Religion and Western Popular Music: Reach Out and Touch Faith?

Clive Marsh, University of Leicester, UK

Vaughan S Roberts

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/vaughan_roberts/48/
RELIGION AND WESTERN POPULAR MUSIC:
REACH OUT AND TOUCH FAITH?

Clive Marsh and Vaughan S. Roberts

Abstract: Popular music is an ever-present element in Western culture and exhibits some significant religion-like qualities. Increasingly these are being studied by theologians and scholars of religion. This article reviews some of that recent academic research, focussing on the role played in popular music by lyrics, ritual and practice, and its critique of religion. Then we proceed to look at the wider implications of the growing place of spirituality in our society and how that relates to religion and pop music, before concluding by examining some of the ways in which the practice of listening to popular music shares common ground with forms of religious practice.

Keywords: BODY, CULTURE, FANDOM, POPULAR MUSIC, PRACTICE, RELIGION, RITUAL, SPIRITUALITY

‘Popular music’ may mean the music of the masses, folk music or pop (as opposed to rock, or country) music. It could even mean ‘popular classical’ music (Morricone or even Mozart as opposed to Scriabin). ‘Religion’ might mean the major world faiths, spirituality or social practices which function as religion. ‘Western’ seems more specific, though may mean either ‘in the West’ (though where, exactly, geographically speaking?) or influenced by Western culture. In short, all three elements in our title could be unspecific, as Monica R. Miller observes: ‘The scholar of religion searching “for” religion in popular culture forms walks a fine line’.¹ She argues that within hip hop culture, signs and symbols: ‘are much less stable than they appear, and this incoherence troubles the

This insight can be extended across most forms of popular music but here we set ourselves the defined task: to summarise and comment on key things which seem to be happening at points of intersection between widely-available, commercialised popular Western music and the phenomenon known as ‘religion’, be that in its specific, tradition-driven communal world forms, or in Western social practices which appear to be operating alongside (and possibly replacing) those forms.

**Religion in popular music (in words)**

It is not hard to think of recent popular songs that reference religion. Most will not extend far into the world of doctrinal nuance but songs that deal with angels, soul, prayer, heaven, hell, salvation, karma, grace, the devil and Jesus are ready to hand. From Metallica’s retelling of the death of the first born from the book of Exodus (‘Creeping Death’) through Robbie Williams’s love of ‘Angels’ to Tori Amos’s ‘Crucify’ or Jurassic 5’s exploration of ‘Freedom’, the world of popular music is replete with references to the terminology of religion.

What, though, is to be made of such references? Are they serious points of connection with the traditions which make use of those terms? Are they playfully undermining what might be expected? Could they be doing both? Two basic observations should be made about a focus on the lyrics of popular music. First, Western popular music does still carry traditional religious insights and commitments. Religious lyrics which appear in mainstream chart music are often the subject of scholarly analysis, whether or not they derive from artists known to have (or have had) religious affiliation (e.g. Dylan, U2). But it is questionable whether the carrying of religious language within mainstream popular music can be regarded as a primary form of communication for religious

2. Miller, p. 95.
traditions. At most they keep such language as part of cultural currency, or as forms of spiritual support for the already religious.

Despite the attention often paid to lyrics, however, and their perceived danger (e.g. by religious conservatives), a second observation has to be made: it is not primarily through lyrics that popular music ‘works’. Sound, the contexts in which it is played, and the impact of sound upon the body and the emotions are what make music popular. It is therefore a fundamental mistake, when exploring religion and popular music in the Western world to focus attention solely on lyrics.

**Religion in popular music (ritual/practice)**

Religion relates to the rhythm of life, wherever we live in the world. Seasons have their effects on the spiritual life. The quasi-religious role that music festivals now play in Western culture has been identified by a number of authors. In his analysis of the origins of the Glastonbury Festival in the UK, Partridge notes how an ancient sacred space and an imagined pre-modern past ‘provided the key to the future return of the sacred’. The desire to see a ‘spiritual awakening’ was part of the original manifesto for the event in the early 1970s and fits into a clear pattern of the Churches proving less and less attractive, while secularisation was proving more complex than often supposed.

This overtly spiritual strand continues to be part of the Glastonbury experience. In addition to the distinctly Methodist background of the

---


founder of the event, Michael Eavis, British journalist John Harris reported that at the 2013 Glastonbury Festival he found the lively, extrovert and zany alongside words of wisdom, from guitarist Johnny Marr about God being present in every blade of grass, through to a relaxed representative from one of the mainstream Churches at an open marquee providing food and shelter for whoever wanted it. Religion is there, tangled up in the mix of what has become an annual rite for many. Forms of popular music provide some of the focal points where religious exploration happens amongst the explicitly religious, the anti-religious, the ex-religious, the plainly disinterested and — most certainly — amongst the ‘spiritual but not religious’ alike.

Music can, though, have an ambiguous role to play in society. As Hesmondhalgh observes, as well as enabling ‘life-enhancing forms of collectivity’, music can also ‘reinforce defensive and even aggressive forms of identity that narrow down opportunities for flourishing in the lives of those individuals who adhere to such forms of identification’. Akin to the religious gatherings that festivals may sometimes look like, such events can exclude and demarcate. It is important to ask whether such collective forms of musical experience really do foster human flourishing or may prove as ambiguous as religion itself.

Popular music surfaces in religious ritual practice in more formal ways, however, though rarely in unambiguous ways. Different from the ways in which ‘the devil’s tunes’ were taken on within hymnody, or influenced the folk masses of the 1960s and 1970s, the second half of the twentieth century and the start of the twenty-first has increasingly seen (secular) popular music used in worship. Aside from questions about lyrics, important though those are, concerns about what functions such music is playing are understandable. Elton John’s ‘Candle in the Wind’ carried no particular religious connotations for many years but was sung in reworked form for the funeral of Princess Diana and has been played

at other funerals since. The music of Sigur Ros creates a contemplative mood regardless of what their words might mean.

All, however, is not necessarily positive for religion when popular music is used within, or in relation to it. As has long been recognised, if insufficiently studied, popular music has excelled as a site of transgression over against all forms of authority and assumed cultural mores. In what ways, then, has popular music satirised or criticised religion?

### Popular music as religion’s critic

‘And all this talk of Jesus coming back to see us couldn’t fool us’ is just one small way in which songwriters – here, Bernie Taupin and Elton John (‘Captain Fantastic and the Brown Dirt Cowboy’) – fold into their compositions critique of the religiosity within which they were reared. Such questioning of religion may not, of course, signal religion’s demise nor even any explicit intent on the part of songwriters to bring this about. The ‘Dionysian spirit of popular music’ certainly posed a profound challenge, verbally and as practice, to the usually more cautious and conservative practices of religion throughout the second half of the twentieth century and into the present. Popular music might often be highly commercialised and repetitive. But it might equally be alternative to the mainstream (and sometimes seen as ‘other than “good”’). In words and practice – exploring sex and drugs, but also peace, politics, justice and care of the earth whilst being rock ‘n’ roll – popular music would undermine mainstream religious belief and practice, even providing a substitute for it. Yet ironically it would also challenge religious traditions to do better with respect to some of the ethical concerns about which religions themselves are so often vexed.

10. Partridge, p. 64.
The challenge to religion – and particularly, in the West, to Christianity – can be stark and explicit. In his account of the emergence of unbelief in Western culture, Charles Taylor remarks: ‘What made Christianity particularly repulsive to the Enlightenment mind was the whole juridical–penal way in which the doctrine of original sin and atonement were cast during the high middle ages and the Reformation’. This observation forms an appropriate backdrop to lyrical observations about atonement in the work of American singer-songwriter Patti Smith and UK hip hop duo Dan le Sac Vs Scroobius Pip, in particular Smith’s version of Van Morrison’s ‘Gloria’ (Horses, 1975) and Dan le Sac Vs Scroobius Pip’s ‘Sick Tonight’ (The Logic of Chance, 2010). ‘Sick Tonight’ contains the line: ‘They say Jesus died for somebody’s sins but God knows he didn’t die for mine’. Similarly Smith’s re-working of ‘Gloria’ begins with the words: ‘Jesus died for somebody’s sins but not mine’ (Horses, 1975). Such lyrics suggest that this feeling of repulsion about penal atonement persists and that popular culture is a location for the appearance of such echoes amongst twenty-first century children of the Enlightenment.

The switch to spirituality

The question of whether religion has become a museum piece is accentuated by the ‘switch to spirituality’ whereby the primacy of autonomy means that individuals can pick their values and beliefs as freely as they choose the tracks on their iPod. Religions as institutions and structured traditions have less and less hold on, or appeal for, individuals. The growth in numbers of SBNRs (‘Spiritual but not Religious’) might seem to elide the question of where any beliefs come from, and underplay the inevitably social element in human living. In practice the social element may reappear (as at least quasi-religious) amongst

music fans longing for connectedness, or need to be referred to when people more consciously seek a belief system. In the minds of many, however, the sense of individual freedom, freedom from religion and for self-expression, self-discovery or even self-construction, is marked.

Rupert Till argues that contemporary religious practice is

in a transitional phase, where some religious traditions, more suited to a different era, are dying off rapidly, while other new religions are being born. Religions such as Christianity are trying to negotiate how much can be retained and how much must be given up if they are to survive.¹⁵

Whilst Till’s rather stark profit-and-loss approach to religion may be open to question, he rightly identifies the significant state of flux that religions find themselves in, and that popular music is an important factor in this cultural change. Partridge, too, logs the nature of the challenge to traditional religious practice, cataloguing the many alternative religious groups and New Religious Movements which can be allied to the developing function and use of popular music in Western society.¹⁶ This development being so, there remains the question of what popular music is doing whether or not its functions may be termed ‘religious’ and whether the question even matters.

**Popular music as religion**

Glastonbury might be a sacred place, historically speaking. The founder of its festival may be a Methodist, and the contemporary practice of its 170,000 attendees may look as though they are having transcendent experiences. But is Glastonbury actually religion? Debates go on as to

¹⁵. Till, p. 178.
whether it is wise to call pop fans religious.\textsuperscript{17} It is necessary to attend to what fans themselves think they are doing, and how music users themselves articulate what music does to and for them.\textsuperscript{18} Yet whilst important, this does not answer conclusively the question of whether a religious reading of popular culture or fandom is legitimate. Human experience could be enhanced by being brought within a religious frame of reference even for those who are, for whatever reason, vehemently anti-religious. A religious interpretation of a particular human practice might actually inform beneficially a person’s understanding of what is happening. That said, we are more inclined to agree with McCloud and others who oppose the over-hasty labelling of fan activity as religious behaviour. What we go on to say here does not depend on a ‘fandom as religion’ argument. We do, though, want to stress the importance of music-listening as a contemporary individual and social practice, and the value of interpreting the practice through the lens of religious studies.

As Lynch’s study showed, there is not much evidence of clubbers offering religious readings of whatever sense of transcendence they may have in engaging with music in late-night club culture.\textsuperscript{19} Unlike Lynch, our own studies of music users, about half of whom self-described as religious, indicate some use of transcendence discourse. They also seek joy and happiness in their music use, without eschewing attention to the way in


\textsuperscript{19} Lynch, \textit{Understanding Theology and Popular Culture}, p. 179.
which music helps them deal with negative aspects of life. We do not wish to claim all such music use as religious. We have, however, drawn attention to the significance of embodiment, ritual, transcendence and connectedness as ways of characterising a framework within which contemporary use of music can be understood. Our attentiveness to the ‘affective space’ which music creates for listeners, and within which they appreciate and reflect on their life experience in intensive ways, is echoed in Partridge’s study and also in Hesmondhalgh’s exploration of ‘why music matters’.

Our proposal then, is that beyond the understandable exclusion of religion (as practice or academic discipline) from discussion of the contemporary impact and function of popular music, in its very religion-likeness fresh interdisciplinary conversations are needed. Studies such as Hesmondhalgh’s which are not hostile to full and open interdisciplinary analysis of what music is doing – with or without the full knowledge of listeners – can enable rich explorations to begin.

Popular music as practice / Religion in everyday life

The religion-likeness of listening may initially appear even less prominent when attention is paid to individual music use. Even here, however, the life-structuring and life-enhancing properties of listening practice invite a constructive comparison with religion. Listening to music ‘in everyday life’ may not always be a chosen activity. Much encounter with music is involuntary, sometimes unwelcome, and produces a low level of emotional engagement. Nevertheless music-participation, be that making or listening to music, is an embodied practice. Heaney comments on the essentially corporeal nature of music: ‘music is also felt as well as made and heard: it induces and invokes the participation of the whole person, body and soul, not just the processes of intellectual reason’.

Christianity and the body have a complex and ambiguous relationship which has reverberated through Christian history and into the present. Christian faith is often perceived to have a negative view of the human body and creation more generally. Augustine (354–430 CE) is often credited or blamed for this but during his relatively long life his views changed and developed, so we should beware of easy simplifications of his theology. One significant idea from Augustine which continues to resonate with contemporary culture is that we are creatures both ‘in time’ and ‘out of time’. The example he uses is of how when we sing a song or a hymn we are in an embodied moment in time – a voice, a body, a mind singing words and music. But those words and music have an existence outside of the embodied present. They were written in the past and often sung in the past. In all likelihood, they will be sung in the future as well. More than just a timeline is being identified here. Before widespread education and ready availability of the printed word, much music and song would have relied upon memory. By calling to mind the words to a song, Augustine was aware that we as human beings are stepping beyond the present moment into a different level of reality and consciousness. Living with music is as much about living within (inhabiting) music, and inviting us to see it as beyond us. Musical moments which may accompany the practice of daily living may thus benefit from being reflected upon theologically both in terms of embodiment (the concreteness of material existence) and transcendence (being taken out of oneself into a much bigger, sense-making whole).

Two theological projects currently underway which take seriously the place of our embodied experience in thinking about God are, in the UK, Sarah Coakley’s explicit linking of bodily and spiritual practices with the task of theology, and, in the US, James K. A. Smith’s exploration of how ‘cultural liturgy’ (i.e. liturgical forms in the wider world) relates to Christian liturgy in churches. Coakley notes that theology is something ‘that demands bodily practice and transformation, both individual and social’. Smith cites the novelist David Foster Wallace: ‘In the day-to-day

trenches of adult life, there is no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everyone worships. The only choice we get is what to worship’. Without claiming that music is being worshipped or even that music users are worshippers, it is nevertheless imperative to explore both what religious people do with music but also what use is being made of music by all of its users.

Concluding comment

It may be much too grand to claim that the ubiquity of popular music and the extent to which and intensity with which its fans listen to music, attend gigs, visit fan sites, and experience deep emotions constitutes a sort of ‘sonic piety’. The two-way traffic between religion and its traditions, and music as a contemporary practice demand, however, the multi- and inter-disciplinary attention of academics from many departments, and of practitioners from many different communities (faith and artistic). For it is here where much practical meaning-making happens, where ethical views are forged, and political stances taken up, just as music is being enjoyed. The inter-disciplinary enquiry will have to ask more insistently than it is doing at present how individual(ised) music-listening patterns relate to social structures. How might religions (traditionally understood) find a new place in relation to the experiences which people are having in response to music? How might individual listeners need to be challenged to think about the value systems within which their listening happens and to which their affective responses to music lead them? To do this would bring practitioners, academics and faith communities together in a way which might enhance human flourishing.

Clive Marsh is Director of Lifelong Learning, University of Leicester.

Vaughan S. Roberts is Team Rector of Warwick.