

# THE THEOLOGICAL PROBLEM OF POPULAR MUSIC FOR WORSHIP IN CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANITY

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## Introduction

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The widespread adoption of popular styles of music for worship has been one of the most striking developments in English Christianity over the past four decades. Where in most mid-20th century churches a musical triumvirate of choir, organ and hymnal reigned supreme, a significant number of congregations have now augmented or replaced these with instrumental ensembles, worship bands or electronic music. The well-documented post-war growth in religious diversity has also been accompanied by increased musical diversity, with church music in folk, rock, reggae, urban, world and dance music styles now taking its place alongside the choral, hymn and older chorus repertoire. The 'happy-clappy' Christian has become a recognisable caricature even amongst those who do not attend church. Three of the four most recent enthronements of Anglican archbishops have at some point departed from a high art musical style, variously incorporating western pop-style music or songs from the worldwide church.

However, despite all of this, a feeling persists in some quarters of the church that popular (and particularly pop) music for worship remains problematic, and should at best remain an exceptional feature. In the 1990s, many Anglican eyebrows were raised at the choice of music for Archbishop George Carey's

enthronement service (Rees, 1993; Webster and Jones, 2006), or at episcopal support given to 'alternative' services using electronic music and multimedia technology. In Roman Catholicism, Pope Benedict XVI's previous well-publicised criticisms of rock music as 'the expression of elemental passions' (Ratzinger, 2000) seems set to continue the recent official coolness towards further liturgical liberalisation. A similar debate over rock music's moral probity still rages in more conservative evangelical circles (Jasper, 1984; Lucarini, 2003), whilst some liberal Christians have found some popular styles trite, inauthentic or too closely associated with conservative evangelicalism for their tastes.

This article seeks to begin to explore and understand some of the reasons why popular music for worship should have remained so problematic despite its widespread adoption in practice. Much has been said about the nature of 'true' worship, its 'quality', 'beauty' and 'sincerity'; its ability to inspire 'reverence' or its degree of 'relevance' to contemporary experience; the extent to which it might represent an 'authentic' extension of the English church music tradition,

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or an 'alien' intrusion into it. However, the differing assumptions underpinning these well-used terms have rarely been articulated in depth or subjected to scrutiny. Indeed, a veneer of objectivity has often served to conceal the fundamentally divergent theological and epistemological starting points of participants, with the result that rather than engaging in genuine dialogue, those expressing different viewpoints have been (to a great extent) speaking past each other. In response, it is suggested that gaining a historical perspective on

the contemporary debate is important. Although a full anatomy of changing responses to popular music is impossible here, some key underlying questions in the recent history of music for worship are identified. Exploring these further may help to remove some of the heat from current discussions and bring some more light to bear upon them.

### **An elusive subject?**

One major obstacle here is that the study of church music in general (and popular worship music in particular) has fallen between several disciplinary stools. Musicologists and music historians have treated new works for church by established composers, but have assessed them primarily according to musical quality, rather than by whether they seem 'good' or 'appropriate' for worship. Historians and sociologists of Christianity have approached church music largely as a source for understanding quite different questions: for example, to trace patronage of the arts or to trace theological and social attitudes in the words (see, for example Adey, 1988; Tamke, 1978; Ward, 1996 and 2005) in preference to considering why people valued music as part of worship at all, or what they thought 'good' church music was. Theologians, likewise, have rarely tackled these questions head-on: those who have engaged in theological reflection on art or the arts (Harries, 1994; Pattison, 1991) have tended to allot comparatively little space to music (particularly popular music). The one notable exception, Jeremy Begbie, has focused primarily on theology *through* music. (Begbie, 2000, 2002).

Whilst there is a large body of church-based literature devoted specifically to church music, much of it concerns the practicalities (choir training, for example) and largely skirts around theological questions of why music might be used in worship and what (if any) assessments might be applied to particular genres. 'How-to' manuals on popular worship for music have tended to focus particularly on the state of mind and heart of the worship leader, rather than engage in theological reflection on particular styles of music themselves (see, for example: Bowater, 1986; Kendrick, 1984; Redman, 2003). Yet throughout these sizeable literatures and also in everyday congregational life, strong assumptions exist about the nature of different musical styles and their potential (or otherwise) for the worship of God, resulting in passionate and sometimes acrimonious debate.

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### **Tracing the history**

Debates over the use of popular music in church are by no means new, running through the writing of the Church Fathers, through the Reformation period, and late Victorian reactions to Sankey and Moody and the Salvation Army bands. Nevertheless, despite this long history, the period from the 1950s onwards has seen some of the most heated debate on popular music for worship in the history of the Christian church. To understand this we need to see the second half of the 20th century as not only a period of far-reaching religious change, but also a time of significant musical change. At the same time as the resurgent avant-garde of Boulez and Stockhausen was challenging art music's mainstream, so the period also saw the explosion of rock'n'roll from the mid-

1950s and its association with a new emphasis on freedom of expression and liberation from establishment expectations (Marwick, 1998).

These associations have sometimes been enough in themselves to dissuade some Christians from embracing the new music, but its growing pervasiveness quickly led figures inside the churches to experiment with popular music in an attempt to build bridges to worship. Amongst the notable early contributions were Geoffrey Beaumont's Folk Mass of 1956; several books of hymn tunes by the Twentieth Century Church Light Music Group; the appearance of rhythm and 'beat' groups playing a combination of traditional hymn arrangements and their own compositions; and (later, largely through the charismatic renewal) the widespread adoption of contemporary folk and soft rock styles in the Sound of Living Waters (1974) and Songs of Fellowship books (1981 onwards) respectively. Though comparatively little of this was the 'rock' or 'pop' of chart music, it did represent a self-conscious alternative to the inherited body of hymn, carol and choral music, and deliberately sought to make its appeal through the idioms of a contemporary style. Any illusion of consensus on church music was fast disappearing by the late 1970s/early 1980s

The adoption of new popular music styles for worship gradually became widespread, but sometimes remained contentious. An easy reception for popular music in worship was made more difficult by the direction of wider religious change in the postwar period. At first, a modest revival in the popularity and influence of Christianity in the 1950s seemed to have given church leaders, clergy and church musicians cautious confidence that the kind of church on

offer was an appropriate one for the nation (Hastings, 1992). However, as church attendance figures began to drop dramatically from the late 1950s, the need for change became widely discussed, in particular to reconnect with the young (Jones, 2000).

The challenge of worshipping in a post-Christian society thus transformed what had begun as a largely abstract theological problem about popular music into a

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pressing pastoral problem. Moreover, the acceptance of a de facto pluralism in worship and theology frequently led not to greater dialogue between different traditions of worship but an increased tendency towards distinct musical sub-cultures within the church. Indeed, asking questions about the 'problematic' nature of popular music in worship also begs equally significant questions about how other forms and styles of music have been implicitly understood. Part of the legacy of modernity has been to normalise certain styles of assumptions or behaviour as 'natural' or intrinsically superior by problematising others as marginal, trivial, heterodox or dysfunctional (Foucault, 1979). In English church music for much of the twentieth century, 'establishment' commentators assumed the supremacy of Western classical music, particularly as it came to be expressed in hymns and choral music. Although the principles of this form occasionally had to be re-asserted against poorly executed examples of the genre, the justification of the pre-eminence of Western classical music for Christian worship was (as already suggested) only rarely given explicit articulation.

However, comparatively few contemporary musicologists are now prepared to assert the inherent superiority of any particular musical genre, only of particular examples of each form (Beard and Gloag, 2005). This in turn has led to an outpouring of interest in other forms of music as equally legitimate subjects for study and aesthetic engagement. If it is valid to reject the inherent superiority of any particular genre, the 'theological problem' at stake here is arguably at least as much the legacy of an assumed natural affinity between Christian theology and the Western classical tradition as it is a problem of 'popular music' per se. Put simply, serious theological reflection on music for worship also needs to understand why hymn and choral music should for so long have been regarded as so 'normal'.

### **Key questions**

If the 21st century is to witness a more constructive engagement between theology and popular music, and see dialogue between the different positions on popular music in church, a number of key underlying questions need to be asked deliberately and openly. The most fundamental question is why use music in worship at all. For Percy Scholes, writing in 1938, music was 'first of all an offering to the Being worshipped'; second, an expression of the sentiments of the worshipping community; and third for the teaching and communication of the faith (Scholes, 1938). At one level, there seems little here to gainsay. In practice, however, church musicians and writers on church music have tended to favour one of these three purposes over the others. Discussion over the relative merits of music as a devotional aid (on one hand) and a

pastoral and evangelistic tool (on the other) has been particularly pronounced in the twentieth century. Scholes himself saw a hierarchy of importance here, regarding the third purpose being 'less noble of itself' and even sometimes inclined to result in 'the use of bad music to lead men into good ways' (Scholes, 1938).

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A second key question is what we mean by 'good' music. There has been widespread agreement on the need to offer the best music to God, but less searching reflection on what 'good' might mean.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the period from the 1950s to the present, popular music has often been deemed to be unsuitable for worship since it was self-evidently anything but 'the best' style that the church had to offer. Few serious thinkers about music today are inclined to assert the inherent superiority of any particular genre. The fact that we generally recognise a range of personal aesthetic judgements does not, however, mean that we must therefore opt for an uncritical relativism. From a practical-theological perspective, Gordon Lynch (Lynch, 2005) has recently suggested a number of starting-points for a specifically theological aesthetics of popular culture (and here we are adapting Lynch's questions to the topic in hand): what does it mean to be fully human, and to what extent do particular musics enable us to grow towards this? To what extent can a piece of popular music be regarded as 'honest, challenging and redemptive'? Is the pleasure we experience in worshipping through (any) music 'healthy' (here, within a Christian

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<sup>1</sup> This is graphically illustrated in the 1951 Archbishops' Commission report *Music in Church* which simply states that church music should be 'good, as music' (see Church of England , 1951; Jones and Webster , 2006).



understanding of humanity). To what extent does it enable us to tune in to our ultimate reference point in life (in this case, the God of Jesus Christ)? Of course, each of these questions presuppose a further set of questions (what do we mean by 'challenging', 'healthy', or 'redemptive'?) and these too need answers. However, beginning to ask the salient questions is an important step on the road.

A third question concerns definitions of the 'popular'. As discussed elsewhere (Jones and Webster, 2006), historians of Christianity have had as much difficulty defining 'popular' religious belief as musicologists have in pinning down 'popular music' as a category. The basic point, however, is that 'popular' is a negotiable category in church music as much as in other spheres, and we must seek to understand how it is being used, either descriptively or polemically. Part of the difficulty here is that we have inherited a sharp distinction between 'elite' and 'popular' culture recognisable to an earlier age in which an educated social elite sought progressively to distinguish their own tastes and leisure pursuits from what they regarded as the uncivilised masses. Problematic as these categories were even then, neat distinctions of 'popular' music are even more difficult to sustain in the late 20th/early 21st centuries, in which the boundary-lines between 'high' and 'low' culture have become increasingly blurred.

The occasional accusation that pop music is too commercialised to be viable for worship highlights a fourth key axis of the twentieth century debate, namely the extent and impact of the associations pieces of music carry with them. Many

writers on church music concur that it may be insufficient for music to be compositionally 'good' if it conjures moods and images which prove distracting for worship or potentially morally corrupting. Early experiments with 'light' music for worship frequently fell foul of accusations that it was too strongly

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reminiscent of the theatre or dancehall for use in a liturgical setting. A similar concern has seen a vociferous debate over rock music and its possible satanic or licentious properties within British evangelical circles in the 1970s and 1980s, and in the United States more recently. However, a crucial theological and musicological question is begged here: to what extent are any of the meanings carried by a particular piece inherent in the music? If pieces of music do have inherent or eradicable meanings, it may indeed suggest that certain forms of music might prove less appropriate for worship than others. On the other hand, if meaning in music is not fixed but fluid, and may be reinvested with alternative meanings, the question becomes pastoral rather than epistemological: how may music with unhelpful associations be redeemed? What enables this process of translation to take place? How should it be introduced in a pastorally sensitive manner?

Besides these more theological and pastoral questions lies a historical one: in part, 'unwanted associations' in music for worship have frequently been problematic due to contrasting assumptions about the dividing line between the 'religious' and the 'secular'. Those selecting or composing music for worship have invariably (and understandably) sought that which directs the worshipper's attention towards the 'sacred' rather than the 'profane'. However,

these, too, are categories with shifting boundaries and the extent to which a broad or narrower definition of the 'religious' is adopted will invariably prefigure the range of ideas, activities and music considered appropriate in worship. Further historical work is therefore needed to trace the changing ways in which discussions of what constitutes 'good' church music have depended partly upon assumptions about what makes 'sacred' music and what is 'secular'.

## **Conclusion**

Debates on the potential of popular music for worship have frequently proceeded as if certain styles and genres of music were self-evidently fitting (or inappropriate) for use in church. In fact, a variety of undiscerned ideological and aesthetic assumptions underlie the different theological positions on the subject. If the Christian churches are to progress beyond what has become a somewhat circular debate, these underlying assumptions need to be brought to light and critically examined.

It has been suggested that one important starting point is to trace the development of contemporary attitudes towards popular music for worship in recent history, and in particular to re-problematise the dominant traditions of English church music which have too often been assumed to provide a self-evident canon by which to judge new music. This is in no way a descent into a state of total relativism with regard to the selection of music for church, as an emerging interest in the theological aesthetics of popular music suggests. Different styles of music for worship will no doubt continue to generate strong

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personal reactions, but if underlying aesthetic and cultural assumptions are articulated more explicitly, the business of trying to write a theology of popular music will become a more constructive enterprise.

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