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## ROBIN HARRIS

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# ETHNO DOXOLOGY:

## FACILITATING LOCAL ARTS EXPRESSIONS FOR KINGDOM PURPOSES

*I, Robin, had the opportunity to interview Brian Schrag about the guiding principles of ethnodoxology and its crucial role in cross-cultural ministry. Below is a portion of our conversation.<sup>1</sup>*

**RPH:** This term—ethnodoxology—is new to most people. What does it mean?

**BES:** Ethnodoxology is a theological and anthropological framework guiding all cultures to worship God using their unique artistic expressions. The term derives from two biblical Greek words: “ethno” from ethne (peoples) and “doxology” from *doxos* (glory or praise).

**RPH:** How long has it taken for ethnodoxology to emerge as a strategic missional approach?

**BES:** In 1993, the term ethnodoxology had probably never been uttered on this planet. However, by 2003, a network emerged called the International Council of Ethnodoxologists (ICE). By 2013, ICE was connecting hundreds of individuals and scores of organizations, had produced a remarkable two-volume scholarly and practical foundation for the new discipline, and had helped to spearhead a reorientation of mission education and practice.

### ETHNODOXOLOGY'S POWER

**RPH:** So why is locally grounded artistic communication so powerful for the expansion of the kingdom of God?

**BES:** Artistic communication

- is embedded in culture and so touches many important aspects of a society;
- marks messages as important and separate from everyday activities;
- involves not only cognitive, but also experiential and emotional ways of knowing;

- aids in remembering messages;
- increases the impact of messages through multiple media that often involve the whole body;
- concentrates the information contained in messages;
- instills solidarity in its performers;
- provides socially acceptable frameworks for expressing difficult or new ideas; and
- inspires and moves people to action and can act as a strong sign of identity.

Perhaps most importantly, local artistic communication is generally created and owned locally. There is no need to translate foreign materials, and community artists are empowered to contribute to the expansion of the kingdom of God.

**RPH:** In what ways has the church traditionally engaged the arts in cross-cultural ministry, and how does ethnodoxology connect to those approaches?

**BES:** At least three broad approaches in relation to the arts come to mind:

- Some cross-cultural workers approach the arts in a **Bring It – Teach It** framework, teaching their own arts to people in another community. This can lead to unity among diverse Christian communities, but it excludes local arts and artists.
- In another framework called **Build New Bridges**, artists from one community find ways to connect artistically with members of another community. This approach results in collaborative artistic efforts, often in response to traumatic events.
- In a third approach, arts advocates take a **Find It – Encourage It** stance, learning to know local artists and their arts in ways that spur these artists to create in the forms they know best. The advocate enters local creative processes, helping give birth to new creations that flow organically from the community. This approach usually requires longer-term relationships with people, and above all, a commitment to learn.

Ethnodoxology flows from Find It - Encourage It. Though the approach is not new—Patrick and other missionaries to the Celts engaged with local arts in the 5th century—ethnodoxology has taken its current form in response to relatively recent academic and missiological influences.

## ETHNODOXOLOGY PROCESS

**RPH:** What is the basic process for doing ethnodoxology in a community?

**BES:** This approach typically includes five steps:

1. Learn to know a community and its arts.
2. Identify ways particular artistic genres can meet particular community kingdom goals.
3. Spark creativity in these genres by local practitioners.
4. Encourage community members to improve the new creations.

## ...INCREASE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF CHURCH PLANTING EFFORTS, DISCIPLESHIP AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION, EVANGELISM AND SHORT-TERM MISSION OUTREACH.

5. Integrate and celebrate the new works and plan for continuing creativity.

In summary, our job is getting to know people and encouraging them to create arts in contexts that strengthen and spread the kingdom in sustainable ways.

**RPH:** What are the contexts in which an ethnodoxological approach increases kingdom impact?

**BES:** Ethnodoxology can increase the effectiveness of church planting efforts, discipleship and spiritual formation, evangelism and short-term mission outreach, and helping people respond to injustice and trauma.

## CENTRAL AFRICA CASE STUDY

**RPH:** What kind of impact did you see from this approach where you served in Central Africa?

**BES:** In the 1940s, a Congolese evangelist planted the first church among speakers of the Mono language in what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). He counseled the first Christians to burn their musical instruments and learn to sing Euro-American hymns translated into a trade language—Lingala. When my family and I moved to their community to help translate the Bible into Mono in the early 1990s, we found a church that, while it was active, worshipped through foreign arts and language and had a mixed moral reputation.

With the church leaders, I explored possibilities of integrating older song styles into the lives of Christians, and they eventually decided to form Chorales Ayo, or Love Choirs. These groups composed songs based on Scripture, with lyrics in the Mono language, and in a traditional song style using a local harp. After years of difficulty (including civil war), these groups have spread and are now thriving in many Mono villages. In 2012, Mono pastor Gaspard Yalemoto reported this:

In the past, Mono traditional instruments were only used to worship the gods of our ancestors. However, in 1992, Brian moved to my village and started learning to play traditional Mono songs on the kundi—a local harp. Eventually a small group joined him and began composing Scripture-based songs. Today, in all of the Mono churches, we see a radical change in how Christians live, because God’s message communicated through kundi songs directly touches their hearts. Many declare by their actions that the Spirit has used this to bring them back to the foot of the cross of Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup>

## IMPLICATIONS

**RPH:** If we, the church, adopt the kind of approach you used in DRC, what do you think will happen?

**BES:** If ethnodoxology becomes the primary approach to growth in mission and worship:

- Minority artists and their arts will be well integrated into their community’s church life.
- The church will become an engine for revitalization of minority arts and their communities, rather than a frequent contributor to their demise.
- Sharing of artistic resources in the church will move both from minority to majority cultures and vice versa.
- More artistic forms will be represented around God’s throne (Rev 7:9-12) and in his city (Rev 21:22-27).

**RPH:** What if we do not integrate this approach?


**BES:** If ethnodoxology sputters and dies:

- Protestant and evangelical worship will become more and more like pre-Vatican II Catholicism: essentially uniform expressions of corporate and individual worship. This increases a sense of unity in the worldwide church while diminishing its reflection of God’s creativity.

- Most artists in minority and older traditions will remain outside the church, continuing what seems to be an inevitable slide to disappearance. This slide is caused by globalization, urbanization, some misguided missionary activity, and other factors that strengthen majority arts and smother those from minority communities.

## ETHNODOXOLOGY’S ROLE IN THIS VISION FOR THE FUTURE

**RPH:** How would you summarize your evaluation of and vision for the church in relation to the arts?

**BES:** The reality I see today is that people communicate in almost 7,000 languages around the world, not just by spoken words, but through artistically rendered song, drama, dance, and story. These communities have non-existent or imperfect relationships with God, and struggle with violence, disease, social upheaval, anger, sexual promiscuity, anxiety, and fear—as do our own societies. God gave every culture unique gifts of artistic communication to tell truth and bring healing, hope, and joy in response to these problems. However, too many of these gifts lie dormant, misused, or dying. If we can help our brothers and sisters—and ourselves—breathe new, redeemed life into these artistic traditions, all cultures will eventually use all of their gifts to worship, obey, and enjoy God with all of their heart, soul, mind, and strength. It will not happen completely on this earth, but we can join God in working toward the next. 

<sup>1</sup> This article was originally published in the March 2014 edition of the *Lausanne Global Analysis* (LGA) and is republished here with permission. Learn more about the LGA and subscribe at [www.lausanne.org/analysis](http://www.lausanne.org/analysis).

<sup>2</sup> Quoted from an endorsement for Brian Schrag’s *Creating Local Arts Together: A Manual for Helping Communities Reach Their Kingdom Goals* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2013).

## DO THEY HAVE SIN? / ROBERTA R. KING

In one church in Africa, worship is announced through drums, “speaking” to those who have not yet arrived: “Hurry, the service is about to begin!” As the drumming continues, rattles and bells enter in, and singing starts. Often in a call-and-response style, the singing includes vibrato and improvised harmony. The congregation rises and

moves energetically in celebration of their new life in Christ.

One newly arrived missionary joined in the celebration of song and dance. Others sat motionless, uncomfortable with the non-Western form of worship and unaware of the statement they were making through their refusal to participate.

The service ended and the believers surrounded the dancing visitor with expressions of welcome and thanks for

worshiping with them. Then they asked, “Why don’t the others worship with us? Do they have sin in their lives?”

Apparently among these Africans only those who have sin in their lives find it difficult to enter into worship and dance.

<sup>1</sup> Reprinted with permission from Krabill, James R. et al, eds. 2013 *Worship and Mission for the Global Church: An Ethnodoxology Handbook*. Pasadena: William Carey Library, 184.