

# Religious Popular Music: Between the Instrumental, Transcendent and Transgressive

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## Abstract

The use of post-rock 'n' roll popular music genres by religious groups is accompanied by a notable ambiguity: Is religious popular music designed to be an instrumental tool for outreach/evangelism, or does it have an intrinsic value in summoning and exploring the transcendent? The article focuses on the previously rarely explored idea that the instrumental use of popular music in Christian and Jewish settings is often much more important than its transcendent qualities. The importance of the instrumental in Christian and Jewish popular music reveals itself in subtle and not-so-subtle signifiers and practices that point to an anxious desire to discipline music's possible transgressive force.

**Keywords:** *religion and popular music, contemporary Christian music, contemporary Jewish music, transcendence, transgression, instrumentalism, religious experience*

This article discusses how 'transcendent' and 'transgressive', as experiential and conceptual categories, can be used to help understand religious popular music. Given that almost all the concepts that we discuss in this article (including 'religious' and 'popular music') are understood in radically different ways both in everyday life and in scholarly thought, we emphasise the insights that can emerge when they are brought to bear on specific empirical examples.

The transcendent is tricky to conceptualize. In large part, the difficulty lies in whether, and if so how, to develop a concept of transcendence that can appreciate both religious conceptions of transcendence as linked to the divine and non-religious conceptions of the transcendent as something that,

if it exists at all, is ultimately a product of human society and imagination. Religious/theological conceptions of transcendence and the divine consist of everything from treating the divine as totally out of reach of human activity to treating it as immanent to everyday life – with concomitantly different conceptions of the transcendent. Similarly, non-religious or ‘secular’ philosophies range from Hegelian, quasi-mystical notions of ‘spirit’ to a radically positivist suspicion of anything that is not directly observable – with similarly diverse implications for conceptions of transcendence.

The transgressive is similarly knotty. The concept can be used to refer very literally to any activity that breaks a law of some kind, but it also forms the basis for highly theoretical thinking on the experiential limits of human behaviour. Further, the concept of the transgressive has been used to understand a class of activities that, particularly in pre-modern and non-Western societies, temporarily suspend or invert the rules of everyday life. Finally, it is also used to highlight certain forms of art in which social conventions are challenged. The concepts of transcendence and transgression often overlap, but they are not identical; they also often exist in a kind of tension. In this article, the tension between transcendence and transgression is explored in relation to Christian and Jewish religious popular music, defined here as popular music that 1) draws on post-1950s genres of Western popular music, 2) is underpinned by particular religious-cultural industries, and 3) is primarily performed within institutionalized Jewish and Christian contexts.

Religious music of this kind can be marked out as ‘Jewish’ or ‘Christian’ in a number of ways. As has already been explored in detail by a number of scholars, especially with regard to Christian music (e.g. Howard & Streck 1999; Häger 2003; Hendershot 2004; Romanowski 2000; Moberg 2009), such aspects as the content of lyrics, the expressed religious affiliations of the artists themselves and the dissemination of the music through specialized production and distribution outlets are crucial here as possible factors identifying popular music as ‘religious’. While we do not disregard these factors, the main aim of this article is to highlight a rarely explored phenomenon that is particularly characteristic and revealing of the dynamics and tensions within religious popular music: the *instrumental* use of popular musical aesthetics by religious groups. This instrumental use has consequences for the ways in which religious popular music attempts to manage the tension between popular music’s transcendent and transgressive potentials.

We will be tentative and exploratory in our discussion of an aspect of religious popular music that, as far as we are aware, has rarely been

extensively discussed before in scholarly work dealing with the intersection between religion and popular music, more specifically with religious popular music. Further, our discussion of transcendence and transgression also relies on a very broad overview of a complex and somewhat ineffable literature, and should also be seen as tentative and exploratory. Although we draw on empirical examples in support of our argument, more extensive empirical operationalization and testing is needed. Nonetheless, as scholars who are also actively engaged in a variety of religious and musical worlds, our argument also contains an element of critique and provocation, designed to lay the groundwork for further empirical work concerned with ongoing debates on popular music within religious communities themselves.

### **Approaching Transcendence, Religious Experience, and Transgression**

Any religious conception of transcendence needs to be considered in close connection to the intimately related (and equally ambiguous) concept of 'religious experience'. This is usually understood as referring primarily (although by no means exclusively) to various types of instances of 'mystical unity' with the divine (Fitzgerald 2000, 134) or more profound individual experiences of something 'wholly other' (Otto 1958) that is removed from normal everyday existence.

It has become increasingly clear, though, that when the concept of transcendence is understood as necessarily standing in some form of binary opposition to everyday material and embodied existence, it also tends to become essentialized and rooted in some unspecified "'deep' individual feelings' or encounters with an equally unspecified 'numinous' realm – both of which remain ultimately inaccessible, and thus ultimately inexplicable, to any outside observer (Meyer 2008a, 129). Yet most conceptions of transcendence – whether scholarly, theological, or some combination of the two – usually retain some sense (of a phenomenological nature or otherwise) that it is an experience that involves *some kind* of felt sense of separation from everydayness and materiality. Having said that, when the concepts of transcendence and religious experience are used as analytical tools in empirical research, they both need to be approached in terms of 'experiences *deemed* religious' (Taves 2009), i.e. as experiences which gain their particular meanings in particular religious and relational contexts. The anthropologist Birgit Meyer (2008a; 2008b) articulates this approach clearly when she asserts that 'religious feelings are not just there, but are

made possible and reproducible by certain modes of inducing experiences of the transcendental' (Meyer 2008b, 707).

When considering any given set of notions about experiences deemed religious or transcendent in different religious contexts, scholars thus have much to gain from striving to identify and learning to recognize recurring ways of encouraging, organizing (including policing) and inducing such experiences – for example through the use of popular music – within such contexts. In doing so, scholars also need to pay attention to the ways in which acceptable and established modes of inducing and attaining such experiences within particular religious settings often tend to stand in some form of more or less clearly articulated *tension* with those practices which are perceived to constitute or encourage transgressions of these accepted modes. For example, this kind of tension is often in evidence in the search for transcendence within Abrahamic and dualistic religious systems such as Judaism and Christianity, in which the nature of the divine and how to engage with it has always been a subject of debate and controversy. The divine, whether conceived as immanent or as utterly 'other' than or removed from human existence, requires a kind of transcendence to reach (cf. Hartshorne 2005).

Transcendence could therefore generally be conceptualized as a kind of experiential 'logic' (in the Bourdieusian sense). In spite of always being grounded in immanence and materiality (cf. Sobchack 2008, 197), transcendence could be understood in terms of a valency, a dynamic along which *people may desire to travel* in order to attempt to experience a kind of 'weightlessness', a sense that everyday reality no longer applies, a sense that there is something greater than oneself and one's immediate environment (cf. Taves 2009, 66). Such an understanding is also consonant with non-religious practices that see the temporary achieving of transcendence as a goal, including some forms of musical practice. It might prove fruitful, therefore, to situate transcendence amongst a cluster of similar, though not identical, logics. Most important for our purposes here is the *transgressive*.

The concept of the transgressive, as developed by theorists such as Bataille (1985; 1993) and Turner (1974), and as implied in the work of structuralist anthropologists such as Douglas (1984), points towards a form of experience that breaks the boundaries of the everyday. An important point to note is that the *telos* (or perhaps, the *reductio al absurdum*) of attempts at transgression is similar to that of transcendence – the separation of the individual from the world – but that transgression also implies a much stronger, often antagonistic relation to everyday life. Transgression chal-

lenges the systems of thought; the boundaries; the power relations through which the world is constructed. Transgression treats received and accepted rational, instrumental and economic forms of reasoning as contingent, as open to challenge.

In structuralist anthropology, the concept of transgression is closely allied to that of the 'sacred'. Often, the very experience of the sacred implies or requires a kind of transgression in the first place, a passing from the profane world to another one (e.g. Calianu & Burgdoff 2005, 8011). The same is true of transcendence, which also implies a kind of movement out of this world. However, although transcendence and transgression may follow similar logics when it comes to attaining or reaching a sense of the sacred, they should by no means be viewed as identical; at certain points they may even be conflictual and contradictory (cf. Calianu & Burgdoff 2005, 8011). For example, within some Christian settings the transcendent is frequently expressed through a movement away from corporeality. In contrast, the transgressive is often based on *embodied experience*, its boundaries and limitations, as well as on a fascination with the erotic and with death.

Opposed to the logics of the transcendent, transgressive and sacred, we can identify another cluster of logics, grounded on the everyday and the mundane. In creating the mundane world, logics of the economic, the communal and – most importantly for the argument put forward here – the *instrumental* are paramount. We understand instrumentalism in Weberian (1991) and Habermasian (1984) terms as a form of action that is guided by means-end rationality and that disciplines and governs the bounds of desirable outcomes. Inasmuch as the instrumental, as it is generally understood, aims at producing results in the material world, it is by definition separate from the transcendent and transgressive. Viewed more broadly, however, as a form of action that intends desirable outcomes, the relationship to the transcendent and transgressive is much more ambivalent and ironic. The only way to achieve 'pure' transcendence and transgression is to not aim to achieve it in the first place, making transcendence and transgression almost always implicated in instrumental practice in some way.

At this point in our argument we want to shift briefly from the descriptive to the prescriptive, in order to ground what follows in a critical perspective. Our assumption is that the richness of human experience cannot and just as importantly *should not* be confined to any one logic or cluster of logics. Accepting the proviso that functional explanations are problematic, we would nonetheless view these various logics as responding in some way to human need. Based on these assumptions, then, a consideration of transcendence,

and how it may or may not be experienced in religious popular music, needs to take place alongside a wider consideration of other kinds of experience and how they conflict with or support logics of transcendence.

### **The Search for Transcendence in Popular Music**

Western post-1950s popular music and the scenes that reproduce it are characterized by a complex relationship to everyday life. Popular music is both an integral part of the everyday, perhaps even a source of 'empowerment' within the everyday (Grossberg 1984), but it also facilitates moments of 'liberation' from everyday rationality, for example through producing blissful, quasi-erotic experiences of the body, through which space is carved out from the everyday (Reynolds 1990).

In this respect, popular music points towards a transcendence of the everyday. But it is a transcendence that is frequently intimately connected to a logic of transgression that may surpass the transcendent. In its bodily focus and its tendency to challenge boundaries, popular music has often been and often still is a source of transgression. Transcendence was and is an important aesthetic principle in the Western classical music tradition, although mostly in the form of a transcendence based around a desire to transcend the body in order to reach a 'higher' aesthetic realm (Chanan 1994). However, through its earthy, bodily focus, and in contrast to notions of transcendence prevalent in most Jewish and Christian religious contexts, the transcendence of popular music is more firmly rooted within the transgressive. In this respect, popular music's practices often contain a kind of rejection of certain experiential logics.

One example of such practices is the common rejection of the music stand in favour of a practice of apparently unanchored spontaneity in performance. The music stand, and the injunction that 'proper' music should be 'read', took on increasing importance in the post-Enlightenment period (e.g. Frith 1996, 22–7). Contemporary popular music looks back to a pre-enlightenment time, when memory, improvisation and bodily expression were much more important in musical performance. Music stands are rare in non-religious popular music. Performers generally sing and play from memory, even if the music is carefully rehearsed and non-improvised. Occasionally a singer will use a music stand to hold lyrics (for example Michael Stipe of R.E.M often uses one) and a string or horn section backing a group or individual will often use stands. These, however, are exceptions. In contrast, in religious popular music the music stand is much more commonly used, particularly in

Christian worship music and its Jewish analogue. This is even the case with performers who clearly do or at least could know their work by heart. Even a cursory Internet search for images of Christian worship music reveals many pictures of groups using music stands. In short, the music stand disciplines the musical performance, providing a form of 'reassurance' that music's anarchic power will not take over. As such, it takes attention away from the artist him/herself towards a score that is followable, that is available to the audience, and that cannot (and indeed should not) be departed from. While we are by no means arguing that the presence or otherwise of a music stand is an infallible guide to demarcating religious from non-religious popular music, the identification of this apparently minor detail does help in opening up some of the hidden tensions and preoccupations that arise when popular music is drawn on for religious purposes and in religious contexts.

While popular music's logic of transcendence and transgression are more powerfully weighted towards the transgressive, within most forms of Judaism and Christianity logics of transcendence and transgression tend to be more strongly weighted towards the transcendent. That is not to say that these religions cannot be transgressive. While the post-enlightenment period has seen the development of rational, formalized, highly disciplined religious 'mainstreams', it has also seen the development of movements such as charismatic Christianity, Pentecostalism and Hassidism which are rooted in a sustained attempt at reaching the divine through joyous spiritual practices; these are often regarded as transgressive both in their focus on the body and in their marginalization of more ordered forms of religious practice.

The transgressive potential of religion, however, is generally turned in a more transcendent direction, due to a tension within the religious mediation of the divine encounter itself. Worship is always mediated (e.g. Meyer 2008a), and while the divine encounter may be understood to transcend the everyday, it cannot be achieved without the everyday. This raises constant questions regarding that mediation – how much is 'too much', how far does the 'medium become the message' and so on (cf. Hirschkind 2011)? Prayer and worship itself can become an instrumental exercise that 'uses' formulas to reach the divine for specific purposes. Evangelism and forms of religious outreach and education, for example, can be strongly instrumental practices, in which particular techniques are used to bring people into a religious framework (cf. Meyer 2008a; 2008b).

Both popular music and religion seem to be alike in that the transcendent and transgressive are never wholly free from other experiential logics.

This is not necessarily problematic in itself, but it does raise important questions regarding how, whether and what kinds of transgression and transcendence are viewed as needing to be limited and which are viewed as needing to be nurtured in particular religious contexts. Such questions become more urgent when one considers how those forms of transgression that question existing institutions and power relations often tend to become the most limited.

### **Religious Popular Music, the Instrumental, Transcendence and Transgression**

A consideration of how different kinds of experiential logics are enabled and restricted helps in understanding the limitations and potentials that arise when religion and popular music encounter each other. In what follows we are limiting our reflections to the use of popular music for primarily religious purposes in religious contexts and institutions within Judaism and Protestant Christianity, since these are our particular areas of expertise. We are further narrowing our arguments to 'Western' popular music. We are not primarily concerned with the tracing of religious themes in popular music culture, nor in examining the influence of religion on the work of popular musicians. While it is clearly the case that religious themes and imagery have played and continue to play an important part in Western popular music and that certain religious practices have been influenced by popular music culture, *institutionally speaking* the traffic between religion and popular music has largely remained one way. Put bluntly, religious institutions have played only a very limited part in the contemporary development of popular music culture (cf. Romanowski 2000, 104–5).

Since at least the 1960s, Christianity and to a lesser extent Judaism have drawn on popular music for worship, evangelism and outreach through a desire to ensure that they stay 'relevant' through engagement with contemporary culture. As this phenomenon is illustrative of broader processes of religious change, it has also attracted a degree of scholarly attention (cf. Lynch 2010). The engagement with popular music on the part of many religious communities has led to the emergence of highly active and diverse religious music scenes, with their own artists, record labels and media (e.g. Howard & Streck 1999; Moberg 2009). These scenes have sometimes been profoundly influential on religious culture, as in the transformation of evangelical Christian worship music through the influence of organizations such as Hillsong or (in the Jewish case) through songwriters and performers

such as Debbie Friedman and Shlomo Carlebach. Although certain kinds of popular music have been particularly influential, such as 1960s guitar-led American folk music in the Jewish example and soft rock in the Christian one, most non-religious music scenes and artists have engendered Christian and sometimes Jewish analogues (e.g. Hendershot 2004, 52–5).

Yet, with only a handful of notable exceptions (so called ‘crossovers’, such as Amy Grant for example), hardly any of the artists active in religious music scenes have had much impact outside these scenes. Nor have they proved a source of innovation that could feed back into non-religious popular music. The last popular music to have developed primarily within a religious context that went on to have a major impact on non-religious popular music was gospel, which was a major influence on seminal popular musicians such as Elvis Presley and Aretha Franklin. In the African-American community the church is still an important training ground for popular musicians. There are also other music scenes that have a major religious component, including some forms of trance music, reggae, heavy metal and straight edge punk and hardcore, but they generally retain only tenuous and sometimes openly antagonistic relationships to religious institutions. Openly religious artists who contribute to popular music scenes generally try to keep a distance between religious institutions and music scenes.

It is worth noting, though, that Islamic popular music may be somewhat different in this regard. For example, some American hip-hop musicians retain close relationships to African American Muslim organizations such as the Nation of Islam or The Nation of Gods and Earths. The issue of Islamic music also remains marked by the longstanding and still very much ongoing debate as to whether or not music should be viewed as *haram* (i.e. forbidden according to Islamic law) in Islam. As the phenomenon of Muslim popular music primarily stems from a different general social and cultural context, this complicates direct comparisons with Christian and Jewish popular music. Further, the situation of popular music in non-Western countries with a majority Muslim population cannot be directly compared to Western popular music without considerable empirical and conceptual qualification.

In any case, religious music scenes in Western countries generally remain separate from the popular music mainstream. Why is this so? To a significant degree, and particularly in the case of evangelical Christianity, this is due to a widespread suspicion of, and sometimes outright opposition to, many secular popular scenes, such as for example heavy metal, punk or hip-hop. In the case of Christian popular music, such opposition has become institutionalized through the deliberate creation of structures

designed to uphold boundaries against the world of secular popular music on the part of the largely US-based contemporary Christian music industry (e.g. Pauley 2005). Much like producers of 'evangelical popular culture' generally (e.g. Hendershot 2004), Christian popular music producers have often aimed at offering Christian audiences 'safe' or 'Christianized' alternatives to various forms of secular popular music. Another closely related and longstanding central aim (although never particularly successful) has been to deliberately mimic the world of secular popular music so as to be able to 'infiltrate' and transform it, bringing it into alignment with Christian values from *within* (e.g. Hendershot 2004, 13). Although there are variations, on the whole the phenomenon of evangelical popular culture is governed by an expressly *instrumental* approach to popular cultural aesthetics. As Hendershot writes:

In their appropriation of secular forms such as science fiction, heavy metal, or hip-hop, evangelicals seem to say that these forms are not inherently secular but, rather, neutral forms that can be used to meet evangelical needs. Such appropriation elides the historical specificity of popular forms. (Hendershot 2004, 28.)

Very similar observations are also made by Howard and Streck (1999), who argue that the world of contemporary Christian music should be considered a 'splintered artworld' that is governed by three main types of stance on the combination of Christian faith and evangelism with popular music: 'separational', 'integrational' and 'transformational' contemporary Christian music. As convincingly demonstrated by Howard and Streck, contemporary Christian music should thus be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon that encompasses multiple and sometimes opposing stances regarding the degree to which the music should serve instrumental purposes. In the transformational stance music is valued for its own sake as art; this, however, is much less common than the separational and integrational stance, both of which are governed by an expressed instrumental view of music as either a form of evangelistic outreach or an acceptable form of 'Christian' entertainment. Similarly, given that Jewish popular music tends to be produced and consumed within Jewish communal institutions, there are strong pressures to ensure that it stays anchored within a framework in which its Jewish content and purpose remains clear.

As noted, the development of contemporary Christian and Jewish music in the late 1960s and early 1970s was spurred as much as anything by a

desire to make and keep religion 'relevant' in a broader social and cultural environment that appeared to be increasingly marked by a general decline in traditional forms of religion and an increasing focus on the individual. Even if this has had a sometimes transformative, even liberating impact on religious practice and worship (as for example in the development of participatory, gender-inclusive worship in Reform Judaism), the dominant logic clearly remains one of instrumentalism.

Another distinctive feature of religious popular music is the ambiguous dividing line between concert and worship. Concerts of contemporary Jewish or Christian music (often taking place within religious spaces) frequently feature worship-type practices of various sorts, which are also meant to be recognized as such by participants. Here the tacit injunction to feel spiritually engaged can allow an instrumental logic to enter into an apparently aesthetic practice. For example, although Christian popular music concerts resemble 'secular' concerts in most respects, they simultaneously also tend to contain different types of 'church-like' practices and modes of bodily behaviours (cf. Häger 2003, 49–51). Häger (2003) has referred to this as the mixing of 'rock' and 'Christian' repertoires.

At Christian popular music concerts, with a largely and often exclusively Christian audience, it is not uncommon for bands to incorporate short prayers, edifying speeches or the reading of a few Bible passages into their live performances. Another particularly distinctive feature of Christian popular music concerts is the assuming of so called 'praise poses', whereby both artists and audience members raise their arms upwards towards the sky or ceiling as a sign of being engaged in 'praising' God (Häger 2003, 49–51; Moberg 2009, 164). This is a practice common in evangelical, charismatic and Pentecostal worship settings generally. Such mixing of popular musical and Christian repertoires is highly illustrative of the instrumental use of popular music in Christian settings, with the 'Christian' repertoire taking on particular importance as the primary means whereby the music is afforded a necessary 'institutional anchoring' (Häger 2003, 42) as it becomes explicitly connected to institutionalized worship practices found in more conventional evangelical Christian settings. Similar logics can also be found in contemporary Jewish music, where concerts usually take place in institutional settings and the music is implicated in education and consciousness-raising. For example, Jewish community conferences such as Limmud (which take place in over thirty countries), frequently use contemporary Jewish music as a way of binding participants together and raising funds at gala events. The participative 'feel good' nature of the music, together with its 'safety'

as a non-challenging genre, allows it to be used as a way of creating 'peak experiences'.

The contemporary Christian music industry has been particularly successful in creating an entire parallel 'Christianized' popular musical world for Christian youth (cf. Lynch 2010, 552). Through its reworking of secular popular music styles in an evangelical Christian frame, this is a parallel world largely governed by an instrumental idea of popular musical aesthetics (which also has a bearing on the locations and forms in which the music is performed and received). As such, it is also a world that is constantly occupied with policing popular music's transgressive potential. It is not that music has no value in and of itself in most religious theologies – it usually does – but the dominant tendency is to 'use' popular music in certain instrumental ways, as an instrument for certain predetermined 'accepted' purposes.

Ironically, a music that is often produced for evangelistic ends frequently has the opposite effect among non-religious audiences (e.g. Romanowski 2000, 112). However, the widespread dismissal of religious popular music among non-religious popular music fans is unfair to the extent that, lyrics aside, the majority of religious artists are no better or worse than non-religious artists. Religious music scenes do not always produce 'bad' music and should not be dismissed as such. The lack of aesthetic innovation in popular music may also be driven primarily by commercial concerns. It is nevertheless fair to point out that most religious music scenes are usually aesthetically timid and (sometimes openly) parasitic on non-religious popular music (cf. Romanowski 2000, 109). As noted, although religious artists may be highly proficient in mastering musical conventions, they are rarely interested in doing much more than that (Romanowski 2000, 108). There is little idea of an aesthetic 'for its own sake', that would drive innovation. This lack of a theology of the aesthetic is often related to a firm commitment to the 'middle of the road', based on a view of mass culture that seeks the benefits of a mass audience but does not wish to contribute to its development. It is often the case, then, that religious music can come close to a pastiche, conveying the unintended message that religion is actually antithetical to popular music. One example of this is Jewish rap music, which as Kahn-Harris (2009) has argued, is often parodic and jokey, and based on an implicit sense of the 'unnaturalness' of Jews drawing on black music in this way.

### **Probing the Boundaries of the Transgressive**

For all the critical implications of what we have argued so far, however, we do not want to argue that religious popular music is necessarily worthless or that its instrumentalization is its entire meaning. It is undoubtedly true that religious popular music can and does facilitate transcendent experiences that participants understand as divine encounters. Instrumental as certain aspects of religious popular music may sometimes be, it may also be an instrumentalism that 'works'. In any case, religious popular music can at times explore transgressive territory in a more thoroughgoing fashion.

One example of a form of Christian popular music that goes quite some way in affirming the transgressive potentials of its 'secular' equivalent can be found in the phenomenon of Christian metal music. When evangelical musicians appropriated metal music and culture in the early 1980s, thereby creating 'Christian' metal, they did so for expressly instrumental reasons; the basic idea was to be able to evangelize to secular metal audiences in a way and a language that they were deemed to be more perceptive about and able to relate to and understand. Following its diffusion on a transnational scale in the early 1990s, however, the general outlook and ideological character of Christian metal started to diversify. During this time increasing numbers of bands also started to embrace so-called extreme metal styles, such as death and black metal (Moberg 2009, 132–4). Extreme metal, as the term indicates, is generally governed by conscious extremes regarding the 'sonic transgression' (Kahn-Harris 2007, 30) imbued in the music itself, its often radical lyrical subject matter (such as strongly subversive religious themes), its consciously exaggerated aesthetic and the high degree of intensity and physicality that characterizes its modes of performance and appreciation. In spite of this, however, extreme metal is not appropriately characterized as an entirely 'free', undisciplined cultural form. Rather, although extreme metal music and culture sets out to systematically transgress certain key musical and social conventions, at the same time it also produces its own mundane practices that discipline this transgression (Kahn-Harris 2007).

Although it has become considerably more ideologically diverse since the early 1990s, Christian metal on the whole remains marked by instrumental thinking in that both its musicians and its audiences generally still require that Christian metal lyrics convey a clear Christian message and that the music is created and performed by people who are themselves believers (Moberg 2009, 135–46). However, while Christian extreme metal expressly positions itself in binary opposition to secular extreme metal's main transgressive elements – such as its common use of strongly subversive religious

themes and its antagonistic stance towards Christianity in particular – it nevertheless stands out from most other forms of Christian popular music through its rather unreserved appropriation of extreme metal's energetic bodily practices. For example, Christian extreme metal has incorporated typical extreme metal concert practices such as 'moshing'. This term refers to a common practice at extreme metal concerts, whereby a larger group of audience members (sometimes up to hundreds of people), either spontaneously or after being encouraged by the band, form a temporary area called a 'mosh-pit' in which they slam into each other in seemingly violent and uncontrolled ways.

Like most other forms of Christian popular music, Christian extreme metal also typically engages in the conscious mixing of extreme metal and 'Christian' repertoires through a very deliberate re-working and 're-aesthetization' of extreme metal themes and imagery through a Christian frame. However, through having developed its own Christian version of the metal style and aesthetic, and through its almost unconditional appropriation of bodily practices such as moshing, Christian extreme metal concerts at least open up the possibility of getting 'lost' in the music while simultaneously remaining embedded in a wider context that is expressly delineated as religious (cf. Moberg 2009, 163–5). As such, Christian metal could be viewed as an example of an instrumentalism that 'works'; or at least as an example of religious popular music that, while remaining marked by instrumentalist thinking in many respects, still retains the possibility of transgression, and thereby transcendence, through embodied practices.

Religious popular music can also at times escape instrumentalism to challenge and even transgress the boundaries of popular music itself. Let us now consider an example of Jewish popular music that has emerged as a specifically Jewish answer to a specifically Jewish issue. The seven-week period between the festivals of Passover and the harvest festival of Shavuot is known as the Omer. Shavuot is commemorated as the time when the Torah was given at Mount Sinai, and the Omer period is traditionally marked by counting the days as a kind of spiritual preparation to receive the Torah. The Omer is also observed as a period of introspection, solemnity and semi-mourning, partly to prepare for the giving of the Torah and partly to commemorate various disasters that have befallen the Jewish people during this period. During the Omer, observant Jews do not shave, celebrate weddings or listen to instrumental music. In the mid-2000s the African-American Orthodox Jewish rapper Y-Love and the beatboxer Yuri Lane released an album, *Count It*, specifically designed for the Omer.

It contains no musical instruments and the tracks on the album all deal in various ways with the spirituality of the period. *Count It* could well be viewed as the kind of instrumentalist popular music discussed earlier in this paper – as a gimmick designed to make and keep Judaism culturally ‘relevant’. Indeed, its focus on ‘solving’ a particular problem that arises through Jewish law is quintessentially instrumental. At the same time, the album is not reducible to its instrumentalist elements because Y-Love and Yuri Lane are actually taking the wider genre of rap forward, offering new possibilities for the wider genre. They are questioning some of the conventions of hip-hop through avoiding instrumentation and multi-tracking beatbox. But they are offering these possibilities precisely because their principle logic is one that is concerned with Jewish practice. By making their creative starting point a specific form of Jewish practice they are in fact contributing to music generally.

Another example from Judaism illustrates how music can be used in religious settings in ways that at least partly manage to circumvent the limitations characteristic of the types of religious popular music discussed so far: the Hassidic *nigun*. A *nigun* is a repetitive tune, that is hummed or ‘lai laid’, usually without any words. They are crucial to Hassidic Jewish worship, which emphasizes mysticism and the importance of joyful divine encounter. *Nigunim* are often improvised and sung with a kind of ecstatic fervour by Hassidim. They are often popularized by Hassidic Rebbes – the leaders of Hassidic sects – but they can also be adapted from secular, non-Jewish tunes (indeed, in Kabbalistic theology the adaptation of secular tunes is sometimes seen as a way of redeeming the secular).

While *nigunim* are important features of mass Hassidic gatherings, the *nigun* is also featured at the tables of religious Jews at festive meals, turning the mundane act of eating into a mystical event. What is most important about the *nigun* is that it is usually wordless. This is music used – ‘nakedly’ and without apology – to create moments of spiritual transcendence. The lack of words removes one of the key disciplinary forces that can anchor music in doctrine and mundane practice. There is something untameable about the *nigun* that at least opens the possibility of a closer relationship between the transgressive and the transcendent. It may, of course, be a paradoxical transgression that, like many other forms of transgression, reinforces some kinds of boundaries even as it undermines others. *Nigunim* have emerged through a logic that is internal to the Jewish community. They are not based on a desire and anxiety to tame music’s power for Jewish ends, but on a musical development that is embedded in Jewish community and

Jewish concerns. This, then, is a practice that emerged not from an anxious desire to tame the musical, but from a Jewish logic that, at least indirectly, embraces the music's radical potential.

### **Concluding Remarks**

We live in a plural world: one in which religion and popular music form part of a cornucopia of fields, each with their own particular logics. As we have argued in this article, the dominant logic of transcendence within religious popular music is one that is, for the most part, limited. The instrumentalism of religious popular music limits the capacity of religious popular music to fully 'take off'. Further, its logic largely divorces transcendence from transgression. It is a kind of 'safe' transcendence that actively strives to avoid the more 'dangerous', boundary-crossing, uncontrolled, bodily excess that transgression represents.

This is not to say that non-religious popular music is necessarily always transgressive. It depends on scenes and genres. But Western popular music always carries with it an 'echo' of its transgressive potential, sometimes actualized and sometimes not. It is a potential that tends to become actualized when popular music scenes are less concerned about maintaining communal structures and institutions and go through periods of aesthetic innovation. It is the drive to innovate that carries with it the threat of transgression, aesthetic and otherwise. While popular music scenes are more often sites of stability than sites of change, the potential for radical aesthetic innovation and the transgression it can produce is nevertheless ever-present. So it is that the lack of a drive to aesthetically innovate, or at the very least the desire to keep innovation within 'safe' bounds, and the concomitant lack of any pursuit of the aesthetic as justifiable on its own terms, that tends to turn religious popular music away from transgression. This bifurcation of transgression and transcendence limits that transcendence. Such transgression-free transcendence may bring about experiences of rapturous encounter with the divine, but it is still one firmly rooted in worldly, bounded being that does not challenge the arbitrary nature of institutions and structures.

Religion can be, and often is, a force for questioning and relativizing human institutions through rituals that transgress the boundaries of everyday life. Indeed, with regard to Christianity it may be that in the same worship context where transgression is limited through religious popular music, it is enabled through other rituals such as speaking in tongues. It is

certainly true that the mundane logics of stability and community may serve to balance and counteract such transgressive rituals, but in the moment of transgression there is at least the possibility of a realization that the world could be different. Preserving this possibility in religion requires the drive to transcendence to be intertwined with the possibility of transgression.

Paradoxically, however, preserving the radical possibilities of transgression and transcendence might best take place when religion and popular music are separate from each other. Western popular music requires a certain kind of instrumentation, stage management and infrastructure. When bound up with religious institutions and religious agendas, this can have the effect of reinforcing instrumentalism and preventing transgression. A more powerful kind of transcendence/transgression may be difficult to achieve when Western popular music is brought into Western religious institutions. In short, it may be argued that popular music does not appear to 'help' religion to (re-)discover its own transgressive tendencies. Rather, it is through the search for the transgressive/transcendent itself – when left to pursue its own logic – that makes available a more profound source of religious experience. Just as popular music's power is most profound when it follows its own logic, so it may be, tentatively speaking, that religion's power is similarly to be found within itself. But this, of course, is a claim that would need to be more thoroughly empirically substantiated.

It is possible that both religion and popular music can discover a *similar* process of transcendence/transgression that is *similarly* deemed divine, similarly wordless and powerful, shocking, radical and subversive. To be sure, this perspective raises many theological issues that are beyond the scope of this article. Some theologies would claim that the divine encounter can only be achieved through only one kind of religious practice and structure. Surely, different religious contexts encourage and make possible a variety of different forms of transcendent experiences and encounters. Similar experiences and encounters may be equally attainable through music and perhaps other 'non-religious' practices too. However, it may be that such experiences and encounters are best achieved when different logics are pursued separately, according to their own priorities.

Our tentative argument in this article has been that the preservation of the full range of experiential logics that human beings appear to require may paradoxically be best achieved when fields are separate from each other. Both fields, religion and popular music, contain complex tensions between the transgressive and the mundane – and both of them appear to deal with

these tensions more effectively and interestingly when the fields are kept separate, following their own logics.

It is not that religious popular music is necessarily of poor quality or simply reducible to instrumental impulses. But religious popular music nevertheless appears somehow stilted, largely unable to lead towards the kind of transgressively-imbued transcendence that can offer a radical alternative to mundane reality frequently sought after by people today. Although our argument here has been primarily philosophical and tentative in character, our aim has also been to highlight a particular tension within religious popular music that could usefully be more thoroughly empirically and ethnographically explored in future studies in this area.

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