

Sign and Religion: Augustine's Theology of Aesthetics

(An abstract)

Samuel S. Ho

Lead Pastor

Chinese Ministry

Seattle Chinese Alliance Church, USA

In his *Confessions*, Augustine asks himself how he is withdrawing himself from the incantation of music, even of church music. To Augustine, though music can stir up the flame of his devotion and touches his soul with “some mysterious fancy,” it has to be carefully examined by reason, because it can also arouse sensual pleasure. Sensual pleasure is the outcome of the pursuit of our mind, which make us cling to a certain thing with love for its own sake. For Augustine, God alone is to be enjoyed in and for himself and in respect of him all else is to be used. Thus God alone is the end of our desire; and that entails that there is no finality or intrinsic meaning in this world.

For Augustine, only God is of reality, all else are but signs. Therefore, when a sign becomes an idol rather than being an indicator pointing beyond itself, it generates problems. Augustine points out that our destiny is to enjoy self-sufficient truth and reality, and that we have to bypass the beautiful things in this world, including various kinds of arts, so as to penetrate into the beauty of God. Therefore, Art as Sign should be “self-evaporating.” Augustine insists the beauty of art for its didactic function, and he differentiates the activity of the senses in relation to true

pleasure from their activity in relation to curiosity. The proper work of art itself tends to militate against the idiosyncratic. Therefore, pride in creativity should be eliminated within the work of art. Artistic achievement should be subordinated to didactic and spiritual ends. For Augustine, Christian art does not have a fixed format. Any useful or worthwhile thing obtained from the world may be treated as a gift given unto us for the obedience of Christ. Such “spoils of Egypt” or “spoils of the world” could be used as a kind of Christian artistic archetype.