

## [Article] Art and Mission: Four Questions



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One summer when my dad and I were doing yard work, I asked him, “Did you become a Christian because of your Dad’s preaching?” His father had been an Irish immigrant and Presbyterian pastor.

Dad looked off into space across the top of the rake. “My dad’s preaching? No, I think it was my mother’s singing.”

His mother had died of tuberculosis when he was in his teens. Before that, she was in and out of TB sanatoriums, while giving birth to seven children. Yet somehow, she’d found the energy to sing. Would I be a Christian today if she had not?

Song matters. So do all the arts. This paper will address art in the context of mission, considering four questions:

1. What is Christian about art?
2. What is quality art?
3. Why don’t Christian communicators use art more?
4. What is art for?

### What is Christian art?

Art is a kind of structured, imaginative human production. We create a variety of structured productions. Verbally, we produce lectures, sermons, and political speeches. Verbal art differs, however, in its purpose and form. Its purpose is creative expression, unlike a lecture or sermon. Its form employs imaginative symbols as well as ideas. While a lecture teaches, a sermon preaches, and a political talk persuades, art expresses, often through symbols.

This is where art connects with God. In the beginning, God created. Where I live, in the Pacific Northwest, we continually see and smell and hear and feel what the Creator has expressed: snow-covered mountains, the Pacific Ocean, blue lakes and green forests and pink and lilac rhododendrons, the perfume of daphne, and even the diverse granites from which we chisel kitchen countertops. God creates, giving us a model for our own creativity, our art.

Last year I was asked to deliver public lectures in Oregon about God and the earth. My two talks, rooted locally and theologically, were titled “Mt. Hood and the Incarnation” and “The Columbia River and the Resurrection.” They provided a framework for thinking theologically not only about the earth but also about art. In the first talk, “Mt. Hood and the Incarnation,” I explored that God affirms the material, sensory world, first by creating it and second by inhabiting it incarnationally in a body. We too are called to affirm the sensory world and to care for it.

Tragically, this world displays not only beauty and order but also evil and exploitation. The Columbia River is polluted. Salmon runs have decreased. On the river’s banks, the Hanford nuclear waste storage tanks seep horrible substances into the groundwater. The beauty is broken. So appreciation is not enough. Lament and rage boil out of ordinary people and also out of artists.

But rivers can be cleaned up. Salmon runs can be restored. Even nuclear waste can be contained. Evil can be named, and confronted, and restoration can be begun. What gives us hope that this is possible? Where was the greatest confrontation of evil? The cross of Jesus Christ. Where was the greatest restoration? The resurrection. When these core truths—creation, incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection—fill our minds and frame our work, we will create Christian art.

### **What is quality art?**

Art must be authentic to the gospel and to the culture. Consider the Baro people of the Colombian jungle (also known as Motilone). In the 1960s, Bruce Olsen went to live with them. Four years after he arrived, his friend Bobi experienced a clear transformation of life when he encountered the risen Christ. Bruce and Bobi worshiped together regularly. Months passed. But Bobi did not witness to others about his new faith. Bruce began to wonder: Would the gospel in this tribe end with one man?

Then an unexpected event called a “Night of the Tiger” erupted. Spirits attacked the longhouse. During this event someone was sure to die. Everybody climbed up into their hammocks and sang against the spirits. Bobi sang, too. But he sang to the Lord Jesus. That night, nobody died.

During a big festival a few months later, an old man from another village sat down in front of Bobi and begin to sing. “We heard that there was a Night of the Tiger in your longhouse,” he sang. “We heard that nobody died. We heard that you were singing to some other God. Now we want to hear about that God.”

So Bobi responded. For fourteen hours, the pair sang back and forth, using an art form known as antiphonal song debate that is found in numerous cultures, from the Philippines to Kazakhstan. At the end, several longhouses came to the Lord through this expression of authentic art, and a robust and lasting Christian community was born (Olson 1978, 132–147).

Consider Cambodia, for another example. During the Pol Pot regime, a Christian named Barnabas Mam felt called to write songs. Born into an artistic family, he had some acquaintance with heritage art forms. To pay for Barnabas’s study with traditional musicians, his wife sold her ancestral gold chain. Then Barnabas composed music. Occasionally during those very hard years, he was reduced to writing songs on cafe tables using a chopstick as a pen and tea as ink. Over time, Barnabas wrote more than four hundred culturally contextualized gospel songs. Some are children’s songs set to classic lullabies. Another is a funeral song that has attracted Buddhist monks with its words about humans blooming briefly like flowers.

One Christmas Eve, Barnabas's team found themselves stranded in an unfamiliar village. With permission, they played Christmas songs over the local loudspeaker. In the morning, village elders brought them fruit and rice and enthusiastic praise: "We were so delighted to hear that Christ is not American or French but the son of God who came even for Cambodians. We understood the songs. We appreciate that Christ came for us, and we want to receive him now!" (Hutchinson 2008, 203–36).

Quality Christian art is authentic to the gospel and to the culture. More is required, however. Good art also must be coherent and complex. Literature is great according to the degree to which it weaves complexity with coherence, according to critics Wellek and Warren (1949, 214, 243). Coherence, or unity, is basic. Within that framework, the more complex or diverse the elements, the greater the art. Complexity refers to perspectives and ideas as well as form. Simple denotation is not art. Good art requires nuance, unique motifs, and multilevel connotations, all woven together coherently.

Here are three examples of complexity in global Christian art. First, consider the classic German composer J. S. Bach. "Bach's unique contribution to the church's worship is the way he frequently combines passages of the deepest anguish with dance forms and their capacity for inspiring delight," says theologian Fleming Rutledge (2015, 170–1). Listening to one of his cantatas moves us back and forth "between the deepest, heart-wrenching lamentation and exuberant, life-affirming dance. . . . Bach conveys the joy of the believer who comes to understand that we are not left to our own devices for all eternity."

A second example comes from Mavuno Church in Nairobi, Kenya. Church members wanted to reach out to educated, middle-class Kenyans. Impatient with traditional extended families and traditional churches, those cosmopolitans looked for community in night clubs. So people from the Mavuno Church band secured some gigs in a premier club, the Carnivore. But what kind of music should they play? Western music flooded the air with alienating content peppered with disrespectful lyrics. Christian radio played Western music, too. In both genres, African culture was disappearing.

The Mavuno band tapped into African American gospel music, which they deemed "more emotive, energetic and community-oriented than the mellow, vertically focused Western music. "In the end, they created Afro neo soul music, a lyrical fusion of Nairobi urban storytelling and American rhythm and blues" (Gitau 2018, 71, 119). This proved highly popular and drew many middle-class listeners to the gospel, as well as musicians from other bands.

A third example of complexity is found in the work of Makoto Fujimura, a renowned transcultural contemporary painter, genuinely Japanese and genuinely American. Growing up in Nagasaki, he now lives in New York. His paintings draw on the atomic bombing of Nagasaki, the World Trade Center destruction in New York City (he lives just a few blocks away), the historic suffering of Japanese Christians, the crucifixion of Christ, and the beauty of God's world and the new life he gives us. This complexity illustrates quality art (Fujimura 2016).

Having argued for high quality art, I would like to make a case also for simpler creations that do not rise to that level. At a conference several years ago, my roommate was a woman named Karen. She wrote "clean" romances. The books ended as soon as the characters kissed. Karen had composed dozens of these. Each book took her about two weeks to write.

Finally I asked her, “How do you justify spending your life this way?” She answered, “I’m not a great artist. But I can write these. And they meet a need for women who want to slip away into an alternate world where loose ends get tied up. Readers find my work cathartic.”

In the tradition of science fiction, westerns, historical romances, and detective stories, Karen is writing formula fiction. We might look down on the readers and writers of formula fiction because it’s so predictable. It could be written by a computer. In fact, sometimes these stories have been written by teams who have been assigned certain plots, like the Hardy Boys series. Yet these genres have devoted audiences. As Karen suggests, their readers do not want nuanced, complex books that may end with unresolved questions. They want problems resolved and order restored. If they can’t count on clarity and resolution in their daily lives, at least they can count on it in their books.

Beyond formulaic fiction is didactic fiction, such as the stories we tell in Sunday school. In Kenya, I picked up a novel entitled *Behind the Marriage Mask* (Njoroge 1996). This book is not great art. But its lively narrative presents at least fifteen culturally specific marriage issues, including bride price, in-laws, intertribal tensions, separation for jobs, and even flirting with the maid under the guise of evangelism. Surely this kind of storying has a place.

Finally, there is folk art. This may be simple craftsmanship, but it is rooted in a complex heritage of styles and themes. Adapting to market trends threatens the authentic continuity of folk art. In the novel *The Big Ballad Jamboree*, set in Appalachia just as radio is catching on, a romantic pair of songwriters quarrel over how much to change their songs in order to sell to the market (Davidson 1996). This is also a dilemma for those who create art for tourists (Adeney 2006).

How do we evaluate art? Good Christian art must be authentic to the gospel and the culture. It must be coherent. And it must be complex. There is also a place for simpler art, folk art, formulaic art, and even didactic art.

### Why don’t Christian communicators prioritize art?

Songs, drama, and storytelling are not new in Christian circles. They have been around for millennia. Yet the core of church teaching continues to be didactic, linear, and print-based, even in places where people learn better through oral and imaginative media. I suggest three reasons that this is the case. First, Bible teachers know that without balanced understanding of God, the church will be weak and heresies may develop. Do storytellers provide systematic teaching? Storytellers are artists. They can provide a drama about the prodigal son, a poem on beauty, or a lament. Systematic theology is not their call. They are absorbed with the trees, not the forest. So Bible teachers welcome dramas, stories, songs, and poetry for holidays or evangelistic presentations, but overall, they consider them “theology lite.”

It could be different. Years ago in three Philippine Muslim tribes, dozens of people came to Christ in “people movements.” The people were largely nonliterate. Having worked with a local ballad-writer, I recommended a two-week ballad-writing workshop to create two long series of ballads in each language. First, we crafted a series of about sixty biographical ballads, from Adam to John on the Isle of Patmos. Second, we composed a series of doctrinal and topical ballads about Christian living. Then the fisherman, the farmer, and the mother sweeping her courtyard could sing systematically through the scripture.

In my classes I use an exercise in which students list several of the most common songs in their fellowship and then identify the doctrines found in the lyrics, asking: Which doctrines do we repeat? Which do we ignore? When I described this exercise at a conference on ministry among Buddhists, a man from Sri Lanka said, “We tend to sing only about God the Father. How could we sing about other key themes?” So we talked about themed songwriting contests.

Why do Christian communicators sideline imaginative genres? Because artists usually haven’t paid attention to the systematic curriculum that the church needs. But there is a second reason creative forms are neglected. In the 1970s, I managed a small publishing program in Southeast Asia. During a planning meeting, someone proposed that we produce a New Testament in everyday language. Ideas flowed. One was to include local photos. Then Sophia, a missionary colleague, shot down that idea. “We dare not put photos into this New Testament,” she said. “Photos would communicate to people through their emotions. But the gospel communicates to us through our minds.”

Many leaders like Sophia believe that God has given us the gospel in the logical propositions of Paul’s letter to the Romans. We should not introduce anything that might distract from such clear argumentation. Sadly, they do not understand that we learn through our imaginations as well as our reason, and for some people imagination is a dominant mode. Such misunderstandings can yield tragic results.

A few years ago, I was part of an editorial committee assigned to write a summary statement after a conference. Independent of one another, several Asian and African participants had asked me to include words contrasting hypothetical Western and non-Western styles of thinking. They used terms like *linear*, *independent*, *abstract*, *logical*, and *sylogistic* thinking in contrast to *symbolic*, *imaginative*, *intuitive*, *relational*, *multilevel*, *connotative*, and *cyclical* thinking. When I included these words, two Western theologians on the committee criticized them. “There are only two kinds of thinking: logical and illogical,” one declared.

“What about analogical?” I wondered.

“That’s logical,” he retorted. Then he shrugged, “In any case, this concern about nonlinear thinking is only a minority view.”

Such a bias is nothing new. In Indonesia, a Christian named Coenraad Coolen communicated Bible narrative extensively through *wayang*-style dramas during the 1830s. He helped shape flourishing Christian communities that gave birth to a major denomination in East Java. Bible drama was a basic teaching tool. But when a London Missionary Society representative arrived, Coolen’s “practice of having Bible dramas was entirely condemned,” and the activity ground to a halt (Bentley-Taylor 1967, 70).

Similarly, in Egypt in the early twentieth century, pioneer missionary Temple Gairdner created dramas to help Muslims consider the Lord Jesus. One, entitled *Joseph and His Brothers*, was particularly effective. But other missionaries queried Gairdner’s use of drama in evangelism, and he had to limit it (Stacey n.d.).

The critics have a point that imagination can be overemphasized. In medieval Europe, people learned the gospel through liturgy rich in drama, color, sound, scent, and image. But much of God’s truth remained vague to them. To correct this, Protestants overreacted: We must preach the Word, not paint the picture of God, they said. Zealots went so far as to smash religious art. Symbols can be dangerous, and people can place varied, even contradictory, meanings on symbols. Vital distinctions can be lost. God, Christ, sin, salvation, and other core

realities can be misinterpreted. God's grace is too important to be muddled. We must be clear. But leaders like Sophia, the theologians at the conference, and certain missionaries in Indonesia and Egypt forget that there are different learning styles, some of them culturally specific.

Isn't it time for a healthy balance? The God who spoke propositionally through Paul in the letter to the Romans is the same God who spoke to Balaam through an ass and to Ezekiel through a vision of wheels within wheels, through John in metaphor after metaphor and through Jesus himself in parable after parable. The God who endowed us with reason also endowed us with imagination. Should we worship him with all heart and soul and strength, but just half our mind?

Finally, there may be a third reason why Christian communicators distance themselves from indigenous art. Some symbols may have been part of local spirit worship, and demonic powers may be connected. This is a complex subject. Sincere interpreters will differ. Here I suggest a few reflections. Ancestors are honorable and trees are lovely, but to consult or entreat them may open the door to malevolent spirits. A degree of distance is required. On the other hand, spiritists themselves are human beings of great value, made in the image of God. We approach them with compassion and respect for their spiritual quest. In some cases, their symbolic system may be remarkably creative. Its complex design may be worthy of admiration, even though it may enshrine evils (just as Westerners' capitalism may).

Should believers affirm and employ such symbols? As with meat offered to idols, some Christians may partake while others abstain. In particular, those who were dominated by local spirits may need to separate from those symbols. Consider this parallel example. A prison minister may converse and speak and even joke with a pedophile, while his victim and her mother cannot stand to be in the same room with him. Demons, like cruel despots, may show a benevolent face. Some people are scarcely harmed by interaction with evil, but others are pierced through. For second-generation Christians, the symbols may be recovered as art, with little supernatural power attached.

### What is art for?

Art creates other worlds, which we need. According to anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, the universe is fuller of meanings than normal rational thought can discover. During his fieldwork in the Amazon, he saw traditional ceremonies, rich in imaginative symbols, bringing together meanings that otherwise would remain separated. The singer, the poet, the dramatist, the shaman provided "fireworks" for the community, an emotional purging that served as a catharsis for the larger society (1963, 182). Aristotle also noted this cathartic function for drama.

Anthropologist James Fernandez suggests that art is composed by people who feel their incompleteness more keenly than the masses, and so they are pushed to explore other realms to find wholeness (1974, 119–145). This opens those realms to those who stayed home, the people who never dared to leap. C. S. Lewis said, "One of the functions of art is to present what the narrow and desperately practical perspectives of life exclude" (1966, 10).

In the new worlds generated by art, symbols are often the building blocks. There is force in the semantic tension generated by symbols or metaphors. As theologian Sally McFague says, "The poet sets one metaphor

against another and hopes that the sparks set off by the juxtaposition will ignite something” (1975, 39). Think of all of Jesus’s metaphors.

The creative artist’s yearning is holy, a gift of God. In the words of the poet A. A. Stockdale,  
 When God made the earth, He could have finished it. But he didn’t.  
 He left it as raw material—to tease us, to tantalize us, to set us thinking, and experimenting, and risking,  
 and adventuring.  
 And in this we find our supreme interest in living.  
 He gave us the challenge of raw materials, not the satisfaction of perfect, finished things.  
 He left the music unsung, and the dramas unplayed.  
 He left the poetry undreamed,  
 In order that men and women might not become bored,  
 But engaged in stimulating, exciting, creative activities  
 That keep them thinking, working, experimenting, and experiencing  
 All the joys and satisfactions of achievement. (1964:20)

So the artist quests. If you know everything when you begin, it’s not art. “No surprise in the writer, no surprise in the reader,” is attributed to poet Robert Frost. “Pay attention. Be amazed. Tell the story,” is attributed to poet Mary Oliver.

When my grandmother was on her way out of this world, fading away from tuberculosis, one Sunday evening she sang,

There were ninety and nine who safely lay in the shelter of the fold,  
 But one was out on the hills away, far off from the gates of gold,  
 Out on the mountains wild and bare, away from the shepherd’s tender care.

“Lord, Thou hast here thy ninety and nine. Are they not enough for Thee?”  
 But the Master made answer, “This of mine has wandered away from me.  
 And although the way be rough and steep, I go to the desert to find my sheep.”

And none of the ransomed ever knew how deep were the waters crossed,  
 Nor how dark was the night that the Lord passed through ere he found his sheep that was lost.  
 Out in the desert he heard its cry, sick and helpless and ready to die--

My dad had heard the gospel preached all his life. That night, listening to a story in song, he glimpsed an alternate world, and he called out for his shepherd. Just so, in Cambodia people hear Barnabas’s songs, in Colombia they hear Bobi’s antiphonal chant, in Nairobi night clubs they hear Mavuno Chapel’s band. And they glimpse new worlds. Isn’t that what art is for?

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