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A Possible Understanding of Bonhoeffer's Concept of the Other**

The legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer cannot be questioned. His life and work present a never-ending source for thinking responsibly about church, society and the individual no matter if it's a critique or reinforcement of certain ideas and practices. Indeed, it has an overall relevance even today. Numerous concepts could be mentioned, such as the religionless Christianity. Our aim here is to give a short introduction to Bonhoeffer's concept of "the Other" in the mirror of his most fundamental writings, such as *Creation and Fall*, *Sanctorium Communio*, *Christ the Center*, *Act and Being*, and *Life Together*.

1. The Limit and Gift of Creation

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's writings are profound. While reading *Creation and Fall*, *Sanctorium Communio*, *Christ the Center*, *Act and Being*, and *Life Together*, one basically encounters a traditional way of presenting the concepts of Christian theology in manners of phrases, expressions and terms. However, in its very "traditional" approach we found it to be even more contemporary, for which we can appreciate Bonhoeffer's work. We are aware that from one point of view, it is an immediate assessment of Bonhoeffer's approach. What led us to this were two things.

On the one hand, it was its notion that in human relationships something went off balance even if some individual may think quite the contrary. On the other hand, it was the clear notion that in Jesus Christ the reconciliation had

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** In investigating the topic the text will only focus on Bonhoeffer's main works.

taken place in this human reality. This was the importance of Bonhoeffer's eagerness to think about what it means to be human. This is the context one can understand the meaning of the 'other'.

In order to understand the unique intention of human relatedness we must go back to the origins. Looking at Bonhoeffer's account, it is clearly envisaged in Creation and Fall. In making a theological reading of the creation narrative, Bonhoeffer considers the creation of the individual as part of God's creation. One can say, this is obvious. However, there is a reason to point out this fact, namely, that through this Bonhoeffer aims to emphasize that the reality of the individual is distinct from that of God, but not separated. There is a two-fold relationship between God and the individual: physical and fatherly.¹ The created, the first individual lives on earth as the unity of body and soul, as one who *is* body and soul.² The first created individual is viewed as the image of God. This proves to be significant in connections with human relatedness to the extent the created individual is related to the other individual basically through their bodily reality, which means that "they are there for others and dependent upon others"³ – as Bonhoeffer points out.

However, we also realize that for Bonhoeffer the individual appears to be the first 'Other'. This is constitutive for the overall human reality and relationships. It is through creation that we understand who the "Other" is for us. To put it in another way: it is through the source of creation, through God, that we understand the other, and it is God who defines what it means to be the 'Other'. This is the basic relationship between God and Adam, which has to be understood correctly, and applied clearly in human-human relationship. However, this is only just one dimension. We cannot avoid pointing to the fact that it should be vice versa. Human-human relationship must reflect that the individual is defined by God. This provides the basis for respecting other human beings.

Thus this relatedness between God and Adam involves two things. First freedom, and limitations placed on the individual by the sheer reality of being created. These two are at the very essence of human existence.⁴ The limitations of the first "Other" is important because that constitutes the reality of Adam's life besides freedom. This limitation is not for a pessimistic assessment of life. On the contrary, it is to know that the life of the 'Other' is possible only because of this *limit*, therefore, it has to be understood *as grace*, "which holds humankind

¹ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich: *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works. Vol. 3. Szerk. John W. De Gruchy. Fortress Press, Minneapolis 1997, 75–76.

² Op.cit. 77.

³ Op.cit. 79.

⁴ Op.cit. 86.

over the abyss of nonbeing, nonliving, not-being-created.”⁵ In connection to this, to live the life of being created by God is not a “have to” which lives out of its own reality but a gift which is in “God’s keeping”.⁶

This understanding of the relationship between God and what I call, the first “Other” serves as a foundation in thinking about human beings as “Others”. In this depiction the Creator does not empty the individual. On the contrary, it was exactly this “Human Being” who was meant to be in distinctiveness and in community with God. Nevertheless, this distinctiveness means neither separation from God, nor the lack of community, that is separation from “the Other”. Rather, it is the ultimate expression of being created into community with both the Wholly Other and the human “Other”. Thus, this entire scheme is quintessential for human relationships in which the relation between God and individual, and between the individual and another individual is given.⁷

This is the fundamental context in which the concept of the “Other” appears as limitation, gift and freedom. We see that the understanding of this theological ‘construct’ is important in order to be able to assess the concept of “the Other” in Bonhoeffer’s thinking. It is because the proper understanding of such terms as limit, gift, and grace has to appropriate the right meaning in relation to “the Other” as well. These terms seem to show the right path of approaching “the Other” in order to be in the right relationship with him or her. The fact that an example of this is primarily initiated between God and the first individual has great impact on the way we have to perceive our relationship with others. However, one cannot remain in this primarily initiated relationship, but has to move on to present it to “Others”.

The first “Other”, for the first human individual, is Eve. Adam was not alone in the anticipation of the fellow individual.⁸ This fellow individual derived from Adam emphasizes that Adam is to understand this “Other” as a unique gift. They are no longer alone, they simply have each other. They are one, that is to say, they are in one community of each other, but yet never can be reduced into one another, because they are not the same. For Bonhoeffer the emphasis in this sense is put on the idea that they cannot be divided.⁹ Bonhoeffer argues that Eve

⁵ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich: *Creation and Fall*, 87.

⁶ Op.cit. 90–92.

⁷ Op.cit. 60–67. In the chapter about Gen 1: 26–27 Bonhoeffer seems to underscore this way of looking at the importance of creation in thinking about the „Other“. This is looking at from the perspective of analogia realtionis.

⁸ Op.cit. 96.

⁹ It is important because in our opinion Bonhoeffer here does not allude to gender approach.

is the helper and partner of Adam. The limitation being imposed on Adam, via being created by God, has to be borne and “the Creator knows that this life as a creature can only be borne within its limit if it is loved.”¹⁰ – states Bonhoeffer. For this reason, the Creator creates the helper, the partner, who is both limit and the object of love for Adam.¹¹ “The Other” as the creature of God is a limit and is limited. This other is limited by being created and at the same time the “Other” is limitation for the fellow individual. The most important in bearing this limitation is love. It is loving and being loved which ease the bearing of the limit of what is constituted both in the creation of the ‘I’ and the creation of the “Other”. Therefore, it is through love that the “Other” can be understood as “grace to the first person”¹² even if the “Other” is a limitation.

In this concept it is clear that it is this limitation by the other which makes a genuine, free life possible. “The Other” as limitation is in help for bearing our limits and also in living a free life before God. For this reason, limitation is not a defection but a gift which makes human life possible. In this understanding a negative way of capturing the reality of “the Other” is excluded. “The Other” is not an enemy to be defeated and subjected. On the contrary, this “Other” is the one who in his/her individuality can be the only help and partner in bearing our own limits. This “Other” cannot be consumed in the reality of the other but this “other” is there to love and be loved. For the individual in order to exist the “Other” must be there.¹³

As we observed earlier, the “Other” cannot be reduced into the I. In helping to bear the limit, the “Other” can only be experienced as You, otherwise the You is not looked at as a distinct individual, as a gift. There are two different individuals, nevertheless community exists between them, because “through God’s active working does the other become a You to me from whom my I arise.”¹⁴ This constitutes the real community. The perception of the You is not the same with the perception of the I. If these were the same then there would be no community but simply the want for the “Other”, which desires to dominate over the “Other”. In viewing the “Other” as limit there is no place for domination. The “Other” as limit is not defined by the I. It is not the I who defines the You. It is God who defines both the I and the You.¹⁵ This relation-

¹⁰ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich: *Creation and Fall*, 98.

¹¹ Op.cit. 98.

¹² Op.cit. 99.

¹³ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich: *Sanctorium Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works. Vol. 1. Ed. Clifford J. Green. Fortress Press, Minneapolis 1998, 51.

¹⁴ Op.cit. 55.

¹⁵ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich: *Sanctorium Communio*, 55–56.

ship designates the community of freedom, where to be free means to live with the “Other” as limit and grace.

The description of the concept of the “Other” as limit, grace, and gift is very crucial for Bonhoeffer. The way it sets out the individual’s relationship to both God and the fellow individual is crucial in understanding Bonhoeffer’s idea. It is central because in this idea one thing is very obvious, namely, that *our relation to God cannot be separated from our relation to the “Other”*. Being created, limited and blessed by God means that the “Other” is also a limit and blessing since this “Other” also has been created. The limit is not imposed for narrowing life. Rather, it is a gift, which makes life possible. It is a gift that understands that our relationship to God initiates the same understanding of our relationship to the “Other”. If something in our relationship to God goes wrong, that affects our relation to the “Other”, too. The reflection of our proper relationship to God results in our proper relationship with the “Other”.¹⁶

2. The Burden of the Fall

In spite of its proper intention, the originally initiated relationship between individuals has changed as a result of the Fall. Bonhoeffer argues that in the Fall the boundary between God and individuals was transgressed. Therefore, it resulted in the transgression of the boundary within creation, and between individuals. The violation of the limitation of being created (violating the tree of life) is at the same time the violation of the “Other”. For Bonhoeffer this means that limit is not grace any more. It also means the dividedness of individuals. For this reason, “limit is no longer grace that holds the human being in the unity of creaturely, for love; instead the limit is now the mark of dividedness”¹⁷ – states Bonhoeffer. The transgression of the boundary is done by the individuals themselves. There is no individual who could exempt himself/herself from it. The violation on the limit and of the limit is not committed in loneliness. Instead, this is what causes loneliness. For this reason, “each bears the guilt what the other has done [...] This does not mean, however, that the other person thereby relieves me of my burden; instead I am infinitely burdened with the guilt of the other.”¹⁸

¹⁶ If one reads Bonhoeffer’s works, this idea may define the order of reading. Usually, Bonhoeffer’s most read books are the overall popular ones. But to understand Bonhoeffer more we must read *Creation and Fall*, *Act and Being* and *Sanctorium Communio* first.

¹⁷ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich: *Creation and Fall*, 122.

¹⁸ Op.cit. 120.

The “Other” becomes burden instead of a gift. The relationship is transformed to a very different level. Limit is not recognized as grace any more. Limit is recognized as real burden. The “Other” appears to be some additional impediment for living and not as a partner and helper anymore. The entire situation needs of reconciliation.

This idea of Bonhoeffer as he views the Fall in relation to the consideration of the concept of the “Other” is very important. It is not simply the individual who is depleted by this act but the understanding of the community as well. This is the point when it becomes apparent that something went astray in our relationship to God. This, in connection to the question of the “Other” means that something has been transformed in our relationship to the “Other” as well. The “Other” is standing almost as if he/she would be our enemy. The self-understanding of the person is broken, and the understanding of the community is as well. However, the brokenness of human reality and that of the true notion of community cannot be separated. The individual, the true notion of community with God and with the “Other” are at stake. From this point the “Other” is not a limit anymore. To understand the “Other” as burden from this point seems to be the logical consequence in Bonhoeffer’s thinking. If the result of trans-gressing the boundary were less radical, then the entire understanding of the “Other” would be at stake. However, Bonhoeffer presents it to be as much important as the basic concept. This is why we can state firmly that it is a very strong and significant argument in Bonhoeffer’s thinking of the “Other”. Dietrich Bonhoeffer is also aware of the need of human reality to be restored.

3. To be in Christ

Bonhoeffer sees human reality as one, which has transgressed its own limits. Therefore, the relationships in which the self is engaged are not the way as they should be. This broken character must be renewed, which is possible only through Christ, by being in Christ, thus the originally initiated relationships can be restored. The true knowledge of the individual is gained back through Christ.¹⁹ The broken reality of humanity does not simply consist of the actual fact of sin. It is, along with the fact of sin, a continuous existence, it is an attitude, “being-a-person” which “must die as »Adam«”.²⁰ It is an attitude with which the

¹⁹ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich: *Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works. Vol. 2. Ed. Wayne Whitson Floyd JR. Fortres Press, Minneapolis 1996, 141.

²⁰ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich: *Act and Being*, 147.

person exists in relation to the “Other”. The solution to the situation can come only from outside, through the person who is, and present for me through Christ.²¹ The restoration of the relationship does not start off with restoring one individual’s relation to the “Other”. The only way is to rediscover and relocate the limit and the center of life again, from which the “Other” can be seen as limit and grace anew.

However, in the process of rediscovering the center, the individual does not have to stand where he/she should because of sin. The “I” cannot stand there but needs to be reconciled through the work of Christ, thus finding the proper place in his/her relations. This is the way to rediscover those limits originally set, as Bonhoeffer states:

“Thus, Christ is at one and the same time, my boundary and my rediscovered center. he is the center between ‘I’ and ‘I’, and between ‘I’ and God. The boundary can only be known as boundary from beyond the boundary. In Christ, man recognizes it and thereby at the same time finds his new center again.”²²

Thus, it is with this rediscovered life in Christ by which the ‘I’ is able to carry out the right relationship to God, and, consequently, to the “Other”. It is by being in Christ, being in faith that the former boundary is rediscovered. It is by being created anew that the limit is not a burden anymore but viewed as grace. This is by the work of that entirely Other, of God, that the ‘I’ can find the accurate place in relation to God and to the “Other”. The center ceases to be the ‘I’, but lets God to be the center anew.

This rediscovery makes possible what Dietrich Bonhoeffer introduces as “Life Together”, that is, the genuine community with others. In his book, entitled *Life Together*, he describes the character of this newly realized community. He takes a very strong position on how the inner life of this community should be organized. In this book it comes to the fore, especially on the chapter on Service, that it is not possible in the Christian community to start off with self-justification. It is not the place where, that is to say, the story of the Fall can start over again, even if there is a great temptation for that. It is not even possible from the perspective of being born anew in Christ. Since the ‘I’ is justified through Christ by grace, the only possibility is to serve the “Other” – emphasizes

²¹ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich: *Christ the Center*. HarperCollins Publishers, New York 1978. Bonhoeffer in his Christology argues that it is this ‘present Christ’ by whom the individual is placed back to the proper relationship.

²² Op.cit. 60.

Bonhoeffer,²³ without being consumed by the “Other”. The ‘I’ remains the ‘I’ and at the same time honors the “Other”. In this relationship love is restored, which starts with listening and continues in helpfulness and in bearing the burden of the “Other”. However, this bearing the burden of the “Other”, the freedom and sin is done from the perspective of being in Christ. As Bonhoeffer states:

“Here, bearing the burden of the other means tolerating the reality of the other’s creation by God-affirming it, and in bearing with it, breaking through to delight in it[...]. Then, along with the other’s freedom comes the abuse of that freedom in sin, which becomes the burden for Christians in their relationship to one another. The sins of the other are even harder to bear than is their freedom; for in sin community with God and with each other is broken [...] But here, too, it is only in bearing with the other that the great grace of God becomes fully apparent [...]. Therefore the Bible can characterize the whole life of the Christian as carrying the cross. It is the community of the body of Christ that is here realized, the community of the cross in which one must experience the burden of the other. of one were not experience this, it would not be a Christian community.”²⁴

The context of Bonhoeffer and the significance of the idea for the church today

Bonhoeffer’s work was influenced by a very unique historical and theological environment. The very strong anthropological sensitivity, which at the same time points to the very central Christological approach, must be to a certain extent the result of the contemporary theological agenda. However, Bonhoeffer’s strong emphasis on the question of the “Other” is very unique in the sense that it is not simply focusing on social issues (as it was the case with Reinhold Niebuhr), or to find a certain method of relating theological themes to existential questions (as it was Paul Tillich’s certainly central aim). Bonhoeffer experiencing WWII not only as an outsider, has very much to do with the fallen reality of human situation in a way not emphasizing sin over grace. This Christological concentration, as it came to the forefront already in the work of Karl Barth as the regulating principle. Even Karl Barth was, in our opinion, taking seriously the human condition, but Bonhoeffer placed further emphasis on the question of the “Other”.

²³ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich: *Life Together*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works. Vol. 5. Ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly. Fortress Press, Minneapolis 1996, 96.

²⁴ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich: *Life Together*, 101–102.

This short summary, one may say, is lacking in criticism of Bonhoeffer's concept. It may be true, but there is a reason for that. It is because of our conviction that Bonhoeffer's idea is still relevant today and has a lot to offer to our contemporary churches. Bonhoeffer's strong sense of mutual relatedness is our common denominator. Christianity must be a personal and an individual enterprise, but not a lonely and isolated operation. It is an individual matter, but cannot be separated. As much as it is an individual matter so much it is a question of the community. This has its very strong ethical impetus as well. Bonhoeffer in working with his ideas had the Christian community in mind. However, it has something different to offer to the world. In certain cases, only to explicate what it means to be a Christian, can have an enormous impact on the way how people think about ourselves and each other in our societies today. Do not be more optimistic about what is possible, it will not change the whole world all of a sudden. Do not be such an idealist! Nevertheless, it is definitely of great help to revitalize our Christian life, community, both inside and outside of the Christian community. For developing Christian social ethics for today it is important to develop the right sense of who we are as the Body of Christ. Christian social ethics may only come from Christian theological ethics, that is the understanding of who we are with our limits, burdens, who we can be through the grace of God. That is at stake in facing the "Other".

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The concept of "the Other" seems crucial for Bonhoeffer's dealing with human reality. While he addresses this question by applying traditional terms, at the same time, Bonhoeffer intends to broaden the significance of these terms through different means: he either reads the biblical text simply theologically, or he provides a larger theological frame for his purposes. Either way his

intention is the same: to present a Christologically oriented understanding of the “Other”, the individual. This article intends to trace this method in Bonhoeffer’s major works. The concept of the “Other” appears with respect to various aspects such as creation, sin, to be in Christ and to be in communion with others. The basic concept is that the “Other” is a limitation in the context of God’s grace which can be experienced in the presence of Christ. Individuals must therefore relate to each other through Christ.

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