University of Nebraska - Lincoln
DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Faculty Publications: School of Music | Music, School of

3-1-1998

Gothic Pillars and Blue Notes: Art as a Reflection of the Conflict of Religions, Part I

Quentin Faulkner
University of Nebraska - Lincoln, qfaulkner1@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/musicfacpub

Part of the Music Commons

Faulkner, Quentin, "Gothic Pillars and Blue Notes: Art as a Reflection of the Conflict of Religions, Part I" (1998). *Faculty Publications: School of Music.* Paper 10.
http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/musicfacpub/10

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Music, School of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications: School of Music by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Gothic Pillars and Blue Notes:
Art as a Reflection of the Conflict of Religions
Part I

Quentin Faulkner, AAGO

Candlelight reflecting off the clutter of wall plaques and massive Baroque monuments makes a feeble attempt to dispel the gloom of a late evening in December 1705. The light, radiating from the multiple galleries surrounding the great organ, reveals a large crowd, elegantly dressed, filling the vast nave and spilling over into the side aisles of St. Mary's Church in Lübeck, Germany. Most of these people have already endured the winter chill during three long hours of worship, but they are now eagerly anticipating the musical feast that will occupy the coming hour. Some 40 musicians, both singers and instrumentalists, have taken their places in the galleries and have tuned their instruments (among them is the 20-year old Johann Sebastian Bach, who has traveled 200 miles to experience the splendor of this night). Their eyes are trained on Dieterich Buxtehude, the famed organist of the church, who will soon give the downbeat to begin the religious musical drama. He has written the music especially for this occasion, on poetry specially composed by one of the town clergy. This evening will witness the first concert in the 37th *Abendmusiken*, the series of sacred concerts whose renown has spread all over central Europe. . . .[1]

Anxious faces—men and women, adults and children—peer out from every roof in Tenochtitlan, sometime during the late 15th century. Before climbing to these high vantage points, families have doused every fire, thrown away all cooking utensils, scrubbed every corner of their houses. It is Xiuhmolpilli, the "Tying of Years," the night on which the present age will expire. The prescribed rituals must be observed to ensure that time will be renewed; otherwise demons will come down to destroy the earth. Everyone gazes silently toward the sacred mount Uixachtlan. On the mountain, a victim, a warrior hero, is pinned spread-eagle on the sacrificial stone. At the moment of midnight, a priest in ceremonial garb raises the splendidly carved and ornamented obsidian sacrificial knife and plunges it into the victim's breast, deftly tearing the beating heart from the body. Instantly, others twirl a fire-stick and kindle a sacred flame in the hollowed corpse. An exultant shout goes up as runners bear the new fire to temples and households across the Aztec empire. The universe has been reborn. Orchestras—rattles and drums, flutes and whistles, conch-shell trumpets—burst into vibrant music. Crowds flood into the streets, forming jubilant processions behind priests and professional singers, carefully trained in songs for the occasion. . . .[2]

In the gathering dusk of a fall evening, sometime during the 16th century, a village in rural Japan gathers at its shrine to celebrate a *matsuri*, a festival to give thanks for a good harvest. During the preceding days the inhabitants have prepared themselves by strict fasting and abstinence, by maintaining silence, and by staying awake all night. At the shrine, a pole, decorated with folded paper and strips of cloth, has been erected to mark the spot where the god will come down. A fire has been kindled for light, and the finest foods and wines have been set out, lovingly and beautifully arranged, for the god's arrival. The festival begins with sport—sumo wrestling, cock-fighting, tug-of-war. When darkness has fallen, the head man and his family begin the *kagura*, chanting and dancing that concentrates the attention of all present upon praising the god and winning divine favor. As the *kagura* becomes more intense, the worshipers enter a state of ecstasy, experiencing a sense of oneness between the human world and the divine. After the god has come down and those present have received the divine message, they all partake of the food that has been offered. As the new day dawns, the exhausted villagers join in eating the breakfast that ends the festival, and then return to their homes and their work. . . .[3]

† † † † † † †

At first glance, these three scenes do not seem to have much in common. The gulf between them—religious, cultural, artistic—is enormous. They do, however, share some fundamental similarities, some basic presuppositions. First, the participants in all three are united in the conviction that there is a relationship between them and their god(s), being(s) of an unseen, higher order of existence—a relationship in which the god(s) are primary and far more powerful (this is in fact the single essential, definitive characteristic of traditional religion). The abiding awareness of that relationship is in each case the motivating force behind the activities they are engaging in. Next, all these people regard themselves first and foremost as a part of some larger group (a family, tribe, or people) and as a small component of a vast and mysterious whole to which they are innately connected, instead of understanding themselves primarily as individuals. Therefore, they cannot imagine that the activities they are engaging in could be anything but communal in nature, and they hold them (or something like them) to be indispensable—not a matter of preference, but of duty. Finally, these people are driven by an impulse to discover, confirm, and express their existence in the greater whole of things seen and unseen, by symbolically acting out in ritu-

al, ceremony, and other artistic activity the realities of life as they perceive them.

All of these people unquestioningly accept the value, indeed the inevitability of artistic activity to adorn religious ritual and ceremony. It forms an integral part, both of praising the god(s) and of symbolizing who they, the people, are. In every case they are compelled to devote the best of their artistry and skill in the service of lovingly elaborating what they consider the central themes of their existence: in ritual and ceremony, physical adornment, religious figures, signs or paintings, in religious costume, religious poetry and music, and religious architecture. All of these art forms are typically understood as gifts of the god(s), as infinitely precious mysterious signs of the presence of the spirit-world and of human response to that presence, as signs of solidarity with a family, tribe or people, as basic elements of ritual and ceremony, as a means of contacting and influencing the spirit-world, and as a means of adorning worship. All words, music, ritual movement—all art forms—have a religious significance, because there is understood to be a fundamental continuity between the spiritual and the physical world, and all of life is lived in the consciousness of that larger reality.

In each case—18th-century Germany, 15th-century Mexico, 16th-century Japan—the art produced in the working out of religious duty and devotion has not only religious implications but cultural ones as well. Many of the resulting artifacts are still with us, and we prize them today not by and large for their religious significance but because they reveal to us the essence of those people of the past; they tell us who those earlier societies truly *were*. Museums today exhibit Aztec obsidian blades, concert halls resound with the music of Buxtehude and Bach, theaters mount productions of Noh dramas (the successors of *kagura*), not only because they are great art but because by common consent these artifacts are regarded as manifestations (indeed, the most profound manifestations) of those earlier cultures. This is why the ethnomusicologist Mantle Hood can say:

> . . . I have discovered that the arts are a kind of *camera obscura* of society. Like that optical wonder, they reduce the whole of its identity—sanctions and values, sacred and secular beliefs and customs—to a faithful reflection in miniature, in living colors.[4]

Moreover, in each of the above instances it seems that art and culture are not merely related to religion, they are more fundamentally the product of religion. T.S. Eliot goes so far as to call culture at its most basic level an incarnation of religion.

> . . . we may ask whether any culture could come into being, or maintain itself, without a religious basis. We may go further and ask whether what we call the culture, and what we call the religion, of a people are not different aspects of the same thing: the culture being, essentially, the incarnation (so to speak) of the religion of a people. . . . there is an aspect in which we can see a religion as the *whole way of life* of a people, from birth to the grave, from morning to night and even in sleep, and that way of life is also its culture.
>
> . . . no culture has appeared or developed except together with a religion.[5]

(These insights into the essential interdependence of culture and religion ought not to be as lightly dismissed as Eliot the Christian apologist, the elitist, or the occasional anti-Semite. They will repay further reflection—though I doubt Eliot would be pleased at the conclusions that are about to be drawn from them.) It is probably unfair, however, to interpret Eliot as naively suggesting there was ever a time or place when a given religious system ever held total sway. Religious totalitarianism is indeed beside the point. Whatever a society's *actual* religion is—whatever mixture of adherence to revealed and codified religious doctrine and practice, or to human personalities and ideologies, or to superstition, or to human selfishness—that religion will be faithfully embodied in its culture and its art. To the degree and at the rate the religion changes, so will its accompanying culture and art.

The modern world has no precise analogue to anything that has just been described. Certainly there exists nothing traditionally religious that generates in modern society the kind of vitality and communal unity of purpose evident in all of them, nothing identifiably religious that produces the inexhaustible outpouring of vibrant, creative artistry that characterizes earlier cultures. Perhaps the clearest unself-conscious analogues to the above scenes are popular music concerts (e.g., Woodstock) or sports events—the experiencing of these happenings both in person and vicariously through the mass media. Such events share at least this with the scenes from earlier times: they all command the committed, convinced, passionate, unself-conscious involvement, nay, allegiance of a majority of modern society. But are pop music concerts and sports events art?

Here we stumble upon a number of enigmas that complicate modern living. How are we to make sense of these seemingly contradictory observations: pre-modern cultures in which religion and a vital artistic expression are inextricably bound up with each other; modern society that practices the arts in very untraditional, extra-religious ways, and modern religion that by any measure seems to be on the fringe of the arts? Many would agree that Hood's statement, ". . . the arts are a kind of *camera obscura* of society. . . ," holds true for pre-modern cultures, such as Lübeck, Tenochtitlan, or rural Japan. Is it likewise valid for modern society, and in what way is it valid? Furthermore, should not a people's religion reveal a people's very essence? Then why are the arts such an orphan of religion (specifically, the Christian religion) in the modern world?

Perhaps the most basic impediment to adequate answers for the questions just posed is the lack of agreement on the meaning of the words that are central to the discussion: art, culture, and religion. Controversy swirls around all of them in our time, and coming up with universally acceptable definitions for them is probably a pipe dream. In blissful ignorance of the old saw, "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread," I am here proposing definitions that might be adequate for each of them. This attempt may be foolhardy, but it is actually unavoidable, for otherwise discussion cannot hope to find a common ground upon which debate can take place. Others may contest the proposed definitions, but they are the basis for further arguments, and so it seems only fair to be candid about them at the outset.

What is "art"? "Art" is fundamentally the opposite of "nature." In the broadest sense it encompasses the products of all human creative endeavors, and so it includes not merely the fine arts (limiting "art" to these is a modern idea), but also crafts, buildings, food, clothing, mass-produced items, rituals, and ceremonies—anything that is produced by human imagination, ingenuity, and skill. The dividing line between folk and fine art has never been easy to draw (if it can be said to exist at all), precisely because there is no fundamental distinction between the two. Popular music and sports may not be fine art, but they are most certainly products of human imagination, ingenuity, and skill, and thus they are undeniably art. Much artistic endeavor in today's world is mass-produced, but that does not make it any less art; the machines that make it are merely extensions of human cunning and will. There is, however, one clear distinction between the art of old Lübeck, Tenochtitlan, and rural Japan and the art of modern pop music concerts and sports events: their relation-

ship to traditional religion. It is obvious that the events from past centuries have an integral link to the expression of traditional religious belief; the same cannot be said about pop music and sports.

Everyone would agree that the three scenes described above involve culture as well as religion. What everyone might *not* agree on is a definition of the word "culture." That is the case in part because the meaning of the term has evolved over the past several hundred years. Before the 19th century, it had a personal application (one might speak of a "person of culture"), but thereafter it began to have a social application as well. In the past 20–30 years, the popular conception of the word has undergone yet another dramatic shift in Western society, from being synonymous with the (European-born) fine arts to assuming a broader ethnic significance. The mid-20th-century concern for mass culture's debasement of high culture has largely given way to a sense of celebration of the vitality of mass popular culture, a legitimizing of it. Queen Elizabeth receives and honors the Beatles. U.S. Presidents dine with movie idols (U.S. Presidents *are* movie idols!). Elvis Presley graces a U.S. postage stamp. In fact, we are now experiencing the acceptance (indeed, the celebration) of those very cultural artifacts and behaviors that were formerly by common consent held vulgar or brutal—coarse language, violence, works of art such as Serrano's sculpture *Piss Christ.*

Perceptions today still differ greatly when it comes to identifying what culture is. Some, for example, would assert that the ability to perceive differences between, say, Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* and a comic book shows a higher level of cultural attainment. Such a viewpoint is the natural outgrowth of a traditional (formerly exclusively religious) world view that takes for granted distinctions in value, based on a hierarchical understanding of reality and the ethic that proceeds from such an understanding. Others would say that the values underlying such perceived differences are inappropriate, that a comic book is not inherently less valuable than an old painting, since quality is not absolute, but relative to the value system of the beholder. Since in a democratic society each beholder (consumer) is equal, it follows that no value system is inherently superior to any other (the logical consequence of this is the leveling of the distinction between high and popular art).

No matter how distasteful it may be to some diehards, however, when all is said and done there is no denying the existence of a phenomenon identifiable as modern, popular, secular culture. The origins of this culture were at first veiled, since its art forms (even those that were mass-produced) often bore superficial resemblances to traditional, even traditionally religious, cultural artifacts—think, for example, of neoclassical public buildings, or of mass-produced Christian devotional art. But there is no mistaking its art today. It has spread to the furthest reaches of the globe, wherever modern Western ways of thinking and living have gained a foothold: commercial buildings of steel, concrete, and glass, contemporary, economy-minded modular architecture—skyscrapers, parking garages, super highways, shopping malls, sports arenas, TV studios; hospitals, medical machines, modern medicines; mass media—TV, radio, films, videos, CDs and cassette tapes, the Walkman; mass publishing—magazines, comics, pornography; mass advertising of all types—media, billboards (advertising in fact must be considered the preeminent—and preeminently successful—modern secular art form); even costume—jeans, casual clothing, the "rumpled" look. This art differs from much traditional artistic activity in that it largely ignores human religious expression and formation, and directs itself entirely toward two ends: the promotion of human ease and well-being, and entertainment (normally not enabling people to entertain themselves, but entertaining them).

Not only does this secular culture exist, it is enormously vital and attractive. It has long been recognized that traditional indigenous cultures are powerless against the modern secular cultural juggernaut. Folk cultures begin to wither the instant they come into contact with it, and in every instance their complete annihilation can be prevented only by a committed self-conscious effort to keep the old ways alive (an effort that inevitably results either in their dilution or in their ossification). Nor does this popular secular culture generally exhibit a tolerant, live-and-let-live attitude; consider the following episode in Tempe, Arizona, widely reported in the mass media.

> City officials brainstormed ways to calm Mill nightlife after a riot the weekend before saw 600 youngsters clash with about 70 police officers. . . .
>
> Gone were the horses. Gone was the Mace. In their place, city officials wheeled out a device so diabolical it may single-handedly end the teenage occupation of downtown Mill Avenue. . . . Security guards . . . fed their stereo system Beethoven, Chopin, and Johann Sebastian Bach.
>
> "If they keep playing that stuff, I ain't gonna be on Mill Avenue no more!" said 17-year-old G. Thompson . . . , cringing with almost every crescendo of Tchaikovsky's *Serenade for String Orchestra* . . .

> "This stuff works with your brain," said an annoyed Charles Blevin, 21. . . . "It's irritating."
>
> "We came all this way and all they play is this boring music," said Mintzi Sorrell, 17. . . . "We're not coming back."

So what is "culture"? If pressed as to what they mean by "culture," perhaps some would reply that it is the customs and habits of a particular social or ethnic group (a group with rather clearly demarcated common interests and characteristics). The more hermetic a culture is, the more intense and idiomatic it becomes. That definition is apt, but many would find it incomplete. "Culture" involves ways of *doing* things—customs, habits, rituals, the round of day-to-day life—but it also involves ways of *making* things—arts, crafts, architecture. Beyond these, however, "culture" also involves ways of *thinking*—an entire approach to living. The more you examine it, the further culture's borders extend, until there seems to be little (if anything) it doesn't encompass. Here is a definition of the word that is perhaps sufficiently broad to include all the above aspects of "culture":

> *Culture* is the collective behavior (together with the resulting artifacts) of a society engaged in acting out (symbolizing) its most deeply held and cherished (though not always articulated) shared beliefs and convictions.

This definition is even broad enough to encompass T.S. Eliot's assertion, ". . . no culture has appeared or developed except together with a religion."

Culture therefore has to be understood as a fundamentally religious phenomenon in that both cultural behaviors and cultural artifacts originate in intense (though not necessarily cognitive) beliefs, presuppositions, and attitudes. Again Eliot (p. 32):

> The reflection that what we believe is not merely what we formulate and subscribe to, but that behavior is also belief, and that even the most conscious and developed of us live also at the level on which belief and behavior cannot be distinguished, is one that may, once we allow our imaginations to play upon it, be very disconcerting.[6]

The title of Stephen Carter's recently popular book, *The Culture of Disbelief*, must therefore be an oxymoron. What Professor Carter means by the title is, of course, that modern secular culture trivializes traditional religion. But in a more profound sense, the only source of any culture has to be understood as its religion.

If this definition of culture strikes anywhere near the mark, then perhaps Mantle Hood's assertion about the arts may indeed be universally valid: the arts may well reduce the whole of a society's cultural identity—sanctions and values, sacred and secular beliefs and customs—to a faithful reflection in miniature. If that is true, then the questions posed earlier are compelled into particularly sharp focus. If the artifacts of modern popular culture must indeed be considered art, what is the religion that produces them? It must be a powerful one indeed, since all these arts flourish, flourish globally, essentially without the support or blessing of societal institutions such as government or organized religion, indeed, despite the best efforts of government agencies (ministries of culture in many countries, the NEA and NEH in the U.S.) and schools to promote alternative folk or higher art forms. Furthermore, if that which passes for organized religion in modern society has so tenuous an indigenous artistic expression, to what degree can its "sanctions and values, beliefs and customs" represent the beliefs, attitudes, and presuppositions of its confessed adherents?

When questions such as these do come into focus, there is a knee-jerk reaction, an almost irresistible urge instantly to apply ethical categories and judgments to them. This is "good" (or "healthy"); that is "bad" (or "dangerous," or "socially counterproductive," or . . .). At some point, of course, ethical considerations are not only unavoidable but necessary. But at this point they are particularly detrimental. Secular culture-bashing simply clouds the more fundamental issues at stake. To speak of "higher" or "lower" cultures delays coming to terms with more important (and more accurate) assessments. Therefore, I intend to refrain from this sort of ethical grandstanding. I beg you, the reader, to avoid it, and I beg your favor in ignoring any ethically colored overtones that may have inadvertently crept into the arguments I propose. At this point, I want only to establish the existence of such a thing as a secular culture, by which I mean a culture that has grown up without dependence on or reference to traditional religion, that is propelled by an ideology quite independent of any traditional religious system. Such a culture inevitably establishes new criteria for value and for aesthetic judgments. Life in modern society continues to experience the clash of these new criteria with traditional ones.

To continue: if T.S. Eliot is right (". . . no culture has appeared or developed except together with a religion"), then what is the religion that has produced this secular culture? Assuredly, it is very unlike anything heretofore identified as religion. It has never proclaimed itself a religion—it is a cloaked religion. It has no recognizable worship or officially promulgated doctrine, no distinct rite of entry or act of assent, no stated code of behavior, no buildings, no corporate structure. In fact, it seems to resist codification into articulated, systematized doctrine, and its most ardent adherents probably would vehemently reject the notion that it is a religion. How, then, can it be recognized as a religion? Surely not in the external, organized sense of the term. And surely not in its awareness of being part of a greater whole whose primary component is an unseen, higher order of being. From the human perspective, though, it is possible to understand religion as the process of "idealizing," of projecting and operating on ideals. Mohammed, for example, is understood by his followers as the prophet of Allah, but at the same time he is seen as a human being whose person and teachings are admirable and worthy of emulation. Traditionally religious people would say that religion is the process of *recognizing* ideals; others might say it is the process of *creating* them. In either event, it is the process of idealizing, and in it traditional religion and the idea of a secular religion can find a common ground. Furthermore, the process of idealizing is an ineluctably human activity, a constitutive part of being human. Understood from this perspective, no one can be without "religion," since ideals can be understood in some sense as parallel in function to god(s).[7] It is, of course, possible for individuals to formulate their own private religions out of the various allegiances common to modern living: environmental issues, healthy lifestyles, youth and beauty, substances inducing artificial euphoria, career, success, the family, social pastimes, hobbies, fads and fashions, automobiles, actors and actresses, entertainment or entertainers, athletics or athletes, even such vague ideals as personal sophistication, the life of the mind, nostalgia, or the weekend—all deriving from the more fundamental ideal that lies behind these lesser ones: the worship of the self. Robert Bellah suggests it is logically possible that there may be as many religions in the U.S. as there are people.[8] But such individual religions are not comprehensive enough to produce a culture. It is sometimes said, for example, that modern science has become a religion. Just how weak a candidate pure science is for status as a religion can be assessed both by the small number of its "adherents" (perhaps a few hard-core scientists) and by its artistic and cultural sterility (only when pure science is applied to human tasks does it have the potential to affect culture). Only when a religion is the common property of a larger group of people, a society, can it develop the momentum to perpetuate itself and to be culturally fruitful.

TO BE CONTINUED

NOTES

1. Kerala J. Snyder, *Dieterich Buxtehude, Organist in Lübeck* (New York: Schirmer Books [c.1987]), pp. 51–78.
2. Brian M. Fagan, *The Aztecs* (New York: W.H. Freeman [c. 1984]), p. 213f.
3. Yanagita Kunio, "The Japanese Festival" in *Guides to Japanese Culture* ([Tokyo]: Japan Culture Institute [c.1977]), pp. 37f.
4. Mantle Hood, *The Ethnomusicologist* (New York: McGraw-Hill [1982]), p. xviii.
5. T.S. Eliot, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (London: Faber & Faber [1949]), pp. 27–28, 31, 15.
6. Eliot, p. 32.
7. This perspective is in line with the definition of religion proposed by Erich Fromm (*Psychoanalysis and Religion*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950, p. 21): "Any system of thought and action shared by a group which gives the individual a frame of orientation and an object of devotion."
8. Robert Bellah, *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, c.1985), p. 220.

Portions of this article appeared previously in "Cult and Culture at the Millennium: Exploratory Notes on the New Religion," *Soundings*: An Interdisciplinary Journal (Fall/Winter 1996), pp. 399–420.

Quentin Faulkner, AAGO, is Steinhart Professor of Music at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.