



“To partake in the reality of the fulfilled will of God:” Voluntarism and participation in Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics*

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Abstract

This article exposit Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s account of participation as it appears in the theology of *Ethics* to clarify the extent to which his ontology of participation resembles or diverges from other participatory ontologies. In particular, this article argues for the centrality of the role of the will in Bonhoeffer’s concept of participation in the reality of God in Christ. His language of participation is thus an expression of his voluntarism, which is ultimately a commitment to the claim that the human will in relation to God’s reality and will is central to both justification and a Christian ethics. Because the relation between God and humanity is grounded in the event of justification, which is an encounter between wills, participation in Christ also takes the form of a relation between the human and divine will. This account is sufficient to distinguish it from alternative ontologies of participation.

Keywords

Dietrich Bonhoeffer; participation; justification; ethics

1. Introduction

The concept of participation has enjoyed prominence in recent theology, from Pauline studies regarding participation in Christ to revivals of patristic appropriations of Neo-Platonic ontology.¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s

1 See for example, “*In Christ*” in *Paul: Explorations of Paul’s Theology of Union and Participation*, eds. Michael J. Thate, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, and Constantine R. Campbell

writings frequently make use of the concept of participation, particularly from *Discipleship* on. There is, therefore, a *prima facie* reason to think that Bonhoeffer's focus on participation as a theological concept is consonant with the trend in recent studies. However, not all articulations of participation mean the same thing or amount to the same ontology. An ontology of participation implies that "to be" is "to be in participation with another", such that beings are never isolated or self-sufficient. However, the nature of this participation can be understood in different ways. My task in this article is to exposit more clearly Bonhoeffer's account of participation as it appears in the theology of *Ethics* to identify the extent to which his ontology of participation resembles or diverges from other accounts. In particular, I argue for the centrality of the role of the will in Bonhoeffer's concept of participation in the reality of God in Christ. His language of participation is thus an expression of his voluntarism. In philosophical discussions, voluntarism (from the Latin for will, *voluntas*) is shorthand for views which place a primacy on the will rather than on the intellect in the understanding of human beings and God.² For Bonhoeffer, this commitment to voluntarism amounts to the claim that the human will in relation to God's reality and will is central to both justification and Christian ethics. While Bonhoeffer's espousal of voluntarism has been noted in his early work,³ this theme drops from view both in Bonhoeffer's works and in the secondary literature. I show in this article how Bonhoeffer's voluntarism is implicitly presupposed in his later thinking, particularly in *Ethics*.

First, I briefly unpack Bonhoeffer's account of the role of the will in the event of justification in his student paper on Luther. Justification here is described as the encounter between two concrete wills and the reorientation of the human will toward the divine will in love.⁴ Second, I show how this theme surfaces in Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*. In "Christ, Reality, and the Good," Bonhoeffer writes that because "the will of God has already been fulfilled

(Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018); David Bentley Hart, *You are Gods: On Nature and Supernature* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022).

2 For Bonhoeffer's source on this philosophical discussion, see Wilhelm Windelband, *A History of Philosophy*, trans. James H. Tufts (New York: Macmillan, 1926), 328–329.

3 See Clifford Green, *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality*, Revised Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 30. See also DBWE 1:48.

4 See DBWE 9:329–331. See also DBWE 1:166.

by God, in reconciling the world to himself in Christ...ethics can be concerned with only one thing: to partake in the reality of the fulfilled will of God.”⁵ This participation is the coordination of the human will with the divine will as realised in Christ. I then note that participation in Christ is therefore not a participation of qualities, but the right orientation of the will of the human with God’s will in love. This clarifies in what sense Bonhoeffer’s theology can be described as promoting a participatory ontology, and in what sense this language can be misleading. In recent work, Jens Zimmermann has argued comprehensively for Bonhoeffer’s inclusion into the fold of Christian humanists by virtue of his participatory ontology.⁶ I clarify his claim by arguing that Bonhoeffer’s language of participation ought to be carefully distinguished from other accounts of participation in both theology and philosophy. For Bonhoeffer, we do not participate in Christ or in the divine life by means of sharing in a totality, nor do we participate in an event of (non-personal) being which is greater than the participants.⁷ Instead, we are drawn into participation by the personal relations offered to us by Christ in love and grace. Participation is the cooperation and coordination of our will with God’s will.

2. Voluntarism and justification in Bonhoeffer’s early theology

For Bonhoeffer, the will is characterised as the directedness of one’s desire or love and the power that pursues that love. The will is a relational rather than a possessive capacity, and it thus only appears in the resistance it experiences in the encounter with other wills.⁸ Bonhoeffer’s affirmation of a kind of voluntarism shows up in his early academic writing in two related ways: (1) as an explication of the process or event of justification and (2) as

5 DBWE 6:74.

6 See Jens Zimmermann, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Christian Humanism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019), 337. See also the argument of Justin Mandela Roberts, *Sacred Rhetoric: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Participatory Tradition* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015).

7 See DBWE 3:64–65 for Bonhoeffer’s rejection of the *analogia entis* in favour of an *analogia relationis*: “the relation too is not a human potential or possibility or a structure of human existence; instead it is a given relation, a relation in which they are set that freedom is given.”

8 See DBWE 1:72.

a contrast to the intellectualism of philosophical idealism. On Bonhoeffer's construal of idealism, we are addressed simply through reason, and as a result, only a part of us, our intellect, is addressed. By contrast, when we are addressed through the will, we are addressed in our whole, concrete being.⁹ As we shall see, these two articulations of voluntarism are two sides of the same coin, but it is important to note that Bonhoeffer's affirmation of voluntarism is not a blanket advocacy for the primacy of the will over the intellect,¹⁰ but rather it is the declaration of the primacy of the engagement between the will of God and the human will. For it is this engagement that alone presents *the barrier* for the human being in sin and reorients the human will to love what God loves.

Thus, for Bonhoeffer, the meaning of voluntarism emerges from contrasting accounts of what it means to be human and what it means to be God. Both God and humans are defined in the act of justification, which is defined by the engagement between wills. Bonhoeffer's student paper, "The Holy Spirit According to Luther," articulates Luther's account of the event of justification in terms of the encounter of the Holy Spirit with the human will, an insight that I suggest Bonhoeffer retains throughout his theological writing.

Luther's view, according to Bonhoeffer, is that in the experience of the law, I experience an objective will that is absolutely opposed to my will. Here, for the first time, I know the oppositional character of the will. There is in this experience a clear demarcation between my subjective will and the objective divine will, which opposes me.¹¹ This experience, therefore, defines God as "a specific personal moral will who breaks whatever opposes God."¹² The will that is encountered as opposing my own is not an abstract force but is recognised as having a concrete, personal character of absolute moral dominion over me. God here is neither substance nor mind but will – a will whose power "annihilates me."¹³

9 See DBWE 1:48–49.

10 See DBWE 6:184 for a critique of "blind voluntarism" that overestimates the power of the will and dismisses any use for reason.

11 See DBWE 9: 328.

12 Ibid., 328.

13 Ibid., 330.

But in this event, something unexpected happens. That will, in annihilating me, does not thereby abandon me. Bonhoeffer maintains that for Luther, “the Spirit is an active force and blows and operates where it wills. It moves the hearts it wills to move. To be sure, when the law operates, it is moved by the Spirit; and where it is understood, there the divine will moves the human will.”¹⁴

What Bonhoeffer here describes in terms of the agency of the Spirit shifts to a description of the encounter with Christ in his subsequent writings through the principle that the Spirit brings Christ to the individual.¹⁵ This results in two continuing points for Bonhoeffer. First, the human person is ultimately defined in reference to the encounter with the person of Christ. Second, this Christological point of departure operates materially through the orientation of the will. As personhood is only understood in its relation to Christ in the event of justification, that relation is revealed to be either a relation in which the individual’s will is oriented inward (and away from Christ) in the state of sin, or a relation in which the individual’s will is oriented toward Christ in love through grace.

In *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer presents his concept of the social-basic relation [*soziale Grundbeziehungs begriffe*] as the underlying ontological relation between persons, apart from which persons cannot be adequately defined. This relation is characterised as the *orientation of the will* toward other persons, both human and divine. The event of justification reorients the directedness and love of the human will, giving it the power to love others where before it could only love itself.¹⁶ In *Act and Being*, Bonhoeffer shows how the divine act of justification, as the moment of divine revelation par excellence, presupposes the church community. He writes, “The being of revelation ‘is’ ... the being of the community of persons that is constituted and formed by the person of Christ and in which individuals already find themselves in their new existence.”¹⁷ The being of revelation is the being of the person of Christ existing as the church community. This affirmation of the social embeddedness of the event of

14 Ibid., 331.

15 See DBWE 9:337 and DBWE 1:165.

16 See DBWE 1:166.

17 DBWE 2:113.

justification does not diminish or negate the role of the reorientation of the will of the individual. Rather, it shows its proper sphere of operation: the will relates itself in love both within and toward the church community.

3. Voluntarism, justification, and participation in *Ethics*

In the essays that comprise *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer's thinking on anthropology and justification remains consistent with his earlier theology. In "Guilt, Justification, Renewal," he writes, "Since God became a human being in Christ, all thinking about human beings without Christ is an unfruitful abstraction."¹⁸ Humans are really what they are in their being encountered, judged, and renewed in Christ.¹⁹ Again, in the opening lines of "Ultimate and Penultimate Things," Bonhoeffer declares, "The origin and essence of all Christian life are consummated in the one event that the Reformation has called the justification of the sinner by grace alone. It is not what a person is *per se*, but what a person is in this event, that gives us insight into the Christian life."²⁰ From the divine side of justification, for Bonhoeffer, God forgives what is in the past and preserves what is in the future. The human experience of this divine action results in a recognition of their life as belonging to the presence of God, as being placed in relationship to others, and therefore, they "become free for God and for one another."²¹ Because God's personal encounter with the human in the event of justification is characterised by forgiveness and preservation, the human gains both vision to see oneself and others in and with the love of God, and the freedom to actually *be* for others rather than to simply be for oneself.

While Bonhoeffer's account here does not explicitly use the language of "will," it articulates justification as a freeing of persons to love and be for others that is made possible only through divine action. In being encountered by Christ, the human is allowed to be free for others. Bonhoeffer's articulation of justification in this text centres the engagement of God with the human being that fundamentally reorients not simply

18 DBWE 6:134.

19 See Verhagen, *Being and Action Coram Deo*, 134.

20 DBWE 6:146. See also, *ibid.*, 253.

21 *Ibid.*

the human mind, but the entirety of human life. This emphasis on the event of justification as an interpersonal encounter retains the marks of Luther's influence on Bonhoeffer's theology as an outworking of the event of justification.

In addition to describing justification in terms of the encounter of the human being with God, Bonhoeffer extends his account of justification in "Guilt, Justification, and Renewal" to include the language of participation. There, he writes that the "justification of the church and the individual consist in their becoming participants in the form of Christ."²² Justification is here linked to participation in the figure of Jesus. Bonhoeffer explains this further in "Ethics as Formation":

Only as judged by God can human beings live before God; only the crucified human being is at peace with God. In the figure of the crucified, human beings recognise and find themselves. To be taken up by God, to be judged and reconciled by God on the cross – that is the reality of humanity.²³

Justification is participation in the form of Christ through being formed into the exemplification of humanity that Christ is. Because Jesus Christ is the real human being, on Bonhoeffer's view, the individual must be conformed into the human being that Christ is. And this is marked by being taken up, judged, and reconciled to God in the event of justification.

Now, if justification is defined by Bonhoeffer here as participation in the form of Christ, the reverse is also true. Direct participation in the form of Christ occurs only through justification. Bonhoeffer does speak of an indirect justification of the world and thus an indirect participation of the world in Christ, as Christ is the one reality of the world.²⁴ But participation is enacted through the event of justification as it occurs in the individual and in the church. Only because God is judging and reconciling persons to himself in the event of justification can the world indirectly participate in Christ's action. As Koert Verhagen puts it, "what distinguishes the church

22 Ibid. 142.

23 Ibid., 88.

24 See DBWE 6:58, 142, 235, 279.

from the world is Christ's justificatory taking form within it.”²⁵ Justification here is the “Spirit-effected becoming real in the church of what God has done for all humanity in Jesus.”²⁶ The church, then, is the justified bearing witness to Christ in the world and to the world.

Bonhoeffer connects participation not only to justification, but also to ethical action. In contrast to ethical thinking that attempts to find a human way to be good or to do good, Bonhoeffer asserts that a Christian ethics must ask what the will of God is. In this way, “the question of the good becomes the question of participating in God's reality revealed in Christ.”²⁷ Because Christ unites in his own person the reality of the world and the reality of God, the entirety of Christian life should be understood as participating in the will of God as revealed in Christ's reconciling of the world to God. Bonhoeffer writes,

Since the appearance of Christ, ethics can be concerned with only one thing: to partake in the reality of the fulfilled will of God. But to partake in this is possible only because even I myself am already included in the fulfilment of the will of God in Christ, which means that I have been reconciled to God.²⁸

Being reconciled to God in Christ through the event of justification makes possible the participation in the reality and will of God, which Bonhoeffer sums up as “the realisation of the Christ-reality among us and in our world.”²⁹

Bonhoeffer further articulates Christian ethics as the obedience of or adherence to Christ's concrete commandment, which stands in contrast to timeless principles or ideas that can be known in advance. Christian ethics consists not in *knowing* what to do in all circumstances, but in *listening* to the Word of God in Christ, which Bonhoeffer says “encounters us in historical form.”³⁰ If Christian ethics were to be found in a principle

25 Verhagen, *Being and Action Coram Deo*,” 130.

26 Ibid.

27 DBWE 6:50.

28 Ibid., 74.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid., 379.

that is knowable ahead of time, our actions and the justification for our actions would lie wholly in us, in our knowledge or reason. Bonhoeffer insists, however, that the justification for Christian action lies solely in the will of God, which encounters us through the concrete command. It is not something that we possess but rather is something that we only discern relationally, through being personally encountered by Christ.³¹ Because justification is *extra nos*, righteousness and right action can never be in us, but must be our continued participation with Christ in terms of our relation to him in faith. This participation is not an act of the intellect, for then it would be in us, but instead it is an orientation of the will. As we recall, rather than being a possessive faculty, the will for Bonhoeffer is a relational faculty: the will in its obedience to Christ's command relates us to God.

Bonhoeffer's continued insistence on the external character of both justification and ethical action demands a voluntaristic framing of both central features of the Christian life. That is to say, both justification and ethical action are constituted through the divine will encountering the human will and the human will being reoriented and responding in obedience to God. Throughout his corpus, Bonhoeffer consistently rejects the intellectualising of justification as a self-justification of human beings who hold the capacity of righteousness within themselves. Instead, our righteousness remains alien to us, something that we can access and participate in by virtue of the encounter between the human will and the divine will. Participation in Christ, therefore, is an extrinsic and voluntaristic participation on Bonhoeffer's view. It is a partaking in the reality of the fulfilled will of God by means of being conformed to the figure of Christ through the reorientation of the human will in following the concrete command.

The connections I am making in Bonhoeffer's theology can be summarised in the following way: Bonhoeffer continues to maintain that justification is the extrinsic and voluntaristic encounter between the divine and human will that reorients the human will in love. Justification is the heart of participation and discipleship. For Bonhoeffer, participation in Christ

31 See *ibid.*, 378–379.

cannot be separated from personal relation with Christ, and personal relation with Christ cannot be separated from the engagement between wills that constitutes justification. Bonhoeffer's concept of participation must therefore be conceived of as voluntaristic.

4. Varieties of participatory ontology

Jens Zimmermann, in his work *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christian Humanism*, argues that "Bonhoeffer works out a participatory ontology that allows him to discern sacramentally how God through Christ takes form in believers, in the church, and world."³² In defending the thesis that Bonhoeffer adopts a participatory ontology, Zimmermann wants to show the kinship of Bonhoeffer with Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox thinking, both of which are rooted in what Zimmermann calls a Patristic humanism. But because there is not just one way to articulate a participatory ontology, it is important to specify what kind of participation it is that Bonhoeffer employs in his theology.

Zimmermann relates Bonhoeffer's view to the philosophies of Heidegger and Gadamer, noting that "both Bonhoeffer and the hermeneutic tradition champion a participatory model of knowledge. Knowledge is never neutral observation from the outside but always participation from within a given reality that shapes our imagination and plausibility structures for perceiving the world."³³ In broad strokes, we can say that Heidegger and Gadamer ascribed to a view of understanding in which human beings are not subjects seeking to understand objects which are set apart from the subjects themselves, but rather that we are always already participating in the event of Being that comes to us in language.³⁴ While persons may be in dialogue with each other, what those persons are participating in is an event of non-personal or supra-personal being that presents itself in language which envelops the participants involved. Persons are constituted

32 Zimmermann, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christian Humanism*, xvi. See also *ibid.*, 337.

33 *Ibid.*, 161.

34 See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 291, 293.

by language or discourse, and thus their being is the unfolding of the event of Being itself in language.³⁵

In *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer offers an account of social existence in the primal state that very much exemplifies Gadamer's dialogical model of participation. Bonhoeffer writes, "human spirit in its entirety is woven into sociality and rests on the basic relation of I and You."³⁶ This basic relation can be articulated as the idea that I and You are co-arising and co-dependent. The I exist only through the You, and the You can only exist in its relation to an I. Thus, self-consciousness or selfhood is shot through with sociality. I and You are not separated as subject from object but are rather both inheritors and participants in a broader or prior social structure, which gives them both language and understanding. Both Bonhoeffer and Gadamer thus criticise idealism as trying to solve the problem of sociality through a lack of understanding of the prior connectedness of persons. Further, Bonhoeffer's account here holds that neither the I nor the You grounds the social relation, but instead sociality is grounded in the community between them, of which they are both members. What is decisive here, however, is that Bonhoeffer's endorsement of a dialogical model of participation holds only in the primal state, before the advent of sin.³⁷ The fall into sin brings with it a change in the social-basic relation. Instead of the will being open to others in love, it is now, since the fall, oriented inward and in need of a divine encounter to be opened to loving others once again.

Zimmerman acknowledges that what sets Bonhoeffer apart from Heidegger and Gadamer "is that his Christological ontology defines reality, not just in relational terms but on the basis that the incarnation posits a personal

35 See *ibid.*, 370-371.

36 DBWE 1:73.

37 Bonhoeffer writes that the concepts of person and community in the primal state must serve merely as formal presuppositions which gain their content only from revelation. He warns that this discussion "cannot be a matter of developing speculative theories about the possibility of social being in the primal state not affected by evil will. Instead, methodologically, all statements are possible only on the basis of our understanding of the church, i.e., from the revelation we have heard." *Ibid.*, 65. The question of the primal state is not one of archaeology but of eschatology, that is, of "hope projected backward." *Ibid.*, 61. It is revelation which shows us what we can hope for in redemption by showing us the formal sketches of what that redemption presupposes.

relational transcendence that encompasses and structures all of reality.”³⁸ Thus, what is being participated in, for Bonhoeffer, is not an event of non-personal being, but a person – the person of Christ. This participation involves a relationship, and it is enacted through the engagement of the human will with the divine will. Bonhoeffer’s criticism of Heidegger and Gadamer would be that the capacity to understand oneself in relation to reality apart from the personal engagement with Christ in justification is an illusion.³⁹ For Bonhoeffer, participation is not about humans inevitably participating in the unfolding of Being. Rather, it is something that results from the intervention into one’s factual life experience. What I add to Zimmermann’s account, therefore, is that what makes participation for Bonhoeffer a personal rather than a mechanistic or organic event is that it occurs in the encounter between wills.

A second type or conception of participation, which is prevalent in theological thinking, is a participation in God by virtue of one’s createdness. Kathryn Tanner describes this as a Christian version of a basically Platonic conception of participation, writing, “What creatures get from God pre-exists in God in exemplary, perfect fashion, and therefore when they participate in God in virtue of their creation, creatures also image God.”⁴⁰ This form of participation is shared not only by humans, but by the entirety of the created order. An example of this type of participation can be found in the participatory ontology articulated in Alexander Schmemann’s *For the Life of the World*. A key focus of this text is the emphasis on the nature of a symbol, which does not simply point to its referent as does a sign but also participates in that which it signifies. Schmemann argues that

the world is symbolical ... in virtue of its being created by God; to be “symbolical” belongs thus to its ontology, the symbol being not only the way to perceive and understand reality, a means of cognition, but also a means of *participating*. It is then the “natural” symbolism of the world ... that makes the sacrament *possible*.⁴¹

38 Zimmermann, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Christian Humanism*, 161.

39 See DBWE 2:77-78 n. 89; DBWE 10:394-396.

40 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 9.

41 Schmemann, *For the Life of the World*, 165-166.

In Schmemann's thinking, both human beings and the world point through themselves, through their own createdness, to God and in this way, both testify to and participate in God. For Schmemann, the sacraments are an intensification of this basic truth, that participation with God occurs not as a supernatural exception to the natural order, but by means of what is created. On this view, "the world is...the means of man's communion with God"⁴² because it is through the world that Christ has come to us in the flesh. While Bonhoeffer has a great affinity for this outlook, it does not capture the centrality of participation as he writes about it throughout his corpus.⁴³

In contrast to this view, which Tanner describes as a *weak* sense of participation, Tanner identifies what she describes as a *strong* sense of participation. This is participation in God by means of relating to God through what one is not or what is and remains alien to the individual. This strong sense of participation is the relation to God in Christ that occurs through grace alone. In this strong sense, humans "would image God, not by imitating God, but in virtue of the gift to them of what remains alien to them."⁴⁴ This type of participation is not participation in God by virtue of what is in the creation, but by virtue of being in a relationship with God in Christ. It is this conception of participation that I suggest Zimmermann attributes to Bonhoeffer when he (Zimmermann) writes, "Participation in God or 'Being in Christ,'" as Bonhoeffer puts it, shapes the believer into Christlikeness through the personal (rather than substantial) indwelling

42 Ibid., 89.

43 This is not to say that Bonhoeffer and Schmemann are thoroughly at odds on this score. Both theologians identify fragmentation of human life into dichotomized spheres of sacred and secular, worldly and spiritual, as a distinctive problem that ought to be overcome. And for both thinkers, the flight into "pure" spirituality on the one hand or mere material activism on the other hand are both visions of the Christian life which abstract and dichotomize the life which Christ offered for us that we might offer to the world. Schmemann's solution to this problem of the fragmentation of spheres is to find in the liturgies of the Church an affirmation of the participation of what has been created by God to point toward redemption. For Bonhoeffer, the unity is found in the reconciling work of Christ, which human beings participate in in their own work of reconciliation. A more detailed examination of the similarities and differences between Bonhoeffer's and Schmemann's thought would be rewarding but is beyond the scope of this paper.

44 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 12.

of the triune God in each believer and the church as Christ's body.⁴⁵ Both Tanner and Zimmermann emphasise that participation in this sense is not statically present within human beings, but rather only occurs in the personal relation to God in Christ.

I agree that this is the right way to characterise Bonhoeffer's conception of participation insofar as he is speaking of a person's being in Christ. What I would add here is that what facilitates this participation, that is, both personal and relational, is the engagement between wills that ensures that righteousness and right action remain extrinsic or alien to the capacities of the individual. For Bonhoeffer, I partake in the reality of the fulfilled will of God only insofar as my will is encountered by Christ's gracious word of forgiveness and is reoriented so that it can participate in God's reconciling word to the world.

5. Conclusion

That Bonhoeffer emphasises this strong sense of participation as the extrinsic relationship between will does not mean that he excludes the weaker sense of participation, that of the participation of the created order by virtue of its createdness. This form of participation is operative in Bonhoeffer's thinking as the way that the world happens to participate in God by means of its natural life. This participation of natural life in God is, as Bonhoeffer says, "directed toward justification, salvation, and renewal through Christ,"⁴⁶ even as it awaits its renewal in "the realisation of the Christ-reality among us and in our world."⁴⁷ In this way, Bonhoeffer includes both modes of participation in God because all of reality participates in the Christ-reality. The reconciliation of persons and the world is affected, however, specifically through the reorientation of the human will that begins in the event of justification and continues in hearing and obeying the concrete command of Christ as it encounters the human being in love. This is a voluntaristic ontology of participation insofar as the Christian participates in the will of God, which "is a reality that wills to become real

45 Zimmermann, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christian Humanism*, 55.

46 DBWE 6:174.

47 Ibid., 74.

ever anew in what exists and against what exists,”⁴⁸ because the Christian has already been reconciled to God.

The foregoing analysis helps us to situate Bonhoeffer’s account of participation against various conceptions of participation: a hermeneutic ontology of participation, an intrinsic, creational ontology of participation, and an extrinsic, voluntaristic ontology of participation. What then of the claim that Bonhoeffer includes both an extrinsic and an intrinsic conception of participation? Is one form of participation more fundamental than the other? For Bonhoeffer, all definitions of God and humanity are grounded in the event of justification. God’s work of reconciling the world to himself in Christ is the starting point and the *telos* of understanding God and human beings. This means that the extrinsic participation that is a personal relation between wills is the ground from which we can understand that all of creation participates in the Christ-reality.

Before ending, let me note a further implication of the argument I have laid out here. This reading of Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics* pushes the non-dual interpretation of Bonhoeffer presented by Lisa Dahill to clarify in what sense the doctrine of justification can be made consistent with nondualism. Dahill argues for a reading of Bonhoeffer that affirms a non-hierarchical account of the unity of the reality of God and the reality of the world in Christ. For Dahill, Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics* corrects his own earlier hierarchical dualism, as found in *Creation and Fall*, shifting “the locus of divine presence from a God conceived as its own separate Person into a horizontal presence forming the experience of reciprocal personhood across all the membranes of our endlessly complex creaturely lives.”⁴⁹ On Dahill’s account, Bonhoeffer overcomes a hierarchical God-world dualism in *Ethics* while affirming that “our entire existence is comprised of divinely mediated I/Thou encounters as we negotiate the flow of life across the membranes and lungs and photosynthetic cells of countless microbes

48 Ibid.

49 Lisa E. Dahill, “One Reality, Not Two: Bonhoeffer, Jesus Christ, and a Membraned World,” in *Views of Nature and Dualism: Rethinking Philosophical, Theological, and Religious Assumptions in the Anthropocene*, eds. Thomas John Hastings and Knut-Will Saether (Cham, CH: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 195.

and mammals and plants, in every moment of our breathing lives.”⁵⁰ This account suggests that for Bonhoeffer, the unity of God with the world can be effected organically and apart from the reorientation of the will that occurs in the event of justification.

By contrast, the argument that I have been developing over the course of this article reads Bonhoeffer as insisting on the encounter between wills in the event of justification as the condition for the participation of God’s reconciling the world to himself in Christ. For Bonhoeffer, only because there is the voluntaristic participation of human beings with Christ in justification can we say that there is a participation of all of creation with God – “that reality in all its manifold aspects is ultimately *one* in God who became human, Jesus Christ.”⁵¹

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50 Lisa E. Dahill, The View from Way Below: Inter-Species Encounter, Membranes, and the Reality of Christ, *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*, 53/3 (Fall 2014):256.

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