

MUSIC IN RELIGION: THE INDISPENSABLE SILVER CORD TO THE SUPREME BEING

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Abstract

This paper explores the importance of music in religious practices of various faith traditions. Focusing on the concept of the "silver cord" as a metaphorical representation of the connection between human and supreme beings, it highlights the instrumentality of music in connecting the practitioners to the divine. Spiritualists, enchanter, exorcists and the likes use music to arouse ecstasy and to connect to the divine. For prophet Elisha to hear from God, he needed music. The Holy Bible records that "... when the minstrel played, the power of the LORD came upon him" (2 Kings 3:15; Revised standard version). Pople (2002) has defined music as "the organized arrangement of sounds and silences, created by humans and appreciated for its aesthetic qualities, cultural significance and ability to evoke emotions" (p.19). The paper is worried that, in spite of the importance of music in religious practices, practitioners have not given it the pride of place it deserved. The paper made use of historical analysis of documentary research which depended on extant literature, magazine and journal articles and Internet resources. It found out that music enhanced the spiritual experiences of religious practitioners, had psychological, emotional and communal effects and the ability to create a bridge between the earthly and the spiritual realms. The paper concluded that religious leaders should

not allow modernity to imbue religious music with immoral and secular content. Key words: music, religion, religious experience, silver cord, supreme being and transcendence.

Introduction

Music is one art that transcends all cultures, religions and languages. Every religion in the world over uses music as part of their worship. Through the ages music has been composed because of its power to communicate. It can express thoughts and feelings. It can show every human emotion--joy and sorrow, love and fear. Music with strong, vigorous energy encourages people to dance or to march, while quiet tunes suggest restfulness.

McGehee (1963) has observed that:

Music has the power to take us out of our everyday selves into a world of the spirit, of pure thought, of happiness, of sympathy, of fun, of aspiration; and then to bring us back again refreshed and better able to do our work in the world (p.9).

Music plays important role in the lives of people, in their religious practices, cultural events and even in the education setting. This led Gearreald (1996) to state that:

You may not be able to understand the speech of other races, or be able to read their books, but whatever their race or speech may be, you can understand their music, whether it is of today or of ages long gone by. Few people are gifted with the power to compose, but many have a talent for playing or singing. Nearly everyone has the capacity for enjoying music and nearly everyone loves it (p.15).

Again, many colleges and universities in Nigeria and every country of the world teach music in various forms. Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, for instance, has a music department with seasoned musicology professors of international renown.

Simply put, music is a global language that has been a part of human culture since time immemorial. It has evolved and transformed over centuries, reflecting the influence of different civilizations, cultures and historical periods.

The focus of this paper is, therefore, to examine the significance of music in religious practices and its role in connecting believers to the divine. Relying on the concept of the "silver cord" as a metaphorical representation of the connection between human beings and the supreme being, it will examine how music functions as a powerful medium for enhancing spiritual experiences and fostering a sense of transcendence. It hopes to shade light on its ability to create a bridge between the earthly and the spiritual realms.

Theoretical Framework

Theoretical framework, for the purpose of this short paper, refers to a set of interconnected concepts, theories, and principles that guide the researcher's understanding of the phenomenon being investigated or studied.

Polit & Beck (2017) agrees that "it provides a conceptual lens through which researchers can interpret and analyze their data, helping to develop a robust and structured research study" (n.p.).

Creswell (2014) asserts that theoretical framework serves to contextualize the research problem within an established body of knowledge and contributes to the generation of new insights or theories in the field ... (p.86).

Religious experience theory will be used in this paper.

Religious Experience Theory

This theory deals with various forms of religious experiences, including those facilitated by music. It explores how music can elicit transcendent, numinous or mystical encounters with the divine, shaping believers' perceptions and fostering a deeper connection to the supreme being.

This theory was proposed by William James in 1902. He was an influential American philosopher and psychologist who, In his seminal work "The Varieties of Religious Experience," explored different forms of religious experiences across cultures and advocated for their significance in understanding religion.

James (1902) asserts that "religious experience theory gives valuable insights into the inner dimensions of religious life, exploring the emotional, psychological, and transformative aspects of spiritual encounters" (p.581).

One major strength of the theory is its recognition of the wide range of religious experiences across cultures and faith traditions and its emphasis on the universality of spiritual encounters while acknowledging their cultural particularities.

Thompson (1995) has observed that "Religious experience theory acknowledges the personal and subjective nature of religious encounters and values the individual's direct encounters and interpretations of the divine" (p.117).

On the flipside, however, religious experience theory has its weaknesses which include:

1. Subjective Interpretations.

Religious experiences are subjective hence its interpretations may vary greatly. It can be challenging to establish objective criteria for validating or comparing different religious experiences.

and 2. Lack of Empirical Verification

The theory relies heavily on self-reports and personal testimonies which may be difficult to objectively verify or replicate through empirical methods. This poses challenges for scientific inquiry and establishing causal relationships.

Alston (1989) has observed that "Religious experience theory may face difficulty accounting for experiences that fall outside the traditional religious framework or those that challenge traditional religious dogma potentially marginalizing such experiences" (p.185).

Relevance

The religious experience theory is so pertinent to this paper that it explains the connectedness between music and religion. It also helps to understand how music can

bring about transcendent, numinous or mystical encounters with the divine, shaping believers' perceptions and fostering a deeper union between the practitioner and the supreme being.

The two theories used in this paper are apt in describing cursorily the interplay between music and religion which, to this writer, are two inseparable entities.

Brief History of Music

Music, as noted earlier, has played important role in religious practices throughout history. It has often been considered a spiritual vehicle which connects individuals with the divine and serving as a bridge between the earthly and celestial realms. It will be worthwhile to briefly trace its history.

1. Mesopotamia

Historians believe that music has its roots in Mesopotamia the earliest civilization known to man. They recognized the fundamental connection between music and religion. It was seen as a means of communicating with the gods, and people believed that it had the power to honor and appease them. According to Hickmann (2017), Ritualistic music was used in religious ceremonies which heightened the believers' connection to the divine (p.89).

2. Ancient Egypt

Music was prominently used in ancient Egyptian religious rituals and ceremonies. It accompanied temple rituals, funeral rites and, according to Lichtheim (2006), was believed to be an offering to the gods (p.21).

The Egyptians considered music to be a divine gift, an essential element in their religious practices as it helped connect worshippers with the divine realms.

3. Ancient Greece

music was so important in the Greek religious traditions that Barker (2008) records that: In ancient Greece, Music held a prominent place in religious ceremonies and festivals, including those dedicated to the Greek gods. It was believed that music expressed the divine harmony and was a way to honor the gods (p.252).

4. Medieval Europe

During the medieval period, music played a vital role in religious devotion within the Christian church. It was used to enhance spiritual experiences, deepen religious contemplation and inspire devotion.

Apel (1973) believes that "the Byzantine and Gregorian chant emerged as integral forms of religious music during this era" (n.p.).

These monophonic chants, sung in Latin, created a sacred atmosphere and facilitated a connection to the Supreme Being.

In addition to liturgical music, the medieval period also witnessed the emergence of secular music. Troubadours and minstrels composed and performed music that celebrated courtly love, chivalry and themes of the natural world. However, even these secular songs had religious undertones, often conveying moral or spiritual messages.

Cook (1992) states that "The influence of religion was pervasive, connecting all aspects of medieval life, including its music" (p.13).

Space will elude this paper to mention other periods of history such as the Renaissance to the 21st century, the use of music in the Old Testament Jewish worship, Islamic and African traditional worship and ceremonies.

Simply put, though, from the ancient civilizations to the present era, music has been regarded as a silver cord linking individuals to the Supreme Being in various religious traditions including Christianity, Islam, Judaism, African Traditional Religion and so forth.

A Brief Look at Religion

Having traced a brief history of music, it is worthwhile to discuss briefly what religion is and how important it is to mankind.

Religion is the social institution which deals with man's relationship with the supernatural or spirit beings. It is invaluable to make the human society work. It performs innumerable functions some of which deserve a mention.

1. Religion promotes social cohesion. Religion inculcates shared values and beliefs that unite people from different backgrounds and this helps to create a sense of common purpose and identity, which can be especially important in diverse societies.

Berger (1967) believes that:

Religion helps to unite a society by promoting not only the spiritual dimension of the society but also bringing about a unitive force to which every member of the society will subscribe and, in cases where the cultures are diverse, religion tends to provide a single canopy for all the members of that culture (p.31).

2. Provides a sense of community. Religion provides a sense of community and belonging to its practitioners especially for people who feel isolated or marginalized. This, according to Durkheim (1995), can be through participation in religious rituals, attending religious services or simply interacting with other members of the same faith.

3. Source of social support. Religion offers social support in times of need such as during a crisis or a period of hardship. This is usually through the provision of financial assistance, emotional support or simply a listening ear. This has led Stark and Bainridge (1985) to conclude that:

Religion, which many have predicted would die off due to scientific revolution, will continue to exist as long as humanity exists. It gives solace to those who are going through hard times, creates hope for the downcast, mobilizes support for those in need and, gives meaning to life (p.47).

4. Lastly, Source of moral code. Religion furnishes the society with the moral code that guides people's behavior. This invariably helps to promote social order and stability as well as protect people from harm. Many social scholars believe that without religion, morality, the principles which distinguish between right and wrong or good and bad behavior, will not be achieved in the society.

The Effects of Music in Religious Practices

1. Cultural Preservation and Transmission.

Music helps to preserve and pass on cultural traditions and beliefs to generations yet unborn. According to Barz & Cooley (2012), "music serves as a cultural repository, preserving the rich heritage and history of a religious community" (p.139).

2. Internalization of Religious Teachings.

Scholars believe that music plays important role in helping people to internalize religious teachings, scriptures and chants.

This explains why children are taught at their young age to memorize their religious music which, in turn, help them to become good custodians of their particular religion. Halperin (2011) has observed that "Melodic and rhythmical patterns can enhance the memorization of religious texts, allowing for a deeper understanding of religious doctrines" (n.p.).

3. Emotional and Psychological Impact

Music brings about emotional responses and increases the sense of awe, joy, peace or transcendence during religious practices. It evokes nostalgia, promotes relaxation, reduces anxiety and enhances overall well-being.

Linnemann (2015) believes that "Music acts as a cathartic outlet, allowing individuals to express and process their emotions within a religious context" (p.32).

4. Lastly, Instrument of Communal Bonding and Participation

Music serves as an instrument of collective participation, fostering a sense of unity and belonging among worshipers. Singing together and other musical programs in religious settings helps to create a shared experience that enhances social cohesion and strengthens communal bonds. This led Hemming (2016) to conclude that "Music promotes a collective identity and a sense of togetherness in religious communities" (p.17).

The Silver Cord Metaphor

Music and religion are so interdependent that one cannot function without the other. Since religion is purely concerned with man's relationship with the divine, this paper uses the silver cord metaphor to describe the inherent interconnection between music and religion which invariably attracts divine intervention into man's activities.

1. Symbolic Representation of the Connection between the Human and the Divine

The silver cord metaphor is a symbolic representation of the connection between the human and the divine especially as it relates to music and spirituality. Bergman (2010) believes that "Drawing from the poetic imagery found in religious texts, this metaphor captures the transformative power of music in facilitating a profound sense of transcendence, unity, and communion with the divine" (p.523).

Wilson-Dickson (2006) has observed that:

In religious traditions such as Christianity and Judaism, the silver cord metaphor is derived from passages such as Ecclesiastes 12:6-7 (in the Bible) that describe death as the moment when the silver cord is severed, and the spirit returns to God. This metaphor suggests that just as a silver cord connects the physical body to the soul, music serves as a conduit between the human and the divine realms (p.211).

2. Ability of Music to Arouse Emotions

The ability of music to arouse emotions, stir the soul and transcend ordinary experiences, is seen as the metaphorical silver cord that uplifts and connects individuals to the realm of the divine. Through melodic and harmonic elements, religious music evokes a sense of

awe, reverence and transcendence, enhancing spiritual experiences and fostering a deeper connection with the divine.

3. Lastly, Power to Invoke Spiritual Epiphanies and Communion

The silver cord metaphor highlights the belief that music has the power to invoke spiritual epiphanies, communion and intimate connection with the divine. It offers a channel for worshipers to express their devotion, experience metaphysical union and attain a heightened state of consciousness.

Conclusion

In this paper, it has been established that music and religion are interdependent and both are important aspects of a people's culture. And that music serves as a silver cord which connects the religious practitioners to the supreme being.

Omojola (1995) agreeing with the assertions made in this paper states that:

Among the Yoruba--one of the three largest ethnic groups in Nigeria ..., traditional music can be categorised into two distinct forms, religious and secular. In religious worship, music is usually performed to appease and to invoke the spirits of such deities as Sango (the god of thunder) and Ogun (the god of iron). Apart from the ritualistic use of music, musical performances in Yorubaland are often part of religious festivals (p.7).

Nzewi (cited by Omojola, 1995) states that:

The Igbo systems and ideological formulations were established on and buttressed by communally binding and viable mythological concepts and covenants. These were periodically validated or regenerated or commemorated in order to ensure a continuing binding compact. Such periodic communions required highly stylised media that would give super-ordinary atmosphere, impact and candour to the event... These media (which constituted traditional theatre in ail its scope and ramifications) incorporate the performing arts areas of music, dance, drama and mime (p.9).

In this paper, it has been established that music provides a means to convey and elicit profound religious sentiments and experiences and facilitates a sense of communal engagement. It concludes that music is indispensable in religious rites and ceremonies. It, therefore, recommends that:

1. Sacred music should not be imbued by the secular and immoral music of the present age which tends to perverse the moral and spiritual intent.
2. Every religious group should endeavour to uphold sound and spiritual music that will connect them to the supreme being. Failure of which the experience of the supernatural will be dampened.

And 3. The Teachers of music in the colleges and universities as well as the religious leaders should try as much as possible to inculcate moral values to their students and followers in order to continue to enjoy divine presence and effectuation of prayers and other religious gains.

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