Toward a Theology of Arts and Mission

Artistic expressions are reshaping Christian mission and worship globally. As global churches increasingly contextualize their faith, the arts emerge as a powerful tool that increases spiritual depth and provides a more holistic understanding of the Christian experience. Despite progress, tension persists between Western influences and indigenous forms. From African music festivals to Indian worship reforms, creative initiatives are transforming mission work. Can the arts bridge cultural divides and offer a more holistic expression of faith worldwide?

Human beings have been designed by the Divine Creator to be more than mere robots or computers. They are meant to commune with the Creator, to cultivate a relationship of intimacy, of interaction, devotion, and deep fellowship. It is true that Jesus taught his followers to "think clearly" about matters of faith and their relationship with God (John 14:9–11). But he also stressed the importance of their "loving God deeply" (John 15:5–9), of "worshiping God passionately" (Luke 9:28–36), and of "obeying God faithfully" (Mark 8:34–38).

So much of theology in the past has focused on our *rational* capacities, our articulation of clear doctrines and dogmas. And as important as these are, they will not ultimately get us to those places of intimacy God so deeply desires for us. To achieve this level of faithfulness, we need to move beyond *logic* and *reason* and begin to employ other complementary dynamics of intelligence with which the Creator has also endowed us, the *imaginal* and *emotional.*

Artists are uniquely gifted to help the church deepen its faith, reframe its theology, and expand its practice in these additional realms. Voices from the Majority World church in Africa, Asia, and Latin America – shaped many times by rich traditions of orality and prolific expressions of artistic creativity – are calling for a more holistic understanding of the Christian experience and its implication for living out and

South Asia – An ensemble plays local instruments during a church service.

PHOTO BY MARC EWELL, COURTESY OF WGA.

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sharing the good news. So, this is indeed an exciting moment in the life of the world church as God's people open themselves up to new modalities of faithfulness and explore where the Spirit might lead them.

Arts are, in fact, one of the first places one can detect the church's commitment to embracing more diverse cultural patterns in worship practices, pastoral care, architectural designs, and mission strategies. The long-lasting effect of artistic choices made by faith communities is enormous for a church's self-identity and for its perception by external observers both near and far. Local arts expressions are foundational in every culture. They communicate cultural priorities, embedded values, heart desires, and societal concerns.

According to Mary Beth Saurman, "Oral traditions house their library of cultural and value-centered information, not in buildings or in books on shelves, but in songs, poems, dances, dramas, stories, visual arts, and other expressive mediums. These cultural traditions, when accessed appropriately, function as an effective bridge for an oral tradition's comfortable movement towards new innovations which are entering their life context."[1]

CHANGE IS IN THE AIR

To be fair, there has been some movement in missiological circles toward a healthier posture regarding the arts in recent years.[2] The Evangelical Missiological Society (emsweb.org) has encouraged papers on the theme of arts and mission for several years and structured an arts track in its annual seminar offerings. The American Society of Missiology (asmweb.org) featured arts and mission as its conference theme in plenary presentations and seminar sessions during its June 2023 annual meeting. Chicago's Moody Bible Institute (moody.edu) chose an arts and mission theme for its student missions conference in February 2024.

The Mission Commission of World Evangelical Alliance (weamc.global) created a special double edition of its journal, *Connections*, in 2010 focused on "Arts in Mission." The International Orality Network (orality.net) devoted two issues of its journal, *Arts and Orality*, in 2016 to arts and mission-related themes.

Mission Frontiers Magazine (missionfrontiers.org) has featured arts and mission in three-year installments (August 1996, September/October 2014, and September/October 2023). The current issue of the *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, devoted to this theme, is additional evidence of its relevance to mission thinkers and practitioners.

I should add that outside of North America, arts and mission matters are also being pursued. The Oxford Centre for Mission Studies (ocms.ac.uk) in its *Transformation* journal presented a series of articles on arts and mission in April 2024 for the first time in the journal's history.

A network of missionary organizations in French-speaking Africa, *Initiative Francophone*, regularly organizes conferences and publications on subjects related to African culture and the arts; their 2023 annual consultation was entitled, "Rites, symbols, songs and dances examined by the Gospel." As recently as Saturday, August 10, 2024, an all-day seminar was held at one of the large evangelical churches in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, with the theme of "Arts and Worship for the African Church."

More in-depth missiological treatments of the arts are also beginning to emerge in book-length published works.[3] The 2023 annual conference and journal of *NAIITS: An Indigenous Learning Community* (vol. 21), also featured the theme, "Ethnomusicology: Indigenous Heart Languages," with case studies from indigenous Christian communities in North America, as well as New Zealand, Taiwan, and the Philippines.[4]

AND YET … SO MUCH REMAINS TO BE DONE

In 2019, Indian professor Jacob Joseph – a current faculty member at South Asia Institute of Advanced Christian Studies (SAIACS, saiacs.org), Bengaluru, India – published a searing assessment of the ongoing Western influence on the arts in Indian worship practices. Addressing issues as far-ranging as Westernized worship music, posture, language, preaching, architecture, attire, and global media marketing (CDs, DVDs, and on-line resources), Joseph named the desperate need to develop indigenous worship forms for the Indian church. In the opening paragraph of the book's preface, Joseph set the stage for his in-depth critique to follow:

> "Contextualization is a topic that has been discussed in the Christian theological circle for a long time. Numerous papers and seminars have been conducted on this topic but in reality, contextualization is one of the least practiced theological concepts. And worship in India is moving towards even more westernized worship. On one hand several mainline denominations continue to worship in the same pattern that has been existing for many decades without much change. On the other hand, Pentecostal and Charismatic churches incline towards contemporary trends in worship imitating Hill Songs or other contemporary artists. Although theologically we are convinced of the need of contextualization of worship, practically nothing is happening in the local congregations except for a few isolated attempts in certain independent congregations."[5]

China – A group of women from the Naxi ethnic group perform a cultural song and dance together.

PHOTO BY MARC EWELL, COURTESY OF GEN.

Even the recent ground-breaking conferences and publications referenced above are largely academic treatments that will require serious effort and considerable time to trickle down into training programs for church leaders and cross-cultural gospel communicators before eventually entering the life-blood of worshipping faith communities around the world. In the meantime, they remain, according to Jacob Joseph, "an academic exercise in seminaries and other academic circles, rather than a reality within the church."[6]

OVERCOMING A TROUBLED PAST

Daniel Dama is a follower of Jesus and a music composer-performer from the Fulani/Fulbe ethnic group in north-central Benin, West Africa. His 2022 PhD dissertation from Fuller Theological Seminary focused on music as a bridge to reconciliation between Muslim and Christian communities.

For almost a decade, Daniel has been organizing an event called "Africa Sings!," bringing together different religious communities for several days of academic lectures, presentations of various local artistic expressions, and a musical contest where dancer-musicians compete for prizes as the best performers of indigenous musical compositions. At the first "Africa Sings!" event years ago, 50 people participated. This year, for the 2024 rendition of the festival, 400 people attended the lectures and over 4,000 showed up for the musical competition featuring 37 local contestants.

In a more formal part of the festival, Dr. Dama addressed the gathered crowd with words of encouragement to embrace the artistic expressions of their local culture for peacebuilding purposes. In his address, he referenced the difficulties he has faced in his own story as a local artist-musician. Here is an excerpt from his address:

> "I recall a missionary among the Fulani/Fulbe who used Western hymns to evangelize and strengthen the faith of the Fulbe. Although his intentions were legitimate, he employed a method inappropriate for this noble ministry. For example, he taught these Fulbe the 'Grace of God' by John Newton which had been translated into Fulfulde language. He forced the Fulbe to sing like Westerners, as the song is sung in the churches of Europe.
>
> From a young age, I was tired of Western hymns and songs borrowed and performed from Europe. I wanted to hear, sing, and create songs with purely African rhythms. This is how in 1982 I crafted my first Christmas song, then

later wedding songs. When the elders and pastors of my church heard these chants, they threatened to discipline or even excommunicate me. According to them, I was not qualified to make a theologically and doctrinally sound song, especially since I was not a Christian – as if they had a faith-meter to measure the intensity of my faith. I persisted, and by the grace of God, I felt within me a pressure and an anointing of the Holy Spirit ... I could not remain silent. Today, God has blessed these efforts and used my modest person to revolutionize or reform worship within the Fulani/Fulbe churches, not only in Benin, but also throughout West Africa.

As an evidence, look at the thousands of people, regardless of beliefs, ethnicities and tribes that my music ministry has brought together. Here we can notice the phenomenal power of music and the arts to unite and reconcile. Africa has a rich musical and artistic heritage that we must value and promote in the expression of our faith, to reconcile and unite our peoples.[7]

The historic relationship between arts and mission has, indeed, been a somewhat troubled one. As I have noted elsewhere, "many young people today and virtually all secular academics are quick to claim that Christian mission has too often dismissed, demeaned, or even destroyed local arts expressions around the world in an effort to impose the West's imperial project of 'The 3 Cs' – Commerce, Christianity, and Civilization."[8] Even in those instances where local artistic expressions have been retained and tolerated, Western arts have often been elevated, given special status, and promoted over local ones.

Commonly employed terms for arts of European origin such as "fine arts" or "high culture" imply that some arts are better than others, superior in aesthetic content, quality, and performance, and perhaps even closer to God's plan and desire for humanity. In many parts of the world, Western arts expressions have long played the privileged authoritative role of defining, shaping, and judging local arts, labeled condescendingly as "folk arts" and thus as inferior, incompetent, and a grade below the Euroarts standard of excellence.[9]

One effort to move beyond the walls of academia and train an international cadre of ethnoarts specialists for the creation of local arts expressions in the church has been the work of the Global Ethnodoxology Network (GEN). This has been carried out through three primary activities:

- *Networking*: active website at worldofworship.org, free email newsletter, networking app with several hundred global associates, web-based virtual library of resources, participation in regional and global gatherings
- *Training:* two popular courses – *Introduction to Ethnodoxology* and *Arts for a Better Future*, which to date has trained over 1,200 workshop participants from more than 60 countries on five continents)
- *Resourcing*: two large volumes, a *Handbook*[10] and a training *Manual*[11] in addition to an academic peer-reviewed journal, *Ethnodoxology: A Global Forum for Arts and Christian Faith* (artsandchristianfaith.org).

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GOING FORWARD AS A WORLD CHURCH

"Although many studies now exist on the arts and Christianity," writes Warren R. Beattie, "informed yet practical discussion of the relationship between the arts and mission is harder to find."[12] To be sure, there is a body of literature on "mission methods" describing how the arts might be used in a functional way by the church to *do* mission.

But at a deeper level, much less has been written about the power of the arts in providing "a window to the language of the heart" – a language able to "bypass obstacles that keep us from relating to one another."[13] The arts in multiple forms are able, in fact, to express "emotions and feelings, the complexity of the human condition, as well as the ideas and concepts that underpin the cultures people inhabit, and shape our shared experiences as human beings within culture and history."[14]

According to John Franklin, the arts can assist us in carrying out the missional task through the hospitable character they naturally provide. "Art at its best," says Franklin, "reaches into the deep places of our humanity. We are often drawn to art in ways we are unable to explain. Because of its power to move us and to inspire us, art is capable of bridging our differences."[15] This is of particular importance, he adds, in many places in the world where Christian mission is perceived as coercive, rather than invitational; imperialistic, rather than vulnerable; and culturally insensitive, rather than respectful of others.

Might art serve to diffuse the cultural shock so common in our missional work? Could the arts soften the hard edges of our sometimes preachy style? Could the arts provide openings for exploring the big questions of human existence – which are essentially theological questions, questions with spiritual import? Art is certainly capable of bridging our differences and helping us to see what we as human beings hold in common.[16]

Arts and mission – when done well – share more common ground than is sometimes imagined. The world church will be well-served going forward by actively engaging five fields of interconnected aspects of the church's life and witness: biblical roots, creative expressions, mission history, cultural influences, and worship practices.

Biblical Roots

The Hebrew Bible – referred to by most Christians as the Old Testament – is replete with artistic forms designed to assist God's people in their life, worship, and witness. Emily R. Brink categorizes these aesthetic norms of beauty and excellence in three ways: what we *hear* (singing, music, and proclamation), what we *see* (architecture, furnishings, dress, and decorum), and when we *move* (pageantry, drama, and dance).[17]

Abundant detail is dedicated in the Old Testament text to the designing, creating, equipping, and maintaining of worship spaces, furnishings, times, feasts, rituals, garments, instruments, artists, composers, songs, and liturgy.[18] The New Testament, however – with its incarnationally-grounded, outwardly-directed focus – appears to radically redefine the relationship between arts and the church's life and mission.[19] So that will need to be examined carefully to discern why and how this should shape the church's faithfulness to God's reconciling purposes in the world today.

Creative Expressions

From the opening verses of the biblical story, we are introduced to a God who is the Supreme Artisan of the Universe and in whose image we as humans are created.

"We possess the gift of creativity because we bear the image of God," says the 2010 Lausanne *Cape Town Commitment*. "Art in its many forms is an integral part of what we do as humans and can reflect something of the beauty and truth of God. [...] Drama, dance, story, music and visual image can be expressions both of the reality of our brokenness, and of the hope that is centered in the gospel that things will be made new. In the world of mission, the arts are an untapped resource. We actively encourage greater Christian involvement in the arts."[20]

Mission History

"There was nothing distinctive about the earliest Christian art," writes mission historian Andrew F. Walls, "except its subject-matter: it brought no style, form, or technique that was not already employed in pagan Roman art."[21] Eleanor

Kreider illustrates this brilliantly in her description of early catacomb paintings, bas-relief sculpture, signet rings, images of doves, fish, ships in full sail, anchors, and hero and biblical stories clad in the iconography of Greco-Roman culture.[22]

But by 1500, says Walls, "European Christianity possessed a coherent, largely homogeneous artistic tradition. Art was, generally speaking, Christian art."[23] Mission workers today need to study carefully and reflect deeply on the Euro-centric colonizing impulses of the 16th–19th centuries and the lasting impact that this mighty force of cultural hegemony had on virtually every part of Latin America, Africa, and Asia.[24]

Cultural Influences

In its Prologue to the Lausanne Occasional Paper, "Redeeming the Arts" (2004), the authors make this rather startling assertion: "Art, in and of itself, cannot transform; only Christ can transform the human condition. [...] We can show that the arts allow for diversity as they 'witness' in verbal and nonverbal ways to the truth about the human condition and incarnationally 'show' God's redemptive purposes."[25]

Ultimately, mission and the arts are best when they work together at the transformational task of God's reconciling mission. This often happens most effectively through the softer, gentler nudging of the arts when they "speak to our need to move beyond prose and step into the world of the poetic, of image, metaphor, drama, movement – all ways of communication expressing more than we can say."[26]

Worship Practices

When Yahweh liberated the Hebrew slaves to begin their long journey toward becoming God's people and a "light to the nations," God commanded Moses to announce to Pharoah, "Let my people go, so that they may worship me in the desert" (Exodus 7:16). What a fascinating mixture of mission, worship, and the arts as God commissions and empowers Spirit-filled artists to build a divine dwelling for his residence among them!

"Christian faith begins in worship," says Beattie, "but when expressed in human lives, it pushes Christians out to witness to God's purposes of redemption and transform the communities and societies around them by demonstrating the reality of the kingdom community and its kingdom lifestyle."[27]

BECOMING THE GOOD NEWS

When the gospel crosses cultural and artistic boundaries, it becomes *good news* to observant Jews, to Greek-speaking Hellenists, invading "barbarians," Irish ascetics, German peasants, Victorian elites, white-robed Nigerians, Indian mystics, and modern secularists. This demonstrates the ultimate translatability of the Christian message that gives birth to the Church – the most linguistically, culturally, and ethnically diverse movement on the planet.

For, in fact, "the Church must be diverse because humanity is diverse," states Andrew Walls. At the same time it must remain one, "because Christ is one, embodying in himself all of the diversity of culture-specific humanity."[28] ■

1. Notes from Mary Beth Saurman's 2010 course, *Ethnoarts and Multilingual Education: Research Methods and Applied Techniques*, at Payap University, Chiang Mai, Thailand. Quoted in Jacob Joseph, *Contextualizing of Worship: An Ethnodoxological Approach* (Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2020), 74.
2. Portions of the following have been modified and updated from my editorial, "Arts and Mission: An Emerging Conversation," in the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies *Transformation* 41, no. 2 (April 2024): 101–108.
3. Warren R. Beattie and Anne M. Y. Soh, eds., *Arts Across Cultures: Reimagining the Christian Faith in Asia* (Regnum Press, 2022); Charles E. Farhadian, ed., *Christian Worship Worldwide: Expanding Horizons, Deepening Practices* (Eerdmans, 2007); Roberta R. King, *Global Arts and Christian Witness: Exegeting Culture, Translating the Message, and Communicating Christ* (Baker Academic, 2019); Roberta R. King and Sooi Ling Tan, eds., *(un)Common Sounds: Songs of Peace and Reconciliation Among Muslims and Christians* (Cascade Books, 2014); Roberta R. King and William A. Dyrness, eds., *The Arts as Witness in Multifaith Contexts* (IVP Academic, 2019); James R. Krabill, gen. ed., Frank Fortunato, Robin P. Harris, and Brian Schrag, eds., *Worship and Mission for the Global Church: An Ethnodoxology Handbook* (William Carey Publishers, 2013); W. Jay Moon, *Intercultural Discipleship* (Baker Academic, 2017); A. Scott Moreau, *Contextualizing the Faith* (Baker Academic, 2018); Antonio Sison, ed., *Deep Inculturation: Global Voices on Christian Faith and Indigenous Genius* (Orbis Books, 2024); Donald K. Smith, *Creating Understanding: Communication, the Framework of Life* (Creating Understanding International, 2021).
4. Learn more about NAIITS on their website, https://naiits.com/.
5. Joseph, *Contextualizing of Worship,* xv.
6. Joseph, *Contextualizing of Worship,* 134.
7. I was privileged to attend "Africa Sings!" in 2024. This excerpt from Dr. Dama's address was shared with me by the author with permission to include in this article.
8. James R. Krabill, "Why Arts and Mission Belong Together," *Mission Frontiers* 45, no. 5 (2023): 8.
9. Krabill, "Why Arts and Mission," 8.
10. Krabill, *Ethnodoxology Handbook,* 2013.
11. Brian Schrag, *Creating Local Arts Together: A Manual to Help Communities Reach Their Kingdom Goals,* Revised Edition (William Carey Publishers, 2025).
12. Beattie, *Arts Across Cultures,* 11.
13. Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, "Redeeming the Arts: The Restoration of the Arts to God's Creational Intention," Lausanne Occasional Paper, no. 46 (2004), Act III-Scene II, https://lausanne.org/occasional-paper/redeeming-arts-restoration-arts-gods-creational-intention-lop-46#3c.
14. Beattie, *Arts Across Cultures*, 14.
15. John Franklin, "Arts and the Missional Task: Practising Hospitality," *Connections* (Journal of the WEA Mission Commission) 9, no. 2–3 (2010): 6.
16. Franklin, "Arts and the Missional Task," 6, https://weamc.global/archive/Vol09No2-3_Arts.pdf.
17. Emily Brink, "The Significance of Beauty and Excellence in Biblical Worship," in *Worship and Mission for the Global Church: An Ethnodoxology Handbook*, edited by James Krabill, et al. (William Carey Library, 2013), 9–12.
18. James Krabill, "Arts and Mission: A Complex Story of Cultural Encounter," in *The Arts as Witness in Multifaith Contexts*, edited by Roberta R. King and William A. Dyrness (Cascade Books, 2019), 28–30.
19. John Piper, "The Missional Impulse Toward Incarnational Worship in the New Testament," in *Worship and Mission for the Global Church: An Ethnodoxology Handbook*, edited by James R. Krabill et al. (William Carey Library, 2013), 96–102.
20. Julia E. M. Cameron, ed. *The Lausanne Legacy: Landmarks in Global Mission* (Dictum Press, 2023), 130–131, https://lausanne.org/lausanne-legacy-landmarks-global-mission.
21. Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Orbis Books, 1996), 173.
22. Eleanor Kreider, "Artistic Expression in Early Christianity," in *Worship and Mission for the Global Church: An Ethnodoxology Handbook*, edited by James R. Krabill et al. (William Carey Library, 2013), 9–12.
23. Walls, *The Missionary Movement*, 174.
24. Ed Lapiz, "Where Every Nation Has a Contribution," *Connections* (Journal of the WEA Mission Commission) 9, no. 2–3 (2010): 7–8.
25. Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, "Redeeming the Arts: The Restoration of the Arts to God's Creational Intention," Lausanne Occasional Paper, no. 46 (2004), prologue, https://lausanne.org/occasional-paper/redeeming-arts-restoration-arts-gods-creational-intention-lop-46#3c.
26. Franklin, "Arts and the Missional Task," 7.
27. Beattie, *Arts Across Cultures,* 12.
28. Andrew F. Walls, "The Ephesians Moment in Worldwide Worship: A Meditation on Revelation 21 and Ephesians," in *Christian Worship Worldwide: Expanding Horizons, Deepening Practices*, ed. Charles E. Farhadian. (Eerdmans, 2007), 32.

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