

“You Don't Get Away That Easy:” Rethinking the ‘Secular’ in Secular Music

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Abstract

The dichotomy of the ‘sacred’ versus the ‘profane’ continues to inform discussions of religion and public life. In terms of pop culture, this takes the form of a distinction between the mainstream and Christian music industries, relegating ‘spiritual’ music to the latter category and dismissing any reference to spirituality in mainstream music as demonstrating a ‘weak religiosity.’ I argue that an examination of references to spirituality in song lyrics, complemented with an analysis of artist interviews, reveals that music which we deem ‘secular’ is not characterized by absence of attention to spirituality, but rather contains a wide range of approaches to the transcendent, echoing Charles Taylor’s discussion of the ‘nova effect.’ In this study, I draw on Taylor’s *A Secular Age* in a review of songs from the best albums lists of 2017, as provided by *Rolling Stone*, *Pitchfork*, *New Musical Express*, and *Billboard*, focusing on references to spirituality in song lyrics. I argue that a re-examination of lyrics may lead us from skepticism toward spirituality in pop music to anticipation of spiritual encounters and reflections by musical artists of all genres.

Kew Words: music, sacred, secular, spirituality

The day I first happened upon the album *Humans* by Bruce Cockburn proved to be a turning point for me in terms of my encounters with music and spirituality. What was most significant to me was the place in which I encountered it: a Bible bookstore. I had already passed through several stages of my life’s musical journey. Beginning with my first love, the harmonies of the Beach Boys, I had progressed through the mail-order record club stage, and developed a fondness for Cheap Trick, Prism, and Trooper. But then I answered an altar call at a Full Gospel Business Men’s Fellowship meeting, which led me to reconsider my 42 record albums as evil. Even “O Canada” came under suspicion. I had heard of backwards masking, and so my friend and I listened to a few tracks which sounded like they might contain hidden

messages. Convinced that the only music safe to listen to was the Christian contemporary music¹ that the Bible bookstore sold, I called the youth from the church together and we congregated at the local garbage dump to watch me burn all of my records. Included in these were The Babys *Union Jacks* with the song “Jesus Are You There?” and the Little River Band album *Sleeper Catcher*, with the song “Fall from Paradise.” In spite of their expressions of spiritual searching, I was set in my convictions to the point where I could overlook those songs as anomalies.

From then on, I only listened to Christian music; I even reviewed album lyrics before making a purchase, counting the number of times that God was mentioned in each song. I did find some artists to whom I still listen today, but I gradually became disillusioned with much of this music. It simply did not speak to me in terms of my life experience at that time, and seemed to be repeating spiritual platitudes which did nothing to assuage my teenage angst. Then came the day I found *Humans*. The fact that this album was being sold in a Bible bookstore transgressed my binary opposition between Christian and secular music. The location was ‘sacred,’ but this was mainstream, ‘secular’ music. After listening to more of Cockburn, I discovered that his Christian faith was evidenced in many of his songs and albums. I began searching for other artists who identified as Christian, but who were recording on mainstream labels, and began to listen to Bob Dylan, Cliff Richard, T-Bone Burnett, U2, The Call, Donna Summer, Midnight Oil, The Waterboys, The Alarm, and Kansas. About 15 years ago, I encountered *Paste Magazine* for the first time, which opened my musical doors even further, and I discovered the songs of Over the Rhine, Damien Jurado, and Pedro the Lion. However, my sacred-secular dichotomy remained largely intact, and I considered these artists unique in the midst of the swamp of worldly music.

It was in the early 2000s that I began to explore spirituality in popular music in a more intentional manner. My friend was convinced that bands such as Collective Soul signaled an increased attention to messages of faith in pop culture. I was up for a challenge, and so I began my current journey to find reflections of spirituality in popular songs and albums, and in the biographies of their authors and singers. Beginning with *Rolling Stone* magazine’s *500 Greatest Albums of All Time* (Rolling Stone 2018a) and its list of the *500 Greatest Songs of All Time* (Rolling Stone 2018b), I examined every song on every album for references to spirituality. I decided to expand my search by adding other musical sources, and proceeded to review all of the songs from the ‘best’ or ‘greatest’ songs and albums of the first decade of the 2000s based on lists provided by *Rolling Stone*, *Pitchfork*, *New Musical Express*, and *Billboard*. Since 2010, I

¹ Howard and Streck define Christian contemporary music in the following way: “Standing in the gap between evangelical Christianity on the one side and youth culture on the other, contemporary Christian music offers evangelical Christians who cannot identify with what they see on MTV their own set of alter egos...Christian music provides the evangelical audience with the same ethereal voices, the same driving guitars, and the same chunky rhythms that can be found anywhere on the radio dial-but with one important difference: rather than challenging predominant evangelical values, this music affirms them” (Howard and Streck 1999:5).

have conducted annual reviews of the lyrics from the ‘best’ or ‘greatest’ songs and albums, as identified by each of these four sources. The results of this search have prompted me to question the ways I have thought about and categorized Christian and secular music.

In contrast to my teenage assumptions as to what constituted sacred and secular music, I suggest that we rethink the more general concept of the secular, following the lead of Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age*, as a more general condition in which we live, and within which we wrestle with and respond to our spiritual nature. Within this space of the secular, musical artists (and humans in general) exhibit a general struggle with, and often a turning towards, the transcendent in a wide range of ways and to varying degrees. In this article, I argue that we need to reconsider the term ‘secular’ as applied to popular music, and popular music as reflecting human encounters and struggles with spirituality. Spirituality seems to be an inescapable element of the human condition, something that we all address in one way or another. As Neil Osborne of the band 54.40 sings: “God myth and mind and soul... [you] don’t get away that easy” (“You Don’t Get Away (That Easy)”).

Review of Literature

The distinction between the ‘sacred’ and the ‘secular’ has been given ample attention in sociology since the discipline’s origins (Durkheim 1915). However, much of sociology presents the sacred and secular as in tension with each other, or even in opposition to one another (Hamilton 1995). A very different approach to the ‘secular’ is found in the writings of Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, who approaches secularity as a general condition of society. In his book *A Secular Age*, he addresses the question: “Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?” (Taylor 2007:25). In contrast to ‘subtraction’ theories, such as Weber’s theory of rationalization, Taylor proposes that historical developments, including the Protestant Reformation, have led us to an age in which individual choice is the foundation of our response to the transcendent. “There arises in Western societies a generalized culture of ‘authenticity’, or expressive individualism, in which people are encouraged to find their own way, discover their own fulfillment, ‘do their own thing’” (Taylor 2007:299). This is a ‘secular age’, in which we have become disenchanted with the promises of religion, a condition which Taylor calls the ‘malaise of modernity.’ This is an age in which our attention has shifted away from the transcendent to focus on the immanent, the here and now. There is no dichotomy of sacred/secular within our society, but rather we all (including those who identify as people of faith) live within an all-encompassing age of secularity. In contrast to theories which suggest that religion is becoming replaced by science or politics, Taylor writes that many of us (“a growing category of people”) become dissatisfied with the abandonment of the transcendent, and often pursue new paths to satisfy that hunger (Taylor 2007:302). Subject to cross-tensions,

the pull of the immanent and of the transcendent, our search for fulfillment explodes into a myriad of options, which Taylor identifies as the ‘nova effect.’ While individuals may reject the established paths of their parents through the doors of organized religion, their lives are not characterized so much by an abandonment of faith, but rather new forms of faith. As a result, we still frequently encounter individuals who *choose* to pursue the transcendent through church and mosque, but within a complex mix of other orientations towards the spiritual. In this secular age, we also encounter those who strongly disagree with, critique, and abandon established religion. What characterizes these orientations is that they are the result of individual choice.

I find that Charles Taylor’s discussion of the secular age corresponds with sociologist Reginald Bibby’s studies on the decline and resurgence of organized religion in Canada, which bear titles including *Fragmented gods: The Poverty and Potential of Religion in Canada* (1987), *Restless gods: The Renaissance of Religion in Canada* (2002), *Beyond the Gods and Back: The Demise and Rise of Religion in Canada* (2011), and *Resilient Gods: Being Pro-Religious, Low Religious, or No Religious in Canada* (2017). Bibby writes that Canadians, rather than abandoning the transcendent, have pursued various paths of spiritual fulfillment. In *Beyond the gods and Back*, Bibby examines three markers of religiosity: church attendance, religious identification, and belief in God. In summarizing his findings, Bibby writes that “Canada is not a country characterized by either pervasive secularization or revitalization. Rather the findings show that solid cores of people are either involved or not involved in religious groups, either identify with traditions or do not identify with any, and are either theists or atheists” (Bibby 2011:51). In short, Canadian society is today characterized by polarization over religion. While the proportion of atheists has been growing, and church attendance has been declining, Bibby argues that Canadian society is neither completely religious nor atheistic, but rather Canadians exist on a polarization spectrum, which includes various levels of church attendance, belief and identification. One of his findings is that, rather than identifying with organized religion, Canadians are increasingly identifying as spiritual, a subjective category which is difficult to define. Bibby writes that spirituality is distinct and separate from ‘religion,’ is often viewed as superior to religion (emphasizing personal choice over adherence to rules), and has shed the negative baggage of religion.

If North American society is characterized by polarization regarding spirituality, presumably this will be reflected in various social arenas. In his book *Eyes Wide Open*, Calvin College scholar William Romanowski writes of popular culture as reflecting and influencing the values and themes of the broader society, including religion and spirituality (Romanowski 2007).² In this article, I suggest that references to spirituality within popular song reflect the nova effect in a spectrum of orientations towards (and at times away from) the transcendent.

² While I recognize that attention to song lyrics as revealing something of the musical artist’s biography has been critiqued by scholars as misguided (“songs, after all, are not mostly general statements of sociological or

While the exploration of spirituality in music is not new to academic literature, I find that current studies tend to be limited in terms of being artist-specific (Duffett 2015; Gellel 2013; Hausmann 2013), genre-specific (Fillingim 2003; Johnson 2013; Moberg 2012; Pinn, 2007; Tinajero 2013), without a sample, and thus appearing as a random selection of songs about things such as angels; or dismissive of the expression of spirituality in popular music as weak religiosity (Weinstein 1995), as evidenced by a surface-level expression of spiritual imagery, song titles and catchphrases lacking any apparent depth of meaning. In contrast, I propose that attention to spirituality crosses lines of musical genre, and often reflects the life experiences and identities of musical artists.

Even when these connections to artist experience and identity are less obvious, lyrics often reflect attention to spirituality. In *Gods and Guitars*, Michael J. Gilmour provides a rationale for exploring spirituality in the lyrics of popular music. Responding to critics who challenge the importance of examining song lyrics, Gilmour notes that “when organized religion does not play a part in a person’s life (and even when it does), art forms provide another venue for engaging our most intimate and pressing concerns” (Gilmour 2009:36). He identifies the various ways artists refer to spirituality- as personal belief, as artistic motif, or as a target of criticism and rage (real or staged)- encouraging the reader to take the religious reflections of these artists seriously. “We can learn much about religion, and perhaps even the reception of religion by audiences, if we listen closely to these artists” (Gilmour 2009:29).

In the remainder of this article, I will explore the discourse of spirituality in song lyrics from the ‘best’ albums of 2017, as ranked by *Rolling Stone*, *Pitchfork*, *New Musical Express*, and *Billboard*. Following Gilmour’s lead, I will examine lyrics in terms of their integration of human relationships (especially romance and sexuality) and spirituality, the ways in which artists challenge organized religion, and the ways in which they affirm faith and express their own spiritual beliefs. I suggest that while artists commonly draw on a cultural vocabulary with readily recognizable and accessible phrases and images, musical artists also often demonstrate a more in-depth approach to spirituality through their critiques and challenges of organized religion, their expression of spiritual searching and questioning, and their affirmation of spirituality including songs in the form of prayers and blessings.

Methodology

In this study, I have utilized the sociological methodology of content analysis (Neuendorf 2016) with attention to themes of spirituality in the lyrics of popular songs. I first accessed the lists of best albums of 2017 on-line, as published by *Rolling Stone*, *Pitchfork*, *New Musical Express* and *Billboard*. These web-sites were selected to represent a combination of American

psychological truth...they are more likely to be examples of personal rhetoric.” (Frith 1996:163), I nonetheless propose that song lyrics do reflect themes present in the broader society, and at times in the artist’s life.

and British (*New Musical Express*) sources. They were also selected to represent the albums considered the best by music critics and those which were most popular among consumers in terms of albums sales and on-line streaming (*Billboard*). The music critic sources each publish annual lists of the best 50 albums from the previous year, while *Billboard* publishes an annual list of the 200 most popular albums. In order to maintain consistency, I have analyzed the top 50 albums in the *Billboard* list.³ In order to read the song lyrics, I utilized the web-site *AZLyrics.com* based on its comprehensive collection of lyrics and because I found it to be more user-friendly than other lyrics sites. When an album was not available on *AZLyrics.com*, I utilized *Genius.com*. The current sample, upon which this article is based, includes 2080 songs from 152 albums. Taking an open approach, I created a list of terms and phrases reflecting attention to spirituality based on careful readings of song lyrics, instead of approaching the lyrics with a ready-made list of terms. After identifying and highlighting words and phrases (and at times entire songs) from these lists, I created an index for each term/phrase, indicating each song in which the word/phrase was mentioned across the sample. I then coded each word/phrase (and sometimes the entire song) as follows:

1. Cultural Vocabulary: These are terms and phrases found in popular songs, consisting of only one or a few words, which are appropriated from the realm of the sacred in North American society, and used for purposes which do not reflect any clear intent to express spirituality. While attention to these terms may appear trivial, I argue that they reflect the extent to which attention to spirituality has infused our vocabulary as a society, and the ways in which artists continue to draw on this vocabulary for their own purposes.
2. Challenging/Critiquing Spirituality: These are words/phrases, and sometimes entire songs or albums, which indicate a confrontational approach to spirituality, for example critiquing organized religion or challenging the existence of God. In his book *Acting in Concert* (1998), Mattern writes of the confrontational use of music to challenge the established social and political system. As an integral element of society, the church and more generally established religious practice are often subject to challenge and critique, and sometimes to outright confrontation and condemnation.
3. Seeking Spirituality: These are songs which express a search for, or questioning of, spirituality. These songs may describe the process of spiritual searching, or may more directly ask questions of a spiritual nature, for example about the existence of God.

³ Note that the 2017 *Billboard* lists do not only include recordings from the previous year, as these lists reflect consumer choices which may include earlier recordings (for example, the 2016 recording *Starboy* by The Weeknd).

4. **Affirming Spirituality:** These are words/phrases, and again sometimes entire songs or even albums, which affirm or take a positive approach to spirituality, for example affirming the existence of God or angels. This category includes songs which take the form of prayers, defined here as direct communication with the spiritual realm or with divine being(s), at times petitioning or challenging God, or offering a blessing to someone.

Finally, I have conducted on-line research to explore the ways by which musical artists self-identify in terms of spirituality and religious affiliation. My findings suggest that popular music artists are assuming a range of orientations towards spirituality through their songs and albums, including those of established religions such as Christianity and Islam, and alternative forms of spirituality. I have also found that attention to the transcendent crosses all music genres represented in this study, suggesting that spirituality is a pervasive theme throughout popular music.

I recognize that one of the limitations of this study is that it says very little about the process of meaning-making, as listeners derive and negotiate their own sense of the transcendent and spirituality, at times disregarding the actual song lyrics.⁴ The listener's experience is complex, as Marsh and Roberts have demonstrated in their discussion of the Magisteria-Ibiza Spectrum (Marsh and Roberts 2012), being influenced by a myriad of social factors, and yet reflecting the individual's creative ability to interpret the song in unique and changing ways. These complex phenomena of interpretation and meaning-making deserve to be explored through further research.

Cultural Vocabulary

In an interview with *The Telegraph*, musical artist Morrissey spoke about his relationship with spirituality. When asked if he spoke to God, Morrissey replied, "Well, we all do. Which is a form of prayer itself. The most common phrase bandied about these days is 'Oh my God'. People say it automatically all the time, not realising that that's a form of prayer" (Deacon 2011). My first category of analysis, that of cultural vocabulary, focuses on this automatic level of discourse, the use of words which are also used to describe or relate to the transcendent, but without further consideration or elaboration. As Gilmour notes, "religious language does not require a spiritual object to be meaningful" (Gilmour 2009:72). In this study, the cultural vocabulary category is represented in most albums from the current sample (405 songs on 110 albums).

⁴ For further discussion on the relationship between words and meaning, see the writings of Simon Frith: *Sound Effects* (1981), *Music for Pleasure* (1988), and *Performing Rites* (1996).

Much cotemporary popular music is infused with terms including ‘blessed,’ ‘heaven,’ ‘divine,’ and ‘spirit,’ and phrases including ‘God only knows’ and ‘it’s a miracle,’ but which often appear disconnected from attention to the transcendent. As an example, Tracy Bonham sings, “I give you my four leaf clover/ ‘cause God only knows that is the only one/ the only one of mine” (“One Hit Wonder”). In this song, Bonham is singing to her lover, reflecting a common theme in popular music: musical artists often describe love and loved ones in terms of the transcendent.

This is the first of two of the identifiable themes within the Cultural Vocabulary category, Human Relations, in which songs utilize terms that are often applied to the transcendent to describe human social interaction and romantic and/or sexual relations. The second theme, Landscape, refers to songs which make only brief references to places associated with religion (for example, ‘church’ or ‘chapel’), without providing any significant context or further discussion. The Human Relations theme appears in 61 songs on 20 albums, while songs reflecting the Landscape theme appear in 12 songs on 12 albums.

In popular music, human love is often described in terms of the divine, as exemplified by several of the songs on Noel Gallagher’s High Flying Birds’ album *Who Built the Moon?*: “All that I know is that you fell from above” (“Holy Mountain”); “You’ve fallen like an angel/ Stranded on the earth” (“Be Careful What You Wish For”). As Gilmour notes, “describing romantic love in exaggerated terms, including the use of sacred terminology, is commonplace in poetry and popular music, as is the tendency to link sexuality with spirituality” (Gilmour 2009: 96). Gilmour identifies these adaptations of religious language as serving “hyperbolic ends, celebrating both sexuality and the object of affection (usually feminine) with language traditionally directed to God as an act of obeisance.... [often appearing] in redemption narratives, with sex standing as an equivalent for heaven or paradise” (p. 97). For example, in “Habit of You,” Keith Urban sings of his love as ‘magical’ and ‘spiritual’; in “Sun Don’t Let Me Down” he sings of being “so close to heaven” when he’s with his loved one. Sexual intercourse is described as heavenly in songs by The Weeknd (“Ordinary Life”) and Keith Urban (“Your Body”). Numerous references to divine love in Bob Dylan’s *Triplicate*, an album featuring covers of classic American songs, also suggest that this is a well-established theme in popular music.

When love is described as divine, loved ones often become ‘angels.’ Out of the 40 songs which include this word, at least 18 apply the term ‘angel’ to a human relationship. Noel Gallagher sings of his child as a fallen angel, “stranded on the earth” (“Be Careful What You Wish For”), Harry Styles sings of a girlfriend as his “only angel” (“Only Angel”), Jay-Z refers to his ‘ummi’ (mother) as an ‘angel’ (“MaNyfaCedGod”), while Big Sean calls his grandmother an angel (“No Favors”). Wolf Alice sings of people as “earth angels” (“Heavenward”). In her song about Trayvon Martin, Lady Gaga sings about the unarmed, slain Black teen as an “angel down” (“Angel Down”).

Some songs juxtapose the image of an angel against the broken reality of human sinfulness. In the song “Poison Pens” by Creeper, the singer likens himself to an angel who descended into sin for his lover: “I fell like an angel for you/ Now I do the deeds that devils do.” In “Clartin”, J Hus raps about his angelic exterior as concealing his truly sinful nature: “Smile of an angel/ Don't let that deceive you/ Cause sometimes I'm evil.” The Weeknd sings of his girlfriend as having “devil eyes” (“False Alarm”). Post Malone sees the devil “in the form of a whore” (“Cold”). In contrast to divine love, personal problems are ‘demons’ (J. Cole, “She’s Mind, Pt. 1”, “Change”). Estranged lovers are referred to as ‘ghosts’ in St. Vincent’s “Fast Slow Disco,” and in Harry Styles’ “Two Ghosts.” However, broken relationships can be saved, as exemplified by Paramore’s song “Forgiveness.”

Residente’s description of Christmas in Puerto Rico, found in the song “Sons of the Reedbed,” provides an example of the Landscape theme: “On Holy Fridays we eat yautía/ And the three kings come from Juana Díaz.” In the Foo Fighters’ song “La Dee Dah” from *Concrete and Gold*, Dave Grohl refers to a painting he had created as a backdrop for a band when he was in his teens (“Jim Jones painting in a blue bedroom”). Kasabian refers to a wild party as a “hilltop paradise” in “The Party Never Ends,” while The Weeknd likens Mulholland to hell (“Ordinary Life”), and Panic! at the Disco sings of the ‘black magic’ of the same locale (“LA Devotee”).

Challenging and Critiquing Spirituality

Following Mattern’s (1998) discussion of the uses of music, my research demonstrates that musicians often challenge and critique religious structures and institutions through song. I have included 59 songs in the Challenging/Critiquing Category, found within a total of 26 albums.

While Valerie June’s song “Long Lonely Road” refers to church attendance as integral to rural life, and while church is a place of nurturing faith in the songs of Florida Georgia Line such as “God, Your Mama, and Me (“That Sunday morning choir calling/ church doors open wide”), church attendance may also be part of an outward performance that masks personal troubles: “We go to work, we go to church/ We fake the perfect life” (Chris Stapleton, “Either Way”). While popular music may romanticize rural Bible Belt life in the United States, highways of ‘white men’ continue to run through the sacred burial grounds of indigenous peoples (“White Man’s World”).

Some artists verge towards nihilism in their songs. For example, songs such as “Dream2” on Code Orange’s album *Forever* emphasize violence (“Suck the soul right through the mouth/ My family needs to feast”), while others dwell on psychological demons (“I know that you don't wanna lie/ It's just the demon in your mind “ –“The Mud”), and the futility of prayer (“Close your eyes, Pray to God/ That this storm will pass/ That we will move on/ The one

thing I know/ Is that if you're wrong/ The hurt will go on/ The end will never come" - "Hurt Goes On").

Others, while taking a slightly less nihilistic worldview, nevertheless sing from a world-weary state of disillusionment with society and its institutions, including religion. Songs from the latest Foo Fighters album take this approach, commenting on the soul ("Got no soul to keep/ Ain't no brother's keeper" - "Make It Right") and paradise ("Where is your Shangri la now?" - "Happy Ever After (Zero Hour)"). Given the band's name, it seems slightly ironic that The Priests also reflect this theme in their music: "to people in sanctuaries all I can say is/ You will not, you will not be saved" ("Nothing Feels Natural").

Some song lyrics also draw on religious imagery to describe a coming apocalypse. According to Beck, these are "secular times, these times", in an era when values are up for grabs ("To your demons/ nothing's even right or wrong" - "Wow"), our future is uncertain ("Hands up in the air/ living out on a prayer" - "Up All Night"), as is truth ("I see the silhouette of everything/ I thought I ever knew/ Turning into voodoo" - "I'm So Free"). Anything and everything can be bought and sold ("You stole away like a thief, reeling from the sticker shock, Of the price they put upon your soul" - "Dear Life"). The world is a 'broken carousel', in which we must settle for the 'consolation prize' on the road to Valhalla ("Square One"). Time is running out ("I'm so Free"), judgment day is coming but there's nothing we can do about it ("Oh there's trouble on the way/ Get a dog and pony for a judgement day" - "Dreams"). Our fate is inescapable, "spinning out of control on a broken carousel" ("Square One"). At times Beck's lyrics seem to echo the book of Ecclesiastes: "Time is running out/ Nothing new under the sun/ Better get down" ("I'm So Free").

Similarly, Residente's "Apocalyptic" portrays a "final judgement day" in which "miracles don't save people anymore/ Because saints threw themselves from a bridge/...animals eat each other/ And religions rip their necks off."

Perhaps most notable in terms of its critique of religion and faith is Father John Misty's album *Pure Comedy*, which the artist describes as:

the story of a species born with a half-formed brain. ...Over time, and as their brains prove to be remarkably good at inventing meaning where there is none, the species becomes the purveyor of increasingly bizarre and sophisticated ironies....designed to help cope with the species' loathsome vulnerability and to try and reconcile how disproportionate their imagination is to the monotony of their existence. Something like that. (Sub Pop 2018)

Josh Tillman, the artist behind the Father John Misty identity, sees organized religion as a central element in the 'pure comedy' of human existence. In the album's title song, the artist sings: "Comedy, now that's what I call pure comedy/Just waiting until the part where they start to believe/They're at the center of everything/ And some all powerful being endowed this horror show with meaning."

For Tillman, the earth is a “godless rock” (“Things It Would Have Been Helpful to Know Before the Revolution”), on which we make “all our best attempts at transcendence” (“Birdie”). We hold to our “creation myth,” as we listen to commercialized Christian contemporary music by “bullshit bands... that sound like dollar signs and Amy Grant” featuring “five young dudes from white families... [who] sing like angels with whiter teeth” (“The Memo”). In these songs, Christian social outreach amounts to little more than the ‘Starvation Army’ (“A Bigger Paper Bag”). Tillman writes of the suffering people already endure in their hell on earth, and then in “When the God of love returns there’ll be hell to pay,” he confronts God about the final judgment:

We crawled out of the darkness
 And endured your impatience
 We're more than willing to adjust
 And now you've got the gall to judge us

At times, the options of spiritual faith and scientific theory appear equally devoid of meaning. On her album *All American Made*, Margo Price sings:

You can take your pick,
 You either came from an ape,
 Or the dad of a magic man up on a cross (“Loner”)

Randy Newman’s song “The Great Debate” expounds on the topic of creationism versus evolutionary theory in its dramatization of the Scopes Monkey Trial, with the ‘true believers’ (singing “I’ll take Jesus every time!”) squaring off against proponents of Darwinian evolutionary theory. In the end, the arguments of both sides are reduced to ‘merchandise’.

Other artists confront hypocrisy in organized religion. In “2100,” Run the Jewels raps “Seen the devil give a sermon in the church.” Similarly, Princess Nokia sings: “Everybody make a cross when they know they 'bout to sin” (“Chinese Slippers”).

Finally, themes of atheism inform some songs. According to Lana del Rey: “We're the masters of our own fate, We're the captains of our own souls” (“Lust for Life”). In his song “Living with Your Ailments,” British singer Kiran Leonard sings: “There is a happiness beyond meaning/ ...I can just be mortal, godless, and free.”

Seeking Spirituality

According to Taylor, our current society is characterized by individual choice, and often by a lack of commitment to any one perspective on spirituality. In *A Secular Age*, he writes: the salient feature of the modern cosmic imaginary is not that it has fostered materialism, or enabled people to recover a spiritual outlook beyond materialism, to return to it as it were to religion, though it has done both these things. But the most important fact about it[...]is that it has opened a space in which people can wander

between and around all these options without having to land clearly and definitively in any one. (Taylor 2007: 351)

Among the albums which I burned at that youth group evening so long ago was a copy of The Babys' *Union Jacks*, on which lead singer John Waite asks "Jesus, are you there/ and do you really care?" ("Jesus, are You There?"). Waite's spiritual questioning is not uncommon among pop music artists. In the current sample, I found 105 songs in this category, across 60 albums. In an interview with Michelle Zauner of Japanese Breakfast, *Crack* magazine described Zauner's journey to write the lead song from her debut album *Psychopomp*. The song "In Heaven" was written in the wake of her mother's death from cancer:

Alienated by both the religious consolations of her extended family network, who'd tell her things like 'she's in a better place' and 'she's in heaven,' as well as the seemingly dispassionate logic of her atheist friends, Zauner turned to the works of psychoanalyst Carl Jung as a "middle ground between spirituality and religion. (Yalcinkaya n.d.)

Several songs on *Concrete & Gold* by the Foo Fighters explore the connection between humans and the cosmos. In an interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine, lead singer Dave Grohl commented on the lyrics and music video for the song "The Sky is a Neighborhood": "I've always been a sky-watcher since I was a kid. I've always just stared at the sky and waited for a sign." This sense of searching is reflected in the songs "The Line" ("satellite searching for a sign of life") and the album's title track ("tried levitation, you're not alone, the stars are holding open, a door we'll never close").

For some artists, it is disillusionment with organized religion and its practitioners which has led to this state of spiritual uncertainty and searching. Referring to his grandfather, "a preacher man," Jay-Z raps:

...I hated religion 'cause here was this Christian
He was preachin' Sundays, versus how he was livin' Monday
Someday I forgive him
'Cause strangely our division led to multiple religions
I studied Muslim, Buddhist, and Christians ("Legacy")

For others, the search for the transcendent is set against disillusionment with contemporary social problems. Arcade Fire's album *Everything Now* is an insightful exploration of the trappings of our insatiable drive to consume, juxtaposed against a search for true fulfillment. Humans are "searching for signs of life" ("Signs of Life"), longing to "live forever" ("Peter Pan"), and wondering if there could be a "Good God" ("Good God Damn"), while our innocence quickly fades ("We were born innocent/ but it lasts a day"- "Put Your Money on Me") and we are left to face our sinful nature as "trumpets of angels call for my head" ("Put Your Money on Me"). In the end, Arcade Fire concludes that "We Don't Deserve Love."

Questions of spirituality are often expressed in the context of musings about the end of life. Pink sings: "I don't have the answers/ but the question is clear/ Let me ask you/ Where

does everybody go when they go" ("I Am Here").

Some artists reflect on their search for truth through mysticism and fortune telling: "I followed the lines on my palm/ I followed them but they were all wrong" (Sheer Mag, "Until You Find the One"). St. Vincent recounts her own spiritual searching: "From healers to dealers and then back again/ From guru to voodoo and voodoo to zen" ("Pills").

Still other artists sing about turning inward to find God (Julie Byrne, "All the Land Glimmered") or an unnamed 'guide' (Girlpool, "In the World"), or of finding spiritual fulfillment through nature (Bjork, "Body Memory"), music (Sampha, "No One Knows Me Like the Piano"), cloud formations (Protomartyr, "A Private Understanding"), or cosmic light (Ariana Grande, "Focus"). Even Father John Misty expresses a sense of spiritual searching: "What with all our best attempts at transcendence/ Something's bound to take" ("Birdie").

While some songs embrace the futility of religion ("This is a hymn for the hymnless/ kids with no religion/... 'cause if there's a heaven/ don't care if we get in"- Kesha, "Hymn"), others express hope in the transcendent.

When darkness falls

May it be

That we should see the light

...When doubt returns

May it be

That faith shall permeate our scars (Metallica, 'Now That We're Dead')

Affirming Spirituality

In *A Secular Age*, Taylor writes of our dissatisfaction with contemporary social and spiritual malaise: "We can feel this emptiness in the everyday, but also it comes out with particular force in what should be the crucial moments of our life: birth, marriage, death... the enclosure in the immanent leaves a hole here" (Taylor 2007:309). This malaise may heighten our sense of the fragility of meaning, making our lives seem flat and empty. However, not everyone experiences the "malaises of immanence" or responds to them in the same way. "The dissatisfaction they give rise to can send people back to seek some relation to the transcendent, but it is also felt by those who for one reason or another cannot countenance such a return, or only in forms which are very far from traditional established religion" (Taylor 2007:309-310).

As I have already explored songs which critique and challenge religion and the concept of spirituality, in this section I will explore songs and statements by musical artists which exemplify a range of turnings towards the transcendent. In this category, I found 183 instances of this category across 60 albums, including 36 instances of prayer across 28 albums, and 5 instances of blessing across 4 albums.

While it is presumptuous and often difficult to identify the faith perspective of a musical artist, many artists in this sample self-identify with some form of organized religion, and a larger number report the influence of childhood experience with organized religion. I recently reviewed interviews with musical artists in the pages of music magazines and on web-pages, searching for ways by which musical artists assign themselves a spiritual identity.

In these interviews, spirituality often appears as distinct from religion, reflecting Bibby's findings. This may reflect a reluctance to identify with any one organized religious tradition, perhaps based on a general disillusionment or disenchantment with religion, coupled with an interest in other non-traditional forms of spirituality (Taylor 2007: 26). It may also reflect a tendency to associate with more than one form of spiritual expression. For example, in the liner notes for *Carry Fire*, Robert Plant lists the following as 'inspirational': "The Interconnectedness of All Things" (a reference to Douglas Adams' book *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency?*), "the Revelator of the White Leafed Oak" (a reference to the book *City of Revelation* by John Michell, British author and prominent figure in the Earth Mysteries movement?), and to the "all-seeing eye" (Robert Plant 2017:9).

In my web-based review, sixty of these identified organized religion as having been an important influence in their childhood. Most of these (19) referred to their Roman Catholic background, while others (19) referred to their childhood families as more generally Christian. One specified having a Pentecostal/Church of Christ background, while another identified as having a combination of Baptist, Episcopal, and Pentecostal childhood experiences. Others referred to their Jewish origins (7), while a few identified as Muslim by birth (3). Other identities include Unitarian, Santeria, Mormon, Christian Scientist, and Jehovah's Witness. One artist described growing up in a commune, while another referred to his childhood as simply 'religious.' In contrast, of the 73 artists who identified as practicing some form of spirituality today, the most common identify was 'spiritual' (20). Nineteen identified as Christian, including Catholic, Protestant, Anglican, and Episcopal affiliations. Others identified as Rastafarian, Scientology, Jewish, Universal Life Church, Muslim, Black Hebrew Israelite, Eastern Philosophy/New Age, Santeria, Magic/Occult, Mormon, and Kabbalah. Four artists said that music is their religion, and one identified nature as her religion. Two artists identified as agnostic, one as secular humanist, and six identified as atheists. Finally, one artist identified as 'not religious.'

Artists at times make clear references to their spiritual identities. On "Since Way Back," Drake raps "Thank God I'm Christian." However, other artists identify with alternative or 'new age' spirituality. Open Mike Eagle sings "I protect my neck with some magical jewels" ("Legendary Iron Hood"), Valerie June sings about dancing on astral planes ("Astral Plane"), while other artists sing about being "born under a star" (Ibeyi, "Valé"), or about "energies floating by" (Wiley, "Birds n Bars").

The terms and phrases found in the songs under review seem to reflect their author's interest in spirituality. God is mentioned in 138 songs, and is most often referred to as male (in 27 songs) and in the singular tense (the term 'gods' appears in only 14 songs), suggesting a monotheistic, patriarchal (Abrahamic?) approach to religion. Jesus is mentioned in 36 songs, Jah is mentioned in 7 songs, Karma appears in six songs, the words 'Jehovah,' 'Jehovah's Witnesses,' and 'Gurus' each appear in two songs, while 'Buddha,' 'Buddhist,' and 'Chakras' are each mentioned once. One song includes both the Guru Mantra and Hare Krishna Mantra.⁵ Terms and phrases from the songs which suggest attention to Abrahamic faiths include: Bible (in 10 songs), Christian (6), Christmas (15), Church (31), Devil (40), Hallelujah (16), Hell (48), Lord (56), Prayer (101), Saints (21), Saved (20), Sin(ner) (42), Soul (102), and Sunday (13).

Several albums are thematically spiritual. The latest album by Chronixx, *Chronology*, is an experience of Rastafarian praise: "To the King of all kings, all praise is due/... Creation glorifies Creator/ So all deeds done are in the name of my Maker" ("Legend"). Chronixx isn't shy about singing his faith. In "Spanish Town Rockin," Chronixx raps "Me read me bible everyday/ A so me well Biblical/ And meditate in the morning so me well spiritual." In "Big Bad Sound," he pays tribute to the central figure of Rastafarianism and demonstrates the religion's Abrahamic roots:

Haile Selassie I, conquering lion
 Ah from the land of King Solomon
 Reign and rule over Ethiopian
 Reign the believing of the ark of covenant
 More than the dwellings of Jacob and Abraham
 So the lord God loveth holy mount Zion

In "Ghetto Paradise," Chronixx sings about both the beauty and social inequality in Jamaica: "Jamaica spiritually irie/ Pretty and it nice/ Still a ghetto paradise and mi nah apologise." He writes of seeing the sun every morning as a blessing ("I Can"), and identifies as one of 'Selassie children': "Give thanks to Rastafari/ See another day/ Thanks to Rastafari" ("Tell Me Now"). The track "I Know Love" ends the album with a song of faith in Jah: "I know Jah Jah, yeah, set me free."

While *Chronology* stands out in its focus on Rastafarian spirituality, themes of praise and prayer are common throughout the current sample. Other albums that demonstrate a theme of spirituality running through most, if not all of their songs include U2 *Songs of Experience*, Kendrick Lamar *DAMN*, J. Cole *4 Your Eyez Only*, A Pentatonix *Christmas*, DJ Khaled *Grateful*, Chance the Rapper *Coloring Book*, and Stormzy *Gang Signs and Prayer*.

Prayer is often mentioned in popular music, although the object of prayer is not always specified. In Open Mike Eagle's "Hymnal," Sammus raps "Then I rap and I pray and the grief

⁵ George Harrison, "My Sweet Lord", from the Guardians of the Galaxy 2 soundtrack.

stops." Perhaps most notable in the current sample is Sam Smith's song "Prayer," in which Smith is tempted to "turn my back on religion," but then decides to pray: "There's dread in my heart and fear in my bones/ And I just don't know what to say/ Maybe I'll pray." In this song, Smith's doubt is transformed into a prayer: "I have never believed in you, no, but I'm gonna pray."

The song "Him" also takes the form of a prayer, as Smith sings of his struggles to reconcile his Christian faith with his sexual orientation.

Holy Father
 Judge my sins
 I'm not afraid of what they will bring
 I'm not the boy that you thought you wanted
 I love him

Smith is not the only artist who presents songs in the form of prayers. Prayers may appear as brief passages in songs, including Vince Staples' "BagBak," Paramore's "Hard Times," Kesha's "Praying," U2's "Lights of Home," Kendrick Lamar's "FEAR," Run the Jewels' "Thieves! Screamed the Ghost," and Charlotte Gainsbourg's "Sylvia Says." At times an entire verse or stanza takes the form of a prayer. Stormzy's "21 Gun Salute," "Blinded by Your Grace Pt. 2," and "Lay Me Bare" serve as examples.

Yo God, what's good? I need you bad
 Devil's in my ear I need you back ("Lay Me Bare")

DJ Khaled's "Unchanging Love" and Big Sean's "Intro (I Decided)" are also in the form of prayers in their entirety, while Logic's "Waiting Room" is rapped in the form of a conversation between the artist and God, who concludes the dialogue with this:

Once you have walked in the shoes of every race, religion, gender, sexual orientation
 Loving and hateful person
 It is only then that you will understand how precious life truly is

Songs may also take the form of blessings. U2, with guest Kendrick Lamar, play upon the format of the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12), taking verbal jabs at those who are arrogant, superstars, and the filthy rich ("Get Out of Your Own Way," "American Soul"). Words of blessing also appear in Lamar's "Glow," Chance the Rapper's "Summer Friends," and in Stormzy's "100 Bags":

Hello, hello my son, good morning
 ...May the God of Jehovah bless you
 Guide you but teach you everything you are doing (Stormzy, "100 Bags")

At times, references to faith by artists reflect their perspective on America (Lana del Rey's "God Bless America -and all the Beautiful Women in It"). At other times, faith appears as a central element in childhood memories ("Pile in the church pew rows/ Gran made the best yeast rolls/ Gospel of stories told/ 'Bout the one way to save your soul"-Valerie June, "Long

Lonely Road”), or in the context of remembering a loved one: “Mama told me stay strong/ grandma told me stay on/ Now she looking down, throwing blessings” (Migos, “Out Yo Way”). Other artists and songs which make the association between spirituality and death include Kevin Morby (“Pearly Gates,” “Downtown Lights”), Wolf Alice (“Visions of a Life”), Chris Stapleton (“Daddy Doesn’t Pray Anymore”), and Florida Georgia Line (“Dig Your Roots,” “While He’s Still Around”).

God is also invoked in light of concerns regarding social injustice. Margo Price sings
 No matter your religion, no matter your race
 No matter your orientation
 No matter your creed and no matter your taste
 No matter your denomination
 We are all the same in the eyes of God
 But in the eyes of rich white men
 No more than a maid to be owned like a dog
 A second-class citizen (“Pay Gap”)

Robert Plant’s *Carry Fire*, described by allmusic.com as “an album of hope,”⁶ draws on religious imagery to bring its songs about imperialism, immigration, and violence to the listener. In “Bones of Saints,” Plant seems to be singing about mass shootings:

I hear the children scream
 But then the fear abound
 And that's the leading question
 Where all the money comes
 I'll say who makes the bullets
 If you tell me who sells the guns

Artists sometimes express spirituality as a battle with evil forces: “Went to war with the devil and shaytan/ He wore a bad toupee and a spray tan” (Run the Jewels “Talk to Me”); “You defeat the devil when you hold onto hope” (“2100”).

Finally, musical artists at times draw on, paraphrase, or simply include words of sacred scriptures. In the current sample, these are most often Bible passages, but may include words from other inspiration sources including Gandhi (Run the Jewels, “Thursday in the Danger Room”), the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. (Run the Jewels, “Thieves! Screamed the Ghost”), and Carl Sagan (Kesha, “Spaceship”). References to Biblical passages are found in the following songs: Chronixx, “Big Bad Sound” (Philippians 2:10, 11), “Country Boy” (John 8:11), “I Can” (Psalm 121:1), “Selassie Children” (Psalm 118:22), and “I Know Love” (Genesis 1:2, 3-4); Kendrick Lamar, “FEAR” (Deuteronomy 28:28, Amos 3:2); Run the Jewels, “Talk to Me” (Ephesians 6:12); Bjork, “Sue Me” (1 Kings 3:16-28); Moses Sumney, “Quarrel” (Luke 12:48) and

⁶ Robert Plant: *Carry Fire*, <https://www.allmusic.com/album/carry-fire-mw0003102509>. Retrieved September 4, 2018.

“Lonely World” (Matthew 7:6); Stormzy, “Mr. Skeng” (Matthew 12, John 19); Keith Urban, “John Cougar, John Deere, and John 3:16” (John 3:16); and Chance the Rapper, “How Great” (Revelation 10:5).

Conclusion

In this article, I have presented evidence that stands in contrast to common assumptions about popular culture and the sacred-secular divide. Popular music is infused with the responses of musical artists to the transcendent and to the spiritual. In contrast to my own presumptions about the antagonistic approach popular musicians would take to matters of faith, I have found that the greater percentage of songs represent either a quest for spiritual fulfillment or an affirmation of spirituality. While the popular press still seems to respond with surprise to popular artists who overtly discuss matters of faith, perhaps further analysis of the words of these artists will lead us to reconsider our assumptions, and to anticipate music as, among other things, a record of artistic encounter with the transcendent.

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