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*Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Limits of Responsibility in a
Globalizing Era*

Esther D. Reed

Christian ethicists are relatively familiar with questions about the practical meaning of responsibility as it relates to consumption. Asking the question of responsibility might lead to lifestyle changes respect to food and clothing, whether or not to travel, whether to buy books electronically, renovating furniture rather than buying new, and such like. As a consumer, I could buy clothes *only* from shops such as Sancho's Dress in the city where I live. This small, independent clothing shop stocks clothing made from pesticide- and fertilizer-free cotton and traces all stock to ensure that fair wages are paid to workers. The owners raised £11,000 by crowd-funding to develop a small factory in Ethiopia to produce shawls, scarfs and ponchos. Co-founder of the business, Kalkidan, wrote in her blog entry 'Hand-Made: Why less is more?':

Sometimes it can feel as an understatement to say that our scarves are 'hand-made', as they are in fact the result of a long and ancient chain of skilled hand-crafting. The cotton is of course hand-picked (for better or worse), then hand-spun into twine by an elderly community affected by leprosy before it is put into a wooden loom, which is of course pedal powered (by feet not hands) made from fast growing locally sourced wood before it is hand-woven and finally hand-wrapped by us before sending out into the world.

We chose this process because we understand that the real value of things lie in the hands that they have passed and the lives that they have changed. A balance which can work for overall good or overall bad, as if they pass through the hands of low skilled low wage workers it can have a negative and impoverishing effect on individuals and their futures.

We just wanted to let you know how powerful you are as a consumer and also to promise that we will keep things well made and quite small in order to do justice to the process of making and to be able to always measure the externalities we are creating.¹

¹ Sancho's Dress Blog July 8, 2015. <http://www.sanchosdress.com/blogs/news/34995972-hand-made-why-less-is-more> (Accessed: 31 August 2015).

The externalities, or third-party effects such as environmental damage and human suffering, are minimized at every stage of production, processing, shipping and sale.² Mobilizing consumers to take responsibility for such issues of global social justice is integral to their business plan and resonates positively with the rise of ‘ethical’ consumption in recent years that has created sizeable markets for fair trade goods in most developed countries.

Living close to this shop, I am fortunate in being able to ask the shop owners, Kalkidan and Vidmantas, the names of the women who stitched the blouses and trousers. Most towns and cities now have similar shops that sell traceable cotton and wool goods, however. And it is increasingly common in the farming industry to boast proudly of fully traceable meat, ‘farm to fork’, for the best possible eating experience. Only a very few examples come to mind of consumer purchases more directly originating in the products of mining (mindful that the clothes made in Ethiopia and sold in the UK must be transported somehow and cattle are over-wintered in barns constructed from stainless steel, etc.). The Fairphone social enterprise company aims to develop smartphones that are designed and produced with minimal harm to people and the planet marks a step forward in this regard: ‘We want to integrate materials in our supply chain that support local economies, not armed militias’.³ Its strapline ‘the smartphone with social values’ stimulates consumers to think about issues at every stage of a phone’s life, from the mining of metals and conflict-free minerals to fair

² Recent research has investigated ‘egoistic’ or ‘hedonistic’ motives vs. ‘altruistic’ or ‘moral’ motivations. E.g., Margaret Levi and April Linton, ‘Fair Trade: A Cup at a Time?’, *Politics & Society* (2003) Vol.31, No.3, 407-432; Simon Zadek, Sanjiv Lingayah, Maya Forstater, *Social Labels: Tools for Ethical Trade. Final Report* (Luxembourg: European Commission, 1998) 32f. Matthias Varul and others speak of moral or ethical ‘selving’ or consumption choices as important in self-identity and becoming the ‘type of person’ one wants to be. See Matthias Zick Varul (Principal Investigator), *Fair Trade Consumerism as an Everyday Ethical Practice – A Comparative Perspective An ESRC-Funded Research Project at the University of Exeter Results and Policy Implications* (June 2008), <http://people.exeter.ac.uk/mzv201/FT%20Results.pdf> (Accessed: 31 August 2015). See also Clive Barnett, Paul Cloke, Nick Clarke, Nick, Alice Malpass, ‘Consuming Ethics: Articulating the Subjects and Spaces of Ethical Consumption’, *Antipode* (2005), Vol.37, No.1, 24-45.

³ Fairphone, <https://www.fairphone.com> (accessed 24 April, 2017).

factory wages and disposal. Priced competitively when viewed against the industry leaders, Fairphone wants customers to make purchasing decisions for a range of reasons including performance and reliability but supply chain and sourcing, repairability, worker welfare, the benefits of business to society, and more, too: ‘We’re producing a phone to improve the electronics value chain. One step at a time’. Initiatives such as the Fairphone social enterprise company bring these supply-chain concerns to public attention, along with a focus on longevity to extend the phone’s usable life, safe and fair working conditions.

Initiatives such as Sancho’s Dress and the Fairphone social enterprise company are important in pressing home to consumers the need for traceability, transparency and accountability in business.⁴ Yet it is it is easy for the individual consumer to become overwhelmed by complexity and overtaken by a sense of powerlessness in the face of systemic corruption and trans-border interactions beyond our ken. A starting point for this essay is that few purchases that contain the products of mining are traceable. It is much more difficult to ask the question of responsibility with respect to the products of mining than with clothes, bed linen, and food, etc. While most of us could live more simply, few, if any, could live without the products of industry-scale mining, and few of these products have supply chains traceable by consumers or standards of certification that consumers may consult readily. Even crofters in the highlands of Scotland who take no electricity from the national grid, eat only local produce and let children walk to school, need the products of mining in wind-turbines, asphalt, concrete and kettles. Even if we try to source our wardrobes and fridges carefully, few of us have much if any control over the ethical sourcing and

⁴ For good overview of these issues, see Albino Barrera, *Market Complicity and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), esp. ch. 4.

production of the infrastructure facilities and systems that serve the country in which we live, its transportation and communication systems, power plants, and so on.

Sinful social structures are all around:

Man . . . is also conditioned by the social structure in which he lives, by the education he has received and by his environment. These elements can either help or hinder his living in accordance with the truth.⁵

Sin is both as an act *and* as a condition. While the structures and conditions of sin are rooted in personal sin and do not arise independently of the choices of persons, and while not all sinful structures been constructed with sinful intention, the multi-strata complexity of human existence today means that few can separate themselves from structural evil.⁶ There is never a clear line, as Daniel Finn observes, between the causal influences of structure and free choice, since structural influence occurs through the exercise of freedom.⁷

Social structures are systems of human relations among (preexisting) social positions. They are ontologically real, emergent “things” that exist at a “higher level” than the individual persons from whose actions they emerge. Structures exert causal impact on persons who take on positions within them by generating restrictions, enablements, and incentives that influence the (free) decisions those people make. Structures can appropriately be called sinful when their causal impact encourages morally evil decisions. What “evil” means depends on the sort of social structure under discussion (e.g., political evils differ from parish evils).⁸

A contemporary understanding of ancestral or original sin, informed by the social sciences, is needed today if Christian ethics or moral theology is to ask the question of responsibility in practically meaningful ways. The question of responsibility cannot be abstracted from sinful social structures.

⁵ John Paul II, *Centesimus annus* (1991), §38, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html.

⁶ For one of the most cogent considerations of this topic, see Daniel K. Finn, ‘What Is a Sinful Social Structure?’ *Theological Studies*, March 2016, Vol. 77 Issue 1, p136-164, at p.136.

⁷ Finn, ‘What Is a Sinful Social Structure?’, pp. 159.

⁸ Finn, ‘What Is a Sinful Social Structure?’, pp. 163.

The Question

How, then, might Bonhoeffer help Christian people to think about responsibility in a globalizing era — that is, in an era when tightly connected agent-act-consequences models of responsibility are breaking apart in the face of transnational capital flows, speed-of-light transfers of vast amounts of money, overloads of information, conflicting data, huge fluxes in market pricing, all of which contribute to so-called ‘butterfly effects’ in business whereby a small change at one point in a nonlinear system can result in differences in unpredictable places elsewhere? Our era is different from his, but the claim in this essay is that Bonhoeffer’s learning of responsibility from the risen Christ present now in the (global) church is a welcome provocation to new thinking about the meaning of responsibility learned from land, distant neighbor, (global) church and bible. More specifically, and thinking with Bonhoeffer, the claim is that Christian people will not ask the question of responsibility or understand the meaning of responsibility adequately unless and until asking the question of the community of faith globally, and will not ask the question of the community of faith globally unless and until asking the question of responsibility.

I have written elsewhere about Bonhoeffer’s theology of responsibility. For present purposes, we may simply note that, in his early dissertation writings, Bonhoeffer rejects the foundational modern concept of the autonomous ‘I’ for whom the will is the locus of responsibility.⁹ While Bonhoeffer does not write at length about responsibility in his early dissertation writings, responsibility may be considered as ‘a problem of act’, that is, as a problem of agency and individual freedom, via his critique of ideas of personhood in the philosophy of Kant, Hegel,

⁹ See Esther D. Reed, ‘The Limits of Individual Responsibility: Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Reversal of Agent-Act-Consequence’ in *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 37.2, Fall/Winter 2017.

Husserl, et al. Similarly, responsibility may be considered as a problem of 'being' via his critique of Heidegger's concept of existence as 'always-being-already-guilty'. Bonhoeffer, in effect, cuts through questions about the limits of responsibility understood exclusively as a reflexive relation that links agents to actions by a causal tie. He reverses the meaning of responsibility from I-You-I to You-I-You, or You-We-You which, I suggest, potentially makes a difference to how Christian people might think about responsibility as church globally today.

Bonhoeffer's context was very different from our own. The political emergency in Germany gave exchanges between Christian people internationally a new urgency and sense of purpose. In our own day, as the ever more powerful systems and structures of globalization facilitate money and commodity flows across territorial borders, as huge markets move unpredictably, crash, revive, and so on, with massive social impacts but few obvious subjects making decisions, and with globalization seeming to be a morass of processes without traceable agency, a 'process without a subject', Christian people are able to communicate across territorial borders with increasing effectiveness.¹⁰ For present purposes, we delimit consideration to what responsibility might mean for Christian people *locus imperii* who have benefitted for centuries from sinful social structures that have destroyed natural environments, perpetuated the arms race, disrupted local barter economies, fuelled corruption at every level, and more. What kind of ecclesial re-formation does his restructuring of the meaning of responsibility as learned in Christ yield for our globalizing world? What follows practically from universal solidarity in Christ given the legacy of colonialism? Can the terrible dissymmetries of history be overcome to reach a new

¹⁰ For this phrase, see Colin Hay, 'What Place for Ideas in the Structure-Agency Debate? Globalisation as a 'Process Without a Subject', *Writing in the Critical Social Sciences* (London: First Press, 2001), http://www.criticalrealism.com/archive/cshay_wpisad.html.

understanding of responsibility? How are we to be church with such large inequalities of income and wealth between (and within) countries?

My claim is that the basics of an answer are given in the following:

1. church members are structurally 'with-each-other' [*Miteinander*] as appointed by God;
2. church members are structurally '*being-for-each-other*' [*Führeinander*];
3. the principle of vicarious representative action [*Stellvertretung*] becomes the lived meaning of responsibility.¹¹

The challenge is to think through what each moment might mean in our globalizing era given Bonhoeffer's reversal of the meaning of responsibility from a problem that is 'mine' to manage in the illusion of the self-reflective, free choice of the knowledgeable, acting self to your gift to me. If, following Bonhoeffer, 'You' hold the meaning of responsibility for me because Jesus Christ himself is the meaning of responsibility — 'You' in places far away — the question becomes what this means for the church globally, and how to exploit the opportunities of our globalizing era as well as contend against its pathologies.

Postcolonial Readings

Postcolonial readings of Bonhoeffer are critically important in opening minds to perspectives and issues developed outside the so-called 'West'. Ulrike Auga reads Bonhoeffer alongside Indian literary theorist and feminist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in order to approach questions of marginalization and resistance in a manner that is theologically informed and yet able to think critically and politically too.¹² Paul S. Chung uses Bonhoeffer's insight into reconciliation and how to think about the Other

¹¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio* Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English Edition [DBWE 1] (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 178.

¹² Ulrike Auga, 'Decolonizing Public Space: A Challenge of Bonhoeffer's and Spivak's Concepts of Resistance, 'Religion' and 'Gender'', *Feminist Theology* (2015), Vol. 24:1, 49–68.

in ways that undergird public theology in postcolonial relief.¹³ Chung's particular focus is a dialogue with Confucian ethics and how to bring Bonhoeffer's commitment to God in relation with humanity into a fruitful interaction with Confucian humanism, notions of *ben* or benevolence, and emphasis on the mysteries of the cosmos. He notes Ghandi's importance for Bonhoeffer and his comment in a letter of May 22, 1934 that more Christianity exists in the world of the 'heathens' than in the whole state church of Germany.¹⁴ David S. Robinson reads Bonhoeffer in ways that look forward to a global ecclesiology, with particular reference to Bonhoeffer's engagement with questions of race and how churches can unmask and confront segregation.¹⁵ Postcolonial theorist and theologian Luis Rivera Pagán has reflected on the need to reclaim from Bonhoeffer those aspects of his writings that explicate the need for theology to acquire 'the view from below'.

The essential imperative might be to remember and radicalize the prophetic words written by the imprisoned Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in a note surreptitiously preserved by his friend Eberhard Bethge: "We have for once learned to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled—in short, from the perspective of those who suffer."¹⁶

Robinson words were picked up and noted by Carmelo Santos, an interim editor of the *Journal of Lutheran Ethics*, when developing a strategy for the future of the journal.¹⁷ Bonhoeffer has been read alongside the writings of Martin Luther King in order to identify their shared insights and interpret their various legacies in ways that

¹³ Paul S. Chung, 'Dietrich Bonhoeffer' in *Postcolonial Public Theology: Faith, Scientific Rationality, and Prophetic Dialogue* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2016), 47. See further Green and Tseng, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Sino-Theology* (Chung Yuan: Chung Yuan Christian University Press, 2008).

¹⁴ Chung, 'Dietrich Bonhoeffer', 53.

¹⁵ David S. Robinson, 'Confessing Race: Toward a Global Ecclesiology after Bonhoeffer and Du Bois', *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* (2016), Volume 36, Number 2, 121-139.

¹⁶ Luis Rivera Pagán, 'Listening and Engaging the Voices from the Margins: Postcolonial Observations from the Caribbean', in Luis Rivera Pagán, *Essays from the Margins* (Eugene: Cascade, 2014), 47.

¹⁷ Carmelo Santos, 'From Monologues to Conversations: Reflections on the Future of the Journal of Lutheran Ethics', in *Currents in Theology and Mission* 43;1 (2016), 18.

might spark new dialogue.¹⁸ John de Gruchy wrote in the 1980s about the relevance of Bonhoeffer's writings for the South African church, and has subsequently suggested that a new generation of theologians continues to explicate Bonhoeffer's legacy to good effect in that country.¹⁹

'One-third-world' Christians also need ways of examining their own lives and resisting naïve complicity in unjust social systems that advantage the privileged but exploit and dehumanize others, however. Bonhoeffer's challenge to us is to find a way of talking about responsibility that does not collapse into individualism, that is, the problem of the agent *incurvatio in se ipsum* (curved inward on itself), or become ensconced within a univocal logic that subsumes socio-economic, cultural and religious differences within itself. Bonhoeffer teaches that responsibility *on our own terms* is always another way of dealing death and suffering death. Responsibility *in Christ* is ours already. But which of us is ready to receive this gift? Which of us does not tremble in the face of a gift addressed to each in our singularity and uniqueness? Which of us knows how to live with the guilt that is integral to the Christian life of vicarious representative action (*Stellvertretung*)?

Being *Miteinander* in Sin

In order to develop the basics of an answer as noted above, the remainder of this essay engages specifically with *Sanctorum Communio* chapters 4 and 5, and attends to its major themes of sin and broken community, including ethically collective persons, the church community as established in and through Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit in the church of Jesus Christ, the empirical form of the church, and the church as a distinct

¹⁸ Willis Jenkins and Jennifer M. McBride Ed., *Bonhoeffer and King: Their Legacies and Import for Christian Social Thought* (Nashville, TN: Fortress Press, 2010). See also J. Deotis Roberts, *Bonhoeffer and King: Speaking Truth to Power* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004).

¹⁹ John De Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer and South Africa: Theology in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984); John W. DeGruchy, 'Bonhoeffer's Legacy: A New Generation', *The Christian Century* (1997), April 2, 343-345.

sociological type. At issue is what being *miteinander* and *föhreinander* might look like today in a globalizing era of industry-scale agriculture, fishing, forestry, the oil and petroleum industry, other energy sources, and more.

Bonhoeffer starts *Sanctorum Communio* chapter 4 with the problem of sin:

The world of sin is the world of 'Adam', the old humanity. But the world of Adam is the world Christ reconciled and made into a new humanity, Christ's church. However, it is not as if Adam were completely overcome; rather, the humanity of Adam lives on in the humanity of Christ. This is why the discussion of the problem of sin is indispensable for understanding the sanctorum communion.²⁰

'Sin and Broken Community' explicates the basic relation(s) between I and You inherent in the concept of sin, details how sin breaks immediate community with God and neighbor, and effects 'ethical atomism'.²¹ Sin isolates one person from another as each recognizes their own sinfulness and, simultaneously, throws a person into the misery of sin caused collectively by all. Significantly, sin has a significance that is not only individual but also supra-individual. It is simultaneously 'the deed of the human race and of the individual'.²² Utter solitude and the deepest, broadest sense of shared sinfulness define our fallen nature. Human beings are bound together in a state of corruption. The individual culpable act and the universality of sin are inseparable.²³ *'The human being, by virtue of being an individual, is also the human race'*.²⁴ The whole of humanity is found in my individual sinful act. The human race falls away from its vocation with every sin that I commit. The universality in sin is posited with, and in, every individual sin. I stand alone, utterly singular, in my sin but am associated in my guiltiness with all people. The sin of every individual is indivisible

²⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 107.

²¹ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 108.

²² Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 108.

²³ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 110.

²⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 115.

from the sin of every other individual. Together every human person constitutes the *peccatorum communion* [community of sinners] that is the human race.

Note Bonhoeffer's focus on human solidarity in sin as both personal and relevant to the entire human species:

One falls away not only from one's personal vocation but also from one's generic vocation as a member of the human race. Thus all humanity falls with each sin, and not one of us is in principle different from Adam; that is, every one is also the "first" sinner.²⁵

Bonhoeffer's handling of human solidarity in sin is pastorally gentle but strong. He holds together a focus on the individual and the human race. Significantly, he does this with a simultaneously strong focus on membership of an empirical community: 'The meaning and the reality of such a call can be grasped only by one who has experienced it within an empirical community. ... The call comes not to the individual, but to the collective person' — at which point Bonhoeffer alludes to the empirical community of Israel who experienced the history of their calling together, were chastised and comforted as a people.²⁶ This emphasis in *Sanctorum Communio* on the social character of the Christian calling precludes any individualist conception of the church wherein persons decide for themselves on a whim the meaning of good and evil, and, simultaneously renders meaningless any theory of sin as 'universal' without reference to its social articulation.²⁷

Bonhoeffer moves in *Sanctorum Communio* Chapter 4 Part B to consider ethical collective persons with reference to biblical conceptions of the people of God. It is not individuals but the people, he says, that fell into sin. 'Thus it is the people who must

²⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 115.

²⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 118.

²⁷ For useful background, see Christiane Tietz, 'Bonhoeffer on the Uses and Limits of Philosophy' in Brian Gregor and Jens Zimmerman, Eds, *Bonhoeffer and Continental Thought: Cruciform Philosophy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), ch. 1.

be comforted (Is. 40:1)').²⁸ God works with entire peoples as well as with individuals: 'There is a will of God with a people just as with individuals'.²⁹ God is concerned with every community, however small, and with the nations. And here is the nub of the matter as it concerns culpability:

The corporate culpability of a community is something different from the culpability found in social interactions within the community. If the 'people' must repent, it does not matter how many repent, and in actuality it will never be the whole people, the whole church; but God can regard the 'whole' 'as if' all had repented. "For the sake of ten I will not destroy them" (Gen. 18:32).³⁰

God sees the whole people in a few. God alone sees all of humanity in the story of Jesus Christ, which makes a difference to the question of responsibility understood with reference to human solidarity in sin.³¹ 'The call comes not to the individual, but to the collective person'.³² The people of God does not comprise isolated individuals are called to do penance but the people as a whole. Not all will repent but God sees the whole in a few — which is important for what Bonhoeffer says later about vicarious representative action, that is, the meaning of *Stellvertretung*. His argument is fundamentally Christological; only because humanity is either in Adam or in Christ is he able to develop this line of thought. For this reason also, sin is approached by Bonhoeffer as an ecclesial question. He holds the tension between individual and collective responsibility with reference to the local, ecclesial community. This is the 'proven center of activity' that, for Bonhoeffer, is to be considered always in ways that are locally, concretely, and empirically grounded.³³

This ecclesial framing of the question of solidarity in sin (and responsibility) becomes more apparent in *Sanctorum Communio* chapter 5:

²⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 119.

²⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 119.

³⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 119-20.

³¹ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 121.

³² Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 118.

³³ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 118.

The whole theological reflection thus far not only leads to the discussion of the *sanctorum communion*, but is possible and meaningful only from the perspectives of the *sanctorum communion*.³⁴

Bonhoeffer's treatment of solidarity in sin as an ecclesial question runs counter to modern individualistic sensibilities. He has yet more to say, however, about how the church is not exempt from the seriousness of sin and its effects. The reality of sin and the *communio peccatorum* remain in the church even despite its being in Christ: 'Adam has really been replaced by Christ only eschatologically, ἐπ' ἐλπίδι (*in spe*) [in hope]'.³⁵ As long as sin remains in the world, the church shares the sinful existence of humanity. The church must take this seriously with respect to its own behavior and decision-making, and pay attention moreover to the extent to which the church participates in the *communio peccatorum* and how its life in Christ bears upon its ethos and, for our purposes, how it understand the calling to responsibility.

The ontic-ethical base-relations in the state of sin not only are fundamental for all personal social relations, but also condition even their empirical formation. When they are modified, or re-created, in the concept of the church, this concrete form of the community must change as well; indeed this provides the possibility and necessity of developing a unique empirical form of the community.³⁶

The church is simultaneously a participant in the sin of Adam and a new community established by God. The challenge is to discern what responsible living looks like given these realities: 'It will ... be necessary to delineate the new social basic-relations, which are established by the fact of Christ, as constitutive in the deepest sense for a social body like the church'.³⁷

Being *Führeinander* across Global Inequality

It is well known that Bonhoeffer urges Christian people to prioritize theological over every other consideration, and insists that the church needs a theological basis for

³⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 122-23.

³⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 124.

³⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 125.

³⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 126.

every striving for world peace, every social action, gesture of friendship, and more. With Bonhoeffer, there can be no compromise in confessing ‘one body and one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all (Eph. 4:14ff)’.³⁸ However remote the location, whether or not the local community has running water, whether a cash or barter economy, whether predominantly consumers or producers of the products of industrial agriculture, the theological truth claim is that we are ‘one body and one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all (Eph. 4:14ff). Whether mining and loading iron ore, or sitting in rooms supported by steel girders made from iron ore, we are one church. Everything depends upon Jesus Christ, the risen, exalted Lord. ‘All worldly powers are subject to and bound to serve Christ, each in its own way’.³⁹ The church’s proclamation of Christ ‘is not subject to any earthly limitations; it is ecumenical, which means it encompasses the entire globe’.⁴⁰

This is not all that needs to be said, however, when global risks are facts of life for everyone but vulnerability to risk is something very different: ‘disaster risks are skewed toward developing countries’.⁴¹ Small islands, developing states, and other small countries, have far higher levels of relative risk of poverty in a changing climate with respect to the size of their populations and economies than do the USA, UK, or other members of the G8.⁴² Non-white and low-income communities typically breathe

³⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 193.

³⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English Edition [DBWE 6] (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 401.

⁴⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 402.

⁴¹ United Nations Human Development Report 2007/2008, *Fighting Climate Change: Human Solidarity in a Divided World* (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2007), p. 76. http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR_20072008_EN_Chapter2.pdf (accessed: 24 April, 2017).

⁴² Pan American Health Organization, *Disaster: Preparedness and Mitigation in the Americas*. Entry on ‘Risk and poverty in a changing climate’ Issue 112, October 2009. <http://www.paho.org> (accessed: 8 April, 2017).

air polluted with more hazardous ingredients than affluent white communities.⁴³ The source of many risks associated with climate change and economic volatility affect the world's poor but can be traced to energy consumption patterns and political choices in the rich world.⁴⁴ Very poor people in diverse countries around the world are already bearing the brunt of the consequences of climate change, the targeted killing of terrorist suspects, downturns or worse in the global economy, and more.

As a child of the Reformation, Bonhoeffer did not urge the church to engage directly in politics. 'The church of the Reformation', he says 'is not encouraged to get involved directly in specific political actions of the state. Instead, it has to affirm the state as God's order of preservation [*Erhaltungsordnung*] in this godless world'.⁴⁵ It should recognize and understand the state's creation of order – whether good or bad from a humanitarian perspective – as grounded in God's desire for preservation in the midst of the world's chaotic godlessness'.⁴⁶ The church has neither to praise nor censure the laws of the state. Instead, it has to affirm the state as God's order of preservation in this godless world'. It should recognize and understand the state's creation of order – whether good or bad from a humanitarian perspective – as grounded in God's desire for preservation in the midst of the world's chaotic godlessness'. Bonhoeffer distinguishes between gospel and law and holds that the actions of the state should remain free from interference by the church: 'It remains for the humanitarian associations and individual Christian men who see themselves called to do so, to make the state aware of the moral aspect of the measures it takes in this

⁴³ Michelle L. Bell and Keita Ebisu, 'Environmental inequality in exposures to airborne particulate matter components in the United States', *Environmental Health Perspectives* (2012) 120(12), 1699-1704.

⁴⁴ United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2016* (New York, UNDP: 2016).

⁴⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 'The Church and the Jewish Question', *Berlin: 1932-1933* Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English Edition [DBWE 12] (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 362.

⁴⁶ Bonhoeffer, 'The Church and the Jewish Question', 362-63.

regard, that is, should the occasion arise, to accuse the state of offenses against morality'.⁴⁷ Individual Christians have this calling, not the church per se.

The church cannot primarily take direct political action, since it does not presume to know how things should go historically. Even on the Jewish question today, the church cannot contradict the state directly and demand that it take any particular course of action.⁴⁸

'As church, it will only ask whether or not the state is creating law and order'.⁴⁹

While it is from the Christian proclamation and faith that the state receives its own rights, Bonhoeffer's default position is that Christians are to remain subject to authority.⁵⁰ Opposition to the state should occur when certain limits are reached, and these limits are ecclesial. 'The limits are reached wherever there is a clash between the space the body of Christ claims and occupies for this world for worship, offices, and the civic life of its members, and the world's own claim for space'.⁵¹ When the very being of the church is challenged, however, there are three possibilities for action that the church can take vis-à-vis the state:

1. questioning the state as to the legitimate state character of its actions, that is, making the state responsible for what it does.
2. service to the victims of the state actions. The church has an unconditional obligation toward the victims of any societal order, even if they do not belong to the Christian community; (Let us work for the good of all – Gal. 6:10).
3. not just to bind up the wound of the victims beneath the wheel but to seize the wheel itself, when the matter is of the *status confessionis*.⁵²

⁴⁷ Bonhoeffer, 'The Church and the Jewish Question', 363.

⁴⁸ Bonhoeffer, 'The Church and the Jewish Question', 363.

⁴⁹ Bonhoeffer, 'The Church and the Jewish Question', 364.

⁵⁰ Bonhoeffer, 'The Church and the Jewish Question', 365. See also Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship* Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English Edition [DBWE 4] (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 244.

⁵¹ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 245-46.

⁵² Bonhoeffer, 'The Church and the Jewish Question', 365.

The commandment of Jesus Christ does not establish the rule of the church over government in any practical sense yet, nonetheless, rules church, family, culture, and government by setting each of these mandates free to exercise their respective functions.⁵³

The functions of the state are cast by Bonhoeffer in terms of law and order. This much is familiar to students of his work. ‘As long as the state acts in such a way as to create law and order – even if it means new laws and a new order – the church of the Creator, Reconciler, Redeemer cannot oppose it through direct political action’.⁵⁴ As church, the church vis-à-vis the state it will only ask whether or not the state is creating law and order. In doing so the church will see the state as limited in two ways. Either it creates too little law and order, whenever, for instance, a group of people is deprived of its rights. Or it creates too much law and order, notably when the state develops its use of force to such a degree as to rob the Christian faith of its right to proclaim its message, thereby compelling the church to speak.⁵⁵ Our question is whether, in a globalizing era, a Bonhoefferian ethic will include careful attention to international and transnational law, such that the church’s obligation becomes:⁵⁶

1. questioning the state *system* as to the legitimate ~~state~~ *inter- or transnational* character of its actions, that is, making the state *system* responsible for what it does;
2. service to the victims of the state *system* actions. The church has an unconditional obligation toward the victims of any societal order, even if they

⁵³ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 402.

⁵⁴ Bonhoeffer, ‘The Church and the Jewish Question’, 364.

⁵⁵ Bonhoeffer, ‘The Church and the Jewish Question’, 365.

⁵⁶ International law commonly refers to customs and rules that are generally regarded and accepted as binding in relations between states and between nations. Transnational law is law that applies to all persons, businesses, and governments that perform, or have influence across state borders.

do not belong to the Christian community; (let us work for the good of all – Gal. 6:10);

3. ‘not just to bind up the wound of the victims beneath the wheel but to seize the wheel itself’ (p.365) when what is at stake is a matter *status confessionis*.

If valid, this reading of Bonhoeffer would constitute one way, albeit one amongst many, of moving from being *miteinander-in-sin* across global inequality to being *föhreinander* in day-to-day practical ways.

Stellvertretung as the Lived Meaning of Responsibility

Mindful that being *miteinander-in-sin* looks different from different perspectives and that different peoples are differently culpable, we move to consider how, for Bonhoeffer, responsibility is Jesus Christ’s vicarious representative action.⁵⁷

Responsibility is understood as vicarious representative action (*Stellvertretung*) enacted by believers, with and for other believers, within the church community.⁵⁸

Responsibility is vicarious representative action taken by the church for the sake of the world. The truth of the church-community is pre-volitional; the ontic-ethical existence of the church in Christ is deeper than volitional social acts, personal social relations, existing communal relations, and so on. The essence of the church is constituted by divine not human act, hence the primacy of theological moves to define responsibility in terms of ecclesial living because of the incarnation and resurrection, and because Christ Jesus is the ‘material bearer of value’.⁵⁹ Hence: ‘[t]he “political ethics” of the church-community is grounded solely in its sanctification, the goal of which is that the world be world and community be community, and that, nevertheless,

⁵⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 146-48.

⁵⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 178-192.

⁵⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 129.

God's word goes out from the church-community to all the world, as the proclamation that the earth and all it contains is the Lord's.⁶⁰

Given this, our question is what it means to live the realities of *stellvertretung* globally when the church *locus imperii* is slow in exposing itself to the gaze of Christ and neighbor, slow to learn Bonhoeffer's reversal of the meaning of responsibility from I-You-I to You-I-You, or You-We-You, and when the realities of global inequality and injustice can either become debilitating because of the weight of guilt, or lead to desensitization, thoughtlessness and apathy. Schliesser's particular interest in *Everyone Who Acts Responsibly Becomes Guilty: Bonhoeffer's Concept of Accepting Guilt* is with Bonhoeffer's *accepting* of guilt. Her work is of help to us here. Briefly stated, as Schliesser makes plain, Bonhoeffer urges acceptance of the interconnectedness of humans in guilt and emphasizes *Stellvertretung*, or being guilty of the other person's guilt, as integral to discipleship: 'our new humanity consists in "bearing the troubles and sins [Schuld] of all others"'.⁶¹ The concept of accepting guilt, she shows, is integral to the Christian life of vicarious representative action (*Stellvertretung*) and emerges from core biblical Christological convictions. Schliesser reviews a wealth of scholarship on Bonhoeffer's theology of guilt that, broadly speaking, locates him firmly within 'western', Protestant tradition(s). She compares Bonhoeffer's Christologically informed casting of obligation in terms of *Stellvertretung* with classic Greek tragedies fuelled by the inevitability of fate,⁶² before venturing a reconstruction that emphasizes the believer's renunciation of innocence by incurring guilt for the sake of another as entailed in participation in the life of Christ.

⁶⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 261-62.

⁶¹ Christine Schliesser, *Everyone Who Acts Responsibly Becomes Guilty: Bonhoeffer's Concept of Accepting Guilt* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), p. 165, Citing *Discipleship*, 285.

⁶² Schliesser, *Everyone Who Acts Responsibly*, 170.

Our question is what *Stellvertretung*, or being guilty of the other person's guilt, might entail for the global church today. As we have seen above, different peoples are differently culpable; the practicalities of what it means to live *föhreinander* look different from different perspectives. Living the meaning of *Stellvertretung* in the re-forming church globally will be encountered variously too. Hence the need to approach with caution what it might mean not only to accept that You — ‘You’ in places far away — hold the meaning of responsibility for me, but that You — ‘You’ are Christ to me and therefore bear my guilt. Bonhoeffer is clear about this being the direction in which Christian ethics must travel: ‘[V]icariouly representative action and suffering, which is carried out by the members of the body of Christ, is itself the very life of Christ who seeks to take shape in his members’.⁶³ The structure of responsible action within the local community of faith involves willingness to become guilty one for another, as does the structure of responsible action for the community of faith on behalf of wider society: ‘Those who act responsibly take on guilt—which is inescapable for any responsible person—place this guilt on themselves, not on someone else’.⁶⁴ This much is clear. Less clear is how to affirm truths to which Bonhoeffer bears witness across such large inequalities of income and wealth between (and within) countries, without papering over differences that should bear upon the meaning of responsibility. What is to prevent even the concept of responsibility in the (global) church from becoming yet another hegemonic construction?

Unexpectedly, perhaps, it is at this point of self-agonizing that Bonhoeffer calls the believer, paradoxically, to abandon agent-centred ethical concern. Believers are called to abandon an ethical position of responsibility for themselves, a position that counts for nothing before God, ‘thereby demonstrating precisely the necessity for

⁶³ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 222.

⁶⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 282.

vicarious representative action'.⁶⁵ Like the kind of ethical suspension that Kierkegaard bequeaths, like Abraham at the point of sacrificing Isaac, a person's claim to responsibility is abjured for the sake of God's command.⁶⁶ Against every sense of duty and obligation, pleas from beloved faces or religious imperatives, the believer must abandon even the possibility of their own responsibility as nothing other than an expression of sinfulness and finitude. Only the responsibility encountered in Jesus Christ is perfect and unlimited. No other act of responsibility is adequate. To acknowledge Jesus Christ as the very embodiment of the person whose 'entire life, action, and suffering is vicarious representative action', and who is able to live in such a manner because he is 'concerned exclusively with God's love for human beings', is to suspend one's own obligation to responsibility - that turns to infinite guilt anyhow in the double bind of conscience facing the impossibility of acting or being responsible.⁶⁷ This is a kind of death: 'In the knowledge of my being-a-sinner as an individual ... yet never as an exoneration ... only in the judgment in which I must die as 'Adam'''.⁶⁸

While living the realities of *stellvertretung* globally is hampered by one-third-world inability to deal with the problem of guilt, Bonhoeffer's challenge is to live as church. It is this simple, and this difficult. Responsibility is returned to the believer as a uniquely singular and unrepeatable gift *in community*.⁶⁹ '[S]o the *community of human beings with each other has also become a reality in love again*'.⁷⁰ 'This is accomplished by the Spirit-impelled word of the crucified and risen Lord of the

⁶⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 156.

⁶⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 97.

⁶⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 38-39.

⁶⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being* [DBWE 2], (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 147-48.

⁶⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, 142-44.

⁷⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 157.

church'.⁷¹ The meaning of responsibility is encountered as God leads his people out from the sinfulness of the *cor curvum in se* into the gaze of the other: '[H]uman beings are directed into their reality only from outside'.⁷² The meaning of responsibility is discovered in practical ways as forgiveness is shared amongst those who share the bread of Christ's body. Responsibility is never individualistic or isolated, nor merely an ideal. Instead, personal responsibility is possible only as a member of Christ's body: 'Love is ... not an actualization of the metaphysical social-relation [*metaphysischen Sozialbeziehungen*], but rather of the ethical social-affiliation'.⁷³ Responsibility is not experienced as potentiality but as God's gift to be received from the hands of others.⁷⁴ His challenge is to speak one to another the words of biblical comfort familiar to the church rather than deciding upon a 'penultimate' response of 'a kind of helpless solidarity' in the face of terrible realities. Conscience is something defined by the past in Adam.⁷⁵ A different future is present in faith and given to the church in baptism.⁷⁶ All Christian responsibility has its origin in this gift.

Sanctorum Communio Globally

What, then, does it mean to live *sanctorum communio* globally? Bonhoeffer's theology and practice of ecumenism yield insight at this point. Keith Clements has written most clearly on Bonhoeffer's ecumenism and claims to show that ecumenical considerations were central to Bonhoeffer's life and work from the early 1930s: '[h]is commitment to and active involvement in the ecumenical movement ... form the most

⁷¹ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 157.

⁷² Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, 89.

⁷³ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 165.

⁷⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, 117.

⁷⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, 155.

⁷⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, 159.

continuous thread of his life and activity, and links all his various engagements'.⁷⁷ From his involvement with the 1931 conference in Cambridge, England, of the World Alliance for Friendship and appointment as an honorary Youth Secretary for Europe,⁷⁸ through ecumenical camaraderie with congregations in London (1933-34) and meetings with bishop of Chichester, George Bell, to the ecumenical conference in Fanø (1934) that threw its weight behind the Confessing Church, and agreement of the constitution for the World Council of Churches (1938), to his conducting of services for prisoners of multiple nationalities whilst in jail, Bonhoeffer's career was shaped in large part through ecumenical encounter. His lament in 1932 was that theological reflection lagged behind ecumenical developments: 'There is still no theology of the ecumenical movement', but his last recorded words in a message to George Bell, bishop of Chichester were "“Tell him . . . With him I believe in the principle of our universal Christian brotherhood which rises above all national interests, and that our victory is certain.””⁷⁹ This victory, says Clements, was not of one nationality or grouping, or even of the Allies closing in on Berlin, but of the community of Jesus Christ in existence across the world. Even if not developed fully, Bonhoeffer's hunch was that the ecumenical witness of diverse Christian communities throughout the world to their one Lord Jesus Christ was an inspiration still to be claimed, and a service still to be performed.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Keith Clements, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Ecumenical Quest* (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 2015), p. ix.

⁷⁸ The main purpose of the World Alliance, as its name implies, was to work for peace, and it was this, which was the prime attraction of the organisation for Bonhoeffer. For him ecumenism and peace were two sides of the same coin. (See K Clements, "Ecumenical Witness for Peace", in JW de Gruchy (Ed.). *Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 154-172.)

⁷⁹ Recounted by Clements, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Ecumenical Quest*, p.2.

⁸⁰ Clements uses the phrase 'an inspiration still to be claimed', *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Ecumenical Quest*, p.8.

The organized ecumenical movement in the 1930s and 1940s, the work of the World Alliance, its associated youth secretariat, the International Missionary Council, the 1927 Lausanne Faith and Order Conference, ecumenical support for the Confessing Church, the birth of the World Council of Churches, and more, all belonged to their time. Even so, Bonhoeffer was clear that the World Alliance was church, that is, more than a society with a common purpose, because founded utterly and only on obedient listening to and preaching of the Word of God.⁸¹ The work of the World Alliance exceeds the work of local Christian communities but is God's work nonetheless, for peace amongst the nations: 'Its aim is the end of war and the victory over war'.⁸² In his 'Theses Paper for the Fanø Conference' (1934), Bonhoeffer denounces war as the enemy of peace and critiques secular answers from pacifism before developing overtly answers in response to the divine commandment not to kill: 'To the objection: the State must be maintained: the Church answers: Thou shalt not kill Have you dared to entrust God, in full faith, with your protection in obedience to His commandment? Believe in God and be obedient'.⁸³ Neither war nor fatalism but prayer and faith in Christ's coming reign overcome evil. In his address to the Fanø Conference entitled 'The Church and the Peoples of the World', Bonhoeffer similarly cuts across the twin crags of nationalism and internationalism, or what today might be called partialism and impartialism, with a call to hear and heed the word of God. Peace is not 'a problem' but a commandment from God.⁸⁴

Some reasons for caution must be heeded. Bonhoeffer's optimism with respect to the ecumenical movement has been noted and criticized by some. Jesuit theologian

⁸¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *London, 1933-1935* DBWE 13 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 304.

⁸² Bonhoeffer, *London*, 305.

⁸³ Bonhoeffer, *London*, 305-06.

⁸⁴ Bonhoeffer, *London*, 307.

John Wilcken thought that Bonhoeffer asked too few questions about the ecumenical church:

There can be no doubt that Bonhoeffer was too optimistic in his attitude to the ecumenical movement. He was eager that something should be achieved, and achieved quickly. After all, it was clear that the world was in a dangerous state, and, in particular, Bonhoeffer was deeply aware of the desperate state of affairs in Germany at the time. It was his hope that the Ecumenical Church, by speaking the authoritative Word of God to the world, would provide the solution to the world's problems. Clearly he was expecting too much.⁸⁵

Wilcken's concern is that the pain in Bonhoeffer's heart with respect to the crisis in Germany and approaching peril biased him toward the welcome, positive and supportive aspects of the ecumenical movement with insufficient attention paid to where and how it might fall into sin. Bonhoeffer's own observation was a plea for Christian people to pause and take stock of the simple fact that Christian people and churches from throughout the world reach out toward each other, come together, pray for the promised unity of the church. This is reason enough, says Bonhoeffer, at least to ask whether God wants to bestow blessing on such activity.⁸⁶ 'Is not this witness of all Christian churches at the very least something that must prompt a moment's pause and reflection?'.⁸⁷ Only a truly bad theology would forbid taking these things seriously.⁸⁸ This essay is an attempt at least to begin consideration of what 'taking these things seriously' might mean today.

⁸⁵ John Wilcken SJ, 'Bonhoeffer: Church and Ecumenism', *The Heythrop Journal* 10, No 1 (1969), 5-23, at p. 23.

⁸⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education at Finkenwalde* DWBE 14 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), p. 408.

⁸⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education at Finkenwalde*, p. 408.

⁸⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education at Finkenwalde*, p. 409.