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Religion and Spirituality

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ROY SHUKER

Religion and Spirituality

Introduction

The relationship between popular music and religion has heightened the struggles and accommodations that exist between music and religion in general. Because both music and religion, through performance and ritual, induce experiences of embodied power, they can be either rivals or associates. The global media reach and appeal of popular musics in the twentieth century raised the stakes of competition, in the one case, and elucidated the symbiotic bonds, in the other.

The fundamental historical, musical and social sources of popular music are deeply imbued with religious elements. African, Afro-Caribbean and African-American musical sources are connected with religious practises of spirit possession and spirit communication. South Asian popular forms, such as *qawwālī* and film music, developed from the metaphoric analogy of human love to divine love found in Hindu and Muslim devotional practises. The hymnody of European and North American Protestantism derived from folk tunes that were appropriated to liturgical contexts during the Reformation.

As used here, 'religion' is taken to include institutional expressions of organized religion, charismatic forms of popular religion, and those individual experiences that are characterized by plumbed depths or transcendence within human life – that which is commonly called 'spiritual.'

Religious Proscriptions Against Popular Music

Religious proscriptions against music have been related to codes of purity, morality and anti-somatic mind/body dualisms. Regulations against musical expression have often exhibited a gendered dimension, discouraging music because of its sensual effects and prohibiting women's musical expression more stringently than men's (Jones 1987, 1991; Rycenga 1999). Judaism, Christianity and Islam have adopted the strongest positions against musical expression, reflecting those traditions' ambivalence toward the body; but cultures shaped by these monotheistic traditions also produced a wealth of popular musics in the twentieth century. Thus, proscriptions have rarely been absolute.

Forms of religious opposition to popular music fall into two broad categories: institutional and individual. The first occurs when religious organizations take a public stand against a particular genre, artist or song. Examples of this – such as the boycotts and record-burnings that took place under the auspices of church groups following John Lennon's 1966 declaration that the Beatles were 'more popular than Jesus now' (Martin and Segrave 1988, 178; Schultheiss 1980, 155ff.) – have constituted a kind of explicit cultural contestation. The second form occurs when individual performers (often amidst the battles created by religious opposition to popular music) waver between popular music and religious conviction. Famous examples of this phenomenon (beginning with Franz Liszt in nineteenth-century Europe) have included Thomas A. Dorsey, Yusuf Islam (aka Cat Stevens; see <http://catstevens.com> for interviews concerning his conversion to Islam), Little Richard and Jimmy Snow, who toured with Elvis Presley before finding a vocation as an evangelical Pentecostal minister, preaching against the evils of rock music (Martin and Segrave 1988, 50, 74; 'Ex-R'n'R Star . . .' 1961). 'Big' Bill Broonzy, however, admitted going in the other direction: having started as 'a preacher – preached in the church. One day I quit and went to music' (Szatmary 1991, 3). Blind Lemon Jefferson gained fame as a blues performer, but simultaneously recorded religious songs under the name Deacon L.J. Bates.

The institutional and individual forms of opposition between religious consciousness and popular music performance share a common strategy: popular music is 'othered' in cosmological terms. The music becomes associated with Satan, with the demonic in general or with sinful activities, such as sex, drugs and drink. This yoking of musical skill with sinister forces has had a long lineage. Its high profile in the blues tradition, where guitarist Robert Johnson was reputed to have struck a bargain and sold his soul to the devil, has been traced to both African and European sources (Walser 1993; Ventura 1985). The legend resurfaced in the persistent rumors that three of the four members of Led Zeppelin had sold their souls to Satan in exchange for instant success and massive popularity (S. Davis 1985).

The 'othering' of popular music by religious authorities is part of a larger structural antinomy. When an institutionalized religion champions cultural conformity, class and race respectability, and the political status quo, popular musicians are made to signify – and they often willingly adopt – a contrary stance. Martin and Segrave (1988) suggest that '[w]ith its black roots, its earthy, sexual or rebellious lyrics, and its exuberant acceptance by youth, rock and roll has long been under attack by the establishment world of adults' (3), a world whose

authority has often been instantiated by religious institutions, as highlighted in the early religious opposition to rock music by the US Catholic Youth Organization (18–29).

Religious institutions that represent adult authority and pious decorum have been opposed to popular music on the basis of its association with dance and therefore, by implication, with sexuality. When a religion's primary interaction with the world is through moralism, its opposition to any powerful medium not under its direct control can be assumed. Thus, the presumed suspension of rational control characteristic of bodily activity and ecstasy is labeled morally deviant and dangerous. Upon taking control of Sudan in 1989, the National Islamic Front immediately began 'clamping down on Sudanese musicians with a puritanical zeal that has forced many of the country's best-loved performers into exile or silence' (Verney 1994, 190). This culminated in an attack on Hanan Bulu-bulu, 'the provocative Madonna of Sudanese pop,' whose concerts were banned. Her stage performances drew on suggestive traditional bridal dances and urban women's music; thus, she was condemned for 'immoral behaviour' and branded as "'half-Ethiopian" – a euphemism for sexual licentiousness' (Verney 1994, 196).

The reactionary US critic Carl Raschke (1990) suggests that heavy metal music begets 'violence – often the most irrational and uncontrollable violence engineered by the Archfiend himself,' since rock music wants to 'provoke an upsurge of the irrational' and 'get the listeners to react, not ruminate' (166, 170; emphasis in original). The genre may have changed from one generation to another, but the tone and content of the attacks have remained consistent. Speaking in 1938, Archbishop Beckman felt similarly about jazz: he feared that "'jam sessions," "jitter-bugs," and cannibalistic rhythmic orgies . . . [are] wooing our youth along the primrose path to hell!' (Merriam 1964, 243).

As can be seen from this last example, the tenor of Christian critiques of popular music were, and are, heavily burdened with racism and classism. When a southern segregationist in the United States attacked a 1956 rock concert, he stated in no uncertain terms that 'Christians will not attend this show. Ask your preacher about jungle music' (Martin and Segrave 1988, 42). These racist attacks facilitated the 'othering' of popular music, warranting the ultimate religious insult from the monotheistic traditions: the label of 'pagan.'

Shared Functions of Music and Religion: The 'Pagan' Contexts of Popular Music

The word 'pagan' is, itself, a term of contestation. Originally a term invented by Roman city-dwellers to

describe less sophisticated country-dwellers, it was transformed into a scornful obloquy by which Christian and Muslim invaders could dismiss indigenous religions as 'inferior' and 'primitive.' By this definition, all polytheistic systems were deemed pagan. The vital relationship between music, dance and religious ritual in polytheistic traditions was often singled out by missionaries as indicative of moral decay and satanic influence.

Given the preexistence of this discourse against 'pagan' music and religion, it is not surprising that it resurfaced with the advent of popular musics, especially since those musics often had their roots in African, Native American, South Asian Hindu and Pacific Islander polytheistic religious cultures. Resistance to jazz often referred to the use of drums as a form of 'primitivism,' and '[a]nti-jazz groups were formed and banners paraded proclaiming, in a revealing phrase, "Down with Jazz and Paganism"' (Taylor 1985, 165). A Minneapolis Catholic Youth Center newsletter from the mid-1950s 'advised its readers to "Smash the records you possess which represent a pagan culture and a pagan concept of life"' (Martin and Segrave 1988, 25–26).

The connection of pagan traditions to drums, and to a more active form of ritual participation than is common in monotheistic traditions, is not entirely fallacious – only the condemnatory judgment is. Almost all indigenous religious traditions have formal means for maintaining communication with the spirit realm (whether the spirit realm is understood as the realm of deities, ancestors or of secondary types of spirits like demiurges or saints). The most common forms of this communication are shamanism and spirit possession, both of which employ drums, rattles, flutes, whistles, kazoos and other similar instruments (Eliade 1972; Nketia 1962). Even more importantly, both the shaman and the spirit medium function as religious virtuosos, whose success depends on community support, community participation, and their own performative ability to travel, or be possessed, through the vehicle of sound. The fact that such performances are made possible by the attainment of an altered state of consciousness, frequently through the use of hallucinogens, makes the comparison to popular music quite fecund.

It has been argued that voodoo, a syncretic religious tradition built around spirit possession, was one of the origins for the jazz that emerged in New Orleans. Ventura (1985) speculates that the African cosmology of the crossroads resurfaced 'in Congo Square, [where] African metaphysics first became subsumed in music. A secret within the music instead of the object of the music' (124). Cavin (1975) highlights the role of the voodoo queens of New Orleans, who operated as 'charismatic authorities,' creating a context where an 'exchange

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between European and African culture and music' developed in a predominantly female and thoroughly interracial environment, imbued with creative religious ideas and activities (13, 21–22).

Taylor (1985) develops the comparison of shamanism and popular music. He, too, argues that popular music combines worlds, thus bringing together a variety of spiritual powers. Taylor notes how rock syncretizes the power of black blues, Christian gospel music, Native American traditions and sex (172), so that rock 'succeeded, like nothing before it had done, in *demonstrating* an occult mystery. In so doing it directly reflected its shamanistic heritage, for the shaman seeks to bring to the whole tribe a very special and unusual vision of the world . . . [a] vision that cures human ordinariness' (207; emphasis in original).

The active role of music in religious ritual has provided evocative myths for popular musicians. Cross-cultural explorations of percussion undertaken by Grateful Dead drummer Mickey Hart were inspired by the comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell, and led to the Dead playing a show at the Pyramids (Hart 1990; Sylvan 1998). Likewise, feminist New Age percussionist Layne Redmond (1998) traces her music to ancient goddess-based traditions as described by archeologist Marija Gimbutas. The jazz-band leader Sun Ra was far ahead of these relative newcomers: his flights of religious speculation were based on a study of ancient Egyptian and other African sources, and his ritual leadership of the Arkestra was deliberately based on the religio-political functions of West African master musicians (Szwed 1997; Sun Ra 1988).

The varied neo-pagan movements of Europe and North America are intricately linked to popular music. The 'magickal' explorations of Aleister Crowley (1875–1947) provided a major inspiration for Jimmy Page of Led Zeppelin, who actually purchased Crowley's Loch Ness mansion (S. Davis 1985). The signature song of the band, 'Stairway to Heaven,' draws on a variety of neo-pagan themes, such as the idyll of the rural past, the sacredness of Nature and the contradictions of Christianity. A romanticized Celtic pagan past has been integral to the musical appeal of Enya and Loreena McKennitt. The Lilith Fair, a tour of women rock musicians organized by Sarah McLachlan, took its name from a feminist reclamation of Lilith, the mythical first wife of Adam; Lilith has also been prominently associated with contemporary feminist goddess religions. Tori Amos and PJ Harvey have extended feminist critiques of Christianity into their music (Rycenga 1997).

Music, Religion and Resistance

Religion itself has a dual character: its supernatural authority can be used either to validate existing power

structures or to pose an alternative to arbitrary, temporary and unjust structures of human power. Popular music, in its mass dissemination, can create an effective medium for a countercultural stance, which, in turn, is made more powerful by association with religious righteousness. Black churches in South Africa, by nurturing musical groups like Ladysmith Black Mambazo, became visible and audible centers of resistance to apartheid, while also focusing global attention on their struggle (Marre and Charlton 1985, 43–44).

The co-development of Rastafarianism and reggae in Kingston, Jamaica from the 1930s onward exemplified the blending of music and religion into a counter-discourse. The Rastafarian critique of racism and imperialism in religion, and its projection of a Pan-African religious vision, found a worldwide audience through reggae. In the 1970s, the popularity of bands like the Abyssinians, Bob Marley and the Wailers, and Burning Spear imparted a religious logic to political critique and the use of ganja. Marley's description of Rastas and reggae musicians as 'soul rebels' epitomized music's role in this religious resistance.

An earlier example of this role for music can be found in the back-and-forth movement of gospel from black churches to popular music genres (Maultsby 1992). Aretha Franklin is one of many black soul singers who received her training in gospel music, and she has often returned to sing in church. Embodied forms of worship in black North American Christian churches were often criticized by racists as signs of backwardness. But the validation of gospel music by record-buyers and radio listeners created a cultural space for this form of Christianity, so markedly different in style from that of the mainline white Protestant churches. The high profile of gospel music also ensured the survival of musical forms that had sustained black slaves in the struggle against slavery. As Dahl (1984) notes, 'During slavery the church was . . . the place where highly codified (because dangerous) emotions were vented in song and witness . . . The black church, it could almost be said, was the first jam session – and black women . . . mostly poor women, culture bearers and music makers who remained anonymous beyond the black church . . . were always powerhouses in it' (5–6, 152).

But the politics of respectability, and the internal contradictions within Christianity, could make the black church alternatively a source of popular music creativity and a force opposed to popular music. Such a clash occurred over the blues (A. Davis 1998). Davis points out that the blues presented a cosmological vision, one that 'disputed the binary constructions associated with Christianity' and 'blatantly defied the Christian imperative to relegate sexual conduct to the realm of sin' (123). By

giving women an autonomous sense of self, and a power based in the body, the blues also revealed fault lines of class and gender in the black community. Thus, a song like Bessie Smith's 'Preachin' the Blues' 'establishes the realm of the blues as spiritually coexistent with and simultaneously antithetical to Christian religious practices' (129). The blues – a popular music form that, while secular, encroached on religious ground, and was therefore condemned from the pulpit – formed a counter-discourse that revealed the tensions within African-American Christianity (Ventura 1985, 133–34).

The religious critique of popular music has created a situation in which the deployment of religious symbols becomes highly charged and bitterly contested. Heavy metal bands choose names that 'invoke the auratic power of blasphemy or mysticism (Judas Priest, Black Sabbath, Blue Öyster Cult),' and the Devil becomes a 'transgressive icon' rather than a worshiped reality (Walser 1993, 2, 151). Similarly, the cultural subtexts evoked by Madonna are often steeped in religious imagery, from her name to her celebrated video for 'Like a Prayer,' to her controversial use of Hindu facial markings in a provocative performance at the MTV awards ceremony in 1988 (McClary 1991; Scott 1993).

There is, as Lewis (1990) notes, an irony in the fact that women were so long excluded from performing religious music, since 'churches are often the first place a musically inclined girl sings before an audience' now that the 'secularization of music and fragmentation of religious power' have opened this venue as a 'safe' place for women to express themselves musically. She notes that both Tina Turner and Pat Benatar have credited their religious upbringing with launching their musical careers (Lewis 1990, 56–57, 74, 81; Post 1994, 42).

Popular Music with Religious Intent

As a result of religious proscriptions against or suspicions about secular music in some cultures, musicians have often wrapped themselves in a cloak of devotion in order to have their music recorded and heard at all. Jones (1987) reports how Tunisian popular singers have felt compelled to highlight their piety, by performing the 'umra, or minor pilgrimage' or by recording 'a spate of devotional songs to be used in religious segments on radio and television and for record releases' (80).

The political movements and countercultural tendencies of the 1960s were marked by an 'eclectic taste for mystic, occult, and magical phenomena,' as well as by extended exploration of Asian religious traditions by Westerners (Roszak 1969, 125). Similarly, a cross-fertilization of Western and Asian forms of music occurred. While Ravi Shankar was trained as a Hindustani classical performer, his worldwide celebrity made

him a popular music icon. Shankar's contact with musicians as varied as Dizzy Gillespie, John Coltrane and George Harrison legitimated this religio-musical alternative. Similarly, Indian film music deftly combined its classical religious heritage with the song forms of Western music, prompting singing star Lata Mangeshkar to reiterate traditional formulae while maintaining a hectic, modern schedule: 'I believe that music and God are one. My father always maintained that music has a power that leads to a short cut to God. Yes, I am religious and yes, I do pray, but not four hours a day . . . I pray according to the free time I have, when I'm not recording film music' (Marre and Charlton 1985, 146).

John Coltrane's explorations of religious thought, whether African, Asian or Western Christian, had an influence on jazz and rock musicians of the 1960s. Coltrane said that, in compositions like *Om*, *A Love Supreme* and *Meditations*, he was on a quest for 'something that hasn't been played before.' This 'continual looking which may be described as the spiritual aspects of improvisation . . . was obviously also an ideal metaphor for the spiritual searching of mankind and, in his last years, Coltrane felt the need to make this absolutely explicit' (Priestley 1987, 52–53). The effects of Coltrane's explorations were varied. Roger McGuinn of the Byrds credits a tape of Coltrane's 'India' and of his 'Africa' with inspiring the psychedelic opening of 'Eight Miles High' (Thomas 1975, 198–99). Sonny Rollins reexamined his music and spirituality in the light of Coltrane's influence (Fiofori 1971). But Amiri Baraka was critical of the depoliticization that was fostered when the music 'gets to be ultra-metaphysical where you get a lot of "Om-m-m-m-m" in it' (Priestley 1987, 56).

Popular music's power has led some musicians into a mythologizing replete with religious connotations. Sun Ra's claim to legendary origins on Saturn, John Lennon's challenge to all theologies in 'Imagine,' Maurice White's spiritual mission as the leader of Earth, Wind & Fire, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's charge to bring *qawwālī* to the world and the martyrdom of Algerian Berber singer Lounes Matoub, murdered in 1998 by Islamic traditionalists for his political opinions (Barry and Holmes 1998) – all these stand as examples of charismatic spiritual leadership on the part of popular musicians. The music of Yes, exemplified in lengthy songs such as 'Sound Chaser' and 'The Revealing Science of God,' has taken this mythologization into sound itself, imparting a sense of music's immanent sacredness.

The politics of religiously based popular music has often trodden a thin line between aggressive proselytizing and ecumenical harmonizing. Qureshi (1992) charts the development of *qawwālī* under the Indian recording industry's title of 'Muslim devotional' (111). From the

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time of Partition (1948), 'one can observe a shift away from a more orthodox supralocal Islam to a heterodox Sufism which addresses Indian Islam and Indian saints, and embraces a general humanism extolling all religions' (115).

A genre of rock music called 'Christian rock' has had to overcome both secular suspicion and internal religious criticisms in order to flourish. Contemporary Christian music (CCM) has become a billion-dollar industry in the United States, with its own charts, distribution networks and awards shows. Its highest-grossing artist, singer Amy Grant, became a 'crossover' success in 1991 with her secular single, 'Baby Baby.' But her very success has raised questions within evangelical Protestant circles, as her fame, her lyrics and her behavior (including a divorce and remarriage) have been scrutinized for signs of worldly ensnarement (Howard and Streck 1999; Clark 2000). Conversely, at the beginning of U2's career, the avowed charismatic Christianity of three of its members made them suspect in the eyes of secular critics, especially when songs like 'Gloria' seemed unctuously pious. The fact that their brand of Christianity was inclusive rather than dogmatic eventually placated their detractors, but bands more closely associated with evangelical Christianity, like Stryper, have rarely enjoyed sustained commercial success.

Conclusion

Comparisons between the functions of religion and those of music have multiplied since the advent of popular music. The dedication of fans, the ritual aura of concerts and the near-theological hairsplitting among cognoscenti are all reminiscent of religious enthusiasm (Leonard 1987; Taylor 1985), as are explicit religious communities based on popular music, such as Deadheads, the Church of John Coltrane and the cult of Elvis sightings (Sylvan 1998). The idea that popular music provokes religious experience has been both lauded (Hart 1990) and damned (Pattison 1987), but, as Sylvan suggests, popular music may well provide 'a significant alternative religious choice that bypasses the narrow opposition between traditional religious institutions and secular humanism' (1998, 22). Whether skeptically denouncing religious hypocrisy, as in Jethro Tull's 'My God,' or amplifying religious criticism of a sinful world, as in U2's 'Sunday Bloody Sunday,' there is no doubt that popular music will continue to give expression to the emotionally potent themes of religion.

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Resistance and Protest

Both the terms 'resistance' and 'protest' were applied to popular songs in the United States in the 1930s. The composer Charles Seeger wrote that folk music was acceptable if 'it shows clearly a spirit of resentment towards oppression or vigorous resistance' (Cantwell 1996, 93). Meanwhile, the Communist journal *New Masses* gave a collection of black North American music the title *Negro Songs of Protest* (Gellert 1936).

The first academic study of the phenomenon defined protest songs as 'spontaneous outbursts of resentment, composed without the careful artistry that is a requisite of songs that become traditional' (Greenway 1953). The same author traced the Anglophone protest song to the medieval period and such songs as 'The Cutty Wren,' but the term has now come to be used almost solely to describe lyrics created in the twentieth century (and often sung to well-known tunes) either by various social and occupational groups – black North Americans, soldiers, industrial workers, those subject to colonial exploitation – or by professional songwriters. Although such protest was synonymous with left-wing or 'progressive' causes (see, for example, Lieberman 1989), Dunaway (1987) has pointed out that right-wing groups such as the Ku Klux Klan also created protest songs, while the role of Plastic People of the Universe in Communist Czechoslovakia was one example of resistance to left-wing regimes.

Collections of Anglophone protest songs were edited by Alan Lomax and others (Lomax 1999 (originally published in 1967); Hille 1948; Seeger and MacColl 1961) before the term was taken up by the music industry as a descriptor for compositions dealing with nuclear weapons, civil rights, the Vietnam war and other topics by young singer-songwriters such as Bob Dylan, Phil Ochs, Donovan and Country Joe McDonald. The ersatz protest song 'Eve of Destruction' (1965), composed by P.F. Sloan for Barry McGuire, sold a million copies.

An important Spanish-language protest song movement also arose in the 1960s (see, for example, Pring-Mill 1983, 1987, 1993; Stilman 1972; Vettori 1974). The beginnings of the *nueva canción Chilena* (Chilean new

song) movement in 1966 were followed in 1967 by the first Latin American festival of *canción protesta*, held in Havana (Ossorio 1967). It was this event that inspired Barbara Dane to establish her Paredon label, which specialized in the issue of protest and revolutionary songs on an international basis between 1969 and 1980. (In 1991, Paredon was acquired by the Smithsonian Institution.)

In Africa, *chimurenga* songs – *chimurenga* is the Shona word for resistance, revolution or struggle – were performed and broadcast in Zimbabwe by Thomas Mapfumo during the anti-colonial struggle of the 1960s. Above all, in the 1970s there was the 'stubborn utopia projected through Bob Marley's music and anti-colonial imaginings' (Gilroy 2000, 133). The pervasive trope of 'protest' in rock culture can, however, lead to the mistaken assumption that other musics necessarily share these characteristics. This has been strongly argued by Schade-Poulsen (1999) in relation to the *rai* genre of Algeria (28–32) and by de Kloet (1998) in a study of Chinese popular music.

The terms 'protest' and 'resistance' are often used interchangeably, but a distinction can be made between protest songs as explicit statements of opposition to the political, economic or social status quo and music of resistance which may be more coded or opaque in its expression of dissidence – what Lipsitz (1994) has called 'immanent resistance.' The flexibility of 'resistance' in this sense, and its connection with the influential Gramscian concepts of hegemony and subordination, have made the concept one of the most widely used explanatory tools in the study of popular musical forms. It informs analyses of Western youth subcultures (Hall and Jefferson 1976) and African migrant workers' dance (Erlmann 1996), as well as numerous studies of African-derived musics in the Americas, recent examples of which include work on Brazilian music (Fryer 2000), Haitian music (Averill 1997) and Duke Ellington's 'jungle' music of the 1920s (Middleton 2000), and on music and the 'black public sphere' (Neal 1999).

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