

WHEN YOU DO NOT FIT IN: UGLINESS AS A THEOLOGICAL PROBLEM*

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ABSTRACT

The article draws attention to the ethical and pastoral dangers associated with the theological subordination of ugliness to other purposes, such as universal harmony and order; the search for the immutable, or divination. It also traces the tendency to conflate moral and aesthetic ugliness, which has led to the marginalisation or even persecution of others on the basis of their outward appearance. As a counterpoint to these tendencies, the article emphasises the idea of the ugly suffering servant Christ, which contains pastoral and countercultural potential.

Keywords

Ugliness; Beauty; Marginalisation; Subversive ethics; Pastoral care; Suffering servant; Jews; Witches

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Among the important themes that have received well-deserved attention in theological discourse are undoubtedly the values of the good, the true, and the beautiful. Traditionally, theologians have recognised them in the ordered cosmos as well as in individual creatures and understood them as a reflection of the qualities of the Creator,

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who embodies them in full. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* aptly captures this tendency:

All creatures bear a certain resemblance to God, most especially man, created in the image and likeness of God. The manifold perfections of creatures – their truth, their goodness, their beauty – all reflect the infinite perfection of God. Consequently, we can name God by taking his creatures' perfections as our starting point, 'for from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator'.¹

The effort to find traces of God in the beauty of creation and to give it deep religious meaning is theologically understandable and has produced many remarkable ideas. But focusing on beauty also has its flipside, which cannot be ignored, as it has sometimes led to the subordination of the ugly to the beautiful or even paved the way for its marginalisation and demonisation. In this article, we want to focus on this phenomenon. Specifically, we will look at human ugliness as it is subjectively perceived, either from the individual's own perspective or from the perspective of others. What is relevant for us is that the ugly can be, and often has been, considered inferior, with all the negative implications that this may entail. However, it is not our aim to provide a definition of ugliness since we believe that it is a generally recognisable phenomenon. Ugliness can be conceived, for example, as a disturbing disharmony of features or a certain type of disfigurement, but its understanding is subject to cultural variations and related to individual perceptions and is therefore a much more complex category that is difficult to grasp. We also want to note that although our paper focuses on what can be regarded as an aesthetical phenomenon, our primary interest is in providing the pastoral and ethical impetus. Therefore, our aim is not to delve into the aesthetics of human appearance, psychological discussions of self-perception, or to address standards for beauty and ugliness. We start from the simple premise that there is a general, albeit always culturally conditioned, human experience of ugliness as well as the painful experience of persons who are considered ugly by others.

For example, those who suffer from a noticeable defect that makes them unsightly may internalise certain cultural stereotypes and feel

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2nd ed.; Citta del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), 17, par. 41.

inferior. Yet, the cause of such a self-perception may not be related only to the common exaltation of beauty. If we look into history and especially into Christian religious tradition, we can discover the deeply religious roots of the extolling of beauty and the beautiful, as already evidenced by the ancient Jewish and Christian texts. These texts quite unanimously associate God, heavenly beings and the heavens with all-encompassing beauty. According to the Psalmist, God is ‘the perfection of beauty’,² and the later apocalyptic literature offers us insight into the colourful images of the heavens and celestial beings, which are depicted in superlatives of beauty.³ Beauty is also an integral part of the protological⁴ and eschatological representation of humanity in its perfection. In such a context, ugliness is an unfitting and problematic aberration that needs to be explained theologically.

In this paper, we would like to discuss the problematic aspects of the way ugliness has been, and sometimes still is, dealt with in theology, and, in particular, the risks involved in some theological responses to the ‘problem of ugliness’. In addition, we would like to contribute to this topic by attempting to offer one Christological corrective related to the notion of an ugly Jesus.

1. Subordination of the Individual to the Larger Whole or to Another Goal

First, we want to point out that the difficulty with some theological responses to the phenomenon of ugliness is that they do not pay attention to the individual. It goes without saying that theologians address the problem of ugliness abstractly and generally. However, these solutions should not at the same time be insensitive, even insulting and cruel to the perspective of the individual to whom they might be applied. Such solutions can be seen in some approaches that implicitly or explicitly attribute significance to ugliness in the context of a larger whole or explain the existence of ‘anomalous’ human beings as a form of omens.

The first approach is present in some of Augustine’s works. Augustine holds that ugliness contributes to the higher value of harmony and

² Cf. Ps 50:2. See also Ps 27:4, Is 33:17, Ez 1, Wis 13:5.

³ E.g., 2. *Baruch* 51:5.9–10; *Testament of Abraham* 2:4. On the depiction of beauty in the Book of Revelation, see Pieter G. R. de Villiers, ‘Beauty in the Book of Revelation: On Biblical Spirituality and Aesthetics,’ *Spiritus* 19, no. 1 (2019): 1–20.

⁴ See, e.g., *Sibylline Oracles* 1:22–24.

order. He does not classify ugliness as bad but as less good in comparison to what is beautiful because ugliness preserves less measure, form, and order.⁵ However, he does not always think of ugliness only as an aesthetic category but sometimes also looks at it through an ethical lens. For example, when he writes that there are repulsive parts of animal bodies, it is clear that he thinks purely in aesthetic terms because these parts are not moral agents. What is important for Augustine is that they are necessary for the proper functioning of the organism. The significance of the ugly is thus explained by the fact that it is an indispensable part of the whole. However, when Augustine transfers this analogy to human society, he has already crossed over to the ethical level. In his view, a well-managed society cannot do without ugly elements such as executioners or harlots. Although the executioner is ‘cruel’ and the harlot is ‘foul’ and ‘devoid of dignity’, they play essential roles within the whole of the social organism.⁶

This Augustine’s emphasis on the functional role of ugliness for higher goals is also evident in his reflection on the impermanence of physical beauty, which Irina Metzler aptly summarises:

Divine providence shows that corporal beauty is the lesser beauty, since providence also has such beauty accompanied by pain and sickness, deformation of limbs and loss of colour, so that thereby (by the mutability of the body) we are reminded to seek the immutable.⁷

From these considerations, only the last one directly concerns the physical appearance of human beings, but as in the case of the ugly parts of the animal body, we observe the same logic here: the aesthetically ugly is explained by its higher purpose. Although this line of thought is profound and in many ways inspiring, there is a significant danger here, namely that we overlook the individual reality and experience of

⁵ See Augustine, *On the Nature of Good*, 3.

⁶ See Augustine, *On Order*, IV,12–13. Aquinas also refers to this image in a paraphrase of Augustine’s description: “Thus, Augustine says that a whore acts in the world as the bilge in a ship or the sewer in a palace: “Remove the sewer, and you will fill the palace with a stench.” Similarly, concerning the bilge, he says: “Take away whores from the world, and you will fill it with sodomy.”” (*De Regimine Principium* IV,14.6). Cited from Ptolemy of Lucca and Thomas Aquinas, *On the Government of Rulers – De Regimine Principium*, trans. James M. Blythe (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1997), 254.

⁷ Irina Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe: Thinking about Physical Impairment in the High Middle Ages, c.1100–c.1400* (London: Routledge, 2006), 49. See Augustine, *True Religion*, XL,75.

a person who painfully copes with his or her ugliness. Augustine's explanation that their ugliness serves a greater harmony in the world order or the search for the immutable is not likely to be a comforting response to their suffering and feelings of inferiority. Furthermore, a similar explanation of aesthetic and ethical ugliness – as in the case of an executioner or harlot on the one hand and animal parts on the other – can also give the impression that aesthetic and ethical ugliness are somehow related.

The second approach, namely the symbolic understanding of ugliness, can be illustrated in the example of Isidore of Seville and Conrad Lycosthenes. In his *Etymologiae*, Isidore of Seville devotes an entire section to 'portents', in which he discusses new-borns with various 'defects' as omens of God pointing to the future:

Varro defines portents as beings that seem to have been born contrary to nature – but they are not contrary to nature, because they are created by divine will, since the nature of everything is the will of the Creator. Whence even the pagans address God sometimes as 'Nature' (*Natura*), sometimes as 'God.' A portent is therefore not created contrary to nature, but contrary to what is known nature. Portents are also called signs, omens, and prodigies, because they are seen to portend and display, indicate and predict future events. The term 'portent' (*portentum*) is said to be derived from foreshadowing (*portendere*), that is, from 'showing beforehand' (*praeostendere*). 'Signs' (*ostentum*), because they seem to show (*ostendere*) a future event. Prodigies (*prodigium*) are so called, because they 'speak hereafter' (*porro dicere*), that is, they predict the future ... Some portents seem to have been created as indications of future events, for God sometimes wants to indicate what is to come through some defects in new-borns, and also through dreams and oracles, by which he may foreshadow and indicate future calamity for certain peoples or individuals, as is indeed proved by abundant experience.⁸

Similarly, in his famous, lavishly illustrated treatise *Prodigiorum ac ostentorum chronicon*, Conrad Lycosthenes depicts various individuals who did not have the commonly expected appearance, such as physically impaired people or human beings born as Siamese twins. Building upon the ancient tradition of physiognomy, which considered the unusual shapes of the human body as the signs of future events,

⁸ Isidore of Sevilla, *Etymologies*, IV,3,1–5. Cited from Stephen A. Barney et al., *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 243–244.

he sees these anomalous beings as both members of the human race and divine omens.

These theological-cultural approaches have in common that they subordinate individual cases of ugliness to a higher purpose that is meant to give importance to ugliness. Augustine understands ugliness as a necessary component of the complex whole of harmony and order or as an incentive to search for the immutable. And for Isidore and Lycosthenes, ugliness becomes God's numinous language that has an oracular role.

In both cases, ugliness is instrumentalised for the sake of another value. The meaning of the concrete and the specific is thus marginalised or neglected. This approach stands in sharp contrast to our contemporary perspective, which pays much more attention to the experience of individuals who face internal pain or external rejection due to their ugliness.



Fig. 1: C. Lycosthenes, *Prodigiorum ac ostentorum chronicon*

As we believe, it is necessary to listen to the voice of these neglected and thus follow in the footsteps of the tradition of subversive ethics⁹ that forms the core of liberation theology, feminist theology, and similar currents. This approach gives a voice to the overlooked and prioritises the individual over the ‘totalitarian’. While this perspective has been reflected in many areas, including social justice and equality, we believe it also needs to be taken into account in theological reflection on ugliness.

2. Ugliness and Marginalisation

Although Augustine and other theologians understood ugliness only as a *lesser good*, not an *evil*, the category of ugliness is nevertheless historically connected to the demonisation of others. The religious association of the ugly with evil is mirrored in works of art that depict Satan as a visually hideous and terrifying being.¹⁰ However, the connection between ugliness and moral evil is not only found in the visual arts.¹¹ When John Calvin wrote that nature and ‘flesh’ bear the marks of the ‘ugly deformity’ after the Fall, he was not referring to the aesthetic but to the ethical realm.¹² Unfortunately, some Protestant texts and sermons, and even non-theologically oriented works, have taken this metaphor into the physical realm, describing repulsive bodies as evidence of corruption by sin.¹³ In this context, Naomi Baker points to an encyclopedic work for women entitled *The Ladies Dictionary* (1694), where ugly bodies are understood as fallen, with their ugliness or disfigurement to be removed only at the resurrection. William Sanderson writes similarly in his drawing manual *Graphice* (1658): ‘True beauty in any Creature, is not to be found, being full of deformed disproportions,

⁹ See Samuel Wells, Ben Quash, and Rebekah Eklund, *Introducing Christian Ethics* (2nd ed.; Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), 159–195.

¹⁰ A good example is the depiction of Satan devouring the damned in hell in the painting by Fra Angelico *The Last Judgement* (1431).

¹¹ Naturally, even a depiction of the ugly can be aesthetically beautiful. As Eco notes, ‘in any case a principle is admitted that is observed almost uniformly: although ugly creatures and things exist, art has the power to portray them in a beautiful way, and the Beauty of this imitation makes Ugliness acceptable.’ Umberto Eco, *On Beauty* (London: Seeker & Warburg, 2004), 135. However, this topic is beyond the scope of our inquiry.

¹² John Calvin, *Institutiones*, I,15.4. See Naomi Baker, *Plain Ugly: The Unattractive Body in Early Modern Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 45.

¹³ See Charles H. Parker, ‘Diseased Bodies, Defiled Souls: Corporality and Religious Difference in the Reformation,’ *Renaissance Quarterly* 67, no. 4 (2014): 1265–1297, doi: 10.1086/679783.

far remote from truth; for Sinne is the cause of deformity.¹⁴ This general concept of the ugliness of the created beings is connected with original sin rather than with individual sin. Most theologians have resisted the idea that there is any or at least a clear connection between ugliness and particular sins. After all, even some saints were not physically attractive.¹⁵ However, some theologians opened the door to the dangerous idea that physical ugliness might indicate a defective human character. As Irina Metzler writes,

Albertus Magnus opined that the physical appearance of a person can influence their character, qualifying this remark, however, by adding that this does not make a person behave in a certain way *absolutely*. This means a person retains an element of free will, so that instead individuals should strive to overcome the negative effects of physical blemishes. According to Albertus Magnus, the soul moves the body in many ways; conversely, the parts of the body can pervert or corrupt in different ways the activities of the soul. These sorts of sentiments pave the way for the view that there is an interplay between soul and body, and possessing an impaired, defective, disfigured or simply an ugly body can mean that such a person also has a defective, that is, evil, soul.¹⁶

There is no dispute that such a concept, which is itself misguided, can also be severely abused. If the depravity of the human heart is mirrored in external, physical form, those we wish to label as morally corrupt can also be easily portrayed as ugly. In other words, the combination of moral and visual ugliness can become a tool of propaganda and repression, as we, unfortunately, know well from history. Particularly notorious in this sense is the depiction and representation of witches and Jews.

For instance, a Nazi propagandist Julius Streicher, in his anti-Semitic newspaper *Der Stürmer*, denigrated Jews by using fictitious

¹⁴ Baker, *Plain Ugly*, 45.

¹⁵ The apocryphal *Acts of Paul and Thecla* describes Paul quite ambiguously as ‘a man short in stature, with a bald head, bowed legs, in good condition, eyebrows that met, a fairly large nose, and full of grace’ (APTh 3). Cited from Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures: Books that Did Not Make It into the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 114.

¹⁶ Metzler, *Disability*, 54. See Albertus Magnus, *On Animals*, 1,2,2.

information such as the ritual ingestion of the blood of non-Jews.¹⁷ These dark denunciations were accompanied by crude caricatures.¹⁸ One of them depicts Jews with conspicuously large noses and blood-thirsty expressions that recall the demonic features of the individuals who watch suffering Jesus in Hieronymus Bosch's famous painting *Christ Carrying the Cross*.¹⁹ Another means of denigrating Jews was to associate them – both metaphorically and visually – with animals considered unclean, parasitic, blood-thirsty, and repulsive. This is amply illustrated by Charles Patterson, who states:

John Roth and Michael Berenbaum write that Nazi propaganda constantly described Jews as 'parasites, vermin, beasts of prey – in a word, subhuman'. In 1952, the year before the Nazis came to power, great enthusiasm greeted a Nazi speech in Charlottenburg, a wealthy Berlin district, when the speaker called Jews *insects* who needed to be exterminated. In the Nazi propaganda film *Der Ewige Jude* ('The Eternal Jew'), which opens with footage of a mass of swarming rats, the narrator explains, 'Just as the rat is the lowest of animals, the Jew is the lowest of human beings'.²⁰

Clearly, the stereotypes associated with visual ugliness here are meant to demonstrate moral ugliness.²¹ We can illustrate the same stereotyping in the case of witches, who were not infrequently depicted as hideous, old women.²² An example of such a visualisation

¹⁷ See Randall L. Bytwerk, *Julius Streicher: The Man who Persuaded a Nation to Hate Jews* (New York: Dorset Press, 1985).

¹⁸ Most of these caricatures were drawn by a German anti-Semitic cartoonist Philipp Rupprecht, known as *Fips*. See Carl-Eric Linsler, 'Stürmer-Karikaturen,' in *Handbuch des Antisemitismus. Judenfeindschaft in Geschichte und Gegenwart, Bd. 7: Literatur, Film, Theater und Kunst*, ed. Wolfgang Benz (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015), 477–480.

¹⁹ Cf. Boria Sax, *Animals in the Third Reich: Pets, Scapegoat and the Holocaust* (Continuum: New York – London, 2000), 62.

²⁰ Charles Patterson, *Eternal Treblinka: Our Treatment of Animals and the Holocaust* (Lantern Books, New York, 2002), 46. See also Bein's analysis of the image of the 'Jewish parasite' in the Nazi ideology in Alex Bein, 'The Jewish Parasite,' *Yearbook of the Leo Baeck* 9, no. 1 (1964): 3–40.

²¹ For more, see Jay Geller, *Bestiarium Judaicum: Unnatural Histories of the Jews* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018).

²² As Gregory shows, English pamphleteers in the 16th and 17th centuries portrayed women accused of witchcraft as ugly and old. Yet court records show that these were primarily women of influence, and this depiction was probably purposeful. See Anabel Gregory, 'Poor, Old, and Ugly? Portrayal of Witches in 16th- and 17th-century Pamphlets,' *History Today* 66, no. 8 (2016): 41–47. See also Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 82.

is Albrecht Dürer’s painting of a witch riding backwards on a goat. This kind of depiction has created a very dangerous stereotype that could lead – and often, unfortunately, has led – to terrible deeds, to which Umberto Eco refers: “in most cases, the many victims of the stake were accused of witchcraft because they were ugly.”²⁵ There is little doubt about the religious underpinnings of this demonisation. It is telling enough that in the background of the above-mentioned caricature in *Der Stürmer*, we see three crosses as an allusion to the Passion story, probably referring to the alleged role played by the Jews in it.



Fig. 2: Julius Streicher, *Der Stürmer*

The demonisation of the ugly has another very dangerous consequence, namely the viewing of the ugly as a threat. An illustrative example *par excellence* offers the character of Quasimodo in Victor

²⁵ Umberto Eco, *On Ugliness* (New York: Rizzoli, 2007), 212.

Hugo's famous novel *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*. Quasimodo is characterised by loyalty and devotion, but he is known to everyone especially for his physical ugliness, which is why people fear him, as this excerpt from Hugo's novel shows:

When this species of cyclops appeared on the threshold of the chapel, motionless, squat, and almost as broad as he was tall; squared on the base, as a great man says; with his doublet half red, half violet, sown with silver bells, and, above all, in the perfection of his ugliness, the populace recognized him on the instant, and shouted with one voice,

'Tis Quasimodo, the bellringer! 'tis Quasimodo, the hunchback of Notre-Dame! Quasimodo, the one-eyed! Quasimodo, the bandy-legged! Noel! Noel!

It will be seen that the poor fellow had a choice of surnames.

'Let the women with child beware!' shouted the scholars.

'Or those who wish to be,' resumed Joannes.

The women did, in fact, hide their faces.

'Oh! the horrible monkey!' said one of them.

'As wicked as he is ugly,' retorted another.

'He's the devil,' added a third.

'I have the misfortune to live near Notre-Dame; I hear him prowling round the eaves by night.'

'With the cats.'

'He's always on our roofs.'

'He throws spells down our chimneys.'

'The other evening, he came and made a grimace at me through my attic window. I thought that it was a man. Such a fright as I had!'

'I'm sure that he goes to the witches' sabbath. Once he left a broom on my leads.'

'Oh! what a displeasing hunchback's face!'

'Oh! what an ill-favored soul!'

'Whew!'²⁴

It can hardly be doubted that the association of ugliness with the Fall and moral corruption is *much more* dangerous than the subordination of the ugly to another purpose. Indeed, the consequence of such a conception may be not only the marginalisation of ugly people but

²⁴ Victor Hugo, *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (San Diego: Icon Classics, 2005), 58.

also moral vilification, the legitimisation of violence, and even extermination. Modern history is replete with examples where violence and cruelty towards other human beings have been either motivated or accompanied by the portrayal of victims as ugly, disgusting, and repulsive ‘vermins’. Through these depictions, the aggressors clearly sought to deny their humanity and the moral duties and responsibilities associated with it.

3. Remembering the Ugly Christ

As we have seen, the theological problem of ugliness has been dealt with in many unfortunate ways that do not take into account the individual’s situation. Nevertheless, we would like not only to point out the issues associated with some theological and cultural responses to the problem of ugliness but also to offer a Christological insight that may serve at least as a partial corrective to the marginalisation of ugliness. We find this stimulus in the song of the suffering servant of the Lord in Isaiah 52–53:

He had no form or beauty. But his form was without honor, failing beyond all men, a man being in calamity and knowing how to bear sickness; because his face is turned away, he was dishonored and not esteemed. This one bears our sins and suffers pain for us, and we accounted him to be in trouble and calamity and ill-treatment. But he was wounded because of our acts of lawlessness and has been weakened because of our sins; upon him was the discipline of our peace; by his bruise we were healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; a man has strayed in his own way, and the Lord gave him over to our sins. And he, because he has been ill-treated, does not open his mouth; like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and as a lamb is silent before the one shearing it, so he does not open his mouth. (Isa. 53:2–7 NETS²⁵)

The New Testament writers viewed this section of the Old Testament as a typological prophecy of Jesus’ Passion (Rom. 4:25; Mk. 8:31; 1 Cor. 15:3–4). Interestingly, in the context of the Passion, the New Testament writers omit the servant’s *ugly appearance* altogether in their

²⁵ Since the Church Fathers drew on the text of the Septuagint, we present a translation based on it.

references and allusions. Physical disfigurement due to the violence suffered is therefore present only implicitly.²⁶

Despite this, the Church Fathers deal with the idea of an unsightly servant Jesus because, unlike the New Testament writers, they do not selectively choose ‘appropriate’ quotations from Isaiah’s song but embrace it in its entirety. Thus, they must address the potential difficulties inherent in the idea of Jesus’ ugliness. They query how it is possible to combine the divine and the ugly. The urgency of this question is evident from the polemics and rebukes to which Origen responds in his work *Against Celsus*. According to Origen, the Greek philosopher Celsus, after whom the work is named, wrote that

if a divine spirit was in a body, it must certainly have differed from other bodies in size or beauty or strength or voice or striking appearance or powers of persuasion. For it is impossible that a body which had something more divine than the rest should be no different from any other. Yet Jesus’ body was no different from any other, but, as they say, was little and ugly and undistinguished.²⁷

It is obvious that the image of the ugly and mutilated Christ is far from the ideal of beauty and goodness, so it does not resemble the perfect harmony of both values, which the Greeks called *kalokagathia*.²⁸ This fact is even more evident if we compare this image with the prevailing concepts of the Greek and Roman gods. As evidenced by their extant ancient statues, these gods were regarded as models of supreme beauty. In contrast, as Georg Hegel states in his *Aesthetics*:

Christ scourged, with the crown of thorns, carrying his cross to the place of execution, nailed to the cross, passing away in the agony of a torturing and slow death – this cannot be portrayed in the forms of Greek beauty.²⁹

²⁶ See Marc Brettler and Amy-Jill Levine, ‘Isaiah’s Suffering Servant: Before and After Christianity,’ *Interpretation* 73, no. 2 (2019): 158–173, at 165–168. doi: 10.1177/0020964318820594.

²⁷ Celsus in Origen, *Against Celsus*. VI,75. Cited from Henry Chadwick, *Origen: Contra Celsum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 388.

²⁸ See Eco, *On Beauty*, 42–47; Eco, *On Ugliness*, 23–33.

²⁹ Cited from Georg W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 538. On Christian visualisations of the Suffering Servant, see Martin O’Kane, ‘Picturing “The Man of Sorrows”: The Passion-filled Afterlives of a Biblical Icon,’ *Religion and the Arts* 9, no. 1–2 (2005): 62–100, doi: 10.1163/1568529054573451.

For Greeks, the idea of ugly divinity was rather unnatural. Some early theologians responded to the problem by underlining the beauty in the ugly Jesus. This paradox is only apparent because they did not consider this beauty to be external but moral or spiritual. Clement of Alexandria reflects on this idea as follows:

The Spirit gives witness through Isaiah that even the Lord became an unsightly spectacle: ‘And we saw him, and there was no beauty or comeliness in him, but his form was despised and rejected by people.’ Yet, who is better than the Lord? He displayed not beauty of the flesh, which is only outward appearance, but the true beauty of body and soul – for the soul, the beauty of good deeds; for the body, the beauty of immortality.⁵⁰

And to already mentioned Celsus, pointing out the ugliness of the prophesied Christ, Origen answers:

How did he fail to notice that his body differed in accordance with the capacity of those who saw it, and on this account appeared in such form as was beneficial for the needs of each individual’s vision? ... To those who are still down below and are not yet prepared to ascend, the Logos ‘has not form nor beauty’. However, to those who by following him have received power to go after him even as he is ascending the high mountain, he has a more divine form.⁵¹

While such solutions are understandable in the context of the polemic of their time, it is clear that the swift theological move to ‘the beauty of good deeds’, ‘the beauty of immortality’, and ‘divine form’ leaves *physical* ugliness far behind. Beauty – even if it is the beauty of an ethical and theological nature – again overshadows the unembellished reality, namely that Jesus, seen through the lens of a suffering servant, had a repulsive appearance. The paradox, then, is that some early church writers rehabilitated the idea of Jesus’ ugliness, though only to make it a platform for developing reflections on his beauty and thus marginalising ugliness all over again. Moreover, such a practice neglects the idea’s comforting pastoral potential. This potential consists in the fact that people who are

⁵⁰ Clement of Alexandria, *Christ the Educator*, III,1.5. Cited from Clement of Alexandria, *Christ the Educator* (FC 23; Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1954), 201.

⁵¹ Origen, *Against Celsus*. VI,77. Cited from Chadwick, *Origen*, 390.

disfigured and marginalised can identify with the condition of Christ, who also had no form or beauty, his form was without honor, failing beyond all men. His face was turned away, he was dishonored and not esteemed. Many were astonished at him, his appearance was beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of mortals.



Fig. 3: Hieronymus Bosch: *Christ Carrying the Cross*

Nevertheless, the pastorally utilised idea that the sight of a mocked Christ can bring comfort is not without its dangers. As liberation theology and feminist theology have pointed out, such an idea has also been misused to sanctify oppression. One was to be meek and obediently carry one's cross as Christ did, thus leaving oppressive social structures unchanged. As Leonardo Boff, one of the leading representatives of liberation theology, notes, the image of Christ's suffering on the cross can make the oppressed interiorise their powerlessness. Christ thus becomes a symbol of subjugation, not the one who incites liberation.⁵²

The feminist point of view is well summarised by Czech theologian Jana Opočenská in her concise synthetic work on this current:

⁵² See Leonardo Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator: A Critical Christology for Our Time* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989), 271. Cf. Rosino Gibellini, *La Teologia del XX secolo* (Brescia: Editrice Queriniana, 1992), 394–395.

Neutral texts can also be dangerous, i.e., they can be oppressive, if they are used to inculcate patriarchal principles and behaviour. If a woman plagued by a man's beatings is exhorted to carry her cross and suffer as Jesus suffered to save her marriage, then the neutral biblical motif (carrying one's own cross) is used to reinforce patriarchal values.⁵³

However, we understand the ugliness we are discussing here primarily as a fate that can be dealt with internally but cannot be changed – unlike the discrimination associated with it – by external social and legal measures. That is why in this case, the danger pointed out by liberation theologians and feminists is much smaller, and the awareness that Christ was considered ugly can play a fruitful pastoral role. This role is based on the assumption that the burden of unattractiveness might be better borne by Christians if they look to this very Christ – not the beautiful and dazzling one, but the repulsive and disfigured one from whom many turn their eyes away.

In addition, the idea of the ugly Christ does involve not only this pastoral aspect but also a culturally critical and transformative dimension. The ideal of beauty, as presented to us in various social media, can lead not only to feelings of inferiority in those who do not meet this physical 'standard'. Its exaltation also implicitly suggests that it is one of the main values to orient our lives around, even a certain measure of the quality of a particular person. As Jay B. McDaniel critically notes, 'success and physical attractiveness are the twin gods of consumer culture'.⁵⁴ Of course, it is not that we want to question the phenomenon of physical beauty and its aesthetic significance. Rather, we want to draw attention to the fact that other values have a much more important role in the Christian tradition than this type of beauty. Those who admire, for example, Albert Schweitzer, Dorothy Day or any other figure who sought to give practical, ethical expression to his or her faith are usually not interested in their appearance but focus on their words and actions. In this respect, Clement of Alexandria's emphasis on the beauty of the works of Jesus is more than a pious cliché. For he shows that true humanity, of which Jesus was the model, is not related to outer attractiveness or ugliness but to actions. The countercultural

⁵³ Jana Opočenská, *Zpovzdálí se dívaly také ženy* [Women Were Also Watching from Afar] (Praha: Kalich, 1995), 48.

⁵⁴ Jay B. McDaniel, *With Roots and Wings: Christianity in an Age of Ecology and Dialogue* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 13.

significance of this idea is obvious – while contemporary society places fitness and beauty on a pedestal, the image of the suffering and ugly servant is a subversive image that highlights other values.⁵⁵ This image also undermines the idea that aesthetic ugliness mirrors moral ugliness, the idea that has been used as propaganda to demonise certain groups of the population, as we have shown earlier.



Fig. 4: Albrecht Dürer, *The Witch*

⁵⁵ See McDaniel, *With Roots and Wings*, 14: 'Attractiveness ... is defined in an unchristian way. If we are Christian, we might like to define attractiveness as having the kind of magnetism that Jesus had: a drawing power that comes from humility, compassion for the marginalized of society, and a willingness to speak the truth regardless of the cost. But rootless consumerism does not define attractiveness this way. From its vantage point, the attractive person is one who is young and sexy or old but distinguished. Attractiveness means outer not inner beauty.'

If Jesus understood as an Isaiah-like suffering servant brings salvation, he brings it precisely as deformed, as ugly.⁵⁶ This is no docetic or spiritual speculation but a very much corporal – ‘flesh and blood’ – narrative in which ugliness has an essential role. As Augustine wrote, ‘Christ’s deformity is what gives form to you. If he had been unwilling to be deformed, you would never have got back the form you lost. So, he hung on the cross, deformed; but his deformity was our beauty.’⁵⁷

However, if we understand salvation in its fullness, we cannot skip over the fact that salvation also brings comfort in the painful struggle with one’s own ugliness and frees human beings from the social pressure to conform to the ideal of bodily beauty.

In his famous statement, Dostoevsky claimed that beauty would save the world, but in fact, it was ugliness that brought redemption and salvation to humanity. This by no means implies that Jesus brought salvation *because* he was ugly, that salvation is only for the ugly, or even that ugliness itself is a qualification for salvation. It is not our purpose to enter into a soteriological discussion. We merely intend to point out that ugliness cannot under any circumstances be degraded, dehumanised, or belittled. It is tied to Christ, who brings salvation to humanity precisely as an unsightly and deformed suffering servant. If we consider this, we could bring a little more acceptance, kindness, hope, and love into the world because we will help overcome the dangerous stereotypes that associate ugliness and disfigurement with moral distrust, danger, and fear.

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⁵⁶ See also the connection between ugliness and redemption in the concept of de Gruchy in Pavol Bargár, “‘It felt it...it was perfect’: Apollo, Dionysus, Christ, and Black Swan,” *Communio Viatorum* 60, no. 3 (2018), 313–335.

⁵⁷ Augustine, *Sermons* 27.6. Cited from Augustine of Hippo, *The Works of Saint Augustine. Part III – Sermons. Volume II: Sermons 20–50*, trans. Edmund Hill (New York: New City Press, 1990), 107.