustine on the extension of the soul. Temporally retrojected and projected, the unity of the soul is found in memory and anticipation, the whole always present in the parts, as the anticipated whole of a melody grants each note its meaning. Death and sin shatter the melody into a mere non-sequence of notes, where “life abiding in love breaks the continuity of the historical process” and unites past and future for us in the death and resurrection of Christ (I, 146). Faith and election create a community from isolation by reestablishing a coda that orients the scattered, discordant notes to itself.

Vicarious representative action therefore leads to the “*paradoxical reality of the cross-community*, which contains within itself the contradiction of simultaneously representing utmost solitude and closest community” (I, 151). Solitude has reached its deepest because the call and commandment of God has touched all, Jew and Greek. Community is closest in that the goal which unites is God as the community itself, so that the community wills itself only by willing God. The community of the cross reflects Christ’s vicarious representative action in its three basic social relationships of plurality, community, and unity. The death of Christ isolates individuals into a *plurality*, each conscience admitting culpability in rejecting the claim of God he represents. The resurrection makes the community of the cross into a *unity* through justification, all

becoming one in the collective person of Christ. With the community between God and humans restored by love, human beings are restored to loving *community* with one another.

In Christ God creates the reality of a “pardoned humanity...not religion, but revelation, not religious community, but church...[and yet] there is a necessary connection between revelation and religion as well as between religious community and church” (I, 153). This ‘necessary connection’ founds a twofold relation between Christ and the church. On the one hand, the “church is already completed in Christ, time is suspended (*aufgehoben*)” or the “border of history marked by death is abolished (*aufgehoben*)” (I, 154, 151). On the other, the church is to be actualized in time and history through the Holy Spirit. The ‘necessary connection’ here is identical with that previous ‘necessary connection’ by which the Spirit bridges the questions of realization and the empirical form of the community. The church is real, the outward form of community must be actualized.

But what is ‘real’ if not ‘actual’? Bonhoeffer’s use of these terms reflects what Christoph Schwöbel has called Barth’s “inversion” of “the modern paradigm,” reversing the priority of knowing over being as well as the priority of possibility over actuality.¹¹ Revelation demands both. The theological method makes the first inversion. One must be within revelation to know it, and there is no hope of thinking one’s way to the other. The being of revelation as church makes the second inversion:

But we must pay strict attention to the fact that here the counterpart of actualization by the Holy Spirit is not potentiality in Christ, but the reality of revelation in Christ. This is the foundation for

¹¹ Christoph Schwöbel, “Theology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), p. 29.

the entire understanding of the problem of the church...the church that is established in Christ and already completed in reality must necessarily be actualized. (I, 144)

Appeals to ‘possibility’ as the counterpart of ‘actuality’ would “destroy the reality character of redemption,” and faith in the reality of justification and reconciliation (the church) is only possible in the actual church (ibid). In both inversions, Bonhoeffer has followed Barth with a predictable twist. If for Barth the “being of God must be understood as the ground for knowledge of God” and “the actuality of the Word of God determines the possibility of theology,” then the being of the church as the being of Christ preconditions both the *knowledge* of God and the *actuality* of the church as the place where the Word is spoken (theology).¹² Bonhoeffer’s unwillingness to separate the Word from the community in which it is spoken forces him to these conclusions.

The main difference between realization and actualization, though, is that realization lacks temporal concreteness; in the divided path of history, it tracks with the undercurrent of eternity, bending time towards itself through the Word. Actualization begins with the “social nexus” initiated by the Word, in which Christ is present through the Spirit, and Bonhoeffer draws a familiar circle linking Christ, Spirit, faith and Word (I,158). The Word has three ‘modes of operation’ analogous to the three social basic relations in Christ. As Christ’s death breaks the *plurality* of sinners into “isolation” (*Alleinsein*), the Spirit as personal will leads the *plurality* of elect into “solitude” (*Einsamkeit*), a reckoning of the individual with the “claim” and “gift” of the Spirit (I, 162). As the vicarious action or love of Christ brings *community* by opening again relations within humanity and between humanity and God, the Spirit presses all towards the church-community itself as the object of God’s creative will, where the other (contra

¹² Schwöbel, 30.

Barth) is no mere “parable” and “proxy” for the divine Other but is “infinitely important” (I, 169ff.). The new social basic relations here are “giving” not “demanding,” but the I-You relation of “solitude” remains as the Law remains with the Gospel. It is “overcome” (*überwinden*) and “abolished” (*aufgehoben*), but never completely, never ‘radically.’ Finally, as the resurrection of Christ ‘justifies’ the community as a *unity*, in the Spirit Christ is present as a “concrete” collective person, the “social form” of the church’s unity.

Subtending the collective person as the form of unity is the objective spirit of the church community, from which spring the empirical social structures of the human spirit adopted by the Holy Spirit in grace. This structure is not decisive, however, for the thesis of this chapter or the study as whole, and so I will conclude with a few selective remarks. The non-necessity of dealing with the particulars of the empirical form when understanding the theological structure of the church is given by Bonhoeffer himself: the objective spirit and its forms are not identical with the Holy Spirit. Objective spirit gets its character from its “historical context” and always differs (I, 215). The “material” relation between the empirical and essential churches is found in the Holy Spirit, so that outlining the nature of the essential church and the Spirit effectively settled the fundamental questions concerning the relation between church and revelation. With regard to the empirical church, three other points may be made briefly.

First, and alongside this “material” unity of the church, Bonhoeffer asks about a “logical” unity or the possibility that everything referred to under the label of the church could really belong together in a single concept. The Word provides for this unity by gathering all individuals into empirical congregations as collective persons and finally

into the one collective person of Christ according to the “function” of the body of Christ (I, 225). The next two points follow from this and will reveal their full significance later when considering Bonhoeffer’s complete thought-form. If the Word holds together all aspects of the empirical and essential church in its *function*, then, second, the “sociological functions” of the church relate directly to the Word. The congregation’s sociological reality is in the assembly for preaching and sacrament, and while the assembly gathers to hear the preached Word, it also “bears” the office of preaching. The Word is inseparable from the church, the community of faith, just as the community is inseparable from the Word (I, 232ff). The congregation and not the Word alone is the presupposition, the reality, of revelation. Third, however, there is the question of right preaching, which is the question of teaching or theology, a question of “authority and freedom” with regard to the Word and church doctrine (I, 250ff). These three elements in Bonhoeffer’s discussion of the church will correspond to three forms of theological knowledge, as we will see shortly. The remaining topics of the dissertation (the placement of the church among sociological types, faith and the “experience” of the church, and eschatology) add nothing to our exposition of Bonhoeffer’s concept of the church as a solution to the problem of revelation and may be set aside. With the three preceding points, one sees that the entire scope of the church is referred back to the Word and to the theological dialectic as the unexamined presupposition of the whole study. *AB* fills the lacuna at the center of *SC*.

CHAPTER IV

ACT AND BEING: THE PROBLEM OF KNOWLEDGE RESOLVED IN THE CHURCH

After completing his dissertation in December 1927, Bonhoeffer left the following January for a pastoral appointment to a German congregation in Barcelona, Spain. The change of climate seems to have yielded, or at least helped along, certain theological changes as well. One of the last entries in his Barcelona diary (Mar 10, 1928) reflects a perplexity towards his new direction: “My theology is beginning to become humanistic; what does that mean? I wonder whether Barth ever lived abroad?”¹ The significance of this “humanistic” departure from Barth becomes more apparent as the Spanish sojourn wears on. Spain’s relative political peace and the sincere piety of his parishioners led Bonhoeffer to a new question regarding ‘strength of life.’ Shortly after his last diary entry in a letter to Walter Dreß, he remarks that “my previous understanding of dogmatics is being seriously questioned by all these new impressions in a country that has known neither war nor revolution, neither a youth movement nor a Spengler... In any case, I know have serious questions about whether Barth could have written in Spain” (X, 76). In order to turn his “Berlin winter theology” towards spring and summer, he would have to revise it “from the ground up” (X, 77).

The absence of war and the nationalist enthusiasm it generated in Germany apparently allowed Bonhoeffer to reconsider pietism. Writing to Dreß again (April 20), he comments on the “uninhibited theological element” of a certain inauspicious book, its

¹ X, 64.

“enormous piety,” the sense for which “Barth somewhat blunted” in him (X, 87). Bonhoeffer goes so far as to admit that “Barth has become quite dangerous personally for me as well, a fact I sense with increasing clarity here in the life of the congregation when I occasionally...people characterized by an extremely strong piety or even pietism” (ibid). He hardly restricts the recognition of such piety to the ‘holy’ but finds it also in “people with passions, criminal types, small people with small goals, small drives and small crimes...real people” (X, 127). It is these people who “stand more under grace than under wrath,” whereas “it is precisely the Christian world that stands more under wrath than under grace,” a world he judges as a “masquerade” (ibid). In this same letter, Bonhoeffer also partially acknowledges Widmann’s insistence that there are “sociological prerequisites” for theology. If the sermon and its hearers are “grasped by Christ,” then “Christ becomes flesh as much in the word of the pietists as in that of the clerics or of the religious socialists...[and] these empirical connections actually pose difficulties for preaching that are absolute, not merely relative” (X, 127-8). “At the most profound level,” he admits, “people are simply not all one, but are individuals, totally different people, people ‘united’ only by the word in the *church*” (ibid). This holds true for teaching as well as preaching, and during his tenure as assistant vicar, Bonhoeffer delivered three lectures and a number of sermons. The three lectures correspond rather neatly to the epistemic, historical and ethical circles, so we shall ask first to what extent his new found humanism has altered the connections forged in Berlin (I), turning then to the habilitation essay, *Act and Being*, in order to analyze the structure of its argument (II). The conclusion will then gather up the threads of this study to consider the unity of the dissertations and the thought-form that embraces them.

I. The Will is a Wild Bull: Barcelona and the ‘Strength of Life.’

While in Barcelona, Bonhoeffer took in at least two bullfights, to great theological effect. Observing that the bourgeois spectators believe they “owe it to their central European civilization to be shocked,” he still finds that behind the lust for “blood and cruelty,” it is also true that “wild, unrestrained power and blind rage...ultimately succumb[s] to disciplined courage, presence of mind, and skill” (X, 83). “Not by accident,” the bullfight exists alongside a “most gloomy Catholicism” as a “remnant of unrestrained, passionate life...the Sunday corrida constituting the necessary counterpart to the mass” (X, 77). This element of ‘unrestraint’ is perhaps what Bonhoeffer has in mind when he likens Spain to Germany, musing that neither nation “completely opened up to humanism” so that “a remnant of something else always persisted” beneath or alongside the inheritance of classical western antiquity (X, 89). Indeed, a kind of vitalistic Nietzschean affirmation of the will is combined with Luther’s admonition to “sin boldly” in the final lecture on ethics. Bonhoeffer seems pulled thereby between not two but three poles, not merely between Barth and the humanistic, pietistic, liberal Protestantism of Berlin, but now too a second humanism opposed to both, a humanism of “strong life,” a humanism not of the *good* but of the capable, the *powerful* will.

The capacity and struggle of the will for obedience was, as we have seen, a distinct—and distinctly “unBarthian”—theme present in his writings from the beginning. If a new emphasis is readily identifiable at all, it appears in rhetoric that closely

resembles that of the prison letters, although the language of the sermons and the lecture series is noticeably different on this point. While no single trope shapes all of the sermons, a collection of related themes repeat themselves throughout. Near to the center of this rhetorical constellation is the concept of life, understood as strong or weak. Weakness belongs to death, the world, loneliness, homelessness, judgment, guilt and time. Strength belongs to life, the church, solidarity, home, grace, forgiveness and eternity. The dualism of time and eternity, religion and revelation, sin and justification remains, but the focus of the sermons, including the choice of texts, increasingly tends towards the presence of God in history, and the neat separation of church and world characteristic of the dissertation seems to have relaxed. The lecture series given to the Barcelona congregation also employs figures typically associated with the prison writings, such as center and periphery or religion as the attempt to “put Christ in place” and Christianity as “irreligious” and “amoral,” as well as a thoroughgoing affirmation of “strength of life” (X, 354, 374).

The lectures topics reflect a continued outworking of the three circles, but in a more practical, pastoral manner. The first lecture on “The Tragedy of the Prophetic and Its Lasting Significance” deals with the distinction between *faith and knowledge* in terms the divine Word and call as a crisis of historical and political life. The second lecture, “Jesus Christ and the Essence of Christianity,” presents the distinction between *Christ and history*, Christ’s “contemporaneity” to the present, as the answer to whether Christ can still lay claim to the whole and center of cultural existence. The final lecture, “Basic Questions of a Christian Ethic,” continues this line of thought by arguing for a distinction between *ethics and metaphysics*, between Christian ethical life and the search for

enduring moral “principles,” grounded in the continuously new relation of God to human history. Despite the fact that the lectures were delivered towards the end of his stay in Barcelona, the ‘humanistic’ note seems less pronounced than in the sermons, or at least Bonhoeffer accents the ‘either-or’ with equal weight. The notion of “strength” nonetheless shows up with some frequency, along with a litter of references to Nietzsche and a perplexing display of nationalism, all of which we will have to consider in weighing the ‘humanism’ of the Spanish interlude. Rather than treating the sermons independently, I will bring them to bear on the themes of the lectures as relevant.

Delivered on November 13, 1929, the first lecture announces as its occasion the crisis of contemporary European culture, a crisis driven by “unclear political ideology” and the marginalization of the educated middle class, for whom “the rug—or the bourgeois parquet floor—has been pulled ruthlessly from beneath [their] feet” (X, 326). In the midst of this disorientation, Bonhoeffer seeks a polar star in “traces of God’s presence on earth, in ancient or modern times... eternal, supratemporal” (X, 327). The prophets, as he often suggests with Barth, belong to a line extending through Paul to Luther and Kierkegaard, a line extended into the present by dialectical theology. The era of the prophets he likens to his own, full of “Volkish arrogance and immorality,” to which the prophet must preach a message of judgment and destruction (X, 330). This is the ‘tragedy’ of the prophet, that in the name of God he turns against the people he loves, so that his own life is divided, the “battlefield of two worlds,” to which he “rushes in blindly—into divine ruin” (X, 333). Such remarks echo his earlier description of Luther and the Barthian contest between time and eternity, localized again in the soul and will of the individual who experiences the divine call. Alongside the declaration of God’s

unapproachable holiness and the condemnation of religion stands God's lordship over history. The next lecture explores the character of that lordship in the cross and its community.

The second lecture addresses directly the place of Christ in history, "in the place where decisions are made concerning...our own lives and the life of our Volk" (X, 342). The problem is the marginalization of Christianity in the bourgeois world, where "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...the so-called parlor into which one doesn't mind withdrawing for a couple of hours...the cross as an ornamentation or decoration for our lives" (ibid). By contrast, to take Christ "seriously" is to accept his exclusive claim, rather than put him "in the appropriate and worthy position" as religious genius or ethicist (X, 343). Bonhoeffer sets out to distinguish the Christian message from all others, religious or secular, by separating two modes of historical interpretation, one in which everything has already been decided by the categories of interpretation ("idealism"), and one in which the phenomena of history are permitted to speak for themselves ("contemporaneous"). In the latter, "psychology" and "chronology" are set aside, unrelated to any abiding human essence (X, 354). "Humanism" and classical culture are derided as the "enemies" of Christianity, to the extent that they see the divine already in the human, for Christianity consists in "the way of God to humanity," with all its consequences for ethical life.

Bonhoeffer's first sustained work at Christian ethics returns to question of the child as one "beyond good and evil," prior to the Fall and in the "primal community" of loving immediacy to God (I, 363). Taking the Sermon on the Mount as his guide, he

argues that what is new in Jesus' 'ethical' message is the complete surrender of the human will to the divine will in every moment of ethical decision, that there are no laws by which a person could make themselves 'good' but only God's will, renewed every morning. Grace is the 'end' of the Law, abrogation and fulfillment. He then illustrates this ethical reasoning by engaging three contemporary issues: the relation between "historical development" and the commandment to love, the relation between love and truth, and the relation between "nature and spirit." Less abstractly, these are the problems of war against neighbors, lies and social order, and sexuality, all of which exemplify a conflict in the "hierarchy of divine orders," a tension between nature and grace, and all of which recur in his nearly completed *Ethics* in the 1940s (X, 369).

In these "concrete situations," the vitalist element is most evident. "War," he writes, "is murder...nothing but a crime," but how does one choose between killing one's enemy and allowing them to kill one's neighbor, when we are commanded to love both (X, 370)? Here Bonhoeffer takes a surprising turn, moving back to a "broader problem, to the question of the relation between history and God, Volk and God, growth and God" (X, 373). He then likens a 'Volk' to an individual, whose growth requires expansion, "pushing aside other individuals," where every people is "called to create its own history, to enter into the struggle with the life of nations," where God gives youth, strength and victory (ibid). "For God wills strength of life, not anxiety" (374). That strength is found only where Christ has "liberated [human beings] from the world, ethics remaining merely a sacrifice, a demonstration of our weak will...In this way the kingdom of grace establishes itself above the kingdom of the ethical" (X, 378).

The volitional element so pervasive in the student essays and dissertation eventually had to face not only these concrete ethical questions, but the question of German “self-assertion,” where Nietzsche’s name had been so forcefully invoked. The problem of “self-assertion” was framed as a question of Germany’s right to “growth” or “maturation,” a framing that acquired metaphysical force from the German understanding of nations as individuals and providence as favoring some over others. The ambiguous humanism hanging over these lectures therefore crystallizes in the confrontation between Nietzsche and Christ, the “overman” and the “child.” Already underway, the habilitation essay develops the problem of Christian understanding as the problem of the child.

Shortly after the last lecture, Bonhoeffer returned to Berlin in late February of 1930. Only a few weeks later, he submitted his habilitation essay for approval to Seeberg’s replacement, Wilhelm Lütgert, for whom Bonhoeffer would serve as assistant until his first trip to America in September. We can safely say that his time back in Berlin little impacted the writing of *Act and Being*, which was carried out largely in Barcelona. His correspondence with Detlef Albers, a teacher at the German school in Barcelona, reveals the continued spiritual impact of the city, particularly in contrast with his feelings about Germany. He describes the atmosphere in Berlin as “old, gray, covered in the moss of tradition...the air is close...and musty enough to suffocate you, and everywhere it smells like sweat...it costs the me the most resolute energy and self-control” (X, 177). To Albers’ complaint that Barcelona is more “stale and worthless” than Berlin, Bonhoeffer responds in earnest:

But if one believes one understands something of the nature of what spirit really is, can one not somehow welcome a turn away from what has in fact become an all-too-human spirit—including the spirit of humanism (or perhaps this very spirit is meant)—and the turn to the ‘material,’ which is also bequeathed by the spirit and is less likely to be subject to misunderstanding? Perhaps today

as never before, ‘spirit’ really is to be found in the particular, that is, precisely in the material, in concrete, given reality—and precisely not in ‘intellectuality.’ (X, 182)

A turn to the ‘material’ seems perfectly in keeping with the appropriation of Nietzsche so apparent in Barcelona, and he points Albers to the people, the “unintellectual ones,” who make it seem that the “the intellectual overproduction [in Germany] has something repugnantly nonintellectual about it” (ibid). In a letter to Helmut Roßler, he dismisses a lecture by Seeberg as “shallow religious babble,” and despite his respectful correspondence with and eulogy for von Harnack, it is hard to believe that the latter really understood the direction of his last close pupil. *Act and Being* would certainly have surprised the old master.

II. *Act and Being*

In order to qualify for a teaching appointment, Bonhoeffer had to submit a second dissertation or habilitation essay, and while the planning and execution of the habilitation generally followed quickly upon taking the doctorate, *Act and Being* seems to have been conceived and written at unusual pace. His advisor, Seeberg, had only approved the dissertation in December of 1927, and Bonhoeffer took up pastoral duties in Barcelona in February of the next year, dealing with the consistory and ordination requirements in between, as well as the revision of *Sanctorum Communio* for publication. The first mention of his habilitation topic only appears in June of 1928, in a letter to Walter Dreß, where he mentions “beginning a longer work—either a complete piece about ‘consciousness’ or a smaller preliminary piece about ‘the child and theology’” (X, 103).

A month later, in a letter to Seeberg discussing the revision of his dissertation, he comments that “my thoughts are already busy with another project, albeit again not historical but rather systematic. It picks up the question of consciousness and conscience in theology and also several Luther citations from the big Galatians commentary...this will be theological rather than psychological” (X, 122). With the deadline for its completion in February, only nine months remained for actual writing, and it was accepted by the Berlin faculty on July 12, 1930.

The connections between consciousness, conscience, the child and justification (Luther’s concern in the Galatians commentary) should already be partly in view. According to the student essays, sermons and dissertation, conscience is the place where the message of justification strikes in order to break through the self-enclosure of “knowledge.” References to ‘the child’ as a theological concept appear only in Barcelona, and then infrequently, although Bonhoeffer had obviously struggled with the idea indirectly from the beginning of his academic career, preaching to children in Berlin and again in Barcelona. The continuities with his previous work are more visible in his initial statement of the problem in the habilitation essay itself.

The central thesis of *AB* is the most noticeable (and significant) of these continuities, namely, that the tension between act and being is resolved only in the “sociological category” of the church (II, 31). If the church is the solution to the problem of revelation—the subject matter of the essay—then *AB* must stand in some systematic relation to *SC*. I have suggested that *SC* approaches the problem of revelation from the direction of its mediation in the church, the ‘horizontal’ or historical dialectic, while *AB* approaches revelation from the standpoint of the knowing subject’s relation to God, or

the 'vertical' dialectic. Again, both *AB* and *SC* treat *both* dialectics, the suspension of the isolated individual into community *and* the suspension of the blind individual into a knowing relation with God. The entwinement of the dialectics means that the whole 'event' of revelation can be understood by apprehending it first from one aspect, then from the other. I will return to the relation between the two texts and their arguments in the final chapter, focusing here on *AB*.

Exploring Bonhoeffer's interpretation of the problem confronted in *AB* will clarify these connections somewhat. This preliminary statement of the problem may be divided into four sections. After listing current theologians and philosophers preoccupied with the themes of 'act' and 'being' respectively (1), he names the question of act and being explicitly as a theological question regarding revelation (2), extends this statement by defining his terms (3), and then provides an outline of the argument (4).

The theoreticians of 'act' include Karl Barth, Frederick Gogarten, Rudolf Bultmann, Hans Michael Müller, and Frederick Karl Schumann, while those associated with 'being' include Paul Althaus, Reinhold Seeberg, Karl Holl, Emanuel Hirsch, Frederick Brunstäd, Erich Peterson, Martin Heidegger, and Erich Przywara. Whether or not such a division really characterized the field at the time, the lines so drawn tell the reader what Bonhoeffer is after. On the one side, we find Karl Barth and the dialectical theologians, with a mixed lot of idealists, Thomists, and existentialists on the other. Generally speaking, Bonhoeffer divides the field into two camps, those who allow Kant to determine the path of their thought and those who seek to go beyond or behind him. His statement of the problem makes this relation to Kant explicit:

At the heart of the problem is the struggle with the formulation of the question that Kant and idealism have posed for theology. It is a matter of the formation of genuine theological concepts, the decision one comes to between a transcendental-philosophical and ontological interpretation of theological concepts. It is a question of the ‘objectivity’ of the concept of God and an adequate concept of cognition, the issue of determine the relationship between ‘the being of God’ and the mental act which grasps that being. In other words, the meaning of ‘the being of God in revelation’ must be interpreted theologically, including how it is known, how faith as act, and revelation as being, are related to one another and, correspondingly, how human beings stand in light of revelation. Is revelation ‘given’ to them only in each completed act; is there for human beings such a thing as ‘being’ in revelation? What form does the concept of revelation have when it is interpreted in terms of act and when it is interpreted in terms of being?²

Although the repetition might be distracting, this introduction to his theme is sufficiently clear. The ‘act’ in question is the *act of faith* as a ‘mental’ or ‘cognizing’ act in its relation to the *being of God* in revelation. As an inquiry into “how the human being stands in light of revelation” and whether revelation occurs only in “each completed act,” *AB* recalls the earlier critique of Barth’s actualism.

A few important terminological distinctions follow. The act of faith is not identical to consciousness as act because faith has a specific character as “pure intentionality,” whereas consciousness “in itself” is malleable, capable of multiple modes (II, 28). This allows Bonhoeffer to discriminate between “direct” and “reflexive” consciousness, or *actus directus* and *actus reflexus* (ibid). When consciousness turns back on itself and takes itself as its own object (as in Idealism), the outward direction of faith is lost. The curvature of knowing has consequences for being: “even as consciousness [Bewußt-sein], being [Sein] is not in principle contained within consciousness [Bewußt-sein]” (II, 29). By playing on the semantics of *Bewußtsein*, as a variation on the verb ‘to know’ (*wissen*), Bonhoeffer attacks the transcendental and idealist definitions of subject and object, knowing and being. Though consciousness is a

² II, 27ff. It is unclear why the editor of the English edition italicizes the phrase “how human beings stand in light of revelation.” This would reinforce the emphasis, for example, of Clifford Green, that *AB* concerns anthropology rather than revelation—an emphasis this study shows to be mistaken, despite its many contributions.

manner of being, being is not contained in or objectified for consciousness. Being (*Sein*) is not the being of beings (*Seiendes*).

Bonhoeffer then outlines the study in three parts, corresponding to the table of contents, and each develops the problem of revelation in greater detail. Section A examines act and being as two strategies for dealing with the question of knowledge in terms of self-consciousness and applies those strategies to the “conceptions of God and revelation, from which everything else proceeds” (II, 30). The question of knowledge is not only a question of the creature regarding itself, but in that question the creature is carried out beyond itself, and the vector of its understanding “in reference to transcendence...suggests that the question of God is part of [the question of self-knowledge] too” (ibid). Because “the meaning of epistemology is anthropology,” not every epistemology will be compatible with the Christian understanding of God and revelation: “the concept of a contingent revelation of God in Christ denies in principle the possibility of the self-understanding of the I apart from the reference to revelation (Christian transcendentalism). The concept of revelation must yield an epistemology of its own” (II, 31).

If the first part demonstrates that both act and being lead to irresolvable contradictions in terms of human self-understanding, the second part looks to reconcile them in the church:

But inasmuch as an interpretation of revelation in terms of act or in terms of being yields concepts of understanding that are incapable of bearing the whole weight of revelation, the concept of revelation has to be thought about within the concreteness of the concept of the church, that is to say, in terms of a sociological category in which the interpretation of act and of being meet and are drawn together into one. The dialectic of act and being is understood theologically as the dialectic of faith and the congregation in Christ. Neither is to be thought without the other; each is ‘taken up’ or ‘suspended’ [*aufgehoben*] in the other. The theological concepts of object and knowledge are shown to be determined by the sociological concept of the person and must be recast accordingly. (ibid)

Again, the Barthian dialectic, the ‘act’ of suspension, is corrected with the “sociological category” of the church. The dissertation makes the same claim in substance, but the argument there proceeded from the perspective of the *historical* or *sociological* dialectic of the church, not the *eternal* or *theological* dialectic that founds it. The act of faith occurs in the being of the church and is “suspended” in it, providing for its continuity and concreteness. Here too, the key is the “sociological concept of person” or the being of the church is conceived in personalist terms, thus as spirit and act. The braiding of the dialectics gives Bonhoeffer’s theology its unique shape as a synthesis of Barth and Berlin.

In the final section, he denies the possibility of neutral conceptions of knowledge and being, claiming that all such concepts, “insofar as they are acquired from revelation, are always determined by the concepts of sin and grace, ‘Adam’ and Christ” (II, 32). As a mode of humanity in contrast with Adam, ‘being in Christ’ belongs to the “wider concreteness of...the church” where the past is “suspended [*aufgehoben*] in the future” and “out of the human being of conscience grows the child” (ibid). Bonhoeffer’s final summary of the essay cements its continuation of the logic set forth in the dissertation: “This entire study is an attempt to unify the concern of true transcendentalism and true ontology in an ‘ecclesiological form of thinking’” (ibid).

If *SC* explored the form (or being) of revelation as a community (“Jesus Christ existing as community”), *AB* examines the knowledge of the individual as they are transferred into that community by revelation. Just as the church, in its historical dialectic through sin to reconciliation, is the goal and fulfillment of all human community, so too “being in Christ” is the fulfillment of individual human thought and

life. To make good on this claim, Bonhoeffer must show that every attempt of human beings to understand themselves apart from God fails (A), that only the church can offer a full account of human self-understanding (B), and that this understanding corresponds to a mode of “being human” in Christ (C). After interpreting each of these steps in greater detail, the final chapter will take up the unity of Bonhoeffer’s thought-form in relation to the being of God as conceived in his habilitation essay.

I.a. The Failure of Autonomous Self-Knowledge as Act and Being.

The first chapter of *AB* divides into two subsections on transcendental and ontological philosophies respectively, or idealism and phenomenology in “genuine” and spurious forms. Although Bonhoeffer describes Kant as a “transcendental” philosopher in distinction from the “idealism” of Fichte and Hegel, it is more accurate to speak of “transcendental” (Kant) and “absolute” (Fichte, Hegel) idealism, just as we must distinguish here too between “formal” (Husserl, Scheler) and “existential” (Heidegger, Przywara) phenomenology. Kant’s is the genuine transcendental attempt, while Heidegger and Przywara present genuine ontologies. The criterion for a “genuine” philosophy is the same, regardless of its transcendental or ontological orientation, namely, that it refuses to let the I understand itself “out of itself” or autonomously. For both attempts at self-understanding, transcendental and ontological, Bonhoeffer tries to show that philosophy fails according to internal (philosophical) and external (theological) criterion. Philosophically, the I can never catch hold of itself, so that when it pretends to know itself (as in Idealism) it has covered over a contradiction, and even when it tries to acknowledge this limitation (as in Kant), it still establishes itself by cunning—in the

apparent “kenosis” of reason, it wins itself back by “krypsis” (II, 60). Theologically, the self-enclosed I leaves no room for revelation by drawing God into what the I already knows about itself. Each philosophy reflects these failures in a different way, depending on whether it prioritizes thought (transcendental) or being (ontological) in its interpretation of self-consciousness.³

Transcendental philosophy is “epistemology,” or the theorizing of self-consciousness in reflection, the I’s taking hold of itself by turning back upon itself in thought (I, 33). Where the priority of thought is affirmed, genuine transcendental philosophy (Kant) denies the I access to itself, whereas Idealism gives the I over to itself completely. In the former, the ‘reality’ behind subject and object, thought and being, I and other—the “transcendental unity of apperception” and the “thing in itself”—are “pure limit concepts,” so that the human being (*Dasein*) is stretched out between two unknown poles (II, 35). It is “being between” (*Sein zwischen*) and “between transcendence” (*zwischen Transcendenz*) as a consequence of the definition of being in relation to thought, object in relation to subject (ibid). ‘Objects’ for Kant are functions of judgments in the synthetic act of consciousness, so neither the world nor the I are available “in themselves” to the thinking subject. This has ontological consequences on both ends. For the self, it means that there is no “being pure and simple” but only being “in reference to,” being from and unto two poles which cannot be defined in advance of concrete experience (II, 37). Similarly, the being of a thing only ‘is’ in reference to knowing. What or how it ‘is’ depends on its relation to the self and vice versa, since the two are “constituted” by this relation.

³ Whether or not Bonhoeffer’s criticisms are correct and whether or not his position is viable in light of the counter critique by any one philosophy (especially Heidegger) is immaterial here. I only intend to present accurately the unfolding course of his thinking.

Idealism, by contrast, goes beyond the “modesty” of the transcendental perspective to a metaphysical “violence” that “lays hands” on the unconditional (II, 40). For idealism the I is no longer “entwined in transcendence” or “between” but is “turned in upon” itself, just as being is no longer “in reference to” thinking but occurs “through” it (II, 42). The failure of idealism is stated rather directly. Philosophically, it presupposes the very thing it believes itself to have established, that is, the capacity of self-consciousness to grasp not only itself but also the structure of being. The equation of being and thought, substance and subject, is simply incoherent. The I cannot be thought because it is the “precondition” of thinking (II, 38). “The eye does not see itself,” but idealism nonetheless pretends to have accomplished a “self-sublation” (*Selbstaufhebung*) of thought into itself (II, 45-6). Yet the I must already be there in order to “create” itself through the movement of thought. That is the irresolvable contradiction of absolute idealism. Theologically, idealism leads to the equation of God and humanity by defining both, together with reality, as spirit (*Geist*) or thought “in the unity of spirit beyond the subject-object dichotomy” (II, 49). Epistemology has become the “turning of spirit to spirit” (ibid).

Despite his intentions, Kant repeats the more evident philosophical contradiction of idealism in a different form, as Hegel had already suggested⁴. It is meaningless for the I to set its own limits over against the ‘unknown,’ since it must know the hither side of the “boundary” of reason to do so. In drawing its own limits, the I has once again embarked on a “self-suspension” and reinstated its omnipotence by sleight of hand, hence it is guilty of a false modesty and the same violence as idealism (II, 38). But Kant has

⁴ For background here, see Sally Sedgwick, *Hegel's Critique of Kant: From Dichotomy to Identity*, (Oxford: OUP, 2012).

resisted the desire of idealism to render God an object. For transcendental philosophy, God only 'is' in the act of consciousness as "pure intentionality" and "condition...in process, never completed," so that God is "always at the back of human being" (II, 45). God is simultaneously "honored" by the "boundary" that reason imposes on itself and dethroned because "there are for reason essentially no boundaries," if it can legislate its own limits (ibid). The limitation of reason, says Bonhoeffer, is therefore a matter not of theoretical but of practical reason—a moral decision and not a rational necessity. Reason "can only be brought into obedience," and there is a boundary "only for a concrete human being in its entirety, and this boundary is Christ" (ibid). If thought has, by an illusion, seized itself in this way, then being has been absorbed into the act of consciousness and the logos placed above and beyond being, so that neither is "suspended" into the other (II, 46).

The ontological strategy, represented for Bonhoeffer by phenomenology, aims "to demonstrate the priority of being over against consciousness and to uncover this being" (II, 59). The question is whether reason can really "surrender its claim" upon being, so that thinking is itself "suspended (*aufgehoben*) in being" with the recognition that *Dasein* is "always already existing" before it turns to itself in reflection (II, 60). Here human self-understanding derives not first from observing oneself but from the world, "from what they have beheld," the being in which they live and move (II, 61). Bonhoeffer does not draw the distinction explicitly, but the difference between spurious and "genuine" phenomenology corresponds to formal and existential phenomenology, Husserl and Scheler versus Heidegger and Przywara (the latter is only an 'existential phenomenologist' in a qualified sense).

The four lie along a continuum, measured by the extent to which being is given due priority over thought. Husserl remains “partially under the spell of idealism,” since he examines only the “phenomenon of pure consciousness” and brackets out the existence of the essences that comprise intentional objects (II, 62). Scheler is a slight improvement in this respect, moving from the purely logical to the “totality of life” by “transferring the a priori from the formal, from what pertains to consciousness, to the material...to the domain of value, to the given” (II, 65). He dismisses the Kantian question as “formalistic,” but being is still accessible to the I “from itself,” so that he slips back into a “pure immanence” (II, 67). By describing Dasein’s thinking as mode of being (*existentia* “as a mode of the *esse* of *essentia*”), Heidegger overcomes the formalistic and timeless view of being. Where Husserl “brackets,” Heidegger “discloses” (ibid). Being achieves thereby an “unconditional priority over thought” and yet “being equals Dasein, equals the understanding of being, equals spirit” (II, 71). The apparent reconciliation of act and being is subverted by the self-enclosure of Dasein, which awakens itself through its own conscience and authenticates itself through its own death. Finally, then, this “ontological accomplishment of the suspension [*Aufhebung*] of thought in being is conditioned by the view that human beings...have the understanding of being systematically at their disposal” (II, 72). Heidegger’s Dasein understands itself solely from itself, even it is already ‘in the world.’ Przywara goes beyond Heidegger by freeing Dasein from this self-enclosure, claiming that humans understand their being only in analogy with the being of God.

Each fails of internal philosophical criterion (humans grasp their being out of their own resources) but also of external or theological criterion. Przywara’s doctrine of the

analogia entis, for example, still risks a “metaphysics of immanence” and does not “adequately express the transcendence of God” (II, 74). The pretense of this “formalistic-metaphysical” attempt resides in its appeal to a generic being, particularly a generic human being or creatureliness, as its starting point (II, 75). Human being is unknown to itself as a creature, but is understood theologically only as being-in-Adam or in Christ, in sin or in grace, in shattered community or in the church. Being is always morally charged, for God is “not primarily the ‘sheer is,’ but the ‘righteous one,’ the ‘holy one,’ ‘love’” (ibid). Once more, reason has justified itself. Heidegger has so defined being temporally that even God’s eternity would be subjected to time, resulting in a “consciously atheistic philosophy of finitude” in which “being enclosed...can no longer be separated from finitude” (II, 72). Scheler contrives a “religious phenomenon” that depends *a priori* on the thought but not the existence of God. Husserl simply brackets God out.

The litany of charges raised against transcendental and ontological philosophies comes down to the notion that human beings cannot understand themselves on their own. Philosophically, this would entail reason or thought catching hold of itself, which always leads back to the contradictions and circularities of reflection. Theologically, reason’s desire to close the circle of self-understanding leaves no room for revelation; if humans can understand themselves alone, they do not need God. But if the unity of the self is found only in revelation, then philosophy finds its limit only when it “knows revelation and confesses itself to be Christian philosophy in full recognition (*Anerkenntnis*) that the place it wanted to usurp is occupied by another—by Christ” (II, 78). Put differently, the “offense against Christian theology in any autonomous self-understanding is that it

believes human beings to be capable of giving truth to themselves” (II, 79). In their “genuine” forms, these philosophies nonetheless lend themselves to theological interpretation, insofar as the “in reference to” (*in bezug auf*) and “being suspended” (*Aufgehobensein*) of act and being point out beyond themselves, so that in revelation “both are brought together, surmounted and transcended [*aufgehoben*] in an original fashion” (ibid). A human ‘is’ only ‘in reference to’ themselves or to the Word, and so they ‘exist’ only in Adam or in Christ, in isolation or in the church, which reconciles act and being, continually suspending one in the other.

I.b. The Church as the Reconciliation of Act and Being and the Place of Human Self-Understanding.

If human being cannot answer the question about itself, the answer must be given to it by God, or not at all. To show that humans come to themselves only in the church, Bonhoeffer argues that neither act nor being alone can “bear the whole weight of revelation” and that the church holds the two in a proper dialectical tension. Part A of *AB* demonstrated in a “preparatory” fashion that self-understanding is heteronomous, since autonomous attempts fail. B.1 and B.2 deal with revelation conceived as act and as being respectively, and both follow the same *threefold* line of questioning by beginning (a) with God’s ‘being’ in revelation (as contingency versus continuity), then turning (b) to human knowledge of revelation (as non-objective versus objective), which (c) defines human being in revelation (as decision versus being-in). Section B.3 argues, in response to Part A, that (a) human beings are led out beyond themselves and encountered only in the church, and then in response to the three aspects of B.1 and B.2 that (b) *God* is both

contingently free and continuously present in the church, that (c) *human beings* must decide freely in faith for God and that they are already 'in' faith in the church, and finally (d) that there are forms of knowledge appropriate both to direct and reflexive consciousness in the church. Part C elaborates this knowing human being as two basic forms of intentionality in Adam and in Christ, with social and temporal dimensions.

Let us compare Bonhoeffer's separate analyses of revelation in act (B.1) and being (B.2) with regard to their three components, the being of God (a), knowledge (b), and human being (c), so as to highlight the tensions reconciled in the concept of the church. If the manner of knowledge defines human being, and if divine revelation defines the character of knowledge, then revelation redefines human being. A brief comparison will elucidate how the limits of act and being for interpreting revelation mirror one another and point to a higher synthesis. If revelation is interpreted only as act, it is merely contingent, never objective, and demanding continual decision. If revelation is interpreted only as being, it becomes continuous but at the risk of being merely objective and existent, having the being of a thing. As Bonhoeffer stated in the introduction, everything depends on the proper theological concept of the object (*Gegenstand*) as what stands against (*gegen*) the subject without being reduced to its corollary, a mere object.

A proper understanding of the *being of God in revelation* (B1/2.a) must overcome two mistaken tendencies, one born from the concept of act, the other from the concept of being. When revelation is interpreted solely in terms of act, God's freedom is maintained in its *contingency*, but the *continuity* of revelation is lost. When one approaches revelation strictly from the standpoint of being, revelation remains in continuity but its

contingent, free character is replaced by the being of a thing, an “existent” (*Seiendes*). Where the freedom of God takes precedent, as it does in Barth, revelation, “which places the I into truth, which gives the understanding of God and the self, is a contingent event that is to be affirmed or denied in its positivity—that is to say, as received reality” (II, 82). Such freedom admits of a “twofold” interpretation, as “formal” (*formal*) and as “actual” (*aktuell*) or as “formalistic-actualistic” (II, 85, 83, 90). *Formal* freedom is sheer autonomy, bound to nothing, always beginning anew; actual freedom has “all the instability of a deed being done right now” (II, 83). Coinciding with the act of consciousness, revelation occurs only in the “direct” intentionality of faith, never in reflection, and is “supratemporal” (II, 84, 99).

Barth meant to preserve the freedom of God in this way, and the formal concept of freedom inevitably leads him, says Bonhoeffer, to a “dialectical” thinking that prevents theological concepts from “petrification” into the categories of being (II, 90). Griesbach’s philosophy takes a similar approach, as do the theologies of Gogarten and Knittermeyer. Like Barth, they attack the claim of thought to absorb being entirely into itself, seeking “reality” in the “encounter” of existence with its “other,” an encounter that “takes place in, and really constitutes, history” (II, 88). But if the ‘other’ is God, human existence is not encountered as a “whole” or “concretely,” but only in its transcendental aspect—as a “heavenly double” (II, 99). If the concrete other, the neighbor, replaces God, then the finite ‘you’ (*Du*) is “absolutized” and humans again find that they can place themselves in the truth and revelation is excluded. The aporia of a “formal” notion of God’s freedom are overcome only in a “substantial” one, wherein “it is not so much a question of the freedom of God...on the other side of revelation, as it is of God’s coming

out of God's self in revelation...a matter of God's *given* Word, the covenant in which God is bound by God's own actions...not free from human beings but free for them" (II, 91). Here, God is "bound" to the "'historical,' 'existing' Word," and Christ forms the "boundary" of concrete existence that is "no longer located in or can be established by human beings" (II, 82). Whenever Bonhoeffer speaks of the "historical" Word or the Christ as "concrete" limit, he has in mind the church.

Revelation conceived as being, rather than act, suffers just the opposite predicament. Revelation is indeed 'given' in continuity, but as a thing, an "existent," whether in the form of doctrines, "psychic experiences," or institutions (II, 103ff.). None of these can provide the "encounter" that "draws out" the mind and existence turned in on itself, and only the Catholic view of revelation as institution encompasses thought so that its being is 'in' revelation rather than standing over it. Even when the being of revelation is conceived as institution, it "is not capable of encountering the existence of human beings qua sinful existence...[that] can happen only in the real encounter with another person" (II, 105). Two sets of criterion converge here. Not only is an existent incapable of encountering a human being and so breaking them out of thought's self-enclosure, but neither act nor being can be interpreted in terms of an existent, since an act is never a thing available to reflection and being is irreducible to the being of beings. Genuine ontology "suspends" (*aufgehoben*) thought in being, rather than leaving being over as remainder for thought, an existent (II, 106). Bonhoeffer turns to the kind of being that is not a thing, that is, personal being, but not even the "claim of the neighbor" can break through to us without God. "That this [break through] does happen 'through' something

that exists is the problem of revelation; everything depends, therefore, on the interpretation of ‘through’” (ibid).

Barth pursued the actualistic strategy to free God from the knowing subject. To be “known” of this subject is to be its object, its “captive”—as “something known, it ‘is’ only in the system” of thought (II, 46). So that God may not be reduced to a thing, God ‘is’ for Barth only “in God-understanding-Godself in human beings in the act of faith” (II, 93). If the act of consciousness, which is humanity’s, and the act of revelation, which is God’s, are to coincide in the act of faith, Barth faces two obstacles. He not only has to avoid the idealist identification of the I with God, but the human subject must really participate in God’s own self-knowledge that is the content of revelation. According to Bonhoeffer, Barth accomplished the first at the expense of the second, so that “it remains unclear, even in Barth, how the religious act of human beings and God’s action in human beings are to be thought, without dividing them into two...spheres, or without suspending either the objectivity of God or the fact that human beings are encountered in their existence” (ibid). Barth fails on all these points. God’s presence in thought is transcendental, dividing the self into a “heavenly double.” Presence *in* is never presence *to* thought; God is not ‘thinkable’ or available to reflection (an object). The placement of revelation in the *transcendental* sphere means that the human being is not really “encountered in their existence” because they are not encountered as a whole, confronting a *concrete* limit. Revelation therefore requires a being beyond knowledge but upon which faith can rest, an ‘object’ that is not a ‘thing.’ That is the correction to transcendental thinking. Ontological thinking earns a similar reproach. It must overcome the “false objectivity of something that exists” for the objectivity of what *freely* ‘stands

against' the subject and limits it, "so that knowledge is itself based on and suspended (*aufgehoben*) in a being-already-known" or "as that in the presence of which it must suspend (*aufgehoben*) itself ever anew in knowledge" (II, 107).

Knowledge (B.1/2.b) joins the being of God in revelation to human being. If God's being is contingent and the knowledge of it only in the constantly renewed act of faith, the human being standing before that knowledge must constantly decide for or against it. Constant decision is constantly under the threat of slipping away, of deciding against God or God deciding against the person. The question of faith's continuity becomes urgent, and in two forms, since there is the continuity of the new and the old 'I' (the "heavenly double" or Adam and Christ), but also the continuity of the "total-I," the "transcendental" and the "empirical" or concrete I (II, 99). Barth preserves the first continuity at the expense of the second, while Bultmann does just the opposite.

For Barth, the new I (Christ) is "formally presented as the non-being of the old" or its "suspension" (*Aufhebung*), with the emphasis on the negative connotation as 'cancellation,' and so the self is split in two (II, 98). Revelation is relegated to the transcendental sphere, while the empirical I remains untouched. The continuity of the new self with the old (as a suspension/cancellation, in the manner of Luther's *simul*) bifurcates the total I into discontinuity. The transcendental self is renewed, the empirical remains unregenerate. The historical character of human existence is lost along with the historical character of revelation. This effectively reaffirms Bonhoeffer's earlier thesis concerning the formal rather than historical quality of Barth's "dialectic." To be historical rather than "timeless," the act of faith would direct itself to the manner in which Christ "touches upon existence in its historical, temporal totality" (II, 100). In doing so,

Barth would have to explain how it is that the human subject participates actively in the event of faith, avoiding “two separate acts of faith, I and not-I” (ibid). Bultmann, by contrast, begins with continuity of the historical I, but never finds his way to the continuity of the old and new existence, since it cannot be sustained by a constant decision, much less as a human possibility.

For the “conjunction” of this new I and historical *human existence* (B.1/2.c), Bonhoeffer returns to the idea of the church in Reinhold Seeberg, who in connection with Luther and on “the basis of his consistent voluntarism” conceived the new I as the “redirection” of the will by God (II, 101). The newness is in the *direction* of the will, its intentionality, while the continuity lies in the reality of the will itself. It is “my will” that is redirected in Christ ‘existing as community,’ as church. Revelation as act and being are “truly combined” (II, 102). Nonetheless, the conflict of the two wills breaks up the continuity of the new self, “infringed upon again and again by the old,” and Bonhoeffer finally rejects the notion that the individual can in any way sustain the continuity of the new existence (ibid). Humans know their motives no more (or only a little) than those of God, yet they can only understand themselves as a “unity,” by somehow closing the circle of self-understanding, albeit provisionally. As the first part of the essay demonstrated, that unity has to be given in faith and revelation, since self-consciousness or reason cannot supply it for itself. Only in the gift of a new self does real unity occur for the first time, in the encounter with and participation in the ‘person’ of Christ as the church.

Human existence is (re)born of encounter that things can never give, must be “affected” and “thinkable in continuity,” else it deteriorates into shards of act and

intention (II, 113, 115). One can be ‘in’ the church as an institution, a thing, but it can never reach through to existence. The being of revelation converts human being “in such a way that knowledge, encountering itself in that which is, suspends [*aufgehoben*] again and again in the face of the being of those existence things and does not force them to be at its disposal” (II, 108). He again signals the church as the solution to these questions, remarking that “the reality of revelation is just the sort of thng which constitutes the being (the existence) of human beings—but this being is the triune divine person...provided that it is understood as being-in-Christ, that is to say, being in the church” (ibid).

The final section of Part B (B.3.a-d) shows how the church reconciles all of these tensions between act and being. In correction to all philosophical attempts at autonomous self-understanding (Part A), the church alone is the place where human beings are encountered and so led out beyond themselves to unity and understanding (B.3.a). In the church also the freedom and being of God (B.3.b) come together so that human decision and ‘being in’ (B.3.c) are united in the form of knowledge specific to the church (B.3.d).

Bonhoeffer departed from a specific interpretation of Kant’s philosophy in which the priority of thought over being led to the self-enclosure of human beings, the perverse curvature of intention and reason. Siding with Kant against Hegel, he asserts that human beings cannot place themselves in the truth. Siding with Hegel against Kant, he also asserts that to define the limits of knowledge is to effectively place oneself in the truth, a theoretical sleight of hand. Self-imposed limits are not real limits. Instead, the perception of one’s life as limited by truth only comes from revelation as the only real

extra nos. That limit takes the form of a “theological-sociological category” that resolves all foregoing questions regarding divine and human being and knowing (II, 110).

“Theological-sociological” means the *Other* present in the *others*, *God* present in and through the neighbor in the *congregation*. Revelation involves the *being of God* (B.3.b) and the human being in the being of the church. Both the being of God and human being must be contingent and continuous, combining act and being. Now what is the being of the church, that it alone can encounter human beings and lead them out to self-understanding, while preserving at once the contingent freedom and continuous presence of God? Bonhoeffer’s first remark in this direction concerns the nature of temporality. In order to encounter human existence, revelation must be present, else it would sink into the past, and being “caught up in its context” (the first century), would revert to the being of a thing, an existent (II, 111). Proclamation raises the past into the present by means of the future. Scripture and sacrament are mere artifacts of history unless in preaching their meaning, the Word, addresses humans in the horizon of their future as a word of coming judgment and forgiveness, brought into the present. Like Barth, the subject of that address is Christ but in a completely different form, as the subject of the community in which preaching and hearing, revelation and faith, take place. In this being “Christ is the common person [*Gesamtperson*] of the Christian community of faith,” and the “protestant idea of the church is conceived in personal terms” (ibid).

As the earlier references to the “sociological category” suggest, Bonhoeffer is now falling back on his dissertation to comprehend the form of mediation appropriate to revelation. “Common person” is a synonym for “collective person” or the community as

person. The question is how the sociological category of *Gesamtperson* reconciles the freedom and contingency of God with divine presence and continuity in revelation. Barth tied the freedom of revelation to its personal character, to divine election, but God's person remained wholly transcendent to history, bifurcating the human being. For God to enter history, to become 'objective,' would be to sacrifice the contingency, the subjectivity of God in revelation. That in brief is the problem of 'act' and 'being,' which Bonhoeffer resolves by construing the community, a worldly object, as an active subject. The personal is the objective par excellence as what 'stands against' and limits my own subjectivity. Transcendental philosophy and ontology, Barth and Przywara, all think too "individualistically," when what is needed is a "Christian sociology," a conversion of the act-being problem through the "sociological category" (II, 113).

The sociological category satisfies the criterion of continuity through a "trans-subjective" reality, since it is not Barth's 'solitary I' but the church community which hears the Word and is the counterpart of the Kingdom of God. The church precedes and survives every individual encounter with the Word as a field of encounters in which the individual's hearing is caught up, and so the continuity of revelation "does not lie in human beings, but rather it is guaranteed suprapersonally through a community of persons" (II, 114). The whole nexus of relationships, of "being affected," depends on the fact that Christ is the "subject" of the whole community, for "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" (ibid). The community *as* church (and not simply religious community) 'is' only in the act of faith and encounter with Christ; only

in faith does Christ speak. The dialectic of act and being, thought and reality, now “emerges with clarity as the form of the dialectic of faith and church” (ibid).

The being of revelation, as community, necessarily involves *human beings* (B.3.c). Where act and being converged in the being of God through the *Gesamtperson* of Christ, in contingency and continuity, they converge also in human being as suffering, as those “who are acted upon” (II, 116). Human beings stand under the power of sin or of grace, Adam or Christ, and so are not in possession of their own being, which is always “in reference to.” The self-reference of sin is shattered only in Christ, who lays exclusive claim to “existence in social context” and to “authentic” existence and personhood (ibid). This suffering or passivity of creatures in Christ must hold together the *continuity* of the new and old existence with the *existentiality* of the decision of faith. The eyes of faith open to discover that the being of revelation (the church) preceded it, even if that being only ‘is’ for faith, which is “suspended” (*aufgehoben*) in the community of faith that is in turn suspended in the Trinitarian life (II, 118). Suspension grants a new intentionality or point of reference, so the being of revelation (*Offenbarungsein*) and the human being (*Menschsein*) are neither “reified” nor “non-being” (II, 120).

All of this assumes that “the individual pure and simple is an unworkable abstraction...[instead] woven into sociality not only in their general spiritual nature, but also and especially in their existentiality,” that is, their being encountered by Christ (ibid). Clearly, the entire argument of *Sanctorum Communio* is presupposed here, given that “general spiritual nature” refers to the primal state broken by sin and “existentiality” to the church. The dialectic of act and being could just as well be described using the

monad image from *SC*. Bonhoeffer makes the equation himself: “To speak of the human being as individual person and humanity, never in separation but always in unity, is only another way of talking about the human being as act and as being” (ibid). This also explains the continuity and existentiality of human beings in the church, that one gives and receives forgiveness, receives the Spirit (*Geist*) of the church and “expresses” it (II, 121). The subject, the I, of the new existence is always the “historical One,” Christ existing as community, but “only in faith” (ibid). The “unity” of this “historical I” is the unity of the community of faith—in the language of *SC*, the unity of its objective spirit. Faith knows it is possible only through the community of faith in which it is “suspended,” and its act “comes from being just as it proceeds towards being” (II, 122).

Terms like ‘suspension’ and ‘reference’ are *epistemological* (B.3.d). Bonhoeffer’s anthropology closely aligns being and knowing. To be is to be ‘in reference to,’ and reference is determined by intentional consciousness or knowledge. But faith is only in direct consciousness or intentionality, even if it is suspended in the being of the church, and never in reflection. Barth did not differ greatly on these points, but beyond this Bonhoeffer rapidly distances himself. For Barth, God remains known indirectly in the act of faith in order to remain free from objective knowledge, under the power of the I. Against this, Bonhoeffer brings three objections, that Barth’s whole scheme is individualistic, that he has misunderstood God’s freedom, and that there is more than one form of theological knowledge. If revelation is “essentially oriented towards the community of faith,” then something more than the “individual act” must hold it in place (II, 124). Similarly, to think of God’s freedom as detached from the event of salvation “is to formalize, to *rationalize*, the contingent positivity of that occurrence” (ibid). These

two objections are clearly related (to the individual act corresponds a formal freedom, while to the social act corresponds a concrete or substantive freedom) and have consequences for knowledge. Twice Bonhoeffer lists three forms of theological knowledge, and while the parallels and precise meaning are not especially clear, the basic significance of the three forms is that there is a kind of objective or reflective knowledge of revelation. Barth's fundamental error on all counts is to have defined God as subject rather than person, as abstract knowledge rather than volitionally as "creator and lord," and "from such an inadequate conception of the being of revelation arises an inadequate concept of knowledge" (II, 125).

Proper knowledge, like the concept of person, is "framed in sociological categories," corresponding to sociological functions of the church, only indirectly named as hearing, preaching, and teaching, or the believing, preaching, and theological ways of knowing (II, 126). The first is "existentielle," the knowledge of direct consciousness encountered by the word; the other two "ecclesial" and occur in reflection (ibid).⁵

Believing knowledge is encountered by the person of Christ, preached in the community whose 'suffering' testifies to the true character of revelation as coming "from outside," and that is the "peculiarity of the sociological-theological category," that there is a

"genuine *outside* only where human beings are *in* Christ" (II, 127). This even applies to

⁵ The earlier reference (pp. 124-5) to the three modes of theological knowledge as "believing, existentielle, and ecclesial" can be interpreted two ways. One may regard it as an error by assuming that Bonhoeffer only meant to refer to the two forms of consciousness, direct (existentielle) and reflective (ecclesial), that comprise the three ways of knowing (believing, preaching, theological), in which case he should have omitted "believing," or rather "unbelieving," making it a double error. But if the "unbelieving" is not an editorial error, then one may regard the categorization as correct, since alongside the two forms of consciousness in faith (existentielle and ecclesial), there is also the possibility of unbelief. The confusion arises from the fact that both the believing and unbelieving modes of consciousness, as well as the believing, preaching and theological ways of knowing are all referred to generally as "theological ways of knowing," that is, made real on the basis of revelation. On Bonhoeffer's terms, of course, such a description ('theological') is no less appropriate for unbelieving than believing consciousness, since unfaith is known in light of faith, Adam in light of Christ. This latter interpretation of the passage seems to me correct, contra the German editors.

the external world of ‘things,’ illuminated as a “new sphere of knowledge and objects, that of existence in social reference” (ibid). Yet all of this holds only for faith and vanishes when the direct intention tears away from its object to reflection, where the Word is no longer encounter but memory, not present but past. Where “person and word have separated,” preaching and theological knowing remain (ibid).

The whole problem of preaching and the knowledge appropriate to it arises from the fact that, as for Barth, in true preaching it is God who speaks, ‘taking up’ the words of the preacher and making them God’s own. With nothing more than testimony and memory at their disposal, preachers are helpless to ensure that their speech contains the living spirit and not merely the dead letter. Bonhoeffer’s solution lies in the fact that preaching is an office of the church, so that preaching is itself ‘born’ by the community of faith. The office itself rests upon the promise that when preachers strive to speak faithfully, God will not forsake them. But the question of right preaching is inseparable from the question of right doctrine and the problem of theological knowledge as the “memory of the church” (II, 130). Taking place in reflection, the knowledge of theology, like that of preaching, is not existential, and in referring itself to ‘things’ (dogmas), it does not differ in method from profane thinking except by working itself out in obedience, ‘in reference to’ Christ and the church. Methodologically, the “dialectical method of ‘the proviso’ is as such no humbler than any honorable systematic thinking” (II, 131). The difference between profane and theological, disobedient and obedient thinking, is the decision to think in the presence of the church or of the “living person of Christ...[who] can destroy this existing thing or acknowledge it” (ibid). Dogma may

state that God forgives sins, but nothing is effected by this statement one way or the other. God must act for dogma to be meaningful.

All three forms of knowledge belong to a mode of being, 'being in Christ.' The final chapter contrasts its specific form of intentionality, and its unique consciousness of time, with 'being in Adam.' The intentionality and temporality of humans is conditioned by the community that defines them, broken or reconciled.

Ic. Human Being and Self-Understanding in Adam and Christ.

The forms of human being and self-understanding that follow from the view of revelation worked out above are familiar enough to the reader of *SC*. The problem of self-understanding does not begin with the abstract question of epistemology but with human being before God. The attempts at autonomous self-understanding from which the essay departed turn out to be ontologically and so theologically loaded: thinking directed to itself turns the human heart in on itself and amounts to sin. Adam is the form of autonomous thinking and being; it is "solitude." In solitude human beings have "turned inward" and "torn themselves loose from community with God...and other human beings" (II, 138). The whole world, including God, is reduced to "things." Thought is most helpless to escape itself here. But Bonhoeffer also rejects the appeals of Kant and Heidegger to conscience, which "only dulls the mute loneliness of a desolate 'with-itself'" (II,139). He has already indicated the arrogance concealed in conscience, that in judging itself, it wishes to set itself up as judge, and thus absolve itself. To count up one's own errors may be nothing more than a subtle reaffirmation of one's moral

competence. Conscience, like reason, can give itself no real limit, no ‘outside,’ which Bonhoeffer locates again in the encounter with Christ, so that solitude recognizes itself as “guilt towards Christ” (II, 141).

In its self-referentiality, solitude is a “decision made in self-seeking,” a “free and conscious” act of will (II, 144). Absent the dimension of will or act, sin would not be guilt or transgression, but in accordance with the whole set of problems raised by the essay, one must also speak of the being of sin so as not to exclude act. Contingency and continuity must be held together, even in sin, and no definition of sin as an “entity” will suffice. The concept of “person” again, and without much definition, resolves the tension. Adam is both I and humanity, act and being, with a ponderous consequence, that “just because the deed of the individual is at the same time that of humanity, human beings must hold themselves individually responsible for the whole guilt of humankind” (II, 146). Conceiving Adam only in the “mode of being of ‘person’” makes this possible (ibid), but that conception is in turn only possible on the basis of revelation (Bonhoeffer claims this despite the fact that “persons” are by definition only in Christ).

Returning to Heidegger’s language of “everydayness” (*Alltäglichkeit*) as “guilt” and a “decision for solitude,” he shows again how conscience aids the unbeliever in their “flight” from all limits, including death and the future, reduced to “an event that conscience can conquer” (II, 148). What conscience cannot overcome is Christ, who in “temptation” (*Anfechtung*), rather than conscience, exposes solitude as an inescapable guilt and death, where, so far from being alone, everything speaks and “becomes their accuser” (II, 149). Temptation is no “dialectical point of transition toward faith,” as if by

dying one were guaranteed new life, which is “God’s free gift to God’s community,” those who are ‘in’ Christ (ibid).

Adam’s being is an inverted, self-seeking sociality lived in fear of the future. Christ’s being, by contrast, is an open, self-giving sociality that takes up the fear of Adam into hope and lives out of the future as a child. Here intentionality has shifted from the self to Christ, from one’s own sin to grace. It is no longer under its own power, but the power of God. The reality of this new being depends on the “person-being” (*Person-
Sein*) of God as the “unity of act and being” in the church (II, 151). The meaning of being has to be revealed, and only reconciled life knows the shape of life violated by sin: “it is only in revelation itself that being-a-creature can be defined in terms of being-a-person, insofar as it is the person whose existence has been encountered, judged, or created anew by Christ...all ontological definitions remain bound to the revelation in Christ” (II, 152-3). The being of revelation in the church as the union of act and being provides only a “formal definition” of being, rendered concrete and “historical” through its intentional and temporal reference to past and future (II, 155).

Conscience, in fear of the future and death, twisted the heart of Adam back around itself, but freed from this fear in Christ, conscience now “belongs to the past” (ibid). Yet even in Christ, human beings return to reflection on themselves, reawakening conscience, and this can mean falling back into “temptation” (as “disregard” for grace by fixating upon sin) or continuing toward “penitence” (as seeing one’s sin in the light of forgiveness). In the former, intentionality inclines to the past and to death alone, where in the latter it views the past in relation to the future and life. Being ‘is’ now not in the mode of past or present, as “thing” or “existent,” but defined instead by the future. In sin,

there is no future; the world closes in on itself. In contemplating and deciding for the future, conscience, even as penitence, is “suspended” (*aufgehoben*) in the “personality in relation” that consummates intentionality and freedom (II, 158). The transcendence “amidst” and “between” which faith too is “suspended” reveals itself as the coming of God that alone has the power to “determine the present” (II, 159).

Bonhoeffer concludes by arguing that infant baptism captures the paradoxical being of faith as what “lies temporally in the past and is, nonetheless, an eschatological occurrence” lying “between eternity and eternity” (II, 160). Faith, for Barth, had to wait on the arrival of the future in each new moment. Bonhoeffer finds the promise of its presence, its continuity, in the sacrament of baptism: “faith is able to fix upon baptism as the unbreakable Word of God, the eschatological foundation of its life” (II, 160). The exiled adult has found their way home, and “home is the community of Christ” (II, 161). With the being of God revealed in the sacramental being of the church, we are finally in a position to survey the systematic connections in Bonhoeffer’s theology as they appear in the unified pattern behind both dissertations.

CHAPTER V

THE CHURCH AS THE BEING OF GOD AND THE UNITY OF BONHOEFFER'S THOUGHT-FORM.

For German theology in the nineteenth century, “religion” offered an answer to the great intellectual and social questions of the time. Intellectually, it overcame the firm boundary between God and humanity drawn by the previous century, if always on the side of humanity. As thought, feeling or conscience, God proved immanent to human self-consciousness. This immanence extended to the course of history as well through an identification of the Kingdom of God with the German “religious community” as the highest development of the human spiritual essence. Socially, then, it promised to endow an emerging German nation with purpose and unity across religious and class divisions. The failure of the churches in the face of the “social question” and the general crisis of the educated middle class in the period leading up to the Weimar Republic had ripened the German ideology for attack. Karl Barth turned the Kingdom of God against history, revelation against religion. His early work, at least, left no room for God in the German *Gemeinschaft*. Bonhoeffer accepted the displacement of religion by revelation, but felt that Barth had abandoned history, choosing instead to find God in the community of the church. His early theology, from its beginnings at Berlin until his departure for America in 1930, is one sustained attempt to articulate this position, laid out chiefly in the dissertation and habilitation essay.

The unity of these two lines of argument, and many subsequent or ancillary pieces, has been overlooked. It lies, first, in a common thought-form, received, modified, and unfolded over the course of his career. Composed of three interlocking problems,

which I have described as the tensions between faith and knowledge, Christ and history, ethics and metaphysics, the unity becomes visible only in continuity with a complex “constellation” of attempts to resolve these tensions, reaching back to the beginning of the nineteenth century. In order, by way of conclusion, to draw together the threads of this study and of Bonhoeffer’s early theology into a coherent pattern, let us first recapitulate briefly the path of inquiry so far (I), turning then to the unity of the thought-form in the dissertations (II), its discontinuities in both (III), and finally to a few concluding remarks (IV).

I. Recapitulation

I began by observing that terms like “religion” and “religious community” functioned in a complex semantic web (summarized in the ideal of *Bildung*) that stretched and reformed with the economy of German social and intellectual life in the nineteenth century, while retaining its basic shape. Nonetheless, one could essentially define religion as the relation between finite and infinite spirit (*Geist*), corresponding to a particular theory of self-consciousness. Despite some still prevailing caricatures, religion was conceived socially, and the religious community played a critical role in the intellectual and social functions allotted to the concept. If the ‘infinite’ was the invisible and unknown source from which society could alone draw its meaning and direction, religion described the link between the invisible world and the visible one. Hegel, for example, believed that by isolating the conceptual structure of self-consciousness, he had unlocked the structure of being itself and could apply it to the whole of nature and

history. Faith becomes knowledge through the ‘Trinitarian’ mediation of God’s being in history, especially the history of the church. Where faith and knowledge, Christ and history are identified, so are ethics and metaphysics in the morality (*Sittlichkeit*) of nations. Troeltsch would later combine a metaphysically less confident version of this approach with the emerging field of sociology. Following in the more skeptical line of Schleiermacher, Ritschl and Hermann separated what Hegel had identified. The rift between thought and being, and the being of God in particular, forced the question of God into the ethical sphere, where conscience found in Christ the absolute claim of God upon human existence.

Karl Barth took over this strategy with a few serious revisions, and Bonhoeffer aims at a synthesis of Barth’s theology with aspects of the Hegelian legacy, mediated to him most directly through Reinhold Seeberg. Barth’s theology developed in four stages. After an initial agreement with Herrmann, he articulated his “dialectic of veiling and unveiling” first in an *eschatological* and later in a *Christological* idiom (with “pneumatocentric” and “Christocentric” phases). These two idioms corresponded to the *dialectical* and *dogmatic* methods respectively. The eschatological idiom expressed the dialectical of veiling and unveiling as the dialectic of time and eternity. Here Barth imposed the Kierkegaardian distinction of time and eternity on the Kantian distinction of known and unknown. But the core dialectic was preserved in route to his *Dogmatics* through the Hegelian language of ‘suspension’ (*Aufhebung*), interpreted in a loosely phenomenological rather than metaphysical manner. The “triple circle” or “trinodal logic” (Ward) showed itself as the Trinitarian outworking of this phenomenality in which the knowledge of objects, over which the subject lords itself, suffers a “crisis” in

encounter with the Word. The autonomy of reason is broken by the autonomy of God. Faith and knowledge, Christ and history, ethics and metaphysics are all set in disjunction.

Barth's diastasis begins by sealing the human subject in on itself in the *circle of knowledge* or self-consciousness. The normal order of knowledge as subject-object relations is then revealed as a perversion of the self not through any experience of the phenomenal world, but through a purely free and contingent act of God. The "rupture" occurs at the edge of consciousness, never within it, as the governing tropes of *Romans II* indicate (tangent, crater, prison). A fissure opens up in the self-relation that constitutes knowledge. The subject-object relation remains in all of its limitations, except that it knows them as its limits and in them knows God as "the Unknown." But this is not knowledge *per se*, knowledge as the cognizing act of the subject. Barth calls such knowledge sin and its subject "Adam." To the new knowledge relativized in faith corresponds a new subject, "Christ," whose eyes are opened to its blindness. This opening transpires in an *ethical encounter* with the *cross of Christ* or the word concerning it. Still, the *historical* or phenomenal reality of the cross has no force of its own, appearing as one object among others. The primary "node" of God's hidden reality only shows through the second "node" of the historical medium (Christ) through a third, the Holy Spirit, which gives the human subject ears to hear the ethical claim placed upon it. The "saturation" of the phenomenon, to borrow a recent phrase, has a "trinodal" character that explodes the adequacy of subject-object relations.

Saturation in this instance is not just phenomenal richness (rather than "banality") but personal, thus ethical and free. Its contingency can only be ascribed to the invisible agent uncovered (and hidden) therein. Around the time of his dogmatic turn, Barth had

already recognized the ontological deficiency of his interpretation of the phenomenality of revelation, its merely functional character. In a 1923 letter to Thurneysen, he exclaimed, “A Trinity of being, not just an economic Trinity! At all costs, a doctrine of the Trinity!”¹ Bonhoeffer would no doubt have concurred with this piece of self-criticism, for that was the substance of his remark that Barth’s dialectic (another way of saying “Trinity”) was “formal rather than real.” The dogmatic method and the doctrine of God that supported it did not, in Bonhoeffer’s view, correct the formalism of *Romans II*, since it short-changed the role of human faith in revelation, the being of God in revelation, and the concreteness of Christian ethics. Formalism continued to riddle the whole thought-form with difficulties. The concreteness and continuity of the self and of God in revelation, as well as genuine ethics, could only be had in the sociological category. Barth’s formalism was of a piece with his individualism, and that was the real problem. The heavenly double, the absence of the incarnation, and the confusion of indicative and imperative all required an entirely new mode of thinking.

The sociological category introduced within the theological dialectic a second, historical dialectic, and although its complete form appears only in Bonhoeffer’s dissertation, its elements are clearly present (retrospectively) in his student essays and sermons. He fastens his new direction to the “voluntary-form of Spirit,” with three consequences drawn explicitly in the student essays. First, the splintering of the self into two subjects, Adam and Christ, is overcome through the presence of the Holy Spirit as the gift of a new will. Second, the church community as a whole and not the individual is

¹*Revolutionary Theology in the Making: Barth-Thurneysen Correspondence, 1914-1925*, Trans. James Smart (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1967), p. 176.

the counterpart of election and the recipient of this gift, where the preached Word presupposes the living congregation. Third, the identification of indicative and imperative, commandment and new creation, is broken, allowing for sanctification as well as temptation. If Bonhoeffer considered Barth's thinking too "formal" and "logical," the shape of the "material" and the "real" is in the *will*. That is the difference between a theology oriented to the *subject* and one oriented to the *person*. Barth's theology is also personalist in a sense, dependent as it is on the idea of an ethical encounter irreducible to the thinking appropriate to things, but he also describes the person as "inconcrete" (*Nichtgegebene*). Bonhoeffer, following Seeberg, construes his opposition to Barth on this point as distinctively Lutheran (versus Reformed), but his volitional interpretation of the concept of "person" partially derives from sociological sources. His reading in the formal sociology of Weber, Troeltsch and Simmel would have already provided a volitional framing to sociological questions well before he ran across Barth. Seeberg and Scheler only reinforced it theologically, and he exploited this tendency in the correction to dialectical theology.

The need for such a correction was in view almost from the beginning of his studies. Recall that his letters with Richard Widmann (summer 1925) dealt with the tension between theological and sociological dialectics and the shortcomings in Barth's doctrine of revelation. I have tried to show—convincingly, I think—that the question of revelation is actually a whole constellation of questions arranged within a coherent but generally unarticulated thought-form, one that for Barth and Bonhoeffer is virtually all-encompassing. If this is the case, then *SC* deals with revelation, as the "weaving together" of divine and human freedom, from the standpoint of its historical form or

mediation, while *AB* treats the question of knowledge proper. *SC* begins with the problem of community or of the sociological dialectic and finds its answer in the form of the church, which is established in revelation. *AB* begins with the problem of human self-understanding and finds its answer in divine revelation, given in God's being as the church. The two lines of investigation converge in the identification of revelation and the church, "Jesus Christ existing as community." *SC* asks about the form of the church as the form of God's presence in history, but does not address the relation between God's being and the individual's knowledge, upon which rests the outward form of the church in its historical dialectic. *AB* asks about the knowledge of God's being for individuals, but does not address the personal form of the church in which that being subsists.

These are the intersections that give Bonhoeffer's early theology its shape, coherence, and direction. He could not state the matter more directly: "the dialectic of act and being is understood as the dialectic of faith and the congregation in Christ" (II, 114). I now want to spell out in more detail how the two studies and the dialectics they develop hold together in a unified thought-form, turning then to the discontinuities.

II. The Unity of Bonhoeffer's Thought-Form

To the reader who is not yet convinced that the heuristic guiding this study, the "triple circle," really structures Bonhoeffer's theology and does so in a roughly self-conscious fashion, I offer two further pieces of evidence, probably in vain. The first is the lecture series from which I took the phrase in the first place. Speaking on the topic of

“The History of Twentieth-Century Systematic Theology,” Bonhoeffer organizes his theme into fourteen paragraphs. The first two summarize the situation of society and the church since 1900 (§1-2), the next seven interpret the themes and figures of liberal Protestantism in recent theology (§3-9), and the last four present the thought of Karl Barth (§10-13), concluding with the question of theology’s present situation (§14). In §10, “The Turning Point,” Bonhoeffer sums up the crisis of the nineteenth century: “In all three circles (the problems of knowledge, history and ethics), there was the issue of balance with culture. In all three [there is] the same structure; culture should not be confronted with a claim that is unsustainable” (XI, 224). These three circles correlate loosely to the progression of the lectures, although the lines between topics are uneven. *Epistemology* (§3-4) as developed in connection with the “mediating concept” of religion (Troeltsch, the Neo-Kantians, Otto) merges with the question (§5-7) of the *historical* “essence” and “absoluteness” of Christianity and the theme of the “biblical Christ” (von Harnack, Kähler), which leads in turn to the problem of *ethics* (§8-9) by way of the doctrine of justification (Ritschl, Holl). This thematic order is repeated in the lectures on Barth, as Bonhoeffer moves from the question of God (§10-11) to that of the preached Word of the cross and its ethical implications (§12-13). The final section, “Where do we stand?,” raises questions against each of these three emphases, pointing forward to the tripartite structure of Bonhoeffer’s own theology.

The lecture was given in Berlin during the winter of 1931-32, and later that April the triadic theme appear again in a published essay entitled “Concerning the Christian Idea of God,” although it was prepared for Prof. Lyman’s seminar at Union Theological Seminary in New York in December 1930. The essay aims to present “no more than the

framework within which the idea [of the Christian God] should be thought,” and the frame is conceived “dogmatically” according to the problems of knowledge, history, and justification (X, 451). The first section revisits the argument of *AB*, rejecting the autonomy of a thinking that “is in itself a closed circle, with the ego at the center...[and] does violence to reality, pulling it into the circle of the ego” (X, 452). Genuine reality (*Wirklichkeit*) is not a possibility of thought but is “given before and beyond all thinking...[and] limits my boundlessness from the outside” only in faith (X, 453). Echoing again his critique of Barth, God is “not logically transcendent, but really transcendent,” and this means a transcendence in the form of “personality” found in God’s “self-revelation in history” (X, 453, 455, 456). The second section recalls his earlier critique of Idealism, which offers a philosophy of history based in general principles of thought, whereas Christianity views history as continual “decision,” and the difference “becomes very conspicuous in the interpretation of the other man, of the neighbor, that is, of present history” (X, 458). Bonhoeffer plainly has the church in view with these remarks. The concreteness of historical decision leads, in the final section, to the questions of justification or the “pure way of God to man,” with the paradoxes of revelation and hiddenness, death and resurrection, sin and forgiveness (X, 461). Just as the particulars of the church recede in the previous section to focus upon the idea of God, the particulars of ethics recede here behind the act of God in making a “new creature,” but the implicit connections with ethics are evident enough.

The lecture follows the completion of *AB* by a eighteen months, the essay by perhaps as little as little as six months. Their thematic connections are hardly new, and it is more than reasonable to assume that the structure which holds them together is

operative all along the line. The 1930 essay is especially useful at this point, since it relates all subsequent themes back to the idea of the self-revealing God. All three “nodes” belong to the concept of self-revelation or what we might call the theological structure of phenomenality. I take this to be the meaning of Bonhoeffer’s claim that “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” (X, 460). Put differently, “in the act of justification God reveals himself as Holy Trinity” (X, 461). The form of the event of self-revelation already implies its content; justification implies Trinity. If one recalls Bonhoeffer’s insistence on the concreteness of that form, then the unity of his theology crystalizes in the concept of the church. I have sketched repeatedly the three dimensions of this thought-form and their unity. I have also tried to uncover the thought process and motivations behind the historical development of that pattern in Bonhoeffer’s thinking, for example, why his exposition of the concept of the church precedes his exposition of revelation, narrowly conceived. I now want to explore the unity of both dissertations in detail.

That unity depends on the identification of two dialectics. The dialectic of thought and being is interpreted through the dialectic of the individual in society, or, theologically, the dialectic of faith and the being of God in revelation is interpreted as the dialectic of faith and the church community. The church is the being of God in history, the heart of God become visible in the world and at one with it. Both dialectics belong to the interpretation of self-consciousness, which stands (differently) at the center of both *AB* and *SC*. In each study, Bonhoeffer attacks the possibility that self-consciousness is self-explanatory. In the case of *AB*, this involves a *negative* demonstration, that the I

cannot understand itself, whether by reflexively tracing its genesis and constitution back to some fundament of its own existence (Hegel) or by circumscribing the limits of its knowledge with respect to itself (Kant). The limit of its reason and the meaning of its being must come from without, given and revealed from the hidden source and destiny of the ego's being. In the case of *SC*, a *positive* demonstration is pursued, showing that self-consciousness arises only in intersubjective relations of ethical encounter, that is, in sociality. The self seeks its meaning in what is given, and what is given is the church; the self is whole only in sociality and community, but it enters community only through revelation. The compound tension between thought/being and self/others is an irreducible feature of subjectivity, resolved in the church.

The fact of this irreducibility should caution readers against trying immediately to make sense of Bonhoeffer with the categories of “narrative” or “grammar” or more aggressively “postmodern” notions. The justification for such (too often procrustean) procedures is a well-established cliché about the ‘death of the subject,’ which is part and parcel of a much grander cliché about the end of ‘modernity.’ Clichés need not be outright lies but merely sins of omission—a truth whittled down to a half-truth for the sake of convenience. This is what one finds in so many ongoing eulogies (or malogies) for the recently un-deceased. Where subjectivity or self-consciousness is construed as the conceptual identification of the I with itself through the act of reflection, its implosion is unavoidable. For if the identity of self-consciousness depends on the reflexive mediations of language, then one may dissolve it into the processes of communicative action (Habermas), the differential relations of semiology (poststructuralism), the epistemic self-ascription of mental states (analytical philosophy via Wittgenstein), or the

hermeneutically prior reality of language (Heidegger). But the reflection theory suffers from an obvious defect. In order to recognize or represent myself, and so establish the identity of the 'I' with itself, I would already have to know that the 'I' identified in reflection is in fact mine. The Ego always stands in an immediate relation to itself, since I never need proof that the contents of my consciousness are actually *mine* (the basis of Kant's transcendental deduction). Bonhoeffer expressed this succinctly at the outset of *AB* when he follows Kant's recognition that the I "cannot be thought, because it is the precondition of thinking" (II, 38). It cannot become an object for itself because the self-relation that defines precedes every attempt to objectify itself.

He is mistaken, however, to accept Kant's other assumption, that "everything about the I is constituted by thought, even if it is true that "thinking precedes the I" (ibid). If the former were the case, the I would have to constitute itself in concepts and thus in reflection, leading back to the circular logic just denied. Kant simply turned his back on the question by throwing the identity of consciousness out of the court of reason, which could establish its limited rights without tracing its roots that far. Fichte and Hegel pursued the model of reflection to its logical conclusion. The alternative, pursued by the Romantics and Schelling in his critique of Hegel, understands that the identity of self-consciousness precedes any act of reflection through which the self might re-cognize itself, and thus precedes language and concepts, to which it is irreducible. Dieter Henrich has called this a "pre-reflexive" model of self-consciousness, in distinction from the model of reflection. But because an I, an ego, is difficult to imagine apart from reflection and language, Henrich calls this pre-reflexive I non-egological, viewing it as mysterious

substrate in which the processes of sociality originate and from which all further conscious, linguistic 'identity' is built up.

We need not chase down these difficulties any further, but having a sense of the paradoxes immanent to self-consciousness will shed a little light on Bonhoeffer's grappling with them. So if the "eye does not see itself" in reflection, its intentionality stretches outward from an unknown origin towards an unknown future (II, 46). Kant described this condition as the "homelessness of the mind," that we are "neither suspended from heaven nor rooted in earth," and Bonhoeffer plays upon the image of exile in *AB* by arguing that the I cannot understand itself out of its own resources. Thought wants to touch its feet down to earth and take hold of the heavens—to circumscribe its place, its being, in the whole of Being. If thought grants itself priority over being in this task, a reality that supersedes the I is never recovered. Any object (*Gegenstand*) that it comes upon is the creation of the I and so fails to 'stand against' the I as an independent reality. That is the weakness of transcendental thinking, but even ontological thinking, which attempts in principle to cede being a priority over thought, falls back into the same predicament. The fate of God in each case reinforces Bonhoeffer's conclusion: the kind of self-understanding that lies within reach of human beings always conceals its own failures and distorts the reality of God. This is the epistemic circle, the circle of consciousness.

The tension between thought (act) and being has two consequences for interpreting the being of God in revelation. On the one hand, God's being must be, as for Barth, in the act of faith. That is only to respect the theological dialectic that governs Bonhoeffer's entire theology. God must remain the free subject of revelation, creating

the 'subject' appropriate to the 'object' it reveals in the "secondary objectivity" of the act that "suspends" human subjectivity in divine subjectivity. On the other hand, if God is to reveal "Godself," then God must really become "objective," being in such a way that each new moment does not threaten to dissolve the relationship. Barth's God not only lacks concreteness but seems fickle as well, bound to nothing. If revelation is *only* in act and non-objectivity, the continuity of God's gift and human life within it falls apart. Here we are confronting the historical circle of mediation, of Christ and the incarnation. Bonhoeffer only has recourse to one kind of being that is non-objective and that is personal being, which is actualistic. But how can the being of God become historical (objective) and personal (subjective) so as to embrace the whole of human being?

As the previous chapter explained, Bonhoeffer resolves the tension between act and being by interpreting the act of faith as occurring within the church as the personal being of Christ. The church is the sort of the being that is both personal and objective, contingent and continuous, a field of faith whose subject is Christ. To be "suspended" in the being of God is to be "suspended" in relation to others in the church as the ongoing current of the divine life in which one rises and falls as the direction of human existence runs with or against God. This depends entirely on the notion that the church is a) a personal being made up b) of concrete ethical relations between individuals with a continuous worldly form. *AB* makes no effort to defend or explain that claim, and absent any awareness of *SC*, the reader might find it simply unintelligible. What does it mean to say that the community has a personal character? Certainly not an "absolutizing" of the concrete You, a total identification of the divine claim with the claim of the neighbor, such that one becomes a cipher for the other (II, 88ff.). Similarly, the modes of human

being as Adam and as Christ are social, modes of the dialectic between the I and community. *SC* fills out the problem of mediation with the sociological or historical dialectic.

AB contained the implicit claim that human beings are constituted in social relationships. The church is the fulfillment of human being as the place where human beings are encountered and find the meaning of their existence, but even the anxious, isolated sinner “in Adam” lives out of the dialectic between self and community. This anthropological underpinning is the real key to Bonhoeffer’s early theology. By altering his anthropology, Bonhoeffer alters the meaning of revelation. The “suspension” of a person, constituted in sociality or ethical relations, necessarily differs from the “suspension” of a subject, constituted by subject-object relations. These two basic poles—suspension and sociality, revelation and church, dogmatics and sociology—control the dynamics of his theology in this earliest stage and probably well beyond. The concept of *suspension* comes from Barth, *sociality* from Seeberg, and I think we best understand Bonhoeffer as trying to synthesize the two, or to fit Seeberg’s theology of sociality into Barth’s notion of revelation. The possibility of reconciling the terms does not, as one might suspect, owe to their common origin in Hegel. Neither Barth nor Seeberg has left the ideas where Hegel set them. “Suspension” for Hegel describes the dialectical movement of all reality, whether logically as “autonomous negation,” ontologically as the “self-unfolding of the concept,” or theologically as “self-revelation.” Suspension is the *act* by which *being* comes to know itself, by which ‘absolute spirit’ attains self-consciousness and identity. It is identical with the process of history. The processive nature of being explains the twofold sense of suspension as ‘canceling’ and

‘taking up.’ The achievement of identity depends upon integrating the past into the present, such that the meaning of the past is preserved and takes on new significance.

Hegel’s dialectic is objective, for what is ‘taken up’ passes through a stage of ‘determinacy’ or ‘concreteness’ or ‘objective spirit.’ The path of Hegel’s dialectic can be comprehended panoramically, *horizontally*, from beginning to end, and the end is determined by the beginning. The future is already decided by the past. Barth’s dialectic, by contrast, uses the language of ‘canceling’ and ‘taking up’ to describe the subject-object relation of human knowledge that has been ‘elevated’ *vertically* into the self-relations of intra-Trinitarian life. Its path can only be comprehended out of the event itself, since there are no necessary logical or ontological connections between the state of nature and the state of grace. On this basis, Barth reverses the relation of possibility and actuality. There is no path from thought to being, possibility to actuality, humanity to God. What truly “is” never intrudes into the realm of finite being for Barth, and here Bonhoeffer introduces his distinction between real and actual as the provisional presence of the Kingdom of God (the real) in the church (the actual).

Seeberg also divorces Hegel’s conception of sociality from its metaphysical scheme and the necessary identification of real and ideal, substance and subject. Will (*Urwille*) replaces Idea (*Begriff*) as the core of reality, and Seeberg can speak of an “overcoming” (*Überwindung*) of individual wills or “evil will” in the *Urwille* as the “solution of world problems.”² As opposed to Hegel’s faceless Absolute, Seeberg’s God is personal, and the concept of personality is naturally volitional. Despite the disavowals

² Reinhold Seeberg, *Christliche Dogmatik*, 2 Bds., (Erlangen: A. Deichertische Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1924), Bd.1 92ff, 212ff,

of metaphysics and speculation in the “modern positive” school of Erlangen Lutheranism, compared to Barth a thoroughly ‘religious’ mindset still governs Seeberg’s dogmatics, with its progressive historicism and talk of the “religious community” as the “form of appearance of the Kingdom of God” (*Erscheinungsform Gottesreich*).³ “Sociality” is an integral aspect of this appearance, belonging to the human “essence” (*Wesen*) for the sake of the “divine world-administration in history,” and “objective spirit” provides the “connecting link” (*Verbindungsglied*) between the sociality and historicity of human being, our spatial and temporal dimensions. To be human is to be co-constituted in acts of will, so that “all human community is community-of-will (*Willensgemeinschaft*).”⁴ Bonhoeffer follows Seeberg on these points, as well as his use of the *Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft* distinction, but loosens them from a comprehensive theory of religion.

Whether or not the idea was filtered through Seeberg (this is unclear), Bonhoeffer also approximates his professor in borrowing Hegel’s description of the church as “Jesus Christ existing as community.” This idea is the real meshing point between Barth and Seeberg, suspension and sociality, and thus provides a valuable insight into the reconfiguration of the three circles. Barth’s solution to the problem of transcendence was the (formal) ethical address of the Word in Jesus Christ, an encounter with the divine Thou in the word about the cross which brings about, by God’s free act, the ‘taking up’ of human into divine knowledge. The personalist element is crucial, since it sustains the non-objectifiable character of revelation by which it pierces the immanent circle of consciousness. Barth’s view of revelation (as of 1922) had no worldly *form*, which is

³ See, for example, *Ibid*, Bd.2, 319ff, 332ff.

⁴ Seeberg, Bd.1, 505, 507.

another way of saying it does not enter *history*. A worldly form would be a thing, not a person, an object rather than God. Seeberg finds the form of revelation (*Erscheinungsform*) in the church, but its form is that of “religious community,” a merely immanent and objectified form. In its “objective spirit” God has become an object, and that is precisely why Barth rejected ‘religion’ in the first place. Only if the worldly, historical, *social form* of community takes on the *ethical-personal* character, can the proper transcendence of revelation be preserved. Scheler’s concept of ‘collective person’ fills the gap, linking suspension to sociality through the *ethical-personal social form*.

The two subjects of Adam and Christ are now two communities which nonetheless bear a personal character. The discontinuities of the self, old and new, concrete and transcendental, have been reconciled in Christ as the personal being of God made visible and historical in the communal life of the church. From the broken sociality of human existence God in revelation brings a new creation. The theological dialectic becomes an historical dialectic. God’s freedom is woven into human freedom. This is the unity of Bonhoeffer’s thought-form in its earliest stage. I turn now to its discontinuities.

III. Discontinuities in the Thought-Form.

Bonhoeffer seems to have had the problems of *AB* in view when he wrote *SC*, as his correspondence and student papers indicate. His reservation towards Barth, which birthed the dissertation, had to presuppose some conception of the problems presented in

AB, however vague it might have been. The questions of God and revelation were second to none, and the matter of mediation would have been pointless without them. In fact, the project of describing the mediating form of revelation in the church was a preliminary stage to getting at a new conception of God and revelation, or rather taking Barth's conception in the appropriate direction with the help of Luther. But continuities in the thought-form by no means guaranteed continuities in the means used to express it. Barth himself had abandoned the eschatological idiom for a Christological one and the dialectical method for the dogmatic, all the while retaining the language of "suspension" and the elements of his thought-form. Barth likely thought that he had only found the language to better articulate the "material insight" of his theology. With the sociological-theological dialectic of Adam and Christ, we touch upon a similar discontinuity in Bonhoeffer's early work, and certainly the most obvious one.

His dissertation had to supply the historical form of revelation (*Offenbarungsform*) without sacrificing its theological, that is, revealed, status. What distinguished the form of the Christian community from others was a unique pattern of willing, one unavailable in the normal range of volitional configurations that separated mass (*Masse*) from Society (*Gesellschaft*) from Community (*Gemeinschaft*). The tradition of *formal sociology* provided the terms for distinguishing the church's historical form, a form which, strictly speaking, was not historical but essential, since formal sociology distinguished itself sharply from the science of history as dealing with essential sociological *types*. A social philosophy drawn from the formal phenomenology of Husserl and Scheler underwrote the perception of these types, and Barth's theological dialectic was inserted at the ground level to explain the reality of ethical basic relations

that constitute the church. Scheler may have described his phenomenology as “material” in comparison with Husserl’s, but its formal character is quite clear in comparison with Heidegger, upon whom Bonhoeffer draws heavily in *AB*. This is perhaps the most significant discontinuity between the dissertation and habilitation essay, a transition from formal to existential phenomenology, or from a symbiosis between Husserlian intentionality and sociological will-structures to Heidegger’s analytic of Dasein and its modes of self-disclosure.

Heidegger does not blend easily with any of the thinkers, mostly of Neo-Kantian stock, that form the background of Bonhoeffer’s theology, and it is doubtful that Bonhoeffer understood immediately the real challenge Heidegger posed to theology. At the same time, Bonhoeffer’s God was not the God of metaphysics, the God whom Heidegger wished to banish “from the realm of thought,” but the young theologian did not raise the question of God’s being with rigor one might have hoped for. Instead, he assumed the rights of theology to the name of God and went on to look for a new method that nonetheless held profound implications for the being of God. Barth believed his theology depended on an isomorphism between his *dogmatic method* and his doctrine of God, and the dogmatic method presumed a specific methodological role allotted to the church as confessional authority. What put the “church” in “church dogmatics” was its teaching authority in the service of preaching. Bonhoeffer’s turn to a *sociological method* (a “Christian sociology,” to be precise) takes on a new significance in this light, for the church enters in to theology in a completely different mode, as the living congregation and the very presence of God. This, and not merely anthropology, is at

stake in the contrast between Adam and Christ: the being of God. So discontinuities are of no small importance.

How do the accounts of Adam and Christ differ in *SC* and *AB*? At the most basic level, they do not. The being of Adam in both is described by terms like “isolated,” “demanding,” “selfish,” “inverted,” burdened by conscience and self-justification, as “individual” and “supraindividual deed,” and as cast down into “solitude” and “guilt.” The being of Christ in both is described by terms like “sharing,” “giving,” “being for/with others,” “turned outward,” as contemplating Christ alone, as God’s creature, and as “living from the future.” The question, then, is whether the move from Scheler to Heidegger substantively altered the interpretation of these common descriptions. I do not see that it has, since the being of Christ in both conforms to the criterion of the *sacraments* as the temporal paradox of the future in the past and the social paradox of a community upholding that which upholds it (I, 240ff; II, 160ff). The differing languages used to describe this being in *SC* and *AB* do not measure the phenomenon Bonhoeffer is after and add nothing to it on their own. It is plausible that acquiring a new vocabulary would permit him to see aspects of the sacramental ontology that escaped his attention before, but that does not seem to be the case in the period from 1927 to 1930.

IV. Conclusion

I have mentioned a few other discontinuities above, for example, his “humanistic” interest in Nietzsche and the “strength of life” at Barcelona. Here one may well find the

beginnings of a genuine departure from the thought-form that structures Bonhoeffer's early theology, or at least its first iteration. By the Christology lectures of 1933, real changes in this pattern are undeniable, and of course the prison writings reflect a new orientation as well, although even here I have given reason for suspecting continuity (as in the analogues between "sociality" and "worldliness"). But on the whole, the years 1918-1930 reveal a surprising unity and continuity, identified in a complex thought-form that lays the foundation for his theological work beyond the university in the spheres of the church and the world. Judgment as to whether that thought-form really remained constant through several modifications, as did Barth's, must await a complete study of Bonhoeffer's theology. Perhaps the current study moves us closer to that goal and to the understanding of Bonhoeffer's vision, the vision of God's heart, revealed in the communion of saints for the sake of the world.

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