

## THE WHOLE HOUSEHOLD OF GOD (OIKOS): SOME ECCLESIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES (PART 2)

Ernst M Conradie  
Department of Religion and Theology  
University of the Western Cape

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### Abstract

*Part 2 of this article continues the discussion on the ecclesiological significance of the ecumenical root metaphor of the "whole household of God". It explores the place and mission of the church within God's household in critical dialogue with Dietrich Bonhoeffer's notion of sanctorum communion, Karl Barth's distinction between Christuskirche und Bürgerkirche and selected contributions to ecclesiology in the context of African theology. The argument of both parts of the article is that a Christological concentration may help the church to retrieve its distinctive place within the household of God. This may be supplemented by a centrifugal pneumatology which can assist the church to appreciate its mission within the larger household.*

**Keywords:** African Theology, Barth, Bonhoeffer, Household, Oikos

### Dietrich Bonhoeffer on *Sanctorum Communio*

Ecclesiology and ethics are dominant themes in the oeuvre of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. This is especially evident from his doctoral thesis *Sanctorum Communio*, but also from his lectures on ecclesiology, *Discipleship*, *Life Together* and *Ethics*. In comparison with later ecumenical discourse on this ecclesiology and ethics – for which Bonhoeffer in many ways laid the groundwork – it is remarkable to note both the centrality of Christ and the emphasis on worldliness which characterise his work. This may be illustrated through reflection on some quotations from his *Sanctorum Communio*:

"It is impossible to reach the real existence of other subjects by way of the purely transcendental category of the universal."<sup>1</sup>

"But the metaphysical concept of the individual is defined without mediation whereas the ethical concept of the person is a definition based on ethical-social interaction ... one cannot even speak of the individual without at the same time necessarily thinking of the "other" who moves the individual into the social sphere."<sup>2</sup>

"God or the Holy Spirit joins the concrete You; only through God's active working does the other become a You to me from whom my I arises. In other words, every human you is an image of the divine You."<sup>3</sup>

Bonhoeffer's doctoral dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio* offered a "theological study of the sociology of the church." He based his description of the church on a theory of sociality where a person is constituted by the presence of a concrete other person (which may remind

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<sup>1</sup> See Bonhoeffer (1998:45) for an incisive critique of Kantian epistemology.

<sup>2</sup> Bonhoeffer 1998:50.

<sup>3</sup> Bonhoeffer 1998:54-5.

one of African notions of *ubuntu*). The other makes an ethical appeal on me precisely through her or his uniqueness and otherness (which is not emphasised in the notion of *ubuntu*). The presence of the human other is possible on the basis of God's otherness. Moreover, God is disclosed to a person through the otherness of another. God's transcendence is not a remote otherness or absence but is embodied through the otherness of another person. This is epitomised by God's presence in Jesus Christ, the man for others. This "ethical concept" of a person differs radically from Kant's transcendental idealism in which the presence of another is understood on the basis of the self-reflection of the knowing subject. In Kant's way the other is necessarily similar to the self and often simply an extension of the self.<sup>4</sup>

This theory of sociality provides the groundwork for Bonhoeffer's description of the church as a community of persons, that is, a social formation based on both the distinctness of persons and a reciprocity of will (not a mystical fusion in which the boundary between other and self disappears).<sup>5</sup> For Bonhoeffer, the church should not be confused with the empirical existence of a religious community. The reality of the church is a *revelational* reality which can only be grasped through faith.<sup>6</sup> The church is not constituted by the strength of the will or the solidarity of the persons in the community. The church is constituted as the community of sinners<sup>7</sup> who have received God's pardon on the basis of the vicarious representation of Christ, actualised through the work of the Holy Spirit. The (hidden) reality of the church is a final reality based on God's ultimate word of forgiveness. Bonhoeffer concludes that "*community with God for us exists only in faith*, that it is not experienced like the sort of community of spirit found in friendship or shared experience. It is an article of faith that God through Christ has entered into a community of love with us."<sup>8</sup> It is not shared experiences, "romantic feelings of solidarity between kindred spirits" or moments of spiritual exaltation which constitute the church, but the divine act of forgiveness.<sup>9</sup> Again, the reality of the church can only be perceived through faith.<sup>10</sup> Bonhoeffer observes that his age is not short of experiences of the church but of faith.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, God's work takes place especially in and through the concrete, empirical church within which the word is preached and the sacraments are celebrated. The means of grace becomes effective within and despite the historical framework of the empirical church.<sup>12</sup> The Christological emphasis here is unmistakable: "Christ is the foundation upon which the building (*oikodome*) of the church is raised ... the entire building begins and ends with Christ, and its unifying center is the word."<sup>13</sup>

The ecclesial tonality of Bonhoeffer's *Discipleship and Life together*, with the characteristically strong emphasis on costly obedience, communal life, discipline and service does not imply any departure from the Christological groundwork laid by *Sanctorum communion*. Christian fellowship is not a human ideal but a divine reality created by God in Christ

<sup>4</sup> See also Green 1999:114-119.

<sup>5</sup> Bonhoeffer 1998:80-84, 86. This aspect is typically less emphasised in African notions of *ubuntu*.

<sup>6</sup> Bonhoeffer 1998:127, 130, 134, 144.

<sup>7</sup> Bonhoeffer 1998:212f.

<sup>8</sup> Bonhoeffer 1998:174-5 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>9</sup> Bonhoeffer 1998:277, 281.

<sup>10</sup> Bonhoeffer 1998:279.

<sup>11</sup> Bonhoeffer 1998:282.

<sup>12</sup> Bonhoeffer 1998:280.

<sup>13</sup> Bonhoeffer 1998:245-6.

in which we may participate. This may be illustrated from three quotations from a chapter on community in *Life Together*:

- On innumerable occasions a whole Christian community has been shattered because it has lived on the basis of a wishful image.<sup>14</sup>
- God hates wishful dreaming because it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious. Those who dream of this idealized community demand that it be fulfilled by God, by others and by themselves. They enter the community of Christians with their demands, set up by their own law and judge one another and even God accordingly. They stand adamant, a living reproach to all others in the circle of the community. They act as if they have to create the Christian community, as if their visionary ideal binds people together.<sup>15</sup>
- Because God already has laid the only foundation of our community, because God has united us in one body with other Christians in Jesus Christ long before we entered into common life with them, we enter into that life together not as those who make demands, but as those who thankfully receive.<sup>16</sup>

In *Sanctorum Communio*, and in his lectures on “The nature of the church,” Bonhoeffer emphasised that the church is not called to be a tiny, sacred haven from the world (a *collegium pietatis*) but a presence in the midst of the world and involved in the world. The distinctiveness from the world which characterised the communal life at Finkenwalde was not a retreat into pious assemblies in isolation from the world, but a necessary requirement in order to address the challenges of that time, free from the idolatries and ideologies of the world. *Life Together* was not a withdrawal from the church struggle and the fight against Nazism, but a unique way of preparing young ministers to enter that combat and to revitalise the church.<sup>17</sup> Here ecclesiology and ethics are not fused into one another; the distance between them is necessary in order to allow the church to make a unique contribution in society.

Although Bonhoeffer’s “ecclesiastical phase” is not a narrowing detour from his heavy ecumenical involvement in the church struggle and the evident worldliness of his prison correspondence,<sup>18</sup> there is indeed a much stronger emphasis on the situatedness of the church in the world in his *Ethics*.

In the opening essay of the edition of *Ethics* in the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Volume 6) he offers a profound critique of the separation of church and world into two distinct spheres of reality (church and state, sacred and profane).<sup>19</sup> He insists that there is only one reality, namely “the reality of God as the ultimate reality beyond and in all that exists.”<sup>20</sup> He immediately adds that, “In Jesus Christ God has entered into the reality of this world.”<sup>21</sup> And: “There are not two realities, but only one reality, and that is God’s reality revealed in Christ in the reality of the world.”<sup>22</sup> The whole of reality cannot be divided into what is sacred and what is profane, spiritual and material, religious and worldly. He concludes that “there is no real

<sup>14</sup> Bonhoeffer 1996:35.

<sup>15</sup> Bonhoeffer 1996:36.

<sup>16</sup> Bonhoeffer 1996:36.

<sup>17</sup> See Geoffrey Kelly’s introduction to the English edition of *Life together* (in Bonhoeffer 1996:20).

<sup>18</sup> See the editors’ afterword by Müller & Schönherr (in Bonhoeffer 1996:134).

<sup>19</sup> Bonhoeffer 2005:55-8. He argues that, as a result of this distinction, “Christ becomes a partial, provincial affair within the whole of reality. One reckons with a reality outside the reality of Christ. It follows that there is separate access to these realities, apart from Christ. However important one may take reality in Christ to be, it always remain a partial reality alongside others” (2005:57).

<sup>20</sup> Bonhoeffer 2005:54.

<sup>21</sup> Bonhoeffer 2005:54.

<sup>22</sup> Bonhoeffer 2005:58.

Christian existence outside the reality of the world and no real worldliness outside the reality of Jesus Christ.”<sup>23</sup>

This position has important implications for Christian ethics<sup>24</sup> but also for an understanding of the position of the church in the world. Bonhoeffer acknowledges that the church is not co-extensive with the world, but also insists that it is not separate from the world; it is *in* the world. The church occupies a certain space in the same way that God’s revelation in Jesus Christ occupied space in the world.<sup>25</sup> Spatial images such as a temple, a house (*oikos*), a building may therefore be used appropriately for the church. The church can be described sociologically; it is not a purely spiritual entity. In Jesus Christ God occupied space in the world (even though there was no place in the inn and no place for the Son of Man to sleep) in order to embrace the whole reality of the world.<sup>26</sup> On this basis, Bonhoeffer can maintain that “the church of Jesus Christ is the place [Ort] – that is, the space [Raum] – in the world where the reign of Jesus Christ over the world is to be demonstrated and proclaimed.”<sup>27</sup> The space of the church is not the space of a cult which separates itself from the world. The church does not exist for itself, but reaches beyond itself to witness to the foundation of all reality in Jesus Christ.<sup>28</sup> The church does not need to extend its space in the world: “It desires no more space than it needs to serve the world with its witness to Jesus Christ and to the world’s reconciliation to God through Jesus Christ. The church can only defend its own space by fighting not for space, but for the salvation of the world.”<sup>29</sup> The church is the place where God’s ultimate word of mercy and forgiveness for sinners is heard and accepted through faith.<sup>30</sup>

In an essay entitled “On the possibility of the church’s message to the world” Bonhoeffer remains hesitant to claim that the church can offer solutions to the world’s social, economic and political problems. He notes the ambiguity of the societal campaigns of many churches and argues that it is unbiblical to start with human problems and to look for divine solutions to such problems.<sup>31</sup> The way of Jesus Christ is not from the world to God but from God to the world. Instead, Bonhoeffer maintains that the message of the church to the world is none other than God’s word of redemption in Jesus Christ. The responsibility of the church towards the world is to make room for (to prepare the way for<sup>32</sup>) the gospel in

<sup>23</sup> Bonhoeffer 2005:61.

<sup>24</sup> Christian ethics, Bonhoeffer argues, is not a reflection on being good or doing good, but on the will of God. It is not founded upon the realities of the self or the world, but on the reality of God as the ultimate reality (2005:47-8). It is not concerned with the realisation of ideas or visions, but with the realisation of a reality that has already been revealed. It reflects on the will of God which is “nothing other than the realization of the Christ-reality among us and in our world (2005:74).

<sup>25</sup> Bonhoeffer 2005:62-3.

<sup>26</sup> Bonhoeffer 2005:63.

<sup>27</sup> Bonhoeffer 2005:63.

<sup>28</sup> Bonhoeffer 2005:63.

<sup>29</sup> Bonhoeffer 2005:63-4.

<sup>30</sup> For Bonhoeffer (2005:146f), God’s final word of mercy forms the root of the famous distinction between the ultimate and the penultimate. Christian life entails a coming to terms with the penultimate where the liberating message of God’s forgiveness is heard and appropriated under the conditions of sin.

<sup>31</sup> Bonhoeffer 2005:356.

<sup>32</sup> Coming to terms with the penultimate implies a calling to “prepare the way” for God’s grace, for example, by sharing your bread with the hungry and sharing your dwelling with the homeless (that is, by addressing the impact of sin). See also Bonhoeffer’s description of the task of “preparing the way” for the coming of God’s ultimate word of forgiveness. This implies numerous responsibilities: “The hungry person needs bread and the homeless person needs shelter; the one deprived of rights needs justice, the lonely person needs community; the undisciplined one needs order and the slave needs freedom.” (Bonhoeffer 2005:163). Bonhoeffer (2005:167) immediately adds that “Preparing the way ... starts from the clear recognition that Christ himself must travel the way. It is Christ’s way to us that must be prepared, not our way to Christ; and Christ’s way can only be prepared in full awareness that it is precisely Christ who must prepare it.” It is striking that the service

the world.<sup>33</sup> It has to resist economic systems that hinder faith in Christ, but cannot make a positive contribution towards a new world order on the authority of the word of God (such a contribution can be made on the basis of the responsible counsel of Christian experts).<sup>34</sup> The task of the state is not a redemptive one: Its purpose is to establish a just order through law, orders of preservation to protect life and human communities and to restrain evil. This creates the necessary space for the redemptive preaching of the church.

In my view Bonhoeffer's understanding of the message of the church as the message of redemption in Christ here remains classically Lutheran. I wish to offer only a few rather cryptic comments in this regard:

1. The emphasis in Bonhoeffer's work is more on justification and less on sanctification (which is also evident in the distinction between the ultimate and the penultimate).
2. It is not clear to me that one can overcome the Lutheran dichotomy of two realms on the basis of the incarnation and the cross alone. There is an unmistakable Christological concentration in his work which seems to inhibit a more centrifugal pneumatology.
3. It is clear that Bonhoeffer wishes to affirm both the church as a divine reality and as an altogether human reality. The aim of the incarnation is not the divinisation of humanity. God became human in order that we may become human.<sup>35</sup> However, it is not clear (to me) how he understands the church as a divine reality. In Bonhoeffer's whole oeuvre he emphasises the presence of God amongst us in Jesus Christ. God has become human. But what does it mean that this human, Jesus of Nazareth, is also God (the risen Christ)? In Bonhoeffer's own time he felt the need to stress God's immanence. After his death, his own prison writings elicited heated debates on how God's transcendence may be understood (if at all).
4. It is also not clear whether Bonhoeffer can escape from a dualism between earth and heaven, life and eternal life on the basis of this emphasis on God's presence.<sup>36</sup>

In the light of these comments it may be worthwhile to explore the contribution of Karl Barth on the relationship between church and society from within the reformed tradition.

### **Karl Barth on *Christusgemeinde* and *Bürgergemeinde***

"It is true that the deepest, ultimate divine purpose of the civil community consists in creating opportunities for the preaching and hearing of the Word and, to that extent, for the existence of the Church. But the only way the State can create such opportunities, according to the providence and ordinance of God, is the natural, secular and profane way of the establishment of law, the safeguarding of freedom and peace... The divine purpose is therefore not at all that the State should itself gradually develop more or less into a Church. And the Church's political aim cannot be to turn the State into a Church, that is, to make it as far as possible subservient to the tasks of the Church. If the state grants the Church freedom, respect and special privileges ... the Church will not immediately start dreaming of a Church-State."<sup>37</sup>

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of the church in the world (the larger household of God) has no ultimate significance according to this view. Its only purpose is to prepare others to hear the word of justification. The law prepares the road for the gospel.

<sup>33</sup> Bonhoeffer 2005:357, 360.

<sup>34</sup> Bonhoeffer 2005:361.

<sup>35</sup> Green 1999:122.

<sup>36</sup> For a critique of the dualism between this-worldliness and other-worldliness in Bonhoeffer's theology, see Van Ruler 1972:171-187.

<sup>37</sup> Barth 1960/2004:166.

In an essay on *Rechtfertigung und Recht*, first published in 1938, Barth explores the relation between divine justification and human justice (associated with church and state). Barth argues that the authority of the state is derived from the authority of Christ. The role of the state (Pilate) is understood within the context of the *second* article of the creed. He argues that the chief criterion of a lawful state is whether it “grants legal protection to the free preaching of justification”<sup>38</sup> – not because the church requires room for itself, but precisely because of its concern for the world. In Nazi Germany this legal protection became jeopardised because the state demanded total allegiance to itself. This amounted to a form of self-divinising.

In a discussion of the term *paroikia* in this essay, Barth emphasises that the home (or state) to which Christians belong and where they have citizen rights is an eschatological one. Christians who are homeless in this world and in this age are not consoled with a home here and now in the church. They are sojourners (*paroikia*) who have no abiding city here: “the earthly church stands over against the earthly State as a sojourning (*paroikia*) and not as a state within the State, or even as a State above the State.”<sup>39</sup> The church as *paroikia* believes that this eternal home is indeed a reality and hopes for the unveiling of this reality which remains concealed here and now.<sup>40</sup> A church which lives in expectation of the eternal home (state) constantly expects the best from the earthly state in terms of justice and continues to honour it even where this expectation is not fulfilled.<sup>41</sup> This, of course, begs further questions about the continuity and the discontinuity between an earthly home(lessness) and the eschatological home, between God’s ultimate word of justification and contemporary judgements in the sphere of human justice.

Barth’s famous essay on “The Christian community and the civil community” (*Christusgemeinde und Bürgergemeinde*, 1946) offers a reinterpretation of the relationship between church and state on the basis of the sovereignty of Christ.<sup>42</sup> Barth uses the image of two concentric circles which have Christ as the common centre. The Christian community forms the inner circle and the civil community the outer circle.<sup>43</sup> The light of Christ’s reign falls on the church and from there is reflected unto the state. Accordingly, the relationship between church and state is analogous. Through its existence and its preaching, the church has to remind the state of the reign of Christ. In this way the state can become a mirror image of God’s reign. The church serves as a primordial example for the state.

Barth’s approach may be contrasted with the traditional reformed emphasis on the orders of creation and providence. The function of the state is not merely the product of sin (to restrain evil); the state is also an instrument of divine grace.<sup>44</sup> The state has a function in God’s plan of salvation. The state is related to the centre of Christian belief, namely Christ as the crucified and risen Lord. The state is an allegory, a correspondence and an analogue of the reign of God.<sup>45</sup> The church may desire that the shape of the civil community should

<sup>38</sup> See Barth 1960/2004:137.

<sup>39</sup> See Barth 1960/2004:127.

<sup>40</sup> See Barth 1960/2004:127.

<sup>41</sup> See Barth 1960/2004:140.

<sup>42</sup> See Barth 1960/2004:149-189. With the concept of community Barth stresses that what is at stake here is not so much institutions but humans gathered together. There is little reference to the significance of the place (*oikos*) within which they are gathered. For the discussion below, I am indebted to the very helpful summary of Barth’s views in Durand 1981:9-11.

<sup>43</sup> See Barth 1960/2004:156, 169.

<sup>44</sup> See Barth 1960/2004:1536.

<sup>45</sup> Barth 1960/2004:169.

point towards the reign of God, not away from it. Although human politics cannot be equated with the politics of God, they should proceed on parallel lines.<sup>46</sup>

Barth gives a long series of examples of the ways in which the exemplary existence of the church expresses itself analogously in the political sphere. Because God became human, human beings are the measure of all things. The welfare of human beings should therefore not be sacrificed for the sake of some abstract cause (the nation, progress, culture or civilisation). "Man has not to serve causes; causes have to serve man."<sup>47</sup> Since the future for which the church waits, is the definitive revelation of the divine justification (a legal verdict), the church would favour a constitutional order above anarchy or tyranny.<sup>48</sup> Because the Son of Man came to save the lost, the Christian congregation will side with the weak while it strives for social justice.<sup>49</sup> Since the church is a fellowship which is united by one faith, one baptism and one Lord, the church will stand for the equality, freedom and responsibility of adult citizens of all religious persuasions, classes, races and of both genders.<sup>50</sup> Because the church lives from the disclosure of Christ as the Light of the world, it will resist forces of darkness and will be the sworn enemy of secret policies and secret diplomacy.<sup>51</sup> Because the church is established and nourished by the free proclamation of the Word of God, it will resist attempts to control and censor the expression of public opinion.<sup>52</sup> In each case the Christological concentration recognised within the church community makes it evident that the relationship between church community and civil community cannot be more than an analogous one.

Barth's intentions are clear. He wants to counter any separation of church and state into two distinct spheres. He wishes to ensure that the state (and civil society) falls under the reign of Christ and that the theological foundations of the state are not understood on the basis of natural law<sup>53</sup> or the orders of creation. He also wishes to acknowledge that the church community exists within the civil community, shares certain characteristics with the civil community (as indicated by the political term *ekklesia*<sup>54</sup> and that it also shares the perceptions of the civil community. Nevertheless, it should be clearly noted that the source of salvation should not be expected from within the state. This comes from Christ and from the message proclaimed within the church. This message may have implications outside the Christian community but can only be appropriated analogously and incompletely there. The church reminds the civil community of God's reign but does not expect the civil community to gradually become the reign of God.<sup>55</sup> Barth says: "It belongs to the very nature of the State that it is not and cannot become the Kingdom of God. It is based on an ordinance of God which is intended for the "world not yet redeemed" in which sin and the danger of chaos have to be taken into account with the utmost seriousness and in which the rule of Jesus Christ, though in fact already established, is still hidden."<sup>56</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Barth 1960/2004:170.

<sup>47</sup> Barth 1960/2004:172.

<sup>48</sup> Barth 1960/2004:172.

<sup>49</sup> Barth 1960/2004:173.

<sup>50</sup> Barth 1960/2004:175.

<sup>51</sup> Barth 1960/2004:176.

<sup>52</sup> Barth 1960/2004:177.

<sup>53</sup> See Barth 1960/2004:163-5.

<sup>54</sup> See Barth 1960/2004:153-4. Barth therefore insists that a non-political Christianity is impossible; the Christian community cannot be indifferent to the civil community (157, 162).

<sup>55</sup> Barth 1960/2004:167.

<sup>56</sup> Barth 1960/2004:168.

Barth immediately adds that the Christian community itself exists within "the still unredeemed world" (Barmen). Even at best, the church itself is not an image of the reign of God. The "real Kingdom of God will follow both State and Church in time."<sup>57</sup> This implies that both the church community and the civil community can only be understood on the basis of the reign of God.<sup>58</sup> For Barth, the reign of God is defined in terms of the centre, namely Christ. The reign of God is understood primarily in noetic terms, namely as the final revelation of God's merciful judgement, that is, of divine justification. Both church community and civil community fall under the jurisdiction of this judgement. The question which has to be raised here is what the ultimate significance of the civil community would be? Or, in the imagery of the metaphor on the whole household of God: What is the ultimate significance of the house itself? Will the house be finally destroyed under God's judgement or will it become a home for all God's creatures?

### **African Christian Theologies on 'Ecclesiology and Ethics'**

"The Church in Africa is challenged to rise above the purposeful subordination of women. It has to open its arms to a Gospel of Christ that is for all, so that women are enabled to enjoy full citizenship, membership and participation in the Body of Christ, from which they have been denied for so long. Above all, the Church is not a human institution. It becomes Church not because some people decided to come together, but because the Holy Spirit brought them together in one Body. Therefore, as we attempt to discern the role of women and/or men in the community of faith, there is a need to heed and obey the promptings of the Holy Spirit of God. The task awaiting the feminist endeavour is to find a place in the one household of God."<sup>59</sup>

"The numerous problems facing Africa today could be traced back to the missionary era and even beyond. The Church itself is challenged to find practical responses to these problems, but the Church can only do this when it is itself renewed and redefine itself so that its very existence will incorporate within itself and its mission the questions and concerns of the African context today."<sup>60</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Barth 1960/2004:168.

<sup>58</sup> In his later work Barth increasingly relativised the relationship between church and world. This is related to the universalistic element in his theology: since all of humanity is elected in Christ, all share in the salvation in Christ. Jonker (1990:542-543) notes in this regard that: "In his later period Barth did not even regard Word and sacraments as means of grace in any proper sense, because he understood Christ to be the only sacrament of salvation for the world. Even though Christ makes use of the Church in this respect, He remains totally free from the Church and does not need the Church in his work of redemption... The Spirit also is not restricted to the Church, but is operative in the whole world to accomplish the salvation that is intended for the world, and in some sense is already present in the world. The Church is therefore not absolutely necessary for the salvation of the world, but the world is absolutely necessary for the existence of the Church... The paradoxical result is that on the one hand the nature of the Church is described in terms of its mission to the world, but on the other hand the Church is freed from the idea that it is in itself the only haven of salvation that should try to gather the whole world into the Church. The relevance of the Church is no longer dependent on the number of its members, but only on the question whether the Church is a sign of love and salvation of God and faithfully proclaims by word and deed that salvation is already present in the world."

Here one may also recall Bonhoeffer's famous retrieval of the need for arcane discipline. Where Christians are operating in society there is no need to use Christian symbols and to explain the content of the Christian faith. At the same time Christians may draw their vision and strength from participation in the arcane disciplines within the church community.

<sup>59</sup> Tororeiy 2005:169. The remarkable Christological and pneumatological description of the household of God in this formulation should be noted.

<sup>60</sup> A concluding comment in an edited volume on *The church and reconstruction of Africa* (edited by Mugambi 1997b:231).



Can the ecumenical metaphor of the whole household of God be employed to clarify the nature and mission of the church within an African context? This is an important question for ecumenical Christianity, given the shifting centre of gravity in Christianity towards countries of the southern hemisphere. Can African Christianity help the ecumenical church to find its place in God's household? An important dimension of this question is related to the place which women occupy both in churches and in households in Africa. In terms of church membership and involvement women are *the* dominant force in most African churches, but institutional churches have largely marginalised their experiences, voices and gifts.<sup>61</sup>

It is interesting to note that household imagery seems to be particularly attractive within African contributions to ecclesiology. This is for example evident from the metaphors of the family of God, kinship, the clan and ancestral communion which are often employed in this regard. In the discussion below I will investigate the fruitfulness of the metaphor of the household of God in especially two edited volumes on the nature and mission of the church, namely *The church in African Christianity: Innovative essays in ecclesiology*, edited by Jesse Mugambi and Laurenti Magesa (Nairobi: Acton, 1998), and *On being the church: African women's voices and visions*, edited by Isabel Phiri and Sarojini Nadar (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2005). I will not seek to make a substantive contribution toward an African ecclesiology – which, as a tenth-generation Euro-African, I would be hesitant to do. Instead, I will offer some fourth-order reflections<sup>62</sup> on its ecumenical significance. I will follow the logic of the essay thus far but more or less in inverse order, starting with some more general observations.<sup>63</sup>

- a) In African contributions to ecclesiology there is an apparent resistance to draw any clear distinction between the agenda of the church and that of the state or civil society. This may be the result of the hesitance in African traditional culture and religion to define strict boundaries between different spheres of life, including the sacred and the profane. This may also be due to the overwhelming societal challenges which both state and church are called to address (around hunger, poverty, unemployment, domestic violence, violent crime and corruption, economic and political oppression, civil war, xenophobia, environmental devastation, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, etc). In many countries Christianity is numerically strong and in rural areas local churches are often the best vehicle for the delivery of a range of social programmes – since there is a lack of other

<sup>61</sup> See Phiri & Nadar 2005:6.

<sup>62</sup> I suggest a distinction between the unsystematic, reflective wisdom embedded in Christian praxis, theology as a second-order, more disciplined reflection on Christian praxis, systematic theology as a third-order, relatively more abstract reflection on the content and significance of the Christian faith as this is evident in the biblical roots and the subsequent history of Christianity, its institutions, rituals, ethos and praxis, and fourth-order reflection which emerges from critical reflection on (other) systematic theologies. This last form of reflection is found in debates amongst professional theologians and emerges as a result of a recognition of the conflicting diversity of third-order theological positions. In making this distinction I recognise the priority of Christian faith in relation to reflection on such faith and deliberately relativise the significance of my own reflections. This is particularly important with regard to discourse on the church from the perspective of African women's theology. The narrative style which is often adopted from in this context invites second-order reflection on ecclesial praxis while relatively more abstract reflection on the very nature of the church is less prominent, although certainly not absent. In the words of Mercy Amba Oduyoye (2005:153), "Ecclesiology is not simply studying and talking about the Church. It has to do with being the Church." See for example the essays by Akintunde, Masenya, Moyo, Nadar and Phiri in Phiri & Nadar (2005).

<sup>63</sup> To make this explicit: ecumenical discourse on the *oikos* metaphor > questions on the place of the church within the household of God > an ecumenical focus on either the nature of the church or the mission of the church, that is, on ecclesiology or on ethics > Bonhoeffer's and Barth's emphasis on the Christological centre of the church > the need for a supplementary centrifugal pneumatology > the Barthian shift to the world > the relationship between church and civil society/state.

- well-functioning social institutions and since churches command some degree of moral leadership. Given the urgent nature of such societal challenges, churches find themselves called to respond in whatever way they can. Although there is recognition of the distinct spiritual contribution which churches can make in this regard, pastors often have to assist in areas which would elsewhere be the task of various levels of government. Church leaders and ecumenical bodies regularly address societal concerns at the macro-level. In the telling words of Peter Kanyandago: "Christians cannot leave this serious problem [unfair international trade] in the hands of politicians only."<sup>64</sup>
- b) In the fairly substantial corpus of literature in African Christian theology on the nature and mission of the church much is said about the indigenisation of the African church, Christian ministries and the mission of the church in society but comparatively little about the distinct nature of the church.<sup>65</sup> Overtly, the focus is indeed on ethics and not so much on ecclesiology, on Life and Work / Church and Society and not so much on Faith and Order. There is ample evidence of the Barthian shift to the world and of Bonhoeffer's notion of the "church for others",<sup>66</sup> but less emphasis on the distinctiveness of the *Christusgemeinde* or on some form of Christocentrism.<sup>67</sup> The two volumes of essays identified above serve as welcome exceptions in this regard.
- c) A detailed study of the relationship between Christ and the Spirit (the *filioque* controversy) in various African Christian theologies could yield some important pointers for wider ecumenical discourse in this regard. There is an understandable fascination in African theologies with the figure of Jesus Christ – who was introduced within most of Africa by Western missionaries. Given the highly ambiguous legacy of mission, African theologians raise Bonhoeffer's famous question in an acute way: Who is Jesus Christ, for us, today? Many contributions take the "many faces of Jesus" in Africa as a point of departure for further reflection.<sup>68</sup> Under closer inspection, the Christological centre of the church in Africa therefore reveals an underlying, conflicting diversity. At the same time, there is an almost innate attraction towards the power and work of God's Spirit, to healing, exorcism, prophecy, charismatic leadership and the infusion of God's spirit in Christian ministries. This is obviously related to the balance of material and spiritual forces which is emphasised in probably all African worldviews. In this light further reflection on the relationship between Christ and the Spirit may well prove to be highly stimulating.
- d) African discourse on the nature of the church may provisionally be classified in three groups.<sup>69</sup> Firstly, some contributions stress the institutional dimensions of the church.

<sup>64</sup> Kanyandago 1998:190.

<sup>65</sup> See for example the two volumes on the church in Africa edited by Jesse Mugambi (1997a, 1997b). See the index to the bibliography, *Mapping Systematic Theology in Africa* (Conradie & Fredericks 2004) for detailed references.

<sup>66</sup> See Tororeiy (2005:169) and Waruta (1998:39) for two explicit references.

<sup>67</sup> See Nyamiti 1998:146 for an emphasis on the Christocentric nature of the church – which he links immediately to its theocentric and indeed trinity-centred orientation.

<sup>68</sup> See the index to the bibliography mentioned above for references in this regard.

<sup>69</sup> I am drawing here on an essay by Douglas Waruta (1998) entitled, "Towards an African church: A critical assessment of alternative forms and structures". Waruta uses the distinctions between the static and the dynamic, between tradition and innovation and between particularity and universality to distinguish four major types of churches in Africa, namely 1) the "dominant types" (highly institutionalised mainline churches, with urban strongholds and seeking to influence public policy, 2) the "popular types" (Pentecostal and other non-denominational evangelical churches, characterised by political and doctrinal conservatism, where formalism is rejected and participatory forms of worship is encouraged), 3) the "distinctive type" (a loose collection of

While some criticise the mainline churches for taking over Western styles of organisation and leadership, others are precisely attracted by positions of honour and status within hierarchical church structures. This does not apply to churches of Western origin only; several African Indigenous Churches (AICs) have adopted similar structures when they have become larger and well-established.

By contrast, there is a second group of contributions which emphasise that the church is a movement driven by the Spirit and not primarily an institution. They encourage unstructured forms of worship, charismatic leadership and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Examples of such churches include the Spirit-type ("Zionist") African Indigenous Churches and emerging churches with a Pentecostal orientation.

The third group of contributions is especially important for present purposes. Here the church is regarded neither as an institution, nor as a movement, but as essentially a group of people, a worshipping community, including the living and the dead. It is here where images of the church such as the family of God, the communion of the saints, membership of a clan and ancestral fellowship are particularly attractive.

The church may be portrayed as a *fellowship*, the household of God. This is for example evident in an essay on the "Ecclesiology of African Independent Churches" by Zablon Nthamburi: "Through the Holy Spirit the Church is transformed into a household of God whose love unites all its members into an unbroken fellowship."<sup>70</sup> He notes that such fellowship is reminiscent of the African concept of the extended family where every member is to be respected, appreciated and able to make a contribution.<sup>71</sup> Membership of the church is not defined in institutional terms but in terms of being incorporated in the new family of God. Membership thus not only implies fellowship and nourishment but also family discipline.<sup>72</sup> Where there is an emphasis on the church as a family, there may emerge a need for evolving institutional structures in order to ensure the smooth transition from one generation of leaders to the next.<sup>73</sup>

The church may also be portrayed as an analogue to an *African clan*. In an essay on "The African clan as the true model of the African church," John Waliggo emphasises that the church is primarily a clan (Israel) or a family (being brothers and sisters in Christ) and not an institution. He seeks to demonstrate that the clan system in Uganda offers a prefiguration of Christian fellowship, for example in terms of the election of leadership, leadership as serving the interests of the family and clan, the involvement of all members of a family (the laity) in housekeeping, the incorporation of new members within an open-ended clan (e.g. through marriage and adoption/baptism), the need for family discipline, the sense of unity, belonging, oneness, togetherness and celebration in families and the role of family meals (the Eucharist), enjoyed at the house of the head of the extended family.<sup>74</sup>

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smaller non-mainline churches which are identified by some or other distinct feature: Adult baptism, Seventh-Day Adventism, the Salvation Army, etc) and 4) the "indigenous churches" (a wide variety of so-called AICs, typically drawing strongly on traditional forms of African culture, characterised by their dynamism but also by doctrinal instability). My classification follows that of Waruta in using the distinction between institution and movement as a point of departure for further reflection.

<sup>70</sup> Nthamburi 1998:45.

<sup>71</sup> Nthamburi 1998:45.

<sup>72</sup> Nthamburi 1998:52-53.

<sup>73</sup> Nthamburi 1998:53-54.

<sup>74</sup> See Waliggo 1998.

The church may also be portrayed as a form of *communion with the ancestors*. This is the argument of an extensive essay on "The church as Christ's ancestral mediation" by Charles Nyamiti.<sup>75</sup> In a deliberate attempt to retain continuity with Catholic orthodoxy, he argues that the triune God may be understood in terms of ancestral kinship between Father, Son and Spirit. God has allowed us to participate in this ancestral kinship through adoption in Christ who has become our brother, proto-ancestor and mediator. The church is the extension of Christ's ancestorship to human communities.<sup>76</sup> Throughout the essay Nyamiti refers to the (tripartite) church as militant, suffering and triumphant in order to emphasise that this ancestral communion incorporates those who have died in Christ (and those in purgatory!). He recognises the role of non-African ancestors in faith and argues that "with regard to adult non-canonized African individuals, only Christian hope (not certainty) can be the basis of veneration of them as our ancestors in Christ."<sup>77</sup> He suggests that this model of the church implies the regular and frequent cult of the ancestors, in a Christianised form, where Christ's mediation will serve as the basis for members of the church to act as mediators for one another and in communion with the saints.<sup>78</sup> In this way he stresses the fellowship of earthly members of the church with the saints in heaven. A church without communion with its heavenly members is a truncated church, a body with missing members.<sup>79</sup> Indeed, for Nyamiti, the call for an African ancestral ecclesiology entails reflection on the church in the light of the confession of the communion of saints.<sup>80</sup> He also stresses that this is crucial in order to guard against a purely secular ecclesiology where the church is seen as one institution amongst others at work in civil society.<sup>81</sup> On this basis Nyamiti reflects on a number of traditional and other characteristics of the church, including the hierarchy, *diakonia*, healing and hospitality.

In an essay on "The church as a family model," Tanzanian Catholic theologian Aidan Msafiri explores the strengths and weaknesses of this model for the church in Africa on the basis of the correlation between an African understanding of family and the church as the family and household of God. Amongst the strengths he mentions the Trinitarian, theocentric and Christocentric dimensions of the family of God. Interestingly, he also highlights the profound unity and interconnectedness between the human family and the cosmos in traditional African cosmologies. Humans have to respect trees for mediating life, rivers for communion and mountains like Kilimanjaro for connecting people with God. Amongst the limitations of the model he identifies patriarchal cultures, the changes in the structure and cohesiveness of African families and a degree of exclusivity since human families are typically more limited in scope than what a vision of the unity of humankind would require.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>75</sup> See Nyamiti 1998. This essay builds on Nyamiti's earlier work on an ancestral Christology.

<sup>76</sup> See Nyamiti 1998:132.

<sup>77</sup> Nyamiti 1998:147.

<sup>78</sup> See Nyamiti 1998:142.

<sup>79</sup> See Nyamiti 1998:168.

<sup>80</sup> See Nyamiti 1998:144.

<sup>81</sup> See Nyamiti 1998:144. He adds: "It is not surprising that many ecclesiologies today are primarily secular in orientation: they present the Church mainly as a human societal body chiefly concerned with earthly welfare such as social justice, peace, liberation from hunger, disease, socio-economic or political oppression and the like. In some of the worst cases the Church's task is reduced to the socio-political level" (1998:167).

<sup>82</sup> Msafiri 2002:85-98.

Despite the attractiveness of such metaphors for an African ecclesiology, Isabel Phiri observes that African women theologians have pointed out that African communities and families are typically structured along patriarchal principles – which women find oppressive for themselves and their children.<sup>83</sup> She nevertheless adopts the language of community in order to describe the church as a healing community, with reference to the healing ministry of Mayi NyaJere in Chilobwe, Malawi. Here she follows the lead of Mercy Amba Oduyoye who also refers to the household of God in the title of a chapter on ecclesiology in her *Introducing African women's theology*.<sup>84</sup> Oduyoye distinguishes between the house and the hearth – as the warm sense of homeliness that mothers are typically called upon to provide within the larger household (the *oikonomia*). She refers to the church as the “hearth-hold” of Christ within the larger household of God (understood expansively as the cosmos itself).<sup>85</sup> She supplements such a notion of the household with the Christian understanding of fellowship (*koinonia*), a participative partnership of both women and men, based on equity and mutuality, that is, on mutual caring, a sharing of skills and other resources and an African sense of hospitality.<sup>86</sup>

This pattern is followed in several other essays in the volume *On being church: African women's voices and visions*. The point of departure is indeed communion, fellowship, *koinonia*. However, the emphasis is on the need for inclusive participation within that communion, in such a way that the communion could be enriched by the gifts and ministries of the women who constitute a clear majority in most churches in Africa. Mercy Amba Oduyoye thus understands Christian ministry in terms of an equal partnership of both men and women.<sup>87</sup> Likewise, Dorcas Akintunde, in discussing the subordination of women in the Christ Apostolic Church in Nigeria, calls for partnership in the exercise of power.<sup>88</sup> In a discussion on “Sex, gender, power and HIV/AIDS in Malawi,” Fulata Moyo calls for the reign of *agape*, understood in terms of mutuality, reciprocity and companionship in marriage relationships. The task discerned in all these contributions is for women and men to discover their true humanity in Christ. As Mary Tororeiy notes in an essay on “Voices from the periphery”, what is at issue is African women's theology is to find a common humanity as part of God's creation (with reference to Bonhoeffer's emphasis on being human).<sup>89</sup> She nevertheless recognises that the church is not merely a human institution; it is the one body of Christ, brought together through

<sup>83</sup> See Phiri 2005:30.

<sup>84</sup> Oduyoye 2001:78-89. She notes that the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians have agreed to promote the biblical imagery of the household to designate the community under God. Oduyoye (2001:80) adds that “The church is indeed the hearth-hold with God as mother, the whole earth is the hearth and all human beings as the children of God. Dealing with the Church, however, they would specifically see a community that claims special relationship with Jesus of Nazareth who was named the Christ.” While Oduyoye here emphasises the continuity between Christians and other human beings (within the context of the Circle), it is interesting to note that the household metaphor is used here in the narrower (local Christian communities) and in the wider sense (all human beings, the economy, the earth, the cosmos) sense of the word.

<sup>85</sup> Oduyoye 2001:79.

<sup>86</sup> See Oduyoye 2001:86. She explores the notion of hospitality in another chapter on “Hospitality and spirituality” (Oduyoye (2001:90-109). She suggests that hospitality includes 1) welcoming / receiving, 2) charity / almsgiving, 3) boarding and lodging, and 4) protecting / sanctuary and integration.

<sup>87</sup> See Oduyoye 2005:151.

<sup>88</sup> See Akintunde 2005.

<sup>89</sup> See Tororeiy 2005:169.

the Spirit of Christ. It is only on this basis that women and men can find their place in the one household of God as equal partners.<sup>90</sup>

- e) These perspectives on an African ecclesiology do not yet offer an answer to questions on the place and mission of the church in God's household. They typically stress the continuity between the church and the rest of God's household, both in terms of being part of God's creation and in terms of the (patriarchal) distortions which are found in church and society. They describe the nature of the church in terms of a free community of equals, but seem to place less emphasis on the distinctiveness of the church community within the larger human community.

### Conclusion

The Christological concentration which is so evident in the work of both Bonhoeffer and Barth may help the church to gain clarity on the distinctness of its place in God's household. The (limited) space in the midst of the world which the church occupies, is characterised by the earthly symbols of incarnation and cross, water, bread and wine. This offers a strong corrective to contemporary discourse on the *oikos* metaphor in which different manifestations of the household imagery are all too often confused and conflated with one another. Church communities live together with other communities within the household of God, but have a very specific understanding of the foundations of the house, namely in terms of divine justification on the basis of the vicarious work of Christ. It can only seek to contribute to the building of the house on that basis. As Barth notes, the most important contribution which the church community can make within the civil community is to be itself, to proclaim the gospel of the reign of Jesus Christ. The church can best be relevant within the world if it focuses on its own subject matter.<sup>91</sup>

This Christological concentration in the contributions of Bonhoeffer and Barth should perhaps, especially in the African church, be balanced by a centrifugal pneumatology which recognises the presence and activity of the Spirit of Christ in every sphere of the household.<sup>92</sup> This may help the church to follow the movement of the Spirit and to understand its own mission. An understanding of the place and mission of the church in God's household therefore requires further reflection on the *filioque* controversy: The relationship between the work of Christ and the work of the Spirit. It also requires further reflection on the relationship between justification and sanctification. Moreover, it requires reflection on the

<sup>90</sup> See the remarkable quotation from Tororeij 2005:169 at the beginning of this section. See also the subtitle of the volume of essays entitled *Groaning in faith: African women in the household of God* (Kanyoro & Njoroge 1996). The metaphor of the household of God is used throughout this volume despite the patriarchal overtones of many African households. The place of women in the household of God is explored both in the wider sense of society (see Grace Ndyabahika's essay on "Women's place in creation") and the narrower sense of church (see Musimbi Kanyoro's essay on *koinonia* entitled "God calls to ministry: An inclusive hospitality"). The place of the church within the larger household of God is not explored in any depth in this volume.

<sup>91</sup> See Barth 1960/2004:157-58.

<sup>92</sup> Barth himself spearheaded the movement of the church to the world. He recognised that the secular turning away of modern humanity from the church coincided with the turning of the church towards the world. Barth welcomed the disintegration of the *corpus Christianum* as this liberated the church for its mission and service in the world. According to Barth, the church only exists because of its mission, namely to be an *eccentric* church for the world. He rightly argued that the content of the proclamation of the church in the world has to focus on the Lordship of Christ over the whole world. However, he perhaps underestimated the structural differences between Christology and pneumatology (see Van Ruler 1972:9-40). On the turn to the world in Barth's theology, see especially Jonker 1994.

relationship between cosmos and *eschaton*, redemption and the completion of God's work, life and eternal life, house and home, earth and new earth.

How, then, should the place and the mission of the church within the larger household of God be understood? Following Bonhoeffer's lead, one may perhaps talk about the church as occupying a humble room within the larger household of God. Within this (upper) room the church community may celebrate its adoption as children (not merely as resident aliens) within the household. It acknowledges that Jesus is the door through which one may enter this room and through whom the homeless may experience both a refuge and abundant life (John 10:9). However, the church cannot be restricted to one room of the house. That would amount to a privatisation of sphere of influence of the church and to a domestication of the power of the gospel. Perhaps an open-plan house would suit the church best. The church has to retain a presence within the larger household. Here the African notion of the *ikhaya*,<sup>93</sup> the household of the extended family with its many huts and large communal space, is particularly apt. The church may be at home within the larger household, in the communal spaces, in the public square and the marketplace.

Moreover, the church offers a particular vision on the very architecture, building and ownership of the house. The church is that place within the house where one can find traces that bear witness to the presence of the owner and keeper of the house. The church also concerns itself with the rules for the management of the house. On this basis the church can proclaim that this is indeed the household of God, despite the devastating impact of sin in the world. On this basis Christian communities may act, precisely as children and heirs of the household, also as domestic servants in the house, adopting the way of Jesus Christ towards the well-being of the whole household. This should entail the church's involvement in housing schemes for the homeless, participation in the search for appropriate forms of habitation, in numerous tasks of housekeeping,<sup>94</sup> but also an invitation to others to abide in Christ (John 15:4), to hear that the Holy Spirit lives amongst the community of disciples (John 14:16), to long for life in the house of the Father (John 14:2f). Indeed, the church community longs for the day when this household will offer a home for all God's creatures. It prepares the house for the home-coming feast. It does not long for another home; it hopes that the house which it inhabits will indeed become God's own home, on earth as it is in heaven.

<sup>93</sup> This is a particularly rich expression suggesting the fecundity of the land, the presence of the ancestral spirits, the harmonious co-existence of relatives within closely knitted kinship systems, the availability of sufficient food, bountiful herds of livestock, joyous social gatherings, hospitality shown to visitors and travellers, storytelling around the fire in the evenings and much laughter. In the father's village there will be many houses, or smaller huts, traditionally built from branches and mud with thatched roofs. One hut will serve as the sleeping quarters for a husband and wife and small children. Cooking, washing and eating would be done communally while social gatherings would take place in the evenings around an open fire. Whenever the family is extended, especially through marriage or the birth of children, new huts would simply be added for the newcomers. In traditionally sparsely populated areas there would always be room to extend the father's household.

<sup>94</sup> See the following comment by Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike (1998:67): "The sacrifice that mothers make for their children sheds light on the selfless character of the divine love for humanity. Millions of African women are struggling in body, wasting away and working hard in tilling the land, baby-sitting, home-keeping cooking, washing clothes, fetching water, looking for firewood and petty trading in fruit and vegetables, leading the singing and prayers at liturgical and paraliturgical celebrations, so that the lives of others may flourish."

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