

Visual Faith, by William A. Dyrness

reviewed by [Doug Adams](#) in the [September 25, 2002](#) issue

An "openness to spirituality is perhaps the most important recent development" in the visual arts, William Dyrness states, and he perceptively glimpses this openness in many contemporary artists. But a longer look at these artists' works would help the reader see that they go beyond spirituality to embody Christian theology. One such artist cited by Dyrness especially illustrates how extensively Christian theology and contemporary artists' works inform each other.

Christo's *Umbrellas Japan--USA* in October 1991 raised 1,760 yellow umbrellas in an area north of Los Angeles and 1,340 blue umbrellas in an area north of Tokyo. Dyrness notes that groups of people could picnic under the umbrellas (which were each 28' 5" in diameter), but he does not discuss the artist's theological understandings of the work. As Christo explained to me, he was inviting a wider sense of communion and community and proclaiming "the priesthood of all believers in religion and democracy in politics."

In the history of both European and Japanese religions, umbrellas were displayed above the most important persons in the worship space and in processions. In the political realm, umbrellas were held above the heads of state. Christo's umbrellas invite those who pilgrimage and picnic under them to realize their own importance in both church and state. Umbrellas also affirmed a wider sense of community between Americans and Japanese, separated by the world's widest ocean. At a time when some American politicians were bashing Japan as an economic enemy, Christo raised umbrellas to lead us to see our similarities.

As umbrellas protect what is beneath them, the *Umbrellas* project gave us a sense of sheltering under God's providence. This project was similar to Christo's 1969 *Wrapped Coast* near Sydney, Australia, or his September 1976 *The Running Fence*, in which a river of fabric was stretched over 25 miles in northern California, from Highway 101 to the Pacific Ocean near Bodega Bay. Christo presents the earth as a gift by wrapping it or by running a fabric fence around it, a fence which he called a "ribbon of light." He presents the wrapped earth as a mystery, and the Creator as a

gift giver.

By dropping his last name (Javacheff) and using only his first name, Christo emphasizes his theological identity. Jeanne Claude, Christo's wife and collaborator, wonders how writers could miss the theological dimensions of his works. Christo emphasizes mortality, death and resurrection by taking his works down after a few weeks. Viewers do not have forever to see them. Wrapping and then taking off the wrapping leads people to see coast lines, hills and buildings afresh. Often using white fabric, he evokes the shroud as a symbol both of death and resurrection.

His early projects might be up for just three days, while the more extensive projects of recent decades stay up for three weeks. The number three reminds us of Christ's three days in the tomb. The three also is present in the 3,100 umbrellas and the 30 miles over which the umbrellas stretched in Japan and the U.S. The yellow and blue of the umbrellas have associations with time and theology: the yellow with the sun and the son Jesus, the blue with the moon and the mother Mary.

Dyrness's book shows how artists in much earlier periods engaged biblical and theological ideas and how modern artists from the mid-19th to the mid-20th centuries disengaged from them. He senses that contemporary artists are open to reengaging those ideas; but he does not convey to readers how extensively artists already have achieved that reengagement or how enthusiastically the public is responding. Dyrness writes that artists like Christo are "typical of the postmodern desire to take art back to the people--at least when the people can get to his work." Such a statement captures artists' intentions but does not show us the extent of the public's response. Hundreds of thousands of people made the pilgrimage to see *Umbrellas*, and *Running Fence* attracted a similar number.

In 1995 10 million Germans went to Berlin to see the *Wrapped Reichstag* which Christo presented as a birthday present to the newly reunited Germany. The Reichstag was a symbol of a democratic Germany before Nazi and communist rule. Something of a prophet, Christo had long known that the iron curtain and Berlin Wall were coming down--events he had foreshadowed in his rust colored *Valley Curtain*, which he placed in a Colorado valley where it was soon ripped to pieces. *Running Fence* parodied the Berlin Wall by echoing the wall's length.

Christo believed that communism would fall and Christianity would flourish in Eastern Europe and Russia. His works help others to see and believe.