



Journal of Religion & Society

The Kripke Center

Volume 1 (1999)

William David Spencer and Aida Besancon Spencer (eds). *God through the Looking Glass: Glimpses from the Arts*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998. Pp. 208. No Price Listed.

[1] Husband and wife William and Aida Spencer have gathered a collection of nine essays by academics and practicing artists in this book to explore the role of the arts in the Christian life. Their concern is primarily with contemporary art and they include a variety of mediums: fiction and poetry, music, painting and sculpture, dance, drama, and cinema.

[2] The overall tone of the essays is decidedly apologetic and practical. Not only do the authors think that the arts are an integral part of what it means to be human, but that the arts also help people understand both God and themselves. More problematic, for some readers at least, will be the underlying tenor of the apology that seems to insist that there also be a normative biblical and theological hermeneutic for any Christian use of the arts. Every essay concludes with a list of activities that readers might do or reflect on to further explore the connection between the arts and Christian life.

[3] After a brief introductory chapter by William David Spencer, Aida Spencer provides an essay on "The Bible as Apologetic for Art." In it she develops the idea that the God found in the pages of the Bible is a creating and creative God who uses a variety of artistic forms in revelation. Aida Spencer also writes the next chapter "Fiction as a Looking Glass." The organization and method used in this chapter is typical of the approach found in many of the essays in the book. Spencer first must demonstrate that the artistic medium under consideration (the literary genre fiction in this case) can be found in the Bible as if to validate that Christians can take this expression of the arts seriously only because it can be grounded in some way in biblical texts. Only then does she move to talking about the contributions of fiction to the both theology and the Christian life. Throughout the essay her concern is practical, even when discussing theoretical concepts like style or plot, as she suggests criteria a Christian might use to evaluate fiction.

[4] Music is discussed in William Spencer's essay "God in the Music Box Mirror" where he first catalogs some of the variety of music found in the Bible before turning to the

contemporary music scene. He evaluates some contemporary music with the categories of foolish and wise songs derived from the biblical text.

[5] The visual arts are represented by two essays. In "Looking Comes First: A Personal Artistic Journey," Bruce Whitney Herman relates his artistic pilgrimage and philosophy with the help of numerous plates of his paintings. Gwenfair M. Walters takes a more historical approach in her chapter, "Postcards from the Past: Depicting God through the Visual Arts" in which she discusses different ways Christ has been presented in particular periods in history. Walters argues that the images and controversies they sometimes provoked often reflected different ways that the Church understood spirituality through the ages.

[6] Celeste Snowber Schroeder uses the theological categories of creation, incarnation, and redemption in her essay "Movement: The Language of Dance" to provide readers with a framework to appreciate dance.

[7] Norman M. Jones' contribution "The Dramatic Arts and the Image of God" makes the case that the theatre helps create a world where people can step outside their limited perspectives and see things in new light.

[8] Jasmin Sung with Richard Peace in "Eyes to See, Ears to Hear, and Minds to Understand: Movies and Other Media" argue for the need for media literacy because of the seductive nature of the cinema which provides viewers with the director's view of reality.

[9] William Spencer concludes the book with his essay "Ministry through the Arts" which explores how the church can use the arts in ministry.

[10] Most collection of essays will be uneven and this is the case with this book. Sung's essay, for example, is brief, lacking any real theological analysis of media and ignoring numerous recent books on religion and film. Walter's historical essay would be greatly strengthened if she had included examples of some paintings to illustrate her discussion as writers such as Jane Dillenger or Margaret Miles have done with some of their work. Illustrations are not necessary for those knowledgeable in the field, but for those not schooled in art history, they would help drive home Walter's points. Such an omission is surprising in a book that is so clearly sympathetic to the arts.

[11] This reviewer found most helpful the essays written by practitioners of arts: Herman, Schroeder, and Jones. Herman provided plates of his paintings, Schroeder offered a view of the Christian life of risks and leaps of faith based on her experience of improvisation in dance, and Jones allowed for the possibility of an authentic spirituality in theatre which didn't necessitate that the theatre be grounded in explicit biblical language and thought. Because the arts require the participation and interaction of the viewer or listener and participants bring different life experiences to the arts, Christian appropriation and use of the arts seem to require that art be allowed a polyvalency missing in many of the essays. Assertions such as Walter's that "the governing principle is to judge the theological content of a painting or sculpture in light of the Scriptures . . . for there can be no new revelation" seem to unnecessarily narrow how (and what) Christians can use in the arts.

[12] Still, the book is not without merit. Its emphasis on the wide range of the arts cautions readers not to be overly dependent upon the written and spoken word, but to be open to all

art forms as tools for understanding God and themselves. The book's practical bent means that ministers and laypersons in the church will find the book most helpful.

David B. Howell, Ferrum College