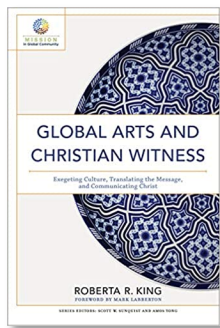


[Review] *Global Arts and Christian Witness: Exegeting Culture, Translating the Message, and Communicating Christ*, by Roberta R. King



RON MAN

Ron Man is Missionary in Residence at First Evangelical Church in Memphis, Tennessee, where he also served for 22 years as pastor of worship. Under the auspices of Worship Resources International, over the past 20 years he has taught about the biblical foundations of worship in 37 countries; maintains a website of free worship resources; and writes a monthly newsletter, *Worship Notes*. He is also the author of *Proclamation and Praise: Hebrews 2:12 and the Christology of Worship* (2007). In addition, he serves on the executive committee of the Global Consultation on the Arts and Music in Missions.



King, Roberta R. *Global Arts and Christian Witness: Exegeting Culture, Translating the Message, and Communicating Christ*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2019. 288pp. ISBN 978-0-8010-9885-7.

Roberta King is Professor of Communication and Ethnomusicology in the School of Intercultural Studies at Fuller Theological Seminary, and a former musical missionary to Africa. In *Global Arts and Christian Witness* she has drawn upon a lifetime of service to give a rich overview of how the arts can and should play a central role in the work of the church worldwide, both inside and outside its walls. King not only feels passionately about the subject but she has also walked the walk (or, perhaps more fittingly, given her African sojourn, danced the dance): she recounts many experiences from her own time in Africa and from her involvement in various global arts events, and she shares numerous anecdotal accounts from former students and other practitioners around the world.

As N. T. Wright points out,

The arts are not the pretty but irrelevant bits around the border of reality. They are highways into the center of a reality which cannot be glimpsed, let alone grasped, any other way. The present world is good, but broken and in any case incomplete; art of all kinds enables us to understand that paradox and its many dimensions. . . . Perhaps art can help us to look beyond the immediate beauty with all its puzzles, and to glimpse that new creation which makes sense not only of beauty but of the world as a whole, and ourselves within it. (Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* [New York: HarperOne, 2010], 235–6)

Similarly, King argues for a “new perspective [that] fosters embracing all cultural peoples and their artistic languages. . . . and redeeming them for making the gospel known and faithfully lived out. A people’s expressive languages offer a resource of culturally defined signal systems that contribute to bringing peoples to see the glory of God and know his salvation” (239). She offers what she calls a “global safari highlighting how God is making himself known through music and the arts worldwide.” She is certainly a qualified guide on this expedition.



King recognizes that “the world of global arts has expanded enormously” (2) and, due to globalization and mass communication, it is more recognized and experienced than has ever before been possible. Yet at the same time, she warns that those technical advances can lead to a homogenization that threatens local cultural identity. And so she argues for celebrating the rich cultural diversity we find in global arts, and for expanding their use from the church into the community and the world, in the cause of gospel witness:

The global arts tap into the deeper affective dimensions of people more directly than mere informational input alone. They communicate in profound ways and make a transformative impact. Thus global arts not only play an accompanying role to witness in general, but they also themselves preach and proclaim the gospel in multivocal ways with significant impact. (15)

The book is divided into three sections:

1. *Foundations in Global Arts and Christ-Centered Witness*. In this section’s two chapters, King examines the nature of culture and of global arts as “expressive culture” (31). She strongly defends the need for critical contextualization in adopting and adapting local art forms for Christian worship and witness, insisting on the local rather than universal nature of artistic meaning. She outlines Donald Smith’s “signal systems” as demonstrating the multivalent ways we can verbally and nonverbally communicate our love for God and neighbor:

Just as spoken languages facilitate communication within social contexts, global arts such as music, performing arts, and visual arts bring together multiple expressive languages that are likewise culturally embedded. They speak simultaneously on multiple levels, both verbal and nonverbal, increasing and enhancing the depth of emotional engagement, profoundly affecting the evaluative dimension. (33)

2. *Encountering Christ through Global Arts*. In this section (three chapters), King shows how Christian ethnoartistic principles can help us to do “cultural exegesis,” giving insights into a culture’s beliefs and then allowing us to “translate” and communicate the biblical message and its application to life using culturally appropriate art forms.

The global arts, as expressive languages practiced within their particular cultural contexts, promote opportunities for listening, asking, and interacting with people. In the midst of engagement through the expressive arts of a people, we are relating with them within their own communicative worlds, building trust and credibility as bearers of the gospel message. (67)

3. *Engaging Peoples for Christ via Global Arts*. In these four chapters, King moves us out into public and lifestyle witness through the arts, promoting the discipling of artists for effective outreach (while still allowing for the role that laity can play in artistic witness). She shows the special necessity of artistic forms, such as storytelling, proverbs, and song, in order to communicate biblical teachings in oral cultures. And she examines the value of artistic endeavors in promoting peacebuilding interfaith dialogue, and witness in multicultural settings.

We need to acknowledge that music and the arts offer dialogical ways of encountering and engaging with diverse peoples in Christ-centered witness. . . . Identifying, acknowledging, and engaging with people’s heart musics and artistic languages. . . . provides profound opportunities to engage people on deeper levels within their worlds and to build incarnational friendships. (231)

In her “Postlude,” King helpfully presents a challenging summary agenda for an expanded understanding of and vision for the vast resources that global arts can bring to Christian witness. She “invites us to reassess and reimagine ways to extend our approaches of dynamic witness through the global arts” (231), an agenda that includes

- 1) a shift from depending on spoken and written languages alone to a fuller appreciation for and use of the full ranges of peoples’ artistic and expressive languages in witness;
- 2) a recognition that each culture has its own set of artistic practices, rather than the assumption of universal forms;
- 3) an appreciation of the deep ways that the arts speak to people’s hearts and souls;
- 4) a realization that ethnic and artistic diversity is not just “out there” in far-flung places, but through globalization is also increasingly the norm in our own cities;
- 5) an encouragement of participatory art expressions that include laity, not just the “professionals”; and
- 6) a focus on the collaborative process of art creation as much as on the product.

King convincingly shows us how a proper appreciation for and practice of “culturally defined and appropriated” (239) artistic expressions can open doors for the gospel, build community, and foster dialogue among interfaith groups. We must first know God’s Word and do our cultural exegesis of the arts of the peoples with whom we are interacting,” King writes. “Following on that, we must then be able to adjust and adapt our approaches according to a people’s context, life situations, and generation” (242).

Global Arts and Christian Witness is an important contribution to a field of ministry that has grown in importance and focus over the past few decades, and King proves an exceptionally qualified, winsome guide through the subject.