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**Elvis' Gospel Music:
Between the Secular and the Spiritual?
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Abstract

Do fans sanctify their heroes? In the past, I have argued that Elvis fandom is *not* a neo-religious practice but that attention to a modified version of Durkheim's theory of religion can, nevertheless, help to explain it as a form of social interaction. I take that argument further here, first by revealing the ethical and analytical advantages of neo-Durkheimian theory, then by pitting this theory against three aspects of Elvis' sincere engagement with gospel music. Elvis Presley won three Grammy awards for his gospel albums and was the musician who did most to bring the gospel quartet tradition to the mainstream. His eclectic personal ties to spirituality and religion have become a focus of debate within his fan culture. They offer a set of discursive resources through which to explain the emotional impact and social influence of his music. If star musicians are positioned as centres of attention, what happens when they use their privileged position in the spotlight to offer a "spiritual" message?

Keywords: Elvis; gospel music; fandom; Durkheim; spirituality; totemism

I can understand that people have spiritual leanings and want to find a way to God. But there is only one way to God. Elvis never said, "I am the way, I am the light, I am the truth. And no man will ever come to God except if he comes through me." Elvis didn't say that. Jesus said it. Elvis is always going to be a special person in our lives because of what he did for our lives. But what he didn't offer was salvation. He did not offer a way back to God. Those of us who have successful lives, mostly if we have them, we have those lives successful because of what God has done for us through Jesus—nobody else... I trust Elvis as a man. He may have died in unhappy circumstances, but I'm sure inside he knew exactly who he was or perhaps more importantly who he wasn't...I don't want him tarnished. I have much more respect for Elvis than someone who might fall before him and worship him, because I don't think Elvis would have liked that.

Cliff Richard [1].

1. Introduction

Is music fandom a realm of spiritual practice? Do fans use their connections with heroes to adopt practices like veneration, sanctification or idolatry? While appearing to be magical and important social figures, stars are not necessarily deified. In the two decades since I started researching Elvis fandom, I have never met anyone who was “saved” or redeemed by Elvis Presley. On the other hand, I have met many fans that have been seduced, fascinated, empowered and inspired by his music. They all say that he has changed their lives for the better, but none expect heavenly rewards because of their fandom. I will begin my discussion by referring to comment that started this piece. It was made by the British singer Cliff Richard, someone who remains both an avid Elvis fan and dedicated Christian. His description of Elvis as someone who “is always going to be a special person in our lives *because of what he did for our lives*” (emphasis mine) expresses the emotional appeal of a singer who was welcomed as a stellar performer, not worshipped as a deity. Richards not only claims that Elvis served fans, however. He raises the possibility of idolatry by saying that those fans should never actually *worship* Elvis. This notion is problematic, for Richards, not because *God* would not like it, but because *Elvis* would not have liked it. When discussing the ethics of fan behaviour, Richards’ appeal is therefore primarily to what *Elvis* would have wanted. By rejecting “someone who might fall before him and worship him”, he wards off the *hypothesized* possibility of fans indulging in acts of religious devotion and misguidedly using Elvis as an *idol*. Richards draws on the assumption that fans would, notionally, wish to keep *Elvis* interested in *them*. He can count squarely on fans seeing Elvis as their centre of attention. Contemporary religious studies scholarship has a tendency to gloss over the distinction between *paying attention* to one’s hero and relinquishing one’s individuality (submitting). In his book *Sacred Matters: Celebrity Worship*,

Sexual Ecstasies, The Living Dead and Other Signs of Religious Life in the United States, for example, Professor Gary Laderman claims that the Presley phenomenon is “seemingly secular but abundant with religious meanings” and its star “saves...the masses” [2]. His work takes it as self-evident that Elvis is positioned as a deity by fans. Laderman is not the only scholar to propose that spiritual identification shapes the Elvis phenomenon. His work comes in the wake of a range of scholars who hold similar views, such as Erika Doss, Robin Sylvan, Rupert Till and Christopher Partridge [3,4,5,6]. Sylvan, for instance, claims that Elvis and Beatles fan cultures “had powerful but unconscious religious dimensions” not just because of “West African spirituality implicit in the music, but also because they were deifying their musical heroes and engaging in what might be described as a form of worship” ([4], p. 72).

My argument in this piece of work is that Elvis fandom is best approached as a *secular* activity that can be understood by modifying Emile Durkheim’s classic sociology of religion. Compared to ideas positing the neo-religiosity of fan practices, attention to aspects of Durkheim’s work improves our understanding in both an ethical and analytical sense. What follows will develop in three parts. The first shows how Durkheim’s notion of religion can be modified to help readers recognize Elvis fandom as part of a *secular* experience that is both social and emotional. The second considers where the neo-Durkheimian model differs from neo-religiosity scholarship. The third part explores three limit cases that begin to challenge a secular, neo-Durkheimian reading. These cases do not suggest that fans directly worship Elvis (as in Richards’ vision of idolatry), but they do contest the notion that Elvis fandom is a secular process by showing—at least upon first inspection—how the singer and his fans have engaged in acts of *Christian* worship.

2. Secular Music Audience Practice: Rethinking Durkheim

I am not suggesting that popular music in general, or Elvis' music in particular, has *nothing* to do with sacredness or religiosity. Rather, I argue that a careful reformulation of Durkheim's work allows us to make a separation between the secular sociology of Elvis fan practice and the religious content of some of his music. A first way to approach this is by thinking about popular music's gradual development. Western music has changed significantly in form and context over the long span of history. It is therefore dangerous to make any easy generalizations about its development [7]. Some influential writers, however, have suggested that music has emerged from its sacred context in a gradual process of development. In *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, Jacques Attali famously said that music has undergone a series of historic transformations that have turned it into a commodity: "We have gone from the rich priest's clothing of the musician in ritual to the sombre uniform of the orchestra musician and the tawdry costume of the star, from the ever-recomposed work to the rapidly obsolescent object." [8]. Attali does not argue that popular music and religion have absolutely no connection, but rather that their relationship—if it can be generalized—is *primarily* one of *secularization*. What religiosity scholars see as the *expanded* sacred could equally be seen as something that perpetually dissipates as it enters new contexts. The gospel style, for example, has extended beyond church and become enjoyed by pop audiences. Christian music has hybridized ritual sounds and commercial concerns. One problem with the idea of modernized music, however, is that not all forms *seem* exclusively "modern" and secular. Does the general decline of spiritual engagement spell its end, or simply its rebirth in a secular forms? Few, if any, cultural forms can have completely escaped the pervasive influences of Judeo-Christian culture. Perhaps more than other forms of popular culture, music—with its

capacity for emotional resonance—has, arguably, had a multiplicity of connections with its historical context, some of which appear to go beyond expressions of musical tradition or genre to encompass *affect*.

Many people *experience* popular music as a powerful phenomenon. It offers a form of emotional sustenance and can be highly rousing. Music is widely seen as something intoxicating, a form of magic, perhaps: something that arguably approximates or stimulates spiritual transcendence. A good example of its effects provided by Joel Williamson, in his recent book on Elvis, when he describes the way in which the singer moved female fans. He comments on Sonny West (a man who later became Elvis' bodyguard), recalling a mid-1950s date where West took a virtuous "good girl" to see the singer perform:

A half hour later, this young woman was, in Sonny's limited understanding, "behaving totally out of character." She acted "like a sex starved little nymphet", he declared. "Believe me", Sonny insisted, "this gal changed right before my eyes". Sonny's perception was that Elvis had caused the girl to become something she was not...Sonny never did, as he delicately worded his ambition, "score with the lady". Indeed, he said, "after the show my gal just went back to what she was like before". [9]

It is evident here that the female fan in question was swept away by Elvis' performance to the point where she temporarily lost her sexual inhibitions. Elvis' performance let her escape from quotidian life and experience a realm of different feelings, one to which Sonny West—identifying in a different way with Elvis—did not have access. We could, of course, use spiritual language to describe this moment of lust. Some might say that Sonny's date *transcended* her daily life and entered into a *sacred space of imagined union* with her hero. If many people *assume* that a musical performance is a spiritual act, does that mean that it definitely is one?

In the absence of a more comprehensive understanding of fanish rationality, instances of excitement (sexual or otherwise) seem premised on something *mystical*—explicable only in terms of charisma, enchantment or spirituality. We can counter claims about Elvis’ supposed sacredness with Arthur C. Clarke’s famous point: “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic” [10]. In other words, both fans and scholars reach for religious vocabularies, perhaps, in part because they lack a sufficient *theoretical* framework to explain fans’ emotions. Until we have a clear, *secular* explanation of the emotional experience and language of fandom, religiosity explanations will continue to haunt popular music scholarship.

Emile Durkheim wrote influential work on the sociology of religious experience. Ironically, a modified version of it allows us to challenge neo-religiosity readings and understand popular music’s “sacred” energy as *secular* attention. Durkheim’s work describes how the energy of the collective is expressed through individual excitation as something he calls effervescence: “The very fact of assembling is an exceptionally powerful stimulant. Once individuals are assembled, their proximity generates a certain kind of electricity that quickly transports them to an extraordinary degree of exaltation” [11]. Effervescence was only part of Durkheim’s understanding of tribal religion, however:

By gathering together almost always at fixed times, collective life could indeed achieve its maximum intensity and efficacy (*i.e.*, effervescence), and give a man a more vivid sense of his dual existence and his dual nature (*i.e.*, transport him into and out of a sacred realm). But this explanation is still incomplete. We have shown how the clan awakens in its members the idea of external forces that dominate and exalt them. But we have yet to understand how these forces were conceived in the form of the totemic species, that is, as an animal or plant.

([11], p. 165, emphasis mine).

Durkheim recognized that each tribe had a totem—an animal, plant, person or object—which mediated the emotional charge of the collective. In a section on the “genesis of the totemic principle” he explained that “Within a crowd moved by common passion, we become susceptible to feelings and actions of which we were incapable on our own” ([11], p. 157). As he further suggested:

By definition, it [the totem] is shared by everyone. During the ceremony, all eyes are upon it...Because religious force is nothing but the collective and anonymous force of the clan, and because this can be imagined only in the form of the totem, the totemic emblem is like the visible body of god. Therefore it seems to be the source of actions, benevolent or dreaded, which the cult’s purpose is to invoke or prevent.

([11], p. 166, emphasis mine).

Totemism is therefore the key point where the energy of the collective is mediated to participating individuals through one focus; it acts as an *emblem*, rather like a flag might encapsulate and evoke our feelings toward a nation. Durkheim further explained why a human totem could feel energized while representing the collective:

This unusual surplus of forces is quite real: it comes to him from the very group he is addressing. The feelings provoked by his speech return to him inflated and amplified, reinforcing his own. The passionate energies he arouses echo back to him and increase his vitality. He is no longer a simple individual speaking, he is a group incarnate and personified.

([11], p. 158, emphasis mine).

In Durkheim’s analysis, whatever or whoever comes into contact with him or her gets magically and contagiously connected to the sacred aura (*i.e.*, the energy of the collective expressed as something sacred). Individual followers now experience effervescence *through* their contact with the totem. This jolt of social energy not only gives followers a mood-raising personal boost. It also begins to motivate shared beliefs, values and behaviour that maintain the social system. The totem therefore occupies a central social role because he or she both symbolizes the powerful force of

the collective (in an “energetic” sense) and governs the boundary between the sacred and the secular (in a semiotic one).

While Durkheim primarily wrote about tribal religion, it is important to add that his theory was a vehicle of secularization. It replaced divine mystery with human sociology. Durkheim argued that religious assembly was not the only means of creating heightened collective emotion, citing the French Revolution, for instance, as a moment of “general effervescence” ([11], p. 158); [12]. When applied to Elvis in particular, Durkheim’s work has significant explanatory power. His formulation of effervescence describes a type of emotional excitation emergent when physically coming together as the tribe in collective experiences. On an individual level, participants are aroused through their experience of participation in the collective. They require this communal context to feel excited. In an age of electronic media, it could be argued that participation in a collective is not limited to physical, face-to-face group encounters. We are encouraged to assume a degree of social unity when we are part of *any* collective, real or notional, including, say, the viewing audience for a national television show. For Durkheim, totemism is a way to mediate collective energy. In popular music, experiences of social unity are often premised on a shared focus—sometimes a celebrated, leading individual such as musician and star.

Attention to totemism alone goes quite far in helping us to understand fans’ desires to get closer to their heroes. Durkheim’s notions of totemism and effervescence can help to explain music’s function as a vehicle for intimacy, the repeated behaviour of celebrity-followers, the marketing of particular artists, and other aspects of popular music. Applied to an artist as unique as Elvis, many aspects of Durkheim’s schema work perfectly. Sonny’s date, for example, knew that Elvis was a focus of attention

and responded to his style of performance, to the extent that she expressed her sexual excitement. She demonstrated a new set of ethics and values by expressing her desire in public. Elvis' performance is central in this reading because it offers a gestural form of intimacy that justifies his role at the centre of the spectacle.

Some of Elvis Presley's most electric performances were sixty years ago. As an individual, he is no longer here. Despite this, he remains a focus of collective attention—the emblem of a particular social group (his fan base)—because of a musical legacy that still makes him seem sexy, vulnerable and emotionally available. Attention from fans in turn continues to render Elvis an important person in their hearts. His totemic role gives him an energized and privileged position, embodying the approval of his fan base. Elvis fandom can therefore be understood as a matter of discovering “the wonder of Elvis” by unconsciously recognizing both the star's popularity (as a guarantee of his social value) and a feeling a personal connection with his music. In that sense, *one aspect* of Elvis fandom is a bit *like* a tribal religion: for Durkheim, “religion is above all a system of notions by which individuals imagine the society to which they belong and their obscure yet intimate relations with that society” ([11], p. 270). Applying the notion of totemism suggests that there is a recognition in the head of each fan that Elvis is worth our individual attention both because his music has attracted a vast fan base, and because it helps people to feel closer to him [13]. To borrow Durkheim's words, Elvis and his fans “form an interdependent system in which all parts are linked and vibrate sympathetically” ([11], p. 116).

Durkheim's schema is interesting precisely because it shows that something *appearing* to be spiritual activity is actually based on social interaction. It

enables us to understand how a combination of tacit assumptions and group behaviour can generate an emotional buzz. Depending on the celebrity's public persona and the meanings attributed to it, a fan-to-star connection can theoretically consist of almost any positive fan feeling—lust, love, empathy, admiration or even grief—as long as a redistribution of attention is there. If fans *deified* their hero in idol worship, in contrast, they would actually be misattributing the results of a secular sociological process. In a chapter from their book on cult obedience, *The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power*, Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad ask, “Is experiencing intense energy a sign of spirituality, or is the experience in the same vein as young ladies who swoon in the presence of rock stars?” [14]. Kramer and Alstad draw a distinct boundary here between sacred and secular experience. Their contention is that the buzz of participating in rock music is qualitatively different to what are, in their view, more “genuine” spiritual miracles. From Kramer and Alstad's perspective, recognizing the difference may actually help us become more aware of the truly divine.

3. The Limits of Neo-Religiosity Scholarship

Elvis' fans tend to say that his magnetic appeal is either solely based on him as an individual or is inexplicable. Although popular speech confuses the two, I would argue that this understanding of personality as a source of charisma is not the same as deification, which is the attribution of metaphysical divinity. Fans become emotionally moved when paying attention to their heroes, but that does not mean that they “sacralize” or “venerate” or “transfigure” or “sanctify” or “worship” them. To say this does not mean, however, that the extended spirituality paradigm is “untrue” or the neo-Durkheimian one is “true”, as if there is an ultimate truth at stake. Both theories attempt to account for pleasurable participation in popular music. Each

produces its “truth” in a different way. The key question is how *analytically and ethically useful* it is to frame fan participation as a form of sacralizing activity. A judicious appropriation of Durkheim’s work avoids the pitfalls of neo-religiosity scholarship and offers a fresh perspective on the subject of fan behaviour.

Neo-religiosity scholarship has a significant central problem. One of the problems with liberal definitions of spirituality and the sacred is that they stretch almost *ad infinitum*. Religiosity scholars constantly run the risk of empire-building beyond notions of the sacred that can be offered with any degree of precision. In Christopher Partridge’s work, for example, the sacred is applied to anything set apart from daily life. Therefore, high culture and art are sacred (because they require cultivation to appreciate). The profane is seen as a variant (because it transgresses the absolutely sacred and thus reinforces its importance as a category). Loud music is seen as sacred (because it immerses us in an experience that is different from daily life). Celebrity-following is seen as a sacred practice (because fans supposedly “sacralize” anything touched by heroes who are set apart from daily life). Through such acrobatic semiotic feats, Partridge’s use of the term covers just about all popular music-related experience. The issue is even more pressing when we look at academic discussions of “post-secular” culture or “secular spirituality”. According to Cimino and Smith “secular spirituality” can mean anything from feeling wonder when seeing nature to believing that the world is governed by unseen deities [15]. “Secular spirituality” therefore references anything beyond total materialism and occupies an extremely broad conceptual marshland. If “spirituality” and “secular spirituality” represent everything beyond materialism, they lump together very diverse and contradictory feelings and ideas, from Satan worship on one hand, to Islamic fundamentalism, Christian mysticism and neo-gnostic conspiracy theories on the other. In other words,

the sacred, spirituality, post-secularity, “secular spirituality” and associated ideas are being used as *ecumenical concepts*—outreach tools that can place anything, including all of popular music, within their purview:

“The commonplace becomes impregnated with the solemn, the serious, and the sacred.” ([6], p. 238).

“Religion can both refer to a bounded and specific set of institutions and practices that endure over time and to a more nebulous sense that of the spiritual as it interpenetrates with everyday life.” [16].

The idea that spirituality nebulously “impregnates” and “interpenetrates” everyday life mystifies the term itself. The argument that religious faith is like some kind of gothic mist falling on individuals and cultures mistakes a process that mediates between social activities and personal convictions. Contrary to the claims made that sacredness is everywhere, spirituality can be understood as *a perspective from which daily life can be seen* as miraculous. The issue is that anything and everything can be seen as spiritual if it is framed that way: even science and materialism, for example, can arguably be construed as alerting us to the magnificence of God’s creation. Unlike Partridge, I therefore think it is unproductive to look for the sacred *in* the secular. If a star signs an autograph, it has value in the fan community not because it has radiated out as something contagiously sacred, but precisely the other way round: being a personally inscribed endorsement, it draws us closer toward (and makes us more intimate with) him or her. The process is a pull, not a push. We are not drawn to Elvis—or One Direction for that matter—because they are intrinsically sacred (or socially sacralized); if we are drawn to them, it is because we recognize their popularity and feel an emotional investment in their performance. In contemporary society, neither of those aspects are sacred or spiritual things.

Generalizations about spirituality and sacredness fail to define or find secularity. They are therefore in danger of *constantly overstepping the mark*. Part of the issue is that dictionary definitions of spirituality are rather liberal. According to the Oxford Dictionary “spirituality” is the adverb form of the adjective “spiritual” which has two associated meanings. One is “relating to religion or religious belief” (where the latter means belief, faith, devotion to and worship of “a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal God or gods”) [17]. The other is something “relating to or affecting the human soul as opposed to material or physical things”, which breaks down into “having a relationship based on a profound level of mental or emotional communion” and “not [being] concerned with material values or pursuits” [18]. In the context of such an all-inclusive, human rather than divine definition, to its engaged participants popular music is *necessarily* spiritual. After all, it raises our mood and brings us closer together. However, so does successfully participating in relatively secular activity, from watching an absorbing lecture to playing a team sport.

Satisfying communal activities do not have to be seen as spiritual ones.

The liberal quality of spiritual language also helps to create a kind of vagueness in popular discussions. Religious terms are ingrained in ordinary talk about music. They are attractive both to listeners who wish to emphasize the awe-inspiring nature of musical experience and scholars concerned to question the rationality of fan behaviour. Indeed, fans, critics and academics *all* use a vocabulary from religion to talk about popular music culture. Despite this apparently shared ground, at times they talk past each other because they use *different registers*. Fans alternately deny the religiosity of their experiences and embrace a language of spiritual transcendence. To describe feelings of uplift that spring from their love of music, they sometimes reach for religious terms [19]. They tend to adopt figures of speech that most people use to

describe engagements with pop culture, terms that do not especially single them out as eccentric. Popularly accepted terms include words like “icon”, “idol”, “passion”, “soul”, “devotion” and “pilgrimage” [20]. Music critics, as a kind of intermediary group, have often drawn upon religious language *as rhetoric*, emphasizing the power of particular performers to change lives. In this register, concepts such as prophecy and terms like “fire” play a key role [21,22]. Peter Guralnick’s affectionate suggestion that Sam Phillips “had the look of an Old Testament prophet in tennis sneakers” is a typical example [23]. The music critics’ register is subtly different in tone and style from the more blatant mass culture parodies formulated to dismiss Elvis fans as being “crackpot cultists”. In Christopher Partridge’s discussion, for instance, Elvis fans are associated with veneration, transfiguration, idol worship, fetishism, conspiracy theories, shrines and visions. Such terms suggest that scholars aim to create portrayals that do not treat fans as ordinary, sane, rational human subjects.

The term “worship”, for instance, is not innocent: there is a danger that it can be extended from religious discourse to dismiss fan engagement as servile activity. Religiosity scholars have used a spiritual vocabulary to associate fandom with arguably negative, *fundamentalist* qualities like worship (submission), piety (intolerance) and blind faith (closed-mindedness)—qualities that raise ethical concerns. For Partridge, for example, Elvis fans are essentially idealists, out of touch with the realities of life. They are portrayed as dreamers who have chosen to ignore the final predicament of their hero as a “bloated, paranoid drug addict who died in less than seraphic circumstances” ([6], p. 239). On face value, one or two prominent examples of the Elvis phenomenon—from the famous meditation garden at Graceland to the fans’ annual candle-lit vigil—*seem to* imply spiritual devotion. These practices are, in fact, different ways in which people pursue their totemic interest as fans:

thinking about their personal loss and individual connection to Elvis, and being pleasantly reminded about his ongoing popularity. Such fan practices are not moments of beatification or veneration, as if to say that Elvis was perfect and could do no wrong. Elvis fans have not blindly chosen to ignore the final predicament of their hero as an addict who died in less than seraphic circumstances. In fact, they often know *far more* about that than the reporters and scholars who misidentify their community. Instead, they *choose* not to emphasize Elvis' least appealing qualities *to non-fans* because those will not attract new recruits to the fan base—a concern that is perfectly consistent with Durkheim's argument that totemic groups share self-preserving value systems [24].

In order to understand the ethical significance of a secularized version of Durkheim's schema, I will discuss Elvis fandom's changing predicament in the public sphere. The mass culture critique is the idea that fans are controlled and manipulated by popular culture to the point where they are docile, subservient dupes. In public discussions of fandom, this paradigm has held sway as the dominant discursive resource. It was most prominent in the mass broadcast era between the 1920s and 1990s [25]. Mass culture ideas suggested that dedicated followers were in fact servile consumers who had relinquished their individual independence in favour of embracing irrational fads and fancies. In this paradigm, criticism had often been expressed through the concept of “idol worship”. Because of the emotional nature of their interests and the way that they entered the public sphere, pop and rock fans were an easy target for such interpretations. Describing music fans as “idol worshippers” became a way to portray them as misguided “believers” unable to separate fantasy from reality [26].

At the climax of Elvis' 1969 film *Change of Habit* (dir. Graham), a nun played by Mary Tyler Moore found herself in church watching the man that she loved strumming his guitar and leading the congregation in a rousing folk pop sing-a-long called "Pray Together". She gazes most longingly at Dr. Carpenter (played by Elvis) then glances across to a crucifix hung on the wall. The camera pans up to the cross, inviting spectators to share her gaze and her dilemma: should she keep her vows and follow her religious vocation or lead a romantic life in the arms of the man she loves? *Change of Habit* was Elvis' final narrative film and amongst the least popular with his fans. Watching its ending, it is hard not to think that Sister Michelle was supposed to substitute for spectators as they compared religious ecstasy and rock'n'roll glory. It is hard not to interpret the scene as a sly, knowing, Hollywood skit on the idea that Elvis was, to his fans, almost as seductive as the Almighty. *Change of Habit* was not the only time that Elvis sent up his own alleged divinity, however. One of his renditions of "The Lord's Prayer", recorded in Nashville, May 1971, joked about how he went from Sun Records to RCA [27]. In other words, Elvis clearly understood and affectionately played upon the idea that his fans had mistakenly worshipped him.

The idea of Elvis fans as "worshippers" has had a long and varied history. In the conservative 1950s, Elvis caused widespread excitement amongst female teens. His phenomenon was particularly prone to mass culture interpretations: almost everything—from the sentimentality of his music to his refusal to adopt middle class trappings—sat uneasily with structures of cultural capital that informed critical elites. In the tumultuous 1960s, Elvis made light, family movies that sat uneasily with the changing times. To an extent, "crackpot cultist" readings of his fan base—as one Amazon book reviewer labelled them—were already in circulation and made their

way into media representations. In the 1970s, Elvis toured the USA and played to packed audiences, but eventually became addicted to prescription medication, put on weight, and died on the brink of a new tour. In the neoliberal 1980s, a feeling emerged that Elvis' human failings were being ignored by those who rallied to save his legacy. Critics dismissed the Elvis phenomenon as emotionally excessive, commercial and vulgar. "Drive-by" media, unconcerned with any sustained engagement with fans, lambasted Elvis' following. In a process not unique to representations of Elvis culture but common to portrayals of pop fandom, the media focused on a handful of "extreme" fans [28]. It selected only their most eccentric practices to show, and it presented them only within particular frameworks. Tom Corboy's 1984 documentary *Mondo Elvis*, for instance, featured a woman who said her husband divorced her, in part for "excessive devotion to Elvis Presley" [29]. In the nostalgic 1990s and 2000s, guardians of refined culture felt threatened by Elvis because he was increasingly adopted as part of America's heritage. Historical plaques were erected to mark his achievements. Fans campaigned for a national Elvis Presley day, to be held on his birthday every year. The Smithsonian recognized his artistic significance. In 1992, presidential candidate Bill Clinton played "Heartbreak Hotel" on national television. The American public voted to select an image for a commemorative postage stamp. Just when Elvis was becoming officially accepted as a *legitimate* historical figure, to some it appeared necessary to focus attention on jumpsuits, pills, burgers, and "crazy" followers. "Cult" diagnoses reflected deep anxieties about the awkward popularity of a contested cultural icon, someone who enchanted working class audiences so well that they could not let him go. Two decades after Elvis died, the BBC devoted an episode of its weekly documentary series *Everyman* to "Elvis and the Presleytarians". Similar representations arose in

environments where there were commercial pressures to portray fans in ways that would normalize “mainstream” (non-fan) audiences. It had become a going concern to stereotype Elvis fans as cultists [30]. To disagree was to fight against the commercial tide.

Unfortunately, when it came to discussing Elvis culture, a number of scholars adopted ideas created by popular parodists, and pursued reworked mass culture perspectives [31]. Because their priority was to frame the Elvis phenomena as a new kind of spiritual practice, some seized upon stereotypes from second-hand sources. I describe this phenomenon, at worst, as a form of “drive-by academia” because it uncritically perpetuates stereotypes developed by “drive-by media”. Exploring supposedly substitute religious practices they envisioned fans as misguided “believers” who had sacrificed their rational faculties in favour of blind devotion. Critics, commentators and academics thus began to label the Elvis phenomenon a “cult” [32,33,34,35]. Others followed in their wake. The scholars who have made such claims sometimes profess to be popular music fans, but they rarely demonstrate any sustained engagement with the Elvis Presley fans that are their object of study [3]. Their diagnosis positions fans as servile and misguided neo-religious believers. I therefore wrote an article for *Popular Music and Society* in 2003 called, “False Faith or False Comparison? A Critique of the Religious Interpretation of Elvis Fan Culture” [31]. As someone who had completed a Ph.D. working with Elvis fans, I was concerned that the subjects of my research were being misrepresented and treated with neither dignity nor respect. The “False Faith” article became part of an ongoing debate about popular music and religiosity. It was summarized by several scholars who said that the neo-religiosity thesis reflected middle class bias in academic discussions about music fandom [36,37,38]. At least one researcher took me as saying that perhaps

academics should “give up critically analyzing” fans’ autobiographical statements [39]. My key concern was that scholars had never taken the time to engage *dialogically* with the human objects of their discussion. Instead they tended to uncritically adopt constructions of fandom emerging from “drive-by” media and, in effect, summon up an imagined cult of Elvis.

Ironically, in cultural studies, the work of Henry Jenkins and others generated a paradigm shift that has put aside mass culture thinking and recognized media fans as textual poachers, cultural participants and activists—networked and politically engaged individuals who can act in communities to express their intelligence, creativity and ability to make a difference to the world [26,40,41]. Mass culture thinking still holds sway to some extent both outside of academia and in some disciplines within it. Psychologists McCutcheon, Lange and Houran, for instance, have pathologized media fandom by attempting to invent a psychiatric disorder they describe as “celebrity worship syndrome” [42]. McCutcheon, Lange and Houran’s use of the term “worship” is indicative here. It could be argued that some neo-religiosity scholarship has, like much psychology, repackaged mass cultural assumptions.

4. Beyond the Stereotypes: Gospel, God-Given Talent and Worship Music

In the last section I questioned the value of making “crackpot cultist” readings of popular music fandom and introduced Durkheim’s notion of totemism to explain fan rationality. One of the ways in which music is secular now is that stars can operate as centres of attention without any particular emphasis on spirituality. If fans do not “worship” Elvis, does that mean his religious concerns are irrelevant to their engagements? This section will examine Elvis’ interest in church music and how his fans have responded to that interest. It considers three different limit cases which

challenge a secular neo-Durkheimian reading: Elvis' passion for sacred music, the idea that his voice was a God-given gift, and his live gospel performances. While these do not suggest that fans have worshipped Elvis himself (pop idolatry), they nevertheless challenge a secular reading of his phenomenon because they appear—at least upon first inspection—to demarcate moments of *Christian* worship. My argument, however, is that Elvis' meaningful engagement with sacred music does not fundamentally alter the secular sociology of his fan phenomenon.

In terms of its styles, themes and lyrics, contemporary music contains all kinds of allusions to the sacred. What, then, is the role of such frequent allusions in Elvis' case? Neo-religiosity arguments have often ignored Elvis' actual music. Partridge, for instance, offers an extended discussion of the transgressive project of Genesis P-Orridge yet says little about P-Orridge's audience. Alternately, he makes very particular claims about Elvis fans while saying next to nothing about *Elvis'* music [6]. Such critical silences indicate the structures of cultural capital that guide popular music scholarship, a field where Elvis remains a relatively unrepresented figure. Attention to totemism suggests that vernacular music has, in a secular environment, provided a wellspring of signs and meanings that can provide an especially close conception of intimacy and therefore make both emotional and economic sense. On the semiotic level (*i.e.*, in terms of musical *content*) ascriptions of “the sacred”—in its widest sense from sexuality and profanity to church-based spirituality—are useful in helping to justify the powerful sensations of intimacy that emerge from celebrity-following interactions.

Elvis was a Christian who grew up going to church and publically expressed his love for gospel music [43]. According to the critic Shane Brown, his earliest known

recording of a gospel song came in September 1954 when he attempted to record Martha Carlson's country-gospel number "Satisfied" [44]. Unfortunately, Sam Phillips only released Elvis' rock'n'roll material. The tape of "Satisfied" was either recorded over or lost. During his earlier years, Elvis was not therefore understood as a gospel artist. Instead he performed rock'n'roll in a state of abandon that had both racial and sexual connotations. Elvis' second Sun single, for example, "Good Rockin' Tonight", knowingly implied sexual pleasure in its title. In an era where civility was defined around the practice of courtship behaviour, Elvis evoked female desire *en masse* in public. He was attacked by a range of critics that represented the Establishment and its interests. Late in the summer of 1956, for example, Pastor Robert Gray told his congregation at Trinity Baptist Church in Jacksonville that Elvis Presley had achieved "a new low in spiritual degeneracy" [45].

During his first phase in the national spotlight, Elvis experimented by reflecting on his connection to religion in order to diffuse the controversy. Explaining his rock'n'roll style in May 1956, he said, "I just landed upon it accidentally. More or less I [am] a pretty close follower of religious quartets, and they do a lot of rockin' spirituals" [46]. As the national controversy broke, he could not sustain this link. Discussing a piece which had said that he got his moves from church singing, Elvis told a *TV Guide* interviewer four months later, "My religion has nothing to do with what I do now, because, the type of stuff I do now is not religious music. My religious background has nothing to do with the way I sing." ([46], p. 53). Although Elvis flaunted his body and teased his audience, he was not quite the young upstart that his detractors imagined. He evidently loved his parents. He also had a deferential attitude and good manners. With an air of apparent innocence, he stressed that his gyrations were simply expressions of the music.

Elvis quickly began singing gospel music on national television in between his rock'n'roll numbers. RCA then decided that they wanted a Christmas album to draw on the success of his recorded gospel repertoire. In September 1957 Elvis went into the Radio Recorders studio in Hollywood and cut the knowing “Blue Christmas”—which had been a country hit for Ernest Tubb—and Leiber and Stoller’s equally racy “Santa Claus Is Back In Town”, plus more conservative Christmas classics like “White Christmas” and “O Little Town of Bethlehem” [47]. This set a characteristic pattern in Elvis’ recording career: church music *alongside* secular material, with considerable interchange between the two. Given his reputation, the singer’s embrace of conservative music was almost as controversial as his rock’n’roll had been. Irvin Berlin, for example, was furious in 1957 that the rock’n’roller had decided to record his staple “White Christmas”. Traditional music nevertheless allowed Elvis to express his conservative side and become a successful, mainstream artist. The bid to present him as a family entertainer—someone that Ed Sullivan grudgingly called “a real, decent, fine boy”—succeeded when Elvis entered the army [48]. The singer continued performing gospel music right up until his death in 1977.

Southern gospel quartets drew no distinction between the sacred and the commercial. They were part of a racially segregated culture of sharp-dressed singing groups who combined a secular approach to stage presentation with a “sacred” repertoire of gospel music. While the quartets emerged from a tradition of church music and sang with immense sincerity, they were commercially viable stars in their own right on the Southern circuit—successful enough, in fact, to tour the region on their own buses and play to packed houses of excited fans. Elvis had grown up with the quartet phenomenon and took its leaders—with all their charismatic vocal feats—to be his own heroes. In the years just before he became famous, he regularly attended the

popular gospel all-nighters at the Ellis Auditorium in Memphis. One of the leading groups, the Blackwood Brothers, signed to RCA. The outfit received national television exposure and sold over a million records. Quartets emerged from the culture of Christianity that was a strong part of the social fabric of the South. They clearly expressed a spiritual ethos *through* commercial means, but it could also be argued that they unwittingly “secularized” their sacred root music by bringing it into a space governed by the concerns of commerce.

Elvis was drawn to the gospel quartet scene and wanted to be part of it. In July 1953, just before his break at Sun, he auditioned for the Songfellows, an apprentice version of the Blackwood Brothers. Once he became an RCA artist, beginning with the Jordanaires (who had started back in 1948), he hired a series of quartets to back him on recorded then live performances. In the 1950s albums were seen as afterthoughts to singles; Elvis’ first official gospel release was his *Peace in the Valley* EP. He followed this up with a string of gospel releases, including the RCA LPs *His Hand in Mine* (1960), *How Great Thou Art* (1967) and *He Touched Me* (1972). His style extended the gospel quartet tradition into contemporary country—popularizing the Nashville sound—and, later, influenced Christian music: a hybrid commercial genre based on religious lyrics, an easy-going delivery, and instruments, sounds and styles from modern folk and pop. Elvis’ interest in gospel was also expressed in his 1970s live sets. Beyond hosting his quartet backing singers, he also introduced, and sometimes duetted with, a gospel vocal group called Voice, an act fostered to showcase the haunting vocals of Sherrill Nielsen. By this point Elvis’ live sets encompassed the totality of American music. In a context that was primarily about entertainment, fans shared the sound of gospel and hymns alongside ballads and up-tempo rock ‘n’ roll numbers. A good example of this is the way that Elvis would

occasionally sing a line or two from the Catholic devotional song, “Ave Maria”, in the middle of his August 1970 extended live rendition of Ray Charles’ “I Gotta Woman”—itself a secular r’n’b song based on the tune of a gospel number by the Southern Tones called “It Must Be Jesus”. At first sight, Elvis’ propensity to sing sacred music alongside its secular counterpart may seem strange, or perhaps even sacrilegious. According to his most infamous critic, the biographer Albert Goldman:

Elvis Presley never stood for anything. He made no sacrifices, fought no battles, suffered no martyrdom, never raised a finger to struggle on behalf of what he believed or claimed to believe. Even gospel, the music he cherished above all, he travestied and commercialized and soft-soaped to the point where it became nauseating. [49]

Goldman lamented that Elvis “sold out” gospel as sacred music, bastardizing it for a commercial mass audience. This claim, like so many of his others, misunderstands both the artist and the vernacular musical traditions within which Elvis’ musical interests developed. It was not so much, as Goldman suggested, that Elvis was single-handedly perverting sacred music; it was rather that what he sang came from a vernacular commercial tradition in which sacred and secular styles were thoroughly and appealingly entwined. Just as Southern traditions drew no clear line between sacred and commercial gospel music, so Elvis drew no clear distinction between his own secular and sacred numbers. He recorded both kinds during his studio sessions and performed both at his live shows; it was actually his record releases that separated the two.

So what did gospel do for Elvis? It was the music that seemed closest to his heart and it served a variety of associated functions. First, the values expressed in gospel were part of his explanatory framework. In a 1956 piece in *Elvis Answers Back* magazine, Elvis explained that, unlike his critics suggested, he had not forgotten religion, and

had stayed dedicated to his faith. He added, “I believe all good things come from God” ([46], p. 70). Over fifteen years later, Sherman Andrus—the black singer who made the Imperials a mixed race outfit—reminded Elvis of his privileged iconic position. He replied, “You know, I know that and I couldn’t have done it without God”. Gospel was therefore the music that Elvis used to express his faith. To one journalist he said, “I never expected to be anyone important. Maybe I’m not now. But whatever I am, whatever I will become, will be what God has chosen for me. I feel he’s watching every move I make.” [50].

The relationship between Elvis’ religious proclivities and musical output is a complex one. We cannot say that gospel was a transparent expression of Elvis’ faith: his engagement with it was as much musical (about form and use) as religious (about content and faith). Musically, he was inspired by a very wide variety of influences and recorded a range of broadly Christian, religious songs, from black spirituals to Catholic tunes like “Miracle of the Rosary”. Although he was a professional singer and addressed a range of audiences with such material, when given free rein to express his own musical preferences he usually pursued gospel quartet singing. Gospel was, in effect, Elvis’ version of both “folk” (pre-commercial) and “soul” (emotionally expressive) music. It connected him to his roots and his mother, a Southern matriarch who also had a strong Christian faith. Here it is important to note that Elvis’ pursuit of the genre has sometimes (falsely) been positioned *against* the imperative of commerce: after all, Elvis would sometimes sing gospel as warm up music at the start of his pop recording sessions, using expensive studio time. Gospel was, in effect, the genre that Elvis used to get his voice ready to attempt various vocal feats. It was also Elvis’ “party” music, in so far that it connected him to a certain kind of communality. He tended to avoid up-tempo gospel on stage, but would often sing it

together with friends back in his penthouse in the early hours of the morning. Elvis used gospel when he wanted to bond voices together. Gospel united the star with those around him, linking all of them to a strong tradition of sacred music. It put his mind at ease. It was also a way to add a touch of metaphysical mystery to his appeal as an entertainer. What I want to emphasize here, however, is that Elvis' followers are interested in his gospel music for their own set of reasons. It could be argued that fans pursue their interest in Elvis' expression of religious faith primarily because it highlights a very close form of intimacy. For instance, biographer Joel Williamson recently noted that the church in which Elvis was raised "focussed on the blessings of the Holy Spirit and on a very personal closeness to God" ([14], p. 85), adding, "These Christians felt the spirit of God with an intimacy and power that mainline churches had found during the Great Awakenings" ([14], p. 87). Williamson draws our attention to intimacy here, perhaps, because faith offers an idealized form of closeness toward which the star-fan relationship aspires.

The second part of this final section will consider how fans of different outlooks understand the role of Elvis' faith in his musical performance. In an interesting recent piece, Andrew Crome has examined My Little Pony fans that have strong, pre-existing religious faith. He has argued that they have used their media fandom to reinforce their Christian identities. Crome's work is interesting because it looks beyond media consumption in its effort to understand research subjects. He refuses to simplistically posit fandom as a replacement for—or degraded form of—spirituality. In a more ambitious project, Crome instead aims to understand how "[media] fandom serves as one resource (among many others) to be used as part of the construction of faith identity" ([51], p. 414). This avenue could be productive for fan studies because

it does not conflate fandom and faith but instead examines the interactive nature of their relationship.

Some popular discussions about Elvis interpret his religious faith. One common idea is that he was not simply a skilled musician but had a God-given gift. This notion has its secular counterpart in the Darwinian idea of natural selection: that musical skill is randomly distributed throughout the population and that through the mechanism of the music industry we promote those who have the most talent. From a sacred perspective, a musical gift is an expression of God's light in the world. Elvis arguably aimed to use the structures of human feeling identified by Durkheim, in that sense, to direct his audience's attention beyond himself and alert them to the divine. Certainly, he often said that he did not like his nickname: he was not "The King" as there was only one (God). In other words he contributed his gift to celebrate his maker. At one point in 1976, according to JD Sumner, Elvis considered committing himself only to gospel music—and, in effect, becoming a preacher—but then the evangelist Rex Humbard told him that "he was tilling the soil for others to sow the seed" [52]. Elvis' performances of songs such as "How Great Thou Art" were genuine attempts to use his vocal gifts to showcase the majesty of the divine, in the same way that, say, the devout Roman Catholic painter Paul Cézanne used his talent to, as he saw it, reflect upon God's creation.

Peter and Madeleine Wilson are an English couple who believe that Elvis has a role as an outreach tool for the church. In 1998 they started Elvis Gospel Ministries as a way to bring fans into the fold of the Christian community. Elvis Gospel Ministries remains an Internet based operation with a regular newsletter, occasional UK events (both in and outside church), connections to Memphis (via both Elvis Presley

Enterprises and the Centre for Southern Folklore) and community of intercessors (who pray on behalf of fans). Elvis Gospel Ministries tends to ignore the non-Christian aspects of Elvis' spiritual quest, including things that have troubled other Christian organizations [53]. They understand Elvis as a kind of disciple figure and use him to preach an evangelical message to fans. On national television, Madeleine Wilson claimed that those interested in Elvis' charisma were actually seeing the Holy Spirit at work:

Nobody can come to God except through Jesus, and I believe that Elvis may be one of the ways—that God's put him on Earth to draw people to him, and then through Elvis to see Jesus... My faith was changed as I have become more excited as I realized how God can move in the world today... People see in Elvis something very, very special. I believe what people see that is special in Elvis is God, is the Holy Spirit. And I believe it's God's way of drawing people to himself. [1]

While it is not impossible to conceive of fans that come to a greater knowledge of God through their interest in Elvis, neither is it *likely* that his music has been the *sole* reason for any Christian conversion. Many fans assent to the “gift” reading simply because it aligns with Elvis' own broadly Christian values. They know that Elvis was a person who held spirituality in high regard. The notion of the gift ultimately therefore serves to align Elvis' own totemic popularity with a version of his spiritual faith in a way that allows fans to *both* respect *his* beliefs (as a spiritual person) and affiliate with him *as a totem* (with his God-given gift justifying his popularity). According to Elvis' friend Christine Ferra, for instance:

Part of the strength of Elvis is his faith and his belief spiritually—that's what attracts a lot of people to him. People can talk about his swivelling hips or his wonderful voice and then the sexual attraction he had, but the biggest attraction of Elvis in my estimation was his spiritual strength and his faith, and his being plugged into the power source—so to speak—plugged into God, and people are always attracted to that tremendous energy. [54]

The “power source” that Ferra identifies here is, arguably, collective support. Elvis’ felt recognition of audience interest inevitably enhanced his confidence and totemic aura. If, nevertheless, both the singer and his Christian fans understand his magnetic appeal as a result of being “plugged into God”, does that mean that Elvis’ fan base ordinarily sees him as a conduit to the divine?

One issue here is that fans usually know more than non-fans about the theological complexity of Elvis’ quest. The singer’s dedicated audience finds his faith interesting precisely because it reveals something about him as a person. His religious quest was characterized by its avoidance of easy divisions. Elvis Presley’s most profound, personal recorded religious experience came when he was driving back from Los Angeles to Memphis during his movie years. After a few hours travelling through New Mexico and Arizona, he experienced a miraculous moment out in the desert. Elvis became fixated on a cloud formation, thinking he could see a human face. He exclaimed:

And then it happened! The face of Stalin turned right into the face of Jesus, and he smiled at me, and every fibre of my being felt it. For the first time in my life, God and Christ are a living reality. ([53], p. 110).

Such revelatory experiences can be accommodated within a Christian perspective, yet Elvis’ varied spiritual interests did not stop there. He had been raised in the First Assembly of God church (a variant of the Southern Pentecostal tradition), but his mother’s family line was Jewish [55]. He put a Star of David on her grave. His inner-circle contained several Jewish friends. According to George Klein, “When he was once asked why he wore both a cross and a Jewish chai round his neck, Elvis said, ‘I don’t want to miss out on getting into heaven on a technicality’.” [56]. Furthermore, in the mid-1960s—under the influence of his hairdresser, Larry Geller—Elvis also

began exploring new age alternative spirituality. In 1965, Geller took Elvis to the Self-Realization Fellowship in Los Angeles, an organization pursuing the meditational teachings of a deceased Indian guru called Yogananda. As the hairdresser explained, “For Elvis, his spiritual studies were part of his spiritual evolution” ([53], p. 137). The Memphis singer was fascinated with Kahlil Gibran’s *The Prophet*, flirted with the study of astrology and telepathy, and gave many of his friends copies of Joseph Benner’s 1914 book *The Impersonal Life*. Indeed, the latter was so linked to Elvis that in 2001 the Presley estate brought out a special Graceland edition [57,58,59].

During Elvis’ lifetime, in show business the news circulated of his willingness to pursue a range of spiritual interests. A number of organizations, including Scientology, “made pitches” to him ([53], p. 135). Precisely because knowledge of his faith is understood as revealing more about his personality, controversies about his religious beliefs have become a point of fan discussion in the wake of his death. Elvis’ spirituality has become subject to claims from individuals and organizations that wish to speak to his audience. A good example of this came when “super fan” Cricket Coulter said that she had given Elvis a copy of the Book of Mormon, and that only a premature death cut short his plan to be baptized in the Mormon faith. In 2001 the archives of the Latter Day Saints church said that it had located two Books of Mormon featuring his annotations, and had also received enquiries on a weekly basis trying to substantiate Coulter’s claims [60]. In summary, while Elvis was most associated with Christianity, his interest in religious practice was a quest that was exploratory in nature. It was so meandering that in 2013 Gary Tillery published a book-length “spiritual biography” to summarize Elvis’ life long quest. It is crucial to understand, however, that Elvis’ public image did not feature much variety while he

was alive. It was not common knowledge until after 1977. Since then his fans have become more apt than outsiders to recognize the complexity of his spiritual engagements because they are more likely to read such biographies.

Although he loved gospel music, Elvis did not actually use it as a means of worship in the strict sense. His relationship to sacred music can be explored through comparison to what Thomas Bossius called “worship music” [61]. This category includes any type of music—from hymns and ritual chants, to contemporary pop songs—written and used with the intention of being “sung prayer”. Bossius mentions that worship music is performed on occasions that are understood by those involved as worship events, even though they can sometimes resemble rock concerts for young Christians.

Crucially, the musicians keep a low profile at such events and the music is organized for the glorification of God rather than for any human individual. In relation to that idea, the Presley repertoire included hymns like “How Great Thou Art” and contemporary gospel such as “Pray Together”. However, other elements of Bossius’s definition do not entirely square with Elvis’ performances. While 1970s live shows included sincere moments of gospel performance, they were not understood by all concerned as acts of worship. It is relevant here to note Bossius’s definition:

Musically, most of the new worship music is based on the styles and sounds of pop, rock, and country, but other types of music are also used... What is specific and new about contemporary worship music is instead that, despite its close relationship to the mentioned genres, it does not function primarily as popular music, but as sacred devotional music. Worship music is not performed as entertainment, but as prayer music in ordinary services or special worship services. In addition, worship concerts are also arranged. These concerts can be said to be something between a worship service and a rock concert... at the youth events, the line between rock and roll entertainment and worship, at least during the up tempo songs, becomes very thin. ([61], p. 53, emphasis mine).

For Bossius, worship music offers “secular” pop and rock pleasures in a religious format. One might argue that Elvis’ concerts were, in fact, the complete *opposite* of that. It is likely that fans understood his “sacred” performances in a secular way, as moments of popular spectacle where Elvis performed vocal feats that showcased what his life was about. We cannot, furthermore, say that Elvis kept a low profile during these events—although sometimes he did attempt to divert attention that was given to him toward his gospel singers and said their vocal achievements were performed in the service of God. The Memphis singer sincerely understood certain parts of his show as an act of worship, but that does not mean that his audience saw them in the same light. Elvis’ fans respected their hero’s religious devotion, but did not necessarily take him as introducing them to Jesus. They knew that his 1970s stage performance was a window on both his personal interests and the ways of the South—a culture bonded through community, locality and religion.

In order to understand the response of Elvis fans specifically to his gospel music, I extracted the full set of over 200 user reviews from his three original studio gospel albums from the website of a popular online retailer. Most of the review comments were simply recommendations, but a small minority considered the way that gospel music inspired Elvis to give his most soulful performances and also of the sense of comfort those performances could bring to listeners. Fans took gospel music as the genre that offered a privileged insight into Elvis’ own struggle and beliefs. Three reviewers, who evidently already had spiritual beliefs, framed their discussion in terms of God’s blessing enabling Elvis to share his musical gift. The same number talked about Elvis’ music giving them a spiritual boost. Two asserted that listeners of any religion could enjoy Elvis’ gospel recordings. Only one out of over 200 mentioned that their engagement with the music gave them a deep spiritual

experience of any sort. None talked about finding Jesus specifically through Elvis. These results only begin to scratch the surface of fan responses. They tell us nothing about the live audiences who attended his shows in the 1970s, but at least reveal something about how his music is understood by dedicated listeners today. What they tell us is that fans frame Elvis' gospel output primarily as a source of their own aesthetic pleasure, rather than something that does pastoral work all by itself. This is consistent with a neo-Durkheimian reading, because it shows that fans see Elvis as their primary centre of attention.

5. Conclusions

In this piece I have suggested that even though Elvis fans are emotionally uplifted by his music and sometimes use religious language, they are not engaged in practices of sacralisation. I have argued that what religiosity scholars see as the expanded sacred is, in fact, a complex, multi-layered phenomenon. On one level, ideas of “idol worship” have been used to frame fandom as servile and misguided. Fans, music critics and detractors all use a religious vocabulary, but they use different registers within the same discourse to emphasize different experiences. At times this means that they talk past each other. Part of the reason for using religious language is that celebrity and music still enchant us in seemingly magical ways. Extracting one mechanism from Durkheim's work means we can recognize this “spiritual” phenomenon as something human: the result of an unequal exchange of attention. In a secular environment, vernacular music provides semiotic resources to express great intimacy and therefore makes commercial sense. When it appears in music themes and lyrics, the “sacred” (in its expanded sense) is therefore a *justification* for thrills generated by the totemic system. Attention to Elvis' sacred music—a field ignored by religiosity arguments—shows us how this happens. Gospel quartets drew no lines

between the sacred and the secular. Elvis loved gospel and used it to enter the mainstream. Despite his own intentions, he did not, however, practice “worship” music. His fans respected his values but have not generally understood him as a conduit to God. Some have said that Elvis used his music as a God-given gift, in part because the reading aligns Elvis’ values with his talents. He remains a centre of attention and is understood as a fascinating, socially-valued individual, but his fans do not position him as a deity or perfect being. An issue with neo-religiosity scholarship is that it rarely addresses counter-arguments or makes the fine distinctions necessary to fully understand the topic. Various ontological levels require untangling: the frameworks dominating public discussions about music fandom, how fans negotiate such frameworks, what actually generates listener emotions, why notions of the sacred appear in popular music, and, finally, how fans understand the faith of their heroes. When we start separating those out, we find that—despite superficial similarities—there is a marked difference between worshipping an idol and following a star.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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