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

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# GOTHIC PILLARS AND BLUE NOTES: ART AS A REFLECTION OF THE CONFLICT OF RELIGIONS

## PART III

Quentin Faulkner, AAGO

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*Part I of this article appeared in the March issue; Part II appeared in the May issue.*

A number of years ago the BBC aired a series of television programs entitled *Civilisation*, produced and narrated by the distinguished historian Kenneth Clark. Clark opened that series with a quote from John Ruskin:

Great nations write their autobiographies in three manuscripts: the book of their deeds, the book of their words, and the book of their art. Not one of these books can be understood unless we read the two others; but of the three, the only trustworthy one is the last.<sup>1</sup>

The reason our society may find it difficult to understand fully what Ruskin meant may well have something to do with the heading that appears over news about the arts every Sunday in *The New York Times: Arts & Entertainment*. Even in so eminent a newspaper, the arts are to a large extent considered synonymous with entertainment. And while entertainment is a worthy and appropriate aspect of human living, the word surely doesn't suggest the profound significance that Ruskin (and I, as well) ascribe to the arts.

The first two parts of this article, which appeared in the March and May issues of this journal, tried to make sense of a number of profound changes in modern society. Those changes have fundamentally reoriented religion, culture, and the arts in the modern world. Here is a summary of the proposals set forth in Parts 1 and 2:

1. Art—by which I mean all the things a society creates—is the most accurate way of understanding what a society's culture truly is.
2. Religion—what a society really values—is the powerful generating force behind its culture and its art.
3. There unquestionably exists today a phenomenon recognized as secular culture, most clearly identified by the vibrant secular art it produces.
4. Traditional religions, especially Christianity and Judaism, by the weakness and scarcity of their indigenous art, show that they are culturally sterile, impotent.

5. We ought to suspect, then, the existence of a powerful secular religion that is making a frontal assault on traditional religions, particularly on those traditional religions that have their power base in the developed world: in Europe and especially in the U.S.

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I've just asserted the weakness of the *indigenous* art of Christianity and Judaism. Before going further, it might be helpful to examine what that word "indigenous" means. *Webster's Dictionary* says "indigenous" means "produced, growing, or living naturally in a country or climate; native; 2. inborn, inherent, innate." So applying the word to the topic being considered here, indigenous would be defined as: "produced, growing, or living naturally in Christianity (or Judaism), native to Christianity; 2. inborn, inherent, innate to Christianity." The best way to understand this idea is to turn to examples. To begin, let's consider Gregorian chant. Chant became fully developed and flourished in the Western (Roman Catholic) church during the early Middle Ages, from about 600 to 1000 AD. As regards music, it (in its earliest, oral form) is the earliest indigenous music

that Western Christianity produced. What are the characteristics of this music?

- It is entirely vocal, not instrumental.
- It puts primary emphasis on the text, not on the music.
- It is primarily objective, with a severely limited emotional range.
- It is rhythmically subtle, not driving or propulsive.
- It is calm, tranquil, and noble.
- It is conducive to spiritual (as opposed to sensual) worship.
- It exhibits minimal variety or novelty.
- It evokes minimal sensual pleasure.

These characteristics correspond perfectly to what the early medieval church thought music ought to be. But more importantly, they are a perfect analogue, a mirror, of early medieval Christianity—they tell us in sound precisely what those Christians cherished, who those Christians really were. That is what "indigenous" means: the music is the product of a strong culture, and perfectly mirrors what that culture was.

Don't scholars tell us, though, that Christian song (i.e., in the Western church, Gregorian chant) inherited a great deal from its Jewish roots?<sup>2</sup> And surely Gregorian chant inherited many things from ancient Greek music; even the names of the Gregorian modes (Dorian, Phrygian, Lydian, Mixolydian) are taken from the names of the modes of ancient Greek music. All of this is probably true (though not provable, since so very little is known about music earlier than Gregorian chant), but it is beside the point. Any art form owes a great debt to its forebears—no art form can be entirely original. That some elements of chant may be traceable to earlier cultures and their art forms is unimportant; what is important is that chant has incorporated these earlier elements into an art form that is undeniably, unmistakably Christian.

To make the matter clearer, let's move into the realm of the visual arts. Envision in your mind's eye the interior of a medieval Gothic cathedral. Down both sides of the nave march two rows of pillars, columns that support the triforium and clerestory and that help hold up the stone-vaulted roof of the church. Are columns indigenously Christian? Of

course not; the Gothic style borrowed them from the earlier Romanesque, which in turn borrowed them from Greek and Roman architecture. Gothic architecture thus uses elements that are derived from other cultures. (We could trace the same process with the stone vaulting, or with the arches.) The borrowings aren't important, though. It's what the Gothic style does with those borrowings that is important. What is crucial is the question, "Does Gothic architecture incorporate those borrowed elements into something new and unique to its own culture (that is, to medieval Christianity)?" Would anyone ever mistake a Gothic cathedral for a Greek or Roman temple? Would anyone ever mistake a Gothic cathedral for anything other than a medieval Christian place of worship? Surely not! To sum up: what makes an art form "indigenous" is not its individual elements, but the way those elements are put together, and the degree to which the resulting synthesis is truly a hallmark of a given culture.

So in the case of the Gothic cathedral, the powerful internal conviction, confidence, and consistency of medieval Christianity has borrowed various disparate elements, has combined them with some new ideas that spring directly from its own self-identity, and has forged all of these into an art form that is its signature, its hallmark, the very essence of its message. The Gothic cathedral unmistakably says, "We worship a transcendent, awe-full God, and we hold that worship to be of vital importance, of immense significance."

Now let us consider Christian art in the present-day U.S. Consider the typical American large neo-Gothic church, at least one of which can be found in most sizable U.S. cities. Such buildings are often rather attractive and imposing, but is their style indigenous to modern Christianity? Not really; it's pretty much a clone of medieval Christian Gothic style. Or consider the typically utilitarian buildings that often house rapidly growing Christian congregations. Is their style indigenous to modern Christianity? Not really; it says, loud and clear, "warehouse," "storage shed," "shopping mall," "economical, modular business architecture." What about the music on cassette tapes produced to accompany soloists or praise choruses? Would anyone recognize the music (alone, without its text) as indigenously Christian? The text may well be Christian, but the music (normally produced electronically, not acoustically) is clearly the product of a secular culture that has fundamentally nothing to do with Christianity, or with any other traditional religion for that matter.

The usual response to assertions such as the ones I've just made is, "So what?

What's wrong with it?" The answer to that question has to be "nothing at all." Surely the musical style of praise choruses isn't inherently wicked, nor is contemporary modular architecture used for church buildings sinful. Indeed, there are some rather attractive examples of this music and this architecture. "What's wrong with it?" however, is the wrong question. The right question is, "What's right with it?" And the answer to that question has to be "Not much." In fact, it seems to me that when present-day Christianity borrows non-indigenous, secular styles to carry on its work or to promote its message,

then present-day Christianity is advertising, indeed trumpeting, to the entire world: "Look! We're so sterile, so impotent, we have so little internal passion, confidence, conviction left that we can't come up with anything that's original to our faith, that's identifiably Christian. We have to borrow our art completely from a culture that has nothing to do with us. And when we borrow, we don't even have the internal energy and vitality to add anything to it that one might clearly identify as Christian (or even religious). We're just a facet of the prevailing secular culture." Is it any wonder that the church is having a hard time of it in the modern world? Whom do

Christians think they're fooling when they do this?

Are my accusations then valid? Christianity has no contemporary examples of indigenous art; all its art is either cloned from the art of a former Christian culture, or it's borrowed completely from the surrounding secular culture, which in anybody's estimation is not very Christian. Therefore present-day Christianity is impotent, sterile; it has lost all its zeal and vitality, its inner conviction, its confidence, its consistency. Is this true? Thank God, no, it isn't. I think that there are a few "beacons of light," a few vitally creative artistic expressions, a few artistic happenings of real integrity, that contradict my accusations. For example, there's the occasional architectural expression that is both contemporary and identifiably part of the continuing Christian religious heritage. An example of this is the celebrated Thorn Crown Chapel in Eureka Springs, Arkansas. Though that structure has many problems as a place for corporate Christian worship (being best suited for private meditation), it seems to me to be a building that is both of the present and is also identifiable as religious, and perhaps as specifically Christian.

In the area of music, there are a number of contemporary artistic expressions that I think clearly give the lie to my accusations. That is, they exhibit great artistic vitality and integrity, and they are identifiably, indigenously Christian. These include (1) the explosion of late 20th-century hymn texts and tunes; (2) the music that has been composed for the use of the Christian monastic community at Taizé in eastern France; and (3) the texts that have been created at the impetus of the Iona Community in western Scotland.

The first half of the 20th century was a fallow period in the creation of new hymn texts and tunes; most that came into being during this period were not especially original. There are some notable exceptions to this observation, but the exceptions prove the rule. There is no more eloquent witness to the regenerative power of the Holy Spirit than the immense upsurge of new, vital, and powerful hymns and hymn tunes that began to appear in the 1960s, and that have grown into a veritable creative torrent. Their appearance has brought about a fundamental change in many new hymnals. Hymnals published in the 1960s placed great emphasis on recapturing the treasury of hymns from past ages. Hymns such as "Of the Father's love begotten," "For all the saints," or "What wondrous love" began to cross denominational boundaries and to crop up in a wide variety of hymnals. Most recent hymnals, in contrast, have been more selective about older hymns to be included, in order to make room for some of the contributions of the great hymnodists living in our own day: Brian Wren, Frederick Pratt Green, Fred Kaan, Shirley Erena Murray, Margaret Clark, Jane Parker Huber, Carl Daw, Thomas Troeger and Carol Doran, Jaroslav Vajda, and Carl Schalk—the list could go on and on. This hymnic rebirth knows no denominational boundaries, and some of the hymns have become familiar, even beloved: Pratt Green's "When in our music God is glorified,"<sup>3</sup> for example, or Jaroslav Vajda's "God of the sparrow, God of the whale."<sup>4</sup> In the list must be included, however, charismatic hymns such as Kathleen Thomerson's "I want to walk as a child of the light"<sup>5</sup> and Donald Fishel's "Alleluia, alleluia! Give thanks

to the risen Lord,"<sup>6</sup> as well as Roman Catholic offerings such as Suzanne Toolan's "I am the bread of life"<sup>7</sup> and Michael Joncas's "Eagles' Wings."<sup>8</sup>

Taizé is an ecumenical monastic community founded right after World War II by Brother Roger, a young Reformed pastor, who still serves as the community's leader and inspiration. "Ecumenical" means about 70 brothers (monks), about two thirds of whom are Protestant and one third Roman Catholic (including some priests). They are bound by a common commitment to celibacy, community of goods, and acceptance of authority. As George Black wrote in this journal a number of years ago, "The brothers and those gathered around them come much closer than most people do to closing the gap between the Christian ideal and everyday behavior in such matters as love, joy, and identification with the oppressed."<sup>9</sup> The community has drawn increasing numbers of young people from all over Europe (recently as far away as Russia), who come to Taizé to attend retreats for prayer and meditation in order to deepen their spiritual lives: an average of 30,000 at Easter, over 100,000 in the course of a year. The problem of a common musical repertoire was a significant barrier to communal worship, and so the community turned to its friend, French organist and composer Jacques Berthier, to solve the problem. He developed several unique sorts of music to serve the community.

Although all of Berthier's music functions in the same way as more familiar mainline hymnody, his pieces are not really hymns in the sense that most Americans understand the term. There are various types of compositions: responses (soloist[s] alternating with a refrain sung by all), canons, brief repeated sung prayers (mantras).<sup>10</sup> At first, in an attempt to solve the language problem, all the texts of these pieces were in Latin. But since the texts are all quite brief and familiar, and since they have long since been translated into many languages for use all over the world, the practice now at Taizé is to sing in a wide variety of languages. Settings such as "Jesus, Remember Me" (a mantra) and "Adoramus te, Domine" have become especially well known, and are found in some recent hymnals. The instrumental descants that Berthier supplied for most of the settings provide great potential musical enrichment; their addition can transform a Taizé piece into an extended musical passacaglia/chaconne.

A passage in the setting of the Latin hymn text "Ubi caritas" ("Where charity and love prevail") is especially interesting, since it bears out the observation I made above about the relationship of borrowing to the creation of an indigenous art form.

Jacques Berthier, *Music from Taizé*  
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In the excerpt above, the music set to the phrase "and tongues will be silent" exhibits a blue note, a phenomenon native to jazz in which some notes (notably the seventh of the chord, as is the E<sup>b</sup> here) are performed in the cracks between the notes of the piano. It is hardly surprising to find an element of jazz in this music, since jazz has had a long and profound influence on 20th-century French music. Berthier may or may not have been aware of the borrowing; however, if the right singer performs this passage, its origin is unmistakable. But does Berthier's setting of "Ubi caritas" sound like jazz? Not in the least! It sounds like only one thing: the music of Taizé. It grows out of and is fully indigenous to that Christian community.

Iona is an ecumenical community of men and women, founded in Scotland in 1938, during the depths of the Great Depression, and with the specter of war looming ever more menacingly. Its founder, George McLeod, was a restless inner-city minister whose gnawing dissatisfaction with the church's lack of impact on the poor and vulnerable impelled him to drastic action. Convinced that the church would always be marginal for working people until its clergy was given a new vision of service, McLeod led half a dozen clergymen and the same number of craftsmen to the remote island of Iona, off the western coast of Scotland. Their immediate goal was the rebuilding of a 1,000-year-old abbey that had fallen into disuse and ruin. The decision to rebuild Iona was not coincidental; Iona is the site of the earliest Christian monastic community in Scotland, founded in the sixth century by Irish monks, from which all the rest of Scotland and much of northern England were evangelized during the seventh and eighth centuries. The rebuilding effort was a gesture symbolizing the unity of worship and work, the church and industry, the spiritual and the material. As a sign of the community's growth and maturation, its members began to return to the inner city, to build housing for the poor and to experiment with alternate forms

of Christian living. The community's main tenets came to be peace and justice, work and a new economic order, and community and celebration.

Today, the community is led by some 200 men and women who reside mainly in Britain, but also in Africa, Australia, India, and North America. Although the community comes under the auspices of the Church of Scotland (Reformed in theology and government), its members are drawn from many Christian denominations, Roman Catholic as well as Protestant. Like Taizé, thousands journey every year to Iona in search of deepening their spiritual lives.

The major hymn writer and composer for the Iona Community is an intense and charismatic personality and gifted poet by the name of John Bell. In his *music*, Bell is much influenced by Scottish (Celtic) folk tunes; he sets many of his texts directly to these folk tunes, and the tunes he himself writes usually sound like Scottish folk tunes. But Bell and his collaborators in the Wild Goose Worship Group in Scotland have been in the forefront of creating new and powerful *texts*, and also of collecting and publishing indigenous music created by Christian communities in many lands around the world.<sup>11</sup>

What is it that makes all of this hymn poetry and music "indigenous"?

1. It grows out of an intense, passionate Christian religious conviction; there is nothing lukewarm or half-hearted about it.
2. It arises from those places where a strong Christian culture not only survives but thrives.
3. In every instance, it is not divorced from earlier Christian artistic traditions; rather, it rests on these traditions and develops them further.
4. Although its various elements may be drawn from diverse sources (some of which are not specifically Christian), the final product belongs recognizably, uniquely, to the Christian church.

All of the examples I've cited are far from the kind of art that many people consider on the "cutting edge" of Christian artistic expression in the U.S. I hope that it is clear why I've avoided discussing this popular Christian art: I think that a rational analysis of the situation leads to the inevitable conclusion that the so-called "Contemporary Christian" arts are not only *not* Christian, they are the clearest signs of the present weakness of the Christian church in modern society.

Does this mean, then, that Christian worship ought to shun all the art forms of modern secular society, ought completely to reject them? That is, I think, a very difficult and perplexing question. In the first place, it is probably impossible, since secular culture is so powerful and all-pervasive in our society. The case presented above, however, develops a cogent argument that simply adopting such art forms into Christian worship advertises just how sterile Christianity is today in the developed world.

Yet shouldn't today's Christian church be free to adopt those features of any sort of art that serve its purposes?

In order to gain perspective on that question, let's consider the major characteristics of, for example, the music of secular religion and culture. It's either produced, amplified, or broadcast electronically; syncopation of some sort is its unerring hallmark; and it is characterized by a distinct, often driving beat, normally produced electronically with machine-like precision. It is music by and large intended to be performed by a soloist or small group, and listened to by an audience. Contrast this sort of music with music indigenous to traditional Christianity (still very much alive in most Eastern Orthodox churches, and less so in the Roman Catholic and other traditional Western churches), which is acoustic (live, not electronic), is smooth and chant-like, and often exhibits great rhythmic flexibility. At its most authentic, it involves music for participation by all in attendance.

The pronounced personality of secular religion's music makes it a perfect reflection of the values of secular religion and culture. That same personality inevitably creates manifold problems when traditional religions abandon their indigenous artistic heritage in order to forge a new music largely derived

from that of secular religion. To the degree that the new music sounds like that of the secular culture, it cannot help but reveal the vitality of secular religion and the embarrassing sterility of the traditional.

Can the Christian church borrow elements from secular art and shape them into its own artistic forms? It has done so in the past, and with the guidance of the Spirit (and the labor of gifted musicians and poets!), there is no reason why it cannot do so again today. There are, in fact, already tentative beginnings of this process: music intended for worship that borrows and attempts to transform elements of modern secular music (synthesized sounds and popular musical mannerisms and chord progressions) into a kind of music that communicates a sense of a transcendent, awesome God. The "bottom line" is this: can the church reshape whatever elements it borrows into new forms that are so unmistakably Christian that no one will be aware of the borrowing unless they consciously look for it—like the pillars in a Gothic cathedral, or the blue note in Taizé's "Ubi caritas"?

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This article began entirely on a theoretical plane, where reason and logic make answers far easier to arrive at and defend. It has ended on a practical plane, the "real world," a world everyone knows is imperfect, a world in which good and bad, Christian and non-Christian and anti-Christian are mixed and mingled, and ambiguities abound. It seems to me that the uncritical importation of non-Christian art into the church has at least this one great benefit: it will hasten the day when the church realizes that pure, unadulterated secular art and traditional religion mix like oil and water. "Oil and water" is, in fact, an apt analogy. You can make them seem to mix as long as you keep stirring them vigorously. But stop stirring, and what happens?

Every generation has its great heresy. The great heresy of our time is the belief, the assertion, that the medium is irrelevant to the message; that is, it really doesn't matter what type of art we use, as long as we get the message across. But, as the prophet Marshall McLuhan reminded us more than 25 years ago, "The medium *is* the message." The art

doesn't just carry the message, the art *is* the message. No matter how novel or appealing or effective it may seem to set Christian texts to rock music, for example, the text is bound ultimately to be obliterated by the art that accompanies it.

If history is any indication, it will probably take the church about 100 years to figure this out. In the meantime, we will have to live with the heresy, and deal with it as kindly, patiently, and fruitfully as we can. What we can do now, at least, is to realize just what is happening—what it means, what it implies.

An institution's weaknesses usually lie in those places where it least expects them, about which it is most complacent, which it pays the least attention to, takes the most for granted. "After all, it's *only* music, or *only* a church building, or *only* a picture, or *only* (fill in the blank) . . ." "Letting the kids kick up their heels a bit with their kind of music—what could be wrong with that?" This series of articles may contribute to viewing questions such as these from a broader, more comprehensive perspective.

When the church finally does sort all of this out, then the church will finally be free to begin to discover, to begin to invent, new forms of art that are truly its own. That means not merely art that is resurrected from the past, or art that is imported lock, stock, and barrel from another culture and another religion. It is these new art forms that the church so desperately needs in order to grow, and to be healthy, and to flourish.

#### NOTES

1. *St. Mark's Rest* (1877), preface.
2. Eric Werner has written a book that treats this common heritage: *The Sacred Bridge* (New York: Columbia Press, 1959).
3. Hope Publishing Company, c.1972.
4. *The Carl Schalk Hymnary* (Chicago: G.I.A. Publications, c.1989), pp. 39ff.
5. *Episcopal Hymnal 1982*, No. 490.
6. *Ibid.*, No. 178.
7. *Ibid.*, No. 335.
8. North American Liturgy Resources (Phoenix, Ariz., c.1979).
9. "Church Musician in France: Taizé," in *Music, the AGO-RCCO Magazine*, April 1976, p. 44.
10. All of the music of Taizé is available in the U.S. from G.I.A. Publications, 7404 South Mason Ave., Chicago, IL 60638.
11. Music of the Wild Goose Worship Group is available in the U.S. from G.I.A. Publications, 7404 South Mason Ave., Chicago, IL 60638.

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