ROUTLEDGE

THE CULTURAL STUDY OF MUSIC

A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

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CHAPTER 26

Music, Sound, and Religion

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I take as my point of departure here a set of commonplace observations: The pervasive, profound relation between the sonic and the sacred is an essential aspect of musical practice, thought, and discourse and an enduring theme in music scholarship. Some of the first musicologies are sonic theologies—the Rig Veda, the Gītassara Sutta, the Psalms of David, the Epistles of Paul, the Surah 96 "al-'Alaq." Long before the disciplining of music scholarship, texts such as these inspired the musicological thinking of figures like Purandara Dasa, Zhuhong, Maimonides, Augustine, and al-Ghazālī as Dharmic and Abrahamic traditions transformed into world religions. Within world religions, the applied musicologies of reform and renewal movements like Sufism, bhakti, the Second Vatican Council, or Hasidism have engaged debates about the propriety of sonic expression and aural experience to clarify doctrine, meet the spiritual and social needs of specific communities, and situate the sacred in relation to a particular soundscape. And through their early modern encounters with non-Europeans, missionaries, mercantilists, colonists, and thinkers like Jean de Léry (Harrison 1973) and Bernard Picart (Hunt et al. 2010) documented a developing sense of a universal relation between music, sound, and religion—a relation intensified through recognition, fascination, violence, ethnocentrism, and civilizational stereotype. In these ways, religion has become such an essential part of music scholarship that to critically rethink its naturalness might seem unnatural.

Music and Religion as Categories

This universality and naturalness is emblematic of the emergence of religion as a *sui generis*, secular, Enlightenment category (Asad 1993; Masuzawa 2005; Taylor 2007)—what Derrida famously terms the "globalatinization" (*mondialatinisation*) of religion (2001, 50). Religion becomes the same thing everywhere, something people have that is distinct from other spheres of experience, action, and belief and, like culture, comparable across time and distances. Similarly, the kinds and qualities of sound that are recognized, objectified, and disciplined as music (Bohlman 1999, 25–26) establish music as a delimited, universal category of human expressive, affective, and sensory experience. Given the pervasiveness of these epistemological categories, the coupling of music and religion in music scholarship seems intuitive and natural when we speak of and represent Jewish music, music and Islam, Christian musical repertoires, Buddhist musical traditions, or Vedic music theory, for instance.

In these cases, music is something known that gives voice to, mediates, and is fundamentally shaped by what is known as religion. Here, religion is circumscribed as doctrine, text, ritual, sincere belief, power, and transcendence, and music is the sound, style, and performance that religion legitimates. The secular concept of religion makes Buddhism and Islam, Hinduism and Judaism, Christianity and Sikhism discrete, comparable domains of spiritual experience, ethical and moral action, and human being that subjects inhabit. And when musics are linked to religions, they too become comparable and metaconceptually the same; the -isms of world religions that suggest some kind of coherence, orthodoxy, and equivalence also suggest that the musics of those religions are alike in terms of style and efficacy.

For anyone attuned to the varieties of religious modernity and secularity that take shape through different understandings of personhood, polity, and society, this conventional way of thinking music and religion is unsatisfying, however. What sense to make of the substantial sonic and theological disjunctures between the Christian musics of Pentecostal Romani in Hungary (Lange 2003), House of God sacred steel musicians in the United States (Stone 2010), women in the Church of the Nazarites (*ibandla lamaNazaretha*) in South Africa (Muller 2000), popular Catholic ensembles in Brazil (Reily 2002), Tanzanian *kwayas* (Barz 2003), and Trinidadian Full Gospel musicians (Rommen 2007)? What sense to make of the popular, marketable, public religiosity of musicians like Matisyahu, Arvo Pärt, Aretha Franklin, Mos Def, or Lupe Fiasco? What sense to make of spiritualized, de-ideologized religious musics at *kīrtan* sessions in Moscow, Mexico City, and Melbourne or at the Fes Festival of World Sacred Music (Kapchan 2008)? What sense to make of the folklorization of religious musics through tourist-

oriented performance (Hagedorn 2001)? What sense to make of religious performance that precedes and enables belief (Engelhardt 2009) or models "real" trance and spiritual ecstasy (Becker 2004; Jankowsky 2007; Kapchan 2007)? And what sense to make of the renunciation or coercive, violent proscription of music in the name of religion?

Perfect sense, I would say, but only when concepts of music and religion are continually and critically examined and their taken-for-grantedness suspended. As spiritual life, ethical and moral action, theology, and the sonic converge in the secular modern, music makes religion, and vice versa. Engaging this, however, means thinking, listening, and writing in terms of the *sui generis*, secular, Enlightenment categories of religion and music—acts that limit perforce the kinds of knowledge scholars can produce.

Secular Epistemologies and Music Scholarship

Ethnomusicologists and historians of music are good at representing and interpreting the musical texts that establish religious repertoires, the ways in which religious musics enable ritual and devotion, the ways in which the religious and the secular interact sonically, the details of doctrine and tradition that shape religious musics, the ideologies and aesthetic values of religious sounds, and the far-reaching effects of religious performance. We are good at this because these kinds of representation and interpretation emerge quite easily from the secular concepts of music and religion that help establish our disciplinary commitments; we are able to stop short of invoking faith and the supernatural. Both ethnography and historiography appeal to Enlightenment reason, the hermeneutics of suspicion, verifiability, critical reflexivity, and the nonabsolute, nontranscendental worldliness of secular knowledge (Said 1983), which is what locates ethnomusicology and historical musicology in the discourses of the social sciences and humanities as opposed to religious discourses. As secular epistemological categories, music and religion are about humanness and humanism (even, and especially, as that assertion might be critiqued in the language of the social sciences and humanities). Perhaps nothing gets at the secular epistemology of music and religion better than John Blacking's rightly famous definition of music—religious musics included—as "humanly organized sound" ([1973] 1995).

Yet the effects and affects of what can be called religious musics may arise precisely because music is not humanly organized sound. Rather, the musicking body and subject may be a sonic medium for divine revelation, spiritual presence, and cosmic union, reframing (or effacing) the role of human agency in the efficacies of religious musics (Friedson 2009, 9). Here we reach an epistemological limit established by secular concepts of music and religion because we verge on matters of faith, the veracity of experience,

the possibility of ritual failure as nonparadoxical, and the reality of revelation and presence. When "faith may be the ultimate touchstone" (Becker 2004, 34) for the kinds of questions scholars endeavor to address about music and religion, the answers that come may well be beyond the privileged knowledge of secular reason, and may therefore not count as knowledge at all. Or by speaking in the language of secular reason and stopping short of invoking faith and the supernatural, scholars may considerably limit the kinds of representations and interpretations they are able to produce.

This is the epistemological divide across which the study of religious musics must continually operate and translate. On one side of this divide is the commitment of secular critique to continually reveal the worldliness of religious musics—their contingency on forms of power, their stylistic affinities to nonreligious sounds, their particular historicity, and their mythic origins, for instance. In its strongest terms, secular critique concerns the human creation of God and the place of religious musics therein. From this position, scholarly discourse places implicit scare quotes around its representations and interpretations of religious musics' efficacies and truths: It is the "voice of a deity," not the voice of a deity, "sacred tradition," not sacred tradition, "divine silence," not divine silence, "authentic," not authentic. The knowledge produced in critical secular ethnography and historiography is of the worldliness of religious musics' transcendence.

On the other side of this epistemological divide is the position of the believer, the convert, or the practitioner. This is a kind of knowing that comes about by being present to the truth, mystery, or utility of transcendence in religious musics, and thereby relativizing the commitments of secular critique as anthropocentric. Like the native ethnographer or the performer who deeply identifies with a style or genre, the religious subject for whom music is efficacious and true can produce knowledge of consciousness and experience precisely because of the selfness that makes articulating that efficacy and truth a challenge. In its strongest terms, the knowledge of faith and experience is the provocation of no scare quotes: It is the voice of a deity, sacred tradition, divine silence, authentic. Period. This is the transcendence of religious musics' worldliness.

In reality, scholars continually mediate this epistemological divide in their production of knowledge. Many, myself included, work with the language and paradigms of secular critique while remaining deeply empathetic to the truth claims and lived faith of those who practice and believe in ways different than our own, and mindful of the epistemological limits of our work for those same reasons (Engelhardt 2009, 51–52). This is not unlike the relationship of the ethnographer or historian to the category of culture writ large. Many others are active participants in or become initiated into the religious traditions in which they work (see, for instance, Bergeron 1998, xi;

Butler 2000, 38–40; Hagedorn 2001, 5; Summit 2000). The dynamics here are of a different sort, marked by scholars' self-distancing from communities, practices, and doctrines and empathetic engagement with the language and paradigms of secular critique in order to address broad, plural audiences by drawing on the knowledge of faith and experience. And beyond the North American and European scholarly traditions I have in mind here, this kind of mediation takes shape in numerous other ways.

Mediating Orthodoxies and Secular Norms

In this part of the chapter, I note some ways this mediation takes shape in the study of music, sound, and religion as orthodoxies encounter secular norms, and vice versa. At the heart of this mediation is ontological difference—the fact that a sound that might be perceived and thought of as music is decidedly not music in a secular, Enlightenment sense, or that the power of religious performance derives from the metaphysics of sound rather than from its sonic qualities. This is the difference between *qirā'ah* and *mūsīqā*, *fanbai* and *yinyue*, chanting and singing, and this difference is one of the enduring epistemological concerns and ethnographic fascinations of music scholarship. The question of whether ontology is "just another word for culture" (Rollason 2008) is transposed into religious practice, experience, and doctrine, bringing matters of subjectivity, materiality, ideology, and alterity to bear on the provocative question of sounds being sacred *per se*.

In Orthodox Christianity, for instance, the human voice is the privileged sound of worship because of its capacity to pray and its perfection as a creation of God. But many Orthodox Christians would hold that the voice of worship is ontically grounded where the aural and the spiritual converge in a gendered subject disciplined by fasting and prayer. The religious metaphysics of the voice, in this case, are directly linked to the spiritual condition of the body and soul, and may not register in the realm of the aural. More generally, when anxieties and debates arise over the performances of professional musicians in any number of religious traditions, ontological difference is articulated in terms of how sincerity and purity matter in religious practice. Despite the exemplary qualities of their performances, professionals may not be religious subjects who can perform authentically. The concern is that their intentions, bodies, and spirits are not disciplined by and reproductive of the religious ideology of a community and that their presence is predicated on monetary payment.

Ontological difference articulates just as forcefully when the opposite is true—when the power of religious performance is not contingent upon the sincerity and purity of performers as religious subjects. In cases where the performance of religious repertoires and sacred sounds precedes belief

or is potentially efficacious in any context, it is the ontological strength of those sounds that unsettles and relativizes the secular norms of modern scholarship, since religion is not something private, but something people might become vulnerable to. Similarly, in contexts of public performance where those who listen have different religious and nonreligious dispositions, listeners' pleasure, affection, or pious engagement might be taken as responses that reproduce religious meanings and subjectivities, when, in fact, they mark an ontological distinction between the religious and the spiritual.

The mediation of ontological difference happens in numerous other ways as well. Within a normative secular modernity, the immediacy of revealed sounds—the Qur'an, the *śruti* texts of the Vedas, the songs of shamanic healers—establishes forms of religious subjectivity and concepts of individual agency that chafe against the figure of the autonomous moral subject of a liberal democratic order, thereby invoking competing discourses of blasphemy and freedom as these sounds circulate within secular publics (Mahmood 2009). Immediacy also matters when hearing and listening to the voice and its sacred utterances, which are forms of touching, require a degree of proximity and presence. In these cases, amplification, broadcasting, and recording are mediations that ontologically transform the voice in ways that undermine religious doctrine and ritual efficacy.

Mediation and immediacy bear on the materiality of sound and religious discourses about its sources. Musical instruments are proscribed in many Christian denominations, for instance, because only the voice is mentioned in the New Testament as being apt for worship—organs, drums, and guitars cannot be baptized. In Jewish practice, the Talmud lays out discrete guidelines regarding the kind of animal horn that can be used to make a shofar and the kinds of repairs that can be made without altering its sacred ontology, ensuring that the mitzvah of hearing the shofar is fulfilled. And in Dharmic traditions, there is a wealth of interpretive tropes attending to the conch shell, its physical qualities, and the auspiciousness and spiritual power of its sound. In each of these cases, material ontologies are the bases of sonic ontologies, which are recognized and reproduced in religious practice.

These understandings of mediation and materiality take shape in relation to religious technologies and media and the forms of mediation and materiality attending to them. This includes traditional forms of notation and circulation and conventional globalized electronic media (Frishkopf 2009; Hirschkind and Larkin 2008; Oosterbaan 2008) as well as *salat* apps for mobile media devices, digitized manuscripts and recordings, remote ritual participation using Skype, other VoIP services and virtual studio technologies, electronic *śruti* boxes, online instruction in religious performance, or emergent broadcasting networks (Lee 1999). Whether old or new,

technologies elicit responses from religious subjects and institutions and shape experiences and practices. They may enable fuller realizations of religious doctrine, transform modes of pious listening and techniques of sensory self-fashioning (Greene 1999; Hirschkind 2006; Schulz 2010), intensify discourses of religious power through repetition, standardization, and schizophonia, and require clarification or alteration of understandings of how embodied performance, authorized voices, and specialist practitioners function in the poetics of religion. In each case, mediations and materialities index the historical specificity and worldliness of religious musics and sounds.

Markets are another productive field through which to critically examine the mediation of religion as tradition and ideology. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, for instance, the marketplace metaphor was a means of conceptualizing the ways religious discourses and sounds took root and took on new meanings. Throughout Eurasia, sounds from "the West" and sounds from the past presented new possibilities for religious practice and identification in a time of profound social dislocation and religious renewal. Following the marketplace metaphor, these possibilities were to be realized through choice and consumption—hallmarks of the personal freedom enshrined in the secular liberal order that was the goal of many post-Soviet transitions. When ideas about individual autonomy resonate with religious ethics and theology, markets can become fields in which religious forms and spiritual power are authorized or produced through acts of consumption. Record sales can embody consensus about religious truth, and exchange can become part of religious practice, in other words.

Markets are also indices of charisma, divine favor, and spiritual flourishing. Pentecostal preachers I have done fieldwork with in Estonia and Kenya invest significant resources into acquiring high-quality equipment, nurturing contacts with studio owners and music distributors, and producing and promoting cassettes and VCDs of their music. Recordings are media of their religious charisma, and responses to their voices, styles, and messages recognize the spiritual power they mediate. For these preachers and their congregants, the market is a field for evangelism and gauging the spiritual needs of listeners as prospective congregants. Market success becomes a sign of God's presence and blessing in the lives they live.

As indices of charisma, divine favor, and spiritual flourishing, markets may dramatically impact established religious orders and institutions. The voices and practices that circulate in markets create religious networks and communities that obscure conventional boundaries between religious traditions, laypeople and authorities, or between private religion and the supposed secularity of markets. Furthermore, markets may amplify the

charisma of star performers and the significance of sacred places, reinvesting singers and shrines, saints and pilgrimages, styles and repertoires with the accord of market recognition (Chen 2005; Kapchan 2007; Qureshi [1986] 1995). This accord emerges from the forms of competition that markets organize (freedom in choice and novelty, freedom in orthodoxy and tradition), which are symbolized in competitive religious performances like Qur'anic recitation competitions.

For scholars of music and religion, markets are essential fields for understanding the dynamics of religion and its social surround. Markets can afford performers, practitioners, and listeners a means of establishing religious meanings in the world as they circulate sacred sounds in public spaces, but their worldliness might also impinge upon the efficacy and purity of those sacred sounds as they are decoupled from sites of religious power. My point is that markets mediate these extremes through their different forms of secularity. Believers make music for and consume music with their co-religionists, but not only, since engagement with religious sound is predicated on forms of exchange and labor rather than on the sincerity or expediency of belief, once again invoking ontological difference. In this way, markets make music and religion valuable and exchangeable across multiple differences, thereby making the conditions for a secular epistemology of music and religion.

My final point about mediating orthodoxies and secular norms in music scholarship concerns the complicated concepts of hybridity and syncretism. Hybridity and syncretism are everywhere in the scholarly discourse of music and religion, perhaps most notably in thinking about Santería, Candomblé, Vodun, and other Afro-Atlantic Orisha worship practices and the globalization of Pentecostal and Catholic Christianities. However, these interpretive tropes rely upon essentialized, secular concepts of religion and music antecedent to the novel forms of practice they inspire. This privileging of religious origins risks reproducing the dynamics of colonial domination, missionization, and global power that scholars have long been committed to critically rethinking (Engelhardt 2006). Hybridity and syncretism are always relative, always for someone, in other words, and the orthodoxies, centers of religious power, and marginal, derivative practices that these concepts naturalize may create more problems than they solve. The banality of hybridity and syncretism in musics and religions shifts scholarly attention to religious performance as a form of consciousness and efficacy that is always integral and historically specific.

Conclusion

I have meditated here on the critical urgency of thinking about the secularity of music and religion when we think about music and religion. Far from questioning the essential place of religion in musical thought and discourse or writing off the universal associations of music, sound, and religion, this is meant to clarify what we talk about and know through these concepts. Scholars often turn to debates about reform, fundamentalism, and innovation in religious performance and aural piety, for instance, because these debates clearly bear on how people inhabit the world musically as religious subjects, act ethically and morally through sound, or invoke religion and style out of expediency. On the other side of these debates, however, are embodied experiences of sacred sound and the consciousness of listening, practicing subjects that are incompletely addressed through the bounded, secular categories of music and religion. This is the alterity that, like the concept of culture, establishes the disciplinary and epistemological boundaries within which music scholarship takes place. Short of imagining nonsecular ways of knowing that are not reducible to belief and faith, the critical imperative is to listen for voices across the differences that music, sound, and religion bring into being within secular modernities.

Further Reading

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