



6-1-2011

The Paradoxical Beauty of the Cross: Theological Aesthetics and the Doctrine of the Atonement in Athanasius' *Contra Gentes-De Incarnatio*

Marcus Little

Liberty University, malittle2@liberty.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/elevol1iss2>

 Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Little, Marcus (2011) "The Paradoxical Beauty of the Cross: Theological Aesthetics and the Doctrine of the Atonement in Athanasius' *Contra Gentes-De Incarnatio*," *Eleutheria*: Vol. 1: Iss. 2, Article 1.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/elevol1iss2/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary and Graduate School at DigitalCommons@Liberty University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Eleutheria by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Liberty University. For more information, please contact scholarlycommunication@liberty.edu.

The Paradoxical Beauty of the Cross: Theological Aesthetics and the Doctrine of the Atonement in Athanasius' *Contra Gentes-De Incarnatio*

Abstract

In his two-part treatise *Contra Gentes-De Incarnatio*, Athanasius offers an interesting apologetic for the Christian doctrine of the atonement by employing various aesthetic themes and forms of expression drawn from the classical notion of beauty found particularly in the Platonic and neo-Platonic traditions. Although Athanasius never mentions the term "beauty" in *Contra Gentes-De Incarnatio*, the concept certainly looms in the background. Writing against the Platonic, Epicurean, and Stoic systems of his day, Athanasius centers his apologetic on the philosophical tension evident in the doctrine of divine transcendence/immanence. This paper argues that Athanasius implicitly characterizes the tension of divine transcendence/immanence as paradoxical in nature and, as such, is not solved but resolved in Christian doctrine of the incarnation and the culminating event of the crucifixion. For Athanasius, the aesthetic force of the crucifixion is its manifold paradox in which Christ, the God-man, conquers by being conquered, restores man's spiritual form by becoming formless, and establishes universal peace by surrendering to violence. Thus, in the Christian tradition, the divine transcendence/immanence paradox is localized and expanded in the incarnation and crucifixion event invoking an overflow of aesthetic inspiration in the heart of the believer.

Therefore, the purpose of this essay is twofold. First, it will identify certain themes in the classical definition of beauty and will examine how these themes are interwoven throughout Athanasius' apologetic. Second, it will attempt to prove that the aesthetic superiority of the cross, as implicitly argued in *Contra Gentes-De Incarnatio*, is rooted in the paradoxical nature of the crucifixion event. Thus, for Athanasius, beauty shines forth through paradox.

Keywords

beauty, aesthetics, atonement, cross, Athanasius

Cover Page Footnote

ThM student at Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary

INTRODUCTION

In this essay I explore various aesthetic themes and forms of aesthetic expression employed by Athanasius in his articulation of the doctrine of the atonement in *Contra Gentes* and *De Incarnatione*. Although the term “beauty” is absent in *Contra Gentes* and *De Incarnatione*, the concept certainly looms in the background. For Athanasius, the symbol of the cross in its Christian context is beautiful yet paradoxical, evoking an overflow of aesthetic inspiration in the heart of the believer.

In the first half, I will briefly define the concept of beauty giving special attention to various themes and characteristics in light of its Christian Platonic and Neo-Platonic context. In the second half, I will attempt to draw out the aesthetic themes implicitly suggested in Athanasius’ *Contra Gentes* and *De Incarnatione*. Finally, following Athanasius’ apologetic in *De Incarnatione* I will attempt to demonstrate that the beauty of the cross is most fully expressed in its manifold paradox. In the paradoxical event of the cross, Christ conquers by being conquered, heals man’s form by becoming formless, and establishes universal peace by surrendering to violence.

THE EVENT OF BEAUTY

FORM

In Western conceptions of beauty, two dominant features consistently emerge. First, following the tradition of Plato, beauty is identified as “form.” By “form,” Plato meant the internal pattern or structure of all existing material things, the harmonious arrangement of parts forming the unity or essence of an object, the ordered multiplicity of constituents forming the aggregate. Plato observed that all existing things are comprised of a harmonious unity of parts, and it is the harmony itself that constitutes the beauty of an object. For Plato, beauty is synonymous with unity, order, harmony, symmetry, and proportionality.¹ Since all existing things are comprised of a unity of parts, to exist, then, is simultaneously to be beautiful. Thus, in the Greek mind, beauty is equated with being/existence.

What is so alluring about the harmonious structural patterns inherent in all existing entities? Why does the recognition of the unity of parts in the whole of objects move us to aesthetic pleasure? In his doctrine of the soul, Plato held that all souls freely existed in the transcendent world of perfect Forms. However, over time, some souls became corrupted and “fell” to the imperfect world of particulars by taking on human flesh. Consequently, deep within the soul of every human is a longing to return to its original abode in the world of Forms. The structural patterns (form) in all existing things in the imperfect world have a perfect

¹ It is interesting to note that Plato considered the equilateral triangle to be the most beautiful of all geometric figures since its unity of parts is of perfect symmetry (Plato, “The Hippias Greater,” *Plato: Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 1880.

corresponding counterpart in the world of Forms. When the harmony of form is perceived in an object, it catches a glimpse of its corresponding counterpart and transcends to the world of Forms. This recognition of the internal form of an object temporarily satisfies the longing of the soul to return to its original home; thus, aesthetic pleasure, according to Plato, is the inflamed longing of the soul for its ultimate return to the world of Forms.

In summary of the Platonic conception of beauty, three characteristics need emphasis. First, beauty is objective in nature. Beauty is a reality external in relation to the subject and resides *in* an object. In this sense, beauty is not in the eye of the beholder. This view of beauty is implicitly suggested in the writings of the early Greek and Latin fathers and receives full expression in Augustine's early philosophical writings. In *On True Religion*, Augustine, following the Platonic tradition, asks whether things are beautiful because they give pleasure (subjective view), or are pleasurable because they are beautiful (objective view). Augustine chooses the latter asserting that an object's evocation of aesthetic pleasure results because its "parts correspond and are so joined together so as to form one harmonious whole."²

Second, the Platonic conception of beauty is rational. The understanding of the "form" inherent in all existing objects entails a certain logic: that the unity of parts in every whole must be arranged in a particular harmonious order. Unities are not formed from any given collection of parts; the parts must follow a certain logical order. But where does this "logical order" originate? For Plato, the answer, of course, would be the world of Forms, but the early Christian Platonists located the origination in God. In the Christianized version of Plato's theory of Forms, the independent, transcendent Forms are identified as Concepts existing in the mind of God; thus, temporal forms reveal something about the nature of God.³ It is no surprise then that beauty plays a revelatory role in many of the early Christian cosmologies. The harmonious arrangement of parts in creation points to the harmonious and orderly nature of God's character; to enjoy the beauty of creation is also to enjoy the beauty of God.

Third, beauty is an event. Beauty occurs when the ultimate Form discloses itself in the material form. When ultimate Form breaks through the gates of material form, the soul is inflamed with aesthetic pleasure as its longing to return home is momentarily satisfied. Thus, the event of beauty occurs when the transcendent Whole makes its abode in the material fragment.⁴ In the Christian formulation, the event of the Whole in offering itself to the fragment is mediated through the Divine Word. As a result of the fall, the relationship between the

² Augustine, "On Free Will," *Augustine: Earlier Writings*, ed. J.H.S. Burleigh, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953), 255.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Bruno Forte, *The Portal of Beauty*, David Glenday and Paul McPartlan (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2008), vii.

material forms and the transcendent Form (God) was severed. Man no longer had complete epistemic access to the ultimate Form in contemplating the lower form in the material. Nevertheless, the Word restores epistemic access by becoming a perfect harmonious unity of the divine and the human. By apprehending the beauty in the perfect unity of the Word, man once again gains access to ultimate Beauty.⁵

BRIGHTNESS

A second feature dominant in the Western conception of beauty is “brightness.” This feature was developed fully in the writings of Plotinus. Plotinus agreed with Plato that the adjectives of “form” – symmetry, proportionality, harmony, and unity – are essential characteristics of beauty; however, he observed that the properties of form do not adequately explain every knowable beauty in the cosmos. Plotinus reasoned that “form” requires a unity of parts comprising the whole, but Plotinus recognized that not all beautiful entities in the cosmos are composed of a unity of parts. Light and color are beautiful but yet do not possess a harmonious arrangement of parts. Some things are beautiful *in themselves*.⁶

But Plotinus also observed that the singular entities of light and color cannot operate independent of form. The illuminating power of light is possible only when light engulfs a form; color is the outcome of the interaction between light and the conditions of matter. Thus, there is a co-dependency between light and form, yet both form and its brightness – the product of light and color – are distinct categories of beauty.

But what makes the brightness of a form beautiful? What is the underlying aesthetic principle of light and color? Aquinas saw the answer to Plotinus’ question in Christianity. Building on the Platonic and Neo-Platonic foundations, Aquinas included brightness (“claritas”) in his three categories of beauty. For Aquinas beauty consists of three interrelated and interdependent categories: *integritas*, *proportio*, and *claritas* (integrity, proportion/harmony, and brightness).⁷ The *proportio* of an object refers to its unity of parts; it is the recognition of the whole as a unity of parts. *Integritas* refers to the perceptibility of the inner-workings of the parts as they harmonize to form the whole; it is the understanding of the relationship among the parts, especially during the process of forming the whole. *Claritas* refers to the illumination of the form; it is the way in which the form communicates and reveals itself to the observer. Aquinas located the aesthetic principle of *claritas* in its revealing and illuminating power. As is the case with form, beauty as *claritas*, is an event. *Claritas*, happens when the Whole (ultimate Form) encircles the part (“lower” form) and then bursts through opening the way for the observer to catch a glimpse of the Whole in all its glory.⁸

⁵ Forte, *Portal of Beauty*, 10.

⁶ Plotinus, “Beauty,” in *The Essential Plotinus*, translated and edited by Elmer Obrien, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1964), 35.

⁷ Forte, *Portal of Beauty*, 16.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

THE PARADOX OF BEAUTY

The Platonic tradition regarded beauty as an event – when the Whole penetrates the part – and this occurs in two ways. First, it happens when the Whole makes its dwelling place in the part. Second, it happens when the Whole bursts forth from the part giving it its brightness. Contained in this definition, however, lies a certain paradox. How is the Whole able to penetrate the fragment? How is the infinite able to inhabit the finite? How is the limitless able to make its abode in that which is limited? How can the Whole be both transcendent and immanent? The early Greek and Latin Christian Fathers found the answer to this paradox in the doctrine of the Word. Christ was the embodied Form of the infinite and the finite; in Christ, the transcendent becomes immanent. Thus, the problem of the event of beauty is resolved in the divine incarnation. But a closer examination reveals, however, that this Christological solution only localizes the paradox rather than solves it. In Christianity, the problem of divine transcendence and immanence, the central problem to the event of beauty, is localized in the divine incarnation. But the form of the incarnation itself, the unity of the infinite and the finite, is paradoxical – it is in the Kierkegaardian sense, a “sign of contradiction.”⁹

In its Christian formulation, the event of beauty – when the Whole offers itself in the part – is localized in the paradox of the divine incarnation. Yet, as the early Christian fathers, including Athanasius, were keenly aware, the paradox of beauty is localized more specifically in the historical event of the crucifixion. The event of beauty culminates in the crucifixion as the Whole literally and historically offers Himself to the part. But as will be shown later, the crucifixion does not solve the paradox of beauty, instead, it expands it. The God-man paradox paradoxically heals man by submitting to the most ignominious form of death; He conquers by being conquered; and He establishes peace by submitting to violence.

In Christianity, the event of beauty – the Whole offering itself to the part – centers on the divine incarnation and culminates in the crucifixion. Thus, the problem of beauty (summarized in the question, “How can the Whole transcend infinite space and occupy the fragment?”) is magnified in the crucifixion. The paradox of the God-man paradoxically heals man’s broken form by submitting to death – the annihilation of form. Paradoxically the Whole, the ultimate Form, is formless (“He hath no form or comeliness, and when we shall see Him there is no beauty that we should desire Him”),¹⁰ yet offers Himself as a Form and heals the

⁹ It is important to note that the paradox of the incarnation, according to Kierkegaard, is not centered in the unity of the divine and human natures, but in the relationship between the divine nature and the individual man – Jesus of Nazareth. The paradox is that Jesus, a Jew from Galilee and a son of a carpenter, is also God. Soren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, translated and edited by Howard Hong and Edna Hong, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 126.

¹⁰ KJV, Isaiah 53:2

fragment (paradoxically there is a certain form in His formlessness). Beauty expands in paradox.

SUMMARY

Although Athanasius never mentions the term “beauty” or its paradoxical nature in *De Incarnatione*, the concept certainly looms in the background. In *De Incarnatione*, the apologetic efficacy of the cross is its paradoxical form. Through the cross, Christ conquers by being conquered, establishes peace by subjecting Himself to violence, and restores man to his original form by becoming Formless. For Athanasius, the manifold paradoxes of the cross lead to unparalleled aesthetic inspiration.

THE PARADOXICAL BEAUTY OF THE CROSS IN *CONTRA GENTES – DE INCARNATIONE*

Contra Gentes – De Incarnatione is a double treatise in which Athanasius presents a logical defense for the Christian faith as well as an explanation of the unique relationship between the Father and Son. Athanasius was prompted to write the treatise in the wake of the growing influence of the Arian heresy. In the first treatise, *Contra Gentes*, Athanasius lays the groundwork for his argument in *De Incarnatione* by situating the doctrine of the atonement in the doctrine of creation. In doing this Athanasius discusses several important theological issues such as the problem of divine transcendence and immanence (a problem already addressed in the event of beauty), the problem of evil, and the nature of idolatry. All of the issues serve as the foundation from which Athanasius builds his aesthetic theology of the cross. To capture the purview of Athanasius’ theology of the cross, an examination of his doctrine of creation and its connection to his doctrine of the incarnation and the atonement as expressed in *Contra Gentes* is in order.

DOCTRINE OF CREATION

Following the theological tradition of the early Greek apologists, Athanasius situated his doctrine of redemption in a cosmological rather than a strictly soteriological framework.¹¹ For Athanasius, the atoning power of the cross affects not just man, but the entire cosmos; Christ came not only to restore the broken fellowship between man and his Creator, but also to provide “healing” for all of creation.¹² In his *Contra Gentes*, Athanasius lays the foundation for the logic of the incarnation by interacting with important themes that significantly impact his doctrine of redemption.

The first of these themes concerns the problem of divine transcendence and immanence, a problem central to the event of beauty. Writing against the current

¹¹ Robert Case, “Will the Real Athanasius Please Stand Up,” *JETS*, 19 no 4 (1976), 283-295.

¹² Athanasius, “Against the Heathen,” *Oxford Early Christian Texts*, edited and translated by Robert Thompson, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 4.

philosophical trends of his day, Athanasius finds in the Christian doctrine of creation the answer to the difficulty in Platonism and Stoicism in affirming both the transcendence and immanence of God. In the Platonic doctrine of creation, the problem emerges in attempting to explain the three-way interconnectedness between the supra-transcendent One, the Forms, and the material world. With his doctrine of the Forms, Plato taught that entities in the changing world of “Becoming” share or “participate” in some way in the unchanging world of Forms. Although a distinct ontological separation exists between these two worlds, the world of Becoming can obtain access to the world of Being through ecstatic contemplation. A problem emerges, however, in grounding material entities in the world of Becoming to their counterparts in the world of Being since to do so would require a multiplicity of Forms, which poses a problem to Plato’s firm conviction in the transcendent attribute of unity.¹³ Plato attempts to resolve this tension by positing an Ultra-transcendent One which is, on the one hand, distinctly transcendent to the material world while at the same time accessible through the ecstatic contemplation.¹⁴ The tension in positing the simultaneity of the transcendence and immanence of the Good in relationship with the material world pervades Plato’s thought and is the impetus for the development of the creation myth in the *Timaeus* in which he posits a fourth entity, the *Demiurge* – the creator of the world using pre-existing matter. In the end, however, Plato remains unclear in explicating the connection between the transcendent One and the material world of Becoming.

In the Stoic system, the tension between transcendence and immanence is resolved by a complete rejection of divine transcendence. The Stoic system posits a rational divine principle (*Logos*) pervading the cosmos which governs and guides the material world according to necessary providential laws.¹⁵ This metaphysical schema results in a radical immanent duality leaving no room for any notion of an external existence operating beyond the material.

Against this backdrop Athanasius seeks a resolution to the tension of divine transcendence/ immanence in Christianity. In *Contra Gentes*, Athanasius affirms absolute divine transcendence in his description of God as a “being beyond all being and human thought,” “invisible and incomprehensible,” and “self-sufficient and self-contained.”¹⁶ Since God created the world *ex nihilo*, He remains ontologically transcendent to the material world.

Although ontologically incomprehensible, God is, however, epistemologically immanent since he imparted to man the divine image – the rational soul. In part two of *Contra Gentes*, Athanasius offers a logical proof for the immortality of the soul, arguing that man’s ability to think and perceive of realities beyond himself

¹³Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius*, (London: Routledge Printing Press, 1998), 9.

¹⁴ Ibid. 8

¹⁵ Ibid.,9

¹⁶ Athanasius, *Contra Gentes*, chapters 2-28.

presupposes an eternal faculty at work from within.¹⁷ Through the soul, man is able to perceive the Image of the Word – the agent of creation – who in turn images the Father. Thus, Athanasius posits that man gains epistemic access to the Father by turning “inward” (a view echoed later by Augustine), using the soul as a mirror to contemplate the divine Image of the Word through which to perceive the Father.¹⁸

Another way in which this tension between the divine transcendence and immanence can be resolved, according to Athanasius, is by contemplating the internal, orderly pattern of creation. Following Plato, Athanasius argues that the basic structure of the created world must correspond to the exact nature of the Creator – thus, since the nature of the Creator is good, then creation must exhibit this same goodness as well. He writes,

Seeing then all created nature, as far as its own laws were concerned, to be fleeting and subject to dissolution lest it should come to this and lest the universe should be broken up again into nothingness, for this cause He made all things by His own eternal Word, and gave substantive existence to creation, and moreover, did not leave it up to be tossed in a tempest in the course of its own nature lest it should run the risk of once more dropping out of existence; but because He is good He guides and settles the whole creation by His own Word, Who is Himself also God that by the governance and providence and ordering of action of the Word, creation may have light and be able to abide away securely.¹⁹

The goodness and loving kindness of God in creation is evidenced by the harmonious interaction between objects with discordant natures. Athanasius saw that the differentiated, mutually exclusive pairs of entities in creation (male and female, dry and wet, hot and cold, winter and summer) working harmoniously together, points to a transcendent source who sustains the cosmic balance. Without the governing hand of the divine Creator, creation would eventually dissolve into chaos.²⁰ By apprehending the harmonious concord in creation man is moved with aesthetic inspiration as he contemplates the providential working of the divine Word sustaining and maintaining the cosmic balance.²¹ Here Athanasius’ explanation of creation reveals several aesthetic themes that run parallel with classical notions of beauty. Like Plato, Athanasius recognizes an internal pattern in all existing things; thus, everything is comprised of an internal “form.” In contemplating form – harmony of parts – man is able to catch a glimpse of the ultimate Form. Here Athanasius follows the Platonic conception of the event of beauty – the Whole offers itself to the part.

¹⁷ Ibid., 85.

¹⁸ Athanasius, *Contra Gentes*, 95.

¹⁹ Ibid., 41.3.

²⁰ Ibid., 36.4.

²¹ Ibid., 2.2

The second theme concerns Athanasius' concept of evil and its significance to his doctrine of creation. Speaking against the Gnostics, Athanasius is keenly aware of the philosophical problems in attributing a substantive status to the concept of evil. Athanasius reasoned that since creation was created "good" and was patterned after the divine goodness of its Creator, it follows then that the existence of evil would have to have occurred through its own spontaneity or it would have to have been created by another god; both of these options, however, would severely diminish God's omnipotence since evil, or its creator, would be on par with God's ontology.²² Man, then, would have no epistemological assurance differentiating between the two. Athanasius saw that the only answer to this dilemma is to strip evil its ontological status; evil is simply a movement towards non-being.²³ Athanasius writes,

For evil does not come from the good nor is it in, or the result of good, since in that case it would not be good, being mixed in its nature or a cause of evil. But the sectaries who have fallen away from the teaching of the Church, and made shipwreck concerning the faith, they also wrongly think that evil has a substantive existence.²⁴

For Athanasius, then, sin is the willful rejection of the good in following after bodily lusts and pleasures, the end of which is non-existence. Although evil is defined as non-existence, Athanasius is careful to define sin as a positive act of a willing human agent. As a charioteer drives his team of horses off the track in pursuance of his own goals, so a person drives his own soul to non-existence by pursuing lower goods in the place of higher ones.²⁵

Athanasius' explication of evil reveals the moral connotations in the Platonic conception of beauty. In the Platonic mind, beauty is being/existence. "Form" is a predicate of existence while non-form leads to non-existence; consequently, to tend towards existence is good/beautiful, and conversely, to tend towards non-existence is evil/ugly. Thus, sin is malicious action towards form – the willful rejection of the form instituted by God.

Athanasius was careful to emphasize that sin is a positive action (it is not simply a choice to refrain from acting) and, as such, can only reject the God-instituted form by creating a new form, a false form. Hence, evil is an objective, a false objective, a fantasy conjured in the imagination which, when fully conceived, gives birth and brings forth a new form – an idol. Thus, to Athanasius, idolatry is the logical consequence of evil and the willful rejection of form/existence. He writes,

²² Athanasius, *Contra Gentes*, 6.2

²³ Thomas Weinandy, *Athanasius: A Theological Introduction*, (Great Britain: Ashgate Publishers, 2007), 15.

²⁴ Athanasius, *Contra Gentes*, 6.3.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.2

Accordingly, evil is the cause which brings idolatry in its train; for men, having learned to contrive evil, which is no reality in itself, in like manner feigned for themselves as gods beings that had no existence. Just then, as though a man had plunged into the deep, and no longer saw the light, nor what appears by light, because his eyes are turned downwards, and the water and the water is above him; and perceiving only the things in the deep, thinks that nothing exists besides them, but that the things he sees are the only true realities.²⁶

Athanasius' concept of idolatry introduces a third theme in his doctrine of creation. First, it is interesting to note that Athanasius locates the source for idolatry in the human imagination, "I mean what is evil, in so far as it consists in a false imagination in the thoughts of men."²⁷ For this reason, Athanasius offers interesting perspectives on the connection between idolatry and artistic creativity. In chapter 13 of *Contra Gentes* he identifies the nature of idolatry with the worship of art. He writes,

Again in worshipping of things in wood and stone, they do not see that while they tread under foot and burn what is in no way different they call portions of these materials gods. And what they made use of a little while ago, they carve and worship in their folly, not seeing, nor at all considering what they are worshipping, not gods but the carver's art.²⁸

In another place, he rejects the view of certain Greeks claiming that the gods invented the arts since "even common parlance understands art to be an imitation of nature."²⁹ Man, as an intelligent and inquisitive being, naturally happened to discover the arts by observing and studying human nature and the world around him; consequently, according to Athanasius, the discovery of the arts should be of no surprise.³⁰ Thus, Athanasius shares Plato's disparaging view of art and rejects the notion of "art for art's sake." Art, according to Athanasius, is only good in so far as it is useful in directing the observer to worshipful praise of its Maker.

SUMMARY OF ATHANASIUS' DOCTRINE OF CREATION

In *Contra Gentes*, Athanasius demonstrates the continuity between God's transcendence and immanence with His creation. In creating the world *ex nihilo*,

²⁶ Athanasius, *Contra Gentes*, 8.3.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.4.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.1.

²⁹ The Greeks believed Zeus invented the plastic arts, Poseidon the steersman, Hephaistos smithery, Athena weaving, Apollo music, Artemis hunting, Hera weaving, and Demeter farming. Athanasius' concept of art as "imitation" ("mimesis") is identical to Plato's as given in his *Republic*. *Ibid.* 18.3.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

God is ontologically transcendent; however, by imparting to man the divine image, He is also epistemologically immanent. As a result, man, by turning inward and reflecting on the image given to him, obtains epistemic access to God by contemplating the divine Word. However, becoming enamored with bodily pleasures, man rejects the God-instituted form by establishing a new form, a false form conceived from human imagination and thus forms an idol. In worshipping the object conjured in his imagination, man falls from fellowship with God thereby losing epistemic access. Athanasius concludes his *Contra Gentes* showing the extent and severity of the effects of the fall – man is both ontologically and epistemologically separated from God. Man's true form, the *Imagio Dei*, is broken – the Whole must offer Himself to restore the fragment.

Building on his conclusion in *Contra Gentes*, Athanasius offers a rational argument for the incarnation in *De Incarnatione*. In this work, Athanasius sets out to accomplish two tasks: to show the rationality of the incarnation and to prove the superiority of the Christian faith over the Jewish, Gnostic, and Greek mythological/philosophical systems. To Athanasius, the Christian doctrine of the incarnation offers a unique solution to the problem of divine transcendence/immanence, a problem central to understanding the underlying paradox in the event of beauty. However, as Athanasius demonstrates, the paradox is not solved, but is localized in the God-man and expanded in the historical event of the crucifixion. The cross, a symbol of peace, unity, and healing is paradoxical in nature; but, as Athanasius masterfully articulates, it is the understanding of the manifold paradox in which the beauty of the cross becomes manifest.

THE LOGIC OF THE INCARNATION

Athanasius begins *De Incarnatione* iterating the connection between the doctrine of creation and redemption. He reasons that since the effects of the fall included all of creation, it seems fitting then that the primary agent in creation – the Word – should be the primary agent in its restoration.³¹ Important to note, Athanasius understood that the event of the incarnation was necessary in light of God's divine goodness. Since the event of creation itself was an act of loving kindness and a reflection of God's goodness, it would seem contrary to His nature to let creation waste away into nothingness. Furthermore, it would be better if man had not been created at all if it were known that he would inevitably turn towards nothingness.³² Thus, God is morally obligated to provide a solution. He writes,

It would be unseemly that creatures once made rationally, and having partaken of the Word, should go to ruin, and turn again toward non-existence by the way of corruption. For it were not worthy of God's goodness that the things He had made should waste away because of

³¹ Athanasius, *De Incarnatione*, 1.4.

³² *Ibid.*, 6.8

the deceit practiced by the devil. Especially it was unseemly to the last degree that God's handicraft among men should be done away, either because of their own carelessness, or because of the deceitfulness of evil spirits . . . It was, then, out of the question to leave men to the current of corruption, because this would be unseemly, and unworthy of God's goodness.³³

Athanasius further reasons that certain aspects of God's divine character are also at stake in regards to the manner in which man's corrupted nature is to be restored. God could not restore man's corrupted nature on the basis of repentance alone given the legality of the situation. Athanasius argues first that repentance does not have the power to reverse one's natural condition; it merely keeps one from committing further acts of sin. Second, accepting repentance as the sole remedy for man's corruption is an affront to the legal situation established in the Garden of Eden. According to the original commandment, the consequence of sin was death; to excuse the punishment solely on the basis of repentance dishonors the judicial nature of the commandment. For the same reason, God could not excuse the punishment of death on divine fiat alone since He would have to reject His own promise, thus making Him a liar.³⁴ Therefore, the only logical solution to avoid the consequences of death that squares with the judicial nature of the commandment is perfect obedience to the law. However, this is a logical impossibility since Adam's sin affected the entire human race. For this reason, the only option left is divine incarnation.

In the background of Athanasius' concept of justice is the aesthetic principle of "form." Athanasius speaks of Christ's vicarious death as a "payment" to God, a view later developed by Augustine and Anselm. Man's sin was an attack on God's honor, and, therefore, a payment was necessary for compensation. The price for man's sin and the lost honor was fully satisfied by Christ's death—Christ's death was "fitting to have taken place."³⁵ In this sense, there is a certain beauty/form in justice as it restores the cosmic balance by bringing creation back into harmony with its Creator.

In summary, it is necessary to highlight some key themes and emphases in Athanasius' doctrine of the incarnation from which he builds his aesthetic theology of the cross. First is the significance of the doctrine of creation in relation to the doctrine of redemption. The purpose of redemption was not only to restore the broken fellowship between God and man, but to restore the cosmic order by bringing it into its proper balance. Second are the legal overtones underlying his doctrine of redemption. Cosmic justice is beautiful in that it restores God's honor bringing creation back into harmony with its Creator. Third is the emphasis on the restoration of man's broken form – the divine image.

³³ Athanasius, *De Incarnatione*, 6.5

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.4

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.6.

The center of Athanasius' logic of the incarnation is the crucifixion event. It is here that the Whole offers Himself and redeems the part. It is also here that the paradox of beauty is expanded: the Whole conquers by being conquered, heals by submitting to death, and establishes peace by surrendering to violence.

THE PARADOX OF THE CROSS

Athanasius repeatedly emphasizes the conquering power of the cross over death. In response to some objections raised against the ignominious manner of Christ's death, Athanasius argues that the public humiliating death on the cross substantiates Christ's resurrection since it leaves no room to question the reality of His death.³⁶ The disgraceful event of the crucifixion brings paradox into full view: Christ conquered death by being conquered on the cross. He writes:

Even Christ did not devise a death for His own body, so as not to appear to be fearing some other death; but he accepted on the cross, and endured, a death inflicted by others, and above all by His enemies, which they thought dreadful and ignominious and not to be faced; so that this also being destroyed, both he Himself might be believed to be the Life, and the power of death be brought utterly to nought. So something surprising and startling has happened; for the death which they thought to inflict a disgrace, was actually a monument of victory against death itself.³⁷

The conquering power of the cross over death is not only realized in the paradox of Christ's ignominious death, but is presently actualized in the lives of the saints. Athanasius expresses his amazement of the transforming power of the cross in the lives of ordinary men, women, and even children who "leap" upon death in martyrdom. He writes,

For when one sees men, weak by nature, leaping forward to death, and not fearing its corruption nor frightened of the descent into Hades, but with eager soul challenging it; and not flinching from torture, but on the contrary, for Christ's sake electing to rush upon death in preference to life upon earth, or even if one be an eye-witness of men and females and young children rushing and leaping upon death for the sake of Christ's religion; who is so silly, or who is so incredulous, or who is so maimed in his mind, as not to see and infer that Christ, to Whom the people witness, Himself supplies and gives to each the

³⁶ Athanasius, *De Incarnatione*, 24.2.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.3.

victory over death, depriving him of all his power in each one of them that hold His faith and bear the sign of the cross.³⁸

The conquering power of the cross over death is manifested not only in its power to inspire courage in the hearts of the martyrs, but also in its power to inspire virtue in the lives of the saints. The ultimate defeat of death on the cross makes possible the necessary motivation and incentive to live righteously and self-sacrificially. Athanasius writes of the cross's power in "drawing men to religion, persuading to virtue, teaching of immortality, leading on to a desire for heavenly things, revealing the knowledge of the Father, inspiring strength to meet death."³⁹

Second, the paradox of the cross is seen not only in its conquering power, but also its efficacious work of peace. Christ, perceived as a threat to peace, institutes peace, by submitting to an ignominious act of violence in the hands of His enemies—peace is established on account of violence.

The efficacious work of peace through the violence of the cross is evident in two ways. First, the violence of the cross brings about unity among the nations.⁴⁰ Athanasius argues that by submitting to an unjust death, the legal hold of the law was broken ("the middle wall of partition") providing the way for unity among Jews and Gentiles.⁴¹ Interestingly, Athanasius suggests that this unification is symbolized in the outstretched hands of Jesus on the cross signifying His calling of all nations to unity and peace.⁴²

Secondly, the violence of the cross ends the cycles of violence of the heathen. Athanasius argues that the violent behavior of the gods in the ancient mythologies and the savagery of the religious rituals of the Egyptians, Greeks, Persians, Goths, Chaldeans and of those "beyond the oceans" can be pacified only through peculiar power of the ignominious death of Christ on the cross. He writes,

But when they have come over to the school of Christ, then, strangely enough, as men truly pricked in conscience, they have laid aside the savagery of their murders and no longer mind the things of war: but all is at peace with them, and from henceforth what makes for friendship is to their liking.⁴³

The paradox of the cross is manifested not only in its conquering power and its work of peace, but third, in its power to heal. Through His ignominious death on the cross, Christ pieces together the broken image of God in man. To Athanasius, the restoration of the divine image was the central purpose for Christ's atoning sacrificial death. Similar to Augustine, Athanasius held that human beings had a

³⁸ Ibid., 29.4.

³⁹ Athanasius, *De Incarnatione*, 31.2.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 25.3.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 51.6.

propensity to corruption since they were created from nothing; however, they could remain incorruptible if they remained in fellowship with God.⁴⁴ This relationship was mediated by the divine Word; reflecting on the divine image, man had epistemic access to the divine Image of the Father. But, as a result of the fall man's image was marred and his form was fragmented. As a result, God sent the divine Word to restore man's broken image by vicariously satisfying the necessary legal demands: "For by the sacrifice of His own body, He both put an end to the law which was against us, and made a new beginning of life for us, by the hope of the resurrection which He had given us."⁴⁵ Thus, paradoxically, Christ, in becoming Formless, heals man's broken form – the Whole offers Himself and restores the part.

CONCLUSION

We have noted the classical notion of beauty as "event." Beauty, in the Platonic tradition, happens when the Whole offers itself in the fragment. We have noted how this definition was expanded and given a Christological coloring in its Christian context. To the early Christian Platonists, beauty happens when the Whole offers Himself and restores the fragment. We have also noted a paradox in the event of beauty. How can the Whole transcend infinite space and inhabit the fragment? How can the Limitless makes its dwelling place in the limited? In Christianity, the paradox is not solved but is localized in the divine incarnation and expanded in the crucifixion event. We have demonstrated that the expansion of the paradox in the cross magnifies the visibility of its beauty – through paradox beauty becomes manifest.

In *Contra Gentes – De Incarnatione*, Athanasius gives this theme its fullest expression. Although he never directly addresses the concept of beauty, its classical notions are implicit throughout the work. For Athanasius, the beauty of the cross becomes visible through its manifold paradox. In the crucifixion event, Christ conquers by being conquered, heals by submitting to death, and establishes peace by submitting to violence. On the cross, the Whole offers Himself and paradoxically restores the fragment.

In conclusion, Athanasius calls us to stand in awe of the paradoxical power of the cross. He also calls us to abandon the idols of material form and fix our gaze on the Grand Artificer. Finally, Athanasius calls us to personal restoration by "looking within" in contemplation as the Whole bursts forth in the fragment.

⁴⁴ Weinandy, *Athanasius: A Theological Introduction*, 30.

⁴⁵ Athanasius, *De Incarnatione*, 10.5.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anatolios, Khaled. *Athanasius*. London: Routledge Printing Press, 1998.
- Athanasius, “*Contra Gentes*.” *Oxford Early Christian Texts*, edited and translated by Robert Thompson. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971.
- _____. “*De Incarnatione*.” *Oxford Early Christian Texts*, edited and translated by Robert Thompson. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971.
- Augustine. “On True Religion.” *Augustine: Earlier Writings*, ed. J.H.S. Burleigh. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953.
- Case, Robert “Will the Real Athanasius Please Stand Up.” *JETS*. 19 no 4. 1976, 283-295.
- Kierkegaard, Soren. *Practice in Christianity*. Translated and edited by Howard Hong and Edna Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991.
- O'Brien, Elmer. *The Essential Plotinus*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1964.
- Plato, “Timaeus,” *Plato: Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989.
- Weinandy, Thomas. *Athanasius: A Theological Introduction*. London: Ashgate Publishers, 2007.