



## ‘Pretty amazing grace’: using contemporary popular music in church worship

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*This article reflects upon the use within corporate worship of music created outside of the church environment. Using the practical experience of producing a Passiontide liturgy that incorporated secular popular music, and the shape of the resulting worship, the article explores the appropriateness of such use and, assuming such use is deemed appropriate, best practice in doing so. Engaging with a range of academic and popular sources, the article sees music as a key component of both church and contemporary cultures and attempts to offer a way of bridging the gap that seems to exist between them.*

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I listen to music every day of my life – I’m listening to it as I write this. Very rarely, however, is that music what might be deemed ‘religious’, ‘sacred’, or ‘liturgical’. My tastes are eclectic but almost entirely secular – by which I mean music created in a non-church environment for use in a non-church environment.<sup>1</sup> As an ordained minister, almost the only time in the week that I encounter music deliberately created for the worship of, and encounter with, God is in worship gatherings. Yet I firmly believe that within the music of my daily life I meet God – encouraging, challenging, comforting, disquieting, raging or whispering. I am not alone. In *The Day Metallica Came to Church*, John Van Sloten writes of his experiences preaching on the message of God found in a variety of cultural idioms – including the music of heavy metal band Metallica.<sup>2</sup>

It was with this experience of music in mind that I began work on my annual reflective service upon the Passion of Christ, which eventually became ‘Outro: A Service of Words and Music Reflecting on the Seven Last Words of Jesus.’<sup>3</sup> Unlike much worship that features music, this service featured no congregational singing, whether hymns, songs, chants or anthems. Rather, after each piece of Scripture there was a piece of popular, secular music to assist the congregation to reflect in some way upon the Scripture heard, especially the words of Christ.

The responses from the congregation were overwhelmingly positive, much to my relief as this was the first time I had used such music as the primary driver of the liturgy – other than opening and closing prayers, the only elements of this worship were Scripture and the secular music I had (prayerfully) chosen.<sup>4</sup> Previously there had always been something else: liturgical scripts, images, extempore prayer, activities, a sermon or reflection, sacramental acts. On this occasion, though, the congregation was effectively being left to their own devices in how they might understand the link between Scripture, secular music and God.

This allowing of secular music to be a primary enabler of theological reflection is what makes Outro worth reflecting upon. Theologian and musician Jeremy Begbie argues comprehensively that music can offer particular ways of enabling ‘theology to do its job better’ and that ‘theology is inseparable (though distinct) from prayer and worship – thinking appropriately *about* God means regularly engaging *with* God.’<sup>5</sup> In Outro there is an attempt to bring these themes together: music in a worship context to enable theological reflection, with the additional factor that the music chosen was secular popular music.

There are few in the Church today who would take the line that all music is so naturally sensual that it ought not to be used in worship at all. Methodism sometimes even declares itself to have been 'born in song', and the hymn of that title declares that singing has always been part of humanity's worship of the divine. This is not simply a hymn writer's hyperbole, it is an observable anthropological reality; religious rites and music are deeply linked in human culture and cult.<sup>6</sup>

Nonetheless, it is noticeable that the focus of the Church's consideration of music within patterned, communal worship (liturgy) generally relates to music specifically created for liturgical use. Frequently the battleground of the so-called 'worship wars' of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has been music, while it also shows itself in the sections on music in publications such as *The Study of Liturgy and Worship* and *The New SCM Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, where the focus is very much on 'liturgical music' as a specialist subject.<sup>7</sup> All this despite the fact that, as the *SCM Dictionary* notes, all music can be seen as innately theological.

What, then, of music created outside the world of worship? Is there enough, or any, of the sacred in the seemingly profane that we might use it to meet with God in our communal worship? In his *Metallica* book, Van Sloten quotes from the Belgic Confession of 1567, which points out that we know God in two ways, and Scripture is the second: the first is 'the creation, preservation and government of the universe'.<sup>8</sup> The Confession makes clear that God is seen everywhere. As Scripture indicates, there is nowhere we can go where we will not find God already present.<sup>9</sup>

In 'Pretty amazing grace', Neil Diamond eulogises on the concept of grace as a transformer of life.<sup>10</sup> The context of the wider album's development makes it unlikely Diamond was specifically reflecting on the grace of God as seen in Jesus Christ, yet this doesn't mean that the words and music, placed within the context of worship, and beside the scriptural account of Jesus' words of forgiveness on the Cross, cannot be seen to speak of such grace – it must be doubted that Cyrus the Great saw his releasing of the Hebrew people from exile in Babylon as being for or of Yahweh-God, yet Scripture is clear that Cyrus is anointed by God.<sup>11</sup> One of the great debates regarding music and theology is that regarding the natural sacredness or otherwise of music. While the likes of Zwingli have been highly suspicious of the sensuous nature of music to the extent that they rejected it (at least from worship), there are those who have taken other views, such as Augustine and Calvin, who saw it as something that

could be redeemed if properly controlled. Here we have a track that very directly asks questions of whether grace 'permeates the world' placed in direct comparison to Jesus' request for forgiveness of those who are crucifying him – one of the Bible's most astounding demonstrations of God's grace.<sup>12</sup> A gut instinct that in secular music there is something of God that might be used in worship and theology is not enough, however, to assume that such use is appropriate.

As I worked on the order for what became Outro I was aware that just because I felt what I was doing was appropriate this did not mean there might not be reasonable objections to what I was doing.

The most obvious objection was one of style. However we understand the term 'liturgy', we must recognise that one of its components is some kind of commonality. Whether liturgy is something done 'by' or 'for' the people it nonetheless involves the people in some way, otherwise it is simply a vanity project. My expected congregation was one not generally aware of the music of Queen, Coldplay or Crash Test Dummies, though one or two would likely know music by Neil Diamond or Johnny Cash. They may have heard of U2, but it is unlikely that even if they knew Bob Dylan's 'Knockin' on heaven's door' they would also know Antony and the Johnson's haunting cover of it (let alone the contrasting Guns N' Roses version best known to most of my own generation). It was, therefore, a legitimate concern whether using such music, likely to be largely unknown to the majority of the congregation, might be unhelpful and classed as a vanity project.

In *Thirty Ways to Use Music in Worship*, John Leach suggests that one way is 'for teaching'.<sup>13</sup> For the purposes of Outro, in which there was no formal teaching element, the opportunity to reflect on Scripture and music, and to therefore 'do' theology for oneself, can be seen as an opportunity for teaching. The importance of this is vital to seeing beyond the style of music provided – sometimes teaching includes providing that which is uncomfortable. Methodists claim that Christ's death is for all, yet many congregations seem to find it difficult to engage with cultures beyond those they are already familiar with. As Leach points out in relation to Arrested Development's 'Fishin' 4 religion', sometimes what people need to hear from music is a challenge to their own comfortableness.<sup>14</sup> It therefore seemed appropriate that, alongside Scripture that can be seen as some of the most challenging in the Bible, I would use music that might add to, rather than detract from, that challenge.

A further objection I considered was whether my choices were legitimately related to the theme and the Scripture passages. As Van Sloten notes, it is perfectly possible to have a view of something, whether music or another cultural medium, that is singular to oneself.<sup>15</sup> I needed my own 'little modern-day synagogue' to discuss the possibilities and appropriateness of my musical choices in terms of content and theological relevance.<sup>16</sup> The nature of my work and the time available to me meant forming a local working group was not practicable, so I turned to another cultural phenomenon – Facebook. I posted a status indicating what my plans were and asking friends to share their own thoughts on possible musical choices and comment on my own thoughts.

All liturgy requires a communal involvement in considering its legitimacy. In the final analysis this will be seen in whether any particular component actually enables people to worship, but in the use of material that was not originally developed for the use of a worshipping community it is clearly of genuine concern that some kind of communal decision as regards appropriateness be taken beforehand. The use of Facebook enabled me to do this as best I could, since my range of friends is as eclectic as my music tastes and able to point me to music my own experience has not brought me into contact with. Certain pieces were included in the worship after direct suggestion, while other suggestions shaped my own musical explorations and the inclusion of different pieces. If, then, secular music is to be considered it must be so in community, to ensure that we are both appropriate in our understandings of particular pieces and open to as wide a range of inspiration as possible – thereby not limiting our thoughts to our own tastes and preferences.

All of the above operates on the assumption that, with appropriate caution, the use of secular music is perfectly sensible. The reality, however, is that such a position is not normative within the traditions of the Church. It is more commonly the view that music may be admittedly used in worship but only if tightly controlled. Jeremy Begbie notes in passing that Elton John played a reworked version of his song 'Candle in the wind' at the funeral of Princess Diana, yet such occurrences are likely to be infrequent in the mind of the public.<sup>17</sup> Clearly the advent of 'alternative worship' has begun to engage in a much more frequent cross-over: Van Sloten's book argues directly for this, while Steve Collins has written about the phenomenon in the magazine of the fairly traditional Royal School of Church Music (RSCM).<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, an innate carefulness still exists in a great deal of the Church's consideration of music in worship. Then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger is clear that while music can be seen as vital within the Church's liturgy since 'mere speech is not enough',

nonetheless pop music is ruled out as 'a cult of the banal' while rock festivals are seen to have a 'cultic character ... in opposition to Christian worship' – strong accusations from the now Pope Emeritus!<sup>19</sup>

One can be certain that they were not written without deep consideration, nor as a lone dissenting voice within the Church. Neither is the suggestion that popular music culture operates in ways similar to new religious movements (cults) without anthropological evidence. In his book, *Pop Cult: Religion and Popular Music*, Robert Trill specifically states that '[p]opular music cultures are a common form of popular or implicit religion.'<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, church concerns regarding the cultic nature of pop music and its use in worship are not helped by the very public failings of early 'alternative worship' service, The Nine O'Clock Service.

Nonetheless, the Church does not speak with one voice on this matter. Popular music forms have frequently made their way into Christian worship. Hymn writers such as Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley attained huge popularity in part because they wrote to tunes the general populous already knew. This tradition continues in John Bell and Graham Maule setting their hymns to folk tunes, and with modern hymn and song writers such as Graham Kendrick, Stuart Townend and Matt Redman writing their own tunes in an idiom most people of the baby boomers and since are familiar with. It is a phenomenon also seen outside worship, where New Christian Music takes popular music forms and attaches explicitly Christian lyrics – even to a style as seemingly in contrast to the Christian faith as death metal. Clearly, though, piggy-backing on popular styles or idioms is not the same as specifically using secular pop music in worship, including the lyrics.

It is clear that popular secular music can contain thoughts and images that are problematic for the Christian faith (one might cite, for example, John Lennon's 'Imagine'<sup>21</sup>). Does this mean that all secular music might be unusable? It might be argued that in the context of exploring the content there may indeed be value in exploring something like Lennon's work – consider 'Imagine' as an interesting comparison with the Hebraic mindset that may have talked of the heavens and sheol but had no concept of heaven and hell in the way we often refer to them. We can also note that certain bands and tracks stand in direct contrast to the idea that secular music is of little worship value. For example, U2's connection with worship has gone so far as inspiring the U2charist phenomenon, in which U2 music is used as the foundational platform for a celebration of Holy Communion – unsurprising with tracks to draw from such

as 'Gloria', 'Rejoice', '40' and 'Crumbs from your table'. Likewise, it does not take much to see the prayerfulness of a song like 'You/you've got the love', a major hit for two different groups. Using such tracks would clearly be more appropriate than some others. Yet the Christian gospel is about grace and redemption, resurrection and new life.

Sometimes the worship value of a song comes not simply from the musical style and the lyrics but the history of a song and the artist(s) involved. Less than a week after leading Outro I led Good Friday services in two of my chapels. These services featured the normative singing of hymns, but also featured 'secular' music. It is the 'Intro' that is of most note here: I used the demo cover version of blues singer Lead Belly's 'They hung him on a cross' by Nirvana. There are clearly those who think Nirvana should never appear in worship and could never add to a sense of the sacred. However, there is a poignant connection with the grace of God in hearing some of the words of that song sung by Kurt Cobain – a man who found himself so lost in the challenges of celebrity, addiction and depression that he killed himself – during a service marking and celebrating the death of Christ and what it means for all of humanity and all of creation.<sup>22</sup>

In the light of the way music can be redeemed, it is appropriate that Johnny Cash's version of the Nine Inch Nails' song, 'Hurt', felt right for Outro. Admittedly Cash's version, a minor hit in 2003, is not quite as the original – it changes the words 'crown of shit' to 'crown of thorns', yet in changing just one word, and through being voiced by a man whose prophetic Christian faith has been evidenced throughout his music career, suddenly the whole song moves from the raging self-hate of drug addiction of Trent Reznor's original outpouring into a part-apocalyptic, part-psalmic reflection on the reality of death (Cash was dying when he recorded the track).

So it is that a combination of context, lyrics and artist can redeem something that originally seems to be far from a Christian ideal. What, though, of music that remains secular in its creation and production?

As we consider worshipping God with the words of the secular we find ourselves considering not only views with regards to the concept of music, but also our theology of the relationship between the divine and mundane, the sacred and profane. If we begin from a position of total depravity we might suggest that without a deliberate sense of God in the work of a particular songwriter or musician we must be wary of assuming it has value in our worship. Van Sloten, quoting Dorothy L. Sayers, suggests an alternative: that what indicates humanity's nature as a divine image is the creative tendency,

and that therefore we ought deliberately to seek to find God in that which humans create, of which music is one example.<sup>23</sup>

This thought ties into the idea that our temptation to divide the divine and profane is problematic. Don E. Saliers, a Methodist theologian, liturgiologist and musician, has pointed out that all music has sacral potential and that 'we need not work with dichotomies between "sacred" and "secular" music as such.'<sup>24</sup> Communal worship is not a place where we separate ourselves from the world, but where we bring the world, what we do within it, and all that we believe to be of worth within our lives before God. We ought not to be one thing in worship and another outside of it. Unless we are to say that all popular music is problematic, we must acknowledge it has the potential for divine worth, and if it has divine worth of some kind then surely it is appropriate for worship, in which we both give God our worth and receive that worth from God – for let us not forget that God is at work in worship alongside us.

One of the congregants at Outro was an organist who had been booked to play at this service had I needed someone to. When he discovered he wasn't needed, and why, he hinted he might not come. In the end he did, despite being sceptical of what might occur. Afterwards he approached me and, clearly emotional, said, 'Thank you. I'm so glad I came.' While I'm happy to acknowledge my own part in the preparation of worship I think this flags up another factor in debate over the use of secular music in liturgy: the part the Holy Spirit plays in allowing us to meet with God in worship.

If we say that secular music should play no part in the worship of God we seem to say that there are things that God's Spirit cannot redeem and work through. While there are theologies within the Church that would posit this idea, it seems to me inimical to the Methodist position of salvation open to all. Yes, such music must be chosen carefully, as any liturgical music ought to be, and the variety of music and interpretation means a communal approach to choosing and interpreting the music is necessary. However, it does seem that there is within the use of secular music the opportunity to bring to our worship music that directly allows for God's grace, redemption, creativity and imminence to show forth.

As Metallica sing, there is within life and faith a 'pursuit of truth no matter where it lies.'<sup>25</sup> If we believe that the truth of God is found and experienced in the world as well as in the Bible and the sacraments of the Church then we must not be afraid to bring the world into our worship – including the music the world listens to day by day.



*Note: the songs used in the service 'Outro' are available as a playlist on Spotify; just search for 'Outro – Palm Sunday 2015'. The lyrics to all referenced songs can usually be found easily by entering the title in an internet search engine.*

## Appendix

### **Outro: a service of words and music reflecting on the last seven words of Jesus**

#### Opening Prayer

##### *Forgiveness*

Luke 23:32–34a

'Pretty amazing grace': Neil Diamond

##### *Paradise*

Luke 23:39–43

'Viva la vida': Coldplay

##### *Family*

John 19:25b–27a

'Sometimes you can't make it on your own': U2

##### *Forsaken*

Mark 15:33–34

'The unforgiven ones': Crash Test Dummies

##### *Thirst*

John 19:28

'Hurt': Johnny Cash (orig. Nine Inch Nails)

##### *Finished*

John 19:29–30

'Knockin' on heaven's door': Antony and the Johnsons (orig. Bob Dylan)

##### *Spirit*

Luke 23:44–46

'Who wants to live forever': Queen

#### Closing Prayer

## Notes

1. There is much debate to be had over the meaning of terms such as 'secular' and 'religious'. Sadly, I don't have the space in this reflection to properly have such a

- discussion, therefore I've chosen to use the term 'secular' as a shorthand for activities and items, especially music, that are not consciously related to the worship and purposes of God. Arguably this is similar to the use of the term 'profane' in Old Testament writings, in which something profane is not necessarily bad but has simply not been set apart for God and made holy.
2. Van Sloten 2010, pp. 9–29, especially noting pp. 20–21, which compare Metallica lyrics to Scripture passages.
  3. The term 'outro' being the pop music equivalent of a 'coda', and therefore a reference to the musical equivalent of 'last words'.
  4. The order of service is reproduced as an appendix.
  5. Begbie 2008, p. 20; Begbie 2000, p. 271.
  6. Brian Hoare, 'Born in song!' in Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes 2011, #21.
  7. Whelan 2013, pp. 91–101. Various items relating to 'Music', especially J. M. Joncas, 'Music as Worship', in Bradshaw 2002, pp. 326–329.
  8. Article 2, The Belgic Confession, 1567, in Van Sloten 2010, p. 59.
  9. For example, see Psalm 139.
  10. Neil Diamond, 'Pretty Amazing Grace', from Diamond 2008 (CD).
  11. See Isaiah 44.24—45.19.
  12. Van Sloten 2010, p. 167.
  13. Leach 2011, pp. 19–22.
  14. Leach 2011, p. 21.
  15. Van Sloten 2010, p. 140–141.
  16. Van Sloten 2010, p. 141.
  17. Begbie 2008, p. 37.
  18. Collins 2007.
  19. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger 2001.
  20. Till 2010, p. 7.
  21. John Lennon, 'Imagine', from Lennon 1987 (CD).
  22. Nirvana, 'They hung him on a cross', from Nirvana 2004 (CD).
  23. Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (New York: HarperCollins, 1979), p. 22, quoted in Van Sloten 2010, p. 148.
  24. Don E. Saliers, *Music and Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), p. 60, quoted in Gilmour 2009, p. 27.
  25. Metallica, 'Through the never', from Metallica 1991 (CD).

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