Scottish Journal of Theology (2023), **76**, 345–356
doi:10.1017/S0036930623000340

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

How is the coming generation to go on living? Bonhoeffer's preservation orders for the 'sixth extinction'

David S. Robinson

Regent College, Vancouver, BC, Canada
Email: drobinson@regent-college.edu

(Received 12 January 2023; revised 10 March 2023; accepted 17 March 2023)

Abstract

This essay adapts Dietrich Bonhoeffer's 'orders of preservation' to address the sharp rise in species extinctions due to human causes. I argue that Bonhoeffer's creative use of preservation orders to build an international alliance provides the scope required to meet the present biodiversity crisis while pre-empting Karl Barth's criticism of static regionalism and avoiding problematic elements in Carl Schmitt's concept of the 'restraining force'. Drawing on Bonhoeffer's 1932 address, 'On the Theological Foundation of the Work of the World Alliance', I present three convictions to guide the task of preservation today, which include the formation of alliances between ecclesial and scientific communities in order to properly specify God's commandment.

Keywords: creation; Dietrich Bonhoeffer; ecotheology; sustainability

> The ultimately responsible question is not how I extricate myself heroically from a situation but how a coming generation is to go on living.
>
> – Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand und Ergebung*[1]

This question, which Bonhoeffer posed in 1942, was motivated by the devastating experience of wartime and focused on the next human generation. Today the task of intergenerational ethics remains urgent in the face of climate change and global economic inequality.[2] Yet we are also facing a new, interrelated crisis. Threats to other

[1]Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, vol. 8 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* [hereafter DBWE], ed. John W. de Gruchy, trans. Isabel Best et al. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2010), p. 42. The original German reads: 'Die letzte verantwortliche Frage ist nicht, wie ich mich heroisch aus der Affäre ziehe, sondern [wie] eine kommende Generation weiterleben soll.' Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand und Ergebung*, vol. 8 of Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke [hereafter DBW], ed. Eberhard Bethge et al. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2015), p. 25.

[2]The contemporary discourse on sustainability received its impetus from the Brundtland Commission's claim that 'the time has come to take the decisions needed to secure the resources to sustain this and coming generations'. See World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* (Oxford: OUP, 1987), Introduction §4.

species are so acute that scientists now speak of a coming mass extinction event – a 'sixth extinction' – so called because its scale is comparable with the five previous mass extinctions shown in the geological record.[3] The difference in the present case is that the extinctions are largely anthropogenic, or human-caused. Thinking in terms of generations, Holmes Rolston puts the matter starkly: 'to superkill a particular species is to shut down a story of many millennia, and leave no future possibilities'.[4]

In the face of such loss, it is critical that ethical concern for the coming generation go beyond human exceptionalism.[5] Other species have played an integral role in human evolution, and theological ethics is now being pursued with an explicitly multispecies approach.[6] This has been motivated in part by recent developments in evolutionary biology and anthropology, which identify continuities in the niche construction activity of humans and other creatures.[7] Adapting Bonhoeffer's question, we would do well not to seek to extricate ourselves from our *natural* situation.[8]

To take responsibility for future generations – human and other-than-human – in the face of rising extinction rates, I argue for the recovery and adaptation of Bonhoeffer's 'orders of preservation' [*Erhaltungsordnungen*].[9] There is considerable ethical value in the concept of preservation orders, as Bonhoeffer articulated them in 1932, but they have been neglected for two main reasons. First, Bonhoeffer is typically styled as a 'theologian of resistance', such that to speak of a 'Bonhoeffer moment' is to speak of opposition.[10] However, Bonhoeffer spoke not only of breaking – and indeed, in 1932 he makes clear that all orders can be broken – but also of *building*. He has a clear interest in how to build and maintain the kind of society that keeps political tyranny from arising.[11] The emphasis on building will be important for the next phase of the environmental movement, now that the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act in the U.S. has

[3]See Gerardo Ceballos et al., 'Accelerated Modern Human–Induced Species Losses: Entering the Sixth Mass Extinction', *Science Advances* 1/5 (5 June 2015), p. e1400253.

[4]He defines species as 'a living historical form (Latin *species*), propagated in individual organisms, that flows dynamically over generations'. Holmes Rolston, *A New Environmental Ethics: The Next Millennium for Life on Earth*, 2nd edn (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 142–3, 152.

[5]Relatedly, Edward O. Wilson refers to human 'exemptionalism', which is the view that human interests can be considered in isolation from the forces that sustain, or cut short, the lives of other species. E. O. Wilson, *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth* (New York: Norton, 2006), pp. 10, 83.

[6]Celia Deane-Drummond, *The Wisdom of the Liminal: Evolution and Other Animals in Human Becoming* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2014); Celia Deane-Drummond, *Theological Ethics through a Multispecies Lens: The Evolution of Wisdom*, vol. I (Oxford: OUP, 2019).

[7]Significant discussions in evolutionary science have drawn on the landmark volume F. John Odling-Smee, Kevin N. Laland and Marcus W. Feldman, *Niche Construction: The Neglected Process in Evolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

[8]In spite of modern presumptions, humans may never have succeeded in separating culture from nature. See Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

[9]Bonhoeffer is adapting Martin Luther's account of the three 'estates' [*Stände*] – *oeconomia, politia, and ecclesia* (household, government and church) – which Luther also refers to as 'orders' or 'institutions'. For a defense of Luther's treatment against Karl Barth's criticism, see Michael Richard Laffin, *The Promise of Martin Luther's Political Theology: Freeing Luther from the Modern Political Narrative* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), pp. 153–94.

[10]See Christiane Tietz, *Theologian of Resistance: The Life and Thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, trans. Victoria Barnett (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2016); Lori Brandt Hale, W. David Hall and Victoria Barnett (eds), *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Theology, and Political Resistance* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020). For an appraisal of 'Bonhoeffer moment' rhetoric, see Joshua T. Mauldin, 'Interpreting the Divine Mandates in a Bonhoeffer Moment', *Political Theology* 20/7 (October 2019), pp. 574–94.

[11]Joshua Mauldin, *Barth, Bonhoeffer, and Modern Politics* (Oxford: OUP, 2021).

initiated a historic level of investment into green technology and other efforts to address climate change. Moreover, it is in proposing the preservation orders that Bonhoeffer argues for a global alliance, which is the level of coordination required in the present to effectively counter threats to biodiversity.[12]

The second reason that the preservation orders have been neglected is that they are often understood as a temporary, compromised concept on the way towards Bonhoeffer's mature account of the 'mandates'. A recent study titled *Bonhoeffer and Climate Change* ranges widely over Bonhoeffer's writings but the preservation orders receive little mention.[13] Admittedly, Bonhoeffer's concern with the term 'order' has to do with its 'inherent danger of focusing more strongly on the static element of order rather than on the divine authorizing, legitimizing, and sanctioning, which are its sole foundation'.[14] He therefore later changes to the term 'mandates' to convey the divine authority given to human institutions.

While I affirm a certain primacy to the divine address, as well as proper acknowledgement of human social construction, I argue that the 'orders' have a productive role to play in a theology of creation. Although Bonhoeffer avoids the term 'creation orders' [*Schöpfungsordnungen*] because of its misuse in his day, his account of human social orders acknowledges a certain givenness to creation. That said, his early deployment of the preservation orders demonstrates both necessary safeguards and creative variations. For example, he designates a new order of *international peace*, showing how the shared task of preservation goes beyond the *völkisch* interests to which creation orders can be susceptible. Moreover, against the temptation to a premature, falsely ultimate account of peace, he claims that social and political *struggle* is an order of preservation.

Bonhoeffer's orders of preservation can likewise communicate stability in a time of great ecological, social and economic flux without resorting to an imperious force. His work stands in contrast to his contemporary Carl Schmitt, a legal and political theorist who derived from the New Testament the concept of the 'restraining force' [*katechōn* in Greek] against chaos and applied it first to the Roman Empire, then to the Third Reich.[15] Schmitt's work has had a significant influence in contemporary political theology, including on questions of international governance in a time of climate change.[16]

My argument unfolds in three parts. In the first, I set the original context of Bonhoeffer's 'orders of preservation', sketching his historical situation and proximate

[12]Such coordination is already well underway, most significantly in the United Nations' Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), which in December 2022 hosted COP15 in Montréal, Canada.

[13]Dianne Rayson, *Bonhoeffer and Climate Change: Theology and Ethics for the Anthropocene* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2021).

[14]Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, DBWE 6, ed. Clifford Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West and Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2009), p. 389. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, DBW 6, ed. Ilse Tödt et al. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2015), p. 393. He does allow, on the same page, that 'order' could be used so long as it avoids misinterpretations such as a 'romantic conservatism'.

[15]To position Schmitt's earlier work vis-à-vis Bonhoeffer's, his *Politische Theologie* was first published in 1922, with a second printing in 1934. See Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985). For Schmitt's treatment of the *katechōn* with a view to the United States in the postwar period, see Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the* Jus Publicum Europaeum, trans. G. L. Ulmen (New York: Telos Press, 2006).

[16]Michael Northcott provides a nuanced engagement with Schmitt's concept of the *katechōn* in the context of his criticism of liberal politics. Michael Northcott, *A Political Theology of Climate Change* (London: SPCK, 2014), pp. 201–67.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930623000340 Published online by Cambridge University Press

foil. Here I note his emphasis on the scope of the whole creation, the criterion for orders' legitimacy, and his discernment of a new order of international peace. In the second, I note the 'great acceleration' in population and consumption levels that has taken place since Bonhoeffer's time, which extends the scope of the threat to coming generations. I also explain what is meant by the 'sixth extinction' and consider the range of human responsibility given that extinction is an integral part of natural history. In the third, I adapt key insights from Bonhoeffer's use of preservation orders in order to formulate a theological and ethical response to the problem of rising extinction rates. This section includes addressing the use of de-extinction technologies as well as the importance of building alliances between ecclesial and scientific communities. Finally, in a Coda I draw on Bonhoeffer's treatment of the 'natural' in his later *Ethics* to identify a further ally in working for sustainability.

The agility of Bonhoeffer's orders of preservation

Bonhoeffer presents the notion of preservation orders to a country in economic and political turmoil. In the aftermath of the First World War, Germany struggled under heavy debt and reparation payments. In 1929 the Great Depression further destabilised a vulnerable economy, fatally weakening the democratic prospects of the Weimar Republic. Facing the downfall of economic and political institutions, theologians were understandably drawn to the notion of order. Infamously, Lutheran theologian Paul Althaus presented an account of 'creation orders' [*Schöpfungsordnungen*], including 'people' and 'race' [*Volk* and *Rasse*], that was quickly assimilated into the aggressive ideology of national socialism.[17]

In January 1932, Bonhoeffer presented a set of theses titled 'The Discernible Nature of the Order of Creation', an argument he delivered as part of a Working Group of Theologians and Economists. Despite the title of his theses, and in contrast to Althaus, Bonhoeffer claims that in a fallen creation we must instead speak of orders of *preservation*. The difference, he wrote, is that 'historical orders as such do not possess ontological validity [*keine Daseins- oder Soseinswertigkeit*] in an absolute sense but are only preserved by God for the sake of their openness toward the gospel, for the hope of new creation'.[18] The sole criterion for recognising an order is whether the gospel can still be heard in it.[19] His claims led to intense discussion and direct opposition with another member of the working group who was associated with the German Christian movement.[20]

Bonhoeffer's theses inform his address to an ecumenical conference, delivered in the summer of 1932, titled 'On the Theological Foundation of the Work of the World Alliance'.[21] In this address he argues for the need to challenge appeals to created intent that do not adequately account for the fall into sin and the coming of Christ. He identifies how such appeals go wrong in both geopolitics and marketplace ethics:

[17]For a recent criticism of Althaus' *völkisch* theology, see Ryan Tafilowski, 'A Reappraisal of the Orders of Creation', *Lutheran Quarterly* 31/3 (Fall 2017), pp. 288–309.

[18]Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ecumenical, Academic, and Pastoral Work: 1931–1932*, DBWE 11, ed. Victoria J. Barnett et al., trans. Anne Schmidt-Lange (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2012), pp. 267–8. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ökumene, Universität, Pfarramt 1931–32*, DBW 11, ed. Eberhard Amelung and Christoph Strohm (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2015), p. 237.

[19]Bonhoeffer, DBWE 11.268; DBW 11.237–8.

[20]For the context of the theses, see Bonhoeffer, DBWE 11.267, n. [1].

[21]For the context and reactions to Bonhoeffer's address, see Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, ed. Victoria Barnett, rev. edn (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), pp. 246–8.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930623000340 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> One need only portray something that exists as willed and created by God and then everything that exists is justified for eternity: the strife among the peoples of humanity, national struggle, war, class distinctions, the exploitation of the weak by the strong, economic competition as a matter of life and death.[22]

Such justification is illegitimate. The *Schöpfungsordnungen* cannot have revelatory force after the fall. Rather, God's commandment only comes from 'the one who has fulfilled God's commandments for us, as the one who brings and promises the new world'.[23] Bonhoeffer emphasises that Christ's coming is about the scope of the earth: 'We understand the entire world order [*die ganze Weltordnung*] of the fallen creation as directed only toward Christ through the new creation.'[24] This is not to draw back from the expansive scope of *die Schöpfung*; it is to turn towards the continuous, yet even greater scope of *die neue Schöpfung*.

Based on the revelation of Christ and the new creation, Bonhoeffer's criterion for the legitimacy of orders is as follows:

> In the historical change of the orders of the world, [the church] must keep its eyes on this alone: which orders are most likely to stop this radical decline of the world in death and sin and will thereby be in a position to hold open the way for the gospel.[25]

At that time, Bonhoeffer discerned a call to 'the order of *international peace*'.[26] Discerning God's commandment to the church, he sought to stem the tide of nationalist resentment and the prospect of a war for territorial expansion.[27] His appeal remains highly relevant today, as Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has drawn Europe into the most destructive war since Bonhoeffer wrote.

Remarkably, Bonhoeffer goes beyond the orders that had relatively provincial scope – family, *Volk*, state, church – to call international peace an 'order'. He thereby introduces the commandment of a 'very specific' and 'completely concrete understanding of God's will for our time'.[28] To speak of an order as commanded rather than merely created in a general sense is to begin the transition to his later language of 'mandates'. The command is for a new order, envisioned by an ecumenical global alliance, which is not solely aligned with any one *Volk* or nation.

Although Bonhoeffer retains the term 'orders', he brings significant dynamism to the concept. He will challenge narrow appeals to one's own national interests, seen as aligned with God's original will, when these national interests came to threaten life itself. Along with his claim that international peace is an order, he claims that *struggle* [*Kampf*] can be an order of preservation, though it is beyond the given order of creation.[29] That is to say, whichever nation takes part in the struggle for peace is taking part in God's orders of preservation.

[22]Bonhoeffer, DBWE 11.363; DBW 11.336.
[23]Bonhoeffer, DBWE 11.363; DBW 11.336–7.
[24]Bonhoeffer, DBWE 11.363; DBW 11.337.
[25]Bonhoeffer, DBWE 11.364; DBW 11.337.
[26]Bonhoeffer, DBWE 11.364; DBW 11.338.
[27]For a treatment of the divergences between Bonhoeffer and Paul Althaus on the topics of nationalism and international conflict, see David Robinson and Ryan Tafilowski, 'Conflict and Concession: Nationality in the Pastorate for Althaus and Bonhoeffer', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 70/2 (May 2017), pp. 127–46.
[28]Bonhoeffer, DBWE 11.364; DBW 11.338.
[29]Bonhoeffer, DBWE 11.366; DBW 11.340.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930623000340 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Bonhoeffer's dynamic use of the 'orders of preservation' pre-empts Barth's later criticism of the mandates. Barth questions why Bonhoeffer limits himself to only four mandates – work, marriage, government and church – and seeks a more dynamic account of the 'ethical event'.[30] He also asks whether their framework of authority is too regional, specifically an expression of 'North German patriarchalism'.[31] By way of a response, one can see that in Bonhoeffer's deployment of the 'orders' (supposedly a less dynamic term than 'mandates'), he is quite free to designate new orders – international peace, struggle – which draw the other orders away from regional stasis. There is a certain agility to the concept of preservation orders for those who would seek to discern the necessary response to present challenges. Given the drastic changes have taken place since Bonhoeffer's time, I suggest that global sustainability can be one such order.

Reckoning with our 'extinction imaginary'

It was ninety years ago that Bonhoeffer delivered his ecumenical address and proposed the term 'orders of preservation'. Since that time, the world has seen an astonishing rise in human population levels, with corollaries in increased levels of consumption and pollution. Human activity has put other species under serious pressure, leading scientists to speak of a new mass extinction event. So who is Jesus Christ, and what is the new creation, for us today?

Bonhoeffer wrote up until the mid-1940s, right on the cusp of what has been called the 'great acceleration'. Charts that span from 1750 to 2010 reveal a series of steep curves in terms of pollution, habitat loss and ocean acidification after the mid-twentieth century, which track with the dramatic rise in earth's population from 2 billion to 8 billion over that same period.[32] As a result, in the past century human activity has led to an exponential rise in the number of extinctions as seen against a statistical background rate.[33]

Just as we begin to reckon with the reality of five past mass extinction events, we encounter claims that we are causing a sixth. As Elizabeth Kolbert writes, '[i]n what seems like a fantastic coincidence, but is probably no coincidence at all, the history of these events is recovered just as people come to realize that they are causing another one'.[34] She offers vivid accounts from around the world, observing staggering losses from the worlds of amphibians to coral ecosystems. Her narrative has been reinforced by a 2019 UN Biodiversity study, which identifies one million animal and plant species under threat of disappearance.[35]

[30]Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/4, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), p. 22.

[31]Ibid.

[32]Will Steffen et al., 'The Trajectory of the Anthropocene: The Great Acceleration', *The Anthropocene Review* 2/1 (2015), pp. 81–98.

[33]As the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment concludes: 'Over the past few hundred years, humans have increased species extinction rates by as much as 1,000 times background rates that were typical over Earth's history.' Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, *Ecosystems and Human Well-being: Biodiversity Synthesis* (Washington, DC: World Resources Institute, 2005), p. 3.

[34]Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York, NY: Picador, 2015).

[35]Reasons for this include, *inter alia*, changes to land and sea use, for more than one-third of world land surface is now devoted to crop and livestock production, and human activity has resulted in more than 400 ocean 'dead zones' covering an area greater than 245,000 km. Overproduction is another driver: plastic found in the oceans and other bodies of water has increased tenfold since 1980. See Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Service, 'Summary for policymakers of the global

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930623000340 Published online by Cambridge University Press

These statistics are not gathered and presented in a vacuum. There are deeply held cultural values behind our particular form of catastrophic thinking, which are different than those held by Darwin and other scientists of the past. As David Sepkoski observes, there have been distinct 'extinction imaginaries' to suit the French Revolution, the Victorian era, and the present cultural moment with its calamitous images of earth's future.[36] Our particular imaginary, he notes, developed 'in the shadow of the bomb'. In the 1980s the extinction crisis was called a civilisational threat that rivalled that of nuclear war.[37] It is therefore important to critically appraise the numbers involved in the calculations of a 'sixth extinction', which are based on best estimates both of the current number of species and of historical extinction rates and so should not form a statistical 'black box'.[38] Historicisation does not negate the facts that we are seeing a serious rise in levels of extinction, but I invoke claims of a 'sixth extinction' advisedly.

While the concept of an anthropogenic mass extinction is relatively new, we have long understood that extinction is an integral part of natural history. Beginnings are entangled with endings, as Darwin observed: new species emerge through natural selection, a process that is usually hardest on their closest kin.[39] Gradual selection pressures along with sudden mass extinction events produce the brute fact that the vast majority of species that have lived on earth have gone extinct. Moreover, it is only because of previous mass extinction events that new species, such as *Homo sapiens*, could develop.

In light of this reality, how do we avoid working against nature herself in the interest of preservation? Ecotheology has been criticised for its tendency to impose certain human models of liberation or peace onto nature.[40] This is because, Lisa Sideris observes, '[e]cotheologians are unsure of what constitutes nature's true nature'.[41] The application of a principle of 'preservation' could similarly suggest a blanket ethical statement that does not adequately account for the fact that nature can seem to put the species before the individual. Bonhoeffer recognised this reality, acknowledging in his later *Ethics* that in the 'domain of natural life', and over vast time periods, the preservation of the species is more important than individual lives.[42] Working with this dynamic, wildlife management strategies do not proceed according to a communitarian ethics.[43]

Nevertheless, some theologians have challenged an approach that takes its moral bearings from nature as it allegedly is. Along with seeking to cut the number of human-caused extinctions, the reality of the new creation may grant humans a new freedom to seek not only to reduce anthropogenic extinctions but even to reduce the statistical

assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services', ed. S. Díaz et al. (Bonn: IPBES secretariat, 2019).

[36]David Sepkoski, *Catastrophic Thinking: Extinction and the Value of Diversity* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

[37]Ibid., p. 235.

[38]Ibid.

[39]Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, ed. Joseph Carroll (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2003).

[40]See an incisive criticism of this tendency in Lisa H. Sideris, *Environmental Ethics, Ecological Theology, and Natural Selection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

[41]Ibid., p. 103.

[42]Bonhoeffer, DBWE 6.184–5; DBW 6.178. He says that this issue requires the work of theodicy, a project now being attempted with regards to earth's deep history. See e.g. Bethany N. Sollereder, *God, Evolution, and Animal Suffering: Theodicy without a Fall* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

[43]A point argued in Sideris, *Environmental Ethics*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930623000340 Published online by Cambridge University Press

background, or 'natural', rate. Christopher Southgate makes this bold proposal, claiming it as an expression of Christian freedom. Per Romans 8, it would be a way to liberate creation from its 'bondage to decay'. He writes that '*a sign of our liberty as children of God starting to set free the whole creation would be that human beings through a blend of prudential wisdom and scientific ingenuity cut the rate of natural extinction*'.[44] Rather than invoking the dynamics of an original creation, Southgate argues on the basis of gospel freedom. Such an appeal returns us to Bonhoeffer's own shift away from an ethics based in nature as it allegedly is.

Adapting preservation orders for the biodiversity crisis

In this section I propose an adaptation of Bonhoeffer's thought with a view to preserving life for the coming generations, both human and other-than-human. I identify three convictions that arise from Bonhoeffer's theology that can help us to discern, and to build, our own preservation orders with a view to global sustainability.

First, preservation is ultimately the act of God. Although we are dealing with human social orders, they only have legitimacy and true power insofar as they are the work of divine providence. 'The preservation is the act of God,' Bonhoeffer claims in his ecumenical address, 'within the fallen world through which he guarantees the possibilities of a new creation'.[45] He goes into more detail on God's preserving work in his lectures on Genesis, later published as *Creation and Fall*, which he delivered shortly after his ecumenical address in the winter semester of 1932–33. Commenting on how God looks upon, or 'beholds', creation, Bonhoeffer regularly repeats the verb *erhalten*, which is alternately rendered as 'to preserve' and 'to uphold':

> God looks at God's work and is pleased with it, because it is good. This means that God loves God's work and therefore wills to uphold and preserve [*erhalten*] it. Creation and preservation are two sides of the same activity of God.…As God looks at it, that work comes to rest and becomes aware of God's pleasure in it. God's looking keeps the world from falling back into nothingness [*Nichts*], from complete destruction [*Vernichtung*].[46]

Bonhoeffer claims that God's work of 'upholding creation' is essentially different from the 'discontinuous continuity' of *creatio continua*: 'It means that the world, which was "once" wrested from nothingness, is upheld in its being.'[47] The concept of continuous creation also diminishes the reality that we live in a fallen world, 'which is the *creation upheld* [die *erhaltene Schöpfung*], not created ever anew'.[48] On this

[44]This commitment is held alongside the attempt to reduce anthropogenic extinctions. Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution, and the Problem of Evil* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), pp. 124–6.

[45]Bonhoeffer, DBWE 11.364; DBW 11.337.

[46]The term 'uphold' conveys the word play with respect to the human fall. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3*, DBWE 3, ed. Martin Rüter, Ilse Tödt, and John W. De Gruchy, trans. Douglas S. Bax (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2004), p. 45; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Schöpfung und Fall*, DBW 3, ed. Martin Rüter and Ilse Tödt (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2015), p. 42.

[47]Bonhoeffer, DBWE 3.46–7; DBW 3.43–4. For a recent treatment of preservation that raises similar concerns about *creatio continua*, see Ian A. McFarland, *From Nothing: A Theology of Creation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2014), pp. 137–42.

[48]Commenting on Genesis 3, Bonhoeffer remarks, '[y]et just because it is *God's* curse that oppresses it, the world is not wholly God-forsaken; instead it is a world that even under God's curse is blessed and in its

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930623000340 Published online by Cambridge University Press

theme, one can compare Karl Barth's more elaborate account, written from the relative stability of post-war Switzerland, of preservation within the trifold definition of providence – *conservatio, concursus, gubernatio* – he inherits from Protestant scholasticism.[49]

Bonhoeffer's conviction that God preserves the world through human social orders offers an invitation for persons of faith to act with a certain transparency about the understanding of divine action that animates their work. Bonhoeffer's later counsel about standing up for natural life remains apt: one ought to do so in such a way as to make it credible that God is standing up for life rather than seeking to draw attention to one's own efforts.[50] This conviction can inform ethical approaches to de-extinction technologies. Once their actual conservation value has been properly assessed, one can ask whether the use of the technologies is primarily an expression of the shift from wonder at the natural world to wonder at the scientist who discovers or, in this case, 're-creates' the natural world.[51]

Second, the gospel addresses the very conditions of life. While Bonhoeffer would certainly insist on interpersonal proclamation, he is after something more ambitious than freedom of speech. He is after the very conditions of created life:

> God's will is directed not only at the new creation of humanity but toward the new creation of the conditions [*Zustände*] as well. It is not right that only the will could be good. Conditions can also be good; the creation of God was as such 'very good'.[52]

Even after the fall, conditions can remain good through the action of God in and through them, in view of the new creation at hand.

What, then, is the human role? Presaging how he will later speak of ethics as 'preparing the way' for Christ, Bonhoeffer writes:

> We cannot reconstitute creation but we should create such conditions under God's commandment – and on this rests the entire weight of God's commandments – that are good in reference to that which the God who commands today will do someday himself, in reference to the new creation through Christ.[53]

Such creative work acknowledges the work of God, a conviction that does not 'compete' with the work humans must do. Recall that struggle is an order of preservation: people will have to fight for good conditions, conditions favourable to life. Such struggle involves decisions in the face of contested questions. In situations of triage, which species should be saved? How should the work of preservation be carried out vis-à-vis the

enmity, pain, and work is pacified, a world where *life is upheld and preserved*'. Bonhoeffer, DBWE 3.135; DBW 3.126.

[49]Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics,* III/3, ed. G.W. Bromily and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960), pp. 61–79.

[50]Bonhoeffer, DBWE 6.184–5; DBW 6.178.

[51]Peter Harrison states that in the nineteenth century there was a shift in which 'the wonders of nature became the wonders of science'. Peter Harrison, *The Territories of Science and Religion* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 169. See also Lisa H. Sideris, *Consecrating Science: Wonder, Knowledge, and the Natural World* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017).

[52]Bonhoeffer, DBWE 11.367; DBW 11.341–2.

[53]Bonhoeffer, DBWE 11.367; DBW 11.342.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930623000340 Published online by Cambridge University Press

development of human industry and business? These questions lead to our next conviction.

Third, God's commandment is best discerned through alliances. Bonhoeffer was arguing for an ecumenical alliance to advocate for international peace, which involved the authorisation to command people not to fight in a particular war. Such a global body requires a strong theological foundation, along with the unifying power of a great, common proclamation.[54] Although Bonhoeffer emphasises unity, he is realistic about the fact that the church is 'torn asunder', a state of affairs that renders the word powerless, even mendacious.[55]

International ecumenical efforts have been addressing the ecological crisis more directly in recent years. These efforts include the World Council of Churches' initiatives on 'Peace, Justice, and the Integrity of Creation', as well as Pope Francis' recent encyclical, *Laudato Si'*. There remains much work to be done among churches in order to expose denial about the 'climate of injustice' that exists between wealthy, high-emission countries and those nations that are less responsible for climate change but more vulnerable to its catastrophic effects.[56] Ecumenical networks can also alert people to ways that they are remotely responsible for extinction pressures placed on species that other Christians know as 'native' to their context.

Given the scope of our current challenges, Bonhoeffer's appeal for global alliance can be productively extended beyond churches towards scientific communities. Such an extension is motivated by Bonhoeffer's statement, in his 1932 argument for a world alliance, that '[a] commandment must be concrete or it is not a commandment. God's commandment demands something absolutely particular now from us'. There is, however, a 'tremendous difficulty', namely, that 'the church must know the situation *in detail* before it can command'.[57] If it does not know the complexity of the subject matter, or fails to consider certain objective points of view, it will be uncertain in its commandment. In the case of such an insoluble dilemma, the church will either resign itself to 'avoidance and withdrawal to the level of principle', or it will dare a 'conscious and qualified silence of ignorance of the commandment'.[58]

When faced with serious social and ecological problems, many faith communities still do not know how to begin. Certain communities may need simply to admit incompetence in order to see a new future.[59] But faith communities need not, and should not, go it alone. Many scientists, both within and beyond communities of faith, are engaged in struggle – again, understood as itself an order of preservation – on behalf of creaturely life as we have it. They will often have detailed knowledge about the needs of local ecosystems and the species that inhabit it.

Take the Fraser Estuary in British Columbia, Canada, a heavily urbanised, biodiverse area with over 100 at-risk species, including the southern resident orca and various species of salmon. Local scientists have pointed out that we do not have an adequate

[54]Bonhoeffer, DBWE 11.356, 368; DBW 11.328, 342.

[55]Bonhoeffer, DBWE 11.369; DBW 11.343.

[56]J. Timmons Roberts and Bradley C. Parks, *A Climate of Injustice: Global Inequality, North-South Politics, and Climate Policy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), p. 229.

[57]Bonhoeffer, DBWE 11.361; DBW 11.333.

[58]Bonhoeffer, DBWE 11.361; DBW 11.333–4.

[59]A point made in Willis Jenkins, *The Future of Ethics: Sustainability, Social Justice, and Religious Creativity* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930623000340 Published online by Cambridge University Press

governance strategy that takes these species' needs into account.[60] In response, they have proposed a plan based on priority-threat management that seeks to engage multiple stakeholders, including indigenous peoples in the area.[61] This is a way of concretely asking local inhabitants to take responsibility for the ways that human niche construction affects the habitats of the other species with which we share a world.

Moreover, scientists are working on a global level of coordination to identify and promote a target for biodiversity, one that can complement the 1.5-degree goal of climate-change politics. The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) has articulated a detailed post-2020 framework that lays out a strategy to halt and reverse biodiversity loss.[62] Economists are also working to demonstrate the high financial cost of unsustainable practices such as overfishing, outlining the positive economic case for the preservation of regions such as the 'high seas'.[63]

While the church can come to know the situation in detail through alliance with scientists, it retains its unique role. The church reminds its allies that biodiversity and the preservation of other species – even peaceable co-existence within our own species – are not merely ends in themselves. Bonhoeffer makes a related point while criticising a tendency, brought in by the 'overpowering influence' of Anglo-Saxon theology in the World Alliance, to treat peace as an end in itself, an inbreaking of the kingdom of God on earth.[64] The problem here is the static notion of peace, which must be preserved unconditionally. In contrast, Bonhoeffer maintains that a properly 'evangelical idea of peace' must exist in a 'vivid relationship' to truth and justice.[65] Moreover, the church proclaims that preservation is for the sake of God's ultimate work of salvation and renewal. This is not only a matter of survival, but of redemption and flourishing in a world made new.

Coda: Life is the strongest ally

In the face of mounting extinctions, there is another 'ally' in the work of preservation: life itself. In Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*, written in the early 1940s, he argues that Protestants ought to recover the category of 'natural life' [*das natürliche Leben*]. This is not a direct appropriation of natural law thinking, but a discerning account of postlapsarian 'nature' that is preserved by God in its penultimacy.[66] He describes natural life with a now familiar term: 'How is the natural recognized? The natural is that form of life preserved

[60]Laura J. Kehoe et al., 'Conservation in Heavily Urbanized Biodiverse Regions Requires Urgent Management Action and Attention to Governance', *Conservation Science and Practice* 3/2 (February 2021), pp. 1–15.

[61]Ibid., pp. 7–11.

[62]For a preparatory document, see Andrea Perino et al., 'Biodiversity Post-2020: Closing the Gap between Global Targets and National-level Implementation', *Conservation Letters* (21 November 2021), pp. 1–16.

[63]Ussif Rashid Sumaila, *Infinity Fish: Economics and the Future of Fish and Fisheries* (London: Academic Press, 2022).

[64]Bonhoeffer, DBWE 11.365; DBW 11.338–9.

[65]Bonhoeffer, DBWE 11.366; DBW 11.340.

[66]For a careful reading of Bonhoeffer's position with respect to current discussion about the normativity of nature, see Michael Mawson, 'Encountering Grace after the Fall: The Normativity of Nature for Protestant Ethics', in Paul Henry Martens and Michael Mawson (eds), *The Ethics of Grace: Engaging Gerald McKenny* (London: T&T Clark, 2022). Contextually, Bonhoeffer was arguing for the value of human life, even the alleged 'life unworthy of life' targeted by the Nazi euthanasia programme.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930623000340 Published online by Cambridge University Press

by God for the fallen world that is directed toward justification, salvation, and renewal through Christ.'[67] Justification, salvation and renewal are the works of God that Bonhoeffer describes as 'ultimate'. As noted above, they are not merely about humanity – not 'monospecies transactions', in the words of David Clough – but are effective realities that transform the very conditions of life for all creatures.[68]

Preservation remains the act of God. God's defence of life against the unnatural involves using life itself, 'life that sooner or later prevails over every violation of the natural'.[69] When standing up for other life – including the life of other species that have effectively been deemed 'unworthy of life' – we can be assured that 'life itself is the strongest ally'.[70] God is always acting to preserve the world through the sheer persistence of life, over and against the death-dealing actions of earth's dominant, though fallen, species. When it comes to forming alliances between churches and other publics on behalf of endangered creatures, life itself can serve as our unifying force.

Conclusion

In this essay I have argued for the recovery and extension of Bonhoeffer's concept of preservation orders to meet the challenge of the 'sixth extinction'. I began by setting the orders of preservation in context, noting Bonhoeffer's claim that in 1932 international peace was an order commanded by God to which the ecumenical church should bear witness. I next reckoned with our 'extinction imaginary', demonstrating what is at stake for other creatures, and indeed humanity itself, as a result of human activity. I then returned to Bonhoeffer's 1932 address in order to derive three convictions to guide the task of preservation today: first, preservation is the act of God; second, the gospel addresses the conditions of life; third, God's commandment is best discerned through alliances. On the latter point, I argued not only for ecumenism but also for an alliance between ecclesial and scientific communities in order to make the commandment concrete.[71]

[67]Bonhoeffer, DBWE 6.174; DBW 6.166.

[68]See David Clough, *On Animals*, vol. 1 of *Systematic Theology* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013).

[69]Bonhoeffer, DBWE 6.184; DBW 6.178.

[70]'Immer wird er jedenfalls zu bedenken haben, daß sein stärkster Bundesgenosse das Leben selbst ist.' DBWE 6.185; DBW 6.178.

[71]This publication was made possible through the support of a grant from the John Templeton Foundation. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the John Templeton Foundation. It was first presented at the 2022 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, which had the theme 'Religion and Catastrophe'. The author would like to thank Niels Henrik Gregersen for his helpful feedback during the revision process.

Cite this article: Robinson DS (2023). How is the coming generation to go on living? Bonhoeffer's preservation orders for the 'sixth extinction'. *Scottish Journal of Theology* **76**, 345–356. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930623000340