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The Climate Crisis and Christian Eschatology

Insights from Dietrich Bonhoeffer

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Abstract

Christian eschatology has been identified as problematic in the context of the climate crisis; on the one hand, it is accused of creating the preconditions for the modern exploitation of nature, while on the other it is accused of stimulating a quietist withdrawal from environmental action. Some understandings of Christian eschatology are helpful in addressing the climate crisis, in particular the promising eschatology of the German Protestant theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Eschatological thinking develops throughout the three phases of his life, with two main themes emerging, namely, 1) his understanding of the world as Christ-reality, and 2) the distinction he makes between the ultimate and the penultimate. Taken together, these concepts can be formative in the construction of the Christian virtue of hope in the context of the climate crisis.

Keywords

climate crisis – eschatology – hope – Dietrich Bonhoeffer – Christ-reality – ultimate-penultimate

1 Introduction: Christian Eschatology and Ecology

The climate crisis, as a relatively novel moral issue, provides a new context for Christian theology; in particular, it asks for a reevaluation of Christian eschatology. Already in 1967, Lynn White, Jr., in the famous article in which he accuses

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Western Christianity of being a leading historic *cause* of the ecological crisis, mentions the linear Christian perception of the future as one of the main reasons for the ecological crisis. He notes that the Greco-Roman understanding of time was cyclical; the world did not have a clear beginning or end. "In sharp contrast," he says, "Christianity inherited from Judaism … a concept of time as nonrepetitive and linear."[1] This linear conception of time, White claims, in conjunction with the anthropocentric view of the human person as the crown of all creation (Gen. 1:26) and the desacralization of nature, makes Western Christianity responsible for creating the conditions that have led to the ecological crisis.[2]

Simultaneously, Christian eschatology has also been criticized for a contrasting reason, from an ecological perspective. This criticism focuses on the eschatological expectation of a new heaven and a new earth—it is argued that the emphasis on God's action can lead to quietism, a dangerous relativization of the importance of human action in the here and now.[3] There is empirical evidence for this claim. Joseph Webster, for example, has done research among church communities in the Scottish fishing village of Gamrie, a town in Aberdeenshire with seven hundred inhabitants and six Protestant churches, all with a millennialist eschatology that developed under the influence of the Plymouth Brethren.[4] The Christians in Gamrie reject the notion of global warming, seeing in it a conspiracy, even a "false eschatology," with the environmental movement offering "false salvation." Similar observations have been made by others,[5] leading Stefan Skrimshire to conclude: "Evangelical Christianity …, fueled by dispensationalist, premillennial eschatology, has historically generated deep ecological pessimism. To this is coupled the popular conviction that

1 Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155 (March 1967): 1203–1207, at 1205.

2 White is not the only one to claim this; his assertion is also echoed by, among others, Richard Rorty, according to whom the Christian belief in the kingdom of God had a formative effect on the modern notion of progress. See Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin Books, 1999), 37.

3 Kathryn Tanner summarizes the connection between eschatology and action well when she says: "What one believes about the end of things affects how one feels about the world in which one lives and one's attitude towards efforts to make the world a better place." (Kathryn Tanner, "Eschatology and Ethics," in *The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics*, ed. Gilbert Meilaender and William Werpehowski [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005], 41.)

4 Joseph Webster, "The Eschatology of Global Warming in a Scottish Fishing Village," *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* 31, no. 1: 68–84.

5 See, for example, Paul Hang-Sik Cho, *Eschatology and Ecology: Experiences of the Korean Church* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2010).

to attempt to *resist* world destruction is to stand in the way of God's plan."[6] Of course, differences in eschatology are not the only thing that can keep churches from engaging actively in efforts to curb climate change,[7] but it plays an important role.

Faced with these two accusations, Christian eschatology is confronted with an urgent apologetic task in relation to ecology.[8] My argument in this article is that while there is merit to the various criticisms made of Christian eschatology, from an ecological perspective the theological understanding of 'the last things' can also function as a powerful source of wisdom and energy, empowering Christians to become involved in battling climate change.[9] In doing so, I will engage the eschatology of the well-known German Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945); his thinking about the eschaton, and about how the expectation of the last things informs Christian activism, opens up a promising avenue for contemporary ecotheology, specifically when it comes to the climate crisis, as it develops a subtle yet applicable grammar for Christians to understand their involvement in issues such as climate justice.[10]

The structure of this article is as follows. In the next, second, part, I will lay out key themes in Bonhoeffer's eschatological thinking by means of a chronological approach. Then, in the following, third, part of the article, I will bring

6 Stefan Skrimshire, "Eschatology," in *Systematic Theology and Climate Change: Ecumenical Perspectives*, ed. Michael S. Northcott and Peter M. Scott (London: Routledge, 2014), 162, italics original.

7 For other reasons, see Randolph Haluza-DeLay, "Churches Engaging the Environment: An Autoethnography of Obstacles and Opportunities," *Human Ecology Review* 15, no. 1 (Summer 2008): 71–81.

8 The challenge is well put by Ernst Conradie, when he asks: "How can both an escapist and a purely this-worldly eschatology be avoided?" (Ernst M. Conradie, *Christianity and Ecological Theology: Resources for Further Research*, Study Guides in Religion and Theology 11 [Stellenbosch, South Africa: SUN PRESS, 2006], 102–103.)

9 This is also argued for by Michael S. Northcott in his chapter on "Ecological Hope," in *Historical and Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Hope*, ed. Steven C. van den Heuvel (Cham: Springer, 2020), 215–238.

10 This article ties in with the growing interest in Bonhoeffer's theology as a promising resource for ecotheology. Among recent publications in this field are Larry L. Rasmussen, "Bonhoeffer and the Anthropocene," *Dutch Reformed Theological Journal* 55 (2014): 941–954; Rasmussen, "Bonhoeffer's Song of Songs and Christianities as Earth Faiths," in *Religion im Erbe: Dietrich Bonhoeffer und die Zukunftsfähigkeit des Christentums*, ed. Christian Gremmels and Wolfgang Huber (Gütersloh: Kaiser, 2002), 186–193; Steven C. van den Heuvel, *Bonhoeffer's Christocentric Theology and Fundamental Debates in Environmental Ethics*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series 217 (Portland: Pickwick Publications, 2017), and Dianne Rayson, *Bonhoeffer and Climate Change: Theology and Ethics for the Anthropocene* (London: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2021).

these themes into dialogue with current conversations in ecology, particularly around 'hope,' sketching in broad strokes the contours of an ecotheological interpretation of the Christian virtue of hope. A conclusion forms the closing part of this article.

2 Key Themes in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Eschatology

In this section, I will trace Bonhoeffer's eschatological thinking as it developed throughout his works, identifying several key characteristics. In doing so, I will engage the emerging Bonhoeffer scholarship on this topic. While Bonhoeffer never specifically addressed eschatology in anything resembling a book-length treatment, eschatological thinking permeates his theology in important ways, as is being increasingly recognized by contemporary researchers.[11] Mark Lindsay summarizes it well when he notes "the fundamental importance of eschatology to Bonhoeffer's theology, ministry, and witness from his earliest career to the end of his life."[12] This eschatology is promising in the context of ecology, as is also increasingly recognized.[13] In describing Bonhoeffer's eschatology, I will use the classic periodization of Bonhoeffer, introduced by his friend and biographer Eberhard Bethge, who distinguishes three phases: 1) youth and student days (1906–1931), 2) involvement in the church struggle (1931–1940), and 3) involvement in the political resistance (1940–1945).[14]

11 The scholarship of Philip G. Ziegler is especially important in this respect. See Ziegler, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer: An Ethics of God's Apocalypse?," *Modern Theology* 23, no. 4 (2007): 579–594; Ziegler, "Eschatology and Secularity in the Late Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer," in *Dietrich Bonhoeffers Theologie heute: Ein Weg zwischen Fundamentalismus und Säkularismus?*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, Stephen Plant, and Christiane Tietz (Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 2009), 124–138; and Ziegler, "'Voices in the Night': Human Solidarity and Eschatological Hope," in *Who Am I? Bonhoeffer's Theology through His Poetry*, ed. Bernd Wannenwetsch (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 115–145.

12 Mark Lindsay, "Eschatology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. Philip G. Ziegler and Michael Mawson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 257.

13 Earlier I made this link explicit in Van den Heuvel, *Bonhoeffer's Christocentric Theology*, 55–64. See also Carlos Caldas, "Mad Max and Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Two Views on the Future of the World," *The Bonhoeffer Legacy: An International Journal* 8, no. 2 (2020): 61–76.

14 Eberhard Bethge, *Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, rev. ed., ed. Victoria J. Barnett, trans. Eric Mosbacher et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).

2.1 *Early Beginnings: The Contours of Eschatological Thinking in Bonhoeffer's Youth and Student Years (1906–1931)*

Bonhoeffer's interest in eschatology stems from his youth, when he and his twin sister, Sabine, would reflect on eternity before sleeping, encouraging one another in this endeavor by a knock on the wall which separated their bedrooms.[15] As a student of theology, Bonhoeffer wrote two papers on the topic: a "Seminar Paper on Church and Eschatology"[16] and a "Paper on Early Lutheran Eschatology."[17] These papers contain the basic outline of his approach to eschatology that is fleshed out more fully later in his theology but does not depart radically from this earliest articulation. In his paper on early Lutheranism, Bonhoeffer emphasizes how much their eschatology was in line with that of the early church, taking literally the biblical descriptions of the occurrences at the end-time. Bonhoeffer shows himself to be critical of the way in which, in his view, biblical fantasies and dogmatic statements are intertwined. However, he does not diminish the value of eschatological thinking as such. He lambasts nineteenth-century theology for giving only limited attention to it. According to him, it is "a sign of religious strength and true integrity when eschatology becomes a topic of theology."[18]

This does not mean, however, that Bonhoeffer advocates an uncritical appropriation, or repetition, of New Testament apocalypticism. Eschatology is not mythology, Bonhoeffer asserts, but "instead it necessarily emerged as a goal from the human experience of the divine."[19] He defines this goal in his "Paper on Church and Eschatology." There, he singles out the image of the kingdom of God—according to him, *the* central Christian eschatological concept—noting the various forms of this image in the New Testament. Bonhoeffer observes how the New Testament presents the kingdom of God as, on the one hand, already

15 On this, see the testimony of Sabine Leibholz, "Childhood and Home," in *I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. Wolfgang Dieter Zimmermann and Ronald Gregor Smith (London: Collins Fontana, 1973), 23.

16 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Young Bonhoeffer: 1918–1927*, ed. Hans Pfeifer et al., trans. Mary C. Nebelsick and Douglas W. Stott, vol. 9 of Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 336–354.

17 Bonhoeffer, *The Young Bonhoeffer*, 430–440.

18 Bonhoeffer, *The Young Bonhoeffer*, 336.

19 Bonhoeffer, *The Young Bonhoeffer*, 311. His willingness to be critical of what he terms 'mythology' shows his training in the method of historical criticism; it is a further indication of his adoption of the approach to the scriptures as adopted by the dialectic theologians. On this, see Michael Mawson, "Scripture," in *The Oxford Handbook of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 123–136; and John Webster, "Reading the Bible: The Example of Barth and Bonhoeffer," in *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics* (London: T&T Clark, 2001), 87–112.

here, yet at the same time not here—as something to come. He focuses on the question of how to overcome this tension, introducing the notion of eschatology. He says:

> The content and extent of the kingdom are foreseen in election and therefore are complete in every instance. In our eyes, however, the course of time cannot be pushed out of mind. The kingdom of God thus expresses the kingdom that is at work on earth as it is perfected in eternity. Consequently the kingdom of God, insofar as it develops and grows here on earth, is an eschatological concept in the same way as the kingdom that has been fulfilled in eternity, because it is the same thing. It is the corollary of God's sovereignty here as there. Eschatology is not a temporal concept; it is supra-temporal.[20]

These thoughts are very much akin to the dialectic between the 'already' and the 'not yet' of the kingdom of God as developed by Oscar Cullmann,[21] who uses the WW2 images of D-Day and V-Day to explain that while victory was decidedly won at D-day, it then still took some time for its final realization on V-Day. In this metaphor, D-Day stands for Christ's victory on the cross, and V-Day for the day when Christ will complete his return, inaugurating the fullness of God's kingdom on earth.[22] One of the consequences that Bonhoeffer draws from this understanding is that, according to him, "The kingdom cannot be built even through the best ethical behavior. If we believe we are building the kingdom of God, we are in great danger of confusing the kingdom of God with a human organization."[23] He then treats the various attempts at 'realized eschatology' of directly identifying the church as the kingdom of God, in Catholicism, but also in Comte and Marx and by the religious socialists of his day. He concludes: "The kingdom of God is simply never actualized here on earth, in the sense that one could say that it is here or there."[24]

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20 Bonhoeffer, *The Young Bonhoeffer*, 313.

21 Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History*, trans. Floyd V. Filson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1950).

22 Another echo is with Geerhardus Vos, who puts it very much like Bonhoeffer when he says: "The higher world [i.e., heaven] is in existence there [i.e., on earth], and there is no escape for the Christian from its [i.e., the heavenly world's] supreme dominion over his life. Thus, the other world, hitherto future, has become present." (Geerhardus Vos, *Pauline Eschatology* [Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1994], 37–38.)

23 Bonhoeffer, *The Young Bonhoeffer*, 316.

24 Bonhoeffer, *The Young Bonhoeffer*, 318. Considering these and other statements, it is difficult to understand why Donald G. Bloesch claims that Bonhoeffer (along with Karl Barth

These early investigations by Bonhoeffer on the connection between eschatology and ecclesiology find fuller expression in his dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, which has a section on "Church and Eschatology."[25] There, he says: "Christian eschatology is essentially *eschatology of the church-community* [*Gemeindeeschatologie*]. It is concerned with the fulfillment of the church and of the individual within it."[26] When it comes to the relation between this belief in the 'new world' and present realities, Bonhoeffer voices the same warning against forms of realized eschatology that he formulated earlier. He writes about the church that it "will refrain from premature attempts to transform this hope into a present reality. But in hope the church grows strong. It knows 'that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to it.' "[27]

In summary, we can say that for the young Bonhoeffer, eschatology was an important locus of doctrine, both in his own spirituality and in his budding theological thinking; instead of working out the form or sequence of a future apocalypse, he focuses on what he considers to be the core of the doctrine, perceiving the church to be the central eschatological entity, giving witness to the fulfillment of the kingdom of God in eternity—but this witness is simply to be accepted in faith; there is no concomitant call to help realize this kingdom on earth.

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and C.H. Dodd) embraces a 'realized eschatology.' See Donald G. Bloesch, *The Last Things: Resurrection, Judgment, Glory*, Christian Foundations (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 29.

25 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens, vol. 1 of Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 193–199.

26 Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 283, italics original. This is a point that Bonhoeffer kept asserting throughout his career. In a sermon on 1 Corinthians 12:26–27, for example, preached in Barcelona (Spain) in 1928, he asserted: "The church, that is our faith—I believe in a holy church—the church is the meaning of our human community [Gemeinschaft]; the church is our hope for this and for the coming age." (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Barcelona, Berlin, New York: 1928–1931*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Douglas W. Stott, vol. 10 of Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008], 510.)

27 Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 289. In Bonhoeffer's Habilitationsschrift, *Akt und Sein*, eschatology is also a theme. As I observed earlier: "This highly abstract, philosophical work culminates in a definition of being-in-Christ as a future-directed becoming, in which the fundamental dichotomy of faith as either an *actus directus* or an *actus reflexus* is overcome." (Van den Heuvel, *Bonhoeffer's Christocentric Theology*, 27, italics original.)

2.2 *Broadening and Concentration: The Eschatology of Bonhoeffer's 'Middle Period'* (*1931–1940*)

Bonhoeffer's 'middle period' covers the period from the start of his 'official' working life in 1931, when, upon completion of his Habilitationsschrift, he had earned the right to be a Privatdozent at the Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität in Berlin, Germany, until the outbreak of war and his switch to resistance against the Nazi regime. During this middle period, he was increasingly drawn into the church struggle, being involved in various positions in the Confessing Church up until the moment when such activities became impossible for him, and he chose to become involved in political resistance against the Nazi regime itself.

At the beginning of this period, he published *Creation and Fall*, which contains the lectures on Genesis 1–3 that he delivered at the University of Berlin in the winter semester of the academic year 1932–1933, and in which he approached the biblical text using kerygmatic exegesis as a method, mirroring Karl Barth. In these lectures, the eschatological dimension is implicitly present, as the editors point out: "Talk about the 'beginning' is eschatology—i.e., talk about the 'last things' or the end. Bonhoeffer pointed out this paradox in his oral introduction to the lecture course and emphasized it in the introduction that he wrote for the printed version."[28] In *Creation and Fall*, Bonhoeffer for the first time explicitly addresses the redemption of nature.[29] In commenting on the fallenness of nature through humanity's fall in sin, he argues that what was lost in the fall was nature's ability to speak directly of Christ—it is this purpose that nature will regain in the eschaton. Commenting on Gen. 4:1, which documents the birth of Cain, the first-born son of Adam and Eve, he remarks that "The end of Cain's history, and so the end of all history [das Ende der Geschichte überhaupt], is Christ on the cross, the murdered Son of God."[30] The cross of Christ, however, also contains the promise of renewal of life. As Bonhoeffer puts it: "The trunk of the cross becomes the wood of life [zum Holze des Lebens], and now in the midst of the world, on the accursed ground itself, life is raised up

28 Martin Rüter and Ilse Tödt, "Editors' Afterword to the German Edition," in *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, trans. Douglas Stephen Bax, vol. 3 of Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 157–158.

29 He had hinted at it earlier, though. In *Sanctorum Communio*, he says: "The concept of the Realm of God … refers not merely to the fulfillment of the church, but also to the problems of the 'new world,' that is, the eschatology of culture and nature. In speaking only about the fulfillment of the church and of the communities, we are dealing with only a part of the whole problem." (Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 283.)

30 Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 145.

anew. In the center of the world, from the wood of the cross, the fountain of life springs up."[31]

This rather poetic language gains more precision in Bonhoeffer's lectures on Christology that he delivered in the summer semester of 1933. When discussing "the Place of Christ," he makes explicit room for a discussion on "Christ as the Center of Nature"—this itself already quite a novum for a modern German Protestant theologian. In that section, he restates the claim he made in *Creation and Fall*, about nature being fallen, awaiting redemption through Christ. Specifying what he means, Bonhoeffer states that a foretaste of this redemption-to-come is visible in the Christian sacraments. As he says it:

> In the sacraments of the church, the old creation is set free from its servitude and obtains its new freedom … In this enslaved creation a sign is set up in which the elements of the old creation become the elements of the new creation. To what extent? To the extent that they are set free from their dumb condition, from their interpretation by humankind. These elements themselves speak and say what they are.[32]

This creative understanding of the Christian sacraments—seeing them as signposts to the liberation of nature in the eschaton—has great value for the budding field of ecotheology, as is being increasingly realized.[33]

Later in Bonhoeffer's middle period, as he is increasingly engaged in the church conflict, his theology again focuses more on the church—wider questions recede into the background. In *Life Together*, for instance, which documents his experiences with community life in the seminary for the Confessing Church at Finkenwalde, he speaks about the church as a sign of hope, in line with his earlier thinking. As the editors write in their afterword to this book: "The church of Jesus … understands itself as anticipating the eschatological community of salvation in the reign of God. And, for that reason, the church of Jesus Christ becomes a sign of hope."[34]

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31 Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 146. It is important to note that this emphasis is not Bonhoeffer's invention; earlier, I signaled parallels to Luther and—before him—to the early church. See Van den Heuvel, *Bonhoeffer's Christocentric Theology*, 83, n. 45.

32 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Berlin: 1932–1933*, ed. Larry L. Rasmussen, trans. Isabel Best, David Higgins, and Douglas W. Stott, vol. 12 of Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 327.

33 See esp. Van den Heuvel, *Bonhoeffer's Christocentric Theology*, 106–110.

34 Gerhard Ludwig Müller and Albrecht Schönherr, "Editors' Afterword to the German Edition," in *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible*, ed. Geffrey B. Kelly, trans. Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtness, vol. 5 of Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 126.

What also remains unchanged in Bonhoeffer's eschatology during this middle period is his resistance to a realized eschatology. This becomes clear in the memorandum that he authored on "The 'Social Gospel' (Soziale Evangelium)"[35] in the context of his ecumenical activities. There he describes the movement's immanent, realized eschatology: "The history of the kingdom of God on earth provides a development from imperialism to internationalism, from monarchy to democracy …, from individualism to collectivism. That is the eschatology."[36] Bonhoeffer is critical of this eschatology, however. He says: "The dualism of two worlds is changed into a monism of an evolutionary theory of history. The teaching of eternal life and immortality are not dealt with here."[37]

Summarizing the development of eschatological thinking in Bonhoeffer's middle period, we see a broadening of focus whereby nature is specifically brought into the picture; further on, however, the focus narrows again, and the emphasis is placed more strongly on the church as the foretaste of the eschaton, witnessing to God's kingdom.

2.3 *Greater Focus on Eschatology During Bonhoeffer's Third Period (1940–1945)*

In the third and final period of Bonhoeffer's life, his involvement in the political resistance, and then his imprisonment, provided a new context for him to theologize. These are the years in which he worked on his magnum opus, his *Ethics*, in which he reflects on the nature and task of Christian ethical engagement in the extreme circumstances in which Bonhoeffer and his companions found themselves, in WW2 Germany.[38] *Ethics* reflects his conviction that the standard accounts of morality had failed in the face of the onslaught of Nazism; subsequently, Bonhoeffer realized the need to think in very different ways about Christian involvement in society. In his first *Ethics* manuscript, "Christ, Reality, and Good,"[39] he introduces his foundational concept of Christ-reality as a critical alternative to the bifurcation of reality in two realms ('sacred' and 'secular')—precisely because such a bifurcation had allowed Nazism to grow unchecked in society, and because it helped Christians rationalize their lack of active resistance.

35 Bonhoeffer, *Berlin: 1932–1933*, 236–243.

36 Bonhoeffer, *Berlin: 1932–1933*, 240.

37 Bonhoeffer, *Berlin: 1932–1933*, 240.

38 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott, vol. 6 of Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

39 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 47–75.

In contrast, Bonhoeffer states that there is only one reality, the reality of Christ. As he puts it: "The *subject matter of a Christian ethic is God's reality revealed in Christ becoming real* [*Wirklichwerden*] *among God's creatures*, just as the subject matter of doctrinal theology is the truth of God's reality revealed in Christ."[40] Although explicitly eschatological terms are absent in the way Bonhoeffer describes his concept of Christ-reality, scholars increasingly recognize the eschatological tension inherent in it. As I put it in an earlier work: "[R]eality as Christ-reality does not do away with the tension between the 'already' and the 'not yet,' but in fact presents Bonhoeffer's own theological appropriation of that tension. Christ, in his coming to this world, has established his lordship over it. We presently live in a time of expectation of the definitive fulfillment of his kingship, at the end of times."[41]

Further on in *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer introduces a concomitant eschatological concept, namely, his distinction between the ultimate and the penultimate—he does so in the *Ethics* manuscript "Ultimate and Penultimate Things."[42] There, he defines the justification of the sinner by grace as the 'ultimate' event. As he says it: "Here the length and breadth of human life are concentrated in one moment, one point; the whole of life is embraced in this event. What happens here? Something ultimate [Letztes] that cannot be grasped by anything we are, or do, or suffer."[43] Bonhoeffer insists that this ultimate word of God cannot be reached by autonomous human beings—it comes to them, excluding every human method of attainment.

There is a counterpoint to this ultimate, however. As Bonhoeffer puts it: "Something penultimate always precedes it, some action, suffering, movement, intention, defeat, recovery, pleading, hoping—in short, quite literally a span of time at whose end it stands."[44] He illustrates this preceding moment by means of examples, mentioning Paul's zeal for the law that preceded his Damascus experience and Luther's stay in the monastery prior to his discovery of grace through faith alone. He concludes: "We must travel a road, even though there is no road to this goal, and we must travel this road to the end, that is, to the place where God puts an end to it. The penultimate remains in existence, even though it is completely superseded by the ultimate and is no longer in force."[45]

40 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 49, italics original.
41 Van den Heuvel, *Bonhoeffer's Christocentric Theology*, 27.
42 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 146–170.
43 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 146.
44 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 150–151.
45 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 151.

The relationship between the ultimate and the penultimate creates tension in Christian life, Bonhoeffer observes. He notes two extremes: radicalism on the one hand, and compromise on the other hand. Radicalism seeks to break and overcome the penultimate, seeing it in stark opposition to the ultimate. As he puts it: "Radicalism always arises from a conscious or unconscious hatred of what exists. Christian radicalism, whether it would flee the world or improve it, comes from the hatred of creation."[46] Compromise, on the other hand, focuses on the value of the penultimate, rejecting the ultimate. He characterizes this second attitude as follows: "The world still stands; the end has not yet come. Penultimate things must still be done in responsibility for this world that God created. We must still reckon with human beings as they are."[47] Bonhoeffer proceeds to reject both these extremes, finding their unity in Jesus Christ. As he puts it: "Jesus lets human reality exist as penultimate, neither making it self-sufficient nor destroying it—a penultimate that will be taken seriously and not seriously in its own way, a penultimate that has become the cover of the ultimate."[48]

Bonhoeffer gives illustrations to further clarify this relationship of the penultimate to the ultimate. He uses the examples of slaves who can't hear the liberating proclamation of God's word, due to the lack of control over their time.[49] He argues: "The condition in which grace meets us is not irrelevant, even though it is always only by grace that grace comes to us. We can make it hard for ourselves and others to come to faith. It is hard for those thrust into extreme disgrace, desolation, poverty, and helplessness to believe in God's justice and goodness."[50]

Much scholarly debate surrounds Bonhoeffer's discussion of the distinction between ultimate and penultimate.[51] Here, too, the eschatological dimension is increasingly recognized.[52] As Lindsay summarizes it: "The eschatological horizon thus provides the framework in which all that is penultimate, including a

46 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 155.

47 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 154.

48 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 158.

49 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 160.

50 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 162.

51 See, for example, Ernst Feil, "Die Dialektik von Letztem und Vorletztem," in Feil, *Die Theologie Bonhoeffers*, 297–300; Hiroki Funamoto, "Penultimate and Ultimate in Bonhoeffer's Ethics," in Alistair Kee and Eugene T. Long, eds., *Being and Truth: Essays in Honour of John Macquarrie* (London: SCM Press, 1986); and David R. Law, "Redeeming the Penultimate: Discipleship and Church in the Thought of Søren Kierkegaard and Dietrich Bonhoeffer," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 11, no. 1 (March 2011): 14–26.

52 On this, see specifically John Panteleimon Manoussakis, "'At the Recurrent End of the Unending': Bonhoeffer's Eschatology of the Penultimate," in *Bonhoeffer and Continental*

Christian political commitment, is granted its due dignity."[53] This has implications for Christian ecological action as well, as will be explicated further on.

Toward the end of his life, when he was in prison (1943–1945), Bonhoeffer's eschatological thinking received a new impetus. His musings during this period about the possibilities of a 'nonreligious Christianity' are well known. These musings stood in a wider frame of thinking about the future shape of Christianity, in what Bonhoeffer perceived would be a context of increasing secularization. His thinking on eschatology gains new relevance and urgency in this context and is expressed in slightly different ways. An important instance of Bonhoeffer's eschatological hope is the section on "Optimism,"[54] which he wrote in "After Ten Years: A Memorandum," written for his coconspirators at the turn of the year 1942–1943 (the same time period during which he wrote *Ethics*). There, he starts by making the point that it seems to make more sense to be pessimistic, as one is then not disappointed. We still have to choose optimism, however, since "[i]n its essence optimism is not a way of looking at the present situation but a power of life, a power of hope when others resign, a power to hold our heads high when all seems to have come to naught, a power to tolerate setbacks, a power that never abandons the future to the opponent but lays claim to it."[55] He recognizes 'stupid' optimism, but he asserts that this should not deter us from being optimists. It may be tempting to resign, withdrawing from the world. In contrast to that, however, he asserts: "It may be that the day of judgment will dawn tomorrow; only then and no earlier will we readily lay down our work for a better future."[56]

This focus on the importance of this-worldly action is deepened during Bonhoeffer's time in prison. There, he emphasizes that the Christian redemption does not equal a redemption *from* life to some heavenly realm, but rather refers people back to the earth, with an invigorated sense of responsibility. In a letter to Eberhard Bethge, written on June 27, 1944, he asserts:

> The Christian hope of resurrection is different from the mythological in that it refers people to their life on earth in a wholly new way, and more

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Thought: Cruciform Theology, ed. Brian Gregor and Jens Zimmermann (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009), 226–244.

53 Lindsay, "Eschatology," 265.

54 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, trans. Isabel Best, Lisa E. Dahill, Reinhard Krauss, and Nancy Lukens, vol. 8 of Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 50–51.

55 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 50–51.

56 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 51.

> sharply than the OT. Unlike believers in the redemption myths, Christians do not have an ultimate escape route out of their earthly tasks and difficulties into eternity … This-worldliness must not be abolished ahead of its time; on this, NT and OT are united. Redemption myths arise from the human experience of boundaries. But Christ takes hold of human beings in the midst of their lives.[57]

Much has been said about the emphasis on this-worldliness in Bonhoeffer's prison writings. Of particular relevance for this article is the observation that the basic structure of his eschatological thinking is not changed, with this new emphasis.

Summarizing the shape of Bonhoeffer's eschatological thinking during the third period of his life, we can say that the focus shifts from the church as an eschatological sign of the kingdom of God to the question of how 'the ultimate' relates to this-worldly engagement. Bonhoeffer, refusing the unhelpful alternatives of 'radicalism' or 'compromise,' makes space for the relative value of 'caring for the penultimate'; while relative, it is the only course open to the Christian.

3 The Relevance of Bonhoeffer's Eschatology for Eco-discipleship

Having outlined the main tenets of Bonhoeffer's eschatology, I now return to the double accusation leveled against Christian eschatology in the context of the climate crisis, namely, 1) the charge that it laid the groundwork for the modern exploitation of nature by means of its linear perception of time, and 2) the charge that pietistic Christians discourage environmental action. In light of this double accusation, in the introduction I asked how Bonhoeffer's eschatological vision could help energize Christians toward climate action. I will answer this question by bringing Bonhoeffer's eschatology into conversation with insights from contemporary hope theory.

As we saw in section 2, the main claim inherent in Bonhoeffer's eschatology is that recognizing reality as Christ-reality means to understand it from its end, that is to say, from its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Crucially, this understanding does not simply invite contemplation but also involves action. This hopeful expectation of the future spurs us on as a hopeful perspective in which we are to be responsibly involved. Seen this way, eschatol-

57 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 447–448.

ogy does not denote an expectation of God's future that is decoupled from, or even opposed to, this-worldly care. Instead, the synthetic view of Bonhoeffer creates a space for genuine responsibility and gives a grounding for hopeful action.

Bonhoeffer's musings on the eschatological character of the Christ-reality are of value for the contemporary debate over climate action among Christians. Of particular importance is his assertion that such work is not juxtaposed to the work of evangelization, whereby the two activities are part of a zero-sum game, but that both are part of the same 'formation' in the likeness of Christ.[58] This notion can help counter the argument—often implicit, but sometimes made explicit—that the biblical vision of the end-time simply asks for continued steadfastness in faith, coupled with adherence to an ethical code, mostly limited to interpersonal affairs. In contrast, Bonhoeffer asserts that God will bring about a qualitatively different future, but for him, this expectation does not exclude but, instead, fully *includes* human action.

This insistence has subsequently been taken up by Jürgen Moltmann, the famous Protestant theologian of hope, who was deeply influenced by Bonhoeffer's theology and who also contributed to the study of it.[59] In his book *The Coming of God*, Moltmann makes a well-known distinction between understanding Christian hope as either 'futurum' or 'adventus.' He explains: "*Futurum* means what will be; *adventus* means what is coming … future in the sense of *futurum* develops out of the past and present, inasmuch as these hold within themselves the potentiality of becoming and are 'pregnant with future' (Leibniz's phrase)."[60] The paradigm of Christian hope is *adventus*—derived from *Advent*. Futurum-hope limits us to exploring the possibilities inherent in what we know; but adventus-hope opens our eyes to what is radically new. As Molt-

58 For Reformed Christians, this will sound familiar—it clearly echoes the well-known saying by Abraham Kuyper that "[t]here is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: 'Mine!'" (Abraham Kuyper, *Souvereiniteit in eigen kring: Rede ter inwijding van de Vrije Universiteit* [Amsterdam, 1880], 35.) It should be noted that this is an echo, though, as there is no historical link between Kuyper and Bonhoeffer.

59 See, among other publications, Jürgen Moltmann, *Herrschaft Christi und soziale Wirklichkeit nach Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Theologische Existenz Heute 71 (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1959); and Moltmann, "Theologie mit Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Die Gefängnisbriefe," in *Dietrich Bonhoeffers Theologie heute: Ein Weg zwischen Fundamentalismus und Säkularismus?*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, Stephen Plant, and Christiane Tietz (Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 2009), 17–31.

60 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 25, italics original.

mann puts it: "The *novum ultimum*—the ultimate new thing—does not issue from the history of the old."[61]

Moltmann's theological grammar closely resembles Bonhoeffer's; his idea of *adventus* mirrors Bonhoeffer's recognition of reality as Christ-reality that liberates us to partake in all of reality, awaiting the fulfillment in an active way. This forms an alternative to the apocalyptic, 'futurum'-oriented hopes of the future that lead to a passive attitude with regard to climate action, and that, as indicated in the introduction, can be found in some pietist theological traditions.

There is great potentiality in Bonhoeffer's—and, by extension, Moltmann's—understanding of the world as having an open future, and which, as Christ-reality, invites our hopeful participation in it. This understanding can provide a crucial alternative, particularly to the complacency involved in a pietistic withdrawal from the world and its tasks, which was noted as problematic in the introduction.

This understanding of the eschaton resonates with insights from contemporary hope-theory, where there is a growing consensus that for people to have an active form of hope, it is important for them to see that their actions can make a meaningful difference. With regard to environmental action, this has been argued by, among others, Elin Kelsey, in her book *Hope Matters*.[62] There she challenges the narrative of 'doomism,' according to which it is already too late to act in order to reverse cataclysmic climate change. According to her, it is still meaningful to act, and this realization is crucial for climate action to be effective. This same point has been made by Jan Jorrit Hasselaar, in his book *Climate Change, Radical Uncertainty and Hope*.[63] Hasselaar identifies hope as an alternative to two unhelpful attitudes regarding the future of the planet: optimism and pessimism. While they may seem divergent, both attitudes are, in fact, treating the future as closed-off; they are deterministic in focus. Optimism entails the belief that things will turn out to be OK, no matter what. Pessimism holds the 'negative' of that conviction: it is convinced that the future will be dark and hopeless, no matter what we do. 'Hope' is opposed to both optimism and pessimism since it holds to the real possibility of change.

It is precisely this hopeful attitude that is inherent in Bonhoeffer's notion of Christ-reality. This point is reinforced by means of his dialectic of ultimate/penultimate. We saw that, according to Bonhoeffer, God alone is respon-

61 Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, 28, italics original.

62 Elin Kelsey, *Hope Matters: Why Changing the Way We Think Is Critical to Solving the Environmental Crisis* (Vancouver, Canada: Greystone Books, 2020).

63 Jan Jorrit Hasselaar, *Climate Change, Radical Uncertainty and Hope: Theology and Economics in Conversation* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022).

sible for bringing about the 'ultimate'; all our human action falls firmly within the category of the 'penultimate'—it has the character of preparing the way. This does not lead him to relativize the importance of this-worldly involvement, however—quite the contrary, throughout his life he increasingly emphasized the significance of such action. In that sense, the dynamic of the ultimate/penultimate emphasizes the importance of this-worldly care (including environmental action). But simultaneously, it does mean that a healthy relaxation takes place that is able to help us deal with a chronic, long-term crisis such as the climate crisis.

This last point is important, since the belief that we, in the here and now, must 'solve' the ecological crisis can have paralyzing effects; on the contrary, the Christian understanding of hope, of which Bonhoeffer offers one version, can help overcome these effects. Also here, Bonhoeffer's account chimes with those of other Christian thinkers. Writing on hope as a theological virtue, David Elliot points to the saints of the Middle Ages, as well as to more recent examples of saintly behavior—he draws attention to the civil rights movement, mentioning Martin Luther King, Jr. as an example—concluding that they "sought first the kingdom of heaven and yet contributed to the earthly city in extraordinary fashion. Trust in God and hope for eternal life helped them elude burnout amid setbacks and avoid becoming hateful to those resisting them. But plainly, their hope for the kingdom of God did not just coexist with their pursuit of justice and reform; it helped motivate, sustain, and shape it."[64] Bonhoeffer's novel theological appropriation of this relativizing yet inspiring effect of hope in the form of the distinction between ultimate and penultimate can help give new impetus to the church as it reflects on its task with regard to climate change.

4 Conclusion

In this article, I have focused on the link between Christian eschatology and ecological action. Noting the importance of this link—both for good and for bad—I turned to the eschatology outlined by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. This area of Bonhoeffer's thought is rich in creativity and nuance and forms a potent resource for the development of the Christian virtue of hope in the context of the climate crisis. I have sketched the development of core eschatological concepts throughout his intellectual development and then brought these to bear

64 David Elliot, "Hope in Theology," in *Historical and Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Hope*, 134.

on the context of the climate crisis, explicating how: 1) Bonhoeffer's eschatological insistence on the world as Christ-reality urges Christians to engage in all of reality, committing to actions to curb climate change, and 2) how his distinction between the ultimate and the penultimate simultaneously provides for a relaxation with regard to eco-activism. Taken together, these eschatological emphases in Bonhoeffer's theology form a fruitful unity, inviting Christian action with regard to climate change that can avoid pietistic paralysis on the one hand and eco-anxiety on the other. Bonhoeffer's thinking opens several promising avenues for the adaptation of Christian eschatological thinking. This is an urgent task; as Catherine Keller notes: "Unless it can meaningfully and effectively address the green apocalypse, Christian theology becomes a trivial pursuit at the end of the second millennium."[65]

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65 Catherine Keller, "Eschatology, Ecology and a Green Ecumenacy," *Ecotheology* 2 (1997): 84–99, at 86.