

God of light and darkness

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Jenny Close earned her first degree in Fine Arts (painting) and then trained as a teacher. For many years her working life was shared between secondary school teaching for Brisbane Catholic Education (BCE) and freelance liturgical art making. Later she was employed by BCE to work in multimedia: video, animation and book illustration. At the same time, she studied theology and in 2005 was awarded a PhD from Griffith University. The title of her thesis was 'A Feminist Understanding of Liturgical Art'. Since 2005, she has worked as a sessional lecturer in theology at Australian Catholic University and Broken Bay Institute. At the same time, she has maintained her art practice, which has become more digital over the years. She retired from full-time work in 2018, but since then has maintained her liturgical art practice and a professional and pastoral engagement with theology.

Abstract

This paper is part of an ongoing project in which I aim to rethink the traditional understanding of beauty as an attribute of God. Working within the context of the theory and theology of aesthetics and the practice of liturgy, I examine liturgical expressions of light and darkness, and beauty and ugliness. My aim is to show how these pairings are related rather than mutually exclusive.

The project was reshaped somewhat in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the problematic liturgical situation in which we found ourselves. So, here, I examine the seeming opposites such as illness/wellness, breaking/healing, absence/presence, celebration/lament and praise/reproach. These will be explored in terms of relationships rather than oppositions. The theological implications of these relationships are used to explore our understanding of the nature of God and the flow-on implications for our Christian mission to heal.

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There is a movement among contemporary theologians to revise the traditional understandings about God as omniscient, omnipotent, impassable and immutable,

that is, a theology of God from above. Some feminist theologians, such as Australian Pat Fox (2001), are focusing on Christology, which gives them scope to construct theologies of God from below.

My approach is decidedly from the ground up. My project is situated in the here and now, when the Covid-19 pandemic is still ravaging Australia and the rest of the world. At this moment in history, it is vital to ask the question: How can we trust that God is loving and good?

Let me provide some background to my struggle with this question. Since my fields are primarily art and liturgy, I generally use liturgical images as a starting point for theological reflections. See in Figure 1, for example, the installation that I made a few ago for a Lenten season.



**Figure 1. Lenten installation at Mt Carmel Catholic Parish, Brisbane.
Artwork and photograph: Jenny Close.**

Here you can see what I have been mulling over for many years—the odd relationships between what seem to be opposites—in this instance, fire and water. That year, there were ravaging floods in northern Queensland and, at the same time, devastating fires in some southern states. As we know, this is a recurring cycle in the Australian landscape and it's getting worse with global warming.

It seemed to me that fire and water, which are also common liturgical symbols, hold both terrible and wonderful aspects. In the readings for the first Sunday of Lent (Year B cycle of readings in the Roman Catholic Lectionary), for example, destruction and salvation, flood and covenant are drawn into alignment in Genesis 9:8-15. Then in the

second reading (1 Peter 3:18-22) the flood imagery indicates a baptism in which we are saved by water.

On the third Sunday in Advent, Year C, the gospel reading refers to a baptism with water and fire: “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming...He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Luke 3:16). Water and fire don’t cancel each other out here, they are, in a mysterious way, related: this is a baptism of earthly and heavenly elements. So, here are these paradoxical relationships in nature and in scripture which are drawn together in our sacramental liturgies.

As a liturgist, I am fascinated by the images that the church uses for prayer. As an artist, my first instinct is to start with the natural world in order to seek understanding of the divine. As a theologian, I know that there are plenty of precedents for this approach: in the tradition I look to Bonaventure and among contemporary schools, I look to feminist and eco-theologians, notably Elizabeth Johnson and Denis Edwards.

In his thirteenth century classic “The Soul’s Journey to God”, Bonaventure claims that we can encounter God through the things that God made. The material world “is itself a ladder for ascending to God” in which we find “traces” of God’s hand (St Bonaventure, n.d.). Bonaventure juxtaposes “the book of creation” with the “book of Scripture” which both reveal God to the world. So, when we look at the terrible and wonderful events in nature and symbols such as fire and water in our liturgies, what do they tell us about God?

I was discussing these ideas at a liturgy conference a few years ago and a British theologian pointed me in the direction of this passage: “I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I the Lord do all these things” (Is.45:7). Terror and wonder are clearly evident in this Old Testament image of God.

There is a similar reference a little closer to home for Christians, however: the cross and resurrection. These realities are interestingly imaged in the San Damiano Cross (Figure 2).



Figure 2. San Damiano Cross. This image is public domain:
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Krucifikso_de_Sankta_Damiano.png

The figure on the cross has the wounds of crucifixion, so this is a suffering figure, but not a corpse, since the eyes are open and looking straight out at the viewer. Jesus is standing, rather than hanging—there is confidence, not defeat in the pose. The cross is, paradoxically, a triumph.

On the left of the main figure, Mary the mother of Jesus and the beloved disciple, St John, gaze at each other consolingly. On the other side stand Mary Magdalene, Mary, Mother of James and the centurion who asked Jesus to heal his slave (Lk.7:1-10).

At the top of the cross Jesus ascends into heaven. The ascended figure carries a cross, which has been transformed from a symbol of suffering and defeat to a golden emblem of

triumph. Between the crucified and the ascended figures are the words which were nailed to the cross: Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews. The irony is not lost on the well-informed viewer. Both human suffering and divine triumph are evident here: terror and wonder.

The allusions to important people and events in the life of Jesus of Nazareth help to remind us that, even in his divinity, Jesus was human. This is an eschatological image of the Paschal Mystery which is comprised of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. It captures both the darkness and the light of these realities.

We traditionally associate light with positives like goodness, and darkness with negatives like evil; but how can both light and darkness come from God? Is not our God all goodness? This is what Elizabeth Johnson has to say:

God is good; but God is not good the way creatures are good; but God is good in a supereminent way as Source of all that is good.

At this point our concept of goodness cracks open. We literally do not understand what we are saying. Human comprehension of the meaning of "good" is lost, for we have no direct earthly experience of anything that is the Source of all goodness. (Johnson, 2008, pp. 18-19)

Johnson claims that God's goodness is a mystery, but I cannot just shrug my shoulders and move on. I gaze with fascination at the paradoxical in nature and use that as a starting point for grappling with the mystery of God.

Our theology tells us that Creation is fundamentally good, but we know that not everything in the garden is wonderful or lifegiving: evolution has costs. Denis Edwards identifies the problem: "...death, the pain involved in parasitism, predation and disease, the waste involved in the abundance of organism, and the extinction of species" (Edwards, 2010, p. 13) are characteristic of the evolutionary processes. He also claims that "It is congruent with a view of God who acts creatively and providentially in and through the laws of nature, in all the randomness and lawfulness that allows and enables a life-bearing universe to evolve" (Edwards, 2010, p. 11) So he sees that "Extinction [for example] is part of the evolutionary pattern of life on Earth... part of the natural cycle of life" (Edwards, 2010, p. 13).

If Edwards is right, then God's creative act includes working through parasitism, predation—and dare I say, pandemics. This is confronting, but Edwards thinks that, ultimately, we cannot know how to interpret the nature of the universe because we don't fully understand the emergent evolutionary process, but he trusts in the value of both the positive and the seemingly negative potentialities of the process. So, what does this tell us about the nature of God? Is this a reflection of Isaiah's "weal and woe" – "light and darkness"?

Of course, it is no news that the nature of God is mysterious and unknowable. But I'm hungering to know more about the God of light and darkness. In my study of the theology and the theory of aesthetics, I came across *On the Sublime* by Longinus (Longinus 2006). This work was written in the first century of the Common Era.

Longinus describes the relationship between art (or human design) and nature—a pair of seeming opposites—as a sort of symbiosis.

...in all cases the vital informing principle is derived from her [nature], yet to determine the right degree and the right moment, and to contribute the precision of practice and experience, is the peculiar province of scientific method. The great passions, when left to their own blind and rash impulses without the control of reason, are in the same danger as a ship let drive at random without ballast. (Longinus, II:1-3)

He claims that, in order to achieve perfection, art and nature must be integrated rather than mutually exclusive: “For art is then perfect when it seems to be nature, and nature, again, is most effective when pervaded by the unseen presence of art” (Longinus, XXII:1).

According to Longinus, nature without human design is creative, but chaotic, unstable and formless. But art without nature is lifeless. Reflecting on this kind of interdependent relationship between opposites gave me a starting point for understanding those interesting, but problematic images, such as water and fire, that I had been working with for so long.

Two hundred years after the time of Longinus, Neoplatonic philosophy was a powerful influence over early Christian theology. As we know, Neoplatonism was underpinned by unhelpful dualisms creating false separations, alignments and valuations: for example, it placed the spiritual in opposition to, and above, the material and it placed male in opposition to, and above, female. These were not pairings—they were mutually exclusive opposites. The outcome is obvious: Heaven, soul and man were aligned, just as earth, body and woman were aligned. Further, beauty and light can be added to the heavenly side and ugliness and darkness to the earthly side.

In order to avoid the pitfalls of dualism, I took a leaf out of Longinus’ book and started thinking in terms of relationships. I devised the model of a continuum which spans the space between heaven and earth—using the fire and water of Luke’s baptismal imagery (Figure 3). Rosemary Radford Reuther (1992, p, 35) uses the term “dynamic unities” which adds a useful layer of meaning to my continuum.

On the heavenly end of the continuum, all is spiritual, harmonious, ordered, stable, light, beautiful and ultimately finished. On the earthly end, all is natural, raw, discordant, chaotic, dark, ugly and ultimately creative.



Figure 2: Illustration “Heaven & Earth” by Jenny Close

When you look at it like this, heavenly ideals have the potential to inspire faint hearts with hope, and foster contemplation, while earthly realities have the potential to confront injustice, challenge the status quo and foster discipleship. Heavenly ideals are comforting while earthly realities are challenging.

It would be easy to align the heavenly attributes with holiness and earthly ones with sinfulness. But that is not how it works here. Similarly, in her deconstruction of ontological dualism, Reuther identifies an alternative approach through “relationality”:

This ethic is not based on setting one part of reality, body, over against another, mind, regarding the one as the principle of evil and the second as the principle of good. Rather, good and evil, and hence ethics, are rooted in relationality itself, life-sustaining and renewing relationality versus a distorted relationality that destroys both sides of the relationship. (Reuther, 1992, p. 36)

It is clear to see how Reuther’s idea of “dynamic unities” works here. I go a little further with my model, however. Somewhere in the centre of the continuum there is a

balance between the heavenly ideals and earthly realities, but the centre is not a fixed point. In the life of individuals or communities, that centre is constantly being renegotiated—now towards one end, now towards the other. However, serious imbalances occur at either extreme.

When heavenly ideals lose their connection to everyday life, they become bloodless. Here, heaven is the only site of redemption. Celestial joy and contentment are the norm. Because everything is complete, there is no possibility of anything new. There is the constriction of the closed circle, the status quo and uniformity. The focus is the “centre” and the “edge” is dangerous and out of bounds.

By comparison, when earthly realities are isolated from heavenly ideals they become soulless. Here, suffering humanity is more “real” than the communion of saints, but there is no way to look beyond the suffering. Nothing is finished, the chaos of change makes for creative challenges, but there is no rest. Life is salvific and the world is the site of redemption, but life is lived on the edge and the bitterness of reality poisons hope.

Isolating heavenly ideals and earthly realities from each other is disastrous. Sinfulness exists at the extreme ends of the continuum—both ends: when our focus on heaven disconnects us from the realities of everyday life, or when we are so taken up with present realities that we lose sight of the hope offered by heaven. On the other hand, holiness thrives when the tensions between heaven and earth are successfully negotiated.

In the San Damiano Cross, we can see an image of the perfect confluence between the heavenly and the earthly in the person of Jesus Christ. But, as noted before, this is an eschatological image and we live in the here and now, so how does it apply?

Elizabeth Johnson’s ecological theology reminds me of the way my model of relationships works.

...divine creativity is the source not just of cosmic order but also of the chance that allows novelty to appear. Empowering the world from within, the Spirit not only grounds lawful regularities, but also embraces the chanciness of random mutations and the chaotic conditions of open systems... Unpredictable upheavals might be

destructive, but they have the potential to lead to richer forms of order. (Johnson, 2008, p. 195)

If opposites such as cosmic order and randomness are both part of God's creative process, then how do we understand the vision of the fulfillment of creation as imagined by, for example, Isaiah (11:6), who described a peaceable Kingdom in which "The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid"?

This image seems to favour only the heavenly attributes of the continuum: harmonious, ordered, stable etc. Where are the earthly attributes? On the face of it, I've always found Isaiah's description a less than wonderful image of the Reign of God. There is clearly no room for dissent in the peaceable kingdom and it sounds a bit bloodless to me. Is this the "new creation" to which 2 Peter 3:13 refers? Denis Edwards describes the new creation this way:

There is radical continuity between creation and new creation. This continuity is grounded ultimately in God's fidelity to what God has created...

God created the universe with precisely those characteristics that are needed as preconditions for God's act of new creation.

(Edwards, 2010, p. 158)

So, the new thing that God does is not discarding and replacing the creation, but rather, bringing it to fulfillment—whatever that means. But the ecological theology of Johnson and Edwards seems to imply that all the attributes of creation—including the seemingly negative ones like extinction events—will all still be there in the new creation, which has nonetheless been transformed.

Bruce Morrill picks up something of the "radical continuity" between the here and now and the reign of God that Edwards describes. Morrill is not talking about evolution or the end times, however, he is describing the unfolding of salvation in the here and now. He claims that "salvation comes not in magical escapes from reality but rather in a renegotiation of our place in this world—before God and people—according to the paschal mystery" (Morrill, 2009, p. 49). I can't help thinking that this is a more promising way of understanding the reign of God than Isaiah's peaceable kingdom.

Elaine Wainwright describes our participation in the basileia of God as “the restoration...of full and right relationship with God, with others of the human community and with the material world” (Wainwright, 2006, p. 119). Further, it is Jesus, in his cross and resurrection, who does this work of restoration of relationships, that is, the work of healing.

Morrill and Wainwright seem to agree that, in the here and now, our world is in the process of being healed and restored by a good God—a loving God. This is a very appealing concept, but can a “restored” creation, be a “new” creation? Perhaps this is a question for another time.

Returning to the image of the God of light and darkness, the following extract from a prayer by Methodist minister Kenneth Howcroft expresses the anguish of those who find themselves held in the tension between the terror of the pandemic and the wonder of God.

A Psalm of lament and praise in a time of coronavirus

How can I praise you, Lord?
Are you plaguing us with this virus
to punish us because we have all done
wrong,
or thought wrongly,
or felt wrongly,
or just been wrong?
If so, why do only some die,
and those, apparently, the ones who
are the least worst or most caring
amongst us?
Or are you trying to teach us a lesson?
If so, why is it so hard to learn?
And how are we to find the answer
when we do not even know the
question?
Or are you still the same loving God,
coming to us in our sufferings

and opening up the way to new life in
Jesus?
Lord, I will try to praise you.
Through gritted teeth,
I will try to praise you.
I will try to remember that you have
created all things,
and this virus is part of your creation.
I will try not to hate it
but seek to mitigate its harm.
I will try to keep myself and others safe.
I will work to pray for them
and seek to help in whatever way I can.
Lord, when I cannot pray or worship
help me be aware of all your people
and your saints and angels
hovering around me,
lifting me up.

When I feel alone,
let me feel you near me,
even if only for a moment that enables
me to go on.

Let me hear you say
“Peace be with you”.
Lord, I will praise you.
Let all the peoples praise you.

(Howcroft, n.d). Used with permission.

Howcroft’s prayer gives us an example of the light in the darkness—praise *in the face of* lament. In fact, there is an enviable acknowledgement of, and trust in, the God of light and darkness here.

In this study, I have not tried to arrive at definitive answers to my many questions, but I have explored some evocative ideas that will help in my quest for understanding. Ultimately, I agree with St Augustine, that if you claim to understand God, then it is not God you have understood (*Sermon 117, 5*). Nonetheless, my hunger to know more about the God of light and darkness urges me on. By thinking of pairs of images, such as fire and water, as related rather than mutually exclusive, and Jesus as the one who heals all wounds and restores all relationships, I can begin to understand how the God who “formed light and created darkness, who made weal and created woe” (Isaiah 45:7), is also the good God, the loving God, who gave creation all the potentialities needed for final fulfillment and transformation.

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