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Songs of Devotion

The musical group Aradhna worships Christ with its own blend of East and West.

An interview with Chris Hale



Peter Hicks and Chris Hale of Aradhna

Born in America, Chris Hale spent his childhood in Nepal, where his parents worked as medical doctors. He attended boarding schools in India and, after attending college in Boston, returned to India for another 10 years. He currently lives in Canada with his wife, Canadian musician Miranda Stone.

Chris's fusion of cultural experiences, his skill as a musician, and his Christian faith have found expression in his very unique band, Aradhna, which means "adoration" in Hindi. With Chris on sitar, Peter Hicks

on guitar, Fiona Hicks on violin, and Travis McAfee on bass, Aradhna's sound is a fusion of South Asian and Western styles that has been described as "strange, striking, and ravishingly lovely" (Christianity Today). Since 2000, they have recorded four albums and performed their music across India, Great Britain, South Africa, South America, Canada, and the U.S.

See Aradhna's website www.aradhnmusic.com for more information about their music, to contact the group, or to purchase a CD.

As an American who grew up in Nepal and India, do you see yourself as Western or South Asian?

I see myself as both in a lot of respects. The fact that I married a girl from the West probably indicates that I'm more a Westerner than I am an Indian. But I'm very comfortable in a South Asian context and often feel more emotionally at home in that context. So people really do look at me and see someone who is a South Asian and an American at the same time.

How is this blending of cultures evident in your music?

In Aradhna, we sing in a genre that is known as *bhajan*, simply translated as a devotional song. Bhajans have been sung in India for at least 1500 years, probably longer. So when we sing bhajans devoted to Christ, we're part of a long tradition.

We've embraced that form in spite of the fact that it has not been used to worship Christ for all those centuries. In the North Indian Hindi belt where I have done most of my work, Christ has been worshipped using the bhajan songs only in the last few hundred years. In South India, tradition has it that the apostle Thomas brought Christianity to India 2000 years ago, but it is impossible to trace bhajan singing back that far—though we can imagine that some kind of traditional Indian music was used.

But I like to acknowledge the greater tradition as being a valid and beautiful teaching in India—that you need to relate to God in a complete surrender of love and devotion.



Fiona Hicks, Travis McAfee, Chris Hale, Peter Hicks

Why did you start the group Aradhna?

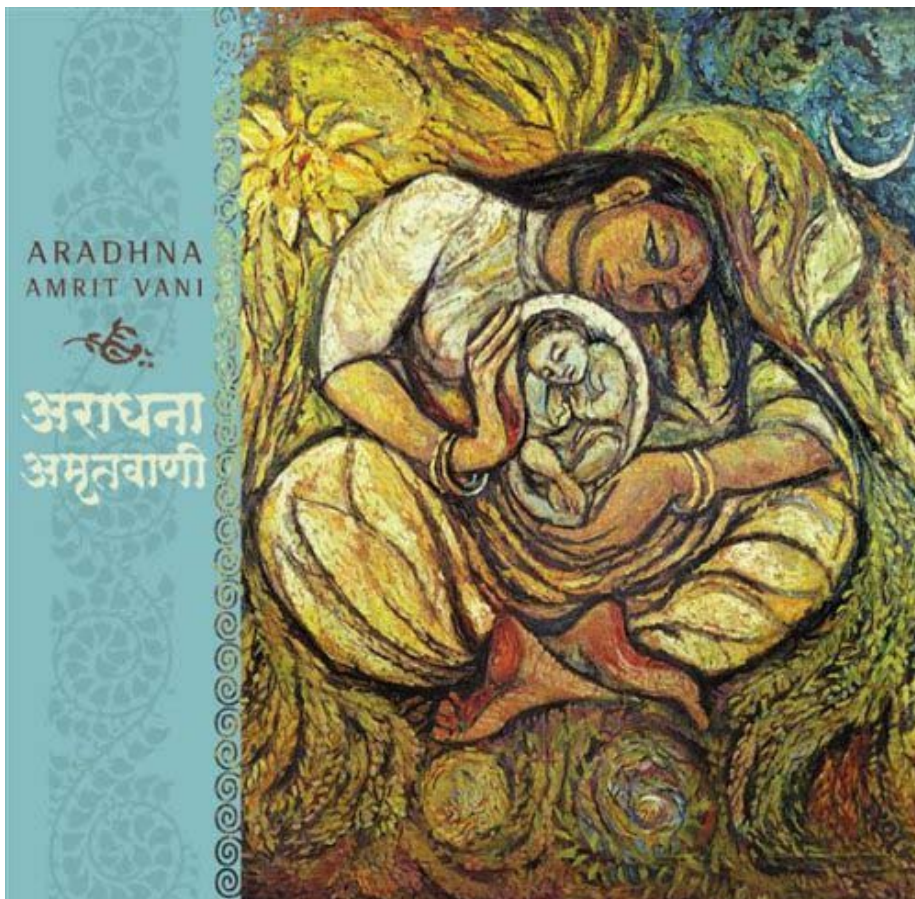
Peter Hicks and I have been friends since 1997. He came to India as an 18-year-old when I was already per-

forming with a rock band called Olio. We played all over India with that band.

Pete and I later stumbled upon the sound of using a guitar and a sitar together, singing these bhajans. We'd sing straight rock music for a few hours during a concert, but we'd throw in a few of these devotional songs in the Hindi language. And Indian young people really liked them a lot—they liked the fusion of rock music with their devotional songs. So Pete and I decided to do these bhajans alone for a full concert of worship. I think our hearts were longing for that.

Do you write your own songs?

In 2000, on our first album, *Deep Jale*, the only song we wrote was one that had English and Hindi in it—it was called "Chosen." On our latest album, *Amrit Vani*, over half of the songs are ones we wrote, or we collaborated with lyricists and composed the music. Even though I grew up in India and Nepal and have been studying Indian music on and off for 18 years, I was mostly trained in Western music through high school and college—classical and jazz—so my confidence in composing in the Indian style has been growing slowly.



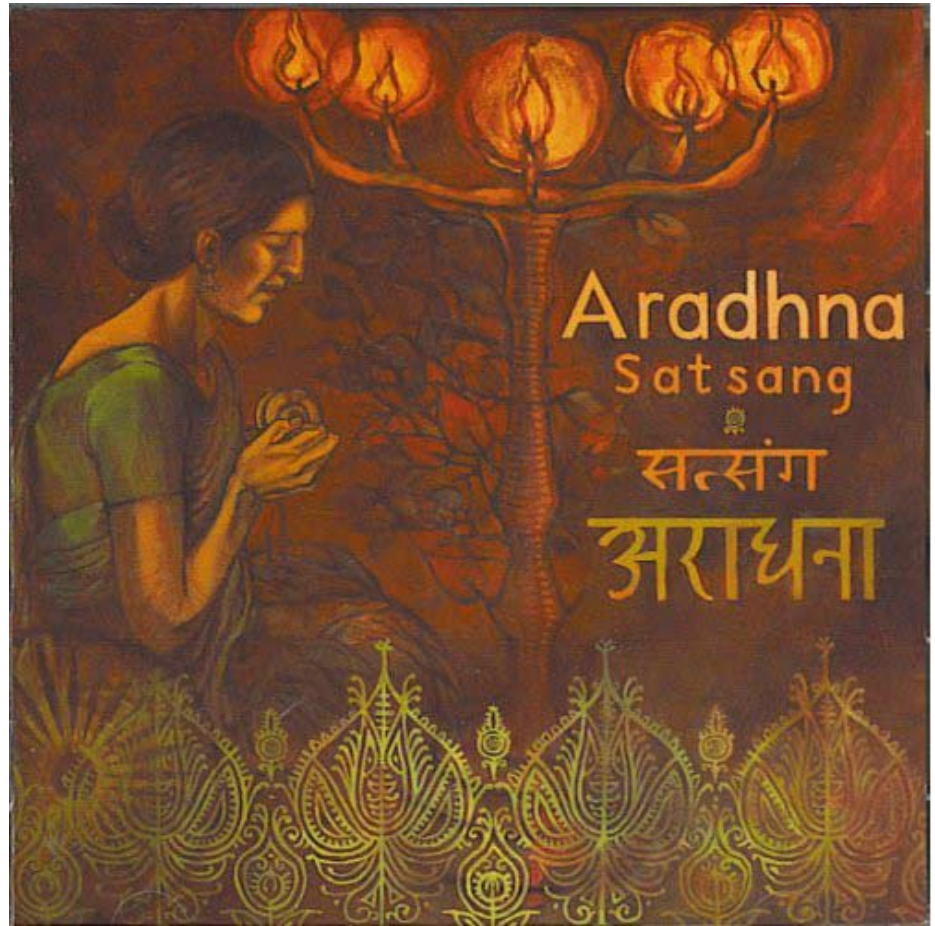
You are not just translating American-style worship songs into an Asian musical style; your lyrics express Christian devotion using distinctively Indian concepts and imagery, correct?

Yes, and that is best done by some of the Indian poets and lyricists who have collaborated on the albums. When I have composed songs myself, I usually use words from Scripture that have been translated into the local language.

On our latest album, we used a Sanskrit song by a Christian poet who lived over 100 years ago. His name was Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, and he has been an inspiration to us. Upadhyay was not at all shy to use terminology that was deeply embedded in the Hindu consciousness, and that got him into trouble with other Christians who were influenced by missionaries' decisions about which words in the Indian spiritual consciousness were valid to be used and which words weren't. Anything else was generally frowned upon.

In this song, Upadhyay used the phrase "the Man-God": *Narahari*. *Nar* means man, and *Hari* is a common name for God in India, though it specifically refers to the Creator God in the form of Vishnu. So for Upadhyay to take a word like that and refer to Christ was a revolutionary idea.

We put the song on our album and have sung it in a lot of Hindu temples and Christian environments, and I always try to explain before singing that song what we mean by it. When you do more extreme forms of contextualization, I think what is needed is explanation and clarity. Often artistic expression like this can shake up the thinking of both communities. It makes the Christian community ask the question, "Why can't we name Jesus something else? We are used to saying *Immanuel*, for example, but are there other phrases around the world that would also describe who Jesus is?" But what challenges many in the Hindu community is the idea that Jesus Christ is not just a Western God, he is universal, and he is the true Man-God who came into this world.



When you are performing for non-Christians, how do they respond to this music that is explicitly about Christ?

First of all, the genre is acceptable. The genre traditionally welcomes the name of any deity to be sung. So an open-minded Hindu would welcome this, and the organizers of some of the temples that have invited us usually give an introductory speech and a concluding speech which inevitably include the idea that Hindus believe that there is one almighty Being who can be named using different names.

There are many others in those communities who are uncomfortable with Jesus because they can't separate Jesus from the historical reality of how he was introduced to India through British colonization—the sense of superiority of Western culture over Indian culture and Western gods over Indian gods. So there is antagonism among some people. But we just present our bhajans and don't worry about it!

How have Indian Christians responded to your songs?

They just go wild over them. In the cities (not as much in the villages), playing their own indigenous music sometimes feels awkward to them. Maybe it's because they have gone to Western-style Bible colleges or because what's really "cool" is the Vineyard worship in some of the English-speaking churches in India—that's what is considered the best, "anointed" worship. So sometimes these more traditional songs have fallen into disfavor with young people in the cities in India. When we white guys sing their own music in what would be considered a "cool" kind of way, with guitars, there's an explosion of enthusiasm.

I feel in some ways happy about that and in some ways sad about it, because I want this kind of thing to be duplicated rather than just being one person singing traditional bhajans to Christ. I'm always looking for any sign that Indian

Christians are getting more involved in this kind of music, even in the fusion sense with Western music mixed in with it. But for the most part, there isn't much out there like this, unfortunately.

In our music there is a sense of meditation, of going deep in devotion—the quietening of the soul leading to ecstasy. Aradhna is trying to promote a more traditionally Indian way of approaching devotion to Christ. But it's a very difficult struggle for some people. If you have a genuine conversion to Christianity and you experience freedom, the taste of everything that went before is bland in your mouth. Everything feels new, and going back to the past feels wrong. Things that are aids to worship for some people look like bondage to others. So we just need to have conversations about these things.

What can Western Christians learn from this Indian form of devotional music?

From the devotional and meditational lifestyle in general—not only Indian but also the mystics from our own Christian tradition, such as St. John of the Cross, who wrote beautiful devotional poetry—from this world of loving devotion, we learn that God wants relationship with people. He doesn't want empty ritual. He doesn't want legalistic attempts to

placate Him. He wants love and relationship. As anyone who is married knows, it is much easier to be legalistic than to live in a relationship of love, with an open face of affection. It's hard to maintain that affection because God often feels so distant, and so much devotional poetry speaks of the pain of that distance.

The idea that Jesus is my best friend, that he's always with me and he'll never let me down—really solid truths of our evangelical faith—these have to be coupled with the devotional truth of separation, which is a reality in the life of every believer. As evangelicals, we don't like to admit that. There are seasons of life when we feel very distant from God, when we have neglected God or we feel He has neglected us, and in those times this devotional poetry can be very useful because it allows the longing to become part of our



Chris Hale

devotion. We bring that to God. We come empty-handed. There are many Psalms of David that speak of this: "Why are you so downcast, O my soul? Put your hope in God."

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" That's probably the most powerful devotional statement of Jesus. It's as if Jesus were saying, "Even now, in this darkest place on the cross, I still speak to God."

The arts can express this longing so powerfully.

This is why I'm grateful that I'm a musician. My parents were doctors, but my mom was also a pianist. They saw the value of the arts, and they have always affirmed that in me. I don't need to be ashamed of being an artist full-time or think that it isn't a real way to minister or that being a preacher is the only valid way of communicating truth. God wants me to be a musician; He has blessed me to be a musician. 🌍



Recording Amrit Vani. Photo by Michael Wilson.

Introducing the Messiah Project Inc.

StoneWorks is eager to support organizations or institutions that exemplify some aspect of our vision to

(1) teach Christians to understand and embrace the language of the arts in life and faith,

(2) mentor and disciple emerging artists within the Christian community, and

(3) restore the arts and renew culture through the recovery of the imagination.

In each newsletter, one of these organizations will introduce itself to you. This profile was provided by Lindsey Robison, president and founder of the Messiah Project.

Mission: To provide venues for artists to share their faith through their art, to put on performances and art displays that speak of God's excellence, and to share the gospel among the nations through the arts. Our events bring together artists from all over the world, broadening their understanding and appreciation of other cultures.



2002 production of "Messiah Live" (Handel's Messiah set with dance and drama). Edward Biamonte Photography.

Activities and events:

Since 1991 we have held at least one musical, dramatic, or dance production each year at the Juanita K. Hammons Hall for the Performing Arts in Springfield, Missouri. These have included community-based Holiday Prelude Festivals, classical works such as Beethoven's *Mass in C*, Puccini's *Messa De Gloria*, or Vivaldi's *Gloria*, and *Messiah Live*, the original production for Messiah Project using a modern dance approach and new drama.

We have given over 33,000 free tickets to public and private school children to attend these events, learn about professional theatre, and have the



opportunity to dance, sing, or play an instrument in the productions. On many occasions, we have also hosted visual art and literary contests connected with the events. We offer a second musical event in the spring at a smaller facility.

Over the years we have taken young musicians on tours to perform in 20 nations. *Saviour*—a “modern oratorio” that portrays the story of God’s plan from Genesis through today through classical ballet—has thrilled audiences and participants alike in Poland, Austria, Thailand, China, Japan, Greece, Bulgaria, and Russia. We have also brought young artists from other nations to the United States to tour and give concerts, thus learning about our culture and making friends that have

lasted over decades. Many young people from our programs have developed their artistic gifts further and are now performing professionally.

In 1996 we opened Credo Arts Center, which houses our offices, a dance studio, and a small theatre. That same year, we also opened Credo Dance Academy, which is a non-competition school with emphasis on classical training in dance.

How to Get Involved:

Different events have different qualifications. The best way to find out where you would like to serve is to visit our website www.messiahproject.org or send a message to messiahpro@sbcglobal.net.

Immediate Need: Participants for a Concert Tour of Russia

We are currently preparing for our first performance of portions of Handel’s *Messiah* at the State Kremlin Palace Theatre in Moscow and the Great Concert Hall in St. Petersburg in May 2010. 150 American singers will join over 100 Russian singers and instrumentalists for the “Merging Musical Worlds” tour, which will also include other works by American and Russian composers.

As one of our directors said, “Come celebrate the enduring spirit of Russia, America, and other cultures of the world as expressed through music. I so hope that we learn from one another and are



Ensemble at a prominent Baptist church in Novgorod, Russia. Edward Biamonte Photography.



The Messiah Project group in front of St. Basil's Cathedral in Moscow's Red Square. Edward Biamonte Photography.

enlightened by the melodies and movement of the different cultures we encounter.”

We still need the following:

- Qualified singers. We are holding auditions in several cities in the Midwest, but can use other means to audition interested singers from other parts of the U.S.
- A technical team to develop the visual side of the performance.
- Corporate sponsors to purchase advertising.

Partnership interests:

One area of the Credo Arts Center is coming open, and we would like to put it to use as a faith-based institute for the study of arts and culture. We would be very interested in exploring the possibility of collaboration with other Christian arts organizations in this venture. 🌐

Contact information:

Credo Arts Center
931 S. Kickapoo
Springfield, MO 65802 USA
417-883-5274

messiahpro@sbcglobal.net

Upcoming Events

January 3-10, 2010: Fusion Faith and the Arts Summer School

Faith and the Arts Summer School is held in Poatina, Australia, each year. Over 80 people of all ages come together to

study a variety of disciplines such as music, painting and drawing, dance, glass and glass bead making, filmmaking and video, sculpture, animation, photography, clowning and mime, creative writing, and street theatre.

Visit www.faithandthearts.org.au for more information. Registrations close December 24, 2009.



Glass blowing. Photo courtesy of Fusion International.

January 16, 2010: Credo Day Boston

Credo Chamber Music is holding its first annual Credo Day Boston at Gordon College in Wenham, MA. String students from 12 to 23 years old are invited to attend this free full day of masterclasses, worship, and service projects. The day will conclude with a free concert featur-

ing the Credo Trio, Credo's touring ensemble, at 7:00 p.m.

Visit www.credo chambermusic.org for more information.

January 28-30, 2010: Calvin Symposium on Worship

Every year, pastors, artists, Christian educators, musicians, worship leaders, and many others gather at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, for a time of worship, fellowship, and learning. The 2010 symposium will explore “the great stories” of the Old Testament and will include many workshops on congregational singing and worship music as well as visual arts, architecture, and drama. Visit www.calvin.edu/worship/sympos/2010/ for information and registration.



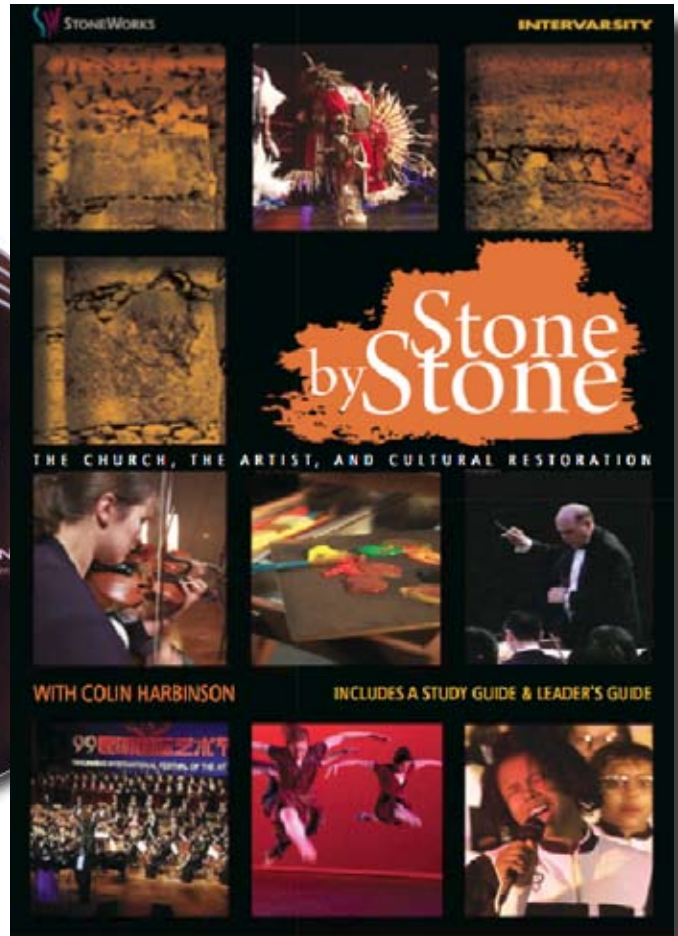
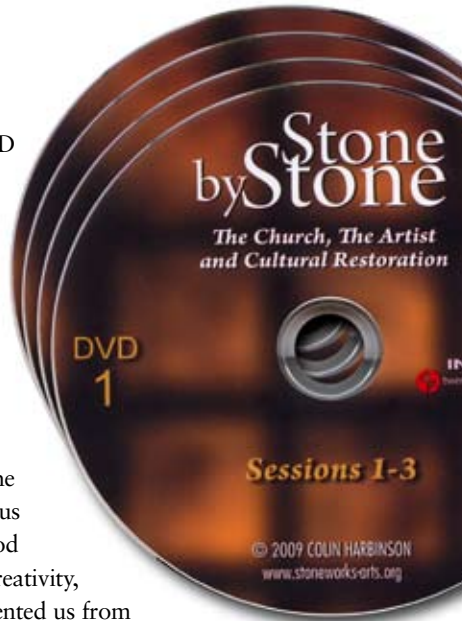
Stone by Stone

A New DVD Teaching Series on the Arts by
StoneWorks International Director Colin Harbinson

Looking for a unique Christmas gift? Colin Harbinson's nine-part DVD teaching series "Stone by Stone," a joint venture by StoneWorks and InterVarsity 2100 Productions, is an ideal choice to encourage an artist or art student.

Harbinson explores some of the stones in the church and in the life of the artist that have prevented us from embracing God's good gifts of imagination and creativity, and stones that have prevented us from bringing hope and restoration to the brokenness of our surrounding culture. He examines what it means to remove these stumbling blocks and to participate as artists in God's restoration plan for His creation.

The accompanying Study Guide can be used for both personal reflection and small group discussion, and the DVD set includes bonus video material showing Christians engaged in the arts in different contexts, a Leader's Guide in downloadable PDF format, and a trailer that can be used for promotional purposes.



To order the DVD Series and Study Guide, go to www.stoneworks-arts.org/stonebystone.html (international orders accepted) or <https://store.intervarsity.org/stone-by-stone-study-guide.html> (for U.S. orders only).

“Colin Harbinson has done all of us in the artistic world a great service by creating the ‘Stone by Stone’ series. He speaks with great authority for two reasons. First, he knows what Scripture says about God’s intent for the arts better than anyone I know. Second, Colin has lived what he talks about, as a creative artist and as a producer and as a teacher. He has seen God do for artists what the Bible says He wants to do! This discussion series is truly unique and I expect to see the lives of many artists changed through experiencing ‘Stone by Stone.’”
—Dick Ryan, National Director for the Arts, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA

“‘Stone by Stone’ provides an invaluable resource for my undergraduate visual arts majors, introducing them to questions of artistic practice within a Christian worldview. The themes Colin Harbinson addresses in the DVDs and the questions in the Study Guide go right to the heart of the key issues for any Christian student pursuing the arts: questions of identity, individual discipleship, relationship to the church and to the culture, the language of the arts, and much more. ‘Stone by Stone’ is as rewarding in an academic context as it is in a professional, ministry, or church-related setting.”
—Dr. Melissa Hause, Associate Professor of Art History, Belhaven College

Have You Read *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture* by H. R. Rookmaaker?

Recommended by Laurel Gasque

H. R. (Hans) Rookmaaker (1922-1977) was a force to be reckoned with. This gruff and abrupt little Dutchman with a twinkle in his eye and a great sense of humor could fascinate and infuriate. Rookmaaker combined a powerful intellect with a missional heart. He unfailingly engaged his listeners and readers in refreshing ways that accorded with their sense of their times.

In 1970 he published *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture*, an immediate best-seller. Malcolm Muggeridge, the renowned British journalist, said he stopped dead in his tracks in London



By the time Hans Rookmaaker burst upon the North American scene in the 1970s, he was an accomplished scholar and a seasoned critic of modern art. He was also one of the world's leading authorities on the history of jazz, blues, and spirituals. Photo by Rudi Beima.

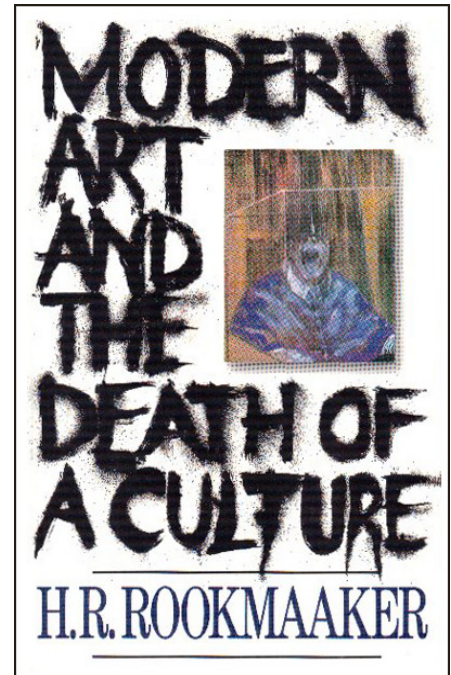
when he saw that a Bloomsbury bookshop window was entirely filled with this book. He read it immediately and found it a “breath of fresh air.” Not only did Rookmaaker contribute to Muggeridge’s

journey of faith, with this stroke he virtually single-handedly invented what some have come to call “crossover books”—books that communicate compellingly from the perspective of faith to a wide audience, not just to a sectarian subculture. At least one publisher (Lion Books) came about because of it.

Ironically, in the 1990s and into the 21st century this book has frequently been adopted by the conservatives in America’s “culture wars” and scorned by many progressive Christians who think they know better. Rookmaaker would have been dismayed, if not appalled, by both types of responses. *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture* deserves a fresh and unprejudiced reading. This book should not be underrated as a result of its later reception.

Modern Art and the Death of a Culture presents an illuminating perspective on the cultural and social dynamics that drove the upheaval of the radical ‘60s, as well as the historical forces and philosophical ideas that shaped contemporary life in the West then and now. Provocatively and compassionately, with compression of style, Rookmaaker used his expertly honed skills as an art critic and art historian to analyze modern art in order to understand the despair and disbelief characteristic of our times. As he laid bare the anguish of modern culture, he also disclosed the hope we have in Christ and the role Christian artists can play in the renewal of our culture and our world.

Although critical of modern art, Rookmaaker was no despiser of it. He decried Christians who dismissed and ignored it. He valued the achievement of



many modern artists in showing vividly the total impoverishment of Enlightenment rationalistic thinking. He also appreciated how modern art had broken down the dogma of “realism” in much 19th-century art that distorted reality as much as some 20th-century art.

Rookmaaker loved the art and design of all ages, particularly his own age. He loved artists and was a rare kind of art historian who inspired so much original art himself. He urged people to consider how art is linked not only to thought on the highest levels, but also to our corporate and personal actions in the world.

Modern Art and the Death of a Culture is a great introduction to his thought. But this book is just the tip of the iceberg of his collective writings, which run to six hefty volumes. Try it! You might like it. It certainly will provoke your thinking.

Laurel Gasque is the author of *Art and the Christian Mind: The Life and Work of H. R. Rookmaaker*, a partner in ArtWay (www.artway.eu) and Sessional Lecturer in Theology and the Arts at Regent College, Vancouver, BC, Canada.