

## On theological aesthetics, decolonisation, and doing theology through the arts

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### Abstract

Throughout history, works of art have often served as a prominent mode of theological expression – also, importantly, here in South Africa. In, thus, revisiting the history of theological inquiry in South Africa as part of a larger process of decolonisation, it is important and necessary to also look to the arts, which is what this article will attempt to do. It will begin with an exploration of the relationship between theology and the arts, before looking at the emergence of the field of theological aesthetics. This will be followed by some comments on the relevance of this field for South African theology, especially when it comes to questions of decoloniality. The article will then conclude with a brief discussion of the South Africa sculptor Jackson Hlungwani as an example of someone who did theology through the arts.

### Keywords

*theological aesthetics; theology and the arts; decolonisation; John de Gruchy;  
Jackson Hlungwani*

## The form of theology

“Theology” is commonly described as “words” (*logoi*) about “God” (*Theos*). This begs the question: what form can, and should these “words” take? In the modern university setting, the answer that is usually given involves “words” that have either been *written down* or, at the very least, been *spoken* within the confines of the academy or the church – thus “words” expressed through verbal means. But surely, this is a reductionist view,

as communication – also pertaining to God – can also happen through nonverbal means, including through the visual arts. In fact, throughout Christianity’s history, the visual arts have repeatedly surfaced as a pertinent and powerful way of conveying ideas about the divine, of speaking of God. This has also been the case in our own context, South Africa. Amidst, for example, the horrific history of colonisation and apartheid, a history which continually resulted in certain voices being excluded from – or silenced by – the verbal theological exchanges happening in university settings, ample “words” about God were spoken in and through artwork, often in defiance of the political and theological hegemonies of the time. When, thus, revisiting the history of theological inquiry in South Africa as part of a larger process of decolonisation, it is important and necessary to also look to the arts.

The article will commence by offering some historical perspectives on the relationship between theology and the arts, before looking at the emergence of the field of theological aesthetics in the previous century, also as a response to the dominance of verbal theologies within the modern university setting. This will be followed by comments on the lack of theological engagement with the arts in the history of South African theology, after which the pioneering work that John de Gruchy did in this regard will be introduced. Finally, it will be argued that the arts – viewed as a mode of theological expression – have an important role to play in the process of reconceiving the history of theological inquiry in South Africa as part of a larger process of decolonisation. This will be illustrated by a brief exploration of the sculptor Jackson Hlungwani’s “African theology of wood and stone”.

## Theology and/through the arts: A historical perspective

From at least the third century onwards, the arts – including the visual arts – held a prominent place in the Christian faith tradition. After what could be described as the “apophatic silence” and “visual erasure” of the first two centuries,<sup>1</sup> artistic creation rapidly became a prominent part of Christian

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1 See Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self. An Essay on the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 198. According to Hans Urs von Balthasar, this

life and piety, fulfilling various functions within faith communities: from the liturgical to the didactic, the symbolic to the sacramental.<sup>2</sup> This can be seen from various works of Christian art – including engravings and mosaics, frescos and sculptures – found in early catacombs and places of worship such as the Duro-Europos Church, one of the earliest known church buildings with its many painted murals of biblical scenes in the baptistry.<sup>3</sup> We also have several Christian manuscripts dating back to Late Antiquity that had been “illuminated” with illustrations and adornments.<sup>4</sup> The well-known “St. Augustine Gospels” from the sixth century, with its depictions of different scenes from the life of Christ (of which twenty-four are still extant), serves as an important example in this regard. Indeed, as Christianity grew and the Church became more established in different parts of the world, especially after the Edict of Milan, Christians increasingly expressed their faith in “visual symbols” and “painted images”,<sup>5</sup> not least to

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“silence” – which also included the dramatic arts – was the result of Christianity’s early self-differentiation from pagan religions (and their art) in light of the new revelation received in and through Christ. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory Vol. I, Prolegomena* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1988), 91.

- 2 See William A. Dyrness, *Visual Faith: Art, Theology, and Worship in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 26–27 and Beth Williamson, *Christian Art: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 3–9.
- 3 Edward Farley, *Faith and Beauty: A Theological Aesthetic* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2001), 6. The “full-fledged painting scheme” in the house church of Duro-Europos included, for example, “the Good Shepherd carrying a sheep over his shoulder”, a “scene with Adam and Eve and the serpent”, and further scenes of “the Healing of the Paralytic, Walking on the Water, the Woman at the Well, David and Goliath, and, with considerable space devoted to them, the Women at the Tomb”. See John Dillenberger, *A Theology of Artistic Sensibilities: The Visual Arts and the Church* (London: SCM, 1986), 16.
- 4 See Dorothy Verkerk, “Early Christian Illuminated Manuscripts” in Robin M. Jensen and Mark D. Ellison (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Early Christian Art* (Abington: Routledge, 2018), 254–272. Verkerk comments: “Despite the small number of extant manuscripts, the variations in book design and the relationship of illustration to text indicate that between the years 400 and 700 was a period of experimentation. [T]he earliest illuminated books were a relatively straightforward illustration of the text, while later illuminated books show a greater sophistication in how pictures might help to convey the Christian message” (254).
- 5 Some of the symbols used by the early Christian Church are listed by Clement of Alexandria (c. 150 – c. 215 AD): “Let our seals be either a dove, or a fish, or a ship scudding before the fair wind, or a mystical lyre, which seal Polycrates used, or a ship’s anchor, which Seleucus got engraved”; Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor (Paedagogus)*, The Ante-Nicene Fathers II (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 3.11 (p. 285).

“inform and sustain a largely illiterate popular piety”.<sup>6</sup> With time, this also led to the rich iconographical traditions which developed in certain parts of the Church, especially in the East and – importantly – on the African continent in places such as Egypt and Ethiopia.<sup>7</sup>

These developments did not always go uncontested. From the outset, there were voices who, in following the admonishments against false representations of God in the Old Testament,<sup>8</sup> expressed the fear that artistic depictions within Christianity, including icons, would become idols, that is, ways of misrepresenting, domesticating, and imposing the self on the Transcendent Other.<sup>9</sup> This resistance to religious images reached a climax in the eighth century with the Iconoclastic Controversy which raged in the Eastern Church, and later also become a prominent feature of the Protestant Reformation, with Reformers such as Karlstadt in Germany and Zwingli in Switzerland actively opposing art in the sanctuary and beyond.<sup>10</sup> Yet, whenever such words of opposition were uttered, voices also appeared who – while acknowledging and speaking out against the dangers of idolatry – countered the iconoclasms of the day by offering robust theological arguments as to why works of visual art can and should form part of the Christian faith. While sometimes hinting at the doctrine of creation (and the fact that humanity is created in the image of the One who, almost *artist-like*, brings forth what is beautiful and good), these arguments mostly centred on the doctrine of the Incarnation. For here, it was said, in becoming flesh, the Word – as the *ikon* of the invisible God (Col. 1:15) –

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6 John W. de Gruchy, *A Theological Odyssey – My Life in Writing* (Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2014), 115.

7 For more on early Coptic and Ethiopian icons, see John W. de Gruchy, *Icons as a Means of Grace* (Wellington: Lux Verbi, 2008), 78–83, as well as Christine Chaillot, *The Role of Images and the Veneration of Icons in the Oriental Orthodox Churches: Syrian Orthodox, Armenian, Coptic and Ethiopian Traditions* (Zürich: LIT Verlag, 2018).

8 The main stricture against idolatry is given in Exodus 20:4–5a: “You must not make a carved image for yourself, nor the likeness of anything in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth.” (NSRV).

9 See Farley, *Faith and Beauty*, 10ff; De Gruchy, *Icons as a Means of Grace*, 26–30 (“Icons and Idols”).

10 See Dillenberger, *A Theology of Artistic Sensibilities*, 56–74 (“Iconoclastic Movements – Variations on a Theme”) and Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400–1580* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).

was “seen, touched, and handled”,<sup>11</sup> with the consequence that, henceforth, other finite realities, including works of art, could also represent and reflect something of God’s transcendence in our midst.<sup>12</sup> Whether then on account of theological arguments such as these – or, simply, due to what could be deemed humanity’s innate and persistent longing to *make* (also as a *religious* act)<sup>13</sup> – the visual arts continued to flourish within Christianity, even, at times, in traditions with strong iconoclastic inclinations.<sup>14</sup>

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11 De Gruchy, *A Theological Odyssey*, 115.

12 One of the pioneering advocates of this argument was John of Damascus. Amidst the eighth-century iconoclastic controversy, initiated by the Byzantine Emperor Leo III, Damascus composed three treatises on “Divine Images” in which he defends the use of icons primarily on the ground of the Incarnation. As Andrew Louth explains: John of Damascus grounds his argument first “on the fact that matter is created, and so not to be despised, as iconoclasm would seem to imply, but even more on the fact that the Son of God himself assumed a material form in the Incarnation. John dwells on the value and beauty of matter and suggests that the iconoclast despising of matter betrays an inclination towards Manicheism. But for John the strongest argument of all, introduced early on in the treatise, is based on the Incarnation: even if the veneration of images was forbidden in the Old Testament (which, he maintains, it is not), because God has no visible form, the situation has changed as a result of the Incarnation, in which the invisible and incomprehensible God has taken on himself a material form.” See Andrew Louth, “Introduction”, in St. John of Damascus, *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, tr. and ed. by Andrew Louth (New York, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003).

13 There seems to be an early link between the making of “art” and what could be deemed religious awareness and activity. Anne Solomons writes: “The general consensus among archaeologists and paleoanthropologists is that behaviours indicative of a religious sense is principally (though not exclusively) related to the emergence of *Homo sapiens*, anatomically modern humans, who later also attained cognitive modernity. The materials from which the development of a religious sense can be inferred include intentional burial, burial with grave goods (implying ritual acts) and art as an index of symbolic culture – in particular cave paintings, though sculptures and other artifacts are also relevant.” See Anne Solomons, “Bones, Pigments, Art and Symbols: Archaeological Evidence for the Origin of Religion”, in Jay R. Feierman and Lluís Oviedo (eds), *The Evolution of Religion, Religiosity and Theology: A Multilevel and Multidisciplinary Approach* (Abington: Routledge, 2020), 256–270. See also the sections “Imagination and Prehistoric Art” and “Human Imagination and Religious Awareness” in Wentzel van Huyssteen’s Gifford lectures, *Alone in the World? Human Uniqueness in Science and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 187–203 and 203–216. For another interesting theological reflection on so-called “rock art” (or, then, ancient pictographs) see the section “The Man in the Cave” in G. K. Chesterton’s *The Everlasting Man* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1936), 19–38.

14 Here one can, for example, think of the Dutch Masters – including Rembrandt van Rijn – who worked in and produced religious images in a mostly Dutch Reformed context in the seventeenth century.

An important observation that can be made about these works of visual art is that they were not always merely responses to or reflections of the formalised theologies of the day – as if one could say: first came the theology and then, afterwards, the art. Indeed, to quote Sarah Coakley, religious images often had a different function than simply representing that which had already been “settled theologically elsewhere”, as some form of decorative addenda to verbal forms of God-talk.<sup>15</sup> From its beginnings, Christian art in itself also emerged as a prominent and powerful mode of theologising, of expressing something about the divine, of speaking of God, and even, it could be added, to God.<sup>16</sup> Through line, form, and colour theology was being done; in brush strokes or the moulding of clay, “words” about God were being uttered. Instead of merely functioning as an *ancilla theologiae*, that is, as an aid to or an illustration of religious truth, art emerged as a *locus theologicus*, a place where the *act* of theology could take place.<sup>17</sup> To quote the art historian Robin Jensen, art in early Christianity served “as a highly sophisticated, literate, and even eloquent mode of theological expression”.<sup>18</sup> As there were verbal theologies, so there were also visual theologies, with both, together, attempting to communicate and build forth theologically on the witness of the biblical texts and the developing faith tradition. Given its ability to give form to that which cannot always readily be said or contained in words,<sup>19</sup> art would even, at times, come to precede, anticipate, or inspire other forms of theological utterances, thereby enabling – as Sarah Coakley writes – “doctrine’s

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15 Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 191.

16 On this last point, see Dyrness, *Visual Faith*, 27, where he discusses – with reference to the work of the art historian André Garber – how many early Christian images functioned as “implicit prayers”.

17 Cf. Karl Rahner, “The Theology of the Religious Meaning of Images”, *Theological Investigations 23: Final Writings* (Crossroad Publishing, 1992), 155–156.

18 Robin Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 3.

19 On this point see the comments by Murray A. Rae in *Architecture and Theology: The Art of Place* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), 8.

creative new expression, animus, and efficiency”.<sup>20</sup> Here the symbol would “give rise to the thought”, as Paul Ricoeur would say.<sup>21</sup>

Yet, just because the arts – and especially the visual arts – would appear as a significant mode of theology within Christianity, this does not mean it would always be viewed and acknowledged as such. Especially with the late-medieval development of theology as a distinct academic discipline within the emerging Western university,<sup>22</sup> it was the *verbal* – that which could be said and written down in the “increasingly arcane but holy language” of Latin – that would be organised and codified as theology proper.<sup>23</sup> This meant that the church’s artists and their artwork often stood on the margins of formal theological reflection, even while these artists – under the patronage of the Church – were creating artwork that would strongly impact the faith, piety, and theological sympathies of their day. This marginalisation of the arts in matters of formal theological deliberation would continue until recently, especially given much of modern theology’s preference for – and some would even argue obsessions with – “pure” doctrine, uncontaminated by, for example, history, context, and the body.<sup>24</sup> However, from the middle of the previous century, various voices – in both the Catholic and Protestant traditions – began to surface who would, often against the theological currents of the day, ask for, and begin to embody in

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20 For Coakley’s discussion of the dynamic interplay between art and doctrine, see her exploration of the depiction of the Trinity throughout history in the chapter “Seeing God: Trinitarian Thought through Iconography”, in *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 190–265. The quotation comes from p. 190.

21 Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1967), 347. One example in this regard, is the widespread depictions of Christ’s anguish on the cross that surfaced during the Black Plague, voicing something of Christ’s suffering in solidarity *with* humanity, before this notion was always explicitly articulated in the written theologies of the day.

22 For more on this development see the classic study by Gillian Evans, *Old Arts and New Theology: The Beginnings of Theology as an Academic Discipline* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980).

23 See Richard E. Sullivan, “The Medieval Church and the Patronage of Art”, *The Centennial Review* 33, no. 2 (Spring 1989):113.

24 See Graham Ward, *How the Light Gets In: Ethical Life I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 119. Just two examples in this regard are the Reformed Orthodoxy which dominated Reformed Theology from the seventeenth century onwards and the Neo-Scholasticism which dominated Catholic Theology from the nineteenth century onwards, both of which were often preoccupied with clear propositional statements that stood apart from, and even over against, the ebb and flow of history.

their own work, a deliberate engagement with the arts (and concepts such as beauty, the imagination, creativity, artistic taste, and so forth). And in doing so, they would give rise to a new field of theological inquiry, namely, theological aesthetics.

## Theological aesthetics

One of the central figures behind this new theological openness to the arts in the previous century, who would often be viewed as the founder of the field of theological aesthetics, was the Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar. In opposition to the Neo-Scholasticism of his day and inspired by the patristic theology he was exposed to while training for the priesthood, Balthasar deliberately set out to “recover for Christian theology a proper aesthetic”, with “beauty” – both as an attribute of God and an analogical expression of God’s glory in the world – as its first word.<sup>25</sup> He would do this, amongst other places, in his seven-volume work titled *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* (or *Herrlichkeit: Eine Theologische Ästhetik*, in German)<sup>26</sup> – a work which would not only “enter fully into the classical debates about aesthetics” from a theological and strongly Christological standpoint, but would also embrace the “witness of artists of many kinds, whether believers or not”.<sup>27</sup> Balthasar was not the only Catholic theologian at the time who sought to incorporate the arts in formal theological reflection, also as a mode of theological expression. Another important voice in this regard is Balthasar’s Swiss compatriot and fellow Jesuit, Karl Rahner. Especially in his important essay “Theology and the Arts” – but also in many other writings<sup>28</sup> – Rahner would make

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25 Stephen Wigley, *Balthasar’s Trilogy* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2010), 25. See also Marthinus J. Havenga, *Performing Christ: South African Protest Theatre and the Theological Dramatic Theory of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2021), 33–37.

26 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetic Vol. I–VII* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1985–1989).

27 John W. de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 102.

28 For more on Rahner’s theological aesthetics see the volume *Karl Rahner’s Writings on Literature, Music and the Visual Arts*, ed. Gesa E. Thiessen (London: Bloomsbury, 2021). See also Peter Joseph Fritz, *Karl Rahner’s Theological Aesthetics* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2014).



a strong case for theology's embrace and internalisation of the arts. He would famously state, for example:

... theology cannot be complete until it appropriates [the] arts as an integral moment of itself and its own life, until the arts become an intrinsic moment of theology itself ... If theology is simply and arbitrarily defined as being identical with verbal theology ... we would have to ask whether such a reduction of theology does justice to the value and uniqueness of these arts, and whether it does not unjustifiably limit the capacity of these arts to be used by God in his revelation.<sup>29</sup>

While Balthasar and Rahner were calling for and initiating theological engagements with the arts in the Catholic world, there were also various voices on the Protestant side who were doing the same. This would include, above all, Paul Tillich, whose reflections on the relationship between theology and the arts came to play a central role in his larger theology of culture,<sup>30</sup> but also others such as P.T. Forsyth, as well as Jane and John Dillenberger, who often collaborated with Tillich. Across the board, the field of theological aesthetics – so named after the appellation used by Balthasar – was thus beginning to take shape. And as the twentieth century progressed and gradually gave way to the twenty-first century, it indeed continued to grow in prominence and influence, so that today it could be seen as a vibrant field of theological inquiry, with many specialised research centres around the world (including in places such as St. Andrews, in Scotland, King's College, in England, Duke, Yale and Berkley, in the USA, and Münster and Marburg, in Germany).<sup>31</sup>

It can then be said that one peculiarity in the emergence of the field of theological aesthetics, especially in the previous century, is that it did not have a decisive impact on the theology being done in a country such as

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29 Karl Rahner, "Theology and the Arts", *Thought*, Vol. 57, No. 224 (March 1982): 24–5.

30 See Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959) and *On Art and Architecture*, ed. John Dillenberger and Jane Dillenberger (New York, NY: Crossroads, 1987). See also Russel R. E. Manning, "Tillich's theology of art" in Russel R. E. Manning (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Paul Tillich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 152.

31 See Gesa E. Thiessen, "Searching for God: Theology, Imagination, Beauty and the Arts" in *Acta Theologica* 40, Suppl. 29 (2020): 29.

South Africa. Perhaps this was due to an ongoing conviction that churches of the Reformation – with their focus on the *hearing* of the Word – cannot and should not concern themselves with the arts, especially the visual arts (even though, as mentioned, there were also Protestant theologians who were actively engaging with the arts in their theologies, while rethinking, for example, the Reformation’s iconoclastic legacy). Or, possibly tied to this, it could have been the result of a particular form of (early Barthian) *Realdialektik*, with its “infinite qualitative difference” between God and world (and Nein! to so-called “natural theology”),<sup>32</sup> which exerted great influence on South African theology at the time when theological aesthetics was beginning to emerge in other settings.<sup>33</sup> Whatever the case may be – and, obviously, more nuanced theological work is necessary in this regard – it so happened that, while there were ample developments in the field of theological aesthetics in the rest of the world, there were very few, if any, deliberate and sustained theological engagements with the arts in South Africa. This, however, changed with the appearance of the ground-breaking book by John de Gruchy titled *Christianity, Art and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice* by the

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32 Barth famously states, for example, in the preface to the second edition of his Romans commentary: “[I]f I have a system, it is limited to a recognition of what Kierkegaard called the ‘infinite qualitative distinction’ between time and eternity ... ‘God is in heaven, and thou are not’”. Karl Barth, *The Epistles to the Romans*, 6<sup>th</sup> Edition, tr. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 10. See also Graham Ward, *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 42. Barth himself was, of course, no philistine, and deeply appreciated the music of Mozart and the writings of Dostoevsky. He did, however, harbour a negative view towards the visual arts, especially when depicting Christian subject matter, and, as just one example, strongly opposed the reinstallation of stained-glass windows in the Basel Cathedral in 1952 after the old windows were destroyed during World War II. In his *Church Dogmatics* he would write the following: “[The visual depiction of Christ] could not and cannot be anything but a sorry story. No human art should try to represent – in their unity – the suffering God and triumphant man, the beauty of God which is the beauty of Jesus Christ. If at this point, we have one urgent request to all Christian artists, however well-intentioned, gifted or even possessed of genius, it is that they should give up this unholy undertaking.” Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, edited by G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, translated by T.H.L. Parker and J.L.M. Haire (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 666.

33 Rian Venter notes that in the latter part of the twentieth century, the South African Barthians often did dogmatic theology in a way that was “sanitised” from questions of “history and its conflicts”. See Rian Venter, “The Triune God in South African Systematic Theology since 1976”, in Riaan Venter (ed.), *Theology and the (Post)apartheid Condition: Genealogies and Future Directions* (Bloemfontein: SUN Media, 2016), 158.

turn of the previous century – a work he would come to describe as both a “celebration of art and a statement of faith”.<sup>34</sup>

## De Gruchy and the decolonisation of theology

De Gruchy mentions that he initially became interested in theological aesthetics in the 1990s after regular conversations about the relationship between “ugliness and oppression” and “beauty and redemption” with a colleague working in the field of architecture at the University of Cape Town.<sup>35</sup> This led to a rather unexpected – and in the end highly personal<sup>36</sup> – research project which would attempt to bring the questions of theological aesthetics to bear on South African realities, especially in the wake of apartheid. At the beginning of the book, De Gruchy admits that there has been “a lack of critical theological reflection” on artistic practice in South Africa’s theological past, also by theologians like himself who had been part of the church struggle against apartheid. His study is then a corrective in this regard, a way of discovering in our own context what he calls “the transformative potential of the arts and their importance for Christian faith and praxis”.<sup>37</sup>

In reading De Gruchy’s book, it is seen how its first section, titled “Historical Trajectories”, offers a helpful, introductory overview of the often-complex relationship between Christianity and the arts throughout history, also by touching on some of the issues mentioned throughout this article. This is followed by a second section, titled “Theological Reflection”, which in many ways centres on Hans Urs von Balthasar’s theological aesthetics with its strong focus on beauty, especially the beauty of Christ, while also briefly reflecting on Bonhoeffer’s notion of an “aesthetic existence”.<sup>38</sup> The

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34 De Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation*, 2.

35 De Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation*, 1.

36 It is worth noting that De Gruchy’s wife, Isabel, is an accomplished artist and poet and would play an integral role in his journey with this theme. For a small sample of Isabel’s wide-spanning work see her collection *Between Heaven and Earth: Poems, Prayers, and Pictures*, with a foreword by Desmond Tutu (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015).

37 De Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation*, p. 2.

38 De Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation*, 97–135 (the chapter “The Redemptive Power of Beauty”, which primarily deals with Balthasar) and 136–68 (the chapter “Restoring Broken Themes of Praise”, which primary deals with Bonhoeffer).

book finally culminates in a last section, titled “Aesthetic Praxis”, where De Gruchy investigates theologically the role the arts played in church and society during and after apartheid, while also casting a vision of how it can potentially enrich and reframe Christianity in South Africa today. And it is then here, as part of this final section, that De Gruchy presents a passionate plea for theology not only to deliberately enter into conversation with the arts going forward, but also for it to recognise the arts as an important and fitting mode of theological expression itself. For, as he continues to show, this is indeed what various works of art – including works of visual art – has often been seen to do throughout South Africa’s troublesome past, namely, to speak of God and God’s beauty, truth, and goodness especially in settings marred by the “ugliness of injustice”, where people’s voices were otherwise silenced.

While De Gruchy does not explicitly mention anything about decoloniality in his book, one gets the sense that the arguments that he makes, especially towards the book’s conclusion, speaks to – or perhaps anticipates – this matter. For in asking us to rethink our conceptions of what theology is or could be, and with what it should engage, not only in the church but also in the academy, he helps us to see how other sources than, for example, the usual verbal theologies of the Western theological canon can be recognised as theological expressions – sources such as art which have originated in and are deeply embedded in our own African context. Indeed, in developing an appreciation for visual theologies (something that has always been part of the Christian tradition, as shown throughout this article), and viewing works of art not only as artistic but also theological contributions, a door is opened – De Gruchy helps us to see – to discover, learn from, and internalise (as Rahner would say) theological ideas which, outside the confines set by Western theology, communicate something of God and God’s relationship to the world from an African perspective. It is furthermore seen that such a turn to visual theologies may, in fact, help us to reconstruct the history

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Bonhoeffer’s engagement with Kierkegaard’s notion of an “aesthetic existence” – which is of central importance in the last-mentioned chapter – would be taken up and further explored by De Gruchy’s doctoral student Adrian Coates in his excellent dissertation, published as Adrian Coates, *The Aesthetics of Discipleship: Everyday Aesthetic Existence and the Christian Life*, with a foreword by John de Gruchy (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2021).

of systematic theology in South Africa, as it encourages us to unearth African theological contributions that would previously – in a theological imagination dominated by the verbal – have been excluded. And this is important, especially in a country where it was often only Western voices – and those emulating them – that would be preserved in print. This was, incidentally, one of the points made by Tinyiko Maluleke in a public address at the Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University in 2019. In speaking on and providing a roadmap for the decolonisation of theology in South Africa, Maluleke explicitly asked for a more robust engagement with local art and artists, also from South Africa's rich history in this regard.

This article is, then, a call to do exactly this, to recognise (together with many others working in the field of theological aesthetics around the world today) the value of the visual for theology, and – in doing so – to acknowledge, learn from, and celebrate the powerful theological contributions that artists have made – and continue to make – in South Africa, especially as part of a process of decolonisation and the search for truly *African* theological expressions. As a practical illustration in this regard, I would – at the end of this article – briefly want to highlight the theological contribution of Jackson Hlungwani, the sculptor who lived, worked, and constructed his New Jerusalem site near the village of Mbokotho in the present-day Limpopo Province.

## Hlungwani: A theology in wood and stone

Jackson Hlungwani<sup>39</sup> was born somewhere between 1917 and 1923 in Mashampa Village near the Zimbabwean border and grew up in a Tsonga-speaking household which prided itself in being part of a Shangaan warrior

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39 The brief biographical sketch provided here was assembled with reference to sources such as Ricky Burnett, "Sparks of Recognition" in Ricky Burnett (ed.), *Jekisemi Hlungwani Xagani: An Exhibition* (Johannesburg: Communication Dept., BMW, 1989), 4–7; Anitra Nettleton, "African Homeland Artists and the Contemporary Artworld: The Politics of Authenticity", in Ian McClean, (ed.), *Double Desire: Transcultural and Indigenous Contemporary Art* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 269; and the programme notes of the recent exhibition of Hlungwani's works at the Norval Foundation, titled *Alt and Omega: Jackson Hlungwani* [Online]. Available: (<https://www.norvalfoundation.org/alt-and-omega-jackson-hlungwani/>) [Accessed: 20 September 2021].

lineage. He never attended school and as a child mostly herded the family's sheep, while his father – who worked at a workshop where railway coaches were assembled – taught him to sharpen iron tools and work with wood. When he reached adolescence, he moved to Johannesburg to work in a coffee factory, also to send money back to his family. Yet, after losing a finger in an industrial accident, and being laid off without compensation, he returned home to look after his ailing parents. Around this time, he joined the Zionist Christian Church (ZCC), and even became an ordained preacher for a while, but later left the church as he did not, in his own words, find the “spiritual peace” he was looking for. Soon thereafter, while working on a construction site, he developed an ulcer on his left shin which he claimed was the result of an attack by Satan. This condition became so painful that he eventually decided to commit suicide by drinking the poisonous sap of the Nkondze tree. However, just before he could do this, he was stopped by a vision of Christ who not only told him that he would be healed, but also gave him three instructions: that he should start his own church, that he should make carvings from wood, and that he should use these carvings to teach the nations.

The next day, Hlungwani's leg was miraculously healed, and he accordingly set out with a strong “sense of mission” to establish a new church community (with the name *Yesu Geleliya One Apostol in Sayoni, Alt and Omega Church*) “in service of his neighbours” in Mbokotho.<sup>40</sup> As instructed by Christ, he also started making carvings, as his father taught him, which

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40 Théo Schneider, “The Star and the Colt”, in *Jekisemi Hlungwani Xagani*, 8. This collection of essays stems from the very first exhibition of Hlungwani's work in a converted warehouse at 140 Bree Street, Newtown, Johannesburg, across the road from the Market Theatre. The exhibition – which was organized by Ricky Bennet (working closely with Hlungwani) – incorporated about 240 works, ran for five weeks, and saw over 8000 visitors. Hlungwani's hope with the exhibition was that – even when removed from their original context – his works would convey “spiritual truths” to people, and from the many reports from the exhibition (which Hlungwani himself attended on a daily basis) it was “a spiritual experience not soon to be forgotten” as “Hlungwani had intended it” to be. Afterwards, many art critics (including Allan Crump, professor of Fine Art at the University of the Witwatersrand at the time), commented that Hlungwani is “possibly South Africa's greatest artist yet”. See Elizabeth Rankin, *Images of Wood: Aspects of the History of Sculptures in 20th Century South Africa* (Johannesburg: Johannesburg Art Gallery, 1989), 75; Ivor Powell, “In the Soul of the Shaman”, *Tribute* (March 1990): 66, as well as Sandra Lynne Hayashida's excellent master's thesis (completed with Klippies Kritzingier), *Mission and the Visual Expression of the Gospel in the Sculpture of Jackson Hlungwani* (Unisa, 2000).

he would gradually assemble on a nearby hilltop, which he called the New Jerusalem. In time, this would become an elaborate religious site, filled with numerous sculptures of mostly biblical figures, which Hlungwani patiently carved from the remains of fallen trees that he would find while wandering along the river. These sculptures – which came to mark a pilgrim’s route that culminated at crucifixes stationed at the hill’s end – was used by Hlungwani (who came to call himself Xidonkani, as in the donkey that carried Christ)<sup>41</sup> to construct and communicate, with incredible “aesthetic imagination and visionary insight”,<sup>42</sup> a unique African theology, which would reflect – and give form to – contextualised interpretations of Scripture interwoven with references to his Tsonga-Shangaan heritage. Through his sculptures, Hlungwani would thus “visually materialise” the Gospel in vibrant African forms. It would be an expression of lived religion which spoke from and to the context in which it came into being – an “original”, “postcolonial” African theology “in wood and stone”, as Anitra Nettleton and Théo Schneider have remarked.<sup>43</sup>

In light of everything said above, I believe Hlungwani’s extensive body of work – which includes sculptures such as *Crucifixes I, II, III and IV*, *Tree of Life*, *Hand of God*, *The Birth of Adam and Eve*, *God’s Legs with Eggs*, *Cain and Abel*, *Michael Star* and so forth – asks to be viewed and studied as distinctly theological expressions, especially if we take the call of decolonisation seriously. In future research, I intend to do exactly this, and hope others will do the same. Yet already here, to conclude this article, I briefly want to mention one of Hlungwani’s creations, as a concrete example of how “words” about God can be uttered in and through works of art. This sculpture is – in the words of Sue Williamson – the “majestic” *Christ Playing Football*, completed in 1983 (at the highpoint of apartheid),

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41 Schneider, who visited and befriended Hlungwani in the 1980s, writes: “The remarkable fact ... is that the artist prefers to call himself Xidonkani today, namely The Colt, the foal of a donkey ... *Xidonkani* points to the borrowed she-ass, alternatively the colt, on which Christ the Son-of-David entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. “I am that colt”, says Jackson Xidonkani Hlungwani, a kind of Christopher (literally “Christ-bearer”), carrying the Star of Zion on its back [as Hlungwani would also illustrate in one of his wood carvings]”. Schneider, “The Star and the Colt”, 10.

42 Lionel Abrahams, “Mbhookota is Everywhere”, in *Jekisemi Hlungwani Xagani*, 14.

43 Anitra Nettleton, “Jackson Hlungwani’s Altars: An African Christian Theology in Wood and Stone”. *Material Religion*, Volume 5, no.1 (2009): 50–69 and Schneider, “The Star and the Colt”, 8.

which originally stood on the so-called “Altar for Christ” in Hlungwani’s New Jerusalem site in Mbokotho.<sup>44</sup> In this work – made from the greyish-brown wood of the Nkonono tree – a clearly identifiable Christ-figure, with “short, study legs” and “long arms that are wrapped in a spiralling thrust about the body”, is seen engaging in one of the favorite pastime activities in Mbokotho at the time, namely football.<sup>45</sup>

What is immediately communicated through this artwork is that, for Hlungwani, the Jesus who is worshipped at the “Altar of Christ” is not a deity far-removed from everyday life, but someone who can be found wherever Mbokotho’s residents are, even if it is on a rural football field. Here there is no sign of what some would contend is a Western separation of the “sacred and the profane”;<sup>46</sup> Christ, the Son of God, as worshipped at Hlungwani’s New Jerusalem site, is deeply present in the community, where he plays among the people of Mbokotho – a remarkable theological statement. For Hlungwani, this “play” does, however, not exclude the anguish people experienced daily, especially under the unjust order of apartheid (which he latently addressed in much of his work). When looking closely at the “playful Christ”, as the work has been described,<sup>47</sup> one sees a “lighting crack” running down like a tear from the figure’s “shadowed, hooded eyes” to its heart, where a blemish in the wood resembles a wound of some sort.<sup>48</sup> Hence, while playing football, Hlungwani’s Jesus also cries with those around him, and is himself wounded – a sign of solidarity with those who are suffering. It is also then as this “wounded football-player” that Hlungwani’s Jesus is seen to take a protective, almost brooding stance over the football itself, as if the ball – perhaps representing Mbokotho and its people – is “eternally the object of its care”.<sup>49</sup> Together with its message of solidarity, the artwork also, therefore, speaks of protection and care, of

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44 Sue Williamson, *South African Art Now* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 72. See also Sue Imrie Ross, *This is My World: The Life of Helen Martins Creator of the Owl House* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 219.

45 Raymund van Niekerk, “Hlungwani”. *Leadership South Africa* 9, no.1 (1990): 50.

46 Peter Rich, “The New Jerusalem”, in *Jekisemi Hlungwani Xagani*, 29.

47 Johan van Zyl, “The Little Donkey who Sculpts”. *Style* (October 1991): 120

48 Van Niekerk, “Hlungwani”, 50.

49 Van Niekerk, “Hlungwani”, 50.



Christ defending and saving the vulnerable, as an experienced football player would do with a football.

From the above it is clear that in Hlungwani's *Christ Playing Football* "words" about God – and, in particular, Jesus Christ – is "carved ... into wood", to quote Klippiess Kritzinger.<sup>50</sup> As has been the case throughout history, "theology" – in the richest sense of the term – has thus been done by means of the arts. What is more, this theology is a distinctly African one – a homegrown theology that speaks about God in African forms. Shall we, therefore, not also turn to Hlungwani and others when revisiting the history of theology in South Africa?

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50 J. N. J. (Klippiess) Kritzinger, "Christ, the soccer champion", *Blad Zonder Naam: Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies Newsletter*, UNISA (August 1999): 2.

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