

Christ under the rubble Bonhoeffer on aesthetic existence in the church as a sphere of freedom in a time of war

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Abstract

In a brief comment from prison Dietrich Bonhoeffer asks how anyone can be happy in a time of war. In response he writes about founding aesthetic existence anew in the church. This essay examines what he meant by this in our own “time of war”. First, by considering Kierkegaard’s rejection of aestheticism, his affirmation of “living poetically” and the “passion of possibility.” Secondly, by recounting Bonhoeffer’s own journey from his early humanist formation and travels abroad to his involvement in the Resistance and imprisonment. Thirdly, by examining what Bonhoeffer meant by the church as a “sphere of freedom”. Fourthly, I discuss the examples Bonhoeffer suggests for nurturing aesthetic existence in the church (art, formation, friendship, and play).

I wonder whether ... it is only from the concept of the church that we can regain the understanding of the sphere of freedom (art, education, friendship, play). This means that aesthetic existence (Kierkegaard) is not to be banished from the church’s sphere; rather, it is precisely within the church that it would be founded anew. I actually believe this, and from here we could recover our connection with the Middle Ages! Who in our time could, for example, light-heartedly make music, nurture friendship, play, and be happy? Certainly not the “ethical” person, but only the Christian (Dietrich Bonhoeffer).¹

The startling nativity scene of “Christ under the Rubble”, displayed in the Lutheran Church in Bethlehem during Advent 2023 was an icon of solidarity with the Palestinian people during the war on Gaza. Irrespective of how we evaluate it as a “work of art”, it is testimony to God’s incarnational solidarity with the suffering people

1 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 268.

of the world and an example of the prophetic role of art.² How to understand that role within church and society and its theological significance led me to write *Christianity, Art and Transformation* twenty years ago.³ In doing so, I became more aware of the remarkable role that art in its various forms played in the struggle against apartheid, much of it outside the church.⁴

While it was important to recall and reflect on the role of art in the anti-apartheid struggle, my focus in writing *Christianity, Art and Transformation* was on the potential role of art in the creation of a more just world global society. In doing so I discussed Bonhoeffer's passing comment on aesthetic existence, quoted above, in a letter from prison to Eberhard and Renate Bethge, his close friend and niece.⁵ That discussion was developed further by Adrian Coates in his dissertation published as *The Aesthetics of Discipleship*, and in a later essay on Bonhoeffer's understanding of "mature aesthetics."⁶ In what follows I take that discussion further with specific reference to ecclesiology within an unjust global context defined by war, most notably but not only in the Sudan, Ukraine and Palestine.

Keywords

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Søren Kierkegaard, aesthetics, war

1. Being "happy" in a time of war?

Reflecting and writing about aesthetic existence in an unjust global context might be dismissed as romantic escapism fed by a fearful imagination. Indeed, at this time, while thousands of innocent people are daily being killed in Gaza and the State of Israel is being accused of genocide, and Christ is crushed beneath the rubble, it might even seem obscene to think and write about aesthetics. But it was precisely in a world at war, while

2 On prophetic iconography, see the reflection by Edwina Gateley in Robert Lentz, *Christ in the Margins: Icons and Biographies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003), 7.

3 John W. de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); see also John W. de Gruchy, "Art, Morality and Justice," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and the Arts*, ed. by Frank Burch Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 418–432.

4 See Marnus Havenga, *Performing Christ: South African Protest Theatre and the Dramatic Theory of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Frankfurt, Germany: Peter Lang, 2022).

5 De Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation*, 147–158.

6 Adrian Coates, *The Aesthetics of Discipleship: Everyday Aesthetic Existence and the Christian Life* (Eugene OR: Pickwick, 2021); see also Adrian Coates, "Bonhoeffer on amusing ourselves to death: Mature aesthetic existence as antidote to everyday asceticism." *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 6, no. 2 (2020): 67–89.

Berlin was being bombed and Bonhoeffer, incarcerated in a prison nearby, was already aware of the unfolding horrors of the Holocaust, that he wrote to Bethge and said: “who in our time could, for example, light-heartedly make music, nurture friendship, play, and be happy?” And, with Søren Kierkegaard’s three stages of existence (the aesthetic, the ethical, and religious) in mind, say further: “Certainly not the “ethical” person, but only the “Christian.”

Taken out of context and read as if only Christians can be happy would be to misunderstand Bonhoeffer. Following Kierkegaard, he is writing about those who are authentically rather than nominally Christian and living “truly human” and therefore blessed or happy lives. Such happiness, as he wrote in *Discipleship* is “not what the world calls *happiness*,”⁷ It has to do with what Jesus taught in his Sermon on the Mount. Being “blessed” or “happy” is contingent on doing the will of God and therefore on loving and serving the “other”, including our enemies, with mercy and compassion.

While it can be said that in his affirmation of “worldly Christianity” in his letters from prison, Bonhoeffer embraces happiness more broadly and in a more “earthy” way than he did in *Discipleship*, it is never cheapened. On the contrary, as he wrote shortly before his imprisonment, he had come to understand happiness from the perspective of those who suffer.⁸ So while it is striking that Bonhoeffer often reflects on happiness (*Glück*) in broader terms while in prison, he sometimes specifically does so in relation to adversity, as in his poem *Glück und Unglück* in which he concludes that faithfulness

can transform disaster
by gently enfolding it
in love’s eternal radiance.⁹

If aesthetics is generally associated with the arts and their potential to help us see and hear reality differently, whether from the perspective of “the other”, or in our own tragic times, such as the death of a loved one, then aesthetic existence is about living imaginatively and creatively in ways that

7 Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 103.

8 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 52.

9 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 442. Translation by Isobel de Gruchy.

help us relate redemptively to the reality we face. Of course, the imagination can play tricks on our awareness and understanding and so obfuscate reality, as when we say someone is “imagining things”. But once we lose our creative imagination, then our humanity is at stake as is our hope for the future.¹⁰ The power of the prophetic and poetic imagination that we find expressed in the biblical narrative, is that it enables us to respond to painful and tragic reality by suggesting alternative redemptive possibilities.¹¹ This points to what Jeremy Begbie calls “the theological promise of the arts” whether in an increasingly reductionist or unjust world.¹² For the creative arts help us to live poetically and so develop a passion for that which God alone makes possible.

2. Living poetically and the passion of possibility

In a letter from prison to his fiancé Maria von Wedemeyer, Bonhoeffer counsels her to “take strong dose of Kierkegaard” to correct some of her more pious and romantic reading.¹³ Bonhoeffer was speaking from experience. After all, it was Kierkegaard’s writings on costly discipleship and his attack on Christendom, that had influenced Bonhoeffer as a young theologian in Nazi Germany, as they had previously influenced his mentor Karl Barth during the First World War.¹⁴ And it is once again Kierkegaard, whose critique of aestheticism significantly contributed to the banishment of aesthetic existence itself from the church,¹⁵ who prompts Bonhoeffer to reflect on the need to renew it within the church in a “world come of age”, as he described the modern secular West in his prison letters.¹⁶ This “world come of age” was not morally superior to other ages, but it was

10 See Graham Ward, *Unimaginable: What we Imagine and What we Can't* (London: Taurus, 2018).

11 See Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

12 Jeremy S. Begbie, *Abundantly More: the Theological Promise of the Arts in a Reductionist World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023).

13 15 February 1944, *Love Letters from Cell 92* (London: Harper/Collins, 1992) 154.

14 Geoffrey Kelly, “Kierkegaard as ‘Antidote’ and as Impact on Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Concept of Discipleship,” in Peter Frick, ed., *Bonhoeffer’s Intellectual Formation* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 145–166.

15 See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), 49–52.

16 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 426–428.

the increasingly post-Christendom reductionist context within which the church had to discern its responsibility and fulfil its mission.

Bonhoeffer well knew that it was not simply Kierkegaard's searing philosophical critique of aestheticism that led inadvertently to the banishment of aesthetic existence from the church; it was also the outcome of a long historical process in the West about which he had written shortly before his imprisonment in a chapter for his *Ethics* entitled "Heritage and Decay".¹⁷ That heritage had reached its apex in Europe during the Middle Ages when Christianity and classical culture combined to produce Renaissance humanism.¹⁸ Hence his observation that to recover aesthetic existence in the church would reconnect us with the Middle Ages.¹⁹ But inquisitions, crusades, and post-Reformation polemic, intolerance, and interminable "wars of religion" turned the church into a bastion of reaction, control, and conformity in which aesthetic existence along with its scientific advances were treated with suspicion if not always rejected or condemned.

The eighteenth-century Enlightenment's protest against intolerant religion in the interests of human emancipation, followed by the French Revolution's rejection of religion in the name of "liberty, fraternity and equality", led to the further alienation of humanism from the church and with it any real connection between Christian discipleship and aesthetic existence.²⁰ In the process, the secular world replaced the church as the "sphere of freedom" where aesthetic existence could flourish without control, and where humanism untethered from its Christian foundations could promote human rights and civil liberties in obedience to universal moral laws as discerned by reason rather than by special revelation.

This was also the context in which aesthetics, literally the way in which we perceive reality, became a branch of philosophy whose focus was defining beauty and exercising aesthetic *judgment* on works of art. Hence the distinction made between primitive and popular art on the one hand, and

17 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 103–133.

18 See Jens Zimmermann, *Incarnational Humanism: A Philosophy of Culture for the Church in the World* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2012), 114–162.

19 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*. 268.

20 See Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 106–111.

fine art on the other, and the insistence that fine art existed primarily for art's sake rather than serving some other more utilitarian purpose whether religious or moral. This notion was pejoratively labelled aestheticism by its critics such as Kierkegaard because art, on that understanding, was governed by individual self-interest, and beauty was exalted at the expense of goodness and truth. In the end art also became subject to ideological abuse, as it did in Nazi Germany with the attempt by the state to control every aspect of human life and its formation (*Gestaltung*),²¹ The end result was aesthetic suicide.²²

Kierkegaard's critique of aestheticism was, however, but the first step in his three-staged autobiographical journey towards ethical responsibility and religious commitment during which aesthetic existence was critically retrieved as "living poetically." For Kierkegaard this was synonymous with becoming truly human and therefore authentically Christian. While it is not necessary to be religious to appreciate the aesthetic or to be moral, we cannot follow Christ without becoming ethically responsible and living poetically.²³ For while our natural passions anchor us to our concrete existence, it is only as we live poetically and therefore open to God's "passion of possibility", as Ingolf Dalferth describes it, that we are able to move beyond "where and what we are as aesthetic, ethical or religious individuals ... towards the universal horizon of possibilities rooted in the actuality of the possible, i.e., in God."²⁴

This not only makes us unique individuals but gives us "the freedom to see, form and shape" our lives in "relationship with God as an original love relationship,"²⁵ but also enables us, further, to use our freedom "in unexpected and surprising ways", chiefly by treating others as neighbours of God's love." In doing so, we are introduced to "an inexhaustible field of the humane exercise of human freedom in seeing, imagining, dreaming,

21 See Peter Adam, *Art of the Third Reich* (New York: Harry N. Abrams 1992).

22 George Pattison, *Kierkegaard, and the crisis of faith* (London: SP CK, 1997) 86.

23 Sylvia Walsh *Living Poetically: Kierkegaard's Existential Aesthetics* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 1994), 18.

24 In e-mail correspondence with the author, 28 February 2024. Ingolf U. Dalferth, *The Passion of Possibility: Studies on Kierkegaard's Post-Metaphysical Theology* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2023).

25 Dalferth, *The Passion of Possibility*, 253–4.

acting, loving together with others in a joint effort of boundless humanity and *Mitmenschlichkeit*.²⁶ In other words, instead of being at the mercy of our own self-centred passions, whether aesthetic, ethical or religious, important as they may be, we become open to God's passion of possibilities, that is, what is compatible with God's love for us and the world. Understood in this way, aesthetic existence is about freely choosing to live by hope and love as we imagine and work for justice and peace. And do so as those who believe in the God who brings life out of death. But for that to happen, we have to learn, with Bonhoeffer, "to see things from below,"²⁷ that is from the perspective of those who suffer and are oppressed.

3. Learning to see things from below

Bonhoeffer's awakening of aesthetic sensitivity and his humanist formation more generally preceded his decision to study theology.²⁸ While still a teenager, his parents wanted him to become a concert pianist for which he had both the ability and inclination. (he was playing and appreciating Mozart long before he read Kierkegaard and Karl Barth). But to his father's dismay he decided to serve the church. This meant becoming a pastor in the Church of the Union in Berlin-Brandenburg of which his parents were nominal members and in which he was, as socially expected, confirmed in 1921.

Young Dietrich's decision to serve the church took everyone by surprise, but it determined his destiny. Even so, whether he had chosen to become a professional musician rather than a theologian, Bonhoeffer would have been as passionate in his desire to excel. But how passionate could he be about the church he was planning to serve for the rest of his life? Was not his father, a distinguished psychiatrist, correct in fearing that he would waste his time and gifts, squandering his humanist formation in serving an institution that was increasingly irrelevant in a secular world? Was there

26 Dalferth, *The Passion of Possibility*, 253–4.

27 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 52.

28 See John W. de Gruchy, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer as Christian Humanist," in *Being Human, Becoming Human: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Social Thought*, eds. Jens Zimmerman and Brian Gregor (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Press, 2010), 3–24.

something more to the church than what he had thus far experienced in the congregation whose worship he and his father seldom attended?

As Dietrich had great respect for his father's opinion, the latter's reservations about his decision to study theology were surely on his mind when he went to Tübingen University in the summer of 1923. But then, during a vacation the following year spent in Italy, Sicily, and North Africa, he began to see the world and the church through new eyes.²⁹ This was triggered as he walked among the ruins of classical antiquity, imbibing the cultural otherness of Muslim Morocco and, above all, experiencing the liturgically splendid, spiritually rich, and ethnically diverse Roman Catholic church.³⁰ If Martin Luther's visit to Rome in the sixteenth century opened his eyes to see corruption in the curia, Bonhoeffer's visit opened his to see the church as a vibrant organism which resonated with his aesthetic sensibilities. Tempted to become a Roman Catholic, he chose to remain a Protestant, but his experience led him to embark on a life-long search to answer the question "what is the church?"³¹ This was far more than an academic quest, but it did provide him with the topic for his doctoral dissertation *Sanctorum Communio* which he completed at Berlin's Humboldt University in 1927.³²

Many years later, while in Tegel's prison, Bonhoeffer confessed to his friend Bethge that while he had learned much during his life, he did not think that he had "changed very much... except perhaps at the time of my first impressions abroad, and under the first conscious influence of Papa's personality."³³ There can be no doubt that despite his father's disapproval of his theological vocation, he remained an important influence in Bonhoeffer's life, not least towards the end when, also in conversation with his brother Karl, a physicist, he became interested in modern science.³⁴ But

29 See Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 56–65.

30 See Bonhoeffer, *The Young Bonhoeffer: 1918–1937* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 88–98.

31 See John W. de Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer's Questions: A Life-Changing Conversation* (Landham: Lexington, 2019), 119–136

32 Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, revised edition edited by Victoria Barnett (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 147–169; 202–206.

33 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 358.

34 See Eberhard Bethge, "The Nonreligious Scientist and the Confessing Theologian: the Influence of Karl Friedrich Bonhoeffer on his Younger Brother Dietrich," in John W. de

among his transforming “impressions abroad” Bonhoeffer would also have included the year he spent in New York at Union Theological Seminary in 1930–31. For it was then that he experienced his “great liberation” which he also described as “a turning from the phraseological to the real”.³⁵

In stark contrast to his experience of the Catholic Church in Rome, Bonhoeffer’s experience of the Protestant Church in New York, typified for him by the recently built Riverside Church close by the Seminary, left him cold.³⁶ While its services were well attended, its music excellent, and the congregation socially concerned, for Bonhoeffer this modernist cathedral was a centre of comfortable white privilege advocating liberal values instead of proclaiming the gospel. But two friendships made at Union soon turned Bonhoeffer’s life around and, to use his own words, the aspiring theologian “became a Christian.”³⁷

The first friendship was that with Jean Lasserre, a French Reformed pastor and fellow international student at Union whose pacifist convictions challenged Bonhoeffer’s German nationalism, and whose understanding of the Sermon on the Mount introduced him to the meaning of costly Christian discipleship.³⁸ The second notable friendship was made with an African American student, Frank Fisher, who helped Bonhoeffer understand the legacy of slavery and the reality of white racism, and introduced him to the Abyssinian Baptist Church in nearby Harlem. It was there that Bonhoeffer found a spiritual home where vibrant faith was wedded to the struggle for racial justice. In addition, his classical aesthetic taste was challenged and enriched by the Spirituals of the descendants of African slaves that expressed both an evangelical faith and a longing for justice.³⁹

Gruchy, ed., *Bonhoeffer for a New Day: Theology in a Time of Transition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 39–56.

35 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 358.

36 See Hans Christoph von Hase, “Turning away from the Phraseological to the Real,’ A Personal Recollection,” in Bonhoeffer, *Barcelona, Berlin, New York, 1928–1931* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 295–296.

37 In a letter to Elizabeth Zinn, January 27, 1936. Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education at Finkenwalde: 1935–1937* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 134.

38 See Editors’ Introduction to Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 13–14. See Jean Lasserre, *War and the Gospel* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1962).

39 See Bonhoeffer, *Barcelona, Berlin, New York, 1928–1931*, 29–31.

Bonhoeffer’s conversion from being a theologian to becoming a disciple of Christ was, under Lasserre’s influence, a radical shift from being a German nationalist to becoming a Christian pacifist.⁴⁰ But if that shift is considered in tandem with what happened to Bonhoeffer at the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Haarlem, then it can also be understood, as an “aesthetic liberation”, to use Bernard Lonergan’s phrase.⁴¹ It certainly led to a fundamental change in Bonhoeffer’s perception of reality, what we would today refer to as a shift from a Eurocentric to a post-colonial worldview.⁴² The path to this shift had, of course, already been prepared by Bonhoeffer’s brief visit to North Africa, but in Haarlem it was made more personal and immediate because it occurred within a racially polarised and unjust society where segregated churches served the descendants of European settlers (who “looked like” him,) and African slaves (who did not).

Bonhoeffer never lost his love for Gregorian chants he first experienced in Rome, or the more familiar Bach’s cantatas loved in his own church, but the Spirituals composed and sung by slaves who became Christians in the Deep South and their descendants in New York, radically altered his perception.⁴³ It was this that enabled him later to identify with the Jews and other victims of the Holocaust. And so, shortly before his own arrest, as he told his friends in the Resistance:

It remains an experience of incomparable value that we have for once learned to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcasts, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed and reviled, in short from the perspective of the suffering.

And, Bonhoeffer continued, to “see matters great and small, happiness and misfortune, strength and weakness with new eyes” and discover “that personal suffering is a more useful key... than personal happiness for

40 See Jean Lasserre, *War and the Gospel* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1962).

41 Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1958), 187.

42 See de Gruchy, *Faith Facing Reality* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2022), 31–55.

43 See Josiah Ulysses Young III, *No Difference in the Fare: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Problem of Racism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 21–27.

exploring the meaning of the world in contemplation and action.⁴⁴ But what is sometimes overlooked is Bonhoeffer's concluding words:

this perspective from below must not lead us to become advocates for those who are perpetually dissatisfied. Rather, out of a higher satisfaction, which in its essence is grounded beyond what is below and above, we do justice to life in all its dimensions and in this way affirm it.⁴⁵

In other words, learning to see “things from below” did not mean that he could not at the same time “do justice to life in all its dimensions”. It also correlates well with what Bonhoeffer would soon, in prison, describe as his “newfound hobbyhorse” namely “the polyphony of life”.⁴⁶

Bonhoeffer used this musical metaphor to good effect to describe the relationship between love as *eros* or sensual, and love as *agape* or divine, as well as the *vita christiana*, or the “Christian way of life” which reflects both the full divinity and full humanity of Christ. So, he writes to Eberhard and Renate Bethge, to both of whom he had mentioned aesthetic existence, and says that if Christ is the “cantus firmus” of their lives, then they will experience and enjoy the fullness or polyphony of life.⁴⁷ To explain this he said further that God “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.”⁴⁸

Aesthetic existence is not, then, a way of escape from costly discipleship but a way of connecting our passion for life with God's passionate love for the world. Indeed, in the letter to Bethge in which he mentions aesthetic existence, Bonhoeffer also says that “we honour God better by knowing everything we value in the life God has given us and loving and enjoying it to the full, and therefore feeling intensely and honestly the pain of whatever

44 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 52.

45 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 52.

46 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 397; see Andreas Pangritz, *The Polyphony of Life: Bonhoeffer's Theology of Music*, translated by Robert Steiner and edited by John W. de Gruchy and John Morris (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2019).

47 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 394–395

48 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 394.

of life's values has been diminished or lost."⁴⁹ Aesthetic existence is a way of being more passionate about life in all its fullness because, paradoxically, we have begun to participate in God's passion of possibility for a world in travail struggling for justice and peace.

To be truly Christian, and therefore follow Christ wholeheartedly, and to be fully human, that is, living life in all its fullness, is not only possible but meant to be. In fact, it can be argued that this is what Bonhoeffer meant when he spoke of "religionless Christianity."⁵⁰ So, when in his letters from prison Bonhoeffer expresses reservations about what he wrote about in *Discipleship*, he was not backtracking on "costly discipleship,"⁵¹ but insisting that being a disciple of Jesus did not mean that he had to discard aesthetic existence, but on the contrary, he could be truly happy and enjoy the "polyphony of life" in "being for others". Just like we pass through a narrow opening in our mother's womb into life, so we journey through a narrow gate to enter life in its fullness and so embark on a journey in which our humanity is fulfilled. This, as he had already said in his *Ethics* is fundamental to Christian formation or *Bildung*.⁵² And it is this aesthetic existence made possible through Christ that needed to be renewed in the church "as a sphere of freedom." So we return to consider Bonhoeffer's question, "what is the church?" which he began to answer in his dissertation *Sanctorum Communio*, but now refers to as a "sphere of freedom"?

4. The church as a sphere of freedom

In writing about the need to renew aesthetic existence in the church, Bonhoeffer undoubtedly had in mind the church of which he and Bethge were pastors, that is, the Church of the Union (Lutheran and Reformed) in Berlin-Brandenburg, part of what is now the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD). The extent to which what he said then can be applied more ecumenically today may be debated. Certainly, how we respond to

49 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 266–267; see Eberhard Bethge, *Friendship and Resistance: Essays on Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1995), 80–104.

50 Ralf K Wüstenberg, *A theology of life: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's religionless Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1998).

51 Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 77–83.

52 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 94.

Bonhoeffer’s proposal to renew aesthetic existence “in the church as a sphere of freedom” today requires contextual consideration. While that is beyond the scope of my essay, what Bonhoeffer said is undoubtedly pertinent for the ecumenical church today, not least in an unjust world at war, because it has to do with what it means to be the church and to live an authentic Christian life irrespective of time and place.

Bonhoeffer’s experience of the church in Rome (and his growing exposure to Karl Barth’s theology) ensured that he could not approach his dissertation in a liberal Protestant or institutional parochial way. The church is not simply a fellowship of individual believers, nor can it be equated with a state-institution; it is God’s reconciled “new humanity”, indeed, “Christ existing as a community of persons,”⁵³ whose “life principle” was love for others.⁵⁴ As such, the church is always in the process becoming the church or, as Bonhoeffer later wrote, “the church is not a religious community” but Christ taking “form among human beings”, and this “happens vicariously... as a model for all human beings.”⁵⁵ With this as its character and purpose, “the church is both “an end in itself,” and a “means to an end”; it seeks to both embody and implement God’s will to create a just and humane community.⁵⁶ So, while the church cannot be reduced to any sociological type or legally defined institution, it “provides correction and boundaries for the entire sociological construction.”⁵⁷

Sanctorum Communio laid the foundation for the development of Bonhoeffer’s theology over the ensuing turbulent years.⁵⁸ But the question “what is the church?” could not remain academic when, in 1934, the Nazi-aligned German Christians (*Deutsche Christen*) attempted to seize control of the Protestant Church. This led to the formation of the Confessing Synod of the Evangelical Church at Barmen in 1934 when it confessed that Christ alone was Lord of the church, thus rejecting Hitler’s totalitarian

53 See Clifford Green, Editor’s Introduction to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio* (Minneapolis: Fortress 1998), 3

54 Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 261, 264–5.

55 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 96–97.

56 Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 261–262.

57 Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 250–252.

58 See Clifford Green, *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality*, revised edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 1–17.

claims.⁵⁹ Then, a year later, at Dahlem, the Confessing Synod went further and declared itself to be the “true” Protestant church in Germany. This led to Bonhoeffer’s controversial statement that “there was no salvation outside the Confessing Church.” Such a dogmatic statement sounded arrogant even to those who supported Bonhoeffer, but Bonhoeffer was adamant. He even extended his conviction to ecumenical relations, insisting that the unity of the church was dependent not only on its confession of Christ as Lord but also on giving its support to the Confessing Church in Germany.⁶⁰ In sum, the freedom of the church, whether as *Landeskirche* or Free Church, Confessing or ecumenical, was not a matter of legal status but contingent on its confession of Christ as Lord.⁶¹

In 1934 Bonhoeffer went to England to serve two German-speaking congregations. Once again, being abroad was important in shaping Bonhoeffer’s theological insight for his future work back home. Two experiences are apposite here. The first was his renewed contact with Bishop George Bell whose support for the Confessing church struggle in Germany was exemplary. But Bell’s support for the arts in the life of the church, not least in its prophetic witness in a world hastening towards war, would surely have been of interest to Bonhoeffer. Indeed, in 1935, Bell had commissioned the first performance of T.S. Elliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral* that dramatically depicted the struggle of the church in the person of Archbishop Thomas a’ Becket against political power.⁶² The second formative experience was Bonhoeffer’s contact with Anglican monastic communities as well as with churches within the Free Church tradition, including the Society of Friends (Quakers). This significantly influenced

59 On the beginning of the Confessing Church struggle, see Klaus Scholder, *The Churches and the Third Reich*, vol. 1 (London: SCM, 1987), 550–582.

60 See, for example, Bonhoeffer’s Address to the Fanø Conference in Denmark in the summer of 1934, Bonhoeffer, *London, 1933–1935* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 307–309.

61 On Bonhoeffer’s understanding of the freedom of the church from *Sanctorum Communio* to his prison writings, see Keith Clements, “The Freedom of the Church: Bonhoeffer and the Free Church Tradition,” in Jurjen Wiersma ed., *Bonhoeffer’s Ethics: Old Europe and New Frontiers* (Amsterdam, Kok, 1991), 155–172; and John W. de Gruchy, “The Freedom of the Church and the Liberation of South Africa: Bonhoeffer on the Free Church and the ‘Confessing Church’ in South Africa,” in Wiersma ed., *Bonhoeffer’s Ethics*, 173–193.

62 See de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation*, 140–141.

Bonhoeffer's thinking about the role of intentional communities within the church, as well as the future of the church itself.⁶³

On his return to Germany later in 1935 Bonhoeffer became the director of the illegal Confessing seminary at Finkenwalde where his enthusiasm for both monastic spirituality and African American Spirituals met with some resistance among his students. This was understandable because they had not shared Bonhoeffer's experiences abroad. Nonetheless life together at Finkenwalde Seminary was a remarkable blend of intense study, worship, work, and recreation. It was also a community which nurtured friendships, not least that between Bethge and Bonhoeffer. Indeed, this "school for disciples" as St Benedict described a good monastery and as Bonhoeffer set forth in *Life Together*, was also one in which "aesthetic existence" (of course, not by that name) was being nurtured at a time when Europe was hurtling towards war.

In 1937 the seminary was closed by the Gestapo and went underground until 1940. By that time Bonhoeffer was banned from public speaking and teaching and became involved in the German Resistance. It was then that he turned to writing his *Ethics* and began to reflect on the way in which the church in the West had squandered its historical heritage which had flourished during the Middle Ages. Bonhoeffer did not complete his *Ethics*. He was arrested by the Gestapo on April 5, 1943, suspected of helping Jews escape from Germany, and imprisoned in Tegel Military prison in Berlin.

Bonhoeffer's immediate family was allowed to visit him as he awaited trial, and he could send them censored letters, but nothing is said in them about the theological thoughts germinating in his mind. But then, in November 1943, he was able to smuggle out uncensored letters to Bethge which began a fresh theological conversation that lasted over the next eighteen months.⁶⁴ Bonhoeffer's reference to aesthetic existence is contained in one of the first of these letters, dated January 23, 1944.⁶⁵ Then, in a letter dated April 30, 1944, he tells Bethge that he is, in fact, busy writing a book on Christianity

63 See Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996); de Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer's Questions*, 125–129.

64 See de Gruchy, *Daring, Trusting Friend: Bonhoeffer's Friend Eberhard Bethge* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 79–86.

65 November 18, 1943, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 179.

in a “world come of age” in which he is dealing with all the issues they were discussing and then, shortly after, sends him an outline.⁶⁶

That Bonhoeffer was thinking deeply about the future of Christianity is also evident in a sermon he prepared during that May for the baptism of the Bethge’s son Dietrich. In it he comments that their church (he has the Confessing Church specifically in mind) which “has been fighting during these years only for its self-preservation ... has become incapable of bringing the word of reconciliation and redemption to humankind and to the world.” As a result, its words have lost their power. For that reason, he continues, ‘we can be Christians today in only two ways, through prayer and in doing justice among human beings. All Christian thinking, talking, and organizing must be born anew, out of that prayer and action.’⁶⁷

Then on June 3, while on special leave from the Italian front for the baptism, Bethge visited Bonhoeffer in prison and soon after he writes to continue their conversation. In doing so, he affirms their shared hope that the prophetic ministry of the Confessing church would continue without it stepping back “into confessional dogmatism.”⁶⁸ Inter alia, Bethge also agrees with Bonhoeffer that people need spaces “for rest and contemplation” where they can “take refuge in quiet and acts of worship” and stresses the importance of connecting “the role of ritual” with that of “the prophetic.” “All that”, Bethge concludes, “is precisely what you are thinking about.”⁶⁹

In introducing his comment on aesthetic existence into the conversation, however cryptically, I surmise that Bonhoeffer is also implying that if the church is going to speak a prophetic word to the world, then it not only has to pray or speak truth to power; it must also be a “sphere of freedom” in which people can recover their humanity and live creative and abundant lives. Indeed, in his letter in which he mentions aesthetic existence, Bonhoeffer not only says that he doubts if a person “who doesn’t know anything of this sphere of freedom”, “can be a good parent, citizen, and

66 April 30, 1944, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 361–366.

67 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 389.

68 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 413, 502–503.

69 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*. 413–414, 499–504.

worker, and probably also be a Christian,” but also could be “a full human being (and thus also a Christian in the fullest sense) is questionable ...”⁷⁰

Thus, what Bonhoeffer says to Bethge about renewing aesthetic existence in the church as a “sphere of freedom” is not only integral to his thoughts about the church existing for others in the struggle for justice, but also a church that provides space for contemplation. Indeed, if Christians are to live in the penultimate in the light of the ultimate, it is as essential to renew aesthetic existence in the church, as it is to re-establish the “arcane discipline” or “secret discipline” that sustains the mystery of Christian faith.⁷¹

If it was at Abyssinian Baptist Church in Haarlem, that Bonhoeffer first experienced aesthetic existence in the church “as a “sphere of freedom” in a world of social injustice, it was during his imprisonment, where his freedom was radically curtailed, that he wrote about the need to recover aesthetic existence in the church and, quite unexpectedly, began to write poetry, something he had never done before. This is significant because, as Bern Wannewetsch says, the apophatic nature of poetic language was “a particularly appropriate medium to capture the complexity of Bonhoeffer’s theological thought” in prison.⁷² To describe it as apophatic also suggests a deep and developing connection between Bonhoeffer’s theological explorations, his spirituality, his poetry and his prophetic vision as he struggled to overcome the doubts that assailed him and the reality of approaching death in a time of war, without losing his hope and humanity.

5. Nurturing life in its fullness

Bonhoeffer highlights “art, education (*Bildung*), friendship, and play” as key elements in the nurturing of aesthetic existence in the church, each of which had long been recognised as integral to a well-rounded humanist

70 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 268.

71 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 365, 373.

72 Bernd Wannewetsch, *Who am I? Bonhoeffer’s Theology through Poetry* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2009), 4; On the relationship between the prophetic and poetic in Bonhoeffer see L. Juliana Claassens, “On Poets and Prophets”, a paper presented at the Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch, February 2024 (Unpublished).

education.⁷³ As such, they were part of Bonhoeffer’s formation as a student, a theologian and pastor, a friend and lover, and above all the human being he had become, living life to the full and even being “happy” in prison in a time of war. As we can see from his letters, alongside his reading of Scripture, his reflections on art, his memory of music, his love of literature, and his letters to and from his family and his friend Bethge, helped him retain his humanity and his faith despite times of deep despair. As he tells his friend:

You are the only person who knows that “acedia”-“tristitia” with its ominous consequences has often haunted me, and you perhaps worried about me in this respect – so I feared at the time. But I have told myself from the beginning that I will do neither human beings nor the devil this favour; they are to see to this business themselves if they wish; and I hope I can stick to it.⁷⁴

Bonhoeffer’s formation or *Bildung*, both as a humanist and a Christian, had not only enriched his life, but equipped him to face its challenges, and inspire creativity that could unexpectedly burst into poetry and equally unexpectedly in an interest in modern physics.⁷⁵

Bonhoeffer’s late interest in physics related well to the development of his theology in prison when he acknowledged the extent to which science had contributed to human well-being and helped humanity “come of age.” In fact, he refers to technology up to the eighteenth century as “handicraft.”⁷⁶ But he is equally aware that technology has become an end in itself in its mastery over nature to such an extent that its “benefits pale beside its demonic powers.”⁷⁷ As Iain MacGilchrist, using Nietzsche’s metaphor, so fully describes it, the emissary of the master has taken control, science has

73 See Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 76–102.

74 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 180.

75 See Eberhard Bethge, “The Nonreligious Scientist and the Confessing Theologian: The Influence of Karl Friedrich Bonhoeffer on his Younger Brother Dietrich,” in John W. de Gruchy, ed., *Bonhoeffer for a New Day: Theology in a Time of Transition*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 39–56.

76 See Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 116.

77 See Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 117; see John W. de Gruchy, *Faith Facing Reality: Stirring up Discussion with Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2022), 79–103.

usurped the humanities and art.⁷⁸ This is not simply an academic matter that has to do with conflict in the academy over resources and curriculum priorities, but about the importance of the arts for keeping the world human in this age of artificial intelligence,

Art as Bernard Lonergan put it “makes ordinary human life more than biological, artistic, or intellectual”, it fosters creativity which leads to the embodiment of “faith, beauty, and the admirable” in our lives and actions even “before it is given a still freer realization in painting and sculpture, in music and poetry.”⁷⁹ Indeed, in experiencing authentic art, irrespective of its form, we encounter truth that changes the way we see the world and, in the process, our lives are changed.⁸⁰ In other words, art helps us recover our ability to see and hear things differently and therefore become a means of grace that awakens the faith that, to quote Begbie, “is enthralled by Jesus’ offer of life in its fullness.” That is, a way of being human in which we freely choose to live by hope and love because we believe that there is “more to the world than we will ever be able to account for, more than could ever be fully discovered, thought, or spoken.”⁸¹ By stimulating imagination, nurturing creativity, broadening horizons, and deepening relationships, the arts help us become more truly human and therefore Christian.

The fact that Bonhoeffer speaks of “play” in the same breath as “art” is not fortuitous for it has long been included in aesthetic theory as a way of knowing ourselves and the world better. It was also an important aspect of Bonhoeffer’s life. As Clive Marsh tells us, Bonhoeffer played tennis, danced and skied with as much vigour as he played the piano.⁸² Marsh also reports that while visiting the Community of the Resurrection at Mirfield during his stay in England, Bonhoeffer “seemed as thrilled by the sight of Anglican monks enjoying sport – tennis, soccer, cricket, even rugby – in the afternoon as by the solemnities of compline and the simplicity

78 Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and his Emissary: the Divided Brain in the Making of the Western World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 409.

79 Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: a Study of Human Understanding* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1958), 187.

80 See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 89.

81 Begbie, *Abundantly More*, 177.

82 Charles Marsh, *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 18.

of communal life.”⁸³ Of course, play can subvert our ability to face reality and address the social challenges, become a way of escaping reality, a cut-throat competing commercial enterprise, or reinforcing our dehumanizing instincts, as in “war games.”⁸⁴ And, as Neil Postman graphically puts it, we can “amuse ourselves to death.”⁸⁵ We can even be “entertained” by the images of terror and genocide that dominate the news on TV. But the play to which Bonhoeffer refers is a way to affirm our common humanity and build a more humane world through building more humane communities.

While art and play are key elements in describing aesthetic existence, Bonhoeffer’s focus in writing to Bethge was especially on the role of friendship, mindful as they both were, of the importance of their own friendship.⁸⁶ We have already noted the importance of Bonhoeffer’s friendships, but his friendship with Bethge was exceptional. It was an example of aesthetic existence which, says Bonhoeffer, must be defended “against all ‘ethical’ existences that may frown upon it ... Unlike marriage and family relationships, friendship does not enjoy “recognized rights” proscribed by law, but “depends entirely on its own inherent quality” as a “sphere of freedom [*Spielraum*].”⁸⁷ As Bonhoeffer wrote in his poem on friendship addressed to Bethge,

Alongside the given orders,
 things formed from weighty, earthy matter,
 alongside marriage, work and the sword,
 what’s free too, strives to live
 and to flourish under the sun.
 It is not the ripe fruit alone
 but the blossoms too,

83 Marsh, *Strange Glory*, 218.

84 Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Play of Art,” in *The Relevance of the Beautiful* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 130.

85 Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin, 1985).

86 See de Gruchy, *Daring, Trusting Friend*, 79–86.

87 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 291.

that are lovely.
 Rarest, most precious blossom of all,
 sprung in a blessed hour
 from the freedom of a playful,
 daring, trusting spirit,
 such is the friend to the friend.⁸⁸

In thinking about the role of friendship specifically in the life of the church Bonhoeffer might well have recalled his early involvement in the World Alliance for Promoting Friendship through the Churches of which he became the German Youth Secretary at its founding Cambridge Conference in 1930. Started in Germany by the well-known pacifist pastor, Sigmund Schultze, with the horrors of the First World War in mind, the Alliance was an attempt to prevent future wars in Europe by developing friendships across national borders through the ecumenical church.⁸⁹ Bonhoeffer, it is true, eventually became critical of the World Alliance because it lacked theological substance and was unable to counter the rise of Nazism. But the Alliance not only survived the war: it also contributed to the formation of the World Council of Churches in 1948. Bonhoeffer did not live to see that development, but he left a strong imprint on the WCC as it developed after the Second World War, not least through the building of friendships across confessional and denominational boundaries.

In a world at war, spheres of freedom in which relationships across national, ethnic, and religious boundaries are seriously undermined by propaganda, censorship, and the instruments of “state security”, the role of the ecumenical church becomes even more important than at other times. It is at such times that friendships that have been made and nurtured across these boundaries during more peaceful times become critical within the peace-making process that must inevitably begin. This is surely a key role and responsibility of the ecumenical church and the reason why aesthetic existence needs to be renewed in the church as a sphere of freedom where we

88 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 268–269. Translation amended by Isobel de Gruchy; see also de Gruchy, *Daring, Trusting Friend*, 59–73.

89 See Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 238–248.

can respond passionately to God’s possibility of peace becoming concrete reality in a world at war.

In his *Beauty of the Infinite* David Bentley Hart says that although the Christian infinite is ethical, it is only so “because it is first ‘aesthetic’”, that is, it “opens up being and beings – to knowledge or love” and awakens “a desire that is moral only because it is not disinterested.” And, significantly, as Hart goes on to say, the Christian icon of the Word made flesh which lies “between idolatry and the ethical abolishment of all images” is how and where the “beauty of the Infinite” is perfectly embodied.⁹⁰ The icon of Christ under the Rubble may not satisfy Romantic norms of beauty, but it bears witness to the redemptive “beauty of the Infinite” Incarnate One who was born in a cattle shed, and whose death on a cross at the hands of an occupying army was foreshadowed by the slaughter of the innocents in Palestine.⁹¹

To “be happy” in such a time is obscene unless it is the “blessedness” of the peacemakers who stand in solidarity with those who suffer, binding their wounds, and working tirelessly to achieve justice. Aesthetic existence and costly discipleship belong together bearing witness to the possibility of the love of God which, writes Bonhoeffer, in a time of war “embraces even the most abysmal godlessness of the world in Jesus Christ. Ecce homo – behold God become human, the unfathomable mystery of the love of God for the world ...”⁹²

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90 David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 19.

91 See de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation*, 97–102.

92 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*. 82–84.

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