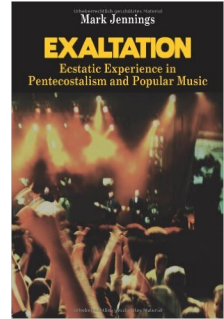


Exaltation: Ecstatic Experience in Pentecostalism and Popular Music, by Mark Jennings

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In 2009, Angelica Mesiti won the Blake Prize for Religious Art with a silent, slow motion video of audience members at an Australian music festival titled *Rapture*. Mark Jennings is similarly interested in the parallels between religion, secular popular music, and festival culture in his work titled *Exaltation*. The study of religion and the study of popular music and culture seem to me to have developed a mutually beneficial relationship in recent years. Analysing ostensibly irreligious popular cultural content gives the study of religion secular credibility, and invoking religious parallels or making use of analytical concepts initially applied to religion gives the study of popular culture the moral seriousness it has sometimes looked for and lacked since the revolutionary pretensions of British cultural studies fell out of favour. The trick is to avoid falling into the trap Sean McCloud identified in this field, borrowing the term “parallelomania” from the biblical scholar Samuel Sandmel to describe how rather superficial analogies between religious and secular phenomenon lead to spurious analyses which—to paraphrase Hank Hill—do not make the study of religion better but only make the study of popular music worse.

Through extensive application of anthropological and sociological theory, as well theological and religious studies concepts invoked for their explanatory and descriptive power, the author avoids “parallelomania” and makes an important contribution, in particular, to the study of contemporary congregational music and contemporary Pentecostalism. Most significantly, the book offers an excellent overview of contemporary Pentecostal musicianship, which differs in significant respects from secular modern musicianship

while at the same time offering certain interesting parallels which are drawn out in the second half of the book on secular music festivals. The social scientific study of Pentecostal congregations is a growing field, as is the field of contemporary congregation music studies, but the focus has often been on the politics and spectacle of so-called megachurches where the full array of media technology can be deployed. The church in a rented hall, with its committed and efficient, but amateur and practically constrained musicians that the author studied are also a common form of contemporary Pentecostalism.

The book also raises several interesting methodological questions about how one studies issues of religion and spirituality within secular spaces with ostensibly secular subjects. In introducing the research, the author debates the fine line between “ethnography” and “participant observation,” noting that his methodological approach tended towards the latter (19–25). He conducted participant observations at a Pentecostal church caled “Breakfree” (a pseudonym) and at a secular music festival, the West Coast Blues and Roots Festival, both in Western Australia. The author reflects upon the limits of his data, and there seems to me to be three particular concerns that one might reasonably raise with the data on which the author relies. However, since the author is relatively restrained in the conclusions he draws from his study (203–16), and although he is sometimes rather loose with his descriptive language—which in utilizing variations upon the language of ecstasy unintentionally overlaps at times with his more theoretical concepts—these concerns over the data are precisely that, and point to ongoing methodological discussions within studies into religion, culture and performance in secularizing societies.

Firstly, since we are dealing with festivals and rituals which are, to various degrees, set apart from everyday life—even if Pentecostal spiritual practice seeks to undermine such divisions—the question the author raises of long-term ethnography as opposed to more targeted observations and interviews is pertinent (19–25). In contrast to certain anthropological approaches that are content to examine musical performance as relatively isolated ritual, questions of the continuity of religious subjectivity and the social impact of personal religious experience have been vital questions in the sociology of religion—even if they appear methodologically old fashioned when faced with the axiomatically multifaceted and irreducibly individual nature of the late modern subject. In my own research, I have been struck by the ability of Pentecostals to transition between the sacred space and ecstatic experience of Sunday morning worship to more mundane experiences of Sunday lunch

or the Sunday afternoon barbeque in which less pious behaviour is on show. These are also concerns of the author, evident in his utilization of Ricoeur's work on mimesis, to explain the ongoing influence of worship music on the lives of Pentecostal musicians, as revealed by the stories they tell during interviews (70–71).

Secondly and more significantly, the datasets obtained from the church and from the music festival are quite different. In the first half of the book, where I feel the book's strength lies, the author draws upon interviews with musicians at "Breakfree" Pentecostal church. In the second half of the book, the author draws upon interviews with audience members at the secular music festivals he attended. He conducted observations of both events but heavily supplements this with interviews with quite different subjects aimed at quite different research questions. Pentecostal worship musicians are quite open about their desire to utilise music to "catalyse" religious experience (25) and such experiences are integral to Pentecostalism in general; seeking after ecstatic experience is a thoroughly documented (and critiqued) aspect of Pentecostal practice. The same assumptions cannot be made about secular popular music performances, and the second half of the book is concerned with the question of whether, and how, the West Coast Blues and Roots Festival can be understood in similar terms as Pentecostal worship music. Here, the author interviews festival attendees and makes selective use of published interviews with a small number of musicians who performed at the events he observed who speak about music in a recognizably spiritual and supernatural manner. Finally and relatedly, we are not told a great deal about how the author went about interviewing participants, and how he approached his research topic in interviews. This is somewhat problematic, since recent work has been done (by Abby Day, amongst others) on the methods through which one might be able to inquire into the beliefs of secular subjects without imposing a religious language upon the conversation, such as the author does when asking "do you think music can be a spiritual experience?" (170).

The book makes heavy use of ten oft-cited scholars to analyse the research data. The author's choice of theorists make sense insofar as he utilizes oft-cited authorities in the sociology of religion (Durkheim and Weber), of the study of festival and ritual (Bakhtin and Turner), and of religion sans religion (Tillich), amongst others, but one does get the impression that the author is working his way through scholars he feels he ought to have demonstrated his knowledge of while writing his PhD dissertation, rather than scholars whose work will draw the most out of his research data. Similarly, the desire to

employ the same scholars to examine both case studies makes for a pleasantly symmetrical table of contents but leads to some underwhelming analysis of the secular music festival. Here, the use of Weber and Durkheim (127–41) seems rather forced as the two are more useful when making sense of the way societies and institutions function. Indeed, the choice of deploying the same ten scholars, and more-or-less the same aspects of each of those scholars' work, to both case studies would seem to presuppose that they are proximate enough phenomena to justify such a move. By the time I reached the end of the end of the book, having read through the application of Weber, Schleiermacher, and others to a secular music festival, I was not so certain.

The use of Bakhtin's work on the carnival is more obviously relevant to the understanding of the West Coast Blues and Roots Festival (141–49), as Bakhtin is the obvious choice to work through when examining festivals, but the festival described by the author is not necessarily as "carnavalesque" as one might imagine. Much of the behaviour described is quite banal and usual when large crowds gather. This makes the use of aspects of Victor Turner's multifaceted work on ritual highly relevant (150–54), in particular his notion of "liminoid" spaces associated with optional leisure activities in modern societies. To my mind, though, Michel Maffesoli's unacknowledged notion of the neo-tribe, commonly cited in studies on popular music and youth culture since the late 1990s, would have most accurately explained the goings on at the West Coast Blues and Roots Festival. Neo-tribal theory has been applied to groups precisely like those attending music festivals who share spontaneous connections, rather than the deeper connections one finds in church congregations, and Maffesoli uses religious metaphors to explore continued desires for collective effervescence in late modernity.

This application of so many heavily-cited scholars of religion to a growing subfield in the study of religion is obviously to be welcomed. Because the book's transitions from theory to theory, and from theory to data, are so clearly sign-posted, I am certain that *Exaltation* will become a useful shortcut for students working on religion and popular music who are looking for a text that has already done the theoretical heavy lifting for them. Chapters 2 and 5 offer brief descriptions of the two case studies, and these descriptive chapters are then followed by two much longer chapters applying five theoretical approaches from theology and religion studies (Schleiermacher, Otto, Eliade, Tillich, Ricoeur) and then five theoretical approaches from the social sciences and social theory (Durkheim, Weber, Bakhtin, Turner, Foucault), such that each of these ten scholars ends up with approximately fifteen pages devoted

to the application of their theories to the experience of Pentecostal worship music and the experience of the secular popular music festival. Each section dealing with a particular theoretical approach is divided in half, moreover, with the first few pages introducing the key theoretical concept, and then the second few pages applying it to one or more examples from either the “Breakfree” Pentecostal church or the secular music festival.

Some readers will probably find the book too clearly signposted, and retaining too much of the regimentation of a PhD dissertation. The challenge, as one of my PhD supervisors put it to me in politely suggesting the re-write of a chapter, is “ticking all the boxes” without being “tick-boxy.” This book does lean towards the “tick-boxy” but students studying religion and popular music will be grateful that the text is so accessible as a result. The book should also be welcomed by scholars of contemporary congregational music and Pentecostal musicianship. The first half of the book offers a very thorough analysis of the role of music in Pentecostal worship services, and the quite particular nature of Pentecostal musicianship which, as an influential form of creative self-expression at odds with many normative practices in secular culture, is certainly worthy of the sustained analysis that the author has offered.

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