

The Artist as Prophet, Priest, and Holy Fool:
*Rethinking of the Vocation of Artists
and Musicians in the Church*

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The question I want to open with today is: how do we understand the role of artists in relation to the ministry of the church? And when I use the term “artist,” I’m referring to anyone who has determined it to be a necessary part of their identity or existence to try and communicate or express meaning-content through creative, non-rational, non-didactic means. That might include painters, sculptors, musicians, poets, dancers, actors, performance artists, and others. This is a question that I have been asking for a number of years, not only in my academic research but also in my own life, grappling with my own identity as both a musician and as a Christian. Not having been raised within any particular church tradition, my first real encounter with what is popularly considered “Christian music” was at the age of twenty-three, when I, a recent convert to Christianity (from a kind of high-minded scholarly agnosticism), wandered into an Evangelical Reformed church that met in a warehouse basement in my hometown of Greensboro, North Carolina, in the southeastern part of the United States (or what we call “the Bible belt”). When the elders of that community learned that I had been performing as a professional indie-folk singer-songwriter for over a decade, they approached me to ask whether I had ever thought about using my gifts “in the service of God.” Honestly, I was a bit taken aback by the question. After all, I had come to understand my work as a “secular” artist to be *precisely* in the service of God.

Maybe this sounds a bit strange to you, maybe not. I invoke this word “secular” cautiously, because that I know that these days it is employed by many folks in the church as

a kind of pejorative term, used to describe the somewhat morally debased thinking or behaviors of the “unchurched.” But this is a relatively recent way of thinking about secular life. Up until the sixteenth century, the “secular” was not thought to be a realm devoid of the sacred. “Secular” people were simply those who had not taken monastic vows, which included most everyone, including the majority of priests. If the term “secular priest” sounds like a bit of an oxymoron to our ears, it is only because of our attempts in the modern West to separate the secular from the sacred, a mix-up which has caused, among other things, the loss of an abiding sensibility for how the sacred is mediated in and through secular life. Since this is the area I am most interested in, both as an artist and as a theologian, I want to be careful to point out that I do not invoke the term “secular” here as an antonym for “sacred,” but merely as a description of a particular social location. When I say I am a “secular” artist, I am simply stating that I am someone who, primarily, creates art outside of liturgical contexts.

In the decade since my conversion to the Christian faith, I have had the pleasure of leading liturgical music in a wide range of Catholic, Anglican, and Protestant churches all across the United States. Yet my primary calling as an artist remains situated within the secular sphere of coffee shops, festivals, dive bars, auditoriums, and street corners. These are the venues in which I have experienced my gifts being utilized by the Holy Spirit most fully—to transform and transgress, to inspire and to challenge, and perhaps most importantly, to heal. For a variety of reasons, this seems to be something that the church—and here I mean the church ecumenical—has a bit of a difficult time grasping. While the aesthetic styles, theological values, and ecclesiastical politics of various denominations may vary greatly, the general attitude towards artists remains largely the same, characterized by the

sense that using your artistic gifts “in God’s service” means primarily—if not exclusively—the worship service.

This way of understanding the vocation of musicians and artists derives from the tendency to equate “sacred” music and art with liturgical music and art, a sentiment that is derived from the writings of several early church fathers including Augustine, Clement of Alexandria, and John Chrysostom. The artistic gifts of the faithful came to be thought of as something like the property of the church, which, when properly guided and directed by the clergy can become useful tools for beautifying worship or aiding in teaching and formation. In the nineteenth century, Cardinal Newman regarded artists in this way when he described the fine arts as the “special attendants and handmaids of religion” which are “very apt to forget their place, and unless restrained with a firm hand will aim at becoming principals rather than servants.”¹

This same attitude towards sacred art and artists was made into an explicit doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church during the Second Vatican Council, when the *Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy* stated in no unclear terms that “sacred music is to be considered the more holy the more closely connected it is with the liturgical action,” and that musical composers in the church should therefore “accept that it is part of their vocation to cultivate sacred music...produc[ing] compositions which have the qualities proper to genuine sacred music.”²

In Protestant churches, the pressure to conform to the needs and expectations of clergy and to solely produce art and music that is conducive to worship functions in a roughly similar way, albeit with a somewhat broader scope, since Protestant “worship” can

¹ Frank Burch Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 72.

² Second Vatican Council, *Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy*, 1963, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html.

occur anytime and anywhere - whenever two or more have gathered to pray and study the Scriptures. Here, one finds a heavy focus on explicitly Christian terminology, teachings and sentiments that reflect Scripturally-based theological content in an overtly obvious way, which helps to establish clear “liturgical” boundaries in musical and artistic encounters that occur outside of church contexts (for example, at a “Christian” music concert, or listening to a song played on a “Christian” radio station while driving in the car).

In both cases, what we find is not only a failure to provide adequate models for thinking theologically about the music and art we encounter in our everyday lives which does *not* contain explicit religious content, but also a failure to offer adequate vocational support and spiritual direction for those artists whose primary calling is *not* to facilitate ritual or worship through the creation of devotional materials, but simply to create art and music according to the creative and imaginative leadings of the Holy Spirit. Liturgy is itself an art form. The ability to discern the appropriate aesthetic qualities to accompany liturgical action requires a complex set of theological, pastoral, cultural, and artistic skills, a unique *charism* to which particular artists and musicians are uniquely called. This, however, is merely one possible authentic expression of artistic or creative vocation. The vocation of artists therefore needs to be conceived of in much broader terms by the church as a whole. Sandra Schneiders boldly suggests that the maturity of a Christian community can be judged by its ability to integrate the artists in its midst.³ And so, to put the question another way: how can the church ecumenical begin to move towards its own maturation through a better integration of art and artists?

³ Maeve Louise Heaney, “Musical Space: Living ‘In Between’ the Christian and the Artistic Callings,” in *Secular Music / Sacred Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013), 27.

Towards that end, and in order to help us move past the artist-as-liturgist model, I would like to propose some new ways of thinking religiously about the role and vocation of artists in the life and ministry of the church, by playing a bit on what Eusebius first identified as the “threefold office” of Jesus as prophet, priest, and king. These three terms have come to represent the mission of disciples in and as the Body of Christ. What I hope to present here are just a few of the ways in which we might begin to recognize how secular artists—that is, artists working outside of liturgical contexts—help to fulfill the mission and ministry of the Church through participation in each these three offices. (Although if you’ve been paying attention you may have noticed that the title of my paper was not “Prophet, Priest, and King,” but “Prophet, Priest, and Holy Fool.” We’ll get to that...).

First, a word about the artist’s role as “prophet.” Here, I do not mean simply those artists who have dedicated themselves to creating works with explicit moral or political aims, although those works and artists could certainly be included here. Instead, I’d like to talk more broadly about prophecy, which is the ancient art of truth-telling, or “lifting the veil” to reveal the costs of civilization, and the ways in which societies tend to justify the marginalization and oppression of certain people and groups for the sake of prosperity, prestige, and power. Prophecy is a sacred activity that by its very nature takes place *outside* of ritual worship and the auspices of religious institutions. Benedictine nun Joan Chidester once remarked that “the prophet’s stance” is having one foot inside and one foot outside of institutional culture, precisely because this is the vantage point from which the prophet is able to see and therefore offer the necessary critique of the injustices, while also caring enough about the institution or culture to have the heart to want to transform it.

Of course, this is precisely the social location in which many artists wittingly or unwittingly find themselves. Creative people often stand at the peripheries of society—they are in the world, but not of it. Artists are trained to hone their senses and maintain a critical inner sensibility about all that they see and hear. Through their seeing, they allow us to pierce through the surface layer of things in order to experience deeper layers of meaning, truth, and possibility. Theologian Walter Burghardt once described contemplation as a “long, loving look at the real.” By carefully laying bare what is real, secular artists can bring us into contact with a felt sense of the holy in the midst of our everyday, mundane experience. The best artists help us to imagine into being that which is beyond the current state of affairs, which requires a willingness to hang out at the borderlands of existence, and a hermeneutic of suspicion for anyone with an agenda too fully entrenched in maintaining the status quo.

In his book *The Prophetic Imagination*, Walter Brueggemann insightfully reveals that the function of prophets is more than simply offering a critique of injustices. Prophets give voice to God’s pain, God’s anguish over the human situation. Cornel West says that the language of the prophets is the language of “cries and tears.”⁴ Of course, this is *affective* knowledge—the emotion-laden language of the heart. This is also the native tongue of many artists and songwriters. We sometimes forget that the concept of “empathy” is not a term that originated from psychology or theology, but from art. The word was first coined by German philosopher Rudolf Lotze in the nineteenth century, to describe the proper attitude for artistic reception, which “depends on the viewer’s ability to project his personality into the viewed subject.”⁵ It is through the evocation of empathy that the arts succeed in being prophetic, not

⁴ cited in John Neafsey, *A Sacred Voice Is Calling: Personal Vocation and Social Conscience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 85.

⁵ Douglas Harper, “Empathy (n.),” *Online Etymology Dictionary*, 2014, <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=art>.

merely in a didactic sense, but in a manner that is fundamentally *relational*. “The morality of beauty,” writes Bernard Häring, “is something much deeper than that of ‘must’ and ‘ought’. Its experience is inescapably personal, a loving and grateful approach to life itself.”⁶

Furthermore, Langdon Gilkey has written about the prophetic role in transgressive art, particularly the art and music associated with punk rock and hip hop, genres that are often deeply misunderstood and misrepresented by religious audiences. Gilkey observes that, while the artists themselves may

feel subjectively that they are merely being ‘hard’, ‘honest’, ‘realistic’, or possibly ironic and humorous...the work itself and the event it creates in relation to us manifests outrage...it tears off the mask covering ordinary experience to expose its disarray, its disastrous waywardness, its betrayals, its suffering...when art thus condemns present reality in the name of humanity and justice, and seeks for its transformation, it becomes itself the vehicle of the transcendent and approaches the religious.⁷

This notion of art becoming a vehicle of transcendence brings us to our second model for the role of the artist as a kind of “priest.” Obviously, this is not intended in the literal sense, but the implication here is that the arts—and artists—function in a *sacramental* way. This sacramental understanding of the arts has been maintained far better within Eastern Christianity than anywhere in the West, where the sacraments were codified within Roman Catholicism and limited to seven (which the Protestants later reduced down to two). When I speak of the artist as “priest” in a sacramental way, I do not simply mean those artists who have dedicated themselves to religious artwork that serves explicit liturgical or educational functions, although those artists and works could certainly be included here. But rather, I wish to speak more broadly here about the function of priesthood in the mediation of the

⁶ Bernard Häring, “Free and Faithful in Christ,” in *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader*, ed. Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen (Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 342.

⁷ Langdon Gilkey, “Can Art Fill the Vacuum?,” in *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader*, ed. Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen (Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 264–265.

Divine. As Paul Tillich said in an address at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City in 1964: “The artist brings to our senses—and through them to our whole being—something of the depth of our world and of ourselves, something of the mystery of being. When we are grasped by a work of art, things appear to us which were unknown before—possibilities of being, unthought-of powers hidden in the depth of life, which take hold of us.”⁸

This notion of the artist functioning as a kind of priest is not a new idea. The French bohemians of the nineteenth century were prone to speaking of artists as the new “priest class” of modern “secular” society. Matisse and Cézanne both wrote of the single-minded vocation of the artist being parallel to that of the priest.⁹ But should secular artists be spoken of as “priests” in any *Christian* sense? Or do they simply function as the “priests” of a rival religion we now call “art”? Catholic theologian Karl Rahner has actually argued for the former, having conducted his own theological investigation into the question of the “poet as priest.” He states, rather boldly, that “everything which comes to expression in art is a particular actualization of that human transcendence through which a person, as a spiritual and free being, is oriented to the fullness of all reality.”¹⁰ Thomas Merton was even more optimistic about the role of art and artists, writing that “art introduces the soul into a higher spiritual order, which it expresses and, in some sense, explains. Music and art and poetry attune the soul to God because they induce a kind of contact with the Creator and Ruler of the Universe. The genius of the artist finds its way by the affinity of creative sympathy, or

⁸ Paul Tillich, “Address on the Occasion of the Opening of the New Galleries and Sculpture Garden of the Museum of Modern Art,” 1964; cited in Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, 91.

⁹ Michael Austin, *Explorations in Art, Theology, and Imagination* (London: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2005), 42–43.

¹⁰ Karl Rahner, “Theology and the Arts,” in *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader*, ed. Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen (Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 222.

co-naturality, into the living law that rules the universe. This law is nothing but the secret gravitation that draws all things to God as to their center.”¹¹

To be sure, this way of speaking about the arts and artists can begin to sound a bit lofty and romanticized. But I think what these theologians are reaching for is a way of recognizing not only the depth of human experience that the arts can open for us, but also the kind of sacrifice involved in handing oneself over to the creative process, and the level of faith involved in the attunement to both our material reality and the possibilities that lie beyond the surface layer of things. The best artists learn to embrace this paradox between the seen and the unseen, becoming conduits for the expression of what lies between. Artists give us “eyes to see” and “ears to hear,” an imperative which is repeated fifteen times throughout the Scriptures. In 2 Kings when the prophet Elisha could no longer see prophetic visions, he calls on a musician for help. “Then,” it says, “while the musician was playing, the power of the LORD came upon him” (3:14-15). Jesus himself seemed to be particularly interested in drawing our attention to deeper realities by expanding our ability to see and hear through his use of parables and stories. Frank Burch Brown provocatively asks: “Is it really a matter of religious indifference that Jesus was such a good storyteller? That his parables are not simply folksy anecdotes chock-full of greeting-card sentiments, but are frequently artful and sometimes dense and difficult in the manner of poetry?”

The parables of Jesus can serve as a segue to our last model for understanding the vocation of artists—as “holy fools” of contemporary society. Now how did I get from king to holy fool? Precisely through an observation of the particular kind of “kingship” that is demonstrated and embodied by Jesus in the Scriptures. We call Jesus the “king of kings,” but this statement only becomes truly transformative when we recall exactly what kind of “king”

¹¹ Thomas Merton, *No Man Is An Island* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 2005), 36–37.

Jesus actually was: a kind of anti-king, who was seen by his contemporaries as a glutton, a drunkard, and a fool. He was one who used artful and frequently comedic means to expose the religious hypocrisies and pomposities of human prestige and power, which can be seen not only in Jesus' parables, but also in some of his more dramatic demonstrations, like his entrance into Jerusalem on a donkey, or his example of servitude by washing the feet of his disciples on the night before his death. These kinds of actions might be understood as a kind of holy performance art, with multiple layers of embodied meaning that allowed his disciples and followers to see and live into a new way of being.

Jesus' modeling of these kinds of performances went on to inspire centuries of variations on "holy foolery." This was a common trope in early hagiographies, and presented as an ideal archetype of true Christian discipleship. The holy fool tradition was largely lost in the West after the Reformation, and especially with the rise of rationalism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But I would like to suggest that a variation on this tradition has been carried on in the careers of many artists and musicians, particularly those who make sophisticated use of irony, humor, and paradox in their work. It was Picasso who first observed that artists use "lies" to tell the truth. Certain theologians and clergy throughout the centuries (again, particularly in the West) have found these "deceptions" in art to be disconcerting, even potentially dangerous. But Reinhold Niebuhr argued that the same is essentially true for theology, since every *idea* of God—who is ultimately the ground of all being—must be expressed using words, language, and concepts taken from within the created world. In other words, preachers and artists are ultimately in the same predicament.

One counterargument that may be raised here is that Jesus used dramatic and artful means in an *egoless* way, in order to spread the good news of salvation, whereas secular

artists, performers, and writers create and perform their works of art merely for the sake of entertainment, decoration, and gaining prestige and fame for themselves along the way. This is the distinction that Elizabeth-Anne Stewart repeatedly makes in her book entitled *Jesus the Holy Fool*. However, this stereotype of the secular artist as a kind of misguided, attention-seeking *un-holy* “fool” dismisses the spiritual, psychological, and logistical complexities of what it means to navigate an artistic vocation within today’s cultural and economic milieu.

The question of celebrity, and the effects of commercialization on perceptions of artistic integrity (not to mention on the psyches of artists themselves) is a point that desperately needs to be explored more carefully within theological contexts, in order to avoid the religious condescension that is so often brought about by imprecise and incomplete cultural critiques. There *is* a distinction to be made between those artists who fall prey to the power and prestige promised by secular capitalism, and artists who, regardless of their level of commercial success, continue to create their works out of a deep a commitment to their craft and a sincere respect for the kinds of human connection and empathic healing that is made possible through the arts.

Artists who are seriously devoted to their craft—whether or not they consider themselves “professionals,” and whether or not they are able to make a living solely from their craft—participate in the sacred act of transfiguration, by seeking to reveal the inner glory and truth of those things that seem to be merely ordinary. The ability to do this well has less to do with what one claims to believe intellectually, or the desire to support the liturgical or formational goals of a particular church, and has more to do with the nature of how one lives, moves, and has their being in relation to a willingness to participate in the flow of one’s own creative intuitions. This rests on an ability and a willingness to attune oneself

carefully to all that is, seen and unseen, taking into account all the symbols and sensory experiences and subjective feelings through which meaning and truth are discerned, and then arranging those elements in such a way that they are able to manifest that which is most important.

The vocation of the artist, then, is not necessarily to be the “handmaiden” of religious ritual or the clergy, but the handmaiden of the *Holy Spirit*, the One who is working in and through all of creation to give people “eyes to see” and “ears to hear” by laying bare those patterns and connections that illuminate the truth at the heart of existence. Art critic John Ruskin admitted that “religion, for its part, has not generally been helped by art,” because it “encourages false religion.”¹² Theologian Karl Rahner likewise wrote that while “some ‘religious art’ is well-intentioned and painted by pious people...it is not genuine religious art because it does not touch those depths of existence where genuine religious experience takes place.”¹³ Indeed, much of the art that seeks to fulfill the liturgical and formational demands of the church often becomes what Frank Burch Brown calls “religious kitsch,” which actually distorts the Gospel precisely because it seeks merely to “elicit religious emotion without an authentic encounter with God.” Brown differentiates between humble simplicity and contrived immaturity. To be sure, the question of how and where we draw this line is a complex matter. Iris Murdoch taught that “learning to detect the false in art and enjoy the true is part of a lifelong education in moral discernment.”¹⁴ Spiritual maturity entails an ability to perceive God’s presence in the subtleties of our experience, artistic or otherwise.

¹² Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste*, 74.

¹³ Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1960), 410.

¹⁴ Cited in Richard Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty, and Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 211.

Artists have a great deal to offer the church beyond simply the aesthetic decoration of the liturgy, the illustration of Biblical texts, or the ability to put theological beliefs to a catchy tune that offers a fleeting emotional high (a phenomenon that I like to call “jingles for Jesus”). In turn, I believe that theology, scripture, and the church have a great deal to offer artists who are struggling to find models for discernment between the life-giving aspects of their artistic calling and the false paths of idolatry that make a god out of artistic “success.” But this cannot be accomplished through efforts to dictate artistic content or control the outcome of creative works. It can only be accomplished by walking alongside artists with a respect for the nature of their vocation, and a willingness to assist them in the hard work of listening for, and fearlessly following, the radical and unruly stirrings of the Holy Spirit. Artists should neither be forced to become slaves to purpose, nor left rudderless to accept the nihilistic frivolity of a world of relativities competing for power. Perhaps if we were to think of artists less like *tools*, and more like prophet, priests, and holy fools, we could begin to move in the direction of true integration.

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