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Book Review

Christopher Partridge / Marcus Moberg (eds.), The Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion and Popular Music

London / New York: Bloomsbury, 2018, xiv + 425 pages,
ISBN: 978-1-350-08262-5

Elvis Presley, with nimbus and royal crown, a winged and flamed heart on his chest, his hand raised in a gesture of blessing and his initials to the left and right of his head – this depiction by illustrator Jim Starr appears on the cover of the *Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion and Popular Music*, edited by Christopher Partridge and Marcus Moberg. The aim of the handbook is to provide a broad overview of the research field of religion and popular music. The task is not easy. The field of popular music and religion is multi-layered and touches not only on definitions of popular music but also on demarcations between religious and secular – or on the blurring of this boundary. A secular song can arouse religious feelings, just as a song created in a religious context can become a viral hit; a star can become a kind of saint, as Jim Starr demonstrated with his Elvis image.

The book opens with an introduction by the editors, who first emphasise that the field of religion and popular music has gained less attention than the empirically observable (or listen-able) interrelations of religion and popular culture more broadly. How true! All the more important, then, is a publication such as the *Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion and Popular Music*. As always for such broad topics, the editors were faced with identifying a useful approach to a complex field. They decided to divide the book into an introduction and three parts.

In the introduction, the editors situate the contributions to the handbook, especially those in Parts II and III, according to a typology proposed by B. D.

Forbes.¹ Forbes distinguished four possible perspectives on relationships between popular culture and religion: religion in popular culture, popular culture in religion, popular culture as religion, religion and popular culture in dialogue. In addition, the editors rightly emphasise the contextuality of methodologies, concepts and categories as well as the cross-disciplinary questions that the handbook poses. For example, they raise the important issue of an appropriate definition of “religion” for this field of research and ask to what extent the term “sacred” is more open than “religious”: “the sacred [...] concerns those ideas which exert a profound moral claim over people’s lives” (7).

Part I, “The Study of Religion and Popular Music: Theoretical Perspectives, Methodologies and Issues”, brings together five contributions that address central theoretical, methodological or conceptual issues in religion and popular music: ethnography (Andy Bennett), emotion and meaning (Christopher Partridge), protest (Ian Peddie), censorship (Michael Drewett) and feminism and gender (Alison Stone). This part of the book develops central processes in the interrelation between religion and popular music across genres and religious traditions. These articles emphasise the diverse social meaning-making processes of popular music and reflect an academic view. It is particularly positive that the contributions in this part highlight the transgressiveness of popular music and religion: both popular music and religion are subject to processes of negotiation, for example regarding censorship (chapter 4). Popular music (as well as religion) can reflect and legitimise dominant ideas – as discussed by Stone (chapter 5) – but also challenge them. And sometimes both processes happen at the same time. The contributions in Part I help frame the following articles and provide reference points across the other parts of the book.

Part II, “Religious Perspectives”, focuses on the interrelation between popular music and religious traditions, specifically Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Japanese religion, Chinese religion, Paganism, Occultism and Caribbean religions (in this order). The individual contributions and their insights are fascinating. A close look at individual religious traditions shows concisely how popular music can emerge in religious traditions, how it can be used by religions to convey worldviews and to evoke emotions, how it is shaped by religious ideas and how certain religious symbols, motifs and narratives are popularised through music and, in part, received again and again.

A point to ponder in relation to this part of the book, however: what we usually subsume under “popular music” originated in the “Western” cultural

1 Forbes 2000.

context, and it is noticeable in this part that Christianity is treated particularly prominently. Not only does Part II begin with Christianity, but four articles are dedicated to this particular tradition (while one of them discusses biblical references in popular music, the New Testament receives more attention than the Hebrew Bible), while the other religious traditions – certainly no less complex – are discussed in one contribution each. One might experiment by reading the contributions in Part II from back to front in order to gain a more unusual view of the interplay between popular music and religious traditions.

Part III, “Genres”, is dedicated to different genres and their interrelations with religion: Heavy Metal, Pop and Rock, Punk and Hardcore, Reggae, Folk Music, Country Music, Electronic Dance Music, Blues and Jazz, Psychedelic Music, Rap and Hip Hop, Goth Music, Ambient Music and Film Music (in this order). These very enjoyable articles convey focused and telling information and great examples that allow the reader to connect the thoughts raised in Part I with different genres and to discover similarities as well as differences in the relationships between religion and specific genres.

The book ends with notes to every chapter, a collective bibliography (which makes it more challenging to select only one contribution to read with students), a discography, a filmography and a very helpful index.

The *Handbook of Religion and Popular Music* is a rich resource that explains the complex subject area in a multifaceted way and with the help of gripping examples. As one reads the book from beginning to end, the topic’s complexity becomes very clear, but individual articles can also be picked out easily because they are self-contained. Despite their brevity, the individual contributions provide an excellent first insight into a specific field of research and offer good starting points for further research. For me, however, the stimulating Part I could have been expanded a little more. The body does appear in some contributions within the first part (especially the one on gender), but a separate chapter on the body as the basis of religion and music would have been exciting. I would also have liked to delve more deeply into a transdisciplinary view of (religious?) values and norms conveyed through music, a topic on which chapter 4 touches, but with a focus on censorship. I recognize, however, that this handbook does not aim to cover every possible topic or angle, but instead provides initial impulses for further research. And it succeeds very well in doing so.

The *Handbook of Religion and Popular Music* is useful reading material for all those interested in music and religion, for example scholars in Religious Studies and Cultural Studies, musicologists, journalists, artists and students

across a range of fields. It can surely be called a standard work for introduction to this subject area. It is very suitable for teaching at the undergraduate and graduate levels. The only (small) disadvantage is that as a handbook in the classic style, it approaches its subject by means of texts and some pictures. Music examples are not integrated. I recommend readers ensure they have internet access within reach as they digest this book, in order that they can listen to the songs mentioned.

Bibliography

Forbes, Bruce David, 2000, Introduction. Finding Religion in Unexpected Places, in: Forbes, Bruce David / Mahan, Jeffrey H. (eds.), *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1–20.