


# The Arts, Theology, and the Primal Imagination in the African Context: A Preliminary Exploration of their Relationship



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## ABSTRACT

Christian Theology and the Arts have a long and complicated relationship, ranging from suspicion to cooperation. Over the centuries, this relationship has taken various forms, with the Arts becoming increasingly estranged from Christian Theology, especially the evangelical Protestant theology that so influenced the missionaries who evangelized Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This, combined with a deep suspicion of African primal cultures and spirituality, has led to a disconnect between the Christian faith and the various Arts that are so much a part of the fabric of African life. This article used a historical survey to examine the relationship between religion and the Arts, then dilated on the consequences of this history to understand the relationship between Christian thought and the Arts in Africa. Overall, the article provides an initial foray for the nature of this relationship and also points towards some possibilities of mutual enrichment.

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## INTRODUCTION

This exploration of the relationship between Christian theology, the Arts, and the primal imagination<sup>1</sup> is on a personal note. An early fascination with building led to a desire to become an architect – to design and build buildings, a vision that later expanded to include interest in the relation of buildings to one another, to land use, and to urban design and planning. As a result of this, a keen interest in architectural history developed, which led to learning of the transitions from Romanesque architecture to Gothic through to the Renaissance styles, the Baroque, Rococo, Neoclassical, Georgian, Victorian, Beaux Arts, Art Nouveau, Modernism to the Post-Modern styles we see today. The skyscraper was especially fascinating, that iconic American contribution to architectural history, born in Chicago, and made possible by technological innovations in materials, the safety elevator, and the curtain wall. The glass and steel skyscraper are emblematic of modern architecture, and a testimony to human ingenuity. It represents both the triumph of modernist design with its emphasis on minimalist ornamentation and the modern belief in the power of technology, as new innovations enable ever higher and more fantastical designs.

The modernist style that dominated the 20<sup>th</sup> century and continues to significantly influence building design today in many ways reflects a maxim coined by the famous architect Louis Sullivan, considered to be the father of modern American architecture and in particular the steel skyscraper. Sullivan said:

<sup>1</sup> Primal imagination refers to the 'primal understanding [that] discloses a universe conceived as a unified cosmic system, essentially spiritual, in which the "physical" acts as sacrament for "spiritual" power. In such a universe... the Transcendent is not a so-called "spiritual" world separate from the realm of regular human existence.' Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Akropong, Ghana: Regnum Books, 2014), 101.

It is the pervading law of all things organic and inorganic, of all things physical and metaphysical, of all things human and all things superhuman, of all true manifestations of the head, of the heart, of the soul, that the life is recognizable in its expression, that form ever follows function. *This is the law.*<sup>2</sup>

“Form ever follows function.” With these words, Sullivan suggested that the form of a structure invariably flows from the function that the building was to serve. It was the function that mattered most; aesthetics, mood, environment, tradition, et cetera, were incidental. Sullivan’s assertion provided a principle by which architects could shake off the shackles of architectural precedent, eschew the ornamental aesthetics of Victorian, Edwardian, and Art Nouveau architecture, and embrace functional, minimalistic design. This iron law was a fitting architectural dogma for the modern age. Its emphasis on the technological, the concrete, the functional, and the scientific, befit the tenor of 20<sup>th</sup> century society. Building design was subordinated to the measurable, the empirical, the deducible, and the predictable. If there was any beauty to be found in the modern style, it was the beauty of the unadorned structure, awe-inspiring in its mastery of materials, methods, technique, and technology.

Consequently, the modernist style became the favoured style of progressive, 20<sup>th</sup> century societies, and especially those that purported to have the most scientific approach to governance and society. Socialist Realism epitomizes this style – functional, efficient, and built on a grand scale meant to overawe the citizen with the power of the scientific administrative state and to lead him “in the way that he should go.” Row upon row of concrete block housing complexes, found throughout the former Soviet Union and its satellite states as well as in many urban housing complexes are good examples. In some countries, whole cities were designed in this style, for example, Brasilia, the capital of Brazil. In the United States, the new ethic was often expressed differently, with a focus on technological innovation – ever taller buildings, more glass, and more steel. But in all cases, the result was less and less of the ornamentation one finds on older structures. Form follows function.

This brief discourse on architectural history shows that architecture lies at the junction of art – as it involves design – and science – as it advances apace with technological innovation. It is likewise apparent that in the advent of modernism in the preceding century – form ever following function – the scientific and technological aspects of architecture appear to have increasingly taken precedence over the artistic or some would say human elements. This is not to say that modern architecture eschews art; it is indeed artistic and can be quite beautiful. However, the artistic features find expression chiefly in the characteristically clean lines of modern and post-modern design. It is found in the technology that enables fantastical shapes and ever-taller buildings or in the creative use of space; this is where beauty resides in these structures.

## METHODOLOGY

This excursion into architectural history may undoubtedly cause some to wonder what all of this has to do with theology. Yet when one looks closer, it becomes clear that there is indeed a link that speaks to the study of theology and religion, or more pointedly, to the relationship of the gospel to the culture. This is a qualitative study that, through a historical exploration, examined the relationship between religion and the Arts. The focus here is on the Western context, specifically European history, or what is called “Western Civilisation”. This is because it is Euro-Western culture that has had the greatest impact on African society, and on African Christianity’s understanding and interaction with the Arts. The paper then discusses how this history has informed and influenced African Christianity in its relationship with the Arts in Africa, and specifically the Ghanaian context. Finally, some possibilities for further inquiry are made. For this discussion, theology refers to what has been called theology proper – the attempt to know and articulate the truth about God – God’s being and attributes – and about God’s engagement with creation. This is distinguishable from religion which has to do with human activity in relation to the transcendent numinous realm - rites, rituals, and rules as it were. The Arts refer to the whole realm of creative human endeavour including but not limited to the visual arts, music, dance, media arts, and drama. This is a preliminary foray, but it is one that it is hoped will stimulate further lines of thought and inquiry.

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<sup>2</sup> Louis H. Sullivan, “The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered,” *Lippincott’s Magazine*, March 1896.

## DISCUSSION

### The Nature of Christian Theology

Andrew Walls holds that Christian theology has its origins and ongoing life in the cross-cultural transmission of the gospel across cultural frontiers.<sup>3</sup> Transmission across the Jewish-Gentile frontier into the Greco-Roman world was the first of many such movements, and the same process of engagement is ongoing even as the centres of gravity of Christian faith have shifted to the non-Western world generally, and Africa particularly. Upon crossing the frontier between the parochial Jewish world steeped in Hebraic culture, traditions, and scripture to the cosmopolitan Greco-Roman world, it was necessary for the content of the faith once delivered to the saints to be translated, not only linguistically, but conceptually into terms that would be meaningful to Gentile converts for whom titles like Messiah, and age-old prophecies about the redemption of Israel were devoid of significance. There was a need for a vindication of the Christian faith in terms that seemed faithful both to Christian teaching and to the cultural traditions of the new Greco-Roman converts.<sup>4</sup> Missionary apologists sought to not only mount an intellectual defence of the Christian faith but to propagate the gospel and to see the conversion of Greek culture to Christ. In this process, they drew on the Greek philosophical tradition in which many of them had been trained. For example, Clement of Alexandria borrowed from Aristotle both the name and the form of the *Protrepitkos*. His apology was, “an appeal to the reader to despise the world and be converted to the pursuit of philosophy.”<sup>5</sup> This is significant, for it was within the Greek philosophical tradition that early Christian scholars found pointers to Christ, and it was that tradition that they sought to convert to Christ. While Clement demonstrates remarkable sensitivity to that which he deems to be good within Greek philosophy, his writing “contains a complete and withering exposure of the abominable licentiousness, the gross imposture, and sordidness of paganism.”<sup>6</sup> Greek philosophy was redeemable; Greek religion was condemnable.

### The Relationship between Arts and Christian Theology in Antiquity

The problem that emerges from this, in relation to the theme of this study, is that in Greek culture, as in most primal religious settings, religion and the arts were deeply related, in fact inseparable. Both related to knowledge of the transcendent realm and the arts can be considered as attempts to convey the reality of the transcendent – to make sensible, in the physical sense, that which was insensible, or beyond the senses. Its power, both in ancient times when it emerged from ‘myth, magic, and religion’, and now, lies in its ability to provide ‘a heightened sense of the real and [to suggest] deeper realities than those conveyed by common sense and science.’<sup>7</sup> The early Church inherited from Judaism a mistrust of especially the visual arts. The second commandment rather straightforwardly forbids the making of images. The Old Testament is full of cautionary tales and further admonitions against graven images and it is assumed that any such effort to create or craft an image, of things in heaven, or on earth, or under the earth, whether seen or unseen, is a move in the direction of idolatry. Image making, whether of men or gods, was deemed to be participation in the worship of other gods, the sole exception, being those images of seraphim that were expressly commanded to be made as part of the cult apparatus of Israel.

The dramatic arts too – theatre – were disdained by Christians, a disdain they held in common with Greek philosophers. This disdain comes through in scripture's use of the word hypocrites – those who wear a false face, a stage actor – to harshly condemn those religious persons who did not practice what they preached. Early Christian scholars inveighed against Christian participation in the theatre, since it had its origin, as did the other arts, in the worship of the gods, held by Christians to be demons. Tertullian asserted in reference to the circus and theatre ‘that the entire apparatus of the shows is based upon

<sup>3</sup> Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and Modern Africa* (London: Harper Collins, 1992), 48.

<sup>5</sup> Jean Danielou, “A History of Early Christian Doctrine before the Council of Nicea,” in *Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture*, ed. John Baker, vol. 2 (London: Longman & Todd, 1973), 7–37.

<sup>6</sup> Cleveland A. Cox, “Fathers of the Second Century: Hermes, Tatian, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria (Entire),” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, ed. James Donaldson and Alexander Roberts, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 167.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Shusterman, “Art and Religion,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 42, no. 3 (2008): 1–18.

idolatry'<sup>8</sup> and was consequently to be shunned by Christians as antithetical to their baptismal vows. For Tertullian, even the artistic ability necessary for theatre shows could be traced to a demonic origin:

As regards the arts, we ought to have gone further back, and barred all further argument by the position that the demons, predetermining in their own interests from the first, among other evils of idolatry, the pollutions of the public shows, with the object of drawing man away from his Lord and binding him to their own service, carried out their purpose by bestowing on him the artistic gifts which the shows require.<sup>9</sup>

The connection, between art and religion, or between artisanship and spirituality, is not one limited to Greece and Rome. Art and artisanship (for there was no clear distinction between the two until relatively recently; an artist was considered a particularly skilled artisan) were believed to be spiritual in nature. *The Crayon*, an important mid-19<sup>th</sup> century art magazine noted, 'As far as we can judge... all Art has been religious in its origin.<sup>10</sup> One needs only to visit any museum of ancient history to bear witness to this assertion since it is apparent that most artefacts from antiquity are either religious objects, imbued with spiritual significance, or intended to convey religious scenes. There is within ancient and primal traditions a sense that the artistic impulse derives from the spirit or supernatural realm. This is clearly attested in Exodus 31 where Bezalel and Oholiab are said to be filled with the Spirit of God to make "artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of crafts." It is further seen in Aaron's explanation of the golden calf in the following chapter where, he says, he threw the gold into the fire and "out came this calf." Though not directly attributing its formation to spiritual forces, the implication is clearly present. This is implicit in the old Celtic prayer, "The Lorica" wherein the author invokes power against 'spells cast by blacksmiths'<sup>11</sup> – smithing being one form of artisanship associated with spiritual power. In Africa, such crafts are often hedged about with 'secret rituals and symbols, along with various rules and taboos... viewed as essential to counteract ... supernatural forces.'<sup>12</sup> The primal sense of a world of spiritual presences, and of the physical as sacramental of the spiritual emerges quite clearly in these associations.

### **Christianity and the Arts from Medieval Times to the Renaissance**

The church eventually made a sort of peace with the Arts – architectural styles borrowed from the civic and commercial buildings of Rome being the first conquest. The conversion of Constantine in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century thrust the Christian church from a marginalized minority to a favoured majority in a short period of time. The imprint of imperial sanction meant that suddenly the church became allied with the state and questions of art and architecture that had been theoretical or devotional concerns became matters of ecclesial and imperial politics. Churches were initially built in a Romanesque style, adapted to the needs of Christian worship, with little in the way of ornamentation or adornment. One senses in this architecture a taking over by the Church of the *Romanitas* ideal, with Christianity serving as the new, society-stabilizing, imperial religion. Christianity was seen as the new Roman religion, 'integral to the best and highest in *Romanitas*, and a characteristic mark of Roman civilization and virtues in relation to un-Roman "barbarism".<sup>13</sup> The purpose of this architecture was not primarily to provide a place for the Christian faithful to worship, as the church had worshipped and evangelized quite effectively with little in the way of physical structures for more than three hundred years. It was rather to 'capture and expound the central convictions of faith' and to '[scale] down and [make] viable the abstract immensity of the fundamentals declared by the new religion'.<sup>14</sup> The *form* of the building followed the *function* of declaring Christian dogma with the authoritative imprimatur of imperial Rome. The 4<sup>th</sup> century Christian Basilica

<sup>8</sup> Tertullian, "Tertullian : De Spectaculis," Chapter IV, accessed July 25, 2024, [https://www.tertullian.org/works/de\\_spectaculis.htm](https://www.tertullian.org/works/de_spectaculis.htm).

<sup>9</sup> Tertullian, "Tertullian : De Spectaculis," Chapter X.

<sup>10</sup> G.J.W., 'Christian Art', *The Crayon*, Vol 7, No. 7 (July 1860), pp. 183-188 (183), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25528084>.

<sup>11</sup> 'The Lorica', translation by Noel D. O'Donoghue in 'St. Patrick's Breastplate', in James P. Mackey, *Introduction to Celtic Christianity* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989), 46-49. ('The Lorica' is a poem with an unknown author)

<sup>12</sup> S. Terry Childs and David Killick, "Indigenous African Metallurgy: Nature and Culture," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, (1993), 317–37.

<sup>13</sup> Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and Modern Africa*, 24.

<sup>14</sup> William McDonald, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture* (New York: George Braziller Inc., 1965), 12.

was as much built as ‘a symbol of authority and social order,’ as of faith in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God.<sup>15</sup>

The visual arts were slower to progress in their acceptance but eventually, the didactic function of art came to be recognized and encouraged – a process that proceeded apace with the steady acceptance of Christianity by Rome, and perhaps an accommodation and assimilation by the Church of those elements of Roman cultural life that could be most easily and readily turned to Christian purpose. Early Christian art as well as Medieval art was representational and not naturalistic in form. For example, images like the Madonna – Mary with Child – were done in a stylistic way to indicate her status as the Mother of God. It was not intended to be an accurate re-creation. For medievalists, the Madonna ‘represents a reality that is essential to us now, in the present’; it was not in any sense a historical reconstruction.<sup>16</sup> In both cases, art was subordinated to theology – it was meant to instruct the faithful, to present to them particular theological themes. So, the peace made by the church with the arts was a peace borne of the subordination of one to the other – art for the sake of, or on behalf of the Church. The formula was firmly fixed and the themes were as inflexible as the Creeds.

This is no denigration of the medieval approach to art but simply highlights the fact that in the medieval period – the high point of European Christendom – artistry was captive to a philosophical ideal that was not, at its core, biblical. It was mystical, otherworldly, and arguably Gnostic, but not Christian in the fullest sense. For the medieval believer, ‘the life of faith consist[ed] in fleeing sin, living in the spirit, seeking to be holy’.<sup>17</sup> Medieval Christian art therefore reflected the exaltation of the immaterial, transcendent realm of the ideal over the mundane. This perspective seems biblical, and undoubtedly there is scriptural support for it. Though this is in a sense biblical, it also borrows heavily from a Greek philosophical perspective that has had a significant influence on the development of Christian thought. It is important to recall that the theology of the Western Church emerged in large part from its engagement with Greek philosophy – Neo-Platonism - a philosophy in which it was the world of ideas that mattered most, not the material world of matter. Augustine has been noted as one whose theology was deeply influenced by Neo-Platonism.<sup>18</sup> The influence of Neo-Platonism on Christian thought is not the key concern, but what is clear is that the vision of reality that emerges from this connection leads, when taken to the extreme, to a conception of the material world itself as entirely bad or sinful, a perspective that lacks biblical basis. However, for medievalists living in the shadow of a Christian mysticism influenced by this vision of reality, ‘the actual world around people was solely meaningful as a reflection of this reality and was of relative value only, as it was transient.’<sup>19</sup>

Another theological perspective that emerged in the medieval period on the relationship between Christianity and the Arts or the culture more broadly, is that most clearly articulated by St Thomas Aquinas and termed scholasticism. Again, it is not the aim of this study to explore this system of thought, but its influence on Christian thinking in relation to culture generally and the Arts particularly, is noteworthy. In simple terms this school of thought flatly rejects the idea that the world is bad; the world is good, but it is autonomous, non-religious, and secular. There is a higher world, ‘the world of faith, of grace, of religion... a world for which we have need of God’s revelation... where our aims and affections should be set’.<sup>20</sup> Late Medieval Gothic architecture, with its soaring towers, flying buttresses, and light airy interior spaces lit by massive stained-glass windows, reflects this aesthetic. One may think of the Cathedral of Notre Dame de Paris as an example. It is architecture designed to draw the eye upwards to the realms of light and truth – to the Transcendent realm where God dwells. The lower world, the realm of ordinary life, the realm of the Arts and Sciences, was one to which reason could be applied, whether Christian or non-Christian. Revelation was not needed to understand or access this realm. Though the Church sought to constrain and guide this “lower sphere,” what invariably emerged was an increased secularisation of

<sup>15</sup> McDonald, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, 14.

<sup>16</sup> Hans Hangelaar-Rookmaaker, “Modern Art and the Death of a Culture: The Roots of Contemporary Culture,” in *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture: The Complete Works of Hans Rookmaaker*, ed. Marleen Hangelaar-Rookmaaker, vol. 5 (Carlisle, UK: Piquant, 2002), 17–32.

<sup>17</sup> Hangelaar-Rookmaaker, “Modern Art and the Death of a Culture: The Roots of Contemporary Culture.”

<sup>18</sup> William Ralph Inge, “The Permanent Influence of Neoplatonism upon Christianity,” *The American Journal of Theology* 4, no. 2 (1900): 328–44.

<sup>19</sup> Hangelaar-Rookmaaker, “Modern Art and the Death of a Culture: The Roots of Contemporary Culture,” 10.

<sup>20</sup> Hangelaar-Rookmaaker, “Modern Art and the Death of a Culture: The Roots of Contemporary Culture,” 21.

society. These developments, along with other historical events, eventually set in motion an intellectual and cultural revolution that would lead to an eventual disassociation of the Arts and Sciences from Christianity.

Much of the great Art commonly associated with European civilization belongs not to the era of Christendom, the Medieval Age of Faith, but to the Renaissance, whose name alone provides a clue as to the sea change in the cultural environment. Well-known names like Michelangelo, Raphael, and Da Vinci, are what come to mind when one thinks of Renaissance Art. The Renaissance was, as we know, a rediscovery and recovery of the classical civilizations of Greece and Rome by Europe. This recovery involved picking up what in many ways had been left out – the primal and pagan legacy of Greco-Roman civilization – and incorporating (or appropriating) it through the Arts and Sciences into European culture and civilization.<sup>21</sup> It led to, among other things, a true revolution in the Arts. While religious themes still dominated, realistic portraiture emerged as well, especially in the Northern Renaissance. One begins to see more paintings of people in natural situations, landscapes, and so forth. Even in religiously themed art, there was an unmistakable shift in focus to the human person in relation to the Divine. The cultural and institutional power of the Church, though formidable, was no longer quite what it had been, and this was reflected in the increasing secularization of society and of art.

### **Post-Enlightenment Developments in the Arts and Theology**

Skipping ahead to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the initial shoots of the secularism of the Renaissance Era came into full bloom. European Christianity, no longer unified under the cultural and religious hegemony of one Church, struggled to respond to the intellectual and theological challenges thrown up by the Enlightenment, which had been itself a response to the failures of the Reformation and Counter Reformation. Euro-Western society, still ostensibly Christian, had become almost entirely secular in the orientation of its intellectual life. After having passed through the tumult of the Reformation, numerous wars of religion, the Enlightenment, and the French Revolution, European Christianity had essentially relegated or consigned the Arts and Sciences to the non-religious sphere.

The Arts themselves continued to develop along lines that broadly mirrored the larger culture. Thematic art – that is art that intends to reflect or convey a higher theological or deep human truth – was slowly abandoned in favour of more rationalistic styles. In lay terms, pictorial art became more photographic in their realism, yet with a concomitant loss of clarity as to the meaning, which ‘was often sadly not apparent from the picture itself’.<sup>22</sup> In this respect, art followed the empiricist emphasis laid down by the Enlightenment. What was to be portrayed was that which was historically true, or that which was measurable and accurate as to date and detail. It was a move, subtle at first, but gaining momentum as the century progressed, towards the functionalism of modernity. These movements paralleled similar movements in architecture, as mentioned earlier, but also in theology and biblical studies. One sees this for example in the development of the historical-critical method of biblical studies, which laid less emphasis on the presumably divine origins of the text as support for its claims and authority (revelation) and more on its historical authenticity, which rendered it ‘an authentic record of divine activity in history’,<sup>23</sup> and therefore acceptable within the epistemological framework set out by the Enlightenment. The anti-supernaturalist attitude of the Enlightenment led Protestant thinkers, already suspicious of Catholic tradition with its reliance on the miraculous to substantiate its claims to authority,<sup>24</sup> to adopt an increasingly suspicious posture toward the supernatural. This worldview posited a rigidly ‘demarcated frontier between the empirical world... and the world of spirit [in which] the natural could, and must be distinguished from the supernatural.’<sup>25</sup> Increasingly the emphasis was on truth, as deducible in rational

<sup>21</sup> It is because of the Renaissance that Greece is thought of as having some connection with English cultural history, even though it lies closer to Africa and shared far cultural and commercial links in antiquity than it ever did with England, whose existence they knew nothing about.

<sup>22</sup> Hangelaar-Rookmaaker, “Modern Art and the Death of a Culture: The Roots of Contemporary Culture,” 37.

<sup>23</sup> G.M. Bediako, *Primal Religion and the Bible: William Robertson Smith and His Heritage* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 104.

<sup>24</sup> Jon Mark Ruthven, *On the Cessation of the Charismata: The Protestant Polemic on Post-Biblical Miracles*, *Word & Spirit Monograph Series* (Word & Spirit Press, 2012), 818-820.

<sup>25</sup> Andrew F Walls, “Christian Scholarship in Africa in the Twenty-First Century,” *Journal of African Christian Thought* 4, no. 2 (2001): 44–52, 49.

terms by the means of human reason, not revelation, and expressed in increasingly abstract and conceptual terms.

To be sure there were still Christian artists and Christian art. Christian music was still composed by Christian composers, just as there were Christian scientists and the like. All of this was true. Yet the overall momentum of the culture was in a different direction. This was even more so with Evangelical Protestantism, a pietistic reform movement that had emphasized personal conversion and social reform. In the areas where Evangelistic Protestantism was influential, Christian influence was felt in the arena of social ethics, public morality, and people's way of living. However, the arts became increasingly secular and eventually anti-Christian. This was the result of a strand of reformed Protestantism that drew deeply from the mystical stream of the Christian tradition and consequently,

Often deprecated everything outside the "spiritual", the "religious" in the more narrow sense... [They] often had virtually no appreciation for the fine arts due to a mystical influence that held that the arts were in themselves worldly, unholy, and that a Christian should never participate in them.<sup>26</sup>

### **Christianity and the Arts in the African Context**

Now we come to the significance of this for African Christianity, for it is out of this strand of reformed evangelical Christianity that the modern missionary movement predominantly arose. This movement carried with it a reforming evangelistic zeal that sought to not only convert but to civilize the African, that is, to develop his agriculture, education, and commerce, to bring him a holistic gospel. They saw rightly that, 'faith is not just a matter of "religion", of the soul and its salvation in heaven, but of salvation of the whole person, a way of life and thought affecting all aspects of human life.'<sup>27</sup> Yet while this was believed in principle, it frequently fell short in practice. These missionaries were perhaps unaware of how profoundly they had been shaped by the Enlightenment, despite the Great Awakenings of the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. These movements were keen on personal piety and zealous for social reform but were 'marred by an unbiblical anti-intellectualism and anti-cultural outlook'.<sup>28</sup>

One must recall that within European intellectual life generally, and in European Christianity in particular, a keen suspicion and disdain for the primal. The "heathen lands afar" which lay under what Denys Hay has called 'the fog of incomprehension'<sup>29</sup> in the Renaissance Era, were by the 19<sup>th</sup> century comprehended within a hierarchical scheme of civilizational and cultural development that assumed Euro-Western primacy and superiority. The primal beliefs and practices of her own societies had been suppressed and derided as primitive barbaric superstitions, unsuited for a scientific age and inappropriate for a Christian civilization. This was especially the case for Protestants for whom anti-Catholic polemics and Enlightenment rationalism combined to exclude 'all but the barest possibility of supernatural activity (which was safely locked in the pages of the Bible) and to render any claims of such present activity immediately suspect'.<sup>30</sup>

Missionaries were generally not anti-supernaturalists - they maintained a strictly biblical perspective and thus admitted the existence of a world of spirit powers. These powers were, however, generally condemned as demonic in origin, or their activities confined to the pages of the Bible. In the mission setting, therefore, large segments of the culture were condemned by mission Christianity as demonic and to be shunned by any who bore the Christian name. The ire raised by Ephraim Amu's decision in 1931 to preach while dressed in his native attire is known to us and is an exemplary case.<sup>31</sup>

This is no news, and is problematic in any context, even as it has proven problematic in the West where the Arts have become almost entirely separated from the arena of Christian thought. In Africa however, it is far more devastating for the burgeoning field of Christian theology because, in African traditional culture generally, the Arts are the primary vehicle of theological conceptualization and

<sup>26</sup> Hangelaar-Rookmaaker, "Modern Art and the Death of a Culture: The Roots of Contemporary Culture," 18.

<sup>27</sup> Hangelaar-Rookmaaker, "Modern Art and the Death of a Culture: The Roots of Contemporary Culture," 21.

<sup>28</sup> Hangelaar-Rookmaaker, "Modern Art and the Death of a Culture: The Roots of Contemporary Culture," 41.

<sup>29</sup> Denys Hay, *Europe in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*, 2nd ed. (Harlow: Longman, 1989), 424.

<sup>30</sup> Joshua D. Settles, "Manifesting the Primal Imagination" (Unpublished PhD Thesis, Akropong, 2018), 124. The supposed accommodation of the Roman Catholic Church with the pagan cultures of Greece and Rome was confirmation of their supposed apostasy, at least from the point of view of many Protestants.

<sup>31</sup> Philip Laryea, *Ephraim Amu: Nationalist, Poet, and Theologian 1899-1995* (Akropong: Regnum Africa, 2012), 18-19.



expression. For example, one may consider drum language, whose communicative potential was so great that when enslaved Africans were transported to the Americas, drums were frequently banned because of their communicative potential.<sup>32</sup> Consider again Ephraim Amu's decision to preach whilst wearing *ntama*.<sup>33</sup> His decision may be understood as not only an expression of his convictions as an African Christian, but as an art performance. Traditional African attire is, after all, a work of art, as is preaching. While work has begun in the area of music, as with the excellent analysis of Ephraim Amu's work by Philip Laryea, even here we are hampered, for textual analysis is only part of what is needed to engage critically with music, especially in the African context where:

Vocal music include[s] not just song texts but also performance practices.... Drama, dance, costume, and choreography [are] not just accompanying or accompanied by song, but [are] integral in the structure of the music itself.<sup>34</sup>

All of these - dance, drama, music – are art forms. Parenthetically, much contemporary Christian art displayed in Africa, particularly images of Jesus, are sadly nothing more than poorly done imitations of already poorly done, sentimental 19<sup>th</sup> century European art, distinguishable for nothing more than its portrayal of Jesus as an emaciated, pale White man, an image that continues to perpetuate the lie that God is a White man or worse that the White man is God. Decolonization of Christian theologies can begin in earnest when this idea is forever banished from the African's consciousness. This is, however, a digression; we cannot tarry here. African Christians continue to be engaged in artmaking, chiefly through the medium of music, yet here we are handicapped by increasing estrangement from indigenous forms of music, dance, visual, and performance art. African Christians are heir to a form of Christianity that has largely ceded the Arts to the secular realm or has reduced it to entertainment. Consequently, Christians have mostly 'lost their critical powers and any real understanding of the arts.'<sup>35</sup> These have been left to the secular art academy and scholars of religion, many of whom are anti-Christian.

## CONCLUSION

Christian Theology has proceeded largely along similar lines to the modernist architectural styles stated earlier – functional, technical, and abstract. Like modernism, it is frequently cold and unappealing – no one grieves that famed architect Le Corbusier's plan to redevelop Paris with rows of high-rise concrete towers never came to pass. It is important then to emphasize that in the African context, the bodily dimension of theology – theology not as a disembodied and disinterested truth-seeking enterprise but as a bodily engagement in the triune life of God – must come to the fore. This means a robust engagement with the Arts. The African theological enterprise must take seriously the full range of human sensory experience and expression in religious matters, including music, art, dance, ritual, and other forms of communication. Propositional articulation of the implications of faith, however important, cannot deliver a full-orbed theology because is not always, nor even primarily, restricted to the written or spoken word. Africans have traditionally expressed their theology through dance, song, shout, and testimony within a ritual context, and consequently have been adjudged as having no theology at all, or a deficient one. The overemphasis on conceptual abstraction as determinative of theological validity, to the virtual exclusion of other forms of artistic expression, is one source of this error. Artistry in music, dance, drama, and other genres is inextricably tied together with the religious. Teresa Reed describes it thusly: '[African] music is intrinsically spiritual, the sacred is intrinsically musical, and both music and the divine permeate every imaginable part of life.'<sup>36</sup> Roberta King has said of African Christians, 'to sing is to theologize, to dance is to witness to his goodness and testify of one's relationship with him, and to dramatize is to make the message clear and understandable.'<sup>37</sup> One would do well to remember also that this is the New Testament pattern: 'the first Christians did not express their faith in a speculative way... They responded to the

<sup>32</sup> Teresa L Reed, "Shared Possessions: Black Pentecostals, Afro-Caribbeans, and Sacred Music," *Black Music Research Journal* 32, no. 1 (2012): 5–25, 10.

<sup>33</sup> *Ntama* is a traditional Ghanaian attire whose use was forbidden by the Presbyterian Church.

<sup>34</sup> Jean Ngoya Kidula, *Music Culture – African Life' in Roberta King, Music in the Life of the African Church* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2008).

<sup>35</sup> Hangelaar-Rookmaaker, "Modern Art and the Death of a Culture: The Roots of Contemporary Culture," 42.

<sup>36</sup> Teresa L. Reed, *The Holy Profane: Religion in Black Popular Music* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 5.

<sup>37</sup> Roberta King, *Music in the Life of the African Church* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2008), p. 7.



preaching [of the gospel] by worship; they sang the work that God had done for them, in hymns.<sup>38</sup> It is, therefore, necessary that truncated and myopic perspectives on what counts as legitimate avenues for theological expression be eclipsed by a more expansive vision.

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<sup>38</sup> Daniel Von Allmen, "The Birth of Theology: Contextualization as the Dynamic Element in the Formation of the New Testament," *International Review of Mission* 64, no. 253 (January 1975): 37–52, 41.

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