

Cool Christians

by [Kenneth Francis](#) (November 2023)



The Last Supper, Andre Derain, 1911

Although Christianity has been making a slow comeback with intellectual bloggers and podcasters in the last two years, as well as a massive surge in interest in the Latin Mass, being a famous Christian actor, especially in entertainment, has been looked upon as uncool by the theologically illiterate. So, it might come as a surprise that some famous super-cool people in the Arts were Christians, despite fans being unaware of their spiritual views.

Arguably the most famous, cool Pop Artist icon of the 20th century was Andy Warhol. He was openly gay, allegedly celibate, and, surprisingly, Catholic. In her book, *The Religious Art of Andy Warhol*, Jane Daggett Dillenberger wrote that Warhol remained celibate, a claim revealed by his own declaration of virginity and at his eulogy, where it was recalled that "as a youth he was withdrawn and reclusive, devout and celibate, and beneath the disingenuous mask that is how he at the heart remained."

He deliberately concealed who he was to the public, famously answering questions with, "uh, no" or "uh, yes", and he certainly concealed the fact that he wore a cross on a chain around his neck, carried with him a missal and Rosary beads, and volunteered at the soup kitchen at the Church of Heavenly Rest in New York, according to Dillenberger.

When thinking of Warhol and the kooky, weird people he hung out with, it's hard to imagine he went to Mass, often to daily Mass, sitting at the back of the church, unnoticed by nearly all his fans, awkwardly embarrassed; and he also financed his nephew's studies for the priesthood and, according to his eulogy, was responsible for at least one person's conversion to the Catholic faith.

However, despite his Catholic faith, his celibacy was "undermined by his role in making art-porn," according to catechist Thomas L McDonald. He added: "This certainly gave him a thrill, which is already sexual sin. Certainly, celibacy is honorable if indeed Warhol was a celibate gay man, but there's something rather twisted in a person who holds out an ideal of sexual morality for himself while encouraging others in their debauchery ... But there is, indeed, something admirable and unlikely in the fact that the battle even took place."

The artist Brian Sherwin said that people who have specific religious views, those that acknowledge the Christian concept of God, are often mocked within the context of the

contemporary mainstream art world, be it in the form of responses during debate about art or in the theme of specific art exhibits, yet you will find very few within the mainstream art world who openly mock the legacy of Andy Warhol.

He added: "In fact, one could suggest that if the art world had a god, he or she would take the appearance of Andy. Humour aside, faith was obviously important to Warhol and clearly influenced some of his art."

Warhol died in his sleep of post-operative gallbladder complications in New York City on February 22, 1987. His body was taken back to Pittsburgh by his brothers for a Christian burial. During the wake, in an open coffin, Warhol was dressed in a black suit, shirt and tie, and sunglasses. He was also holding a small prayer book.

Another surprise Catholic (though some would say alleged Catholic) was the writer Jack Kerouac, who was viewed as the 'king of cool' of hipster counterculture. The writer Greg Sorrell says of Kerouac: "He was a deeply religious, lifelong Republican, and he loathed the counterculture that arose in response to his writing. But he was also a broken and remorseful alcoholic undeserving of his role as a moralist, and he freely admitted it ..."

In October 1969, when Kerouac collapsed due to alcohol consumption, he was rushed to St. Anthony's hospital; however, he died in hospital, drowning in his own blood. His body was taken back home to St. Jean Baptiste Cathedral in Lowell. There his body lay in the coffin wearing a jacket and bow tie, while in his hand he held a Rosary.

Then there was movie icon, Steve McQueen. McQueen never spoke much about his religious beliefs during his Hollywood days, but when he distanced himself from Tinsel Town, he surprised many of his closest circle of friends by his conversion. Before he contracted cancer, he began showing interest in

Christianity and wanted to preach it, according to his friends and loved ones.

In his book, *Steve McQueen: The Salvation of an American Icon*, pastor Greg Laurie wrote about a hospital staff member who recalled and taped words from Hollywood's coolest actor of all times while he was in hospital. Her name was Teena Valentino, a metabolic technician who took care of McQueen 24/7 during the last 99 days of his life. In one of two cassette recordings with her, McQueen said in a prayer:

We thank thee, Lord, for all the kindness and understanding, and Your special way that You reach out to all the staff, the doctors, the nurses, all the people who are helping us be healed in this great, great experiment that we're all part of. And for knowing in their times of anguish that You're here for them, as they are very tired and overworked and need the Lord's love too. And for the patients, all of us who have cancer, in our times of anguish and pain, knowing that the Lord Jesus Christ is there for us. All we need is faith and the ability to reach out and to accept His love, 'cause He is there for us ... Jesus Christ our Saviour. Amen.

And there was another 'cool young dude' who briefly tended to lean towards Christianity during a 1992 tribute concert to Freddie Mercury, a year after the Queen vocalist had died of AIDS. Here, David Bowie provided something extraordinary in pop history. At the end of his set with Queen, he announced that he was going to offer something in a very simple fashion, but "it's the most direct way I can think of doing it," he said. He then lowered himself onto his left knee and, head bowed, began to recite the Lord's Prayer: "Our Father, who art in Heaven ..."

He told audience that, about five minutes before going on stage, 'something just told me to say the Lord's Prayer' as a tribute to both Freddie Mercury, and another friend who was ill with AIDS.

This spontaneous act sounds quite credible, as most of the music industry is diabolical to its core and it was unlikely that Bowie would've acted in a way hostile to a powerful "hand that fed him," both financially and in retaining his worldwide fame. He had his musical reputation to protect. Was it Divine intervention? As for pop singers: In a recent interview in the magazine Premier Christianity, Boyzone's Shane Lynch comments on the existence of the dark side of the music industry saying it is literally Satanic.

Lynch said: "Let me take it straight to God and to the spiritual world. We have the Holy Spirit that guides us and protects us in the name of Christ, but the demonic side of the music industry is very real too. That's how I came to God; through understanding the demonic side ... Lyrically and big players. I've been in rooms—at the top of the top—where albums are prayed over demonically. Music is prayed over demonically that goes out to the radio stations, to the public. When you see that stuff, it's frightening ... Rituals, ceremonies, everything to give light to the devil, to Satan. It's a satanic music industry."

Another alleged surprise Catholic convert who had to deal with his own demons, was the writer Oscar Wilde. Writing in the Catholic Herald, Aaron Taylor wrote that Fr Cuthbert Dunne, the young priest who attended Wilde on his deathbed, kept silent about the controversy for most of his life. But before he died in 1950, mindful of the historical importance of the event, he set down his recollection of it:

[Wilde] made brave efforts to speak, and would even continue for a time trying to talk, though he could not utter articulate words. Indeed, I was fully satisfied that

he understood me when told that I was about to receive him into the Catholic Church and give him the Last Sacraments. From the signs he gave, as well as from his attempted words, I was satisfied as to his full consent. And when I repeated close to his ear the Holy Names, the Acts of Contrition, Faith, Hope and Charity, with acts of humble resignation to the Will of God, he tried all through to say the words after me.

“Fr Dunne visited Wilde several times to comfort him. ‘At these subsequent visits,’ Fr Dunne states, ‘he repeated the prayers with me again and each time received Absolution.’” adds Taylor.

Finally, when it comes to the King of Cool, it’s hard to match philosophy’s slickest icon, Albert Camus (born in French Algeria in 1913). Even though he didn’t regard himself as a philosopher or Existentialist, there is an allegation that a request to be baptized was made by Camus before he died, according to Howard Mumma in his book, *Albert Camus and the Minister*.

Consider the following anecdotal accounts interesting allegations, despite being written by Mumma many years after Camus died; anecdotes that are impossible to verify: While aged in his mid-40s, just a few years before his death, Camus allegedly had a crisis of faith in atheism. Baptised a Catholic, Camus was a theologically challenged atheist, and was fortunate to find liberal Protestant minister, Howard Mumma, from Ohio, a guest minister at the American Church in Paris. Camus began attending the church, giving the false impression he attended to hear the widely admired organist, Marcel Dupré (Camus was acutely aware of his literary “good reputation” as an atheist).

Camus eventually had a conversation with Mumma, and over a few years, they talked about God and faith, according to Mumma.

Eventually, Camus asked to be baptized in private. Mumma paraphrases Camus as saying that something is dreadfully wrong in his life and that he is a disillusioned and exhausted man who has lost faith and hope. Camus said: "To lose one's life is only a little thing. But, to lose the meaning of life, to see our reasoning disappear, is unbearable. It is impossible to live life without meaning." Mumma refused to baptise Camus because he was already baptised as an infant, which is sufficient for a Catholic.

Camus later died in a car crash in 1960, aged 46. One wonders before he died, did he make his peace with God, beg for forgiveness, and was redeemed? Only those who will be redeemed and Heaven-bound will one day know. Although no saint himself, he was repulsed by the depth and breadth of human depravity and malice in a world, but deep down he probably knew he could not justify his indignation. Why? In such a world where, on secular Existentialism, billions of hairless apes habitually physically and/or emotionally hurt one another every hour of every day, there is no such thing as objective morals and duties. Animals are not moral agents. And it is unsurprising that there is nothing cool, or rational, about that.

[Table of Contents](#)

Kenneth Francis is a Contributing Editor at *New English Review*. For the past 30 years, he has worked as an editor in various publications, as well as a university lecturer in journalism. He also holds an MA in Theology and is the author of [The Little Book of God, Mind, Cosmos and Truth](#) (St Pauls Publishing) and, most recently, [The Terror of Existence: From Ecclesiastes to Theatre of the Absurd](#) (with Theodore

Dalrymple) and [Neither Trumpets Nor Violins](#) (with Theodore Dalrymple and Samuel Hux).

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](#)