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The challenge of poverty in Malawi and Bonhoeffer's soteriology

ABSTRACT

The article explores the state, causes, and effects of poverty in Malawi. It proceeds to investigate soteriology as a prominent theme in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theological thought. Then it explores how Bonhoeffer's notion of salvation could be employed as paradigm to address the challenge of poverty in Malawi. The soteriological perspective is preferred, among many other approaches, for two reasons: the hamartiological origins of poverty require a soteriological exploration, and salvation is a prominent theme in Malawi. Approaching the social evils from the perspective of the doctrine of salvation could produce enduring effects. The observation is that such an approach could be more promising and could bear enduring fruits regarding addressing the challenge of poverty in Malawi.

1. INTRODUCTION

In spite of being independent since 1964, Malawi is still very poor. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) indicates that over 85 per cent of Malawians are poor.¹ There is a vicious circle in that the consequences of poverty lead to higher levels of poverty which, in turn, causes more severe consequences such as diseases, vulnerability, and



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1 The United Nations (UN) (1995) defines extreme poverty as "a condition characterized by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, health, education, sanitation facilities, shelter, and information. It depends not only on income but also on access to services." Poverty in Malawi meets the qualities of extreme poverty.

youth emigration to South Africa. Our assumption is that addressing the roots of poverty could, in turn, alleviate other social and political problems facing our nation.

The article also explores the theme of salvation in the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It presents selected cases of how his theology and approach to sociality were inspired by his understanding of soteriology. The overall objective is to display how prominent themes such as ecclesiology and Christology in Bonhoeffer are built on soteriological foundations.

Finally, the article investigates whether Bonhoeffer's understanding of salvation may provide a scheme for, and impetus toward addressing the dehumanising and undignifying phenomenon of poverty in Malawi. Ways are proposed toward ensuring the sustainability of the impact of Bonhoeffer's soteriology for the benefit of the next generation.

2. POVERTY IN MALAWI

Strauss and Horsten (2013:339) warn against relying on the common denominator in definitions of poverty as economic deprivation or lack of income. They argue that the economic definitions should also take into account the variety of social, cultural, and political aspects. Cilliers (2001:3) concurs that "African poverty is not only an economic matter, but also an intensely political issue". Such definitions reflect the multidimensional and structural nature of poverty in Africa.

Malawi has been ranked the fourth poorest country in the world by *Global Finance Magazine* of the United States.² The World Bank defines extreme poverty as living below the International Poverty Line (IPL). The IPL is USD9.5/day for a family of five, as of October 2015. Kalonga (2019:6) argues that a family living below USD285/month, as most families in Malawi do, is considered extremely poor.³ According to Mills (2023:), "Malawi is 30 times poorer than the average global citizen though the country has much development advantage". Mills mentions elitism and competitive clientelism as partly responsible for this situation.

2 It should be stated that, over the past years, there have been many interventions by governmental and non-governmental agencies to reduce poverty, but the results have been very minimal.

3 *The Lamp: Christians, politics and culture* is a Roman Catholic Malawian monthly magazine with the focus on socio-economic, political, cultural, and ecclesiastical issues affecting the nation.

Mhango (2019:8) reports Sakuma Yamamoto, Malawi Country Director of International Support and Partnership for Health (ISAPH⁴), commenting that

... due to the fact that most families are not food secure, it is becoming hard for them to feed their children and pregnant mothers appropriately.

Yamamoto was speaking in T/A M'mbelwa in Mzimba on 22 November 2019. In addition, the World Food Programme, in its *Malawi Country Strategic Plan (2019-2023)* notes development challenges to food and nutrition security. The high poverty levels, inequality crisis, as well as ecological and gender injustices exacerbate the problems. According to the World Bank, Malawi is losing an estimated USD597 million (roughly K40 billion) annually due to poor childhood nutrition (Mzale 2019:2). According to Le Roux and Yeboua (2023), the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification found that 3.8 million Malawians (20 per cent of the population) would experience crisis levels of food insecurity by March 2023.

An Afrobarometer research network study from 2016 to 2018 found that Malawi was the hungriest of the 34 African countries that were investigated.⁵ This is despite 15 years of the Farm Input Subsidy Programme (FISP) that aims to reach financially constrained citizens with affordable agricultural inputs. This is due to poor resource allocation and poor leadership (Chitsulo 2020:1-3). Moreover, there was a trade balance deficit of USD446.5 million (roughly K330 billion) in the October to December 2019 quarter. The deficit arose from the fact that Malawi exports cheap unprocessed items, while importing expensive processed items (Kumwenda 2020:14). One need not be an economist to deduce that the remedy lies in Malawi processing its raw materials itself and in minimising production costs. Policies and practices in that direction call for sound and just leadership.

In discussing factors contributing to hunger in Malawi, Maganga (2018:4) includes irresponsible government, corruption, mismanagement of material resources, and unequal distribution of resources and benefits. In particular, corruption is generally conceptualised as crime of power, committed to the benefit of the powerful and the privileged. Mwale (2019:6) quotes Kamudoni Nyasulu, arguing to the effect that Malawi is witnessing a state capture and that politically exposed persons have facilitated corruption in Malawi.

4 International Support and Partnership for Health (ISAPH) is implementing community nutrition in Mzimba district, northern region.

5 Afrobarometer uses Lived Poverty Index measure to understand how frequently people go without basic necessities in the course of the year.

Kafunda (2019:22-23) argues that, in Malawi, socio-economic decay produced by public debt is a progressive disease, whereby the symptoms become more intense proportional to how fast the debt grows. Impudently accruing debt imposes an unjustifiable burden on future generations, resulting in increasing intergenerational negative impact of debt. Kafunda assesses that servicing foreign and domestic debt reduces capital accumulation, hinders economic growth, and "borrowing for unproductive purposes is unnecessarily mortgaging future generations". In other words, high and unnecessary debts are counterproductive in that they reduce all poverty-reduction initiatives to nothing. Kafunda (2019:22-23) also remarks that, by the beginning of 2019, over 50 per cent of the population was in moderate poverty, although macroeconomic indicators were promising. He finds the reason for this in the synergy of extractive economic and political institutions that hinder fair participation in growth processes and fair sharing in the proceeds. To this end, Kafunda advocates for inclusive economic and political institutions that will afford the masses opportunities for participation in economic activities and for sharing in the proceeds. Further warning comes from Kalonga (2018:6) who argues to the effect that a country cannot extricate itself from poverty simply by borrowing and Foreign Direct Investment, as excessive borrowing only leads to a poverty-debt spiral. Corruption is endemic in Malawi and affects all sections of society. It ruins the social fabric of the nation and contributes heavily to poverty.

Voice of Micah (2018:9) records that, by April 2018, Malawi's foreign debt was USD1.9 billion (roughly MK140 billion), while domestic debt was approximately MK913 billion. Due to corruption, the debts have not produced the much-needed development. Future generations will be more stressed by debt settlement. "All anti-poverty efforts of the government and Non-governmental agencies have failed to yield any positive results" (Kalonga 2019:7).

Another factor in the poverty debate is HIV/AIDS. Malawi's HIV incidence is one of the highest in the world. The high incidence is linked to poverty and vulnerability. COVID-19 added woes to the ailing economy. Speaking in Mangochi at the 6th Annual Lakeshore Conference of the Institute of Bankers in Malawi, the Deputy Governor of the Reserve Bank of Malawi, Grant Kabango, acknowledged that

the turbulent environment created by COVID-19 has greatly affected our economy. Instead of realizing economic growth, we have seen our economy tumbling (Kandodo 2021:4).

He called on the banks to help create some levels of resilience for the most productive players in the economy.

In the above context, Malawian theologian, Augustine Musopole (2005:22), argues with reference to Jeremiah 17:9-10 that

[t]he heart is the symbolic centre of our being and that the heart of human problems is the problem of the human heart.

He links poverty to corruption and outward corruption to inner corruption. Musopole continues that the power of sin disables the moral and ethical faculties. He concludes that “in the final analysis, it is a transformed life that defeats corruption right at its source, the human heart” (Musopole 2005:22).

In summary, one could contend that the causes of poverty in Malawi include, among others, corruption, bad political and economic governance, diseases such as HIV/Aids and COVID-19, unequal distribution of resources, poor response to natural disasters, and high unemployment rates. Some of the effects of poverty include deforestation, early marriages, inability to access good healthcare, exploitation at the hands of the politicians, trauma, and dropping out of school especially for girls. These causes and effects are all, to some extent, linked to both individual and corporate power abuses. As will be noted below, Bonhoeffer considers power abuse a matter of sin and salvation.

3. SOTERIOLOGY IN THE BONHOEFFER CORPUS

The doctrine of salvation, or soteriology, is an important theme on which other themes hinge in the Bonhoeffer corpus. Knight (2019:213) supports the point, by arguing that the ecclesiology of two of Bonhoeffer’s seminal works, *Sanctorum communio* and *Act and being*, is full of soteriology.

These fundamentals of Bonhoeffer’s early soteriology become enduring features of his thought ... The steadily intensifying Christology characterizing the later works is, to that extent, an expanding account of the mystery of salvation (Knight 2019:218).

Knight (2019:) also views both continuation and development of “Bonhoeffer’s theological thought in terms of the doctrine of salvation”. Ziegler (2016:102) notes the importance of Bonhoeffer’s practice of “[a]ppealing consistently to soteriological considerations as materially decisive in establishing moral reality and orienting Christian moral reflection”.

In *Sanctorum communio*, Bonhoeffer (DBWE 1:62) writes:

The concepts of person and community ... are understood only within an intrinsically broken history, as conveyed in the concepts of primal state, sin, and reconciliation.

In Bonhoeffer's historiography, all history could be approached through the lenses of hamartiology (the doctrine of sin) and soteriology. Mawson⁶ affirms this, saying that the "theological dialectic" of creation, sin, and reconciliation appear (though referred to differently) after *Sanctorum communio*. For Mawson (2018:114), Bonhoeffer's "ethical collective persons" in *Sanctorum communio*, "orders of preservation" in *Creation and fall*, and "mandates" in *Ethics* are "similarly constituted and sustained by God's address in response to the disintegrating forces of sin". One may say that, throughout his career, Bonhoeffer presents God's response to the problem of sin and that the doctrine of sin and salvation structures Bonhoeffer's theological career.

Inspired by Mawson, this article explores the three works *Sanctorum communio*, *Creation and fall*, and *Ethics* as representative of Bonhoeffer's articulation of sin and salvation.⁷

3.1 *Sanctorum communio*

In his doctoral thesis at Humboldt University, titled *Sanctorum communio: A dogmatic inquiry into the sociology of the church*, Bonhoeffer brought together social philosophy and the (Barthian) theology of revelation. In the work, Bonhoeffer distinguishes between Christian and idealistic concepts of person (DBWE 1:45, 48, 62). For Bonhoeffer, idealism does not duly acknowledge the reality of sin, which changes the essence of things from the primal to the fallen state. He holds that human beings belong together and are bound together in a *status corruptionis* (state of corruption) (DBWE 1:109) and in a *peccatorum communio* (a community of sinners or sinful community) (DBWE 1:118). The church is the *sanctorum communio* (holy community) drawn from the *peccatorum communio*, but the *peccatorum communio* also continues to exist within the *sanctorum communio* (DBWE 1:213). Nevertheless, the presence of sin does not discard revelation. Nielsen (2010:99) echoes this understanding, saying that, for Bonhoeffer, "there is a simultaneity, a *simul*, between the humanity-in-Adam and the humanity-in-Christ". Transgression belongs to the *Adamsmenschheit* (humanity-in-Adam) and the *peccatorum*

6 Interview accessed on 24 January 2019.

7 For an in-depth treatment of the doctrine of sin and salvation in the Bonhoeffer corpus, the reader is referred to Phiri's doctoral thesis titled "Bonhoeffer on salvation: Towards an adequate soteriology for engaging secular humanism in Malawi", submitted at Stellenbosch University in 2021.

communio. The effects of the original sin are pervasive. Bonhoeffer (DBWE 14:262) holds that “human beings, or more specifically, fallen human beings, viewed in their unredeemed state, are sinful and corrupt before God (*coram Deo*)”.

Bonhoeffer’s early 20th-century theological landscape in Europe was characterised by cultural Protestantism whose proponents were, among others, the so-called Berlin professors. Karl Barth critiqued the prevailing theological landscape as anthropocentric and liberal. As opposed to them, Barth proffered dialectic theology premised on revelation. In principle, Bonhoeffer’s doctoral work followed the Barthian trajectory, although critically. On the philosophical front, Hegel’s idealism was reigning. Bonhoeffer (DBWE 1:43-44) intended to go beyond mere description in an

attempt to overcome the idealist philosophy of immanent spirit with a Christian philosophy of spirit. We hope thus to obtain results that will provide a direction for Christian social philosophy.⁸

Briefly, Bonhoeffer’s notion of hamartiology and soteriology proceeds in contradistinction to those of liberal Protestantism and idealism.

3.2 *Creation and fall*

As a *Privatdozent* in Systematic Theology at Humboldt University, Bonhoeffer presented lectures under the title *Schöpfung und Sünde. Theologische Auslegung von Genesis 1-3*⁹ in the winter semester of 1932-1933. That winter was characterised by sociopolitical turbulence, leading to the transition from the Weimar Republic to the Nazi regime. Bonhoeffer’s lectures were published in 1933 as *Creation and fall*, as Emmanuel Hirsch had already published a book titled *Creation and sin (Schöpfung und Sünde)* in 1931. The lectures and, ultimately, the book came at a time when

the development of modern historical and critical scholarship together with the sciences ... had rendered the traditional Christian account of ‘the beginning’ more and more untenable (DBWE 3:6).

Bonhoeffer’s understanding of sin and salvation would, in some significant ways, differ from that of prevailing critical scholarship, due to his use of the Barthian post-critical approach. Wüstenberg (2008:66) argues that “*Creation and Fall* deals with the loss of true life and the resultant disastrous anthropological position”. One could contend that the theological dialectic of creation, sin, and reconciliation effectively structures *Creation and fall*.

8 Green (1972) mentions that this section was deleted from the current version of *Sanctorum communio*.

9 Translation: *Creation and sin: A theological exposition of Genesis 1-3*.

In Bonhoeffer's (DBWE 3:92) words, "[o]ur history is history through Christ, whereas Adam's history is history through the serpent". In becoming "like God" (*sicut deus*), humanity transgresses the limit and disintegrates. Phiri (2021:92) describes the hamartiological tragedy that "disobedience transgresses the limit, denies creatureliness and advances humans' self-centralisation". The *sicut deus* was manifest in the Nazi principle of the Führer and the entire *Volk* theology advanced by theologians such as Paul Althaus. Bonhoeffer's post-critical theological exposition questions Nazi soteriology. In *Creation and fall*, Bonhoeffer contrasts the orders of creation theology that supported the Nazi ideology of blood and soil. *Volk* theology existed in the realm of creation and fallenness. Bonhoeffer opts to speak of orders of preservation as the means whereby God preserves the world from plunging into chaos in anticipation of its reconciliation with Godself.

Still in the winter semester of 1932-1933, Bonhoeffer gave the lecture "Review and discussion of recent publications in Systematic Theology". Bonhoeffer (DBWE 12:218-19) refers to Luther who described himself as *peccator maximus*,¹⁰ and argues that "the human being is a sinner through and through". Sinful acts originate from the sinful being. Effectively, Bonhoeffer was protesting "Holl's interpretation of Luther's faith as a religion of conscience", stating that Holl's Lutheranism "seemed to threaten the assurance of faith in *extra me*" (Bethge 2000:69).

3.3 *Ethics*

The manuscripts of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* were written between 1940 and 1943 during the Second World War. Phiri (2022:96) recounts that "[t]he League of Nations, formed after the First World War for preserving peace, had failed to prevent another war". In that context,

Bonhoeffer identified pitfalls in the religious as well as secular ethics of the time and embarked on exploring a Christian ethic that would address the moral crisis in Germany and the entire West (Phiri 2022:96).

He thus

calls upon the Church in the West to abandon self-justification, to acknowledge its role in the disruption of the Western society, and then to ask for God's forgiveness (Phiri 2021:108).

10 Translation: The biggest/worst sinner.

At work in Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* is the theological dialectic of creation, sin, and reconciliation, which started in *Sanctorum communio*. As Green (DBWE 6:6) puts it in the introduction to *Ethics*, "reconciliation is Bonhoeffer's premise, his methodological starting point for *Ethics*". Green's argument is that reconciliation grounds Bonhoeffer's ethical thought.

Humanity's ethical malaise arises due to their estrangement from God and self-reference. Phiri (2022:98) remarks that, in the manuscript "Heritage and decay" (from 1940), "Bonhoeffer urges the West to recognise that its unity and meaning rest in Christ". The decay in the West resulted from the people's abandonment of their Christian heritage. In the specific case of technology, Bonhoeffer (DBWE 6:116) looks back with nostalgia that earlier

technology was a matter of handicraft. It served religion, royalty, culture,
... The technology of the modern West has freed itself from every kind
of service.

On account of the decay, sophisticated technology was being used to kill millions of individuals during the Second World War.

Moreover, Bonhoeffer critiques nihilism and secularisation in the West as marks of cultural decay and fallenness, thus exposing the urgency of reconciliation with God. With reference to 2 Thessalonians 2:7, Bonhoeffer (DBWE 6:131) mentions two aspects that can guard the West against falling into the abyss as "the miracle of a new awakening faith and the power that the Bible calls the restrainer". And further in the manuscript "Guilt, justification and renewal", Bonhoeffer (DBWE 6:138, 135) holds the church "guilty of the godlessness of the masses" and maintains that "[o]nly the Church can be the place of personal and corporate rebirth and renewal". Judging from Bonhoeffer's emphasis, one could summarise that the church was supposed to be transformed and then be used as God's vessel for transforming Western society. Transformation of both the church and society, by means of repentance and finding salvation in Christ, would be the sure way of recovering the lost heritage in the West. Good human initiatives such as the League of Nations done apart from faith in Christ would fail to prevent the abysmal fall into human self-destruction.

In *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer's treatment of formation, responsible life, the natural and unnatural, the ultimate and the penultimate, mandates and renewal is embedded in notions of hamartiology and soteriology. Bonhoeffer posits redemption (*Erlösung*) to address the ethical challenges facing the West. He also promotes mature worldliness characterised by this worldly faith to address the concrete realities of life. As Phiri (2021:137) contends, for Bonhoeffer,

remaining silent or actively supporting evil world regimes, like in the case of the German Evangelical Church, is actually seeking reconciliation with sin.

Phiri (2022:89) further remarks that

[t]he soteriological problem addressed by Bonhoeffer concerns, on the one hand, humanity's broken relationship with God, and on the other, the abuse of human and intellectual power.

Thus, developing both vertical and social intentions of salvation.

4. BONHOEFFER'S SOTERIOLOGY AS PARADIGM FOR ENGAGING POVERTY IN MALAWI

The foregoing section highlights Bonhoeffer's understanding of salvation as post-critical in terms of nature, means, and agency. The human predicament that necessitates salvation is sin. Every human being is born in sin and in need of salvation. Humanity is essentially sinful and actual sins are only manifestations of the more serious problem of the sin of the heart. The means of salvation is grace through faith and not works of the law, nor by the German blood. Bonhoeffer, in fact, opposes Pastor Johannes Bruns who attaches salvation to the *Volk* identity (Plant 2014:27-41). Bonhoeffer's view is that the agency of salvation is Jesus Christ incarnate, crucified, and resurrected.

One is provided with a model for relating soteriology to poverty. In his letter dated 2 August 1941 to Bonhoeffer, Lehmann writes that "the political problem is the perennial expression of the struggle between chaos and order in sinful human existence" (DBWE 16:197). By implication, one learns to approach broader social and political issues, poverty inclusive, with the struggle induced by human sinfulness in the background. Influenced by Bonhoeffer, Nullens (2018:7) argues that "[e]vil, or theologically speaking, sin, thus becomes an anthropological presupposition for Protestant engagement with economic theory". In concurrence, Phiri (2021:192) writes that "soteriological formulation ... should also underlie the Church's engagement with the socio-economic and political affairs". These Bonhoeffer-inspired sentiments give credence to our proposal to approach poverty in Malawi through the lenses of soteriology.

Questions of economics, culture, poverty, disease, marriage, corruption, and injustice in Malawi are soteriological in character. This is informed by Green (1972:251), mentioning that

... nations are torn within and without by power struggles: in economic life, in political life, in ideological battles, in patriotism fuelled by hate, in the world scene bristling with weapons ...

Malawi is torn within and without by poverty and its attendant challenges. Following Bonhoeffer's lead, one may contend that all these problems are situated in egoism and lust. Biblical soteriology, as understood by Bonhoeffer, could be a crucial resource in poverty-reduction interventions. Such worldly soteriology should frame poverty-alleviation interventions in Malawi. The church's engagement with the structures of poverty would be a means of concretising obedience. As such, Koopman (2020:162), for example, alludes that the search for gender justice and socio-economic justice in South Africa should be informed by Bonhoeffer's ethic of interpathy, hybridity, and special identification with the most vulnerable.

In discussing the relevance of Bonhoeffer in the aftermath of apartheid in South Africa, De Gruchy (2013:22) remarks that

Bonhoeffer's legacy informs the New Humanist Project, which has focused especially on human solidarity, dignity, rights, and economic justice, and has been responsible for starting a national debate on a special wealth tax.

De Gruchy provides a paradigm for engaging poverty in Malawi from Bonhoeffer's standpoint, particularly his soteriology in our case. Although not directly mentioning Bonhoeffer, the *Belhar Confession* is in line with Bonhoeffer's notions of mature worldliness and being there for others when it states

that God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged ... that the church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others (*Belhar Confession* 1986:3).¹¹

11 This is a translation of the original Afrikaans text of the *Belhar Confession* as it was adopted by the Synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa in 1986.

Plaatjies-van Huffel (2014:320) acknowledges the specificity of the *Belhar Confession* but also confesses that

[t]he issues of racial inequality, discrimination, oppression, poverty and injustice which are being addressed by the *Belhar Confession* are timeless and universal themes.

Thus, the insights from the *Belhar Confession* can relate to the poverty situation in Malawi. Churches and related institutions in Malawi should ensure that justice and righteousness prevail, that they stand by the poor and the underprivileged, and that ideologies that legitimate economic injustice and inequity are rejected. According to Beukes (2017:244), Article 4 of the *Belhar Confession*

[m]otivates the URCSA to be, in a new way, empowered to effectively combat poverty by being involved in a theology of development.

The churches' engagement with poverty in Malawi, being rooted in God's revelation, occupy space in theology of development.

The poverty-triggered situation in Malawi calls for spiritual conversion, which could possibly lead to integrity and moral conversion. Bonhoeffer describes the world as created and sinful and the church as created, sinful, and reconciled to God. The state of reconciliation separates the church from the world. Such state of reconciliation comes by salvation and is holistic. Reconciled humanity asks: What is the will of God? Such an ethical approach would address the causes of poverty, including unequal distribution of resources, corruption, vulnerability, and injustice in the courts. It would lead to the equitable use and distribution of financial and natural resources. The impact of such moral conversion would also be enduring. National budgets would be pro-poor and sensitive to the needs of the poor (Tenthani 2008:6-7). Budgets as well as other policies would demonstrate preferential treatment for the poor. Pro-poor budgets envisage a sensitivity to the needs and aspirations of the poor and targets the structures that support poverty. Macroeconomic and fiscal management is a prerequisite for poverty reduction but only where there is no differential enjoyment of the fruits. In spite of much rhetoric, the pro-poverty character of national budgets in Malawi remains questionable. The situation calls for reconciled ecclesial community whose life would influence society, including political leadership. Ultimately, poverty would be heavily reduced and the poverty-supporting structures weakened.

Along these lines, the call is for *Stellvertretung* – vicarious representative action – that could lead the church to be there for others. The principle of *Stellvertretung* in Malawi would be duly fulfilled when the church members are reconciled with God. The church would not seek its own welfare and

progress; it would stand up for the poor. Many of the poor are *in* the churches. In such instances, the church would not be interested in magnificent building projects, leaving the poor members suffering in their poverty. In fact, some church leaders are living in opulence seemingly without considering the poor members. *Stellvertretung* would address such attitudes. Instead, the churches ought to offer bursaries to the needy students in the church-run educational institutions. Church-run hospitals should not charge exorbitantly but ought to consider the masses who are languishing in poverty. The Service-Level Agreement, which some church-owned health facilities have with the Christian Health Association of Malawi (CHAM), is a positive move, as it helps the poor access, to some degree, good healthcare.

Further to the above-mentioned points, the church should consider the poor in surrounding communities and the whole nation. The church should carry out its social responsibility for the sake of the people, not for self-aggrandisement and self-preservation. It is shameful that some churches or church members, due to egoism or self-interest, exploit the underprivileged by embezzling charity funds, thereby exacerbating poverty. This is a stark negation of the vicarious representative spirit, the ground of which is salvation. The practice is, in fact, an expression of Bonhoeffer's *cor curvum in se*¹². Moreover, most of the perpetrators of corruption and injustice in the public and private sectors are themselves churchgoers. The nation needs servants who have experienced Christ, the ultimate *Stellvertreter*. Consequently, they should have a grip on what *Stellvertretung* entails as well as on the ideal of being there for the poor through action and advocacy.

The church, as repentant, confessing, guilt-acknowledging, forgiven, and reconciled community, should appreciate the meaning of forgiveness and reconciliation. Thus, as a soteriological community, the church in Malawi should engage in programmes aimed at addressing poverty. Such could be a manifestation of the sociopolitical dimension of repenting, confessing, and being forgiven. In other words, the call is for a reconciled ontology, in this instance.¹³ Being reconciled, both individual members and the church as a collective body should identify elements of fallenness in national budgeting and engage them from the perspective of soteriology. Even the state envisaged in the Malawi 2063 would be a "fabulous ghost"¹⁴ if the levels of corruption, social injustice, and poverty are not curbed through reconciliation-driven

12 Translation: The heart turned in upon itself.

13 Reconciled ontology is used, in this instance, to refer to a state whereby a human being who was previously created and fallen has repented and been forgiven by God – a human being who is created, fallen, and restored to God.

14 In this instance, a fabulous ghost means a mere conception spoken of as already actualised but that is, in fact, not yet actualised.

policies and practices. Conradie (2013:18-19) alludes to “[d]eductive logic moving from reconciliation with God to the ministry of reconciliation in society”. Alienation from God is acknowledged as the foundation of social conflict. According to the logic, “the ministry of reconciliation in Church and society only becomes possible on this basis of reconciliation in Christ” (Conradie 2013:20). Conradie’s deductive logic supports our argument that reconciliation with God is the prerequisite in the fight against poverty and other social ills. The positive anti-poverty strategies and projects carried out without faith and salvation in Christ may not prevent Malawians from collapsing into financial or socio-economic nothingness. The fundamental forces underlying poverty defy mere human capabilities and innovations.

Corruption in Malawi carries an elitist face, in that high magnitudes of it are done by high-ranking officials in both the public and private sectors. Such officials are mostly highly educated, proving that reason or intellectualism does not constitute a sufficient resource to engage corruption. The perpetrators of the “cashgate”¹⁵ and other “gate” scandals are elite citizens with good education and high social standing.¹⁶ Intellectual or rational forces, which are not reconfigured through reconciliation, would be hazardous to the Malawi nation.

The enduring way forward to tackle the poverty situation in Malawi is by recourse to forces beyond humanity. The doctrine of salvation, as understood and applied by Bonhoeffer, could provide a helpful resource in poverty-reduction initiatives. The causes of poverty lie at a deeper level where science and reason cannot reach. The problem of the human condition calls for soteriology of the *extra nos* character. Salvation is understood as wholeness among some Africans. The soteriology-based approach would thus address the multidimensional nature of poverty, its causes, and the wider societal structures that support it.

15 According to *The Economist*, 27 February 2014, the Cashgate scandal is a “systematic looting of public money”. It was unearthed in Malawi during the Presidency of Joyce Banda, although it is thought to have started before her reign.

16 Disclaimer: This is not to deny corruption by uneducated and people of low social status. Rather, the purpose, in this instance, is to highlight the unimaginable levels of corruption by the elite and well-educated ones who mostly break the law with impunity.

5. CONCLUSION

An assessment of the magnitude of poverty and debts reveals the unquestionable vulnerability of future generations in Malawi. Heavy debt repayment will likely render them poorer than us.

The crucial place of soteriology in Bonhoeffer's theology has been established. It is argued that Bonhoeffer has soteriological assumptions in the background, although he does not address soteriology directly as he does with Christology, ecclesiology, and ethics. Recognition of the foundational character of soteriology in Bonhoeffer's thought could foster our apprehension of his other themes.

We draw from Bonhoeffer that political and economic governance are soteriological issues. This calls for an approach that is premised on the notion of salvation. It has been realised that, in Malawi, poverty together with its causes such as corruption, bad governance, and inequality, are soteriological concerns – they mostly emanate from human beings who are created and fallen, but not reconciled to God.

Bonhoeffer's notion of salvation could guide Malawians to develop equitable policies and programmes at both personal and corporate levels. Each would live with the other and the future generations in perspective. The churches would act vicariously for the poor and other disadvantaged sections in the country. The negative traits of *cor curvum in se* and *sicut deus*, which serve as a substructure with regard to the causes of poverty, require an address build upon the doctrine of salvation. Reconciliation with God, with the other, and with nature needs to be established as a new substructure in our personal and social relations. Consequently, the positive effects of soteriologically informed socio-economic interventions will be enduring. Reconciliation embodies a comprehensive vision capable of addressing the cross-cutting issues of gender injustice, ecological imbalance, illiteracy, and corruption pertaining to poverty.

Engaging Bonhoeffer's soteriology as a pattern for combatting the socio-economic and political matters behind poverty could ensure this generation's positive legacy to the future ones. The next generation would lead fulfilling lives with poverty substantially alleviated. It is proposed that addressing the foundations of poverty from the soteriological frame of reference could break the vicious circle and further lead to addressing other socio-economic challenges in Malawi.

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