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Listening as Religious Practice (Part One): Exploring Quantative Data from an Empirical Study of the Cultural Habits of Music Fans

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ABSTRACT  This article explores and reflects upon the role that music consumption may be playing in the flexible field of cultural expression, identity formation, and meaning-making activity in the West, as overt commitment to organised religion continues to decline and prove fragile. Using quantitative data from a 2009–2010 study of 231 music users, the authors locate and analyse the respondents’ declarations about their listening practices in relation to their other socio-cultural habits and life-commitments. The article explores the genres and themes of music listened to, the means by which the music is accessed, the frequency of listening, and the scale and nature of non-musical commitments. The significance of differences between replies of male and female respondents and between replies of self-identified religious and non-religious respondents is also considered. The article concludes that, while listening habits differ only slightly between religious and non-religious respondents, there are differences in three significant respects: music use with respect to political self-expression; access of ‘life-worlds’/the narratives that people live by; the frequency and technological format of listening.

Locating Music Use within Contemporary Practice

As increasing numbers of people in many Western societies no longer identify with or participate in traditional religious beliefs and activities, sources and forms ‘of meaning and value beyond traditional forms of institutional religion’ (Lynch, “Public” 244) have long since begun to attract greater scholarly attention (e.g. Lyden; Heelas et al.; Butler Bass 76–83). Linda Woodhead (“Mind”) argues that the dramatic change in religious practice over the past 30 years is so significant that it should be called a ‘de-reformation of religion’:

For most people, religion has ceased to be a matter of belonging to a clerically led community, affirming unchanging dogma, participating in prescribed rituals, and holding conservative social attitudes. It’s transformed into something else.

Commenting further, when reviewing the findings of the £12m Religion and Society research programme of the AHRC/ESRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council/Economic and Social Research Council), Woodhead (“British”) remarked:
We’ve got to stop talking as if religions are packages of unchanging conservative dogmas, rituals and values. They are for a few people but not for most. The majority are a bit religious and interested in exploring things for themselves. They want religion to give meaning to their lives. They don’t want to give their lives to a religious system.

Alongside the changes to religion itself, the challenge of making sense of the alternatives is clear. Martyn Percy’s observation (194) that “There can be no question that secularisation and consumer culture presents [sic] a profound problem for the churches. Malls compete with cathedrals for people, space and attention. Leisure and shopping compete with worship” is followed up with the recognition that “especially individually-centred, therapeutically-attuned forms of spirituality” result. Some have argued that this change is particularly noticeable in Europe but less so in the rest of the world (Davie). However, data increasingly suggest that a similar ‘de-reformation’ is taking place in the United States. Diana Butler Bass draws upon the language of The Great Awakening to speak of ‘a new spiritual awakening’ affecting the religious landscape of the US. She contends that, following an evangelical revival during the 1970s, the US is now

cath up in the throes of a spiritual awakening, a period of sustained religious and political transformation during which our ways of seeing the world, understanding ourselves, and expressing faith are being, to borrow a phrase, ‘born again’. (Butler Bass 5; cf. Roberts)

In her analysis, this transformation extends beyond Christianity and other faiths into wider Western culture, a claim echoed in the works of other scholars and cultural observers (Taylor 100).

This being so, there has for some time been a need to explore in more detail among actual participants (be that in religion or its allied activities) the many different ways in which religious alternatives take shape in Western culture. At a time when religion and spirituality are often sharply distinguished, the ways in which cultural practices contribute implicitly or explicitly to emerging forms of spirituality merit consideration. Heelas et al. (Spiritual Revolution), Lynn Schofield Clark (From Angels to Aliens), Gordon Lynch (Between Sacred and Profane, The New Spirituality), and Heelas (Spiritualities of Life) are examples of initial enquiries in this field. Sociological accounts of such developments are important, inter-disciplinary investigations still more so. While religion scholars and theologians will look for what is ‘religion-like’ and explicitly or implicitly theological, sociologists rightly press for caution, asking whether participants themselves see their practices in religious terms. Conversely, while sociologists and social psychologists note and research religion-like practices and offer accounts and explanations, scholars of religion and theology urge that their relatedness to religion and the explanatory power of religious and theological frameworks should not be overlooked.

Our purpose in this article is to explore one such channel of alternative spirituality. Among the many resources used in the West today for coping with, and structuring, everyday life, the arts are clearly an alternative to religion for many, even feeding directly creatively into religious practice (Wuthnow). Within the arts, use of music is a common and vital resource (Sylvan; Lynch, “Role”; Marsh and Roberts, “Soundtracks”). It was doubtless
always thus: people have long sung songs and drawn (and looked at) pictures as an accompaniment—and in part as an interpretation—of human life (Bellah 24–7; Levitin). Robert Bellah sees rhythm as the foundation of human sociality, since it “is the basis of group rituals that can mimetically define group identity and the roles of individuals within the group” (127). Furthermore, ours is the only genus with the capacity of keeping together in time (ibid 127–8). Thus rhythm, embodied mimetic action, together with the evolution of both music and language (‘musilanguage’) provided the basis for ritualised behaviour and an emerging human sociality. As Iain McGilchrist maintains, music “has a vital way of binding people together, helping them to be aware of shared humanity, shared feelings and experiences, and actively drawing them together” (105).

Relatively new is the explicit detachment of making and appreciating art and music from identifiably religious belief and practice. From the closing decades of the twentieth century onwards, in the West, it seemed right to celebrate the detachment and enjoy the new-found autonomy from religion (especially Christianity). A decade into the twenty-first century, matters look distinctly different. Religion has not gone away—explicitly or implicitly—and is even resurgent in some of its forms, even if also re-defined in more individualistic ways as ‘spirituality’. If we are not quite yet at the point, academically and socio-politically, of welcoming back the closest possible alliance between the arts, the media, and religious meaning-making, there is at least a greater apparent willingness to acknowledge both the de facto functions of the arts and media and the fact that religion may not be redundant. If ‘religion’ is not always an acceptable phenomenon in the secular West, the way music use and other artistic and cultural practices prove spiritually acceptable at least keeps religiosity as a human practice firmly in view.

At the beginning of his recent magnum opus on the place of religion within human evolution, Bellah (drawing upon Durkheim) defines religion as “a system of beliefs and practices relative to the sacred that unite those who adhere to them in a moral community” (1). This configuration of definitions means that we are looking, with respect to music and its uses, for beliefs and practices (what do people think/assume and do?), a sense of the sacred (what matters, in a way, that people have somehow not decided for themselves and which may be difficult to explain?), and some sense of community (whether virtual or real).

We are not suggesting that religious traditions are once more claiming back and seizing control of the arts. We also note that the recognition of greater friendliness between the arts, the media, and religion may be more evident in the media themselves than in the academy, even while both spheres of activity and influence operate in avowedly secular societies across the West (if differently secular, depending on which part of the West is being talked about). Outside of departments actually studying religion, the academic world has arguably been slower to acknowledge the shift towards appreciation of the religion-like quality of much consumption of the arts.

Nevertheless, the task of gathering data about, analysing, and drawing conclusions from evidence of what consumers of the media and the arts are actually doing remains pressing. To undertake the task in a manner which facilitates multi-disciplinary scrutiny does not load the dice in favour of one discipline over another and which gives arts and culture users a chance to
‘have their say’ is notoriously difficult. In this article, we offer the first instalment of one such attempt. Deriving from analysis of data gathered from 231 music fans in the US and the UK in late 2009 and early 2010, the article offers the main findings of the quantitative data collected. Our aim was to gain a clear picture of how music listening fits into people’s life choices and in particular people’s wider consumption of the arts and popular culture. We were especially interested in any notable differences, or unexpected similarities, between those self-identifying as religious and those self-identifying as not religious. We also ventured some more open questions, responses to which were often surprisingly full. Judging by the scale of many of the responses offered to the open questions, music fans were clearly happy to be asked and wanted us to know how important music is for them and how they use it. We shall draw out the findings of those qualitative data in a companion article.

Our 231 respondents came from two main sources: a convenience sample of 103 from three locations and 128 self-selected participants who offered responses in hard or electronic copy through a general appeal. The convenience sample comprised: 36 users of a denominational education and retreat centre in the Southwest of the US, 29 users based around an English Anglican parish in the Midlands, and 38 students from a Liberal Arts College in the Mid-West of the US. Only in the final of those three component groups of the convenience sample might it be said of some respondents that, although users of music, they were not music enthusiasts (i.e. they may not have responded to the questionnaire without peer pressure to do so). The 128 self-selected respondents replied to an online appeal, located on a university web site, but may equally have received news of the survey by electronic means or by word of mouth from many who had themselves completed the questionnaire. The survey was also posted on the volunteer site of a major world development charity. Thus, while the resulting 231 responses cannot be said to be representative of appropriate proportions (per head of population) of religious members of either country providing participants (and 18 respondents were from outside the UK and the US), the range of religious respondents was not pre-selected across the whole group, nor did we control the number of self-identifying religious or non-religious participants. We should also acknowledge that all of our respondents must be considered affluent. As most can easily access the Internet and have resources to expend on concert-going or CDs/downloads, we have had access to the cultural practices of a relatively limited sample of Western citizens.

Of the 231 respondents, 119 called themselves religious, 112 did not. Of the convenience sample of 103, out of which we had hoped to secure a number of religious respondents, 75 self-identified as religious, 28 as not religious. Of the 128 self-selecting respondents, 44 were religious (34%), 84 not (66%). Immediately, it is clear that music fans who profess no religious affiliation, when given a chance, are enthusiastic about talking about their commitment to music. The scale, intensity, and sheer enthusiastic openness of many respondents in the self-selecting group—which will be drawn on more in our later article—was striking.
Accepting the fact that two sub-groups of our convenience sample would contain (in the group based around an English parish) older respondents whose interests were more likely to be in classical or choral music than in popular music—the main focus of our attention—and (in the student group based in the Liberal Arts College of the US Mid-West) younger respondents whose responses might be more immediate and more directly peer-influenced, we were able to sift out a core group of 21–60-year-olds (157 respondents, 68% of our sample) to prevent outliers skewing our evidence. Of these 157, 73 were male, 79 female, with 5 not providing information about their gender; 79 self-identified as religious, 69 as non-religious or (in 9 cases) chose not to answer. In our analysis of the data, we opted to include those who did not reply to this question in the non-religious group.

While we neglect neither the classical and choral interests evident across our whole sample nor the more fashion-led responses of younger respondents, we were conscious that our central questions (what are people doing with popular music today? Are there any notable differences between the use of those identifying as religious or non-religious?) were more likely to be addressed directly within our core group of 157. In our presentation and analysis of the quantitative data in the section “Main Findings” (see below), we therefore draw both on the full sample of 231 (135 UK, 78 US, 18 other) and the core group of 157 (98 UK, 50 US, 9 other) at different points. In addition, in the section “Music Use as a Religious Habit?” (see below), we make use of distinctions between our convenience sample (103) and the self-selected group (128), given that the former provided us with a higher proportion of religious respondents (75 or 73%) and the latter a preponderance of non-religious listeners (84 or 66%).

Main Findings

Types of Music Listened To

In both the full sample and the core group, of an offered list of 16 types of music, rock and pop proved to be the most common forms of music listened to (162 or 70% and 143 or 62% and 122 or 78% and 104 or 66%, respectively). It is not surprising to find an increase in the percentages for the core group, despite the removal of some younger respondents from the full sample, due to the removal also of older classical and choral music listeners. Nevertheless, classical instrumental music still features in both groups as the third most commonly listened-to music (124 or 54% and 82 or 52%). A distinction between religious and non-religious respondents does, however, appear when the detail of the core group is examined. As the third most popular form of music listened to, classical instrumental music is of considerably higher interest (47 out of 79—59%) to religious listeners than to the non-religious respondents among the core group (35 out of 78—45%). For the latter, indie (44 or 56%) and folk (36 or 46%) scored more highly. One surprising feature of the data is the higher proportion of religious respondents within the core group of 157 who listed hip-hop (30 over against 23).

Within the core group, non-religious respondents are slightly more likely than religious respondents to listen to rock, folk, and pop, but are considerably...
more likely to listen to indie music. By contrast, religious respondents are more likely to listen to classical instrumental music, country music (by some margin), jazz, hip-hop, and rap.

Themes within Music Listened to

Respondents were offered nine possible prominent themes in the songs or music to which they listen: war & peace, poverty, justice, religion, sexuality, family, love, spirituality, politics—with the possibility of adding any others in response to an open question. Love was most prominent in both full and core sample (161 or 70% and 106 or 68%). It was chosen as a prominent theme by a slightly higher percentage of religious respondents in each group (73% over against 66% in the full group; 69% over against 65% in the core group). The distinction is small, but may indicate either a more rosy or optimistic view of life on the part of religious listeners or perhaps greater familiarity—through acts of worship—with singing about the theme in public.

A marginally greater percentage of the core group (46% over 44%) listed sexuality as a prominent theme. Not surprisingly, religion and spirituality did not feature heavily as themes for those in either the full sample or the core group who self-identified as non-religious (15% and 18%, respectively), although perhaps the surprise is that it featured at all. One striking difference between religious and non-religious respondents is, however, the stance taken towards justice and politics as themes. In each case, religious respondents revealed themselves to be more comfortable with the theme of justice than politics, while for non-religious respondents, the situation was reversed. Of the core group, 44% of religious respondents indicated that themes of justice were prominent in music they listened to, while this applied to only 31% of non-religious respondents. Among non-religious respondents in the core group, 45% offered politics as a prominent theme, compared with only 28% of religious respondents. We shall suggest possible reasons for this later.

Means of Accessing Music

One of the most significant developments in patterns of music listening in recent years has been the shift from use of hard storage of music (e.g. on CDs) to the collection of music in electronic forms (e.g. on an MP3 player or a laptop computer). This has in turn led to different patterns of listening. Well beyond the Sony Walkman revolution of the 1980s, in which the number of cassette tapes which could be carried to enable a person to be ‘wired for sound’ was a major factor in limiting what could be listened to, the iPod generation can now carry tens of thousands of songs, either controlling their listening through choice or subjecting themselves to the randomness of the shuffle facility, even if the ‘canon’ of material may be chosen in general terms by the iPod owner (Marsh and Roberts, Personal 109–20).

Admittedly, things are moving very swiftly, as patterns of access to music change, but at the point of our survey, across the range of ages questioned, CDs remained the preferred means of listening. This applied both to the full sample and to the core group. Among the full sample, 76% used CDs, only
65% an MP3 player. Within the core group, the percentage of those using MP3 players, not surprisingly, increased (to 73%). With the exception only of those aged 20 or under (where MP3 use was greater than CD use), CDs were still the preferred means of accessing music (79%). There are no significant differences between religious and non-religious listeners regarding either CD use or MP3 use among the youngest respondents.

One slight difference is detectable in the access of music via radio. In both the full sample and the core group, there was evidence of religious listeners making slightly more use of the radio in comparison with using a lap-top to access music.

Frequency of Listening

Most of the respondents said they listened to music daily (83% of the full sample, 80% of the core group). The slight reduction of percentage in the core group is explained by the removal of the youngest members in the survey, for most of whom music access is a daily habit (34 of the 35 respondents aged 20 or under). In both groups, however, there is a slight increase in the number of non-religious listeners who access music daily (83% over against 77% of religious respondents in the core group; 86% over 81% in the full sample). It would be inappropriate to draw a major causal conclusion from these data according to which the less religious one is, the more one is likely to listen to music and/or use music in a religion-like way. But the correlation is nevertheless clear: music fans of all types take their music very seriously (as a daily habit, in most cases) and those who do not inhabit religious practices listen even more in comparison with listeners who self-identify as religious.

Listening in the Context of Other Activities

How do the listening habits fit within the broader framework of cultural and media activity? In addition to asking participants about whether they were members of a political party—to be considered below—we asked questions of participants about their reading and film-watching habits. The data collected show that religious listeners are more likely than their non-religious counterparts to be readers of non-fiction (61% in the full sample, compared with 52%; 56% compared with 51% in the core group). Conversely, non-religious listeners read more novels (70% compared to 66% in the full sample; 76% to 63% in the core group of 21–60-year-olds) and more newspapers and magazines (71% over against 63% in the full sample; 73% compared with 57% in the core group) and are more likely to consult music fan-sites, both official and unofficial, to support them in their listening habits, although it must be noted that consultation of fan-sites as a whole was surprisingly low across all those questioned (25% of the full sample of 231 consulted official sites and 19% unofficial sites).

Unsurprisingly, religious listeners are more likely both to have consulted (at any time) and to be active users of religious scriptures. The Christian Bible and the Buddhist scriptures were the most used (81% of the full sample had read the Bible at some point, 17% the Buddhist scriptures). One point—indeed, the
only point—at which non-religious listeners made greater use of a religious text was among the core group of 21–60-year-olds where more non-religious listeners had referred to the Bhagavad Gita than the religious listeners (18% over 16%).

With regard to film-watching, when offered a range of film genres, the respondents overwhelmingly chose comedy as their most-watched type of film (65% of the full sample, 63% of the core group). Drama, action, and adventure then featured most prominently (in that order), religious listeners indicating a much clearer preference for drama and providing a much greater indication of film-going as a practice than non-religious listeners. Only one of the genres offered (comedy) attracted more than half of the non-religious listeners on a regular basis (64%). All other kinds of film scored lower than 50%. By contrast, comedy, drama, and action all exceeded 50% for religious listeners in both the full sample and the core group.

Within the responses, one statistic is, however, quite striking. For non-religious listeners in the core group of 21–60-year-olds, science fiction films appeared above action, adventure, and romantic comedies. This may, of course, be due to the fact that we just happened to have stumbled upon a group of SciFi enthusiasts, although there was no evidence of any such grouping of respondents. When taken alongside other evidence from this section, it is, however, possible to posit tentative conclusions about patterns of consumption of the arts, the media, and popular culture and the way music fits into this. We shall venture some conclusions in the section “Music Use as a Religious Habit?”.

**Male and Female Responses**

Across the many questions asked of the data available to us, we noted no significant differences between male and female respondents. Our samples produced roughly a 50% split (with marginally more female respondents). Of the 217 who indicated their gender from the full sample of 231, marginally more (and thus a proportionately higher percentage of) males self-identified as religious (58 of 103—56%, compared with 56 of 114 females—49%). These differences became negligible in the core group of 157 21–60-year-olds, of which 73 were male (39 of them religious) and 79 female (38 religious).

More drilling down into the data would, of course, be possible (do more men or more women like comedy films? Are the types of music enjoyed evenly spread?), but it is not immediately germane to our current task to explore potential patterns of music use by religious and non-religious listeners.

**Music Use as a Religious Habit? Analytical Observations**

In the light of the data summarised above, can anything be concluded about how ordinary music listeners are using music in the contemporary West? More particularly, can anything be concluded about the way music use relates to, imitates or replaces religious practice? It must first be acknowledged that despite the considerable data produced and the density of the qualitative material yet to be fully analysed, no simple conclusions can be drawn. There is, for example, no
clear evidence to support the view that those who self-identify as religious listen to music only or primarily for religious ends or that their religiosity creates a major difference in the way in which they listen or any benefits they accrue from the listening. It is not possible to pinpoint from the statistical data clear divisions between religious and non-religious listeners with respect to how listeners behave. The differences noted, which we shall explore, may appear relatively slight, although prove significant. Even more significant differences will become evident in the qualitative material which music fans have provided, to be explored in a later article (e.g. their use of language about the kinds of emotional experiences they enjoy when listening, their reasons for choosing particular pieces of music as especially significant, their stated understanding of the place of music in their coping with/structuring of life).

Nevertheless, from our statistical data, three insights can be presented. Firstly, it is clear from our presentation of the data about the way listeners assess the political content or function of music that there is a difference in the approaches of religious and non-religious listeners. Religious music users may relate more readily to justice as a theme in the music to which they listen because of the terms in which political matters are handled within their faith traditions, while not considering the music they listen to explicitly political. Furthermore, they may be either less political or deem that their political interests are explored and expressed more directly through their religious beliefs and practice. Here, the latter is the more plausible than the former, as both in the full sample, and especially in the core group, religious listeners were much more likely than the non-religious to be active supporters of a political party (52% of religious listeners in the full sample, compared with 23% as well as 52% in the core group, compared with 22% of non-religious listeners).

Perhaps music is more clearly a different kind of outlet for self-expression or reflection. Non-religious listeners, by contrast, may actively seek out political music because it is more directly a channel for the articulation of their values, where there may be no other immediate communal context (real or virtual) through which their commitments are explored and expressed. This is especially the case, given that non-religious listeners are less likely to be members of a political group. We may see here that in an age when it is less likely that people join groups of any kind (Putnam), it is still true that religious people are more likely to sign up not just to their faith communities, but to other groups, too.

From the evidence of the greater participation by religious listeners in the structures of politics (a higher proportion of members of a political party) it is clear that, for them, music needs to carry no specific political role nor serve a political need. Political interests are either served in the context of active political commitment or through explicit religious activity (or through both together). By contrast, non-religious listeners with a political interest, whether or not this is linked to active, explicit political engagement, are more likely to want to see this interest reflected in their musical interests. As a result, religious listeners may appear ‘less political’ in their musical tastes, which is reflected, we suggest, in the distinction between religious listeners’ interest in songs of justice and non-religious listeners’ more explicit appeal to politics as a theme.
It would be too speculative to extend reflection on this observation much further. In keeping, however, with our proposal that music creates an affective space within and around which cognitive work is undertaken by listeners (Marsh and Roberts, *Personal* 16–21), for non-religious people, music can function as one of the social settings where political values are worked out and explored. Where people do not have an obvious (religious or religion-like) group to relate to, a communal setting is found in and through which political commitments are espoused. Bands and artists create followings (real—in concert—and virtual) among which political and ethical reflection occurs. Virtual communities of music fans can thus become political communities by virtue of individuals’ use of music for political stimulus.

This reflection leads to a second insight: consideration of what communal world, schema or cognitive framework within which the ‘work’ of listening may be taking place. By this we mean how much attention is given in practice to the often inchoate or unacknowledged worldview or thought-world within which a listener listens. Music can provide tags or triggers to the thought-worlds within which people live. But how conscious are listeners of the narratives or metaphors they live by (Lakoff and Johnson; McAdams)? Religious people might, of course, be very conscious (and more aware than non-religious listeners) of the community, schema or framework within which they listen. For many of our respondents, this may, for example, be quite explicitly ‘faith community, faith/belief, theology’, even quite explicitly ‘church and faith’. But this cannot be assumed. Many religious adherents may take for granted the structure of belief within which they ‘live, move, and have their being’ (cf Acts 17.28), although they may not be fully aware of how it shapes them. By contrast, non-religious listeners may be very clear about the philosophical or political framework within which they listen, having more clearly chosen their value-system.

However, the data supplied by respondents about the broader cultural context and the collection of habits and practices, within which their listening occurs, are a reminder that life-shaping practices take place within a narrative framework. Indeed, as Paul Ricoeur has noted, narrative “proves to be the first laboratory of moral judgement” (140). It is telling that non-religious listeners show greater interest in novels than non-fiction in their reading habits. It is also significant that science-fiction as a genre surfaces as being of greater interest to non-religious listeners in film-going habits. Science-fiction fans are known to be especially devoted to specific series (TV, films, video games or books) as they interweave reflection with their enjoyment of the genre (Porter; Cowan). Whether such activities always constitute conscious meaning-making akin to religious behaviour may be a conclusion too far. But the differences which are evident between religious and non-religious music users indicate that alongside the practice of listening, where there is no explicit religious narrative world, other resources are found and used. Given the evident higher use of music fan-sites by non-religious listeners, this suggests a different kind of engagement with the music (or with the lyrics or with the life/lives of performers) as part of the resourcing process. For all that music users may share (e.g. a conviction that love is a central theme in music and the intensity of often daily engagement with music), these differences are significant.
Relevant here is also the changing role of soundtracks to TV programmes and video games. For much of the past, they have been deemed ‘incidental’ music designed to set the mood for particular scenes. Although the music used in TV shows and video games continues to do that, the tracks that are used are often drawn from the world of popular music and can be a major source of new musical experiences for viewers. Not only is this music placed within a narrative framework in the programme or game, but it can also be taken up and placed within further narrative streams in discussions of the show or game in various forms of social media (Johnson). Theme tunes act as triggers; ‘closing songs’ may provide neat (and false or premature) closure to TV or film plots. Yet the affective and cognitive ‘work’ being undertaken, consciously and unconsciously, in processing the listening experiences lures people into the narrative worlds which they inhabit, both to enjoy the artistic/cultural event of listening (and perhaps watching, too) and to ‘think through’, however inchoately, the values within and the structures of the stories in and through which they live.

A third insight from the data examined connects the technological shifts now at work in the practice of listening, with the regularity with which the listening occurs. Here, the significant difference between religious and non-religious listeners in our self-selected sample (of 128 respondents) becomes especially important. Of the 84 non-religious respondents from the self-selected sample, 72 (86%) listen to music daily. This number is considerably higher than that of the religious listeners in the same group (28 out of 44—64%). This means that of those music fans who took the trouble to contact us and enthuse about their listening habits, it was the non-religious participants who made a specific point about the intensity of their listening. If we are therefore able to speak of a ‘serious listener’ (as opposed to an occasional, incidental listener), there is among our respondents an indication that a greater intensity of ‘devoted’ listening occurs among the non-religious respondents.

Furthermore, while the CD remains the format in which most people in our survey (religious and not) access their music, a greater proportion of the non-religious listeners in this sample listen to music on an MP3 player (73% as opposed to 70%). Together, this group of MP3 users (72%) almost matches the core group of listeners (73%). The self-selected enthusiasts and the core group of 21–60-year-olds thus offer evidence that nearly three-quarters of committed music users are now daily listeners on MP3 players. Music listening is for some a daily habit, perhaps even a daily ‘spiritual’ discipline. Examination of the qualitative evidence provided by our respondents will reveal whether this is any more than time-filling or making a journey to work more bearable. It will be vital to investigate whether users themselves deem such heavy use as entertainment or relaxation (or both and more), but the scale and intensity of the habit are clear.

Concluding Reflection

Is this ‘religion’? Without further input from the qualitative data, it can be called so only in the very limited sense that it is a regular, binding commitment. Using Bellah’s definition as a working definition, we would go too far to say that contemporary listeners to music gather (even virtually)
around “a system of beliefs and practices relative to the sacred that unite those who adhere to them in a moral community”. Ethnomusicologists would in any case (quite rightly) want to draw attention to the diversity and cultural complexity of different forms of music. Claims for universality in music are difficult to make. What can be said, however, is that substantial numbers of people want to listen to music in an intense, regular way, are clearly happy to talk about this habit, and reveal through the correlations between their listening and other life choices how it fits into their everyday practice and life-structuring. To define the habitual practice as ‘religion’, ‘spirituality’ or even a form of ‘piety’ would be much too neat. ‘Religion’ is probably too socially structured for what we have found so far; ‘spirituality’ is too vague or may imply too close a focus on the inner life of the listener. That there are at least emotional dimensions to the practice of listening is clear. Whether these should be called ‘spiritual’ (and if so, what that means) needs further scrutiny. ‘Piety’ is not what we are identifying, although the moral, disciplined approach implied in piety, while not directly reflected in music listening, is at least echoed in the regularity and intensity of listening. In formal terms at least, intense listeners might be said to be devoted practitioners.

What such a habit may do to and for such listeners, whether it is clearly a ‘meaning-’ or ‘sense-making’ practice and whether radically different things happen for those self-identifying as religious in comparison with those who do not, awaits further input from the qualitative findings of our research. In our later article we shall press the evidence for whether ‘moral communities’ do form, even if in informal ways, around the artists being listened to and among the friends who share musical experiences. We shall also ask how beliefs and values take more concrete shape for listeners—either as individuals or in communal settings—in relation to the music heard. We shall then be in a better position to assess the form and content of the ‘sonic practices’ we are exploring.

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