

TRYSTAN OWAIN HUGHES

Pop Music and the Church's Mission

Trystan Owain Hughes analyses three different Christian stances towards pop music reflecting distinct paradigms for Christian mission and engagement with culture more broadly: prohibition, appropriation and conversation. He critically examines both their relationship to pop music and their underlying theological rationale, arguing that the conversational approach offers the best paradigm and illustrating how it might be applied in both Christian mission and worship so as to assist the church's outreach, especially to younger generations.

Introduction: Pop music and the church

Pop music has always had an intriguing and ambiguous relationship with Christianity. On the one hand, the church has been at the forefront of protests against both the lifestyles and the lyrics of pop musicians. From the stage-gyration of Elvis in the 1950s to the sexually explicit and violent lyrics of Eminem in recent years, numerous church leaders have spoken out against the pop industry. On the other hand, there is also a palpably close relationship between pop music and spirituality. Aside from the contemporary Christian music scene, secular pop music also manifests a definite spirituality. Recent pop artists, such as POD, Jamelia, and Natasha Bedingfield, publicly profess a Christian faith, while many others deal specifically with religious themes in their music. Moreover, many young people see in popular music a reflection of their own spiritual thoughts and questions. While I was running a bible study group at the chaplaincy in Trinity College, Carmarthen last year, one nineteen-year-old student asserted: 'I feel Robbie Williams speaks to me in a way that the church has never done. He really feels how I feel, whereas the church just tells me how I should feel'. This led me to undertake a study of Robbie Williams' lyrics. I found them to be infused with religious imagery, and genuinely searching for the 'wholly other'.¹ His 2002 number two hit, 'Feel', for example, is a deeply personal song of alienation, confession, and the search for God and hope:

1 See Trystan Owain Hughes, 'Alienation and Grace: Robbie Williams "Sing When you're Winning"', on www.spiritofsound.org. Even many of Robbie Williams' song-titles reflect his engagement with spiritual themes – for example, Grace, One of God's Better People, Jesus in a Camper Van, Karma Killer, Angels, Heaven from Here.

There's a hole in my soul;
 Can't you see it in my face
 Of real disgrace?
 I need to feel real love
 And a life ever after²

While his lifestyle has often been criticised by the press and religious groups, Robbie Williams' lyrics in fact reflect the struggles, questions, and aspirations of today's youth.³ These are questions that the church is often failing to ask or answer in a way to which young people, even those who are still attending church, can relate. 'We often want to cringe in church when we sing a melodic jingle about loving Jesus,' noted one young Christian, 'when we think of our souls soaring as we play U2's complex "Pop" album loud on our CD player at home'.⁴

Despite this relationship between spirituality and pop music, the principal attitude towards secular popular culture among churches in the UK today has long been one of apathy and indifference. In some churches, Sunday sermons will occasionally touch upon the latest films, soap opera storylines, or pop songs, while many Pentecostal and charismatic churches use pop music instrumentation in their worship. Largely, however, contemporary pop culture is ignored within churches. Reasons that can be posited for this are numerous. Many Christians have no personal interest in popular culture, others refuse to recognise any Christian value in it, some are disapproving of the low-arts, while the lack of training in the Christian interpretation and use of the various mediums is also apparent.⁵ Whatever the explanation for this situation, it has to be recognised that the mediums of pop culture are largely sidelined in churches. Such a state of affairs certainly has implications for evangelism and mission. After all, as J Andrew Kirk asserts, 'the matter of culture affects every aspect of mission. It is all-pervasive'.⁶ For this reason alone, churches need to formulate a definite approach to popular culture, and specifically to the medium and messages of pop music.⁷ There are, indeed, three sharply-defined Christian approaches to pop music, which reflect three distinct paradigms of mission, that can be adopted and adapted by churches in the UK and are applicable more widely than in relation to pop music and popular culture: prohibition, appropriation and conversation.

2 Robbie Williams, 'Feel', released 2002 (written by Robbie Williams and Guy Chambers).

3 Robbie Williams is no aberration, as numerous other contemporary secular groups and artists such as Nick Cave, U2, Radiohead, Coldplay, Anastacia, and Ash are engaging with similar themes and issues. For further discussion see www.spiritofsound.org and www.thunderstruck.org.

4 Mike Riddell, Mark Pierson, and Cathy Kirkpatrick, *The Prodigal Project: Journey into the Emerging Church*, SPCK, London 2001, p 9.

5 This perception was confirmed by e-mail correspondence with theological students and church leaders while researching this paper (dated 25/05/04 – 15/06/04).

6 J. Andrew Kirk, *What is Mission? Theological Explorations*, DLT, London 2002, p 75.

7 In this assignment, the phrase 'pop music' is used to refer to all genres within the pop world: pop, rock, rap, R&B, hip-hop, etc.

The prohibitionist approach

'Get behind me, Satan': A fundamental divide?

The prohibitionist approach to the popular arts, presently held by a significant minority of American conservative evangelicals, considers them to be in direct opposition to Christianity. This view emphasises that the Kingdom of God is superseding a world that is completely corrupted by sin. The purity of the church is therefore paramount, and Christians are urged to move away from contemporary culture. The approach often appeals to 1 John for its biblical foundation, in which the 'world appears as a realm under the power of evil; it is the region of darkness, into which the citizens of the kingdom of light must not enter'.⁸ With its dualistic overtones, then, the approach urges Christians to separate themselves from popular artistic life. 'We would do much better', wrote Kenneth Myers, 'to make the church a living example of alternatives to the methods and messages of popular culture'.⁹ If the church is unable to do this, then it will unconsciously begin to tolerate, and even embrace, the values of contemporary pop culture. These values are seen to present an unchristian worldview in which rebels are heroes, responsibility for crime is not placed on the criminal, the rich are scheming, people are invariably unhappy, and sexual activity outside marriage is affirmed and celebrated as good. Such an approach, then, retreats into 'a fortress mentality', with complete distrust of 'the "worldly" products of mainstream culture'.¹⁰

Advocates of this approach regard pop music as harbouring one of the greatest contemporary threats to the Christian lifestyle. Its influence on young people is especially blatant. Pop music can even become a personal religion to many, with many stars of the pop world almost deified.¹¹ Even the faithful are not safe from the creeping effect of pop music: youth counsellor Al Menconi notes, 'The majority of "Christian" kids I come in contact with have a stronger commitment to their music than to Jesus...music is the language of today's generation'.¹² The problem posed by pop music, then, is not that it is merely superficial and unsatisfying.¹³ Rather, pop music is regarded as having become an alternative to religion, or even an alternative religion. Furthermore, this substitute is regarded to be actively opposed to the Christian way of life. It is seen as advocating sexual promiscuity, influencing violent behaviour, rejecting Christian beliefs, promoting satanism and

8 H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, Faber and Faber, London 1952, p 61; the prohibitionist approach corresponds closely with what Niebuhr categorized as 'Christ against Culture'.

9 Kenneth A. Myers, *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes: Christianity and Popular Culture*, Crossway, Wheaton 1989, p xvi.

10 Gregory Wolfe, 'Art, Faith, and the Stewardship of Culture', in *Image: A Journal of the Arts and Religion* 25 (1999), p 1.

11 In a widely reported incident at the 1996 Brits Awards, Michael Jackson took quasi-religious pretensions to their most extreme. The self-styled 'king of pop' wore a dazzling white outfit and was hoisted over the stage

in a crucifixion pose, while a number of children and a rabbi stood to the side attempting to touch him. Jarvis Cocker (of the band Pulp) exposed himself on stage, protesting against 'the way Michael Jackson sees himself as some kind of Christ-like figure with the power of healing' (see www.pulp.gb.com/bar-brits.html).

12 Quoted in John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *The Facts on Rock Music: Is it Satanic?*, Harvest House, Eugene 1992, p 10.

13 Craig M. Gay, *The Way of the (Modern) World: Or, Why it's Tempting to Live as if God Doesn't Exist*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1998, pp 212-19.

the occult, encouraging drug-abuse, and promoting nihilism.¹⁴ The challenge of living in a culture that deifies pop music, then, 'may well be as serious for modern Christians as persecution and plagues were for the saints of earlier centuries'.¹⁵ After all, the toxic lyrics of pop music affect us and transform us subconsciously and pervasively. Christians, then, have to make a definite choice between pop music and Christianity, as they are evidently incompatible with each other.

For those holding the prohibitionist position, however, the problem with pop music does not reside with unchristian messages alone. Many maintain that any music that does not glorify God is intrinsically evil, and is, therefore, to be condemned. Biblical references to music are invariably connected with worship and man's religious faith, rather than general 'feelings'. Music, then, should only be accepted if it draws attention to the glory of God. It is only when the voices of the world are suppressed that we are able to hear the voice of God. Larry Poland writes, 'Prayer, worship, meditation, praise, thanksgiving, and petition all require one precondition – freedom of the mind and spirit from distractions of the world, the flesh, and the devil'.¹⁶ Pop music is at war with the soul, and spiritual pursuits become impossible when such noise drowns our conversations with Christ. 'This deafening cacophony', concludes Poland, 'is the objective of hell's minions'.¹⁷ It is clear from prohibitionist writings, however, that the problem lies in the actual *form* of pop music, rather than merely the *message* it communicates. Pop music with a Christian content is therefore also relentlessly condemned, as it is held that the form itself has come to represent the message it so often conveys in the secular world. 'Any criticism of popular culture cannot afford to criticise only the *secular* variety,' writes Kenneth Myers, 'since the forms and the way they are used are virtually identical'.¹⁸

The prohibitionist mission

Advocates of the prohibitionist approach regard biblical truth as threatened by compromise with any contextual, evangelistic, or apologetic fad. The church's principal 'mission' is not to those 'pagan people' involved in, or enslaved by, pop music, but is rather to 'protect believers from the corrosive effects of media on Christian and family values'.¹⁹ Such a counter-cultural movement undoubtedly attracts a certain type of seeker, and therefore this approach does draw in some people to the church. However, many Christians consider the approach to be 'a dangerous narrowing of perspective' and to create 'an increasingly brittle and extreme frame of mind'.²⁰ While this viewpoint might be attractive to a small

14 For discussion and evidence cited by this view see Ankerberg, *Facts on Rock Music*, pp 12ff and John Blanchard, *Pop goes the Gospel: Rock in the Church*, Evangelical Press, Darlington 1991.

15 Myers, *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes*, p xii.

16 Larry W. Poland, 'Christ and Culture: The Christian and the Media', in D.A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (eds), *God and Culture; Essays in Honor of Carl F. H. Henry*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1993, p 264. See also Blanchard, *Pop goes the Gospel*, pp 120, 124.

17 Poland, 'Christ and Culture', p 265.

18 Myers, *All God's Children*, p 23; See also Blanchard, *Pop goes the Gospel*, pp 27-9.

19 Poland, 'Christ and Culture', pp 267, 271.

20 Wolfe, 'Art, Faith and the Stewardship of Culture', p 1.

minority, it largely distances people from the church and has therefore little evangelistic value. The church becomes merely a 'hospital ship, attracting refugees from a former era who find in it hope of return to more familiar waters'.²¹ Furthermore, the approach also struggles theologically. It is certainly limited and selective in its scriptural foundation, and, by regarding the kingdom as purely something otherworldly, it only serves to stifle and restrict our discernment of God's presence and work in this world. Likewise, the approach also suppresses human artistic tendencies. Just as Christ interacted with the humanity of the oppressed and of those on the margins of his society, so artists (both Christian and non-Christian) must be free to depict the full human condition, including its fallen nature. The faith of Christian artists must be confident enough to explore what it means to be truly human. Only then can they take this a step further to depict the grace of God.²²

The appropriation approach

Why should the devil have all the good tunes?: mission as appropriation

The appropriation approach advocates the centuries-old practice of forging Christianised versions of the media of popular culture. Popular culture is regarded as neutral, and it is its use or presentation that makes it 'good' or 'evil'. This approach therefore attempts the creation of a parallel popular culture, which is, to adapt a popular phrase, 'in the world, but not of the world'. This alternative subculture, which currently holds a stronger sway on the church than the prohibitionist stance, includes the utilisation of music, TV, websites, fictional books, and films. Supporters of this approach consider it to be of paramount importance in outreach and mission, especially to the younger generation. It is maintained that, by utilising and adapting pop culture, the church will also show itself to be contemporary and relevant.

Scriptural endorsement of the appropriation viewpoint is drawn largely from John's Gospel. While the fourth evangelist carefully distinguishes between flesh and spirit, he nevertheless recognises spiritual meaning in material and temporal things. Christians are, therefore, not to withdraw from the world, but are rather to convert worldly structures to God's glory. The arts are subject to the rule of Christ, and must therefore be reclaimed and transformed in Christ's name. There is therefore nothing intrinsically wrong with rock or pop music. Such music only becomes evil when 'rock stars take the beat, the music, the rhythm, and put words to it that incite a crowd to sin – profanity, violence, use of drugs or alcohol, sexual immorality, or other illicit practices'.²³ Peters and Littleton compare music to a knife, which is a neutral implement in itself, but can be used for good or evil purposes. The good and positive use of 'secular' pop music, however, is dwarfed in comparison with its hidden dangers: 'When you think your heart is being filled with love, peace, and joy, the performer slips in the one ounce of poison that can kill you'.²⁴ Secular pop music is therefore dismissed completely, as 'its influence can cause us to forsake the truth and indulge in a lifestyle that ultimately leads to

21 Riddell, *The Prodigal Project*, p 18.

22 See further on this, Wolfe, 'Art, Faith, and the Stewardship of Culture'.

23 Steve Peters and Mark Littleton, *Truth About Rock: Shattering the Myth of Harmless Music*, Bethany House, Minneapolis 1998, p 117.

24 Peters and Littleton, *Truth About Rock*, p 121.

hell'.²⁵ The only acceptable form of pop music is that which directly serves to worship and glorify God.

The appropriation approach already holds sway in certain Christian communities on both sides of the Atlantic. In the United States, the contemporary Christian music scene is thriving and pop artists who are signed to Christian record labels often become national stars in their own right, with groups such as DC Talk and Jars of Clay selling as many albums as the celebrity secular pop artists such as Michael Jackson and U2. In the United Kingdom, this parallel pop culture is still very much a minority interest. It does, however, certainly exist, as evidenced in the strength of Christian youth festivals, in the CDs that are sold in Christian bookshops, and in the increasing number of Christian satellite channels. This Christian pop culture is also actively practised, even if largely unconsciously, by many Pentecostal and charismatic churches in the UK. The instrumentation of pop music is, for example, used to accompany worship songs and choruses in many evangelical charismatic churches, while some innovative churches use secular tracks with the addition of their own worship lyrics.²⁶ Likewise, in their outreach to young people even mainstream churches have taken to advocating contemporary Christian music. The Church of England's diocese of Truro, for example, hosts a website for young people ('Kernow Youth') which promotes this replacement culture.²⁷

The prohibitionist critique

Such an appropriation approach has, however, found itself under attack from those advocating the prohibitionist approach. They have ridiculed appropriation as it 'takes all its cues from its secular counterpart, but sanitizes it and customizes it with "Jesus" language'.²⁸ It is posited that 'Christian' pop music is, in fact, a myth. 'Much of the electronic church', writes Charles Colson, 'has given in to the prevailing moods of the culture it purportedly exists to confront'.²⁹ Pop music as 'a form' is simply inappropriate for outreach, and is damaging as a vehicle of holy truth. 'The thin Christian veneer in such projects very quickly wears away,' writes Kenneth Myers, 'and what is *underneath* determines the response of consumers of such projects'.³⁰ In relation to mission and outreach, there are three further prohibitionist objections to the pop gospel idiom. Firstly, it is maintained that it detracts from preaching, which alone should be central in evangelical churches. Secondly, it is seen to present a substitute gospel, where lyrics take on almost biblical importance. Finally, it is posited that Christian pop music discourages personal evangelism and makes Christians into listeners, rather than active communicators.³¹

25 Peter and Littleton, *Truth About Rock*, pp 116-7.

26 For example, hOME in Oxford, a church-plant from the Anglican evangelical church of St. Aldates, inserts worship lyrics over Café del Mar tracks (e-mail correspondence with Naomi Hill and Jon March, 27/05/04 and see www.home-online.org and www.cafedelmarmusic.com)

27 See www.kernowyouth.co.uk

28 Myers, *All God's Children*, p 18. See also Poland, 'Christ and Culture', p 272.

29 Charles Colson (with Ellen Santilli Vaughn), *Against the Night: Living in the New Dark Ages*, Hodder & Stoughton, London 1990, p 102.

30 Myers, *All God's Children*, p 21.

31 See Blanchard, *Pop goes the Gospel*, pp 151-4.

An alternative critique of appropriation

To view this 'Jesus culture' as spiritually damaging is certainly extreme. In reality, Christian pop music may well offer solace and wholesome entertainment to many young Christians. Theologically, however, it suffers from limiting God to those forms of culture that deal specifically with him. There is little, if any, recognition of God's presence and work outside of the walls of his church. Furthermore, concerning outreach and mission, it has to be recognised that the approach will more than often alienate, and even engender hostility and ridicule from, those outside the church. For this reason alone, great care should be taken in an uncritical endorsement and promotion of a parallel pop culture. The failure of a Christian subculture to make a lasting impact on those outside the church is ascribed by Gregory Wolfe to a fear of the imagination. Contemporary Christian music purports to be 'safe', having the church's seal of approval. Without the transforming power of imagination, however, it is a deficient version of the pop culture it sets out to rewrite. It is, then, 'a devil's bargain: in exchange for safety, [they] have given up their imaginative power'.³²

Many Christian musicians find such a lack of imagination theologically suspect and spiritually restrictive. Tom Beaudoin admits that, while he was touring as a guitarist in an emerging Christian rock band, the secular pop music he was listening to 'spoke to me more deeply than the Christian artists I was supposed to be emulating'.³³ Likewise, Pete Ward, despite recording music on a Christian label and performing at Christian UK youth festivals such as Greenbelt and Spring Harvest, is nevertheless disparaging of the whole contemporary Christian music scene. He calls for Christian pop musicians to leave their 'Christian ghettos' and to engage directly with secular youth subcultures at a grass-roots level. By doing so, Christian pop musicians will reflect the contemporary concerns of young people. 'Genuine Christian music', he writes, 'will be a music which grows out of these kinds of contacts and seeks to demonstrate how Jesus identifies with them'.³⁴ After all, non-Christians ridicule Christian music precisely because it fails to express the real issues and tensions that young people face. It has concentrated on the medium itself, rather than how the medium is used to forge identity.³⁵ Christian music, therefore, merely becomes an inferior and an invariably out-of-date imitation of the secular pop scene.

The conversational approach

The spirituality of pop music

In rejecting the appropriation approach, both Tom Beaudoin and Pete Ward adopt a conversational approach to pop music. This approach urges Christians to engage with secular popular culture, in particular as a means of understanding and reaching

32 Wolfe, 'Art, Faith, and the Stewardship of Culture', p 1; See also Franky Schaeffer, *Addicted to Mediocrity: 20th Century Christians and the Arts*, Crossway, Wheaton 1993.

33 Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco 2000, p 14.

34 Pete Ward, *Youth Culture and the Gospel*, Marshall Pickering, London 1992, p 91.

35 Pete Ward, *Youthwork and the Mission of God: Frameworks for Relational Outreach*, SPCK, London 1997, p 83.

Generation X and those younger.³⁶ It is held that contemporary society expresses its 'religious interests, dreams, fears, hopes, and desires'³⁷ through popular music, and it is the duty of the church to recognise this fact and engage with these new poets. Secular pop music harbours, in the words of Karl Rahner, 'the eternal marvel and silent mystery of God'.³⁸ It should therefore be taken seriously as, for many young people, it captures 'a sense of religious longing and daily struggle' and, as such, it 'truly inspires' young people.³⁹ Indeed, many pop lyrics are suffused with direct religious imagery and references, expressing spiritual longing. A recent example is Anastacia's 'Left Outside Alone', which was a huge hit on both sides of the Atlantic. Spiritual imagery is fused with post-modern angst, in an unambiguous search for meaning and a direct cry to God for an end to loneliness and alienation.

All my life I've been waiting...
 You're living in a fantasy without meaning,
 It's not ok, I don't feel safe,
 Left broken, empty in despair...
 I need to pray...
 Heavenly father please save me⁴⁰

Lyrics of many other artists have no direct Christian link, but nevertheless unwittingly deal specifically with key Christian themes such as sin, salvation, love, responsibility to one's neighbours, hope, loss of innocence, and redemption. Avril Lavigne, for example, rarely uses Christian imagery. Still, there remains a deeply spiritual element to her work. Like Anastacia's song, Lavigne's hit single 'I'm With You' deals with emptiness and alienation, and the search for salvation and fulfilment. Here, however, the sense of the transcendent, while certainly present, is implicit, rather than overt.

Isn't anyone trying to find me?
 Won't somebody please take me home,
 It's a damn cold night,
 Trying to figure out this life...
 I don't know who you are, but I'm,
 I'm with you⁴¹

In pop music lyrics, then, Tom Beaudoin refers to a 'lived theology', albeit a theology that is often expressed in unconventional ways.⁴² The Australian pop star Nick Cave has even argued that the sacred and secular are mutually inclusive in pop music:

36 While the term 'Generation X' is somewhat ambiguous, it is largely held to refer to that generation which was born between 1965 and 1980.

37 Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith*, p xiv.

38 Karl Rahner, *Belief Today: Three Theological Meditations*, Sheed & Ward, London 1973, p 14.

39 William D. Romanowski, *Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture*, Brazos, Grand Rapids 2001, p 30.

40 Anastacia, 'Left Outside Alone', released 2004 (written by Anastacia, D. Austin, and G. Ballard).

41 Avril Lavigne, 'I'm With You', released 2003 (written by Avril Lavigne).

42 Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith*, p 18.

'Ultimately, the love song exists to fill, with language, the silence between ourselves and God, to decrease the distance between the temporal and the divine'.⁴³

The church's response

Unfortunately, however, the church has traditionally failed to recognise the possibility of such a close relationship between pop culture and spirituality. As such, it has failed a generation of potential Christians in the UK. This is reflected in the fact that fewer and fewer young people are attending church. 'I believe that the failure of the church, as of yet, to deal with the changes brought on by an electronic culture', writes Tex Sample, 'is a basic factor in the lower levels of participation of post-World War 2 electronic generations'.⁴⁴ The churches largely seem out of touch, with their 'droll music, antediluvian technology, retrograde social teaching, and hostile or indifferent attitudes toward popular culture'.⁴⁵ Mike Riddell describes how the churches he attended did nothing to connect his outside life with the worship of the congregation. Worse still, he found that the worship positively excluded that wider experience.⁴⁶ Many churches are certainly remote from the experience of everyday life, not least in the sphere of popular culture. 'The Christian community, despite its many laudable efforts to preserve traditional morality and the social fabric,' maintains Gregory Wolfe, 'has abdicated its stewardship of culture'.⁴⁷

What is necessary for the church, then, is recognition of the depth of human emotion in popular culture, and indeed of its spirituality.⁴⁸ Once that has been accepted, pop music lyrics can 'become' texts that will help Christians to interpret and to understand the predicament of younger generations. Dialogue with, and interpretation of, this culture is the key to that understanding. Faith issues should be brought alongside pop songs, and they should be allowed to interact with each other: 'We need a different kind of Christian approach – an engaged, critical, and productive involvement with the popular arts – grounded in a faith vision that encompasses all of life and culture'.⁴⁹ Essentially, then, a three-way dialogue is required between the gospel, culture, and the church.⁵⁰ Such dialogue must continue to hold to the primacy of scripture, but should not disparage knowledge derived from other disciplines.⁵¹ If a conflict arises between scripture and the presuppositions of pop culture, then scripture certainly remains definitive. Nevertheless, dialogue should be open to the possibility of faith being informed and transformed. After all, while Christianity presupposes some fixed cultural viewpoints, God continues to be active in the world today. Furthermore, it has to be recognised that the church's musical tradition has never been static. In the

43 Nick Cave, 'The Secret Life of a Love Song', in Nick Cave, *The Complete Lyrics 1978-2001*, Penguin, London 2001, p 11.

44 Quoted in Graham Cray, 'Reaching the Emerging Generation', in *The Church of England Newspaper*, published at www.churchnext.net/living_meatdrink_cen_graham.shtml

45 Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith*, p 13.

46 Riddell, *The Prodigal Project*, p 9.

47 Wolfe, 'Art, Faith, and the Stewardship of Culture', p 1.

48 See John Williams, 'Alien Voices: Listening to Faith's Passionate Agnostics', in *Anvil 21* (2004), pp 191-195.

49 Romanowski, *Eyes Wide Open*, p 14.

50 See *Mission-Shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context*, Church House Publishing, London 2004, pp 90-1.

51 Michael Nazir-Ali, *Shapes of the Church to Come*, Kingsway, Eastbourne 2001, p 59.

sixteenth century, the Reformers adopted secular tunes for use in churches and used the vernacular language for their hymns, and faced similar criticism that those engaging with secular pop music are confronted with today.⁵² Advocates of the conversational approach, however, maintain they are merely trying to reach people through their own cultural channels. This can be done in a very practical way, as the church is encouraged to use pop songs to initiate conversations, in worship, as illustrations in sermons, or in constructing curricula: 'by facing the music we choose to take people seriously and to meet them where they are'.⁵³ While many songs will lack positive, Christian themes and sentiments, it is the church's duty to engage with all secular pop music and be involved in constant interpretation. After all, 'life, situations, people, are seen in their true richness because of Christ'.⁵⁴

The scriptural basis for this approach is centred on an incarnational theology that emphasises that God became involved with the world and its issues (John 1:14) and left his Spirit to continue his work through creation (John 14:15-17; 20:19-23). The gospel is, after all, culturally mediated (Acts 17:17) and its message comes through human channels (2 Cor. 4:7). With regards to mission, the gospel is also recognised to be trans-cultural, with people having to hear the gospel in their own language (Acts 2:8). Issues need to be addressed in a different way with different generations. The church needs to engage directly with the people it encounters and to adjust the form of its message accordingly. John Drane uses Acts 14 to make a case for the necessity of a conversational approach. In Iconium and Lystra, Paul did not change the content of his message, but he did consider the cultural and social make-up of the people to whom he was preaching in each city. By doing so he expressed his message in a different way in both cities, and anchored the gospel in the pervading cultures.⁵⁵

Care certainly needs to be taken with the conversational approach. Firstly, this approach can obscure Christ's divinity and champion him as merely an exemplar of humanity's 'finest ideals, their noblest institutions, and their best philosophy'.⁵⁶ The 'Christ of Culture', therefore, becomes a chameleon, and the word 'Christ' simply becomes 'an honorific title and emotional term by means of which each period attaches numinous quality to its personified ideals'.⁵⁷ Secondly, the approach can lead to syncretism and to an uncritical acceptance of popular media.⁵⁸ William D. Romanowski counters the dangers of an uncritical consumption approach by again looking to scripture. He admits that we should be concerned about the impact of popular arts, as, by their very nature, they seek to elicit varying emotions. This, however, is also the positive side of pop music. The bible tells us that everything in the world belongs to God (Psalm 24:1; Col 1:16), and it is our duty as Christians to analyse all attempts to reflect on life: 'We need to look *as Christians* at the stories that contemporary culture is telling us by learning how to discern and evaluate perspectives in these representations of life in God's world'.⁵⁹

52 Darrell W. Cluck, Catherine S. George, and J. Clinton McCann Jr, *Facing the Music: Faith and Meaning in Popular Songs*, Chalice, St Louis 1999], p 3. On Reformation practice see Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Reformation: Europe's House Divided 1490-1700*, Penguin, London 2003, pp 589-91.

53 Cluck, *Facing the Music*, p 5.

54 Tony Jasper, *Jesus in a Pop Culture*, Fontana, London 1975, p 14.

55 Acts 14:1-7, 8-20; See discussion in John Drane, *Evangelism for a New Age*, Marshall Pickering, London 1994, pp 158-61.

56 Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, p 111.

57 Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, p 115.

58 Cf. *Mission-Shaped Church*, pp 91-2.

59 Romanowski, *Eyes Wide Open*, p 19.

Evangelism and the conversational approach

The gap

The consequences of the conversational approach for outreach and mission are highly significant. John Paul II recently suggested that relating Christ to culture should be at the heart of evangelism. Yet 'countries with a Christian tradition are experiencing a serious rift between the gospel message and large areas of their culture'.⁶⁰ Just as culture needs to be evangelised, faith needs to be inculturated. The first task of a missionary church should be to understand the culture in which it is serving. This means learning a new language, adapting social customs, and understanding channels of communication. The church has learnt to do this on foreign missions, but has hitherto failed to master this successfully with regards to the changing culture of the western world. The 'ship of the church', according to Mike Riddell, is 'foundering in the cross-currents of cultural transition'.⁶¹ Younger people especially feel a lack of connection and meaning with the gospel. It is the church's duty to take responsibility for this tide of alienation, and not to doubt the integrity of disaffected generations. It should not attribute blame to secular society, but rather attempt to understand contemporary attitudes.

Instead of condemning or adapting secular pop music, a reassessment of ethos and methodology is required. The church's theology must be incarnational, and should therefore be prepared to enter into culture as Christ entered into the world. Thus, evangelism should be centred on dialogue with popular culture, rather than on disengaged, didactic techniques.⁶² Religious institutions, after all, should be engaged in learning, as well as teaching. Robert Warren refers to Christianity as the 'adapting faith', and sees the increasingly marginalisation of the church in the western world as a sign of its failure to find contemporary ways of expressing the good news.⁶³ The gospel needs to be continually adapted to the different settings in which the church finds itself. If outreach is to succeed in the post-modern world, then the church must lay aside outmoded tools and look to different forms and expressions of worship and ministry. 'Is it wise', asks Warren, 'to row a losing battle against an ebb tide and offshore wind, when an outboard motor is to hand?'⁶⁴ Mission, therefore, needs to be redefined, to create a church that is authentic to the people that it is trying to reach: 'How can we expect others to come to church when we don't even enjoy it, or find meaning there?'⁶⁵

Seeking and offering fulfilment

To reach young people today, the church should especially aim for a dynamic relationship with secular pop music. Lyrics certainly reveal spiritual interests and needs that are not being fulfilled. Evanescence's 'Bring me to Life', for example, is one of numerous chart hits that have expressed such a sense of discontentment. The song, which reached the top of the charts on both sides of the Atlantic, defies

60 John Paul II, 'Discourse to the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Culture' (18 March 2004).

61 Riddell, *The Prodigal Project*, p 18.

62 Phil Wall, 'Youth Evangelism', in Leslie J. Francis (ed), *Fast-Moving Currents in Youth Culture*, Lynx, Oxford 1995, p 179.

63 Robert Warren, *Being Human, Being Church: Spirituality and Mission in the Local Church*, Marshall Pickering, London 1995, pp 9, 11.

64 Warren, *Being Human*, p 12.

65 Riddell, *The Prodigal Project*, p 36.

both modernism and post-modernism by asserting that the search for meaning must accept the possibility that truth is to be found on the outside. While for Evanescence the answers are not yet evident, the song still professes the hope that meaning will not remain elusive:

Bid my blood to run, before I come undone,
 Save me from the nothing I've become...
 There must be something more
 Bring me to life
 I've been living a lie, there's nothing inside⁶⁶

At a time when church congregations are largely declining in number, such pop songs show a continuing, intense search for spiritual meaning and personal wholeness. 'A spiritual tsunami has hit postmodern culture,' writes Leonard Sweet, 'this wave will build without breaking for decades to come. The wave is this: People want to *know God*.'⁶⁷

To engage both with those who have drifted away from the pews and with spiritual searchers, the church must observe, discern and (where appropriate) absorb popular culture, and must also make use of pop music in churches. By doing so, pop music can offer 'incredible' outreach opportunities.⁶⁸ In fact, since the early 1970s, prominent evangelists (such as Billy Graham and Michael Green) have been calling for attention to be given to the evangelistic possibilities of secular pop music.⁶⁹ The church has, unfortunately, consistently ignored such calls for engagement and dialogue.

Harvey Cox suggests that secular pop music, though largely disparaged by the mainstream churches, may actually hold the future of popular piety. After all, once-belittled devotional practices are continually being adopted and adapted by the churches. 'It is hard to imagine today', writes Cox, 'that Madonna's "Like a Prayer" will one day be accepted by the church as an appropriate devotion. But stranger things have happened'.⁷⁰ Some innovative churches have already introduced secular pop music into their main services, while others are doing so in youth services. Among recent examples of pop songs played during services, used as calls to worship, or adopted as worship songs are The Beatles' 'Help!'; U2's 'All I Want is You' and 'Grace'; Billy Joel's 'Just the Way You Are'; Johnny Cash's 'Hurt'; Natalie Imbruglia's 'Torn'; and Black Eyed Peas' 'Where is the Love?'⁷¹ The creativity and enthusiasm of youth congregations certainly play an important missionary function, and can influence and renew the life of the mainstream church through concentrating on new forms of communication, liturgy, and music. After all, the

66 Evanescence, 'Bring me Back to Life', released 2003 (written by B. Moody, A. Lee, and D. Hodges).

67 Leonard Sweet, *soulTsunami: Sink or Swim in New Millennium Culture*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids 1999, p 420.

68 John Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church: Spirituality, Creativity, and the Future of the Church*, DLT, London 2000, p 55.

69 Billy Graham, *The Jesus Generation*, Hodder & Stoughton, London 1972; Michael Green,

Jesus Spells Freedom, IVP, London 1972; from the 1970s see also H.R. Rookmaaker, *Modern Art and the Death of Culture*, IVP, London 1975 and Jasper, *Jesus in a Pop Culture*.

70 Harvey Cox, 'Foreword', in Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith*, p xi.

71 These examples were given in my e-mail correspondence with ordinands and church leaders, dated 25/05/04 – 15/06/04.

mainstream church has become, in the words of an Evangelical Alliance (UK) working group, 'monocultural', being wedded to traditional 'assumptions, forms and practices'.⁷² Donald E. Miller's study of American churches concluded that successful churches, which he described as the 'new paradigm of church', are the ones that are mediating moving experiences of God. This is often done through electrified worship and an openness to understanding and engaging with contemporary culture.⁷³ Furthermore, while many churches are still preoccupied with issues of meaning, post-modern culture is obsessed with purposeful experience. Full-sensory immersion is the only way that post-modern people connect to the divine in worship.⁷⁴ Popular music can therefore play a crucial role in evangelistic ministry through worship, as well as in apologetics.

Conclusion: Pop music and Christian mission

The three Christian approaches to popular music clearly reflect both diverse theological foundations and distinct paradigms of mission of broader application. Those holding to the prohibitionist approach aim to safeguard their distinct Christian identity from a worldly culture that they regard as corrupt and anti-Christian. It is, therefore, maintained that non-Christians will be drawn to a community that offers something different and separation from such a fallen world. Supporters of the appropriation approach, however, seek to uphold and offer a Christianised popular culture. It is believed that a positive effect of such a parallel culture is that the truth and relevance of the gospel message will be revealed to non-Christians through familiar mediums. Finally, those advocating the conversational approach urge Christians to engage in serious dialogue with secular popular culture, and, by doing so, to foster a freedom to develop new patterns of church life and new ways of being church that relate to today's youth. Alongside this, however, must be the recognition that youth culture is 'a living phenomenon that is always changing'.⁷⁵ Contextualisation, therefore, has limitations. The conversational approach can certainly assist the church in understanding and reaching younger generations, but the essential truth of the Christian message must not be obscured by efforts to incarnate the faith within a subculture. Pete Ward warns against a Christianity that makes 'a tame replica of the God of the Bible', a God who affirms everything the secular culture deems important. Any dialogue with the popular arts must, then, prioritise Scripture and Christian tradition. True contextualization 'requires a rootedness in culture, a faithfulness to the bible, and an openness to the tradition of the church'.⁷⁶ Only then will the church truly relate to its missing generations.

Dr Trystan Owain Hughes has taught theology in the University of Wales, including courses on Christianity and Popular Music, and is currently an ordinand in the Church in Wales.

72 David Hilborn and Matt Bird (eds), *God and the Generations: Youth, Age and the Church Today*, Paternoster, Carlisle 2002, p 192.

73 Donald E. Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, University of California Press, London 1997, pp 17, 84-5, 134-156.

74 Sweet, *soulTsunami*, pp 208-9; see also Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century*, Cassell, London 1996.

75 Ward, *Youth Culture and the Gospel*, p 18.

76 Ward, *Youthwork and the Mission of God*, p 102.