

Rock Concerts and Gin Tasting: The Ethics of Transforming Sacred Space into Entertainment Space

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Abstract

In England and other liberal democracies, Protestant cathedrals are increasingly using rock concerts, drinks festivals, and “raves in the nave” to woo a secular population and pay the bills. Whether the ends justify the means, however, is a question that has received surprisingly little attention. Using English cathedrals as a case study, this article examines the ethics of hosting popular entertainments in Church and suggests that they trivialize the serious message of the Christian faith. The ideological rationale for entertainments is traced to cultural changes during the 1960s which accelerated secularization within society and the Church, and led to a growing emphasis on business and marketing strategies to maintain the Church estate. While this has brought material benefits, the article argues that misappropriating sacred space is harmful to both patrons and the Church. The nature of these harms, both tangible and intangible, is considered in detail, and it is suggested that Church entertainments may eventually lead to churches simply becoming “civic” institutions. There are important lessons to be drawn from this not only for churches in England but elsewhere where secular entertainments have gained or may gain a foothold.

Keywords: cathedrals, entertainment, sacred space, secularization, business, harm, safeguarding

Introduction

It is twilight, an hour before the cathedral doors will open, and already there is a long queue, extending in snake-like formation around the building and into the narrow, cobbled streets beyond. As the cathedral bells chime, a security guard flings open the doors, pop music blasts from the nave, and the queue surges forward, its progress temporarily halted as bags are searched for alcohol and weapons. For two days this ancient Cathedral will host the UK’s touring Gin and Rum Festival, an event which offers gin enthusiasts the opportunity to sample an unrivalled array of spirits in a nightclub style atmosphere. The same scene will be repeated elsewhere at other Anglican cathedrals, but instead of gin tasting, the queue will be for a rock concert, fancy dress ball, or disco. The phenomenon is not confined to England—churches in the US, Canada, and Australia are used for silent discos and pop tributes—nor is there anything

particularly new about it.ⁱ What is new is the scale of the enterprise and appointment of a cadre of managers to organize it. Using the cathedrals of the Church of England as a case study, this article examines the ethics of transforming sacred space into entertainment space, and argues that it can be harmful both to those who attend events and those who allow them.

A brief sketch of the Church of England and its cathedrals establishes some context. Since the time of the Reformation in the sixteenth Century, the Church of England has been the state church in England and in the crown dependencies. Its Supreme Governor is the monarch, but day-to-day running is vested in the archbishops of Canterbury and York, bishops (some of whom sit in the House of Lords), archdeacons, deans of cathedrals, and parish priests. Each of the Church's forty-two cathedrals is the seat of a bishop and located within a diocese, an ecclesiastical district that corresponds roughly with the boundary lines of the English counties.ⁱⁱ Although there are a few modern cathedrals, most are hundreds of years old and "grander than palaces, castles or mansions" (Jenkins 2016:5). Millions of people flock to English cathedrals every year for various reasons, but their primary purpose is to act as a center for Christian worship (Bazemore and Eams 2024). This is reflected in Church of England Canon Law which governs the use of buildings and specifically prohibits "profane" uses of sacred space.

What constitutes profane, however, is a salient point. Canon F16 states that plays, exhibitions, and suchlike are permissible if they "befit the House of God" and are "consonant with sound doctrine" (Canons of the Church of England 2012). The Cathedrals' Measure of 2021 which applies specifically to cathedrals states that those responsible for cathedrals should exercise "due regard to the fact that the cathedral is the seat of the bishop and a center of worship and mission" but that they are also to take into account the importance of the cathedral's role in providing "a focus for the life and work of the Church of England in the diocese" (Church of England Cathedrals Measure 2021:5). In practice, these laws give the clergy considerable leeway in deciding what constitutes an appropriate use of sacred space. Roman Catholic Canon law is much more prescriptive: Canon 1210 stipulates that only activities which help to promote worship, piety, and religion, and are consonant with the holiness of the place are permissible in consecrated buildings (Code of Canon Law 1999).ⁱⁱⁱ While there are certainly instances of Roman Catholic churches flagrantly ignoring this stipulation, it is in Protestant churches that entertainments flourish.^{iv}

But is using sacred space for entertainments really such a bad thing? To answer this question, it is first necessary to consider the extent to which cathedrals are being used for entertainments and how this influences Church life. My focus is on cathedrals because of their spiritual importance within the diocese and their size which makes them particularly attractive to event promoters. For the purposes of the discussion, I define entertainments simply as non-religious events, the object of which is to have fun, and concentrate on *popular* entertainments, those enjoyed by large numbers of people often because they are uplifting and/or escapist.

Research on the Effects of Entertainments on Church Life

There is very little research specifically on entertainments in Church. However, McKenna, Francis and Stewart (2022) analyzed the websites of Anglican cathedrals in England and the Isle of Man over a four-year period (2018-2022) and found they were being used extensively for exhibitions, installations, concerts, art shows, markets, and food festivals. Not all events, however, are listed on cathedral websites, nor does the latter provide much of a feel of the events promoted. To gain a fuller understanding of the nature, extent, and impact of entertainments on cathedrals, therefore, I undertook some research of my own. As Anglican cathedral websites had already been scrutinized, I looked at event promoters' sites to gauge the types of popular entertainments offered. For comparison purposes, I examined the websites of Roman Catholic cathedrals and also checked event promoters' websites.

The desk research completed, I visited thirteen Anglican cathedrals and one Roman Catholic cathedral to observe (from the outside) events as they took place. These included gin and rum festivals, tribute concerts, and a fancy dress ball. Three to four hours were spent observing the scene. While there I chatted informally with people who were milling about, including three deans, two canons, two chaplains, a verger, two event promoters, security guards, several patrons, and interested onlookers. These were chance encounters which provided illuminating insights but should not be taken as representative of the wider population. No personal data was collected that could be used to identify anyone or any particular cathedral, thus ensuring anonymity. My observations/impressions and any noteworthy comments were subsequently recorded in a spiritual diary. This enabled me to discern patterns that would facilitate tentative generalizations.

Results of the Website and Observational Analysis

My analysis of promotional websites revealed that two organizations make extensive use of churches for entertainments: Candlelight Concerts and Silent Discos in Incredible Places. Candlelight Concerts listings for June to December 2025 indicate that twenty-two Anglican cathedrals had been booked for tribute concerts to artists such as Tina Turner, David Bowie, and Adele. Silent Discos in Incredible Places for the period September 2025 to January 2026 lists ten cathedrals hosting silent discos. My review of twenty Roman Catholic cathedral websites combined with promoters' website listings showed that most are offering organ concerts, but one is hosting wine, whiskey, and tequila festivals (in the crypt) and another a Simon and Garfunkel Tribute Act. The scale of the entertainment reflects the scale of the estate: the Roman Catholic estate is much smaller than the Anglican and so too (at the moment) is its foray into entertainment.

The cathedrals I visited (including the Roman Catholic cathedral) revealed a striking similarity in the way events are organized, which is perhaps not surprising as they are managed by a few key promoters. Although the gin and rum festivals began midday and lasted until late evening, most events were in the evening and often divided into two sessions, thus doubling

attendance. The music was cacophonous; there was a DJ or compere, and security guards kept watch throughout. Patrons at the Anglican (and Roman Catholic) cathedrals were overwhelmingly female, middle aged, white, and glamorously attired. One canon I spoke to ascribed the preponderance of females to their cathedral offering a place of safety from predatory men. There were men present, however, again middle aged but casually dressed except for the fancy dress ball where the dress code was a suit. The low representation of ethnic minorities, even in areas of high immigration, could be attributed to several factors, including religion. The majority of non-white onlookers I met thought the cathedral space to be sacred, even if they were of a different faith.

Numbers of patrons ranged from about four hundred to eight hundred people depending on space capacity. Different events attracted different crowds. An external event promoter thought that silent discos and acts like Radiohead, for example, attracted a more raucous crowd. The reactions of onlookers will be described in more detail later, but at all cathedrals they ranged from vehement opposition to enthusiastic support. Geographical location and antiquity of the building may have played some part in this—the more affluent the area, and the older the cathedral, the more likely it was that onlookers grumbled about the event. I met few teenagers, but those I did were not attracted by the prospect of a disco in church. Very few events are targeted at this age group. The high entry cost and alcohol licensing arrangements would be further disincentives.

Effects of Entertainments on Church Life

From my visits to cathedrals, it became clear that requisitioning the nave for entertainments can disrupt worship. Sometimes Services had to be cancelled to make way for an event, but generally services and events ran concurrently with Services being relocated to a chapel. Not everyone liked this arrangement. A visiting priest at one cathedral was distressed to find that the noise and partying at the Gin and Rum Festival interrupted his Service in the chapel: “They didn’t tell me it was actually going to be in the Church!” he groaned. Tourists were often annoyed at being given restricted access, but complete denial was profoundly upsetting for some. One woman who had travelled to a cathedral specifically to give thanks that her daughter was in remission from a very serious illness was almost in tears at not being able to enter without buying a ticket. Fortunately, there was another church fairly close by so her journey was not wasted.

Re-arranging Services and preparing the Church for an evening’s entertainment requires a great deal of organization—contacting promoters, advertising, arranging catering, building a stage, installing lighting and sound equipment, and employing security. This can have a major impact on church life, creating noise and distracting clergy from their central role which is to minister the faith. To reduce the burden on clergy, cathedrals have engaged professional event organizers. Hiring such staff changes the structure and potentially also the culture of the organization. To gauge how many cathedrals have employed event managers, I decided to undertake further research by reviewing Anglican cathedral websites and LinkedIn for 2025.

Thirty-eight cathedrals have appointed events officers/managers or people with direct responsibility for events. These staff are typically part of a larger management structure that includes chief operating officers, finance and marketing managers, and commercial directors. I spoke to two internal event organizers during my cathedral visits, both of whom maintained the events positively impacted cathedrals. One thought there was a genuine religious benefit: "Maybe some of these people will return to pray." It was clear, however, that the focus was on generating income. This raises the question of what the Bible has to say about the matter.

Sacred Space in the Bible

There is no specific reference to entertainments in holy places in the Bible, but God insists we respect sacred space. In Leviticus, He instructs the Israelites to "Observe my Sabbaths and have reverence for my sanctuary. I am the LORD" (Lev 19:30). Later in the Book of Kings, God tells Solomon that "I have consecrated this temple, which you have built, by putting my Name there forever. My eyes and my heart will always be there" (1 Kings 9:3). However, if Solomon or his sons spurned God, He would cut off Israel from the land they had been given and reject the temple (1 Kings 9:6-7). The prophets Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, and Zephaniah all condemn abuses of sacred space and warn of dire consequences. In the Book of Jeremiah, for example, God says: "My tent is destroyed, all its ropes are snapped. My sons are gone from me and are no more ... the shepherds are senseless and do not enquire of the LORD; so they do not prosper and all their flock is scattered" (Jer 10:20-21).

In the New Testament, the cleansing of the temple provides the clearest and strongest indication of the importance of respecting sacred space. Observing the moneychangers hard at work in the temple courts, Christ expostulates: "It is written 'My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it a 'den of robbers'" (Mt 21:13). The dramatic act of overturning the moneychangers' tables and making a whip out of cords to expel the animals demonstrates clearly the need to show respect and not exploit God's house for commercial gain (Jn 2:12-16). In another passage Christ castigates the Pharisees for regarding an oath based on the temple gold to be binding, but not one based on the temple itself: "You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold or the temple that makes the gold sacred?" (Mt 23: 17-18). Having so vehemently defended the Temple as God's House, a House of Prayer, it seems rather unlikely Christ would sanction the transformation of our cathedrals' sacred space into entertainment space.

The text can, however, be interpreted in a way that provides a justification. Christ's overturning of the tables, for example, might not have been anger at commercial activity *per se*, but rather the practice of charging exorbitant rates. The "water into wine" miracle at Cana might be construed as evidence that Christ would have no objection to partying. The tearing of the temple curtain at Christ's death could signify the abolition of the distinction between the sacred and the secular. These arguments can, of course, be challenged. When Christ overturned the tables, he makes specific reference to the House of God being a house of prayer, thereby defining its true purpose for all time. The physical transformation of the water into wine was done at Mother Mary's request and rather reluctantly; "Woman, why do you involve me? My

time has not yet come” (Jn 2:3-4). As for the parting of the temple curtain, although Christ lived amongst us, he was ‘without sin’ and it is this state we are called to imitate. St. Peter reminds us that we need to “Be holy for I am holy” (1 Pet 1:15-16).

The Evolution of Entertainments in Church

In my conversations with clergy at events, it was the liberal interpretation of the Bible on which they relied to defend entertainments in sacred space and the long history of secular uses of the nave in Britain and Europe (British Broadcasting Company 2024a). On the latter point, they are correct. John Davies (1968), a leading authority on secular church use in history, argues that entertainments such as plays, feasting, dancing, and drama can be traced back at least to the Middle Ages. He draws much of his evidence from the accounts of senior clergy who opposed the practice. Archbishop John Thoresby of York, for example, is quoted in 1363 as arguing that plays and suchlike in (then Roman Catholic) churches “offends very grievously against God and His saints Turning the house of mourning and prayer into the house of laughter and excess” (1968:90). Two centuries later in 1546 the Provincial Council held at Rheims forbade masquerades, plays, dancing, and buying and selling in churches. In spite of such opposition, entertainments persisted until the spread of Puritanism in the sixteenth century ushered in a long period of abstemiousness.

It was not until the 1960s that entertainments in Church really revived, and then mainly in Protestant Cathedrals. Exactly why Protestant Cathedrals proved so susceptible is quite unclear. It could be that what Weber termed the “Spirit of Capitalism” encouraged by Protestantism in the post-Reformation era lives on in modern Protestant cathedrals.^v The problem with this argument is, as we have seen, Church entertainments pre-date the Reformation and flourished when England was Roman Catholic. A more likely explanation is the much higher costs of running the Anglican estate and a more liberal Anglican theology. It is to this liberal theology that we now turn.

The 1960s is widely regarded as a watershed for the Church, with effects as profound as the Reformation (Davie 2015; Marwick 1998; McLeod 2007). Sociologist Grace Davie observes that “The churches were in for a bumpy ride in the 1960s. The world into which they appeared to fit so well was challenged on every front ... by the end of the decade a profound and probably irreversible revolution in social and, above all, sexual attitudes had taken place. ... Traditional, often Christian-based values were no longer taken for granted” (2015:31). As church attendance began to decline steeply, Davie observes that the Anglican and free churches “looked to the secular world for a lead and borrowed, in some cases rather uncritically, both its ideas and forms of expression” (2015:31). With the ostensible abandonment of the faith by large swathes of the population, the Anglican Church decided to march to the tune of popular morality rather than oppose it. The emphasis increasingly lay on blurring the distinctions between the sacred and the secular. In this turbulent decade, liberal clergy provoked fierce controversy inside and outside the Church by contesting traditional ideas

about God. Sam Brewitt-Taylor (2013) argues that it was elites in Britain, particularly British clergy, whose radicalism underpinned the secularization that led to falling church attendance.

Several recent studies paint a worrying picture of the context in which the Church in England now operates and the reasons secular uses of churches are rarely challenged. The first study is the 2021 Population Census, which shows that just under half the population (46.2 per cent) in England and Wales describe themselves as Christian compared with 59.3 per cent in 2011. By contrast, the proportion of the population having no professed religion rose from 25.2 per cent in 2011 to 37.2 per cent in 2021 (Office for National Statistics 2022). This decline in Christian affiliation is reflected in church attendance figures. A survey by Statista shows that average weekly Church of England attendance in the UK has declined from just over a thousand in 2009 to 654 in 2022 (Statista 2023). The average attendance at cathedrals is much higher according to the Church's own statistics. In 2022, 14,000 people attended Sunday and weekly Services, but the comparable figure in 2012 was just under 20,000 (Bazemore and Eams 2024). Research by British Religion in Numbers reported by Christianity in the UK indicates that all denominations, except the Pentecostals, New Churches, and Orthodox churches have seen attendance slump since 1980 (Christianity in the UK 2014). Although cathedrals have fared better, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a huge decline in tourists, a key source of revenue. St. Paul's Cathedral in London, costs £8 million a year to run but its income dropped by 90% in 2020 because of the pandemic (Wheble 2021). To reduce the deficit, the Cathedral in 2022 opened its doors for the first time to a rock concert.^{vi}

The Particular Problem with Entertainments

In spite of financial burden, there is something about hosting popular entertainments in a place as beautiful, sacred, and imposing as St. Paul's that just seems wrong. It jars with the serious message of the Christian faith—a message of hope (there is salvation in Christ and life after death); a message of peace (an end to conflict and all that causes chaos and disorder); a message of reconciliation (loving God and one another is the route to peace and to salvation). The life that follows from this is one characterized by sobriety, restraint, compassion, gentleness, and rejection of worldly pleasures and status symbols. To bring popular entertainments into church seems to be a rejection of this way of life, trivializing the Christian message. Dr. Cajetan Skowronski, who organized a petition to ban Canterbury Cathedral's first Silent Disco in February 2024, captured this very succinctly when he told the BBC that: "It will not bring young people closer to Christ, rather it will send the message that Christ and His Church, and all the truth, beauty and goodness it has to offer, are unimportant" (Gillibrand 2024).

In addition to trivializing the Christian message, popular entertainments can tempt the Church down a path that leads to increased commercialism and forgets Christ's assertion that "You cannot serve both God and money" (Mt 6:24). A report by consultants Price Waterhouse Coopers estimates that the global entertainment and media industry will generate \$3.4 trillion dollars in 2028.^{vii} In the UK, revenues are projected to reach £121 billion. Clearly,

entertainments can be a lucrative business for the Church, generating large revenues very quickly. However, the more it becomes involved in the entertainment business, the more likely it is that this will transform the Church's culture and mindset. We have already seen how using the nave for entertainments alters the pattern of Church life, particularly worship, sending a message that entertainments are more important. The appointment of professional managers to co-ordinate events and raise income is also problematic. There is a risk that the Church will fall prey to "new managerialism," an ideology which vests control of an enterprise in a cadre of managers whose role, amongst other things, is to encourage entrepreneurialism. New managerialism is rooted in Taylorist conceptions of Scientific Management which elevates the importance of efficiency in improving performance and achieving organizational goals (Bond and O'Byrne 2013; Hales 2013). Churches do of course need to be run efficiently, but the object of this, surely, is to support worship and prayerful activities, not to build an entertainment empire.

A final problem with entertainments is that they are designed to stimulate consumption. Businesses, driven by the imperative to make money, have a vested interest in encouraging us to buy more goods and spend as much money as possible. Having fun can be both costly and addictive. When Christ met the woman at the well, He promised her living water so she would not have to keep coming back to refill her jar (Jn 4:13-14). The object of Church entertainments is not to satiate the appetite for fun, but rather to encourage repeat visits and stimulate consumption. Robert Bocock (1993) maintains that the ability to consume is now so closely bound up with personal identity that denial of it can provoke deep discontent. He argues that we need "a religiously based discourse, critical of consumerism as the main ideology of the future" (1993:110). Unfortunately, our cathedrals have bought into this ideology and are thus unable to offer such critical discourse.

The Harms Entertainments Pose

Critics could argue that these objections to entertainments are exaggerated. Tribute acts, discos, and the like are just innocent fun and do not harm anyone. On the contrary, there are lots of beneficiaries, not least the Church. If it could be shown that they are harmful, then there would be an ethical case for objecting to them. This line of reasoning resonates with John Stuart Mill's harm principle and the idea that we should be free to do what we like provided it does not injure others (Mill 2012). The harm principle has come to underpin Western jurisprudence and been widely used as a tool in helping to determine the moral acceptability of different actions/behaviors (Bell 2020; Fumagalli 2022; Kondo 2007). While it is very useful for these reasons, the principle has significant limitations. The first is that Christian law, rooted in the character of God, is infinitely more demanding, insisting not only that we avoid harming others but that we love our enemies and do good to them. Second, as Christians we are not free to act as we please. St. Paul tells us that while Christ has indeed freed us, we are not to use this to "indulge the flesh" (Gal 5:13). Finally, the definition of harm is contested and does not fully account for intangible harms where the effects are not immediately visible and

measurable. Therefore, rather than applying the harm principle to examine the ethics of Church entertainments, the following explores the potential harms of entertainments from a Christian perspective, considering spiritual harms as well as the more palpable physical harms that might flow from an application of Mill's principle.

The most serious potential harm of misappropriating sacred space is that it may hinder our relationship with Christ. In John 15:15, our LORD says: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." One of these commandments surely is to respect God's house as a house of prayer. Most of those who attend events will probably not consider this at all, however there were a few instances I witnessed on my visits to cathedrals which made me wonder whether some patrons were attuned to possible harms. At one of the gin and rum festivals, a woman left not long after entering, saying in passing that "It just doesn't feel right, not in a church. I don't like it." A twenties fancy dress ball provoked the same response in two women who departed and, casting a backward glance at the cathedral, commented: "It's disgusting. It shouldn't be allowed ...we said a little prayer before we left." Even if patrons are unaware of potential harms, it is something the Church ought to recognize and be guarding against. By failing to do so, it could be argued that the Church is not just diluting the Christian message, but changing it. St Paul warned of this danger in 2 Timothy 4:3 "The time will come when people will not listen to sound doctrine, but will follow their own desires and will collect for themselves more and more teachers who will tell them what their itching ears want to hear."

Hindering our relationship with Christ is an invisible harm with intangible consequences. However, there are other harms that are palpable and have very tangible consequences. For example, an inebriated patron may get into a brawl causing personal injury or injuries to other parties. At one of the cathedrals I visited, a homeless man complained that people left the cathedral late at night drunk and were very abusive towards him. There will be people at events who gossip about others, causing indirect personal harm. Like getting drunk, this can happen anywhere, but it is a much more serious misdemeanor in church. Then, of course, there are the songs used in concerts. The lyrics of one of Anna von Hausswolff's songs "Pills" which included "Oh, I made love to the devil" provoked a storm of protest outside a French Roman Catholic church in 2021 which was hosting a performance of her music, leading to the cancellation of the event. It subsequently relocated to a Protestant church in Paris (BBC 2021b). This was a rare instance of an actual protest. In England, the silent disco at Canterbury Cathedral triggered prayer vigils at other cathedrals holding silent discos, but the protests were short-lived and failed to dent their popularity.

The Church's willingness to embrace entertainment raises the prospect of yet another tangible harm: reputational damage. As the established Church, responsible for a huge network of churches and faith schools, it should set a good example. The media has on occasion been very forthright in its condemnation of popular entertainments in Church. Writing in *The Times* newspaper, Libby Purves berated two English cathedrals in 2019 for offering crazy golf and a giant helter-skelter in the nave. It was, she suggested, "a new low for the Church of England" (Purves 2019). A few years earlier a cathedral based in the Midlands was admonished for

planning to screen two adult films, *Don't Look Now* and *The Wicker Man*, which feature nudity and (in the latter case) enactment of pagan rites. The Dean of the Cathedral defended screening the films on grounds that they dealt with issues of faith and doubt, would not shock God, and, by offering something different, attract new people into the building (BBC 2018c). The negative media coverage must have had some effect, however, for while cathedrals continue to host film shows, there have been few further screenings of horror movies.

Entertainments may also damage the Church's reputation at the local level. In my visits to cathedrals, I was interested to observe how people outside the cathedral viewed what was going on inside (the doors were often open, or patrons milled about on the forecourt with drinks in hand). Some onlookers saw them as "a great way of bringing people together" and "better than leaving the buildings empty", but many seemed disquieted. The most vocal opposition came from Roman Catholics and atheists. Catholics thought the events to be sacrilegious, reflecting a conception of sacred space rooted in their Catholic faith, and possibly also a lack of exposure within their own Church to secular entertainments. Atheists considered the events symptomatic of a general decline in moral standards, but some betrayed a lingering desire for authentic Christianity. One feisty young woman I spoke to recounted how she had marched into the cathedral, confronted the dean, and reminded him that Christ had "chucked them out of the temple." People of other faiths thought entertainments would never be allowed in their religious spaces and should not be held in Christian ones either. The Protestants I met were much more accepting of entertainments, believing them necessary to attract people into the cathedral and pay the bills. Nevertheless, there were exceptions. One man I spoke to who had been very active in the life of the cathedral I visited had severed his links with it some years ago after a dispute with the dean over an event that he considered completely unacceptable in sacred space. He subsequently joined a more conservative Church. The aspect of the events that drew most criticism was the sale of alcohol. "I can't see anything wrong with a disco, but I don't agree with alcohol" observed a Salvationist. Patrons were delighted by the copious supply of alcohol, but I heard one man, queuing for entry, say to his friend: "There's a bar in there! I'm all for it, but it's absolutely wrong."

This last quotation highlights another harm for the Church in hosting entertainments, namely that it opens the clergy to charges of hypocrisy. It is very difficult for the Church to take a stand on social evils when it seems to be ignoring its own teaching and is guilty of some of the sins that it should be seeking to persuade people to renounce. Alcohol abuse is a case in point. A Government report produced a few years ago, lays bare the social and economic cost of alcohol addiction in the UK—it is one of the leading causes of premature death and costs the National Health Service around £3 billion pounds annually (Commission on Alcohol Harm 2020). To discourage people from imbibing alcohol, tax on spirits has been increased. Yet cathedrals and churches are plying people with alcohol as part of an evening's entertainment. The whole point of the Gin and Rum Festival is surely to get people hooked on these very intoxicating drinks.

Charges of hypocrisy can be a further factor contributing to reputational damage, but concern about a possible backlash has not curbed the spread of entertainments or provoked much dissension amongst clergy. Another harm associated with popular entertainments in cathedrals, therefore, could be groupthink. Irving Janis (1972) popularized this term in the 1970's, using it to describe deficiencies in government decision-making that resulted from pressures towards conformity that arise within highly cohesive groups. The pressure towards conformity is particularly acute when group members must deal with a moral dilemma. As senior clergy meet frequently in various forums and are confronted by very similar problems which often have a moral dimension, it could be argued that they are susceptible to this condition. One of the forums that attracts large numbers of clergy is the English Cathedrals' Association. At its first conference in 2018, entitled *Sacred Space: Common Ground*, the Archbishop of Canterbury in a video link address described cathedrals as fun places.^{viii} Clearly this is a message clergy took on board, though the press was more skeptical. Writing in *The Financial Times*, Sarah Sands (2018) opined that the "temples of fun" envisaged were at odds with the Church's key role, which is to preach a faith that provides comfort and a greater sense of community.

These words, written before COVID swept the nation, proved to be prophetic. In line with many organizations, churches closed their doors to protect people from infection. A survey of 5,500 people by researchers at the University of York in the wake of the closures found that 75 per cent of non-church members sampled wanted access to churches for quiet reflection and comfort (Giles, Dyas, and Payne 2021). What was true during the pandemic is also true now for those people who come into a cathedral looking for spiritual comfort and safe space. As Susan Hill observes, "People do not come to the cathedral because it is the same as other places, but because it is not. The sacred spaces and holy silence are rare and precious" (Hill 1998:15).

The Pragmatic Case for Entertainments

While there are many potential harms in turning sacred space into entertainment space, there are also compelling pragmatic arguments in favor of the practice. Chief amongst these is that the income such entertainments generate keeps them open in the face of declining attendance. Nearly everyone I spoke to on my visits to cathedrals saw money as the key motivator for entertainments. It was mentioned by all the deans, two of whom described cathedrals as "businesses" that needed to be managed. Hiring out the nave for an evening's entertainment can generate large amounts of cash, especially if there are repeat performances in an evening or an act is billed to appear on consecutive days.

Another advantage of entertainments is that they encourage people to come into the building who otherwise have little or no incentive to do so. Although Tom Holland (2019) argues that Christianity has exercised such a powerful influence on the collective unconscious of Western society that it cannot be expunged, it is definitely not part of our national discourse, as we shall see later. Getting people to come into Church *on any pretext* could be viewed

positively as a way of reminding people of their Christian heritage and encouraging them to learn more.

Then again, it could be argued that religion is not entirely absent from secular entertainments in Church. Attending an event could lead to a deeper spiritual understanding. McKenna, Francis and Stewart (2022) cited earlier suggest that religious ideas may be implicit in patrons' experience of coming into a cathedral for an event. Their research, which draws on the work of the sociologist Edward Bailey, suggests that secular events represent a softening of the boundaries between the secular and sacred, generating meanings which can be thought of as consistent with religious ideas. The secular events McKenna and her co-workers studied could be categorized into eight themes which resonate with Christian thinking, including social justice and social conscience, violence and reconciliation, and well-being. These ambient themes might have an important influence on patrons' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors.

A slightly different argument is that entertainments in Church can be considered an expression of Christian theology insofar as they serve the community. A report published by the National Churches' Trust in 2020 calculates that churches in the UK generate £12.4 billion pounds in value annually, and provide essential community services such as collecting for foodbanks and offering homeless night shelters (National Churches Trust 2020). Although this support work is very different from offering popular entertainments, events in the nave can facilitate outreach. A dean I spoke to at one cathedral saw no inconsistencies between biblical teaching and hosting entertainments—it was just another way of showing hospitality. Another clergyman, a vergers who had attended a silent disco in his cassock, was gratified to find that patrons were approaching him during the evening to discuss their problems.

There are merits in this pragmatic rationale, but also problems. Using entertainments to draw people into Church may give them a false impression of what Christianity is really about. Entertainments certainly do generate income very quickly, but they are not a panacea for cathedrals' financial problems, as the case of Peterborough Cathedral recently demonstrated. This Cathedral has been very active in hosting entertainments, but in January 2025 launched an appeal to raise several thousand pounds to keep its doors open seven days a week (BBC 2025d). As to religion being implicit in an event, there is no empirical evidence that patrons make links between an event attended and its religious significance. The patrons I spoke to saw the Cathedral as “just another building,” or, more commonly, thought they were keeping it open for others to enjoy. Having clergy present at events does create opportunities for outreach, but this could take place just as easily in a nightclub, and would help to make the Church more visible in places where it is most needed.

Entertainments, Church, and Society

One issue that has not been considered so far is what the widespread use of popular entertainments in sacred space tells us about the kind of society we live in and the Church itself. David Hart (2009:32) describes contemporary western society as “Post Christian.” Its defining characteristics, he suggests, are the desire to pursue individual and collective freedom

and not to be bound by Christian constraints. That society has become more concerned with freedom in exercising moral judgements is in little doubt. Research by the Policy Institute at King's College which monitors changes in moral attitudes, found that the proportion of the UK population that considers abortion, for example, as immoral has declined from 35% in 1989 to just 18%, in 2019. The same change can be seen in attitudes towards drug use, with 60% disapproving of the use of soft drugs such as cannabis in 1989 and only 29% in 2019 (Duffy 2019). Given these attitudinal changes it is perhaps not surprising that popular entertainments have proliferated in churches in recent years and few people challenge the practice. Entertainments have the further advantage of generating income which accords well with the entrepreneurial spirit of our age.

As we have already noted, the Church has been strongly influenced by the social changes that swept British society in the post-war period. Their effect has been to increase the trend towards secularization. Edward Norman (2002) is particularly critical of the outcome. We are, he asserts, witnessing

...internal secularization of the Church itself in its practices and strategies, in its understandings of the nature of the faith and—most terrible of all—in its lack of holiness. It has failed to formulate clear alternatives to the traditional teaching it has allowed a section of its leadership to abandon; it is characterized by theological and ecclesiological incoherence (Norman 2002:153).

Sam Brewitt-Taylor's research provides support for the argument that there has been an ideological shift within the Church and suggests that it has weakened its ability to influence national narratives (Brewitt-Taylor 2013). He compared press coverage of clergy views on religious/social issues in the 1950's and early 1960's and found that they were given prominence and respected in the pro-Christian press, but by the middle years of the 1960's the protected space once accorded to Christian articles had declined, and the BBC, which had hitherto been avowedly Christian, adopted a neutral stance. Brewitt-Taylor maintains that the airing of radical ideas about the nature of God in the media accounts for this change and contributed to the secularization of the media and wider society.

The extensive use of popular entertainments in Church really needs to be viewed in the context of these changes in society and Church. They are inextricably linked and mutually reinforcing. Any attempt to challenge the practice runs up against this and begs the question of whether popular entertainments in Church are really here to stay. Research by Ruben van Werven (2023) suggests this may be the case. He examined the Church of England's efforts to develop an entrepreneurial orientation by scrutinizing discussion documents from the Church's General Synod over several years. The results showed that although the need for entrepreneurial initiatives provoked conflicts, gradually these diminished as the Church developed a common understanding of what entrepreneurialism means for a faith institution, and clergy became more confident and adventurous in adopting entrepreneurial initiatives. Interestingly, there does not appear to have been any discussion specifically about entertainments. The main discussions were over ways of promoting evangelism and new

approaches to worship. That the Church is entrepreneurial in a purely business sense, cannot really be in doubt. How else would it generate a multi-billion-pound investment fund and come to own some of the most prized real estate in London?^{ix} These resources are managed not by clergy but by specially appointed Church Commissioners. Cathedrals do benefit from their largesse, but they are meant to be largely self-sustaining (Association of English Cathedrals 2019). This expectation has stimulated a more entrepreneurial and management-oriented approach at the local level, within the body of the Church itself.

Conclusion

This article has argued that, whatever the financial benefits, there are both tangible and intangible harms in hosting entertainments in the nave for patrons and the Church. It seems unlikely, however, that the practice will end anytime soon. What Malcolm Gladwell calls the tipping point or the “moment of critical mass, the threshold, the boiling point” (1963:12) in the change process has been reached. The most likely scenario is that English churches will rebrand themselves as civic institutions, and entertainments will spread rapidly to smaller churches. While this conclusion seems pessimistic, smaller denominations such as the Pentecostal churches are growing and there has been a modest increase in churchgoing among young males (McAleer and Barward-Symmons 2025). More significant, perhaps, is the finding by Steve Aisthorpe (2016) that even though people are leaving the established Church, their Christian faith persists; it just finds other means of expression.

The trends that are driving English churches into the arms of commercial organizations—falling numbers and rising financial costs—can be seen in France, Germany, Sweden, Canada, and many other parts of the “developed” world (Ashworth 2019; Sweeney 2023).^x Event promoters operate internationally, so entertainments are increasingly likely to be seen as an antidote to the problems churches face. As entertainments become more entrenched, this article has suggested that the spiritual life of the Church can suffer. Its culture may change, resulting in a much stronger commercial/management orientation. Bad publicity from events may make those outside the Church cynical about it, discouraging newcomers and increasing secularization tendencies in society. The actual impact of entertainments, however, is likely to be influenced by many factors, including the historical place of the Church in a particular society, the extent of secularization, differing social values, denominational differences, church funding arrangements, and church leadership styles. We urgently need cross-cultural research on these factors to better understand the conversion of sacred space into entertainment space globally, and how best to address it. In the meantime, the words of Father Joseph Ratzinger (who became Pope Benedict XIV) seem pertinent: “From the crisis of today, the Church of tomorrow will emerge... She will become small and have to start afresh.... She will no longer be able to inhabit many of the edifices she built in prosperity.” This new Church will be poorer but “more spiritual... a Church of the little ones.”^{xi}

End Notes

ⁱ For information about upcoming silent discos in international locations, see the webpage Silent Discos in Incredible Places at:

<https://www.silentdiscosincredibleplaces.com/upcoming-events/> Details of international locations for tribute concerts to 1990's hits can be found at:
<https://candlelight90sunplugged.com/>

ⁱⁱ A clear summary of the complex structure of the Church of England can be found at:

<https://www.southwellminster.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/No-48-THE-STRUCTURES-OF-THE-CHURCH-OF-ENGLAND.pdf>. See also:
<https://www.churchofengland.org/about/governance/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Canon 1210. Book IV. Function of the Church. Part III Sacred Places. Cann. 1205-1243. See

https://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/eng/documents/cic_lib4-cann1205-1243_en.html#:~:text=Can.%201210%20Only%20those%20things%20which%20serve%20the,e,with%20the%20holiness%20of%20the%20place%20is%20forbidden.

^{iv} The most infamous example is the concert by Tangerine Dream in the Roman Catholic Cathedral at Reims in 1974. For full details of the event, see

<https://daily.redbullmusicacademy.com/2015/11/nico-tangerine-dream-feature/>

^v Weber, Max. 1905. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. New York: Charles Scriber's Sons.

^{vi} For information, go to: <https://onin.london/queen-by-candlelight/> which mentions that the Queen tribute act was the first rock concert to be performed at St Paul's Cathedral.

^{vii} Price Waterhouse Coopers Global Entertainment and Media Outlook 2024-28. Available at

<https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/news-room/press-releases/2024/pwc-global-entertainment-and-media-outlook-2024-28.html/>

See also: <https://www.pwc.co.uk/industries/technology-media-and-telecommunications/insights/entertainment-media-outlook.html>

^{viii} See Association of English Cathedrals 17th September 2018. Archbishop of Canterbury's Opening Address. <https://www.englishcathedrals.co.uk/latest-news/archbishop-canterbury-sacred-space-opening-address/>

^{ix} For information about the Church of England's investment portfolio, see <https://www.top1000funds.com/2024/09/church-commissioners-managing-historic-real-assets-for-the-future//>

^x For information about Canada, please visit: *The Living Church* (2024) "The Collapse of the Anglican Church in Canada." August 5, 2024. <https://livingchurch.org/covenant/the-collapse-of-the-anglican-church-of-canada/>

^{xi} These quotations were taken from an online article by Terry Mattingly, "Many Churches are in Rapid Decline While Others are Booming." *Times Record News*. May 11, 2025. <https://eu.timesrecordnews.com/story/life/2025/05/11/mattingly-many-catholic-churches-decline-others-booming-opinion/83484414007/>

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