Scottish Journal of Theology (2024), **77**, 138–148
doi:10.1017/S0036930624000231

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The beauty of the body and the ascension: A reclamation and subversion of physical beauty

Laura Cerbus

University of Divinity, Kew, VIC, Australia
Email: laura.cerbus@gmail.com

(Received 26 September 2023; revised 19 December 2023; accepted 26 December 2023)

Abstract

In the last century, beauty has not often found itself enlisted in struggles for justice. As Alexander Nehemas recounts, beauty's severance from goodness and truth in the modern period renders beauty dangerous, its charm easily wielded as an instrument of oppression in the hands of the powerful. While some scholars have argued for a return to the pre-modern metaphysics that binds beauty to truth and goodness, the abuse of beauty is not simply a modern phenomenon, and its resistance requires more than a pre-modern solution. Beauty is eschatological; thus its abuse points to a failure to order it properly to its eschatological end. This article will argue that the abuse of beauty can be resisted not by spiritualising beauty, but by ordering physical beauty to its eschatological end. This end is most clearly seen in the ascended Christ, with his beautiful body that is human, wounded and hidden.

Keywords: aesthetics; ascension; beauty body; Christology

In the last century, beauty has not often found itself enlisted in struggles for justice. As Alexander Nehamas recounts, beauty's severance from goodness and truth in the modern period renders beauty dangerous, its charm easily wielded as an instrument of oppression in the hands of the powerful.[1] Beauty thus has been sidelined in modernity. In response to this neglect, some scholars have argued for a return to a pre-modern conception of beauty that is bound to truth and goodness.[2]

However, the abuse of beauty is not only a modern phenomenon. The pre-modern era offers us many examples of the way definitions of beauty functioned as tools of exclusion and oppression, including the early Greek notion of the golden ratio as a standard of bodily beauty. Thus, beauty's complicity in humanity's struggle to wield power over others is not solved simply by reuniting beauty with truth and goodness as ancient and mediaeval theologians did.

[1]Alexander Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 2–3.

[2]See D. C. Schindler, *Love and the Postmodern Predicament* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018); Jonathan King, *The Beauty of the Lord: Theology as Aesthetics* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018); and Junius Johnson, *Father of Lights* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020).

Beyond a metaphysical restoration, then, beauty also requires an eschatological reorientation. In his seminal work on the Holy Spirit and beauty, Patrick Sherry notes the common connection of beauty to eschatology. Beauty, he argues, has an eschatological significance, in that any present beauty we perceive is a harbinger of the beauty to come. Seen most clearly in the transfiguration and resurrection of Christ's physical body, Sherry argues that in 'anticipating a final restoration of all things',[3] these events orient beauty to the future. Sherry cautions against speculation about what that future beauty will be *exactly*: in reference to Paul's metaphors of seed and tent as anticipations of what is to come, he infers that the body will experience significant change, even as it remains a body.[4]

Jeremy Begbie agrees, arguing, 'Beauty we apprehend now is a Spirit-given foretaste of the beauty still to be given, in the midst of a creation that languishes in bondage to corruption, groans in anticipation of a glory not yet revealed'.[5] An eschatological orientation for beauty does not attempt to grasp the beauty of the moment, but should 'look ahead to the beauty of the new heaven and the new earth, of which this world's finest beauty is but a minuscule glimpse'.[6] This observation is crucial for resisting an abuse of beauty, because it requires a chastened view of present, material beauty.

Here we can identify oppressive and exclusive standards of beauty as those which fail to understand physical beauty's eschatological nature and instead seek to immanentise it in the present. The result of this failure to shape our judgement of beauty eschatologically is tragically on display in every era of human history. Natalie Carnes asks,

> How can we avoid thinking of the devastation wreaked by the Nazi quest for the master race? Or the thousand ships launched by Paris's desire to possess Helen? Or the swelling numbers and decreasing ages of women (and, increasingly, men) suffering with eating disorders? Or Toni Morrison's Pecola, consumed and disintegrated with the desire for blue eyes? Beauty has been implicated in misogyny, racism, war, and genocide. Even more: It is part of the entertainment that distracts us from these weighty concerns. Let's not be sentimental about beauty. It has a past that calls for sackcloth and ashes.[7]

From my own Australian context, I could add the way indigenous Australians are alternately judged by western ideals of beauty and subjected to exoticism and objectification. Each of these examples highlights the danger of immanentising standards of beauty and seeking an ideal in the present. Despite the ubiquitous human tendency to find in human beauty an ideal that surpasses all others, the ideal cannot be located here, in this present age.[8] Failing to position beauty eschatologically wrenches it, in its

[3]Patrick Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty: An Introduction to Theological Aesthetics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 163.

[4]Ibid., p. 168. It is important to note here that this eschatological change will be a transformation of the corruption and decay of beauty that sin has caused, but not an erasure of creaturely finitude.

[5]Jeremy Begbie, *A Peculiar Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), p. 10.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Natalie Carnes, *Beauty: A Theological Engagement with Gregory of Nyssa* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), p. xii.

[8]It is worth reinforcing that by 'here' I do not mean in this physical world as opposed to a transcendent immaterial world, but 'here' as in this moment of time. This distinction is important because in the former, material beauty is jettisoned in favour of immaterial beauty. This jettisoning does not solve the problem of beauty's abuse, but simply relocates it.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930624000231 Published online by Cambridge University Press

glory and splendour fully revealed, from the future into the present. Or more precisely, a non-eschatological beauty ignores what is to come in favour of what is now and does not let what is now be shaped by what is to come.

The eschatological end of beauty is most clearly seen in the ascended Christ. Although not accessible to us in its essence, in Christ beauty has been revealed in human form. 'Christ', Hans Urs von Balthasar argues, 'is the visibleness of the Father',[9] and as such reveals the beauty of the '"formless" Father' through the '"formed" Son'.[10] In Christ, we have the perfect image of God. Christ thus perfectly reveals the ways in which God is beautiful. Furthermore, 'all the great words of aesthetics' are signified by the Christ-form, in which 'all of it has its measure and its true context'.[11] Gregory of Nyssa agrees: 'there is nothing formless or unadorned in respect to the Father which does not rejoice in the beauty of the only-begotten Son'.[12] With the Son as the archetype for beauty and thus for all beautification, beauty has an objective anchor that can protect it from abuse, distortion and complicity in evil.[13]

My claim, however, is more specific: namely, that it is the *ascended* Christ that anchors our idea and pursuit of human beauty and provides an image able to resist the abuse that beauty tends to attract. If, as Sherry argues, the beauty we experience at present points towards the beauty to come, specifically in Christ's transformed body, my argument complements it: in the beauty of the ascended Christ, we find the measure of all beauty. Justification must here be given for the attention I am giving to Christ ascended, rather than (as Sherry does) simply to Christ resurrected.[14] T. F. Torrance argues that the resurrection and ascension together have an eschatological reference, but it is the ascension which best makes sense of the present time in which Christ's reign is not complete.[15] He describes it as both 'an eschatological pause in the one *Parousia* of Christ', as well as the event that determines the church's relationship to Christ.[16] It is these characteristics that make the ascended Christ the best image for resisting the abuse of beauty. In the ascension's eschatological character, it

[9]Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Seeing the Form*, vol. 1 of *The Glory of the Lord*, eds. Joseph Fessio SJ and John Riches, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (London: A&C Black, 1982), p. 233.

[10]Ibid., p. 245.

[11]Ibid., p. 465.

[12]Gregory of Nyssa, 'On Perfection', in *Ascetical Works*, trans. and ed. Virginia Woods Callahan (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1999), p. 106; ProQuest Ebook Central, https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.divinity.idm.oclc.org/lib/undiv/detail.action?docID=3134858.

[13]While the focus of this essay is on the beauty of the human body, taking the Son as the archetype of beauty also has implications for the beauty of non-human creatures. One expression of this is found in the divine ideas tradition, which takes the incarnate Word as the exemplar of all creatures. See Mark McIntosh, *The Divine Ideas Tradition in Christian Mystical Theology* (Oxford: OUP, 2021) for a summary of the divine ideas tradition and a treatment of its implications for the beauty of the non-human creation.

[14]The ascension has suffered from considerable neglect in modern theology, and where it has not been neglected, it has tended to be treated as mythological: an event that cannot be affirmed historically due to its incompatibility with a modern cosmology and so instead is interpreted metaphorically. As Robert Jenson observes, 'A body requires a place, and we find it hard to think of any place for this one', *The Triune God*, vol. 1 of *Systematic Theology* (New York: OUP, 1997), p. 202. See also Mark Harris, 'Science, Scripture, and the Hermeneutics of Ascension', *Theology and Science* 12/3 (2014), pp. 201–15.

[15]David Fergusson, 'The Ascension of Christ: Its Significance in the Theology of T.F. Torrance', *Participatio* 3 (2012), pp. 92–107.

[16]Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, 2nd edn (London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2018), p. 145.

orients us, and beauty, towards the future, and in its 'eschatological pause', it resists any triumphalism that would obscure the cross as the pattern of our lives.[17] These possibilities, I will argue, are grounded in an affirmation of the bodily ascension of Christ, however difficult such an affirmation has become in a post-Copernican world.[18] Because of the human nature of the ascended Christ, beauty cannot be divorced from materiality but must include it. Yet in addition to being human, Christ's ascended body is also wounded and hidden. These three characteristics of Christ's ascended body, I argue, subvert attempts to disorder and abuse beauty.

Ascended in the body

Irenaeus, in his resistance to the Gnostic attacks on the human nature of Jesus, insists that Jesus' ascension follows from his bodily resurrection. The ascension, then, was not an ascent of the soul that left Jesus' body behind or made Jesus into something other than human. For Irenaeus, this issue is not simply a matter of historical accuracy. Rather, Irenaeus finds in Jesus' history our own future: our glorification in the body depends both on Jesus' resurrection and on his ascension. Against those who claim that the human ascent is one of the soul, in which the body will be left behind while their 'inner man…ascends into the super-celestial place',[19] Irenaeus insists that at the resurrection (by which he means the final resurrection),

> then receiving their bodies and rising in their entirety, that is bodily, just as the Lord arose, they shall come into the presence of God. For no disciple is above the Master, but every one that is perfect shall be as his Master [Luke 6:40]. As our Master, therefore, did not at once depart, taking flight [to heaven], but awaited the time of His resurrection prescribed by the Father, which had been also shown forth through Jonas, and rising again after three days was taken up [to heaven]; so ought we also to await the time of our resurrection prescribed by God and foretold by the prophets, and so, rising, be taken up, as many as the Lord shall account worthy of this privilege.[20]

[17]See Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), pp. 72–3.

[18]It is outside the scope of this paper to address this difficulty. For a helpful discussion, see Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, p. 128: 'the ascension must be thought out in relation to the actual relations of space and time. On the other hand, however, the ascension must be thought of as an ascension beyond all our notions of space and time (cf. "higher than the heavens", Heb. 7:26), and therefore as something that cannot ultimately be expressed in categories of space and time, or at least cannot be enclosed within categories of this kind…We have heavens that are appropriate to human beings, the sky above the earth, the "space" beyond the sky, but all these are understood anthropocentrically, for they are conceivable to men as created realities. But God in his own nature cannot be conceived in that way – God utterly transcends the boundaries of space and time, and therefore because he is beyond them he is also everywhere, for the limits of space and time which God transcends are all around us. Hence from this aspect the absence or presence of God cannot be spoken of in categories of space and time, but only when categories of space and time break off and point beyond themselves altogether to what is ineffable and inconceivable in modes of our space and time'. See also David Wilkinson, *Christian Eschatology and the Physical Universe* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010); https://www.perlego.com/book/804084/christian-eschatology-and-the-physical-universe-pdf; and Harris, 'Science, Scripture, and the Hermeneutics'.

[19]Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against the Heresies* 5.31.2, trans. Dominic J. Unger (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992).

[20]Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930624000231 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Here, Irenaeus ties the future of our bodies to the past of Jesus' body. In his argument, both the resurrection and the ascension have implications for our bodies.

In Irenaeus, then, we find that the body cannot be left behind. Whatever we say about beauty, it must ultimately involve the body. If Christ's human body has now been glorified, that means that our bodies can expect the same: they will become beautiful. The beauty we expect is not simply a beauty of the soul, in reference to virtue or holiness. That will, of course, be included, but it does not describe the entirety of our beauty. Rather, we will rise in our entirety, to use Irenaeus' phrase, which entails a future beautification of our bodies. The incorporation of Christ's beautiful body into the divine life thus embraces rather than excludes humanity's physical beauty.

In one modern interpretation, the ascension marks the final stage in a process of transformation in which the physical and gendered body of Christ is displaced. Graham Ward argues that the multi-gendered body of the church displaces Christ's body, which in its absence has created space in which the church can expand. Rather than locating Christ's body in heaven, Ward argues that Christ's body is 'permeable, transcorporeal, transpositional'.[21]

In Ward's argument, Jesus' body becomes displaced through a continual direction away from its physicality – particularly, its maleness and Jewishness. As Ward recognises, the humanity of the resurrected (and then ascended) Christ appears in a form unrecognisable to the disciples. Mary, the disciples on the road to Emmaus – these close friends of Jesus do not recognise him. And yet, he is still recognisable *as human*, even if transformed, and however much we may speculate about what this resurrected humanity entails. This continuing humanity grounds our embrace of physical beauty, precluding us from seeing the flesh as a means to the immaterial. What Irenaeus will not allow is the displacement of Jesus' body such that we look away from it and towards some other spiritual reality. As the image of God, the one who perfectly reveals the Father, Jesus tells us that 'the one who has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14:9). In other words, there is nowhere else to look.

The ascension does not then minimise the importance of Jesus' physical body, but suspends our attention between the past and future. 'By withdrawing himself from our sight, Christ sends us back to the historical Jesus Christ as the *covenanted* place on earth and in time, which God has appointed for meeting between man and himself'.[22] Only through the historical, embodied Christ – as opposed to a disembodied Logos – can we meet God. This has implications for our understanding of beauty: we cannot ever get beyond the physical body of Jesus, as Balthasar insists, and we can never get beyond the beauty that appears to our senses.[23] This does not mean that there is nothing beyond, but that we only have access to that beyond through and in the beautiful image – an access that is ever and always dependent on what is visible.

From one perspective, the displacement of Christ's body might seem to aid a resistance of beauty's abuse, as it decentres the physical body, reducing its significance and thus the weight which can be given to its ideals. It also decentres the gendered and ethnic body of Christ, two categories of bodies that often find themselves the target of abuse, in a particular gender or ethnicity being declared as representative of ideal

[21]Graham Ward, 'Bodies: The Displaced Body of Jesus Christ', in John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (eds), *Radical Orthodoxy* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

[22]Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, p. 133.

[23]Balthasar, *Seeing the Form*, pp. 20–21.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930624000231 Published online by Cambridge University Press

beauty, thus marginalising those outside of those particulars. *One* kind of beauty is postulated as the ideal, and all bodies are expected to either conform or to be relegated to the category of 'ugly'. Given these problems, we might be inclined to see the displacement of Christ's body as a means of resisting the abuse of beauty.

And yet this displacement of Christ's gendered and ethnic body also displaces *our* individual bodies. If Christ's body is replaced by the Church's body, as Ward claims, then rather than union there is identification; the individual is overwhelmed. But if Christ's body remains intact as a human body, then, as Irenaeus understood, the future of our own bodies is secure as well. As Douglas Farrow argues, 'Irenaeus was safeguarding not only the integrity of Jesus but the integrity of every particular; that is, he was postulating a creaturely unity which does not exclude the plurality of our human personhood or of our bodily existence'.[24] We are united to Christ, not subsumed into him. This implies that our difference is retained – both our difference from him as creatures, and our difference from each other. This difference does not divide us from one another; instead, when understood as difference given and blessed by God, we can find in Christ's 'love for his own flesh', as Emmanuel Falque describes it, the means by which we can cherish and love our own flesh – and the flesh of the other.[25] Only by a posture of embracing ourselves and each other can we resist the temptation to find either in ourselves or in someone else an ideal beauty that excludes and oppresses.

Christ's beautiful wounds

Part of the stakes here involves the continuity of Jesus' resurrected body and his ascended body, an issue that can be seen by attending to Jesus' wounded body. Recent attempts to resist beauty's abuse have turned to Christ crucified and resurrected. Balthasar, for example, insists that the only way to receive the revelation of beauty is to find it in the sign of the cross, which 'radically puts an end to all worldly aesthetics'.[26] In light of the crucified, all definitions of beauty must be re-thought. Richard Villadesau agrees: the cross 'embraces (in a way that is yet to be clarified) even what appears (from a merely inner-worldly perspective) to be irrational, disordered, lacking in attractiveness and goodness'.[27] Even so, '[t]he beauty of the cross is not the contradiction of what we experience through "worldly" beauty, but is the elevation of the latter to its fullest and most complete level, that of interpersonal communion among humans and with God'.[28]

More than re-defining beauty, Natalie Carnes considers the way that Christ crucified changes the way we act. Drawing from imagery in Gregory of Nyssa's commentary on the Song of Songs, she argues that beauty centred on Christ requires an outgoing movement of love towards the poor and afflicted: beauty does not belong to what is safe, rich, sanitised and healthy, because beauty 'find[s its] final realit[y] in the Word whose flesh was twisted, tortured, and killed – and yet was resurrected in glory'.[29] His suffering flesh is not erased by resurrection, but his wounds endure as a witness to his outgoing love.

[24]Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*, p. 55.

[25]Emmanuel Falque, *God, the Flesh, and the Other: From Irenaeus to Duns Scotus*, trans. William Christian Hackett (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015), p. 153.

[26]Balthasar, *Seeing the Form*, p. 448.

[27]Richard Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty, and Art* (New York: OUP, 1999), p. 193.

[28]Ibid., p. 198.

[29]Carnes, *Beauty: A Theological Engagement*, p. 181.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930624000231 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Here, Carnes is careful to emphasise that beauty does not entail what is ugly, but that 'on this side of the eschaton, finding what is beautiful requires attending to what is ugly'. It is worth quoting her here at length:

> The beautiful and the ugly can reference the same object, looked at in the context of Christ's coming in glory or the context of the exclusive banquet of the satiated. In this world, the beautiful and the ugly are so intimate that attempts to find a 'beautiful' sanitized of the ugly often degenerates into little more than an unblessed rage for order – or a sentimental ignoring of the conditions of life. Attempts to purge the world of un-beauty can only yield ugliness. It is not that finding beauty apart from ugliness is impossible…but that the greater and the more profound the beauty, the greater the ugliness in which it is implicated, for the profoundest beauties participate in the eschatological Beauty, which is to say, the One who is Beauty Crucified. Furthermore, an attempt to find a beautiful unmixed with the ugly is in danger of becoming a love for beauty that disdains the suffering of this world.[30]

This understanding of beauty complicates conceptions of physical beauty and beliefs about where it may be found. The claim that Christ's body is beautiful does not allow us to jettison physical beauty in favour of a beauty that is purely immaterial. And yet if this body is also wounded, permanently marked by the scars of his suffering, any ideal of beauty that would exclude such a body is revealed to be wanting.[31] As Carnes argues, seeking a pure beauty and eliminating all that is not beautiful has no place for Christ.

Claiming Christ's wounded body as beautiful also affirms that in the eschaton, the finitude of our bodies will be maintained, not erased. In the present age, creaturely finitude is woven with death and decay.[32] Yet our eschatological hope is not that our finitude will be absorbed into divine infinitude, but that there will be 'joyous fellowship between the Creator and creation… Such fellowship with the Creator suggests an ultimate affirmation of finitude but also an emancipation from the anxiety that characterises finitude'.[33] Christ's wounded body, a body which has ascended to heaven – to God's space and God's time – affirms that the infinite can embrace the finite without erasing it. Christ's wounds signify that what must be overcome is not the finitude of our creaturely existence, but the corruption and decay that mars creaturely life. As Aquinas argues Christ's wounds are taken up into his incorruptible body and manifest beauty and glory because they are 'signs of virtue'.[34]

[30]Ibid., p. 162.

[31]The claim of the permanence of Christ's wounds follows pre-Reformation theologians, such as Cyril of Alexandria, Bede and Aquinas, who argue for the importance of Christ's ascended body having continuity with his earthly body. As Peter Widdicombe shows in his review of pre-Reformation and Reformation views on the permanence of Christ's wounds, pre-Reformation theologians understood one theological significance of Christ's wounds to be that they testify to the suffering and death of Christ, a testimony that was not erased in his glorification. This claim does not understand Christ's wounds to be signs of corruption. In contrast, Calvin does not see Christ's wounds compatible with glory. See Peter Widdicombe, 'The Wounds and the Ascended Body: The Marks of Crucifixion in the Glorified Christ from Justin Martyr to John Calvin', *Laval théologique et philosophique* 59/1 (février 2003), pp. 137–54.

[32]See Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, chapter 8, for a discussion of time and the resurrection event.

[33]Ernst Conradie, 'On Human Finitude and Eternal Life', *Scriptura* 88 (2005), p. 47.

[34]*Summa Theologiae*, vol. 55, trans. C. Thomas Moore (London: Blackfriars, 1976), p. 35; quoted in Widdicombe, 'The Wounds and the Ascended Body', p. 150.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930624000231 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In arguing for the beauty of Christ's wounded body, we must be careful of justifying suffering on the basis of future glory.[35] The image of a crucified Christ can be and has been twisted and used to oppress. To avoid such distortion, we must note that when we move from the image of Christ's body to other bodies, the context shifts. What Gregory of Nyssa describes in the wounding of the bride, as well as the wound his sister Macrina carries, arise not out of a context of oppression and injustice, but out of a context of pursuing solidarity with Christ. What we are speaking of here is a body that is wounded in the sense that Gregory of Nyssa describes the bride's wounds: a wounding of love by the Spirit, one that in Carnes' interpretation, breaks us open towards and for the other so that we might not be closed in on ourselves.[36]

In contrast, Christ's wounds are inflicted by unjust, oppressive hands. Yet, they break the power of that injustice through Christ's love, as he knowingly subjects himself to oppression in order to overcome it. Andy Johnson argues that Jesus resists a form of humanity that is 'beastly', embodied by the Roman emperor, who pursued domination. Jesus' body thus bears the marks of his resistance to a beastly humanity, and '[i]t is that very body that is raised and ascends to heaven'.[37] In this image, we find our humanity embraced by the divine life – but this is humanity in a certain shape: opened, poured out, wounded. By claiming that body to be beautiful, we resist narrow definitions of beauty that leave no room for the cross.

Affirming the wounded body of Christ ascended has implications both for us and our own beauty, and for others. As both individuals and as the church, we must keep in view Christ's wounded body, even as we celebrate his glorification. Displacing this particular body not only threatens our own particularity in glorification, but it also threatens to overwhelm the image of Christ crucified with the image of Christ glorified. Particularly given the image of the ascended Christ as an image of triumph and victory, attending to the wounded body of Christ becomes crucial for resisting images of beauty that claim glory apart from the cross. In contrast, a christological beauty that attends to Christ's wounds is intermingled with ugliness.[38] In this image, we find our concept of beauty reshaped, our ideas of wholeness and perfection destabilised; for to remain unmarred, healthy and intact means becoming *de*formed according to the shape humanity is meant to take.[39] Christ's wounded body thus subverts any standard of beauty that seeks to eradicate ugliness in the present age.

Christ's veiled beauty

The final characteristic of Christ's ascended body that I want to consider is its hiddenness. Here, in conversation with Balthasar's concept of Christ's veiled beauty and early Christian interpretations of the ascension, I argue that Christ's hidden body should chasten theologies of beauty. Until Christ inaugurates the eschaton at his parousia,

[35]'[T]he talk of self-surrender and abandonment, obedience, and a pure readiness to suffer, all suggests a pattern of human existence which can easily be infected by human domination or self-disparagement, and so become just the opposite of the liberating and empowering form of human life which Jesus as savior might be expected to model'. Mark McIntosh, *Christology from Within* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), p. 139.

[36]Carnes, *Beauty: A Theological Engagement*, p. 206.

[37]Andy Johnson, 'Resurrection and Ascension of True Humanity in Luke-Acts', *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 15/2 (2021), p. 256.

[38]Carnes, *Beauty: A Theological Engagement*, p. 181.

[39]Ibid., p. 206.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930624000231 Published online by Cambridge University Press

beauty will continue to be hidden where we do not expect it, and appearances will continue to distract and deceive.

In Balthasar's theological aesthetics, Christ is the centre of God's revelation as the one whose form perfectly reveals the Father. And yet, even in this perfect revelation, Balthasar considers the phenomenon of hiddenness, of a veiled beauty of Christ, in consequence of which his beauty is not recognised: he is 'misapprehended'. Balthasar argues that in this misapprehension there is always some implication of guilt, because the failure to apprehend Christ is due to a lack of faith: 'If one fails to see the form of Jesus it is not because the objective evidence is insufficient, but because the guilt of a "darkness" which does not see, recognise, or receive the Light'.[40] Christ's hiddenness, Balthasar says, judges those who misapprehend, because in the form of Christ they see nothing lovely, only contemptible.[41] Building on Balthasar, John de Gruchy argues that 'The beauty of Jesus Christ is the beauty of God. But it is the beauty of the "suffering servant" (Isa 53:2–3), and as such it is a veiled beauty which is not self-evident'.[42] It is thus Christ's humility that renders his beauty 'invisible except to the eyes of faith'.[43] As Augustine comments, it is only when Christ reveals himself in glory that his outward beauty will be manifested, an event proleptically experienced at the transfiguration.[44]

Balthasar interprets Christ's hiddenness as a means to subvert Jewish expectations and to make possible the true manifestation of his identity.[45] The purpose, then, of concealment is not to finally conceal, but to reveal. As Balthasar argues, the motif of the Messianic secret in Mark's Gospel has behind it a belief that 'only the risen Christ could be understood and proclaimed without danger of misunderstanding'.[46]

And yet this dialectic of concealment and manifestation does not resolve completely after Christ's resurrection. Only forty days later, Christ ascends into heaven. At this event, his body is truly hidden from view, covered by the clouds, obscured from the disciples' vision. The early Christian tradition interpreted the ascension as an essential stage in the development of faith: it demonstrated the insufficiency of the body for a life of faith, and the need to have Jesus' physical body removed so that his people might understand his divinity. In sermons preached on the ascension, Leo the Great, John Chrysostom and Augustine all interpret the ascension as proof of the limitations of physical, earthly sight. Leo speaks of the apostles' faith pre-ascension as being 'held back by any use of bodily sight'.[47] Augustine more specifically explains this as a failure

[40]Balthasar, *Seeing the Form*, p. 509.

[41]Ibid.

[42]John W. de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice* (Cambridge: CUP, 2001), p. 122.

[43]Ann W. Astell, *Eating Beauty: The Eucharist and the Spiritual Arts of the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016), p. 48.

[44]Referenced in Astell, *Eating Beauty*, p. 46.

[45]Balthasar, *Seeing the Form*, p. 504. Balthasar's language here has the potential to play into negative portrayals of the Jews in Jesus' time. However, rather than functioning in contrast to Gentile expectation or reception, the subversion of Jewish expectation is better read as representative of the way Christ's identity subverts *all* expectations, both Jewish and Gentile. In this reading, Jewish belief becomes the mirror through which all our distorted and mistaken assumptions about Christ can be revealed.

[46]Ibid.

[47]Leo the Great, 'Sermon 74', in *St. Leo the Great Sermons*, trans. Jane Patrician Freeland and Agnes Josephine Conway (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1996), p. 327.

to think about Christ as both man *and* God.[48] He says that while Jesus remained on earth, the apostles continued to think that the Father is greater than Christ; only in his absence can that be corrected. He puts it bluntly: 'the Body they beheld did not permit them' to think of Christ in a 'spiritual manner'.[49] These sermons treat the body, both Christ's and our own, as an instrument that becomes an impediment to a genuine faith that sees Christ for all he is. Initially necessary, the body of Christ is removed in order to facilitate greater faith and understanding of Christ as both human and divine. Thus, we could conclude, the body veils Christ's beauty and prevents us from seeing its fullness. In this view, the hiddenness of Christ's body works against any embrace of Jesus' physical beauty – and, by extension, of ours.

Yet if what we have so far argued is true, then this conclusion cannot leave us resting easy. I propose we return to Balthasar's concept of hiddenness as a way forward – a way that does not uncritically embrace physical beauty but enfolds it into God's redemption still to be consummated. Balthasar, as I have shown, finds in Christ's concealment a necessity based on time and distorted perception. Because of misconceptions about what the Messiah would come to do, Christ does not proclaim his identity 'by means of spectacular theophany that dazzles human misery with divine splendour'.[50] This theophany, however, is coming, and it will be a revelation not only of Christ but also of his bride, whom Christ has adorned and beautified.[51] This returns us to the eschatological location of beauty that we established earlier. Rather than pitting physical beauty against spiritual beauty as something that conceals, I am arguing that we locate physical beauty in a particular time: the eschaton. This does not mean, of course, that physical beauty is not present now – our experiences would quickly contradict such a claim. Instead, locating physical beauty eschatologically inserts an 'eschatological pause' that chastens our pursuit of it.[52]

In the withdrawing of Christ's physical body from our view, the full revelation of Christ's physical beauty has been relocated to the future. Christ's physical beauty is not yet fully manifest, for similar reasons that Balthasar gives for the concealment of Christ's beauty in the incarnation. The danger of misapprehension, of taking preconceptions of what physical beauty is and where it is found, necessitates Christ's physical absence until the *Parousia*. Here I depart from Balthasar: the resurrected Christ does not, as he claims, preclude misapprehension. In proclaiming a resurrected saviour, the danger has been and continues to be that those who hear will see only the glory without the cross. Without absence, we move towards an aesthetic triumphalism – the misconception that we do know in full what physical beauty looks like – rather than adopting a posture of humility that comes from Jesus' body being hidden from our view.

If in the resurrection we have an intimation of what is to come, the doctrine of the ascension reminds us that we are not there yet. Through Christ's hidden body, we are precluded from grasping what has not yet been given. Our grasping after physical beauty now is not grasping after something illicit, but grasping impatiently, without understanding what time it is. Here, Irenaeus' interpretation of the fall is instructive: '[Irenaeus] did not scorn the content of Satan's promise to Adam and Eve. Rather, Irenaeus becomes hot under the collar when becoming "gods" is promised *too early*, that is, to those

[48]Augustine, 'Mystery of the Lord's Ascension', *The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers*, vol. 2, ed. and trans. M. F. Toal (London: Longmans, Green, 1958–1963), pp. 417, 419.

[49]Ibid., p. 417.

[50]Balthasar, *Seeing the Form*, p. 508.

[51]Ibid., pp. 662–3.

[52]Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, p. 145.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930624000231 Published online by Cambridge University Press

who were too small to receive it'.[53] In this human grasping, we can locate oppressive and exclusive standards of beauty as those which fail to understand physical beauty's eschatological nature and instead seek to immanentise it in the present.

Conclusion

The ascension, like the resurrection, is an eschatologically oriented event that reminds us that we have not yet obtained what has been promised. By attending to Christ's ascended body, we find an image of beauty that reveals the future of our own bodily beauty. Suspended as it is between the first and second parousia, this image also offers a way of resisting the abuse of beauty, because it resists conceptions of beauty that tend towards triumphalism.

In the affirmation of the ascension of Christ in the body, we retain not only his physical particularity, but ours as well – a particularity that opens the divine life to a diversity of bodies, rather than erasing such differences. Physical beauty, then, can be embraced as we recognise that Christ's beautiful body is not left behind in his glorification and return to the divine life. Indeed, his ascension promises that we will not leave our bodies behind either but will be beautified in them. Theological aesthetics, then, must not despise physical beauty for the sake of immaterial beauty.

And yet even as the ascension affirms the body, further attention to Christ's body reveals the need for our conceptions of beauty to be redefined. In the wounded body of Christ, we are confronted with a body that is beautiful in ways incongruous with narrow definitions of beauty as pure, perfect and unmarred. A glorification that does not erase his wounds complicates our understanding of what beauty is and where it can be found. This complication resists an abuse of beauty that delineates a narrow and exclusive category of beauty in order to marginalise and oppress those deemed not to be beautiful.

Finally, the hiddenness of Christ's body solidifies our temporal context, because confession of this hiddenness means that despite the resurrection, we are a waiting, longing people. We claim Christ as the archetype of beauty, and yet we have limited access to his physical body, a limitation that chastens any claims to know what perfect beauty looks like. In the present, we yearn for the full manifestation of his body, and until then, we are brought back to what has already been given: the body of Christ in the Eucharist and in the church. The bread and wine, and the communion of the saints, do not displace Christ's body, but through the work of the Spirit are images of his body. Balthasar argues that the Church does not negate Christ's hiddenness, because as a community of sinners it 'neither can nor desires to enter into competition with the form of Christ'.[54] Yet it is also true that '[t]he church adds and enhances the sacramental images that God has given us, in order to bring the aesthetic world into conformity with Christ – they should always direct our eyes upward'.[55] In this movement from the ascended Christ to present images and back to the ascended Christ, we find the physical caught up in the spiritual, redeemed and transformed.

[53]Julie Canlis, *Calvin's Ladder: A Spiritual Theology of Ascent and Ascension* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), pp. 189–90.

[54]Balthasar, *Seeing the Form*, p. 508.

[55]Ibid., p. 413.

Cite this article: Cerbus L (2024). The beauty of the body and the ascension: A reclamation and subversion of physical beauty. *Scottish Journal of Theology* **77**, 138–148. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930624000231