

FINDING GOD IN THE IN-BETWEEN:



A Postmodern Theology of Sacred Music and Art
in Contemporary Western Culture

Kristen Leigh Mitchell

April 10, 2014

Submitted as partial fulfillment for the degree of Master of Divinity in Theology
and the Arts at Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York.

Table of Contents

I. A Punk Girl Walks into a Church	5
II. Methodological Framework	12
III. Categorical Hodgepodge: Sacred, Secular, and Profane in Religion and Culture	17
IV. Framing Art: The Early Modern Legacy	30
V. Re-Framing Art & Religion: The Postmodern Mélange	39
VI. Seeking the Sacred in a Post-Secular World: Towards a Postmodern Christian Aesthetics	51
VII. Context, Content, and the Spirit in the In-Between	63
VIII. Concluding Thoughts	77
IX. Postscript: Areas for Future Study	79

List of Art & Illustrations

<i>Still Life with Bottle of Rum</i> , Pablo Picasso, 1911	Cover
Figure 1. <i>No Man's Land</i> , Joe Fox, 2012	11
Figure 2. Preposterous Categorical Hodgepodge	14
Figure 3. <i>Fountain</i> , Marcel Duchamp, 1917	33
Figure 4. <i>Solitude</i> , Judy Mackey, 2010	37
Figure 5. Scene from <i>Heart-Shaped Box</i> by Nirvana, 1993	48
Figure 6. <i>Journey Within a Journey II</i> , 2012	50
Figure 7. <i>Cobblestone Bridge</i> , Thomas Kinkade, 2000	58
Figure 8. <i>The Lord Is My Shepherd</i> , Warner Sallman, 1943	60
Figure 9. <i>Guernica</i> , Pablo Picasso, 1937	74
Figure 10. <i>In Gratitude for All</i> , Cheryl Rozovsky, 2011	78

List of Musical Tracks on Accompanying CD

1. Sufjan Stevens, "No Man's Land," *The Avalanche*, Asthmatic Kitty Records, 2006.
2. Yes, "Give Love Each Day," *Magnification*, Beyond Music Records, 2001.
3. Regina Spektor, "All the Rowboats," *What We Saw From the Cheap Seats*, Sire Records, 2012.
4. Esperanza Spalding, "The Knowledge of Good and Evil," *Chamber Music Society*, Heads Up Records, 2010.
5. Chris Thile with Edgar Meyer, Stuart Duncan, and Yo-Yo Ma, "Attaboy," *The Goat Rodeo Sessions*, Sony Masterworks Records, 2011.
**Note: Chris Thile, former lead singer and mandolin player for the band Nickel Creek, has also released a solo album of Bach's entire Partita No. 1 in B minor on mandolin, in addition participating in this creative category-defying collaboration between well-known classical and bluegrass musicians.*
6. Fiona Apple, "Extraordinary Machine," *Extraordinary Machine*, Epic Records, 2005.
**Note: This album has been categorized on Wikipedia as "baroque pop/jazz/alternative rock"*
7. Kamasi Washington, "Change of the Guard," *The Epic*, Brainfeeder Records, 2015.
8. Norman Greenbaum, "Spirit in the Sky," *Spirit in the Sky*, Reprise Records, 1969.
9. Josh Garrells, "White Owl," *Love & War and the Sea In Between*, Small Voice and Mason Jar Records, 2011.
10. Mumford & Sons, "Thistle & Weeds," *Sigh No More*, Glassnote Records, 2009.
11. The Isley Brothers, "Shout," *Shout!*, RCA Victor Studio A, 1959.
12. Sister Rosetta Tharpe, "Strange Things Happening Every Day," *Presenting Sister Rosetta Tharpe*, Decca Records, 1944.
13. Rev Charlie Jackson "Wrapped Up Tangled Up In Jesus," *God's Got It: The Legendary Booker & Jackson Singles*, Crypt Records, 2004.
14. Regina Spektor, "Laughing With," *Far*, Sire Records, 2009.
15. Nickel Creek, "When In Rome," *Why Should the Fire Die?* Barefoot Records, 2005.
16. Patty Griffin, "Mary," *Flaming Red*, A&M Records, 1998.
17. Sterntaler Kids, "Schnappi das kleine Krokodil" CD Single, Universal Records, 2004.
**Note: This song was #1 on the pop charts in Germany for three straight months in 2005.*
18. Mozart, "Serenade in B flat, K. 361 'Gran partita,' Adagio," *Amadeus*, PolyGramRecords, 2000.
19. Wilco, "White Light," *Sky Blue Sky*, Nonesuch Records, 2007.
20. Madonna, "Frozen," *Ray of Light*, Warner Bros. Records, 1998.

I. A Punk Girl Walks into a Church

In 2001, the *London Times* reported that in a recent survey of religious affiliation, enough respondents penciled in “Jedi Knight” to justify including this as an option in future polls.¹

Growing up, that was me: an indie/punk/folk-singing feminist from a racially diverse working-class neighborhood in the American South, I could recite Obi-Wan’s wisdom like an evangelical Christian quoted the psalms. Of course, I never suspected that George Lucas actually held the keys to human salvation. But I knew that there were deep truths hiding everywhere: hiding in religions, hiding in nature, and hiding in films like *Star Wars*... along with the poetry of T.S. Eliot, the music of Tori Amos, the stories of J.R.R. Tolkien, and the mythological narratives contained within video game sagas like *The Legend of Zelda*.

Years later, I experienced a full-on, no-holds-barred conversion to Christianity through a surprising series of mystical exchanges with God and Jesus during a time of deep trauma. These experiences genuinely transformed my life, bringing me into a state of existential serenity paired with a brutal self-awareness, which afforded me the courage to face the fullness of reality in all its messiness – the good, the bad, and the ugly. It was only then that I came to think of these bits of the holy strewn throughout the world as part of God’s “general revelation” to humanity, and of my ability to perceive them as a kind of “natural theology.”

It was also during this time that I came to understand how I was perceived by people in Christian churches: as a spunky, secular/agnostic young adult who was estranged from conventional religion and struggling to make sense of my life by looking for meaning in the world around me, I was what they called a “spiritual seeker.” And in many congregations, that made me a hot commodity. At first, I found this situation amusing. After all, my decision to

¹ Barry Taylor, *Entertainment Theology: New-Edge Spirituality in a Digital Democracy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 15–16.

begin attending church services was based on very real experiences of divine encounter, not on any local church's attempt to offer culturally relevant styles of worship to attract "the young people" or "spiritual seekers" such as myself. In fact, my first experience attempting to connect with God through contemporary Christian music had precisely the opposite effect: the music rubbed uncomfortably against every single one of my aesthetic sensibilities, and I felt distracted and embarrassed for everyone there, including myself.

Nevertheless, I kept attending services. I appreciated their casual coffeehouse atmosphere and the lively discussions that the sermons elicited. Over time, I began to observe how this music seemed to facilitate what at least *appeared* to be a very sincere experience of worship for so many of my fellow Christians. Gradually, I began opening myself to the music, out of a sense of compassion and hospitality for the people who seemed to connect with it so deeply. It became something of a spiritual practice for me – a kind of radical embrace of what had previously been, for me, the ultimate "Other."

Naively, I expected my brothers and sisters in Christ to reciprocate. After all, they had warmly welcomed me into their community, and had embraced my humble story of a life transformed by faith with open arms. But when they learned that I was planning on maintaining my life as a surly songstress – frequenting dive bars and hippie festivals, performing "secular music" for secular audiences – there seemed to be some concern. People began to ask, in all sincerity, whether I had ever thought about using my gifts "in the service of God." *What an odd question*, I thought. After all, it had become abundantly clear to me that *all* of my musical performances were in the service of God. I played songs of sorrow, hope, truth, justice, solace, and redemption in an authentic language that people could understand. And I watched as the Spirit moved freely through the music, meeting and healing people exactly where they were. I

understood intuitively that this was ministry. It was my vocation. However it became abundantly clear that within the discourse of this particular church community, “music” by default *always* meant “contemporary Christian worship music.” Thus began my quest for a denomination or faith community that could better understand and support my work as an artist.

The mainline Protestant congregations I visited boasted of the finest hymn compositions from the great traditions of Western Europe. In these contexts, I encountered a deep respect and general reverence for musical artistry, precision, and skill. But alongside this appreciation for the so-called “fine arts” of the Western canon, there was at best a general ignorance – and at worst an outright disdain – for musical forms, styles, and textures from other cultural spheres. This included a rather condescending disregard for all American forms of music and artistry that were understood as being outside of the “canon,” all of which were lumped together under the umbrella term “popular,” and were therefore considered crude, commercial, shallow, unsophisticated, and irreverent. Albert Blackwell speaks from this perspective in his work on “sacred music” when he writes that “musical impoverishment” becomes “most obvious in popular music,” citing that country, folk, rock, pop, and rap all suffer from “harmonic agoraphobia” and a rudimentary understanding of chord progressions.² Clearly my guitar-driven folk singing and DIY indie stylings were not welcome in these communities either, since it was clear that within the discourse of mainline Protestant traditions, “music” by default *always* meant “Western classical music.”

One premise upon which everyone seemed agree was that using one’s artistic gifts “in God’s service” meant primarily (if not exclusively) *the worship service*. This understanding of what defines and constitutes “sacred music” is most explicit in the Roman Catholic churches,

² Albert L. Blackwell, *The Sacred in Music* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 69.

where the matter has been clearly outlined by the Second Vatican Council's *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*:

Sacred music is to be considered the more holy in proportion as it is more closely connected with the liturgical action, whether it adds delight to prayer, fosters unity of minds, or confers greater solemnity upon the sacred rites.”³

Thus, while liturgical traditions and musical styles may vary between denominations and congregations, what seems to persist across the landscape of Western Christianity is an underlying assumption that any conversation about “music” is by extension a conversation about worship, and that furthermore any musical gifts of congregants are to be considered property of the church, ideally to be used as a tool for liturgy, pedagogy, or both.

Initially, my impulse was to scoff at such seemingly narrow thinking. And yet, upon deeper reflection, I had to admit that there was a sense in which I agreed with the basic underlying premise: that music is somehow at its “highest” or “best” when it is facilitating communal praise, wonder, worship, or joy. Of course, this is something that most musicians have experienced at one time or another, regardless of whether they were performing in a religious or liturgical setting. When I perform my “secular” indie/folk songs on a Saturday night at the local dive bar, I often find myself, in the most profound sense, to be facilitating a covert and yet life-sustaining form of “worship” for the people who have gathered there. This deeper sense of worship is something that often spontaneously erupts within the context of everyday music-making, especially in the context of improvisational jamming or group singing. It is experienced as a kind of raw gratitude, not necessarily towards the performers who are facilitating that experience, but a kind of praise wide large and extended to the entire created order that makes such an experience even possible.

³ 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.

Many notable musicians throughout history have attempted to describe this experience, commonly invoking spiritual or religious language in order to do so.⁴ Meanwhile, are relatively few opportunities within the context of American Christianity for serious theological reflection on the music and art that most of us actually listen to and appreciate on a regular basis – that is, music and art performed *outside* of church contexts. Being relegated to the “secular” arena, its contents are seen by many Christians as uninteresting at best, or at worst diabolical. This attitude is situated within a much broader preoccupation in American Christianity to establish concrete and meaningful differences between what happens inside and outside of “the church,” however defined. “Singing *in church* is not a performance,” clergy and worship leaders frequently insist, usually adding that “...*in church* it’s not about getting applause, but about glorifying God.” These kinds of comments are meant to contrast the values of *church* musicianship with the values of *secular* musicianship – the latter of which are assumed to be centered around the egos of narcissistic performers.

And yet, the vast majority of secular musicians and artists that I have known and performed with over the last 15 years of my music career – spanning many different geographic locations and artistic genres – have expressed many of the same values and concerns as church musicians. In fact, we have a term in popular discourse for those who pursue careers in performance only for the sake of their egos: it’s called “selling out,” and it’s pretty universally frowned upon. In my experience, most artists and musicians understand that audience recognition is fleeting and difficult to come by. We persist in our craft precisely for the humbling experience of beauty, belonging, and connection that is made possible through musical communication and artistic embodiment. Even Mick Jagger, one of the most widely-recognized

⁴ See Dimitri Ehrlich, *Inside the Music: Conversations with Contemporary Musicians about Spirituality, Creativity, and Consciousness* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 1997).

narcissistic performers of the late twentieth century, speaks of the experience of “losing himself” in the context of musical performance:

You have to remember that you’re only the catalyst for these events...whether they’re in a small club or at Giants Stadium. Though you might feel that the spotlight’s on you, and physically it is, what’s important is the relationship you’re in with the audience...it’s the same feeling you get from going to a revival meeting...you lose your ego.⁵

Ironically, for many performers in religious contexts, an inverse effect often occurs.

While directing one’s performance towards God (rather than an “audience”) is theoretically meant to help release the inner burdens of perfectionism, self-preoccupation, and judgment, all this lofty religious talk about the importance of losing one’s ego within the context of worship before an all-powerful God can often have the exact opposite effect: self-consciousness about one’s ego manifests in a scrutinizing focus on the self, wherein performers must determine whether their performance has been sufficiently “selfless” enough, or whether it has otherwise demonstrated the appropriate markers of religious authenticity. Self-denial before God thus becomes an ego project itself – one that is rooted in fear, and therefore deeply invested in its own self-righteousness. Performers instructed to approach worship contexts in this way often become blind to their own drive for ego gains through religious cultural capital.⁶

All of this extra posturing is unnecessary when we consider that the more natural state of musical performance is one in which performers tend to “lose” themselves. Musicologist Simon Frith describes the simple and playful delight that often arises from the “sheer physical pleasure of singing itself” in this way:

The singer finds herself driven by the physical logic of the sound of the words rather than by the semantic meaning of the verse, [creating] a sense of spontaneity: the singing feels

⁵ Dimitri Ehrlich, *Inside the Music: Conversations with Contemporary Musicians about Spirituality, Creativity, and Consciousness* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 1997), 61.

⁶ Pierre Bourdieu writes about the concept of “cultural capital” – a kind of relational “currency” in the form of competencies, skills, qualifications that lead to relational power gains within certain social contexts.

real rather than rehearsed; the singer is responding (like the listener) to the musical event of which they are part, being possessed by the music rather than possessing it.⁷

Again, most musicians and performers know this experience well, and for many it is the deeper reason they feel drawn to a career in performance. Music becomes a way to experience the simultaneous emptiness and fullness of self, and in that sense, it can become an instance of “kenosis,” the Christian practice of self-emptying.

Given that these experiences are shared by Christian and non-Christian musicians alike, it seems surprising that more clergy, theologians, and church musicians are not terribly interested in exploring the deeper relationship between music, theology, and worship. Of course, there are practical matters at hand that often tend to stall deeper conversations about music: every week hymns must be chosen, choirs must be rehearsed, and bulletins must be printed. Who has time to think about the deeper meaning and purpose of music when there are pastoral visits to make, meetings to attend, and food pantries to run?

Nevertheless, these issues become significant when we realize that our underlying assumptions about the difference between what happens inside and outside of “the church” are part of a much larger cultural conditioning process that is working on both sides of the spectrum to maintain strict boundaries between “religion” and “culture,” or “sacred” and “secular.” In reality, the lines between these two spheres are highly ambiguous. Those of us functioning within modern Western cultural systems are constantly having to construct and reconstruct these boundaries in a variety of ways, in order to maintain the status quo of modern secular capitalism. Musicians, ministers, the media, academics, atheists, politicians, and everyday church folks are all participants in this larger structuring process, even though most of the work they do is unconscious.

⁷ Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 193.

Particularly within a modern capitalist context, there is a great deal at stake – culturally, religiously, sociologically, and economically – in whether one chooses to label a particular song, film, book, painting, or artist as “sacred” or “secular.”⁸ Within the context of evangelical Protestantism, terms like “contemporary Christian” or just “Christian” have replaced the term “sacred” in order to denote music and art that has been set apart for Christian worship and appreciation. While many of these communities claim to have rejected all forms of “organized religion,” including institutional forms of Christianity, and the designation of anything in “this world” as “sacred,” these same groups are also widely known for their heightened policing of the boundaries between “Christian” and “secular” music and art. And since the term “sacred” in its most basic and banal form means simply “set apart for religious use,” the terms become functional equivalents.

Consider, for example, the story of a young indie musician-turned-contemporary Christian pop artist I saw once at a Saturday night “praise and worship” event during an ecumenical progressive Christianity conference. The lead singer picked up his acoustic guitar, nervously walked to the front of the stage out in front of the worship band, and introduced his next song with an apologetic disclaimer: “This isn’t really a ‘*Christian*’ song, but...” The chorus of this song didn’t have any words; it was just a simple melody hummed over some easy chords. But as I sat and listened to his wordless vulnerability, my heart was broken open in a way that had been missing the entire weekend. And when I looked around at others, I saw tears, and smiles. I saw raw gratitude. I saw real participation. Holy communication.

⁸ In the language of evangelical Protestantism, “Christian” is sometimes preferred in place of the “sacred” designation, since many American Protestants have abandoned the notion that anything of “this world” should be called “sacred,” including religion as it manifests in “the institutional church.” Yet, when it comes to identifying or labeling music and art, the terms “sacred” and “Christian” become functional equivalents. Both of them are equally theologically empty when used in this manner.

What could it possibly mean for a piece of music – or *any* work of art for that matter – to be “Christian” or “non-Christian,” “sacred” or “secular”? Does it have to do with the content of the lyrics? Or whether it is (or could be) used in liturgy or worship? Does it need to be sanctioned or approved by a denominational committee or group of elders? Does it have to have been produced and marketed on a contemporary Christian record label? Or played on Christian pop radio? Can the religious status of a song be determined on the basis of whether or not the artist who penned it is a Christian themselves? Or whether or not *they intended* for it to be used in worship or resonate with Christian faith? What if even one person has an experience of God’s grace or spiritual transformation through it? Does “sacred” music or art become religiously compromised when it becomes too “popular” within a secular context? What about the secular popularity of religious songs like “I’ll Fly Away” or “Amazing Grace”?

After eight years of engaging both musically and liturgically with diverse Christian communities across the United States, Europe, and Asia, while researching the history of debates about music within Christianity going all the way back to the ancient Greeks, I have come to the conclusion that the Christian church as a whole is still largely bereft of any truly applicable theological sensibility for how the Christian experience of God or “the sacred” actually relates to our human encounters with music and art – particularly music and art that is experienced outside of liturgical, ritual, or culturally “Christian” contexts. While Christian theologians throughout history have discussed music in passing – often expressing their own opinions and reactions to the musical styles, instruments, and genres of their own day – very few modern theologians have devoted serious or sustained attention to the relationship of music to spiritual revelation and formation within the Christian community.⁹

⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar is perhaps the only major theologian of the twentieth century who has focused the bulk of his work around aesthetics, and yet he still had little or no interest in questions relating to *actual* works of art.

The recent implosion of modern Western paradigms within academic scholarship, along with the rise of global media culture in the past three decades, have made this question all the more relevant, and at the same time increasingly difficult to address. It is common among scholars and writers who attempt to tackle the subject to find a somewhat flippant disregard for the language of “sacred” and “secular” altogether, suggesting that we may now simply toss these labels into the trash heap of time, along with every other binary classification system that comprises our “Enlightenment” heritage.¹⁰ And yet, while the effort to transcend the limitations of arbitrary cultural categories is commendable, the sense that we still need *some* way of critically examining phenomena remains. We still need to be able to communicate meaningful distinctions between things that are illusory and things that are essential. Dismissing the problem only further enables traditional religious scholars, clergy, and church people to continue employing terms like “sacred” and “secular” in problematic and uncritical ways that perpetuate the status quo.

As such, this paper seeks to contribute to the development of a more theologically-grounded understanding of the arts (and particularly music) within a postmodern religious context, through a critical engagement with our notions of “sacred” and “secular.” How has our understanding of these concepts emerged and developed over time? And is there a way, grounded in Christian theological sensibilities, to move beyond such categories into a deeper understanding of God’s movement in music, art, and the world?

¹⁰ Don Saliers, for example, a leading scholar in the area of music and theology, dismisses the issue altogether, stating simply: “we need not work with dichotomies between ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’ music.” In *Music and Theology*, Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 2007, 60.

II. Methodological Framework

Whoever writes about religion and art comes into contact with two kinds of people: Christians of the most varied stamp, and connoisseurs of art. Both are rather difficult to get along with.¹¹

–Gerardus Van der Leeuw



Figure 1. “No Man’s Land,” photograph by Joe Fox¹²

In the introduction of his book *Explorations in Art, Theology, and Imagination*, Michael Austin writes of the “border police who patrol the boundaries of self-regarding religion and self-defining art” and the “no-man’s land that lies between them.”¹³ The present work will occupy that space. This liminal “no-man’s land” is the land of postmodernity. It is a landless land, a

¹¹ Gerardus Van der Leeuw, *Sacred and Profane Beauty: The Holy in Art* (New York: Abington Press, 1963), xi.

¹² Joe Fox, “No man’s land and restricted area of the UN buffer zone in the green line dividing Cyprus,” *Fine Art America*, April 15, 2012, Accessed April 8, 2014 at <http://fineartamerica.com/featured/no-mans-land-and-restricted-area-of-the-un-buffer-zone-in-the-green-line-dividing-cyprus-joe-fox.html>

¹³ Michael Austin, *Explorations in Art, Theology, and Imagination* (London: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2005), 3.

kind of *Waterworld*¹⁴ that necessitates not only an interdisciplinary approach to scholarship, but an approach that privileges the experiences of those whose concerns exist outside of the confines of traditional academic and theological paradigms.

Catholic theologian David Tracy has helpfully outlined a threefold division in theological scholarship, according to its various “publics”: *foundational* theology, which directs itself to the academy, *systematic* theology, which directs itself to the church, and *practical* theology, which addresses society at large.¹⁵ While hoping not to dismiss the important considerations of academic and scholarly approaches to theological inquiry, my commitments lie firmly with the latter two audiences – which is to say that while I consider myself an academic scholar of religion, theology, and the arts, I consider myself first and foremost an artist and a Christian. Writing as an ecumenical church member to members of the church ecumenical, I hope to frame my subject matter in such a way that draws on both the intellectual and the experiential perspectives of widely diverse publics. In this sense, I wish to follow in the footsteps of Karl Rahner, who advised that if “theology is to be true to its own nature, it will have to reflect on the religion of the people,” and Richard Viladesau, who writes that a “popular” perspective is “superior to conceptual theology insofar as it is closer to God’s original revelation and its invitation to divinization, precisely *because* it has not gone through the narrowing process of systematic thought.”¹⁶

¹⁴ Barry Taylor writes of postmodernity as analogous to the plot of the 1995 film *Waterworld*, in which the polar ice caps have melted and the entire earth has been submerged under water. Much like cultural life under the current conditions of global market capitalism and worldwide communication networks, survivors in the film must “seek to fashion a new way of living out of what they can scavenge from the surface of the waters...by gathering various bits of salvaged materials from the old world and refashioning them into new habitats.” In *Entertainment Theology*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008, 89-90.

¹⁵ Richard Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty, and Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 37, emphasis mine.

¹⁶ Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics*, 16.

In part, the very nature of the question I have presented demands such an approach. Samuel Laeuchli puts the matter bluntly: “The issues between art and religion are not academic squabbles about esoteric problems; they begin in real life and are experienced in real life.”¹⁷ Aesthetic experiences cannot be reduced to theoretical concepts without in some sense reducing, or even negating, the visceral language of materiality that constitutes them. This Neoplatonic tendency towards the ideological and the conceptual – which has been dominant at many points throughout Western history – is contradicted by conviction in Christ’s incarnation, which ultimately places a primary importance on our embodied, material experiences in space and time. As John of Damascus wrote in the eighth century during the heights of iconoclasm, “I worship the Creator of matter who became matter for my sake, who willed to take His abode in matter; who worked out my salvation through matter. Never will I cease honoring the matter which wrought my salvation.”¹⁸

Theologian Frank Burch Brown furthermore observes that any theology of art – or “theological aesthetics” – must address questions that are simultaneously theoretical and practical, and that one of the most important questions left to be addressed in this regard is precisely the quest for a “method and hermeneutics of speaking of the sacred.”¹⁹ This search for a “hermeneutics of the sacred” in relation to the arts is by nature an *interdisciplinary* problem, and requires an interdisciplinary approach, which is where the commitments and concerns of the academy become untenable for our present inquiry. Any comprehensive evaluation of the

¹⁷ Samuel Laeuchli, *Religion and Art in Conflict: Introduction to a Cross-Disciplinary Task* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 2.

¹⁸ He furthermore writes, “Perhaps you are sublime and able to transcend what is material...but I, since I am a human being and bear a body, want to deal with holy things and behold them in a bodily manner.” Cited in Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 5–6, and Frank Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics: A Theological Study of Making and Meaning*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 40.

¹⁹ Frank Burch Brown and Richard Viladesau, eds., “Aesthetics and Religion,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and the Arts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 27.

popular understanding of “the sacred” and “the secular” as they relate to contemporary music and art will inevitably require an application of approaches, insights, and scholarship from fields as diverse as sociology, anthropology, musicology, psychology, philosophy, history, media and communication, art criticism, ritual theory, and the burgeoning field of “pop culture studies.” I am aware that the manner in which I intend to draw from these fields may be enough to give academic scholars with strong commitments to their own disciplines a slight aneurism.

Nevertheless, honest inquiry into our present situation demands that we begin to develop interdisciplinary tools for the responsible integration of wisdom, so that we might respond meaningfully to questions that actually matter to everyday people on the ground. That said, we should always be cautious to accompany such an approach with a humble awareness of our own inability to construct out of the elements of the various disciplines some sort of grand *weltanschauung* or all-encompassing theory that will finally explain everything. I certainly do not intend to arrive at any such theory here. To invoke the spirit of Karl Rahner, I simply wish to engage the subject areas that are crucial to my question as “a deeply thinking dilettante – and one who at the same time thinks deeply about [her] dilettantism and factors it into [her] thinking.”²⁰

Finally, the reader should not be surprised to learn that the author’s own experiences as a musician, an artist, and a person of faith have deeply informed the present inquiry. As Tom Beaudoin has rightly observed, “Academics have typically been averse to thinking of themselves as fans of anything, whether of media culture or of elements of their own academic culture. To allow oneself to be considered a ‘fan’ is to be assumed to surrender the critical faculties that

²⁰ Karl Rahner, *Faith in a Wintry Season: Conversations and Interviews with Karl Rahner in the Last Years of His Life*, ed. Paul Imhof and Hubert Biallowons, trans. ed. Harvey D. Egan (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 19. Cited in Thomas Beaudoin, *Witness to Dispossession: The Vocation of a Postmodern Theologian* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 63.

academic life purportedly works so hard to instill.”²¹ Beaudoin has established himself as a scholar whose work has challenged this tendency, openly admitting the ways in which his own explorations in theology and popular culture have been inseparable from his life and experiences as a musician and a person of faith. It is in this same spirit that I make my own foray into the subject matter at hand.²² For as British theologian Elaine Graham writes:

Critical evaluation of one’s own cultural practices sharpens one’s creative awareness and serves as a glimpse into the spiritual dimensions of everyday, lived experience. This is not intended to be solipsistic or self-indulgent, but rather an experiment in self-reflexive academic enquiry, and an investigation into the ways in which the theological imagination is sparked through different forms of lived experience.²³

♪ *Recommended listening:* [CD track 1] “No Man’s Land” by Sufjan Stevens ♪

²¹ Beaudoin, *Witness to Dispossession*, 92.

²² In the interest of further socially locating myself: I am a white woman born at the cusp of Gen X and Gen Y (later known as “Millennials”). I grew up in a racially and economically diverse working-class community in the urban South, where there were thriving Christian communities of every political and religious bent. I was raised in a family that was politically liberal and spiritual-but-not-religious, and had developed strong agnostic convictions by the time I attended high school. I began performing on stage as a folk musician at the age of 16, and spent five years playing drums in an indie punk band before beginning a solo career as an independent singer/songwriter. I have also worked in radio, theatre, film, photography, and design, and in each of these contexts have encountered creative people who feel estranged from the Christian church, but who nevertheless remain deeply spiritual and thoughtful, and in many cases have developed alternative models for cultivating community through strategies of creative collaboration. Since converting to Christianity in 2005, I have visited, worked with, and sang in a variety of churches, including Episcopalian, Methodist, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, Pentecostal, Lutheran, Evangelical, Nondenominational, Congregationalist, Moravian, and Quaker – in Greensboro, New Mexico, California, New York, Connecticut, Italy, Great Britain, and Indonesia. The congregations I have worked with have been diverse economically, politically, racially, and ethnically; they have been large, small, “traditional,” “contemporary,” intimate, formal, rowdy, and meditative. I also spent two years assisting with production for a progressive Christian music and arts festival, and spent a year as a congregational song leader at a racially and economically diverse Episcopal congregation in the East Village of New York City. In each of these contexts, I have paid close attention to the ways in which people relate their religious and/or spiritual identities to their interactions with (and participation in) music and the arts. I have also paid attention to how different communities construct their sense of who they are in relation to the groups they experience and perceive as cultural and religious “others.” All of these experiences have deeply informed this paper.

²³ Elaine Graham, “‘What We Make of the World’: The Turn to ‘Culture’ in Theology and the Study of Religion,” in *Between Sacred and Profane: Researching Religion and Popular Culture*, ed. Gordon Lynch (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2007), 80–81.

III. Categorical Hodgepodge: The Sacred, Secular, and Profane in Religion and Culture

The attempt to draw clear boundaries between the sacred and the secular (or profane) has an elegant theoretical simplicity. Surely, there is some clear marker between mundane activity and that which connects us to the transcendent...²⁴

It is necessary to begin our inquiry into sacred and secular music and art with a basic delineation of terms. But of course, one does not get very far in such a quest without running into what Colleen McDannell has called a “preposterous categorical hodgepodge.”²⁵ Inevitably attached to any discussion of the “sacred” are old notions of the “profane,” which must then be distinguished from the “secular,” which needs to be situated within a proper analysis of “culture,” which must then be delineated from “religion,” which is hopefully then still related in some way to the “sacred.” From the very outset, we find ourselves trapped within a closed loop of indefinables. Perhaps this is why scholars have tended to shy away from the conversation altogether. I have depicted the problem in the following graph:

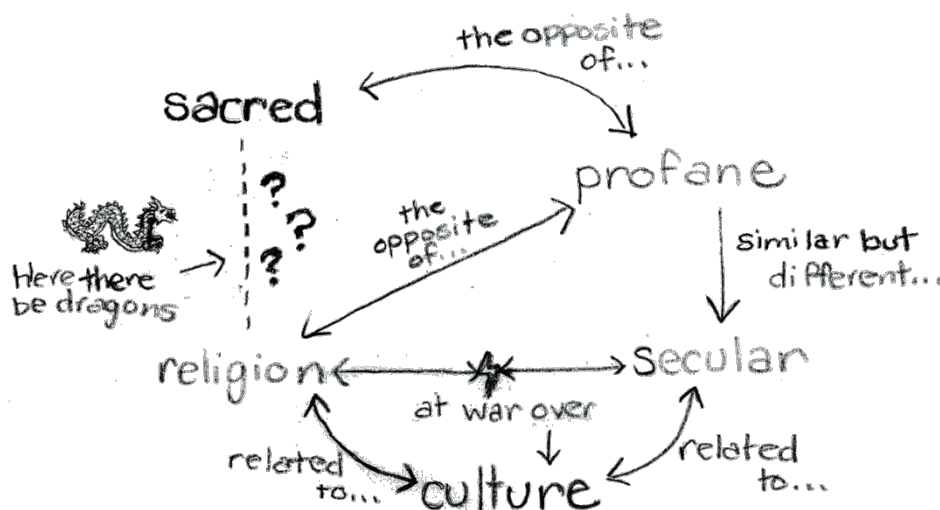


Figure 2. Preposterous Categorical Hodgepodge

²⁴ Jeffrey H. Mahan, “Reflections on the Past and Future of the Study of Religion and Popular Culture,” in *Between Sacred and Profane: Researching Religion and Popular Culture*, ed. Gordon Lynch (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2007), 52.

²⁵ McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 8.

But let us begin with “the sacred,” perhaps the most significant, and yet the most elusive concept of all. Etymologically, the English word “sacred” derives from the Latin *sacrare*, which means “to consecrate” – in other words, the sacred is defined rather redundantly as “that which is held to be sacred.” Interestingly, throughout the literature of modern religious anthropology, the concept of the sacred is nearly always defined *apophatically* – in other words, by what it is not. Influential religious philosopher and theologian Rudolph Otto famously defined “the holy” as *that which is wholly other* – as something unlike anything human or cosmic in form, origin, or effect, and therefore something that is incapable of being grasped conceptually or rationally in its purest form. According to Otto, experiences of the sacred are characterized by what he called the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* [mystery of awe and bewitching], which is described as paradoxically eliciting both attraction/comfort and aversion/terror.²⁶ Twentieth-century theologian Paul Tillich similarly defined the holy as both the “ground” and the “abyss” of being, which by its nature causes humanity to vacillate between feelings of elation and annihilation.²⁷

For this very reason, religious scholar Mircea Eliade argued that “the sacred” can only be experienced *as it manifests*. Eliade’s contemporary Gerard Van der Leeuw further contributed to this line of thought, arguing that “the holy must ‘take place’... it must possess a *form*: it must be ‘localizable’, spatially, temporally, visibly, or audibly.”²⁸ That is to say, whatever we may conceptually think about “the sacred” by way of our theological beliefs or philosophical convictions, we cannot experience “the holy” in any purely abstract sense; it is always “co-

²⁶ Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics*, 151.

²⁷ Kelton Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 108.

²⁸ H.G. Hubbeling, *Divine Presence In Ordinary Life: Gerardus van Der Leeuw’s Twofold Method in His Thinking on Art and Religion* (New York: North Holland Publishing Company, 1986), 20.

experienced.”²⁹ We can only encounter “the sacred” in and through material objects and cultural realms, “not in some privatized, mystical space that is separate from it.”³⁰

Nevertheless, because “the sacred” manifests as something qualitatively *different*, Eliade still ultimately came to define the sacred in apophatic terms as well, as “the opposite of the profane.”³¹ But what, then, do we mean by profane? Here we have another slippery term that is also usually defined in the negative. Indeed, Eliade himself unhelpfully defined the profane as “spaces, objects, practices, and experiences which do not bear the mark of the sacred.”³² A more common definition of “profane” is simply that which is “not religious.”³³ Etymologically, the word profane originates from the Latin *heir es*, which simply meant “outside of the temple,” a meaning which points back to the more pragmatic sociological understanding of the term “sacred,” denoting that which has been “set apart” for religious purposes.

This definition of both the sacred and the profane is consistent with the ancient Hebrew understanding of the holy. The Sabbath, for example, is made “holy” precisely because it has been “set apart” from the other days of the week. The Temple was understood to be “sacred” within the context of ancient Hebrew religion precisely because it had been set apart for use by the priestly class for performing the ancient sacrificial rituals. In other words, the sacred is defined by the boundary lines that are drawn to designate certain times and places as holy. In this sense, we might think of “the profane” as merely the mundane, the quotidian, or the familiar – all that encompasses normal, everyday life outside of the designated holidays or ritual spaces.

²⁹ Richard Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts: Encountering God through Music, Art, and Rhetoric* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 40–41.

³⁰ Gordon Lynch, “What Is This ‘Religion’ in the Study of Religion and Popular Culture?,” in *Between Sacred and Profane: Researching Religion and Popular Culture*, ed. Gordon Lynch (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2007), 137.

³¹ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1957), 11.

³² Lynch, “What Is This ‘Religion’ in the Study of Religion and Popular Culture?,” 134.

³³ “Profane,” *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1993).

This understanding of the sacred is reflected in Merriam-Webster's secondary definition of the "profane" as simply "the secular." McDannell, who uses the words "secular" and "profane" interchangeably, furthermore links the profane to commerce as well as to Neoplatonic dualism, by associating the profane with matter and the body.³⁴ But the word "profane" also carries some additional, sinister connotations. Many people would gladly consider themselves to be "secular" in a modern Western cultural context; few would probably casually refer to themselves as "profane," except perhaps in a bout of self-effacing humor. Indeed, it is quite telling that while the Oxford University Press' online resource Thesaurus.com lists "profane" as a synonym for "secular," the reverse is not true: "secular" is *not* listed a synonym for "profane." Instead, the profane becomes synonymous with words like "obscene," "foul," "dirty," "filthy," "smutty," "wicked," and "sacrilegious."

At the turn of the twentieth century, sociologist Emile Durkheim claimed that "all religions classify things, both real and unreal, into the two opposing and distinctive categories of the sacred and the profane," noting that these two categories are not only radically separate, but openly hostile to one another.³⁵ In *Purity and Danger*, anthropologist Mary Douglas similarly observes how the human construction of concepts like "dirty" and "clean" – along with the creation of ritual practices seeking to maintain a clear separation between them – are deeply embedded within the moral orders of nearly all socio-religious cultural systems. Objects and actions that are perceived as disrupting the boundary lines between established cultural categories and norms will inevitably come to be perceived as "polluting and dangerous."³⁶ Such conditions often lead to the "scapegoat mechanism" that anthropologist René Girard outlined in

³⁴ McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 4.

³⁵ Cited in McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 4.

³⁶ Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Culture, Inculturation, and Theologians: A Postmodern Critique* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), 37–38.

his seminal work *Violence and the Sacred*, whereby cultures seek to quarantine and expel the “polluting” element from their midst through various rituals of sacrificial violence.³⁷ It is within this framework that Durkheim insists that “the religious life and the profane life cannot exist in the same place.”³⁸

But notice how our categories have become muddy: we have said that the “sacred” is the “not-profane,” and that the “profane is the “not-sacred” as well as the “not-religious.” Durkheim seems to assume that religion and the sacred are synonymous, with “the sacred” always manifesting within the cultural sphere of “religion.” This is certainly the situation as modern Western culture has preferred to frame it, with “religion” being presented as a designated sphere that is “set apart” from the rest of society for the purpose of engaging with “the sacred.” This tidy classification system, however, is complicated by the Christian theology of the Incarnation, which places the Gospel tradition sharply at odds with any attempt to neatly locate or isolate “the sacred” within a particular cultural arena.

Indeed, no Christian community seems to have ever quite gotten a full handle on the theological implications of the Trinitarian enigma. Is God’s proper place in Heaven or on Earth? Within culture or beyond culture? Transcendent or immanent? “Both!” was the early Christians’ obstinate reply. “What God has made clean,” Peter is told in a trance, “you must not call profane.”³⁹ Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is depicted as a transgressor of all socioreligious classification systems and boundaries. Indeed, this is the defining feature of his ministry, and the primary reason he is finally executed. The theological notion of the Almighty and Everlasting God becoming incarnate as a poor Galilean, who is then executed as a criminal by the Roman Empire after being scapegoated and betrayed by the religious authorities of his own people, is so

³⁷ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1972)

³⁸ McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 5.

³⁹ Acts 10:15.

radically transgressive as to lead McDannell to conclude that “the separation that Durkheim perceived between the ideal and the material was fundamentally overcome, at least this once, in Christ.”⁴⁰

Mircea Eliade’s later attempt to reconcile Durkheim’s notions of the sacred and profane with the findings of modern anthropology reveal further problems with any neatly codified system of mutually exclusive realms. Eliade rightly observed that in many pre-modern and non-Western cultures, “existence is open to the world” and people are exposed to “an infinite series” of religious or spiritual experiences – “for the world is sacred, [and] every human experience is capable of being transfigured.”⁴¹ In other words, rather than existing within a separate, set-apart sphere, many cultures understand “the sacred” to interpenetrate *all* of life. Van der Leeuw likewise noted that such cultures seemed to exist in a “unity of life,” where “dancing, praying, and working occur in one and the same act” and “everything is connected with everything.”⁴²

Numerous African American scholars have observed that, for West Africans in particular, the sacred “permeates every imaginable part of life.”⁴³ African American musicologist Teresa Reed therefore writes that “unlike the European tradition, in which religion is experienced as rituals performed at appointed times and in designated spaces, West-African religion is much more ubiquitous.”⁴⁴ African American theologian Barbara Holmes similarly affirms that “the need to create impermeable boundaries between the sacred and the secular is not a legacy of Africana culture...it is a much more recent appropriation of western values and categories. In

⁴⁰ McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 5–6.

⁴¹ Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 170–171.

⁴² Hubbeling, *Divine Presence In Ordinary Life*, 10–11.

⁴³ Teresa L. Reed, *The Holy Profane: Religion in Black Popular Music* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 3–5.

⁴⁴ Reed, *The Holy Profane*, 1.

western cultures we speak of sacred and secular as separate realms. This configuration of the life space is alien to Africana culture.”⁴⁵

But here we have started to mix our categories again, speaking of the “secular” and the “profane” as synonymous. Taking into account all the inherent contradictions, let us now settle the matter: are the secular and the profane pointing to the same thing? Gordon Lynch’s careful reading of Eliade’s work is helpful in outlining a key distinction here: contrary to Durkheim, Eliade defined the sacred and the profane not as separate cultural *spheres*, but as different *modes* or “ways of being in the world.” For Eliade, living in a “sacred” world meant “having particular sensitivity to places, objects, and practices which provide a focal point of encounter with the ultimate source of reality and power of the cosmos,” whereas living in “a profane world means having a flattened sensitivity in which all places, objects, and practices have fundamentally the same tone, quality, and significance, other than the meanings that are given to them by an individual’s personal biography.”⁴⁶

It is important to note that Durkheim, Otto, Eliade, and Van der Leeuw were utilizing terms like “holy,” “sacred,” and “profane” within the context of the late nineteenth century, in an attempt to make sense of the growing differences they perceived between how modern Western and “non-Western” cultures seemed to understand and experience life. As the chasm between these two “modes of being” appeared to be widening in the cultural context of white modernism, Riceour characterized this moment in history as a “period of mourning for the gods who had died.”⁴⁷ At the turn of the twentieth century, Van der Leeuw lamented that he lived in a

⁴⁵ Barbara Ann Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 171.

⁴⁶ Lynch, “What Is This ‘Religion’ in the Study of Religion and Popular Culture?,” 134.

⁴⁷ Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture*, 24.

“profane” time, “full of yearning for the lost unity of life.”⁴⁸ Here we can begin to see this particular framing of “the sacred” and “the profane” not as an objective or value-neutral classification system, but as a specific manifestation of the angst inherent in white Western modernity’s push towards secularization and homogenization.

Now within a context of *post*-modernism, we are beginning to see a breakdown of the “secularization” narrative, as modern secular capitalism has failed to bring about the lasting changes for humanity that its proponents once promised. In fact, many sociologists and religious anthropologists have begun to call the entire notion of “secularization” into question – along with the definitions of “religion” and “culture” that were originally tied to it.⁴⁹ People are not becoming less religious over time; they are simply changing the ways and the channels through which they express their religiosity. Postmodern religious scholar Mark C. Taylor has pointed out that both secular atheists and religious people, in their dispute over cultural control, tend to lose sight of the fact that *secularism is itself a religious phenomenon*, which grew directly out of the Judeo-Christian tradition as it developed in Protestantism.⁵⁰ Taylor observes that “religion,” at least as it has developed in the West (and in Christianity in particular), has *always* harbored secularity.

In the context of medieval Europe, to be considered “religious” meant that one lived within an enclosed monastic order, or as a hermit in the wilderness. “Religious” people were those who lived lives “set apart” in sacred time, which was experienced cyclically rather than chronologically. The vast majority of medieval Christians, however, were “secular” – that is to

⁴⁸ Van der Leeuw, *Sacred and Profane Beauty*, 332.

⁴⁹ Even Peter Berger, one of the sociologists who was responsible for shaping the so-called “secularization theory” has since recanted. Daniel A. Siedell, “Liturgical Aesthetics and Contemporary Artistic Practice: Some Remarks on Developing a Critical Framework,” in *Beyond Belief: Theoaesthetics or Just Old-Time Religion?*, ed. Ronald R. Bernier (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010), 14.

⁵⁰ Mark C. Taylor, *After God*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 2-3.

say, they existed in “ordinary time,” participating in the rites and festivals of the local urban churches, which were also understood to be “secular.”⁵¹ The liturgical developments of the eighth century, for example, clearly show how the Roman rite was codified into two variants: the “monastic” and the “secular.”⁵² In other words, because the medieval church encompassed and embraced secularity, it was perfectly normal to have “secular” priests, “secular” churches, “secular” religious traditions, and “secular” liturgies. Thus, from a historical perspective, “secular” cannot be understood as synonymous with “profane,” since again, the profane indicated that which was *extra-ecclesium*, or outside of the church (hence the sinister associations that developed within popular usage).

The Protestant Reformation’s radical rejection of embodied or enclosed notions of “the sacred” played out in the political sphere through a gradual separation of the church from its land holdings, along with other forms of political and economic power that had previously been held by Roman Catholic clergy. Protestant theologian Barry Taylor writes, “One could argue that since the Reformation, we have not had Christianity. The split in the church gave rise to the secular state, which in the end, did away with Christendom.”⁵³ Mark C. Taylor points to the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia as emblematic in establishing the *modern* notion of “the secular,” which is characterized by the “conversion of an ecclesiastical or religious institution or its property to sovereigns, princes, or lay people.” Secular, by extension, thus came to mean “belonging to this world and its affairs *as distinguished from the church and religion.*”⁵⁴ It is

⁵¹ This original sense of the “secular” is what Charles Taylor invokes in his study of secularization. See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 194-195.

⁵² John Harper, *The Forms and Orders of Western Liturgy from the Tenth to the Eighteenth Century: A Historical Introduction and Guide for Students and Musicians* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 14.

⁵³ Barry Taylor, *Entertainment Theology*, 182.

⁵⁴ Mark C. Taylor, *After God*, 131 emphasis mine.

here, in the seventeenth century, that a new kind of radical split begins to develop in the social imaginary between the “sacred” and the “secular.”

In other words, secularization might best be described as a process by which the “secular” as a *realm* of society (characterized by certain times and places), became increasingly permeated with a “profane” *mode*, in Eliade’s sense of a “flattened” way of being in the world. In many ways, this summarizes the lengthy argument made by Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age*.⁵⁵ Gordon Graham points out that the initial cultural shift to “secularity” did not necessarily reflect any actual data regarding the religious beliefs or practices of everyday people, but reflected rather the *evaluation* of those beliefs and practices by educated elites:

The continuing existence of believers is not of any *ultimate* consequence or significance...the fundamental change does not relate to the behavior of ordinary people, which may for long enough continue in the same old way. Whether they believe or not, their ‘belief has become unbelievable.’⁵⁶

In other words, secularization was not concerned with whether or not religious behavior persisted among individuals, but whether religion was understood more broadly to be an “out-moded” way to live.⁵⁷

It is important to situate these historical developments within their economic context, since these changes were brought about in large part by the rise of modern capitalism. In *The Market As God*, theologian Harvey Cox shows how secular capitalism functions as religion – complete with its own doctrines, prophets, missionaries, and martyrs.⁵⁸ In this sense, capitalism and its accompanying “secularization” project can be understood as a supersessionist movement, which sought to sequester the “sacred” *mode* into a specific, privatized, and autonomous *realm* of society called “religion.” This larger cultural strategy of attempting to “quarantine” and

⁵⁵ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*.

⁵⁶ Gordon Graham, *The Re-Enchantment of the World: Art versus Religion*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 42.

⁵⁷ Graham, *The Re-Enchantment of the World*, 42, emphasis mine.

⁵⁸ Harvey Cox, *The Market As God* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2016).

control the experience of “the sacred” was a major concern for mid-twentieth century theologian Paul Tillich, who defined the sacred mode as a “state of being grasped by an ultimate concern,” which he argued:

...cannot be restricted to a special realm. The unconditional character of this concern implies that it refers to every moment of our life, to every space and every realm. The universe is God’s sanctuary...Essentially the religious and secular are not separated realms. Rather they are within each other. But this is not the way things actually are. In actuality, the secular element tends to make itself independent and to establish a realm of its own. And in opposition to this, the religion element tends to establish itself also as a special realm. Man’s predicament is determined by this situation.⁵⁹

This situation also inevitably gave rise to significant confusion about how to define religion and/or “the church” in relation to “culture.” Theologically, the church is defined by the people who remain faithful to Christianity (however understood). But the church is also a culturally-recognized sociopolitical institution, with historic buildings, rites, properties, holidays, and other visible manifestations within a culture. Church communities within the context of modern secularism have increasingly come to function as their own subcultures within a culture, often patterned after their larger denominational subcultures. But they are also heavily influenced by the local concerns and habits of their surrounding political, economic, and material culture (a Presbyterian church in rural Mississippi will be culturally distinct from a Presbyterian church in The Netherlands, or Peru).

To complicate things even further, the very concept of “culture” itself is a relatively recent invention, which also arose during the Enlightenment, right on the heels of this new notion of an *extra-ecclesium* “secularity.” These developments were influenced as much by European colonialism as they were by the new economic and political realities in Europe and the Americas. The modern concept of “culture” can be traced back to German theologian Johann Gottfield Herder, who argued in the eighteenth century that differences between human societies

⁵⁹ Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 41–42.

were reflections of divine providence. According to Herder, God had appointed each group of human beings with “a particular kind of happiness, which each people then organizes itself around, as a way of life.” Cultures were thus believed to be manifestations of a particular “genius” or *Volkgeist* (folk spirit) that had been divinely entrusted to each group.⁶⁰ This first “theology of culture” was influential in the development of modern anthropology.

Later insights gleaned from postcolonial and post-structural thought have exposed the colonizing impulses at the root of such romantic and essentialist notions, while globalization has largely obliterated all sense of “cultures” as homogenous wholes that must be preserved and kept “pure.” Twentieth century anthropologist Clifford Geertz insightfully came to define “culture” more as a process, which he described as a situation in which humans are suspended in “webs of significance” that we ourselves are spinning.⁶¹ “Culture,” in this sense, does not constitute any particular realm or sphere of life, but is rather a complex matrix made up of the material realities we inhabit, the meanings we imagine about them, and the potentialities towards which we strive. In every moment, we are both actively shaping, and being shaped by, culture.

This *post*-modern understanding of culture points to two important considerations for the present study. The first is that we can no longer reasonably speak of “culture” without engaging the broader social realities that academic scholars have historically placed under the special umbrella term “popular culture.” As sociologist David Chaney writes, in academic usage, “the popular” is “not a natural or transparent term of description; it is a weapon.”⁶² Cultural studies scholar John Storey explains:

⁶⁰ Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture*, 41.

⁶¹ Graham, “What We Make of the World,” 77.

⁶² David Chaney, *Fictions of Collective Life: Public Drama in Late Modern Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1993), 193; cited in Gordon Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 14.

Part of the difficulty stems from the implied *otherness* which is always absent/present when we use the term “popular culture”...popular culture is always defined, implicitly or explicitly, in contrast to other conceptual categories: folk culture, mass culture, dominant culture, working-class culture, etc....whichever conceptual category is deployed as popular culture’s absent/present *other*, it will always powerfully effect the connotations brought into play when we use the term.⁶³

The very word “culture” shares the same root as the word for “colony,” and within certain contexts carries with it old notions of occupying and cultivating the land. Particularly within a nineteenth-century white supremacist context, people became “cultured” through violent homogenizing rituals that stripped individuals of any residual indigenous or ethnic influences. Academic theologian Gordon Lynch points out that in much contemporary scholarship, “using the term ‘popular culture’ can [still] have the implicit effect of reinforcing [this] ideologically-loaded binary of high/low culture”.⁶⁴

A second consideration has to do with the relationship of “religion” to this new postmodern understanding of “culture.” Indeed, “religion” has become one of the most contested terms of all. “A child of the Enlightenment,”⁶⁵ also conceived in the colonial encounter, our modern concept of “religion” is also intrinsically tied to Western projects of imperialism and white supremacist interpretations of global diversity. Ritual theorist Jonathan Z. Smith has gone so far as to argue that, in reality, “no specific historical or cultural phenomena correspond to the general term religion.”⁶⁶ Many religious scholars are now embracing this more “functionalist” approach to the study of religion, which ultimately questions whether “religion” and “culture” should be considered distinct phenomena at all, since any socio-cultural system that serves the basic needs of community, identity formation, and meaning-making through ritual might just as

⁶³ John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*, 3rd edition, (London: Prentice-Hall, 2001), 1; cited in Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, 3.

⁶⁴ Gordon Lynch, “Concluding Thoughts,” in *Between Sacred and Profane: Researching Religion and Popular Culture*, ed. Gordon Lynch (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2007), 162.

⁶⁵ Frank Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics: A Theological Study of Making and Meaning* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 112.

⁶⁶ Cited in Mark C. Taylor, *After God*, 5.

well be considered “religious.” Along these lines, comparative religion scholar David Chidester has observed that popular devotion to various contemporary “fandoms,” including film and literary franchises, sport teams, celebrities, and consumer brands, are all categorically religious.⁶⁷ Musicologist Rupert Till’s *Pop Cult* likewise argues that popular music has come to serve a religious function for those living in the wake of Christendom.⁶⁸ From this perspective, many religious scholars now insist that “the study of religion should really be dissolved into the field of cultural studies.”⁶⁹

Lynch, however, cites the reductionist dangers of failing to appreciate the particular kind of wisdom that is communicated and maintained through the cultural systems we have come to designate as “religious” – along with the hazards of “imposing religious concepts and categories onto forms of cultural practice for which they do little useful and analytical work, and obscure more than they clarify.”⁷⁰ It is difficult to imagine how, for example, one might reconcile the experience of even the most devoted Taylor Swift fan, with Paul Tillich’s theological description of religion as “the experience of absolute reality founded on the experience of absolute nothingness.”⁷¹

Furthermore, as Mark C. Taylor points out, “religion does not simply provide secure foundations, but *destabilizes* every type of religiosity by subverting the oppositional logic of either/or.”⁷² In other words, while some form of ritual or “religiosity” can be identified in every human culture (including within so-called “secular” or popular cultures), the traditions that have come to be recognized globally as “major world religions” seem to encompass within themselves

⁶⁷ David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Pop Culture*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005, 30-52.

⁶⁸ Rupert Till, *Pop Cult: Religion and Popular Music* (New York: Continuum, 2010).

⁶⁹ Lynch, “What Is This ‘Religion’ in the Study of Religion and Popular Culture?,” 132.

⁷⁰ Lynch, “What Is This ‘Religion’ in the Study of Religion and Popular Culture?,” 131–132.

⁷¹ Russell Re Manning, *Theology at the End of Culture: Paul Tillich’s Theology of Culture and Art* (Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2005), 108.

⁷² Mark C. Taylor, *After God*, 4, emphasis mine.

a certain maturity characterized by paradox: that is, the ability to address the particular kinds of complexities that human beings face in their existential encounters with life and death.

Functionalism fails to account for the ability of religious traditions to deconstruct and reconstruct the identities of the individuals and communities in their midst, in truly transgressive and transformative ways.

That being said, however, the functionalist approach still resonates strongly with Tillich's own theological definition of religion as "the state of being ultimately concerned."⁷³ As Kelton Cobb explains, for Tillich, anything can become "a vehicle of one's ultimate concern," and in this sense everyone is religious, albeit with a "great divergence" in "what functions for each of us as 'god'."⁷⁴ Tillich, of course, added an attached counsel that most functionalist scholars of religion would want to avoid: namely, that having an ultimate concern which is not, in fact, Ultimate, but is transient or finite, will ultimately lead to existential disappointment. Cobb lists some of the more common "idolatrous" (or perhaps in Buddhist terms, "empty") concerns:

...one's nation, economic well-being, health and life, family, some abstract idea of humanity, work, sports, education, romantic love, pleasure, physical fitness, self-fulfillment, political power, and freedom.⁷⁵

While Tillich speaks of "religion" as a mode of being that cannot be reduced to a particular culture, he still accepts the situation that there are particular phenomena within cultures that are commonly referred to as "religions." The result is a problem of language that highlights the limitations of our current models for describing human social and spiritual activity. Cobb tries to resolve this problem in his own work by using the label "Religion₁" for Tillich's larger theological conception of religion as an Ultimate Concern for the substance and depth underlying all of human existence, and "Religion₂" for the recognizable social institutions of

⁷³ Paul Tillich, *Theology and Culture*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 40.

⁷⁴ Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture*, 103.

⁷⁵ Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture*, 104.

religion that occupy a particular sphere or realm within a particular culture.⁷⁶ Cobb describes Religion₁ and Religion₂ as “different modes in which culture reveals, takes hold of, and develops an apprehension of unconditioned reality. Each one mediates the sacred in a different manner.”⁷⁷

Which brings us full circle to the concept of the sacred, but now with a clearer way of articulating its relationship to religion. Namely, we can understand the “sacred” as a certain *mode* of being, or a way of perceiving the world, which is characteristic of Religion₁, and is sometimes – but not necessarily always – mediated through the cultural realm of Religion₂.

♪ *Recommended listening:* [CD track 2] “Give Love Each Day” by Yes ♪

⁷⁶ Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture*, 92, 128–129.

⁷⁷ Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture*, 131.

IV. Framing “Art”: The Early Modern Legacy

As of yet, we have not said anything about art. Much like the concepts of “religion” and “culture,” our modern concept of “art” also presents problems, since it too is a product of Western modernity’s secularization project. Of course, throughout history there have always been creative mediums of human expression and skilled forms of human craft, which have interacted in a variety of ways with both ritual practice and with theological considerations of ultimate concern. Historically, relations between artists and the church have been characterized by both conflict and creative collaboration. The supersessionist mythology of modern secular art’s “triumph” over religion – a narrative that is still taught in many art and music schools today – obscures the fact that, for example, some of the most prolific composers of “secular” music during the Middle Ages were also, in fact, monks or clergymen.

During the Early Modern period, as patronage for the arts shifted away from the church, the arts increasingly became defined by the interests of aristocratic and bourgeois middle-class life within the context of the emerging market economy.⁷⁸ Thus, the concepts of “art” and “religion” that most people take for granted today emerged relatively recently and right alongside one another, precisely in an attempt to establish their separation. It is within this political and economic context that educated elites began to interpret the waning power of religion as an indication of human “progress” and advancement. These narratives also served as a convenient euphemism for white supremacist ideologies that helped to justify the global occupation of indigenous lands, and the enslavement of native peoples. Cultural “others” were understood to be “primitive” precisely because they engaged in artistic and religious rituals that “civilized” Europeans felt they had moved “beyond.”

⁷⁸ Frank Burch Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 5.

A century later, just as scholars like Durkheim, Eliade, Victor Turner, and Gerardus Van der Leeuw were lamenting the loss of a pervasive sense of “the holy” within the context of modern Western culture, these same writers also observed, with great fascination, that other cultures did not seem to make any meaningful distinctions between “religion” and “art.” Indeed, many parts of the world did not have a conceptual category of “art” prior to their colonization by Western Europeans. Laurenti Magesa writes of Africa:

The unification of all creation in the spiritual realm is at the center of African art...The religious/spiritual and emotional *meaning* takes precedence over mere abstract *beauty* or the visual appearance of the object of art, both for the artist and the African patron. Seldom is art in Africa “for art’s sake.” The reluctance to claim ownership of works of art in Africa is significant in this respect...A work of art...is public property.⁷⁹

Unfortunately, this observation that some sort of shift had taken place within the Western European mindset with regard to art was further folded into the narrative of “progress,” emboldening a widespread sense among elites that the separation of art from religion represented a major step forward in human evolution. While some religious scholars, including Eliade, lamented this situation as being equivalent to a “second fall” of humanity,⁸⁰ most took it as further evidence of white supremacy.

Examining this shift within a postcolonial framework, we must reject old notions of “progress” that conceal the massive human cost of modernity’s emergence, and challenge the myth of Western art’s “autonomy.” Indeed, the notion of “art” as a phenomenon existing “for its own sake” is an idea that, even within a European context, is less than two centuries old. French poet Théophile Gautier coined the phrase “art for art’s sake” (*l’arte pour l’arte*) in his 1835 Romantic manifesto on art as part of a larger art movement that had explicit religious commitments and goals.⁸¹ Philosopher and social theorist Henri de Saint-Simon followed suit by

⁷⁹ Laurenti Magesa, *What Is Not Sacred? African Spirituality* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 78.

⁸⁰ Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 213.

⁸¹ John W. De Gruchy, *Christianity, Art, and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 82–83.

declaring that the artist was the new “priest class” of modern, secularized society.⁸² As art historian William Gaunt put it, for artists of this period there was only “one law, one morality, one devotion, and that was – Art.”⁸³

The philosophical underpinnings of this movement had already been put forth fifty years prior by Immanuel Kant in his 1790 work *Critique of Judgment*. Kant speculated at length on the nature of art, ultimately defining it as that which is created and experienced as *set apart* from any practical purpose. Thus, “art” came to be seen as sacred *by definition*. “Fine art” was furthermore defined as any “representation which is intrinsically final, and which, although devoid of an end, has the effect of advancing the culture of the mental powers in the interests of social communication.”⁸⁴ For Kant, and for the artists and thinkers who followed him, the autonomy of art was important not simply in its creation, but in its reception: “The beautiful is that which, apart from a concept, is cognized as an object of a necessary delight.”⁸⁵ Those who wished to engage in the aesthetic appreciation of “true art” were therefore instructed to “cultivate” a sense of delight that was “independent of all interest.”⁸⁶

The cultivation of aesthetic distance with regard to artistic objects was associated with a particularly elitist definition of culture – to be “cultured” was to have “cultivated” a sense of distance between self and object. “What became high art rituals, connoisseurship and so on,” writes Simon Frith, “were an aspect of bourgeois ‘distinction’ that combined social, aesthetic, and ethical superiority.”⁸⁷ According to Mark Smith, this shift in behavior towards aesthetic

⁸² Henri de Saint-Simon, “The New Christianity: First Dialogue” (1825), in Keith Taylor, ed. and trans. *Henri de Saint-Simon: Selected Writings on Science, Industry, and Social Organization* (London: Croom Helm, 1975), 289–304; cited in Daniel A. Siedell, “Liturgical Aesthetics and Contemporary Artistic Practice,” 14.

⁸³ William Gaunt, *The Aesthetic Adventure*, (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1957), 14; cited in De Gruchy, *Christianity, Art, and Transformatio*, 83.

⁸⁴ Immanuel Kant, “Critique of Judgment,” in *What Is Art? Aesthetic Theory from Plato to Tolstoy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 230.

⁸⁵ Kant, “Critique of Judgment,” 215.

⁸⁶ Kant, “Critique of Judgment,” 199.

⁸⁷ Frith, *Performing Rites*, 29–30.

objects among the elite classes in England occurred within a relatively short time period at the turn of the nineteenth century. Prior to that, he writes, “museum visitors were accustomed to, for example, touching artifacts, feeling their texture and weight.”⁸⁸ Gordon Graham similarly reminds us with regard to music that,

Sitting down and deliberately listening to music for its own sake is not something that human beings have done for very long... Even Mozart could not command the undivided attention of those who had paid him to compose and play... The practice of listening to music for its own sake had to be established... Something similar may be said of the development of the theater. At one time, audiences sat on the stage talking, eating, and drinking during even the best efforts of actors and playwrights. The idea of giving exclusive attention to the drama, and the requisite practice of sitting quietly in the audience, had to come about. So, too, with the development of the art gallery. Visitors to the Louvre, a former palace that the French revolutionaries turned into an early version of the art museum as we now know it, had to be taught how to behave.⁸⁹

Thus, the Western development of an autonomous sphere called “art” focused on the construction of a particular quality of *attentiveness* and contemplation in relation to sensory experiences. In this sense, modern art is defined not so much by objects themselves, but as a way of *framing and experiencing* objects as things of detached, aesthetic interest. This, of course, is the only way of making sense of using one term – “art” – to describe the diverse “objects” represented within the various artistic disciplines and mediums: painting, music, sculpture, poetry, architecture, dance, drama, and gardening (all of which were originally listed as the ‘fine arts’). Naturally, not *all* combinations of colors, sounds, carvings, words, structures, movements, or flowers could be considered “art.” The moniker of “art” *only* pertained to objects that had been framed in such a way *so as to be experienced as art* – which to say, set apart from either doctrinal interest or pragmatic utility. When defined in this way, “art” becomes less about the *contents* of a particular sensory experience, and more about the *forms* that elicit a particular *kind* of sensory experience.

⁸⁸ Mark M. Smith, *Sensory History* (New York: Berg, 2007), 24.

⁸⁹ Graham, *The Re-Enchantment of the World*, 102.

It is important to realize that even in Western culture, the lifespan of this rather unique and particular way of thinking about “art” was relatively brief, lasting only about a century and a half. Marcel Duchamp demonstrated the irony of this approach in 1917 by bringing it to its logical conclusion, when he presented the world with a sculpture he entitled *Fountain*. It was simply an old urinal, which had been signed “R. Mutt.”



Figure 3. *Fountain*, Marcel Duchamp, 1917⁹⁰

The question that is often asked of such pieces – “But is it art?”⁹¹ – represents something of a categorical error. Critics who ask this question are concerned with the object’s contents. But modern art has never defined itself by objects, per se. Rather, “art” is defined by the manner in which those objects are presented, displayed, and experienced by a subject.

⁹⁰ Alfred Stieglitz, “*Fountain* by Marcel Duchamp,” photographed in 1917, accessed April 8, 2014 at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fountain_\(Duchamp\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fountain_(Duchamp)).

⁹¹ “But Is It Art,” *The New Criterion*, March 2014.

Four years after Duchamp's urinal, Russian painter Alexander Rodchenko released a statement coinciding with the opening of his controversial Moscow exhibition entitled *5 x 5 = 25*, in which he proclaimed: "Art is dead!"⁹² It was a clear reference to Nietzsche's declaration of God's death one generation prior. But much like the death of God, this so-called "death of art" did not coincide with any widespread discontinuation of artistry among everyday people. Just as people have persisted with their religious beliefs and practices in the aftermath of God's death, people have continued to paint, sculpt, sing, write, and dance long after the supposed death of "art." In both cases, the pronouncement of "death" was less about specific activities or phenomena, as it was about the paradigms and frameworks in which those activities and phenomena had been interpreted and experienced by elites.

The final deathblow for the "religion" of modern art, however, came not from framed urinals, or from Rodchenko's painted squares. As Bernier writes:

Its crystal wings shattered on contact with twentieth-century trench warfare, gulags, and genocides. . . . On aestheticism fell the verdict that, whatever religion it possessed, it was really a charade of religiosity, the swooning affectation of high-brow poseurs. . . . [The aesthete] ran to museums out of escapism and loathing for our factory-gray, modern reality. . . . But squeamish withdrawal from reality never did art make. Nor, incidentally, does it make for good religion.⁹³

These apocalyptic times also ushered in a final collapse of the economic class structures in which the old artistic paradigms and practices had been established and maintained. In 1845, a columnist for London's *Music World* complained about the growing availability of cheap concert tickets, insisting that "art music" must "not be degraded." "To play the finest music," he lamented, "to an audience which has been admitted at a shilling apiece is [a situation] I can never give consent to."⁹⁴

⁹² Mark C. Taylor, *After God*, 211.

⁹³ Didier Maleuvre, *The Religion of Reality: Inquiry into the Self, Art, and Transcendence* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 192.

⁹⁴ Cited in Frith, *Performing Rites*, 30.

Frith notes that by the end of the nineteenth century, “something very close to a mass musical culture had emerged – a sharing of common taste across a broad social range.”⁹⁵ He therefore warns against the common tendency to equate “mass culture” or “popular culture” with the working class, since for at least the past two centuries, it has been increasingly the case that “highbrow” and “lowbrow” coexist within the aspirations and experiences of economically diverse individuals.⁹⁶ Particularly in the context of the United States, where the social demands of European bourgeois life were largely unsustainable anyway, American pragmatism led to an even greater sense of cultural fluidity. Perceptions of a special kind of transcendence that was only attainable through the “highest” forms of music and art were reinterpreted within the new class orientation. Accordingly, the artistic and musical traditions of Europe came to be associated with wealth, decorum, tradition, solemnity, and reverence.

Musicologist Katherine Preston’s work has challenged the commonly-held assumption that the “musical schism” between classical and “popular” (parlor) music in the late nineteenth century could be neatly mapped onto the class structures of the time. Rather, stylistic categories came to serve as markers of the perceived solemnness of an event or social occasion. Regardless of class context, musicians tended to perform popular tunes at dances, parties, and parades, while reserving classical material from the “Old World” for more serious occasions, like seated concerts, graduations, and civic ceremonies.⁹⁷

It is unsurprising, then, that we should find the attitude in so many American churches that only the “fine arts” of the Western European canon bear the necessary markers of solemnity and seriousness to be deemed appropriate for religious ceremonies, whereas “popular” forms and styles of music (including participatory “folk” music) do not. Most of the resources on “sacred

⁹⁵ Frith, *Performing Rites*, 30.

⁹⁶ Frith, *Performing Rites*, 31–32.

⁹⁷ Frith, *Performing Rites*, 30–31.

music” and worship published by Christian clergy and music directors in the twentieth century reflect this attitude. As one Presbyterian pastor claimed:

No one has ever written a requiem...to be accompanied by three people playing guitars. Why? Because death is still (for some of us, anyway), a fairly serious matter, and guitar-playing just doesn't *sound* serious.⁹⁸

Predictably, the author granted that a requiem written for *classical* guitar would be a notable exception. Such associations may seem perfectly natural within a contemporary American church context. but when looked at from a historical perspective, it becomes clear that they are not only culturally arbitrary, but tied to class values that are contrary to the Gospel tradition.

So what, if anything, can be salvaged from the inheritance of modern art's legacy? While these approaches reflect the social, economic, and political interests of their time, they were also born out of a very sincere desire within that context to see, experience, and understand the world in new ways – particularly through an exploration of the relationship between objectivity and subjectivity. The attempt of artists and thinkers to disentangle “art” from the dictatorial agendas of “religion” and “politics” is certainly praiseworthy, as is their attempt to foster a special kind of attentiveness towards aesthetic experiences of creative self-expression. Their efforts also challenge us to reflect on the aesthetic properties unique to particular mediums, and to experiment with new ways of deepening the communicative potential of symbolic and artistic expression.

Thus, as we venture into an exploration of our *post*-modern cultural, religious, and artistic milieu, let us reclaim some of the more philosophically compelling aspects of the modern art legacy. Without clinging to old notions of artistic “autonomy,” “highbrow/lowbrow” cultures, or “purity” of form, we can still define “art” as *an activity of framing or arranging sensible contents (whether they be words, colors, sounds, or bodies) in such a way that they have the*

⁹⁸ T. David Gordon, *Why Johnny Can't Sing Hymns: How Pop Culture Rewrote the Hymnal* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 2010), 61.

capacity to express multivalent meanings with regard to our subjective aesthetic experiences of living in time and space.

While “music” is certainly not a universal category, all forms of sound-play, for example, entail a certain framing of sound *in time*. This is as true for the cyclical colotomy of Indonesian gamelan music as it is for John Cage’s composition 4’33” (which is four minutes and 33 seconds of silence). In Western music, the harmonic swell of sound’s movement through time is often interpreted as being resonant – both somatically and conceptually – with our experience of existence in time, which is often characterized by varying degrees of tension and release as we move towards our own *eschatos*. As church musician and theologian Don Saliers writes, “All things change, and we are sometimes overwhelmed by the sense of the perishing. Music captures this ephemeral aspect of our existence...awaken[ing] the poignancy of our passage through time.”⁹⁹

Meanwhile, the visual arts (including painting, drawing, sculpting, and architecture) freeze time in order to achieve a particular framing of objects *in space*. Goethe therefore referred to music “liquid architecture,” and to architecture as “frozen music.” In dance, along with drama (the relational ‘dance’ of two or more), the body itself becomes both visual art and music, as time and space are framed together in unique ways that have the power to convey emotion and communicate meaning. Poetry and literature likewise encompass a mixture of both framing agents through the work of story and word-play. By appreciating the various ways in which the different artistic mediums “frame” our experience of time and space – thereby helping us to “see” and “hear” in new ways – we can begin to develop a better means for theological discernment of the sacred in and through the occasions of “art” we encounter in the world.

⁹⁹ Don Saliers, *Music and Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 2007), 66.

For as Paul Tillich reminds us,

Time and space are the main structures of existence to which all existing things, the whole finite realm, are subjected. Existing means being finite or being in time and space. This holds true of everything in our world. Time and space are the powers of universal existence including human existence, human body and mind.



Figure 4. *Solitude*, oil painting by Judy Mackey, 2010¹⁰⁰

♪ *Recommended listening:* [CD track 3] All the Rowboats by Regina Spektor ♪

¹⁰⁰ Judy Mackey, “*Solitude* – Monotone Palette Knife Painting of a Rowboat Adrift,” Palette Knife Painters Blog, April 22, 2010. Accessed April 8, 2014 at http://paletteknifepainters.blogspot.com/2010_04_01_archive.html.

V. Re-Framing “Religion” and “Art”: The Postmodern Mélange



Image source: http://www.grdodge.org/uploads/RTEmagicC_cartoon_01.png

We have observed that the early modernist ideal of separation between “religion” and “art” did not have an equivalent in many indigenous and premodern cultures, and that this rather short-lived experiment within Western culture came to somewhat abrupt end during the mid-twentieth century. The respective “deaths” of God and art eventually ushered in a new era, marked by a breakdown of categories that has given way to what some have called a “post-modern” situation in the West. Barry Taylor has noted that the implosion of modernist ideals and paradigms – inaugurated in part by the dramatic increase in geographic mobility, the availability of new media, and communication technologies – has given rise to a “post-secular” society, characterized by a renewed interest in spirituality, alongside an embrace of religious pluralism in the emergence of a global culture.¹⁰¹

Catholic theologian David Tracy writes, “At no other time have people had such a sense of the difference of others, of the pluralism of societies, cultures, and religions, and of the

¹⁰¹ Barry Taylor, *Entertainment Theology*, 25–26.

relativity that this entails.”¹⁰² “More persons in more parts of the world,” writes Taylor, “consider a wider set of possible lives than they ever did before.”¹⁰³ Within this new global network, our experiences of time and space have been radically altered from the more empirical and localized understandings that dominated the modern European mindset. Graham Ward has observed that, in cyberspace, concepts of space “collapse into omnipresence and multilocality” and “time disappears.”¹⁰⁴ When we are online, we enter into a space that is placeless, and a “timeless time.”¹⁰⁵ Media theorist Douglas Rushkoff writes:

Welcome to the twenty-first century. We are all immigrants in a new territory. Our world is changing so rapidly that we can hardly track the differences, much less master them. . . . We are bombarded every day with an increasing number of words, devices, ideas, and events which we do not understand. . . . Without having physically migrated an inch, we have, nonetheless, traveled further than any generation in history.¹⁰⁶

Within this condition, the classifications and separations that once provided illumination to previous generations now seem irrelevant at best, or at worst oppressive. The collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 was emblematic of an era in which more and more people have begun to participate in the questioning, altering, and/or dissolving of previously-held cultural boundaries: gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, nationalities, religions, and even the lines between established academic disciplines and artistic mediums. As Cobb reminds us,

The *bricolage* that postmodernism celebrates as the ‘little bit from here, little bit from there’ process through which we now grab and assign meaning to the world and improvise in an ad hoc manner our own deepest identities, has become a possibility only because of the new media.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² David Tracy, *On Naming the Present: Reflections on God, Hermeneutics, and Church*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 16; cited in Taylor, *Entertainment Theology*, 73.

¹⁰³ Barry Taylor, *Entertainment Theology*, 46–47.

¹⁰⁴ Graham Ward, ed., *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997), xv. Cited in Taylor, *Entertainment Theology: New-Edge Spirituality in a Digital Democracy*, 34.

¹⁰⁵ Taylor, *Entertainment Theology: New-Edge Spirituality in a Digital Democracy*, 35–36.

¹⁰⁶ Rushkoff, *Playing the Future*, 7; cited in Taylor, *Entertainment Theology*, 79.

¹⁰⁷ Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture*, 39.

Particularly with regard to the arts, cultural historian Thomas Hine reminds us that “human beings have always imitated the images, sounds, and gestures...that were available to them,” but that new media technologies have brought about a dramatic increase in their number and range:

In an earlier age – before the boom in machinery of reproduction and broadcasting – the symbols available to one for imitation would have been produced by a relatively local community, reflecting its historically acquired traditions and ways of knowing. One would imitate, absorb, and build one’s world around the words, images, sounds, and gestures of one’s family, neighbors, and local figures and institutions.¹⁰⁸

The rise of commercial forms of entertainment has also had an effect of further blurring “the boundaries between upper and lower class leisure, creating occasions for people of very different walks of life to be thrown together in their consumption of entertainments with broad appeal.”¹⁰⁹

Hine argues that “high” Western culture has not died; rather, “we are swimming in it.”¹¹⁰ This “democratization” of aesthetic experience is an unmistakable feature of the new global market capitalism. Mark C. Taylor reminds us that

...as high and low collapse into each other, art becomes money and money becomes art. This is simultaneously the realization and the parodic reversal of the avant-garde program of transforming the world into a work of art...if everything is a work of art, then everyone is an artist. This is both the fulfillment and the end of art.¹¹¹

This “liquification” of culture and art through its commercialization has come at a cost, and certainly not without pushback. After World War II, scholars from the Frankfurt School, who had recently witnessed the disastrously effective use of commercial propaganda during the rise of the Nazi regime in Germany, warned of the potential dangers of “culture industries” to narcotize, homogenize, and depoliticize the public through mass media channels. Theodor Adorno argued that “the culture industry gives people a false sense of what will bring them

¹⁰⁸ Thomas Hine, “Notable Quotables: Why Images become Icons,” *New York Times*, Arts and Leisure section (February 18, 1996), 1; cited in Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture*, 36-37.

¹⁰⁹ Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture*, 32.

¹¹⁰ Hine, “Notable Quotables,” 1, cited in Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide*, 36.

¹¹¹ Mark C. Taylor, *After God*, 215–217.

happiness through the aestheticization of everyday life. . .the illusion that happiness can be found through consumer commodities or mass-produced entertainment.”¹¹²

Neil Postman, in his 1985 work *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, carried this same line of critique forward by documenting the ways in which the electronic mediums of the late twentieth century – particularly television – have brought about major (and in his opinion, mostly negative) shifts in the way Americans think about serious matters.¹¹³ In his recent book *Music Quickens Time*, conductor Daniel Barenboim likewise laments the use of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony in a chocolate advertisement, arguing that whenever images are imposed upon “pure music,” “the public is made to forget the necessity to listen and concentrate.”¹¹⁴ These and similar critiques have motivated many professional artists and art critics to double down in their defense of the older “fine art” canons, which are seen as sacred and must therefore remain set apart from commerce. “Popular art,” meanwhile, is seen as having dubious value precisely because of its inherent relationship to commerce.

These boundaries, however, are becoming more and more difficult to defend, especially within the context of a democratized media. The expectation that certain kinds of aesthetic experiences can and must remain hermetically sealed has proven unsustainable in the current climate. We may empathize with Barenboim’s frustrations, and his desire to protect Beethoven’s creative masterpiece from the psychologically exploitative effects of mass advertising. But his appeals to the necessity of aesthetic purity lack the nuance necessary to realistically address the complex relationships that now exist between music, visual art, and commerce in the media-saturated cultures of the twenty-first century.

¹¹² Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, 71.

¹¹³ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985).

¹¹⁴ Daniel Barenboim, *Music Quickens Time* (New York: Verso, 2008), 33.

Efforts to present certain styles of music or art as more “distinguished” or “serious” also unavoidably end up perpetuating old racial and class regimes. In the 1930s, Pierre Bourdieu argued that different demographics engaged in different art worlds – the “bourgeois,” the “folk,” and the “commercial” – based on the cultural capital that each group possessed. However Frith and others have observed that these artistic worlds do not represent distinct, autonomous spheres of aesthetic taste, but rather “the play of three historically evolving discourses across a single field.”¹¹⁵ Drawing on Foucault, Frith shows how these “discourses” have developed alongside one another, each in response to the particular issues raised by their commodification and dissemination within the broadly-defined “mass culture” of late capitalism. Frith therefore describes most of what we see today as “a form of middle-class culture characterized by middlebrow concerns...marked by highbrow traces.”¹¹⁶

Gordon Lynch likewise warns against overstating or romanticizing the perceived contrasts and boundaries between “authentic” folk cultures, “elevated” high cultures, and “debased” commercial or pop cultures. “Any theory of popular culture,” he writes, “that involves some kind of narrative of a ‘cultural fall’ from some glorious past of high or folk culture requires a critical scrutiny of its historical accuracy and adequacy.”¹¹⁷ Indeed, it would be difficult to determine where in this classification system one might place the work of artists like Esperanza Spalding [CD track 4], Chris Thile [CD track 5], Fiona Apple [CD track 6], Kamasi Washington [CD track 7], or Sufjan Stevens [CD track 1], since each of their repertoires encompass a unique combination of folk stylings, art music textures, and popular song forms that represent an assortment of values including authenticity, harmonic skill, and commercial accessibility.

¹¹⁵ Frith, *Performing Rites*, 36-42.

¹¹⁶ Frith, *Performing Rites*, 43-45.

¹¹⁷ Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, 10-11.

Technological developments over the past thirty years have continued to transform the process of artistic creation and consumption, gradually shifting control away from major media corporations. Genres were originally marketing categories that determined the appropriate distribution channels for recorded music (which were largely built around racial categories). Now, with the widespread availability of independent recording software, and with global media distribution channels like YouTube, the influence of recording industry moguls and genre classifications for bins in record stores is becoming obsolete. As more and more artists are free to explore the uncharted territory between genres, terms like “rock,” “pop,” “folk,” “country,” and “rap” have become inadequate for capturing the stylistic complexities of the music being produced today. Many music critics have begun to employ conglomerate labels in order to identify the genre-defying sound-play of emerging artists. The all-female band HAIM, for example, was recently described as “stripped-down-nu-folk-meets-nineties-R&B.”¹¹⁸ Austin City Limits recently described Gary Clark Jr. as a “21st-century rock ‘n’ roll messiah” and “a blues virtuoso who blends reggae, punk, R&B, hip-hop, and soul, reshaping the genre for our time.”¹¹⁹ As fewer and fewer artists seek to confine their creative work within particular musical traditions or genre classifications, we see in popular music something similar to the “spiritual but not religious” trend: a clear rejection of the old frameworks, combined with a freewheeling and hybrid engagement with their former contents.

In addition to the mixing of genres and styles, there has been an integration of forms and mediums as well. Contemporary popular music cultures are no longer characterized by an interest in “pure” musical experience, but seek to incorporate music, words, movement, and

¹¹⁸ Freddie Champion, “Band of the Week: HAIM,” *Vogue*, February 28, 2012, <http://www.vogue.com/culture/article/band-of-the-week-haim/#1>.

¹¹⁹ Austin City Limits Live, “About Gary Clark Jr.,” *Austin City Limits*, <https://acllive.com/calendar/gary-clark-jr-nye-123123>

visual imagery into a more holistic aesthetic experience. Frith suggests that, increasingly, popular musicians should be characterized more as performance artists who mix musical forms with visual art and dramatic/dance mediums.¹²⁰ When we consider role that visual art plays in the packaging and distribution of musical recordings, particularly through an increasing emphasis on music videos (which combine drama, dance, music, poetry, and visual image), we see a complete breakdown of modern art's goal to isolate and elevate different kinds of sensory experiences.

While the elites and bohemians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries insisted that transcendence was mediated through a purity of form, theologian Don Saliers has argued that it is actually through an interrelation of the senses – what he calls a *synaesthetic matrix* – that we awaken to “the deeper dimensions of reality and of the soul.”¹²¹ McDannell likewise reminds us that religious practices are themselves by nature “multimedia events...where speech, vision, gesture, touch, and sound combine.”¹²² This *synaesthetic matrix* as experienced in film, television, and the internet is a large part of what has facilitated the elevation of certain pop stars, icons, and fandoms to the level of religious status within a secular capitalist milieu – a situation has led to increasing anxiety among religious leaders with regard to “popular culture.”

This situation has given rise to tensions particularly within religious traditions that have sought to deemphasize visual experience and elevate “the word.” In 1973, Harvey Cox predicted the advent of social media, saying that high culture and the new media would soon blend into one so that “billions of persons and millions of groups” would be able to “tell one another their stories, listen, respond, and refashion in a thousand unimagined permutations.”¹²³ At the same time, he recognized that this situation would spell the end of the reign of written text – a situation

¹²⁰ Frith, *Performing Rites*, 212.

¹²¹ Saliers, *Music and Theology*, 2–5.

¹²² McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 14.

¹²³ Harvey Cox, “The Seduction of the Spirit: The Use and Misuse of People’s Religion,” in *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader*, ed. Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen (Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 255.

that he anticipated would have “a shattering impact on the ‘religions of the book’.”¹²⁴ Indeed, it was precisely the loss of the *written* word that was most concerning for Jewish media analyst Neil Postman in his critique of television as a news medium. Postman specifically lamented that newscasters were no longer “assembling the news to be read, or broadcasting it to be heard,” but were instead “televising the news *to be seen*.”¹²⁵

Understanding where Christianity fits into this integrated cultural matrix is complex. Theologian Daniel Stout has observed that “in the case of television, not only is the sacred treated in an environment of entertainment, but it is mixed with forms of commercialism as well.”¹²⁶ Television, and the art and music forms associated with it, have thus become emblematic for many religious and non-religious people of an “excessive materialism that contradicts selflessness and prudence.”¹²⁷ Many evangelical Christians, however, have embraced these new mediums, seeing them as an opportunity for evangelism. Meanwhile, an increasing number of Mainline and Roman Catholic religious leaders begrudgingly feel that they simply *must* engage in new media marketing practices in order to make Christianity “more appealing to American youth.”¹²⁸ Barbara Wheeler of Auburn Seminary has suggested that the reason for the decline of mainline Protestantism is precisely its unwillingness to “turn out stuff” at the same rate of evangelicals. “Mainline Protestantism,” she argues, “does not have enough of a culture,” implying that “cultures” are constructed through the production of commodities that can be

¹²⁴ Cox, “The Seduction of the Spirit, 256.

¹²⁵ Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 88.

¹²⁶ Daniel A. Stout, “Religion and Popular Culture: Notes from the Technological School,” in *Religion and Popular Culture: Studies on the Interaction of Worldviews*, ed. Daniel A. Stout and Judith M. Buddenbaum (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 2001), 71.

¹²⁷ Stout, “Religion and Popular Culture,” 71.

¹²⁸ Eric Haley, Candace White, and Anne Cunningham, “Branding Religion: Christian Consumers’ Understandings of Christian Products,” in *Religion and Popular Culture: Studies on the Interaction of Worldviews*, ed. Daniel A. Stout and Judith M. Buddenbaum (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 2001), 269.

bought and sold in the context of late capitalism.¹²⁹ Barry Taylor agrees, arguing that the success of traditional faith “in large part depend[s] on its ability to ‘corner a piece of the market’.”¹³⁰

However, the proposed development of a commercial “Christian subculture” has become problematic for many Christians, since it is an industry that frequently utilizes problematic psychological tactics and emotional manipulation strategies in order to manufacture desire, often (ironically) through an appropriation of traditional religious language, forms, and imagery. This situation that has led to a split within Christianity when it comes to the ethics of mass media advertising. A recent study comparing users and nonusers of books, clothing, film, jewelry, and music associated with the “contemporary Christian” subculture has revealed significant differences between the two groups. Whereas nonusers express an inability “to resolve the *intellectual* inconsistencies they perceive between marketing and Christian teachings,” devout users focus instead on the *feelings of identification* that are generated by the consumption of such products.¹³¹ In other words, “for devout users, the meaning of the product is derived from the products’ identification *as* ‘Christian’, more than from the significance of the product alone.”¹³² As one fan of contemporary Christian music put it, “the great thing about Christian music is that it gets you excited about being a Christian.”¹³³

“Contemporary Christian Music” (CCM) is a genre that emerged in the 1960s, when a songwriter named Larry Norman, who had described himself as “too secular for the Christians

¹²⁹ Barbara Wheeler, “We Who Were Far Off,” Address to the Religious Research Association, St. Louis, 1995. Cited in Stewart M. Hoover, “Religion, Media, and the Cultural Center of Gravity,” in *Religion and Popular Culture: Studies on the Interaction of Worldviews*, ed. Daniel A. Stout and Judith M. Buddenbaum (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 2001), 53.

¹³⁰ Taylor, *Entertainment Theology*, 102.

¹³¹ Haley, White, and Cunningham, “Branding Religion: Christian Consumers’ Understandings of Christian Products,” 285.

¹³² Haley, White, and Cunningham, “Branding Religion: Christian Consumers’ Understandings of Christian Products,” 283–284.

¹³³ Haley, White, and Cunningham, “Branding Religion,” 281.

and too Christian for the secularists,” released his first album of “Jesus Music.”¹³⁴ Since then, CCM has grown into a multibillion dollar industry controlled primarily by major media corporations that are far more interested in their dividends and shareholders than in the theological implications and consequences of their products.¹³⁵ *Variety* magazine reported in 1997 that CCM had shown a 22 percent growth each year in the 1990s.¹³⁶ By 2012, the revenues of this industry totaled 62.6 million dollars. Of course, the record producers and distributors associated with CCM have a strong vested interest in establishing, maintaining, and controlling perceptions about the differences between “Christian” and “secular” music. When CCM fans express sentiments like “Christian music lifts you up, while secular music drags you down”¹³⁷ they are in many ways parroting messages that have been manufactured by the CCM industry, and delivered through Christian television and radio distribution channels, precisely in order to maintain their target demographic.

In reality, however, the relationship between popular music, commerce, and religious identity is far more complex, with boundaries that are much more ambiguous and porous. The 1969 song “Spirit in the Sky” by Norman Greenbaum [CD track 8] is neither considered a “Christian song” by the Christian recording industry, nor would it be considered “sacred music” in most Mainline or Roman Catholic contexts. From a marketing standpoint, the track falls squarely within the “secular” category of rock ‘n’ roll. And yet, as Barry Alfonso points out, the song “has more explicit religious content than do many recent Christian radio hits.”¹³⁸

¹³⁴ Tim Dowley, *Christian Music: A Global History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 234.

¹³⁵ Terry Mattingly, “Christian Music Controlled by Secular Music Industry,” *Scripps Howard News Service*, 2002, <http://www.beliefnet.com/News/2002/11/Christian-Music-Controlled-By-Secular-Music-Industry.aspx>.

¹³⁶ Stephen D. Perry and Wolfe Arnold S., “Testifications: Fan Response to a Contemporary Christian Music Artist’s Death,” in *Religion and Popular Culture: Studies on the Interaction of Worldviews*, ed. Daniel A. Stout and Judith M. Buddenbaum (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 2001), 251.

¹³⁷ Haley, White, and Cunningham, “Branding Religion,” 280–281.

¹³⁸ Barry Alfonso, *The Billboard Guide to Contemporary Christian Music* (New York: Billboard Books, 2002), 21.

To complicate things even further, Christian artists like Josh Garrells [CD track 9] and Mumford & Sons [CD track 10] both produce music that openly expresses their sincere Christian convictions, with frequent lyrical references to Biblical and theological themes. Nevertheless, these two artists refuse to associate themselves with CCM, maintaining a strategic position within the global music industry as a whole. Mumford & Sons has turned down multiple invitations to perform at Greenbelt (England's preeminent "Christian" music festival), and while Garrells – who is himself a Christian pastor – has been "courted repeatedly" by the CCM industry, he has always declined, choosing instead to give away his album *Love & War & The Sea in Between* free for an entire year as an expression of his Christian values.¹³⁹

Of course, the popular music of African Americans has always represented the hybridity of sacred and secular in black consciousness, even as Black churches have often maintained their own strict boundaries between sacred and secular Black music.¹⁴⁰ Black liberation theologian James Cone called the blues the "secular spirituals" of the nineteenth and twentieth-centuries,¹⁴¹ and Black Pentecostal theologian Daniel Hodge used the term "neo-sacred" to describe the ways in which the hip-hop of the late 1990s sought "a new type of theological discourse...in the face of severe economic, social, and political disparities."¹⁴² For Teresa Reed, the 1959 song "Shout!" [CD track 11] does more than simply mimic Pentecostalism: "it *is* Pentecostalism!"¹⁴³

Black singer/songwriter and guitarist Sister Rosette Tharpe [CD track 12], who is often referred to as the "Godmother of Rock 'n' Roll," gained popularity during the 30s and 40s precisely through her performances of Black Gospel music on electric guitar. While the

¹³⁹ John Burnett, "A Christian Musician with More Questions than Answers," *Ecstatic Voices*, December 26, 2013, <http://www.npr.org/2013/12/26/255454906/a-christian-musician-with-more-questions-than-answers>.

¹⁴⁰ Reed, *The Holy Profane*, 30.

¹⁴¹ James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 100.

¹⁴² Daniel White Hodge, "Baptized in Dirty Water: Locating the Gospel of Tupac Amaru Shakur in the Post-Soul Context," in *Secular Music / Sacred Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013), 131.

¹⁴³ Reed, *The Holy Profane*, 30.

performance of black sacred music on electric guitar had long been a staple of roving Black preachers like Reverend Gary Davis and Reverend Charlie Johnson [CD track 13], the popularity of Sister Rosetta's recordings within a secular arena became the inspiration for later rock 'n' roll artists like Chuck Berry, Little Richard, and Elvis Presley. Indeed, it was precisely the *white* appropriation of Black sacred music styles in the 1950s and 60s that was so scandalous to people on both sides of the segregation line. Whites feared that their youth would be profaned by exposure to Black music, while many Black elders felt that their sacred music was being profaned by performance in secular arenas to predominantly white audiences.

Tensions still exist within many African American religious communities today about the relationship between Black popular music and Black sacred or church music. These tensions, however, must be interpreted in light of the unique Black experience of generational trauma, resilience, and survival within a context of American apartheid. The sacred/secular binary often vehemently defended within Black church contexts requires its own analysis, and does not necessarily reflect the same reasons the binary is maintained within predominantly white churches, or within dominant culture as a whole. Womanist theologian Cheryl Kirk-Duggan insists that the element of praise found in *both* Black liturgical and Black popular music "honors the connectivity of all life," because again, no separation exists between the sacred and profane/secular in traditional African cosmologies. She writes,¹⁴⁴

African American music weaves together and depends on drama and dance amid complex, diverse improvisation shaping melody, harmony, rhythm, meter, textures, and instrumentation grounded in a rich culture of oral traditions, sacred and secular alike.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, "Sacred and Secular in African American Music," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and the Arts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 498–499.

¹⁴⁵ Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, "Sacred and Secular in African American Music," 500.

The interpretive situation becomes even more complex when we begin to consider the theological implications of music and lyrics written by artists who may or may not consider themselves Christian or even religious, but who nevertheless compose music that reflects genuine theological depth, and inquiry. On her 2009 album *Far*, Regina Spektor's "Laughing With" [CD track 14] observes that "no one laughs at God in a hospital" or "in a war," but that "God can be funny at a cocktail party when listening to a good God-themed joke" or "when told he'll give you money if you just pray the right way."¹⁴⁶ Nickel Creek's "When in Rome" [CD track 15] asks "Where can a dead man go?" and wonders if we'll "ever really feel at home if we spend a lifetime learning how to live in Rome."¹⁴⁷ Patty Griffin's "Mary" [CD track 16] is a deeply devotional song that expresses the heartache of Mary, and honors the comforting omnipresence of the Mother of God in light of her sufferings in an extremely devout way.¹⁴⁸ These artists, each of whom have remained quiet or ambivalent about their own personal faith convictions, nevertheless lay out sophisticated lyrical theologies that provide material for deep religious reflection.

Tom Beaudoin is among a growing number of scholars who seek to demonstrate how we can responsibly approach the discernment of theological content even in art and music that has no explicit religious content or intentions, including songs and imagery that might appear on the surface to be antithetical or even hostile to religion. By distinguishing "the meanings of a pop culture event" from the supposed intention of its "authors" – whether the artists themselves or the corporate executives who produce and distribute their work – Beaudoin is able to access "redemptive theological reclamations" from 90s artists like Nirvana, Pearl Jam, REM, Madonna, and Tori Amos.

¹⁴⁶ Regina Spektor, "Laughing With," *Far* (Sire, 2009).

¹⁴⁷ Nickel Creek, "When In Rome," *Why Should the Fire Die?* (Los Angeles, CA: Barefoot Recording, 2005).

¹⁴⁸ Patty Griffin, "Mary," *Flaming Red* (A&M, 1998).



Figure 5. Scene from *Heart-Shaped Box* by Nirvana, directed by Anton Corbijn¹⁴⁹

Beaudoin’s approach is more in line with the practices of everyday consumers, who often experience and construct religious meaning through their encounters with popular culture “events,” regardless of whether or not those products have been designed for religious purposes.¹⁵⁰ One “large-scale study of religion and meaning-making in the media age” concluded that:

People very much encounter the media environment as a source of symbols and values – some of which they adopt, some of which they throw away, some of which they reinterpret and reconstruct for themselves. They do not, by and large, see the world as a dualistic struggle between the sacred spheres of the home, church, or tradition against a secular or profane sphere of the media. For them, in their practices of daily life, it is all part of a universe of symbols.”¹⁵¹

This “new” reality is what Barry Taylor dubbed *entertainment theology*: “ideas about God that emerge outside of previously legitimized environments and structures of mediation,” which are

¹⁴⁹ Anton Corbijn, *Heart-Shaped Box* by Nirvana, image from music video retrieved April 8, 2014 from [http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Nirvana_Heart-Shaped_Box_\(Anton_Corbijn\).png](http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Nirvana_Heart-Shaped_Box_(Anton_Corbijn).png)

¹⁵⁰ Quentin J. Schultze, “Touched by Angels and Demons: Religion’s Love-Hate Relationship with Popular Culture,” in *Religion and Popular Culture: Studies on the Interaction of Worldviews*, ed. Daniel A. Stout and Judith M. Buddenbaum (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 2001), 45.

¹⁵¹ Stewart M. Hoover, “Religion, Media, and the Cultural Center of Gravity,” *Religion and Popular Culture Studies on the Interaction of Worldviews*, (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 2001), 54.

being brought forth by “a new breed of theologian, one who work[s] primarily in the realm of the arts.”¹⁵² Taylor sees theological practice as moving away from a didactic approach that offers direct theological answers to questions about God, and toward a “global communal conversation about the sacred in general.”¹⁵³ In light of this situation, the church – rather than setting itself against the emerging theologies that are being mediated through the new art forms of our media-saturated world – must learn to participate in a more sophisticated theological dialogue *with* them. For as Mary Hess writes,

It is imperative that religious educators recognize, first, that...it is inevitable that people will encounter God in the midst of popular culture...[T]he most powerful source of our strength and relevance within a media culture can come from our ability to give people access to the symbolic, narrative, and sacramental meaning-making resources of a faith community.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² Barry Taylor, *Entertainment Theology*, 104–105.

¹⁵³ Barry Taylor, *Entertainment Theology*, 18–19.

¹⁵⁴ Mary E. Hess, “Media Literacy as a Support for the Development of a Responsible Imagination in Religious Community,” in *Religion and Popular Culture: Studies on the Interaction of Worldviews*, ed. Daniel A. Stout and Judith M. Buddenbaum (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 2001), 290.

VI. Seeking the Sacred in a Post-Secular World: Toward a Postmodern Theological Aesthetics



Figure 6. *Journey within a Journey II*, Duy Huynh, 2012¹⁵⁵

As we have begun to see, attempting to apply labels like “sacred,” “secular,” or “profane” to the forms of artistic and musical expression we find emerging in the twenty-first century is a little like trying to draw lines through water. These terms have become anachronistic, pointing to delineated spheres of “art” and “religion” that no longer exist within the everyday lives of many people. The rise of a “mass culture” at the beginning of the twentieth century has led to “a blurring of the distinctions between high and low, art and commerce, the sacred and the profane.”¹⁵⁶ Within this milieu, the old binaries have become unconvincing, precisely because of their failure to recognize and honor “the role of the mundane *in* the construction of the sacred.”¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ Duy Huynh, *Journey Within a Journey II*, 2012, accessed April 8, 2014 at <http://www.duyhuynh.com/gallery.php?gal=2012%20archives>

¹⁵⁶ Frith, *Performing Rites*, 32.

¹⁵⁷ Lynch, “What Is This ‘Religion’ in the Study of Religion and Popular Culture?” 135.

That being said, I do not agree with the suggestion made by Stewart Hoover, which is shared by many others, that we should therefore “abandon all efforts that set up dualisms between... authentic and sacred on the one hand and inauthentic and secular or even profane on the other.”¹⁵⁸ Advocating a wholesale dismissal of all evaluative categories is unhelpful, precisely because it fails to offer practical tools for critical engagement. Indeed, when secular artists and musicians insist that “music *is* my religion” or that “*all* music is sacred,” they are usually not thinking of Blink 182’s “I Wanna F*** a Dog in the A**,” or “Grandma Got Run Over By A Reindeer,” or the German pop sensation “Schnappi das kleine Krokodil” [CD track 17]. As Frank Burch Brown points out, “the claim that all art is religious is almost always accompanied...by an implicit disclaimer or qualification. Art is said to be religious ‘in some sense’ or ‘in the larger sense’...or it is said that all ‘great art’ or all ‘true art’ is religious.”¹⁵⁹

Mark C. Taylor reminds us that “When everything is sacred, nothing is sacred.”¹⁶⁰ At the same time, of course, nothing is sacred when we live in a flattened “mode” where the divine is perceived as being totally absent, or even nonexistent. Christianity might be understood as a series of attempts to strike a critical and theological balance between these two paradoxical extremes, within a variety of social contexts. Frank Burch Brown places the ways in which Christians have historically identified revelations of “the sacred” on a spectrum ranging from the “negative transcendence” of God as infinite, ineffable, and unknowable, to the “immanent transcendence” of God as being present within the finite (panentheism).¹⁶¹ To argue that “Christianity” as a social institution (Religion₂ from our earlier scheme) has emphasized one over the other would be a cultural and historical oversimplification.

¹⁵⁸ Hoover, “Religion, Media, and the Cultural Center of Gravity,” 58–59, emphasis mine.

¹⁵⁹ Frank Burch Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 122.

¹⁶⁰ Mark C. Taylor, *After God*, 133.

¹⁶¹ Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, 117–130.

However, recall that we are defining “the sacred” as a particular *mode* of being that is characterized by a sensitivity to that which is “wholly other” or different from mundane human experience (Religion₁ in Cobb’s framework). We have also said that the sacred *can* manifest within the social sphere of “Religion₂, but is not necessarily bound to it. From a Christian theological perspective, the sacred cannot properly be understood as existing only within one realm of society, much less within a socially separated sphere of religiosity that attempts to operate over and above other cultural spheres. Christians, in particular, are explicitly called by the writings of the New Testament to cultivate a depth of “ultimate concern” that permeates *all* of life – a “Kingdom” mode of being that is open to encountering the sacred in *all* times and places, whether or not they happen to be places and times that have been socially or politically set aside for religious use.

One sentiment that has been a stumbling block for many Christians in this regard is the admonition to be “in the world but not of it,” a popular Christian phrase that is cobbled together from a number of different Scripture passages, including John 15:19 and 17:14-15, Romans 12:2, Ephesians 4:22-24, and 1 Thessalonians 4:1. Yet by no means do these passages suggest that the disciples should try to create some kind of purified, quarantined, or controlled sphere of religion that is free of any cultural influences from the rest of Greco-Roman society. On the contrary, the primary task that Jesus put before his disciples was to go out into the world and shine light on the presence of God’s kingdom that was *already in their midst* (Matt. 5:14). The notion of “the sacred” as existing in a time and place set apart from everyday human experience is precisely what the Gospel tradition was radically challenging.

This becomes even clearer when we place the emergence of the earliest Christian communities within their historical context. Due to the influence of supersessionist thinking, in

the past it was common for church historians to look for the origins of Christianity and Christian worship in the rites and rituals of Rabbinic Judaism. Contemporary Biblical and historical scholarship has since debunked this thinking, however, noting that Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism were two distinctly Hebrew religious movements that emerged *alongside* each other in the centuries following the destruction of the Second Temple in 70CE – an event that effectively marked the end of the ancient Hebrew Temple religion altogether. Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism, then, were two of many competing movements in the first century that arose out of that trauma, and developed over time into two distinct “solutions” for how to move forward. While the Rabbinic tradition sought to salvage whatever ancient Jewish practices and holiday observances they could for a people now living in a perpetual diaspora, the early Christians creatively interpreted the prophetic strains of the tradition in light of recent apocalyptic events, and ultimately came to understand the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as the full and final fulfillment of their ancient Hebrew religion.

The primary site of identity formation and experimentation within which the early Christians worked out the theology of what it meant to be “the church” was not a temple setting, or even a religious worship service, *per se*. Rather, Christianity emerged within the context of weekly meal gatherings that were held in the evening, where “sacred” and “secular” activities and sensibilities blended in the context of a larger Greco-Roman milieu. Recent historical scholarship has shown that the regular meal gatherings which served as the basis for the development of the Christian Eucharist during the first three centuries were not the sole practice of Christian groups, but were part of a much more widespread Hellenistic banquet tradition that was the shared cultural practice of all voluntary groups in the ancient Mediterranean world.¹⁶² As

¹⁶² See Dennis Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

early church historian Valeriy Alikin points out, “Jewish and Christian groups themselves were part of Hellenistic culture as a whole.”¹⁶³ Christianity was not widespread or coherent enough to be considered a “culture” unto itself during the first three centuries. “At most,” writes historian Dennis Smith, “it is a movement within the culture, that uses the rules of the culture to define itself.”¹⁶⁴

Documents from the ancient world show that philosophical schools, trade guilds, Greek burial societies, pagan mystery cults, Jewish and Christian groups, and others all regularly participated in this widely-shared meal practice. Whether the gatherings were of a “religious” or “secular” nature, their meals tended to follow a similar order of events: food was taken while reclining, and concluded with ceremonial libations, followed by a post-supper drinking party (*symposium*) that consisted of conversation, musical and theatrical performances, communal singing, games, orations, and other activities that often lasted well into the morning hours. Groups throughout the Greco-Roman world served similar kinds of foods, offered similar forms of entertainment, played similar kinds of games, and maintained similar seating arrangements and ceremonial roles for guests, which allowed them to question, disrupt, and experiment with established social norms and customs (for example, allowing women to recline with men, or having slaves act as the “presider” for the evening and allowing them to sit in the place of honor). Accordingly, it was also a relatively common practice for groups within this larger context to harshly criticize the meal practices of *other* groups, while idealizing their own meals as exemplary embodiments of commonly-shared classical Greek values: *koinonia* (communitas), *philia* (friendship), *isonomia* (equality), and *charis* (grace).

¹⁶³ Valeriy Alikin, *The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering: Origin, Development, and Content of the Christian Gathering in the First to Third Centuries* (Boston: Brill, 2010), 5.

¹⁶⁴ Dennis Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 8.

Understanding the early Christian eucharistic gatherings as part of this larger Hellenistic meal practice not only helps us to make sense of the copious references to meals and meal-related practices in the Gospel texts and epistles, but offers a significant paradigm shift in our assumptions about the relationship between the early Christians and their surrounding culture. Liturgical scholars in the past have tended to take the polemical writings of the patristics at face value, leading to the widespread assumption that “pagan” meals during this period were largely “secular” gatherings that were purely for entertainment, whereas Christian meals were sacred and solemn affairs. But as Alikin points out:

Clement of Alexandria states that the purpose of singing at pagan banquets is for the participants’ entertainment; however the evidence testifies to the contrary: pagans sang at their banquets in honor of their gods, just like the Christians did in honor of God and Christ.¹⁶⁵

Because so many of the early Christian writings contained such strong rhetorical arguments against musical instruments, *harmoniai* (genres), and styles associated with pagan cultic banquets, church historians and musicologists have also tended to assume that the music of the early Christians could not have possibly derived from Greek sources. A closer examination of their writings, however, reveal the extent to which the early Christians were indebted to classical Greek philosophy in formulating their opinions about what kinds of instruments and musical aesthetics were proper to the post-supper drinking party. The same musical critiques of the popular Greek music styles voiced by Clement of Alexandria and other early Christians were voiced by many non-Christian Greeks as well, for example the Greek physician and Skeptic philosopher Sextus Empiricus, who complained that “the music today weakens the mind with certain fractured mele and effeminate rhythms.”¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁵ Alikin, *The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering*, 223.

¹⁶⁶ Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Musicians* 7, 12, ed. Thomas J. Mathiesen, *Strunk’s Source Readings in Music History*, Rev. Ed., Volume 1: Greek Views of Music (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1998), 97-99.

Based on numerous references to improvisational singing contests at the early church gatherings,¹⁶⁷ both at the symposium and in the everyday lives of Christians,¹⁶⁸ several scholars have concluded that the melodic content of early Christian music would have been heavily influenced by localized traditions of Hellenized-Syrian folk singing. Without sufficient musical notation, of course, it is impossible to know for certain what the music actually sounded like. The famous Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 1786 is the only extant fragment of Christian music notation prior to the fourth century, and while it does show considerable Greek influence, it is difficult to speculate or draw meaningful conclusions about normative church practice from a single example. Still, Byzantine scholar and Romanian Orthodox priest John A. McGuckin points out that since hymnic worship was already the bedrock of ancient Greek religion, hymn-singing itself did not belong to any particular segment of society. “Throughout Christian antiquity,” he writes, “the influence of popular (or secular) song, with its well-rehearsed themes of love, or valor, were certainly adapted by church hymnographers.”¹⁶⁹

Greek culture strongly influenced not only the forms and styles of early church music, but its function as well. It is clear that within the larger cultural context of the Greco-Roman banquet tradition, Christian singing at the meals was not merely intended to serve as an accompaniment to sacred ceremony or ritual, but was a marker (and shaper) of a burgeoning Christian identity. Singing at the meals had social, political, moral, and religious implications. It also commonly served as a way of testing whether someone had consumed too much alcohol.¹⁷⁰ Plutarch, Athenaeus, and Tertullian all make references to singing as a way to discourage

¹⁶⁷ See for example Tertullian, *Ad uxorem* 2.8.8.

¹⁶⁸ See John Chrysostom, *In Psalmum* 41.2, “Teach your children and wives also to sing such songs, not only while weaving or while engaged in other tasks, but especially at table.”

¹⁶⁹ John A. McGuckin, “Poetry and Hymnography (2): The Greek World,” *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, Harvey & Hunter, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 644-645.

¹⁷⁰ See Alikin, *The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering*, 224.

drunkenness, with people being occasionally called to offer a song as a playful way of testing whether they had drunk too much wine. This method was not unique to the Christians, for references to tests of drunkenness can be found in the descriptions of meals going back to the earliest writings of classical Greece. The author of Ephesians references this tradition when he encourages members of the community not to get too drunk with wine during the singing portion of their gatherings – “for that is debauchery” – but to be filled with the spirit as they sang psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.¹⁷¹

Here we can begin to see that applying our modern concepts of “sacred” and “secular” to the cultural practices of the early Christians is anachronistic. “The sacred versus secular model is not appropriate for ancient meals,” writes Smith, because “in ancient Mediterranean culture in general, sacred and secular are interwoven, and tend to be indistinct.”¹⁷² Indeed, the blending of sacred and secular in the formation of Christian social, political, and religious identity becomes even more clear when we examine the banquet tradition of libations – a ritual that typically marked the transition between the meal and the post-supper drinking party. Both in classical Greece and in the Hellenistic era, libations were always dedicated to a god or gods, and were always accompanied by the singing of a communal hymn (*paean*). Biblical historian Hal Taussig writes,

The choice of which god should be honored in the libation helped those at the meal to practice their own emerging social loyalties. That some [groups] came to raise the cup only to a certain god helped them develop a certain social identity in the confusing Hellenistic polyglot... That early Christians raised the cup uniquely to Jesus or to Christ was done against the backdrop of other meals’ experimentation with libation as an identity marker.¹⁷³

In Roman times, imperial concerns over meal groups as potential centers for sedition and rebellion led to a series of laws being passed that limited (and in some cases

¹⁷¹ Ephesians 5:18-19.

¹⁷² Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 6. d

¹⁷³ Hal Taussig, *In the Beginning Was the Meal* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 109.

banned) certain voluntary group gatherings that were suspected of being “in conflict with the public interest.”¹⁷⁴ This social and political backdrop provides rhetorical context for so many of the allegations and defensive statements we find in the early writings of Christians and other groups, in which the exemplary meal practices of one’s own group are contrasted with the depraved sensibilities of other groups. Following Caesar Augustus’ military victory over Egypt in 47 BCE, a decree was passed requiring *all* meal groups to offer libations honoring Caesar Augustus as Lord.¹⁷⁵ Taussig argues convincingly that the hymns found in John 1:1-18, Colossians 1:15-20, and Revelation 4:11 (among others) are all examples of *paean*s that would have been sung at the Christian meals during the libation, which came to function as a blended form of social, political, and religious protest and resistance within that cultural milieu.¹⁷⁶

This brief historical review of the emergence of early Christianity shows how freely and unreservedly the early church communities borrowed from, improvised with, and transformed both the Hebrew and Greco-Roman cultural traditions they inherited and participated in daily. Rather than becoming the organizers of a new religion that stood against their surrounding culture, the early Christians imagined themselves to be more like yeast (Matt. 13:33) and salt (Matt. 5:13) within it, change agents that by their very nature *disappeared* into the larger mix in order to bring about the preservation, enhancement, and transformation of the whole. The early Christians sought to be witnesses of God’s revelation in the world through a kind of participation in the surrounding culture that was marked by a heightened or “transfigured” way of seeing and experiencing the world around them.

¹⁷⁴ Taussig, *In the Beginning Was the Meal*, 119.

¹⁷⁵ Taussig, *In the Beginning Was the Meal*, 78.

¹⁷⁶ Taussig, *In the Beginning Was the Meal*, 109.

Note the sense of urgency in the Biblical admonition that we must have “eyes to see” and “ears to hear.” This refrain is repeated fifteen times throughout the Scriptures, and five times by Jesus himself.¹⁷⁷ “Revelation,” translated from the Greek *apokalypsis* or “apocalypse,” literally means to “lift the veil.” The early disciples understood themselves to be living in the apocalyptic lineage of the Hebrew prophets, who had embodied a spiritually-informed way of seeing and hearing that pierced the veil of the social status quo, exposing the harmful patterns of groupthink, systemic oppression, and deference to foreign military powers. Christian evangelism, following in this lineage, was never about wielding crafty rhetorical strategies in order to convince others to join their group, or to adhere to certain religious practices or beliefs. It was never about getting “butts in pews.” True evangelism was about revealing to the entire world the “sacred sparks”¹⁷⁸ that were already present in everyone, and everything. Contemplative theologian Barbara Holmes explains the Christian experience of divine revelation in a similar way:

When you least expect it, during the most mundane daily tasks, a shift of focus occurs. This shift bends us toward the universe within – that cosmos of soul and spirit, bone and flesh, which constantly reaches toward divinity. Ecclesial organizations want to control access to this milieu but cannot. The only divisions between the sacred and the secular are in the minds of those who believe in and reinforce the split.¹⁷⁹

This experience is similar to what Beaudoin described as the ‘irreverent’ spirituality embraced by Generation X in their encounters with popular media art and culture:

In this space of fresh and frightening indeterminacy, religious pop culture images roam freely, and Xers abandon themselves to grace. This grace comes at a cost – the abandonment of the comfort of past generations, of a once-for-all final reality. Having grown up too quickly anyway, Xers will not go back to the childhood of pre-simulational religiousness. Abandoning themselves to video culture, cyberculture, and fashion, Xers’

¹⁷⁷ cf. Mark 8:18, Jeremiah 5:21, Mark 4:12, Isaiah 6:9-10, Psalm 115:5-8, 2 Peter 1:12, Romans 11:8, Acts 28:26-27, John 12:40, Matthew 13:14-15, Ezekiel 12:2, Isaiah 44:18, Isaiah 42:18-20, Deuteronomy 29:4, Psalm 69:23.

¹⁷⁸ The notion of “sacred sparks” comes from Jewish Rabbi Lurian Kabbalah, who spoke of the need to discover the sacred in ordinary, everyday deeds. In Dorothee Sölle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 159-160.

¹⁷⁹ Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable*, 170.

lives can become lived prayers for the embrace of the religious in the pop culture milieu, which is the virtual location of GenX salvation.¹⁸⁰

This notion of “lived prayer” gets us a bit closer to the original Biblical sense of the word “faith,” which comes from the Greek *pistis*, meaning “to trust.” Active trust in God is something that cannot be ultimately compelled or controlled by religious authorities or institutions; it can only be modeled, lived, and encouraged. “Not even the best preacher,” writes Methodist theologian Christopher Morse, “can make God real to anyone... we simply cannot determine when in our words and actions God will choose to confront us or others through – and in spite of – what we say or do.” “Falling in love,” he continues, “is something that finally no human being can compel,” and the human will “cannot make us delight in something.”¹⁸¹

But how can something so fleeting and subjective as our felt sense of love, or our aesthetic experiences, play a serious role in the theology of divine revelation? Indeed, the relationship between theology, ethics, and aesthetics is fraught with many potential conflicts and paradoxes (which is perhaps why so many theologians have avoided the topic!). Frank Burch Brown explains,

Whereas Christians are more or less accustomed to debating issues of morality and theology, and are often unapologetic about doing so, they usually find it embarrassing to be seriously worried – as many are – about such “trivial” things as taste and aesthetics. ...[P]eople who care most about taste...often strike others as aesthetes and elitists – as uncharitable in spirit and far removed from the poor and socially marginal folk beloved by Jesus.¹⁸²

A strong “aesthetic relativism” has developed in reaction to the short-sighted elitism of the modern Western thinking around aesthetics during the colonial period. Many people nowadays are rightfully suspicious of *any* aesthetic standards, particularly those that would seek to establish any sort of *a priori* relationship to ethics or morality. It is on this very basis that most

¹⁸⁰ Thomas Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998), 40–41.

¹⁸¹ Morse, *Not Every Spirit*, 27.

¹⁸² Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste*, 3.

ethnomusicologists advocate a totally contextual approach to aesthetic evaluation: music or art can only be conceived of as “bad” in the sense that it deviates from some arbitrary and culturally-contextual expectation or desire.¹⁸³ Within this context, all statements about “good” or “bad” art can be interpreted as social positioning gestures, which merely serve to demonstrate one’s cultural capital, and shape existing discourses of power.¹⁸⁴ According to Frith, these communicative gestures are a necessary part of the social structuring processes that make aesthetic pleasure even possible, because they enable mutual experience, and stimulate internal dialogue.¹⁸⁵

But while there is a great deal of truth in this perspective, there is also a danger in our learned apathy and indifference towards making any aesthetic judgments. Doing so relinquishes all evaluative power to those who would seek to use and abuse the arts for their own gain. As De Gruchy warns, “The exploitation of music and art for economic, religious, or political ends often succeeds in “captur[ing] the loyalty of those who have no sense of discrimination between what is good or bad.”¹⁸⁶ Real-world ethical and theological consequences can and do result from a failure to pair our felt aesthetic experiences with critical reflection. This is particularly the case when it comes to issues of economic exploitation, cultural appropriation, commercialism, and representation issues. Aesthetics must, therefore, always be supplemented by ethical and theological perspectives.

The reverse is also true: if we are to understand beauty, truth, and goodness as allies in a more comprehensive wisdom – as the classical Greek philosophers did – then theology and ethics must always be supplemented by an aesthetic perspective that allows beauty to speak for

¹⁸³ Washburne and Derno, *Bad Music: The Music We Love To Hate*, 1.

¹⁸⁴ Christopher J. Washburne and Maiken Derno, eds., *Bad Music: The Music We Love To Hate* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 3.

¹⁸⁵ Brown, *Religious Aesthetics: A Theological Study of Making and Meaning*, 149–150.

¹⁸⁶ De Gruchy, *Christianity, Art, and Transformation*, 91.

itself. Hans Urs von Balthasar drew on this framework in his own theological defense of Beauty with a capital “B.” Elaine Scarry made a similar argument from the perspective of contemporary Western philosophy: “[Beauty] ignites the desire for truth by giving us, with an electric brightness shared by almost no other uninvited, freely arriving perceptual event, the experience of conviction and the experience, as well, of error.”¹⁸⁷ The arts, then, through their interplay with beauty, can offer a unique epistemology that provides access to theological and ethical insights otherwise unattainable and inexpressible.

Bringing it back down to the practical level, Frank Burch Brown asks provocatively, “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?”¹⁸⁸ Swiss Protestant theologian Karl Barth famously considered Mozart [CD track 18] to be a theologian *par excellence*, vowing that if he ever got to heaven he would “first of all seek out Mozart, and only then inquire after Augustine, St. Thomas, Luther, Calvin, and Schleiermacher.”¹⁸⁹ “Why is it possible to hold that Mozart has a place in theology?” Barth asked himself, acknowledging that the composer was neither a father of the church nor a particularly active Christian, and furthermore someone who by all accounts seemed to have lived a rather superficial life (“and who was a Catholic, besides!”). Nevertheless, he insisted that:

In the face of the problem of theodicy, Mozart had the peace of God, which surpasses all reason...He heard – and he allows those who have ears, even to this day, to hear – what we shall only see at the end of time: the total coherence of the divine dispensation. As though from this end, he heard the harmony of creation...where there is deficiency, but without being a defect; sadness, without becoming despair; gloom that nevertheless does not degenerate into tragedy; infinite sadness that nevertheless is not forced to make itself absolute...he did not hear a middle, neutral tone, but heard the *positive* tone *stronger* than

¹⁸⁷ Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 52.

¹⁸⁸ Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste*, 10–11.

¹⁸⁹ Karl Barth, *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart*, trans. Clarence K. Pott (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1992), 69; cited in Saliers, *Music and Theology*, 24.

the negative. He heard the latter only in and with the former. But in this inequality he nevertheless heard both together. . . . And insofar as he heard the created world entirely without resentment or bias, what he brought forth was not his, but creation's own music: its dual, but nevertheless harmonious praise of God.¹⁹⁰

Perhaps Wassily Kandinsky said it best when he wrote in his famous 1910 manifesto *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*: “Art is a language whereby we speak to the soul (in a form accessible and peculiar only to this language) of things which are the soul's daily bread and which it can acquire only in this form.”¹⁹¹ It is for this reason that Catholic theologian Karl Rahner acknowledged that:

Theology cannot be complete until the arts become an intrinsic moment of theology itself. . . . If theology is not identified *a priori* with verbal theology, but is understood as man's total self-expression insofar as this is borne by God's self-communication, then religious phenomena in the arts are themselves a moment within theology taken in its totality.¹⁹²

To be sure, the discernment of “religious phenomena in the arts” requires a balance of theological, ethical, and aesthetic considerations. Theologically speaking, it is important to keep in mind that “the criterion of genuine [Christian] faith is not an elevated state of *feeling*, but an encounter with God's historical revelation in Christ and a response to it in concrete action.”¹⁹³ While the felt senses are vital to an authentically embodied revelation, there is a unique ethical imperative inherent within Christian aesthetic encounters that requires us to move beyond the quest for feel-good subjective experiences: “Christian solidarity with the poor and suffering, symbolized by the spirituality of the cross, introduces a ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’ to our experience of the world and its beauties.”¹⁹⁴ Theologian Richard Viladesau reminds us that:

The Christian message is not merely that God is lovely, but that God is love: not merely that God is beautiful and is to be found in the pursuit of what is attractive and desirable in

¹⁹⁰ Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik III*, 3, trans. Richard Viladesau (Zurich: Zollikon, 1932ff), 337-340; cited in Viladesau, “Aesthetics and Religion,” 3-4.

¹⁹¹ Kandinsky, Wassily, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1977.

¹⁹² Karl Rahner, “Theology and the Arts,” in *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader*, ed. Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen (Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 218-219.

¹⁹³ Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts*, 31.

¹⁹⁴ Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts*, 52-53.

the world, but that God is transcendently and absolutely beautiful and is to be found even in what to the world's eye is ugly and deformed and unworthy....[Beauty] attains its full meaning only in the light of the final, total order and harmony of God's kingdom, the triumph of God' love over the evil, sorrow, and pain, the ugliness and disorder, that we now experience in an incomplete and still evolving world...Religious experience in this context is not simply elevation of spirit, heightened interiority, and peace, but contains also an element of unrest and incompleteness, as well as a consequent imperative to action.¹⁹⁵

Disregard for this ethical imperative is precisely what led the Hebrew prophets to repeatedly cry out against music whenever songs of praise and worship were used to placate the masses as a means of drowning out the cries of the poor and the oppressed.¹⁹⁶ "In the face of beauty and terror," Don Saliers writes, "emotions can be 'true' or 'false' to how things are."¹⁹⁷ If Christianity is calling us into a more and more authentic relationship with reality, that means we must have the courage to embrace *all* of it – the good, the bad, and the "ugly." This is precisely why theologian Paul Tillich eschewed "idealized naturalism" and "beautifying realism" in art for its "unwillingness to see and to face our real situation."¹⁹⁸



Figure 7. *Cobblestone Bridge*, Thomas Kinkadee, 2000¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁵ Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts*, 52–53.

¹⁹⁶ See, for example, Isaiah 5:12, "They have harps and lyres at their banquets, pipes and timbrels and wine, but they have no respect for the work of his hands," and Isaiah 14:11, "Your pomp is brought down to Sheol, and the sound of your harps."

¹⁹⁷ Don Saliers, "Beauty and Terror," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality*, 2, 2 (2002): 187.

¹⁹⁸ Paul Tillich, "Existential Aspects of Modern Art," in *Christianity and the Existentialists*, ed. Carl Michalson (New York: Scribner's, 1956), 278.

¹⁹⁹ Thomas Kinkadee, "Cobblestone Bridge," *Art by Thomas Kinkadee: Painter of Light*, 2000, accessed April 8, 2014 from <http://www.artbythomaskinkadee.com/cobblestoneBridgeView.html>.

Such concerns commonly characterize “kitsch,” a term pejoratively applied to art that is perceived as being too shallow or narrow in scope. Adorno’s argument concerning “kitsch” was that it actively worked to conceal the ugly by pandering to the human desire to feel “on safe ground all of the time,” and by gratifying our “infantile need for protection.”²⁰⁰ Frank Burch Brown called religious kitsch the aesthetic counterpart to “cheap grace,” because it “seeks to elicit religious emotions without an authentic encounter with God.”²⁰¹ Kitsch has been described as sentimental, mediocre, cheap, banal, counterfeit, illusory, “forever immature,” and requiring a level of involvement that is only “slight or superficial.”²⁰² John De Gruchy pointedly reminds us that “the totalitarian art of Nazism and Soviet Russia was invariably kitsch,” because it served as a kind of “training on a mass scale in untruth.”²⁰³

But De Gruchy also compassionately acknowledges that “people will always find comfort in kitsch, for that is the whole point of it,” calling attention to the fact that, for many people, “life is ugly and brutal, so why should they appreciate art that reinforces what is daily experienced?”²⁰⁴ In his analysis of the Protestant devotion to the paintings of Warner Sallman (images that for many are emblematic of religious kitsch) art historian David Morgan reminds us that “every human society is, in the last resort, men banded together in the face of death.”²⁰⁵ Colleen McDannell furthermore cautions us to consider how factors like class, race, gender, and social status factor into the dominant culture’s construction of what counts as “kitsch.”

²⁰⁰ Theodore Adorno, “Television and the Patterns of Mass Culture,” in *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*, eds. Bernard Rosenberg and David M. White (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1957), 476. Cited in Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture*, 47.

²⁰¹ Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste*, 146, 133.

²⁰² Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste*, 147.

²⁰³ De Gruchy, *Christianity, Art, and Transformation*, 76.

²⁰⁴ De Gruchy, *Christianity, Art, and Transformation*, 76–77.

²⁰⁵ David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 10.



Figure 8. *The Lord Is My Shepherd*, Warner Sallman, 1943²⁰⁶

Given that, perhaps we should not be so quick to dismiss art or music that does not immediately resonate with our own aesthetic sensibilities, or does not speak to the truth of our own experience, particularly when we see that it is performing a life-affirming or life-sustaining function for someone else. After all, Brown reminds us that,

Among the most bonding of joys is the discovery that one's tastes are mutually shared. By the same token, among the most alienating disappointments is the discovery that a beloved person or admired group rejects the very kinds of art and beauty that one cherishes, or through which one worships. These are sensitive matters. ... If you attack my devotion to [insert anything here]...I may well feel that you don't understand something important about the inner meaning of my faith. ... The rule of love evidently requires sensitivity in matters of taste. It may require learning to attend in new ways to arts that are not historically a part of one's own tradition.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁶ Warner Sallman, *The Lord Is My Shepherd*, 1943, accessed April 8, 2014 at <http://aposlutheran.wordpress.com/2012/08/22/a-symbol-of-jesus/>

²⁰⁷ Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste*, 9-10.

Here, then, we have two somewhat contradictory but equally important value considerations for developing a more theologically-grounded Christian aesthetics: it must include both the capacity for critical evaluation *and* leave room for compassionate appreciation of the aesthetic experiences and emotional needs of others. An approach similar to Albert Blackwell's "hermeneutic of appreciation" is called for, one that refuses to slight "the critical obligations of attending, understanding, and evaluating," but one that also seeks to move "beyond reduction and suspicion," into a more mature appreciation for not only our inherited aesthetic traditions, but the many creative ways in which people have expanded upon them, or deviated from them. Brown calls this approach "ecumenical taste": a way of aesthetic perception, judgment, and enjoyment that can relish in differences without breeding alienation and resentment, practiced through a willingness to openly and lovingly discern what is delightful and meaningful to others.²⁰⁸

Of course, our processes of evaluation still need to be guided by some basic criteria within a given context. But these kinds of evaluations do not need to be the sole property of "high art" critics or narrow-minded clergy. Gordon Lynch helpfully highlights nine different factors that tend to characterize the aesthetic evaluations that occur broadly within the context of American pop culture as a whole: technical skill, originality/creativity, believability, moral value, enjoyableness, "numinousness," practical functionality (particularly applicable to dance music, love songs, work songs, lullabies, etc), and authenticity.²⁰⁹ Lynch demonstrates that these evaluations take place regardless of whether or not people making them are aware of them. He also makes the case that how we prioritize these nine criteria within a given context will usually determine the effect that a particular instance of music or art will have on us. The more criteria

²⁰⁸ Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste*, 12.

²⁰⁹ Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, 190–191.

are met by a particular piece of art, Lynch argues, the more likely it is to be perceived as “sacred” or as religiously significant.

Taking the conversation about taste even one step further, Simon Frith insists that arguments about music are not finally “about likes and dislikes as such, but about ways of listening, about ways of hearing, about ways of being.” The practice of expanding oneself by making room for another person’s *way* of hearing is precisely what is needed within a Christian theological context. This is as true for fans of contemporary Christian music and the Western classical canon as it is for those who would limit their aesthetic appreciation of what is “good” to *avant garde* indie music, Black gospel music, EDM, or country. “It is an act of Christian love to learn to appreciate or at least respect what others value in a particular style or work that they cherish,” Brown advises. “That is different, however, from personally liking every form of commendable art, which is impossible and unnecessary.”²¹⁰

Perhaps the answer to bad taste, then, is not the cultivation of “good” taste, but rather, hospitality.²¹¹

♪ *Recommended listening:* [CD track 19] “White Light” by Wilco ♪

²¹⁰ Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste*, 250–251.

²¹¹ Brown, *Religious Aesthetics: A Theological Study of Making and Meaning*, 156–157.

VII. Context, Content, and the Spirit In-Between

Having examined the relationship between the sacred, the arts, religion, and the new media, and having looked at some of the theological, ethical, and aesthetic factors that are relevant in developing a more “Christian” aesthetic sensibility, we can now identify and correct some of the most common errors made in our attempts to define “sacred” music and art. I will classify the first as an *overvaluation of context*, and the second as an *overvaluation of content*.

Overvaluation of Context

Overvaluation of context manifests as the impulse to limit one’s definition of “sacred” music and art to that which has been composed solely for liturgical or religious purposes. This common error manifests in the tendency think about the theological role of music or art primarily as a “tool” for liturgists to use in order to make worship or the contemplation of God more aesthetically pleasing. Theologian Robert McAfee Brown argued along these lines when he suggested that churches needed to develop better relationships with artists in order to “rehabilitate” liturgical life: “we need their help so that we can get beyond the almost unrelieved boredom of so much of our corporate worship.”²¹²



Image Source: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/nakedpastor/2010/02/cartoon-high-risk-operation/>

²¹² Robert McAfee Brown, “Forward,” in *Art and Worship* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1988), 10.

From this perspective, “sacred” music and art is simply *liturgical* music and art – art and music that has been created to accompany religious rituals. This is the common understanding of most secular Western art music institutions, as well as Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and many Protestant churches. The Second Vatican Council’s *Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy* explicitly decreed that:

Composers...should accept that it is part of their vocation to cultivate sacred music and increase its store of treasures. Let them produce compositions which have the qualities proper to genuine sacred music.²¹³

Teresa Reed has pointed out that this attitude is also prevalent in many predominantly African American churches.²¹⁴ This overvaluation of context means that music and art which is created for contexts *outside* of liturgical worship tends to be given a lower classification – as “mere” entertainment that is therefore unworthy of serious theological engagement or consideration. Those who devote themselves to the creation or performance of this *extra ecclesium* art – whether in the context of “high” classical art or “low” popular art – are assumed to be motivated primarily by egoic concerns. While their work may be of interest to individual church members, they are unlikely to receive much acknowledgement, interest, or support from the church communities as a whole, since their work is seen as being extraneous to church life.

The so-called “worship wars” that developed in the context of late twentieth century Protestantism can be understood in light of this error. “How many kinds of music are there?” *Christian Century* journalist Steve Thorngate once provocatively asked his readers: “Most teenagers could come up with four or five. An aficionado might list dozens. But ask a church worship committee and you may hear that there are only two types: traditional and

²¹⁴ Reed, *The Holy Profane*, ix-x.

contemporary.”²¹⁵ Indeed, when churches operate under the spoken or unspoken assumption that the highest form of music (and therefore the only music that really matters) is liturgical music, it should come as no surprise that Christian musicians who have experienced the holy moving in and through other musical styles would seek to incorporate those styles into the liturgy.

Of course, the “worship wars” of the 1980s and 90s were *primarily* an expression of the racial and economic tensions felt among white Protestants in the years following the Civil Rights Movement. In general, the question of whether or not a particular song or musical style is “appropriate” to a particular religious or cultural context depends on a variety of theological, sociological, psychological, and historical factors that are unique to each congregation and far beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, what I hope to show here is that how church’s failure to provide adequate opportunities for meaningful theological engagement with music that exists *outside* of worship compromises the community’s ability to critically discern what kinds of music and art would make the most sense *within* the context of a liturgical prayer gathering. In other words, the two do not always need to overlap. As Van der Leeuw observed, music “can be filled with holiness, and yet not be church music.”²¹⁶ A jazz mass can offer a deeply enriching approach to the liturgy, but the act of composing a mass in the style of jazz should not be *necessary* in order for Christians to be invited into an experience of the manifold ways in which jazz can be a conduit for the sacred.

It is also worth noting again that, historically speaking, the Christian church was not always so disengaged from secular forms of entertainment and creative expression. Throughout the Middle Ages, Christian clergy and monastics composed various styles and forms beyond just liturgical music – including love songs, work songs, drinking songs, lullabies, and popular

²¹⁵ Steve Thorngate, “New Harmonies: Music and Identity at Four Congregations,” *Christian Century*, November 29, 2011, 22.

²¹⁶ Van der Leeuw, *Sacred and Profane Beauty*, 270.

religious tunes. Recall that “secular” was not always thought to be a sphere outside of religion. Pre-modern Christians understood “the sacred” to come along with the mundane in secular arenas. Particularly within the context of secular churches (again, churches within urban centers were considered “secular”), Christians engaged openly in many forms of secular creative expression. The twelfth century abbess Hildegard of Bingen was known to have frequently used elements of secular and folk music in her religious compositions; and often spoke highly of the lyre, an instrument with distinctly non-liturgical associations at the time.²¹⁷ Even St. John Chrysostom, the highly revered composer of the Divine Liturgy that is still used in Eastern Orthodox Churches today, expressed praise in his fourth century sermons for the participatory folk music of his day (particularly work songs and lullabies), noting their role in easing the sufferings of everyday people.²¹⁸

Overvaluation of liturgical context in the defining of “sacred music” also causes us to lose sight of the *prophetic* role of music and art, something that is referenced throughout the Hebrew scriptures. Prophetic utterance is a religious activity that by its very nature occurs outside of traditional religious settings. Frank Burch Brown suggests that the art and music which has “the greatest religious significance is not necessarily the art of institutional religion, but rather, that art which happens to discern what religion in its institutional or personal forms most needs to see.”²¹⁹ “It is not merely for us, the viewer or listener, to ask questions of art,” writes Michael Austin. “The artist, whether consciously or not, asks questions of *us*...confront[ing] us with truths to which we would prefer to be blind.”²²⁰ Langdon Gilkey

²¹⁷ Hildegard of Bingen, *Book of Divine Works with Letters and Songs*, ed. Matthew Fox (Santa Fe, NM: Bear & Co., 1987), 358, and John D. White, “The Musical World of Hildegard of Bingen,” *College Music Symposium* 38 (1998): 14.

²¹⁸ Calvin Stapert, *A New Song for An Old World: Musical Thought in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 127.

²¹⁹ Brown, *Religious Aesthetics: A Theological Study of Making and Meaning*, 111.

²²⁰ Michael Austin, *Explorations in Art, Theology, and Imagination*, (London: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2005), 13.

therefore insists that *whenever* music and art participate in a condemnation of our present reality, and call for its transformation, they become “vehicles of the transcendent, and approach the religious.”²²¹

Of course, *some* evaluation of context is vital to any hermeneutic, religious or otherwise. Legitimate concerns that arise in relation to artistic context can include everything from the pernicious effects of mass media and commercialization, to questions about the social location, personal background, and intentions of artists, all of which influence how a work is presented and perceived. *Overvaluation* of context, however, also causes us to lose sight of the creative ways that audiences make their own meanings of the artistic materials they encounter. As McDannell writes, “within one context, the same object may have different meanings.”²²²

Along these lines, Maxine Greene highlights the role of participatory contemplation that is inherent in modernity’s approach to art, insisting that “mere printed words, musical notes, brushstrokes on canvas cannot be regarded as works of art...works of art only come into existence when a certain kind of heeding, noticing, or attending takes place.”²²³ Michel de Certeau has similarly shown how our subjective interactions with the objects, images, and ideas we encounter in everyday life are creative acts in themselves. From this perspective, even in the most “presentational” listening context, audiences are never just passive recipients, but always participants in their own subjective meaning-making. For Michel de Certeau, the way we construct meaning through our encounters with art is itself a kind of “art.”²²⁴

²²¹ Langdon Gilkey, “Can Art Fill the Vacuum?” in *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader*, ed. Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen (Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 265.

²²² McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 66.

²²³ Maxine Greene, *Landscapes of Learning* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1978), 191.

²²⁴ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984).

Gordon Graham agrees: “Appreciating a work of art requires imaginative activity on the part of the observer no less than the maker.”²²⁵ Thus, even when a piece of music is presented by an artist *as* secular, or as “mere entertainment,” it may very well still be received and experienced by an audience member *as* theologically significant, or even as sacred. Consider, for example, the possibility of interpreting the lyrics of the Madonna song “Frozen” [CD track 20] as more than one woman’s longing for her emotionally frozen lover (the meaning that Madonna almost certainly intended) but also layered with the voice of God’s crying out in the wilderness: “...give yourself to me.” This participatory work of creative reflection and reception should be interpreted theologically as a co-creative act, which takes place between the offering of the performer, the attentive empathies of the listener, and the Spirit in-between.

Overvaluation of Content

Another common error made in the identification of the sacred in art and music is an overvaluation of content. This is marked by the tendency to identify “sacred” music and art on the basis of whether or not it contains explicit religious content. An overvaluation of content is common among both Christians and non-Christians, and occurs particularly in regard to music, visual art, and storytelling. Tillich writes, “when we hear the words ‘religious art’ we usually believe that one refers to particular religious symbols like pictures of Christ, pictures of the Holy Virgin and Child, pictures of Saints and their stories, and many other religious symbols.”²²⁶ Likewise with regard to music, Simon Frith notes that “most people if asked what a song ‘means’ refer to the words.”²²⁷ Thus, regardless of the context of the performance, music is often

²²⁵ Austin, *Explorations in Art, Theology, and Imagination*, 133.

²²⁶ Tillich, “Existentialist Aspects of Modern Art,” 271.

²²⁷ Frith, *Performing Rites*, 158.

referred to as “sacred,” “religious,” or “Christian” when it contains direct Biblical or theological quotes, teachings, or references.



Image source: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/nakedpastor/2012/02/bible-heads/>

The relationship between music and words has always been a bit fraught in the context of Christianity, going as far back as the fourth century, when Augustine expressed concern in his *Confessions* over whether or not his love of the music was distracting him from the teachings of the hymns. This concern was common to many of the ancient Greek philosophers and theologians, all of whom had inherited some version of the Neoplatonic tendency to reject all pleasures associated with the body. Particularly within an ancient Greek context, all bodily sensations were associated with femininity, and were believed to have the power to pull the soul downward from a “higher” moral and spiritual order. Centuries later, Thomas Aquinas attempted to correct the matter by drawing on an Aristotelian framework, saying in his *Summa Theologica* that “for those who hear the singing: even if they sometimes do not understand what is being sung, they nevertheless understand the reason for the singing, namely, the praise of God; and this suffices to excite their devotion.”²²⁸ Unfortunatley, Augustine’s “musical Puritanism” won out, and continues to hold sway particularly in many modern Calvinist churches.

²²⁸ Cited in Viladesau, “Aesthetics and Religion,” 22.

Since the sixteenth century, the Protestant hymn tradition in particular has placed a heavy emphasis on the role of lyrics. Of the six criteria determining which songs may be considered acceptable for inclusion in the Presbyterian hymnal, for example, four of them have to do with lyrical content. In defense of this position, Presbyterian pastor T. David Gordon has insisted that “one of the tests of a hymn is whether it would exist as Christian verse if it were *not* put to music.”²²⁹ Unsurprisingly, then, Rev. Gordon’s biggest complaint about most popular music lyrics is that few of them “would provoke any emotional response *if they weren’t set to music.*”²³⁰ This, of course, represents a basic misunderstanding about the relationship between music and lyrics in popular song. As Simon Frith has shown, popular song lyrics are not *meant* to be poems of verse that can stand alone. Quoting from Leon Rosselson, he writes: “The language of song, like the language of drama, is not a literary language; it embraces the idioms and rhythms of everyday speech while looking for ways of enriching that language.”²³¹

Don Saliers also recognized that “the fusion of text and tune is more than the text alone. There is an *affective* knowledge of the words that comes with the music and the conjoining of voices.”²³² Frith further explains that singing “has as much to do with establishing the communicative situation as with communicating, and more to do with articulating a feeling than explaining it.”²³³ Moreover, archaeologist Steven Mithen has shown that from an evolutionary standpoint, singing developed prior to syntax as the earliest form of human communication. Our primary form of communicating with one another is not rational but *affectual*.²³⁴ In other words, all words are fundamentally rooted in music, not the other way around. “A song does not exist to

²²⁹ Gordon, *Why Johnny Can’t Sing Hymns*, 130, emphasis mine.

²³⁰ Gordon, *Why Johnny Can’t Sing Hymns*, 135.

²³¹ Frith, *Performing Rites*, 170.

²³² Saliers, *Music and Theology*, 39.

²³³ Frith, *Performing Rites*, 168.

²³⁴ Steven Mithen, *The Singing Neanderthals: The Origins of Music, Language, Mind, and Body* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

convey the meaning of the words,” writes Frith. “Rather, the words exist to convey the meaning of the song.”²³⁵

Overvaluation of content takes place in Christian communities with regard to visual art as well. This is particularly the case whenever church leaders try to subordinate the image to the word, insisting that images can be made “holy” only insofar as they can provide a kind of “book to the laity” (in other words, illustrations of Biblical texts for people who cannot read). Pope Gregory’s sixth-century dictum that Christian images were there to serve the illiterate in this way has been paraphrased by countless theologians in the centuries ever since, and was eventually incorporated into Roman Catholic canon law, becoming the primary justification for the use of Christian visual art in the Latin West.²³⁶ While widespread literacy has largely eliminated the need for images to function this way among Christian adults, the impulse has been carried forward particularly in modern-day Protestantism, through the mass proliferation of so many “picture Bibles,” coloring books, and Sunday school felt-boards, which are used to illustrate the story of salvation in a manner accessible to children.

At the end of our discussion of modern art, we observed that the nature of visual art is to capture space by freezing it and framing it in time. The deep-seated iconoclasm that occasionally emerges within Christianity can be understood as rooted (at least in part) in the Abrahamic emphasis on the experience of God *in and through* time, which may help to explain why words and music have remained primary, and images have consistently become sources of controversy. Protestant theologian Karl Barth even went so far as to insist that there can be “no theological visual art. Since it is an *event*, the humanity of God does not permit itself to be fixed

²³⁵ Frith, *Performing Rites*, 166.

²³⁶ Herbert L. Kessler, *Seeing Medieval Art* (Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press, 2004), 126–127.

in an image.”²³⁷ This may also help to explain why some of the most ardent opponents of explicitly “religious” art have been Christian theologians. John Ruskin insisted that “religion, for its part, has not generally been helped by art,” because religious art “transgresses the bounds of harmless fiction or edifying symbolism” and “constitutes outright deception that encourages false religion.”²³⁸ Karl Rahner writes,

Religious painting is not simply identical with painting which represents some explicitly religious content. If someone paints a Nativity scene...and explains by means of halos and the like what the painting is supposed to mean...maybe it is not an especially religious painting at all, because it cannot evoke a genuine and radical religious response in the viewer...Some ‘religious art’ is well-intended and painted by pious people, but it is not genuine religious art because it does not touch those depths of existence where genuine religious experience takes place.”²³⁹

Paul Tillich was especially hard on the use of art as theological illustration:

Religious content in itself does not give a religious picture, and many of those pictures which you find in the magazines of the churches, in the little Sunday papers in the churches themselves or, even worse, in the assembly rooms of the churches or in the offices of the ministers are of this same character. They have religious content but no religious style. In this sense they are dangerously irreligious, and they are something against which everybody who understands the situation of our time has to fight.²⁴⁰

French painter Henri Matisse insisted that “a work of art must carry in itself its complete significance, and impose it upon the beholder *even before he can identify the subject matter*.”²⁴¹

The Christian tendency to overvalue explicit religious content, and to subordinate music and to the role of didactic illustration, is based on a profound misunderstanding of the complex semiotics at work within artistic expression and reception. Many churches in the West have lost sight of the more ancient aesthetic tradition, still maintained in Eastern Orthodox churches, wherein art and music can be understood as having their own theological epistemology and

²³⁷ Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1960), 410; cited in Austin, *Explorations in Art, Theology, and Imagination*, 21, emphasis mine.

²³⁸ Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste*, 74.

²³⁹ Rahner, “Theology and the Arts,” 220–221.

²⁴⁰ Tillich, “Existentialist Aspects of Modern Art,” 277.

²⁴¹ Cited in Janet Walton, *Art and Worship: A Vital Connection* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1988), 80, emphasis mine.

integrity – and in the case of icons, can have their own genuine sacramental value. From this more orthodox perspective, art and music are not intended to illustrate surface-level meanings, but to *illuminate* deeper spiritual levels of meaning. This practice of artistic illumination existed in Western Europe throughout the high Middle Ages, particularly in the tradition of illuminated manuscripts passed down among the Celtic Christians of the British Isles, along with the melismatic singing traditions of French monastics in the twelfth century, both of which went far beyond the use art and music to merely deliver didactic religious content. These traditions offered outpourings of embellishments and other content that was often not religious at all, but was nevertheless inspired by the creative interplay of text and context.

Unfortunately, this understanding of art as religious practice only barely survived the Reformation, and has not made its way into the consciousness of American Christianity. As a result, many Christians in the United States – particularly those raised within the secular capitalist frameworks of “religion” – often have a difficult time discerning the theological subtleties and themes in the genres, styles, and mediums of contemporary art and music. The controversies surrounding Darren Aronofsky’s 2014 film interpretation of *Noah* offer an example of the basic confusion surrounding the theological role of the arts in relation to Biblical texts. Many Christian audiences were concerned that Aronofsky’s exploration of the Biblical narrative seemed to depart from a strictly surface-level illustration of the text. But again, as Christian blogger Mark Wingenter reminded audiences, what Aronofsky offered – and indeed, what the arts must always offer – was not an illustration but an imaginative *illumination* that “stretches the boundaries of our understanding of the Biblical narrative” and “forces us to ask questions we might not dare to on our own.”²⁴²

²⁴² Mark Wingenter, “Noah on the Modern Day Felt Board,” *Reel World Theology*, April 2, 2014, <http://www.reelworldtheology.com/noah-on-the-modern-day-felt-board/>.

Viladesau furthermore reminds us that “revelation” in the context of Christian tradition requires more than just an obligatory recitation or regurgitation of the original message; it must include “the community’s reflection on it, explanation of it, recognition of its meaning in different circumstances, and formation of ideas and ways of living from it...not only imaging the divine and the events of salvation history, but providing images of life in the spirit, and its consequences.”²⁴³ Elaine Graham has pointed to a number of methods by which artistic expression serves to mediate the sacred in this way, particularly within the context of film and television:

- by portraying figures or exploring themes of redemption or salvation
(i.e. *The Matrix*, *Shawshank Redemption*)
- by serving as an outlet for supernatural belief or the suspension of disbelief
(i.e. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Harry Potter*)
- by exploring various ethical or existential aspects of what it means to be human
(i.e. *Bicentennial Man*, *Blade Runner*)
- by re-signifying religious themes and motifs in post-religious contexts
(i.e. *Dogma*, *Stigmata*)

Within each of these approaches lies an opportunity for Christians to encounter God, arrive at deeper theological insights, and expand their acuity for the discernment of the sacred in the context of the everyday world. This, of course, would result in a much broader understanding of what could be considered “Christian” content.

The Spirit In Between

If sacred music and art cannot be reliably classified according to religious context *or* religious content, then how can we speak of “the sacred” in music or art at all? Or, to return to our original question: how might we develop a more *theologically*-grounded way of speaking

²⁴³ Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics*, 172–173.

about God’s presence in music and the arts? The answer requires both humility and attentiveness in the active work of discernment within a given context. For Tillich, sensitivity to the religious character in art opens us up to the perception of a quality he called *religious style*²⁴⁴ – an elusive concept that entails an acknowledgment of the complex interplay between form, context, and content. Because religious style is a dynamic concept, it reveals something of the relational exchange that exists in the *what* and the *how* of any artistic offering.

Art that has “religious style,” Tillich explains, “has the power, the courage, to face the situation out of which the religious question comes, which is namely the human predicament.”²⁴⁵ This explains why Tillich considered Picasso’s *Guernica* to be “the greatest Protestant picture of the twentieth century”: “because it shows the human situation, without any cover.”²⁴⁶



Figure 9. *Guernica*, Pablo Picasso, 1937²⁴⁷

Viladesau agrees that “Art has a special role to play with regard to theological thought, namely as a primary factor in the discernment of the “human situation” to which the Christian message must be addressed.”²⁴⁸ According to Erich Neumann, a theologically meaningful style that “rises to the level of the sacral” is produced “precisely when [the artist] does *not* represent the existing

²⁴⁴ Manning, *Theology at the End of Culture*, 139.

²⁴⁵ Tillich, “Existentialist Aspects of Modern Art,” 276.

²⁴⁶ Tillich, “Existentialist Aspects of Modern Art,” 274.

²⁴⁷ Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*, 1937, accessed April 8, 2014 at <http://www.highresolutionart.com/2013/11/guernica-pablo-picasso-1937.html>

²⁴⁸ Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts*, 154.

canon, but transforms and overturns it...for he then gives utterance to the authentic and direct revelation of the *numinosum*.”²⁴⁹

Religious style is, in this sense, not a matter of evolution in form only, but a revelation of the spiritual matter or substance that “ignites the creative spark of style from out of the infinitely fertile material of form.”²⁵⁰ Addressing an audience at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Tillich once asserted that, “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.”²⁵¹ Neumann believes that this takes place when ‘the need of the times’ works inside of the artist, even if it is often “without his wanting it, seeing it, or understanding its true significance.”²⁵²

At the same time, we have seen that “the ability of a work of sacred art to be revelatory and inspiring depends largely on the degree of aesthetic and religious receptivity operative in the viewer.”²⁵³ What we are able to see is shaped by what we are *willing* to see. For this reason, Leo Tolstoy strongly rejected any conception of art that was constructed out of elevated notions of Beauty (with a capital B) or “detached” aesthetic pleasure. For Tolstoy, art was about *empathic communication*:

The activity of art is based on the fact that a man, receiving through his sense of hearing or sight another man’s expression of feeling, is capable of experiencing the emotion which moved the man who expressed it....To evoke in oneself a feeling one has once experienced and having evoked it in oneself, then, by means of movements, lines, colors,

²⁴⁹ Erich Neumann, “Art and Time,” in *Man and Time: Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks*, vol. 3, Bollingen Series XXX (New York: Pantheon Books, 1951), 13, emphasis mine.

²⁵⁰ Manning, *Theology at the End of Culture*, 139.

²⁵¹ 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.

²⁵² Neumann, “Art and Time,” 13.

²⁵³ Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts*, 157–158.

sounds, or forms expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling that others may experience the same feeling – this is the activity of art.²⁵⁴

It is oft overlooked that the etymology of the word “empathy” derives not from modern psychology, but from art. German philosopher Rudolf Lotze coined the term *Einfühlung*, “to feel into,” in order to describe a posture of artistic appreciation that “depends on the viewer’s ability to project his personality into the viewed subject.”²⁵⁵ Art, then, is fundamentally *relational*; it is a visceral, affective exchange between humans through which the Divine can also be revealed and made manifest. Discernment of the sacred in instances of art and music requires a particular kind of attentiveness, a perceptual *mode* that is infused with an awareness of God’s presence – something akin to prayer or contemplation in which we attend to the world with a sense of wonder and awe. “In art,” says Thomas Merton, “we find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time.”²⁵⁶

French philosopher Simone Weil argued that “egoism” was fundamentally a state of being *distracted* – that is, a state of being taken over by imaginary or false ideas about the self, which conceal the truth that we are mediocre, limited, vulnerable, and mortal. Distraction is what permits and maintains “illusion, reification, objectification of others, thoughtless consumption, and desecration of the beautiful.”²⁵⁷ As Rozelle-Stone and Stone explain, according to Weil “we cannot truly love ourselves because of our finitude, which is experienced as wretchedness.”²⁵⁸ *Attention*, however, is rooted in a divine model that overcomes these limits: “In becoming attentive, we are not only able to see what is external to us in all its reality, but we are also able

²⁵⁴ Leo Tolstoy, “What Is Art?,” in *What Is Art? Aesthetic Theory from Plato to Tolstoy*, ed. Alexander Sesonske (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 410–411.

²⁵⁵ Douglas Harper, “Empathy (n.),” *Online Etymology Dictionary*, 2014, <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=art>.

²⁵⁶ Gilkey, “Can Art Fill the Vacuum?,” 265.

²⁵⁷ A. Rebecca Rozelle-Stone and Lucian Stone, *Simone Weil and Theology* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Co, 2013), 137.

²⁵⁸ Rozelle-Stone and Stone, *Simone Weil and Theology*, 136.

to know the reality of ourselves: our mediocrity, our finitude, our vulnerability to moral gravity...[and] here is the crucial and paradoxical point: without attention, part of the reality we cannot realize is our own distractedness.”²⁵⁹ Art, then, is one of the most important tools we have to assist us in Divine revelation by providing us with an “object of attention” that “lifts the veil” on our illusions, while at the same time keeping us present in the contemplation of our inherent hunger.²⁶⁰

²⁵⁹ Rozelle-Stone and Stone, *Simone Weil and Theology*, 138.

²⁶⁰ Rozelle-Stone and Stone, *Simone Weil and Theology*, 139.

VIII. Concluding Thoughts

The purpose of this paper has not been to establish *a priori* religious or aesthetic standards by which Christians can judge the theological value or liturgical ‘appropriateness’ of art, but to complicate contemporary discourses that seek to identify the “sacred” in music and art, and in so doing, to assist in the development of a more theologically-grounded sensibility regarding Divine revelation within artistic creation. By unshackling our perspective of “the arts” from the interests of modern Western colonialism, as well as the demands of liturgical accompaniment and the function theological pedagogy, perhaps we can develop new “eyes to see” how the Spirit is moving in those in-between places: between religiosity and secularism, between content and form, between genres and mediums, between theology, ethics, and aesthetics, between object and subject, between self and other, between seer and seen, and between hearer and heard.

Michael Austin writes, “The fact is that our lives are lived in space and in purposive, dramatic, relationship with others. We live in a sensory order, in which we find all the elements of art – shape, texture, color, sound, rhythm, line, edge, weigh, movement... And in the midst of this sensory order we each find sacred places – places where we come to the very center of ourselves as persons.”²⁶¹ Thomas Merton believed that the highest calling of art was to introduce

... 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 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. Since all true art lays bare the action of this same law in the depths of our own nature, it makes us alive to the tremendous mystery of being, in which we ourselves, together with all other living and existing things, come forth from the depths of God and return again to Him.²⁶²

²⁶¹ Austin, *Explorations in Art, Theology, and Imagination*, 91–92.

²⁶² Thomas Merton, *No Man Is An Island* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 2005), 36–37.

Frank Burch Brown also acknowledges that when we think of the art that we experience as highest, “what persists is the feeling, evidently very deep, that such art is fulfilling what all art is meant to be.” And yet he reminds us that “not all art needs to do that. It is enough that some of it does.”²⁶³ To those works of art that do and those that don’t, may we nevertheless seek to turn our attention towards them in hospitality, love, gratitude, and grace.



Figure 10. *In Gratitude for All*, Cheryl Rozovsky, 2011

²⁶³ Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste*, 123.

IX. Postscript: Areas for Future Study

This paper may serve as a foundation for two further areas of consideration.

The first is the question of how an ecumenical approach to aesthetic taste might be informative for ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. In his discussion of the performative nature of religion, Frank Burch Brown points out that different Christian groups constitute “different performing ensembles and performance traditions, each with its own ways of rendering the classic that provides the group’s identity, and shapes its sense of what is ultimately important.”²⁶⁴ Like any performance art, no single ‘performance’ of religion will ever ‘match the script’ or be identical to other performances. This way of understanding religion as performance may help us to appreciate the diversity both within and between our religious traditions, since “a degree of pluralism is unavoidable within any religion that is much extended geographically and historically.”²⁶⁵

The same can be true for interreligious dialogue, insomuch as it helps us remember that whenever we encounter someone from another religion, what we are encountering is a particular performance of that religion, not the tradition as a heterogeneous whole, and still less “religion” its idealized form. Brown’s system for describing the three different ways in which Christians have historically interpreted “secular” music and art (by denying that it has any religious value at all, by considering it as a “preparation” for hearing the truth of the Gospel, or by receiving and embracing it as a pluralistic expression of Ultimate Reality) maps neatly onto Catholic theologian Paul Knitter’s own system for describing the various historical approaches to theologies of religion (exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism).²⁶⁶ Thus, it is also possible that Brown’s “fourth way,” which is to embrace “secular” music as an opportunity for learning how

²⁶⁴ Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, 179.

²⁶⁵ Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, 180.

²⁶⁶ Paul Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002).

to become a better Christian *precisely by* looking through the lens of the “other,” may also serve as a model for a more hospitable theology of interreligious encounter.

A second goal for future study would be a deeper consideration of the vocation of artists and musicians in the church(es) of the twenty-first century. In 1904, French expressionist painter Georges Rouault wrote in a letter to Catholic priest Abbé Mugnier:

I love my art passionately, and there is a growing conflict between my art and my religion. It is at the very moment when I have the greatest need for religion to sustain me in life and in art, that the advice and counsel of very religious and very respectable Catholics have filled me with some confusion... You can well understand what it is to be an artist...so dedicated to his work that it fills him with sadness to see that the conflict might end deplorably in letting go of religion.²⁶⁷

Sadly, as my own personal narrative attests, the situation for artists in the church has not improved much in the last century. I have met with countless painters, writers, actors, sculptors, performers, composers, filmmakers, and others committed to their craft who have determined that there is no “place” for them in the church because of the treatment that they and their work have received from clergy and fellow churchgoers. Of course, it could be argued that the arts must always exist at the borderlands of society and religion, and at the edge of meaning and meaninglessness. Perhaps it is the case that the place of the artist is by nature a liminal one, always requiring one foot inside and one foot outside the system.

But given some of the implications of the present study, I wonder how the church might begin to expand its understanding of the role of artists and musicians within and beyond its walls? How might communities provide better support for parishioners with artistic vocations? Such a study would require both a reflection on the theological understanding of vocation, as well as an exploration of how artists and musicians in contemporary church cultures are working to subvert and transform our understanding of Christian discipleship.

²⁶⁷ Austin, *Explorations in Art, Theology, and Imagination*, 104.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alfonso, Barry. *The Billboard Guide to Contemporary Christian Music*. New York: Billboard Books, 2002.
- Alikin, Valeriy A. *The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering: Origin, Development, and Content of the Christian Gathering in the First to Third Centuries*. Brill: The Netherlands, 2010.
- Arbuckle, Gerald A. *Culture, Inculturation, and Theologians: A Postmodern Critique*. Colleagueville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010.
- Austin, Michael. *Explorations in Art, Theology, and Imagination*. London: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2005.
- Barenboim, Daniel. *Music Quickens Time*. New York: Verso, 2008.
- Beaudoin, Thomas. *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998.
- Beaudoin, Thomas. *Witness to Dispossession: The Vocation of a Postmodern Theologian*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008.
- Blackwell, Albert L. *The Sacred in Music*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999.
- Brown, Frank Burch. *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and the Arts*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Brown, Robert McAfee. "Forward." In *Art and Worship*. Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1988.
- Brown, Frank Burch. *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Brown, Frank Burch. *Religious Aesthetics: A Theological Study of Making and Meaning*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989.
- Burnett, John. "A Christian Musician with More Questions than Answers." *Ecstatic Voices*, December 26, 2013. <http://www.npr.org/2013/12/26/255454906/a-christian-musician-with-more-questions-than-answers>.
- "But Is It Art." *The New Criterion*, March 2014.
- Campion, Freddie. "Band of the Week: HAIM." *Vogue*, February 28, 2012. <http://www.vogue.com/culture/article/band-of-the-week-haim/#1>.

- Certeau, Michel de. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984.
- Cobb, Kelton. *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005.
- Cone, James. *The Spirituals and the Blues*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009.
- Cosgrove, Charles H., "Clement of Alexandria and Early Christian Music." *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 14, 3 (2006): 255-282.
- Cox, Harvey. "The Seduction of the Spirit: The Use and Misuse of People's Religion." In *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader*, edited by Gesa Elisabeth Thiessen. Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004.
- De Gruchy, John W. *Christianity, Art, and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Dowley, Tim. *Christian Music: A Global History*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011.
- Ehrlich, Dimitri. *Inside the Music: Conversations with Contemporary Musicians about Spirituality, Creativity, and Consciousness*. Boston, MA: Shambhala, 1997.
- Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1957.
- Frith, Simon. *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996.
- Gilkey, Langdon. "Can Art Fill the Vacuum?" In *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader*, edited by Gesa Elisabeth Thiessen. Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004.
- Gordon, T. David. *Why Johnny Can't Sing Hymns: How Pop Culture Rewrote the Hymnal*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 2010.
- Graham, Elaine. "'What We Make of the World': The Turn to 'Culture' in Theology and the Study of Religion." In *Between Sacred and Profane: Researching Religion and Popular Culture*, edited by Gordon Lynch, 63–81. New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2007.
- Graham, Gordon. *The Re-Enchantment of the World: Art versus Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Greene, Maxine. *Landscapes of Learning*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1978.
- Griffin, Patty. *Flaming Red*. A&M, 1998.

- Haley, Eric, Candace White, and Anne Cunningham. "Branding Religion: Christian Consumers' Understandings of Christian Products." In *Religion and Popular Culture: Studies on the Interaction of Worldviews*, edited by Daniel A. Stout and Judith M. Buddenbaum, 269–88. Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 2001.
- Harper, Douglas. "Art (n)." *Online Etymology Dictionary*, 2014.
<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=art>.
- Harper, Douglas. "Empathy (n)." *Online Etymology Dictionary*, 2014.
<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=art>.
- Harper, John. *The Forms and Orders of Western Liturgy from the Tenth to the Eighteenth Century: A Historical Introduction and Guide for Students and Musicians*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Hess, Mary E. "Media Literacy as a Support for the Development of a Responsible Imagination in Religious Community." In *Religion and Popular Culture: Studies on the Interaction of Worldviews*, edited by Daniel A. Stout and Judith M. Buddenbaum, 289–312. Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 2001.
- Hildegard, Saint. *Book of Divine Works with Letters and Songs*. Edited by Matthew Fox. Santa Fe, NM: Bear & Co., 1987.
- Hodge, Daniel White. "Baptized in Dirty Water: Locating the Gospel of Tupac Amaru Shakur in the Post-Soul Context." In *Secular Music / Sacred Theology*, 126–48. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013.
- Holmes, Barbara Ann. *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004.
- Hoover, Stewart M. "Religion, Media, and the Cultural Center of Gravity." In *Religion and Popular Culture: Studies on the Interaction of Worldviews*, edited by Daniel A. Stout and Judith M. Buddenbaum, 49–60. Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 2001.
- Hubbeling, H.G. *Divine Presence In Ordinary Life: Gerardus van Der Leeuw's Twofold Method in His Thinking on Art and Religion*. New York: North Holland Publishing Company, 1986.
- Kant, Immanuel. "Critique of Judgment." In *What Is Art? Aesthetic Theory from Plato to Tolstoy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1965.
- Kessler, Herbert L. *Seeing Medieval Art*. Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press, 2004.
- Kirk-Duggan, Cheryl A. "Sacred and Secular in African American Music." In *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and the Arts*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

- Knitter, Paul. *Introducing Theologies of Religions*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002.
- Laeuchli, Samuel. *Religion and Art in Conflict: Introduction to a Cross-Disciplinary Task*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980.
- Lynch, Gordon. "Concluding Thoughts." In *Between Sacred and Profane: Researching Religion and Popular Culture*, edited by Gordon Lynch, 162–63. New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2007.
- Lynch, Gordon. *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005.
- Lynch, Gordon. "What Is This 'Religion' in the Study of Religion and Popular Culture?" In *Between Sacred and Profane: Researching Religion and Popular Culture*, edited by Gordon Lynch, 125–42. New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2007.
- Magesa, Laurenti. *What Is Not Sacred? African Spirituality*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013.
- Mahan, Jeffrey H. "Reflections on the Past and Future of the Study of Religion and Popular Culture." In *Between Sacred and Profane: Researching Religion and Popular Culture*, edited by Gordon Lynch, 47–62. New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2007.
- Maleuvre, Didier. *The Religion of Reality: Inquiry into the Self, Art, and Transcendence*. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006.
- Manning, Russell Re. *Theology at the End of Culture: Paul Tillich's Theology of Culture and Art*. Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2005.
- Mattingly, Terry. "Christian Music Controlled by Secular Music Industry." *Scripps Howard News Service*, 2002. <http://www.beliefnet.com/News/2002/11/Christian-Music-Controlled-By-Secular-Music-Industry.aspx>.
- McDannell, Colleen. *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995.
- McGuckin, John A. *The Advent Project*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.
- Merton, Thomas. *No Man Is An Island*. Boston, MA: Shambhala, 2005.
- Mithen, Steven. *The Singing Neanderthals: The Origins of Music, Language, Mind, and Body*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006.
- Morgan, David. *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998.

- Morse, Christopher. *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief*. 2nd ed. New York: Continuum, 2009.
- Nero, Mark Edward. "Album Review: Miguel - 'Kaleidoscope Dream.'" *About.com Entertainment: R&B/Soul*. Accessed March 29, 2014.
<http://randb.about.com/od/reviews/fr/Miguel-Kaleidoscope.htm>.
- Neumann, Erich. "Art and Time." In *Man and Time: Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks*. Vol. 3. Bollingen Series XXX. New York: Pantheon Books, 1951.
- Nickel Creek. *Why Should the Fire Die?* Los Angeles, CA: Barefoot Recording, 2005.
- Perry, Stephen D., and Wolfe Arnold S. "Testifications: Fan Response to a Contemporary Christian Music Artist's Death." In *Religion and Popular Culture: Studies on the Interaction of Worldviews*, edited by Daniel A. Stout and Judith M. Buddenbaum, 251–68. Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 2001.
- Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. New York: Penguin Books, 1985.
- "Profane." *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*. Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1993.
- Rahner, Karl. "Theology and the Arts." In *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader*, edited by Gesa Elisabeth Thiessen. Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004.
- Reed, Teresa L. *The Holy Profane: Religion in Black Popular Music*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2003.
- Rozelle-Stone, A. Rebecca, and Lucian Stone. *Simone Weil and Theology*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Co, 2013.
- Saliers, Don. "Beauty and Terror." *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 2, no. 2 (2002): 181–91.
- Saliers, Don. *Music and Theology*. Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 2007.
- Scarry, Elaine. *On Beauty and Being Just*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999.
- Schultze, Quentin J. "Touched by Angels and Demons: Religion's Love-Hate Relationship with Popular Culture." In *Religion and Popular Culture: Studies on the Interaction of Worldviews*, edited by Daniel A. Stout and Judith M. Buddenbaum, 39–48. Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 2001.
- 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.

- Siedell, Daniel A. "Liturgical Aesthetics and Contemporary Artistic Practice: Some Remarks on Developing a Critical Framework." In *Beyond Belief: Theoaesthetics or Just Old-Time Religion?*, edited by Ronald R. Bernier, 11–24. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010.
- Smith, Dennis. *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009.
- Smith, Mark M. *Sensory History*. New York: Berg, 2007.
- Sölle, Dorothee. *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001.
- Spektor, Regina. *Far*. Sire, 2009.
- Stapert, Calvin. *A New Song for An Old World: Musical Thought in the Early Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007.
- Stout, Daniel A. "Religion and Popular Culture: Notes from the Technological School." In *Religion and Popular Culture: Studies on the Interaction of Worldviews*, edited by Daniel A. Stout and Judith M. Buddenbaum, 61–78. Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 2001.
- Taussig, Hal. *In the Beginning Was the Meal: Social Experimentation and Early Christian Identity*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009.
- Taylor, Barry. *Entertainment Theology: New-Edge Spirituality in a Digital Democracy*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008.
- Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007.
- Taylor, Mark C. *After God*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.
- Thorngate, Steve. "New Harmonies: Music and Identity at Four Congregations." *Christian Century*, November 29, 2011.
- Till, Rupert. *Pop Cult: Religion and Popular Music*. New York: Continuum, 2010.
- Tillich, Paul. "Existentialist Aspects of Modern Art." In *Christianity and the Existentialists*, edited by Carl Michalson. New York: Scribner's, 1956.
- Tillich, Paul. *Theology of Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959.
- Tolstoy, Leo. "What Is Art?" In *What Is Art? Aesthetic Theory from Plato to Tolstoy*, edited by Alexander Sesonske. New York: Oxford University Press, 1965.

- Van der Leeuw, Gerardus. *Sacred and Profane Beauty: The Holy in Art*. New York: Abington Press, 1963.
- Viladesau, Richard. "Aesthetics and Religion." In *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and the Arts*, edited by Frank Burch Brown. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Viladesau, Richard. *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty, and Art*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Viladesau, Richard. *Theology and the Arts: Encountering God through Music, Art, and Rhetoric*. New York: Paulist Press, 2000.
- Walton, Janet. *Art and Worship: A Vital Connection*. Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1988.
- Washburne, Christopher J., and Maiken Derno, eds. *Bad Music: The Music We Love To Hate*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- White, John D. "The Musical World of Hildegard of Bingen." *College Music Symposium* 38 (1998): 6–16.
- Wingerter, Mark. "Noah on the Modern Day Felt Board." *Reel World Theology*, April 2, 2014. <http://www.reelworldtheology.com/noah-on-the-modern-day-felt-board/>.