Culture

Kendrick Lamar performs during halftime of the NFL Super Bowl 59 football game between the Kansas City Chiefs and the Philadelphia Eagles, Sunday, Feb. 9, 2025, in New Orleans. (AP/Matt Slocum)

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Across cultures and centuries, humans have found themselves reaching for ways to understand life's paradoxes and mysteries, to narrate the sacredness present in ordinary struggle. In a world that is violent and frightening, especially for the most vulnerable, what can we learn from the spiritual journey of others?

None of us are the first to go through trials, nor to engage in the struggle of meaning-making. Great theologians, prophets, artists and seers — some of whom lived through incredibly tumultuous periods of history — utilize the language of the mystical as they undergo their spiritual journey. And the greatest among them put the ineffable so perfectly into words that it changes something within us. Like a sacramental or metaphysical motion, a great piece of art can inexplicably transform us.

Two individuals in recent memory with the ability to do this are Kendrick Lamar and Sr. Thea Bowman, the latter deceased and the former still living. Lamar, one of the most successful rappers in the world, and Bowman, a Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration, may not have much in common on the surface, but they both embody a mysticism that calls for action. If you picture mystics as quiet introverts locked away in monasteries, you'll miss the colorful variety of spiritual seers that exists within the long tradition of the Catholic church — and you might just miss Bowman and Lamar.

Using the medium of rap and the medium of theology, respectively, Lamar and Bowman have each ushered something new into the world: a piece of God incarnated in their own unique way.

Sr. Thea Bowman, a Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration, speaks at St. Augustine Church in Washington in 1986. Bowman died in 1990 and her sainthood cause was opened in 2018. She has the title "Servant of God." (OSV News/CNS file/Catholic Standard/Michael Hoyt)

Thea Bowman grew up a Black American in Jim Crow Mississippi. Her grandparents had once been enslaved, and Bowman and her family experienced the crushing weight of segregation and racism. Drawn to Catholicism by the priests, sisters and laypeople at her Catholic school, she converted as a child and eventually discerned a religious vocation. But she didn't disappear from the world; she turned her vocation outward. Bowman demanded that the church face the reality it would rather ignore: it claimed to be universal while treating Black Catholics as outsiders. And Thea Bowman didn't just talk about it — she sang, she wept, she made the hierarchy squirm.

Addressing the USCCB in 1989, amid a severe battle with cancer that would ultimately take her life, Bowman's voice rose in song to the all-male clergy members present: "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child."

Lifting Black Catholic identity into a sacred, prophetic space, she blended African-American cultural memory, song and ritual with a call for justice, inclusion and communal faith. Her words celebrated Black life and faith as a vital force, insisting that the church itself becomes truly Catholic only when it embraces the full presence, gifts and leadership of Black people.

"To be Black and Catholic still though often feels like being a second or third class citizen of the Holy City." When Sr. Thea Bowman spoke, the church had no choice but to listen. She laid bare the hypocrisy of priests and ministers sent to Black parishes without learning Black culture, Black clergy shut out of leadership, decisions about Black Catholics made "in rooms by white people behind closed doors."

Hers was not a polite critique. It was an indictment, delivered in the cadences of Black song and prophetic fire. She stood before the highest powers of the church and declared that their claim to universality was incomplete until it embraced the lives, leadership and laughter of her people. More than three decades later, her words are not history: They are a mirror that the church still resists looking into.

For Bowman, music was mysticism, and mysticism was resistance — a refusal to let violence or racism have the last word.

Kendrick Lamar, too, embodies that refusal in his art. Born in 1987 in Compton, California, Lamar grew up amid the discriminatory practices that included the war on drugs, police brutality and structural poverty. He began rapping as a teenager, carrying the stories of his neighborhood into a genre that had long been a vehicle for survival and protest. Across albums like "good kid," "m.A.A.d city" and "To Pimp a Butterfly," he weaves together autobiography, ancestral memory and biblical imagery into songs that function like modern psalms: lament and rage bending toward redemption.

The world recognized this prophetic edge in 2018 when Lamar became the first rapper to win the Pulitzer Prize for Music, awarded for the album "DAMN." His track "Alright" became a rallying cry in the Black Lives Matter movement. In other songs, he indicts America's racial sins with Old Testament fury, wrestles with temptation and salvation like St. Augustine, and consecrates Black joy as holy survival.

When he took the stage at the 2025 Super Bowl halftime show, with President Donald Trump in the audience, Lamar declared, "The revolution about to be televised. You picked the right time, but the wrong guy," signaling that the spectacle itself could not contain his message. The stage became a symbolic game board, referencing the "rules" of American society (a game rigged by oppression, surveillance and systemic violence), but Lamar navigated it with the skill and authority of a prophet, moving through choreography, lyrics and visuals with the wisdom of generations before him.

Black dancers formed the American flag, while lyrics like "40 acres and a mule" illustrated the systemic injustice perpetrated against the Black community. When the set transformed to evoke a prison yard, it called to mind the for-profit prison system and the mass incarceration of Black people. The performance honored ancestors while proclaiming that Black life, memory and resistance are central, holy and transformative.

Like Bowman singing "We Shall Overcome" to a room of predominately white male bishops, Lamar sanctified public space, insisting that the mystical power of Black lineage and solidarity can proclaim justice even in a world designed to deny it. In the months since, the echoes of this prophetic performance have rippled across American society in more ways than one, a reminder that the mystical is not quiet or private but alive wherever justice is demanded.

Kendrick Lamar and Sr. Thea Bowman are united in their insistence on carrying the spiritual journey into public spaces. In the face of systemic violence, exclusion and the erasure of Black lives and traditions, they model what it means to transform suffering into prophetic witness, turning memory, ritual and creativity into acts of survival and revelation. For the mystical is not confined to cloisters or quiet meditation, but lives in the streets, the stage and the pulpit; wherever the sacred intersects with the struggle for justice.

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