

# Title: Social Media as Second Creation: Cyber-Space as a Denial of Cosmic Community

The digital world invades every aspect of everyday life in the modern world. As a result, social media has a significant effect on the way we interact with our world. I intend to evaluate these effects of social media on social interaction in light of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christ-centered reality in order to uncover the intersection of Christian anthropology, eco-theology, and social media. Through this doctrine of a Christ-centered reality, I will argue that the social media "world" is not an extension of natural creation as a proper place for humans to experience relationship, with others or creation, but is instead an anthropocentric extension of human consumerist society, thus constituting a second creation imposed onto the first.

Central to this argument is the premise that God is the active sustainer and center of reality. Bonhoeffer makes the Word, Christ, the primary concern of his theology. Thus, if God creates through His Word, then the Word must be the active center and sustainer of reality.<sup>1</sup> If God is the active sustainer of creation, as Bonhoeffer's argument goes, God is the center of all creation. This allows Christians to "look outside their former circle of self," to God's existence "in His body" through the Church.<sup>2</sup> God, then, is both the center of reality itself as well as the basis for community, forming one unified cosmic community between Himself, the Church and creation.<sup>3</sup>

From Bonhoeffer's conclusion of a "unified cosmic community," two implications can be identified. Firstly, God actively permeates the distinction between individuals within community. Thus, God's permeation of creation is the foundation for Christian community. Secondly, God's permeation of creation requires that we acknowledge creation as being infiltrated with the Word of God. Thus, creation has value insofar as God actively sustains it. Both of these premises come together to form the "cosmic community" in Bonhoeffer, a community reflecting the body of Christ in and through its connection to a God-sustained creation. My strategy, then, will be to evaluate social media in light of these two premises to determine its acceptance of the God-sustained creation.

In the first case, I will argue that social media replaces community with an "attention economy."<sup>4</sup> First, it is necessary to put social media in conversation with Luther's doctrine of justification. Trevor Sutton, in his article "inclined to Boast," does just this, arguing that the desire to be justified is an intrinsic aspect of the human condition.<sup>5</sup> To Luther, as Sutton points out, this desire to deem oneself "just" outside of the church is "self-justification," winning favor and affirmation from others by presenting ourselves as worthy of praise.<sup>6</sup> To Bonhoeffer, in *Life Together*, as well as Luther, justification must happen within community, only through Christ.<sup>7</sup>

Social media replaces justification through community with Luther's self-justification. W.T. Dickens, in "Living Upside Down," argues that social media accomplishes this self-justification with "relentless marketing."<sup>8</sup> James K.A. Smith, in *Desiring the Kingdom*, synthesizes here, arguing that marketing

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall; Temptation: Two Biblical Studies* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997). 21-23.

<sup>2</sup> Dianne Rayson. *Bonhoeffer and Climate Change Theology and Ethics for the Anthropocene*, Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2021, 47.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>4</sup> W.T. Dickens, 2018. "Living Upside Down: Inverting Consumerism's Notion of Freedom." *Theology Today* 74 (4): 382.

<sup>5</sup> Trevor Sutton, 2019. "Inclined to Boast: Social Media and Self-Justification." *Concordia Journal* 45 (1): 35.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Samuel Wells, and John W. Doberstein. *Life Together*. London: SCM Press, 2015, 21-22.

<sup>8</sup> Dickens, 382.

presents the consumer with an “objective” standard to measure themselves, and others, against.<sup>9</sup> I will argue, as Sutton and Dickens do, that this is the driving force for social media. Social media provides a space which the user can demonstrate their adherence to the market standard, orienting the individual towards themselves and replacing justification through community with a constant striving to prove adherence to the market standard. Thus, individuals become objects, the Church community, permeated by God’s existence, fragmented into individuals on their own individual pursuit for justification.

As for the second premise, social media rejects the value of creation as sustained by God. This can be first seen through Bob Goudzwaard’s analysis of modern anthropology. Modern anthropology largely resembles cartesian dualism; humans exist primarily as thinking beings which can be distinguished from the body.<sup>10</sup> The primary implication of this, as it relates to our discussion here, is that it divorces physical and abstract realities. This has allowed, firstly, social media to exist in a space absent of physical form, as can be seen in Belk’s “Extended Self in a Digital world.” Here, Belk describes the digital world as one in which physical form is malleable through “avatars.”<sup>11</sup> In social media, this comes in the form of filters, the ability to edit photos, bitmojis, and the representation of abstract lives to prove adherence to the market standard.

However, the distinction between physical and abstract reality is beyond our own bodies. Norman Wirzba in *the Paradise of God* discusses this in terms of “the book of nature” and “the book of scripture.”<sup>12</sup> Here, Bonhoeffer’s specific doctrine comes back into view; the book of scripture permeates, exists alongside, and is inseparable from the book of nature. However, the separation of body and mind for the sake of conforming to a market standard has divorced these two books. The sustaining existence of God has been removed in modernity and replaced with human autonomy. Creation is now valued in light of its usefulness to “human flourishing.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, the human desire is to escape dependence on a devalued creation. John Suler, in *Psychology of the Digital Age*, describes “cyberspace” as a space which “mimics” the physical world.<sup>14</sup> Such is the premise of social media, a space for disembodied minds to escape dependence on ecological systems to a new, secondary creation.

Finally, the culmination of our evaluation of social media in light of Bonhoeffer’s unified reality can be seen. The replacement of community with individualism is, beyond a negation of connection between individuals and creation, an abandonment of creation all together in favor of a digital world which is meant to “transcend” physicality. Thus, social media becomes a secondary creation, imposed onto the first for the sake of denying the physical, resulting in a loss of doctrinal community as well as ecological responsibility.

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<sup>9</sup> James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011, 97.

<sup>10</sup> Bob Goudzwaard, and Bartholomew, Craig G.. *Beyond the Modern Age: An Archaeology of Contemporary Culture*. Berlin: InterVarsity Press, 2017. 113.

<sup>11</sup> Russell W. Belk, “Extended Self in a Digital World.” *Journal of Consumer Research* 40, no. 3 (2013): 481.

<sup>12</sup> Norman Wirzba, 2003. *The Paradise of God: Renewing Religion in an Ecological Age*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 65.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 68

<sup>14</sup> John R. Suler, *Psychology of the Digital Age: Humans Become Electric*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 37

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