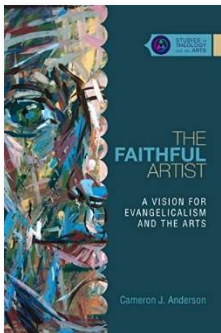


[Review] *The Faithful Artist: A Vision for Evangelicalism and the Arts*, by Cameron J. Anderson



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It was when I started working at our family's art gallery as a teenager that I awakened to the wonders of fine art. As part of that job, I spent my summers on the Newport bayfront framing and selling some of the best pieces in contemporary art. I had hour upon hour to enjoy Howard Behrens's explosions of pallet knife color, Jiang's wild expressionist tigers, and John Nieto's strong Native American images in bold lines and colors. But they all paled in comparison to Manuel Nunez's depictions of women. Some are in doubt, others victorious. Some are dancing, others are foreboding. Yet they all reflect the struggle and beauty of the Christian spirit. Nunez painted "The Good Fight" when I was a junior in high school, and I spent all of my savings on the serigraph as soon as it was printed. It covered an entire wall of my tiny bedroom and always stirred a desire in me to live well. A good friend from my church's youth group once asked me why we never see paintings like that in church. I couldn't come up with a good answer. Twenty-five years later, Cameron Anderson's remarkable book *The Faithful Artist* has finally answered this question.

Anderson's central thesis can be summed up in the following quote:

I write fully persuaded that art, in its most exalted form, can be used by God to transform women and men, to extend his common grace to the world and to lead the church to worship. I believe with equal conviction that the content and character of contemporary art could gain the gravitas that it seeks if the artists who produce it were able to discover or recover the deep things of God. (5)

For me the most striking thing about *The Faithful Artist* is that Anderson equally loves the church and fine art. This is not a book about how the church can use art simply as a tool to further its agenda. It's about how the church and art can and should enrich each other.

Anderson begins by explaining how, after World War II, American Christianity became increasingly focused on conserving older cultural values, while art was constantly challenging and attempting to change those same values. As time went on, the two became bitter enemies. Gerardus van der Leeuw wrote that art and religion are both imperialistic and therefore will always be in conflict (van der Leeuw 2006, 3), while Nicholas Wolterstorff insists that they are "inextricably bound" (Wolterstorff 1987, 4). Anderson concurs that "the modern antagonism between



art and faith is a late nineteenth-and twentieth-century aberration” (14). Anderson suggests that evangelicals often don’t trust their senses to bring them closer to God, because those same senses can too easily draw them into temptation. For instance, the morality of drawing, painting, and sculpting nude figures is hotly contested in conservative circles. But there is a sharp distinction between the purpose of nude art and pornography. During the Renaissance, religion and art were united in their use of nude figures, such as in Michelangelo’s “The Creation of Adam.” Anderson doesn’t want simply to justify the nude in art—he wants us to see the body as “a physical site suited to host the dynamic relationship between the divine Spirit and our human spirit” (70). Building on Hegel’s definition of art as the sensuous presentation of ideas, the author explains that human beings can only learn about the world through their senses, and the senses must be used if we are to move beyond a weak spirituality. A particularly salient quote from Dorothy Sayers encapsulates this point: “To forbid the making of pictures about God would be to forbid thinking about God at all, for man is so made that he has no way to think except in pictures” (Sayers 1987, 22).

Beauty seems to have been caught in the middle of this struggle between art and religion. Modern art rejected beauty, replacing it with the sublime, because beauty was believed to be subjective and associated with religion. “Kitsch” was the term applied to anything that exhibited traditional or religious forms of beauty. Postmodernism also rejected beauty, because it was seen as a way for the establishment to create consumerism or to oppress women. Beauty was also rejected by the church as impractical or useless, even though great theologians such as Augustine and Edwards extolled the importance of beauty. Evangelicals felt that their focus should be on saving souls, not beautifying our churches and homes. Anderson explains that when the church rejects the importance of beauty, the Transcendentals—goodness, truth, and beauty—are then incomplete, and “when beauty is absent, goodness and truth grow anemic . . . beauty is a signpost of God’s glory and, rightly perceived, this glory is so great that neither the brokenness of this world nor our false piety can block its rays from bursting forth” (224).

Returning to church history, Anderson shows that Christian artists created beautiful religious images for almost 400 years, but eventually those images were not only revered, but worshipped. Leo III, the seventh Emperor of Byzantium, was an adamant iconoclast, and in 730 he commanded that all religious images be destroyed—those who resisted the destruction of images were often mutilated or put to death. The Second Council of Nicaea in 787 eventually condemned iconoclasm, stating that images were to be venerated but not adored. In the sixteenth century, the Protestant reformers, such as Calvin, Luther, and Zwingli, believed that our vision of God should be based simply upon the Word of God, rather than images. The Enlightenment’s focus on reason led to a Protestantism that focused excessively on the authority and inerrancy of the Bible. As word was elevated, image was devalued. When the Puritans, Quakers, and other Pietists settled in America in the early seventeenth century, they took their iconoclasm with them.

Although American Evangelicals are still focused on the primacy of the Bible, they are also very much iconophiles. Nothing makes this clearer than the popularity of *The Jesus Film*, or more recently, *The Chosen*. Anderson believes that word and image *can* exist side by side. “In Jesus of Nazareth the verbal and the visual are forever reconciled” (Anderson 2016, 170), because Jesus embodied both. Painters communicate a message in the same way that preachers do, but they use images instead of words. Anderson shows us that art and religion need each other and that artists should reclaim their place in American Christianity. Tradition and innovation can and should work together to renew all things through Christ. Citing Madeline L’Engle, Anderson tells us that “art and Christianity lead to the same place: both aid us in our struggle to make sense of the ‘tragedy and glory’ of life” (251).

What does *The Faithful Artist* contribute to the ethnodoxology movement? The book is written about and for American evangelicals. But two things make this book relevant for a wider spectrum of the world. The first is that American evangelicalism has spread its leafy branches—and accompanying thorns—to almost every corner of the globe. Wherever American Protestant missionaries went, they exported the evangelical conflict with art. Ethnodoxologists now work in many of those places to help local expressions of the church to embrace all of the arts for God's glory. Ethnodoxology itself can be seen as a correction to the conflict between the church and art—a healing balm to the wounds of iconoclasm. The second is that much of the philosophy of art and religion presented in this book is a general apologetic for the use of visual art that can be appreciated by Christians from many different cultures. We would be wrong if we think American evangelicals are the only Christians who are suspicious of using the arts in the Christian experience. Many cultures struggle with these issues whether or not they have been directly influenced by American Christianity.

Anderson's heartfelt writing and careful research leave little to be desired. I highly recommend this book to anyone who has an interest in inspiring visual artists to create great art. The author is a painter himself, and I get the sense that he wrote this book as much for himself as for the reader. Throughout this fine work, you can feel Anderson's love for both American Christians and the art world. He loves the people who raised him and taught him about God, and he also loves the excitement and wonder of the artist in the studio, creating a fresh vision of life. There have been misunderstandings and abuses on both sides, but Anderson believes that we can help reconcile these two if we can understand their troubled past and gently bring them back into the harmony that they were designed for. He is like a child whose parents have separated, desperately longing for them to be reunited.

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