

## Article

# Not Secular: Interrogating the Sacred-Secular Binary through Gospel-Pop Performance

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**Abstract:** Secularisation theory proposed that the modernisation of society would bring about a decline in religiosity across the West, leading to ‘entzauberung’ (disenchantment). Eventually, society would be devoid of belief in the transcendent. Some theorists have challenged this by suggesting (with some qualifying factors) that enchantment better describes the secular age we occupy. Charles Taylor suggests that we can perceive the enchantment of a secular age through the human relationship with art. In this article, I suggest that, when present in popular music, black gospel music (in particular) complicates notions of the sacred-secular binary. The sacred-secular distinction was not familiar to West Africans arriving in the New World during the transatlantic slave trade. Music had played a central role in the lives of pre-diaspora Africans, with no differentiation between sacred and secular musicking. Despite some of the historical opposition to secular music in many black-majority churches, gospel music owes its heritage to this West African worldview. In this article, I propose a four-quadrant model that troubles the accepted binaries of sacred and secular. I use the Kingdom Choir’s 2018 performance of ‘Stand by Me’ at the Royal Wedding of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex as a basis for discussing alternative ways of viewing holy-profane, sacred-secular dichotomies.

**Keywords:** secular; sacramentality; music; gospel; African American; cosmology; gospel choir; secularisation



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## 1. The Royal Wedding and a ‘Secular’ Gospel Performance

Five years ago, on 19 May 2018, The Royal Wedding of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex was aired live by the BBC. It is estimated that the global audience was in the hundreds of millions. In the UK, peak TV viewing figures reached 27.7 million; in the USA, 29 million watched the wedding live (Waterson 2018; Patten and Ramos 2018). This Church of England ceremony broke the precedents of royal weddings in at least two significant ways: including an African American Episcopalian preacher (Bishop Michael Curry) and the performance of the Kingdom Choir, a UK-based black gospel choir. In this performance, the ensemble was mostly made up of Black British descendants of colonial subjects of the West Indies who settled in the UK during the 1950s and 1960s. At the request of Harry’s father, (the now) King Charles III, they sang ‘Stand by Me’, a secular popular song originally performed by African American soul and R&B singer Ben E. King.<sup>1</sup> The performance raised many questions about the transformations of empire and colonialism in relation to state religion.<sup>2</sup> It also raised questions about the place of secular music and its meaning within Christian religious life. It is the latter (in the context of the performance of the Kingdom Choir) with which this article is primarily concerned.

Though the term secular has broad implications in the fields of philosophy and sociology, in this article, the term ‘secular music’ connotes music that does not explicitly deal with God or issues that pertain to Christian belief. ‘Sacred’ may be understood as that music performed with explicit reference to God and/or Christian beliefs. The text of ‘Stand by Me’ indicates that it is a secular love song, and it is widely understood as such. But the intentional selection of a gospel choir to perform this song in a historically religious ceremony implicitly contradicts this straightforward reading. The performance

raises serious theological questions for certain streams of Christianity that see no place for secular songs in sacramental events.

This article proposes a new framework that troubles the traditional sacred-secular binary. Instead, I assert that some secular music carries potential for engagement with the transcendent and may be considered a site for religious encounters. Further, I suggest a different perspective for such engagement through a quadrant model. My quadrant model will be useful to listeners in helping discern choices relating to music they consider secular or profane. Some may criticise the brevity of discussion relating to the (potentially) negative impacts of profanity in popular music. While not dismissing the moral, ethical and spiritual challenges that some secular (and indeed religious) music poses, the intention here is to foreground the positive frame (less highlighted within theology) from which secular music can be engaged (MacSwain and Worley 2012, p. 282). In what follows, I focus on the singing of 'Stand by Me' at the wedding as a case study for my quadrant proposal and as an example of the potential of the proposal to open out the narrowness of traditional sacred/secular binaries.

## 2. Secularisation

There have been many iterations of the concept of the 'secular', but Max Weber (1864–1920) is known to have popularised the term 'secularisation' and, with it, secularisation theory. The central claim of secularisation theory was that, with the rise of modernity across the West, religion would decline at all levels of society, from the individual to the state (Josephson-Storm 2017, p. 4). Secularisation connotes a movement toward a society that does not include the consideration of God (Zuckerman and Shook 2017, pp. 2–3). Scholars have argued that disenchantment is the result of this secularisation process (Durkheim 1912; Weber 1905; Swatos and Christiano 1999; Zuckerman and Shook 2017, pp. 2–3). Disenchantment implies a disconnection with the transcendent, resulting in a society bereft of belief in God, a spiritual world or the supernatural.<sup>3</sup> Disenchantment has its origins in the intellectual and social forces of the Protestant Reformation (Weber 1905). The central implication of this unilinear process of secularisation and disenchantment was that enlightenment rationalism would result in the realisation of Friedrich Nietzsche's oft-quoted phrase 'the death of God'.<sup>4</sup>

Since the rise of secularisation theory, post-modernism (a central feature of which is the rejection of any claim to know the truth in the absolute sense) has complicated the seemingly straightforward advance of secularisation.<sup>5</sup> UK census data from 2021 reflect a decline in commitment to Christianity.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, the UK has been profoundly shaped by its Christian heritage (Brown 2001; Davie 1994; Smith 2008, p. 2). The Church of England (Anglicanism) played a central role in the governance of the United Kingdom. The Church of England was the established church, and the British monarch held the title of the Supreme Governor of the Church. The Church had considerable influence in political affairs, and bishops of the Church of England were given seats in the House of Lords. However, over the years, the UK has become more secular and religiously diverse. As a result, the influence of the Church of England in politics has significantly diminished. The UK is now a multi-faith society, with many people adhering to various Christian denominations, as well as other religions, or identifying as non-religious. In terms of the legal and constitutional aspects, the Church of England is still the established church, but the relationship between the state and religion is generally seen as more symbolic than governing.

Statistics indicate that many in the UK prefer to identify as 'spiritual but not religious'.<sup>7</sup> While the assertions of secularisation theory remain a consideration, the continued practice of spirituality across the West requires explanation (Josephson-Storm 2017, pp. 22–37). Scholars suggest that a framework of 'enchantment' explains the presence of spirituality and religion in ostensibly secular societies.<sup>8</sup> An enchanted worldview recognises and embraces the existence of meanings, purposes and values beyond the material. It acknowledges the presence of spiritual or supernatural forces and finds significance in experiences that cannot

be easily explained or quantified. An enchanted worldview often involves a belief in higher powers, mystical experiences and a sense of wonder and awe in the face of the ineffable. Despite the advance of notions of secularisation and disenchantment, the potential for the evocation of the numinous in ostensibly secular music is accommodated within the enchanted frame that many individuals still occupy.<sup>9</sup> Black gospel music complicates the notion of a sacred-secular binary, I will return to this point later in this article.

The notion of the secular dates back in Christian theology (at the very least) to Augustine of Hippo ([Augustine of Hippo and Dods 2018](#)). But, the sacred-secular binary became important within the Western social imaginary, partially as a reaction to 18th century developments within science (particularly Darwinism) and also due to increasing critiques of Christian doctrines such as the inerrancy and sufficiency of the Bible.<sup>10</sup> During this period, the secular was perceived by initiated Christians not as merely neutral but as something mostly perilous and distinct from a holy life. This approach to the secular extended to certain modes of dressing, entertainment and leisure activities, including participation in secular musicking ([Andemicael 2016](#); [Stephens 2018](#), p. 29). Pentecostal Christianity has traditionally emphasised a sacred-secular binary along these lines.

Within Pentecostal Christianity, the sacred has often been viewed as that which is approved for Christian consumption. By contrast, the secular includes (but is not exclusive to) that which is viewed as profane and, therefore, less valuable, or indeed to be completely avoided. Pentecostalism is the world's fastest-growing stream of Christianity and is arguably the most dominant force in global Christianity.<sup>11</sup> The term Pentecostal, as it is used in this article, invokes 'the constellation of twentieth and twenty-first-century Christian renewal movements that are related to one another as part of a transnational social network connected by shared beliefs and practices' ([Ingalls and Yong 2015](#), p. 3). Significantly, among these shared beliefs and practices is a Spirit-filled experiential spirituality that endows Pentecostal believers with gifts of the Holy Spirit and access to the miraculous. It is also involved in resistance against the demonic world ([Alvarez 2022](#), p. 6). Pentecostals operate within an iteration of the enchanted frame that carries meaning and significance for its participants ([Smith 2010](#), pp. 33–41; [Reed 2003](#), p. 8). Historically, Pentecostal leaders have been vocal about the distinction between sacred and secular music ([Reed 2003](#), p. 8). For this reason, it has often been problematic for musicians and singers with a gospel music background, who hold to Pentecostal beliefs, to operate in a secular musical environment—especially within popular music. Nevertheless, since the inception of black gospel music, Pentecostal musicians have frequently crossed sacred-secular boundaries between gospel and popular music with much success ([Reed 2003](#), p. 28).

Karen Gibson is the conductor of the Kingdom Choir; she grew up in the Pentecostal church. Most of the Kingdom Choir members who performed at the Royal Wedding also have a background in Pentecostalism. The actions of Gibson and her team strongly indicate the enchanted frame from which the choir intended to operate, introducing a spiritual aspect to the performance of a secular song, a dynamic to which we return using the quadrant model later in this article. In public interviews, she has stated that the members of the choir for the Royal Wedding were selected not solely based on skill in singing. They also needed 'spiritual discernment' and the ability to 'go to God'.<sup>12</sup> According to Gibson, choir members were enlisted to pray specifically for the event in the lead-up to the performance ([Premier Christian Radio 2020](#)). Further, individuals outside of the choir were asked to pray for divine providence concerning the performance.

### 3. The Listeners Share

It is not uncommon for the writers and performers of secular music to claim to have a spiritual intent for their songs. Soul singer Al Green insists that his love songs 'function no less effectively than his explicitly religious lyrics in offering a medium of access to God' ([Brown 2011](#), p. 338). Jeff Buckley espoused no religious belief but performed Leonard Cohen's Hallelujah. For Buckley, the song was about the failure of human love, but it is possible to interpret the song from another, more spiritual perspective, as has been

illustrated through the various religious iterations of the song.<sup>13</sup> Speaking of Buckley's rendition, Brown states that 'precisely because the music pulls in a rather different direction from the concluding words, the possibility of a different reading and thus of a different resultant experience is always there' (Brown 2011, p. 338). It is this experience that I am contending is significant in that it carries the potential to signify an engagement with the transcendent. It follows that the notion of the secular (as defined above) does not neatly fit all music that is 'secular' in nature.

'Stand by Me' was first recorded as a popular song by Ben E. King in 1961. King began as a singer in his church choir before becoming successful in popular music. 'Stand by Me' was adapted from a gospel song written by Charles Tindley entitled 'Stand by Me Father' (Darden 2004, p. 162). Although King's 'Stand by Me' adaptation is considered a secular song, the sacred origin of this song carries resonance and offers the listener various opportunities for engagement with the transcendent. There is room for an interpretation of the song which takes the listener outside of the immanent frame.<sup>14</sup>

For many listeners, ostensibly secular music may still be evocative of the spiritual. Indeed, the notion that Christian music is music made by Christians requires challenging on the basis that some of the music that leads people most readily to a consideration of God is composed by people who differ in their concept of God or do not necessarily believe God exists. For example, the composer John Rutter, who composes sacred music based on Christian themes, has identified as an agnostic who does not write to 'promote Christianity'.<sup>15</sup> In an article for the New York Times, Rutter said, 'I love the Church of England. . .when I set a sacred text, I enter it with all my heart. But I'm more a supporter than a specific believer. I have a problem signing on dotted lines'.<sup>16</sup> On the flipside, when operating from the enchanted frame, one can hear certain types of secular music and recognise its potential to evoke the transcendent. On this basis, the Kingdom Choir's performance may be considered evocative of the transcendent.

While not negating the lived experiences of individuals who claim numinous or transcendent encounters as part of their musicking, I assert that music acts as a semiotic sign that signifies the evocation of the transcendent to its listeners (Turino 1999, p. 221, 2014; Perman 2020, pp. 46–79; Tagg 2013, p. 70). In this respect, some music classified as 'secular' can often be experienced as quasi-religious or spiritual.<sup>17</sup> The potential for music to act as a sign for the numinous is confirmed by Charles Taylor, 'what about rock concerts and raves, there is often a powerful phenomenological sense that we are in contact with something greater. . . a disenchanted world needs a theory to explain this kind of experience'.<sup>18</sup> By nature, secular songs do not contain the explicit doctrinal specificity of Christian lyrics. Neither do they (of necessity) contain the religious intent of a Christian composer. As such, so-called secular songs are often open to a plurality of interpretations.<sup>19</sup>

Some theologians of music would prefer more Christological specificity before acknowledging the disclosure of God in secular music.<sup>20</sup> Yet, historical Christianity contains accounts of the revelation of God to humankind in general terms. See, for example, Romans 1:20 'For since the creation of the world his invisible attributes, namely his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what he has made'.<sup>21</sup> In this sense, it is not inconceivable that the transcendent may be disclosed through music that does not specifically or directly reference God.

The role of the listener is critical in constructing music's meaning. Following Gavin Hopps, we may call this the 'listener's share'.<sup>22</sup> Rather than a pre-emptive approach to music's meanings based only on authorial intent, the listener's share avoids essentialisation. The criteria for evaluation are introduced at the end rather than the beginning of the interpretive process. This more hospitable approach leaves room for the process of semiosis. While acknowledging the intent of the author, one can account for how music is used by individual listeners.

Listeners have a vast amount of autonomy as the co-constitutors of music's meanings, the listener's share is the consideration of (and sometimes privileging of) listener inter-

pretations (Corbett 2019, p. 23). If listener experiences are taken seriously, we find that some music acts as a mediator of an impression of the divine and transcendent. Various music scholars have argued that art (including music) plays a significant role in this secular age.<sup>23</sup> An aesthetic encounter with a work of art may lead to an epiphanic experience. This sort of experience is entirely subjective but well-documented (Marsh and Roberts 2012, pp. 77–89). As Taylor states, ‘there are certain works of art by Dante, Bach, the makers of Chartres Cathedral: the list is endless—whose power seems inseparable from their epiphanic, transcendent reference’ (Taylor 2007, p. 607). The existence of the potential for transcendent encounters in secular pop music indicates that popular music challenges the seemingly straightforward project of secularisation. The Kingdom Choir’s performance supports the notion of the disclosure of God everywhere (Brown 2020a; Johnston 2014, pp. 67–119).

#### 4. Black Gospel Music and the Sacred-Secular Binary

While the performance of ‘Stand by Me’ is secular, the context of its delivery made a sacred listening frame available to the audience. Some listeners did not recognise this opportunity; in response to the Kingdom Choir’s performance at the Royal Wedding, world-renowned gospel artist and Pentecostal pastor Donnie McClurkin stated that gospel music should be about the ‘gospel’ (Premier 2020). By which he meant the explicit declaration of issues pertaining to God and, more specifically, the message of Jesus Christ. Though the comment was light-hearted, it was a signifier of the complex issues within church communities pertaining to secular music performances by gospel artists. More generally, Christian leaders such as Jackie Hill Perry have voiced their concern with performing songs that lack a specific mention of Jesus Christ.<sup>24</sup> These discussions (though informal) continue to perpetuate the narrative that the revelation of God is restricted to those areas where a clear articulation of Christian doctrine is centred.<sup>25</sup>

Black gospel music introduces a necessary layer of complexity to sacred-secular discussions. The history of black gospel music is intertwined with the development of secular styles such as blues, jazz, r & b, rock n roll, soul, etc. During the 1930s, the pioneer of black American gospel music, Thomas Dorsey, received heavy backlash for his new style known at the time as gospel blues; he states, ‘Gospel music was new, and most people didn’t understand. Some of the preachers used to call gospel music “sin” music. They related it to what they called worldly things—like jazz and blues and show business. Gospel music was different from approved hymns and spirituals. It had a beat’ (Burnim and Maultsby 2015, p. 202). Dorsey’s comment here is a direct reference to the aesthetics of the music and the implication that (for some) those stylistic features had too much in common with secular music. Since its inception, gospel music (stylistically) has held the sacred and secular in firm tension.

The sacred-secular distinction was not familiar to West Africans arriving in the new world as victims of the transatlantic slave trade. For these West Africans, the sacred-secular binary was a misnomer. African and African-derived music in North America borrows from European, Native American and Caribbean musical cultures, both sacred and secular. The continuity of this practice can be traced back to West African metaphysical concepts, specifically, ‘spirit infuses all life and activities’ (Casselberry 2012, pp. 172–73). The distinction between sacred and secular is a Western invention that some Africans (upon adopting Christianity) incorporated into their worldview. Commenting on this, the theologian Harvey Cox states, ‘...western theology—the kind I learned as a graduate student has been vainly striving to reconcile religion to an allegedly scientific worldview which is actually becoming more outdated every day. Paradoxically, the traditional African cosmology, which the indigenous Christian churches incorporate so inventively, may be more in tune with the ‘quantum world’ than Western theology is’ (Cox 2001, pp. 257–58). The Kingdom Choir’s performance of a ‘secular’ song at a religious wedding challenges the sacred-secular binary. Instead, it is congruent with a theology of sacramentality expansive

enough to affirm that the spirit infuses all of life, including those areas where God is not specifically mentioned.

Combining the sacred and secular continues to be a core theme within black expressive culture.<sup>26</sup> This applies to various elements of the music, such as musical production processes, musical structures and stylistic and textual content. Much ostensibly secular African and African-derived music provides a 'musico-sacred gateway' for engagement with the sacred (Casselberry 2012, p. 172). Many gestures and acts of music-making within 'secular' black expressive culture continue to be evocative of the divine. These acts of music-making carry semiotic significance that may be harnessed in cultures (such as those in the UK) caught between haunted echoes of transcendence and the drive towards secularisation. In identifying the influence of black gospel music on pop, we observe gestures and hear musical elements from twentieth-century Christian/religious sources (Casselberry 2012, p. 181). The semiotic signs for potential encounters with the transcendent are embedded within the aesthetics of gospel music.

### 5. A Four Quadrant Model

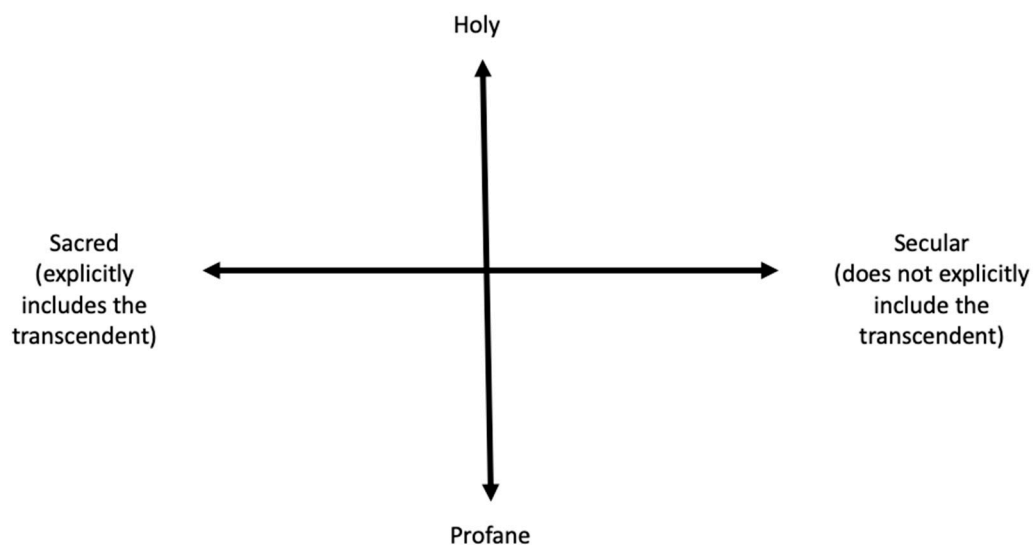
A conflation between the profane and the secular has led some Christian believers to deal with all secular music as if it were profane, resulting in them not engaging with secular music. In this discussion, profane music is that which is deemed rude, obscene or culturally offensive. It should be clear from this definition that not all secular music falls into the profane category, including the Kingdom Choir's performance and, therefore, I suggest a quadrant model that assumes an enchanted, 'spirit infuses all of life' worldview. In this model, the profane should be perceived as distinct from the secular. Clearly, a moral value judgement is attached by classifying some music as profane. An individual or group of people may choose or refuse to engage with music based on their own moral or ethical framework. It is important to note that one need not be a Christian to operate a moral framework that allows for the profane. My purpose here is not to determine the parameters of the profane but rather to suggest a framework that will aid individuals in making personal choices about what music they will (or will not) listen to, participate in or place value on. It should be noted that these choices are sometimes made on our behalf; one only needs to think of artists whose music has been made more difficult to access on streaming platforms due to their engagement in profane activities (Beaumont-Thomas 2018; Sisario 2021). Arguably, censoring some music and including the much debated 'Parental Advisory' label indicates recognition by record labels and executives of potentially offensive, non-age-appropriate references suited for mature audiences, such as sexual content or profane language (Deflem 2020).

With the declining influence of Christianity in the UK and the rise of postmodernist thought, there has been a reduction in certainty (outside of the various requirements of the law) about what can be claimed to be moral knowledge (Willard 2020, pp. xxx–xxx). The distinctions between the holy and profane fall into this category of moral knowledge.<sup>27</sup> My four-quadrant model is a tool for those concerned about such distinctions in sacred or secular music. While it may be useful for the religious, it is equally useful for those who are not. The model is offered as a guide and a framework for reflection and engagement, not as an absolute. At its core is the assertion that sacred music is not the only site that may be conceived of as a place for the experience of the numinous.

The presence of the profane in some music does not indicate a lack of potential to evoke the transcendent. For example, in the Psalms (a book of songs considered a central part of the sacred text of the Bible), there are articulations of profane desires. Imprecatory psalms are a subset of the Psalms that contain prayers or statements that call for God's judgment or punishment of the Psalmist's enemies.<sup>28</sup> Interpretations of these Psalms have been controversial and subject to various debates over the centuries. Imprecatory Psalms are characterised by expressions of anger, vengeance and a desire for retribution against those who have wronged the Psalmist or the people of Israel. While some of these Psalms indicate the understandable desire for revenge, others go further. Indeed, the imprecatory

Psalms have been notoriously difficult to interpret because of their focus on particularly unpalatable types of revenge. Perhaps one of the most controversial is Psalm 137:9, where the Psalmist, in anger, expresses satisfaction at the thought that the enemies' babies would be smashed against rocks. Most Christians would recognise such a horrific desire and its expression in music as being profane. Yet, it has existed within the Judeo-Christian tradition for millennia. While this verse may not have occupied a central place in the Judeo-Christian tradition, theologians do not argue that Psalm 137 (despite its profanity) is secular. Rather, in frustration, the Psalmist is venting honest (and arguably) profane thoughts in song form. My four-quadrant model leaves room to account for God's presence in this context.

The presence of the profane in the imprecatory Psalms is evidence that the Psalms handle the range of human expression.<sup>29</sup> While there is no scope here to deal with moral, philosophical and ethical implications, I suggest that, instead of the suppression of negative emotions, the liberty to process and handle a range of emotions through art (including popular music) is useful for human well-being. Further, a theology that does not robustly address this aspect of music-making does not fully serve practitioners. The enchanted frame accounts for the evocation of the transcendent in what may be considered secular and even profane spaces. Sites previously perceived as secular such as the concert hall, the rave, the pop gig and audio and video streaming platforms may now be considered sites for religious encounters. The encounter with the transcendent is possible in each of the below quadrant categories. With its Christian spiritual meanings and resonances, black gospel music stylisation carries the potential to evoke notions of the spiritual, including in the singing of the Kingdom Choir at the Royal wedding.<sup>30</sup> See Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Sacred-Secular quadrant model.

While it is not the case for all, individuals make choices about the music they engage with based on their own internal moral values. These may or may not be governed by spiritual and/or religious commitments. Indeed, the listener's share approach grants the flexibility to recognise interpretations of a piece of music that the author may not have intended. Though it is acknowledged that the word 'holy' carries deeply religious connotations, in this quadrant model, 'holy' simply acts as an antonym to the profane. A piece of music may be considered within the top left 'Sacred-Holy' quadrant when it explicitly references themes about God or unambiguously spiritual matters. These songs do not contain what might generally be considered morally subversive sentiments. Sacred-Holy songs may include (but are not exclusive to) devotional songs, songs of prayer, songs of worship and praise, etc. It should be noted that the suggested music types for the quadrants are not intended to be exhaustive. The reader may recognise other song types that legitimately fit the categories. Historically, this quadrant is the space in which the

transcendent experience is often understood as sacred (Begbie 2018, p. 127). The top right 'Secular-Holy' quadrant incorporates the enchanted frame. Songs in this quadrant are not explicitly religious but are not morally subversive or repugnant, nor will they conflict with an individual's moral values. Inspirational songs, love songs, birthday songs, freedom songs, and protest songs may fall into this quadrant. This quadrant model is intended to leave room for flexibility by not detailing specific moral parameters since there will be variations in 'moral compass'. These are songs that (broadly speaking) aim at human flourishing.

Indeed, the Kingdom Choir performance could be counted within this quadrant because the song (for all its implicit theological references) does not explicitly mention God but is instead generally understood to be about human love. The enchanted 'spirit infuses all of life' frame allows for transcendent experiences to occur here (Johnston 2014, p. xiii). Johnston states that 'while... occurring outside the church and without direct reference to scripture or to Jesus Christ, such encounters, for that is what they are experienced to be, are seen, heard, and read as foundational to life' (Johnston 2014, p. xiii). For this reason, the historical Pentecostal theological perspective on engagement with secular music requires revisiting. Given the post-Christian pluralistic milieu of the UK, this experience is not restricted to those who adhere solely to Christian beliefs. Instead, alternative understandings of transcendent experience need to be recognised. In a pluralistic society, not all listener interpretations of non-specific secular music will be influenced by the Christian frame. But, this does not affect the potential for music to be heard in a way that is evocative of the transcendent.

Music in the bottom left, 'Sacred-Profane' quadrant contains songs that deal with God and religious themes from a subversive or irreverent perspective. This may be because the content is implicitly subversive regarding God. This might include some elements of the imprecatory Psalms, as mentioned above. However, this quadrant extends to music where the performer or composer's intent regarding sacred matters could be interpreted by the listener as subversive or irreverent, and therefore, the performance may not be received as genuine. An example might be Marilyn Manson's version of 'Personal Jesus' in which Manson takes the intended message of a song originally written by Depeche Mode (1990) and subverts it in the music video by sexualising the meaning of the lyrics and adding a political message that includes the controversial former President of the Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin. In this situation, the listeners' share plays a vital role in determining how the music is interpreted. Intent is almost impossible to substantiate even where the performer has clearly articulated such.

Music that qualifies for the bottom right 'Secular-Profane' quadrant does not usually have an explicitly religious or spiritual theme and obviously would contain profane content. It may also be that the performer and or composer has a profane intent. Though less likely, the potential for the evocation of the transcendent remains even in the Secular-Profane quadrants. Examples can be found in pop and hip-hop, where black gospel choirs are used to provide backing vocals as in, 'Hostile Gospel Pt. 1' by Talib Kweli. While the lyrics may not be related to spiritual themes, the home of the gospel choir is the black church, and the original setting for the gospel choir is divine worship.

By extracting the gospel choir and using it in a secular setting, musicians introduce a kind of haunting of the disenchanting. In this situation, the presence of the gospel choir remains spiritually suggestive while dealing with themes that are not overtly religious. That is to say, the use of the gospel sound invokes an 'enigmatically radiant vision' of a supposedly disenchanting world which causes a troubling of the metaphysical cartography. This becomes even more potent in music videos where the gospel choir is present fully robed and charismatically animated using gestures that are associated with divine worship, such as Foreigner's 'I Want to Know What Love Is'. The use of the gospel sound in Secular-Profane music 'uncannily evokes something more—a glow, a shadow, a sense of enchantment—that carries [the listener] away from a purely material conception of the real (Brown and Hopps 2018, p. 259). In an enchanted frame, the potential for the transcendent



to break through into the secular remains a live option, even where explicitly spiritual themes are omitted or intentionally avoided.

Some Christian believers may be troubled at the suggestion that the transcendent may be evoked in the profane, but, historically, the Judaeo-Christian worldview has been expansive enough to address this.<sup>31</sup> Inferences about the content, quality and nature of spiritual encounters in the Secular-Profane quadrant (or indeed any of the quadrants) are beyond the scope of this article. But it is sufficient to state that one need not acquiesce with profane content to acknowledge God's omnipresence or the potential for God to be active even here.

## 6. Conclusions

Some suggest that Western societies are generally turning away from institutional religion to sites such as the arts for experiences of the transcendent (Taylor 2007, pp. 517–18). As Catherine Pickstock states, 'it can be argued that the historical periods that have seen a gradual decline in the importance of church attendance have also seen the emergence of the public concert, opera and ballet as quasi-sacral rites that are neither liturgical music nor occasional music'.<sup>32</sup> The enchanted frame of post-Christendom in the West is not that of an evangelical Christian revival in the mode of the Great Awakenings of the 1700s–1800s (Partridge 2004, p. 3). Instead, it contains plural accounts for the transcendent.<sup>33</sup> A plurality of views on the transcendent exist in post-Christian Western society. Gospel stylisation in popular music is subject to listener interpretation, but the evocation of the transcendent remains a possibility. That is why the performance of the Kingdom Choir at the Royal Wedding (particularly in the context of the UK in the 21st century) is an appropriate example and the quadrant model is a useful frame for revealing the more expansive way that this performance could be received.

The influence of gospel in popular music is well known.<sup>34</sup> (Seay and Neely 1986, p. 140; Reed 2003; Stephens 2010) Examining gospel musical aesthetic values in pop music is a window to understanding how secular pop music may be evocative of the spiritual in a 'secular' world. Some initiated Christians may argue that the performance of 'Stand by Me' by the Kingdom Choir simply reflects a wider trend toward the disavowal of the need for the explicit inclusion of God in (historically religious) matrimonial ceremonies. While recognising and affirming the desire for specificity in religious ceremony, I would argue that, in this instance, the performance was a demonstration of a holistic notion of enchantment. Secular performances by gospel groups like the Kingdom Choir complicate sacred-secular binaries and encourage fresh thought about sacramentality and the domain of the transcendent. New models that account for enchantment are needed to address the musical experiences of individuals (both within and outside of organised religion) that do not neatly align with the original predictions of secularisation theory (Partridge 2004, p. 1).

Rather than continuing to perpetuate the sacred-secular binary, my quadrant model accommodates a sacramental perspective. By accounting for the evocation of the transcendent in the secular and the profane, it encourages consideration of a 'spirit infuses all of life' worldview. Further, the quadrant offers a framework for considering engagement with music outside of the accepted parameters for the sacred. The Kingdom Choir's performance of a secular song about love in the context of a religious wedding encourages listeners to think more deeply about what sorts of music might be considered sacramental.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ben E. King, Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller have writing credits for this song, released in 1961.

<sup>2</sup> Professor Robert Beckford has raised related questions about the performance in a number of places. For an extended treatment, see chapter 15 'Handsworth Revolution: Reggae Theomusicology, Gospel Borderlands and Delinking Black British Contemporary Gospel Music from Colonial Christianity. In (Henry and Worley 2021).

3 For an articulation of this view, see (Bruce 2002).

4 An analysis of these dynamics from a decolonial perspective is also worth considering but is beyond the scope of the present discussion. I engage decolonial questions in my forthcoming book 'Gospel-Pop Crossovers: Secularisation and the Sacred' (under contract with Oxford University Press). For further discussion about enchantment, see: (Partridge 2004); Nietzsche made his about the death of God statement in a number of his publications but it first occurred in 1882 'God is dead; but given the way people are, there may still for millennia be caves in which they show his shadow.—And we—we must still defeat his shadow as well!' (Nietzsche et al. 2001, p. 10).

5 'Indeed, one of the most surprising features of postmodernity is the way its radical epistemological scepticism appears to have precipitated an openness to mystery and questioning of secularism's confident exclusions' (Brown and Hopps 2018, p. 7).

6 'For the first time in a census of England and Wales, less than half of the population (46.2%, 27.5 million people) described themselves as "Christian", a 13.1 percentage point decrease from 59.3% (33.3 million) in 2011; despite this decrease, "Christian" remained the most common response to the religion question'. Religion, England and Wales—Office for National Statistics. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021> (accessed on 27 May 2023).

7 'The Nones: Who Are They and What Do They Believe?', (Theos Think Tank 2023).

8 The concept of disenchantment cannot easily be dismissed, but it is not the whole story. Partridge recognises that there is ample evidence to suggest a rising tide of spirituality across the West producing a phenomenon of re-enchantment (Partridge 2004, p. 39); Jason A. Josephson-Storm goes further by carefully tracing the genealogy of disenchantment and suggesting that disenchantment itself was a myth (Josephson-Storm 2017).

9 Others have argued similar ideas about a sacred or religious relationship to secular music. See for example: (Sylvan 2002).

10 'The secularisation of the scientific impulse increasingly evident from the beginning of the 18th century deprived Protestant religion (and arguably Catholicism, too) of its active component, leaving it only with a body of doctrines with which to concern itself. The collapse of the complex system of similitudes which had characterised pre-modern knowledge also brought a new shape to the Western quest for redemption. . .the impulse to restore divine likeness within was redirected outwards into the natural world, and scientific activity became an increasingly material means of obtaining secular salvation' (Harrison 1998, p. 273); See also 'The secular revolution transformed the social construction of science. . .from an enterprise of thought compatible with and, to some extent, at the service of theism into one which considered religion to be irrelevant and often an obscuring impediment to knowledge. . .[It] transformed higher education from college institutions promoting a general Protestant world view and morality into universities where religious concerns were marginalised in favour of objective, areligious transmission of knowledge. . .etc' (Smith 2003, p. 2).

11 According to the Pulitzer center ' . . .one quarter of the two billion Christians in the world are Pentecostal or Charismatic' (Pulitzer Center 2023; Vondey 2020, p. 1).

12 'Spiritual discernment' is a religious phrase (often used in Pentecostalism) describing an individual within the Christian community who has spiritual maturity and heightened awareness to be able to make choices that align with what might typically be termed God's will. The ability to 'go to God' refers to an individual who has proven to be in a regular and consistent habit of prayer.

13 Cohen himself walks this line between the spiritual and secular in much of his material. See: (Adams 2021; da Silva 2022).

14 'The immanent frame is the social space that frames our lives within a natural rather than supernatural order' (Smith 2014, p. 141).

15 The interview continues, 'When I press him on the truth of the Christmas story in all those carols, he prevaricates. "That is like asking if a Beethoven symphony is true: it's not a question that gets you very far. The questions I would ask about the Christmas story, or Beethoven, are: is it inspiring, is it uplifting, and does it have something to say to us today? Answer: yes, yes, yes' (White 2001).

16 The article continues: 'As for the church that stands beside his house in Hemingford Abbots, he loves it, but does not often go inside. "I know they do my music, though, because my wife sings in the choir", he said. "Poor thing: There's no escape". (White 2017).

17 Frank Burch Brown also makes this point in (Brown and Hopps 2018, p. viii).

18 (Taylor 2007, pp. 517–18). I intend to deal with the semiotic and phenomenological implications in a subsequent article and my forthcoming book: Gospel-Pop Crossovers: Secularisation and the Sacred (under contract with Oxford University Press).

19 The most well-known hymn in popular culture (Amazing Grace) does not usually contain the specificity of relating to Christ. Indeed, it usually only contains one direct mention of God. This may be one reason it has remained a popular staple even among those who profess no commitment to Christianity.

20 The systematic theologian and musician Jeremy Begbie has critiqued the work of David Brown on the basis that it seems to confuse aesthetic experience (the sublime) with anything truly religious or Christian. See: (Brown 2020b, p. 4); For the specifics of Begbie's contentions see: (Begbie 2018, pp. 14–39).

21 See also Psalm 19:1, which addresses the general revelation of God in creation, 'The heavens declare the glory of God, and the expanse proclaims the work of his hands. Day after day, they pour out speech; night after night, they communicate knowledge.

There is no speech or words; their voice is not heard. Their message has gone out to the whole earth, and their words to the ends of the world'. Christian Standard Bible.

- 22 The 'listeners' share' is a term used by Gavin Hopps in (Hopps 2020).
- 23 See Christian Scharen's chapter 'Secular Music and Sacramental Theology' in: (Beaudoin 2013, pp. 93–107; Marsh and Roberts 2012; Brown 2011, p. 6; Arnold 2016, p. 10; Brown and Hopps 2018, p. xviii).
- 24 While Jackie Hill Perry's comments (like McClurkin's) are made in a humorous manner she highlights her concern with songs that do not specifically mention Jesus. The majority of the comments on her post indicate affirmation of her statement. Yet, the verses of Amazing Grace (as usually sung in most churches) lack specific reference to Christ. It remains a hymn of great significance within the protestant Christian tradition of the Global North. Indeed, 'Precious Lord' written by Thomas Dorsey contains no reference to Christ, but it remains an influential song within the black gospel tradition. 'Jackie Hill Perry on Instagram: "If It Ain't Jesus, I Don't Want It... 🙄"', 22 February 2023. Available online: <https://www.instagram.com/reel/Co-HgViuV68/> (accessed on 22 February 2023).
- 25 Central to Christianity is the revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ. My argument is not for a de-centring of Christology but rather a more expansive theology that accommodates the revelation of God in whatever way God chooses.
- 26 Sanctified and performative musical strategies in black music are often in conversation secular forms which inform the logic of pop/rock (Casselberry 2012, pp. 176–81).
- 27 For further discussions on music and morality, see Martin Cloonan and Bruce Johnson's study of the barbarism present in some popular music in Dark Side of the (Johnson and Cloonan 2008); Thomas Scheff also poses questions about 'what kinds of lyrics would help rather than hinder the listener's development in the real world?' (Scheff 2011, p. 4; Cox and Levine 2016).
- 28 Some examples of imprecatory psalms include Psalm 69, which includes a prayer for God to punish the Psalmist's enemies, and Psalm 109, which contains curses against the Psalmist's accusers.
- 29 'The Psalms are indeed songs, and as songs they speak to and from the affective side of human nature, showing forth the whole gamut of human emotions' (Witherington 2017, p. 6).
- 30 '[Music] offers an important path that can take our experience of the world beyond ourselves and help us to... perceive... something greater' (Corbett 2019, p. 335; Brown and Hopps 2018, p. 163; Taylor 2007, pp. 517–18).
- 31 See for example Psalm 139:8, 'If I go up to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there'.
- 32 (Begbie and Guthrie 2011, p. 190); This is further supported by Frank Burch Brown 'in modernity, what soon becomes perplexing from a theological standpoint is how often music that is ostensibly secular—even instrumental music without words, or secular operas and popular songs—can somehow be experienced as at least quasi-religious or (in present day terminology) spiritual' (Brown and Hopps 2018).
- 33 According to Berger, pluralism is a 'social situation in which people with many different ethnicities, worldviews, and moralities live together peacefully and interact with each other amicably' (Berger 2014, p. 1).
- 34 Grammy Award winning singer CeCe Winans hosted a 6 part documentary on this topic entitled 'The Gospel Roots of Rock and Soul' 'Home', Gospel Roots Of Rock And Soul, <http://xpngospelroots.org/>; Stephens, The Devil's Music (accessed on 10 February 2021).

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