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“You Need a Big God”

Fascinating Interactions between Music and Religion

Abstract

The interactions between popular music and religion are manifold and highly complex. Popular music as an important part of popular culture is a means of communication. Music can transmit not only emotions and a sense of community but also religious knowledge, knowledge that leaves diverse traces in different times and places. In the end, whether we extract religious meaning from popular music and what that meaning is depend on our background and on our capacity to contextualise symbols, motives and narratives – and also on the media used to convey these references. By analysing Florence + The Machines song “Big God” and its music video we will address some of the questions that arise while working in the field of popular music and religion.

Keywords

Popular Music, Florence + the Machine, Religion, Meaning Making, Audio-Visual Media, Big God, Culture

Biographies

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Fig. 1: The veiled women. Music video still from *Big God*, Florence + The Machine, 00:00:04.



Fig. 2: The women lift their hands, perhaps in an act of adoration. Music video still from *Big God*, Florence + The Machine, 00:00:14.

Motionless and colourful, a number of women stand in a black void, their reflections appearing in the water at their feet (fig. 1). All but the woman in the centre are veiled in transparent chiffon; the unveiled woman wears a nude-coloured silk dressing gown and underwear. We hear the howling of the wind, then percussion; a piano tune starts as the camera continues to zoom in. The women begin to move their hands towards the black sky (or heaven?) but then let them sink down onto their foreheads in a position of despair (fig. 2).



Fig. 3: What do the women receive? Music video still from *Big God*, Florence + The Machine, 00:00:46.

“You need a big god, big enough to hold your love”, laments Florence Welch, the unveiled woman, singer in the British indie rock band Florence + The Machine, and then adds, “You need a big god, big enough to fill you up”.¹ And while her voice still modulates the “up”, she takes several deep breaths and opens her arms, as if to signal physically her willingness to receive whatever comes (fig. 3).

The Polysemy of Feeling Ghosted, or the Context Produces Meaning

Florence Welch stated in an interview that the song “Big God” was inspired by the fact that she had been ghosted, that her (text) messages to someone she liked had gone entirely unanswered.² “To be ghosted” is a relatively new term, used in relation to social media interactions to describe being ignored by someone loved or well-liked. As the title of the song and the video make

- 1 “Big God” is a song from the album *High as Hope* by Florence + The Machine (GB/US 2018, Virgin EMI; Republic). The lyrics of “Big God” can be read while watching the music video on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_klrRooQwuk [accessed 12 August 2020].
- 2 See Ryzik 2018; Melena Ryzik’s interview with Florence Welch.

evident, however, this song is not just concerned with the feeling of being unloved; it has to do with women, with (female) strength and with religion and a transcendence we may not initially recognise.

Meaning, we are all well aware, is not permanent and fixed; it is process that will depend, for example, on the artist's background and its impact on a specific artwork and on the receiver's context.³ Knowing that Florence + The Machine tend to compose complex and polysemous songs, we want to explore some of the possibilities "Big God" offers the willing interpreter with a particular interest in exploring interactions between popular music and religion. But first let us look briefly at relevant research on religion and popular music and define some of the terms we will use in this Prelude.

Over the past 20 years, much insightful research has been published on the interrelation of religion and popular music.⁴ These include studies providing an overview of the field, as well as investigations of specific musical genres or religious traditions.⁵ The Issue at hand fits into this growing tradition of research. But how can we systematise studies in the broad field of religion and popular music? John C. Lyden argues with a focus on popular culture that the conjunction *and* in this constellation marks a variety of perspectives on the links between religion *and* popular culture.⁶ Lyden explains these interrelations on the basis of four interrelated categories in research that were established by Bruce David Forbes:⁷ "religion in popular culture", "popular culture in religion", "popular culture as religion" and "religion and popular culture in dialogue". In the first category he places the investigation of the use of religious symbols and motifs in popular culture, while, conversely, the second perspective starts with religion and investigates how popular cultural

3 "Producing meaning depends on the practice of interpretation, and interpretation is sustained by us actively using the code – encoding, putting things into the code – and by the person at the other end interpreting or decoding the meaning [...] But note that, because meanings are always changing and slipping, codes operate more like social conventions than like fixed laws or unbreakable rules. As meanings shift and slide, so inevitably the codes of a culture imperceptibly change" (Hall 2013, 45).

4 Recent examples include, with a broad view: Moberg/Partridge 2017a; Schlegelmilch 2017; Bossius/Häger/Kahn-Harris 2011, with case studies: Heinen 2017; Nava 2017; Barzel 2015; Miller/Pinn/Freeman 2015; Moberg 2015.

5 Bloomsbury has a series on this topic: the Bloomsbury Studies in Religion and Popular Music.

6 Lyden 2015, 15–17.

7 Forbes 2000. For these categories adapted to religion and popular music: Moberg/Partridge 2017b, 1–3.

processes are integrated into religious traditions and world views. Research in the third category asks how popular culture can become “religion”, for example by making transcendental experiences possible or by expressing spiritual feelings. The fourth category has a dialogical basis and explores, for example, how religious groups and popular musicians debate current issues, work together or fight each other or how religion and popular music can be in dialogue on the level of media.

These four categories are helpful for systematising the main lines of the history of research. Even if they do not capture the complexity of empirical interrelations of religion and popular culture, they are useful guidelines for the classification of research perspectives. The contributions to this issue touch on all four of these perspectives, although not always to the same extent. In her contribution, Angela Sue Sawyer brings a song by Tracy Chapman and a biblical passage into an ecofeminist dialogue. Reinhard Kopanski explores two revealing case studies of how popular music is used to express Christian worldviews. And Lavinia Pflugfelder elaborates bricolages of religious motifs in heavy metal video clips.

The editor’s approach considers religion as a complex communication system that interacts on diverse levels with other systems (e.g. economy, politics) of a specific culture and provides a universal orientation.⁸ As a product of a specific culture, religious symbols or narratives cannot be fully understood without involving the contexts in which they are produced, distributed and perceived.⁹ In addition to written or spoken language, gesture and images, music is another means used by religion to transmit a specific world view with its norms and values. And vice versa, these means use religious motives, symbols and narratives, with agents, religion and the respective means of communication therefore refreshing a cultural imaginary¹⁰ by constantly setting and resetting meaning.

8 “Religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (Geertz 2004, 4). See also Stolz 2001, 33.

9 The concept of the “circuit of culture” is a fruitful starting point for analysing cultural products and artefacts. This cultural studies approach suggests we analyse a product within a complex circuit of production, distribution, perception and individual interpretation to be able to understand its meaning at a specific time within a specific group. See Du Gay et al. 1997.

10 See e.g. Pezzoli-Olgiati 2015.

In this issue, we focus on popular music and define it as part of popular culture. In everyday language, popular culture is still placed in tense relationship with something called “high culture”. In this context, popular culture is associated with a mass and globalised market, while high culture is associated with an educated and/or, depending on the perspective, bourgeois context. But as John C. Lyden points out, it’s not that simple.¹¹ Even if one wants to retain such a simple dichotomy, one must recognise that its transitions are fluid: “Jazz might have begun as a popular art form, but it soon became so sophisticated that the majority of the population lost interest in it, and now it is primarily played and studied more in academic settings than in nightclubs.”¹²

We take popular music to be part of popular culture. Popular music is thus a form of cultural communication. It can legitimise power and dominant discourses, but it can also question them – which is especially interesting in relation to religion.

The inclusion of references to religious texts or persons is not at all unusual in many popular genres, but because these references have been separated from their original context, we, the audience, perceive them differently or may even miss cues when we hear a song for the first time. But still, even if unconsciously, we learn a lot about the cultural and religious background as we listen to popular music of all sorts, be it from the sound, the melody or the lyrics.

Popular music can transmit not only emotions and a sense of community but also religious knowledge, knowledge that leaves diverse traces in different times and places. In the end, whether we extract religious meaning from popular music and what that meaning is depend on our background and on our capacity to contextualise symbols, motives and narratives – and also on the media used to convey these references.¹³

The complexities of these interrelations of religion and popular music are illustrated by an analysis of our example: the music video for the song “Big God”.

11 Lyden 2015, 13.

12 Lyden 2015, 13.

13 See Belting 2011, 9–62, especially the discourse about the difference between image and media.

It's All About Composition

Lyrics, Images and Emotions in BIG GOD

“You keep me up at night / to my messages, you do not reply” – as noted, on a first level the lyrics of “Big God” seem to address feelings of rejection and emptiness, but, when we add in the video’s dance performance¹⁴ and the choice of words and metaphors, second and third levels of meaning emerge. Even as we describe the music video closely, analyse it and gather further information to contextualise it, we realise that the emotional effect of the music video and its criticism lies in the abundance of interactions between sound, text, body and audiovisual medium – and all the explicit and implicit references to religion.

A Female Jesus? Emphasising Emotions in Music Videos

We can read Florence’s performance as an almost-love story gone bad. We see a woman’s emancipation from feelings of unworthiness as she gathers her shattered self, a progression visualised through the other women, who dance with her and at the end disappear – or better, reconnect – leaving a still injured but now whole and more mature person. This self-healing is not easy: “Sometimes I think it’s getting better, and then it gets much worse, is it just part of the process? Well, Jesus Christ, it hurts.”

The pain our protagonist, Florence, feels is visualised by all of the women, including Florence herself in their midst, who trudge desperately through the pond on their knees until she pronounces the words “Jesus Christ, it hurts.” Then the women fall into the water as if deadly wounded. Only Florence rises in this moment, suggesting she has gone through the worst and now the healing can begin (fig. 4). After a struggle with the situation and, more significantly, with herself, Florence frees herself from the idea that she is precious only because another person says so. Interestingly, as Florence repeats the line “Jesus Christ, it hurts”, the other women (or parts of Florence’s shattered self) are lifted up and then dangle like puppets above her head (fig. 5). While in the background we hear a distant “Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ, it hurts”, we see Florence spreading her arms like wings... or like Jesus on the cross.

14 British dancer and choreographer Akram Khan worked out the choreography; the video was directed by American photographer and director Autumn de Wilde. See Reed 2018.



Fig. 4: Getting better after profound sadness. Music video still from BIG GOD, Florence + The Machine, 00:01:57.

We see Florence go through the most extreme emotional depths, where the pain is almost unbearable, but even there hope rises, and she finds a way out of the pain (fig. 6) and to a new strength.

At the end, Florence sits in the water alone, her shattered self whole again. She is very wet after a short dive through the water, and touches her still intact body with a certain astonishment and sensitivity. A new chapter of self love and self esteem can begin. She is blessed and in a sense has baptised herself. Throughout this whole ceremony of rebirth, her gaze is directed upwards.

The interaction of the textual characterisation of an emotion and its visual representation in BIG GOD is clearly religiously charged. The music video's choreography highlights emotional aspects of the song's lyrics by visualising them. Florence is not only visually but also metaphorically almost naked – she cannot hide her feelings beneath her clothes, which are almost transparent and actually underwear. This music video gives us a multidimensional representation of emotions, as pure as it gets.

Art historian Hans Belting proposes that an image (understood in a broad sense) does not come from nowhere but has its roots in our cultural imaginary, which has been fed over the centuries with vast numbers of images, which are more or less popular depending on the socio-political situation.¹⁵

15 “But it is not at all obvious what we mean when we refer to a ‘new’ image, for all past images were once new. Some may seem new because they employ a new medium or



Fig. 5: Rising from the pain. Music video still from BIG GOD, Florence + The Machine, 00:02:12.



Fig. 6: The way out of the pain. Music video still from BIG GOD, Florence + The Machine, 00:02:17.

respond to a new collective perception” (Belting 2011, 36). Here Belting elaborates Warburg’s idea of recurrent motives and representational strategies and focuses on how the qualities of a specific media – that used to transmit an image – shape the perception of the beholder.

All the images we see are in the end entangled with the vital image repertoire we have saved within us, in our human bodies. Each image is located within our bodies, with which we perceive what is external to our body, adjusting (or contextualising) what we see with what we already know.

When Florence + The Machine not only sing of a “Big God” and call Jesus by name but also highlight emotional aspects of the song’s lyrics with subtle but evident references to religious imagery (cross, rebirth, baptism), we can conclude that the presence of religion is not by accident; it is intended to direct the affective impact of the song.

The “Body” of the Song

The female body is central to the representation of emotion in the music video for “Big God”. Florence’s body is far more than just an instrument used to articulate words and thereby shape the melody. Her voice is incredibly expressive, as she whispers, sings, cries and croaks, but so too is her physical presence, particularly the way she moves her body. In squatting, flexing and trudging with the other women through the water, she expresses anger, hope, vulnerability and relief. The female body conveys not only words but also images. Images are created by the moving bodies, the colours and the light and are representations of emotions which are part of our common imaginary.

The music video of BIG GOD brings us words as well as images. The lyrics are polysemous: they are about a woman feeling rejected by someone she feels close to, but can also be read as a woman’s fervent plea to God to answer her prayers and requests. Her words “To my messages, you do not reply” may be directed to a real person, but they could also be for a transcendent being. Or for both. In her despair and loneliness Florence returns to God, even though she does not seem sure of her faith. The line “I still like you the most / You’ll always be my favourite ghost” may likewise refer to her ex-love and also to a transcendent counterpart, to whom she cannot connect. She stomps in the water, without orientation or destination. There must be a “big God”, but she evidently cannot see him/her/it. The unveiling of the women, which happens with the fading of the word “ghost”, can be read symbolically, as her opening her eyes and finding a way to get through this on her own, almost a visual injunction to pull herself together. With an almost angry energy she begins to struggle against the pain, and when she cries out, “Jesus Christ, it hurts”, the listener might recall Jesus on the cross as he cried out to his father in his darkest hour (Matt. 27:46). This connotation is reinforced by the visualisation

of Florence under the female puppets with her arms spread out (fig. 6), as if she is hanging on a cross.

At the end, when we see Florence finding a way through her pain, we may assume that she has found her “big god”, who can replenish her. She needs to love herself before she can love and be loved. The lines “You need a big god / big enough to hold your love / You need a big god / big enough to fill you up” can be read not only as a spiritual longing for a sense of life and a feeling of being complete, but also as individual insight: she has so much to give and wants to receive an equal love, and the faithful “receive” if they are open and ready to let another “see the true you”. In the music video for “Big God” we see the women’s bodies move beneath the almost transparent fabric, and we see Florence touch herself with a naïve, but still erotic fascination. This context makes evident the ambiguity of the line “big enough to fill you up” – is a spiritual or physical hunger to be satisfied, or is she singing of a woman’s sexual hunger or longing, which she dares to pronounce and at the end feeds by touching her own body. She has overcome her longing for a transcendent or physical other who completes her, and she has emancipated herself metaphorically from a patriarchal system that sees women as passive receivers and not as agents. Director Autumn de Wilde based the composition of the dancing women on a painting by Francisco de Goya called *Vuelo de brujas* (*Witches Flight*, 1797/98, oil on canvas), seeking to show the strength of women by referring to imagery of witches – strong, unconventional women with knowledge and often persecuted by (male) authorities.¹⁶

When Florence sings at the end, “Shower your affection / let it rain on me / And pull down the mountain / drag your cities to the sea” and softly touches her own body, we realise that she needs no man or god at all, for she is able to satisfy herself physically and mentally. Her new confidence is based on her new strength which grew during the process of healing the trauma of being abandoned. She needs no other person, no god, to feel safe and strong. The reference to Psalm 46:2, “Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea” (KJV),¹⁷ can thus be understood in terms of self-empowerment. And, remaining in this biblical context, her self confidence has grown until it is strong enough to metaphorically move mountains: “Jesus answered and said unto

16 For more information about the production of the music video by de Wildes, see Lanigan 2018, and the analysis *The Pop Song Professor* 2018.

17 See also Matt. 17:20.

them, Verily I say unto you, If ye have faith, and doubt not, ye shall not only do this which is done to the fig tree, but also if ye shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea; it shall be done” (Matt. 21:21).

These verbal references to the Bible provoke specific images in the minds of the audience, intensifying the vision of a double female emancipation – emancipation from the pain caused by rejection by an “other”, and emancipation from the idea of needing an “other”, whether transcendent or human, to feel whole and “filled” with love.

Florence has survived the trauma with an intact body and although she still feels vulnerable, she is stronger than before, knowing now what she is able to endure and that she can find strength in herself.

Religious Imaginary and Popular Music

Planning this issue was a fascinating multimedia experience. Questions ranged across how music can be adequately presented in an open access on-line journal and how “popular music” can be defined. The issue also explores diverse music genres, from Christian rock to metal and flamenco, all of which in some way interact with religion. We were surprised to receive no articles on religiously charged opera libretti, but integrate this last genre of popular music in structuring this issue as an online-journal libretto. Right now, you are reading the *Prelude*, which introduces some of the main arguments. Each *Act*, or thematic article, is followed by an *Interlude*, a short music video review by a younger scholar which focuses on a specific religious aspect in a music video. The section concludes with a *Postlude*, which offers a short synthesis and considers where we might go next.

Act One, Angela Sue Sawyer’s article “Comfort the Waste Places, Defend the Violated Earth”, opens the issue with a ecofeminist interpretation of Tracy Chapman’s song “The Rape of the World” and the biblical passage at Isaiah 52:1–52:6. Sawyer shows how in the song lyrics and the scriptural text, overlapping metaphorical references to motherhood, sexual violence and environmental consequences of human actions are developed, encouraging us consider ecological questions, theology and the power of women.

Act Two, with the title “What makes Popular Christian Music ‘Popular?’”, by Reinhard Kopanski, compares two successful projects in Christian popular music: one by the US-American artist Lauren Daigle and one by the German music group Koenige & Priester. Kopanski explores how religious worldviews

are formed in Christian popular music and how a religious message is communicated without diminishing the broad appeal of the songs.

In Act Three, “Heavy Metal Bricolage”, Lavinia Pflugfelder explores the complex reception of religious imagery and “religionised” visual language in Heavy Metal and especially Extreme Metal videoclips. She argues that these clips develop a religious language and a Metal-specific visual programme that uses and combines imagery from different religious traditions.

The Interludes each draw on a YouTube videoclip. They discuss Lady Gaga’s JUDAS (Katharina Luise Merkert), Rosalía’s AUNQUE ES DE NOCHE (Eva Meienberg) and Dorian Electra’s ADAM & STEVE (Yannick Schlote).

To allow the reader to experience the mediality of the music and the virtual journal, we have added QR-codes for the music videos in the Interludes, and provide URLs for the platforms for the videos cited in the Acts. We strongly encourage readers to watch the music videos analysed in the short reviews, and also recommend they listen to songs and watch videos mentioned in the articles. The full possibilities of the media are evident when we hear the melody, comprehend the lyrics and see how music is visualised for a broad public.

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Discography

High as Hope (Florence + The Machine US/GB 2018, Republic/Virgin EMI).

Filmography

BIG GOD (Florence + The Machine, Autumn de Wilde, US 2018), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_kIrRooQwuk [accessed 27 May 2020].