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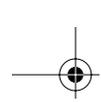
the split

A *key issue in the strained relationship between Christianity* and the arts is the perceived division between secular and sacred. Christians have found it hard to appreciate art that deals with daily living, especially if it doesn't supply an obviously spiritual conclusion.

This problem is exemplified in what is known as contemporary Christian music (CCM). Created as a marketing category to distinguish what had once been known as Jesus rock from traditional southern gospel, it is music created by Christians and largely consumed by Christians. As far as I am aware, it is the only musical category recognized in the record industry that is defined entirely by lyrical content. All other categories—blues, soul, dance, heavy metal, rap and so on—are defined by musical style.

This criterion has naturally focused attention on the words of the songs at the expense of the quality of musical composition, musicianship and studio production. CCM practitioners are judged by the pungency of their message and remain eligible for the genre only as long as their lyrics fall inside prescribed parameters. Many of them refer to their work not as an art but as a ministry and speak





openly about using their music “to reach the world for Christ.”

For many Christians, preaching is the role model for communication and the arts are simply another form of communication. Consequently they create art that involves a clearly understood message and possibly even a challenge. The listener is not meant to be enriched but changed. Success is gauged not in terms of critical appreciation but in souls saved.

The thinking behind creating such music seems to be as follows: Young people today don’t have high regard for preachers, and yet they do emulate rock stars. Some rock music contains thought-provoking lyrics. Therefore, the Christian gospel, if successfully couched in a rock music setting, could be more effective among youth than if it was declared from a pulpit.

This is faulty thinking. It confuses the power of the Spirit with the power of technology, charisma and mystique. Rock music can have power over people for reasons that range from the decibel level to the image of a singer built up through the media. The popular messages put over by rock music are usually popular not because they reverse the direction of society, but because they encourage the direction it is already going in.

Nowhere was this more clearly emphasized than when I saw Bob Dylan perform his first concerts with songs written out of an experience of Jesus. On paper this was the perfect opportunity to see a generation influenced by the gospel. Here was one of the most powerful icons from the baby-boom generation pleading with his audience to “get ready,” “wake up” and “serve the Lord.” The result at the concert I attended in San Francisco was that the audience jeered, walked out or demanded to hear his old material. Reviewers were equally condemning. This was not the message that they wanted to hear. They wanted their worldviews to be endorsed, not brought into question, and no amount of charisma, artistic talent and status could change that.

The power of effective preaching isn’t a question of art. Preachers should of course be well read, skillful with language, aware of into-





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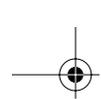
nation and able to craft arguments that engage the interest of the ordinary person, but if we could explain a revival in terms of artistry, then we would be right to credit the artists and not the Spirit. Success in preaching is not a simple matter of effective communication.

Jonathan Edwards, the great preacher of the New England revival, achieved spectacular effects although he read his sermons and did it in a quiet voice. When the evangelist D. L. Moody came to Britain in the 1870s, what surprised those who saw him was that there seemed to be nothing in his disposition or style that could explain the power that was unleashed when he preached. Moody, for his part, was greatly pleased to know that what he did couldn't be analyzed in human terms.

It is therefore wrong for Christians to think that if only we could employ the most powerful arts and media available today we could bring about conversions on a scale never seen before. The power of Steven Spielberg the filmmaker to sell cinema seats or Madonna the musician to sell CDs would not be automatically translated into the power to save souls should they choose to give their gift to the Lord. They may be listened to by more people, for a short while at least, but if they were to be explicit about the Christian faith they would face the same indifference or resistance that any other proclaimer of the good news has encountered.

When Christians think of the arts as something that can be used to win the world to Christ, they create an unrealistic expectation of the arts and put unfair pressure on artists. Christian songwriters are automatically expected to write "Christian songs." But what constitutes a "Christian song"? In theory, according to the Gospel Music Association, a gospel song can be in any style as long as it contains worship or testimony, or is "informed by a Christian worldview." In practice, it tends to be a song that contains the requisite amount of references to the Lord, God, Jesus or the Spirit. Otherwise, how would a half-attentive radio audience know it was listening to CCM?





Frequently a “Christian worldview” is interpreted to mean a view of a pressing moral problem broadly accepted by evangelicals. Therefore, a song protesting abortion or pornography would fulfill the criteria. A song recommending the cancellation of third-world debt might not because, although the idea of this sort of debt cancellation is derived from Old Testament practices, it can seem too political. So already the definition of a “Christian worldview” is problematic.

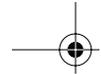
However, the truly Christian worldview is far more pervasive and often less obviously religious than people imagine. Many assumptions in our culture are rooted in the Bible. The dignity of labor and the responsibility for nurturing our talents are biblical views. Concern for an impartial judicial system is biblical. Respect for parents is biblical. I’m not sure that a song that dignified the work of a street sweeper would be considered “Christian” by the CCM industry.

Then there are areas of daily living where the experience of the Christian is no different from that of the agnostic, atheist or believer in false gods. For example, I like relaxing in a warm bath. If I were to discuss this with anyone, regardless of belief, they would at least know what I meant even if they didn’t share my enthusiasm. Uniting us would be our common humanity. We all laugh, cry, eat, sleep and sweat, and some of us take baths.

My perspective on the joy of warm baths, if I cared to elaborate, would be different because of my faith. I may take less of them because I am concerned about wasting natural resources. I may lie back and offer a prayer of thanks for the good things in life. I would of course believe that God created both water and the materials for the bathtub. But if I were conversing with someone about this pleasure I wouldn’t feel compelled to include this information in the conversation.

Similarly, in writing songs the stuff of human life is the artist’s resource. The Beatles wrote about bed (“I’m Only Sleeping”), boredom (“Good Morning”), nostalgia (“In My Life”), childhood





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("Penny Lane"), the weather ("Rain"), loneliness ("Eleanor Rigby") and money ("Taxman"), among other subjects. They were under no pressure to summarize their life philosophy in a single song and yet, if you were to collect their songs and piece them together like a jigsaw puzzle, you could discover a life philosophy, or at least part of one.

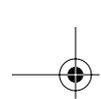
Christian songwriters are encouraged to ignore the ordinary things of life because they don't provide the opportunity to witness. Mention of soup or football doesn't naturally lead to Calvary. They are then left with the overtly spiritual, and this has the effect of making them seem out of balance to non-Christian observers. It appears that they have no regular life, that they don't inhabit the normal world of telephones, cars, surf, television, mountains and fast food. They are like the people who can only talk about how good the Lord has been but can't hold a conversation about baseball, the weather, the economy, the price of gas or the state of education.

The gospel is not limited to mentions of the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. That, of course, is the hub of the matter. There would be no good news without it. But in its fullness, the gospel spreads out and embraces all aspects of our lives. It includes the renewed mind that Paul refers to, the wisdom sought after by Solomon and the justice called for by Amos.

C. S. Lewis once said that he believed in God like he believed in the sun: "Not because I can see him, but because by him I can see everything else." It is possible to create work saturated with gospel insights without spelling out the plan of salvation, just as it is possible to demonstrate the joys of a loving marriage without showing off your wedding photographs. Songwriter T. Bone Burnett, speaking to the *L. A. Weekly*, said, "If Jesus is the Light of the World, there are two kinds of songs you can write. You can write songs about the light, or you can write songs about what you can see from the light. That's what I try to do."

The need to witness in art is nothing more than an application in one particular area of what we are told to do in general. All Chris-





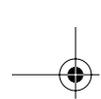
tians should believe in making disciples, but just as a doctor would not be expected to preach to patients or a plumber to wrap texts around new pipe work so artists shouldn't be required to turn their occupation into full-time evangelism unless specifically called to do so.

By continuously "praising the Lord" the CCM artist rarely shows evidence of a comprehensive worldview. In fact, the world is not viewed at all. What is viewed is personal spiritual experience and usually only its more beautiful peaks. The valley of the shadow of death is rarely traversed, nor is the valley of indecision. The casual nonbelieving browser is effectively excluded because there is no overlap of experience.

This raises the question of the relationship between art and propaganda. Some might argue that it is perfectly legitimate to use a song, novel or play as a type of sermon because art has frequently been used to move people to change their opinions. Looking at rock music alone, there have been songs urging us to love everyone ("All You Need Is Love," Beatles), songs selling the virtues of atheism ("Imagine," John Lennon), songs attacking the British monarchy ("God Save The Queen," Sex Pistols) and songs denouncing apartheid ("Sun City," Artists United Against Apartheid). The poetry and plays of Bertolt Brecht in the 1930s were written against fascism. Picasso painted *Guernica* to show the horrors of the Spanish Civil War. Arthur Miller wrote his play *The Crucible* because he was angered by the trials of suspected communists in American public life organized by Senator Joe McCarthy.

Art can be used to persuade. But acknowledging this is not to conclude that art can only be justified if it used in this way. Art is created from passion, and when artists are passionate about injustice or persecution it is almost inevitable that it will affect their work. Usually, however, these people are not single-issue artists. Picasso's feelings about the destruction of *Guernica* can be seen alongside his feelings about everything from music to women to food





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to death. Arthur Miller didn't return to the subject of the McCarthy witch-hunt.

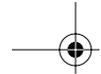
It should also be remembered that art created to change minds often actually does more to bolster the spirit of those already in agreement than it does to convert opponents. The antiwar songs of the 1960s put into words the ideas of the young people opposed to American engagement in Vietnam, but had no reported impact on the policymakers inside the Pentagon.

When art is given over to propaganda it tends to lose the human dimension because it is consumed by the issue. It oversimplifies complex issues. It vilifies the enemy. It devalues words and images. For examples of this we can look at the art approved by the Nazi Party in Germany during the 1930s and the official art of Russia under communism. Significantly, the only art that has survived from this period that still moves people is the art that was then suppressed and which challenged the orthodoxy of the day.

Some art is simply playful. It may be about nothing more than itself. It attempts neither to tell a story or to make a point. A photographer's eye is caught by the peeling paint on the door of a Mediterranean cottage. A poet toys with a combination of words that seems both magical and musical. A painter experiments with color and texture with all the joy of a child playing in a mud bath. A sculptor makes a three-dimensional pun.

To some Christians this is a wasted opportunity, a sermon with no content, a Bible exposition with no substance. But playfulness is an important component of art and perfectly in keeping with a Christian understanding of creativity. Look at the animal kingdom. Can't we sense a spirit of playfulness in the designs? Watching fish from the windows of an underwater observatory in the Red Sea recently I was struck first by the incredible array of colors and then by what I think can only be described as God's humor. The flattened out shapes, the bulging lips, the hammer heads—it was like looking at the sketch pad of someone who had come up with a basic design and was having fun creating as many variations as possible. "God,"



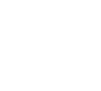


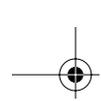
Picasso once said, "is really only another artist. He invented the giraffe, the elephant, and the cat. He has no real style. He just keeps trying other things."

The sound of words can inspire songwriters before a meaning becomes apparent. Sometimes there is no obvious meaning and sometimes there are several possible meanings. Dummy lyrics, used while a song is being composed without any thought to literal sense, often become so molded to the music that it doesn't seem worth improving them. Singer-songwriter Beck typifies this approach when he says, "I sculpt the words, but they also have to feel good in a melody. Sometimes, I'll put in a line just because it suits the melody. It won't be something that speaks of the emotional core in me, but I can't change it as it goes with the melody so much. You can go for the most expensive, crafted shirt in the world, but you're still going to prefer the one that feels good when you wear it. That's what I go for in a song. Ultimately, does it feel good to listen to?"

Because they are forced to work within narrow parameters, CCM artists are disadvantaged. While their non-Christian contemporaries work to create music which makes people go "Wow! Play that again. I love it," they are having to come up with lyric-driven songs presumably designed to make people say, "That's interesting. I agree with that sentiment. That seems true." I suspect that I'm not alone in listening to songs because they excite, relax, console or uplift me rather than because they contain words that endorse certain of my convictions.

Songwriting, like all the arts, should involve self-discovery. As it has been said, "How can I know what I think until I see what I write?" The artist taps deep levels of consciousness and brings to the surface things that amaze him or her. A lot of CCM songwriting begins with a conclusion and the lyric is simply used to expound it. There is no sense of revelation because the artist wasn't on a voyage of discovery. There are no surprises because the artist wasn't surprised. Arthur Miller has said:





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For myself, it has never been possible to generate the energy to write and complete a play if I know in advance everything it signifies and all it will contain. The very impulse to write, I think, springs from an inner chaos crying for order, for meaning, and that meaning, must be discovered in the process of writing or the work lies dead as it is finished. To speak, therefore, of a play as though it were the objective work of a propagandist is an almost biological kind of nonsense, provided, of course, that it is a play, which is to say a work of art.¹

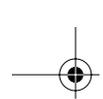
The Scottish poet and musician Don Paterson (not a Christian, as far as I know) says that poems should either surprise or frighten the poet who is writing them. He argues that the poet should be hit by words (just as I assume he would expect a musician to be hit by sounds) and it is from these words that some sense may later emerge.

I don't think poets get ideas for poems, they get words; that's their gift, and they forget it at their peril. What usually happens (to me) is that I get this phrase in my head that I can't leave alone; sometimes it's original, sometimes a cliché or some bit of received language I've discovered something new in; it constantly surprises me when I think about it and that's completely essential—if it doesn't surprise me, I can't expect it to surprise the reader, which is the whole point of the exercise.²

A sermon requires authority, clarity and a personal challenge. Art, on the other hand, often deals in doubt, ambiguity and self-criticism. The Irish poet W. B. Yeats once observed that the quarrel with others produced rhetoric but the quarrel with oneself produced poetry.³ So often Christian artists feel that their role is to take on the enemy, whereas they would produce better and more accessible work if they dealt with the contradictions, waverings and weaknesses within themselves.

The demand for overtly religious lyrics doesn't only come from the Christian music industry. The audience judges artists by their words. If a musician has too many songs without the requisite buzz



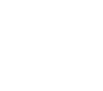


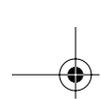
words, they are thought to have lost the faith or at least be in a period of “backsliding.” I’ve known musicians who haven’t supplied the correct number of references to Jesus to receive letters beginning, “Dear former brother in Christ.” Conversely, if a well-known mainstream artist makes even a passing reference to “the Lord” they will be claimed as a believer by an audience desperate to have famous people counted among their number.

Musicians in the Christian music industry who stop using enough religious words are said to have gone secular, and this is not meant in a positive way. However, the description *secular* is very much like *world* in that it has two very different connotations. We may use it to mean nonreligious, in the sense of having no transcendent dimension. Secular humanism is a view of the world that doesn’t include God. A secular society likewise is based on atheistic or agnostic principles. We may also use *secular* to mean nonreligious in the sense of those things that take place outside of such spiritual activities as praying, worshiping, witnessing, ministering and reading the Bible. Understood in this way, attending church on a Sunday is a religious activity but playing sport on a Saturday is a secular activity.

But there is no natural connection between activities that take place outside of church and denying God. *Secular* simply means “of this temporal world or age,” and most of the things that dominate our lives are necessarily of this temporal world or age and none the worse for being so. Of course, for a nonbeliever, secular activities are viewed in a secular way, but a believer should view secular activities as part of a spiritual life. The strength, wisdom and guidance gained during the small portion of our lives we think of as religious should percolate through the larger portion of our lives we think of as secular. “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Christians who categorize art as secular if it isn’t explicitly religious often either refuse to make it because they think it is a compromise or they go ahead and make it but imagine that they are





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entering a faith-free zone. I once saw a poet's entry in a directory of Christian artists which said: "I write poems both Christian and non-Christian." I presume that he meant that the subject matter of some of his poetry was obviously religious and some of it wasn't, but the choice of phrase (from a poet too!) betrayed an attitude that he himself had perhaps not recognized.

The Bible has no equivalent division between secular and religious in the believer's life because anything good in the temporal world can be "set apart for God," in other words made sacred. Marriage, which we are told will not extend to the afterlife and is therefore "of this temporal age," can be made holy. Child rearing can be done in a godly way. Even taking food and drink can, as we have already seen, be done in a spiritual way.

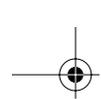
Christians are often affected by the idea that the otherworldly (heaven, the spiritual realms) is the big deal and that everything earthly (work, leisure) is tawdry. This life is a vale of tears which we are to tolerate but not enjoy. The only relief comes when we can think about God and his angels. There is even a chorus which says:

Turn your eyes upon Jesus
Look full in his wonderful face
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of his glory and grace.⁴

The writer may well have meant that our earthly problems are put into perspective when we look to Jesus, but it can appear to mean that our nonreligious experiences should be dimmed. This can lead people to wonder why God bothered to create the physical world and its enjoyments if we can only be truly fulfilled by escaping them.

If we believe that this world is unreal, if our wish is that the things of this life should "grow strangely dim," then we have developed a dualistic view of life. We are not seeing the important division as that which exists between righteousness and evil but between the material and the nonmaterial. With this perspective,





body-based activities such as sport or sex are regarded as inferior to spirit-based activities such as worship and meditation.

We do not need to overtly refer to God in everything we create. Not even every book in the Bible refers to God. Jesus surely didn't mark all his carpentry with a relevant saying, and Paul didn't embroider memory verses on his tents. Christians need wisdom to know when it is appropriate to introduce mention of God or Jesus Christ. There is nothing more disconcerting than when an engaging piece of work suddenly lurches into explicit theology without any apparent connection. It's as if the author has discharged a responsibility rather than reached a natural conclusion.

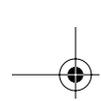
Some art needs to stick to its subject and not attempt any leaps of logic in order to provide a message. A song about an argument with a friend may be best left as a song about an argument with a friend. Attempts to force resolutions, especially spiritual resolutions, can seem unnatural. Even life as experienced by a Christian isn't like that. We go to a wedding feast but no water is turned to wine. We go fishing but no one comes and points out the best place to fish.

If we are cautious about how and when we introduce God by name, his appearance will have an impact that it loses if scattered through almost everything we do. Some of the most powerful Christian work I have encountered has featured God as a powerful yet unnamed presence, and more powerful for being unnamed. Into this category I would put songs like Paul Stookey's "Hymn," written for a wedding service, and Bob Dylan's "Every Grain of Sand," which refers only to "the master's hand."

We needn't write only about the good and uplifting things of life. Christian painting doesn't have to be restricted to landscapes and portraits of puppy dogs. Christian music shouldn't feel compelled to offer comfort and sweet melodies. Christian novels shouldn't always be about bad people who convert or converted people who triumph over adversity. To portray the world as a rose garden can be as misleading as portraying it as a cesspool.

Any honest reflection on life will deal with imperfection. The dif-





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ference in a Christian artist's work should be that the depraved will seem depraved, the ugly will seem ugly. Christians should be distinguished from those who suggest that depravity is normal or that evil is good. A Christian photographer would want to record beauty but would also want to draw attention to ugliness and brutality in a way that would remind us that these conditions are unnatural.

The southern novelist and short-story writer Flannery O'Connor was a brilliant exponent of the world as it is. Her fiction is full of grotesque characters and bizarre situations, but she argued that it was because of, rather than in spite of, her Christian beliefs that she wrote like this. She felt that knowing that perfection existed allowed her to see imperfection for what it really was.

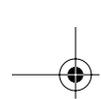
My own feeling is that writers who see by the light of their Christian faith will have, in these times, the sharpest eyes for the grotesque, for the perverse, and for the unacceptable. . . . Redemption is meaningless unless there is a cause for it in the actual life we live, and for the last few centuries there has been operating in our culture the secular belief that there is no such cause.⁵

Dualism has deep historic roots. Christianity (not the Bible) inherited it from the philosophy of Plato, but it was probably in existence long before him. Plato's belief was that the body and its desires are an encumbrance. Relief could only come at death when the body released the soul.

I reckon we make the nearest approach to knowledge when we have the least possible intercourse or communion with the body, and are not surfeited with the bodily nature, but keep ourselves pure until the hour when God himself is pleased to release us and thus having got rid of the foolishness of the body we shall be pure and hold converse with the pure, and know of ourselves the clear light everywhere, which is no other than the light of truth.⁶

Paul, in his letters, refers to the battle between the "spirit" and the "flesh" which has often been interpreted as a conflict between a





higher and lower nature with the Christian life being spent taming physical desires so that spiritual desires can take over control. Not surprisingly, this view gave rise to complex techniques for beating the lower nature into submission: abstinence, fasting, monasticism, and even flagellation and mutilation.

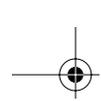
Yet Paul was not a Platonist. In talking about the “flesh” and the “spirit” he was distinguishing between desires controlled by God and those that aren’t. Paul recognized that most sins are initiated by an appeal to the senses. The original temptation was to Eve’s sight and taste. But tongues and eyes are not bad things. When Paul talks about putting to death “the old self” he is not suggesting that we are to mortify our five senses but to ensure that they are controlled by a mind which is undergoing constant renewal.

People with renewed minds are not to approach life as if sensually numbed, as though they can’t wait to escape into the next life. If anything they should approach it with new vigor and increased understanding. My experience of balanced Christians has been that they enjoy life so much more than the average person. Heaven to them doesn’t mark a complete break with earthly experience but an intensification of all that is good about it with the addition of unimagined new dimensions.

Our supreme example is Jesus Christ. God came to earth in human form and yet didn’t confine himself to what a religious Jew of the time would have considered to be the sacred area of life. He didn’t sit in the temple or wear priestly clothing. He lived alongside ordinary people, went for walks, ate and drank with sinners, built furniture, slept, wept, relaxed, cared for his mother, sailed in boats, and attended social functions.

In fact, the criticism of the Pharisees and Sadducees was that he wasn’t religious enough; he was too secular. But the lesson was that God wasn’t interested only in the narrow sphere of religious experience. He was concerned with the totality of life and showed his approval by living it. Each time Christ performed a human activity, he was blessing it.





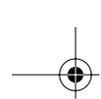
Art, it must be remembered, has intrinsic value. A Christian doctor doesn't normally feel the need to justify the medical profession even though it often provides little opportunity for presentations of the gospel. Medicine, we all realize, is on God's side simply by relieving pain, healing damaged bodies, fighting disease and extending lives. It is for life and against death. It is for preservation and against decay. It attempts to limit the effects of the Fall. Jesus practiced healing and not always, from what we can determine, in order that those that were healed would also be saved.

In a similar way, the arts can act on God's side by preserving beauty and drawing out the highest achievements capable by humans. The arts can help preserve and renew cultures and this is a good thing in itself. This must bring God pleasure. The arts can sharpen the vision, quicken the intellect, preserve the memory, activate the conscience, enhance the understanding and refresh the language. Poetry, for example, is a useful antidote for the poison of sloganeering, spin and double talk. It helps words retain their meaning because it acknowledges that corrupt language results in corrupt thinking. If the best words can no longer be said, the best ideas can no longer be thought. "If a nation's literature declines," said Ezra Pound, "the nation atrophies and decays."

The visual arts help us to see with greater clarity. They draw our attention to overlooked details. They restore our sense of amazement. Dance resensitizes us to the grace of movement. Fiction provides us with unique access to other minds, cultures and periods of history. Music supplies us with hints of the transcendent. It is surely significant that art suffers when cultures decline. The Old Testament often gives us the haunting image of the cessation of music and singing when a civilization crumbles.

Sometimes doctors choose to become missionary doctors, but not usually because they feel that medicine is only justified when harnessed to a gospel program. Similarly, there are many artists who choose to create obviously religious art, and hopefully they too aren't doing so because they feel that their work would otherwise be





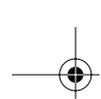
worthless. Just as some people would rather compose cantatas than light orchestral pieces, they would rather paint biblical scenes than self-portraits. The church requires their talent. We cannot criticize the standard of worship songs, Sunday school literature or youth fellowship drama if we don't encourage writers and artists to do their best in these areas.

The problem comes when artists who could be contributing to the discussion taking place in the mainstream arts are hidden away in the church, and artists who should be sticking to the church are deluded into thinking that they are going to transform contemporary culture. I have known people who thought they were Christian Bruce Springsteens but were in fact much better suited to be worship leaders and writers of contemporary hymns. At the same time, I've known singers and songwriters who I thought could have competed with the giants of rock who have fallen back on the comfort zone of the Christian art and entertainment scene.

Then there are some artists, not too many, who manage to create overt Christian art that appeals outside of the church. Gerard Manley Hopkins did so with his poetry and Thomas Merton with his essays, journals and spiritual books. John Tavener is one of the most celebrated classical composers in the world today, and almost all of his work is unapologetically inspired by his exploration of Christian thought through the Greek Orthodox Church. R. S. Thomas, one of the greatest Welsh poets of the twentieth century (he died in September 2000), was also a clergyman, and his poetry was dominated by his personal wrestling with God. Howard Finster, the folk artist from Alabama whose work has decorated the covers of albums by REM and Talking Heads, emblazons his work with Bible texts and spiritual advice.

Contemporary artists not working within a church culture who make spiritual experience the dominant theme of their work are extremely rare. They are usually tenacious and slightly eccentric. Because there is no overlap of experience with the secular mind, what they do has to succeed because it is so powerful that even





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those unbelievers are overwhelmed. A writer in the *London Times*, commenting on Tavener's work recently, wrote, "One may dissent from Tavener's theology and dislike its emotive centrality in his work, but there is always his formal sense to consider. Despite his belief that his religious music must be as limpid and ego-less as an Eden stream, he never lets go of a certain artistic cunning." When the rock critic Greil Marcus reviewed *Belle*, an album by the singer turned preacher Al Green, he remarked that the record carried "a sense of liberation and purpose deep enough to make the sinner envy the saved."

In one of the last interviews he gave, R. S. Thomas was musing on one of the problems that concerns every artist who is a Christian. How do we talk about God in a godless world? How can we discuss the basics of Christian theology when the words and symbols traditionally used to do so have lost their currency? For the answers to such questions, we should turn to the Bible.

