

William A. Dyrness. *Senses of the Soul: Art and the Visual in Christian Worship*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008. 172 pages. \$23.00.

In the book *Senses of the Soul: Art and the Visual in Christian Worship*, William A. Dyrness addresses the perception of art and visual media used in worship by engaging several Protestant, Orthodox, and Catholic churches in eighty individual conversations regarding the types of art and media present in their worship. He also looks at how these artistic endeavors affect the participants emotionally, hinder or enhance their connection to the divine, and link them to their historical practices.

This book builds on the work of David Morgan, Robert Wuthnow, Mark Chaves, and Randall Collins in religious imagery, art and spiritual vitality, visual meditation, and ritual, respectively (2-6) and is an extension of the author's own research in *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture* (2004). As a scholar of preaching fascinated by the topic, I approached this text with anticipation since it is written for artists, scholars, pastors, and congregational worship leaders.

His premise, succinctly stated, is to engage in oral interviews on the role of art and media in Christian worship. As he begins the work, William owns that the selection of these congregations, all Southern Californian, almost all theologically conservative, and mostly Protestant, might slant his data in an overly determined direction (xiii). This slant is, on occasion problematic, yet the book is helpful in understanding attitudes about visual media in worship, in visualizing these churches' physical spaces, and in relating the historical development of the use of visual arts. For him, the "theophanic" elements, objects capable of mediating God's presence, occurs in the homily for Protestants, in the icons for Orthodox, and in the Eucharist for Roman Catholics (8-9, 13). This centralizing theme enables his interpretative reading of visual media in these traditions within a select frame of reference.

William is an excellent descriptive writer and this work benefits greatly from that gift. From his "word art" I could imagine walking where he walked, seeing what he saw. Additionally, he lays out the interviews in a way that both supports his thesis but also challenges it. Chapters two, three and four explore the insights drawn from interviews with church groups and individuals regarding their feelings about visual media and their place in worship. His analysis builds on the work of Antonio Damasio, in order to document how "the visual and emotional are inextricably related" (11). This relationship is clearly demonstrated in several of the interviews as we observe how emotional reactions to visual media may enhance or distract the congregant within worship and that one's own worship history impacts the experience of the media (14-15, 26, 56, 75, 79).

Two chapters are dedicated to the concept of beauty and worship, filled with rich dialogue that adds depth to this work. He taps into the emotional connection people experience through art and visual media in this section. One worshiper sees God gathering humans together by using beauty to call them into community (91). The interviews are so insightful that William acknowledges his regret that there were no opportunities for representatives of the three traditions to listen to each other, offer responses or to challenge assumptions, a missing dimension to the work (100).

The author asserts that Protestants were historically more suspicious about visual media in worship and points out this pattern may be changing as Protestant churches engage in a variety of artistic means (xi, 23, 104). He does not, however, include any examples of these churches on

the cutting edge of media and art usage in worship. I believe this element in the study could have added greater depth to this portion of the work.

To summarize the findings of this study: first, distinctive religious traditions are remarkably persistent over time and second, in “these traditions are embodied in particular sets of physical and visual practices” (155). The consistency of William’s research within each tradition affirms these two principles, but also pushes his present research forward toward future projects (171). The author achieves his stated goal and despite a few limitations, which he owns quite readily, this is an engaging look at the use of arts and visual media in worship and well worth the read.

Karyn L. Wiseman
Hood Theological Seminary
Salisbury, NC