

# Bonhoeffer, Heidegger and Climate Change

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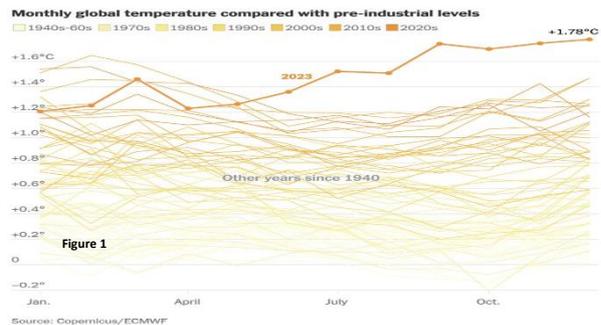
The theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer was strongly influenced by the existential philosophy of Martin Heidegger, whose 1926 book *Being and Time* (*Sein und Zeit*) provided a pivotal basis for Bonhoeffer's 1931 postdoctoral dissertation *Act and Being* (*Akt und Sein*). *Being and Time* was a celebrated text of German philosophy when Bonhoeffer was forming his theology. Bonhoeffer and Heidegger shared a distinctive approach to philosophy in their placement of thought in the framework of existence. This existential approach can now support theological engagement with the climate crisis as we confront the darkening and heating of the world. The temporal ontology that Bonhoeffer developed from Heidegger also helps to relate long term natural climate change to theology.

Ontology is the study of being. Bonhoeffer's *Act and Being* is an exploration of systematic ontology, seeking the broadest possible logical foundations for thought, with act defined primarily as thought. Building on Heidegger's existential approach, Bonhoeffer's ontology placed Jesus Christ at the focus of how thought relates to existence. Advancing an ethical dialogue between theology and philosophy through a relational vision of God, *Act and Being* shows how Christology can inform major ethical questions. This framework can provide essential input for effective responses to climate change.

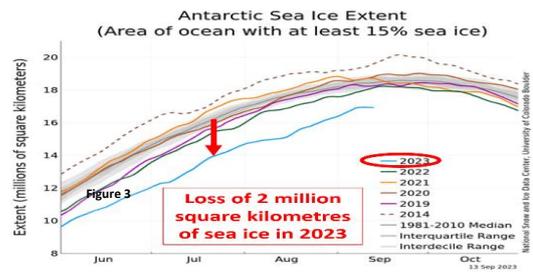
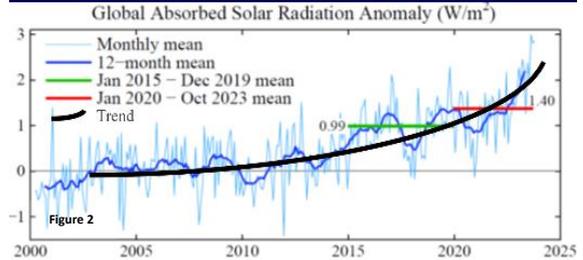
How our thinking guides our existence should be central to climate policy. Global warming is a primary planetary danger, vividly seen in the worsening impact of floods, storms, fires and drought. The dire risks of global warming include planetary tipping points that now threaten a phase shift into an irreversible Hothouse Earth<sup>1</sup> with apocalyptic implications.

2023 was by far the hottest year in recorded history, with a sudden increase of world temperature far bigger than ever seen before (fig. 1). The world has become 2% darker in the last decade, reflecting less sunlight due to factors such as the loss of ice and snow (fig. 2). Antarctica has lost two million square kilometres of sea ice that a decade ago reflected sunlight back to space (fig. 3). Warming factors are combining to speed up climate change. We have entered dangerous territory for climate stability.

The darkening trend is accelerating, and the world is absorbing this extra heat. The warming effects of darkening over the last decade are equal to the



## The Darkening of the World 2% loss of sunlight reflection since 2013



<sup>1</sup> Steffen et al, (2018) *Trajectories of the Earth System in the Anthropocene*  
<https://www.pnas.org/doi/full/10.1073/pnas.1810141115>

effects of about fifty years of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.<sup>2</sup> The darkening of the world is an accelerating feedback process like the squeal of an amplifier, multiplying the risk that the Earth System will suddenly destabilise in unexpected ways. The physical darkening of the world climate has parallels in the cultural darkening of mass psychology, politics, economics and war.

Cutting greenhouse gas emissions cannot mitigate climate change for decades. Most warming is due to past emissions, which have far bigger ongoing committed effect than each year's new emissions.<sup>3</sup> A recent epiphany for many climate experts<sup>4</sup> is the realisation that the main action that could slow down global warming is to increase planetary albedo, rebrightening the planet, using technology to reflect more sunlight to space. Higher albedo would mitigate extreme weather, biodiversity loss, sea level rise and systemic disruptions. The potential to address these existential risks shows that rebrightening the planet is now an urgent security imperative.

Bonhoeffer's Christ-centred approach can inform the dilemmas that now prevent climate action. A starting point for such discussion is the question of how we can know anything at all, our epistemology. In a recent study by Nik Byle<sup>5</sup>, Bonhoeffer's Lutheran theology is shown to inform his critique of secular epistemology as an intellectual form of sin.

The core error Bonhoeffer saw in modern thought appears in Descartes' axiom 'I think therefore I am'. Martin Heidegger reversed this Cartesian logic to instead effectively say 'I am therefore I think'. Bonhoeffer took up this reversal to argue in *Act and Being* that human identity as defined by the modern philosophy of systematic doubt ignores how our social existence in the world is the necessary condition for thought, and that Heidegger's reversal makes anthropology, the study of humanity, logically prior to epistemology, the theory of knowledge. While recognising the central importance of scientific knowledge, the existential perspective sees the coordination between facts at the social level as essential for science to make moral and cultural sense.

Bonhoeffer saw the modern rejection of faith in God as exhibiting what Martin Luther called 'the heart turned in on itself'. This pervasive modern individualism has the logical end point of solipsism, the myth that we cannot be sure that anything other than our own mind exists. Solipsism in turn creates nihilism, the attitude that nothing really matters, a despairing mentality that can only be overcome by the psychology of faith.

Bonhoeffer insisted that the real system of the world will be revealed by God through faith. He reinterpreted Heidegger's existential anthropology in terms of theology, aiming to integrate thought and existence in a unified vision of reality grounded in the messianic presence of God in Christ. As Dianne Rayson argues, "Bonhoeffer's theology is consistently concerned with human flourishing 'here and now', a 'worldly Christianity' that addresses the one, unified reality in which we find ourselves."<sup>6</sup>

Modern epistemology rejects faith, and as a result was seen by Bonhoeffer as intrinsically sinful. He saw sociality as the basis of salvation, in his call for the church community of faith to challenge the selfish and uncaring values in modern individualism. The gospel critique of

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<sup>2</sup> Total absorbed insolation used to be 100 watts per square metre. The 2 w/m<sup>2</sup> increase since 2013 equates to 2% darkening. James Hansen et al <https://www.columbia.edu/~jeh1/mailings/2024/Groundhog.04January2024.pdf> state "this reduced albedo is equivalent to a sudden increase of atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> from 420 to 530 ppm."

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.globalwarmingindex.org/>

<sup>4</sup> Hansen et al, *Global Warming in the Pipeline*, <https://academic.oup.com/oocc/article/3/1/kgad008/7335889>

<sup>5</sup> N. Byle, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christological Reinterpretation of Heidegger*, Lexington Books, 2021, p.49

<sup>6</sup> D. Rayson, *Bonhoeffer and Climate Change: Theology and Ethics for the Anthropocene*, Lexington Books, 2021, p.3

worldly values challenges the individualistic culture of indifference to relationship. The failure of modern thought to see the centrality of Christ enables what Bonhoeffer called cheap grace, twisting theology to serve social and political interests that reject the messianic call from Christ for social transformation.

Bonhoeffer argued in *Act and Being* that Heidegger's ontology overcame the failure of previous philosophy to integrate thought and existence. Heidegger's shift was to see the meaning of being in relational terms, defined by human being in the world, revealed through the primary phenomena of care and anxiety. This explanation of human existence asks how our being in the world can enable authentic freedom. Through an engaged existential openness, our involvement in social relationships of care is needed to assess the value of scientific knowledge. For climate change, the existential framework of care and anxiety can achieve an ethical authenticity not available to the solely descriptive methods of science.

Relationships of care can attune our life to disclosure of truth. Heidegger saw the ethical decision of authentic care as the way to overcome the forfeiture of our lives to the inauthentic gossip and ambiguity of mass opinion. His call to authenticity described an existential context that for Bonhoeffer was decisively revealed in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. The passion story of cross and resurrection as the paradigm of authentic existence provided the model for Bonhoeffer's ethics, opening conversation about how Christ as a human ideal indicates a path toward planetary transformation.

Bonhoeffer parted with Heidegger by insisting that a deeper level of truth must be found in theology, in the Christ-centred faith in God that led to his martyrdom in the fight against Hitler. For Bonhoeffer, accepting the wisdom of the Hebraic heritage of Christianity was central to authenticity, whereas Heidegger's limitation to the Greek and German world of philosophy distorted his thinking, notably in his disastrous support for Nazism.

Heidegger's philosophy rejected the assumptions required by faith in God. He called the concept of Christian philosophy "a misunderstanding",<sup>7</sup> insisting that theology must be clearly demarcated from philosophy. Despite these views, an unconscious recognition of authentic Christianity can be found in his central idea that care is the meaning of being.<sup>8</sup> His posthumously published interview "*Only A God Can Save Us*"<sup>9</sup> expanded on his view that we live in a destitute time of the default of God, where "not only have the gods fled, but the divine radiance has become extinguished in the world's history". He wrote "The essential episodes of the darkening of the world are the flight of the gods, the destruction of the Earth, the standardisation of man, the pre-eminence of the mediocre".<sup>10</sup>

Bonhoeffer's use of Heidegger created a radically critical stance toward church tradition, given Heidegger's atheistic view that religion cannot provide coherent answers due to its dogmatic commitments. The key idea that Bonhoeffer builds from Heidegger is that existential care grounds our lives in the providential love and grace of God, suggesting an implicit faith behind Heidegger's ideas.

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<sup>7</sup> Introduction to Metaphysics:7

<sup>8</sup> This analysis of Heidegger's relation to Christianity draws from my Master of Arts Honours Thesis [The Place of Ethics In Heidegger's Ontology](#), Macquarie University, 1992

<sup>9</sup> Martin Heidegger, "Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten," Der Spiegel 30 (Mai, 1976): 193-219. Trans. by W. Richardson as "Only a God Can Save Us" in *Heidegger: The Man and the Thinker* (1981), ed. T. Sheehan, pp. 45-67, available at <http://www.ditext.com/heidegger/interview.html>

<sup>10</sup> Poetry, Language, Thought: 91; Introduction to Metaphysics: 45

Heidegger's discussion of logos, the Greek word for speech and reason, shows how much his Christian heritage imbued his thinking, and also has climate implications. Heidegger defined logos as "the original connecting connectedness of being that emerges in language."<sup>11</sup> He argued that logic must be grounded in analysis of logos.<sup>12</sup> Logos of course is understood in theology as Jesus Christ as the word of God, so Heidegger's discussion of logos necessarily opens a dialogue between faith and reason.

The logos theme of connectedness is central to Christianity. The Bible sees God as manifest in the interconnectedness of all reality. Texts that support this theme of connectivity include John 1:14, "the word became flesh"; John 15:1, "the true vine"; Colossians 1:17 "in Christ all things hold together"; Colossians 3:14 "love binds all virtues together", and Hebrews 1:3 "Christ upholds everything by his word of power". Divine connectivity means that religion connects the world as our ligaments connect our skeleton (Eph 4:16), an observation that builds on the shared etymology of religion and ligament. Recognition of our connectedness supports systematic approaches in theology that integrate the sacred and the secular, through faith in the "one God who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph 4:5).

Connectivity is also central to scientific understanding of how human culture is embedded in planetary ecology and climate. The connection between theology and climate policy is grounded in the idea that divine grace permeates the universe and is reflected in the orderly stability of intact ecosystems. The climate question of how to save the world leads to an understanding of salvation in terms of restoring a state of ecological grace. In a state of grace, everything is connected in balance and harmony, whereas disrupted ecosystems are in a state of corruption and decline. Bonhoeffer's contrast between the life of grace in Christ and the life of corruption in Adam can view climate repair as aiming to restore a state of grace, preventing the catastrophic fall from grace threatened by global warming. This vision of climate repair rejects the mentality of cheap grace where tribal identity has displaced true faith and salvation is confined to the supernatural belief in individual afterlife.

The interconnectedness of nature underpins Revelation 11:18, "the wrath of God will destroy those who destroy the Earth." This means the sanctity of natural ecosystems and the fragility and sensitivity of the Earth are primary concerns of God, and the complexity of nature is intrinsically good and sacred. This ecological vision of divine wrath reflects emerging understanding of the fragility of the planetary climate. The teaching of Jesus in the Beatitudes that the meek will inherit the Earth (Matthew 5:5) can similarly be read to see salvation in ecological terms, seeing wild nature as the epitome of meekness in this world of human domination.

Seeing the collapse of nature as divine wrath connects the Biblical idea of God and the Gaia Theory, the observation that the Earth system functions like a single organism to maintain conditions suitable for life, known as homeostasis. The biosphere has regulated itself through interconnected feedback mechanisms that are robust until pressures become too extreme and the system collapses, like a sick person. Earth system equilibrium is sensitive to smaller impacts than we easily imagine. We now face the risk of climate tipping points being triggered by the trillions of tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> and methane that industrial civilization has added to the air. As our world economy destroys the Earth, we are destroying planetary homeostasis, allowing our planetary home to fall from grace into corruption, turning our heavenly home into a living hell of life under wrath.

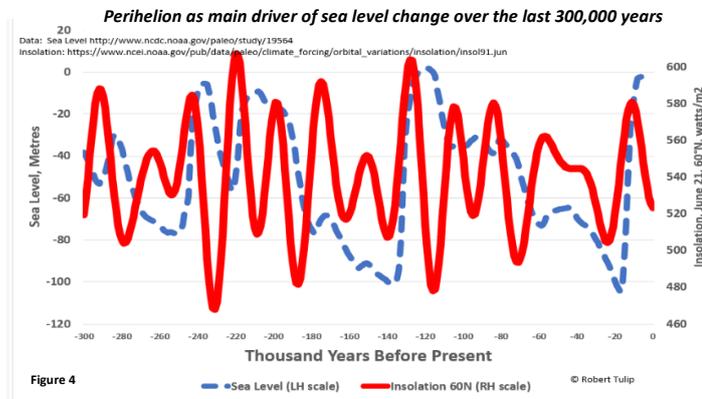
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<sup>11</sup> Introduction to Metaphysics: 128

<sup>12</sup> Sein und Zeit: 159

The theme of logos as connectivity extends also to the deep time framework of natural climate change. Climate science has discovered a profoundly orderly structure of planetary time driven by Earth's regular orbital variation of seasonal light, known as insolation. The astrophysicist Milutin Milankovitch<sup>13</sup> discovered that a primary driver of ice ages was the perihelion, the annual date when the Earth is closest to the Sun.

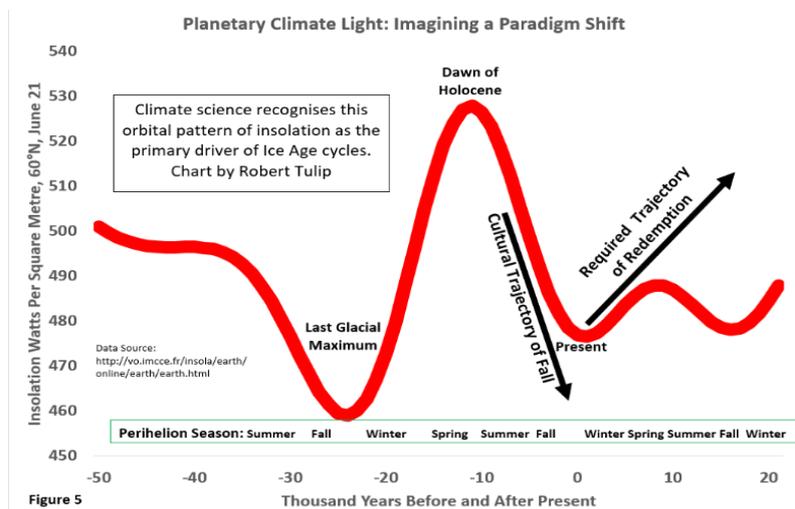
Perihelion now occurs around 3 January each year and advances by one day every 58 years. It will reach the June solstice in ten thousand years. In the ice ages, this natural pattern produced a regular cycle of warming in perihelion summer and cooling in perihelion winter, with the Northern Hemisphere dominating the global glaciation



pattern. Figure 4 shows insolation and sea level over the last 300,000 years, showing how everything is connected at the level of planetary cosmology. The perihelion date was the primary factor causing the rise and fall of sea level, a key indicator of climate change.<sup>14</sup>

A theology of climate change can see the perihelion cycle as the underlying natural framework of Christian cosmology, as the planetary background for the manifestation of divine order and grace revealed in Christ. If God is manifest in nature, on Earth as in Heaven, then a primary manifestation should appear in the largest orderly patterns of our planet. And indeed, there is a direct correlation between the Christian vision of history and the natural climate cycle, although the connection between orbital patterns and climate has been severed by the dominance of human influence since the rise of neolithic agriculture.<sup>15</sup>

The insolation pattern correlates to the Christian story of fall and redemption. Figure 5 shows the perihelion date advanced through the northern season of fall from about 4000 BC to 1246 AD. In previous cycles for the last three million years, this fall period caused a fall in planetary temperature, like the annual autumn. This most recent perihelion fall was the



period that Christianity has traditionally interpreted as the 6000 years of fall from grace.<sup>16</sup> This descending trajectory began to reverse in 1246 AD when the perihelion crossed the December solstice, when northern days start to lengthen in the annual cycle. This shift in the underlying natural climate direction aligns to the conventional eschatological hope of a

<sup>13</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Milutin\\_Milankovi%C4%87](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Milutin_Milankovi%C4%87)

<sup>14</sup> R. Tulip, *The Physics of Astrological Ages*, 2022, in Correlation, the journal of the British Astrological Association

<sup>15</sup> Ruddiman: Early Anthropogenic Hypothesis (2007) <https://agupubs.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1029/2006RG000207>

<sup>16</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Millennial\\_Day\\_Theory](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Millennial_Day_Theory)

time of planetary redemption and repair. Within this cosmic pattern, the incarnation of Christ can be imagined in terms of the presence of the high point of the climate cycle at the low point, symbolically the Golden Age in the midst of the Iron Age, or in Bonhoeffer's phrase, God as the beyond in the midst of life.<sup>17</sup>

The connection between this terrestrial cosmology and the climate crisis is its illustration that the world needs a long term paradigm shift, a profound change in cultural trajectory. In Christian terms this paradigm shift is from the wide and easy road to destruction to the hard and narrow path to life (Matthew 7:13-14). The change of civilizational trajectory from collapse to repair aligns to the Biblical vision of the creation of a new heaven and new earth (Rev 21) and the light that shines in the darkness (John 1:5). Equally, the parable of the wheat and tares (Matthew 13:24-30) suggests our world is dominated by delusion and needs to achieve a transforming enlightenment. The story of the Last Judgement (Matthew 25:31-46) indicates how this cultural transformation can occur, through a focus on works of mercy.

Just as the natural cycle of light is now undergoing a slow shift from descent to ascent, from fall to winter, so too our cultural path requires a change of direction. The problem is that our world culture remains dominated by ideas that evolved during the millennia of fall. The development of ideas about how to change trajectory is lagging, just as sea level change lags the orbital driver of climate.

The inertia of our obsolete cultural trajectory of fall is reflected in the inability to stop global warming. The abundant power and prosperity available from fossil fuels has created a deadly addiction, seen in the steady worsening of extreme weather and the range of systemic climate crises afflicting our planet. Weaning the world from this destructive power is a highly complex task, well beyond the scope of simplistic calls to cut emissions.

The latest scientific thinking on this question of how to change our planetary trajectory<sup>18</sup> has concluded that the key factor is sunlight reflection, as the single change that can most easily be mobilised to cool down the planet, as the first step in a sequential path toward climate repair. Brightening the planet by reflecting more sunlight, for example with marine cloud rebrightening,<sup>19</sup> can slow the immediate crisis, and can also enable the emergence of the global conversation that will be needed to create a genuinely sustainable and peaceful future for the world, by preventing the collapse that would otherwise be inevitable. Reversing the darkening of our world requires technology for rebrightening, as both a practical and symbolic way to begin the paradigm shift to a brighter global path that is at once more reflective, more intelligent and more hopeful.

The courageous vision in the lucid scholarship of Dietrich Bonhoeffer provides a model for confronting the formidable challenges of our world today. By grounding theology in respectful engagement with philosophy, including the relational ethics of care presented by Heidegger, Bonhoeffer identified pervasive false assumptions that prevent the world from finding a practical path of salvation. Putting eschatology and climate change into an understandable rational perspective, learning from Bonhoeffer's theology, can open new strategic conversations, engaging the worlds of politics, religion, industry, culture and science in cooperation toward an integral shared vision of peaceful planetary flourishing.

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<sup>17</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters & Papers from Prison*, SCM Press 1971, p282

<sup>18</sup> Hansen et al, *Global Warming in the Pipeline*, <https://academic.oup.com/oacc/article/3/1/kgad008/7335889>

<sup>19</sup> <https://rebrighten.org/>