

Spiritual resonance: polyphony and pneumatology in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's late theology

Joanna Tarassenko
joannatarassenko@gmail.com

Abstract

This article presents a pneumatological reading of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's appeal to the phenomenon of musical resonance through his use of the metaphor of "polyphony" and related musical casts of mind. In so doing, it provides an alternative reading of Bonhoeffer's late theology by establishing a connection between *Letters and Papers from Prison* and *Ethics* through his use of musical metaphors. In it I make two significant claims about Bonhoeffer's use of musical metaphors in his late theology. First, that polyphony is a dynamic metaphor which Bonhoeffer discovers and utilises to express his understanding of the relationship between God and the world in Christ. I argue that the limitations of visual-spatial metaphors, which Bonhoeffer openly laments in *Ethics*, are overcome by his discovery of polyphony in *Letters and Papers from Prison* as a metaphor which conceptualises the relationship between God and the world (operating in a single realm or space) as well as preserving the distinction of each; in this respect, polyphony texturizes Bonhoeffer's view of reality, carefully nuancing it. The way the metaphor functions for Bonhoeffer mirrors the way he employs the work of the Holy Spirit in his theology. Thus, it indicates that *implicit* in Bonhoeffer's theological appeal to polyphony is a model of the agency of the Holy Spirit, so that in exploring polyphony a latent pneumatology in Bonhoeffer can be unearthed. Read in this way, polyphony is a potent metaphor for illuminating the Spirit's work as that which enables unity, distinction, and dynamic relationality between God and the world in the church. The article concludes by pointing to how a musico-pneumatology such as that which we find in Bonhoeffer can be further developed.

Keywords

Bonhoeffer; Polyphony; Music; Pneumatology; Holy Spirit

Introduction

When Michael Welker remarks in *God the Revealed* on the potency of Bonhoeffer’s phrase “polyphony of life” for its potential to articulate a doctrine of the Holy Spirit, it is worth taking notice!¹ In this article I will explore how *implicit* in Bonhoeffer’s use of the metaphor of polyphony is a model of the agency of the Holy Spirit. Thus, building on this captivating but fleeting insight from Welker. I argue that a subtle theology of the Holy Spirit in *Ethics* is mirrored by the metaphor polyphony in the *Letters*.²

I will first explore the subject of a pneumatology in Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics*.³ While discussion of the Holy Spirit in that text is brief, it is by no means absent. We will see that the Holy Spirit “actualizes” what Christ “establishes”, terminology which Bonhoeffer virtually employs as a formulation elsewhere.⁴ To better understand this account of what the Spirit actualizes, and Christ establishes, I will examine Bonhoeffer’s view of reality in *Ethics*, which he articulates as being a shared space between God and the world,

-
- 1 In a footnote commenting on the “polyphony of life”, Welker (2013:170) observes: “Bonhoeffer could and, it seems, should have mentioned the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in this context. One point needing clarification is the extent to which he is prevented from doing so by a clearly discernible Hegelianizing pneumatology in his early writings [...] and by difficulties distinguishing clearly between the objective spirit and the Holy Spirit.”
 - 2 I explore this subject at much greater length, also with reference to some of Bonhoeffer’s earlier works (in particular *Sanctorum Communio*), elsewhere. See Tarassenko (2024).
 - 3 As in his *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer also discusses the work of the Spirit in *Sanctorum Communio* (see below). In addition to these texts, Bonhoeffer produced two essays for his theological studies on the Holy Spirit (the first on the pneumatological interpretation of scripture and the second, a seminar paper on the Holy Spirit according to Luther), and he writes inquiringly of the intractable problem of differentiating the Holy Spirit’s agency from human agency in Creation and Fall. Furthermore, the writings of the Finkenwalde period reflect Bonhoeffer’s views on the Spirit’s role in the life of the church at some length. See, for instance, his description of Pentecost as “a one-time revelation of God in salvation-history – analogous to the event of the incarnation” and his extensive teaching on the Spirit’s role in establishing the church. Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education at Finkenwalde: 1935–1937*, DBWE 14: 488; 434–76. See: the entire second half of *Discipleship* in which he addresses baptism in the Spirit and in creating the church-community. See also: Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, DBWE 3:64.
 - 4 This formulation, of sorts, occurs a number of times in *Sanctorum Communio*, for instance when he states: “We experience our election only in the church-community, which is already *established* in Christ, by personally appropriating it through the Holy Spirit, by standing in the *actualized* church”; Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, DBWE 1:143. Italics mine.

grounded in Christ. We will see that Bonhoeffer's understanding of reality relies on a distinction between the work of Christ and that of the Holy Spirit. Having drawn attention to Bonhoeffer's awareness of the inadequate spatial language for expressing this view of reality in *Ethics*, we turn to the potential solution afforded by the metaphor of polyphony. By means of conclusion, I will underscore how polyphony and other acoustic phrases can illumine the work of the Holy Spirit in Christology, in the life of the church and in the individual Christian.

Pneumatology in Bonhoeffer

If pneumatology is not quite “a conspicuous absence”, as one thinker notes, it is widely thought to be an underdeveloped area in Bonhoeffer's thought.⁵ In *Ethics*, there are only five explicit mentions of the Holy Spirit in the main body of the text, two of which are passing nods.⁶ Nevertheless, in the first manuscript: “Christ, Reality and Good. Christ, Church, and World”, Bonhoeffer provides an extended description of the relationship between Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. There he writes:

The subject matter of the Christian ethic is God's reality revealed in Christ becoming real [Wirklichwerden] among God's creatures, just as the subject matter of doctrinal theology is the truth of God's reality revealed in Christ. The place that in all other ethics is marked by the antithesis between ought and is, idea and realisation, motive, and work, is occupied in Christian ethics by the relation between reality and becoming real, between past and present, between history and event (faith) or, to replace the many concepts with the simple name of the thing itself, the relation between Jesus Christ and the Holy

5 In response to D.S. Bachtell's observation that the work of the Holy Spirit is entirely lacking in Bonhoeffer's writings with the exception of *Sanctorum Communio*, Ann Nickson (2002:59) argues that the “pneumatological inadequacies are most obvious” in that text. Nickson and Bachtell are in good company. Their views express a sentiment which has often prevailed with respect to Bonhoeffer's pneumatology, as summarized by Rowan Williams (2018:197): “Reference to the Holy Spirit in his entire corpus is slight – not absent, as a glance at his hermeneutics will confirm, but not strongly developed in relation to his Christology”. My argument runs entirely counter to these.

6 The index lists nine but four of these are editors' notes.

Spirit. The question of good becomes the question of participation in the divine reality which is revealed in Christ (*DBWE* 6:49–50).

So, Bonhoeffer is saying: the Holy Spirit makes real – or “actualizes” – in the present the reality of Christ, which I take to mean both the past events of the incarnation, cross and resurrection, and also the present person of Christ. David Ford calls this statement “programmatically” for identifying a pneumatology in *Ethics*, contending that the rest of *Ethics* should be read in light of this, as “unfolding the implications of the reality of Jesus Christ being realized through the Holy Spirit.”⁷

Based on this excerpt from *Ethics* alone, it would seem that the widely held view that Bonhoeffer’s understanding of Christian formation and ethics is only Christ-centred – a concretization of his Christology – should be nuanced by reference to the work of the Holy Spirit, which he himself includes in this crucial description of what ethics is.

“Reality” in *Ethics*

But what does it mean to say that “the reality of Jesus Christ is realised through the Holy Spirit”? Or that the Spirit “actualizes” what Christ “establishes”? To better understand the distinction Bonhoeffer is making between Christ and the Spirit we must examine his view of reality in *Ethics*. We will see that Bonhoeffer relies on the Spirit to make distinction between the world and the church.

In *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer explicitly criticises the idea of thinking in terms of two distinct spheres which we can broadly label “secular” and “sacred” because they split reality apart.⁸ He states: “It is denial of God’s revelation in

7 “This theological account of reality and the good clearly draws ethics into coincidence with spirituality as the realization of and participation in the divine reality. It also encourages one to read the rest of the *Ethics* as unfolding the implications of the reality of Jesus Christ being realized through the Holy Spirit” (Ford, 2003a: 275). He writes similarly in a second, related essay, “It is therefore appropriate to read the rest of the *Ethics* as unfolding the implications of the reality of Jesus Christ being realised through the Holy Spirit; and that also may serve as an initial definition of Christian holiness” (Ford 2003b:368).

8 “Reality as a whole splits into two parts, and the concern of ethics becomes the right relation of both parts to each other” (*DBWE* 6:56).

Jesus Christ to wish to be “Christian” without being “worldly,” or [to] wish to be worldly without seeing and recognizing the world in Christ” (*DBWE* 6:58). Instead, he describes the world and God as “belonging together” in Christ. He views God and the world as operating in what Charles Marsh calls a “shared reality”.⁹ However, the shared space Bonhoeffer describes is not a simple unity. God and the world remain distinct. The reality, which is established in, by and through Christ is not, therefore, fully actualised in the world. It is the work of the Spirit – working through the church – to protect the world as a distinct entity. Bonhoeffer writes in the same manuscript:

The church can only defend its own space by fighting, not for space, but for the salvation of the world. Otherwise the church becomes a “religious society” that fights in its own interest and thus has ceased to be the church of God in the world. For this the Holy Spirit equips those to whom the Spirit comes. Of course, it is presupposed that such a witness to the world can only happen in the right way when it comes out of sanctified life in God’s church-community (*DBWE* 6:64).

The work of the Holy Spirit is essential, therefore, in differentiating the church and the world. Indeed, the church in which Christ’s reality is actualised, exists *for* “the salvation of the world.” We, the church, are being sanctified for the good of the world, and not as a distinct entity annexed off in piety. Only as a result of this distinction can the church be properly related to the world, which, Bonhoeffer suggests, is also the Spirit’s task.

With this view of reality in mind, we can better understand Bonhoeffer’s description of what the Spirit does in relation to Christ. We can see how this pneumatology helps Bonhoeffer maintain his commitment to the ontological reality of God and the world being together in Christ, while also maintaining a necessary distinction between them in our present social situation. This is what it means to distinguish the Spirit as “actualizing” what Christ “establishes”.

9 Marsh (1997:105-106) puts it thus: “It is the ‘shared reality’ of God and humanity that Bonhoeffer emphasizes, not the necessary identity of the two. Similarly, this shared reality, mediated by Christ alone, militates against all conceptions of totality as self-mediated, as he affirms nowhere more elegantly than in the theme of the recapitulation of the world in Jesus Christ”.

Indeed, Bonhoeffer is so concerned that reality be understood as a shared space between God and the world in Christ – but one which, importantly, requires a difference to be maintained – that in the same manuscript he expresses his consternation over a lack of adequate spatial language to communicate this view of reality. He writes: “This belonging together of God and world that is grounded in Christ does not allow *static spatial boundaries*, nor does it remove the difference between church-community and world. This leads to the question of how to think about this difference without falling back into *spatial images*” (DBWE 6:68).¹⁰ When Bonhoeffer writes “static spatial boundaries” and “spatial images” he seems to be referring to “container metaphors”. That is, images and language which are visually informed and so delimited by visible parameters.¹¹

Polyphony as an image for pneumatology

Does polyphony provide Bonhoeffer with a solution to the problem he poses in *Ethics*? I contend that it does. Having examined one shade of a subtle pneumatology as it appears in *Ethics* – how the shared space between God and the world, as established by Christ, is actualized by the Spirit in the church – we turn now to Bonhoeffer’s use of polyphony. In what remains, I will show how polyphony helps Bonhoeffer to articulate the view of reality he has expressed in *Ethics*, allowing him to describe this “belonging together of God and world that is grounded in Christ” with careful nuance.

In a letter to Bethge on 20 May 1944, Bonhoeffer first uses the metaphor of polyphony to describe the tension Bethge must manage between loving the

¹⁰ Italics mine.

¹¹ Lakoff and Johnson penetratingly discuss how “container metaphors” are fundamental to humans, even across cultures, because of the basic human instinct for territoriality. They write: “But even where there is no natural physical boundary that can be viewed as defining a container, we impose boundaries – marking off territory so that it has an inside and a bounding surface – whether a wall, a fence, or an abstract line or plane. There are few human instincts more basic than territoriality. And such defining of a territory, putting a boundary around it, is an act of quantification” (Lakoff and Johnson 2003:29).

world and loving God.¹² He describes this as maintaining the polyphony of life, as follows:

What I mean is that God, the Eternal, wants to be loved with our whole heart, not to the detriment of earthly love or to diminish it, but as a sort of *cantus firmus* to which the other voices of life resound in counterpoint. One of these contrapuntal themes, which keep their *full independence* but are still related to the *cantus firmus*, is earthly love ... Where the *cantus firmus* is clear and distinct, a counterpoint can develop as mightily as it wants (*DBWE* 8:394).

Here the *cantus firmus* represents loving God and the counterpoint represents earthly loves. Rather than negating or minimising the latter in the name of the former, there is a capaciousness which results from loving God. Bonhoeffer says, in effect, that by focusing on loving God, love of earthly things expands, and is even enhanced. At the very same time, the distinctiveness of these earthly loves is retained. He has gone so far as to express this in terms of a “full independence” (*selbständigkeit*). But the unity between them is a close one, the closest imaginable, and he even goes on to liken the relationship between loving God and loving the world with the Christological definition, the unity of the two natures in Christ.¹³

We see in this letter to Bethge that Bonhoeffer wants to ensure that God and the world are in the fullest possible relationship because of Christ, while also maintaining the distinction between them. That is, we see the practical outworking of the shared space between God and the world which we have heard about in our examination of *Ethics*.

To appreciate the intimate, dynamic relationship which Bonhoeffer is using polyphony to articulate, it is worth reminding ourselves how polyphony

12 Bonhoeffer discusses polyphony only two more times in his letters, dated closely to the first occurrence (21 May and 29 May 1944). In the second letter he refers to polyphony as his *Fündlein*, a term which is famously difficult to translate and which *DBWE* renders as “little hobbyhorse.” John Morris argues, convincingly to my mind, that a better translation is “little invention” and that through this Bonhoeffer is probably making a deliberate allusion to Bach’s Two-and Three-Part Inventions. See John Morris, “Bonhoeffer’s Little Invention” in Pangritz (2019). My thanks to John W. de Gruchy for drawing my attention to this.

13 “The two are ‘undivided and yet distinct,’ as the Definition of Chalcedon says, like the divine and human natures in Christ” (*DBWE* 8:394).

is normally used in the world of music. A broadly acceptable definition of musical polyphony runs as follows:

Polyphony is a style of music in which two (or more) voices are equally important and fully developed, thus retaining particularity while sounding simultaneously. It is sometimes based on a *cantus firmus*, a pre-existing melody around which the other(s) are composed (Tarassenko 2024:42).

This is better heard. Notwithstanding a long classical music heritage, a good example is provided by the Prog rock band Yes, which demonstrates that polyphony does occur in contemporary music.¹⁴ At the start of this track there are two “voices” – electric guitar and bass – which are “equally important” and “fully developed”; that is, they occur simultaneously but each retains its integrity and does not blur, merge or diminish with the presence of the other.

Implicit in this, as in all polyphony, is musical resonance. The distinct voices retain integrity, but they also *enhance* one another. And it is the phenomenon of musical resonance entailed by polyphonic music which means that polyphony can image the capaciousness of the relationship between God and the world. As the image of polyphony expresses a differentiation between God’s voice and the world’s voice, we also find implicit in polyphony is a model of the agency of the Holy Spirit, particularly in this idea of musical resonance.

To illustrate: If an individual were to start singing and someone in the same room were to join in, the sounds would retain distinctiveness – the voices would be recognisable – and they would also resound; they would increase and enhance one another. Additionally, as we sing together, we might adjust our pitch or volume, attuning and modulating our voices to improve the overall quality of resonance.

Such musical imagery is laced with descriptive potential for presenting the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church. But before offering

14 See, for example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=La9Me7alNqA>. In particular, the first 20 seconds of the track. The first instrument is the electric guitar, which is joined by the bass at 13 seconds.

three specific suggestions as to how it can express a pneumatology, I will summarise the foregoing.

In this article I have shown that Bonhoeffer distinguishes between the roles of Christ and the Holy Spirit, saying that: “the Holy Spirit realizes the reality of Christ” or “the Spirit actualizes what Christ establishes.” It is this distinction which enables Bonhoeffer to uphold his particular ontological commitment to the full reach of Christ’s salvific work while also affirming our present experience and the ongoing reality of sin in the church. He relies upon description of the work of the Spirit to differentiate between the reality of God and the world being held together “in Christ”, on the one hand, and the present-day situation in which Christ’s power on earth is not fully realised, on the other. This pneumatology, therefore, clearly, and successfully ameliorates his Christology by allowing Bonhoeffer to describe the full effect of Christ’s incarnation, death and resurrection while avoiding monism or universalism.

Yet, Bonhoeffer’s descriptions of the Spirit can, at times, suggest the work of the Spirit is only employed as a buffer to his Christology, protecting against a full identification between Christ and the church or the world. Although we have not had opportunity to address *Sanctorum Communio*, we may note, in passing, that this is especially the case in that text in which description of the Spirit is employed to avoid a full identification of Christ and the Church in the formulation “Christ existing as church-community”.

The metaphors of polyphony and musical resonance (as well as other musical casts of mind like “attunement” and “modulation”) provide a constructive way of discussing this relationship between the work of the Spirit and Christ. They can help us to further elucidate what it means to say that the Holy Spirit “actualizes” what has been “realised” or “established” in Christ, by providing descriptions which allow us to explore the positive implications of this pneumatology.

Conclusion

By means of a conclusion, I offer the following three possibilities for how musical metaphors such as musical resonance provide imaginative potential for articulating a pneumatology:

First, taking polyphony as an image of the two natures in Christ (as Bonhoeffer does) which allows for the “full development” and “distinct integrity” of each, we can imagine the musical resonance between these distinct melodies as imaging the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing together the human and divine natures into a kind of dynamic relationality; helping them to relate and resound – a Spirit Christology reminiscent of John Owen’s.

Second, musical images for pneumatology provide a means of conceptualising sanctification. The relationship between God and world which is established in Christ, can be imagined as being modulated by the Spirit; for it is the Spirit who attunes the church to Christ, and who makes Christ recognizable through the church to the world. In creating resonances between Christ, the church and the world, the Spirit enables the voice of Christ to be heard, received, and acknowledged in the world; a voice which is neither competing for space, nor negating humanity. Instead, by the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ’s voice inhabits the created space in such ways that, from the perspective of human experience, expand and enhance our experiences, as the reality of Christ resounds in them.

Third, and finally, this musical language and thinking has the potential to inculcate our spiritual discernment, as a kind of heuristic device. The individual Christian can better think through her relationship with Christ, including the role of Christ’s voice in relation to her own. In particular, instead of viewing Christ’s voice and the Christian’s in competitive terms, as mutually exclusive realities, we can imagine Christ’s voice and our own as retaining their distinctive integrities, while also being compatible and even enhancing one another. The person who is conformed to Christ becomes, at the very same time, more truly his or herself by imaging Christ through the fulness of his or her own particularity, which the Spirit enhances. So that:

Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men’s faces.¹⁵

This is what it means to be spiritually resonant.

15 Hopkins (1986:129)

Bibliography

- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. 1998. *DBWE (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English) 1: Communio Sanctorum: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*. Edited by Clifford J. Green. Translated by Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. 2004. *DBWE 3: Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3*. Edited by John W. de Gruchy. Translated by Douglas S. Bax. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. 2005. *DBWE 6: Ethics*. Edited by Clifford J. Green. Translated by Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. 2019. *DBWE 8: Letters and Papers from Prison*. Edited by John W. de Gruchy. Translated by Isabel Best, Lisa E. Dahill, Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. 2013. *DBWE 14: Theological Education at Finkenwalde: 1935–1937*. Edited by Victoria. J. Barnett & Barbara Wojhoski. Translated by Douglas W. Stott. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.
- Ford, David F. 2003a. “Holy Spirit and Christian Spirituality.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*. Edited by Kevin Vanhoozer. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 269-290.
- Ford, David F. 2003b. “Bonhoeffer, Holiness and Ethics”, in *Holiness: Past and Present*. Edited by Stephen C. Barton. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 361–380.
- Hopkins, Gerard M. 1986. *The Major Works*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson. 2003. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Marsh, Charles 1997. *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer: The Promise of His Theology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Nickson, Ann. 2002. *Bonhoeffer on Freedom: Courageously Grasping Reality*. London: Routledge.
- Pangritz, Andreas. 2019. *The Polyphony of Life: Bonhoeffer's Theology of Music*. Edited by John W. de Gruchy and John Morris. Translated by Robert Steiner. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books.
- Tarassenko, Joanna. 2024. *The Spirit of Polyphony: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Musical Pneumatology*. London: Bloomsbury. (forthcoming).
- Welker, Michael. 2013. *God the Revealed: Christology*. Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans.
- Williams, Rowan. 2018. *Christ the Heart of Creation*. London: Bloomsbury.