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# **“Why Should [*Evangelicals*] Have All the Good [*Christian*] Music?” An Exploration of the Segregation of Catholics and Protestants in Popular, Young-Adult Oriented Contemporary Christian Music**

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*Evangelicals dominate contemporary Christian music, understood here as both genre and industry, and the small number of Catholics who are involved remain segregated from them. This article explores this segregation. It presents historical examples and unpacks possible reasons for it. These include the lack of an evangelical drive in Catholics, differing religious imaginations in the two communities, and lingering overt and covert anti-Catholicism. It ends by speculating about the future of the music and movement and how the segregation might be overcome.*

Christian music fans, artists, and observers have claimed that Martin Luther famously asked, “Why should the devil have all the good music?” – although this quotation cannot be found in any of his writings. A documentary was recently released under that title; Paul Baker, long-time historian of Christian music, penned a definitive text called the same, and an album using this quotation was released by Geoff Moore and the Distance in 2006.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, in a recent article in *America*, the weekly Jesuit Catholic magazine, Catholic writer and essayist David Nantais asked, “What Would Jesus Listen To?” and discussed his attitude

toward Christian music. He claimed that as a Catholic he is “uncomfortable” listening to it. He speculated that this is because of his “Catholic religious imagination,” which in contrast to a Protestant religious imagination compels him to see God in all things, secular rock and roll included. Further, Nantais suggests that, at the end of the day, he will listen to rock, “straight, with no religion chaser” (24).

Regardless of who first asked, “Why should the devil have all the good music?” or who asks, “What would Jesus listen to?” the questions have captured the imagination of many of the movement’s insiders and commentators. Though today, Christian music is produced in a startling range of musical styles, an examination of the young adult market (pop, rock, punk, and rap) reveals a number of distinct features. First, evangelical Protestants dominate. Second, few Catholics are involved, though their numbers are increasing.<sup>2</sup> Third, in nearly every aspect of the genre – promotion, production, festivals, etc. – the two communities are segregated. Lastly, the topic has received scant scholarly attention though the industry is growing rapidly.

In this essay, I ask, “Why should *evangelicals* have all the *Christian* music?” I intend this examination to offer a lens into the broader study of religion and popular culture. This is the beginning of a comparative study of the music’s content and context, and for my purposes here, I would like to establish a theoretical framework. I will begin by defining what is meant by “evangelical” and with a historical overview of the movement. Then I will explore aspects of Catholic and evangelical theology that have relevance to this study, and end with some speculations about reasons for the segregation of the two communities in the industry.

## Terms

Along with religion scholar William Shea, I define evangelicals as those who “have in common,” four things: first, “a stress on conversion”<sup>3</sup>; second, “an activism focused especially, but not exclusively, on evangelization”; third, “an unequivocal affirmation of the authority of the Bible”; and fourth, “a soteriological focus on the suffering and death of Jesus as normatively understood

as atonement for sin” (12). Further, because evangelicalism’s historical referent is the Protestant Reformation, it is necessarily anti-Catholic; it defines itself overagainst the perceived wrongs of the Catholic Church. I will use the term evangelical, then, to describe any musician whose work illustrates Shea’s themes.

## Background

Christian music, as a genre, has, of course, existed since the beginning of Christianity. Used as a part of worship, it reflected the needs of the community, and expressed its theological convictions and love for God, Jesus, and each other. But Christian music also exists as an industry labeled “Contemporary Christian Music” or CCM for short. This industry was born out of the Jesus Movement of the 1960s. Much of the music, in its early days, such as Larry Norman’s “I Wish We’d All Been Ready,” drew more on fringe-group apocalypticism than orthodox evangelical theology (Powell 634). In the 1980s, the scene seemed to have morphed into two separate streams: one, a type of music that mimicked its secular counterparts, such as the metal band Stryper, and the other, a more explicitly worship type that drew a hearty amount of criticism for being saccharine.

When Amy Grant burst onto the scene in the late Eighties, Christian music had its first gold-record maker and truly successful crossover artist. In her first top 40 single, “Find A Way,” Grant sang, “If our God His Son not sparing/  
Came to rescue you/  
Is there any circumstance/  
That He can’t see you through” (Grant and Smith). Concerts and festivals were suddenly able to attract a



*Recording Artist Amy Grant*

hundred thousand people. CCM also had – as is well documented by *Spin* magazine’s Andrew Beaujon – a set of controversial issues that her crossover put in sharp relief. Most importantly among these, it had its first real identity crisis: what was Christian music?

Was it, as Beaujon asks, message or music? (43).

In the 1990s, Christian music revenue skyrocketed. Bands like Jars of Clay and DC Talk continued to blur the line between Christian music *per se* and in their cases, pop grunge music, as Grant had before them. Certain acts were still relegated to the Christian community and its bookstores and subculture, though they might have not been exclusively recording “worship” music. Others were challenging the saccharine stereotype and making music nearly indistinguishable from its secular counterparts.

All along though, the largest denomination of Christians in America was missing from the scene – though at the Second Vatican Council in 1965, Pope John XXIII and later Pope Paul VI had encouraged the use of the vernacular language and contemporary hymns in Catholic Mass. The result was a relatively small number of folk Masses in the Seventies. Catholic music, for the most part, has never been as copious or as lucrative as its evangelical counterpart. But there is one artist who had a great deal of success: John Michael Talbot. Talbot was a born-again Christian and musician in the



*Artist John Michael Talbot*

1970s affiliated with the hippie, Jesus-freak roots of Norman and others. In the late 1970s, he converted to Roman Catholicism, became a Third Order – or lay – Franciscan monk, and in 1982, founded the Brothers and Sisters of Charity, the only Catholic religious order in the U.S. in which men and women cohabitate. Today, he is the number one selling Catholic artist

with more than four million records sold and forty albums to his credit (Powell 919). But even though Talbot’s music is appreciated outside the liturgy, his music is worship-like; it does not imitate the styles of today’s youth culture. Even when he claims his material ranges from “traditional meditative songs to more expansive and challenging material,” as Talbot describes his most recent, and fiftieth recording, the songs are still liturgical. They make up a part of a Requiem Talbot is composing, and explicitly follow the

order of the Roman Catholic Mass. Talbot claims,

We begin with a song of praise from the Easter Vigil, Send Forth Your Spirit, move to a Kyrie as a time of repentance, followed directly by a Gloria celebrating the forgiveness God gives us in Christ. After that comes some basic scripture and challenge regarding the gospel of Jesus Christ, followed by a reflection on the immensity of the Spirit of God. This leads us into then awe and wonder of the Sanctus, and deep gratitude for Jesus as our Lamb of God in the Agnus Dei, usually sung before receiving the Lord in Communion. After Communion come songs calling us to really receiving [sic] Jesus into our lives. Come Home Little Children is especially dear to my heart as one who has wandered wide on occasion, and have experienced the love of the Father through Jesus when I come back to my spiritual home. Then we conclude. (“Notes”)

So where are the Catholics in the type of Christian music that more closely emulates the secular? By and large, they do not exist.

### **Exploration**

A combination of factors combine to discourage Catholics from making religious music and to segregate Catholics and evangelicals in the contemporary Christian music industry, three of which I would like to highlight here. First, Catholics are not, by and large, evangelical and the contemporary Christian music scene is. Second, American Catholics see no need to form or join alternative music communities because they do not believe that secular culture must be avoided. Third, the Contemporary Christian Music industry has an anti-Catholic bias. Catholics, therefore, resist joining with evangelicals in it and when they do produce overtly Christian music, form their own groups, found their own record labels, arrange their own festivals, etc. I will examine these assertions in turn.

First, Catholics are not evangelical, and both overtly Christian music and the CCM industry are. Historically, Martin

Luther's return to the gospel that he believed had been compromised by the Catholic theology of works is what brought the word "evangelical" into common Christian parlance. So not only is the notion of what evangelical means based on Luther's skepticism towards aspects of his Catholicism, but theologically, the degrees of emphasis Catholics and evangelicals afford *scripture*, on the one hand, and *works* on the other, vary considerably. Further, Catholics do not undergo the conversion experience so central to evangelical life, and some (many?) would resist the idea of a "personal Jesus," and focus instead on God and his creation. Though some Catholics can be considered evangelical, drawing others to the faith is not greatly emphasized in Catholic communities.

Second, American Catholics see no reason to divide the sacred and secular worlds as strictly as evangelicals. Some scholars attribute this to the "Catholic imagination" as David Nantais mentioned in *America*. Sociologist of religion and popular novelist Andrew Greeley has explored this topic most comprehensively, based on David Tracy's systematic theology. Tracy discusses how theologians, in their search to find an adequate language to discuss the primary Christian event – the incarnation – look to symbols of that event, which give rise to critical thought "before returning to the symbol." Tracy claims "two major conceptual languages have served as the principal candidates" for this discussion: the analogical and dialectical (408). The Catholic imagination is most often "analogical"; the Protestant, "dialectical," in Tracy's understanding. Catholic thought, in this theological construct, posits God as present in and revealed through all things in the world. The world, in turn, becomes "theologically envisioned as sacrament – a sacrament emanating from Jesus Christ as the paradigmatic sacrament of God, the paradigmatic clue to humanity and nature alike" (413). The Catholic imagination – as Andrew Greeley picks up on Tracy's work – locates and approaches God through art, community, food, and stories, for instance, in addition to the sacraments and clergy (Greeley 111-135).

The dialectical imagination, in contrast, is focused on the proclaimed word and is "constituted by the negative dialectic." Tracy asserts that Protestants "develop a second order language

expressive of a negation of all human efforts to save oneself,” that reflects their understanding of the world as flawed. They deny, he claims, “any easy continuities between Christianity and culture ... [any] self-propelling ‘progress’ within society and culture,” and their theological language then is “the negation of all aesthetic, ethical and ‘pagan’ religious possibilities.” The dialectical language, Tracy continues, must “disclose the reality of the infinite, qualitative distinction between *that* God and *this* flawed, guilty, sinful, presumptuous, self-justifying self” (415). In other words, the Protestant “dialectical imagination,” assumes a strict demarcation between things of the world and things of God. How to bridge the gap between can be a messy job.<sup>4</sup>

To sum, Catholics encounter God in all things – in nature, as well as in scripture, in community as much as in the biblical word. Protestants deny the validity of seeing God in the things of this world and the things the “flawed self” produces. Catholics emphasize the incarnation and God’s immanence; Protestants emphasize redemption and God’s transcendence. Catholics have no need then for separate, overtly religious, explicitly Christian music. Protestants do.

The third reason for the segregation of Catholics and evangelicals in the Christian Music genre is that the industry has an anti-Catholic bias. A number of the organizations I examined used overtly anti-Catholic or aggressively evangelical language to describe themselves. Organizers of some events required oaths and pledges to be signed which asserted the primacy of the Bible for instance; in others the bias was more subtle yet just as pervasive. Some Catholic organizations likewise suggest the CCM industry is biased, although accusations are not explicit. Catholic Music Network, for example, claims it was established by folks who “had a hard time trying to find a place on the Internet that would carry various Catholic artists let alone make sure it followed the teachings of the Catholic Church. After prayerful thought,” their mission statement concludes, “Catholic Music Network.com was established and dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary.” The names of Catholic festivals such “Proud2BCatholic” also suggest this, and a number of Catholic

artists claim to have experienced blatant anti-Catholicism. Even John Michael Talbot's organization, the Catholic Association of Musicians, claims to "fall between [the] preexisting categories of Christian and Catholic music, while not excluding either" (Talbot).

I attribute this tension between Catholics and evangelicals to a number of factors, two of which are most important: first, non-denominational Christians (which many evangelicals are) confuse "ecumenicalism" with "non-denominationalism" and gloss over Catholic uniqueness, and second, anti-Catholicism still exists in American society and culture generally.

Non-denominational evangelicals and others sometimes think erasing the lines between groups of Christians, and becoming non-denominational or "post-denominational," is a way to unite Christians of different denominations. But "ecumenicalism," the promotion of cross-Christian understanding and dialogue, is not the same as non-denominationalism. In fact, the ecumenical movement necessarily *requires* the boundaries between Christian groups to exist. In a recent review in the on-line magazine *Contemporary Christian Music*, Patrick Ross stated that in Talbot's *Songs for Worship*, "... a few selections reflect a Catholic influence, e.g. 'Lamb of God.' Yet these transcend any ecclesiastical boundaries, *as all true worship does.*" This sentiment does not correspond with either official Catholic doctrine or lay Catholic thought. In recent national studies, Catholics assert that their sacramentality, liturgical worship, emphasis on good works, emulation of Mary and use of her as intercessor, and the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist is what makes them unique (D'Antonio 61). They agree that the Bible is important, but do not consider it the single or even primary way of knowing God. Indeed, only 38% percent of Catholics versus 73% of Protestants claimed the Bible was "very important" (39).<sup>5</sup> Eliminating these aspects of Catholicism in deference to least-common denominators – such as the Bible – erases what is Catholic in Catholic Christianity.

It is not surprising that the CCM industry exhibits a bias; U.S. society in general still harbors what one scholar calls an "enduring but intermittent" anti-Catholicism (McGreevy 159).

Phillip Jenkins calls this “the last acceptable prejudice” and claims it is “insidious,” “abundant,” and frequently goes unacknowledged. He notes that the problem is such that people can criticize the institutional church with relative abandon, but that such sweeping condemnations of ethnic, racial, or other religious groups would be met with fierce protest and denunciation (4-12).

I do not mean to vilify evangelicals or portray Catholics as victims, however. I follow historian John McGreevy who distinguishes between a religious and a cultural anti-Catholicism that remains pervasive in both overt and covert ways. Unlike Jenkins though, McGreevy encourages vigorous criticism of the church both from within and without, and cautions Catholics “not to mistake criticism, for prejudice” (160). Catholics – in the past as now – have constructed their identity vis-à-vis a real or sometimes imagined anti-Catholicism. This in turn has led to the creation of separate institutions, organizations, and the like. It remains to be seen if this will be the case with Catholic Christian music on a larger scale.

## **Conclusion**

There is a group of young Catholics who can be called “evangelical” in a broad sense. These Catholics spend spring break on mission trips and attend Catholic World Youth Day. As Dean Hoge and others have documented in their informative study, they share their faith with others and imagine themselves as “Christians” first, though many of them are also clearly enamored with the Pope. It is my suspicion that Catholic musicians in this mold are the type of Catholics who would be compelled to produce overtly Christian music. Observe the mission statement of Disciple Records, a new Catholic label:

Our mission is to respond to the growing interest within the Roman Catholic Church to use contemporary, primarily non-liturgical music, as a tool for evangelization and encouragement. Our goal is to develop Catholic artists who are gifted in this area and to help the church effectively utilize

those gifts through recording and live performances.  
(Disciple Records)

It is quite possible that there are also Catholics – like those in Disciple Records – who would be embraced by the Contemporary Christian Music industry and who might have no qualms about joining an evangelically dominated organization to that end. Disciple Records describes its genre as contemporary *Catholic* music however.

In closing, I ask, why has so little work been done on the relationship between evangelicals, Catholics, and popular culture in America? There are many important scholarly works that broadly explore Christianity and popular music, but my preliminary research reveals that a comparison between Catholic and evangelical attitudes towards and participation in various aspects of Christian popular music has been confined to Greeley’s work on the religious imagination and others who have taken up his ideas. William Romanowski has explored some of these issues from a confessional evangelical perspective, but we have yet to see a major scholarly, comparative treatise on the subject. A forthcoming three-volume work by Praeger Publications will hopefully remedy this, and I hope my work will likewise add to the conversation.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>See Heather Whinna and Vicki Hunter, *Why Should the Devil Have All the Good Music?* RightRightRight Films, 2006; Paul Baker, *Why Should the Devil Have All the Good Music? Jesus Music – Where It Began, Where It Is, and Where It Is Going.* Waco, TX: Word Books, 1979; Geoff Moore and the Distance, “Why Should the Devil Have All the Good Music?” *Evolution.* Forefront Records, 1993.

<sup>2</sup>This cannot be explained numerically. Of recent surveys that explicitly ask for religious identification, the numbers of Catholics and evangelicals are quite close. The Pew Research Center puts the percentage of white evangelical and Catholic Americans at an even 23%. Likewise, a *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly* survey found the percentage of self-identified Catholics in the United States to be 21%, and evangelical Christians to be 24%. See Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, “Faith-Based Funding Backed, But Church-State Doubts Abound,” 10 April 01; and “Exploring Religious America, 2002,”

*Religious and Ethics Newsweekly* and *U.S. News and World Report*, funded by the Lilly Endowment, Inc, Principal Investigators Mitofsky International and Edison Media Research. Association of Religion Data Archives. 5 October 07. <<http://www.thearda.com>>.

<sup>3</sup>This stress on conversion is central to the evangelical narrative and includes the experience of being “born again” spiritually in Christ. It is through this experience that Christians acknowledge their sinfulness and Christ’s atonement for that sin. For a fascinating treatment of the conversion experience, see Randall Balmer’s *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. New York: Oxford UP, 2000.

<sup>4</sup>Tracy has taken a strong postmodern turn in his recent work. Drawing on Derrida, he examines the Hidden and Incomprehensible God (or the Void) by drawing on various aspects of apophatic, or negative theology. As the postmodern theorists “affirm the positive reality of the notion of the radical incomprehensibility” of this God or Void, he speaks of apophatic mystics who bear fragments of – acts as “pointers” to - the divine. By using postmodern theology then, Tracy is looking “beyond the usual forms of relationality, whether process, analogical or dialectical.” It is in this “mystically-oriented form of postmodern thought” where he envisions the greatest possibility for rethinking how such Incomprehensibility is made manifest in the Divine Mystery. For an academic explication, see “The Post-Modern Re-Naming of God as Incomprehensible and Hidden,” *Cross Currents*, Spring/Summer 2000: 240-247, and also both Scott Holland, “This Side of God: A Conversation with David Tracy,” *Cross Currents*, Spring 2002: 54-59, and Lois Malcolm, “The Impossible God: An Interview With David Tracy,” *Christian Century*, February 13-20, 2002: 24-30 for discussions of how his current thought fits into his larger theological schema. He continues to distinguish between some “liberal” Protestants and Catholics as he takes his thought beyond the dialectical and analogical; he claims Catholics and Jews are “less troubled” by postmodern thought since they are not as tied to modernity as he imagines Protestantism is. The three-volume treatise of his new work has yet to be published.

<sup>5</sup>It is important to note that this runs counter to official church emphasis on devotional practices such as Bible-reading since the Second Vatican Council in 1965. As D’Antonia et al. concluded, however, “Scripture-based activities have not yet been integrated into the traditional behaviors that Catholics associate with being a ‘practicing Catholic’” (61).

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