

Natalie Fritz; Anna-Katharina Höpflinger

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Natalie Fritz and Anna-Katharina Höpflinger

“And God Is Never Far Away”

Or the Sum of this Issue

Abstract

The postlude offers a summarising reflection on music and popular culture.

Keywords

Madonna, Like a Prayer, Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, Religious Expectations, Meaning Making, New Spirituality, The Mercy Seat

In this Issue we have journeyed through popular music genres and scholarly approaches and now, in this postlude, we can look back to some of the most revealing discoveries. As the authors have demonstrated, popular music carries a wide range of religious symbols and motifs. In many cases, artists not only pick up religious symbols and motifs and place them in new contexts, but also create a new whole out of different religious narratives (see Eva Meienberg and Katharina Luise Merkert), which can lead to a genre-specific religious-visual language (see Lavinia Pflugfelder). But popular music can also be a means of expression for more traditional religious communities or world-views. More established religious ideas can be communicated through popular music in new and innovative ways (see Reinhard Kopanski). Popular music tells us much about the values and expectations of a specific culture and can therefore enter into fruitful dialogue with religion and pressing contemporary issues (see Angela Sue Sawyers and Yannick Schlote).

In the following we will highlight some aspects of the interrelation of religion and popular music with two examples from the 1980s: Madonna’s famous song “Like a Prayer” with the video clip from 1989¹ and Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds’ “The Mercy Seat”, from the album *Tender Prey* (1988) and focus thereby on the

1 LIKE A PRAYER (Madonna, Mary Lambert, US 1989), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=79fzeNUqQbQ> [accessed 2 June 2020].



Fig. 1: Music video still from LIKE A PRAYER, Madonna, 00:00:10.

intermedia relation of music, lyrics and videoclips to raise for example questions about world-views, religious doctrines and formulate normative guidelines.

Holy or blasphemous?

Madonna is one of the most famous artists of the 20th century. She grew up in a Roman Catholic setting, which undoubtedly has influenced her art. "Like a Prayer" was released in 1989 and became one of her bestselling – but also one of her most controversial – songs. The discussion it stirred stemmed mainly from the accompanying video clip. The story of the video is that of a white girl (Madonna) who witnesses the assault of a white woman by white men. A black man attempts to save the victim and is arrested by the police who arrive on the scene. Madonna, who had been seen by one of the perpetrators, seeks shelter in a church. There she prays in front of a black saint, Martin de Porres, who looks like the arrested man. The statue comes to life, and they kiss. At the end, Madonna is in court and is able to ensure the black man is cleared of the crime. The story is not told chronologically, but jumps forwards



Fig. 2: Music video still from *LIKE A PRAYER*, Madonna, 00:01:23.

and backwards, while between the single pieces of the plot, Madonna sings with a gospel choir.

At the start of the video, we see the singer running in the twilight and then falling, and 10 seconds in, the camera leads her gaze, and ours, towards a burning cross (fig. 1).

Even though the word “cross” is not mentioned in the lyrics, a subtle redemption may be found the lines “I hear you call my name / and it feels like home”. In fact, the lyrics are arbitrary in that they refer explicitly to neither God nor a beloved person, but Madonna herself described the song as a story about a girl feeling loved and saved by God in an almost mystical way, as though God was her male partner.² So redemption here lies in the feeling of being loved – by whom is in the end not significant.

The video clip suggests, however, another reading of cross, not its positive Christian connotations as a sign for redemption, by setting the song within a racial controversy. Visualising a love song in terms of assault and racial injustice is unusual. On the audio level the gospel singers, who first accompany

² Perricone 2011.



Fig. 3: Music video still from LIKE A PRAYER, Madonna, 00:01:27.



Fig. 4: Music video still from LIKE A PRAYER, Madonna, 00:01:30.

Madonna's voice as background choir and then in the last third take over the lead, already point to a mix of musical traditions. Consequently, the burning crosses here are indicative of racist whiteness, as symbols of the crimes of the Ku Klux Klan in the United States, whereas the African American protagonists and the dark-skinned saint are good, with the African American congregation welcoming Madonna with open arms (figs. 2, 3, 4), while her kissing the dark-skinned saint, who comes to life again, is a reference to racial equality.³

On the audio and textual levels "Like a Prayer" provides no evidence for a political statement or criticism. If we hear the song only, we would never think of racism; it's "just" a love song. The video clip, however, visually promotes what the lyrics say: redemption can be found in the community of caring of others. Skin colour is of no importance. In the music video Madonna's statement against racial discrimination and the representation of the church as an important social actor in racial justice are explicit and highly political, which provoked protests from various parties as soon as the video was published. For fundamental Catholics she was doomed as a blasphemous singer,⁴ and while a music journalist was stunned that Madonna would profit from showing burning crosses, Madonna's response was that she had always thought that art should be controversial.⁵

The interaction between music, lyrics and visual representation in the case of the LIKE A PRAYER video clip therefore plays with aesthetic conventions and references to religious symbols and meaning, and thus not only challenges the socio-political status quo, but also opens the beholder's eye to potentially less obvious aspects of religious communication.

3 "If any one of the images in the *Like a Prayer* video blatantly violates so-called racial taboos and potentially offends viewers, it is the depiction of Madonna's character being kissed by the black male. [...] In *Like a Prayer*, however, Madonna does not allow the viewer to dismiss or ignore the relationship or wish it away. She also does not give in to the racists, whose burning crosses in the background blaze with the rage of fear and hatred that would keep the races polarized. Madonna challenges viewers not by advocating interracial relationships but by presenting images that confront them with their own historically grounded prejudice" (Scott 1993, 66).

4 Romero 2010; Holden 1989.

5 Holden 1989.

From reference to a new spirituality

With our second example – the song “The Mercy Seat” by Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds – we can look in greater detail at this intermedia interaction of music, text and image and the relationship to religion. The Australian artist Nick Cave grew up Anglican. His songs have often dealt with religious themes, especially in the 1980s. The song “The Mercy Seat”, performed by Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds on the album *Tender Prey* (1988), is a striking example of this interrelation between religion and music.

“I began to warm and chill / to objects and their fields / a ragged cup, a twisted mop / the face of Jesus in my soup.” These are the first sung lines of this song – preceded by a mumbled first-person account of how the singer landed on death row. The song deals with death and hope, sin and forgiveness, and guilt and innocence, with many allusions to the Old Testament (e.g. Lev. 16:11–19; Lev. 24:19–21) and New Testament (e.g. Luke 2:6–8) on the eve of the singer’s execution by electrocution. The song’s music video jumps between a black-and-white prison cell where Nick Cave, aka the first-person singer, explains the feelings of a “moribund” man (fig. 5) and the band performance, in colour and somewhat distanced, of the song’s chorus (fig. 6).⁶

This visual discrepancy between the two scenes reflects the many contradictory lines within the lyrics – the “mercy seat” may refer to the electric chair, used for executions, or to the throne of God, the place where mercy can be found. It also serves as a leitmotif of the band’s whole œuvre. Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds constantly question humankind and humanity – even life itself – in their songs and often refer to one of the “providers of sense and orientation”, to religion and especially the Bible. As Cave sings in “The Mercy Seat”, “God is never far away”.

“The Mercy Seat” is not the only place where the band analyses the world and human behaviour by referring either to the legitimacy of punishment in the Old Testament (as, for example, also in “I Let Love In”, 1994) or the prospect of hope, the crucial element of the New Testament (as also in “Sun Forest”, 2019). The fundamental questions the band – or mostly Cave – raises in its/his texts are too complex and in the end also too individual to answer in general terms, but the band frequently deals with this deficiency by integrating a critical reading of specific Christian narratives or symbols as possibilities for how to manage life.

6 For the full video see THE MERCY SEAT (Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, 1988), <https://www.nickcave.com/videos/the-mercy-seat/> [accessed 2 August 2020].



Fig. 5: Nick Cave, “the first-person singer”, in the cell awaiting his execution – a cheap print of an *imago pietatis* on the wall. Music video still from THE MERCY SEAT, Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, 00:01:08.



Fig. 6: The band playing the chorus of “The Mercy Seat”. Music video still from THE MERCY SEAT, Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, 00:00:49.

In his lyrics Cave sometimes struggles with his faith (e.g. “There Is A Town”, 2003), prays for mercy (“Skeleton Tree”, 2016) or finds a little or momentarily comfort in faith (“Waiting for You”, 2019). The essential questions and feelings Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds address with their texts are approached subtly, openly and very sensitively, and even though these huge issues seem to yearn for emotion-laden answers, the band’s musical qualities do not emphasise a specific feeling, but break with convention and expectations to allow the audience to agree or not.

Since the band has been active for almost 40 years, it has established not only an extensive discography but also a huge fan community. In recent years Cave has built up a close relationship with his fanbase through diverse media in addition to music. The semi-fictional documentary 20,000 DAYS ON EARTH (Iain Forsyth & Jane Pollard, GB 2014), about 24 hours in Nick Cave’s life, and the documentary ONE MORE TIME WITH FEELING (Andrew Dominik, GB 2016), which accompanies the making of the album *Skeleton Tree*, following the death of Cave’s 15 year old son in July 2015, present the human being behind the artist and work as a bond between fanbase and public persona. After the death of his son, Cave started the “Conversation with”-series, shows with music and personal Q&A with the audience, and also initiated a blog named *The Red Hand Files*,⁷ where he answers questions and writes about life and death or anything quotidian. The posts are sometimes poetic, sometimes angry, sometimes full of grief, but they appear honest and affable and can have a religious touch – as journalist Russell Cunningham writes, “Reading the Red Hand Files brings a sense of Easter revival, of hope amid despair, inviting us to be still, be present in the moment, guided by a suited and booted vicar.”⁸

Stepping down from the pedestal on which his fans place him to become human again seems to be a form of personal trauma therapy for Cave. Jem Aswad records Cave’s answer to the question of why he is doing this:

‘My son died’, Cave said. ‘It changed everything for me. Coming out of punk rock, I had an adversarial, conflicted relationship with my audience, especially in the early days. But after my son died I got an incredible amount of mail from people writing to me with similar experiences. I felt connected to them,’ he concluded. ‘I felt like we were suffering together.’⁹

7 The Red Hand Files, n. d.

8 Cunningham 2018.

9 Aswad 2019.



Fig. 7: Nick Cave singing and performing “Magnetotape” at Copenhagen, September 2017, 00:05:00.



Fig. 8: Nick Cave asks his fans, “Can you feel my heart beat?” Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds performing “Higgs Boson Blues” at the Beacon Theater, New York, 14 June 2017, 00:09:47.

Nick Cave gains credibility from his ability as a popular singer/songwriter, author and screenplay writer to show his suffering, his grief and how he tries to cope with the eventualities of life. As journalist Kate Hennessy puts it: “It’s about being present, knowable, vulnerable and real. And funny. Always that.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Hennessy 2019.

Cave has increasingly gained the aura of a leader of a cult, as is particularly evident when we see Cave and the band play live and celebrate their music together with their fans. Perhaps their transformation of questions into music and into performance constitutes an aesthetic sense or meaningfulness. Deploying Victor Turner's ritual theory, we can conclude that the meaning of the song is established during its quasi-ritual performance. Cave, who is well versed in the Bible, refers to Scripture as a manual for vital issues and orientation and also adopts an emotional performativity that we know from American televangelists. Even though we can assume that this form of performance carries a touch of irony (just read his blog), it is fascinating that as he sings, this critical ex-punk rocker – now usually clad in expensive, tailored suits – holds out his hand over the heads of the fans as in a gesture of blessing¹¹ (fig. 7) or encourages them to feel his heart beat¹² (fig. 8).

In addition to referring to biblical narratives with their texts, on a performative level Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds also bring people to their “church”, where everyone who dares can find meaning in life – or as Cave sings in “Into My Arms”: “I don’t believe in an interventionist God / But I know, darling, that you do / But if I did I would kneel down and ask Him / Not to intervene when it came to you / Not to touch a hair on your head / To leave you as you are / And if He felt He had to direct you / Then direct you into my arms”.¹³

Music as a sign of religious expectations

As the examples show, the interrelation of popular music and religion is embedded in an intermedia network; different perspectives open up different questions. At the same time, these interrelations are also part of a larger cultural and time-specific context with particular norms, values, conventions and expectations. Through popular music, normative values are conveyed. The negotiation can trigger protest as in the case of Madonna's song, or approval, but in both cases it shapes responses to existential questions and ideas of basic human norms and transmits these ideas through global distribution.

11 Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, 2015, “Magneto”, performed live in Copenhagen, uploaded 13 September, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D1XKc8lROTs> [accessed 22 August 2020].

12 Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, 2015, “Higgs Boson Blues”, performed live at the Beacon Theater, NYC, 14 June 2017, uploaded 15 June, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QTpd0RPZi5s> [accessed 22 August 2020].

13 For the lyrics of “Into My Arms” see Cave 1997.

The songs addressed, and still address, different discourses. Popular music thus forms not only its own logic of mediation and representation but also its own genre-specific approach to religion. As these songs by Madonna and Nick Cave and the case studies in this issue show, the use of religious symbols, motifs and narratives in a specific song can say a lot about the respective music culture, its performances and ideas of the world, just as popular music can reveal much about common ideas on religion and dominant cultural values. Popular music thus connects the collective with the individual: a personal artistic expression of a musician or a band is placed in dialogue with the basic religious ideas of a society or community. The interrelations between music and religion are complex and fluid: a “secular” song can form “religious” emotions and/or transcendental experiences; it can help in difficult life situations. Vice versa, a song from a religious perspective or community may be secularised and transmitted in a secular context as a secular song. Some songs are both religious and secular, depending on how religion is viewed and defined. Some musicians can be worshipped like transcendent figures as saints or even gods, and a pronounced fan cult can develop around them, as in the case of Nick Cave. And for some people, popular music (as a whole) is itself more than music; it is a lifestyle or might even become a religion – regardless of religious motifs in lyrics or video clips and regardless of star-musicians.

Examination of religion and popular music poses the complex theoretical question of the fluid boundaries between religion and non-religion. That question must be answered anew in each case study, not in general, but in relation to a concrete perspective, a specific band or song. This insight brings us back to the point of departure for our Issue, which hopefully will encourage scholars to explore the fascinating interactions between religion and popular music, because, as we have learned, “God is never far away”.

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