

## WORSHIP WARS: CHRISTIAN POPULAR MUSIC IN THE CHURCH

**Abstract:** This paper investigates the debates that characterized the past decades since popular religious music appeared in church music scene. The new style has been a topic of great controversy in various ways since its beginnings. By many it is considered the most effective instrument for spreading Christianity among younger generations. However, many opponents dislike the entering of this modern church music rooted in popular culture into the realm of Christianity. My paper focuses on the conflicts that reveal the differences between the „traditional“ and „modern“ contemporary vernacular Christianity at once.

**Keywords:** Christian Popular Music, Contemporary Christian Music, Music Wars, Religious Music

*“Music and worship forms are emotionally charged issues that strongly resist rational analysis.”  
(Steve Miller)<sup>1</sup>*

*“Catholic church music today is beset by tensions and polarizations. Perhaps the most critical problem is its failure to achieve unity amid a pluriformity of styles and forms. Instead of a growing tolerance and understanding of differing viewpoints, there is opposition, even antagonism, expressed by proponents of what seems to be two divergent musical streams.”  
(Miriam Therese Winter)<sup>2</sup>*

Achieving religious modernisation has led to significant conflicts in all ages. Struggles between the defenders of traditions and the innovators striving to adapt better to the demands of Christian believers living in the given period occurred throughout history from the Early Middle Ages.<sup>3</sup> Since of all the branches of the

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1 MILLER 1993. XI.

2 WINTER 1984. 3.

3 It is not the aim of this article to follow the historical course of the debates. A relatively good overview is given by WILSON-DICKSON 1998 and NEKOLA 2009.

arts it is music that is capable of responding most rapidly to changing social, cultural and religious demands and of reaching the greatest numbers, it is inevitable that music is often the first and most eloquent in representing the demand for change/no change, and music also becomes the symbolic battleground of religious opposition. In our world that is accelerating and expanding exponentially as a consequence of the info-communication revolution, these struggles have perhaps appeared more forcefully than ever before. Basically we can distinguish two levels of the debates that arise. On the one hand they can appear at the denominational level. Good examples of this are the age of the Reformation, or the conflicts among the Protestant and evangelical churches that began in the United States in the 1960s and became known as the *Worship Wars*.<sup>4</sup> Although this reached its height not in music but in the nature of the liturgy, the role of music within the liturgy was also interpreted differently and has aspects of relevance to our topic. On the other hand, debates also arose within the different denominations, primarily over the nature of the music.

If we begin our investigation in connection with Catholic popular music, it can be clearly seen that conflicts over music are not a product of our times. Mass culture and within it the rapidly growing popularity of mass-produced “popular music” in the 20<sup>th</sup> century played a role in the origins of these conflicts, trends that ran ahead of church regulation. However, it can also be observed that rather than easing the conflicts, the regulation drawn up at the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) did more to deepen them. Of course, this was also partly due to the fact that mass communication brought the debates to the attention of far greater numbers and so they were able to influence the direction of local conflicts. Naturally even after the Council there remained segments of lived religiosity that had not been unequivocally regulated.<sup>5</sup> Very prominent among these was the question of church music, whether the use of modern “secular instruments” not earlier used in the liturgy should be allowed within the frame of mass or only outside the walls of the church. Because religious music is an especially suitable tool for reaching the young generations, the significance of the debates that arose must be sought not only in the conflicts; they must be interpreted in a far wider context, namely the connection between religion and modernisation, religion and transformation, and religion and mass culture.

Over the course of history church music was never static, homogeneous and unchanged, it was a heterogeneous, syncretic phenomenon incorporating a variety of legacies and musical worlds in which the characteristics of the particular age could always be observed. Music, as one of the most important parts of the mass giving an aesthetic experience, was in the centre of community attention

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4 For more detail, see NEKOLA 2009. 127–132.

5 However, the liberalisation that began with the Vatican Council resulted in ambivalent reactions and growing internal tensions. While some looked on it as the beginning of a “new language” taking into account the characteristics of the new generations and the new technical and cultural conditions, others deplored it as the generator of processes leading to the loss of the Roman Catholic Church’s traditional image and to the acceleration of secularisation processes.

in earlier centuries too. As a liturgical element that had an aesthetic as well as a faith content, it inevitably was and still is influenced by public taste. The way it is viewed depends to a great extent on the concept of "beauty" in the given period and on the current fashion. Although the sources of earlier periods reveal little of the debates,<sup>6</sup> there is irrefutable evidence that they were constantly present. Thus, although the faithful today regard all the "traditional" liturgical songs that in cases have been in use for centuries as popular songs, it is quite possible that at the time of their introduction they generated similar conflicts to those around their modern counterparts, but the memory of those conflicts has faded over time.

However, there had not been any perceivable influence in this area comparable to that which began from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It can be stated with confidence that church music today has reached an unprecedented degree of diversity: music traditions from different ages and cultural strata are present side by side with fashionable music of the present time. This kind of diversity inevitably affects individual believers differently and can lead to sharp conflicts. In the accelerated pace of our world today the church needs to find a response to more and more influences, while there is less and less time to think through and formulate the reaction and various consequences. It is typical of this "regulated lack of regulation", that in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century *Motu Proprio* issued by Pope Pius X in 1903 that decided in favour of the reviving Gregorian chant in liturgical music and also regulated the use of instruments, forbidding all secularity in church music, was still cited as a point of reference. It was inevitable that differing positions would proliferate and the conflicts between representatives of the different readings would deepen. However, in our time the judgement of church music is complicated by the fact that the predominant aesthetic canons are also fragmented, allowing greater scope for the differing interpretation and contradictory judgement of the various trends.

Attitudes towards the new type of religious music are also accordingly divided among both the clergy and the laity. It would appear on the surface that the demand for religious revival would be automatically accompanied by support for Christian popular music, as well as for the revival movements arising at the level of micro communities, and beyond these the existence of a correlation at the generational level with a fraction line between the older generations (rejecting) and the younger generations (supporting) would also appear to be self-evident. However, in the deeper layers of the phenomenon far more complex attitudes and conclusions can be found, that in many cases contradict the surface appearance. The fact that it is not possible to generalise them geographically adds a further nuance to the debates. Like the different kinds of modernity, the evaluation of Christian popular music can also differ on the basis of cultures and political regimes. It was different behind the Iron Curtain from the situation in the plural democracies, and within the latter there is a difference between for instance the United States and France. In view of all this, it cannot be the aim here to give

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6 WILSON-DICKSON 1998 gives a good summing up of the debates over church music in the different periods. In order to avoid repetition of his work these are not discussed here.

a general summing up of the conflicts occurring within “Western Christian culture”, but instead to point out their characteristics and arguments, mentioning a few of the most important “generator” works.

In this case a methodological obstacle makes analysis more difficult. Until quite recently, the English-language literature on the subject of the debates had two main characteristics: on the one hand participants in the debates were persons practising their religion, they made no secret of their position as believers and in practice approached the subject as a question of faith. Even the seemingly most objective writings occupied a position – through personal involvement – on one side or the other. On the other hand, as a consequence we find arguments, not interpretations, that in all cases aim to persuade. Change in this can be observed only very recently; a good example is issue 2009/4 of the journal *Liturgy*, and the doctoral dissertation of Anna Nekola (2009).

It can be seen as a general tendency that while in evangelical congregations the debates are basically grouped around theological and music theological questions, in the Roman Catholic Church they largely have a more profane, aesthetic basis. The logical explanation of this difference is that the music of the former denominations was always much more open to the current music styles of the given period, something for which they were predestined by the time of their foundation: because they had little or no historical past they could not use music genres reaching back to periods older than themselves.

Criticisms from the Catholic side largely appeared from high culture, based on the value system of high culture. It was mainly critics who spoke up and they could have been using the study written by Adorno in 1938 on jazz, the fashionable music trend of the time “the current musical condition of the masses is one of ‘degeneration’.”<sup>7</sup> as the basis of their argument when they described the emerging contemporary music as uniformly tasteless. They also followed Adorno in condemning the appearance of secular styles. Adorno basically rejected the consumer civilisation producing the fashionable music:

“Because the commodity form dominates the whole of music life today: the last remnants of pre-capitalist music life have been dissolved. Music, with all the attributes of the ethereal and sublime which are generously accorded it, serves in America today as an advertisement for commodities which one must acquire in order to be able to hear music.”<sup>8</sup>

and the same marked antipathy also appeared in the criticisms. The church persons who spoke up gave the impression of an institution closed to the world and the secular, they opposed the profane culture of their own age to the religious sphere as something incompatible with it.

7 ADORNO 1970. 227–229.

8 ADORNO 1970. 240.

“Christian rock artists admit to imitating the world’s styles and using them for godly ends. But adopting the world’s methods and using them for God is blatant compromise. The biblical mandate in Romans 12:2 is clear: ‘Do not be conformed to this world.’ [...] ‘You can have your contemporary music or the Bible, but not both.’”<sup>9</sup>

In addition many expressed the criticism that the emerging Christian popular music industry was too closely adopting the materialism of the consumer civilisation that is contrary to the teachings of Christianity.

“But as the CCM [Contemporary Christian Music] industry became more successful and popular, it began to draw criticism from two groups: on the one hand, from those who believed that the original evangelistic ideals were being compromised, and on the other, from those, who felt the industry was limiting the performers’ artistic and commercial potential. There was merit to this latter criticism; with its imitative posture and often pedantic lyrics, CCM had little appeal outside the evangelical subculture, and mainstream media critics easily dismissed most CCM as clichéd and redundant.”<sup>10</sup>

Among the representatives of criticism with a theological approach in the broad sense, Walter Kohli – who was a Protestant, but his work became a basic reference for Catholic critics – summed up the characteristics of rock music in the following nine points: 1. it aspires to fame, 2. it is operated by financial and industrial interests, 3. power and manipulation, it is capable of influencing young listeners, 4. recreational drug use and alcoholism, promiscuous sexual life, 5. influence of Eastern religions, 6. occultism, 7. rebellion and destructive anger, 8. chaotic mammoth concerts, 9. selfish, “take it” mentality.<sup>11</sup> “After enjoying rock music the audience awakes as though from a trance and is overcome by an urge to rage, anger and aggression.”<sup>12</sup> A book by the Franciscan Corrado Balducci, based on the views of Kohli, holds that satanism and rock music belong together “and one works to the benefit of the other: the first created the second, and the latter now serves the good and development of the former.”<sup>13</sup> On the basis of such views these authors reject the use of rock music not only in the liturgy but also for evangelising and worship occasions.

“Music stimulating one-sided movement, inducing a state of trance, intoxicating, hypnotising or causing ecstasy can never be played in divine services or for evangelisation, because here the purpose of

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9 The criticism is cited in MILLER 1993. 43.

10 ROMANOWSKI 1997. 45.

11 KOHLI 1984. 21.

12 KOHLI 1984. 36.

13 BALDUCCI 1992. 10.

music is to prepare the listener to receive the Word of God with a clear head and mind [...] Since the typical elements of rock music [...] are contrary to the order of divine creation, [...] there can be no such thing as Christian rock music."<sup>14</sup>

In the case of the criticisms made of Christian popular music it is not always possible to separate the theological from the aesthetic criteria. Kohli's views continue to have a significant influence on the arguments of those dealing with Catholic church music. While still a cardinal, Pope Benedict XVI wrote on the possibilities for the use of popular music.<sup>15</sup> He recognised that since the Enlightenment the distance between faith and contemporary culture has been a growing,<sup>16</sup> and the church too must find an answer to this.

"[...] the gap had grown deeper, and the perplexity regarding how the faith must and can adopt forms of cultural expression in the present is obvious Ratzinger in the confused confrontation of the dry pragmatism of today's church and the attempts made at cultural expression of the faith."<sup>17</sup>

But in his opinion that reply and the church's search for a new "language" cannot be restricted to the church subordinating itself to modern culture since that culture is beset by constant doubts in its search for itself.<sup>18</sup> For, as Kohli writes

"Christian pop music is the 'bait' with which they want to address the industrialised neo-pagans of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in their own (often slipshod and crude) language. If they really do 'take the bait' and come to a living faith in the risen Christ, and find their place in a congregation, then this maligned music has served its purpose and can disappear from the musical lexicon of the next generations (or never even enter it)."<sup>19</sup>

Ratzinger in addition thinks that Christian popular music cannot be used solely for the purpose of pastoral success:

"there are many kinds of music that are false, that evoke sensual ecstasy, from the cultic music of pagan religions to the pop and rock music of today [...] 'This draws persons into a sensual ecstasy, destroys rationality, and subordinates the spirit to the senses.'"<sup>20</sup>

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14 KOHLI 1984. 114, 120.

15 RATZINGER 2007. 135.

16 RATZINGER 2007. 133.

17 RATZINGER 2007. 134.

18 RATZINGER 2007. 135.

19 KOHLI 1984. 112.

20 LUKÁCS 2013. 63–64.

According to his conclusion

“Liturgical music must be humble; its aim is not to please but to edify [...] The church cannot remain at the level of utility music (‘Gebrauchsmusik’) serving only practical purposes, it cannot become music for agitation or mere entertainment: it must provide a home for beauty.”<sup>21</sup>

He raises the theological problem that in reality the liturgical changes and the resulting debates that have emerged are signs of a deeper crisis, that following the innovations

“the principal subject [of worship] is not God, and not Christ, but we who are celebrating.”<sup>22</sup>

It is only recently that the struggle of the opposing sides has reached a stage where it is possible to draw conclusions about them. Miller – who as a consumer of Christian popular music, when he was informed that this type of music is a wolf in sheep’s clothing, began to question its authenticity, and decided to examine the arguments for and against – gathered the following main criticisms from the “literature”. 1. Christian popular music has a harmful effect on the health (charges of health threats), 2. it causes moral corruption, 3. it is excessively worldly, 4. it is of poor aesthetic quality and a cautioning inner witness, 5. charges of bad associations, questionable motives and dangerous leanings.<sup>23</sup> Practically all these considerations can be found in his opinion of the American Cecilianists:

“Music that builds primarily on people’s sensual reaction is not worthy of the liturgy. This music [...] asserts an attraction only at the sensual level, as far as possible excluding intellectual factors [...] with its simplicity and constant beat this music evokes sensual excitement in the listener. This kind of monotonous, constantly repeated rhythm dulls the consciousness [...] and degrades it to the level of mere motoric reaction, that serves only to obliterate everything personal. Thus the music makes it impossible for the congregation to pray, something that should be the aim of the liturgy, while it arouses confused emotions (that are only good for awakening sensual desires...)”<sup>24</sup>

In interpreting the debates, Janco takes stock of all the pitfalls that prevented a dialogue between the two sides. In his opinion they are the following: 1. There are no objective authorities that could authenticate the positions of the different

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21 Joseph Ratzinger: *Das Fest des Glaubens*, Johannes, Einsiedeln, 1981 cited in LUKÁCS 2013. 63–64.

22 LUKÁCS 2013. 27.

23 MILLER 1993. 9–74.

24 WILSON-DICKSON 1998. 264.

parties. Some point to Western European music tradition as the norm, others mention music preferences and sociological studies analysing their social influences, still others argue pro and contra from the Bible. 2. The absolutisation of one's own position, opposed to a caricaturing of the other side and their arguments, displaying themselves as heroic while the other side are presented as selfish and negligent. In face of the concept of tradition and the sacred, the opponents are presented as transient and artificial, while the opposite side contrast their own openness and readiness to communicate with the outdated, aloof and ageing opponents. 3. The believers are treated as children incapable of deciding. 4. The debates are limited to style and the manner of performance.<sup>25</sup> In addition, Janco points out that the debates have now become inextricably intertwined with the church renewal that followed the Second Vatican Council, and the opposing sides are made up of those demanding "reform of the reform" and those "intent on maintaining the reform". In general the former support the Tridentine rite and Gregorian chant, while the latter show acceptance of contemporary music genres.<sup>26</sup>

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25 JANCO 2009. 48–50.

26 All this, of course, appeared in a slightly different way behind the Iron Curtain. Indeed, it is my conviction that the opposing sides handle their own positions in an overstated way. It is not possible solely on the basis of musical preferences to draw unequivocal conclusions regarding the general reform-mindedness or conservatism of individuals. Although it is very important, music is only one segment of this.



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