

THE MODERN POSTMODERN CONDITION:
SEEKING RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN CULTURE

by

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(Under the Direction of Carolyn Jones Medine)

ABSTRACT

Modern American Christians that adhere to the Biblical invocation to be “in the world, but not of the world,” are faced with a unique dilemma in contemporary American culture. Due to American public culture’s emphasis on individualism and Christianity’s emphasis on a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, many Christians feel compelled by these social influences to develop their own individual brands of Christianity, which in many ways threaten parochial Christian traditions. Therefore, new religious communities are arising blending influences from these Christian traditions and from popular American culture. By doing so, Christians involved in these communities are attempting to balance their individual identities with communal worship in order to adapt to a rapidly changing society.

INDEX WORDS: Postmodernism, American Christianity, Popular Culture, Contemporary Christian Music, Religious Identity

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Postmodern Condition in American Religious Discourse

An emphasis on individualistic identity in modern American culture has contributed to fractures in the development and maintenance of communal religious beliefs. This emphasis on private religion effectively alters public discourse surrounding what it means to be “religious.” While it certainly is true that many (and even a majority) of modern Americans continue to participate in what would be considered religious traditions (specifically Christian traditions), a secularized popular culture has opened, and perhaps altered, the definition of what it means to be religious in modern America.

The shift in religious language has manifested in various ways. Religious language in American society has been dominated by Christian discourse; in other words, the distinction between the terms “sacred” and “secular” has been indoctrinated in American language as the distinction between what is “Christian” and what is not. As American public discourse continues to secularize its language on religious matters, the line between the secular and sacred in this regard is blurred. Non-Christians, for example, have opened themselves up to the religious conversation by creating a distinction between “religiosity” and “spirituality,” denoting that the former is steeped in ritual, tradition, and dogma, while the latter follows one’s own path to that which he or she views as divine.

I intend to blur the distinction between that which is “religious” and that which is “spiritual,” effectively conflating religious belief into one category, but one that contains infinite possibilities. As public culture in America has opened itself to the discussion of religious belief

and practice apart from Christianity, Christianity itself is adapting to this secularized culture as well.

How has this shift in American culture developed? I intend to focus on the way in which a secularized public discourse has affected certain forms of modern American Christianity, particularly through the influence of popular music. Many important historical developments have influenced this shift, including but not limited to: the Reformation's legacy in American culture, from which an emphasis on religious freedom and individualized Christian faith planted the seeds of modern religious pluralism; as well as the youth movement in the post-war 1950s, out of which a host of new individual identities projected their voices into the cultural narrative, bringing new perspectives to public discourse that previously were ignored or oppressed.

These cultural developments — along with others of comparable influence, such as the Civil Rights and Women's movements of the 1960s and 1970s — are the foundation for the theory present throughout the thesis. Specifically, I want to tie the manifestations of these and other cultural movements to what I perceive as a general disorientation of religious identity in both public and parochial American culture. In other words, modern Americans often feel compelled to create their own religious identities amidst being bombarded by myriad influences from multiple angles. This bombardment, which is engendered by a cultural emphasis on individualized freedom of choice and manifested in religious discourse by a tendency towards pluralism, reflects the Postmodern condition in American society. The Postmodern condition, as I will define it, marks not a specific point in history but an era in which a stable, public culture is in the process of a major shift. As a result, individuals trying to make sense of this greater cultural shift as it is occurring are burdened with the difficult task of orienting themselves to a

constantly changing society. I will define this terminology — and this condition — at length in the first chapters as the foundation of this thesis.

The Postmodern condition is the concept I will use to denote the state of identity crisis in modern America, and more specifically the religious identity crisis in modern American Christianity. The country ostensibly was founded upon principals of freedom, justice, and the pursuit of happiness that would be available to all citizens, but as the population continues to grow, conflict surrounding each individual's attempts to actualize these ideals continues to grow as well. Postmodern inquiry seeks to identify these sources of conflict in the hopes that they can in some way be mediated, affording the country's founding "inalienable rights" to all citizens. Therefore, the Postmodern condition's effect on American Christianity has been to bring forth the particularities of pluralism in American culture to mark the tension between individual religious faith and religious community. The individual quest for meaning, in this respect, can disconnect one from public and shared ritual.

By focusing on particular topics and problems in modern American Christianity, I plan to demonstrate the effects of the Postmodern condition. The Protestant ethic in American society has always overlaid a pluralism that has found its voice against parochial Christian metanarratives in the past forty years; this pluralism often manifests itself through the beliefs and practices of young Christians, who in that span have developed as active participants in both Christian culture and public American culture.

Course of Action

The first chapter of this thesis will set out a detailed description, critique, and analysis of the Postmodern condition and the Postmodernism movement. Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* will be a key text in the discussion, through

which I will define “Postmodern” as “a method of philosophy that attempts to analyze the present as it occurs.” My overall analysis will take the form of this type of inquiry in an attempt to conceptualize issues in contemporary American Christianity. By invoking Charles Taylor’s notion of “expressivism,” I will track the movement of young Christians against parochial practices.

In sum, the dilemma posed by the Postmodern condition in American religious culture is how to develop and sustain an individual religious identity or a spirituality amidst myriad influences from multiple cultural sources, both “secular” and “sacred.” The question of whether hyper-individualism can be aligned with a greater social project is one that worries Taylor, for example. How does one discern his or her spirituality or beliefs in such a situation, and is it possible, or even desirable, to align that individual identity and spirituality with an organized religious community? I will address these issues in the second and third chapters.

Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction philosophy toward the Postmodern condition can provide building blocks for religious discourse to be reconstructed in light of the plurality of religious beliefs that exist. In addition to Taylor, thinkers such as Albert Camus, H. Richard Niebuhr, and William James have offered their own analyses and criticisms of what I will suggest is a sort of deconstructed, personalized religion. They also have suggested steps towards a form of religious discourse that can be shared in a plurality of religious beliefs that exist.

In response to Taylor’s issue, and the deconstructive method of managing the Postmodern condition, David Ray Griffin offers a “Constructive Postmodern Philosophy” that he hopes can work towards engaging societal concerns and thereby progress beyond the present point of confusion toward common goals. Now, it seems, Americans mired in this condition

stand in a liminal space, one of uneasy transition. How can Americans orient themselves religiously in a (post)modern world?

As a key indicator of how the Postmodern condition is affecting American Christianity, I want to examine one strategy by which many young American Christians are attempting to address the problems posed by this liminal space of limitless choice in order to create a religious community more acceptable to them in a changing public American landscape: the use of popular music forms in personal and communal worship.

As a background to this cultural development, the fourth chapter will analyze specific ways that popular culture has affected America's youth. It will detail an emphasis on individual development, particularly the individual as a consumer based, in part, on studies of the expendable income at the disposal of American youth. In response to this youth culture, Christianity has adopted methods and practices from secular influences in popular culture in order to attract attention to and maintain itself amongst the myriad influences these youth are seeing in everyday life. These influences often come through an influx of advertising outlets developed in post-WWII America. Using David Halberstam's work on youth culture's influence on greater society beginning in the 1950s and Stephen Prothero's treatment of the so-called "Jesus Movement" in the 1960s and 1970s, I will demonstrate how certain American Christians are blurring the old adage to be "in the world, but not of the world." Though this distinction still plays heavily in Christian discourse, the way in which these young Christians are finding spiritual influence in forms of popular culture is a unique marker of a changing tradition. Within these new religious movements, many young Christians find themselves free to adopt a form of religious identity influenced by both sacred tradition and secular modernity.

One of the chief markers of popular culture's influence on America's Christian youth is the employment of popular music styles in worship. The core of my thesis, therefore — represented in the fifth chapter — will be to use Stephen Prothero's tracking of Contemporary Christian Music in *American Jesus*, music clips from the film *Jesus Camp*, Ben Pasley's analysis of music in his spiritual life in *Enter the Worship Circle*, and Randall Balmer's discussion of a variety of evangelical communities in *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America*, to examine one way in which modern American Christians are attempting to practice an integrated life and to merge secular and sacred elements. By understanding and engaging with popular culture through its worship style, these young Christians are connected to "worldly" influences, but by remaining true to their Christian faith in acknowledging these influences, they are able to enrich their individual spirituality further. These Christians are critiquing and revising parochial traditions that cut themselves off from public culture by denoting "secular" and "sacred" in a strict dichotomy. As modern American culture continues to embrace the influence of globalization, many believe that it is less practical to retain an esoteric and exclusive religious community.

Therefore, what have been called popularly (and sometimes inaccurately) evangelical or nondenominational groups have adapted to their cultural contexts in order to be successful. As the hyper-individualistic sensibilities of public American culture seem to be driving young people away from mainline, parochial churches, many of these same young people are finding religious identity in less traditional forms of Christianity. These less traditional forms, which often seem doctrinally more rigid than mainline denominations, offer young Christians, ironically, a space in which to create and to express their own understanding of Christian identity. I will examine how music functions to create this space of freedom and self-expression

within what seems to be rigid boundaries of these new religious movements. Overall, the development and maintenance of these new religious movements is reflective of the Postmodern condition's influence on American Christianity.

CHAPTER 2

POSTMODERNISM AND AUTHENTICITY: THE CURRENT STATE OF THINGS

“Postmodernism suggests that what has been presented in our social-political and our intellectual traditions as knowledge, truth, objectivity, and reason are actually merely the effects of a particular form of social power, the victory of a particular way of representing the world that then presents itself beyond mere interpretation, as truth itself.” — Gary Peller, from *Reason and the Mob: The Politics of Representation*, reprinted by Henry Giroux in his introduction to *Postmodernism, Feminism and Cultural Politics* (21).

The concept of “Postmodernism” easily can be misunderstood. Though the goal of many Postmodern thinkers is to move beyond the assumptions and methods of the modern age (i.e. the post-Enlightenment age, for my purposes here), postmodern inquiry, as I will define it, properly utilizes modern ideals as part of its method and, therefore, is not simply “post” modern at all. In a religious context, American culture is still in the modern age, influenced greatly by the ideas brought forth during the Reformation and the Enlightenment.

Critics of Postmodernism and Postmodern theory often believe that the “movement” would like to eschew all modern modes of thought and action, but this, I will argue, is not its chief aim.

The challenge in present American society is to orient oneself towards and within a culture that affords the freedom to choose. A propensity for pluralism results from this freedom, whereby public discourse is open to a unique narrative from each individual. For this type of

society in a religious context, the challenge to construct one's personal religious identity is an overwhelming task because the public discourse is constantly changing. To maintain a doctrinal or parochial view is nearly impossible because new ideas are being projected into the greater public narrative each moment.

To clarify terminology denoted by Dr. William Power, there is an operative distinction between the terms parochial, public, and popular in analyzing cultural discourses. For my purposes in analyzing the Postmodern condition in American Christianity, "parochial" refers to a rigid cultural narrative that defines itself strictly upon its own terms, apart from "public," or general, American culture at large. "Popular" culture is distinguished from public discourse by reflecting viewpoints or affinities of large groups of people, but not by representing specific groups in and of themselves. Popular discourse, therefore, is not defined by an intricate set of qualifications, like a parochial narrative, nor does it necessarily include all possible narratives of a larger culture, like public discourse.

The Postmodern Condition

Postmodernism, by its definition, should be cognizant of the challenge of identifying the present state of culture. Its goal is not to destroy the principles of religious and cultural belief set forth by the modern era and to create an entirely new idea, for to destroy the modern would be to ignore what has influenced that which is occurring today and only would perpetuate the difficulty of understanding the manifestations of the Postmodern condition. Instead, Postmodernism should seek to accept the challenge of adapting to the changes that are presently occurring in American culture in order to understand its present shift.

Though Postmodernism would, ideally, lead to new developments in American culture, a movement suggesting a clean break or a clear distinction between the Modern era and the

Postmodern era ignores the overlap and transition between these two ideas. I will defend the notion that though American culture is immersed in the Postmodern condition — i.e. Americans are trying to understand and identify new ways in which myriad communities are manifesting themselves and placing themselves within these contexts — present society is moving through a transition from what is considered the “modern” era to something different. The Postmodern condition, as it is, exists as an inquiry directed toward this transition itself and not necessarily toward the specific end of something entirely “post” modern.

In his seminal Postmodern work entitled *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1984) Jean-François Lyotard writes, “Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives” (xxiv). Though it seems to be, this is *hardly* a simple definition, for there are many layers to the term “metanarrative” that must be discussed before one can even begin to dissect Lyotard’s work.

Throughout *The Postmodern Condition*, by speaking counter-intuitively to traditional or established ideas, Lyotard develops new styles of language. In order for that language to be understood by greater society, however, it must be described in generally relatable terms. One of the chief, and appropriate, critiques of Postmodern theory is that the ideas are inaccessible to the very people these ideas are affecting. Since I perceive American Christians to be affected both consciously and unconsciously by the Postmodern condition, my goal in this piece is to mediate such a language. I will work with Lyotard’s definition of the “postmodern” and the concept of “metanarrative” that I see as central to the state of contemporary American religious culture. The Postmodern condition in American society, American religion and particularly American Christianity engages in this sort of “incredulity toward metanarratives.”

For the purposes of this discussion — a particular inquiry into religious thought and practice — an individual narrative can be described as what one articulates as one's personal religious identity. One may be a Jew, a Muslim, a Christian, or an Atheist, but in all cases, his or her personal beliefs are based upon the collection of personal experiences; through those experiences, one constructs his or her personal religious identity. Therefore, there are as many different definitions of Jew, Muslim, Christian or Atheist as there are individuals who call themselves such. In contrast, a metanarrative can be defined as a controlling narrative for a culture, one that shapes its members. Personal identity, necessarily, is affected by the metanarrative that governs one's culture. An example of a metanarrative would be a dictatorial theocracy, which attempts (successfully or not) to define individuals within its scope universally and statically, subsuming individual differences.

Underlying my position in this thesis is the notion that American culture operates underneath parochial Christian metanarratives. In other words, the way that most Americans distinguish between "secular" and "sacred" is through Christian terminology. Therefore, when people say American culture is moving toward "secularization," they often mean that it is moving away from a predominantly Christian culture.

I would like to oppose both of these ideas — that America is become more "secular" AND that people are leaving Christianity at an increasing clip. In contrast, the incredulity toward parochial Christian metanarratives is leading public religious culture in America to several other options. First, there is a movement towards defining religion in a more personal context — i.e. not adhering to parochial dogma or doctrine's demand to define itself as strictly either "Christian" or "non-Christian." Second, there is a movement to develop a more pluralistic, nondenominational Christianity that borrows (and sometimes appropriates) influence from

secular influences in popular culture. In other words, many people who consider themselves unquestionably Christian are revising parochial traditions to adapt to their personal influences, whether these influences originate in church or in a public, secular setting. It is my assertion that both of these progressions are a result of a conglomeration of individual narratives speaking back to Christian metanarratives; in a culture like the United States, where individuality, democracy, and self-sufficiency are stressed, standard and universal definitions are problematic for many people. In *American Jesus*, Stephen Prothero refers this emphasis towards an individualized religious identity as “seeker sensitivity,” which will be a key term in my later discussion of the Postmodern condition’s effect on American Christianity.

“Non-Christians” also are identifying themselves as “spiritual” beings, understanding themselves as religious apart from an organized, Christian tradition. Likewise, many Christians are refusing to attach themselves to a specific parochial tradition underneath the vast umbrella of “Christianity.” They consider their personal relationship with Jesus Christ of the utmost — and in many cases, the only — importance to the salvation of their souls, and they are questioning traditional notions of parochial religion. This does not mean that people are eschewing organized communities and allowing religious anarchy within this open pluralism, but more that new types of Christian communities are constantly forming under these revisionist principles. I also assert that these shifts in American religious culture has developed over a long period of time, beginning with the Great Awakening and carrying forth into the modern period. The concentration of these influences constitutes the American postmodern condition.

It is impossible to create a full snapshot of present-day society, and I take to heart the words of Postmodern philosopher Michel Foucault, in his essay *The Subject and Power*, “Maybe the most certain of all philosophical problems is the problem of the present time, and of what we

are, in this very moment” (336). The Postmodern condition in American religious culture in this very moment is marked by pluralism: the culture is constantly trying to engage in discourse with the millions upon millions of individual narratives speaking back to parochial Christian metanarratives, each saying something different, yet many saying the same thing: “Only I can define my own religious beliefs.”

The Present Moment

I must disclose that I find myself personally affected by this so-called Postmodern condition, coping with the particular predicament that I am outlining throughout this work. I grew up in a strict Roman Catholic home and set myself apart from it through personal reflection in an effort to develop my own religious identity. Effectively, I have developed my own narrative in response to the identity constructions put forth by the Catholic metanarrative, while I still am greatly affected and inspired by the values and beliefs presented to me while living as a part of that culture for the first eighteen years of my life. I am cognizant that my personal response to the problem of religious identity in modern America is just that — personal. What I want to examine here is one element of how this tension is represented in American religious culture: the use of popular music forms to shape and influence religious belief.

Technology, which has advanced immensely especially in the last twenty years, and which has involved further developments of the Internet during even the past five years, plays a role in this phenomenon. Exposure to myriad narratives expressed in multiple artistic forms has created a profound effect on the American psyche (and doubtless the world psyche, but I will restrict my analysis to only that society of which I am a part). With access to any number of religious beliefs, commentaries and criticism, through such venues as Beliefnet, home pages of individual religions, blogs, and so forth, Americans have an increased exposure to information

and potentially, the accompanying ability to pick and choose within that plentitude. Gone are the days in which the average citizen was informed only by his or her preacher, or by the local news; surely, people continue to look here for guidance, but these outlets no longer define public culture on the whole, and no longer do these monolithic institutions have the only control over the thoughts and beliefs of public culture. The public has the ability (and the avenues) to choose from a plethora of viewpoints. By taking to heart the advertising theme of “the customer is always right,” young Americans have become adamant about defining their experience on their own terms.

The modern technology boom, particularly the development of the Internet (and social networking sites extraordinarily popular with the teenage and twenty-something culture even more specifically), is an excellent representation of this trend. Young people are connecting with each other and disseminating information immediately and constantly. The amount of input into an average social networking site on a daily basis is mind-numbing. People update their interests, religious beliefs, and pictures documenting their most recent trip to the grocery store by the second, all while writing personal notes and posting news stories to put these individual experiences in context. Internet users are constantly connected to each other, and as a result, constantly interacting with each other. The cultural disconnection lies in generational differences, and the youth of today are on a completely different plane than their parents, and especially their grandparents. As public interests are still defined upon parochial models, a disconnection lies between metanarratives and individual narratives. Social networking sites (Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, Twitter, the list goes on) are prominent examples of the present obsession with individual narrative. Their users are updating the world constantly with everything that is occurring in their lives. It is the fluid nature of identity that opposes a standard

or static definition for “Christianity,” or “religion,” or “faith,” or even (and especially) “God.” In this context, Charles Taylor develops the notion of modern Western culture’s obsession with “authenticity” and its tendency toward “expressivism.” In *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* (2002), he accordingly (albeit briefly) sums up the present condition with respect to religious tradition:

We used to live in societies in which the presence of God was unavoidable; authority itself was bound up with the divine, and various invocations of God were inseparable from public life. . . in this ‘enchanted’ world, there is a strong contrast between the sacred and the profane. By the sacred, I mean certain places, like churches; certain times, like high feasts; certain actions, like saying the Mass, in which the divine or the holy is present. . . and there is an obvious way in which God can be present in society: in the loci of the sacred. (pp.64-65)

This short paragraph describes the specifically theocratic metanarrative of the Roman Catholic-dominated era of Western Europe. American society lives underneath an “enchantment” that is more Protestant and more subtle, described as “the Protestant Work Ethic” or “the melting pot.” In the theocratic world of Catholic Europe, the sacred is embodied with respect only to “religious” spaces, although that power extends into public discourse to define the “self.”

Taylor’s idea of “expressivism,” describes the sea change from that Durkheimian enchantment to the modern situation. He explains, “It seems more and more evident in [post-Enlightenment] cultures that valid religious adherence can only be voluntary. Forcing it has less and less legitimacy” (71). Especially in terms of the way that young people today express themselves individually, he notes:

The current youth culture is defined, both by the way advertising is pitched at it, and to a great degree autonomously, as expressivist. The styles of dress adopted, the kinds of music listened to, give expression to the personality, to the affinities of the chooser, within a wide space of fashion in which one's choice could align one with thousands, even millions of others. (82)

The ability to display one's personal style and viewpoint for literally the entire world is an attractive form of individuality, but one that is in tension with the governing cultural metanarratives. Taylor continues:

This [form of expressivism] has begotten a culture of 'authenticity' . . . [which poses] that each of us has his or her own way of realizing one's own humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one's own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority. (83)

This notion of authenticity is key to understanding the distrust of metanarratives. In a direct legacy from their parents' generation (the revolutionaries from the 1960s), modern teenagers and "twenty-somethings" have a predisposition for opposing the "establishment," which can be represented by any metanarrative that appropriates the identity of the people. As this work progresses I will explain that discourse with parochial Christian metanarratives is occurring even (and especially) within the religion itself, but, in ways they express it, young people today would prefer to live by their own definitions rather than take one that is preexistent. There is another interesting social force at work here. While people are striving to express themselves and oppose the establishment, they are establishing new communities, composed by the sharing of individual narratives. Instead of seeing someone's difference as wholly "other,"

there is potential to recognize that other as another self undertaking the same plight of discovering individual selfhood. Through these avenues, new cultural movements are forming in present American culture, though sometimes only in the moment. Taylor notes this distinction: “The resulting general structure is not that of common action, but of mutual display. It matters to each of us as we act that the others are there, as witnesses of what we are doing, and thus as co-determiners of the meaning of our action” (85). Thus, though the meaning behind identity is still authenticated in public space, the private development of these expressions are where the meaning holds its root.

Taking into account Taylor’s discussion, it is apparent why Postmodernism cannot be an official movement or a static entity without contradicting itself. What Lyotard discussed in 1984 was a general response to the metanarratives of his time (many of which still persist), and as Edward Said explains in *The World, The Text and The Critic*:

The contradiction perhaps in most theories that develop as responses to the need for movement and change is that they risk becoming a theoretical overstatement, a theoretical parody of the situation they were formulated originally to remedy or overcome. To prescribe [this] toward totality as a theoretical remedy for reification is in a sense to substitute one unchanging formula for another. (239-240)

Society is constantly progressing, and it is clear through the above analysis that a movement called “Postmodernism” that began after the second World War and intensified in the 1970s Parisian student movements cannot apply to what is occurring today based upon the same principles. However, the spirit of that Postmodern inquiry can apply to all moments in all times, as it serves as a fundamental mode of analyzing a present state. Lyotard asks the fundamental question of a Postmodern inquiry: “Who decides what knowledge is, and who knows what needs

to be decided?" (9) He questions institutions or ideas in order to understand their basic principles. In this mode, a metanarrative might be questioned because it is a monolithic entity predicated upon myriad assumptions and historical happenings, as well as created by, perhaps, corruptive powers. To the present example, American Christian metanarratives, I will apply Lyotard's question: who decides what it means to be a Christian, and who knows what needs to be decided? Underneath a Protestant metanarrative in American culture that emphasizes a personal relationship with Jesus Christ in order to have true understanding and knowledge of God lies an on-going construction of individual identities in tension with that narrative.

CHAPTER 3

DECONSTRUCT TO RECONSTRUCT: TWO METHODS OF POSTMODERN INQUIRY

Before delving into an analysis of the way this shift in American culture is manifesting in religious practice, I want to focus upon ways in which Postmodern philosophers are attempting theoretically to manage the quandaries posed by the Postmodern condition. As young Americans reach adolescence, when they begin to create personal identities apart from their parents and distinguish themselves within society, so much has been constructed around them already. The Postmodern philosophies of Jacques Derrida and David Ray Griffin offer ways to try to work through common issues raised by the Postmodern condition.

Postmodernism in Context

Often, detractors of Postmodern philosophy argue that many of its proponents do no more than create anarchic and relativistic theories toward societal institutions. However, many of these thinkers do not aim to destroy modern ideals or to create anarchy within society; conversely, their methods are an extension of modern thought — utilizing reason to obtain knowledge and understanding. In his essay entitled *Postmodernism in Philosophy of Religion and Theology*, John Macquarrie states, “We can do justice to postmodernism only by looking carefully at particular examples as we find them in the work of some leading exponents” (9). Therefore, much of this chapter focuses on Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction theory and its relation to the Postmodern discourse. Following an extensive look at this philosophy, I will examine another viewpoint addressing the Postmodern condition, constructive postmodern philosophy, finally closing with a general analysis of these ideologies as they relate to Postmodernism and modern society. Thus, these philosophies reflect ways in which modern Americans both analyze

themselves in depth to understand who and what they are, and how they build communities around themselves in order to understand their personal identities in a social context.

In present Western culture, that which is considered truthful knowledge often is ascribed to a fixed set of constructed ideals, and in light of this, Postmodern discourse often attempts to determine the factors why any fixed set of ideals is fixed. Derrida's deconstruction theory, for example, does not see prescribed constructions as entities or ideas that need to be destroyed and disproved, but as constructions or methods that need to be deconstructed and improved. I would argue that the way in which individual American Christians are addressing parochial Protestant metanarratives with which they do not completely agree reflects the deconstructive approach.

Generally, Postmodern philosophers see the need for a reevaluation of institutions within modern society. Deconstruction and constructivism apply separate discourses towards these institutions. Deconstruction approaches structures in order to understand why they were formed, whereas constructive postmodern philosophy, according to David Ray Griffin, "seeks to overcome the modern worldview not by eliminating the possibility of worldviews as such, but by constructing a postmodern worldview through a revision of modern premises and traditional concepts" (viii). While these two philosophies move in seemingly opposite directions, their purpose remains the same: to examine problems and issues in modern society.

Deconstruction: Dismantling

In his introduction to *Deconstruction in Context*, Mark C. Taylor explains, "As God created the world through the Logos, so man creates the 'world' through conscious and unconscious projection. In different terms, the modern subject defines itself by its constructive activity" (3). For modern thinkers, the tool through which knowledge can be justified is reason, and the scientific method is the discourse through which reason can operate.

Deconstruction applies this same scientific method to problems created by modern thought, and it can be applied to dichotomies within society in which one ideal opposes another, generating hierarchical values. For example, modern scientific thought developed in opposition to classical ideals of religious belief. Enlightenment thinkers believed that truth in the “pre-modern” sense was not discovered by a method acceptable for obtaining knowledge; therefore, it could not be accepted as truth. Thus, the notion of enlightenment was born, which argues that reason is the tool by which knowledge and truth can be discovered. Originally, these modern thinkers found themselves opponents to religious ideals of previous movements, but in opposing religious metanarratives of its time, science became a metanarrative in its own right.

Deconstruction, for Derrida, is meant to discover justice for two opposing viewpoints. Justice, in this example, lies outside the dichotomy that might assert, in the most extreme case, for example, that if scientific thinkers are right, religious believers are automatically wrong. A deconstructive approach to this situation would not assume that neither side is right nor wrong, but it would analyze both elements of the dichotomy in order to discover what — if anything — each holds that is fundamentally true.

In John D. Caputo’s *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, Derrida describes the notion of deconstruction as the “relentless pursuit of the impossible” (32). To continue the previous example, while deconstruction would point out the misunderstandings between pre-modern religious belief and post-Enlightenment rationality, it would not seek to disprove either side’s argument. In fact, Derrida’s deconstruction aims to do quite the opposite; it retains hope for a future, one of justice and one of continual growth — not one of anarchy or relativism. Deconstruction does not intend to stop at the point at which the issue is deconstructed; the idea is then to reconstruct. In essence, Derrida’s theory is messianic in scope

because it has a teleology in mind. If either, neither, or both of the ideas in this example are true, deconstructing them to their bases would be the first step to revealing that truth.

The key is to avoid the “catch phrases” or thoughtless, simple explanations that the metanarrative may provide. In Caputo’s *Nutshell*, Derrida examines the problems of attempting to explain deconstruction. The ironic part of trying to fit deconstruction in a nutshell, so to speak, is that the very idea of deconstruction is the antithesis of a nutshell; describing something in a nutshell is to oversimplify it. In *What’s Wrong With Postmodernism*, Christopher Norris aptly states, “Obviously we cannot unquestioningly accept the principles of Derridan deconstruction, for that would be an inherent contradiction of the discourse” (135).

In short, then, deconstruction cannot be described in a nutshell; rather, it is more akin to a collection of nutshells. In reality, deconstruction simply addresses the mode of the construction of questions necessary to compile an answer. For example, if I were constructing a puzzle, and some of the pieces were missing, I could not fill in the holes; therefore, the puzzle would not be complete. A reasonable course of action would be to find the missing pieces first before trying to complete the puzzle without them.

The same principle applies to identity construction. Especially in modern American youth culture, young people have so many influences and ideas presented to them by way of advertising, social networks, and traditional peer-to-peer and parental influence, they have difficulty understanding what it means truly to “be themselves.” Yet, to “be yourself” remains a public motto and a chief facet of the American Dream. Everyone, Americans believe, has the ways and means to be that which they want to be, and therefore are given the opportunity to develop their own identity and their own dream. As a result, to find their way to this individual identity, they must deconstruct outside influences and come to understand what is truly their

own. Realistically, of course, this is quite a challenge, and this challenge is the crux of the Postmodern condition on an individual level.

Opponents of deconstruction often claim its philosophy to be relativist, yet Derrida disagrees. He says, “Relativism is a doctrine, a way of referring to the absolute and denying it; it states that there are only cultures and that there is no pure science or truth,” (James K.A. Smith 11). Thus, it is not impossible to believe in an absolute and practice deconstruction; in fact, the case is precisely the opposite. Deconstruction’s aim is not to question the ability to obtain true knowledge, or to know oneself fully, nor is its purpose to denounce the findings of those who have claimed to know truth or know themselves. In contrast, deconstruction portrays the inherent biases and issues with constructions based on presupposed ideals. Postmodern deconstruction searches for true knowledge by using the same method employed by Enlightenment thinkers. To justify knowledge, questions need to be asked in order to discover an answer; the purpose of deconstruction, then, is to seek the questions first rather than seeking an answer immediately. If an answer has not been discovered, then where would one look if not to the first question? Things must progress step by step.

If there is a correct way to build something, and it is built incorrectly, one must deconstruct it in order to make it well. If one purchased a Lego set, and it was built in a completely incorrect manner, how would it be corrected? There are two answers to this. One is that there *is* no correct way to build it; that’s the beauty of Legos! However, the second explanation following a rational course would be to take it apart and rebuild it. Would it be rational to buy a new Lego set and build it onto the already incorrectly built set? Thus it is so with societal problems from a deconstructionist standpoint. Why would one continue to build upon that which perpetuates an already faulty structure, when — by the scientific method — the

appropriate conclusion would be to begin a new experiment against the failed experiment? From an individual standpoint this method works as well. If people are dissatisfied with the way they have been defined by a metanarrative, would it behoove them to continue to identify themselves by that definition and continue to live with a disoriented view of themselves? Or, would the individual deconstruct (and eventually reconstruct) his or her own narrative to something more suitably appropriate to what he or she is experiencing?

Religious metanarratives, too, can be deconstructed. Caputo explains with reference to Derrida's deconstruction, "Deconstruction saves religion from seeing things, from fanaticism and triumphalism. Deconstruction is not the destruction of religion, but its reinvention" (159). In the context of American Christianity, would it be acceptable for a person who has a strong relationship with Christ, and also happens to identify closely with rock 'n' roll music, to submit to the idea that this type of music is of Satanic purpose and eschew this strong influence on his or her identity? Is enjoying secular influences automatically indicative of his or her ability to be (or not be) Christian?

Constructive Postmodern Philosophy: Utilizing the Building Blocks

From another angle, constructive postmodern philosophy seeks not to deconstruct existing modern thought, but to develop ways in which society can move beyond the problematic issues developing in present culture. Like deconstruction theory, however, constructive philosophy specifically aims to revise modern thought. John Macquarrie offers a counter-analysis of Derrida's work, positing:

Derrida stated in an early writing that his philosophical method 'blocks the way to all theology' but seems later to have modified his opinion, and if he has not become a theologian, he could at least be called a philosopher of religion in search of a theology. . .

So we have to ask, does postmodernism lead inevitably to skepticism or can the way to theology be unblocked? (10)

In his introduction to the “SUNY Series in Constructive Postmodern Thought” (1993), David Ray Griffin explains, “The constructive activity of this type of postmodern thought is not limited to a revised worldview; it is equally concerned with a postmodern world that will support and be supported by the new worldview” (viii). In other words, in contrast to deconstruction philosophy, which aims to break down socially constructed identities in order to find the root of their assumptions and claims, constructive theory according to Griffin is more urgent. He says that the present constructive movement “is based on the awareness that the *continuation of modernity threatens the very survival of life on our planet*” (ix, italics in text). In those terms, the constructive method seeks a truly post-modern world.

At this point, these two postmodern theories seem to be in strict opposition. Postmodern deconstruction searches for the building blocks of reason and knowledge that have formed the modern discourse, whereas constructive postmodern philosophy seeks to step beyond the modern discourse in anticipation of a new age. And in this sense, interestingly, constructive philosophy appears to be a construction of presupposed ideals, against which a deconstructionist inherently should be opposed. At the same time, constructive theory — as outlined by Griffin — would oppose the notion of a stopping point when reaching the base of a construction. However, he clarifies that constructive philosophy carries out considerable deconstruction, “but the accent is on construction” (1).

In this light, constructivism aptly critiques deconstruction, suggesting that a postmodern thinker should not rest when confronting problems in modern discourse. Deconstructionist discourse can be anarchic and chaotic. For example, if one were to question continually in search

of the meaning of life, there could be no end to the questioning. While this is a perfectly acceptable method of brain exercise, practicality can elude it on a grander scale. Human beings have displayed a need for social constructions in everyday life, and though deconstruction seeks to break down these constructions in order to understand them, they cannot remain in shambles and rebuilding is necessary. Hypothetically, Postmodern discourse supports the idea of oppressed peoples organizing in order to construct a just society. Thus, Postmodern philosophy does not decry this type of construction.

If deconstruction seeks to understand the roots of individual and community narratives, constructive theory provides the means by which these narratives speak back to metanarratives. When a group of young Christians decided to pick up their electric guitars and bleed rock 'n' roll for the sake of their relationships with Jesus and to save the souls of their peers, they undertook a Postmodern strategy. In effect, constructive postmodern philosophy reflects ways in which (post)modern Americans develop communities in a hyper-individualistic setting. Where deconstruction leaves off, constructive theory picks up. Griffin says:

Constructive postmodern thought provides support for the ecology, peace, feminist, and other emancipatory movements of our time, while stressing that the inclusive emancipation must be free from modernity itself. The term *postmodern*, however, by contrast with *premodern*, emphasizes that the modern world has produced unparalleled advances that must not be lost in a general revulsion against its negative features. (ix, italics in text)

In essence, then, deconstruction of societal institutions that have caused the problems constructive thinkers aim to correct is not the end, but the beginning.

Merging Two Philosophies Toward a Common Goal

A question follows, however: is creating a truly postmodern world a possibility or an inherent contradiction? Under the assumption that postmodern thinkers are inherently pluralist — i.e. that they imply the recognition of difference opposing dominance of any one group and its ideas — John Macquarrie explains, “Even a convinced pluralist recognizes that there are limits, or we may end up with an individualism which threatens the cohesion of society. . . No group has a monopoly of prejudice, and the postmodernists are quite frequently guilty of stating a position quite arbitrarily and privileging it above all others” (13).

Although many of the proponents of both deconstruction theory and constructive philosophy may disagree, juxtaposing the two methods seems to offer an appropriate method to examine modern discourse. However, as in any movement, the opposition of these two ideals can provide a stumbling block to each method’s conclusions. For example, deconstruction can spiral out of control — becoming relativist if it never ends — to defeat its purpose of discovering justice and meeting an absolute end. Yet, if it creates a construction from its findings, then it is inherently contradictory. Macquarrie analyzes contradictions in deconstruction theory, explaining:

The word ‘deconstruction’ is a combination of two opposites, ‘destruction’ and ‘construction’, so it is already paradoxical and is both a taking apart and a putting together. According to Derrida, descriptions, histories, theories, etc. need to be taken apart, because language is riddled by ambiguities. The logical analyst’s plea that each word should have only one meaning is impossible to obey. (16)

However, Macquarrie also notes deconstruction's messianic aspiration that supports the creation of a post-modern world, saying, "The work of deconstruction prevents closure, and room is left for new interpretations" (17).

On the other hand, despite seeking departure from modern ideals, constructive theory is born of them. If there is an acknowledgement that some modern principles (but not others) can be carried forth into the new age, how are those correct principles to be determined? The answer, compiled from both philosophies, seems rather clear: deconstruct to reconstruct. By deconstructing a modern construction, a Postmodern thinker can obtain knowledge of this construction in order to effect a new creation that will sidestep and move beyond modern problems inherent within society. However, the Postmodern condition persists as these theories remain extensions of modern thought as opposed to departures from it. Macquarrie aptly criticizes, "Postmodernists have not broken free of one of the worst errors of the Enlightenment — the belief in progress, in the innocence and perfectibility of the human race by its own efforts" (18). Thus, until Postmodern thinkers determine the problems of modern society and extricate themselves from them, a truly *post-modern* age will not arise. As it stands, Postmodernism is not fruitless, nor is it unsuccessful. However, Postmodernists must recognize the problems in their own discourse in light of the modern principles inherent within their method of examination.

Modern Americans are dealing with both individual identity crises and their relationships to parochial institutions in ways reflective of these Postmodern theories. In modern American Christianity, individuals often lead double lives by attempting to strike a balance between creating a personal religious identity and living as part of a modern Christian community. The next chapter tracks a collection of twentieth century thought on personal religious belief, attempting to paint a portrait of deconstruction and construction of religious identity in modern

society in light of these Postmodern issues. Then, I want to move onto my prime example: the influence of popular music on worship in American Christianity, which manifests these theories in practice.

CHAPTER 4

A FOUNDATION FOR RELIGIOUS BELIEF: HOW DOES ONE (DE)CONSTRUCT RELIGIOUS IDENTITY?

The Postmodern condition in American culture has developed in relationship to the legacy of American Protestantism, emphasizing a personal interpretation of the Bible and a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. In the twentieth century, therefore (though certainly before and definitely since), the notion of personal religious identity has been contemplated at great length. American philosopher William James, for example, defines religion in a way that is consonant with Protestant individualism. He describes religion as “the feelings, acts and experiences of individuals in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine” (C. Taylor 5). Working from this and other basic definitions of religious belief, it is my assertion that the basis of personal religious identity develops from the answer to this question: What is it, then, that one considers divine, or in other words, what is it towards which one apprehends him or herself that makes life worth living? To examine this I will look at, first, the work of Albert Camus.

Identity Construction as an Art Form

Camus’ fundamental question in *The Myth of Sisyphus* asks simply, first and foremost, whether or not life is worth living. This is a primary question, before the presence of gods, and before the support of religion, which suggests that each individual must make a choice to live his or her life or to commit suicide. He writes that “it is legitimate and necessary to wonder whether life has a meaning; therefore it is legitimate to meet the problem of suicide face to face.

The answer, underlying and appearing through the paradoxes which cover it, is this: even if one does not believe in God, suicide is not legitimate” (v). Though this may seem like a quick conclusion, he covers the other side of this broad spectrum as well, explaining that “it often happens that those who commit suicide were assured the meaning of life” (7); in other words, by choosing death over life, a suicidal person has chosen specifically not to live because the meaning of his or her life as such was unbearable to withstand.

What does mid-twentieth century, French existential philosophy have to do with the Postmodern condition in American Christianity? At the point which one chooses life, he or she must do something with that life — support it, perpetuate it, nurture it. In “Art and Politics in Albert Camus: Beauty As Defiance and Art as a Spiritual Quest,” John Randolph LeBlanc explains: “Camus did not understand absurdity as a quality rendering the human condition hopeless, but rather as our ethical and philosophical baseline. . . In human existence, between birth and death, the only real question for Camus was what one is to do” (132). Thus, the decision to live is the foundation of personal religion.

In this light, LeBlanc explains that “Camus believed that we define ourselves by the existence we create and constantly re-create, always in the context of ‘others’ . . . a self-conscious creativity was the only antidote for a self-destructive capacity” (127). Camus calls this creativity artistry.

LeBlanc continues, “Camus was convinced of the inadequacy of organized religion and Western humanity’s dangerous dependence on the symbol ‘God.’ Ties to God and nature, at least as they were inadequately articulated in religion and science, had been severed, rendering humanity terribly free” (129-130). This “terrible freedom” reflects the state of the Postmodern

condition in American Christianity, where definitions of Christian identity and community are wide open to individual interpretation against parochial traditions.

In concert with the Postmodern philosophies I presented in the last chapter, then, Camus' notion of identity development as an art form takes on the method of a construction via deconstruction. Invoking Camus' *The Rebel*, LeBlanc notes:

Revolutions begin by destroying all that surround them and conclude by destroying themselves. Rebellion, on the other hand, though like revolution born of the absurd realization that things are not as they should be, is a response in quite another direction. While each entails a vision imposed, revolution physically imposes the vision, destroying that which has been created. For its part, rebel creation offers its vision, one of a more complete, if never ultimately complete, existence. (135)

Thus, the rebel plays with the established vision instead of eschewing what is already in place. Further, as “creation is the human longing for freedom hurling itself against a terminal existence. . . the artist [as Camus describes it] gives form to reality through style” (LeBlanc 136-137). Each person in this model is constantly working to understand his or her religious identity and attempting to match it with those in their surrounding communities, grasping for common ground and seeking common understanding. But in a culture where pluralism has been forged — in other words, where one is socially pressured to build a unique personal identity and accept others' will to do the same — it is difficult to pinpoint definitive answers and definable conclusions. As a result, as Camus explains, identity construction becomes an art, and open to interpretation.

Invoking this concept further, LeBlanc writes:

The human conception of a better world could be no more adequately expressed than in artistic creation. . . Any vision of a better world must remain a vision. No creative work is

final, vision always demands rearticulation. Unlike the revolutionary's material aspiration to absolute unity, the rebel's vision must be grounded in the goal of a more lucid articulation rather than revolutionary consummation of unity. (136)

Developing a personal religious identity can create difficulty for a Christian seeking both a personal relationship with Jesus and also with a community that shares his or her common beliefs. The challenge, then, is to combine personal (deconstructed) identities with constructing communities.

Along these lines, Christian theologian H. Richard Niebuhr explains that the search for meaning in life is the crux of an earnest search for personal religious faith. In his essay "Life is Worth Living" (1939), he explains:

The question about life's meaning is the religious question. It is useless to ask whether there is any source of meaning in life, whether any god exists. The existence of gods is given with life. The question is rather, what is my god? In what being do I trust, and as that reality for the sake of which I live and die? (5)

Niebuhr's ultimate trust lies in the Christian God, yet he recognizes that no matter what one might call the "eternal power" (5), each human being entrusts his or her loyalty to some form of ultimacy, providing for oneself a locus of belief and meaning from which each individual's spiritual action emanates.

For the purposes of this discussion, asking the initial question "What makes life worth living?" represents the basis point for personal religious identity. Niebuhr explains, "The most profound questions of life are uttered usually by youth, not because it is more intelligent than maturity and age but because it is the time when beginnings must be made" (3). In this light, focusing on the development of the individual's religious identity in youth culture is a

particularly useful example of Postmodern condition in American society because it shows where this process of identity development often begins. Children are shaped unconsciously by society around them, and while adults inevitably are as well, those who are concerned with separating themselves individually from the general masses consciously interact with the influences affecting them. Adolescence is one of the most common “rebellious” stages in American life, when young people are expected to begin recognizing and asserting their individual uniqueness. Thus, here “beginnings are made.”

The Individual in Modern American Christianity

In modern American Protestantism, there is enormous emphasis on interpreting the Bible “properly” for oneself in order to grow towards a closer relationship with Jesus Christ. The issue, of course, is what one considers “properly” in this case. With thousands of different preachers teaching different parts of the sacred Book in different ways — in addition to each individual family, Bible Study group or academic class reading it to its own interpretation — there is little in the way of a single parochial interpretation of Christian principles in modern America. In the preface to his book, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America*, Randall Balmer explains his personal experience with this muddled identification. “*Christian*, in the vernacular of my evangelical subculture, was an exclusive, elitist term reserved for someone who had ‘prayed the prayer,’ had acknowledged personal sinfulness and the need for salvation, and ‘accepted Jesus into his heart,’” he says (4). All of these qualifications certainly can define someone who is Christian, yet, that depends on the person to whom one is speaking. Furthermore, Balmer explains:

Christian also meant a good deal more. It meant immersing oneself in the evangelical subculture, affiliating with a local church (not just any church, but a church that

‘preached the Bible’), eschewing ‘worldliness’ in its many insidious forms, hewing to strict codes of personal morality, sending the kids off to Sunday school, youth meetings, Bible camps, and eventually, to a Bible school or a Christian college. It mean establishing daily ‘quiet time,’ a period of personal devotions characterized by reading the Bible, meditation, and prayer. Being a *Christian* meant witnessing, ‘sharing your faith’ with non-Christians — that is, anyone who did not fit this definition. (4)

There are literally tens of millions of people in the United States that call themselves Christians and do not adhere to all of these qualifications. Therefore, how is one to decide what is or is not “Christian?” Justifiably, the leaders of early American Protestantism and millions of Christian sects since that time have cast off the parochial traditions of a greater Church. It is very difficult, in kind, to make any sort of claim that “all Christians believe _____.” It is probably true that each Christian believes that Jesus is the Son of God and lives by the principles set forth by the Bible; but, to use a brief example, even the argument between Christians concerning whether the Bible should be taken literally inevitably will vary people’s interpretation of those basic principles, and thus, their Christian identity.

Balmer’s definition of Christianity develops a snapshot of the limited community in which he was reared, and as such, does not represent all Christians. But, at the same time, there is a striking resemblance between the evangelical congregations he researched for the book¹ and the community in which he was raised. His definition of “Christian” includes common buzzwords and phrases such as “worldliness,” “preaching the Bible” and “quiet time” that seem like overgeneralizations, but he highlights that the terms are vague, and they purposely are left

¹ The book covers sixteen different communities conglomerating only a small piece of what he dubs the evangelical subculture. He is very clear that these are not necessarily representative of a greater movement, but all function similarly surrounding the vague definition he lays out in the preface.

open to interpretation. Therefore, a double identity develops for each Christian: there is a desire to be a part of a community of believers while at the same time each individual is charged to cultivate a personal relationship with Jesus within his or her soul, where no one else can be present. If one purpose of public ritual is to cultivate the souls of all believers who take part into communal belonging, this purpose can be lost when each individual is expected to be fully accountable for his or her own cultivation.

Addressing possible disconnections between personal and communal religion directly, Charles Taylor analyzes William James' definition of religion in *Varieties of Religion Today*, explaining that for James, "the real locus [of religion] is in *experience*, that is, in feeling, as against the formulations by which people define, justify, rationalize their feelings (operations that are, of course, frequently undertaken by churches)" (7). Taylor notes that James' definition can be subject to neglecting the communal interaction necessary for the development and maintenance of religious faith. From the perspective of these highly individualized notions of religious faith, "we can see a steadily increasing emphasis on a religion of personal commitment and devotion over forms centered on collective ritual" (Taylor 9). Taylor denotes the discord between this emphasis on personal religion and the maintenance of traditional Christian communities:

It is much more that the drive to personal religion has itself been part of the impetus toward different facets of secularization. It was this drive, for instance, which powerfully contributed to the disenchantment of the world of spirits and higher forces in which our ancestors lived. (13)

Effectively, the "drive to personal religion," so to speak, which is exemplified by the philosophies presented here from Camus to Niebuhr, James, and Taylor, is a chief cause of the

religious identity crisis facing American Christians. Many Christians who would consider themselves traditionalists accuse American public culture and even many of their fellow Christians of “secularizing,” or in Balmer’s terminology, submitting to “worldliness,” and they are correct in many ways. I will examine, in the forthcoming chapters, the adoption of secular rock ‘n’ roll music in modern Christian worship is a reflection of those communities’ adaptation to the issues presented by the increasing emphasis on individualized faith in American religious language and as a departure from the dominating parochial metanarratives that delineate “secular” and “sacred” as “Christian” and “not Christian.” Against this sort of language, Contemporary Christian Music has adopted both music and practice from the rock ‘n’ roll culture that began popularizing itself in the 1950s and 1960s, and has adapted that music and ritual to a Christian context. Therefore, by accepting and embracing forms of popular culture, Christians who are worshiping in this way have been criticized highly by traditionalists.

Does the adoption of a personalized religion in contrast with a parochial tradition have anything to do with whether or not one is “Christian?” The answer is murky, and it seems that anyone who desires to call themselves Christian can find a way to justify that they are such. Therefore, despite the emphasis placed on developing one’s personal relationship with Jesus, or creating and shaping one’s religious identity based from internal experience, modern American Christians are undertaking both developing their own personal faiths and constructing communal practice through the influence of these myriad individual voices. As such, the complementary methods of Derrida’s deconstruction and David Ray Griffin’s constructivism provide a theoretical basis for the way young American Christians are creating their personal religious identities and constructing communities around them.

Taylor concludes the first chapter of *Varieties* on this note:

We could imagine a sect in which the individual's relation to God is everything; and yet people are brought into contact with God through revival meetings. They come to conversion at that climactic moment of decision when the preacher calls on people to come forward and declare their faith. This can be white-hot experience, but in what sense is it individual? There are a number of questions here that need to be resolved. (29)

He is right that this instance shows a disconnection between individual faith and the role common practice plays in supporting religious communities. The next chapter moves from a theoretical basis to a practical one, showing how the individualized nature of religious belief in modern American Christianity is manifesting itself in new forms of worship. Contemporary Christian Music reflects a religious landscape in American society that is juxtaposing traditionally "secular" and "sacred" elements into a cohesive religious practice.

Effectively, this practice is formulating a new religious movement. While this change is taking place, a debate is raging within Christian communities between what of these new religious movements follows Christian "tradition" and what is "cult." Yet, my focus is upon the young people living in the present, unconcerned with making grander decisions on that scale and simply trying to understand themselves socially and religiously in modern America.

CHAPTER 5

AMERICAN YOUTH CULTURE AND CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN MUSIC

Again, I cannot exhaust all the factors that have led to what I perceive as a trend of many modern American Christian youths speaking against parochial metanarratives. Therefore, I want to point to several pieces of literature that have led me particularly to this conclusion, both of which outline specifically important shifts in American culture imperative to my work on the subject: David Halberstam's analysis of youth culture's emergence surrounding rock 'n' roll music in the 1950s, and Stephen Prothero's description of the social activity surrounding the "Jesus Movement" in the 1960s and 1970s in his book, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon*.

Here, I want to outline the social movement in modern American Christianity surrounding Contemporary Christian Music (CCM), particularly the branch that fuses rock 'n' roll-style music with Christian themes and ideas in its lyrics. Interestingly enough, as Prothero discusses with regards to the style's roots, the philosophy behind many Contemporary Christian musicians' songwriting is very much akin to that of secular rock 'n' roll musicians: themes of alienation, rebellion and counterculture are key facets of the content. In this mode, CCM embodies the issues facing modern American Christians resulting from the Postmodern condition: there is a desire among young Christians to live individually in their own faith while remaining faithful to Christian tradition. Therefore, while CCM embodies many of the traditional themes of Christianity, it takes on a new form of nontraditional practice borrowed from popular rock 'n' roll.

American Youth and Popular Culture

In his introduction to *American Jesus*, Prothero develops one of the key issues in modern American culture, the growing secular influence on the way Christians define themselves. He explains:

Jesus became a major personality in the United States because of the ability of religious insiders to make him culturally inescapable. He became a national icon because outsiders have always felt free to interpret him in their own fashion. To put it another way, while Christian insiders have had the authority to dictate *that* others interpret Jesus, they have not had the authority to dictate *how* these others would do so. . . some [of these people have insisted] that they understood Jesus even better than the did the Christians themselves. . . Everyone is free to understand Jesus in his or her own way. And Americans have exercised this freedom with wild abandon. (16)

As the figure of Jesus and the Christian religion that follows Him have been ubiquitous in public American culture to date, the countercultural revolutions in 1960s America created an interesting interplay between the secular and sacred worlds. In his journalistic monstrosity, *The Fifties*, David Halberstam notes a unique shift in American culture that occurred in the post-WWII economic boom. This shift set the stage for the Postmodern condition as I have described it, including the development of a definable youth culture set apart from the views of its parents and predecessors. As the United States and Russia battled to outspend each other during that post-war economic boom, young people were acquiring their own income, and thus, advertising strengthened to market products to this burgeoning cultural voice. Halberstam notes:

A new young generation of Americans was breaking away from the habits of its parents and defining itself by its music. There was nothing the parents could do: This new

generation was armed with both money and the new inexpensive appliances with which to listen to it. . . the average teenager, [*Scholastic* magazine] said, had an income of \$10.55 a week. That figure seemed remarkable at the time; it was close to what the average American family had had in disposable income, after all essential bills were paid, fifteen years earlier. (473)

The numbers themselves are startling, and the effects were staggering. The excerpt comes from Halberstam's chapter explaining the significance of Elvis Presley, and the effect of rock 'n' roll on the future of American society. This cultural shift is chiefly important to the development of hyper-individualism in modern youth culture. He continues:

The young formed their own community. For the first time in American life they were becoming a separate, defined part of the culture: As they had money, they were a market, and *as they were a market they were listened to and catered to*. Elvis was the first beneficiary. In effect, he was entering millions of American homes on the sly; if the parents had had their way, he would most assuredly have been barred. (474, emphasis mine)

In a religious context, Prothero marks a similar phenomenon still very much present in modern American culture, one that perhaps resulted from this economic shift. Earlier in his introduction, he sets the stage for his premise by painting a picture of the vast pluralism that American religious culture has become, "a sprawling spiritual marketplace, where religious shoppers can choose among all the world's great religions, and from a huge menu of offerings inside each" (6). Even within Christianity itself, the distinction between what might be Christian and what might not be is up for hot debate. The way in which youth culture responded to its

newfound freedom and attention from society as a whole manifested itself by bringing to the mainstream a shift from traditional religious practice, particularly through music.

Melding Influences: The Basis of Contemporary Christian Music

CCM, therefore, is rooted in the religious revivals inspired by the official disestablishment of state churches in 1833, which supported what Prothero calls a “new spiritual marketplace [that] produced unprecedented religious creativity and intense religious competition” (46). Rejecting “deference and hierarchy. . . authority of ministers, veracity of creeds and the importance of theology,” nondenominationalists began cropping up in droves, marking a seminal moment in developing a vast pluralism in American Protestantism. Without a definitive dogma or doctrine underlying Christianity as a whole, and under the pretext of personal interpretation of the Bible, the only way to find common ground in many cases is to agree to disagree. Though “the Bible remained authoritative,” Prothero continues, “a new cultural hero [emerged]: the populist preacher, who combined evangelicalism and egalitarianism in daring new ways” (47).

Likewise, in the 1960s, countercultural Christian movements spoke to the youth who felt disenfranchised from mainstream culture. The irony of course is that these young people were not disenfranchised at all — as Halberstam and Prothero point out — and those who became part of the countercultural “Jesus Movement” of the 1960s and 1970s were chief predecessors for certain elements of the landscape in modern American Protestantism. Prothero explains, “We now know that neither secularization nor dechristianization are unidirectional processes. Both proceed in fits and starts, and each is eminently reversible. We also know that the sixties were as spiritual a decade as the United States has ever seen — an age of Aquarius *and* of avatars” (125).

Beginning in California, the source and center of many popular countercultural movements of the time, the Jesus Movement sought an alternative to the hippie drug culture, utilizing similar philosophies and anti-establishment credos to help disoriented and ostensibly disenfranchised young people to find a community of which they felt comfortable being a part. Simply because one did not want to be a part of a parochial Christian community certainly did not mean they did not want to be Christian, neither did it mean that one wanted to automatically go all the way to “the other side” — the depths of sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll.

Therefore, communities such as Ted and Elizabeth Wise’s House of Acts sought not an intermediary between the two, but a whole new culture based on Christian principles. Prothero explains that the Wise’s community “looked like a hard sell, since hippies were allergic to organized religion as the Black Panthers were to politics as usual” (126). Yet, the Wises brought a different form of Christianity to the table, and it hardly resembled organized religion: in fact, Prothero notes, they openly disdained the institutional church, offering a simple alternative of Jesus that rejected pot, acid and heroin but embraced hippie culture. Jesus was presented as a revolutionary coming to take down the religious establishment of his day, saving the dispossessed and the disillusioned, “the high, not the mighty” (127).

Out of these countercultural leanings, naturally, came a style of Christian music that fit the sensibilities of the people to whom Jesus People (those part of the Jesus Movement) were evangelizing. Pioneered by such musicians as the late Larry Norman, “a long-haired, raspy-voiced Jesus Freak, who better than anyone in his generation translated the gospel into the lingua franca of the counterculture: rock ‘n’ roll” (Prothero 137), this fusion of secular music and Biblical tradition was an excellent remedy to the identity crisis of the youth culture. It was also a

way to separate from the culture of that generation's parents yet remain true to the principles of Christianity.

In the final chapter of *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, called "Sound Check," Randall Balmer connects the growing counterculture of the Jesus Movement and the sub-genre of CCM that emanated from it. Like Prothero, he explains that the most significant changes in evangelical music occurred during the 1960s, as American evangelicalism perpetuated its "remarkable knack for survival by tapping into the prevailing popular tastes" (298). He continues:

Although it would be an understatement to say that evangelicals were slow to warm to rock 'n' roll, by the late 1960s some evangelical musicians recognized that the strains of "Make Me a Blessing" and "Bringing in the Sheaves" could no longer compete with "Hey, Jude," "Alice's Restaurant," and "I Can't Get No Satisfaction." (299)

It is not only true that evangelical musicians realized the potential behind songwriting utilizing popular music styles for saving the souls of the lost, but also that type of music reached their own souls as well. Yet, the paradox of merging Christian thought and secular performance into a new musical style helped usher in the double-consciousness so apparent in American Christianity, especially among young Christians, who are advertised to intensely from all angles (including religious), and are highly suggestible and easily distracted.

Quickly, before returning to a brief historical progression of CCM, I need to clarify the term "double-consciousness," for I believe it is a central concept in the plight of young, modern American Christians I am attempting to portray. In *Souls of Black Folks*, W.E.B. DuBois defined the African-American as having an always divided soul, without "true self-consciousness" (45). He continues:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (45)

Though I do not intend to draw connections between the plight of early twentieth century African-Americans and mid- to late-twentieth century (predominately) white, middle- to upper-middle class Americans, DuBois' concept of the double conscious applies directly to the paradox facing young American Christians today, one resulting from the conglomeration of secular and sacred elements in CCM. In light of rock 'n' roll's popularity with youth culture in the late 1950s, Halberstam explains that "market economics had won. . . [and] it was a critical moment for the whole society: The old order had been challenged and had not held. New forces were at work, driven by technology. The young did not have to listen to their parents anymore" (479). As a result of this market shift, advertising outlets began focusing on youth, and, under the auspice that they "did not have to listen to their parents anymore," this cultural moment spurred the way that young people are able (and in many ways are pressured) to develop their own identities.

Balmer illustrates this issue facing American evangelicalism in conjunction with Halberstam's view of the youth culture's effect on advertisers (and thus, its place in popular culture), saying "I've long believed, in fact, that evangelicalism in America, lacking the confessional emphasis and liturgical rubrics that bind other religious groups, has been susceptible to the cult of personality, a weakness only magnified in recent years by the widespread use of television" (8). Further, the way in which young people are met at every corner by constant advertising has exploded further in the last ten years due to the development

of the Internet, where there are not pauses for commercials like there are on television, but where advertising is constantly mainlined into the users' subconscious. Through these myriad influences, young people are seeking orientation amongst many different outlets, burdened by the pressures of developing a personal identity.

Halberstam's decree that the youth were free from their parents marks a strong hub in the development of this double consciousness, because the fact remains that children still do have to listen to their parents, for the most part. Furthermore, as Charles Taylor explains, even though each individual ostensibly seeks his "own path," so to speak, the tendency of modern expressivist youth culture, which relies on "mutual display" over "common action," seeks outside witnesses or "co-determiners of meaning" in order to justify its activity (85). Often these "co-determiners" are peers, but young Christians are also highly influenced by the tradition that is the basis for their religious belief. By participating in modern American popular culture, they represent a departure from their parents' generation, and there are always the eyes of the "sacred" Christian culture looking down upon the "secular influence" that permeated the Jesus Movement and its subsidiary, CCM.

This double consciousness had become a necessary reality for those participating in the Jesus Movement due to the factors permeating American society in the 1960s. Prothero describes the adherents to this new movement as "sporting long hair and well-worn Bibles, some played the role of Jesus Freak to perfection, [walking] a middle path between their square parents and countercultural radicals" (141). Yet, at first, this middle path was difficult to walk. Prothero continues: "Consistent with its Jesus movement roots, CCM initially aimed more at selling Jesus than at making money. . . [but] at first the music was too Christian for the secular market and too

secular for the Christian market” (151-152). Therefore, the Jesus People were disenfranchised from both Christianity and popular culture.

However, the CCM movement speaks to many young people that are in the same position as the Jesus People of the 1960s, seeking an intermediary between the parochial tradition of their parents and the reckless abandon of the rock ‘n’ roll lifestyle. Prothero explains that naturally evangelical leaders initially shunned CCM, citing its musical medium as a tool of the devil regardless of content. However, as the genre became more mainstream the critics’ focus shifted to attack the message instead, suggesting that these groups were in fact not worshiping Jesus at all. They argued that, despite their lyrical content, the “crossover” artists (between an exclusively Christian audience and a wider, secular popularity) were “sacrificing Jesus on the alter of the *Billboard* charts” (153).

But in modern America, young people are young people, regardless of religious tradition. Short of being completely cut off from popular society, they are invariably affected by it. “Just as rock music benefited from the fulminations of anti-rock parents and pastors — ‘If Mom hates it, I’ll buy it’ — Jesus rock seemed more authentic after it was blasted as blasphemous. What could be more enticing to young Christians than a sound that grated on pastors and parents alike?,” Prothero says (153).

Larry Norman, known commonly as the “Father of Christian Rock,” “entered the scene with a rhetorical mantra: ‘Why should the devil have all the good music?’” (Balmer 299).

[At this time], larger forces were at work in American evangelicalism. For the first time in nearly half a century [since they were publicly “embarrassed,” according to Prothero, during the Scopes Monkey Trial of 1925 (138)], evangelicals were beginning to venture, albeit tentatively, out of their cozy subculture into the larger world. Even this modest

dangling of toes into the water was heady and invigorating; for someone who grew up singing in the junior choir the possibility that long hair and rock 'n' roll might be justified for spreading the gospel was positively titillating. (Balmer 299)

Resulting from these cultural developments, CCM developed its own subculture, and has reflected an important shift in American Christianity. In modern society, many young Christians certainly are moving away from traditional religious beliefs in many different ways. The lasting effects of CCM and the Jesus Movement and have contributed greatly to a blend of secular and sacred elements in the personal faiths of many modern Christians, as the next chapter will describe. These modern Christians are responding to the Postmodern condition in American society by speaking back to parochial Protestant metanarratives. With its emphasis on individual justification of faith and personal interpretation of the Bible, American Protestant "tradition" has always been, in theory, supportive of new religious movements. As new religious movements in modern American Christianity, such as the development of CCM, emerge, the line between secular and sacred continues to blur, and it is difficult to predict what will become of Christian tradition in a truly post-modern society. The modern American is a cosmopolitan American, burdened by a seemingly unlimited freedom of choice and social pressure to be a unique individual. The question remains whether the new movements in American Christianity will be able to sustain any element of traditional Christianity, as it seems already that the line between "secular" and "sacred" is blurred beyond recognition in many cases. Does this mean that these modern Christians are no longer "Christian?" Many "traditionalists" would say they are not, but those that are a part of these new movements clearly believe that they are. Under American principles of democratic freedom, and the Protestant emphasis on personal justification by faith, it is difficult to argue against them.

The tension between “traditionalists” in American Protestantism and those involved in the legacy of the Jesus Movement in new Christian movements — displayed by a merging between secular and sacred elements — is representative of the Postmodern condition in American society. Regardless of how these cultural changes will manifest in the future, CCM has developed and is moving forward as a response reflecting the modern challenge of re-defining religious belief in an ultimately pluralistic culture. Many young Christians worshiping in this manner are deconstructing personally and attempting to reconstruct communally. The final chapter of this thesis depicts several Christian communities attempting to balance mutual, individual display with community, effectively addressing the Postmodern condition in American Christianity both consciously and unconsciously.

CHAPTER 6

POPULAR MUSIC IN CHRISTIAN WORSHIP: REFLECTING ON NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS IN AMERICAN SOCIETY

Summarizing to this point: the Postmodern condition in American culture has effected a sort of “secularization” with regards to religious language, and the definition of a Christian community has shifted in many cases. Contemporary Christian Music in modern evangelical circles draws parallels to both “traditional” Protestant worship as well as secular communities surrounding popular music in public American culture. Engaging in a practice deemed “un-Christian” by its many of its Christian predecessors and critics, CCM, nevertheless has gathered a flourishing community of followers in modern American evangelicalism.

Before continuing with this discussion, however, I want to clarify the term “evangelicalism” using the work of Randall Balmer. His work, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory* tracks sixteen separate “evangelical communities” in American culture in an attempt to gauge some context for the “subculture” as he describes it. In describing the outlook for his research, Balmer says:

I felt something of a compulsion to defend evangelicalism against its many detractors who dismiss it without troubling themselves to understand it. . . I was pretty sure that the press had missed the story, that they had bunched all evangelicals together and failed to appreciate the spectrum of evangelicalism in America. (6-7)

He also concedes that there are many positive and negative aspects of this subculture, noting that because of his personal upbringing he “could not readily disguise [his] own discomfiture with all the nonsense that parades as the New Testament gospel of Jesus Christ. . .

[wanting] to say something about the evangelical subculture that defines and nurtures and sometimes suffocates those who consider themselves born-again Christians” (6-7).

In the same way, the influence of popular music has shaped many different Christian communities, including some that designate themselves as “evangelical.” The examples below display an attempt to mediate the influence of popular music on young Christians, representing a common bond between these communities that reflects the Postmodern condition in American Christianity.

New Religious Movements in American Christianity

In *The New Religious Movements Experience in America*, Eugene Gallagher explains:

Inherent in the message of any new religious movement is an indictment of its predecessors and competitors. From the perspective of a new religious movement, other religious groups can be portrayed as inadequate or wrong because their grasp of the truth is incomplete, their practices are misguided, their ethical codes lack the proper emphases, their understanding of human nature is flawed, or their understanding of history is mistaken, among many other reasons. (2)

In this respect, modern Christian communities that use popular music for worship reflect a departure from parochial traditions. These communities in contemporary American Christianity work against parochial metanarratives by adopting the style of secular pop music into their worship services resulting in individual communal narratives.

In this chapter, I examine uses of music in modern “evangelical” Christian communities, portrayed in the film *Jesus Camp* as well as in a unique discussion of the concept of worship in Ben Pasley’s book *Enter the Worship Circle*. These specific Christians are defining themselves apart from to a parochial Protestant metanarrative; however, they continue to define themselves

as Christians, even though their practice and worship hold in common many characteristics with secular art. Therefore, I want to highlight music as performative worship in these communities, and how, secular or sacred, contemporary music is affecting the lives of these specific Christians.

Eugene Gallagher's definition of a "new religious movement" depicts well these communities as unique and separate from parochial American Protestant traditions.

Countercultural movements within American Christianity have popped up in response to the Jesus Movement and other legacies of post-WWII culture, taking into account the way youth movements respond to public culture. While continuing to preach the Apostle Paul's adage to be "in the world but not of the world," many American Christian communities are utilizing new, unique methods of performance and incorporating popular styles of music into worship.

In acknowledging his claim regarding the study of new religious movements, Gallagher notes that one must be quite careful in choosing terminology. He explains:

Any conversation about new religious movements is necessarily and unavoidably embedded in controversies about the potential dangers posed by groups described as cults. One of the implications of that social context for study of new religious movements is that any observer must choose to adopt a particular descriptive and analytic vocabulary.

(xiv)

In this context, I am discussing certain evangelical Christian narratives in the United States as countercultural to parochial Protestant metanarratives. By *parochial*, I am referring to communities that maintain structured services and traditional hymns, whether they be Lutheran or Methodist (which still celebrate some transformation of the Mass), or even Southern Baptist (which worships in more free form, but adheres to the singing of a few hymns and a long

sermon). Of course, there are variations among these groups as well, but when I say *parochial* Christianity in reference to worship, this is what I mean.

Therefore, the communities in *Jesus Camp* and *Enter the Worship Circle* fit the (post)modern state of American Christianity at large, which remains in flux. Performative worship described in both is quite contrary to traditional American Protestantism, as well as to each other, but both contain qualities that Gallagher defines as indicative of a new religious movement.

The Christian communities in the following study fit these qualifications. Since the 1950s, secular music has developed a stronghold on the psyches of American citizens, and it has permeated the religious nature of many Americans, and in effect, many American Christian communities.

Gallagher describes how new religious movements identify themselves, and I think, looking back upon the influence of rock ‘n’ roll in American culture, the myriad subgroups that have formed around musical performers fit the following qualifications:

Change unsettles established authority; threatens the social order; promises to reorder power, prestige and authority; exacts costs from some unwilling to bear them; and bestows benefits on those who had no previous access to them. Change shakes things up. People who have something to lose in the process of change may well oppose agents of change. So it is with new religious movements, which often explicitly intend to produce personal, religious and social change. (19)

A New Form of Worship

Essentially, Randall Balmer defines “evangelical” by profiling a variety of people who call themselves “evangelical.” He is open about not being able to define the term properly

because there is so much dissension between people who define themselves as such. The discussion of CCM falls similarly into this problematic realm. Each artist brings to the table his or her own brand of Christianity and his or her own brand of musical influence; as a result, it is extremely difficult to pin down exactly what to discuss when presenting the greater movement.

Yet, concurrent with the cultural movement surrounding the Jesus Movement and the development of CCM within American Christianity came a strengthened propensity for a “seeker-sensitive” model. This seeker-sensitive model is in line with much of the brief Christian history important to this thesis, preaching a Christianity chiefly directed toward a personal, individual profession of faith being of importance to salvation. In this mode, the “non-denominational” spirit in American Protestantism has engendered a popular form of community, most recognizable in what have become known as megachurches. Prothero explains that these megachurches have become an important legacy of the Jesus movement, despite the fact that the original Jesus People were so adverse to the traditional, institutional church (147). However, the megachurch hardly resembles tradition in either structure or practice. Prothero continues:

Architecturally, seeker-sensitive churches look more secular than religious, mimicking malls with their large open spaces, flooded with light. Services feature contemporary music played over elaborate sound systems, often with Jumbotron screens and projected lyrics that make singing (and hand raising) easy for newcomers. Though based on the Bible, sermons are mercifully short, particularly in comparison with the singing, which often consumes more than half of the time for worship. (147-148)

During musical portions the faithful raise their hands and close their eyes, singing with their hearts and actions; the scene in these moments resembles a rock concert much more than a traditional church service. Prothero says that although this megachurch gathering seems contrary

to the anti-establishment roots of the Jesus movement, these churches “bill themselves as the 7-Ups of the Christian world — alternatives to the vast denominational bureaucracies” (147). The interesting note, of course, is how vast these churches themselves have become — with congregations especially dominated by young Christians — denoting the way in which many American Christians are accepting of a new tradition.

The following examples display a new form of worship, which for the most part is rooted in the theories and historical movements outlined throughout this thesis. By engaging with a seeker-sensitive approach to developing personal faith, young American Christians are ready to depart from the parochial tradition of their parents, as is evidenced by the Jesus Movement. The influence of secular rock ‘n’ roll on youth culture, coupled with the generational split occurring within the Jesus Movement (as well as similar developments in 1960s American culture that created a generation gap in perpetuity), generated Contemporary Christian Music as a style of Christian worship that melds secular and sacred elements.

Immediately after the title of *Jesus Camp* flashes, the documentary focuses on a stolid, unimpressive church that looks more like a YMCA community center than what one would picture as a traditional church. Like many other new churches in the United States, this is not uncommon. Instead of having theocratic state commissions to build classic Gothic structures, churches today open in the homes of individuals like they did in the days of the original Christians, and eventually, they rent spaces. Depending on how many people are drawn to that space, eventually the megachurch is born; yet, the traditional steeple and pews are eschewed for square, office building-esque structures and folding chairs, with a stage in the round rather than an altar guarding a sacristy. It seems that the faith is more important than the place here.

In this scene, the camera moves inside, where a group of young children is engaged in a performance art piece. They are dressed in all black, faces painted in camouflage, and, as we see them, a male child's voice echoes over the church. A transcript of the scene follows:

MALE CHILD (speaking): "There has never been a generation like this one."

FEMALE CHILD (speaking): "For the Lord will cover the earth, as the water covers the seas."

(Children in congregation shown — looking fascinated with the actions on stage, which can only be described as performance art; they also look frightened)

CONGREGATION (chanting): "Now is the time."

FEMALE CHILD (speaking): "We prophesy to these dry bones. Arise."

CONGREGATION (chanting): "Now is the time."

(Cut to child flinging his arms open)

P.A. SYSTEM (in song): "SPEAK THE WORD OF THE LORD!"

(Children continue interpretive dance, crossing sticks back and forth)

P.A. (song continues below): "For the Lord, the Messiah/ Prophecy, for the Word of the Lord!/ Fascinate a generation!/ Prophecy!"

(everyone clapping loudly with the music; performance intensifies)

P.A. (song concludes): “He is Coming! Arise! Arise! He Shall Shake the Nations!”

In the reproduced scene above, there is nothing unique about the lyrics of the song, though the music itself is dark, driving, and guitar-infused, closely resembling rock ‘n’ roll. The main purpose of depicting this scene is to recognize its Postmodern Art elements (note: capital “P” denoting the “weird for the sake of being weird” mantra often adhered to by artists involved with this movement), in play as the children engage in a performance piece to demonstrate the intensity of the call to worship. With the performance working in concert with the music, there is a distinct digression from a traditionally structured ceremony, for surely this particular ritual would not be performed weekly, if ever again at all. This type of performance is common throughout the film, which demonstrates the requirement of fresh, contemporary worship in at least this particular community’s version of the American Christian youth movement.

The film’s major focus on performance demonstrates how the children in these communities react to this style of contemporary worship. Twenty-five minutes into the film, a young girl named Tory is introduced. A ten-year-old from Lee’s Summit, Missouri — a suburb of Kansas City — Tory, like the other children interviewed in the film, is headed to the “Kids on Fire” bible camp in Devil’s Lake, North Dakota. In her introduction, Tory, is breakdancing to music that sounds indistinguishably like the band Korn, a secular rock group that was one of the predecessors and chief practitioners of “Nu Rock,” a style of rock ‘n’ roll music popular on mainstream radio in the late 1990s and early 2000s (and still to some degree today — for some inexplicable reason).

The music Tory is listening and dancing to, however, is not Korn. The music is quite heavy — i.e., strongly overrun by distorted electric guitars accompanied by a driving rock ‘n’ roll backbeat, which lies underneath nearly indistinguishable lyrics sung by a voice that lies somewhere between a desperate scream and an agitated rap. When the song concludes, Tory explains her engagement with this music:

My favorite kind of music is like, Christian, heavy metal rock ‘n’ roll. It focuses in the basis toward Jesus, and some of the songs don’t say ‘Jesus’ or ‘our Lord’ and stuff like that, but they do have a Christian basis and it is focused towards Him, and that’s why I like Christian. But really Britney Spears and Lindsay Lohan and stuff like that I could definitely care less about them, because their songs are mainly based on like guys or girls and stuff, and we as Christians, well *I*, do not believe in that.

Further, she describes her style of dancing, which is characterized by her love for Jesus:

When I dance, I really have to make sure that it’s God, because people will notice when I’m just dancing for the flesh. I do that sometimes, and I must admit that I really need to get over that, so I’m not the only one that makes that, people out there [looks at the camera directly], you’re not the only one who makes that mistake.

Tory does not describe the difference between dancing “for the flesh” and when it’s God. As it is presented, there appears to be no distinction between these forms of dancing as there appears to be no distinction between heavy metal “Christian” music and heavy metal “secular” music. On outward appearance, then, both Tory’s style of music and style of dance are influenced by the same sources, which originate in secular pop music. By adapting these practices into a Christian world — whether they are distinguishably “Christian” — Tory is able to enjoy the music she likes, and her parents feel confident that she is growing up “in the world,

but not of it,” because she listens to music by Christians and for Christians. In this way, secular pop culture has had a distinguishable effect on what is viewed sacred by this Christian community.

Balmer notes, “In the case of [Christian] heavy metal, critics maintained that the ‘gospel message’ was so buried underneath the beat and pyrotechnics and the keening guitars that it would take J. Edgar Hoover and a score of minions several weeks to unearth it” (300). A funny comment? Yes. Is there truth to this commentary? Certainly. He continues, “The justification for all this was that these evangelical musicians were simply preaching the gospel in a new medium and that all you had to do was pay close attention to the lyrics. . . the musicians themselves tended to ignore their critics, especially the older generation of naysayers” (300).

Note also that Tory is very careful about avoiding a generalization of all Christians, and emphasizes that she is only speaking for herself when she explains what she believes, and why *she* listens to Christian music. This propensity to express herself as a unique individual, even at ten years old, is reflective of the seeker-sensitive, individualistic definition of faith.

As the film shifts to its official subject, the “Kids on Fire” camp, we see another instance of secular culture’s influence on the community portrayed by the directors. Rap music, the secular arm of which is often critiqued roundly in public discourse by secular and religious folk alike, is evoked in a song that opens the camp. As an older teenager leads a choreographed dance, the lyrics echo through the congregation:

Verse: Awww yeah/ He was born to a Virgin on Christmas Day/ He went and Jesus died on the cross to take Sin away/ you take Him high/ you take Him low/ you take J.C. wherever you go.”

Chorus:

Call: “Tell me who’s in the house?”

Response: “J.C.!”

Refrain: “Jesus Christ is in the house, today.”

Coda: “He’s in you and you want to dance, we kickin’ it for Christ, Dance! (hey homey), we kickin’ it for Christ, Dance! (hey homey), we kickin’ it for Christ, Jesus Christ is in the house, today.”

Clearly, the rhetoric utilized in these lyrics is representative of urban, African-American hip-hop music, something to which the people gathered in rural North Dakota are not often privy firsthand. Therefore, the influence of hip-hop culture has made its impression — as it has on much of American culture — in some of the most unexpected places. At the same time, popular hip-hop also often blends sacred belief into its lyrical content, so perhaps this influence is more seamless than it appears.

Outside the worship hall, another of the young protagonists in the film, nine-year-old Rachel, discusses what she refers to as “Dead Churches.” Through her earnest assertion of how she views God’s favor, she gives us a snapshot of the importance of performative worship in her community:

So far camp has been AWESOME. I love being in the presence of God. God is not in every church, there is such a thing called, there are ‘Dead Churches,’ and the people there, they sit there like this [sits still, and in a monotone voice, says]: ‘We worship you God, we worship you,’ they sing like three songs, and then they listen to a sermon.

Churches that God likes to go to is where they're jumping up and down, shouting his name, and just praising him and not acting, they're not quiet, 'we worship you,' they're like 'HALLELUJAH GOD!' And depending on how they invite him, he'll be there or not.

In this respect, Rachel (and as it is portrayed by her community as a whole) seeks to evoke God through this type of emotional worship. Music invokes strong emotions within us, and to Rachel and many other Christians that have become part of similar new movements in the United States, this feeling is to be let out and embraced. The traditional model of "stand up, sit down, kneel" is simply unacceptable to the attention span of much of today's youth, and these new movements are embracing the connection brought by the shockwaves inspired by contemporary musical culture in the last fifty years. When I say *contemporary*, I am referring to all the examples above — rock 'n' roll, heavy metal, hip-hop, or any other type of music originally brought to the greater population in a chiefly "secular" context.

Though it originally was critiqued as such, contemporary music of these sorts is not turning people away from their faith, as is demonstrated by the children in *Jesus Camp*. Some might argue — and the film is portrayed with an agenda in a disturbing light — that these children are being brainwashed by adults that use these types of music infused with "Christian" lyrics in order to preach the gospel. It is all about advertising, these people say. Certainly, this may be true, as particular religions, like any other social movement organized through hierarchy, carry the capacity to be corrupted.

However, this intertwining of secular and sacred musical performance is not necessarily something forced upon children in an evil advertising scheme. It is something in which people are consciously engaging.

Though the charismatic worship practiced by the children and communities in *Jesus Camp* (i.e. highly emotional outbursts, speaking in tongues, etc.) certainly has been an inextricable part of sects in American Christianity for several hundred years, the incorporation of contemporary music is the factor that sets these current movements apart from parochial tradition. At the same time, they are following much of the pluralist legacy of American Protestantism because this blending of secular and sacred cultures is not a new phenomenon. In a similar light, it certainly is possible as well that a modern rock concert that exhibits this same type of charismatic practice could have been influenced in some part by these types of religious ceremonies.

In Ben Pasley's *Enter the Worship Circle* he identifies himself as definitively Christian, yet by his understanding of practice he sets himself apart from what is considered traditional worship. He engages in performative practice that is comfortable and understandable on his own terms. Christianity as a larger movement is very real to him, but he sets himself apart from a specific Christian metanarrative. Thus, he creates his own religious identity and proves that defining himself as an individual does not mean necessarily having to create his own meaning for life; it involves, more than anything, incorporating whatever he finds evocative and meaningful into what he consider his personal (and eventually, communal) spirituality. In that respect, worship can be defined as any submission of vulnerability toward the object, person or god that is being worshiped.

Pasley supports this idea: "Worship is more than a single activity or concept because activities do not always assign value. It is actually impossible to define any spiritual or emotional truth by using only outward physical expression," (31). In other words, worship cannot be defined by a single source or as a definitive concept; as such, Pasley's definition attempts to

answer some of the questions posed by Postmodern American Christianity. There is much contention regarding what is “Christian” and what is not, and by developing a personal Christian narrative against a parochial tradition, Pasley recognizes the non-universal qualities of his personal and communal practice. His internal faith has been developed individually, and from there he seeks to construct his external faith with a community of common believers and practitioners.

He continues: “To illustrate, we could photograph a person’s action and write the caption ‘This is love’ underneath, but we would not have proven the person truly loved the recipient of the action” (31). Love provides an excellent metaphor for religious belief — this is possibly why the phrase “God is Love” is so applicable. It is difficult to describe to anyone else why one might love his or her spouse; though there are certainly characteristics one can explain, in the end this description is simply an acknowledgment of a common understanding. Religious belief and engagement with God exists likewise. This is why Pasley’s definition of worship and the children’s practice in *Jesus Camp* cannot be dismissed simply as unique aberrations from traditional Christianity. Surely, there still may be a large number of American Christians practicing in the same manner that our ubiquitous forefathers had; however, there is an increasing number worshipping in contrast to the parochial, doctrinal sects of the faith, as is evidenced by the popularity of nondenominational congregations. Whether it is the difference between the First and Second Baptist Church, located across the street from each other with one church worshipping through traditional hymn and the other led by a contemporary Christian rock band, or whether it is the distinction between a Catholic church still conducting its services in Latin and a Pentecostal community speaking in tongues via the Spirit, worship is an element of

religious practice that involves vulnerability toward the object of worship, one that includes the personal.

Pasley continues further, distinguishing this disparity of religious worship in kind:

A “snapshot” of worship activity might reveal someone participating in a religious ceremony. Performing religious rites, ceremonies, and requirements might look like ‘worship’ on the outside, but these things don’t prove the heart. Bowing at an altar may bend the person into the ‘form’ of reverence, but the action could be played like an actor’s role on a stage. This action might be motivated by fear or obligation. It might just be a cultural habit. If true worship goes deeper than outward performance, what then is the proper inward motivation? (32)

Pasley also argues that “it is absurd to equate the Way with a religion where the rules of conduct define its membership. Listing good things and bad things can categorize the world, but it cannot introduce a person to God” (99). In this respect, dogmatization of religious practice is dangerous, in Pasley’s view, because it can have the adverse effect on the practitioner, leading him or her to *misunderstand* God.

One of the central portions of Pasley’s narrative is the place for music within his own personal practice, as he is a musician in his own right. He does make a distinction between worship music and other music, but it is not the traditional secular/sacred dichotomy; instead, he personifies music to show the difference between the soul that worships through music, and the one that does not:

I am the music of the worshiping soul. . . I exist in the heavens, in the spiritual world that some men never see, and I move like a great tide from the throne room of God into the rooms of worshipers everywhere. My distant half-brothers fill the earth with reflections

of love for *everything but* the living God. They are only half-rhythms and half-music, and they only hint at the sacred, even if pointing to the profane. I am pure. Whether aggressive or sublime. Whether future or primeval. Whether simple or confused. I can be angry or sad or lonely or happy or insane or romantic. I am the sound of relationship between people and God. (159)

Though Pasley is a Christian, and he certainly is referring to the worshiping soul of the Christian God in this context, his description of music relates across many spiritual boundaries. As I describe religion and theology in a pluralistic context, the worshiping soul in Pasley's description stretches to anyone who understands music as a window to his or her soul. In light of these examples, the secular/sacred dichotomy presented by critics of Contemporary Christian Music begins to dissipate, and static, parochial definitions of what it means to be "Christian" continue to be challenged in these forms of worship.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

This is Your Soul on Music

In Daniel Levitin's *This is Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Human Obsession*, he examines how music affects all of us, and secular or sacred, how it speaks to the depths of our souls. Each person in the above examples shares a common bond, his or her particular form of Christian worship. Music is at least one of the factors that ties these Christians together across boundaries of difference. No matter what music they like, no matter how they perceive God, they follow a similar form of religious worship; though their sensibilities may differ greatly, there is a common bond at the root, simply, their compilation of originally "secular" music styles with Christian practice.

Levitin's discusses how we develop our musical tastes in his chapter "My Favorite Things: Why Do We Like the Music We Like?" His work describes well the scenes in *Jesus Camp* in which contemporary popular music finds its way into religious ceremonies. Though I would be surprised to find out that many of the youth leaders and those of the "older generation" present at these youth meetings connect in the same way to Christian rap and rock music, Levitin's explanation of the development of musical tastes at a young age corresponds directly to the way in which Christianity is presented to modern youth. He explains that most people have formed their musical tastes by the time they are eighteen or twenty, mostly due to the fact that they discover the myriad opportunities in the outside world throughout their teenage years. Like Niebuhr, he explains that this is a particularly formative time of development, saying,

“we experiment with the idea that we don’t have to limit our life’s course, our personalities, or our decisions to what we were taught by our parents, or to the way we were brought up.” (226)

In this manner, the Christian message of free will and personal decision to develop a relationship with God takes a step to the forefront of modern American Christianity during adolescence. With the ubiquity of secular popular music available to teenagers — especially through the Internet, ringtones for cell phones, the list sprawls — it is important to spread the Christian message in a way the kids can connect with it.

This notion, however, is not unique to Christianity, of course; no matter what may be “cool” or “hip,” music is a key indicator of social status. Levitin continues:

In Western culture in particular, the choice of music has important social consequences. We listen to the music that our friends listen to. Particularly when we are young, and in search of our identity, we form bonds or social groups with people whom we want to be like, or whom we believe we have something in common with. As a way of externalizing the bond, we dress alike, share activities, and listen to the same music. (226)

Therefore, the spiritual expressions that people make with not only through music, but also through fashion, physical activity, and literature, for example, all come into play as they develop both personal and social identities. Inevitably, young Christians interact with people outside their faiths if they go to public school or work in the public sector. Unless they separate themselves from others by only allowing themselves “sacred” sensibilities, they will inevitably find relation to people outside their particular theology. In effect, religious belief comes into play across all social boundaries. And thus, the influence of popular culture is moving into evangelical worship in order to recognize a new plurality of religious identification.

Levitin is a key influence in the definition of worship I set out earlier: this facet of religion can be described, I argued, as “any submission of vulnerability toward the object, person or god that is being worshiped.” Music plays a role in this submission. Levitin writes that “to a certain extent, we surrender to music when we listen to it. . . we allow ourselves to trust the composers and musicians with a part of our hearts and our spirits; we let the music take us somewhere outside of ourselves. Many of us feel that great music connects us to something larger than our own existence, to other people, or to God” (236-37).

People create their religious identities in a similar fashion. A seeker-sensitive spirituality can be characterized by an incorporation of anything that the seeker deems spiritually accessible and, finally, necessary to self-expression. Therefore, secular influences are not to be excluded from sacred worship in modern Christianity because they are important to the people that live “in the world.” Of course, for these people who desire still not to be “of the world,” there is a challenge in accepting these influences. For others, all with which they come into contact might lead them to God — or, at least to some form of religious meaning.

In contemporary America, Christians gathered together through common bonds regardless of creed, theological differences, and denominational or nondenominational orientations reflect this influence of popular culture. The challenge for American Christians in the modern era is to recognize how their beliefs and understandings of the world around them will be affected by a constantly changing society. By juxtaposing the events occurring in these microcosmic communities, I have attempted to look at one feature of the landscape of American religious culture, one shifting dramatically toward a seeker-sensitive, individual definition of the Christian faith. However, taking into account Charles Taylor’s distinction between “mutual display” and “common action,” I am left with the question: What effect will this have on

Christian communities in the future? Christianity has survived by adapting to or by recreating its surrounding culture, and today's situation in (post)modern American culture is no different. However, adapting to a pluralistic, individualistic culture seems to have undermined many of the common bonds by which traditional Christians have identified themselves and each other: common practice. Therefore, the challenge for these new religious movements, from my perspective, is not to justify themselves as "Christian" or "not Christian," but to maintain the identities they have created amidst a constantly changing society: this attribute is what stands out among enduring religious communities.

A Mediated Double Consciousness

In the final chapter of *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, Balmer interviews a popular Christian pop group from the 1990s, Jars of Clay, amidst the wide success they found both on the secular pop charts as well as within the Christian music industry. In Balmer's short profile of the band, they provide a perfect example for the greater youth movement in American Christianity as I have outlined it here. Their music has been roundly criticized by both parochial traditions for being too aberrant and by public culture for being too traditionally religious; yet, in this light, they represent a large number of young American Christians trying to define themselves in a (post)modern culture.

Balmer asks Jars of Clay member Stephen Mason about the difficulties the band has faced when trying to balance their Christian beliefs with their influence stemming from secular pop music:

Although there is no evidence that Jars of Clay has soft-pedaled its theology to appeal to the secular market, they too have been criticized. "It can start to get to you when people ask over and over again, 'Are you going secular?'" Mason said wearily. "Well, what do

you define as secular? Do we want to reach unchurched people? Of course. And we're not going to hide what we believe to do that. But the greater our reach becomes, the more suspect our faith and commitment in the eyes of some people. It's like 'either you're in or you're out.' There's got to be a third rail where music can just be music. And in the end there's really nothing we can do but be who we are." (306)

In the end, Mason's response is representative of how many modern American Christians want to identify themselves: on the borders of parochial metanarratives, but yet still able to form new narratives. The emphasis on personalized religious identity — developed over the recent history of American Protestantism and perpetuated by the Postmodern condition — often creates a discord between individuality and community. Yet, these young Christians are incorporating secular music into their religious worship to mediate this Condition. As Mason's quotation suggests, they are unconcerned with labels and barriers. They seek to define personal identity. From there, they move to find a community of believers similar to them.

American public culture is secularizing in many ways much like Contemporary Christian Music is secularizing; in other words, the influence of a secular pop culture has influenced many Christians because there is a greater sense of interconnectivity across the United States, and increasingly, across the world. Therefore, the people who are practicing these new forms of worship are becoming more in touch with their faith as they separate themselves from a parochial tradition that they feel is no longer reflective of the real world. The critics of Contemporary Christian Music and other progressive movements within the faith charge that these Christians are neglecting the admonition to be "in the world, but not of the world," but, in response to these parochial traditions, Christians cognizant of their changing society are seeing past generations as the ones dismissive of being in the world, and they find that incorporating

influences that reflect their everyday experience to be spiritually enriching. Especially in the evangelical tradition, it is important for those spreading the word of Jesus Christ to understand those to whom they are evangelizing. As American culture changes, parochial traditions are losing touch with new generations by remaining static, and so young Christians especially are taking cues from popular American culture to define themselves on their own terms.

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