



Art & True Spirituality

Art as an Essential Form of Worship

including some
Cautionary Thoughts for Christian Artists

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Introduction

A Foundation for a Biblical Aesthetic

In another essay, *A Call to God-Centered Art*, I presented an overview of the concept of *worldview*, and summarized with a very brief *Foundation for a Biblical Aesthetic*. I offer this now as a prerequisite introduction to this current essay:

*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 the Reality of God.**

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.**

From a biblical worldview, art seeks to reflect God and His attributes. Reflecting on the attributes of God is an essential form of worship. Thus, works of art presenting a reflection of the attributes of God can be a worship offering.

Before looking a little further into art as an essential form of worship, I'd like to mention a few cautionary thoughts for Christian artists to consider, lest we "get off the road and into the swamp", as it were, as we journey on our paths of artistic creativity.

Worshipping the Creation rather than the Creator¹

In *A Call to God-Centered Art*, I offered the reminder that the God of the Bible has chosen to reveal Himself, through His creation, through His written word and ultimately through His Living Word, Jesus Christ. I presented a case for the focus and source of inspiration of the Christian artist to be the Person of God Himself, as well as, the attributes of God as seen in His material creation and in humanity, which He made in His image. The goal of the Christian artist, then, is to communicate, express and reflect the attributes of God, as the artist perceives them in God and His creation. However, as we know, creation and humanity is fallen. And, the history of western art shows a proclivity of artists, particularly, in the modern and postmodern eras, to focus their artistic offerings on the “death that has entered into the world through sin”², and the ills of the human condition.

I argue here that art presented as a reflection upon God and His attributes is an essential form of worship. But, as

¹ Romans 1:25

² Romans 5:12, Cf. vv. 14-21

the apostle Paul implies in his letter to the Romans, art which reflects the attributes of the fallen material creation is not biblical worship, but rather pagan worship:

Romans 1:20-25

20“For since the creation of the world *His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made*, so that they are without excuse. **21**For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. **22**Professing to be wise, they became fools, **23**and *exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures*. **24**Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. **25**For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and **worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator**, who is blessed forever. Amen.”

The Artist is Not Superman

I am not referring to Clark Kent, but to Friedrich Nietzsche's "superman" – specifically, his concept of the *Übermensch*, the "overman", the "human exemplar". In his *"Thus Spake Zarathustra"* (1883), Nietzsche put forth the idea of the free-spirited, self-realizing, "tragic artist" - yet "artist-genius", and artist as "sage".³ Beginning with the Romantic period (1820-1920), the artist came close to being deified, or at least considered to have reached a higher plane of existence by virtue of his "self-expression".

Romanticism assigned a high value to the achievements of "heroic" individualists and artists, whose examples, it maintained, would raise the quality of society.⁴ This image of the artist as some kind of special human being very much predominated the Romantic period, highly influenced the Modern periods, and in a Postmodern way, is still very much alive.

I would like to suggest that one aspect of pop music's popularity is something which is beyond the music itself,

³ Cf. Lampert, Laurence: *Nietzsche's Teaching: An Interpretation of Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Yale University Press (1986)

⁴ Cf. Morrow, John: "Romanticism and Political Thought in the Early 19th Century", *The Cambridge History of Nineteenth-Century Political Thought* (2011)

but accompanies the music. That something is what I will call "image". A musical entertainer becomes popular not merely by virtue of his music but also because of an accompanying image – namely, an image of something which is deemed "heroic" in some way by the populace. That heroic aspect elevates the artist to a "higher plane" than the admirers. Obviously, the public adoration of pop stars hardly falls short of hero-worship. What may not be as obvious is that the same phenomenon exists with artists in the world of fine arts.

Let us briefly consider the popular phenomenon of "media events" such as "benefit concerts" for the aid of human society:⁵ In their book, *"Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History"*⁶, D. Dayan and E. Katz suggest that media events are an expression of a "neo-romantic desire for heroic action", meaning that media events produce leaders who inspire collective action with belief in the "power of the people" to change the world.

⁵ Suggested articles: John Street, Seth Hauge, Heather Savigny: *"Playing to the Crowd: The Role of Music and Musicians in Political Participation"*, British Journal of Politics and International Relations (2008); *"Voice of the People? Musicians as Political Actors"*, Cultural Politics, Duke University Press (2008); *"Politics as Music: The Sound of Ideas and Ideology"*, Music and Politics, Polity Press (2012).

⁶ Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1992.

And so, we have with us still this romantic view of artists as heroic individuals having the ability to raise the quality of society. Certainly, as Plato expounds in his "Republic", art has the power to influence society for good or evil. But, how far are we to take this idea? Aren't these things what we conventionally attribute to religion – "aiding human society" and "raising the quality of society"? Can we liken art to religion? Many people who do not believe and practice any religion have art occupying that place in their "spiritual lives". Art IS their religion, so to speak; and some will actually put it in those very words.

Art is not Religion

But, in the biblical worldview, art is *not* religion⁷; and artists are not "priests". Artists cannot minister salvation⁸ through their art; and art, in and of itself, cannot impart salvation.

It is not an issue of having an inordinate appreciation of art and respect for artists. It is more an issue of having a misplaced veneration of art and for the wrong reasons. Not only is the craft and persona of the artist too often "adored", but their works of art are too often "revered". For example, the tenets of existential phenomenology,⁹ underlying much of the art of the modern periods,¹⁰ present the work of art as an "art object", even a "sacred" object, to be "encountered", to be "engaged with", and "related to". In the modern and postmodern periods, the art object has been "freed" of having to represent

⁷ I am using the term, "religion" in an attempt to communicate in the broadest terms possible. But, from a biblical worldview, I would consider authentic biblical Christianity to be the only true religion in accordance with the God who has chosen to reveal Himself through the biblical scriptures which He Himself has inspired, as well as, through His creation, and ultimately through His Incarnation, Jesus Christ.

⁸ The Greek word translated salvation is *soteria*, meaning: "deliverance" or "a setting free". There would be many ways to attempt to encapsulate all that "religion" is and does. For our purposes here, I found the concept of "salvation" to be the most appropriate.

⁹ e.g. Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), "Being and Time".

¹⁰ e.g. Impressionistic, Expressionistic, Cubist, Abstract

something other than itself, and therefore now is an independent entity with its own life and identity. In an existential phenomenological view, the art object has become an "It", or even a "Thou", which Martin Buber placed in the realm of the Divine.¹¹ But, the work of art, itself, is not divine – at most, it is merely a *reflection* of God. But, what is the origin of this phenomenon of *the religionization of art*?

Catharsis

The Greeks laid a foundation for much of our western perspective on art. One of the pillars of their aesthetics is the concept of "Catharsis"¹². As we take a look at the Greeks' perspective on *catharsis*, I think both its connection, as well as, its significant distinctions, will become clear, with regards to the idea of *the religionization of art*. At the outset, I will say that **what we are considering here is whether or not *catharsis* is an authentic *spiritual phenomenon* from the perspective of a biblical worldview.**

¹¹ Martin Buber (1878-1965), "I and Thou".

¹² Other foundational aspects of Greek thought on the arts are the concepts of "Mimesis" and the "Apollonian-Dionysian Dialectic".

"Catharsis"¹³ can be defined as the concept of *purification* and *cleansing* of the soul through art.¹⁴ Actually, with this concept of *catharsis*, Aristotle was overtly contradicting Plato who held that Greek dramas evoked irrational emotions from an audience, over-riding the rational control which, for Plato, defined the highest level of our humanity. But Aristotle's theory of *catharsis* could be likened to what we might consider to be a *quasi-homeopathic process* in which **a small dose of negative emotions portrayed in a Greek drama serves to purge those same emotions when perceived by the audience.**¹⁵

Also, Aristotle's concept of *catharsis* is related to his concept of "*anagnorisis*"¹⁶ found in his *Poetics*, which refers to the moment in a work of art where there is a "*recognition*" of reality.¹⁷ The two terms work together in this way: Through the various art forms,¹⁸ the spectator "*recognizes*" the reality of a life situation or of himself. The mental and emotional effect is a *purifying or cleansing of the*

¹³ Greek: *katharismos*, Strong's # 2512

¹⁴ *Merriam-Webster's Encyclopedia of Literature* (1995)

¹⁵ Prior to the *Poetics*, Aristotle had used the term *catharsis* purely in its medical sense, usually referring to reproductive fluids or menstrual fluid.

¹⁶ The root verb form is *gnorizo*, Strong's # 1107, to come to know, to discover.

¹⁷ *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*

¹⁸ Originally, Greek drama.

soul, with the result being a renewal or restoration of the soul.

This also brings to mind the Greek word, *kairos*¹⁹, which in the New Testament usage means: "an appointed time", sometimes, *an opportune time*. In the Greek Orthodox churches, before the liturgy begins, the statement is made: "*It is the time (kairos) for the Lord to act*", indicating that the time of the liturgy is an intersection with Eternity - that is, a time to meet with and experience the Divine.²⁰ From the perspective of a biblical worldview, whether it be a "liturgical" or "non-liturgical" service of worship, this would certainly be the desired effect of time spent in prayer and worship.

But, as ingenious and noteworthy as these concepts are, do *catharsis* and *anagnorisis* necessarily result in *kairos*? **Can art provide a religious experience in the sense of affecting salvation²¹ to the human soul?** Do Aristotle's concepts of *catharsis* and *anagnorisis* actually go *beyond the*

¹⁹ # 2540, *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*

²⁰ "An Explanation of the Divine Liturgy in the Greek Orthodox Church", Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church 2187 West 14th Street, Cleveland, OH

²¹ The Greek word translated salvation is *soteria*, meaning: "deliverance" or "a setting free".

*realm of emotions and into the realm of spirit?*²² The answers offered depends upon one's world view: One with a materialist world view would say: "All such thought and talk is utter nonsense – there is no such thing as “spirit”, and we don't have souls!" One with an Eastern world view would say: "Of course! Art and artist touch the "universal spirit" - artist and audience are one – we are all part of the Divine." One with a biblical world view would say: "Certainly, God can speak and move *through* art, just as He can - and does - speak and move *through* all of His creation.²³ But that is *not* to say that art, in and of itself, is divine, or that the artist can impart salvation. Only God is Divine, and only God’s Spirit has the power to impart salvation." While it may be tacitly considered normative in

²² Delving deeper into Greek mythology, prior to Greek drama, and prior to Plato and Aristotle, we do see the concept of *ritual cleansing*. This ritual was an effort *to cleanse away blood-guiltiness* – i.e. "blood is purified through blood", a process found in the "Oracle of Delphi". Aeschylus (524-455 B.C.) explains the ancient ritual in his drama, "Orestes": "The blood of a sacrificed piglet is allowed to wash over the blood-polluted person, and then running water washes away the blood". Depicted on an unearthed ancient Greek mixing bowl is the exact same ritual for the "healing the daughters of Proetus from their madness". This ancient ritual has obvious religious overtones, albeit pagan. And one may want to draw a connection with the concept of catharsis. But, Aristotle’s concept of catharsis in Greek drama, is definitely in the realm of the psychological, rather than the ritualistic practices of the ancient Greek mythology and cults.

²³ God's ultimate communication has been through His Son, Jesus Christ. (Hebrews 1:1-3) Psalm 19 indicates that God also communicates through His Creation. But there is very much about God which is not communicated through Creation – viz. many mysteries concerning God and Humanity are only communicated through the biblical scriptures – mysteries like, the Fall of Humanity and the Redemption of Humanity.

a humanist perspective, from the perspective of a biblical world view it would be considered spurious to *deify* either art or artists.

But, more specifically: The question of art as a religious experience depends on **whether one considers religion to be in the realm of the spirit or merely in the realm of the emotions**. That is, are *catharsis* and *anagnorisis* **spiritual phenomena** or merely **emotional phenomena**?

Can art mete out emotional healings through these phenomena? Can art actually provide the equivalent of a blood-atoning sacrifice²⁴ for “the deliverance from the power and effects of sin”²⁵? Again, the response from a materialist worldview perspective would be: "All such thinking is nonsense!" The response from an Eastern worldview perspective would be: "Most certainly. The person needs only to *visualize* herself as being healed and forgiven."²⁶ The response from a biblical worldview perspective would be: "Yes, God still heals today; and He is certainly able to use artistic communication *to open up a person's heart to receive* His healing touch. But God is the

²⁴ Cf. Hebrews 9:22

²⁵ Merriam-Webster's definition of "salvation".

²⁶ More accurately, in the Eastern view, there is no such thing as "transgression", therefore it would be more of a case of the person casting off and setting herself free of such a "self-abusive" concepts as the need for "atoning sacrifices for forgiveness".

Healer, not the artist nor his art. Also: neither an artist nor his art can absolve sin – only acknowledgment of our sin²⁷ and faith in the atoning blood sacrifice²⁸ of the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, can forgive sin and cleanse away its unrighteousness.²⁹

Why have I made much to do about art not being a "religion" and the artist not being a "priest"? My point, in both cases, is this: with such a perspective we have **the abomination of exalting of "the creature rather than the Creator"**.³⁰ Artists do not create the divine in their art. In fact, artists do not create anything in the same way as God creates - that is, "something from nothing".³¹ Artists *re-create* through their works of art, utilizing elements from God's creation.

Art and religion exist *independent* of each other – not unrelated - but *distinct* from each other. Art may have religion as a source of inspiration. But art is not religion.

²⁷ An aspect of biblical "repentance"

²⁸ Cf. Hebrews 9:22

²⁹ In New Testament theology, "sin" (Greek: *hamartia*, Strong's # 266) is understood to be "missing the mark of God's perfection and falling short of His glory". Romans 3:23; 1 John 1:9

³⁰ Romans 1:25

³¹ Ex nihilo

Art may reflect the works of God, but art is in the realm of the material creation, rather than in the realm of spiritual salvation. There is only One Creator and One Savior. The artist is not a savior, nor even a priest. Art may speak of salvation, but, in and of itself, cannot affect salvation.



Art as an Essential Form of Worship

Still, there is the question: Could God – and does God desire to - employ the artist and his work of art for “religious” or “spiritual” purposes? More specifically: Can the presentation of works of art be an essential form of worship which, like other forms of worship and prayer, provide a **bridge – a door, or a window, or a portal - between the physical and spiritual realms, through which God can reveal Himself?**

“O Magnify the Lord” by “Telling of His Glory”

A number of times, the psalmist, David, exalted: **“O magnify the Lord with me!”**³² The Hebrew word translated “magnify”³³ simply means “to make great” – namely, by focusing on Him and reflecting on Him.

And this magnification is a result of **“telling of His glory”**.³⁴ The apostle Paul exhorted that **“whatever you do, do all to the glory of God”**. And again, the psalmist, David, informed us that **“The heavens are telling of the**

³² Psalm 34:3, 35:27, and 69:30

³³ Hebrew: *megaluno*, Strong's # 3170

³⁴ An excellent example is what is known as “The Magnificat” in Luke 1:46-55.

glory of God”,³⁵ yet – “there is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard.”³⁶ This presents us with the possibility that arts like music, dance and painting can “tell of His glory” even without using words. If you will, it is something akin to “writing on human hearts”.³⁷

An Essential Form of Worship

An essential form of worship is to *reflect on God and His attributes*. We see this demonstrated in scripture when Moses asked to see *the glory of God*: God put His glory on display *by rehearsing His attributes*, and thereby demonstrated how we can give God glory and worship Him.³⁸

Therefore, I think it an accurate assertion to say that, in the biblical worldview, **a Christian artist may worship God by reflecting on His attributes through a work of art**. In this case, the artist imitates the Creator through *artistic recreations which reflect the attributes of the Creator*.

³⁵ Psalm 19:1a, vv. 1b-2: “and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night reveals knowledge.”

³⁶ Psalm 19:3

³⁷ Proverbs 3:3, 7:3; Jeremiah 32:33; 2 Corinthians 3:3.

³⁸ Exodus 33:18-34:8

The Radiance of His Glory

“He (Jesus) is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature.”³⁹ This verse tells us that Jesus is the exact and full revelation of God – the **ULTIMATE REFLECTION of God’s attributes**. Jesus is Perfection – a standard we ourselves cannot attain to in this life; yet, as in all things pertaining to God, **Jesus is our Pattern** – including *our pattern in worship* and, as I am proposing, *our pattern in art*. **As Jesus reflects the attributes of the invisible God, we too should endeavor to reflect His attributes in our worship and in our art.** Like the Person of Christ Himself, **the attributes of God are “the radiance” – the *shining forth*⁴⁰ of His “glory”,⁴¹** which is the very nature of the invisible God. The attributes of God are a **“representation of His nature”,⁴² “the image of His person”⁴³, “an engraved impression of His essence”⁴⁴**.⁴⁴ Of course, only Jesus is the *exact* reflection of the attributes of God.

³⁹ Hebrews 1:3

⁴⁰ Cf. Hebrews 1:3. Greek: *apaugasma*, Strong’s # 541

⁴¹ Cf. Hebrews 1:3. Greek: *doxa*, Strong’s # 1391. “i.e. What He essentially is and does, as exhibited in whatever way He reveals Himself in these respects, and particularly in the person of Christ.” (W.E. Vine, *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*)

⁴² Hebrews 1:3 *New American Standard Version*

⁴³ Hebrews 1:3 *New King James Version*

⁴⁴ Hebrews 1:3 *Apostolic Bible Polyglot Version*. Greek: the *character*, Strong’s #5481 of His *ego*, Strong’s # 5287.

Jacob's Ladder

Art exists within the realm of this material creation. It may receive inspiration from the spiritual realm, and it may inspire pursuit of the spiritual realm, but art communicates within the realms of the soul – the mental, emotional and physical realms.

But, art may refer to things in the spiritual realm. And art may even touch the spirit through the intellectual and emotional forms⁴⁵. The apostle Paul spoke of “comparing⁴⁶ spiritual *things* with spiritual *forms*”.⁴⁷

So, in a manner of speaking, *art may act as a **bridge** between the physical and spiritual realms. A work of art can act as a type of "Jacob's Ladder" stretching between the physical and spiritual realms.*⁴⁸ A biblical image to communicate what I am referring to is found in Genesis 28:12 "He (Jacob) had a

⁴⁵ I've chosen the word, “forms”. But other words listed in the thesaurus may seem more fitting when speaking of various art forms. .e.g. procedures, methods, systems, arrangements, formulas, customs, practices, usages, rituals

⁴⁶ Or adapting, or interpreting

⁴⁷ 1 Corinthians 2:13 The words, “*things*” and “*forms*” are not in the Greek text, but translators have completed Paul’s thought in ways similar to this.

⁴⁸ A biblical image to communicate what I am referring to: Genesis 28:12 "He (Jacob) had a dream, and behold, a ladder was set on the earth with its top reaching to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it." (Biblical angels function as "messengers".)

dream, and behold, a ladder was *set on the earth with its top reaching to heaven*; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it." Biblical angels function as "messengers". In this picture, they are *bringing divine messages to human beings*. This implies some sort of **"translation process" taking place between the spiritual realm and the physical realm**. I believe this mysterious function can take place in God-centered art. In turn, I believe the Christian artist can provide works of art, which have been fashioned with elements from this material creation, in which the Spirit of God can *speak through* – **"combining spiritual things with spiritual forms"**⁴⁹. Thus, a work of art can be used by the Spirit of God as a **bridge – a door, or a window, or a portal - between the physical and spiritual realms, through which God can reveal Himself?**

Reflecting on the attributes of God is an essential form of worship. And, as the artist reflects on *the attributes of God* through his works of art, he grows in his knowledge and experience of the Person of God.

⁴⁹ 1 Corinthians 2:13