

# Introduction to a Forum on Religion, Popular Music, and Globalization

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This issue of the *JSSR* brings together scholars from mass communication, ethnomusicology, religious studies, and the sociology of religion to explore how practices and understandings of religion might be changing in the context of a global, mediated capitalist marketplace. Each of these essays foregrounds music as a particular cultural form with a unique role to play in the maintenance and change of religion's character and practices in the global marketplace. This forum therefore resonates with the forum on religion and place that appeared in this journal last year (September 2005, vol. 44, no. 3), as this set of essays, like that one, seeks to locate the study of religion "outside of scriptures or texts, and to therefore study history, context, and practice," as Elizabeth McAlister wrote in the previous forum (2005:254). Religion, as scholars in the sociology of religion and in religious material cultural studies have pointed out, is about much more than what happens during services or prayer times, and is much more than a set of beliefs or ideological commitments (see, e.g., Ammerman 2006; Hall 1997; Morgan 2005; Promey and Morgan 2001). Religion is lived and embodied. It is not static and it is not only written down, but rather is mobile and anchoring, personal and collective, dynamic and staid. It is also, in many cases, commercialized and global.

Music is only one cultural form that is a part of our commercialized and globalized experiences of religion, however. So why focus on music in a journal widely read by social scientists interested in religion?

Music is a fascinating topic for scholars of religion for many reasons. Music "springs out of the very speech and soul of a person or a community," as Trotter (1987) has written, and has always played an important role in relation to religion and its practices. The Gregorian chant, the Protestant hymn, the Muslim *Madih nabawi*, the Hindu *kirtan*: all offer expressive forms of individual or corporate worship and devotion. Music is evocative and affective, something deeply personal and emotionally connective.

Whereas music is probably the most available and accessible of all art forms, the music of religious rituals and observances is deeply connected to the particular cultural locations in which it originates. Of course, music and cultural products have always traveled from places of origin to new locations. In the current context of globalization, however, transportation technologies and economies of scale have made migration more common, and have also sped up the processes of migration. People now have transnational experiences and identities, never completely leaving their places of origin and taking more of those places with them into their new locations. In this context, listening and performing music from one's place of origin can therefore become a source of comfort, and a source of identification with "home" for expatriates, in a way that other religious practices may not afford. At the same time, global capitalism has transported cultural products to new contexts, meaning that migration is no longer the primary source of goods exchange: the commodity market is. The Internet, the MP3 format, and other new media have introduced the specific music of religious cultures to people who have no immediate connection with a particular music's culture of origin. In this sense, music, as an easily transportable and highly reproducible

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medium, has become a commercialized vehicle that may introduce people to religious experiences not previously available to them—or it can facilitate deeply personal and individual experiences that may or may not be identified as “religious” at all.

In a 1997 article reflecting on participant observation experiences in a variety of contemporary religious settings in the United States, Stephen Warner noted that “music and motion can bridge linguistic and other cultural boundaries,” helping us to “tune in to one another” in important ways (1997:6, 12). Warner notes his surprise at finding so little scholarly research on the significance of music-making in the studies of contemporary religious communities in the United States (see also Wuthnow 2003). This blind spot concerning the role of music in social settings is not unique to the sociology of religion. As cultural studies scholar Jonathan Sterne (2003) mused, just as there was an “Enlightenment” central to modernity, so too was there an “Ensoniment” that encouraged us to think about music and its role in social life in certain ways. As Burnett (1996) argued, one of the difficulties in building theoretical approaches to the role of music in society relates to the ways in which different scholarly disciplines relate to popular music. Communication scholars have had surprisingly little interest in music, Burnett argued, because music crosses various media—radio, cinema, television, records, cassettes, CDs, live performances, and now the Internet—and because mass communication scholars tend to be concerned with the *messages* of communication texts. Ironically, perhaps, some in the fields of musicology, ethnomusicology, sociology, and anthropology have been uninterested in the study of popular music because they view it as mass communication.

Many of the studies of popular music that do exist may be considered a subset of the larger interdisciplinary field of cultural studies. Grossberg (1997:237) suggested that “[c]ultural studies is concerned with describing and intervening in the ways ‘texts’ and ‘discourses’ (i.e., cultural practices) are produced within, inserted into, and operate in the everyday life of human beings and social formations, so as to reproduce, struggle against and perhaps transform the existing structures of power.” In a piece still widely cited among those who study popular music, Simon Frith (1981) argued that most critical accounts of popular music can be related to the mass culture theories of Horkheimer and Adorno (1944), or those of Benjamin (1936). Writing in the shadow of the atrocities of World War II, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Benjamin were convinced that standardization and mass production of cultural forms had trivialized everyday life and that cultural products had lost their critical role in society. Benjamin shared this conviction, yet was especially interested in how certain works of art (particularly in older societies) had come to have what he called an “aura,” encouraging a feeling of awe among groups when they were employed in practices of veneration. Whereas Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s work might be seen as the foundation for contemporary studies interested in the relationship between music and the industries that mass produce and distribute it, Benjamin’s emphasis upon the ways in which art may or may not have an “aura” has inspired a raft of work among scholars seeking to demonstrate the ways in which differing subcultures employ popular cultural forms for their own meaning-making practices (therefore perhaps inscribing an “aura” on popular cultural forms). In recent years, this scholarly bifurcation between focus on the industry and on audience practices has been addressed in the work of those attempting to explore music in relation to both its cultural and economic dimensions. See, for example, Attali’s (1985) work on the way in which sound recordings allow for the stockpiling of musicians’ time and labor; Foreman’s (2002) discussion of the radio play of mainstream U.S. music and marginalization of rap music immediately after the terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11; and Negus’s (1999) study of music genres and the various corporate cultures that mediate between consumers and producers of popular music.

Although they often employ differing vocabularies, cultural studies scholars share with scholars in the sociology of religion an interest in individual and group/subcultural identity, a concern for the operation of power in discourse and practice, a desire to analyze the relationships between and among individuals and various institutions of society, and concerns regarding the role of

culture and cultural products in relation to beliefs and practices. Whereas scholars of religion have long been concerned with the question of whether popular cultural forms “secularize” or “trivialize” religious faith, those in cultural studies would see these questions as related to the highbrow/lowbrow culture debate that tends to favor high cultural forms (e.g., modernist art, gothic architecture, classical music) and denigrate the popular (e.g., angel lapel pins, roadside shrines, the movie *Bruce Almighty*). One of the concerns of cultural studies scholars in recent decades, therefore, has been a desire to reclaim artifacts of popular culture for analysis, exploring the ways in which specific cultural forms are embraced, marshaled, or marginalized by differing societal groups and for different purposes. Rather than positing some cultural forms as good and helpful and others as trivial and banal, therefore, analysis frequently turns on questions such as: “Under what circumstances do people employ cultural artifacts for religious aims, and what difference do these practices make in relation to larger structures of society?” In a culture such as the United States, in which the entertainment industries figure largely into both globally exported and domestically consumed goods, such questions can encompass a fairly wide scope.

Studies of music at the intersection of economy and cultural practice have opened new avenues for exploration among those interested in religion and its interface with cultural products and practices. The study of the contemporary Christian music industry and its music has been a focal point for some (Brown 2004; Gow 1999; Howard and Streck 2004; Viljoen 2006; Young 2005), as has the rise of worship music and the ways in which this music has influenced the Christian music industry and practices in evangelical communities, especially in the United States (Nekola 2005; Lubken 2005). Some ethnomusicologists have explored popular music as an integral part of newer religious and cultural communities, such as the Kwaya community of Tanzania (Barz 2003), the Five Percent Nation offshoot of the Nation of Islam (Miyakawa 2005), and the emergent mix of Protestantism and Rastafari in Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and the United States (Rommen 2006). In my own studies of Muslim rap and Bhangra music, I have been interested in ideological linkages between nation, religion, economy, and practices of self-identification through commodified goods (Clark 2007). This intersection of nation, religion, and ideology has also been explored specifically in Maira’s (2002) study of the support for Hindi nationalism among South Asian immigrants in North America, Grimshaw’s (2002) exploration of country music’s appeals to patriotism among conservative Christian southerners, and Gordon’s (2003) study of the conflict that emerged when an Egyptian Shaabi singer and spokesperson for McDonald’s came under fire for an anti-Israel song he popularized.

The three remaining essays in this forum offer some starting points for the means of exploring the intersection of religion with cultural practices and cultural industries among scholars of the sociology of religion. In the next essay, Gordon Lynch offers a close reading of several of the most influential works in the study of popular music as they relate to alternative religious and spiritual communities, reflecting on his own interviewing experiences among this population in the United Kingdom. He argues that whereas the existing work offers an important foundation for the study of popular music in relation to the formation of religious and spiritual identities, more work is needed in the area of reception of music and the integration of music into everyday life. In the essay that follows Lynch’s, Katherine Hagedorn answers Lynch’s call for listening to the listeners, exploring how listeners “are reinvesting these objectified, commodified, recontextualized aural experiences with sacred meaning,” as she writes. Maybe people can transcend despair through this music, she suggests.

Music is not always a gateway to greater understandings and appreciations of cultures beyond one’s own, of course. Music can also be a vehicle for the expression of fervent nationalism, a rallying cry that unites one ethnic group against others (Hajduk 2003). In today’s pluralistic religious landscape, this role of popular music and its relation to religion also cannot afford to be overlooked. Katherine Meizel’s exploration of “God Bless the U.S.A.” and “God Bless America,” two songs often employed as patriotic anthems, considers how music with religious referents has provided a theme song for U.S. nationalistic sentiments.

Western capitalism's marketplace increasingly defines the context in which such ethno-religious conflicts, exchanges, and experiences take place. As such, it seems wise to reconsider the notion that the embrace of popular cultural expressions of religion is a sign of a shallow faith. As Hendershot has argued in her examination of the conservative Christian cultural products industry, "to purchase Christian products (in the United States) is to declare one's respectability in a country in which people are most often addressed by mass culture not as citizens but as consumers" (2004:30). Considering the role of popular cultural industries in relation to religion, therefore, not only enables us to think about the personal experiences of religion, but also about the status of religion in relation to national identity and citizenship. The marketplace and the media, as institutions of culture, are central locations for struggles over power and definition involving religion, and promise to remain so for the foreseeable future.

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