

personal Jesus

how popular music shapes our souls

Clive Marsh & Vaughan S. Roberts



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For Philip and Hannah,
who keep Clive in touch and don't hold back with their opinions;
and for Paul,
who didn't need to share his extensive record collection
and sound system with his younger brother,
but did—generously.

For Mandy, Becky, and Jon
and our shared love of music of all kinds.

contents

Foreword by Tom Beaudoin ix
Acknowledgments xi
Introduction xiii

Part 1 Music and Religion

1. Music in Context: Contemporary Discussion about Religion and Popular Culture 3
2. Explorations in Affective Space: The Magisteria-Ibiza Spectrum 15
3. Acknowledging a Theological Interest: Popular Music from Sin to Sacramentality 29

Part 2 Living by Pop Music

4. Pop Music in the Marketplace 41
5. Pop Music and the Body 57
6. The Tingle Factor: Popular Music and Transcendence Today 77
7. Pop Music, Ritual, and Worship 91
8. What's on Your iPod? Classics, Canons, and the Question of What Matters 109

Part 3 Pop Music and Theology

9. The Discipline of Listening: How (and Why) What We're Doing with Music Matters Ultimately 123
10. Three Steps to Heaven? On Negotiating Meaning between Popular Music and Christian Theology 139
11. Embodied Social Rituals: Revisiting Theology through Popular Music 163

A Programmatic Postscript: Practical Consequences for Church,
Academy, and Daily Living 183

Notes 191

Bibliography 211

Subject Index 225

Music Index 233

foreword

One of the most fundamental experiences of human life in almost any culture is music's power to structure personal and social identity and relationships. There are special reasons for this to be true in contemporary technological societies, where musical invention and enjoyment is notably diffuse and influential in everyday life. This is so on a micro level, when people can personalize their favorite music electronically, listening in privacy throughout their day. It is also true on a macro level, with the profusion of concert and festival culture, from public minstrels on street corners and in subway stations, to larger concerts and multiday festivals, all of which show every sign of increasing their place in the soundscape that arranges everyday life for a majority of the world's privileged people.

Music, especially that music disseminated “popularly” through electronic media platforms of internet, film, and television, is a fundamental palette for contemporary sensing, for negotiating what is real. Popular music is that color wheel in relation to which people identify those claiming powers around which they orient their lives. The experience of those who enjoy music, inadequately called (and sometimes dismissed as) “fans,” is a significant frame for holding whatever people come to call religious or spiritual.

Clive Marsh and Vaughan Roberts are on the leading edge of research that makes theological sense of popular music. With *Personal Jesus*, they show how important it is for theologically minded people to take seriously the concerns of fans, as those active listeners experience the music that they love, that they incorporate into their bodily dispositions and their thinking, and that they ritualize. They show how religious studies is not an optional discourse for comprehending popular music's function in everyday life, but an important partner in an interdisciplinary exploration. They do all this while balancing respect for the impact of music on listeners and the active meanings that fans make of it, on the one hand, and the theological tradition that provides basic concepts for organizing experience, for those related to—but not stuck within—religious communities, on the other.

Much theological research to date in popular culture studies has treated pop culture as a set of “texts” waiting to be read, like minor bibles awaiting postmodern interpreters. I am not the only theologian who has resisted working from the experience and practice of others, having often preferred my own practice instead, but cloaked in and defended by normative-sounding, systematic-theological-aspiring, concepts. Marsh and Roberts rightly criticize my and others’ work, or rather resituate it in its promise and limits, and help change the conversation. If popular music matters, they argue, that mattering has to do with its uses. Even more so, if it matters theologically, that mattering has to do with music’s effect on human beings. In so proceeding, Marsh and Roberts prepare the way for a new style of making theological sense of popular culture. The continued decline of the influence of religious traditions makes this kind of theological study even more imperative. In this situation, Marsh and Roberts show us why studying the lived experience of popular music is an imperative if we want to find out where religion cohabitates with ordinary stuff, more or less openly, today: in the spaces of meaning communicated by music in everyday life.

Tom Beaudoin
Fordham University, New York City

acknowledgments

A book like this takes a long time to put together. Cowritten, long in gestation, a labor of love as well as both an academic project and a contribution to a faith tradition, a project borne of passion to which many other fans of popular music have contributed; it is the result of countless conversations and debates in addition to the hours spent before a screen, poring over books or, yes, just listening. Trying to list all those who should be thanked will prove impossible. But try we must because the material here has been thrashed out formally and informally in many places and contexts.

Chapter 2 began life as the Fernley-Hartley Lecture for 2010. Clive is very grateful for the invitation to deliver that lecture and for the continued support from the Fernley-Hartley Trust as the lecture (first published in *Epworth Review* 37/3, 2010) now finds its way into book form. He has delivered other sections, early drafts of the material presented here, or studies related to it, in many places, including the *Theologische Hochschule*, Reutlingen (Germany); the Conference of the Austrian Methodist Church (Vienna, June 2010); the Institute for Theology, Imagination and the Arts at the University of St. Andrew's, Scotland; the Leicester Cathedral theological discussion group; the 2011 Christian Congregational Music conference at Ripon College, Cuddesdon, Oxford; the Society for the Study of Theology (SST) Theology and Arts Seminar (York 2012); and Hinde Street Methodist Church (one of the Hugh Price Hughes Lectures for 2012). He is grateful to Michael Nausner, Gavin Hopps, David Monteith, Monique Ingalls, Ben Quash, and Sue Keegan Von Allmen for their initiative and support in making such opportunities possible.

Vaughan has delivered early drafts of ideas and material presented here at the British Sociological Association Sociology of Religion Study Group; the Institute for Theology, Imagination and the Arts at the University of St. Andrew's, Scotland; and with churches in the Warwick Team Ministry. He is grateful to Timothy, Beth, and Isabel Hart-Andersen for sharing their road trip across twelve states (and five national parks) of the USA in 2009 when we first tried out our music survey.

We have both presented at the Music and Religion consultation of the American Academy of Religion and at the UK-based international Religion and Popular Culture Network, both groups being important channels of support for our work and reflection.

No less significant are long-suffering local groups and congregations who have been willing to endure musical experimentation at various times. Clive wishes to thank churches in the Rotherham and Leicester Trinity Circuits of the Methodist Church, and the community at the Queen's Foundation Birmingham for their forbearance and participation. Vaughan wishes to thank the Parish of St. Thomas on the Bourne, Farnham; the University of Bath and Christ Church, Bath; the Benefice of Chewton Mendip, Litton and Ston Easton; the Collegiate Church of St. Mary and the Warwick Team Ministry; the Dioceses of Guildford, Bath and Wells, and Coventry.

More informally, though just as vitally, we have each enjoyed sometimes long-standing, often intense, discussions with friends and relatives far and near about music, religion, meaning, theology, and daily life—all of which have fed into the pages that follow. In no other order than alphabetical, we thank: John and Mary Adams; Terry Babbage; Simon Ball; Christopher Booker; Emma Carney; Barry Chapman; Elain Crewe; Rachel Eddyshaw; Ken Garrett; Ian and Rachel Gaubert; Chris and Nicky Gladstone; Ali Harris and Nick Pilkington; Nick and Ros Henwood; Chris and Jan Herbert; Andrew and Sarah Hindmarsh; Eleanor Jackson; Jonathan Kerry; Chris Leyton; Hannah, Jill, and Philip Marsh; the May family; Doreen Mills; Keith and Susan Mobberley; Michael Nausner; Andrew Northcott; Ellen and Steve Price; Becky, Jon, and Mandy Roberts; Cait, Francis, and Timothy Roberts; Penny and Chris Roles; Chris Shannahan; Alison and David Sims; Alison Skinner; Chris Smaling; Nicky Sorsby; Gina Southey; Graham Sparkes; Caroline and William Waldegrave; Sophie Waring; Martin Wellings; Chris and Trevor Wheatley; Hazel and Nick Whitehead; Jakob Wolfes; Isobel Woodliffe; and Catherine Wright. Vaughan would also like to record his abiding gratitude to Eira Roberts who encouraged him in his early years to listen to The Beatles, the Dave Clarke Five, and other bands, and who retained an abiding love of popular music until her death during the writing of this book.

On a practical note, Clive also thanks Michelle Bennett, Kathy Springthorpe, John Tompkins, and Lindsey Ball for help with processing some of the software and paperwork behind the book. We both also express our sincere gratitude to Rob Johnston and Bill Dyrness, as series editors, and to Bob Hosack and the team at Baker for taking our manuscript on and seeing it through to publication.

introduction

This book is a theological exploration of the contemporary cultural significance of popular music. It examines what popular music does *to* people and what people do *with* popular music through the kinds of music they listen to and the way they listen. It offers interpretations of what is going on and concludes with some suggestions regarding how music illustrates what popular culture generally is doing in Western society today.

The book is designed to be used by those who teach and study at college, seminary, or university to think about and explore how and why music is used as it is today. But we hope it will not be confined to classroom use. It can be used in the living room too—by any lover of music who wants to enjoy even more the music they listen to, by thinking about just *how* important it is to them (and why). It contains the fruits of some original research undertaken in North America and the United Kingdom (UK), where we surveyed people about their musical listening habits.

The book is written by two music lovers, neither of whom is a professional musician or has anything to do with the music industry. When it comes to music itself, we are amateurs. Our professional competencies are in education and religion. But our professional and personal experience of music and engagement with music over many decades have shown us that we cannot understand who we are, who we relate to, and what is happening in our fields of work and study without understanding popular culture and music's place within it. Whenever we have found people speaking of personal development, human growth, emotional intelligence, spirituality, coping strategies, meaning-making, experiences of transcendence, or sheer enjoyment of life, then music has not been far away. If we were not music lovers, we might not have chosen to write a book. But we would still need to wrestle with music's contemporary role because it is simply *there*, provoking and inspiring people, turning people on, providing emotional satisfaction, giving words to use on important occasions, structuring people's diaries, supporting political campaigns, helping people pass the time, accompanying people in their domestic tasks, filling in the

potentially embarrassing silences in restaurants, and driving people to despair in supermarkets and department stores.

Our focus is on the active use of music: Why do people *choose* to listen to particular music? Why do they *choose* to listen to it in particular ways? We have not neglected to consider evidence of what music may be doing to people without their knowing it, and we have consulted the results of research conducted in such fields. But our purpose is to tease out what people are doing with their *conscious practice*—whether or not they are fully aware of the significance of their action or of the multiple ways in which their practice can be analyzed and illuminated through such analysis.

In order to understand better what popular music is doing, we had to dip our toes into many disciplines: sociology, psychology, cultural studies, media and communication studies, musicology, and anthropology. The primary discipline from which we come, however, is religion, within which we have received training in biblical, theological, literary, historical, and pastoral studies. It could be said that we are submerged in the study of religion (from insider and outsider perspectives) while we are only toe-dipping in others, and we need to accept this. But we must quickly add that to write this book we have had to surface and get out of the water (of the study of religion) in order to take a dip in other pools. We have moved well beyond our comfort zones. Others will need to judge whether we have become multidisciplinary enough to do justice to our subject matter. But even though we have adopted a multidisciplinary approach, we have to come clean too: we are interested throughout in what, if anything, contemporary popular music and its reception has to do with religion today. Our purpose is not simply to use (i.e., abuse) other disciplines to enable us to say what we want to say anyway. We have been listening to music, its recipients/users, and people from many different perspectives who, like us (though from different disciplinary perspectives), are trying to work out what's going on. That said, we are looking for a theological return here. If music is really as important as music fans suggest—in the statements they make and the behavior they display—then theology as a discipline needs to be interested.

We accept that the users of this book are quite likely to be studying courses in religion or theology, and possibly primarily in Christian seminaries/colleges or taking Christian theology courses. Yet our sincere hope is that anyone interested in the interface between religion and popular culture might find this book helpful. It is designed to give the reader plenty of material to work with and react to. You need not be identified as “religious” to use or benefit from it. Our hope is that the book will stimulate you to think through your music-listening habits to see (if you *are* religious) how your music habits do or do not mesh with your religious practice, or (if you are *not* religious) whether you have any religion-like music-listening habits on which it might be interesting to reflect further.

First let us state what we are *not* doing in this book, then what we *are* doing. We are not focusing on *religious* music in general or Christian music in particular. We are not focusing on what religious people are doing with music generally. Nor are we making a claim that, in what we explore in the book, we are uncovering a form of implicit or vicarious religion. We do make comparisons between music-listening habits and religious practice, and suggest where lyrics or the way music is performed, sold, or used might have religious allusions; when we do so, our claim is that we are using a lens to interpret what is happening more generally in society. We are not saying that such music *is* religion, or that its listeners *are* engaging in religious practice without knowing it.

The purpose of the book is thus to explore music-listening habits in the widest range possible, ensuring that a religious studies perspective is part of the mix. Let us state our basic contention: *Ensuring the critical study of religion in relation to how people listen to contemporary popular music will foster appropriate understanding of the music itself. It will help us understand how religions do (and must) work in society today. More fully exploring the function of music as a form of popular culture will be good for society as a whole.*

Whether or not you use the book in conjunction with a formal course of study, we want to encourage you, the reader, to think critically (i.e., analytically and creatively) about your music-listening habits. What do you listen to? When? For what purpose? How?—on an MP3, a computer, a sound system? Who do you listen with? How much live music do you experience? Do you play music yourself?

We are not intending to explain away your enjoyment of music or make it any less enjoyable. Our purpose is not to kill an enjoyable pastime through unnecessary analysis or overanalysis! On the contrary, our intention and hope is that you will enjoy your music listening all the more. By understanding more about your music habits and the context in which they occur, you may find that you are opened up to more and different music, prepared to think in a fresh way about how you discover or construct the beliefs you have or commitments you hold. That is what this book aims to achieve and why it is also a work of theology. Whether or not you participate in any religious practices or hold to any theistic philosophical viewpoint, this book will at least encourage you to think about the values or narratives that you live by and how those scripts interact with the way you consume music as part of popular culture.

part 1

music and religion



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music in context

Contemporary Discussion about Religion and Popular Culture

We all used to listen to a preacher every Sunday; the human need for that kind of storytelling does not go away. It's up to writers and journalists to fill the gap.

Malcolm Gladwell, writer¹

It is a nice thought that you might be able to listen to lots of popular music and call it “work.” That is what popular music critics do for a living. Of course, they would quickly point out that they must listen to a lot of dross in the process of discovering the next big hit or an emergent new band or genre. It is a nice thought, too, that you might listen to popular music while knowing that it contributes positively to the shape of your life. Perhaps popular music develops or supports your spirituality even while giving you a good time. Perhaps it influences your politics or at least gives a way of proclaiming publicly the political views you have. Perhaps it somehow gives meaning to your life or helps you figure out what, if any, meaning you think life has.

Yet popular music may do none of these things. Some philosophers, theologians, and religion scholars—especially those trying to be fashionable and in tune—and even some cultural critics might want to *think* that it does such things. But perhaps popular music really is just for fun. Perhaps people consume popular music in the same way that they buy socks. Perhaps buying a CD or downloading an album is a feel-good action that has a temporary effect and no

more. Through their choice of music, consumers may simply be consciously escaping everyday life or managing their moods.

There's a Lot of It Around

The scale on which people listen to music across the Western world deserves attention. As Adrian North and David Hargreaves have tellingly observed, “The UK spends more annually on music than on water supply.”² Daniel Levitin similarly reports of North America: “Americans spend more money on music than they do on prescription drugs or sex, and the average American hears more than five hours of music per day.”³

This mass consumption pertains to many different kinds of music. But only if all music is deemed mindless escapism can this large-scale consumption be considered wastefulness or avoidance of life. Without making any assumptions or judgments about good music or bad music, high or low culture, it is clear that such consumption might well be doing something to and for people, even if this is only keeping people happy. That may be no bad thing. But it is worth exploring *how* music is doing this and what other functions it has. Here is where this present book fits.

“Music has always had an association with the numinous and has been commonly put to ritual use.”⁴ “With regard to mood management it goes almost without saying that, like everyone else, adolescents will use music to achieve or alleviate particular moods.”⁵ Such scholarly statements stand alongside the many anthologized quotations from great and good people reminding us of music's importance. We can head back to the Reformation and hear Martin Luther's placing music alongside theology as a gift from God: “I have no pleasure in any man who despises music.” The atheist Aldous Huxley declares, “After silence that which comes nearest to expressing the inexpressible is music.” We may agree with jazz saxophonist Charlie Parker that “music is your own experience, your thoughts, your wisdom. If you don't live it, it won't come out of your horn.” There is plenty of floating testimony to the function and significance of music. Luther and Huxley did not have post-1950s popular music in mind; hence one of the matters we need to address in this book is whether such positive statements about music can potentially apply to any type of music. Our simple opening observations are these: (1) There is a lot of music around. (2) People use music for lots of reasons and gain much from it. Yet there is also a question: Can popular music possibly have a function similar to the religious or classical forms more readily associated with being cultured, being educated, or fostering personal and spiritual development?

The practice of listening to popular music takes its place within a whole range of contemporary activities that cluster under the umbrella of “popular culture.” Along with watching television and films, playing video games, and doing and

watching sports, listening to popular music is something a lot of people spend a great deal of their time doing. All of these practices merit close scrutiny. As for music, whether listening is a conscious and active practice (choosing to turn on a radio or MP3 player, listen to a CD, or attend a live concert), or a more incidental activity (background music while shopping or eating in public), listening to music is an everyday occurrence. As such, it falls within the purview of what scholars of religion and culture need to address if we are to understand how religions function today. Moreover, if religions are in decline in the West, then (in so-called secularized times) it is important to scrutinize any practice that can seem religion-like to see if it is functioning *as* religion or *in place of* religion. If so, a further question remains: What has happened to metaphysics and to God? To demonstrate that social practices are religion-like merely shows that such practices are *functioning* as religion functions. It says nothing about the belief structures upon which specific religious traditions depend.

In using contemporary practices of music listening as an extended case study, this book contributes to the growing literature on the relationship between popular culture and religion and assesses the significance of its findings for Christianity and for Christian theology (see part 3). We focus on Christian theology because of our interests as authors and because speaking of religion in general terms only is impossible. After all, religions are specific, even if they change and are changeable to some degree. But we must undertake some general inquiry too. We dare not draw specific conclusions too hastily if we are to let contemporary practices speak to us. We need to ask what contemporary Western citizens *actually* do. Before that, however, we need to be clear about what work has already been done in religion/theology and popular culture (specifically regarding music). We need to delve into many other disciplines in search of material that will inform and illuminate—even explain—what we find. But for the moment we need to see what is around in religious studies, theology, and the sociology of religion, explorations within which our own study can find its proper place.

Bread, Circuses, and Popular Songs

The first recorded use of the phrase “bread and circuses” is attributed to the Roman satirist Juvenal (ca. 50–ca. 128 CE), who referred to the way the general populace can be easily bought off, or become preoccupied, with simple pastimes, as a way of being distracted from more important matters.⁶ Juvenal was concerned that politicians were offering bribes—like giving candy to children—to deflect the people’s interests from politics. The recipients, caught up in mindless activities, would thus neglect their public responsibilities. Switch to the present, and we hear echoes of the same concern as observers declare that popular culture numbs people; it lures them away from life’s monotony. In

the same way that Karl Marx called religion “the opium of the people,” popular culture is a drug that draws people away from the task of changing the world. Rather than being a helpful escape, all it does is feed an addiction—to more and more of the same—inviting people to step onto the path to hedonistic self-interest. Popular culture is produced at the instigation of wealthy, devious impresarios, or big businesses, who make money off unsuspecting victims by feeding them lazy, cheap thrills that seem to satisfy but do so only temporarily and not in any really meaningful way. So some say.

Such opposition to popular culture and its dangerous impact has deep and influential scholarly roots in the modern period. Theodor Adorno (1903–69) is perhaps the writer cited most often with regard to such a line of thinking. In a series of essays written throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Adorno launched a fierce attack on popular music and on “the culture industry” for promoting mass standardization under the guise of fostering individuality.⁷ Rather than encouraging listeners toward independent enjoyment of music and its potential depths, popular music merely lured people into vacuous repetition of standard formulas. It numbed them into mass groupings and stifled individual creativity.

To the “hypnotizing effect of mass culture” and the stifling of individual creativity, Kelton Cobb adds three further features of the Frankfurt School’s opposition to popular culture: “the affinity for kitsch,” the commendation of the avant-garde, and the preference for folk art over mass culture.⁸ Kitsch as “garish, pretentious, or sentimental art,” and “sugary trash,” in Adorno’s words,⁹ demands too little of the viewer or listener and numbs the imagination. Avant-garde art, by contrast, wakes people up. And folk art carries with it an authenticity that cannot be reflected in the technological productions of mass culture. With respect to popular music, these views led Adorno to reject any form of music that is blatant in its sentimentality or nostalgia, is too easy to understand, or fails to demonstrate a raw authenticity.

Adorno presents an important line of argument. Though ultimately concluding that there is a “surplus of condescension” in the Frankfurt School’s approach to popular culture, Cobb recognizes the dangers of too hastily dismissing their views as “shrill and elitist.”¹⁰ This is reflected in music studies too. In 1990, Richard Middleton observed that there are flaws in Adorno’s approach but that interpreters need to understand both his method of understanding music and his historical location rather than simply dismissing him “as an embittered elitist pessimist.”¹¹

We agree with Cobb and Middleton. Whatever may be said about the context out of which Adorno and his Frankfurt colleagues wrote (opposition to Nazism), or of the privileged intellectual milieu out of which their thinking emerged, their critique remains potent. Having to work at music can be much more rewarding than being presented with wholly undemanding listening, which becomes tedious after multiple auditions. Furthermore, technology has had a

huge impact on music by facilitating its mass production and distancing hearers from the original creators. Authenticity can too easily be compromised when the skill and creativity of those who compose and create music is filtered through multiple layers of technological processing to serve the desired market-driven needs of financial backers. These critical observations should not be overlooked.

That said, Adorno's criticisms do not always hit the mark with how much popular music (indeed much music) actually works. For one thing, repetition is an important feature in all music, within a single piece, in the act of playing (practicing) and in the act of listening. To be critical of popular music's repetitiveness fails to respect this feature of music per se and by extension disrespects ritualistic dimensions of human life more generally. Middleton's point about understanding Adorno's "immanent method" for understanding music ("the 'truth' of a work is to be found within the work itself")¹² is also well made. But as Middleton explains, though Adorno's criticisms may hit the mark with Tin Pan Alley music of the 1930s and 1940s, they do not really do justice to the complexity and diversity of "the entire musical production-consumption process" as it has developed. As we shall see, the move to a greater respect for the participative nature of music consumption—according to which a contemporary listener (of all forms of music) is not to be regarded as merely a passive, numb consumer—substantially qualifies Adorno's critique. Furthermore, we need to consider the *positive* impact of technology upon music, both in terms of the music created (e.g., by electronic means) and technology's role in disseminating music.

It is clear, then, that within current academic discussion of the interplay between theology or religion and popular culture, substantial criticisms of popular culture are possible and perhaps necessary. At the same time, we should not permit those criticisms to have the last word. Whatever the dangers of popular culture, there has been such a shift—in the way popular culture works, in the way popular arts and media are produced and consumed, and in the context where reception of such arts and media happens—that it is vital for these to be respected within theology/religion and popular culture discussions.

From Mass Culture to Pop Culture

Three important conceptual developments that affect our understanding of the relationship between religion/theology and popular culture form frameworks that take us beyond Adorno and the critical assessments of his work.

The first of these is the shift from mass culture to pop culture. Middleton logs "three 'moments' of radical situational change" in the development of Western music history over the past two hundred years: the "bourgeois revolution," the onset of mass culture, and the emergence of pop culture.¹³ It is the shift from the second to the third moment that we must note here, while Adorno's critique of popular music applied largely to Middleton's second moment. This

means that we are in a different place from Adorno when looking at popular music's relationship to theology and religion. By "mass culture" Middleton means "the development of monopoly-capitalist structures" and "an emerging American hegemony" as music became internationalized and its consumption more standardized across the West.¹⁴ In the third moment—the emergence of pop culture—Middleton observes that while the global reach of the music business continues, "the existing monopolistic cultural formation both confirms itself and, at another level, becomes noticeably fissured, through the development of an assortment of transient subcultures."¹⁵ These developments are allied to changes in technology and production, as well as linked to groups' identity formation, especially the emergent youth market. In other words, widespread expansion of music consumption happened in the 1950s and 1960s, with global aspirations on the part of the music business, while the seeds of diversification in music taste and styles were sown, which came to fruition later. In the 1950s, pop music culture may have appeared to be largely about rock 'n' roll. Yet by the end of the twentieth century, rock, folk, punk, heavy metal, hip-hop, garage, country, and many other types of music all had their market niches.

Middleton acknowledges that the moments he identifies are economically driven. But he cautions against making easy assumptions about causal links between economic factors and musical developments. In other words, one cannot control how music is understood and received simply by demonstrating how it is produced and marketed. The economic factors must not be overlooked, for at times they may account for why so many people know, and can get hold of, particular music in the first place. But they cannot of themselves always explain how and why music works.

For this book, we must look at what was happening in the world of religion (and in Christianity in particular) during this time in the West. The shift from mass culture to pop culture in popular music occurs alongside a major leap in the longer, more gradual process of secularization, which has been happening over two to three hundred years.¹⁶ As now widely recognized, though the Enlightenment was not itself a movement hostile to religion, it did set in motion a process of "turning to the subject" and toward the dominance of rationality in academic inquiry. Human experience, and the capacity of human reason to understand that experience, became central to intellectual endeavors. In the long term, this could not do anything but undermine the established authorities in intellectual and cultural life, especially the authority of the Christian church.

Move forward to the period after World War II and the rise of pop culture just sketched, and we find secularization accelerating across Western culture. Many scholars have mapped this and theorized about it, and some continue to support a version of the secularization theory, which says that religion will continue declining until it is no longer a major part of Western cultures or needed by them.¹⁷ Whatever we make of these reasons and projections, for our purposes it is undeniable that Christianity underwent a major challenge to its

intellectual credibility and cultural significance across the West in the second half of the twentieth century. In this context Middleton, a musicologist, observes:

The thrust of modernization—involving the breakdown of traditional frameworks of meaning, the growing crisis of traditional socializing institutions (family, church, school), the secularization and deritualization of life—has resulted in an increasing stress on the sphere of culture, and especially popular culture, as a primary site for the interpellation of subjects.¹⁸

In and through popular culture, Middleton observes that people are questioning meaning and explanation. However, popular culture is tangled up with commerce and entertainment, so we cannot always easily see how this is happening, what value systems are being adopted, what moral choices are being made. But it is essential when human inquisitiveness occurs in a new place—displaced from institutional settings such as the religious—that all disciplines contribute to working out what is going on. Our task is not to identify the obviously religious in secular sources. Nor is it to claim in any simple way the religion-likeness of secular practices in the world of popular music.¹⁹ Our point is simply to notice the cultural displacement of meaning-making from identifiable religion. Religions continue to do their work but have no monopoly on meaning-making or truth-seeking. Our task is to examine what we are to do when folk culture and entertainment (which in the past would have been more clearly identified as religious practice) are more clearly detached from religion, while sometimes serving a similar function. This is our context. Pop culture is that important.

From a Transmission View to a Ritual View of Communication

Understanding the relationship between religion/theology and popular culture must address the second of the three important developments: the shift that has occurred in understanding how communication works. The shorthand version of this shift states that we have moved from a transmission view of communication to a ritual view. A transmission view suggests that communication is about imparting, sending, passing on information to others.²⁰ As James Carey states, “The center of this idea of communication is the transmission of signals or messages over distance for the purpose of control.”²¹ When applied to religion, such a view focuses on beliefs as held by individuals: the convictions held, and to be held, by people who come within a message’s reach. It becomes important for communicators to get the message across and for recipients to show that they have heard by demonstrating their belief in what they have been told. When related to the world of music, such a view of communication puts great emphasis on a composer or lyricist. The assumption at work here is that a songwriter wants to get something across to a listener. In the case of popular music, the application of a transmission view of communication inevitably

places emphasis on lyrics alone. Thus, despite the fact that we are dealing with music, lyricists are seen only as poets, and it is through words that they communicate their message.

This surely is not the case for songwriters past and present. In the case of songs, words matter. But they do not matter equally for all songwriters. Some songwriters seek to be poets; many do not. As Barry Taylor rightly says, “With pop music, the meaning of a song is not found exclusively in the lyrics; it is also found in the emotional arc the song creates.”²² In addition, instrumental music may not have any clear message to communicate. Focusing wholly or primarily on a composer’s or songwriter’s intentions may be a mistake when it comes to understanding how music works.

The transmission view of communication, then, though dominant in Western culture, does not tell the whole story. A ritual view of communication is also needed. As Carey explains, “In a ritual definition, communication is linked to terms such as ‘sharing,’ ‘participation,’ ‘association,’ ‘fellowship,’ and ‘the possession of a common faith.’”²³ Mention of “faith” in that definition already indicates how this view is applied to religion. Carey continues: “This definition exploits the ancient identity and common roots of the terms ‘commonness,’ ‘communion,’ ‘community,’ and ‘communication.’ A ritual view of communication is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs.”²⁴ Strikingly, Carey counts the ritual view as older than the transmission view. Thus, though the transmission view may now be dominant in the West, it is a modern view, riding on the back of technological developments in the field of communication, the increased capacity to send messages farther and more effectively. The ritual view focuses more on the relationship between communication and the culture of a *gathered* community. Much greater emphasis is placed on embodiment and body language, drama, visual elements, and use of space and time. Not surprisingly, this ritual view of communication, when applied to religion, merely highlights what has long been going on in worship and liturgy.

To speak in any unqualified sense of moving *from* a transmission view of communication *to* a ritual view is misleading on two fronts. First, before the modern period, the ritual view was already predominant as a practice.²⁵ To imply that the ritual view is something new is unhelpful. Second, as Carey points out, though the ritual view needs to be rediscovered, we cannot have one view without the other.²⁶ Hence, while Carey clearly favors the ritual view and stresses the significance of understanding communication as culture through this lens, he is not neglecting the transmission element, which is still present.

When applied to religion and to understanding any form of Christianity in the present, the move from a transmission view to a ritual view of communication means there is a shift away from the *content* of what is believed to *how beliefs are shaped* within religious communities. What people believe seems to matter less

than the fact that a believer is a community member and an active participant in that community's ritual practices. Believers receive communication by virtue of their participation. This shift recognizes (again) the importance of religious *practice*, as opposed to simply religious *belief*. Its drawback is that the content of belief (orthodoxy) could disappear from view in a damaging way.

Such a concern lies beyond the direct focus of this book, though it is worthy of note here. This book's interest in popular music's use, in the light of a new emphasis on a ritual view of communication, means that paying attention to the reception of music will entail looking at the communal contexts in which music is heard, listened to, and used. We shall inevitably need to notice the roles played by concerts, fan clubs and fan sites, and festivals; these are examples of settings in which a ritual view of communication enables us to make more sense of music consumption, rather than using a transmission view, which overemphasizes lyrics.

From Production to Reception

The third important development in the task of understanding the relationship between religion/theology and popular culture is the shift from production to reception. Again the heading is shorthand. What we mean here is a shift of focus that has taken place across the humanities and arts, in many different academic disciplines, in understanding how the creation and consumption of works of arts and media products occur and are best to be studied. In the study of literature, for example, there has been a shift of focus from author, to text, and more recently, to reader. It is recognized that a written text, especially a work of fiction or a poem, may not mean simply what its author intended. Great works of written art become significant precisely because they are used and prove to be helpful and inspiring in fresh ways and new contexts. The text, therefore, has a life of its own and works beyond what an author intended. The reader plays a role in seeing what a text might say in one's context. Although a text cannot be made to mean anything a reader intends, the interplay between text and reader is where creative things happen.

Likewise in the study of film, where once the focus was on the director (What did the director *intend?*), there has been a shift over many years to the film *as a film* (What is on the screen? How does a film work as a kind of visual text?), and then in turn to the viewer.²⁷ How much does the viewer need to bring to a film for a film to mean anything? Isn't it true that in the choices a person makes about which films to watch, and through the intentions one brings to the watching, the viewer contributes to what a film achieves in the viewer's life?

It is easy to see how these developments have an impact on understanding the reception of any art form, music included. If we accept that it may be wrong to focus only on lyrics in popular music, then the lyricist has already decreased

in significance to some degree. And when a work is listened to, what form of a song/work are we talking about? There can be a world of difference between a CD/downloaded version of a studio recording and a live performance itself. Popular songs increasingly lack definitive form. For example, though there is the version of Arcade Fire's "Rebellion" on the album *Funeral*, keen fans of the band may quickly claim that you have not really heard the track until you have experienced it live.

The shift from production to reception—a shorthand version of what Middleton calls "the entire musical production-consumption process"—has had a major impact on attempts to grasp how popular music works and what it is doing in Western culture. Discussions of theology/religion and popular culture have described this shift in different ways. In exploring popular music, musicology favors a "textual" approach (the music in itself: Adorno's "immanent method"); cultural studies, however, "have gravitated toward forms of 'consumptionism,' which want to locate the textual moment, the moment of meaning production, overwhelmingly in acts of use."²⁸ The shift is seen in discussions of popular music, where the primary focus is now on use. As with the two views on communication, the point is not that one approach replaces another (author-text-reader and composer-music-listener are always present and worthy of investigation). We must simply recognize that cultural studies approaches are currently dominant in the attempt to understand popular music: what are people actually doing with music, and why?

The tripartite approach to the study of popular culture and its reception appears in many ways in the field of theology/religion. Three examples will suffice. Gordon Lynch uses the approach to especially good effect in his 2005 work *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*. Lynch adopts an "author-focused approach" to reading Eminem, a "text-based approach" to interpreting *The Simpsons*, and an "ethnographic approach" to understanding club culture.²⁹ In this way, Lynch demonstrates how the threefold approach works with different forms of popular culture: music, television, dance. In *Participation and Mediation: A Practical Theology for the Liquid Church*, Pete Ward takes up Brian Longhurst's version of the production-text-audience continuum, breaking down the three moments of the continuum into a five-stage process: (1) the context and methods of production; (2) production of music itself; (3) music as text; (4) identifying audiences; (5) examining patterns of consumption.³⁰ In choosing to apply Longhurst's approach to an example of modern Christian (worship) music, Ward demonstrates that an interpretative framework devised for popular culture generally works equally well for Christian resources. Christian popular culture is thus shown to be not different in kind, but merely one form of popular culture. Finally, Kevin Vanhoozer adapts the same "author-text-reader schema" to enable the contributions to the essay collection *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends* to be located within a clear interpretative framework.³¹ In our view, Vanhoozer rather underplays the significance

of audience and receiver in his use of the schema. Yet it is refreshing to see the tripartite approach being used across the theological spectrum to good effect.

There is widespread recognition of the need for more empirical data—evidence of what actual audiences (be it of film, television, music) are doing, thinking, and believing.³² In this book we cannot yet provide the full findings even of our own research in this area. We shall, however, be in a position to draw on, in a limited way, the music-reception research we have done, as well as ensuring that we draw on the empirical work of others.³³ In exploring how music works, we shall thus be respecting all three “moments” of the production-text-listener continuum.

To Whom Are We Speaking?

In locating this work within the shifts of focus just identified in patterns of interpretation in the arts, we are indicating what kind of contribution we hope to make to theology/religion and popular culture discussion. The fact that we speak of a “theology/religion and popular culture discussion” at all signifies our primary readership: those in the academy who are also contributors to this discussion, and those in ecclesial communities who make use of the fruits of related research and writing. However, because our focus is on actual reception and use of popular music, though without disregarding composition and production, we have other readers in mind. Reception and use cannot be studied without undertaking interdisciplinary work. We therefore write also for those in other disciplines and for everyday users of popular music. If the claim we make is accurate—that much more occurs in the midst of music consumption than meets the eye—then such an argument cannot be left for consideration by theologians, religion scholars, or ministry practitioners alone. The insights that religious studies and theology can bring to the task of analyzing what music consumption is doing in society then become publicly important. These insights cannot be confined to the religious realm.