



Thinking of God as an Artist

By Glen Greenwalt

Western theology is dominated by images of God as a divine sovereign. God is conceived as king, judge, returning conqueror. Not surprisingly, the theology that emerges from this tradition is constructed around images drawn from throne rooms, law courts, and military campaigns—especially those of a totalitarian society. God is an absolute, though benevolent, despot who works his will through a descending order of institutions and underlings. As a result, human institutions appear to mirror the divine order. Doctrine is formulated as a codex of laws, and church leadership is almost inevitably hierarchical. The troubling consequence of this logic is that it overlooks how thoroughly human is this way—as are all ways—of thinking about God. Thus, the political structures of the Church amazingly resemble those of tribal or medieval monarchies.

The idea that God may be more like an artist than a feudal lord has been in the back of my mind for some time. A career shift has brought this idea to front and center. After teaching theology on a college campus for over twenty years, I recently began working as a junior graphic artist in a prospering design company. Literally overnight, the rules of my universe were turned on their head. For the last six years of my teaching, church administrators had come to view our department as a threat to the Church. At the apex of the struggle, with considerable anger in their voices, they enumerated both real and fallacious complaints. At the heart of all these complaints was the charge that the Church possessed the truth; therefore, our job “was not to teach students how to think or imagine new things, but to ‘indoctrinate’ students in the truth we possess. Other people may search for the Truth, but we have the Truth.” In this environment, novelty in and of itself was viewed as a threat to the existing order—which, as a matter of fact, is the way matters are in all totalitarian states.

When I began work as a graphic designer, I discovered a whole new set of rules. The work of graphic design is extremely precise. Mistakes are measured in the width of a human hair. However, my experience in this new work environment was not unlike the one that many Russians from the cold war era reported after first coming to the United States. The openness and freedom were almost overwhelming. Suddenly, in my new job as graphic artist, I was being told that I was too cautious. My new boss told me that the first rule of the company was to “have fun.” With every new assignment I was told things like, “look over what we have done and come up with something better”; “we can’t survive if we keep repeating ourselves”; “break the rules if you have to, but come up with something new”; “the only limits around here are those of your imagination”; “here are some suggestions, but you are the designer, it’s up to you.”

Suddenly, I had to rethink my own identity, as well as my understanding of the Church. My own indoctrination both as a farm boy of German ancestry and as a conservative believer did not prepare me to think highly of artists, much less to think of God as an artist. I appreciated the beauty artists brought to the world. My problem was with the artists themselves, who sat around drawing and painting when they could have been working. Furthermore, I feared that artistic freedom led to the kind of bohemian lifestyle decried by the Church. Even though my dad is very artistic—and I myself felt the power of art—I limited my exposure to art to looking at art books, wandering through galleries, and sketching in church, where I was not wasting time, I might be working, and my surroundings were wholesome.

What if God is first and foremost an artist, however? On closer reflection, the idea is not as peculiar as it first seems. In fact, it seems logically necessary. God is, after all, Creator, before God is Lord, or certainly Redeemer or Judge. We view God as Lord by fact of creation. A lord requires subjects, so that apart from creatures, God is not inherently Lord. Furthermore, God is only redeemer and judge by the fact of sin. So if creation is an artistic act, then God by definition must be an artist. What effect might such an insight have on our understanding of God?

If God is an artist, then God loves beauty. This suggestion is perhaps more controversial than it seems at first. Theologians, after all, are as quick to praise the beauty of creation as are artists and poets. The difficulty of this suggestion arises in viewing beauty as a measure of value. Most often, beauty is viewed as the superficial appearance of things, rather than as something inherently valuable. We are offended, therefore, by the reported quote from a famous model who said that if she had not been beautiful she would have become a teacher. Furthermore, history is replete with examples of artists who loved beauty, but lived immoral lives. Even if we came to agree about the inherent value of beauty itself, we would likely disagree over what we found to be beautiful.

Yet most of us would agree that a life without beauty would hardly be worth living. So what is this quality we yearn for, but have such difficulty defining or agreeing upon?

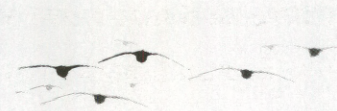
Beauty has been defined in many ways. Plato thought of it as the perfect harmony of things. Aristotle conceived of beauty as a state in which everything fits. For Friedrich von Schiller, beauty is

something that confers happiness on us and causes us to forget that we are limited. Rollo May, in his book *My Quest for Beauty*, suggests that beauty is what gives us a sense of joy and rightness simultaneously. "Beauty gives us not only a feeling of wonder; it imparts to us at the same moment a timelessness, a repose—which is why we speak of beauty as being eternal."¹ Along similar lines, Victor Frankl, in his memoirs from the concentration camp, portrays beauty as a refuge from emptiness, desolation, and spiritual poverty produced by the horrific conditions of the camps.

As the inner life of the prisoner tended to become more intense, he also experienced the beauty of art and nature as never before. Under their influence he sometimes even forgot his own frightful circumstances. If someone had seen our faces on the journey from Auschwitz to a Bavarian camp as we beheld the mountains of Salzburg with their summits glowing in the sunset, through the little barred windows of the prison carriage, he would never have believed that those were the faces of men who given up all hope of life and liberty. Despite that factor—or maybe because of it—we were carried away by nature's beauty, which we had missed for so long.²

Beauty, then, seems to be a state in which things are as they should be, not in a legal sense of meeting certain predetermined regulations, but in the sense that all of the elements come together in a satisfying way. As the chief designer at my firm says of things he is designing, "I think it just wants to be this way," as if the elements of the work call out to be arranged in a certain way. What interests me about this sense of right, in contrast to legal notions of right, is that one can never predetermine what will be beautiful, except in the most general fashion. Colors, textures, shapes, lines all change from one piece of art to another, but when they come together in something that is right, it is beautiful.

If God is an artist, then God must appreciate the infinite varieties of the beautiful. As we look closely at nature this seems to be the case. From very simple elements nature everywhere replicates itself into an infinite variety of shapes, forms, and living things.



Looking at nature, it appears that God did not foreordain a particular order for the universe, but rather imbued nature itself with the artistic capacity to shape and form itself in ever-new creations. This is perhaps what Ellen White speaks of when she describes the final restoration of the universe as one where one beat of harmony sounds throughout the universe.³ It is not that God seeks peace in the universe governed by dint of arms, but that God envisions a world where all things move and find their place like streams seek the sea, or like flocks of blackbirds swirl and turn in flight. Beauty is located in the harmony created out of the interplay of diverse and often disparate elements. As C. S. Lewis somewhere remarks, in the perfection of heaven we do not become more alike, but unlike, in the way that no two blades of grass or two snowflakes are alike.

If God is an artist, then God enjoys the novel and the new. This suggestion is not the assumed posture of most religious faiths. Most portray a high need for continuity and conformity. As a result, as Rollo May points out, almost every religious institution harbors a timeless fear of its artists, poets, and saints, for they are the ones who threaten the status quo, which each community is devoted to protect. Forever unsatisfied with the mundane, the apathetic, and the conventional, artists, poets, and saints push always onto new worlds.⁴ Yet the postulate that God as artist loves novelty seems to arise necessarily from our first postulate.

In the Church, we emphasize texts that say God is the same yesterday, today, and forever to imply that faith never changes, yet we overlook texts such as Isaiah 43:18, 19, which say that God is going to do new things, greater things than he has done before. Richard Rice and Fritz Guy have helped us think of ways in which God's character is constant but the dynamics of his love and activity are constantly changing. The metaphor of God as artist may help us give shape and form to this conception of God's dynamism. If God really is an artist with the considerable skill and talent that belongs properly to one of God's stature and

being, then God cannot be someone who simply paints by numbers or continually repeats himself.

One of the designers where I work is a very intelligent man who entered the graphic design business by way of engineering. This man has had virtually no contact with the Christian faith, which leads to interesting comments—often laced with explicatives—as he tries to make sense of the numerous religious bulletins, brochures, and advertisements the firm helps design. Never before had I realized how much of the language of the church—such as love offerings and efforts—is totally unintelligible or even morally troubling or ridiculous when taken at its everyday street value. The very language that is coveted for its ring of piety within the church is silly or problematic to those who were not indoctrinated within the church.

As Jesus repeatedly pointed out, the businessmen and women of the world appear to be wiser than the saints of the church. No business could survive by holding onto its same language and logos. Businesses pay billions of dollars a year to design companies to help them make their products more attractive to customers. How can the church thrive with fossilized language and concepts? Maybe Ellen White was pointing us in the direction of the need for novelty and change when she spoke of “present truth.”⁵ Truth and novelty are not inherently contradictory terms. The logos of companies such as Texaco have undergone a great deal of change through the years, yet we recognize a Texaco sign when we see it. The church need not give up its values; it must find ever-new ways of understanding and expressing them.

If God is an artist, then he loves balance—particularly if the balance evokes movement and change. Most religious traditions love the language of balance and harmony. But when they speak of balance and harmony what they usually have in mind are stabilized structures. As a pastor, I once heard someone comment that if God had placed a fence around us for our protection, then he would have wanted us to be as

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close to the center of the field as possible, and not at the edges. Yet there could be no field without edges. As a matter of fact, boundaries are extremely important in art. A picture not yet framed never looks as good as it does with a fitting frame. However, good art is seldom centered in the middle of the frame. As a matter of fact, one of the first lessons a beginning art student must master is that of filling up the entire space within the frame. Not only is it inevitable that there will always be people and ideas at the boundaries of the Christian community and the Adventist Church, it is a fact that most of the growth of the Church—as in a plant or any living thing—takes place along its boundaries.

This is not to overlook the fact that nature is replete with centered, symmetrical features—eyes, ears, nostrils, hands, feet, fingers, and toes are perhaps the most self-evident. We seldom see things, however, in their symmetrical pose. The Egyptians painted human beings with their right eye directly forward, the face and thighs profiled, the torso facing the observer, and the feet with right-sided toes. They produced the idealized features of the human being, but in so doing they terribly distorted how human beings actually look in everyday life. They missed the thing itself for their idealization of it.

Again, one of the things a beginning art student must learn is that one can never produce “realistic” images of a person until one gives up trying to draw “eyes,” “noses,” “ears,” and the like. This lesson is important because we never see a body from a stereotypical perspective. Look closely at someone in the room and you will notice that you probably don’t really see his or her eyes, let alone the “whites of their eyes,” but only a dark shadow of an odd shape—and the same holds for the rest of the nameable parts. Fingers are only partially there, and most likely only three show, legs are not of equal lengths like the legs of a table, and so on.

Rollo May suggests that perhaps the biblical prohibition against idols is particularly directed toward the human penchant to create static visions of God. “The creative artist and poet and saint must fight

the actual (as contrasted to the ideal) gods of our society—the god for conformism as well as the gods of apathy, material success, and expletive powers. These are the ‘idols’ of our society that are worshiped by multitudes of people.”⁶ Thomas More somewhere makes the same point more poetically, when he says that in walking into a natural forest, one can’t go first to a card catalog or find the trees and plants arranged alphabetically or have enough light to see everything with the same degree of detail.

Not even the Bible was composed as a book of law or an encyclopedia of facts, but as a scrapbook of stories, parables, sermons, letters, and even fables. If God wanted everyone to agree to a particular number of belief statements, would not God have written a formal statement of beliefs? The closest God ever came to giving us a creed was in writing out the Ten Commandments. However, the Ten Commandments are hardly a creed. Instead, they are a set of principles that evoke the creation of rules and standards under ever-changing situations. Still, the human penchant to write creedal statements goes unabated even in churches such as the Seventh-day Adventist and Baptist, both of which have historically rejected them.

Some in Adventism are dissatisfied even with the twenty-seven fundamentals of Seventh-day Adventist belief because they are open to wide interpretations. At the college where I taught, we were asked to sign a statement of narrowly defined propositions that looked amazingly like the creedal statement of the Adventist Theological Society—a society of self-policing Adventist conservatives. Our refusal to sign was seen as evidence of our disloyalty to the Church—even though the Church never voted on this document! Such actions arise from an understanding of God as feudal lord, not as the Creator of the Universe.

Balance in nature is not predicated on uniformity.

In our attempt to decipher all of the symbols of the Apocalypse of Revelation into time slots on a prophetic calendar we overlook the artistic implications of the Great Controversy theme: namely, that controversy can only exist in the universe because God risks it.

As a matter of fact, where any living population loses its diversity its survival is threatened. This example should give us room for pause as we observe the push for uniformity that now marks certain segments of the Church. Such behavior, rather than bringing vitality and health to the Church, deprives it of the cross-fertilization of ideas it needs for survival, in much the same way that inbreeding in zoos and clear-cutting of forests ultimately deprives species of the diversity needed for survival. If God creates and speaks as an artist, then theologians and church administrators may need to take a second look at how they go about their business if their goal is to be godlike.

If God is an artist, then the meaning of the parts must be discovered in their relationship to the whole. This idea is often lost sight of in religious faith, although it does appear in heresies. A heresy in faith is usually not so much a matter of getting something wrong as it is of treating something important as if it were all-important.

Artists seldom create by simply isolating a particular feature, or by following a step-by-step outline. Watching a professional artist work, one discovers that the artist will dab a little paint here, and then a little paint there, and perhaps then even cover over the first paint that was laid down, with a different color or image. The reason for this is not that the artist is disorganized. The artist works rather by discovering through the process of painting the relationship called for by the various elements of the painting.

Everywhere in nature we see this same shifting and transformation as various elements such as weather, living populations, and chance occurrences come together. Interestingly enough, our very word for ecology is derived from *Eco*, an abbreviated form for the Greek *oikos*, which means home—either a human home, a temple, the home of the gods, or even the astrological “house” or domicile of a planet. An ecological system is a place where things are at home with each other.

This concept suggests again that the language of throne rooms, courts, and warfare may not be the first

language of divinity. The first language of the universe is home. As seen from space, the earth is a single, beautiful place. It is home to all of life, as we know it. We are creatures of the earth. It is our home. Unfortunately, we lose sight of the encompassing view of life in our territorial interests and conflicts. Even in Adventism, which so prides itself on being a single worldwide family, our doctrines are often co-opted by the language of law, courts, and military conflict. For example, the sanctuary doctrine is often depicted as the setting for a criminal court, rather than as a place where God comes to dwell with us, which turns it into a refuge from our adversaries. To think of God as artist is to restore the language of sanctuary as the place of refuge. More importantly, if God as artist dwells in the sanctuary, then the sanctuary is a place of worship and wonderment. Awe of God is not something that must be demanded, as by an earthly despot, but something that overcomes a person in the face of the magnificent.

Finally, (in art, of course there are no real “finally’s,” but in writing there must be) if God is an artist, then God is so committed to creativity that God is willing to chance chaos and even destruction for the sake of freedom. This claim is perhaps the most contentious one that arises from seeing God as an artist, for it leaves open the possibility that God risked not only death, but also murder, rape, and pillage in creation for the sake of freedom.

Inherent in the Adventist vision is the picture of the Great Controversy between God and evil. Unfortunately, in our attempt to decipher all of the symbols of the Apocalypse of Revelation into time slots on a prophetic calendar we overlook the artistic implications of the Great Controversy theme: namely, that controversy can only exist in the universe because God risks it.

Unlike most CEOs, God prefers risks to orchestrated outcomes. One of the real liabilities to the long-term growth and health of the Church is the present climate of suspicion and control. If church leaders are incapable of thinking like artists, they should at least

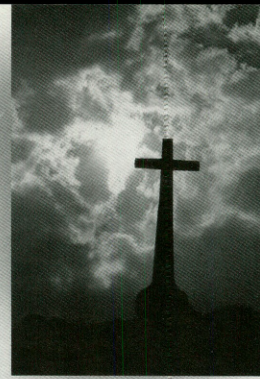


Photo: Lisa Gilbert

have the good business sense that one cannot secure resources by burying them, but that business must be done in the open marketplace of people and ideas. We talk and pray about the Spirit, but we organize and structure our Church by carefully insuring that no new idea or concept can come along and take us by surprise. We govern surprise out of the life of the Church.

An artist can execute a detailed and precise sculpture or painting, but the completed work emerges from countless preliminary observations, sketches, drawings, color studies, and the like. Artistic endeavors emerge upward out of life. They are not dictated downward. Most great artistic movements arise out of the creative interface of a number of artists, poets, art collectors, and others who meet and share ideas in their homes and studios, or in cafes and taverns. Art is a cumulative enterprise. It is seldom done well in isolation or in official academies. It grows out of the free exchange of ideas and perspectives, most of which end in failure. Yet it is precisely out of this uncontrolled, at times chaotic environment that great art emerges.

It is hardly surprising, then, that art is viewed by many as a threat to the establishment of order. As Rollo May has noted, "whenever there is a breakthrough of a significant idea in science or a significant new form in art, the new idea will destroy what a lot of people believe is essential to the survival for their intellectual and spiritual world. This is the source of guilt in genuinely creative work. As Picasso remarked, 'Every act of creation is first of all an act of destruction.'"⁷ Admittedly, the destructive side of creativity threatens the security and peace we seek in joining the Church in the first place. Yet perhaps even our desire for security is outside the bounds of the faith Jesus promised, for he said he came not to bring peace but a sword.

Even this promise of Jesus has been co-opted by the language of law and military campaigns into the language of ecclesiastical courts and even crusades, whereas Jesus was talking about the inevitable rejection experienced by seers, saints, and other harbingers of the new. In other words, Jesus moved the language of rejection and suffering from the arena of

victimhood that seeks only the end of conflict, to that of the challenge of being a creator of the new. Creative people, as May sees them, "are distinguished by the fact that they can live with anxiety, even though a high price may be paid in terms of insecurity, sensitivity, and defenselessness for the gift of the 'divine madness,' to borrow the term used by the classical Greeks."⁸ In other words, rather than reading the Great Controversy story as the story of victims, in the way that Nietzsche read the Christian story, the Great Controversy is the inevitable consequence of a world in which people have the will to freedom—as a gift of God!

In the end, those who are condemned in the judgment are not those marginalized by society, but those who marginalize others. The Kingdom of God is described as a party where all are invited. It is the kind of place where there is laughing, singing, dancing, feasting, and celebrating. It sounds, that is to say, very much like the kind of place where artists, poets, musicians, writers have always hung out together.

Notes and References

1. Rollo May, *My Quest for Beauty* (San Francisco: Saybrook, 1985), 20.
2. Victor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959), 50, 51.
3. Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1950), 678.
4. May, *Courage to Create* (New York: Norton, 1975), 27, 32.
5. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1. (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1948), 88-89.
6. May, *Courage to Create*, 30.
7. *Ibid.*, 60.
8. *Ibid.*, 93.

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