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Beauty appears in sadness, misery and folly: an ethical perspective

Jones, Chris
Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa
chrisjones@sun.ac.za

Abstract

This chapter focuses on the beauty that often appears in and from (extreme) sadness, misery and folly. It argues that the experience of beauty is an ancient impulse, and that one need not progress through the lower hierarchical levels set out by the psychologist Maslow before experiencing the higher, more sophisticated level of beauty. It looks at how beauty and ugliness are often interwoven with each other, but also how each one takes its own form and style in society. Beauty calls and attracts us; it is present in everybody and all around us; there is a transformative power in beauty that invites and encourages us to become the changing music in this world and transform it through a cosmic dance that radiates further beauty. With a view of John's vision from Patmos of the New Jerusalem, we must try to transform our cities with beauty, goodness, and truth.

Keywords

Maslow's hierarchy of needs; physiological needs; security and safety needs; social needs; self-esteem; self-actualisation; life is beautiful; ugly; miserable; folly; transformative power; music; New Jerusalem

1. Introduction

The American psychologist Abraham Maslow was very interested in learning about what makes people happy, and the things they do to achieve happiness, whilst other scholars of his time tended to focus more on problematic behaviours. Maslow created a hierarchy of needs, "a theory of psychological health predicated on fulfilling innate human needs in priority, culminating in self-actualization" (Cherry 2018:n.p.). He was a humanist who was convinced that people have an innate desire to be self-

actualised. To reach these ultimate goals, a number of basic needs must first be met, such as "the need for food, safety, love and self-esteem" (ibid.).

There are five different levels of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. We start at the lowest level, known as physiological needs, which include things that are essential to our survival: namely, food, water, breathing, homeostasis, shelter, clothing, and sexual reproduction (ibid.). As we move up to the next level of hierarchical needs, the requirements, according to Maslow, become more complex. They include the need for security and safety, such as financial security, health and wellness, and safety against accidents and injury. At this level people seek control and order in their lives. Therefore, "finding a job, obtaining health insurance and health care, contributing money to a savings account, and moving into a safer neighbourhood" are among other examples motivated by security and safety needs (ibid.).

The third level of Maslow's hierarchy has to do with social needs. It includes things such as love, acceptance, and belonging. At this level the need for emotional relationships is a driving factor and includes friendships, romantic attachments, family, social and community groups, churches and religious organisations, sports teams, book clubs, and other group activities (ibid.).

The fourth level of hierarchy focuses on the need for appreciation and respect and can be described as "esteem needs".

> In addition to the need for feelings of accomplishment and prestige, the esteem needs include such things as self-esteem and personal worth. People need to sense that they are valued by others and feel that they are making a contribution to the world. Participation in professional activities, academic accomplishments, athletic or team participation, and personal hobbies can all play a role in fulfilling the esteem needs … Together, the esteem and social levels make up what is known as the psychological needs of the hierarchy. (Ibid.)

This brings us to the peak of Maslow's hierarchy, namely, the self-actualisation needs. According to Maslow, self-actualisation may loosely be described

> as the full use and exploitation of talents, capabilities, potentialities, etc. Such people seem to be fulfilling themselves and to be doing

> the best that they are capable of doing … Self-actualising people are self-aware, concerned with personal growth, less concerned with the opinions of others, and interested in fulfilling their potential. (Ibid.)

At first, this theory makes a lot of sense: for instance, can one really expect someone who does not have bread to eat, water to drink, and who lives in threatening and unstable conditions, to appreciate and create beauty? Having said this, we must acknowledge that a theory like this cannot be applied rigidly in all circumstances. According to South African psychologist Wilhelm Jordaan, there are certain faults in this theory. He illustrates this by asking: Can beauty be reserved only for those who have scaled the hierarchy of needs to a position of sophistication or higher material success and satisfaction; is it only accessible to those who have reached the level where they can declare: now that we have about everything, we can sit back and see and enjoy the beauty of things around us? (Jordaan 20017:12). This would mean that people in extreme poverty, living in distress and misery, have no aesthetic impulse. This criticism of Maslow's hierarchy – namely, that needs do not necessarily follow a hierarchy – is supported by Wahba and Bridwell,1 who report "that there was little evidence for Maslow's ranking of these needs and even less evidence that these needs are in a hierarchical order" (ibid.). This will be become evident as the chapter unfolds.

Researchers' critiques also involve the assertion that Maslow's theory is difficult to test, especially his definition of self-actualisation. Nevertheless, despite these criticisms, Maslow's hierarchy of needs has remained influential because it is "focussed on the development of healthy individuals". When researchers, led by psychologist Ed Diener from the University of Illinois put the hierarchy to test in their study published in 2011, they found

> that while the fulfilment of the needs was strongly correlated with happiness, people from cultures all over the world reported that self-actualization and social needs were important even when many of the most basic needs were unfulfilled. Such results suggest that while

1 Wahba, M.A.& Bridwell, L.G. 1976. "Maslow reconsidered: A review of research on the need hierarchy theory" in *Academy of Management Annual Meeting Proceedings* 15(2):212–240. April 1976.

> these needs can be powerful motivators of human behaviour, they do not necessarily take the hierarchical form that Maslow described. (ibid.)

2. Life is Beautiful

In the film *Life is Beautiful* (*La Vita i Bella*), the invalidity of the assumption that people in extreme poverty or in the deepest misery have no aesthetic impulse is revealed. In this film, Guido Orefice and his son, Giosuy, are in deep distress and deadly peril in a German concentration camp during World War II. Dora, Guido's beloved wife, is in a nearby camp. One night, Guido slips into his camp's control room and plays the song "Barcarolle" from Jacues Offenbach's *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*. In the silence of the night, the beauty of the song resounds and sends a message of meaning, hope and love to Dora and all the other prisoners caged like animals in the camps.

Perhaps this is the kind of beauty the French poet and critic Charles Baudelaire articulated long ago as something intense and sad; something that exclaims the desire for life, even if it is mixed with the bitterness of loss and deprivation. Baudelaire reckons that all beauty eventually stands in the sign of extreme sadness and melancholy (Baudelaire 1909:21). For Jordaan a sense of beauty is an ancient human impulse coming from the paradox of our existence and can be experienced in everything that comes from the chaos of the human heart, whilst simultaneously "giving life to a dancing star" (2007:12). This is why, according to him, things like poems, compositions, paintings, sculptures and the whole cosmos are actually a project of beauty. If one looks closer and listens carefully, this dancing star is also found in the ordinary, everyday things we experience and are confronted with (2007:12).

Beauty lies in a flower garden in a squatter camp; in a colourful poster on the wall of a zinc and cardboard shack; in the burning of a candle; in the water one sprinkles on a withered plant or uses to wash a dirty bike. Affectionate care binds all these beautiful things together. It makes beauty accessible to everyone, regardless of the misery, brokenness and folly in which they may find themselves. We should never make beauty exclusive. It is not (necessarily) to be found in expensive art and evenings in theatres. Beauty lies in everything and everyone, all around us (Jordaan 2007:12).

In God's sight, beauty is found in all created things, including humans (Westermann 1997:586). Kahlil Gibran, poet, philosopher and artist, says in this regard: "People … beauty is life when life unveils her holy face. But you are life and you are the veil. Beauty is eternity gazing at itself in a mirror. But you are eternity and you are the mirror" (Gibran 2000:83).

3. The beautiful and the ugly intertwined

South African-born theologian Ockert Meyer writes that in the film *American Beauty* there is one exceptional scene – of the most beautiful he has ever seen. It shows a boy with his video camera, recording a plastic bag that is swirled around by the wind.[2] If one looks in a particular way at it, it looks as if the bag is dancing in the wind. And then again, it seems as if the wind is playing with the bag. The director specifically chose the plastic bag because it is something that is ugly in everyone's eyes. In this way, the elastic dance of the plastic bag is set against the artificial – can one also say the plastic? – beauty of American culture (Meyer 2003:75).

The well-known Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh wrote in one of his letters: "This morning I visited the place where the streetcleaners dump the rubbish. My God, it was beautiful!" (Hughes 1991:63). Some undoubtedly see beauty where others see dirt. This would make complete sense to artists like the Dadaist Kurt Schwitters, who created art out of bits and pieces he picked up in the street (De Gruchy 2001:78).

In the newsletter of the Afro-Palestine Forum[3] (Issue 69: May 2019), there is an article about Palestinians in Gaza who make sculptures and art pieces out of Israel's weapons.

> Majdi Abu Taqiyeh, 40, got the idea of making sculptures out of Israeli bullets when his brother was shot during the Great March of Return demonstrations along Gaza's eastern boundary… [He] chose the occupation's bullets as a medium to work with so they [would] become messages to the world…. [He] wanted to make human

2 This scene can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gHxi-HSgNPc.

3 A pan-African civil society organization mobilizing support and building solidarity towards the liberation of the Palestinian people

> figures out of bullets to represent the lives of martyrs who died from those bullets and others who were injured.

The article also quotes Ahmad Abu Ataya, 47, who makes prayer beads, flower pots and canes out of tear gas canisters he collects during demonstrations. "If this life isn't ours, it'll be for our children … We go to the boundary fence for our rights so we can live." For Abu Ataya, his art "is proof of life. The Israelis throw death at us, and we make life out of death."

Immanuel Kant, the influential German Enlightenment philosopher, reasons that fine art can portray something which is ugly in nature. It is important to remember that Kant distinguishes between fine art and the beauty of nature (1952:167). With this in mind, he argues that

> where "fine art" evidences its superiority is in the beautiful descriptions it gives of things that in nature would be ugly and displeasing. The Furies, diseases, devastations of war, and the like can (as evils) be very beautifully described, nay even presented in pictures. One kind of ugliness alone is incapable of being represented conformably to nature without destroying all aesthetic delight, and consequently artistic beauty, namely, that which excites *disgust*. (Kant 1952:168)

This point is further illustrated by another German philosopher, Theodor Adorno, who reasons that the beautiful "needs the ugly as a negation through which to actualize itself" (Adorno 1984:72). He then continues by saying that art "has to make use of the ugly in order to denounce the world which creates and recreates ugliness in its own image" (Adorno 1984:72). If aesthetics was only about the beautiful, we would, according to South African theologian John de Gruchy, never really understand "the dynamic life inherent in the concept of beauty" (Adorno 1984:75). De Gruchy accentuates the fact that "beauty may have the potential to redeem … but ugliness has the equally necessary capacity to subvert and deconstruct that which destroys life" (De Gruchy 2001:78–79).

In *The Book of Joy, Lasting Happiness in a Changing World*, emeritus Archbishop Desmond Tutu illustrates and strengthens this argument by saying "that nothing beautiful in the end comes without a measure of some pain, some frustration, some suffering. This is the nature of things. This is

how our universe has been made up" (Tutu & Abrams 2016:45). Echoing this sentiment, Canadian poet Anne Michaels writes in her novel *Fugitive Pieces*, about a Greek Jewish ghetto during the Second World War: "Find a way to make beauty necessary; find a way to make necessity beautiful" (1997:44).

4. Beauty and ugliness also have their own style

The beautiful and the ugly are not only interwoven, but also reflect their own unique style. It seems as if beauty and ugliness are more than a particular way of looking, a mere matter of taste. It is something that takes shape in society. For example, observing the built heritage of former communist states, it is apparent that these buildings were designed and constructed at a time of political oppression, when politics glorified what was bad, and reflect something of that oppression and injustice. One only has to look at Moscow, Prague, Budapest and Warsaw, to name a few. All the buildings are strong and well built, but not very pretty (Meyer 2003:76).

But off course, one finds brutalist concrete buildings in other countries too such as Germany – where Bauhaus was a powerful aesthetic movement – and also in the United Kingdom where many brutalist housing estates represent oppression and injustice, having been used to rehouse inner-city slum dwellers, often a long way from their jobs, shops and old communities. They too represent the worst political instincts, yet from a capitalist, not a communist perspective.

However, if one refers to the Soviet brutalist architecture as oppressive, it is important to balance this notion with the philosophy according to which it was constructed namely, equality, pragmatism, a no-frills approach to life where everyone had a decent place to live/work, abandoning the decadence and elitism of Russia's recent past. We should always be careful about a West-centric reading in this regard: we of the non-Communist world *want* to read oppression in the architecture of the Soviet state, and so we do.

With this in mind (and as already indicated), there are indeed oppressive buildings and much hated in former Soviet countries in Eastern Europe, but there are two ways to read them. Both readings are culturally determined, and one should recognise both in an argument like this. I however tend to

deepen into the one about how pragmatism, authoritarianism and the top-down imposition of uniformity in the name of equality stifles individual expressions of beauty. These qualities are certainly embodied in Soviet brutalist architecture and express how the utopian ideals of communism morphed into the dystopian realities of the USSR.

De Gruchy writes in his book *Christianity, Art and Transformation* that his friend Julian Cooke, a professor of architecture, made him "aware that apartheid was not only unjust but also ugly, and that this was reflected in the architectural landscape of our country". He says that it all seems so obvious now, "but it was a flash of insight when this first dawned on me" (2001:1). In this sense architecture and art succeed in "'immortalizing' its leaders and doctrines" (Sontag 1972:91).

Beauty is something that is often neglected in our spiritual vocabulary, but this was not always the case. For centuries, the church was the bearer of culture and beauty. But during the Reformation of the sixteenth century, art largely disappeared from most Protestant churches and thereby from the lives of believers. Meyer writes that for a while he and his family belonged to a congregation in Holland with a 1,000 year old church building. This church was properly renovated and cleaned in the 1970s. In the process, it was discovered that the entire domed roof of the church concealed some incredibly beautiful paintings depicting the life of Jesus. But during the Reformation, these beautiful images were covered with paint. Fortunately, restorers have been able to remove the paint, and today it is as if Jesus is living, working, and speaking above one's head when one attends a service in that church (2003:77).

While referring to the life of Jesus, one cannot avoid reference to the beauty of God, which includes the "ugliness" of the cross. Although this aspect of the "utter horror, but also extreme beauty of life, as it is embodied in Christ" (Cilliers 2012:168) is not addressed in depth in this chapter, I shall refer briefly to Johan Cilliers,[4] who writes that this

4 Also see his article "Fides Quaerens Pulchrum: Practical Theological Perspectives on the Desire for Beauty" in *Scriptura* 108, 2011(3):257–266 in which he reasons that beauty is a multi-layered concept and can be understood as "the quest for a radically different (and paradoxical) form of proportion within the experience of pain, horror and destruction. In this sense beauty is not contradicted by the notion of ugliness, but rather indicates the quest for the healing of proportions and the connection between

> is a strange kind of beauty in which darkness and light lie close to one another, but it is about a God who in darkness is revealed as the light. Indeed, a strange kind of aesthetic: the more God is portrayed as horrible, the more beautiful is this revelation. God's glory after all lies in God's ingloriousness, God's might in God's impotence, God's victory in God's death. (Cilliers 2012:168)

He then refers to Alejandro García-Rivera, who writes that

> the beautiful has to do with what moves the heart and thus the grotesque and unattractive can also manifest beauty … but to see the beauty in the grotesque and unattractive, one must engage the communal dimension of beauty. In this sense art needs theology … theology discerns the beautiful in the face of a crucified man through the lens of the community that gathers around the foot of the cross (Cilliers 2012:168).

5. Beauty draws and calls us despite our circumstances

A further consequence of the Reformation was that one often misreads the word beauty/beautiful in the Bible. Yet it is there. In the Living Bible we find it in Psalm 96:6: "Honour and majesty surround him; strength and beauty are in his temple." Verse 9: "Worship the Lord with the beauty of holy lives. Let the earth tremble before him." Verses 11 and 12: "Let the heavens be glad, the earth rejoice: let the vastness of the roaring seas demonstrate his glory. Praise him for the growing fields, for they display his greatness. Let the trees of the forest rustle with praise." This Psalm "was sung during the ceremony of enthronement celebrating the New Year in the temple in post-exilic Jerusalem. It invites those who are worshipping to sing a new song to Yahweh and so declare 'his glory among the nations'" (De Gruchy 2001:223). It also reminds the people that Yahweh "is the creator of all things, that 'might and beauty are in his sanctuary'" and that his people must "enter the temple to bring an offering and worship Yahweh in 'the beauty of holiness'" (ibid.:223). This implies that our holiness is derived from God's, and it is this beauty that also makes us beautiful.

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the visual and transcendent meaning". For more perspectives read Umberto Eco, 2004: *On Beauty*. Secker & Warburg. London.

In the Bible generally, and specifically in the Psalm referred to, God's beauty is nothing but his power to attract, the power to awaken joy and wonder. Tilden Edwards, founder and senior fellow of the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation in Washington DC, writes in his essay, *God draws us through beauty*, how he once passed through a village in India and "was struck and saddened by its abject material poverty everywhere." And yet, "In the midst of the squalor, my eye suddenly was arrested by the sight of a young girl combing the long flowing hair of her sister, both girls sharing beautiful serene smiles" (2017:167). He says that this brief experience came to mind again when a female participant in a Shalem group, who experienced this with him, was asked to think of some past experience of the divine.

> Those unselfconscious girls involved in a simple shared act somehow transcended the poverty of their environment and revealed God to her. It was a timeless moment that exposed a divine beauty of the soul to that woman's consciousness. She cared deeply about the alleviation of the poor physical conditions of that village. But in a special moment she also realized that there was a second dimension to her calling; to appreciate the end in itself love affair God has with us, drawing us through endless sights and sounds to realize the great love woven through all creation (2017:167).

6. Transformative power of beauty

This beauty of God is not an escape from our horrible and harsh reality, unlike much of today's art, which can be seen as an escape from reality. Rather, God's beauty is the beauty of his glory and holiness; God's beauty is usually inseparable from his goodness and truth; God's beauty is actually the power of convincing us of his truth and goodness (Meyer 2003:79).

According to the Platonic tradition, beauty is the "third transcendental" alongside truth and goodness (De Gruchy 2001:103). Hans Urs von Balthasar, the Swiss theologian and Catholic priest, who placed the concept of beauty back on the theological agenda, also links biblical revelation and classical philosophical insight, in order to "develop a Christian theology in the light of the third transcendental, that is to say: to complement the

vision of the true and the good with that of the beautiful" (Balthasar 1982: from the Foreword – n.p.).

Understood this way, beauty is, according to De Gruchy, "part of the nature of God; it is the essence of God's glory (*doxa*). Every created object, humanity included, partakes to some extent in this beauty. Hence, the inherent potential of all creation to express the beauty of God, which presupposes an analogous relationship" (2001:103).

Plato "insisted on the relationship between the truth, beauty and goodness". For Balthasar, "the three transcendentals (truth, goodness and beauty) interrelate, and need to be evaluated in relation to each other" (Balthasar 1982:118). According to De Gruchy, "they are all integral to God's being and revelation, and therefore to our transformation" (2001:104). Consequently, according to Balthasar, it is beauty that attracts people and draws them towards truth and goodness. This makes beauty redemptive and transformative. If beauty is neglected, it becomes devastating not only to the other transcendentals, but also to Christianity.

> The beautiful guards the other (transcendentals) and sets the seal on them: there is nothing true or good, in the long term, without the light of grace of that which is freely bestowed. And a Christianity which went along with modernity and subscribed merely to the true (faith as a system of correct propositions) or merely to the good (faith as that which is most useful and healthy for the subject) would be a Christianity knocked down from its own heights (Balthasar 1984: 38f).

If you take away beauty, "you undermine the attractiveness of the good and of the true" (De Gruchy 2001:106). Balthasar confirms this by saying that in "a world that no longer has enough confidence in itself to affirm the beautiful, the proofs of truth have lost their cogency" (Balthasar 1982:19). De Gruchy summarizes this insight as follows:

> Truth without goodness and beauty degenerates into dogmatism and lacks the power to attract and convince; goodness without truth is superficial, and without beauty – that is, without graced form – it degenerates into moralism. Alternatively, we could say that truth

> and goodness without beauty lack power to convince and therefore to save (2001:107).

De Gruchy emphasizes a further dimension to the relationship between truth, goodness and beauty, or between the dogmatic, the moral and the aesthetic: "The true and the good are not primarily perceived by the rational faculties as propositions and principles: they are experienced through hearing and seeing, through intuition and imagination. Hence the fundamental importance of the arts for Christian faith and life" (2001:107).

Karl Barth, a Swiss Reformed theologian, agrees with Balthasar, but the two also differ in opinion on certain respects. Barth reasons that God's beauty belongs uniquely to God and that we cannot describe God's beauty. We can only *try* to describe it by referring to the form in which God reveals his beauty. In this sense, we can argue that "God's beauty is God's power to attract, to give pleasure, to create desire, to awaken joy and wonder. God does this precisely because God is 'pleasant, desirable, full of enjoyment'" (De Gruchy 2001:112). In this regard Barth and Balthasar agree.

The disagreement between them has broadly to do with the following: according to De Gruchy, Barth "insists that God's beauty is an explanation of God's glory, not its equivalent" through creation and redemption (2001:113). For Balthasar, beauty is far more than an explanation of God's glory: "It is transcendental and therefore a constituent of *Herrlichkeit*. Thus, beauty becomes determinative for Balthasar's theology in a way that was impossible for Barth" (ibid. 2001:114).

In this respect, on a horizontal level, the Anglican priest, theologian and ecumenist, Paul Avis, offers some further insight, arguing that,

> [i]t is questionable whether we can ever know one except in intimate connection with the others … There is a truth – a reality, an authenticity – about beauty and goodness. There is goodness – a wholesomeness, salutary goodness, sacredness – about both beauty and truth. There is beauty in truth – in its self-evidence, its simplicity, its transparency – and in goodness, especially in the comeliness of moral character. (Avis 1999: 78–79)

7. Be the music to the world

For us to experience and see beauty, goodness and truth, we need artists – who are sometimes prophets – and theologians to help open our eyes. Not because they do such wonderful work, but because they are often capable of seeing beauty, goodness and truth before us. The truth of people's suffering, the truth of violence, but also the truth of God. For it is the truth, the beauty and goodness of God which open our eyes to look differently, not only at God, but also at people and our reality – to see the pain and brokenness of people and also the hardships that may hide in their eyes. Beauty can save the world in mysterious ways. It was the beauty of Christ's work and his faith that was central in the spirituality and witness of Emeritus Archbishop Tutu who, in the midst of the ugliness of apartheid and the struggle to bring about its downfall, opened up a window of hope through which the transformation of South Africa could be brought about.

For religious people, sin is the power that makes the world ugly, but it is the sacred, truthful and good lives of believers that must become the music for the world. That is why beauty is not just something that is meant for artists only, it is a command to everyone.

In the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*, an accountant finds himself in prison because of a misunderstanding. He comes into contact with a world that is profoundly different from the one he was accustomed to. In one gripping scene, he gains access to the control room of the entire prison. While the prisoners are exercising or just hanging around in the big indoor quad, he switches on a record player in front of the microphone and the prisoners hear an aria from Mozart's opera *Figaro*[5] instead of the daily announcements. What follows then is almost sacred. The prisoners are speechless whilst listening – amazed and enthralled by the new sounds they are hearing. In light of this, we must always remember: in a world of captivity and enslavement, believers must embody the beauty, goodness, truth, and holiness of God to the world (Meyer 2003:83-84). It is this beauty that has the potential to destroy the evil in this broken world. To the beat of this music we radiate beauty in a "cosmic dance" (De Gruchy 2001:114).

5 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qzuM2XTnpSA/

8. The New Jerusalem

The beauty of the world does not only come from the brushes of the great artists, the pens of great writers, and the music of great composers, as implied earlier on. It also comes from the everyday lives of the faithful, from the sanctified lives of religious people who have become the godly music and cosmic dance for the world. Sin makes the world ugly; holiness creates beauty. Perhaps beauty and holiness are the two words our world needs most (Meyer 2003:85). Maybe they best describe the future that God is taking us to. We read about it in Revelation 21.

There are two interesting things about the way John describes the future: the first is that he describes heaven as a beautiful, holy city; and the second is that this city has no church (Revelation 21:22). The Reformation of the sixteenth century was propelled by people like Luther and Calvin, who were unhappy with the church, as well as the cities of their time and how people lived. They had a vision of the future of the church and of the city, too. John also had problems with the city, just as we do today (Wolmarans 1995:16). And because John describes the New Jerusalem in metaphorical language, he could just as well have said that he saw the New Cape Town, or the New Johannesburg, or even the New Cape Flats descending from heaven. We must also seek a vision of the city – and then go out and realize it (Wolmarans 1995:18).

There is, according to Wolmarans, a beautiful city descending from heaven. And each one of us is either building this city or delaying its arrival. Sometimes we even break it down completely, and then we have to build it all over from scratch again. Sometimes the walls go up slowly. Yet the city rises, piece by piece. If we build a city today, we should do it without a church – and then ask the people to go out and make the city beautiful, holy and filled with goodness and truth, to serve and proclaim God, to be God's music to the world and its cities, to seek God's face, to write God's Name on their foreheads, and to live in such a way that it will rub off on everyone they may meet (Wolmarans 1995:19-20). John's vision of God's holy and beautiful city enabled him and us to perceive reality in a totally and different way.

Perhaps the remarks of the Russian political and Christian philosopher Nicolas Berdyaev help us best to build this city of artistic beauty as John saw it:

> Romantic Christian art sees unearthly beauty in imperfection, in the lack of finality itself, in this groping toward an upsurge beyond the limits of this world. Christian art does not leave us in this world, in beauty already finally attained, but leads us out into another world, with beauty beyond and outside the limits of this (Berdyaev 1955:228ff.).

The German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer affirms this when he writes that art enables us to "go beyond ourselves", meaning that there is something out there which is more than what we bring to it and what we must strive for in order to realise something of it in our world (Gadamer 1986:18).

9. Concluding remarks

Edwards says that beauty is one profound way God draws us to his love. "Our capacity to appreciate beauty is one of the great mysteries of our nature. We could have been made like robots who would not recognise and be moved by beauty." However, "God chose to make us otherwise" (2017:167). He goes on to make the point that the recognition of beauty has an opening effect on us and that we become vulnerable to a living radiant presence that overflows the boundaries of the moment's littleness, and one might add, the world's misery and folly. "That overflow," he continues, "is expressed in tears when the beauty is strong enough. When the disciples felt the radiant beauty in Jesus passing by, they were moved to drop everything and follow him. Real beauty has that kind of power" (ibid.). It is important to make ourselves open to the heart of beauty,

> to let it pervade us with wonder and reveal something of its mysterious divine source. God entices us to come nearer with each particular form of beauty that moves us. That movement has great power to liberate us, at least for the moment, from the many attachments and worries that weigh us down. In the wake of that

> liberation we discover a fresh capacity to touch the beauty we see with the soul beauty hidden within ourselves. (ibid.)

De Gruchy reminds us that the act of wilfully depriving others "of beauty and intentionally create … ugliness is from a Christian perspective nothing less than sin in its most cynical form" (2001:88). But he also refers to "the remarkable attempts by those affected to transcend their situation through township art, home decoration and the music, dance and colourful vestments" (2001:88). Art, music and dance are indeed the vehicles of beauty. Where we can dance together, we can live together.

May the claim of Prince Myshkin in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot* become true: "the world will be redeemed by beauty" (Dostoyevsky 1986:103). Beauty is not only erotic and seductive, but, as Prince Myshkin implies, also divine. It can lead us to God, to worship, prayer, reconciliation, and social harmony, among others, as referred to by Eduard Thurneysen (1964:24) and Richard Peace (1971:73). Dostoyevsky knew that the "'idiot' saves the world not by words but by being who he or she is, and by doing that which he or she does in love and hope even if the world fails to see the mystery that is being revealed" (De Gruchy 2001:132).

In *John Calvin: Christian Humanist Evangelical Reformer* De Gruchy reasons that to "contemplate beauty is not an alternative to doing justice any more than prayer is an alternative to action … to highlight beauty is not to downplay truth or ethics" (2009:200; 202). This kind of beauty propels us into society, transforms us and seeks the just and true transformation of our cities through us. As believers we must not only be concerned about truth and goodness, but also beauty, which is often neglected by the faithful.

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