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Secular Music and Sacred Theology

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Chapter 6

Secular Music and Sacramental Theology

Christian Scharen

This chapter begins with the surprising fact that in Charles Taylor's monumental work *A Secular Age*, rock concerts are discussed as serious sites for understanding religion today.¹ Don't get me wrong. Having sung U2's song "40" with tens of thousands of others at the close of a rock concert, I thought rock concerts ought to be sites for serious thinking about religion today.² My surprise comes in finding perhaps the most important philosopher of our time saying it. Taylor's comments about the contemporary religious significance of rock concerts, brief though they are, are connected to a central strand of his argument in *A Secular Age* that details the fate of what he terms "the festive" or "festive Christianity" central to pre-modern Latin Christendom (and much antecedent religious experience cross-culturally).³ The forms of religious ritual Taylor calls "the festive" were systematically repressed by waves of reform from the Middle Ages on, repression that accelerated in the seventeenth century. Yet repression of "the festive" was never totally successful, and his (brief) account of the religious role of rock concerts constitutes part of his articulation of a return of the festive in contemporary culture.

¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 517.

² U2 closed their third album, *War* (Island, 1983), with a version of Psalm 40 with a chorus taken from Psalm 6. See Christian Scharen, *One Step Closer: Why U2 Matters to Those Seeking God* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), 30–33.

³ Taylor, in *A Secular Age*, discusses "the festive," including Carnival and similar feasts of the liturgical calendar, as a recurrent theme in his argument. For the first comments on this theme, see 45–54.

In what follows, I propose an experimental method for reviving sacramental theology drawing on Taylor's work as theological provocation.⁴ Beginning with three examples of "secular" music drawn from top Grammy award winners in 2011, I first suggest ways they perform a kind of "secular" sacramental theology. I put the term "secular" in quotes because while they are not performing explicitly Christian or sacred music by industry-standard categories, they nonetheless each have internal religious commitments shaping their art. Besides, my constructive theological position challenges such a notion of secularity as implicated in a dangerously reductionist version of Christian faith. Second, I unpack Taylor's argument about "the festive" with some care, tending to its pre-modern shape, the reasons for and consequences of its repression, and the shape of its return in contemporary culture. Finally, with Taylor's understanding of "the festive" in mind, I return to these "secular" artists with which I began to ask how they imply compelling revisions of sacramental theology and practice for churches in a secular age.

Performing "Secular" Sacramental Theology

In what follows I will briefly describe three pop music artists and their performances at the 2011 Grammy Awards. Of course the choice of pop music artists to engage could have been different. My engagements with Arcade Fire, Lady Gaga, and Esperanza Spalding work as exemplary cases, highlighting distinctive characteristics of, as Taylor terms them, "rock concerts, raves and the like" which embody elements of "the festive" and thereby provide key aspects of an enduring human response to and mode of seeking for God.⁵ Following introductions to each, including their performances at the Grammy Awards, I suggest ways each can be read in relation to themes of sacramental theology including the Proclamation of the Word, Holy Baptism, and the Eucharist.

Arcade Fire

Arcade Fire, a seven-member indie rock band from Montreal, has been critically acclaimed since their beginnings a decade ago. Usually that is

⁴ While Taylor is not a professional theologian, he is a Catholic and within *A Secular Age* he offers a constructive Christian theology as compelling as his historical and philosophical work that predominates in the book. For an example, see his account of a Christian version of ordinary human flourishing, 17–18.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 517.

the death-knell for a band, with awards too often going to artists with big sales numbers rather than critical praise. All three of their albums—2004's *Funeral*, 2007's *Neon Bible* and 2010's *The Suburbs*—were nominated for "Best Alternative Album."⁶ *The Suburbs* was also nominated for the most prestigious of all the Grammy Awards, "Album of the Year," as well, a first for the band. While they lost "Best Alternative Album" to The Black Keys, they surprised everyone by winning "Album of the Year" over such megastars as Lady Gaga and Detroit rapper Eminem. Their win left award presenter Barbra Streisand looking confused, seeming to think the band's name was "The Suburbs" and the album called "Arcade Fire." The band, backstage preparing to play a final song live to wrap up the broadcast, shared looks of disbelief. They piled out from their cramped space behind stage, and Win Butler, the band's founder and lead singer, dropped to his knees to cross the last few feet onto stage as a spontaneous expression of humility and gratitude. Upon reaching the microphone, the shocked band expressed jubilant thanks, and then declared, "We're going to play another song 'cause we like music!"

After a few moments of darkness, a few more thanks, and the squealing sound of guitars being plugged in, the band launched into the second song from *The Suburbs* titled "Ready to Start." The song begins with Win Butler's pulsating fuzzy guitar, almost like a busy signal one used to get on the phone, picked up and carried along in a frenetic pace by the pounding tempo of Régine Chassagne and Jeremy Gara each on their own drum kits. Suddenly, Tim Kingsbury's insistent, propulsive bass leads the rest of the band (Will Butler, Win's brother, on piano and Sarah Neufeld on violin) and in fact the whole audience into a joyfully earnest proclamation of the possibility of beginning again despite the compromises of life in "The Suburbs." The faces of the band were clearly caught up in the joy of the moment. The performance offered an intensity of surprising proportions for a highly scripted broadcast, as if the fully realized possibility of rock and roll concerts to take people outside of themselves broke open even this jaded audience. They were, in this moment, exactly as the English rock critic Paul Morley has labeled them: "a scholarly post-punk gospel choir merrily identifying the menace of the world."⁷

⁶ Arcade Fire, *Funeral* (Merge Records, 2004); Arcade Fire, *Neon Bible* (Merge Records, 2007); Arcade Fire, *The Suburbs* (Merge Records, 2010).

⁷ Paul Morley, "Keep the Faith," *The Guardian* (Sunday, 18 March 2007) available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2007/mar/18/popandrock.features11>.

Lady Gaga

Earlier in the night, Lady Gaga's dramatic red-carpet entrance inside a large egg transitioned to a birth on stage that grew into a high-energy performance of Gaga's hit single, "Born This Way." Perhaps the planet's biggest and most flamboyant pop singer and performance artist, her second album, 2009's *The Fame Monster*, received six Grammy nominations in 2011, including the coveted "Album of the Year," and won awards for "Best Female Pop Vocal Performance" for the single "Bad Romance" and "Best Pop Vocal Album."⁸ While early records stayed within typical bounds for pop dance music, her latest album *Born This Way* embodies a countercultural imagination.⁹ Her commitments to inclusion and diversity emerged as she began to publicly speak on behalf of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights. Commenting on this shift in her life and her music, she said: "For three years I have been baking cakes—and now I'm going to bake a cake that has a bitter jelly."¹⁰ That bitter jelly is embodied in *Born This Way* and its title track. The lyrics of "Born This Way" work the typical categories of rejection in our society: race, class, gender, ability, and sexual orientation, in addition to the generalized bullying and teasing typically suffered by those deemed "misfits." Taking off from her *The Fame Monster* album and subsequent worldwide Monster Ball Tour, her fans began calling themselves "little monsters" and Lady Gaga "Mother Monster": the one who offers inclusion to those who feel excluded, community to those who feel isolated, a place to fit for those told they are misfits.

In her Grammy performance, Lady Gaga was rolled out from stage left in darkness, chanting the opening lines of "Born This Way" from within her translucent egg: "It doesn't matter if you love him, or capital H-I-M: just put your paws up because you were born this way, baby." She climbed out of the egg, surrounded by a wonderfully diverse group of dancers all keeping artful time with the infectious dance beat of the song. Typical of her performances, the musicians are hidden in darkness at the rear of the stage dominated by the drama of Gaga and her dancers. She begins by evoking the love of "capital H-I-M," a sort of ham-fisted reference to God, before channeling her mother's teaching that God made

⁸ Lady Gaga, *The Fame Monster* (Interscope, 2009).

⁹ Lady Gaga, *Born This Way* (Interscope, 2011).

¹⁰ "Lady Gaga Tells All," *Rolling Stone* Issue 1308-1309 (June 21, 2010) <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/lady-gaga-tells-all-rolling-stones-new-issue-20100621> [Accessed January 12, 2012].

her perfect. As a result, Gaga declares, you should hold your head up and believe that in all your particularity you are God's good creation ("cause God makes no mistakes"). "To paraphrase Will Campbell," theologian Rodney Clapp writes, "the Gospel message is that we're all misfits but God loves us anyway." Calling her a "Kierkegaard in fishnet stockings," Clapp points out how Gaga reminds us of Jesus' own "lack of fit" and the accusations that he was not at all a proper Messiah, beginning from his ignoble birth among the animals in a stall to his death hung between two criminals on a cross.¹¹

Esperanza Spalding

Esperanza Spalding, a twenty-six-year-old virtuoso bassist, singer, and composer, co-hosted the "Pre-Grammy Telecast" when the bulk of the awards are given. She co-hosted with Bobby McFerrin, himself a virtuoso vocalist and conductor as well as ten-time Grammy winner. Walking out to begin the telecast, McFerrin checked his mic, Spalding picked up her bass, and they launched into an inventive and deliciously fun version of the Eddie Harris tune, "Freedom Jazz Dance," made famous by Miles Davis on his 1967 album *Miles Smiles*.¹² Later that evening, much to her (and most people's) surprise, Spalding received the award for "Best New Artist," winning over teen pop icon Justin Bieber and hip-hop star Drake. As she took the stage in disbelief, she began by saying, "Thank you to the academy for even nominating me in this category." She thanked all her friends, family, and teachers, a community she described as "such a blessing" in her life and music. Spalding has particular aims to communicate through her music, some that are self-evident as she and McFerrin begin with a firm yet measured groove, but exploring a dynamic range and emotional breadth marked by intensity from a whisper to playful scat to a head-back, full-throated, soulful cry. Their interrelated improvisation of jazz communion joined themselves to the band behind them and the audience in front of them.

Growing up, Spalding explored jazz but also played bass and sang in a popular Portland indie rock band, Noise for Pretend. Her musical range and interest is enormous—one report lists her iPod collection at eleven thousand songs—from Johann Sebastian Bach to Stevie Wonder (enough

¹¹ Rodney Clapp, "From Shame to Fame," *Christian Century* (July 13, 2011) <http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2011-07/shame-fame> [Accessed June 20, 2012].

¹² Miles Davis, *Miles Smiles* (Columbia, 1967).

music to play continuously for nearly two months).¹³ Her range of influences matches her iPod collection, causing some critics to describe her work as too broad in style, unfocused, in need of editing. Others describe her eclecticism as particularly fitting—a representative of a post-hip-hop generation. Her very identity embodies a kind of multiracial (she has an African American father and a Welsh-Mexican-Native American mother) and multilingual (she sings in Portuguese, Spanish, and English) complexity fitting for the internet-driven twenty-first-century global music scene of which she is now a leader.¹⁴ While her recent album, *Chamber Music Society*, employs classical depth and enhanced string arrangements (done by Spalding herself), her next album is titled *Radio Music Society*, a decidedly populist move.¹⁵ A look at her playing schedule shows the same range, touring with jazz luminary Joe Lovano's Us Five group and opening for a series of concerts by Prince in New York and Los Angeles. The spirited nature of her music is rooted, she says, in a similarly dynamic understanding of God "whose beauty, presences and effect in and on my life invokes infinite inspiration, admiration and wonder."¹⁶

To conclude this section, I must say clearly the ways each performer and performance gestures toward aspects of sacramental theology. While I do this in brief fashion here, I will develop this a bit further in the third part in relation to congregational worship practices. I hope aspects of this "leaning into" theology have been evident already. Arcade Fire—and its charismatic front man, Win Butler—embodies the voice of preacher-prophets, like Jesus and his followers, who were accused of turning the world and its values upside down. Such prophetic voice is evident on all their albums, *The Suburbs* included. While they lament the trap of the vampire relationship between workers and their corporate bosses in suburbia, they see the possibility of saying no to this reality and starting again with something true. Lady Gaga draws upon the baptismal sen-

¹³ John Colapinto, "Profiles: New Note: Esperanza Spalding's Music," in *The New Yorker* (March 15, 2010): 37.

¹⁴ Colapinto, "Profiles: New Note: Esperanza Spalding's Music," 34. Colapinto visited her in her Austin, Texas home and filmed her talking about her creative process working on a new song. It is incredible to hear her say and show a humility that knows "sometimes a musical idea comes to me that I don't have the maturity to fully realize yet." <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/goingson/2010/03/video-esperanza-spalding.html> [Accessed January 7, 2012].

¹⁵ Esperanza Spalding, *Chamber Music Society* (Heads Up, 2010); *Radio Music Society* (Heads Up, 2012).

¹⁶ Esperanza Spalding, *Junjo* (Ayva Music, 2006), liner notes.

sibility of dying and rising, saying no to the inequality that makes some powerful and others marginal, and saying yes to a God-given equality and created goodness. Her embrace of design, costume, and dance performance lend an explicit sense of creative freedom to her call to be true to God's creative intentions for each person. Esperanza Spalding's intimate and passionate merger of instrument and song evokes a joining not unlike communion, becoming one body with musical forebears (Eddie Harris and Miles Davis), musical community in the present (Bobby McFerrin, the band, the audience) and the depth of her connection to God whose creative gifts overflow as healing and joy in the midst of it all. The word and sacrament of pop music gospel, sung and played for the sake of the gathered assembly of believers, a gathered assembly at the Grammys who despite their music industry status are nevertheless continually taken out of the moment and transported to that other place, a place where time shifts to no time and one can join in a communal experience of music with body and soul. This is not, of course, to say that these artists offer traditional Christian theological perspectives in general, let alone on preaching and sacraments. Yet the combination of the fact that they all describe their work in religious terms and that their performance offers variations of "transcendent" experience sets up my discussion of Charles Taylor's notion of "the festive" and its religious role in culture, mostly now lost, but perhaps returning through such live pop music performance.

On "The Festive": Repression and Return

Of course it is not at all clear that Arcade Fire, Lady Gaga, and Esperanza Spalding are commonly heard as I presented them: as participants in the work of God. Not only that: pop music is, as theologian and musician Jeremy Begbie has noted, mostly considered "god-forsaken."¹⁷ Among other things, I want to ask in this next section about how we ended up with a dominant culture in North America that divides sacred from secular, reduces faith to morality, and reduces worship and religious ritual to what is proper, decent, and manageable. If we are to understand at all how the past frames the particular forms of life we inhabit in our

¹⁷ A phrase taken from the endorsement by Begbie on the back cover of my book *Broken Hallelujahs: How Pop Music Matters to Those Seeking God* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011).

present age, we'll need to find some way of asking about this history, and wondering about music's role in it.

As a key notion to guide us, it is important to have a definition of "the festive." Charles Taylor uses this notion of "the festive" to refer to "large numbers of people coming together outside of quotidian routine, whether the 'outside' is geographic, as in the case of pilgrimage, or resides in the ritual of the feast, which breaks with the everyday order of things."¹⁸ He means such events as Carnival, still surviving as a major festival in Brazil and New Orleans, for example, or what he calls the "feasts of misrule" including the medieval Feast of Fools typically held near year's end.

Historian Peter Burke writes that the Feast of Fools was typically held on December 28, organized by junior clergy. The feast would begin with the election of a bishop of the fools, and include:

dancing in church and in the streets, the usual procession, and a mock mass in which the clergy wore masks or women's clothes or put their vestments on back to front, held the missal upside down, played cards, ate sausages, sang bawdy songs, and cursed the congregation instead of blessing them.¹⁹

The Feast of Fools embodies, Burke writes, the typical character of these feasts: reversals of roles, especially, but also suspension of typical social norms allowing an experience of "the world turned upside down."²⁰ Many of these "feasts of misrule" fell during Christmastide, the traditional season of the twelve days of Christmas, "since the birth of the son of God in a manger was a spectacular example of the world turned upside down."²¹ Festivals were often very localized to begin with, and as Taylor notes, tended to mix some "sacred ritual with a lot of very earthy eating, drinking and dancing, with often unmentionable consequences for the sexual morality of young and old alike."²²

"The festive," as Taylor describes it, has multilayered meaning. It connected people to one another and to something "more," be that explicitly sacred or not. Integral to these festivals was a kind of overflowing, an

¹⁸ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 469.

¹⁹ Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York: New York University Press, 1978), 192.

²⁰ Burke, *Popular Culture*, 192.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 193.

²² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 465.

abundance of what anthropologist Victor Turner called “*communitas*” in which one can “forget oneself” and the distinctions of the established order give way to another sort of common unity or belonging that is deeply moving.²³ They were, in a sense, a time out of time, when the ordinary routines of daily life fell aside and all joined in celebrations, merriment, and play. For example, a Scandinavian Christmas cookbook records that the length of the Christmas festival was concurrent with the Christmas beer supply.²⁴

These many festivals that developed as part of “festive Christianity” in the West are largely known because of the waves of reform that sought to suppress or at least downplay the “elements of collective ritual and magic, in favor of personal commitment, devotion, and moral discipline.”²⁵ Erasmus, the Dutch Renaissance scholar, wrote in horror about his first-hand experience of the Carnival he witnessed in Siena in 1509. It was a decidedly unchristian feast, he argued, because it contained: “*veteris paganismi vestigia*” (traces of ancient paganism) and “*populus . . . nimium indulget licentiae*” (the people over-indulge in license).²⁶ One can trace these two kinds of religious objections, the one theological (against idolatry) and the other moral (against sin). A common strategy employed in efforts to control or even eliminate the Carnival, Feast of Fools, and other similar festivals was to trace their roots to the ancient Greco-Roman *Bacchanalia*, and especially the New Year’s festival, *Saturnalia*.²⁷ These celebrations tied together the theological and moral concerns, and united Protestant and Catholic reforms.

The whole drive of reform “from the High Middle Ages through the Reformation and Counter-Reformation right up through evangelical renewal and the post-Restoration Church,” was to make Christians with a strong and personal devotional commitment to God and the faith.²⁸ I think of the iconic Eric Enstrom photograph that hung in our dining room during my childhood. Taken in 1918, the photo shows Charles Wilden in Bovey, Minnesota, head bowed and hands folded, a loaf of

²³ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969), 94.

²⁴ Kathleen Stokker, *Keeping Christmas: Yuletide Traditions in Norway and the New Land* (Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2001), 34–38.

²⁵ Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 257.

²⁶ Burke, *Popular Culture*, 209.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 465–66.

bread, bowl of soup, and a large Bible on the table before him. Like many devotional images of its time, it portrays the morals of modernity that Taylor argues were the successors to “festive Christianity”: individual devotion, modesty, and decency. This same reforming ethic drove the nervous reaction to Handel’s first London performances of his new oratorio *The Messiah*, staged in a theater and using its performers. As one writer at the time put it, “I ask if the Playhouse is a fit Temple to perform it in, or a Company of Players fit Ministers of God’s Word.”²⁹ Handel himself, worried about such criticism, advertised the performances without using the word “Messiah” simply calling it “A New Sacred Oratorio.”³⁰

The trouble that faced the London debut of *The Messiah* was part of the rise of what Taylor calls an Age of Mobilization.³¹ During this era, nation-states took center stage and capitalism became the dominant economic system, and both depended on disciplined individual citizens doing their duty.³² What the early response to *The Messiah* represents, then, is continuing pressure against “the festive” and for decency and uprightness. Yet the long history of jubilant performances of *The Messiah* highlights how hard it is to suppress “the festive” as communal expression of musical joy—a factor that points forward to the role Taylor assigns to rock concerts. While it is true that “the festive,” as Taylor outlined it, is a deep and abiding feature in human social life, it has had to exist in marginal settings and has suffered many efforts at control (no bawdy performers or theater context for *The Messiah* these days!).

Today, one might say, the return of the festive is a remarkable part of the breakdown of modernity and its moral order of “decency.” Of course the breakdown of traditional sexual mores is most prominent but the overall pattern of rejection of the modern moral order from Romanticism onward seeks to escape from the reduction of experience underwritten by the modern moral order. Its rejection of the earthy, experiential, and communal in favor of the heavenly, cognitive, and individual left moderns alone in a disenchanting world of sober discipline. To make sense of the effects of the trajectory of reform, Taylor coins the term “excarna-

²⁹ Calvin R. Stapert, *Handel’s Messiah: Comfort for God’s People* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 45.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 471, demarcates the Age of Mobilization as 1800–1950.

³² Aspects of this longer story in the Latin West are found in Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994).

tion" by which he means "the transfer of our religious life out of bodily forms of ritual, worship, practice, so that it comes more and more to reside 'in the head.'" ³³ With respect to three modes of human communication (embodied *habitus*, symbolic expression and language), "the festive" was mainly rooted in the first two, while the "excarnating" reforms led to a restriction of the life of faith to the third: language and especially propositional truths. ³⁴ Taylor goes so far as to say such restriction of modern society ordered by what he calls "code fetishism" not only makes us blind to "the vertical dimension" but actually "dumbs us down, morally and spiritually." ³⁵

"The festive" breaks open such sober discipline, opening into a renewal of experiences that fuse common action and experiential feeling, a powerful sense of connection and even transcendence. In our contemporary age (post-1950s), in what Taylor calls the "Age of Authenticity," the expressive individualism rooted in the elite thinkers of the Romantic era now has become broadly distributed in society. The manifold impacts include an imperative of self-cultivation: be (or find) yourself! Individuals search for depth experiences, renewal, experiences of fusion, of common action and purpose with others. This might happen at sports games, for instance, when the crowd rises as one to cheer a last-minute goal. ³⁶ Spiritual seekers, Taylor writes, are likely to find such connection and transcendence via pilgrimage and communal song at rock concerts and festivals. Either way, something key happens that taps the dimension of religious experience meant by the concept of "the festive": "moments of common action/feeling, which both wrench us out of the everyday, and seem to put us in touch with something exceptional, beyond ourselves." ³⁷ While not explicitly religious, such experiences at concerts "sit uneasily in the secular, disenchanted world." Many people who experience these momentary senses of "wow" are not satisfied; they want to take that experience further, and thereby "seek practices which are their main access to traditional forms of faith." ³⁸ Taylor acknowledges

³³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 613.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 615.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 707.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 482; See also Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age* (New York: The Free Press, 2011), 190.

³⁷ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 482–83.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 518.

that while these experiences—at rock festivals or elsewhere—are the “closest analogues” to the festivals of prior times, they are not (usually) set within a public or social frame of structure and anti-structure (to recall Turner’s phrase).³⁹ Such contemporary experiences of “the festive” may involve aspects of anti-social behavior, of many sorts, but this is the point. They tend to be rather uncoordinated, wild, as much for fear as for hope that such energy could revive a fuller experience of faith and practice in modern life. Nonetheless, Taylor concludes, the rise of such experiences over the last fifty years heralds the need for the deep power of “the festive as a crucial feature of modern life.”⁴⁰

What I have tried to open up here is a way of showing how the repression of “the festive” marks a constriction of how we understand God, how and where we imagine God to be at work, and our place in that. This constriction of the life of faith is a Puritan impulse, dividing clean from dirty, Godly from the God-forsaken. While this is indeed an ancient impulse in culture, it has had a particularly powerful hold on western modernity and its moral imagination.⁴¹ Under this influence we might forget God’s abundant and surprising ways. We might then be formed with constricted imagination, worrying that the wrong people in the wrong place could never be “fit Ministers of God’s Word.” We might then struggle to see pop singers at the Grammy Awards as an inspiring example of God’s people singing. Yet exactly because of the power of “the festive” and the spiritual longing that emerges there, the sound track for the “Age of Authenticity” seems to be bursting with religious questions and experiences, often sung by the most surprising people in the most unlikely places. Given this, those who inhabit contemporary communities of faith, who are the conservators of the practices of traditional faith, ought to take seriously that they may be the means through which the concertgoer could find means to sustain and deepen the “wow” they experience in the live music performance. Because the church is the body of Christ, formed into the very character of God who listens to the cries of human life from sorrow to joy that emerge in popular music, and whose very gift of communion it is that festival goes experience there, Christians of all people ought to see the connections between “secular music” and “sacramental theology and practice” as

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 715.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Rutledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).

crucial. It is exactly such festival communion that we already know in our bones, can articulate and ought to enact ourselves with great integrity and imagination. Were we to do so, those same hoards who are shouting "Now I'm ready to start" with Arcade Fire may just be in the assembly at the great festival of the vigil of Easter shouting "This is the night." Give them the full stretch of living, cries real and deep, sorrowful and ecstatic, and something of the festival of old will capture their full selves in the life possible for all.

Beyond Excarination: The Festive in Word and Sacrament

For now, I want to conclude with some practical comments about what the intersection of "secular music" and "the festive" says about the proclamation of the word and celebration of the sacraments as key elements of Christian worship. The proclamation of the Gospel is, of course, first of all a living word, Jesus Christ, who comes despite our well-defined expectations about how a proper God should act. That this Word might find ways to "speak" in our day through music should not surprise us. Ministers of music know this in their bones: their gift and task is to proclaim the word in song and music. The whole musical tradition of the Christian church globally shows this power of music to proclaim the Gospel. It should not surprise us then to find in "secular" music a word of the Lord speaking in prophetic or any other scriptural mode. When we do hear such a pop music word, we find ourselves opened to what theologian David Ford calls "the logic of superabundance."⁴² It is an "overwhelming" that either threatens us or opens us to transformation and, Ford would say, salvation. The experience of overwhelming, of transformation and salvation, is a key feature of "the festive."

Likewise, baptism is into Christ's own death and resurrection, and although this saving plunge happens only once, in it the Christian has, as Martin Luther taught, "enough to study and practice all his or her life."⁴³ Daily practice amounts to saying "no" to death, the devil and all his empty promises, and "yes" to the God of all creation who in mercy loved us and freed us for abundant life. Yet baptism too often is merely

⁴² David F. Ford, *Self and Salvation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 98.

⁴³ Martin Luther, "The Large Catechism," *The Book of Concord*, ed., Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 461.

a sentimental light wetting of an infant's head, a public means to acknowledge a child's birth, but no dramatic dying dare be invoked or the sentimental magical moment would be broken. Too often the font is put away when not in use (as it was last summer when we went to celebrate my son's thirteenth baptismal anniversary and we literally had to pull it out, uncover it, and fill it with water).

Given the surprising abundance of spirituality in pop culture, ought Christians claim a baptismal practice like Lady Gaga, shaped by a baptismal "no" to the death-dealing world's order of things and a "yes" to new identity as beloved, as opened to the fullness of all God intends? Christians might 'chime in' with Gaga's effort to drown the identities that divide them and us and open us to life in a body of many members, all blessed and gifted. David Ford's notion of "overwhelming" helps us again here. Ford says, "Baptism is the clearest Christian testimony to the fundamental and inescapable reality of being overwhelmed. Those of us who are baptized have taken on an identity shaped by the overwhelming of creation, death, resurrection, and the Holy Spirit."⁴⁴ Too often our sin is holding on to death-dealing aspects of lives. This overwhelming of baptismal saving from sin is desperately needed in our time, and the flamboyant display by Lady Gaga only serves to make that point more dramatically.

Lastly, some practical comments about what this experience of festive joy says about the meal we share called Eucharist. This eschatological meal both remembers all God has done and most especially in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, but it also makes present now a foretaste of that great festival banquet promised on that day when all shall be well, all whole, the lamb sleeping with the lion. Such an eschatological presence filling our cup to overflowing suggests ways we might enact a Eucharistic practice that is more like wisdom's feast, reviving the deep logic of "the festive" in which our bodies are brought together into one Eucharistic body and formed in a life of healing that is not our own but gift, offered in the interplay of the body taken, blessed, broken, and given. The effervescent jazz-pop improvisation between Esperanza Spalding and Bobby McFerrin captures this joining, this communion, exhibiting an interplay as one musical experience that, like the liturgy of communion, might allow us to be caught up into the action of being given for the sake of the world. Great music played together in joy, just as the

⁴⁴ David F. Ford, *The Shape of Living* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 49.

bread and wine of Eucharist, proclaim the feast as a living word, an echo and embodiment of the promised eschatological feast. That festival in heaven, shared as a foretaste even now, has the spirit-filled power to draw us body and soul into festival celebration of life in its fullness.