

FINDING GOD IN THE IN-BETWEEN:



A Postmodern Approach to Sacred Music and Art
in Contemporary Western Culture

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Table of Contents

I. Punk Girl Walks into a Church	5
II. Methodological Framework	12
III. Categorical Hodgepodge: the 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. Suffjan 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. Norman Greenbaum, "Spirit in the Sky," *Spirit in the Sky*, Reprise Records, 1969.
8. Josh Garrells, "White Owl," *Love & War and the Sea In Between*, Small Voice and Mason Jar Records, 2011.
9. Mumford & Sons, "Thistle & Weeds," *Sigh No More*, Glassnote Records, 2009.
10. Regina Spektor, "Laughing With," *Far*, Sire Records, 2009.
11. Nickel Creek, "When In Rome," *Why Should the Fire Die?* Barefoot Records, 2005.
12. Patty Griffin, "Mary," *Flaming Red*, A&M Records, 1998.
13. 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.*
14. Mozart, "Serenade in B flat, K. 361 'Gran partita,' Adagio," *Amadeus*, PolyGramRecords, 2000.
15. Wilco, "White Light," *Sky Blue Sky*, Nonesuch Records, 2007.
16. Madonna, "Frozen," *Ray of Light*, Warner Bros. Records, 1998.

I. 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 or liberation. But I knew that there were deep truths hiding everywhere: hiding in religions, hiding in nature, and hiding in *Star Wars*... along with the poetry of T.S. Eliot, the music of Tori Amos, the stories of J.R.R. Tolkien, and even the narratives of video game sagas like those of Shigeru Miyamoto.

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. This experience genuinely transformed my life, bringing me into a state of existential serenity, coupled with a brutal self-awareness that afforded me the courage to face the fullness of life 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 had been perceived by the church: as a secular/agnostic young adult, estranged from conventional religion but 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 rather amusing. After all, my decision to begin attending church services was based

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

on a very real experience of divine encounter, and certainly not on any local church's attempt to offer culturally relevant styles of worship to "spiritual seekers" such as myself.

My first experience attempting to worship God through "contemporary Christian music" occurred when I stumbled into an Evangelical reformed church that met in an old warehouse basement on the other side of the tracks. The pastor was brilliant, and the people were kind. Over time, I developed a deep appreciation for these gatherings and the lively discussions that the sermons and study of Scripture elicited. But the music rubbed uncomfortably against all of my aesthetic sensibilities. I felt embarrassed on behalf of everyone there, including myself. Nevertheless, I kept attending services. Over time, I observed how this music facilitated what at least appeared to be a very sincere experience of worship and joy for many of my fellow Christians. And so I gradually began opening myself to the music, for their sakes. It became something of a spiritual practice for me – a kind of radical embrace of what had previously been, from my perspective, the ultimate "Other."

Naively, I expected my brothers and sisters in Christ to reciprocate this same hospitality. After all, they had warmly welcomed me into their community, and fully had embraced my humble story of a life transformed by faith. But when some of them found out I was still maintaining my lifestyle as a surly songstress who frequented dive bars and hippie festivals, performing "secular music" for secular people, there seemed to be some concern. People began to ask, in all sincerity, whether I had thought about using my musical gifts "in the service of God." *What an odd question*, I thought, since it had become clear to me that *all* of my musical performances had always been in the service of God. I played songs of sorrow, hope, truth, justice, solace, and redemption in an authentic language that people could understand. I watched as God moved people through this music, meeting and healing them exactly where they were. I

understood intuitively that this was ministry; it was my vocation. But it became increasingly clear that within the cultural context of this particular community, “music” by default meant “contemporary Christian worship music.” I began exploring other denominations and churches, in search of a faith community that could better understand and support me in my work as a musician and an artist.

Many of 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 overall reverence for musical artistry and skill. But alongside this appreciation for the “fine” arts of the Western canon, there was at best a general ignorance – and at worst a complete 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,” which were all lumped together under the umbrella term “popular,” and were considered crude, commercial, shallow, unsophisticated, and irreverent. Most of the musicians and clergy in these churches would wholeheartedly agree with Albert Blackwell when he writes that “musical impoverishment” becomes “most obvious in popular music,” citing his opinion that country, folk, rock, pop, and rap all suffer from “harmonic agoraphobia” and a rudimentary understanding of chord progressions.² My guitar-driven folk singing and DIY indie stylings therefore found no place in these Christian communities either, since it was clear that within the cultural context of mainline Protestantism, “music” by default meant “Western classical music.”

One premise upon which everyone could agree was that using one’s artistic gifts “in God’s service” meant primarily – if not exclusively – *the worship service*. This understanding of what constitutes “sacred music” was made most explicit in the Roman Catholic congregations I

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

visited, where the matter had been outlined very clearly 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 Christians are to be considered the property of the church, ideally to be used as a tool for either liturgy or pedagogy.

Initially, of course, my impulse was to scoff at such seemingly narrow thinking. And yet, upon further reflection, I had to admit that there was a deeper 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, and joy. Even when performing my “secular” indie/folk songs on a Saturday night at the local dive bar, I often found that in the most profound sense I was facilitating a covert and yet life-sustaining form of “worship.” This was something that often spontaneously erupted within the context of everyday music-making, particularly in the context of improvisational jamming or communal singing. It was an experience that my fellow musicians, whether they were “religious” or not, knew well. Indeed, many notable musicians have attempted to describe this experience, commonly invoking spiritual or religious language.⁴

Meanwhile, there remain very few opportunities within most religious communities for any serious theological engagement or reflection on the kinds of music and art that most people

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.

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

encounter on a daily basis – that is, music and art that is performed and experienced *outside* of the church. Being relegated to the “secular” arena, its contents are seen as uninteresting at best, and at worst, diabolical. Of course, this attitude is part of a much broader preoccupation among many modern Christians to establish concrete differences between what happens inside and outside of “the church” (however defined). “Singing *in church* is not a performance,” I frequently hear clergy and worship leaders say, adding that “...*in church* it’s not about getting applause but about glorifying God.” Such comments are intended to contrast the values of church musicianship with those of secular musicianship – the latter of which are always assumed to be centered around the egos of narcissistic performers.

And yet, curiously, the vast majority of secular musicians and artists that I have known and performed with over the years have expressed many if not most of the same values concerns as church musicians. In fact, we have a term in secular discourse for those who make music only for the sake of their egos: it’s called “selling out,” and it’s pretty universally frowned upon. I would argue that many (if not most) artists and musicians begin pursuing their craft not purely for the sake of audience recognition (which is often fleeting and difficult to come by), but for the unique experience of human connection that is made possible through musical and artistic forms of communication. Consider Mick Jagger, one of the most applauded performers of the late twentieth century, expressing his sentiment that his performances are not really about *him*:

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

For many performers in religious contexts, inwardly directing a performance towards a loving and merciful God (rather than an “audience”) can help to release some of the inner

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

burdens of perfectionism and self-judgment that are often at play in other kinds of arenas. But the irony is that, in many cases, all this lofty religious talk about the importance of losing one's ego within the context of worship can often have the opposite effect on performers. Self-consciousness regarding one's ego can manifest in a scrutinizing focus on the self, wherein performers must then determine whether their performance was sufficiently "selfless," or otherwise has demonstrated the appropriate markers of authenticity. Self-denial thus often becomes an ego project that is deeply invested in its own self-righteousness, and performers in worship contexts can become blind to the ways in which they are caught up in a state of performance for the sake of ego gains through religious social capital.

Meanwhile, all of this posturing is unnecessary, since the more natural state of musical performance is one in which performers "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 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.⁶

Most musicians and performers know this experience well, and for many, it is the deeper reason they feel drawn to a career in musical performance. Music becomes a way to experience the simultaneous emptiness and fullness of Self. In that sense, it can become an instance of "kenosis," the Christian spiritual practice of self-emptying. Given the pervasiveness of such experiences, shared by Christian and non-Christian performers alike, it is surprising that more clergy, theologians, and church musicians have not been interested in exploring the theological nature of music both within and beyond Christian worship.

⁶ Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 193.

Certainly, there are practical matters at hand. For those working in the church, every week hymns must be chosen, choirs must be rehearsed, and bulletins must be printed. Who has time to think about the meaning of music when there are pastoral visits, meetings to attend, and food pantries to run? Nevertheless, these issues become significant when we realize that our assumptions about the difference between what happens inside and outside of “the church” are part of a much larger structuring process that is working on both sides to maintain strict boundaries between what modernism has defined as “religion” and “culture.” In reality, these lines are highly ambiguous, and are constantly having to be constructed and reconstructed by ministers, the media, liturgists, theologians, church elders, musicians, and everyday folks.

Particularly within a modern capitalist context, this structuring process is bolstered primarily through the elusive application of two highly-charged adjectives: “sacred” and “secular.” Within the context of the arts, there is a great deal at stake – culturally, religiously, theologically, and economically – in how one chooses to label a particular song, film, book, painting, or artist.⁷ Consider, for example, a young indie-musician-turned-contemporary-Christian-artist who I once observed performing at a Saturday night “praise and worship” event during an ecumenical Christian conference; the lead singer introduced his beautifully-written original song with the apologetic disclaimer: “This isn’t really a ‘*Christian*’ song, but...”

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? Whether it is (or could be) used in liturgy or worship? Does it have to be sanctioned or

⁷ 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.

approved by a denominational committee? Can the religious status of a song be determined on the basis of whether or not the artist who penned it *intended* for it to resonate with the Christian faith or be used in worship? What if even one person finds spiritual meaning in it, or has an experience of God’s grace through it? Does “sacred” music become religiously compromised if it becomes “popular” within a secular context? What about the commercial popularity of religious songs like “I’ll Fly Away” and “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, I have come to the conclusion that the church (as a whole) is still largely bereft of any truly applicable theological sensibility for how the Christian experience of God or “the sacred” relates to our human encounters with music – particularly music that is experienced outside of liturgical, ritual, or culturally “Christian” contexts. While Christian theologians throughout history have discussed music in passing - often expressing their opinions and reactions to the musical styles, instruments, and trends of their own day - very few modern theologians have devoted serious or sustained attention to the relationship of music to spiritual revelation within Christianity.⁸

The recent implosion of modernist 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 to find among scholars and writers who do attempt to tackle the subject 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 classification that has comprised our

⁸ 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.

“Enlightenment” heritage.⁹ 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. The need to be able to make meaningful distinctions between things that are extraneous or illusory, and things that are fundamental and essential, persists. Dismissing the problem outright only further enables traditional religious scholars, clergy, and laypeople 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 context, through a critical engagement with notions of “sacred” and “secular.” How has our understanding of these concepts developed over time? And is there a way, grounded in Christian theology, to move beyond such categories into a deeper understanding of God’s presence in art, music, and the world?

⁹ 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.¹⁰
 –Gerardus Van der Leeuw



Figure 1. “No Man’s Land,” photograph by Joe Fox¹¹

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.”¹² The present work will occupy that space. This liminal “no-man’s land” is the land of postmodernity. It is a landless land, a

¹⁰ Gerardus Van der Leeuw, *Sacred and Profane Beauty: The Holy in Art* (New York: Abington Press, 1963), xi.

¹¹ 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>

¹² Michael Austin, *Explorations in Art, Theology, and Imagination* (London: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2005), 3.

kind of *Waterworld*¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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.”¹⁵

¹³ 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, the survivors in the film “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.

¹⁴ Richard Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty, and Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 37, emphasis mine.

¹⁵ 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.”¹⁶ 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 the conviction in Christ’s incarnation, which ultimately places a primary importance on our embodied, material experience in time and space. 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.”¹⁷

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.”¹⁸ 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

¹⁶ Samuel Laeuchli, *Religion and Art in Conflict: Introduction to a Cross-Disciplinary Task* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 2.

¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ 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 political commitments to their own disciplines a slight aneurism.

Nevertheless, honest inquiry into our present situation demands that we develop interdisciplinary tools for the responsible integration of wisdom, so that we can begin to respond meaningfully to questions that actually matter on the ground, in the lives of everyday people. That being said, we should 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.”¹⁹

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

¹⁹ 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.”²⁰ 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.²¹ 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.²²

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

²⁰ Beaudoin, *Witness to Dispossession*, 92.

²¹ In the interest of further socially locating myself: I am a white woman born at the end of ‘Generation X’. 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 liberal and spiritual-but-not-religious, developing 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 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 Roman Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, Episcopalian, Pentecostal, Lutheran, Evangelical, Nondenominational, Congregationalist, Moravian, and Quaker churches, 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 contemplative. 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.

²² 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...²³

It is necessary to begin our inquiry into sacred and secular music and art with a basic defining 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.”²⁴ Inevitably attached to any discussion of the “sacred” are old notions of the “profane,” which must then be compared to and distinguished from the “secular,” which has to be situated within a proper analysis of “culture,” which needs to 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. I have depicted the problem in the following graph:

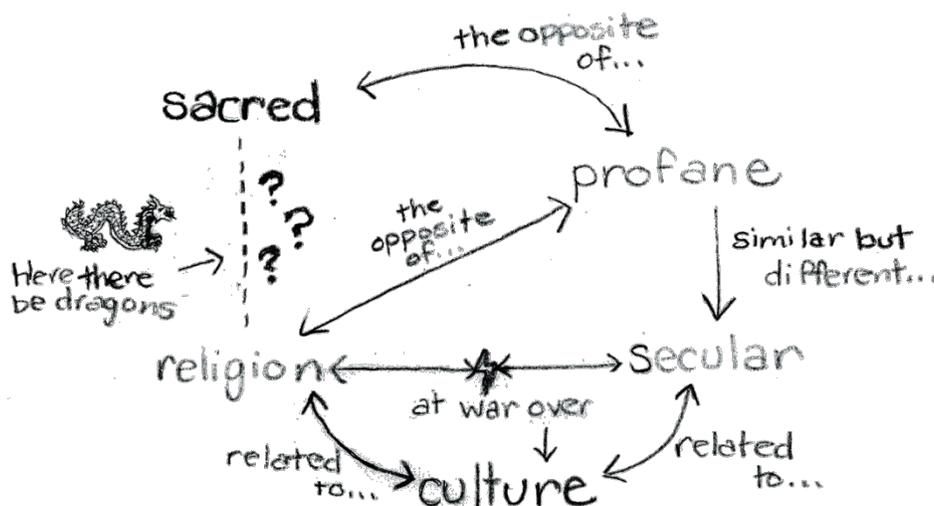


Figure 2. Preposterous Categorical Hodgepodge

²³ 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.

²⁴ McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 8.

But let us begin with “the sacred,” perhaps the most significant, and yet most elusive, concept of all. It is significant to note that, throughout the literature, the sacred is nearly always defined *apophatically* – that is, by what it is *not*. Influential religious philosopher and theologian Rudolph Otto once defined “the holy” as that which is *wholly other* – in other words, unlike anything human or cosmic in form, origin, or effect, and incapable of being grasped conceptually or rationally. According to Otto, the experience of this holy *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* [mystery of awe and bewitching] is characterized by a paradox of simultaneous aversion/terror and attraction/comfort.²⁵ Twentieth-century theologian Paul Tillich similarly described the holy as both the “ground” and the “abyss” of being, which causes us to vacillate between feelings of elation and annihilation.²⁶

Religious scholar Mircea Eliade has likewise pointed out, however, that we can only experience the sacred as it *manifests*. Eliade’s contemporary Gerard Van der Leeuw contributed to this point as well, arguing that “the holy must ‘take place’ . . . it must possess a form: it must be ‘localizable’, spatially, temporally, visibly, or audibly.”²⁷ That is to say, we cannot experience “the holy” in any “pure” or abstract sense; it is always “co-experienced.”²⁸ However we may conceive of “the holy” in our ideological conceptions or theological convictions, we can only *encounter* “the sacred” in and through material objects and cultural activities, “not in some privatized, mystical space that is separate from it.”²⁹

²⁵ Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics*, 151.

²⁶ Kelton Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 108.

²⁷ 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.

²⁸ Richard Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts: Encountering God through Music, Art, and Rhetoric* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 40–41.

²⁹ 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.

Nevertheless, because “the sacred” seems to manifest as something qualitatively *different*, Eliade also defined the sacred apophatically, as “the opposite of the profane.”³⁰ But what, then, do we mean by profane? Here we have another slippery term that is also typically 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.”³¹ A more common definition of “profane” is simply that which is “not religious.”³² Etymologically, the word originates from the Latin *heir es*, which simply meant “outside of the temple.” Yet Van der Leeuw adds that “holiness is not afraid of reality, but of *naturalness*.”³³ In that sense, we might be tempted to think of the profane as merely the mundane, the quotidian, or the familiar – all that is to be expected in the course of normal, everyday life.

Merriam-Webster’s second definition of the “profane” is simply that: “the secular.” McDannell, who uses the words secular and profane interchangeably, also links the profane to commerce as well as Neoplatonic dualism, associating the profane with matter and the body.³⁴ But “profane” also carries with it additional, sinister connotations. Many Americans and Western Europeans would gladly consider themselves “secular”; few would probably casually refer to themselves “profane” (except perhaps in a bout of self-effacing humor). Indeed, it is 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.

³⁰ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1957), 11.

³¹ Lynch, “What Is This ‘Religion’ in the Study of Religion and Popular Culture?,” 134.

³² “Profane,” *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1993).

³³ Van der Leeuw, *Sacred and Profane Beauty: The Holy in Art*, 173, emphasis mine.

³⁴ McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 4.

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,” and that these two categories are not only understood as being radically separate, but even hostile to one another.³⁵ In *Purity and Danger*, anthropologist Mary Douglas similarly observed how the construction of concepts like “dirty” and “clean” – and the creation of ritual practices that seek to maintain a separation between the two – are practices that are deeply embedded within the moral orders of nearly all socio-religious cultural systems. Objects and actions that are perceived as contradicting or transgressing culturally established classifications or boundaries inevitably come to be perceived as “polluting and dangerous.”³⁶ It is for this very reason that Durkheim insisted that “the religious life and the profane life cannot exist in the same place.”³⁷

But notice how our categories have become muddy again: we have said that the “sacred” is the “not-profane,” and that the “profane is the “not-sacred” as well as the “not-religious.” But, then, what are we to make of the relationship between “religion” and the sacred? Durkheim assumes that the two are synonymous, with “the sacred” always being envisaged as manifesting within a particular cultural sphere called “religion,” which is understood as being set apart and protected from “the profane.” Indeed, this perspective stems from the Hebrew tradition, and would seem to represent much of what Western Christianity has become, at least from a sociohistorical perspective. But theologically speaking, Christianity has always had a bit of a mess on its hands when it comes to religious manifestations of “the holy.” The paradox of the Incarnation, and the resulting Trinitarian enigma, along with the relationship of the Gospel to the

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.

³⁷ McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 5.

ancient traditions of Israel, place Christianity sharply at odds with the sociological tendency to neatly locate “the sacred” solely within the sphere of “religion.”

That being said, it is also the case that no single Christian community seems to have ever gotten a full handle on the resulting theological implications. Is God’s proper place in Heaven or on Earth? Within the 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.”³⁸ Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is depicted as a transgressor of existing socioreligious boundaries. Indeed, this is a defining feature of his ministry, and the reason he is finally executed. Theologically, the notion of Almighty God becoming incarnate as a poor Jew, and being executed as a criminal by the Roman Empire after being betrayed by the religious authorities of his own people, is a radically transgressive narrative – one that causes McDannell to conclude that “the separation that Durkheim perceived between the ideal and the material was fundamentally overcome, at least this once, in Christ.”³⁹

Mircea Eliade’s attempt to reconcile Durkheim’s notions of the sacred and profane with the findings of modern anthropology reveal further problems with this neatly codified system of mutually exclusive realms. Eliade 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.”⁴⁰ Rather than existing within a separate sphere, then, many cultures understand “the sacred” as interpenetrating *all* of life. Van der Leeuw likewise noticed that these

³⁸ Acts 10:15.

³⁹ McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 5–6.

⁴⁰ Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 170–171.

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.”⁴¹

Numerous African American scholars have maintained that, for West Africans in particular, the sacred “permeates every imaginable part of life.”⁴² African American musicologist Teresa Reed 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.”⁴³ African American theologian Barbara Holmes likewise 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 western cultures we speak of sacred and secular as separate realms. This configuration of the life space is alien to Africana culture.”⁴⁴

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: contrary to Durkheim, Eliade defined the sacred and the profane not as separate *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,

⁴¹ Hubbeling, *Divine Presence In Ordinary Life*, 10–11.

⁴² Teresa L. Reed, *The Holy Profane: Religion in Black Popular Music* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 3–5.

⁴³ Reed, *The Holy Profane*, 1.

⁴⁴ Barbara Ann Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 171.

quality, and significance, other than the meanings that are given to them by an individual's personal biography."⁴⁵

Durkheim, Otto, Eliade, and Van der Leeuw, each in their own way, utilized terms like "holy," "sacred," and "profane" 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, Ricoeur characterized this moment in history as a "period of mourning for the gods who had died."⁴⁶ Van der Leeuw lamented that he lived in a "profane" time, "full of yearning for the lost unity of life."⁴⁷ Here we see that this particular framing of "the sacred" and "the profane," as defined by early sociologists and anthropologists, is one that emerged within a context of angst that resulted from Western modernity and its push towards secularization.

Now, within a context of *post*-modernism, we are beginning to see a breakdown of the modern "secularization" narrative, as the promises of modernity and secular capitalism have failed to bring about the lasting positive changes and advancements that many of its proponents had hoped for. As a result, 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 are tied to it.⁴⁸ Postmodern religious scholar Mark C. Taylor has pointed out that both secular and religious people, in their dispute over cultural control, have lost sight of the fact that *secularism is itself a religious phenomenon*, one that grows directly out of the Judeo-Christian

⁴⁵ Lynch, "What Is This 'Religion' in the Study of Religion and Popular Culture?," 134.

⁴⁶ Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture*, 24.

⁴⁷ Van der Leeuw, *Sacred and Profane Beauty*, 332.

⁴⁸ Even Peter Berger, one of the sociologists who was responsible for shaping the so-called "secularization theory" has since recanted it. 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.

tradition as it developed in Protestantism.⁴⁹ Taylor observes that “religion,” at least as it 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 in sacred time, which was experienced cyclically rather than chronologically. But the vast majority of medieval Christians were “secular” – that is to say, they existed in “ordinary time,” participating in the rites and festivals of the local urban church, which was also understood to be “secular.”⁵⁰ The liturgical developments of the eighth century clearly show how the Roman rite was codified into two variants: the “monastic” and the “secular.”⁵¹ In other words, it was perfectly normal to have “secular” priests, “secular” churches, “secular” religious traditions, and “secular” liturgies, since the medieval church both encompassed and embraced secularity. Therefore from a historical perspective, “secular” should not be taken as synonymous with “profane” since, again, the profane was indicative of anything that was *extra-ecclesium* or outside of the church (hence, the sinister associations that developed in popular usage).

The Protestant Reformation’s radical rejection of enclosed or embodied notions of the transcendent divine 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 previously held by the 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.”⁵² Mark C. Taylor points to the

⁴⁹ Mark C. Taylor, *After God*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 2-3.

⁵⁰ 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.

⁵¹ 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.

⁵² Barry Taylor, *Entertainment Theology*, 182.

1648 Treaty of Westphalia as an emblematic moment that established the modern notion of “the secular,” characterized by the “conversion of an ecclesiastical or religious institution or its property to sovereigns, princes, or lay people.” Secular, by extension, came to mean “belonging to this world and its affairs *as distinguished from the church and religion.*”⁵³ It is 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*.⁵⁴ Gordon Graham similarly points out that the shift to “secularity” did not necessarily reflect any actual statistical data regarding religious beliefs or practices, but 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.’⁵⁵

In other words, the debate is not about whether religious behavior continues to persist, but whether religion is understood to be an “*out-moded*” way to live.⁵⁶

Furthermore, it is important to situate these historical developments within an economic context as well, since these changes occurred alongside the rise of modern capitalism. In *The Market As God*, theologian Harvey Cox shows how capitalism functions as a rival religion, with

⁵³ Mark C. Taylor, *After God*, 131 emphasis mine.

⁵⁴ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*.

⁵⁵ Gordon Graham, *The Re-Enchantment of the World: Art versus Religion*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 42.

⁵⁶ Graham, *The Re-Enchantment of the World*, 42, emphasis mine.

its own doctrines, prophets, missionaries, and martyrs.⁵⁷ In this sense, modern capitalism and its accompanying “secularization” project can be understood retrospectively as a supersessionist religious movement that sought to sequester the “sacred” *mode* into a specific, privatized, and autonomous *realm* of society called “religion.” This strategy of attempting to quarantine and 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.⁵⁸

The situation also inevitably gave rise to significant confusion about how to define religion or “the church” in relation to “culture.” Theologically, of course, the church has defined itself as being made up of those who remain faithful to Christianity (however that might be understood). But the church is also a culturally recognized sociopolitical and historical institution, with buildings, properties, rites, holidays, and other visible manifestations. As a result of secularization, church communities within the context of modernism have increasingly come to function as their own cultures within a culture, typically patterned after larger denominational subcultures, but also heavily influenced by the local concerns and habits of the surrounding political, economic, and material culture.

To complicate things even further, the very concept of “culture” itself is a relatively recent invention, which arose during the Enlightenment on the heels of this new notion of an

⁵⁷ Harvey Cox, *The Market As God* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2016).

⁵⁸ Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 41–42.

extra-ecclesium “secularity.” Again, it is important to understand that these developments were influenced as much by European colonialism and the new economic and political realities in Europe and the Americas (particularly the occupation of indigenous lands and the development of the transatlantic slave trade), as they were by scientific discovery, the Protestant Reformation, and the development of new communication technologies like the printing press. Modern theology’s concept of “culture” can be traced back to the German theologian Johann Gottfried Herder, who argued in the eighteenth century that differences between human societies 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.” In other word, cultures were believed to be manifestations of a particular genius or *Volkgeist* (folk spirit) that had been divinely entrusted to each group, so that what one finds all over the world are a variety of “experiments in how to be human.”⁵⁹

This first “theology of culture” was influential in the development of modern anthropology. Later insights gleaned from poststructuralist and postcolonial thought have corrected such overly romantic and essentialist notions of “cultures” as homogenous wholes entrusted with particular aspects of divine wisdom that must therefore be preserved and kept “pure.” Globalization has exposed the error of all such characterizations, led to an understanding of culture that is much more a process than an object of study. Twentieth century anthropologist Clifford Geertz insightfully described “culture” as a situation in which humans are suspended in “webs of significance” that we ourselves are constantly spinning.⁶⁰ “Culture” in this sense does not constitute any particular realm of life, but is rather a complex matrix made up of the material

⁵⁹ Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture*, 41.

⁶⁰ Graham, “What We Make of the World,” 77.

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.” As sociologist David Chaney writes, in academic usage, “the popular” is “not a natural or transparent term of description; it is a weapon.”⁶¹ Cultural studies scholar John Storey explains:

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.⁶²

Academic theologian Gordon Lynch points out that in much contemporary scholarship, “using the term ‘popular culture’ can have the implicit effect of reinforcing the ideologically-loaded binary of high/low culture” – a binary that any postmodern and postcolonial analysis of our contemporary situation no longer supports.⁶³

A second consideration is the relationship of “religion” to this new postmodern understanding of culture. Indeed, “religion” has become one of the most contested categories of all. “A child of the Enlightenment,”⁶⁴ also conceived in the colonial encounter, our modern concept of “religion” is intrinsically tied to Western projects of imperialism and white

⁶¹ 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.

⁶² 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.

⁶³ 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.

⁶⁴ Frank Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics: A Theological Study of Making and Meaning* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 112.

supremacist interpretations of global diversity. Ritual theorist Jonathan Z. Smith has gone so far as to argue that in truth, “no specific historical or cultural phenomena correspond to the general term religion.”⁶⁵ 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 well be defined as “religious.” Along these lines, comparative religion scholar David Chidester has observed that popular devotion to various “fandoms,” including film and literary franchises, sport teams, celebrities, and consumer brands, are all categorically religious.⁶⁶ Musicologist Rupert Till’s *Pop Cult* likewise demonstrates how popular music has come to serve a religious function for those living in the wake of Christendom.⁶⁷ From this academic perspective, many scholars now insist that “the study of religion should really be dissolved into the field of cultural studies.”⁶⁸

Lynch, however, cites the reductionist dangers of failing to appreciate the particular kinds of wisdom and significance that are constructed and maintained within those cultural systems that we have come to recognize 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.”⁶⁹ It is difficult to imagine how, for example, one might reconcile the experience of even the most devoted Taylor Swift or Grateful

⁶⁵ Cited in Mark C. Taylor, *After God*, 5.

⁶⁶ David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Pop Culture*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005, 30-52.

⁶⁷ Rupert Till, *Pop Cult: Religion and Popular Music* (New York: Continuum, 2010).

⁶⁸ Lynch, “What Is This ‘Religion’ in the Study of Religion and Popular Culture?,” 132.

⁶⁹ Lynch, “What Is This ‘Religion’ in the Study of Religion and Popular Culture?,” 131–132.

Dead fan, with Paul Tillich's theological description of religion as "the experience of absolute reality founded on the experience of absolute nothingness."⁷⁰

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."⁷¹ In other words, while some form of ritual and "religiosity" can be identified in every human culture (including so-called "secular" cultures), the traditions that have come to be recognized around the globe as "major religious traditions" encompass within themselves a certain maturity that is characterized by an ability to address the paradoxes and complexities that human beings encounter in their existential confrontations with life and death. Functionalism therefore fails to account for the wisdom that exists within religious institutions and traditions to successfully deconstruct, and then reconstruct, the identities of individuals and communities in transformative ways.

That being said, the functionalist approach resonates strongly with Tillich's theological definition of religion as "the state of being ultimately concerned."⁷² 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 "great divergence" in "what functions for each of us as 'god'."⁷³ Tillich, of course, added an attached counsel that most functionalist scholars would want to avoid: namely, that having an ultimate concern which is not, in fact, ultimate, but rather is transient or finite, will ultimately lead to existential disappointment. Cobb lists some of the most common "idolatrous" (or in Buddhist terms, "empty") ultimate concerns:

⁷⁰ Russell Re Manning, *Theology at the End of Culture: Paul Tillich's Theology of Culture and Art* (Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2005), 108.

⁷¹ Mark C. Taylor, *After God*, 4, emphasis mine.

⁷² Paul Tillich, *Theology and Culture*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 40.

⁷³ Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture*, 103.

...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.⁷⁴

While Tillich speaks of “religion” as a mode of being that cannot be reduced to a particular culture, he still acknowledges that there are particular cultural phenomena that are commonly referred to in modern society as “religions.” This results in a problem of language that highlights the limitations of our current models for describing social and spiritual activity in humans. 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 of all human existence, and “Religion₂” for the recognizable social institutions of religion that occupy a particular place or realm within a culture.⁷⁵ 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.”⁷⁶

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 ♪

⁷⁴ Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture*, 104.

⁷⁵ Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture*, 92, 128–129.

⁷⁶ 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 modernity. Of course, throughout history there have always been creative forms of human expression and skilled means of human craft, which have interacted in various ways with ritual practice and considerations of ultimate concern. Historically, relations between artists and the church have been characterized by both conflict and creative flourishing. This is particularly true in the case of music. However, the modern study of musicology still insists on organizing the history of Western music into categories of “sacred” and secular,” in spite of the fact that these terms are anachronistic when applied to the compositions of ancient and medieval Europe. The narrative of art’s triumph over religion in the context of modernity thus serves supersessionist ends by overshadowing the reality that many of the most prolific composers of “secular” music during the Middle Ages were also, in fact, clergymen.

During the Early Modern period, however, patronage for the arts shifted away from the church, and creativity increasingly became defined by the interests of aristocratic and bourgeois middle-class life in the context of an emerging market economy.⁷⁷ Thus, we see that the concepts of “art” and “religion” which most people take for granted today emerged relatively recently and alongside one another, precisely in an attempt to further establish their separation. Within this political and economic context, many educated elites began to interpret the waning power of religion as an indication of human “progress” and advancement. Such narratives served as a convenient euphemism for the white supremacist ideologies that helped justify the global occupation of indigenous lands and the enslavement of native peoples. Other cultures were seen

⁷⁷ Frank Burch Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 5.

as being more “primitive,” exhibiting animalistic behaviors and antiquated beliefs that “civilized” Europeans believed they had moved beyond.

A century later, when scholars like Durkheim, Eliade, Victor Turner, and Gerardus Van der Leeuw began writing about the loss of a pervasive sense of “the holy” within the context of Western Europe, 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.⁷⁸

Unfortunately, the observation that a shift had taken place within the Western European mindset was folded into secularization’s narrative of “progress,” further emboldening a widespread sense among elites that art’s separation 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,⁷⁹ most took it as another sign of white Western superiority.

By examining this shift within a postcolonial framework, we can reject old notions of “progress” that conceal the massive human cost of modernity’s emergence, while also debunking the myth of Western art’s supposed “autonomy.” Indeed, the very 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*

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

⁷⁹ Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 213.

l'arte) in his 1835 Romantic manifesto on art,⁸⁰ as part of a larger art movement that had explicit religious commitments and goals. Philosopher and social theorist Henri de Saint-Simon declared that the artist was part of the new “priest class” of modern, secularized society.⁸¹ As art historian William Gaunt puts it, for artists of this period there was only “one law, one morality, one devotion, and that was – Art.”⁸²

The philosophical underpinnings of this movement had, of course 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 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.”⁸³

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.”⁸⁴ 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.”⁸⁵ This cultivation of aesthetic distance with regard to artistic objects was also associated with a particular definition of “culture” – one that maintained the privileges of urban elites. To be “cultured” was to have cultivated a sense of distance between

⁸⁰ John W. De Gruchy, *Christianity, Art, and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 82–83.

⁸¹ 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.

⁸² William Gaunt, *The Aesthetic Adventure*, (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1957), 14; cited in De Gruchy, *Christianity, Art, and Transformatio*, 83.

⁸³ Immanuel Kant, “Critique of Judgment,” in *What Is Art? Aesthetic Theory from Plato to Tolstoy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 230.

⁸⁴ Kant, “Critique of Judgment,” 215.

⁸⁵ Kant, “Critique of Judgment,” 199.

self and object. “What became high art rituals, connoisseurship and so on,” writes Frith, “were an aspect of bourgeois ‘distinction’ that combined social, aesthetic, and ethical superiority.”⁸⁶

According to Mark Smith, the shift in behavior towards aesthetic 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.”⁸⁷ Gordon Graham similarly reminds us 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.⁸⁸

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 experience. In that sense, modern art was defined not so much by objects themselves, but as a way of framing and experiencing objects *as* things of aesthetic interest. This, of course, is the only way of making sense of using one term – “art” – to describe the diverse “objects” represented by the various artistic disciplines: painting, music, sculpture, poetry, architecture, dance, drama, and gardening (all of which were originally listed as the ‘fine arts’). Not all combinations of colors, sounds, carvings, words, structures, movements, or flowers were considered “art.” The concept of “art” only pertained to objects that had been framed in such a way so as to be *experienced as art* – which to say, apart from any doctrinal interest or pragmatic

⁸⁶ Frith, *Performing Rites*, 29–30.

⁸⁷ Mark M. Smith, *Sensory History* (New York: Berg, 2007), 24.

⁸⁸ Graham, *The Re-Enchantment of the World*, 102.

utility. When defined in this way, “art” becomes less about the *contents* of a sensory experience, and more concerned with the *forms* that inspire a particular kind of sensory experience.

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 such an 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, 1917⁸⁹

The question that is often asked of such pieces – “But is it art?”⁹⁰ – represents something of a categorical error. Critics who ask it are concerned with the object’s contents. But modern art has

⁸⁹ 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)).

⁹⁰ “But Is It Art,” *The New Criterion*, March 2014.

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.

Four years after Duchamp’s urinal, Russian painter Alexander Rodchenko released a statement that coincided with the opening of his controversial Moscow exhibition entitled $5 \times 5 = 25$, in which he proclaimed: “Art is dead!”⁹¹ This was a clear reference to Nietzsche’s declaration of God’s death one generation prior, and much like the death of God, the so-called “death of art” did not coincide with any widespread discontinuation of creative self-expression or artisanship. People continued to paint, sculpt, sing, write, and dance long after the supposed death of “art,” just as people have persisted with their religious beliefs and practices even in the aftermath of God’s death. In both cases, the pronouncement of “death” is less applicable to specific activities or phenomena *per se* as it is to the paradigms and frameworks in which those activities are interpreted and experienced by elites.

But the final deathblow for the religion of modern art came not from framed urinals, or 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.⁹²

These apocalyptic times were also ushered in by 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 concerts, 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 what I can never give

⁹¹ Mark C. Taylor, *After God*, 211.

⁹² Didier Maleuvre, *The Religion of Reality: Inquiry into the Self, Art, and Transcendence* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 192.

consent to.”⁹³ 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.”⁹⁴ Therefore he 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.⁹⁵

Particularly in the context of the United States, where the social demands of European bourgeois life were largely unsustainable, American pragmatism led to an even greater sense of cultural fluidity. The perception of a special “transcendence” that was only attainable through the “highest” forms of music and art was reinterpreted within the new class orientation, such that the artistic and musical traditions of Europe came to be associated with wealth, decorum, tradition, solemnity, and reverence. Musicologist Katherine Preston’s work has revealed that the “musical schism” between classical and “popular” (parlor) music in the late nineteenth century does not map onto the class structures of the time, as is commonly assumed. Rather, these stylistic categories came to serve as markers of the perceived “seriousness” of an event or social occasion, with musicians performing popular tunes at dances and parades, while reserving “classical” material from the Old World for more “serious” occasions like seated concerts, graduations, and civic ceremonies.⁹⁶

It is unsurprising, then, that we should encounter the attitude within many American mainline and Roman Catholic churches today 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

⁹³ Cited in Frith, *Performing Rites*, 30.

⁹⁴ Frith, *Performing Rites*, 30.

⁹⁵ Frith, *Performing Rites*, 31–32.

⁹⁶ Frith, *Performing Rites*, 30–31.

“folk” music) do not. Most of the materials published by Christian clergy and music directors throughout the twentieth century on the subject of “sacred music” or church music 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.⁹⁷

Predictably, the Rev. Gordon granted the *classical* guitar as a notable exception. While these associations may seem perfectly natural within an American context, it is clear that they are not only culturally arbitrary, but the result of class and cultural values that run counter to the Gospel tradition.

And yet, in spite of the fact that modernist approaches to art were inevitably products of the social, economic, and political interests of their time, it is important to keep in mind that within this context, they were also born out of a very sincere desire to see, experience, and understand the world in new ways, through an exploration of the relationship between objectivity and subjectivity. The attempt of artists and thinkers to disentangle “art” from the agendas of “religion” and “politics,” and to develop a special kind of attentiveness towards aesthetic experiences and creative self-expression, can still offer us lasting value. Such efforts challenge us to reflect on the aesthetic properties unique to particular mediums, and to experiment with new ways of developing 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 seek to embrace some of the more philosophically compelling aspects of the modern art legacy. Without clinging unnecessarily to old notions of “highbrow/lowbrow” cultures, artistic “autonomy,” 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*

⁹⁷ T. David Gordon, *Why Johnny Can't Sing Hymns: How Pop Culture Rewrote the Hymnal* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 2010), 61.

such a way that they have the 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” (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.”⁹⁸

Meanwhile, the visual arts (including painting, drawing, sculpting, and architecture) freeze time in order to achieve a particular framing of *space*. Goethe therefore referred to music “liquid architecture” and 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 emotions and communicate multivalent meanings. Poetry and literature likewise encompass a mixture of framing agents through the work of story and word-play. In appreciating the various ways in which 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 occasions of “art” that we encounter in our world.

⁹⁸ 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, 2010⁹⁹

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

⁹⁹ 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 increasingly 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.¹⁰⁰

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

¹⁰⁰ Barry Taylor, *Entertainment Theology*, 25–26.

relativity that this entails.”¹⁰¹ “More persons in more parts of the world,” writes Taylor, “consider a wider set of possible lives than they ever did before.”¹⁰² 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 mind. Graham Ward has observed that, in cyberspace, concepts of space “collapse into omnipresence and multilocality” and “time disappears.”¹⁰³ When we are online, we enter into a space that is placeless, and a “timeless time.”¹⁰⁴ 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.¹⁰⁵

Within this condition, the classifications and separations that once provided illumination to previous generations now seem irrelevant at best, and oppressive at worst. The collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 is symbolic of an era in which more and more people have begun to participate in the questioning, altering, and eventual dissolution of all previous cultural boundaries: gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, nationalities, religions, and the lines between 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.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰¹ David Tracy, *On Naming the Present: Reflections on God, Hermeneutics, and Church*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 16; cited in Taylor, *Entertainment Theology*, 73.

¹⁰² Barry Taylor, *Entertainment Theology*, 46–47.

¹⁰³ 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.

¹⁰⁴ Taylor, *Entertainment Theology: New-Edge Spirituality in a Digital Democracy*, 35–36.

¹⁰⁵ Rushkoff, *Playing the Future*, 7; cited in Taylor, *Entertainment Theology*, 79.

¹⁰⁶ Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture*, 39.

With regard to the arts, cultural historian Thomas Hine points out 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.¹⁰⁷

The rise of commercial forms of entertainment has also had the 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.”¹⁰⁸

Hine argues that “high” Western culture has not died; rather, “we are swimming in it.”¹⁰⁹ 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.¹¹⁰

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 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. Theodor Adorno argued that “the culture industry gives people a false sense of what will bring them happiness through the

¹⁰⁷ 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.

¹⁰⁸ Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture*, 32.

¹⁰⁹ Hine, “Notable Quotables,” 1, cited in Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide*, 36.

¹¹⁰ Mark C. Taylor, *After God*, 215–217.

aestheticization of everyday life...the illusion that happiness can be found through consumer commodities or mass-produced entertainment.”¹¹¹

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.¹¹² In his recent book *Music Quickens Time*, conductor Daniel Barenboim 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.”¹¹³ These and similar critiques have motivated many professional artists and scholars to double down in their attempts to maintain strict boundaries between the canons of “high art,” which is regarded as sacred and must therefore be protected and set apart, and “popular art,” which is thought to be of dubious value because of its relationship to commerce.

These boundaries, however, are becoming more and more difficult to maintain. The expectation that certain kinds of aesthetic experiences can and must remain hermetically sealed from our social, political, and economic lives has proven unsustainable in the current climate. While we may empathize with Barenboim’s frustration and his desire to protect the integrity of Beethoven’s creative masterpiece from the manipulative agendas and psychologically exploitative effects of mass marketing, his appeals to the necessity of aesthetic purity lack the nuance necessary to realistically address the complex relationship that now exists between music, visual art, and commerce in the media-saturated cultures of the twenty-first century.

¹¹¹ Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, 71.

¹¹² Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985).

¹¹³ Daniel Barenboim, *Music Quickens Time* (New York: Verso, 2008), 33.

Efforts to present certain styles of music or art as “distinguished” also unavoidably end up perpetuating the old racial and class regimes. In the 1930s, Pierre Bourdieu maintained that different demographics of people engaged in different art worlds – the “bourgeois,” the “folk,” and the “commercial” – based on the cultural capital that they possessed. But this notion has since been questioned by Simon Frith, who observes that these worlds are not distinct or autonomous cultures of artistic taste *per se*, but rather “the play of three historically evolving discourses across a single field.”¹¹⁴ Drawing on Foucault, Frith demonstrates how these “discourses” have developed in relation to one another, and 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 what we see today as “a form of middle-class culture characterized by middlebrow concerns,” and yet “marked by highbrow traces.”¹¹⁵

For these same reasons, Gordon Lynch warns against overstating or romanticizing the perceived contrasts and boundaries between “authentic” folk cultures, “elevated” high cultures, and “debased” commercial or mass 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.”¹¹⁶ 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], or Sufjan Stevens [CD track 1], since each of their repertoires represent 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.

¹¹⁴ Frith, *Performing Rites*, 36-42.

¹¹⁵ Frith, *Performing Rites*, 43-45.

¹¹⁶ Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, 10-11.

Technological developments over the past thirty years have also continued to transform the process of musical creation and reception by shifting control away from major media corporations. Independent record labels and alternative distribution strategies have freed many artists to explore the uncharted territory between genres. Terms like “rock,” “pop,” “folk,” “country,” and “rap” hardly seem adequate for capturing the stylistic complexities of so much of the music that is being produced since the turn of the third millennium. Many music critics have begun to employ conglomerate labels in order to identify the genre-defying sound-play of new artists. The all-female band HAIM, for example, was recently described as “stripped-down-nu-folk-meets-nineties-R&B.”¹¹⁷ As fewer and fewer artists seek to confine their creative work within particular traditions or 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 hybrid engagement with their former contents.

In addition to this mixing of values and genres, 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 visual imagery into a more holistic aesthetic experience. Frith suggests that, increasingly, popular musicians would be better characterized as performance artists, who mix musical forms with visual and dramatic/dance forms.¹¹⁸ When we consider role that visual art plays in the packaging and distribution of musical recordings, particularly through an increasing emphasis on videos (which combine drama, dance, music, poetry, and visual image), we see a complete breakdown of modern art’s goal to isolate and elevate certain kinds of sensory experience.

¹¹⁷ Freddie Champion, “Band of the Week: HAIM,” *Vogue*, February 28, 2012, <http://www.vogue.com/culture/article/band-of-the-week-haim/#1>.

¹¹⁸ Frith, *Performing Rites*, 212.

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.”¹¹⁹ McDannell likewise reminds us that religious practices are themselves by nature “multimedia events...where speech, vision, gesture, touch, and sound combine.”¹²⁰ 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 in order to elevate “the word.” In 1973, Harvey Cox predicted that “high culture” and “the new media” would soon blend into one, such 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.” At the same time, he recognized that this situation would spell the end of the reign of written text – a situation that he anticipated would have “a shattering impact on the ‘religions of the book’.”¹²¹ Indeed, it was precisely the loss of the *written* word that was most concerning for Jewish media critic Neil Postman in his analysis of television media, lamenting 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.”¹²²

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

¹¹⁹ Saliers, *Music and Theology*, 2–5.

¹²⁰ McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 14.

¹²¹ 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), 255–256.

¹²² Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 88.

treated in an environment of entertainment, but it is mixed with forms of commercialism as well.”¹²³ Television, and the art and music forms associated with it, have thus become symbolic for many religious people of an “excessive materialism that contradicts selflessness and prudence.”¹²⁴ Many evangelical Christians, however, have embraced these forms, seeing them as an opportunity for missionary work. Meanwhile, an increasing number of Mainline and Roman Catholic religious leaders feel (begrudgingly) that they simply *must* engage in new media marketing practices in order “to make Christian values more appealing to American youth.”¹²⁵ Barbara Wheeler of Auburn Seminary suggests that one of the reasons for the decline of mainline Protestantism is 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 in the context of late capitalism, “cultures” are constructed through the production of commodities that can be bought and sold.¹²⁶ 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’.”¹²⁷

However, the development of a “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 through an appropriation of traditional religious language and imagery. This situation that has led to a split within Christian thought when it comes to the ethics of mass media advertising. A recent study

¹²³ 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.

¹²⁴ Stout, “Religion and Popular Culture,” 71.

¹²⁵ 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.

¹²⁶ 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.

¹²⁷ Taylor, *Entertainment Theology*, 102.

comparing “users” and “nonusers” of the books, clothing, film, jewelry, and music associated with the “Christian” subculture, has revealed a significant difference between these two groups. Namely, while nonusers express their inability “to resolve the intellectual inconsistencies they perceive between marketing and Christian teachings,” devout users are apparently uninterested in these kinds of cognitive issues, focusing instead on the *feelings of identification* that are generated by such products.¹²⁸ 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.”¹²⁹ 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.”¹³⁰

“Contemporary Christian Music” (CCM) is a genre that emerged in the 1960s, when a songwriter named Larry Norman, who described himself as “too secular for the Christians and too Christian for the secularists,” released his first album of “Jesus Music.”¹³¹ 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 consequences of their product output.¹³² *Variety* magazine reported in 1997 that CCM had shown a 22 percent growth each year in the 1990s,¹³³ and by 2012 the revenues of this industry totaled 62.6 million dollars. This powerful industry has a strong vested interest in establishing, maintaining, and controlling perceptions about the differences between “Christian” and “secular”

¹²⁸ Haley, White, and Cunningham, “Branding Religion: Christian Consumers’ Understandings of Christian Products,” 285.

¹²⁹ Haley, White, and Cunningham, “Branding Religion: Christian Consumers’ Understandings of Christian Products,” 283–284.

¹³⁰ Haley, White, and Cunningham, “Branding Religion,” 281.

¹³¹ Tim Dowley, *Christian Music: A Global History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 234.

¹³² 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>.

¹³³ 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.

music. The kind of CCM fans who insist that “Christian music lifts you up while secular music drags you down”¹³⁴ are in many ways parroting the messages that have been manufactured by the media industry to strategically sway their target demographic.

But in reality, the relationship between popular music, commerce, and religious identity is far more complex, with boundaries that are much more ambiguous and porous. As Barry Alfonso points out: “Spirit in the Sky” by Norman Greenbaum [CD track 7] is not considered a “Christian song” by the corporate music industry at all, falling squarely within the “secular” category of rock and roll. Yet the song “has more explicit religious content than do many recent Christian radio hits.”¹³⁵ To complicate things even further, Christian artists like Josh Garrells [CD track 8] and Mumford & Sons [CD track 9] produce music that openly expresses sincere Christian convictions, with frequent lyrical references to Biblical and theological themes. Nevertheless, they do not choose to associate themselves with CCM, maintaining a very strategic position with the global music industry as a whole. Mumford & Sons, for example, has turned down multiple invitations to perform at Greenbelt (England’s preeminent “Christian” music festival), and although 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.¹³⁶

Of course, the popular music of African Americans has always represented the hybridity of sacred and secular in black consciousness.¹³⁷ Black liberation theologian James Cone called

¹³⁴ Haley, White, and Cunningham, “Branding Religion,” 280–281.

¹³⁵ Barry Alfonso, *The Billboard Guide to Contemporary Christian Music* (New York: Billboard Books, 2002), 21.

¹³⁶ 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>.

¹³⁷ Reed, *The Holy Profane*, 30.

the blues the “secular spirituals” of the nineteenth and twentieth-centuries,¹³⁸ and Black Pentecostal theologian Daniel Hodge uses the term “neo-sacred” to describe the ways in which hip-hop has sought “a new type of theological discourse...in the face of severe economic, social, and political disparities.”¹³⁹ For Teresa Reed, the song “Shout!,” originally released in 1959, does more than simply mimic Pentecostalism: “it *is* Pentecostalism!”¹⁴⁰ While there has been no shortage of tension in African American religious communities concerning Black popular music and its relationship to “sacred” Black church music, 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 “no separation exists between the sacred and profane/secular” in traditional African cosmologies. She writes,¹⁴¹

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.¹⁴²

This situation becomes even more nuanced when one begins to consider the theological implications of music and lyrics written by artists who may or may not consider themselves Christian or religious, but who nevertheless compose songs of real theological inquiry and depth. On her album *Far*, Regina Spektor’s “Laughing With” [CD track 10] wisely 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.”¹⁴³ Nickel Creek’s “When in Rome” [CD track 11] asks “Where can a dead man go?” and suggests that one’s soul may “never really feel at home if you spent a lifetime learning

¹³⁸ James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 100.

¹³⁹ 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.

¹⁴⁰ Reed, *The Holy Profane*, 30.

¹⁴¹ 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.

¹⁴² Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, “Sacred and Secular in African American Music,” 500.

¹⁴³ Regina Spektor, “Laughing With,” *Far* (Sire, 2009).

how to live in Rome.”¹⁴⁴ Patty Griffin’s “Mary” [CD track 12] 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.¹⁴⁵ 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 intentions, including songs or imagery that may appear on the surface to be antithetical and even hostile to religion. By distinguishing “the meanings of a pop culture event from the intention of its ‘authors’, whether artists, designers, or corporate executives,” Beaudoin is able to access “redemptive theological reclamations” from artists like Nirvana, Pearl Jam, REM, Madonna, and Tori Amos.



Figure 5. Scene from *Heart-Shaped Box* by Nirvana, directed by Anton Corbijn¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ Nickel Creek, "When In Rome," *Why Should the Fire Die?* (Los Angeles, CA: Barefoot Recording, 2005).

¹⁴⁵ Patty Griffin, "Mary," *Flaming Red* (A&M, 1998).

¹⁴⁶ 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)

Beaudoin's approach is much more in line with the practices of everyday consumers, who often experience and construct religious meaning through their encounters with popular culture regardless of whether or not these products have been designed for religious purposes.¹⁴⁷ 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.¹⁴⁸

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 being brought forth by "a new breed of theologian, one who work[s] primarily in the realm of the arts."¹⁴⁹ Taylor sees theological practice as moving away from a didactic approach that offers answers to questions about God, and toward a "global communal conversation about the sacred in general."¹⁵⁰ In light of this situation, the church – instead of setting itself up 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. 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.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁷ 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.

¹⁴⁸ 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.

¹⁴⁹ Barry Taylor, *Entertainment Theology*, 104–105.

¹⁵⁰ Barry Taylor, *Entertainment Theology*, 18–19.

¹⁵¹ 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, 2012¹⁵²

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 in the twenty-first century is a little like trying to draw a line 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 “meant a blurring of the distinctions between high and low, art and commerce, the sacred and the profane.”¹⁵³ These kinds of distinctions have become unconvincing for so many people precisely

¹⁵² Duy Huynh, *Journey Within a Journey II*, 2012, accessed April 8, 2014 at <http://www.duyhuynh.com/gallery.php?gal=2012%20archives>

¹⁵³ Frith, *Performing Rites*, 32.

because of their failure to recognize and honor “the role of the mundane *in* the construction of the sacred.”¹⁵⁴

Nevertheless, I do not agree with the suggestion made by Stewart Hoover and 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.”¹⁵⁵ Advocating a wholesale dismissal of all evaluative categories is unhelpful precisely because it fails to offer practical tools for critical engagement. Indeed, when artists and musicians outside of the church frequently insist that “music *is* my religion” or that “*all* music is sacred,” usually they are not thinking of Alison Gold’s “Chinese Food,” Nicki Minaj’s “Stupid Hoe,” or the German pop sensation “Schnappi das kleine Krokodil” [CD track 13]. 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.”¹⁵⁶

Mark C. Taylor reminds us that “When everything is sacred, nothing is sacred.”¹⁵⁷ At the same time, nothing is sacred when the divine is perceived as being totally absent either. Christianity might be understood as a series of attempts to strike a critical and theological balance between these two paradoxical extremes, within diverse geographic, social, and historical contexts. Frank Burch Brown has helpfully identified an entire spectrum of different ways that Christians have historically or institutionally identified “the sacred,” ranging from the “negative transcendence” of God as infinite and ineffable, to the “immanent transcendence” of

¹⁵⁴ Lynch, “What Is This ‘Religion’ in the Study of Religion and Popular Culture?” 135.

¹⁵⁵ Hoover, “Religion, Media, and the Cultural Center of Gravity,” 58–59, emphasis mine.

¹⁵⁶ Frank Burch Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 122.

¹⁵⁷ Mark C. Taylor, *After God*, 133.

God as immersed within the finite.¹⁵⁸ To argue that “Christianity” as a social institution (Religion₂ from our earlier scheme) has emphasized one or the other would be a massive oversimplification of our sociohistorical reality.

But recall that we are defining the sacred as a particular *mode* of being, characterized by a sensitivity to that which is “wholly other” or different from what is commonly experienced or expected in human life. We have also said that the sacred can be constitutive of, but is not necessarily bound to, the social sphere of “Religion₂.” As Methodist theologian Christopher Morse writes, “The Spirit of God is as much a reality of politics and economics as of religion, of the so-called ‘profane’ world as of the sacred.”¹⁵⁹ Thus, from a theological perspective, the sacred cannot be understood as a particular *realm* of society, or as a cultural sphere of religiosity that is meant to exist over and above other spheres. Rather, Christians are called by the writings of the New Testament to cultivate a depth of concern that permeates *all* of life, a mode of being that is open to encountering the sacred in *all* times and places.

A 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 saying that is drawn from Scripture passages like John 15:19 and 17:14-15, Romans 12:2, Ephesians 4:22-24, and 1 Thessalonians 4:1. And yet, by no means do these passages suggest that the disciples try to create or protect some controlled, isolated, and purified realm of religiosity, in order to quarantine themselves off from ancient Roman society. On the contrary, the task that Jesus puts before them is to go out into the world and shine light on the presence of the *basilea* or Kingdom of God, which he claimed was already at hand (Matt. 5:14). The notion of the sacred as set apart from human experience in time and space is precisely what the Gospel tradition seeks to radically

¹⁵⁸ Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, 117–130.

¹⁵⁹ Christopher Morse, *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief*, 2nd ed. (New York: Continuum, 2009), 40.

overcome. And so, instead of becoming the organizers of a new religion, the disciples were instructed to be like yeast (Matt. 13:33) and salt (Matt. 5:13), two change agents that by their very nature disappear into the larger mix in order to bring about the preservation, enhancement, and transformation of the whole. This is how we are to be witnesses of God's revelation in the world – through a participation in the world that is marked by a transfiguration of our everyday seeing and hearing.

The word “revelation,” of course, is a translation of the Greek *apokalypsis*, which literally means a “lifting of the veil.” Biblical evangelism is not about the application of popular sales strategies and communication tactics in order to convince people to join a particular group, accept a particular ideology, or adhere to a certain set of ritual practices or beliefs. True evangelism is about participating in divine revelation by piercing the veil of mundane, everyday life in order to illuminate the “sacred sparks” hiding within.¹⁶⁰ Note the sense of urgency in the Biblical counsel that we develop “eyes to see” and “ears to hear,” a theme is repeated fifteen times throughout the Scriptures, five times by Jesus himself.¹⁶¹ Barbara Holmes explains the Christian experience of sacred encounter 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.¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ 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.

¹⁶¹ 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.

¹⁶² Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable*, 170.

This experience is similar to what Beaudoin has described as the ‘irreverent’ spirituality embraced by younger generations 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’ lives can become lived prayers for the embrace of the religious in the pop culture milieu, which is the virtual location of GenX salvation.¹⁶³

This notion of “lived prayer” also gets us a bit closer to the original Biblical sense of the word “faith,” which comes from the Greek *pistis*, meaning to “trust.” Trust in God is something that cannot ultimately be compelled or controlled by religious authorities or institutions; it can only be demonstrated, modeled, and encouraged. “Not even the best preacher,” writes 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.”¹⁶⁴

That being said, how can something so subjective, fleeting, and relativistic as our aesthetic experiences of art and music play a 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

¹⁶³ Thomas Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998), 40–41.

¹⁶⁴ Morse, *Not Every Spirit*, 27.

uncharitable in spirit and far removed from the poor and socially marginal folk beloved by Jesus.¹⁶⁵

A strong “aesthetic relativism” has developed in reaction to the short-sighted elitism inherent within the Kantian system. Many people are rightfully suspicious of *any* aesthetic standards, particularly those that would seek to establish any sort of relationship to morality. Within this context, all statements about “good” or “bad” art are interpreted simply as social positioning gestures that are used to demonstrate one’s cultural capital, and help shape surrounding discourses of power.¹⁶⁶ According to Frith, these gestures are a necessary part of the social restructuring processes that make aesthetic pleasure possible, because they enable mutual experience and stimulate internal dialogue.¹⁶⁷ Most ethnomusicologists would therefore advocate a totally contextual approach to aesthetic evaluation: music or art can only be conceived of as “bad” in the sense that it deviates in some way from culturally-contextual expectations and desires relating to issues of authenticity, appropriateness, and/or difficulty.¹⁶⁸

While there is a great deal of truth in this perspective, the learned apathy and indifference to any relationship between aesthetics and ethics has its own limitations, insofar as it relinquishes all evaluative power to those who would seek to 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.”¹⁶⁹ Real-world ethical and theological consequences can and do result from an engagement with aesthetic experience that is not coupled with critical reflection, particularly as it

¹⁶⁵ Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste*, 3.

¹⁶⁶ Christopher J. Washburne and Maiken Derno, eds., *Bad Music: The Music We Love To Hate* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 3.

¹⁶⁷ Brown, *Religious Aesthetics: A Theological Study of Making and Meaning*, 149–150.

¹⁶⁸ Washburne and Derno, *Bad Music: The Music We Love To Hate*, 1.

¹⁶⁹ De Gruchy, *Christianity, Art, and Transformation*, 91.

relates to issues of economics, appropriation, commercialism, representation, and embodiment. Aesthetics must, therefore, be always supplemented by ethical and theological perspectives.

Of course, the reverse is true: theology and ethics must be supplemented by an aesthetic perspective as well, since beauty is understood philosophically as being deeply allied with truth and goodness. Theologians like Hans Urs von Balthasar and others have defended this perspective from a theological angle, while contemporary philosopher Elaine Scarry has recently made a similar argument from a more secular approach: “[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.”¹⁷⁰ The arts, then, through their interplay with beauty, offer a unique epistemology that provides access to theological and ethical insights otherwise unattainable and inexpressible.

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?”¹⁷¹ Swiss Protestant theologian Karl Barth famously considered Mozart [CD track 14] 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.”¹⁷² “Why is it possible to hold that Mozart has a place in theology?” Barth asked, acknowledging that the composer was neither a father of the church nor a particularly active Christian, and someone who by all accounts seemed to live a rather superficial life (“and who was a Catholic, besides!”).

¹⁷⁰ Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 52.

¹⁷¹ Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste*, 10–11.

¹⁷² Karl Barth, *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart*, trans. Clarence K. Pott (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1992), 69; cited in Saliers, *Music and Theology*, 24.

Nevertheless, Barth 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 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.¹⁷³

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.”¹⁷⁴ 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.¹⁷⁵

Ultimately, 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.”¹⁷⁶ There is a unique ethical imperative inherent specifically within Christian aesthetic encounters: “Christian solidarity with the poor and suffering, symbolized by the spirituality of the cross,

¹⁷³ Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik III*, 3, trans. Richard Viladesau (Zurich: Zollikon, 1932ff), 337-340; cited in Viladesau, “Aesthetics and Religion,” 3–4.

¹⁷⁴ Kandinsky, Wassily, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1977.

¹⁷⁵ 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.

¹⁷⁶ Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts*, 31.

introduces a ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’ to our experience of the world and its beauties.”¹⁷⁷

Richard Viladesau furthermore 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 the world, but that God is transcendentally 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.¹⁷⁸

Disregard for this ethical imperative is what led the Hebrew prophets to repeatedly cry out against music whenever songs of praise and worship were used as a means of drowning out the cries of the poor and the oppressed.¹⁷⁹ “In the face of beauty and terror,” Don Saliers writes, “emotions can be ‘true’ or ‘false’ to how things are.”¹⁸⁰ If we are being called into a 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.”¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁷ Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts*, 52–53.

¹⁷⁸ Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts*, 52–53.

¹⁷⁹ 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.”

¹⁸⁰ Don Saliers, “Beauty and Terror,” *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality*, 2, 2 (2002): 187.

¹⁸¹ Paul Tillich, “Existential Aspects of Modern Art,” in *Christianity and the Existentialists*, ed. Carl Michalson (New York: Scribner’s, 1956), 278.



Figure 7. *Cobblestone Bridge*, Thomas Kinkade, 2000¹⁸²

These concerns characterize a common criticism of “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 actually 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.”¹⁸³ 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.”¹⁸⁴ Kistch has been variously defined as sentimental, mediocre, cheap, banal, counterfeit, illusory, “forever immature,” and requiring a level of involvement that is only “slight or superficial.”¹⁸⁵ John De Gruchy 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.”¹⁸⁶

But De Gruchy also compassionately acknowledges that “people will always find comfort in kitsch, for that is the whole point of it.” He calls attention to the fact that, for many

¹⁸² Thomas Kinkade, “Cobblestone Bridge,” *Art by Thomas Kinkade: Painter of Light*, 2000, accessed April 8, 2014 from <http://www.artbythomaskinkade.com/cobblestoneBridgeView.html>.

¹⁸³ 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.

¹⁸⁴ Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste*, 146, 133.

¹⁸⁵ Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste*, 147.

¹⁸⁶ De Gruchy, *Christianity, Art, and Transformation*, 76.

people, “life is ugly and brutal, so why should they appreciate art that reinforces what is daily experienced?”¹⁸⁷ In his study of Protestant Christian devotion to the paintings of Warner Sallman (popular images that many people consider to be emblematic of religious kitsch) art historian David Morgan humbly reminds us that “every human society is, in the last resort, men banded together in the face of death.”¹⁸⁸ Colleen McDannell furthermore cautions us to consider how factors like class, race, gender, and social status factor in to most constructions of what does and does not count as “kitsch.”

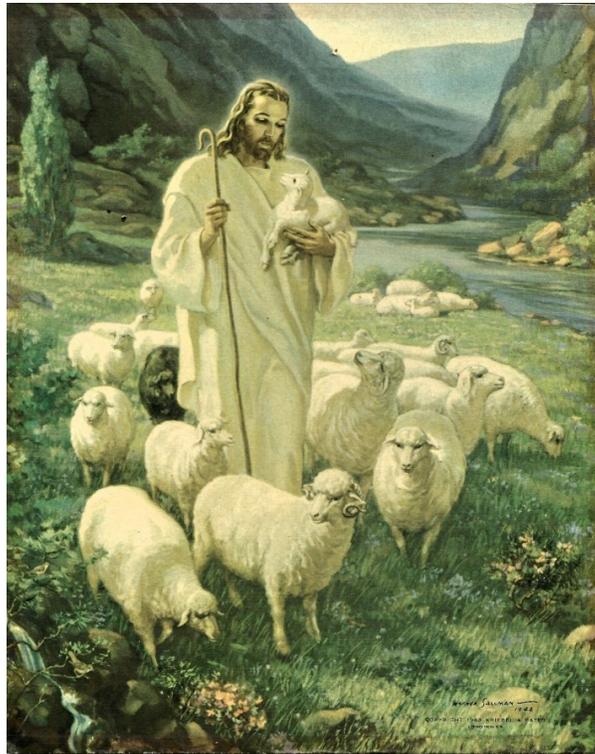


Figure 8. *The Lord Is My Shepherd*, Warner Sallman, 1943¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁷ De Gruchy, *Christianity, Art, and Transformation*, 76–77.

¹⁸⁸ David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 10.

¹⁸⁹ Warner Sallman, *The Lord Is My Shepherd*, 1943, accessed April 8, 2014 at <http://aposlutheran.wordpress.com/2012/08/22/a-symbol-of-jesus/>

Given that, we should not be so quick as to dismiss art or music that does not immediately resonate with our own aesthetic sensibilities or the truth of our own emotional experience, particularly when 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.¹⁹⁰

Here, then, we have two equally important considerations for developing a theologically-grounded Christian aesthetic: it must include both the capacity for making critical evaluations *and* the capacity to leave room for compassionate acceptance and appreciation of the aesthetic and emotional experiences and needs of others. An approach similar to Albert Blackwell's "hermeneutic of appreciation" is called for, which refuses to slight "the critical obligations of attending, understanding, and evaluating," but also seeks to move "beyond reduction and suspicion" to a more mature appreciation for our inherited traditions, and the many creative ways in which people have expanded upon and deviated from them. Brown calls this approach "ecumenical taste": a way of aesthetic perception, judgment, and enjoyment that can relish in aesthetic differences without breeding alienation and resentment, through a willingness to lovingly discern what is delightful and meaningful to others.¹⁹¹

Of course, our processes of evaluation still need to be guided by some basic criteria within a given aesthetic context. But these kinds of evaluations do not need to be the sole property of elitist "high art" critics, or narrow-minded clergy. In fact, Gordon Lynch highlights

¹⁹⁰ Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste*, 9-10.

¹⁹¹ Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste*, 12.

nine different factors that tend to characterize aesthetic evaluations that occur within the context of popular American culture: technical skill, originality/creativity, believability, moral value, enjoyableness, “numinousness,” practical functionality (particularly applicable to dance music, love songs, work songs, lullabies, etc), and authenticity.¹⁹² Lynch argues that these evaluations occur regardless of whether or not the people making them are aware of them. He also makes the case that how we prioritize these criteria usually determines how any instance of music or art will affect us within a certain context. Lynch suggests that the more criteria are met by a particular piece of art or music, 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 in Christian contexts. 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 “the good” to *avant garde* indie music, Black gospel music, EDM, or bluegrass and 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.”¹⁹³ Perhaps the answer to bad taste, then, is not the cultivation of “good” taste, but rather, of hospitality.¹⁹⁴

♪ *Recommended listening:* [CD track 15] “White Light” by Wilco ♪

¹⁹² Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, 190–191.

¹⁹³ Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste*, 250–251.

¹⁹⁴ 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 two of the most common errors made in the attempt 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 developed for liturgical or ritual purposes. Theologically and ecclesiastically, this common error manifests in the tendency think about the theological role of music or art primarily – or even solely – as a “tool” that liturgists must employ in order to make worship, or the contemplation of God, more aesthetically appealing. 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.”¹⁹⁵



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

¹⁹⁵ 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 ritual. 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 decrees 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.¹⁹⁶

Teresa Reed has pointed out that this attitude is also prevalent in many predominantly African American churches.¹⁹⁷ This overvaluation of context also means that music and art which is created for contexts *outside* of liturgical worship are considered to be of a lower classification – “mere” entertainment and therefore unworthy of any serious consideration or engagement. Furthermore, those who devote themselves to the creation or performance of this *extra ecclesium* art and music are assumed to be motivated by egoic concerns, and are unlikely to receive much acknowledgement, interest, or support from church communities as a whole.

In fact, the so-called “worship wars” can be interpreted as a manifestation of this very problem. “How many kinds of music are there?” *Christian Century* journalist Steve Thorngate once asked provocatively. “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 contemporary.”¹⁹⁸ When churches operate under the spoken or unspoken assumption that liturgical music is the the highest form of music and therefore the only music that really matters, it should come as no surprise that certain Christian musicians who have

¹⁹⁷ Reed, *The Holy Profane*, ix-x.

¹⁹⁸ Steve Thorngate, “New Harmonies: Music and Identity at Four Congregations,” *Christian Century*, November 29, 2011, 22.

experienced the holy in and through other musical styles and expressions would seek to incorporate those styles into the liturgy.

The question of whether or not a particular song or musical style is “appropriate” for a particular worship service within a particular religious context depends on a number of different theological, cultural, pastoral, and historical factors, which are unique to each congregation and far beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, what I hope to show is that the church’s failure to provide adequate opportunities for meaningful reflection and engagement with the spiritual and theological complexities of music *outside* of worship compromises church members’ ability to critically discern what kinds of music and art make the most sense *within* the context of a liturgical rite or prayer gathering. In other words, the two do not always need to overlap. As Van der Leeuw observes, “Music can fulfill all the demands of ecclesiastical style, and still not be religious.” At the same time, music “can be filled with holiness, and yet not be church music.”¹⁹⁹ 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 us to acknowledge the manifold ways in which jazz music can function as a conduit for encounters with the sacred.

It is also worth noting again that, historically speaking, the Christian church has not always been so disengaged from secular forms of creative expression. Throughout the Middle Ages, various styles and forms beyond liturgical music were composed, sponsored, sung, copied, and preserved by Christian clergy and monastics – including love songs, work songs, drinking songs, lullabies, popular religious tunes. Recall that “secular” was not always understood to be a sphere outside of religion. Premodern Christians understood the sacred to comingle with the mundane in the secular realm, and within this context, Christians could engage openly in many forms of secular creative expression.

¹⁹⁹ Van der Leeuw, *Sacred and Profane Beauty*, 270.

While John Chrysostom may have harshly criticized the popular music associated with the heavily sexualized theater in the context of fourth century Greece, in his sermons he also expresses high praise for participatory folk music (particularly work songs and lullabies), acknowledging their role in easing the sufferings of everyday people.²⁰⁰ Twelfth century abbess Hildegard of Bingen was known to have frequently used elements of secular and folk music in her compositions; more than once speaking very highly of the lyre, an instrument that at the time had distinctly non-liturgical associations.²⁰¹

An overvaluation of liturgical context in the defining of “sacred music” also causes us to lose sight of the prophetic role of music and art that is referenced throughout much of the Hebrew scriptures. Prophecy is a religious activity that by its very nature originates outside of the institutions of political and religious power. 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 needs most to see.”²⁰² “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.”²⁰³ Langdon Gilkey likewise insists that when music and art participate in a condemnation of our present reality and the call for its transformation, they become “vehicles of the transcendent, and approach the religious.”²⁰⁴

²⁰⁰ Calvin Stapert, *A New Song for An Old World: Musical Thought in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 127.

²⁰¹ 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.

²⁰² Brown, *Religious Aesthetics: A Theological Study of Making and Meaning*, 111.

²⁰³ Michael Austin, *Explorations in Art, Theology, and Imagination*, (London: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2005), 13.

²⁰⁴ 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.

Of course, some evaluation of context is vital to any hermeneutic, religious or otherwise. 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 an artist, all of which can influence how a work is perceived. *Overvaluation* of context, however, can cause us to lose sight of the creative ways that audiences make their own meanings of the artistic material they encounter. As McDannell writes, “within one context, the same object may have different meanings.”²⁰⁵ Maxine Greene highlights the role of contemplation in modernity’s approach to art, emphasizing that “mere printed words, musical notes, brushstrokes on canvas cannot be regarded as works of art” because “works of art only come into existence when a certain kind of heeding, noticing, or attending takes place.”²⁰⁶ Michel de Certeau has shown how our subjective interactions with the objects, images, and ideas we encounter in everyday life become creative acts themselves. From this perspective, even in the most “presentational” context, audiences are never 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.”²⁰⁷

Gordon Graham agrees: “Appreciating a work of art requires imaginative activity on the part of the observer no less than the maker.”²⁰⁸ 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, and even as sacred. Consider, for example, possibility of interpreting the lyrics of the Madonna song “Frozen” [CD track 16] as more than a woman’s longing for her emotionally frozen lover (the meaning that Madonna

²⁰⁵ McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 66.

²⁰⁶ Maxine Greene, *Landscapes of Learning* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1978), 191.

²⁰⁷ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984).

²⁰⁸ Austin, *Explorations in Art, Theology, and Imagination*, 133.

almost certainly intended) but as the voice of God’s crying out: “...give yourself to me.” The participatory work of creative reflection and reception should be interpreted theologically as a co-creative act taking place between the artistic offering of the performer, the attentive empathies of the listener, and the presence of 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 with 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.”²⁰⁹ Likewise with regard to music, Simon Frith notes that “most people if asked what a song ‘means’ refer to the words.”²¹⁰ Thus, music is often referred to as “sacred,” “religious,” or “Christian” when – regardless of the context for performance – it contains direct Biblical quotes and/or explicit theological teachings.



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

²⁰⁹ Tillich, “Existentialist Aspects of Modern Art,” 271.

²¹⁰ Frith, *Performing Rites*, 158.

The relationship between music and words has always been somewhat fraught in the context of Christianity, going as far back as the fourth century when Augustine expressed his concerns in *Confessions* over whether or not his love of the music was distracting him from the teachings of hymns. This concern was common to many Greco-Roman Christians of the fourth century, all of whom had inherited the Neoplatonic tendency to reject all pleasures associated with the body. In an ancient Greco-Roman cultural context, 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. He wrote 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.”²¹¹ Viladesau notes, however, that Augustine’s “musical Puritanism” won out, and continues to hold sway in most of the modern Western churches.

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, four of them have to do with lyrical content. In defense of this position, Presbyterian pastor T. David Gordon insists that “one of the tests of a hymn is whether it would exist as Christian verse if it were *not* put to music.”²¹² Unsurprisingly, Rev. Gordon’s biggest complaint about contemporary lyrics is that few of them “would provoke any emotional response *if they weren’t set to music.*”²¹³ This, of course, represents a basic misunderstanding about the relationship between music and lyrics in popular song, for as Simon Frith has shown, popular song lyrics are *not* meant to be poems of verse that can stand alone.

²¹¹ Cited in Viladesau, “Aesthetics and Religion,” 22.

²¹² Gordon, *Why Johnny Can’t Sing Hymns*, 130, emphasis mine.

²¹³ Gordon, *Why Johnny Can’t Sing Hymns*, 135.

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.”²¹⁴

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.”²¹⁵ 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.”²¹⁶ Moreover, archaeologist Steven Mithen has demonstrated that from an evolutionary standpoint, prior to the development of syntax singing functioned as the earliest form of human communication; thus, the root of words is music, not the other way around. Our primary form of communicating with one another is not rational, but *affectual*.²¹⁷ “A song,” Frith therefore insists, “does not exist to convey the meaning of the words; rather, the words exist to convey the meaning of the song.”²¹⁸

A similar kind of overvaluation of content frequently takes place in Christian communities with regard to visual art, particularly when the church tries to subordinate the image to the word and insist that images must serve as a kind of “book to the laity” – which is to say, as didactic illustrations of Biblical texts for those 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 ever since, and was eventually incorporated into canon law, becoming the primary justification for visual art in the Christian West.²¹⁹ This impulse has

²¹⁴ Frith, *Performing Rites*, 170.

²¹⁵ Saliers, *Music and Theology*, 39.

²¹⁶ Frith, *Performing Rites*, 168.

²¹⁷ Steven Mithen, *The Singing Neanderthals: The Origins of Music, Language, Mind, and Body* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

²¹⁸ Frith, *Performing Rites*, 166.

²¹⁹ Herbert L. Kessler, *Seeing Medieval Art* (Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press, 2004), 126–127.

been carried over into Protestantism through the mass proliferation of so many “picture Bibles” and Sunday school felt-boards, which are used to illustrate the story of salvation in a manner accessible to children.

At the end of section three’s discussion of modern art, we saw that it was the nature of the visual arts to capture space by freezing and framing it in time. It is worth noting that the deep-seated iconoclasm that frequently emerges within Christianity is rooted precisely in the Abrahamic experience of God *through* time, which may help to explain why words and music have remained primary while images have consistently been controversial. Karl Barth 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 in an image.”²²⁰ 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.”²²¹ 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.”²²²

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

²²⁰ Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1960), 410; cited in Austin, *Explorations in Art, Theology, and Imagination*, 21, emphasis mine.

²²¹ Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste*, 74.

²²² Rahner, “Theology and the Arts,” 220–221.

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.²²³

The 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*.”²²⁴ The tendency within the Christian tradition to overvalue explicit religious content, and to subordinate art and music to the role of didactic illustration, has led to a profound misunderstanding of the complex semiotics at work within artistic expression. Many churches in the West have lost sight of the aesthetic tradition still maintained in Eastern Orthodox churches, whereby art and music are understood as having their own theological integrity and sacramental value. From an Orthodox Christian perspective, art and music are not intended to illustrate on a surface level, but to *illuminate* on a deeper spiritual level. This practice of illumination still existed in Western Europe during the high Middle Ages, particularly through the tradition of illuminated manuscripts, as well as the melismatic singing of twelfth-century monastics. Unfortunately, this perspective has only barely survived the Reformation, and has yet to make a significant impact on the religious consciousness of most American Christians within a modern capitalist mindset.

Many Christians in the United States therefore have a difficult time discerning the theological subtleties in the genres and forms 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 strict illustration of the text. But as Christian blogger Mark Wingerter reminded

²²³ Tillich, “Existentialist Aspects of Modern Art,” 277.

²²⁴ Cited in Janet Walton, *Art and Worship: A Vital Connection* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1988), 80, emphasis mine.

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.”²²⁵

Viladesau furthermore reminds us that “revelation” in the context of Christian tradition is always more than simply a regurgitation of an 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.”²²⁶ Elaine Graham has pointed to a number of methods by which artistic expression serves to mediate the sacred in this way, particularly in 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 / 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, is a much broader understanding of what might be considered “Christian” content.

²²⁵ Mark Wingerter, “Noah on the Modern Day Felt Board,” *Reel World Theology*, April 2, 2014, <http://www.reelworldtheology.com/noah-on-the-modern-day-felt-board/>.

²²⁶ Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics*, 172–173.

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 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*²²⁷ – 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.”²²⁸ 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.”²²⁹



Figure 9. *Guernica*, Pablo Picasso, 1937²³⁰

²²⁷ Manning, *Theology at the End of Culture*, 139.

²²⁸ Tillich, “Existentialist Aspects of Modern Art,” 276.

²²⁹ Tillich, “Existentialist Aspects of Modern Art,” 274.

²³⁰ Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*, 1937, accessed April 8, 2014 at <http://www.highresolutionart.com/2013/11/guernica-pablo-picasso-1937.html>

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.”²³¹ 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 canon, but transforms and overturns it...for he then gives utterance to the authentic and direct revelation of the *numinosum*.”²³²

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.”²³³ 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.”²³⁴ 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.”²³⁵

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.”²³⁶ 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 or “detached” aesthetic pleasure. For Tolstoy, art was about empathic *communication*:

²³¹ Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts*, 154.

²³² 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.

²³³ Manning, *Theology at the End of Culture*, 139.

²³⁴ 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.

²³⁵ Neumann, “Art and Time,” 13.

²³⁶ Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts*, 157–158.

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, sounds, or forms expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling that others may experience the same feeling – this is the activity of art.²³⁷

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.”²³⁸ 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.”²³⁹

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.”²⁴⁰ As Rozelle-Stone and Stone explain, according to Weil “we cannot truly love ourselves because of our finitude, which is experienced as wretchedness.”²⁴¹

²³⁷ 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.

²³⁸ Douglas Harper, “Empathy (n.),” *Online Etymology Dictionary*, 2014, <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=art>.

²³⁹ Gilkey, “Can Art Fill the Vacuum?,” 265.

²⁴⁰ A. Rebecca Rozelle-Stone and Lucian Stone, *Simone Weil and Theology* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Co, 2013), 137.

²⁴¹ Rozelle-Stone and Stone, *Simone Weil and Theology*, 136.

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 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.”²⁴² 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.²⁴³

²⁴² Rozelle-Stone and Stone, *Simone Weil and Theology*, 138.

²⁴³ 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 doing so, to assist in the development of a more theologically-grounded sensibility regarding Divine revelation in artistic creation. By unshackling our perspective of “the arts” from the interests of Western modernism, 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.”²⁴⁴ 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.²⁴⁵

²⁴⁴ Austin, *Explorations in Art, Theology, and Imagination*, 91–92.

²⁴⁵ 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.”²⁴⁶ To those that do and those that don’t, may we nevertheless turn our attention towards them in hospitality, love, gratitude, and grace.



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

²⁴⁶ Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste*, 123.

IX. Postscript: Areas for Future Study

This paper may also 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.”²⁴⁷ 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.”²⁴⁸

The same can be true for interreligious dialogue, inasmuch 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 its idealized form. Brown’s system for describing the three different ways in which Christians have traditionally interpreted “secular” music and art (by denying its religious value altogether, by considering it as a “preparation” for hearing the Gospel, or by receiving it as a pluralistic expression of Ultimate Reality) maps neatly onto Catholic theologian Paul Knitter’s own system for describing the various theologies of religion (exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism).²⁴⁹ Thus, it is also possible that Brown’s “fourth way,” which is to embrace “secular” music as an opportunity for learning how to become a better Christian precisely by looking at it through the

²⁴⁷ Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, 179.

²⁴⁸ Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, 180.

²⁴⁹ Paul Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002).

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.²⁵⁰

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 in the borderlands of society and religion, at the edge of meaning and meaninglessness. Perhaps it is the case that the place of the artist is by nature a liminal one, 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 explorations of how artists and musicians in contemporary church cultures are working to subvert and transform our understanding of Christian discipleship and formation.

²⁵⁰ Austin, *Explorations in Art, Theology, and Imagination*, 104.

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