



# A Call to God-Centered Art

A Foundation for a Biblical Aesthetic

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# Preface

C.S. Lewis' essay, *"Abolition of Man"*<sup>1</sup>, and Richard Weaver's work, *"Ideas Have Consequences"*<sup>2</sup>, both present a philosophical view of human history as descending from Absolute Truth<sup>3</sup> to Relativism,<sup>4</sup> or from Objectivism to Subjectivism<sup>5</sup>.

Other authors have written about the effects of this phenomenon on the arts – for example, Eric Kahler's *"Disintegration of Form in the Arts"*<sup>6</sup> and Hans R. Rookmaaker's *"Modern Art and the Death of a Culture"*.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> (1943)

<sup>2</sup> (1948)

<sup>3</sup> "Absolute Truth" is defined as inflexible reality which consists of fixed, invariable, unalterable facts.

<sup>4</sup> "Relativism" is the claim that what is true for one individual or social group may not be true for another, and there is no context or independent vantage point to adjudicate the matter. What is true or false is always relative to a conceptual, cultural, or linguistic framework.

<sup>5</sup> "Objectivism" holds that truth is not determined by the subject, but rather is inherent in the object. In contrast, "Subjectivism" holds that truth is not inherent in the object, but rather determined by the subject.

<sup>6</sup> (1968)

<sup>7</sup> (1994) Also see: Chuck Colson's *"How Now Shall We Live?"* (2004) and Nancy Pearcey's *"Total Truth"* (2004)

In his work *“How Shall We Then live?”*,<sup>8</sup> Francis Schaeffer discussed what he called “The Line of Despair”, tracking a descent from objectivity, order & form to subjectivity, disorder & fragmentation which has taken place in western history and culture.<sup>9</sup>

Whether or not one is particularly versed in philosophy or theology, I believe this phenomenon and its outcomes are clear to any interested observer of the arts. The focus on the objective beauty of both order and form in the natural creation belongs to art of bygone eras. Most consistently, the perceived and expressed reality of almost all modern and post-modern art is a subjective communication of fragmentation and disorder. Beyond this, the predominant focus of today’s artists is to communicate novel self-expression mirroring the ills of our human condition.

Personally, I find our western cultural milieu wearisome. And, while I believe that humanity has been created in the image of God, I find the near-glorification of self-

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<sup>8</sup> (1955)

<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, Schaeffer identified this movement occurring firstly in Philosophy, then in the Visual Arts, next in Music, then throughout the general Culture, and lastly in Theology.

expression tiresome. And, in comparison to the infinite nature, attributes and mysteries of God, I find the current artistic fixation on humanity boringly repetitious. Thus, this essay is a call to God-centered art, in which those artists who do hold a biblical worldview will adventurously investigate the attributes of the God who has revealed Himself in His creation, in the scriptures which He has inspired, and in His Incarnation, Jesus Christ, with a view to definitively reflecting and daringly expressing such a worldview in their works of art, as an act of worship to the Ancient of Days<sup>10</sup> and the Great I Am<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Daniel 7:9, 13 , 22.

<sup>11</sup> Exodus 3:14; John 8:58, 14:6, 15:5; Revelation 1:8, 21:6.

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# Introduction

*“But there are some people, nevertheless —  
and I am one of them —  
who think that the most practical and important thing  
about a man is still his view of the universe. ...  
We think the question is  
not whether the theory of the cosmos affects matters,  
but whether,  
in the long run, anything else affects them.”*

G. K. Chesterton, *Heretics*

This essay is an exploration in the field of “Aesthetics”, with a view to coming to a foundational understanding of the nature of art in the context of a biblical worldview, which will, hopefully, prove to be of some value for artists in their creative endeavors for the glory of God. Ultimately, it is a call to God-centered art.

We will be discussing art from a philosophical and theological perspective. In our endeavor to understand art

as an expression of reality, we will also be looking into some scientific aspects of perception.

I believe the content applies to all the various art forms. While various concepts will be discussed in more detail, following, are some simple definitions:

## **Worldview**

The term, “worldview”, will be used to mean *a perception of reality*. This is the essential meaning of worldview. There are, in fact, many worldviews which have been categorized and classified<sup>12</sup> in various ways.

## **Art**

Similarly, published definitions of “art” are exhaustive.<sup>13</sup> Here, the term, *art*, will be succinctly imply defined as *a form of human communication expressing perceived reality*.

*Artists communicate their perceptions of reality through the use of various mediums such as words, images, sounds,*

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<sup>12</sup> Viz. “Categorize”, meaning to put things into groups with the same features; and “classify”, meaning to divide things into groups according to their type.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2014).

movements etc. Some "art forms" utilized by artists would be literature, poetry, painting, sculpture, music, dance, et. al. Their "works of art" are *reflections of reality*, mirroring their perceptions.

*As perception is integral to communication, reflection, and expression, so also, worldview is integral to art. The enterprise of art and the pursuit of the artist is perceiving and communicating reality.*

## **Reality**

One understands and defines "reality" according to one's worldview. In this essay, which is written from *a biblical worldview*, Ultimate Reality<sup>14</sup> is defined as *God*. All that God has created, which is universally accepted as reality,<sup>15</sup> reflects that Ultimate Reality. It is therefore proposed that what artists recreate should also reflect that Ultimate Reality.

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<sup>14</sup> With a capital "R"

<sup>15</sup> With a small "r"



## Aesthetics

“Aesthetics” can be simply defined as *the study of the relationship between art and reality*. In this essay, it will be proposed that aesthetics, as a philosophical discipline, should address *the relationship between art and God*.

Following is a brief etymology of the word "aesthetics": The Greek word *aisthanomai*<sup>16</sup> is a verb meaning “to perceive”. In turn, the Greek word *aistheterion*<sup>17</sup> is a noun meaning “the faculties of perception”. Therefore, this discussion of “aesthetics” will be grounded in the phenomenon of “perception”.

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<sup>16</sup> Strong, James. *Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*. (1890). # 143. Greek word definitions (keyed with Strong’s numbers) are from *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*. Vine, Unger & White (1985). ISBN 0-8407-7559-8.

<sup>17</sup> Strong’s # 145

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# Perception

For analysis, we can separate “perception”<sup>18</sup> into two processes:

Firstly, *the processing of sensory input*<sup>19</sup>, which transforms low-level information to higher-level information.

Secondly, there is the processing connected with a person's previous *experience and knowledge*, as well as, mechanisms such as attention, which influence one's perceptions and expectations.<sup>20</sup>

Various forms of sensory stimulation combined with our previous experience and knowledge allow us to create our overall perception. Perception is shaped by learning,

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<sup>18</sup> The process of perception begins with an object in the real world, termed the *distal stimulus* or *distal object*. By means of light, sound or another physical process, the object stimulates the body's sensory organs. These sensory organs transform the input energy into neural activity—a process called *transduction*. This raw pattern of neural activity is called the *proximal stimulus*. These neural signals are transmitted to the brain and processed. The resulting mental re-creation of the distal stimulus is the *percept*. Goldstein, E. Bruce, “Sensation and Perception” (2009), pp. 5-7.

<sup>19</sup> A *sense* is a physiological capacity of organisms that provides data for perception. A *sensory system* is a part of the nervous system responsible for processing sensory information. A sensory system consists of sensory receptors, neural pathways, and parts of the brain involved in sensory perception. Commonly recognized sensory systems are those for vision, hearing, somatic sensation (touch), taste and olfaction (smell). In short, senses are transducers from the physical world to the realm of the mind. Krantz, John, “Experiencing Sensation and Perception”, Chapter 1, “What is Sensation and Perception” (2013), p. 1.6

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Bernstein, Douglas A. (5 March 2010). *Essentials of Psychology*. Cengage Learning. pp. 123–124. ISBN 978-0-495-90693-3.

memory, expectation, and attention.<sup>21</sup> It is significant to note that *perception is a continuous learning experience*.

What some refer to as a “Perceptual Set”, is a predisposition to perceive things in a certain way based on *expectations shaped by previous experience*.<sup>22</sup> Essentially, **one’s “perceptual set” is one’s worldview**.

“Predictive Coding” is a theory of cognition in which the brain is constantly generating and updating a mental model of sensory input. The model is broadcast through the network of sensory processing brain regions. In each region, the model being propagated is compared to the current sensory input, and if they do not match, a “Prediction Error” is sent back up the network and the model is revised. Again, *perception is a continuous learning experience*. This is why the more familiar one is with art in general, and a particular artist, and a specific work of art, the more one perceives, and understands, and appreciates the art.

I believe this concept of *perception*, as being a learning experience, can be paralleled to that which the apostle

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<sup>21</sup> Gregory, Richard, “Perception” (1987), pp. 598-601

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Weiten, Wayne, “Psychology: Themes and Variations” (2008), p. 193

Paul referred to as **“the renewing of the mind”**.<sup>23</sup> To put it in other terms: Through the processes of “predictive coding”, one’s mental models are being continuously generated and updated, thus changing and renewing one’s “perceptual set” or worldview. And, of course, for Christians, Paul would endorse that **the input source of our experience and knowledge be the Word and Spirit of the God through which we perceive His glory in the face of Jesus Christ.**<sup>24</sup> Thus, our *perception of reality* would constitute *a biblical worldview*; and *the reflection of reality* through our works of art would **reflect and glorify God.**

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<sup>23</sup> The (Greek) *anakainosis*, Strong’s # 342, “renewing” of the (Greek) *nous*, Strong’s # 3563, “mind”; Cf. Romans 12:2; Ephesians 4:23; Titus 3:5.

<sup>24</sup> 2 Corinthians 3:18 and 4:6

# Aesthetics

*Aesthetics* is a branch of philosophy – specifically, the philosophy of art. If we agree that art is concerned with communicating perceptions of reality, then aesthetics is connected with the fundamental branch of philosophy known as "ontology". Ontology is the study of being, namely, *how we define reality*.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, when we speak of ontology, we are again essentially referring to *worldview* – that is, *one's perception of reality*.

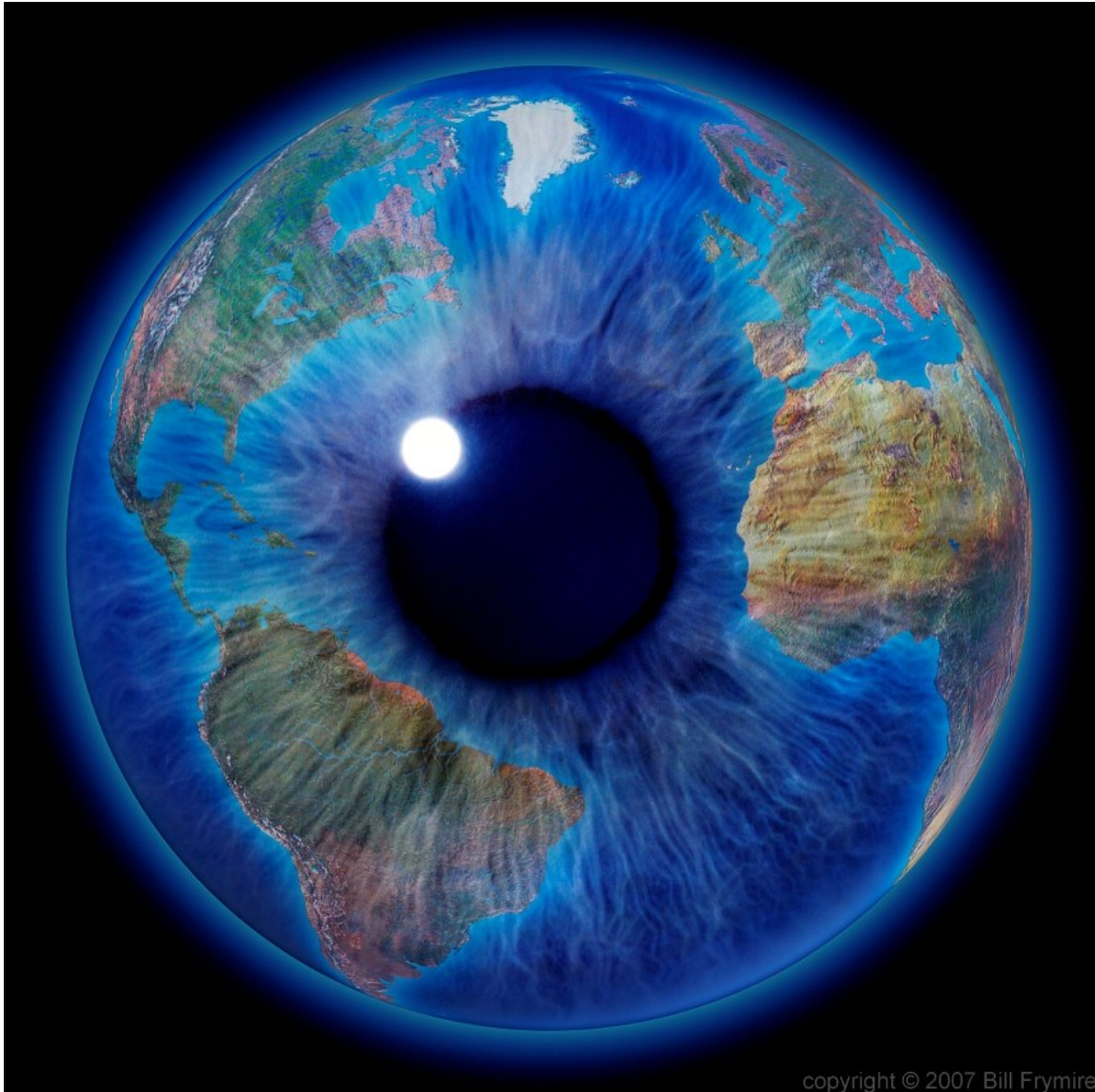
I would like to purport that **theology**, *the study of the nature of God*, is the "backstory", so to speak, of ontology and one's worldview. For instance, Christianity asserts that the biblical revelation of God is *the basis of reality*; while atheism asserts that the absence of any god is *the basis of reality*; and pantheism asserts that the divine is *the reality* of all things that exist. Everyone, from atheists to pantheists, has *a theology* - a view of God, whether positive or negative, selective or all-inclusive - but a view of God never-the-less. Therefore, everyone has *a theology* – whether it is biblical, atheistic or pantheistic. And that *theology is the foundation of one's worldview*.

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<sup>25</sup> The study of *perception* would be connected with Epistemology, the study of knowing. But the study of *reality* itself is connected to Ontology. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2014)

To summarize, we understand that *worldview is a perception of reality*; and that art is *a form of human communication expressing perceived reality*. We also understand that worldview is the ontology and foundation of the philosophy of art. Therefore, philosophy of art, or *aesthetics, is the study of the relationship between art and reality – that is, how reality is communicated, or expressed, or reflected in works of art*. And again, in a biblical worldview, we are dealing with *the relationship between art and God – that is, how God’s attributes are communicated, or expressed, or reflected in works of art*.

# World View



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In aesthetics the question is asked: *“As an artist, what is the reality I am perceiving and reflecting in my works of art?”* As we have established, our *perception of reality* is determined by our particular worldview, so we all answer this question according to our worldview.<sup>26</sup> Our simple definition of *worldview is a perception of reality*; but here are two more definitions from notable scholars:

- *“A ‘life-system’, rooted in a fundamental principle from which is derived a whole complex of ruling ideas and conceptions about reality.”* \_ Abraham Kuyper
- *“A perspective on life, a whole system of thought that answers the questions presented by the reality of existence.”* \_ Francis Schaeffer

There are a good number of different presentations of the various worldviews.<sup>27</sup> The listing, labeling, defining and categorizing of all the various worldviews is an interesting and exhaustive endeavor indeed. I will leave that task for others to work out. Suffice to say that all worldviews

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<sup>26</sup> So, the Christian artist is asking: *“What are the attributes of God I am perceiving and reflecting in my works of art?”*

<sup>27</sup> For a good overview of the concept of “worldview”, I would suggest *“Worldview: Definitions, History, and Importance of a Concept”*, a lecture by Dr. David Naugle, Professor of Philosophy, Dallas Baptist University:

[https://www3.dbu.edu/naugle/pdf/worldview\\_DefHistConceptLect.pdf](https://www3.dbu.edu/naugle/pdf/worldview_DefHistConceptLect.pdf)



speak in various ways to the basic and ultimate issues of life, existence, and afterlife. And, all worldviews hold various perspectives regarding the main branches of philosophy<sup>28</sup> and the various disciplines of scholarly study<sup>29</sup>. For our purpose here, we could classify worldviews into two very broad categories representing two different views of reality: “**Naturalism**” and “**Supernaturalism**”.

*Naturalism*<sup>30</sup> is the view that everything in the universe, including plant, animal and human life forms, and all their faculties, consists solely of physical matter. There is no such thing as “soul” or “spirit”. The material universe is all that exists.<sup>31</sup> Only that which can be observed with the senses is real, and is to be investigated by, and explained through, the scientific method alone.

By the term, *Supernaturalism*, I simply mean the general contrasting view that reality has a spiritual dimension. There are different varieties of *supernaturalism*:

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<sup>28</sup> E.g. Ontology, the study of Reality; Epistemology, the study of Knowledge; Axiology, the study of Value.

<sup>29</sup> Theology, Ethics, Aesthetics, Logic, the Physical Sciences, the Social Sciences, et. al.

<sup>30</sup> Also known as *Physicalism* or *Materialism*

<sup>31</sup> *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. e.g. Secular Humanism, Atheism, Agnosticism, Postmodernism

One supernatural view maintains that only the spiritual dimension exists – all else is illusion.<sup>32</sup> And what appears to be many, separate things in nature actually all belong to one impersonal, grand, spiritual force which alone is reality.<sup>33</sup>

Another supernatural view regards material things to be real, but sees a spiritual dimension behind the physical dimension in which spirit entities<sup>34</sup> control the activities of all things in nature.<sup>35</sup>

And there is a supernatural worldview which recognizes a personal Spirit Being, Almighty God, who has always existed in eternity past – before space and time. As the Creator of all that exists, He is above all that He has created. Humanity has been made in His image and likeness. In fact, all of His creation reflects His attributes.<sup>36</sup> This is the One True, Triune God who has chosen to reveal

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<sup>32</sup> e.g. Pantheism, Hinduism

<sup>33</sup> Monism: “All is One. One is All. All is God.” e.g. Taoism, Buddhism, New Age Spirituality, et. al.

<sup>34</sup> e.g. gods, angels, demons

<sup>35</sup> e.g. Animism, Polytheism, Spiritism, et. al.

<sup>36</sup> His “attributes”, which are many, are His glory reflected throughout all of His creation, and should also be reflected in that which artists “re-create” in their works of art. Therefore, while it is beyond the scope of this particular essay, essays on the attributes of God would be essential to the aesthetic of Christian artists.

Himself through His creation, through scriptures which He Himself has inspired men to write, and ultimately through His own Incarnation, Jesus Christ.<sup>37</sup>

Accordingly, we have **The Creator God** – the Origin and Source of all life – Ultimate Reality. And we have **the Creation** - comprised of all the material things in nature, including human beings, as well as, all that human beings *re-create*, including their **works of art**.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> This a short summary of the worldview of biblical Christianity.

<sup>38</sup> *Asah* is a Hebrew word which can be translated – *to create*. There is another Hebrew word, *bara*, which technically means *to make something out of nothing*. But *asah*, particularly when used in combination with *bara*, means *to make or form something* – we could understand it to mean *recreate*. The arts are certainly "creative" endeavors, but not necessarily "creating" endeavors in an exact sense of the word. "Creative" can be used as an adverb describing the activity of the art form, or an adjective describing the artist's craft or the resulting work of art. But I think it would be universally accepted that art is *not creating something from nothing*, but rather, *making or forming something from pre-existing materials* – that is, "recreating". God "creates" – artists "recreate".

# Focus

Having established that context, I believe there is a foundational issue to be addressed by dealing with some pivotal questions regarding the artist's *focus* and *source of inspiration*:



## The Material Creation

Is the artist's *focus and source of inspiration the material creation*? Is the work of art the artist's expression of *something perceived within the realm of the material creation*? In other words, **is art a reflection of the material creation**? If so, then how does the artist *perceive the material creation*?

As I mentioned in the Preface, much has been written about how throughout history western culture's *perception of reality* has drifted away from *objectivity, order, and form* toward *subjectivity, disorder and fragmentation*. This is the result of abandoning a biblical worldview. In a materialistic<sup>39</sup> worldview, the only available option is to appeal to some authority, other than the perceptions of artists – namely, science – to tell us if the material creation operates according to *the order of intelligent design* or *the disorder of chaos*. The perceptions of science have changed in sync with changes in worldviews. Throughout most of human history, the discoveries of science revealed *order in the material creation*. It wasn't until less than 200 years ago that speculative science started to question that intrinsic order. And now, with more recent discoveries, many

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<sup>39</sup> i.e. naturalistic

scientists are once again perceiving *a pervasive order throughout the material creation*. Of course, since pure science is based on physical observation, it cannot inform us about anything that existed *before* space and time or anything existing *outside of the material creation*.

*As the perceptions of artists change in sync with changes in worldviews, the focus of artists also changes*. Generally speaking, it has been quite some time since the beauty of nature has been *the focus of artists and their source of inspiration*. Not with standing various revivals of neoclassicism, objectivity, order, and form no longer represent the general artistic milieu of our modern and postmodern age.

## Our Humanity

I think it accurate to say that today the vast majority of works of art are not focused on things in nature, but rather almost without exception *focused on the individual self, or the collective human society and culture*. This being the case, we must ask again: How does the artist *perceive humanity*?

And, such a self-centered and man-centered predisposition begs this question: Has art been reduced to being only **a reflection of our humanity**? Whether it is the expressions of the emotions and imaginations of the individual artist, or reflections mirroring the human condition, or attention-getting statements of cultural commentary – will the focus of artists continue to be limited to increasingly bizarre expressions of what they perceive *within the realm of our humanity*? If so, then however unique and novel an artistic expression may be, *its source of inspiration is solely human*. It is merely subjective perception and essentially **humanity reflecting itself**. Regrettably, with the vast majority of today's artists operating within a worldview of naturalism,<sup>40</sup> this is

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<sup>40</sup> Also known as *Physicalism* or *Materialism*. e.g. Secular Humanism, Atheism, Agnosticism, Postmodernism

commonly accepted to be the nature and purpose of art. This essay is a call to something beyond that.

## **The Attributes of God**

As I stated in the Preface, this essay is a call to *God-centered art*. This is an appeal for artists who hold a biblical worldview, and are inclined to find their source of inspiration in nature and in humanity, to **focus on the attributes of the Creator in His creation**. And, perceiving that reality from a biblical worldview, to unapologetically endeavor to **communicate – express, reflect – the attributes of God in their works of art**.

To define the attributes of God would be like trying to define God Himself, for His attributes speak of His essence, nature and character. Indeed, since God Himself is infinite, we may find a list of His attributes to also be infinite. And, while it is not within the scope of this essay to attempt to list, define, and classify<sup>41</sup> the attributes of God, I would strongly encourage artists to dedicate themselves to a life-long study of God and His attributes. There are many good books on the names and attributes

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<sup>41</sup> Some theologians classify the attributes of God into two groups – 1) “Communicable”: those that are unique to God, and 2) “Uncommunicable”: those that are shared with His creatures.



of God.<sup>42</sup> And the scripture narratives which bring forth the various names attributed to God are like miniature portraits of His essence, nature, character, and therefore, His attributes.<sup>43</sup>

Again, in an age in which the vast majority of artists are inspired to express *themselves*, and are focused on making politicized cultural critiques of the human condition, this essay is a call to *God-centered art which communicates, expresses and reflects His attributes as the reality which the artist perceives in nature and humanity.*

## God Himself

The attributes of God we may perceive in nature and humanity are commonly referred to as His “communicable” attributes, which can, therefore be communicated through works of art. The attributes of God which belong to Himself alone are referred to as His “incommunicable” attributes, not to be found in nature or humanity. But, cannot these “incommunicable” attributes of God also be communicated through works of art?

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<sup>42</sup> e.g. *The Attributes of God*, Arthur W. Pink (Baker); *Knowing God*, J.I.Packer (IVP); *The Knowledge of the Holy*, A.W. Tozer (Harper & Row)

<sup>43</sup> Cf. *The Names of God*, Andrew Jukes (Kregel); *Names of God*, Nathan Stone (Moody).

Cannot a work of art be the artist's expression of something perceived *outside the realm of the material creation*? In other words, cannot art be a **reflection of the spiritual realm**? If so, its source of inspiration would be something *outside of both nature and humanity*. It would be an artist's attempt at an **objective perception reflecting God Himself** – in contrast to an artist's *subjective* perception of the spiritual realm. And for those having a **supernatural worldview**,<sup>44</sup> this is what they would consider to be the nature and purpose of art.

I think it very important to make some clear distinctions at this point: It is possible to have a "supernatural" worldview without having a "biblical" worldview. A biblical world view is *specifically* based on that which is found in the Old and New Testament scriptures of the Bible. Whereas Eastern worldviews may be based on a variety of Eastern scriptures.<sup>45</sup>

In Eastern worldviews, humans have eternally existed as "spirit" and *are* "divine". In the biblical worldview, humans *receive* "spirit" when God (viz. the God who has

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<sup>44</sup> Pantheism, Hinduism, Taoism, Buddhism, New Age Spirituality, Animism, Polytheism, Spiritism, Theism, and Biblical Christianity

<sup>45</sup> e.g. Taoism: *I Ching*; Hinduism: *Vedas*; Buddhism: *Sutras*; New Age Spirituality: *A Course in Miracles* (Schucman).

revealed Himself in the biblical scriptures) breathes His life-giving Spirit into them as created beings; and, through faith and regeneration, they *receive* the "divine nature" and the life of The Eternal One. In the biblical worldview, humans are *not* divine. In Eastern worldviews humans *are* divine. In the biblical worldview, humans *reflect* God. Therefore, through their works of art, Christian artists may seek to **express something objective – something outside of themselves and outside of the whole created realm - something of God Himself.**

# A Foundation for a Biblical Aesthetic

In summary, I offer the following as **A Foundation for a Biblical Aesthetic**:

*In the biblical worldview, **God is Ultimate Reality.***

For the Christian artist, **art is the communication, or expression, or reflection of one's perception of that Reality.**

Since God has chosen to reveal Himself through His creation, the scriptures which He inspired, and through His Incarnation, Jesus Christ, the Christian artist's *perception of God and His creation is shaped by a vital relationship with the Person of God through the agency of His Spirit and in the context of His written word.*

**The attributes of God**, revealed in his creation, in His written word, and in His Living Word, Jesus Christ, are *the conceptual forms by which we perceive and communicate our expressions and reflections of God.* Therefore, **the purpose of the Christian artist is to communicate through works of art his perceptions of God and His attributes.**