So Many Paths:
Reconsidering the Secular/Sacred Divide in Popular Music

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Abstract

Much of the literature on popular culture and spirituality continues to rely on a categorical distinction between the sacred and the secular. Studies which challenge this well-worn dichotomy tend to be artist- or genre-specific, or without a robust sample, leaving the prevalence of spirituality within popular music a question to be researched further. This article draws on the writing of philosopher Charles Taylor (2007), Cultural Studies scholar Emily McAvan (2012), and sociologist Reginald Bibby to explore themes of spirituality as they are woven throughout the music of the past decade (2011-2020). It is argued that much of what has been categorized and dismissed as 'secular music' expresses attention to spirituality in myriad ways, including songs which critique and challenge spirituality, those which express a sense of spiritual searching, and those which acknowledge and affirm spirituality, even in terms of prayers and blessings. Quantitative and qualitative analysis reveals that spirituality is a recurrent theme across popular music genres and throughout the past decade. A careful re-examination of lyrics can lead us away from skepticism toward the expression of spirituality in popular music, and toward anticipation of spiritual encounters in the lyrics of popular musicians.

Keywords: popular music, sacred, secular, spirituality

In 2009, online music site Pitchfork interviewed John Darnielle, lead singer for the Mountain Goats, about the band's most recent album *The Life of the World to Come.* The album had drawn significant media attention (Village Voice, Stereogum, Exclaim, Paste, Christianity Today) due to Darnielle's self-identification as 'agnostic,' which was curious considering the album's track titles, each named after a passage from the Bible (for example, Psalms 40:2). In the Pitchfork interview, the singer/songwriter discussed his spiritual journey from Catholic schoolboy to atheist to agnostic, and then back to semi-regular attendance at a Catholic church,

while also occasionally chanting and praying at Hare Krishna temples.[1] Commenting on the relationship between his life and music, Darnielle said:

> If you're into music, you're into religion, somehow or another. Religion, that's the bloodline of music. The whole reason, I'm pretty sure, we have music on notation is to preserve chant-- to transcribe what was going on, which we're singing in order to describe the experience of the divine…That is making what to me is a pretty obvious connection between whatever we want to call divine and music, which seems permanently and inextricably bound. (Darnielle, in Breihan 2009)

Darnielle's words stand in stark contrast to common assumptions about music and spirituality, found in both popular media and academic writing: the sacred and secular exist in a dichotomous relationship, which is then reflected through social phenomena such as popular song and artist identity. In other words, 'Christian' artists sing 'Christian' songs. This is evidenced by media articles which express surprise at the number of rock musicians who profess some form of spiritual faith and/or adherence to organized religion[2]. Most recently, the *National Catholic Register* published an article which listed forty-one rock musicians who had "come to Christ through some of the least likely ways," against the backdrop of "the empty allure of limitless sex, drugs and rock-and-roll" (Stagnaro 2021) . See also Hillburn and Willman 1987, and Savage 2018. However, attention to spirituality continues to inform recent album covers (Wavves *Life Sux EP*, Billie Eilish *When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?*; Kamasi Washington *The Epic*, Miguel *Wildheart*, Father John Misty *I Love You Honeybear*, Drake *If You're Reading This It's Too Late*), album titles (D'Angelo and the Vanguard: *Black Messiah*, Robbie Robertson *How to Become Clairvoyant*), and the imagery in music videos (Madonna: "Living for Love;" "Devil Pray;" "Ghosttown"). In the mid-1990s, journalist Garcia Guy of the *New York Times* commented on an apparent surge of musical artists finding spiritual faith, and situated this phenomenon within the broader context of modern life.

> Why is faith suddenly so fashionable again? Part of the answer seems to live in the increasingly ephemeral nature of modern life. In an age when cultural fads are gobbled up and dispensed within nanoseconds, the timeless verities of good and evil speak with new authority. (Guy 1994)

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[1] "John Darnielle is almost certain there is no God, but he can't quite count himself as a nonbeliever" (Saba 2009). Darnielle has previously described himself as a 'Catholic atheist' (Shellnutt 2016).

[2] This is also evidenced in the difficulties faced by musical artists who do not always fit neatly into categories of 'Christian' and 'secular' music, including Amy Grant, the 77s, Kanye West, and Mumford & Sons. Note that this paper follows the American Sociological Association's definition of spirituality as "individual and group efforts to find meaning for existence within or independent of organized religion" (https://www.asanet.org/topics/religion-and-spirituality).

In a previous article, I drew on philosopher Charles Taylor's analysis of modernity as a 'secular age' characterized by the resurgence of interest in the transcendent to which Guy refers, in order to argue for a reconsideration of the secular/sacred dichotomy in popular music (Epp 2018). Focusing on music from the 'best albums' of 2017 as ranked by Rolling Stone, Pitchfork, New Musical Express and Billboard, I found discourse of spirituality to be a common theme throughout popular music as artists critiqued, explored and affirmed spirituality through their song lyrics. In this article, I suggest that my previous findings are generalizable to popular music from the past decade (2011-2020), cutting across musical genres and reflecting a diffuse approach to spirituality as a common mode of both artistic expression and personal spiritual identity. In short, discourse on spirituality is a recurrent theme within popular music, with musical artists exploring and expressing a multitude of ways to understand and relate to spirituality, thus blurring the divide between the 'sacred' and the 'secular.' To quote the Little River Band: "There are so many paths up the mountain/ Nobody knows all the ways/ There are so many paths up the mountain/ And the view from the top is still the same" ("So Many Paths").

Society, Music, and Spirituality

The relationship between social life and the sacred has been the subject of inquiry within sociology since its inception. From Durkheim's dichotomization of the sacred and profane (Durkheim 1976), to Becker's typology of sacred and secular societies (Becker 1950), sociologists have drawn on and reproduced this division and the tension between these two realms of human experience. More recently, societal trends in terms of decreased attendance at traditional religious establishments (Macdonald & Clarke 2017), and an increasingly diverse spectrum of spiritual and religious identities (Beyers, Cummins & Craig 2016) have resulted in concerns over secularization, especially by dominant organized religious groups. There is, however, significant disagreement about how to interpret these changes. While some scholars have treated secularization as a given,[3] others have provided alternative interpretations of religion and social change.

In 2015, the Crossroads television program *Context with Lorna Dueck* aired an episode on religiosity in Canadian society ("What do Canadians Believe?"), featuring Canadian entrepreneur Angus Reid and sociologist Reginald Bibby. Host Lorna Dueck opened the episode with the questions: "Is Canada becoming less religious, or more, or both?" The program focused on a recent (2015) Angus Reid poll of over 3000 respondents, which revealed the polarization of Canadian society between those who said they were inclined to embrace religion (30%), those who were inclined to reject religion (26%), and those who were

[3] "The question is not whether secularization has occurred since the 1960s…but what has brought about these remarkably swift and pervasive changes" (Hay 2014:136).

ambivalent or undecided (44%). While Reid and Bibby agreed on the complexity of assessing religiosity in Canada, they disagreed on the character of the middle or 'ambivalent' category. While Reid expressed a strong concern about the data ("Canada is becoming a very postmodern society"), Bibby was more optimistic about the continued relevance of spirituality in Canadian society.

> The vast majority of people in that ambivalent middle have certainly not given up on religion. We're finding that 70% of them show up for services at least occasionally. We've got about 70% of them that claim they believe in God, and beyond believing in God, they maintain that they believe in a God that cares about them. We're finding that a surprising number of those people, about 4 in 10, say that they're open to the possibility of being more involved if they can find it worthwhile, and even a very practical thing: are they expecting to have a religious funeral? About 1 in 3 of them are. So I would argue that the ambivalent middle certainly can go either way, but at this point in time, many people who do value faith probably know those people well, they're relatives and friends, they're people who are not that far from religion but have to be convinced that greater involvement is really worth their while…We have a polarized reality in Canada, some people embracing faith, some not, a lot in the middle. (Crossroads Christian Communications Inc. June 4, 2015)[4]

Philosopher Charles Taylor explores this 'ambivalence' in *A Secular Age*, presenting the social response to modernity's crisis of faith in terms of a 'nova effect,' as those who are disillusioned with traditional religious structure and practice ('the malaise of modernity'), but who are also frustrated with the abandonment of the transcendent, respond to these cross-tensions through a myriad of options to abandon, embrace, or innovate paths to spiritual fulfillment. Underlying each of these options is the role of individual choice (Taylor 2007).

Drawing on Taylor's writing, musician and scholar Jonathan Arnold uses the term 'post-secular' to describe contemporary North American society, in which the individualism referred to by Taylor gives way to a search for relationship and spiritual engagement.

> In the modern secularized and post-secular West, increasing levels of biblical and religious illiteracy along with decline in membership of institutional religions has seen a concurrent increase in the appetite for aesthetic religious, or quasi-religious, experiences…One of the problems with these categories of 'religious' and 'secular,' therefore, is the lack of recognition of the many people who do not neatly fall into either category, and that faith is not the same as ideological and doctrinal belief. (Arnold 2019:3, 17-18)

[4] In his most recent book, Bibby categorizes Canadians as 'pro,' 'no,' and 'low' in terms of religiosity (Bibby 2017).

From this perspective, a spiritual posture or practice which appears to be idiosyncratic, such as singer Bjork's belief in elves or John Darnielle's spiritual path of 'Catholic atheism' and 'Hare Krishna services,' "is certainly part of a larger movement, to the extent that it is social, and a larger awakening, to the extent that it is spiritual" (Hiebert 2020:138).

Popular media is an appropriate area for analysis of this culture shift, providing "an entry point that *can presume neither belief nor unbelief* in its audiences" (McAvan 2012:2). She identifies these changes as

> oriented more toward the individualized practices of New Age "spirituality" than toward Christianity or Judaism…however God figures and Christian symbols are nevertheless pervasive throughout popular culture. The return of the religious has been in two forms therefore, the rise of so-called fundamentalisms in the Abraham faiths…and the rise of New Age style spirituality. It is in the interplay between traditional religions and New Age-ized spirituality that the stream of spiritual popular culture that I call the postmodern sacred finds itself. (McAvan 2012:2)[5]

Sociology also has a long and established tradition of analyzing popular culture as reflective of both societal norms and social change. While early 20th-century writing identified popular culture as dangerous in its mass production and mind-numbing consumption,[6] scholarly literature since at least the mid-20th century has explored the relationship between spirituality, religion and popular music (Partridge and Moberg 2017). However, this literature often relies on the well-worn sacred/secular dichotomy, reflecting the structure of the music industry with its categories of 'gospel' and 'sacred' music, more than the meanings embedded in the creation and consumption of popular song.

For example, recent analysis of 'implicit religion,' or the discovery of the 'sacred' in the realm of the 'secular' (Bailey 1998), has also informed recent scholarship on popular culture, including music video (Morgan et al. 2012). While such attention informs a growing body of literature on popular music, such studies identify any attention to the spiritual within popular music as expressing at best a 'weak religiosity' (Weinstein 1995). These studies are most often artist- or genre-specific, and do not address the prevalence of references to spirituality within the broad spectrum of popular music (Duffett 2015; Fillingim 2003; Moberg 2012). In a previous article (Epp 2018), I argued that spirituality is a prevalent and recurring theme within popular music, crossing musical genres and appearing in multiple forms, including those artists who draw on a 'cultural vocabulary' of religious terms and imagery, those whose songs challenge organized religion and dominant forms of discourse on spirituality, those who engage in

[5] Note that McAvan identifies 'New Age' spirituality as one form of the 'religious.'
[6] See Ross 2014 for an interesting discussion of popular culture from the perspectives of Adorno and Benjamin.

spiritual questioning and seeking, and those who affirm spirituality and whose songs may even take the forms of prayers or blessings. However, my previous article only examined songs and albums from one year (2017), and thus was limited in its scope. In this article, I argue that my findings may be generalized to the decade of 2011-2020, albeit with some variation across years. I also argue that most often songs and albums reflect a questioning/seeking posture. While songs do not necessarily reflect the spiritual orientation of their creators, available evidence also suggests that musical artists often identify as 'spiritual' rather than within any one of the dominant organized religious traditions.

Methodology

My findings here are based on the sociological methodology of content analysis (Krippendorff 2018; Neuendorf 2016), focusing on themes of spirituality within popular music albums and songs from the years 2011-2020. I have followed the same process as in my previous article (Epp 2018), which was part of a ten-year period of analysis. First, I accessed the lists of the 50 'best albums' from each year as published on-line by *Rolling Stone*, *Pitchfork*, *New Musical Express,* and *Billboard.* The first three sources represent the best albums as selected by music critics, while *Billboard* represents consumer purchases and streaming of albums and tracks. Next, I analyzed the lyrics from all songs on each album, using the web-sites AZLyrics.com and Genius.com.[7] The current sample, upon which this article is based includes 19,131 songs from 1,384 albums over the decade, and between 32-48% of total tracks for each year (average 37%).[8] In the rest of the paper I refer to 'total tracks,' indicating all of the songs from a given year, and 'selected tracks,' indicating the songs which appeared of interest in terms of their references to spirituality. I have taken a 'grounded' approach in being receptive to the words used to describe spirituality in each song, rather than approaching them with a pre-constructed list of terms. After identifying and highlighting words and phrases (and at times entire songs) from these lists, I then coded each word/phrase (and sometimes the entire song) as follows:

1. Cultural Vocabulary (CV): These songs include brief mentions of words and phrases (for example, 'angel' and 'heaven') which are also used in the English language to discuss spirituality and religion. However, their appearance in these songs does not necessarily convey any attempt to express spirituality. While attention to this category may appear

[7] Note that the *Billboard* lists do not only include recordings from the previous year, as these lists reflect consumer choices which may include earlier recordings. The 'Adjusted' totals represent the removal of albums which are listed more than once throughout the decade. The NME list from 2018 included 100 albums, of which I have included the top 50 for the sake of consistency.

[8] Beginning in 2017, the number of tracks selected increased significantly as a percentage of each year's total tracks: 2017- 38%; 2018- 40%; 2019- 48%; 2020- 43%. Prior to 2017, selected tracks accounted for an average of 33% of total tracks per year.

inconsequential, I argue that their consistent appearance reflects the role of spirituality and organized religion in our society, and the ways in which musicians continue to draw on this vocabulary for artistic expression. Cultural Vocabulary includes two sub-categories: (i) Human Relations, or the use of terms associated with spirituality and religion to describe human relations, and (ii) Landscape, referring to brief references to symbols, structures, and icons associated with religion and spirituality which are simply present in the 'landscape' of the song.

2. Challenge/Critique (CC): This category represents a confrontational or even aggressive approach to spirituality. These songs may question spirituality, critique or reject organized religion, or take a position of challenging or arguing against the existence of spiritual realms and divine beings.
3. Seeking (S): These are songs which express a search for, or questioning of, spirituality. For example, these songs may include questions about the existence of God. They may also include vague references to 'angels,' one's 'soul,' or 'the cosmos,' but without clearly affirming their existence.
4. Affirming (A): These words, phrases, and songs assume a stance of belief, affirming spirituality, God, or divine beings such as angels. Affirming songs include two sub-categories: (i) Prayers, in which the singer/writer addresses a spiritual entity directly, at times in terms of a petition and/or challenge, and (ii) Blessings, in which the song calls on a divine being to bless a person or group.

In addition, I constructed an index for each of four years (2011, 2014, 2017, and 2020) for each term, phrase, and song which reflected the artist's attention to spirituality. My preliminary analysis of these indices suggests that 'God,' 'prayer,' and 'spirit' are the three most commonly used words to indicate attention to spirituality in popular music. I also conducted an on-line search for interviews from each of these four years in which musical artists self-identify in terms of spirituality or religion. In the final section of this paper, I will discuss these findings which I present as tentative, acknowledging spiritual identity as fluid and dynamic, in contrast to websites and on-line discussion forums which attempt to determine the religion of musicians (Hollow Verse, Quora). 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, Judaism, and Islam, as well as 'alternative' forms of spirituality. However, the most common form of spiritual identification among these artists is that of 'spiritual, not religious.' 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. In the remainder of this paper, I will discuss the prevalence of each category

within my findings, and provide examples from song lyrics and interviews with musical artists to support my points.[9]

Before continuing, I acknowledge some limitations to my study, drawing on my reading of socio-musicologist Simon Frith. The first of these is the lack of attention to the context or function of the song. Frith argues that while studies such as my own are statistically useful, they are also overly simplistic, assuming a transparency of meaning: "content codes refer to what the words describe— situations and states of mind — but not to how they describe, to their significance as language" (Frith 1986:80). Secondly, Frith argues that content analysts often assume public agreement with the song's message and ignore its "ideological work." Finally, my analysis cannot assume a transparency of meaning on the part of the musical artist. In addition, and following Cultural Studies scholar Stuart Hall's discussion of Encoding/Decoding (Hall 1980) and Marsh and Roberts' Ibiza-Magisterium Spectrum (Marsh and Roberts 2013), the meaning of any message is both created and interpreted within contexts of multiple influences. I acknowledge that there is no necessary correlation between song lyrics and the artist's spiritual self-identification (artists who identify as agnostic or even as atheist may include prayers in their lyrics). I also realize that there is a strong element of subjectivity in my analysis. My aim, therefore, is to suggest trends and themes in these songs and their lyrics, while recognizing that they may be read differently by another analyst. For example, songs which I have included in the 'Seeking' category may be thought by another analyst to more appropriately represent the affirmation of spirituality. Nevertheless, and while recognizing these limitations to my study, I propose here that 'spirituality' is a recurrent and significant theme throughout categories of popular music, and across the past ten years.

[9] For a more detailed discussion of one year's worth of songs, please see Epp (2018).

Table 1: Categorization of Tracks by Discourse on Spirituality

Year	Albums	Total Tracks	Selected Tracks	Cultural Vocabulary	Challenge/ Critique	Seeking	Affirming
2011	164	2080	726	354	27	171	171
2012	160	2176	717	386	28	166	112
2013	142	1986	645	326	67	167	77
2014	154	2081	669	300	48	229	96
2015	150	2224	760	403	48	199	90
2016	147	2179	721	377	23	179	96
2017	152	2080	785	399	58	151	227
2018	149	2115	847	460	36	223	111
2019	149	2181	1051	583	73	267	116
2020	148	2312	994	522	46	291	118
Total	1515	21,414	7915	4110	454	2043	1214
Adjusted*	1384	19,131	6966	3554	419	1860	1036

*The totals in this row are adjusted for repeated listings (primarily in Billboard).

While the actual number of songs within each category varies over the years of this study and across the sources, the most common category across sources, years, and genres is that of Cultural Vocabulary. The second largest category is Seeking, the third largest, including prayers and blessings, is Affirming Spirituality, and the consistently smallest category is Challenge/Critique. Aside from a few variations[10] the relative weight of the analytical categories is fairly consistent across sources, years, and genres.

Cultural Vocabulary

"*Religion is, once more, haunting the imagination of the West*" (Ward 2003:vii).

In his discussion of 'implicit religion,' Reginald Bibby writes that the "age-old belief in the order of the universe…is reflected today in common assertions that 'there is a purpose for everything' or that 'things will work out okay' (Bibby 2016:445). The English language is replete with words including 'soul,' 'spirit,' 'heaven,' and 'divine,' which are commonly used to describe spirituality and religious experience, but often without consideration of their spiritual implications. It is perhaps no surprise then, that Cultural Vocabulary is the largest category in this study, accounting for approximately 14-27% of the total song tracks each year (average

[10] Albums whose songs are predominantly Affirming more often appear in the lists from Rolling Stone and Billboard. The lists from Pitchfork often include a small number of instrumental albums, without song lyrics.

19%), and between 45-55% of the total selected tracks (average 52%).[11] Some albums consist primarily of tracks in this category (for example, Beastie Boys *Hot Sauce Committee Part* 2, with 11 out of 17 tracks classified as CV). However, most albums include a combination of tracks from more than one of the four categories. For example, while 10 out of 19 tracks on Drake's *If You're Reading This It's Too Late* are of the CV category, on "Jungle" the artist raps: "These days, I'm letting God handle all things above me." Similarly, while I have categorized eight of the songs on *How Big, How Blue, How Beautiful* by Florence + the Machine as CV, the first words in the song "Mother" appear as a prayer ("Oh Lord won't you leave me/Leave me on my knees/'Cause I belong to the ground now/And it belongs to thee").

In approximately 20% of the songs in this category, 'spiritual' words are used to describe human relations. In the song "Romance," Wild Flag sing "First you wreck me, then resurrect me, it's too much." Some songs refer to love and lovers in terms of their angelic qualities ("you make me feel/Like an angel, all aglow": Katy Perry, "Spiritual") or as an object of worship ("Black
goddess in a shabby raincoat": Iggy Pop, "Gardenia"). However, songs also reveal these impressions of divinity as illusions: "You're no angel either, baby" (Beyoncé, "No Angel").

Sexual relations are described as 'divine' (Madonna, "Holy Water") or magical (Coldplay, "Magic"), with lovers working 'miracles' ("Oohooo, you're a Miracle Worker/Oohoo, you're a surgeon of love": SuperHeavy, "Miracle Worker"). in "Bedroom Hymns, Florence Welch intertwines spiritual and physical intimacy: "You had Jesus on your breath/And I caught Him in mine/Sweating out confessions/The undone and the divine/This is his body, this is his love/ Such selfish prayers and I can't get enough, oh."

Songs in the Landscape sub-category, accounting for about 5% of CV tracks, include brief references to religious or spiritual symbols or landmarks. For example, country music artist Luke Bryan draws on religious symbolism to set the tone in "Roller Coaster" ("She had a cross around her neck/And a flower in her hair"). Michael Stipe of R.E.M. sings of the din of church bells ("I rang the church bell/Till my ears bled red blood cells": R.E.M., "All the Best"), while rock supergroup SuperHeavy contrast the peacefulness of a church with mechanical noise ("I hear a church bell ring/ With a kind of lilt and swing/ Just then the noise of the planes/ Is shattering, shattering, shattering": "I Don't Mind"). Religious symbols also appear in the context of references to ceremonies such as funerals and weddings ("I guess you know why I walked away/When we walked to the altar that was an awesome day" (Nas, "Bye Baby"). At times, communities are also described in spiritual terms:

> This town, she is a temptress/A siren with gold eyes/She'll cut you with her kindness/Then she will bleed you with her lies/She's been called a glistening devil

[11] In 2019, songs in this category accounted for 27% of total tracks, and 55% of total selected tracks.

> And she's good at keeping score/If you make it, she's your savior/If you don't, she's a whore (Eric Church, "Devil, Devil")

Finally, some songs combine personal relationship and landscape modalities: "The same old you/In church on Sunday/Getting high when the sun goes down" (Miranda Lambert, "Same Old You").

Challenge/Critique

> *I'm a complete atheist but I've been obsessed with the aesthetics of the SoCal church-goer for a while now, which probably means I should stop watching 'Rich In Faith.'* (Alison Mosshart of The Kills, in Dominique 2016)

In contrast to the moral panic of anti-rock Christian literature from the 1960s to the late 1980s (Nekola 2013), songs challenging and critiquing spirituality and religion were consistently the smallest in number compared to the other categories in this study, accounting for between 1-3% of total tracks and between 3-10% of selected tracks for each year.[12]

In his discussion of collective uses of music ("Acting in Concert"), Mark Mattern describes the confrontational role of music:

> Music marshals the energies of a community in a confrontation with another community whose interests are viewed at least partly as contradictory. Community members use this confrontational form of acting in concert to enlist sympathy and support for the claims of their community, to draw attention to their concerns, and to assure that the interests of their community take precedence over the interests of other communities. (Mattern 1998:25)

This line of thought has more recently been reflected in a rich and growing body of literature which identifies the role and potential of music as a form of resistance (for example, Parmar et al. 2015; Kanāʻinah et al. 2013; Korczynski 2015).

Popular culture also plays a confrontational role in the cultural shift from institutionalized religion to a more individualistic sense of spirituality. "Religion is considered to be tied to institutions such as the Catholic and Anglican Churches, to be disconnected from if not totally opposed to real-life spiritual practice" (McAvan 2012:7). Only a few albums were thematically critical of religion in the current sample, including Miguel *Wildheart*, Slipknot *We are Not Your Kind*, Bring Me the Horizon *amo*, and Against Me! *Transgender Dysphoria* Blues. Otherwise, songs in this category were scattered throughout albums on each of the four sources.

Some songs critique organized religion, including those of Madonna: "The All-Seeing Eye is watching tonight/That's what it is/Truth and the Light/The All-Seeing Eye is watching

[12] In 2013, this category accounted for 10% of total selected tracks.

tonight/Nothing to hide/The secret's inside/It's like everybody in this party's shining like Illuminati" (Madonna, "Illuminati). In "The Snake," country singer/songwriter Eric Church compares religious leaders to serpents:

> Rattlesnake, Copperhead/Either one of them'll kill you dead/We stay hungry, they get fed/And don't pass the plate around/Lie by lie, cheat by cheat/Venom in smiling teeth/They just run those forked tongues/And the whole world's burning down/Rattlesnake said to the copperhead/"Ain't no way they'd win/"'Cause the mice are sheep and the shepherd's asleep"/And the copperhead said "Amen"

Other artists acknowledge a spiritual reality, but without hope. These songs assume a perspective of despair or even apathy in the face of a God who is distant, absent, or unresponsive to their struggles (Pallbearer, "Devoid of Redemption"; Florence + th eMachine, "Lover to Lover"; Purple Mountains, "Margaritas at the Mall"). King Krule raps "I know when I look into the sky/There is no meaning/And I'm the only one believing/That there's nothing to believe in" (King Krule, "Has This Hit?"). Organized religion appears in some songs as a purely human institution, providing empty promises of salvation: "Indecision overload/Keep a buckle on the devil and your eyes on the road/Reaching out for the hand of God/But did you think you'd shake your own?" (Slipknot, "Unsainted"). Indecision overload/Keep a buckle on the devil and your eyes on the road/Reaching out for the hand of God/But did you think you'd shake your own?" (Slipknot, "Unsainted"). At times religion is critiqued for racial injustice or colonialism, as in the words of American rapper Rapsody: "They said we wouldn't have s_/Wouldn't last if it was up to white Jesus ("Eve"). However, later in the album Rapsody thanks both God and Jesus. "There's no world/and no God/and no hate/and no fun/and no faith/and no God/it's just me/getting high" (Lotus Plaza, "Monoliths"). In the song 'Designer,' New Zealand singer-songwriter Aldous Harding likens the search for God to a failed tourist expedition: "Heaven is Empty: Heaven is Empty: Heaven is empty, nobody's there/I brought my camera, it stayed in its bag/People ask me all the time what I want/The answer is one, Heaven is empty."

However, nihilism and hope are sometimes voiced by the same musical artist. Bring Me the Horizon sings "I can't hide from the nihilist at my door (Bring Me the Horizon, "Nihilist Blues"). However, the band doesn't give up all hope: "I'm not looking for salvation/Just a little faith in anyone or anything/I'm not looking for salvation/Just a little faith in anyone or anything" (Bring Me the Horizon, In the Dark). One member of the band commented on the group's most recent album: "Everything boils down to love in the end" (Trendell 2018).

Seeking

> *I feel like a lot of people believe, "Oh, there's something else out there," and everyone's trying to search for it in their own way. I don't consider myself a religious person, but I consider myself a very spiritual person.* (Trevor Powers, aka Youth Lagoon, in Symonds 2013).

On September 5, 2021, *The Washington Post* published an article identifying the COVID-19 pandemic as a 'spiritual boon' for some individuals. For example, Barrie Rein Thunemann

> began connecting with Talmud study groups on Facebook; taking a course exploring 10th-century Jewish ethics on Zoom; stopping driving and using technology on the Sabbath and, perhaps most importantly, launching a small, monthly women's group centered on the moon, the Jewish calendar and ancient Jewish beliefs about natural cycles and patterns. (Boorstein 2021)

Thunemann's experience seems to exemplify the words of Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age*, in which the philosopher writes:

> The multiple critiques levelled at orthodox religion, Deism, and the new humanism, and their cross-polemics, end up generating a number of new positions, including modes of unbelief which have broken out of the humanism of freedom and mutual benefit…We are now living in a spiritual super-nova, a kind of galloping pluralism on the spiritual plane. (Taylor 2007:299-300)

This apparent sea-change from organized and institutionalized religion to a more pluralistic approach to spirituality is reflected in the second largest category of this study. Songs which express spiritual seeking or a vague sense of spirituality account for between 8-13% of total tracks and between 19-34% of selected tracks for each year.[13] Albums whose tracks primarily fall into this category include: Florence + the Machine *Ceremonials*, Kasabian *Velociraptor!*, Smashing Pumpkins *Oceania*, and Actress *R.I.P.* Some artists are very direct in their questioning: "Is there a God?/Is he watching?/Is she watching?/Are they watching now?/If not, what are we doing?/Where are we going?/What are we doing now?" (Miguel, "Candles in the Sun").

Jagwar Ma appears to question reincarnation in "Man I Need": "Is there another being before this?/Is there another life?/Is there another?/Are you willing to die?" Other examples of soul-searching are found in pop rock groups from Great Britain (The 1975, "If I Believe You") and North America (Imagine Dragons, "Burnout"), rock (Muse, "Mercy"), folk rock (Dawes, "As If By Design"), country (Maren Morris, "I Could Use a Love Song"), and rap (Janelle Monae, "Stevie's Dream"; Eminem, "Stepping Stone"). Singer-songwriters Paul Simon ("Proof of Love"),

[13] In 2014, this category accounted for 34% of total selected tracks.

Natalie Prass ("Far From You") and Natalie Laura Mering (aka Weyes Blood) often express a sense of spiritual searching in their lyrics: "Something to Believe: Give me something I can see/Something bigger and louder than the voices in me/Something to believe, to believe" (Weyes Blood, "Something to Believe").

Some artists voice frustration at the intolerance of religious groups towards diversities of race, gender, and sexuality, leading them to 'reprogram' their spiritual paths: "Hey sister am I good enough for your heaven?/Say will your God accept me in my black and white?/Will he approve the way I'm made?/Or should I reprogram the program and get down?" (Janelle Monae, "Q.U.E.E.N.").

However, though some songs may reflect a turning away from established religious practices, they often also refer to a vague sense of spirituality ("I don't go to church, but I'm so spiritual": Brockhampton, "New Orleans"), and even to prayer in their continued search for spiritual fulfillment ("I don't believe in God, but I pray hard": Tommy Ca$h, "Cool 3D World"; "I'm on my knees, I'm praying for a sign": Foo Fighters, "Walk"; "When the end comes my way/Will I drop to my knees and pray?": Foals, "Syrups"). The artist Bjork sings: "So where do I go/To make an offering?/I fall on my knees/And lay my flowers/Burn incense/Light the candles" ("Family").

Some songs express a vague sense of soul or spirit: "Souls in chains/Souls in pain/Souls in chains/Souls in pain" (Primal Scream, "2013"). Finally, some instrumental albums include tracks which convey a sense of spirituality, such as John Hopkins' *Singularity*, and *Shall We Go on Sinning so that Grace May Increase* by The Soft Pink Truth.

Affirming

> *It's a blessing and a curse. I'm a believer. The Christian traditions of love thy neighbor, do good unto others, love God with all your heart … they're wonderful things. But with any organization, a little gang mentality creeps in* (Josh T. Pearson, as quoted in Barton 2013)

In contrast to the relatively small number of songs in the CC category, songs in this category accounted for up to 11% of total tracks for each year, and up to 30% of selected tracks for each year.[14] Albums with spirituality as a theme include Chance the Rapper, *Coloring Book;* G.O.O.D. Music, *Cruel Summer*; Rick Ross, *God Forgives, I Don't*; Kendrick Lamar, *To Pimp a Butterfly*; Chronixx, *Chronology*; Stormzy, *Gang Signs & Prayer*, Logic, *Everybody*; DJ Khaled, *Grateful,* and Lauren Daigle, *Look Up Child*). However, albums such as U2's *Songs of Innocence* or Madonna's *Rebel Heart* feature songs of both faith and critique of organized religion. While only a few artists self-identified with an organized religion (most often Christianity) in their

[14] In 2011, this category accounted for 8% of total tracks and 24% of total selected tracks. In 2017, this category accounted for 11% of total tracks and 30% of total selected tracks.

lyrics (PartyNextDoor, "Since Way Back"; Lil Baby, "Transporter"; Kanye West, "Kids See Ghosts"; Frank Ocean, "We All Try"), even songs by artists who otherwise self-identified as agnostic or even atheist at times conveyed a sense of faith and a posture of belief: "On the rise and fall like the storm /We stand on Jah man, we set the bar/Because we're heavy. Superheavy/Yo! surprise the cosmic and keeping armed/Outside the enemies of thee. keep so far!" (SuperHeavy, "SuperHeavy").

Some songs incorporate characters from religious scripture in their lyrics. In 'F_ Your Ethnicity,' Kendrick Lamar raps: "It is when Thomas focused on Christ that he was able to declare him Lord." Samson and Delilah appear in the lyrics of Florence + the Machine:

> It's a different kind of danger/And the bells are ringing out/And I'm calling for my mother/As I pull the pillars down/It's a different kind of danger/And my feet are spinning around/Never knew I was a dancer/'Till Delilah showed me how ("Delilah")

Other biblical characters appearing in popular song include Daniel (Bastille, Daniel in the Den), Mary Magdalene (FKA Twigs, Mary Magdalene) and Lazarus (David Bowie, Lazarus). Popular music also pays tribute to historic religious figures, including Martin Luther King, Jr. (Kendrick Lamar, "HiiiPoWeR"), Malcolm X (Kamasi Washington, "Malcolm's Theme", Kodak Black, "Malcolm X.X.X."), and Joan of Arc (Madonna, "Joan of Arc").

Songs expressing faith also draw on well-known works of poetry and music, such as "The Second Coming,' a poem by William Butler Yeats ("I need something holy/Give me a little taste/I need something muddy/To cover up the stain/The center won't hold": Sleater-Kinney, "The Center Won't Hold"); "Footprints," a popular religious poem (Sia, "Footprints"); and Frances Ridley Havergal's hymn Take My Life and Let It Be (Vampire Weekend, "Hold You Now"). Wilco's "Ode to Joy" gives a nod to Friedrich Schiller's poem and Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Bill Callahan's "Lonesome Valley" recalls the gospel song by this name, albeit without any mention of Jesus Christ.

Scripture passages from religious texts also appear occasionally in songs[15], although often paraphrased. These passages most often come from the New Testament of the Christian bible. In Run the Jewels' "Jeopardy," frontman Killer Mike raps: "Prevail through hell, so Satan get thee behind me." In "The Ghost of Tom Joad," Bruce Springsteen sings: "He pulls a prayer book out of his sleeping bag/Preacher lights up a butt and he takes a drag/Waiting for when the last shall be first and the first shall be last." In "She Keeps Me Warm," Mary Lambert recalls 1 Corinthians 13:4 when she sings "Love is patient, love is kind,"[16] while "Thistles & Weeds" by Mumford & Sons suggests the words of Luke 9:60: "I begged you to hear me, there's more than

[15] In 2017, eighteen songs incorporated passages from the Bible in their lyrics.
[16] See also Ashley Monroe, 'If Love Was Fair.'

flesh and bones/Let the dead bury the dead, they will come out in droves/But take the spade from my hands and fill in the holes you've made."

Old Testament references include Leon Bridges' "Flowers" (Psalms 37:20) and text from Psalms 23 in "Blind Threats" by Schoolboy Q ("Walking in the valley of the shadow of death"). In the CD booklet for *Transangelic Exodus*, Ezra Furman dedicates the album:

For the immigrant
For the refugee
For the closeted
For the out
For the vulnerable
For the homeless
For the searching

Furman concludes with the words of Exodus 23:9: "Do not oppress a foreigner: you know the feelings of the foreigner for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt."

Still other artists refer to beliefs and practices outside of dominant religious traditions, including astral planes ("The temple of bodies/A building with souls/Given the cosmos/As we let go": Mastodon, "Stargasm"), the worship of nature and the sun ("Here we come to a turning of the season/Witness to the arc towards the sun": The Decemberists, "Don't Carry it All"; "Kneeling, my god is the Sun": Queens of the Stone Age, "My God is the Sun"), or feminine deities ("And where are you now/O Mother of the world": Swans, "Mother of the World"; "Speak and make lightning and then confess/Her children rise up and call her blessed": Tom Morello, "Speak and Make Lightning").

Other songs express a diversified spirituality, a sort of spiritual mélange: "Looking for a pentagram/…Eat, pray, love/Spend time in the Ashram" (M.I.A., "Boom Skit"); "I believe in God/I believe in mermaids too/I believe in 72 virgins on a chain (why not, why not)" (Nick Cave, "Mermaids"); "All these psychics and these doctors/They're all right and they're all wrong/…It's not some message written in the dark/Or some truth that no one's seen/It's a little bit of everything" (Dawes, "A Little Bit of Everything"). Hip hop duo Bad Meets Evil express this diffuse sense of spirituality in "Above the Law": "As I await, word of Satan as I drop/Fall to my knees before this Ouija board/And I pray, now I lay me down to sleep… I thank God for my safe thinking… Beef has left you prayin' right? Like Allah hu Akbar!"

Some songs are written in the voice of God ("I love to speak with Leonard/He's a sportsman and a shepherd/He's a lazy bastard/Living in a suit": Leonard Cohen, "Going Home") or Jesus ("Remember that you are in my hands/And remember that I know the future/Better than you know the past": DJ Koze, "Jesus"). Not all interpretations of divine voice are the same in terms of their tone, as exemplified by heavy metal band Disturbed: "I'm the hand of God/I'm the dark messiah/I'm the vengeful one" ("The Vengeful One").

Two sub-categories appear within the broader category of songs which affirm spirituality, both of which express specific postures towards the spiritual realm and divine beings. In the first of these, song lyrics are directed to God or another spiritual entity in the form of prayer. Prayers appeared in a total of 229 songs in the current sample, accounting for 1% of total tracks over the decade and 3% of selected tracks (about once per every eight albums). Prayers may appear briefly within a song, or the entire song may itself be a prayer, as exemplified in tracks by Blood Orange, Kendrick Lamar and Leon Bridges:

> Lord, I just wanna be/Rooted and grounded in thee/Lord, place me/Lord Jesus, place me, yeah/I wanna be centered in thy will/In thy holy will/In thy holy will/In thy holy, holy, holy, holy, holy will/Lord, I just wanna be/Highly favored in thee/Lord, make me/Lord Jesus, place me/I wanna be centered in thy will/In thy holy will/… And it's all that you know to be true/Something you need/It's all that I know to be true/Something you see/All that I know to be true (Blood Orange, "Holy Will")

> Lord God/I come to you a sinner/And I humbly repent for my sins/I believe that Jesus is Lord/I believe that you raised him from the dead/I will ask that Jesus will come to my life/And be my Lord and Savior/I receive Jesus to take control of my life/And that I may live for him from this day forth/Thank you Lord Jesus for saving me with your precious blood/In Jesus name, Amen (Kendrick Lamar, "Sherane A.K.A. Master Splinter's Daughter")

> Lord, don't remember my sins/My sins from my youth/Don't remember my sins/And father, please elude my transgressions/Let them blow in the wind like sand/Cause all of my deeds, you know them/Use me as your vessel/I want to shine like the candle/Shine like the burning candle in the room/Lord, don't remember, ooh, don't remember/And father, please elude my transgressions/Let them blow in the wind like sand/Cause all of my deeds, you know them/Use me as your vessel/I want to shine like the candle/Shine like the burning candle in the room/Don't remember me as a dead man walking/I don't wanna be like the Israel children/Lord, don't remember, ooh, don't remember/My sins from my youth (Leon Bridges, "Shine")

One of the most-repeated examples in popular music is known as the 'bedtime prayer' ("Now I lay me down to sleep…"), and appears in at least three songs in the current sample (John Prine, "God Only Knows"; XXXTentacion: "Before I Close My Eyes"; Lil Baby: "Grace")[17] Beyoncé sings the Lord's Prayer in Spanish at the end of her song "Heaven," while Ezra Furman provides a prayer in Hebrew at the end of "God Lift Up the Lowly." Other examples of prayer are found in songs by rock artists and groups from Great Britain (Coldplay, "BrokEn", "When I Need a Friend"; Spiritualized, "So Long You Pretty Thing") and North America (Deerhunter,

[17] Perhaps one of the best-known references to this prayer occurs in Metallica's "Enter Sandman."

"Monomania"; Tom Morello, "God Help Us All"), country music (Brantley Gilbert, "My Faith in You"), R&B (R. Kelly, "Shut Up"), rap (Iggy Azalea, "Don't Need Y'All"; Schoolboy Q, "Blind Threats"), and pop (Yungblud, "god save me but don't drown me out"). In "Looking for Mercy," Madonna sings: "Every night before I close my eyes/I say a little prayer that you'll have mercy on me/Please dear God, to live inside the divine/Not like I want to die/Teach me to forgive myself, outlive this hell."

Finally, blessings appear in 16 songs within the current sample. These are songs in which the lyrics convey spiritual or divine favor to another person or group. One example of this is found in Coldplay's song "Children of Adam" ("May there be peace and love and perfection throughout all creation, through God.")[18] Lil Wayne raps "God bless the reader" ("Open Letter"), Lil Baby blesses his 'youngins' ("God bless they souls, every one of them names": "The Bigger Picture"), while SZA sings "God bless these 20 somethings/God bless, oh God bless" ("20 Something").

Spirituality and Ambivalence

As was noted earlier, faith is at times expressed alongside critique and uncertainty within the same album or even song. NF raps: "Church is where I found God, but it's also where I learned to judge" ("10 Feet Down"). The band DIIV paraphrases Psalms 25:7 in "Lorelei," but then appear to reject God and Heaven in "Acheron": "Hate the God/I don't believe in/Heaven's just a part of hell/Hate the one/Who wouldn't save us." The musical artist Dave discards spiritual faith in "Psycho" ("I used to hear a voice when I was praying/But nowadays I don't even wanna be saved, nah/Fuck that, I don't wanna be saved"), but then draws on the Old Testament account of the selection of David as king (1 Samuel 16) to discuss family relations:

> Man come to my door, he said, "Bro, man!/Let's have it large, you know"/I was like, "Fam, that's my brother"/He was like, "Yeah?"/And you know, on your birthday, man sent you a little card/ And it begins: 'Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel/But Samuel said to him, "The Lord has not chosen these"/So he asked Jesse, "Are these all the sons you have?"/"There is still the youngest," Jesse answered/"But he is tending the sheep"/Samuel said, "Send for him/We will not sit down until he arrives"/So he sent for him and had him brought in/He was ruddy and of fine appearance and handsome features/Then the Lord said, "Rise and anoint him/He is the one"'
> Bro, you know what that means/Say no more, man ("Drama")

The tracks on Killer Mike's album *R.A.P. Music* also convey a sense of ambivalence. In 'Untitled,' the rapper describes women as God's vessels: "The Lord give a load, you got to carry it like Mary did/That's why I'm giving honor to all these baby mommas/It takes a woman's

[18] Translated from Farsi to English.

womb to make a Christ or Dalai Lama" ("Untitled"), prays with some uncertainty to God on "Ghetto Gospel" ("I pray the Lawd hear me but really Lawd is ya listenin'"), but also expresses his lack of faith in the establishment ("I don't trust the church or the government/Democrat, Republican/Pope or a bishop or them other men/And I believe God has sustained you with rap": Killer Mike, "Untitled"), and raps on the album's title track "I've never really had a religious experience, in a religious place. Closest I've ever come to seeing or feeling God is listening to rap music. Rap music is my religion" ("R.A.P. Music").

Identity and Spirituality

While information on the ways by which musical artists self-identify in terms of spirituality is not plentiful, on-line interviews with popular culture magazines and web-sites provide some indication of self-identification at specific points in time, and within the context of the interview.[19] Out of a total of 650 musical artists from the years 2011, 2014, 2017, and 2020, I found interviews in which 233 artists provided statements about their position on religion and/or spirituality. While these musicians provided a range of responses reflecting Taylor's 'nova effect,' including affiliation with organized religions, their most common response was "I'm spiritual, but not religious." Charles Taylor identifies this sense of "being, but not belonging" as a common mode of spiritual identification within contemporary society, as the individual orbits "farther out from a star which is still a key reference point" (Taylor 2007:520). In total, 64 (27% of the 233) musicians took this position on spirituality, including Taylor Goldsmith of the band Dawes:

> Whether you like it or not, making any kind of art acknowledges some kind of higher power…Even though I am not religious in any direct way, I feel like the only words I can think of would be spiritual. It doesn't go further than that for me. I don't pretend to have any understanding of any of that. (Goldsmith in Keil 2017)

The second most common response was 'Christian,' voiced by 48 (21% of the 223) musicians, including country musicians Josh T Pearson and Ashley Monroe:

> Every day I open my Bible, I find something, I write it down, and I put my hand above my head and I just say. 'Thank you,' and I'm instantly in a place where I'm humbled, I'm not worried about anything, and more often than not, a tear will fall out without me even realizing it. (Ashley Monroe in Lanham 2021)

[19] The publication of interview excerpts may also unfairly depict musical artists in terms of their positions on religion. For an example of this, see Prato 2019.

Some respondents identified with specific Christian denominations (Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, Ethiopian Orthodox, Catholic), and referred to the influence of family in forming their own perspective on spirituality. Justin Lewis Scott, otherwise known as American rapper Big K.R.I.T., attributed his faith to the influence of his grandmother:

> She gave me morals to do right by people and find the world on my own. Sometimes, people put too much faith in a human and they disappoint you and you shift your belief to something bigger. As far as my faith, I'm really protective of it … I feel it would be kind of wrong if I didn't talk about it. Even songs where I proceed to be ballin' and having fun, I still mention God. I'm not going to take any of this for granted. (Scott, in Maness 2011)

The third most common response was simply 'not religious,' expressed by 37 respondents (16% of the 223), followed by Atheist (21, or 9%). Dan Bejar (aka Destroyer) referred to his parents' influence on his perspective on religion.

> My mom's Jewish and my dad was Spanish and raised Catholic, and together they raised us as nothing at all. So it's just a style of writing that I am attracted to. It's moving to me because it involves a struggle and very noble futility—divine futility. (Bejar in Dombel 2015)

Other responses included Jewish (16, or 7%: see Silver 2019), Music as my religion (11, or 5%), Muslim (9, or 4%), and a range of options each accounting for 1-2% of the total: Santeria, Mormon, Buddhism, Nature & Elves, Tarot, Meditation, Theism, Universal, Eastern religion and philosophy, Pantheism, All-theism, Zen, Jehovah's Witness, Magic/Occult, Witchcraft, Kabbalah, Transcendental Meditation, Rastafarianism, Satanism, Zoroastrianism, Scientology, Secular Humanism, Black Hebrew Israelite, and 'Undecided.'

Conclusion

Some have considered the 1990s and early 2000s the era of spirituality in popular music, with songs on the radio by bands such as Creed and Collective Soul containing lyrics about heaven. But the presence of spirituality in popular music has not waned. As part of this study, an index for each of four more recent years (2011, 2014, 2017, 2020) was created, listing each of the words from the year's songs relating to spirituality, the most common words being G(g)od, soul, and pray(er). This article has outlined broad themes in the words of songs and their singers which suggest that spirituality continues to pervade popular music across lines of musical genres and over the past decade. While songs take a variety of approaches to spirituality, they most often reflect a posture of spiritual questioning and seeking by their artists, who themselves most often identify as 'spiritual, not religious.'

In contrast to both the warnings of rock 'n roll's devilry as found in the Christian bookstores fifty years ago (e.g., Larson 1970), and the media reports of surprise at the number of musical artists and rock groups expressing a sense of spirituality, a more engaging and productive approach as both listeners and analysts moves beyond the sacred/secular dichotomy toward a posture of anticipation as we encounter the musical expressions of the spiritual journeys of popular musical artists.

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