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Religiously (Un)musical, Musically (Un)religious

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ABSTRACT

The expression “religiously unmusical” has become a catchphrase for many, since it was introduced by Max Weber a century ago. In this paper the question is asked whether the concepts of religiosity and musicality can be used to throw light on each other. A philosophical anthropology inspired by fundamental ontology is the basis for the investigation. It is concluded that viewing religiosity in the light of musicality can be fruitful in order to interpret and conceptualize religious phenomena as they appear in our world today. And, vice versa, a religious terminology can be fruitfully used to characterise much of what happens in the music scene.

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Music has been an important aspect of religious expressions and use in rituals, ceremonies and festivals all over the world and all through history. In this paper, I will attempt to explore another way of relating religion to music than just seeing music as an expression and manifestation of religious beliefs and sentiments. There seem to be close proximities between religion and music, even when they are considered separately. Both show us something about the human condition, they unleash imagination, foster creativity, and give concrete expression to intellectual and emotional vision. Religiosity and musicality may have something in common that deserves to be considered.

My interest in this question is due to the fact that we live at a time when, in my view, our understanding of religion and religiosity needs to become more nuanced. Why were the secularization theses of Max Weber, Peter Berger and others not realized? I think that an answer to that question can partly be found if we try to understand religion in terms of the existential importance it has in many people’s lives. When it comes to music, not many would consider reductionist or functionalist theories when trying to explain the phenomenon. Does it actually need explanation at all? It is often simply taken for granted that music is of great existential importance for a lot of people, and that musicality is something that individuals are endowed with in varying degrees.

Weber foresaw a coming disenchantment of the world caused by modern rationalism and that religion would eventually disappear. Berger saw modernization as a process whereby society and culture would be released from the domination of religious institutions and symbols. However, religion has not disappeared, even if the interest in organized religion in Europe has decreased. The persistence of religion may indicate that religion is something more than an explanation of the world, or a way of morally regulating our lives or a refuge for the unfortunate. Science, rational ethics, utilitarianism and the welfare state have fulfilled many of these functions, but religion remains. What if we look at religiosity as an aptitude or talent, akin to musicality?

Both Max Weber and Richard Rorty have designated themselves “religiously unmusical”. And Jürgen Habermas has termed himself “tone-deaf in the religious sphere”. None of these thinkers are against religion as such. They even view some kinds of religiousness as good or even necessary for society. But they have no personal inclination for religion.

The expression “religiously unmusical” obviously brings to the fore the query concerning what it means to be religiously musical and, in short, what it means to be religious. Can the analogy to music throw light on the concept of religion? And, vice versa, can religion help us understand music? What could it mean to be musically religious? As a philosopher of religion I am mainly interested in the first of these questions. However, I will give some thoughts also to the second.

The expression “religiously unmusical” is most often referred to as having originated with Weber, who 1909 wrote in a letter:

It is true that I am absolutely unmusical religiously and have no need or ability to erect any psychic edifices of a religious character within me. But a thorough self-examination has told me that I am neither antireligious *nor irreligious* (Svatos, 1998, p.548, Svatos’ emphasis).

Weber’s widow, Marianne Schnitger Weber, writes in her biography of Weber that he “always preserved a profound reverence for the Gospel and genuine Christian religiosity”. And Weber was also personally engaged in Christian social activity. So he makes a clear distinction between being religiously unmusical and being irreligious. Weber was certainly not contemptuous of religion (Svatos, 1998, p.548).

When he used the expression religiously unmusical he did not only refer to himself but also to the general modern layman, who due to the disenchantment of the world also had become religiously unmusical. The lack of religious musicality was for Weber a cultural condition afflicting the majority, who would have been religious believers in a previous epoch but were not in the present.

According to Peter Gosh it is possible that Weber borrowed the analogy between religiosity and musicality from William James. James viewed religiosity as a natural human aptitude that could not be challenged by rationality. He considered the atheistic or “rationalistic” attitude to be a “psychophysical deficiency, like being tone-deaf” (Ghosh 2008, p. 246).

Since musicality does not change with historical epochs, Weber's relating religiosity to musicality may seem quite farfetched when he claims that the majority has become religiously unmusical in the modern epoch. However, religiosity has survived modernity, partly in the form of individualistic spirituality, and therefore James' account may have proven itself to be more accurate, i.e. to view religiosity as an individual aptitude. This is, of course, not wholly contrary to Weber's, since he wrote that he has no ability to erect any psychic edifices of a religious character within himself.

When it comes to Rorty, apart from terming himself religiously unmusical, he also began calling himself an anticlericalist in the latter part of his life. He was clearly much more critical towards institutionalized religion than Weber was, but he was not an atheist. After the end of metaphysics and foundationalism and the loss of faith in reason, he did not consider the philosopher to have an advantage over the religious believer. He was quite favourable towards a religiosity that had rejected the so-called ontotheological tradition, like the religiosity of Gianni Vattimo, with whom he found common ground expressed in the book *The Future of Religion* (2005).

When Rorty terms himself religiously unmusical, he is referring to his non-religious upbringing. Of course, our upbringing is of importance in these matters. Extending the parallel to music, it is likely that someone brought up in a musical family may early detect her musicality and devote her life to music. However, it is also possible that someone without musical background later in life may detect her musical talent. I think the same is true with religion. Furthermore, we have the, albeit very rare, phenomenon of infant prodigy, when children at a very young age display, for example, their extraordinary talent for music or their saintly character. Although our social conditioning has an important role to play, it is obviously not the whole story. One can conclude, therefore, that Rorty by using the expression religiously unmusical did not mean that religiosity is wholly dependent on upbringing and social conditioning. Robert Gradmann seems to get it right when he claims that "religiosity to a high degree is a matter of innate talent, but also of religious education" (Henkel, 2011, p.390). Note how easily "religiosity" and "religious" could be exchanged for "musicality" and "musical" in this sentence.

Jürgen Habermas termed himself religiously "tone deaf" in a conversation with Joseph Ratzinger (Habermas and Ratzinger, 2005, p.11). He was previously an adherent to thoroughgoing secularism but has recently changed his view. In his article "Religion in the Public Sphere" (Habermas 2006), as well as in other recent publications, is he inviting religion to the domain of public *communicative action*, although he conceives of a translation of religious vocabulary into secular as a possible and necessary requirement.

Habermas has developed an idea where he wants to give religion a positive role. He wants to come to terms with the paradox of modern rationality. On the one hand rationality makes life more efficient. On the other hand the efficient systems tend to encroach on life worlds, which result in loss of meaning and a breakdown in cultural reproduction. Other problems that modern secular rationality has difficulty coming to terms with are climate changes and environmental catastrophes as well as increasing economic

gulfs between rich and poor. Habermas sees in religion a possible motivating force; religions may be needed to restore meaning, hope, and solidarity in secular society.

However, religious truth claims can, according to Habermas, be judged only within the particular religious context in which they are expressed. In order for them to enter into the public sphere they have to be translated, somehow or other. I think that the question of how such translation process could be possible can be illuminated by viewing religiosity in the light of musicality and considering how musical experience is conceptualized and presented in the public sphere.

Habermas' contextualization of religious truth claims is in line with Rorty's rejection of metaphysics and foundationalism and it brings to bear upon the question how we should conceive of religion and religiosity in a religiously plural world. The general understanding of religiosity in modern times is very much influenced by a concept of religion that was developed at a specific time in history and within a specific Christian setting. In his groundbreaking work *The Meaning and End of Religion* (1963), Wilfred Cantwell Smith writes that the term *religio* originally referred to practices and attitude. A decisive change in the use of the term appeared during the seventeenth century with the development of new ways of looking at the world and a propositional conception of truth. *Religio* became a system of ideas in which the person of faith was involved and not the personal attitude of faith itself. A religion became a set of doctrines and the truth of religion became the truth of doctrines. An ideal conception of truth (genuine religion) was replaced by a logical one (true religion). Thus there was a transition from a personal orientation to a "depersonalized intellectual systematization" (Smith, 1963, pp.23–43). This modern concept of religion also influenced the Western development of the concept of world religions by which religious phenomena worldwide were interpreted. The basic question to ask about religious people around the world became: What do they believe? According to Smith, this gave a distorting picture:

I have become strongly convinced that the vitality of personal faith, on the one hand, and, on the other hand (quite separately), progress in understanding – even at the academic level of the traditions of other people throughout history and throughout the world, are both seriously blocked by our attempt to conceptualize what is involved in each case in terms of (a) religion (Smith, 1963, p.50).

Richard King writes that the concept of religion is a "product of the culturally specific discursive processes of Christian history in the West" (King, 2002, p.40). King is like Smith critical to the modern concept of religion and the way it has distorted understanding of religious phenomena worldwide. And many have, from various angles of vision, joined in the critic (see for example: Asad, 1993; Balagangadhara, 1994; Fitzgerald, 2000; and Masuzawa, 2005).

The modern concept of religion tend to view religions as mutually exclusive belief systems, which confuses the fact that for example

a single Chinese may be and usually is a 'Confucian', a 'Buddhist' *and* a 'Taoist' ... at the same time. The perplexity arises not from something confused or bizarre about China so much as from the conceptualization of religious systems, which is brought to bear but is evidently inappropriate (Smith, 1963, pp.67–68).

The phenomenon of so called multiple religious belongings has recently been detected also in the West (Phan, 2003 and Cornille, 2002).

What I want to say with these examples concerning the concept of religion is that viewing religiosity in the light of musicality may help us develop a conception of religion that is more adequate when investigating religious phenomena as they manifest themselves empirically. Instead of trying to find out whether persons who involve various different religious narratives, practices and symbols in their religious life are *real* Christians or Buddhists, for example, one could investigate what kind of religiosity is involved and how it is expressed. This would also be a way to come to terms with the question of authenticity. Generally so-called mixing of religions is considered inauthentic. But if we rid ourselves of the holistic concept of religion, where do we stand then? Then the religious person who draws from different traditions could be seen as experiential rather than inauthentic. Parallel to a person engaged in experiential musical activity.

I will give an example of how one can associate religiosity to musicality or more broadly to artistic aptitude or talent. The piece of music seems to affect some persons more than others and open for them meaningful life worlds with strong existential importance. This is true both for the performer and receiver. Some may say "I cannot live without music" or "music is my religion". And there also follows a creative aspect, which is not only a need but also a possibility to enrich life. It is something subjective, but also intersubjective, since it can be conceptualized and shared. This conceptualization and sharing may also foster and increase the experience.

Similarly a religiously inclined person may find that religious expressions, narratives, rituals, and symbols, affect her in such a way that she cannot help but experience a correspondence with her own existential disposition; the narrative becomes existentially true and opens for her a meaningful form of life to enter into, to expand, and to be transformed by. Of course, there are important differences. The musical world is mainly aesthetic, but sometimes one also speaks about the truth in music (see, for example Levinson 1981). The religious form of life does often have ethical and soteriological aspects that may be absent in the musical.

What would happen if we relate this way of thinking about religiosity as akin to musicality to Habermas' idea of letting religious concerns enter the public sphere and become part of what he terms communicative action? Then, among other possible effects, for example interreligious dialogue could merge into public debate and become a creative activity where conceptualizing activity in terms of "translating" religious concerns and

expressions to more publicly understandable ones could take place. I see here parallels to what is taking place in public critique of art and music, which is quite different from much of the present critic of religion, where religion is misunderstood as expressing universally understandable truth claims about an objective reality. I do not deny that some such critique is relevant when directed to a specific kind of religiosity. However, I think we have moved beyond the conflict between science and religion, which is a phenomenon that took place in the West at a certain time in history. The conflict between science and religion in modern culture was caused by a disagreement about foundations, about what guarantees certainty, and about what should be considered the secure ground. Today we are in a situation where the foundationalism itself is being questioned, and this has consequences for how we understand both science and religion.

I consider this way of thinking about religion as relevant today, when so many reject institutionalized religion and say that they are not religious, but spiritual, or interested in spirituality. One could say that such persons are “religiously musical” but they do not seem to like the “music” played by religious institutions, or maybe the institutions themselves have become religiously tone deaf in their view.

We generally do not ask the question where music comes from, if it exists in a metaphysical heaven, or in a world of forms. Although the question may be interesting for some, it cannot be answered. And our ability to appreciate music is not dependent on whether music exists independently of human beings or not. What we can say is that music affects human beings and makes possible creativity and opens up, for some more than others, existentially important forms of life.

In these post-metaphysical times, when many of us have rejected ontotheology and foundationalism, we may be able to appreciate the idea that religious truth claims about God or an Ultimate reality only have meaning subjectively or intersubjectively in a certain context and that there is no way of objectively determine the mode of being of God or the mode of being of “the religious” or “the sacred”.

If we turn away from metaphysical questions and focus on the existential disposition of the religious subject, an interesting perspective will open up when it comes to understanding religiosity. To illustrate what I mean, I will quote Frederick Streng, who has observed that anyone talking about the nature of reality does not stand outside of that to which they refer, but stands within it (Streng, 1995, p.205). After comparing three different structures of what Streng calls ultimate transformation – one Christian (represented by Paul Tillich), one Daoist (represented by Hellmut Wilhelm) and one Buddhist (represented by Keiji Nishitani) – Streng concludes:

In the first case [Tillich] we saw that the sense of reality assumed the expectation of essences whereby life is given value. Life has a reason and meaning through the categorization of what ‘is’. The sense of reality in the second case [Wilhelm] focused on a holistic grasp of principles

which themselves were not abstractions of essences but intuitions of moving forces within a concrete situation where a person lived. In the final expression [Nishitani], regarding the field of emptiness, the sense of reality is much more a state of consciousness or an attitude whose chief quality is found in the paradoxical expression that one knows 'selfhood' when one is aware of the no-self. These formulations of ultimate reality, then, are not seen as 'mere speculation' or systems of verbal abstraction. Rather, the formulations themselves become ontological activities whereby a person's sense of value and reality are given form and content.

We may conclude, therefore, that the nature of reality is manifested as much in the process of knowing and valuing it as in the formulations that specify it. In this sense, a cross-cultural philosophy of religion will be well served by looking beyond the labels of systems of ideas to the existential importance that they have in disclosing the truth about life. (Streng 1995, pp. 222–3)

Streng here employs a conception of truth that is not propositional truth claims about an ultimate reality but an existential transformative truth experience.

If we apply Heidegger's ideas developed in what he calls fundamental ontology, that we are attuned to existence in different ways that determine how we understand our life worlds and act in them (Heidegger, 1996, pp.123–144), then we will understand that it is not one worldview that determines our actions, but our existential disposition and moods that we are tuned into that determine how we act in, experience and conceptualize our various life worlds.

Since the time of Heidegger it has been common to distinguish between two different kinds of inquiries. One is the ontic, which deals with different kinds of beings or entities in their totality of causal connectedness. The other is the ontological, which investigates the being of these entities, for example what it *means to be* a human being, the manner or way it shows itself or comes to presence. Now, if religious phenomena are investigated under the concept of religion in relation to systems of beliefs, as an ontic inquiry, then certain consequences follow. The first question asked is: "What do they believe?" But an ontological inquiry will give us another kind of knowledge. It will disclose varieties of ways of being religious, where the one characterized by propositional truth claims is only one.

So far I have considered how the concepts of music and musicality can be used to throw light on the concepts of religion and religiosity. Now I would like to give some thoughts to the opposite: How might the concepts of religion and religiosity illuminate the concepts of music and musicality? I am not a musicologist but a philosopher of religion, so this will be just some preliminary considerations from my side. Others may have a lot more to say on the subject as for example the ethnomusicologist Carol M. Babiracki who in religion finds a way to understand music:

Musical performance's magical, malleable, polysemic power can both engender understanding and confound it. It is no wonder, then, that ethnomusicologists have turned to religion, considering it to be as important to understanding music as music is to understanding religion (Babiracki, 2001).

Sometimes music, and other forms art, is seen as a kind of revelation. Music transmits an experience of something of great existential importance that would otherwise remain hidden. The composer or musician becomes someone akin to a priest or prophet. Johann Sebastian Bach is a good example of this in that he goes under the epithet of "The Fifth Evangelist". And many more examples could be given.

It has not been uncommon in history to view music as representing the beautiful and sublime. Music has also been a powerful vehicle to transmit religious notions and emotions. Religion and music have certainly nourished each other. However, music has also all through history been used to oppose religion. A very conspicuous phenomenon at the present time is so called Black Metal, which is very often associated with Satanism, a religion that is an anti-religion. Just to mention one interesting phenomenon, the Swedish Black Metal group Watain is ritually practicing what they call Chaos-Gnosticism, which views chaos as the original, desired state where creativity can flourish. Christianity with its idea of cosmos has in that understanding hampered human creativity. Interestingly, Weber did consider mysticism as celebrating chaos over cosmos, due to its irrational strand (Ghosh, 2008, p.247).

When Max Weber described modernity as a form of disenchantment, he was referring to the fact that the rational, mechanistic worldview had replaced a religious one. This may be true, but I would like to claim that thinking in terms of worldviews and religions is itself disenchanting. A conceptualizing activity that takes its point of departure in the question of what it means to be human may make visible phenomena that hitherto have been covered over by crude and misleading concepts. What I have suggested here are just some possible preliminary steps towards re-enchantment.

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