

Pop goes the Pope: religion and popular music in Italy

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ABSTRACT

Music has maintained a long relationship with cult since ancient times, contributing to its efficacy and strengthening a communitarian identity. The advent of Christianity marked a sensible change in the way music was used, pioneering the very idea of listening as absolute, later extended to Western art music. The spread of popular music in the twentieth century impacted on religion too and the Christian world was particularly affected from the Second Vatican Council on, both within liturgy and in secular activities. A strong impulse to legitimate and even welcome sounds and practices from pop and rock culture was given by John Paul II, in 1997 during a concert featuring the future Nobel Prize Winner Bob Dylan. The article explores this changing relationship from an interdisciplinary perspective, borrowing from history, musicology, anthropology, sociology, theology, and cultural studies, as suggested by the ‘media, religion and culture’ approach. The first part reviews the historical steps leading to contemporary soundscape with respect to religion. The second part focuses on three case-studies, each representing a distinct point of view: that of traditional music revived, centered on collectivity; that of *auteur* music, centered on the power of the word; that of crossover pop, aimed at offering an aesthetic experience.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 26 February 2021

Revised 31 May 2021

Accepted 1 July 2021

KEYWORDS

Music; popular music; sacred; noise; silence; Italian Church

1. Introduction

The musical creator is a being comparable to the gods, and music itself is the supreme mystery of the science of man (Claude Lévi-Strauss)

In the Christian community the church bell is ‘the most salient sound signal. In a very real sense it defines the community, for the parish is an acoustic space, circumscribed by the range of the church bell’ (Schafer 1980, 53–54), calling upon the citizens to mourn and now to rejoice (Huizinga 1996), warning them of danger, as much as in the past it frightened away evil spirits. Functioning as the village clock, it announced religious and civil services, creating a sense of local rooting (Corbin 1994). During my childhood, I experienced the solitary ring of the church bell in a small hamlet where my family spent their summer holidays. That unique sound resonated above a stunning

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silence, announcing the Sunday Mass time. As a grown-up, every year early in December I still can hear the shepherds climbing down the hills to announce Christmas time with the sound of their bagpipes mixing with the car horns in the streets of Rome. The parish had a central role in my teenage years, along with school, family, friends, and soccer. Going to church and participating in activities organized by the priest often implied some singing, whether it be gay liturgical songs during the Mass or ancient melodies in Latin during evening Vespers. We used to sing aboard the coach on mountain trips, at the oratory for Carnival parties, and in processions accompanied by the marching band. No one was aware that we were making an offering to God, for that was indeed the primordial function of music in ancient times: a symbolic representation of a sacrifice to deities, to both placate their wrath and secure their favors. This archaic modality contributes to making music a pre-logic manifestation of the unconscious (Shepherd and Wicke 1997), or else a supreme mystery (Lévi-Strauss 1964). In the guidelines to social communications drawn up by the Italian Episcopal Conference it is written: 'Art as a possible meeting place with mystery' (CEI 2004, 49). Among the arts, music stands out as the ineffable, as is the mystery of God, and love (Jankélévitch 1983).

September 27, 1997 is a crucial date for those who are interested in reconstructing the relations between popular music and the Church. On that day, the most revered rock star in the world and the Minister of God on earth found themselves face to face in an outdoor concert in Bologna and exchanged a few words in front of 300,000 people and 200 cardinals gathered for the 23rd Eucharistic Congress. The star was Bob Dylan, twenty years later awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. The Minister was John Paul II. One cannot imagine more distant persons: Dylan, even though carrying along his many changes and (apparent) contradictions, was the icon of the counterculture. Wojtyła, even though adored for his innovative ways and gestures, was an anticommunist, hostile to leftist movements in the Church. But the two found a common ground on a question raised by a cult song by the American artist ('Blowing in the wind'), who interrupted his performance to reach the Pope for a handshake, after taking off his hat. Then he went back to his guitar to conclude his show. Finally, John Paul II commented upon Dylan's lyrics, which had been read in Italian by an actor at the end of the concert. The long and short of it is that it was true that 'the answer is blowing in the wind', but not in the wind which blows everything away. Rather, the wind which is the voice of the Spirit, that calls and says 'come!' John Paul II shifted then to another line that says, 'How many roads must a man walk down before you can call him a man?' The answer of His Holiness was 'one! There is only one road for man and it is Christ, who said 'I am the way!'

According to Alessandro Carrera, this speech made history in the annals of dylanology (2009, 91). But, more importantly, it marked a turn in the Church's policy towards popular music. Long looked at with suspicion, if not overtly criticized and even banned for the potential damage it could cause to the youth, this music came to the fore out of the blue thanks to an iconic gesture by Wojtyła, who not only legitimized but indirectly promoted rock and pop as new ways to speak to the young¹. Along with Bob Dylan, the Bologna event saw the participation of major Italian pop stars such as Lucio Dalla, who sang 'You've Got A Friend' with jazz pianist Michel Petrucciani; Adriano

Celentano, who revived his cover version of ‘Stand By Me’ titled ‘Pregherò’ (I Will Pray); Gianni Morandi, who sang ‘Imagine’ in Gino Paoli’s translation (the line ‘imagine no religion’ had been translated ‘a world without gods’, a year before) and Andrea Bocelli, who stuck to classical tunes such as ‘Panis Angelicus’ and ‘Nessun dorma’. From then on, the so called ‘Papa boys’ kept on gathering in many similar situations under the sign of music and dance, free to manifest their love for John Paul II their way. Incidentally, if that was the beginning of a new ecclesial approach to communicate with the youth, the rock world had already suggested its own ways to get close to God, as Dylan himself had explored during his ‘Christian period’: ‘There is only one road and it leads to Calvary/It gets discouraging at times, but I know I’ll make it/By the saving grace that’s over me’ (from the 1980 song ‘Saved’)².

However, on 27 September 1997, there was only one rock star and it was the Pope, as Jimmy Villotti—the guitarist who played ‘Blowing in the wind’ in the background—told Alessandro Carrera (2009, 92). That of popular music and religion is nothing but the contemporary evolution of a relationship between music and the sacred which dates back to antiquity and is witnessed in all eras of modern history. The aim of this paper is to highlight the turning points in this relationship and explore its contemporary status in the light of a religion facing the new opportunities and challenges offered by popular music as the predominant form of music on a global level. In particular, I will focus on Italy and try to outline a somewhat contradictory rapport marked by diverging pressures, namely conservative vs innovative. It is within this dialectic that Italian Catholics have largely assimilated the contributions that popular music—be it pop, rock, *canzone* or rap, to quote just a few macro-genres—can offer to believers, both as a support to liturgy and, more significantly, as a lifetime companion able to improve the quality of life itself—something that earlier forms of sacred music cannot do anymore or do to a lesser extent, for a much smaller audience/population³.

2. Close encounters of the first kind: music and noise, or celebrating the sacred

Music and cult share the same foundation, collectivity. Neither of the two can exist—and are hardly conceivable—outside a community. ‘The real meaning of art has always been rooted in the word We’ wrote János Maróthy (1974, 271) while Adorno maintained that ‘jeder Klang allein schon sagt Wir’ (each sound alone already says *we*) (1958–1959, 686). Religion is the matrix of social behaviors that have to do with music, and cults are among the primigenial factors that preside over the origin of music itself (Schneider 1970). Within cults, the electrons of sociability circulate faster than in other contexts (Duvignaud 1967). Music, dance, and painting were originally integrated to a sacred universe from which they separated, little by little (Villadary 1968). Social thinkers who have explored the domain of ‘music and the sacred’ share the view that the two form a unity, in any religion of the world, where at first it manifests itself as magic (Laack 2015; Combarieu 1909). The myths of creation always include an acoustic element: the primordial abyss, the wide-open mouth, the singing cavern, the crack in the rock of the Upanisad. ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God’ (John 1, 1). The sound offer is the greatest sacrifice, the

Gods grow thanks to singing because music is food for Gods (Schneider 1960). 'Religious systems are validated [...] through the recitation of myth and legend in song, as well as through music which expresses religious precepts' (Merriam 1964, 224). Music, like religion, is born to fight fear and where music resounds, there is where order is born (Schneider 1970). In the literature about primitive societies, it is hard to distinguish between magic and religion: the latter is generally considered as a natural evolution of the former, therefore, in their early developments, all cults seem to share the same function, that is to exorcise the loss of presence (or soul)—what Ernesto De Martino called 'the historical drama of the magical world' (1948; Falaschi Zamponi 2014). There is no religious or magic ritual which had not its dance and instrumental music—in this way the French ethnomusicologist André Schaeffner begins the chapter on 'Religion and magic' of his influential book on the origins of musical instruments (1936).

In many kinds of cults music plays a central role, performed by shamans, griots and the various ministers documented in all continents. Scholars have long stressed the relationship between altered states of consciousness and religious experience, which is fully manifested by trance (Rouget 1980; Blacking 1973). Durkheim used the term 'effervescence' to describe the kind of fervor raised by those mediators between earth and sky: effervescence is an imitative behavior which is born out 'by uttering the same cry, pronouncing the same word, or performing the same gesture in regard to some object resulting in making participants feel themselves to be in unison (1961, 262). This can apply to music as well, when the sociologist speaks of electricity that transport people to an extraordinary degree of exaltation, of the exceptional degree of intensity on feast days, of a particular state of consciousness that is eminently contagious and, ultimately, contagion itself is the very process by which sacredness is propagated. Rock music as performed in outdoor festivals exemplifies this behavior, later to be appropriated by disco, techno, EDM and other genres (Becker 2004). The power of creating communities attributed to music has to do with its being a simulacrum of sacrifice, according to Jacques Attali, who leans on Girard's theory about violence in primitive societies, where the fundamental problem was to channel the excess energy by establishing governing powers, whether political or religious. Music functions in a similar way, providing a channelization of noise (Attali 1977). Excess cannot be accumulated to infinity: it must be given to Gods, wasted, or destroyed. Once more, men resort to music as a gift to the supernatural, to conciliate it.

The close relation between music and religion can be appreciated not only at a practical level but also at a theoretical one, as observed by theologians such as Rudolf Otto and Gerardus van der Leeuw, for whom music seems the expression of the holy (Otto 1958; van der Leeuw 1986). Religion cannot live just on inwardness: it is largely based on the dramatization of beliefs, and needs the enacting of the numinous to effectively embed the sacred consciousness into social behavior (Wunenburger 1977). The Baptist theologian Harvey Cox wrote that myth humanizes time whereas rite humanizes space (1969)⁴. In other words, music as myth (Lévi-Strauss) is humanized by the rite of dance, and both relate to religious ceremonies such as the Mass, especially the way this

is performed in the Evangelical Churches. Recalling his repetition law as a mechanism to compensate for the unpredictability of the message, Abraham Moles considers religious chant one of the best examples of functional aesthetics, the aesthetic canon being the direct outcome of the adjustment to an end (1958). There are significant analogies between music and religious rituals. Many emphasized the recreational nature of these latter: Mauss focused on the notions of luxury and Bataille on waste (*dépense*), while Situationists revitalized those themes by pointing out the religious nature of the spectacle, asserting that it is the material reconstruction of religious illusion (Débord 1967). Durkheim holds that ‘The cult is something aesthetic [...] This is why the very idea of a religious ceremony of some importance awakens the idea of a feast. Inversely, every feast, even when it has purely lay origins, has certain characteristics of the religious ceremony’ (Débord 1967, 428). Sixty years later, Jim Morrison used to open his shows addressing the audience with these words: ‘Is everybody in? The ceremony is about to begin’. Not by chance, the theme of the feast—always related with the sacred—surfaced as an interdisciplinary issue in anthropology, theology, and philosophy with the rise of counterculture⁵.

3. Close encounters of the second kind: music and silence, or Christianity and worship

The shift from primitive cults to structured religions such as Christianity is also marked by a dramatic change concerning the symbolic value of noise and silence. The relationship between these two poles of soundscape was inverted, and since Christianity’s advent it was silence that was to be associated with the sacred, whereas for ages it had been noise that connoted a feeling of festivity while worshipping (Lévi-Strauss 1964; Schaeffner 1936). If in early Christianity music functioned in similar ways to other creeds, that is, as a support to the cult without significant distinctions between sacred and profane, mind or body music, the more the Church established a theological canon, the more liturgical music had to be discreet to favor a mood of concentration more suitable for worship. In other words, music shifted its focus from ‘process’ to ‘object’ (Carpenter 1967), accentuating its nature as something to be contemplated rather than as activity. Moreover, its status was weakened: music had to be controlled because of its sensual appeal, as finely described by Augustine of Hippo around the year 400, who—moved by the tears shed at the songs of God’s church—vacillated ‘between dangerous pleasure and healthful exercise’. He was then ‘inclined to approve the use of singing in the church, so that by delights of the ear the weaker minds may be stimulated to a devotional mood’. Yet, when he realized that he was ‘more moved by the singing than by what is sung’, he confessed himself ‘to have sinned wickedly’ and ‘would rather not have heard the singing’. In the end, the future Saint sensed an embarrassing anguish in front of music and its power on human mind and body. This dual drive shaped the Church’s policy for liturgy and, more importantly, had an impact on believers’ everyday life. But if in church music could be easily kept under control, outside it could not be tamed. Feared for its potentially devastating influence on souls, it became associated with the daemonic (Kierkegaard)⁶ and was accepted only after a profound cleaning work, which included the cutting of rhythm,

the subordination to word when used as an accompaniment, and the privileging of instrumental forms over vocal ones⁷. The Council of Trent was resolute in establishing rules that should supervise its use within Sacred Liturgy, including the renewed centrality of Gregorian chant and the elimination of any trace of secular music. To put it in a nutshell, the Counter-reformation exalted silence first, and this had a lasting impact on civil society as well, because silence was to become the only accepted behavior while listening to music in theatres and concert halls, at least from the middle of the XIXth century on. The mutual exchange between rigor and spirituality shaped the modern sensibility towards classical music, transforming a social convention rooted in a historical time, into an aesthetic canon which has been applied to Western art music for centuries. Sacred music is a prototype of it, to the point that going to a concert is viewed as religious experience, as noticed by a lay and materialistic philosopher like Adorno, who wrote that music is the human attempt at naming the Name itself, that is, the Name of God (2003)⁸.

Having evolved over the centuries from early Christian chants to Renaissance complex polyphonies, the notion of sacred music came into use much later than its practice. It was first introduced in 1614 by Michael Praetorius in his *Syntagma Musicum*, a classification of music genres acknowledged within German Protestantism. The Catholic world replied with Giovanni Battista Doni's *Dissertatio de musica sacra* (1640), but it was not until 1894, under Leo XIII's pontificate, that the term was explicitly adopted in an official document by the Pontifical congregation of rites (Garbini 2012). Whether it be intended as an educating force, a 'shaper of morals', as edification, entertainment or God's gift (Schalk 2015), music has always been a concern for the Church, and many Popes have faced the issue of its function linked to liturgical action, and its power of communicating 'beauty': from Pius X in his *Motu Proprio Tra le sollicitudini* (1903) to Paul IV in his instruction *Musicam Sacram* (1967), to John Paul II's *Letter to artists*, where he held that 'Art must make perceptible, and as far as possible attractive, the world of the spirit, of the invisible, of God [...]. Art has a unique capacity to take one or other facet of the message and translate it into colours, shapes and sounds which nourish the intuition of those who look or listen. It does so without emptying the message itself of its transcendent value and its aura of mystery' (1999)⁹. Sharing the same historical and sociological background, sacred music is an integral part of art music so that the boundaries between the two are virtually nonexistent. At the same time, being part of the Western classical canon, sacred music is endowed with universal features which liturgical music, more tied to local communities and geographical areas, lacks¹⁰.

4. Close encounters of the third kind: popular music and religion in Italy

Introducing a special issue of the *Journal of Scientific Study of Religion* devoted to 'religion, popular music and globalization', Lynn Schofield Clark reminded us that, from the perspective of sociology and cultural studies, religion 'is about much more than what happens during services or prayer times and is much more than a set of beliefs or ideological commitments' (2006, 475). Popular culture, in its all-invasive nature, offers a new perspective to religion scholars who have recently opened a fruitful

debate on its potential in enhancing the spiritual experience (Mazur and McCarthy 2001; Clark and Clayton 2012; Forbes and Mahan 2017). Within this domain, music seems to be the favorite of them all and has sparked a great interest in the last few years¹¹. Popular music today occupies about ninety per cent of the contemporary soundscape, mostly in its mediated form, that is through records, CDs, MP3s, streaming and the like. Popular music can be heard anywhere at any time of the day. What is more important, it has raised issues that impact morals, economy, politics, education, and spirituality as well. Although it has been viewed as consolatory, as in the case of mainstream song (Adorno 1941), popular music is connoted as transgressive even when it is blatantly commercial. The messages it conveys inevitably relate to unconventional ways of living, thinking, and behaving, for this is, more generally, the quintessence of music: to provide an alternative to daily life, logos, verbal language, work, etc. (Shepherd and Wicke 1997).

As occurred with cinema first and television later, the Church has always faced the issues generated by new media and forms of expression, in her attempt at understanding, accepting, and promoting all that contributes to human growth. As a matter of fact, though, the Italian Church hardly showed more than disregard, if not condemnation and boycott, towards phenomena viewed as immoral and/or blasphemous, such as dance, for example. This standpoint is by no means limited to the Catholic Church in Italy. On the contrary, it is shared by many creeds in the world, such as Islam¹². However, the attention that the Italian Church drew to popular music's ill-fated influence makes a long story, which can be traced back to the year when tango was introduced to the country. It was 1913 and the new fad coming from the Americas was demonstrated to Pius X in a private show. No matter what His Holiness really said ('the *furlana* is better', it was reported¹³), newspapers and magazines ignited a debate—exploiting what was a piece of 'fake news'—that revolved around the immorality of the dance, considered in the same way as pornography, defined as 'depraved' by more than one catholic pamphlet and banned by the Archbishop of Bologna¹⁴.

Soon after, Benedict XV fiercely remonstrated against exotic, barbarian dances that offended decency, and his successor Pius XII reiterated his predecessor's condemnations of what he termed the 'shameless dances', a societal evil, responsible for spreading a 'morbid restlessness' (Tonelli 1998, 128–130). A few years later, in his *Pastoral letter on dance* of 1948, Cardinal Siri restated those positions, condemning dance as an occasion of sinning, 'an unrestrained freedom to thrill', a 'revolt against law and duty', a 'libidinous exaltation of senses' (cited in Gorgolini 2013, 344). In more recent times, the Episcopal Conference of Emilia-Romagna—the leading region in Europe as far as youth entertainment is concerned—addressed clear warnings about the self-destructive behaviors that originated in the excesses of club culture: the deadly chain that leads from discotheques and rave parties to a mix of hypnotic dance, alcoholics and drugs ending up with car crashes on the way back. In 1996 the bishops denounced 'the emptiness and self-deception offered in discotheques' publishing a trenchant report on the culture of 'getting high' and the night-life mythology (Conferenza Episcopale Emilia-Romagna 1996). However, that document did not contain negative judgments on the music *per se* and took the discotheque phenomenon as a staple of youth culture, which

it would not make sense to prevent. Rather, it blamed the unwholesome uses of music when associated with drinks, pills, and the like.

Finally, let us go back to Bob Dylan. If Wojtyła used his lyrics to launch his deeper message, twenty years later Benedict XVI confessed his dismissal of the pop/pope parade at the Eucharistic Congress in Bologna. In his best-selling memoir on John Paul II, Ratzinger wrote that he ‘had reasons to doubt whether it was a good idea to allow the performance of ‘that kind of prophet’ [...] who had a totally different message from what the Pope had’ (Carrera 2009, 93). But there is another side of the story: not only admonishments and censorship, but also acceptance, assimilation, and active promotion of popular music. On one hand, a long-rooted tradition of gatherings and concerts for celebrative aims has characterized many special occasions such as the World Youth Day and the Jubilee, in addition to what has become a custom every Christmas since 1993, that is the *Concerto di Natale* broadcast from the Vatican. On the other hand, the introduction of popular music into Church habits dates back even earlier than that, i.e. to the late Sixties, when the ‘beat Mass’ burst into many parishes announced by acoustic and electric guitars that had access to church for the first time¹⁵. The Italian Catholic world highlights a much older institution, though, able to give voice to both popular devotion and the passion for folk songs: the amateur choirs created in and around parishes and dioceses. As Charles Schalk observed, ‘the history of the Christian community is the history of a singing and music-making community’ (2015, 22) and Italy is no exception. The repertoire of these informal groups is constantly updated to keep up with the times, which has allowed a good deal of international popular music to become part of a shared culture¹⁶.

In Italy there is no such a thing as Contemporary Christian music (CCM), or Christian rock, which has swept away much of traditional religious music in the Evangelical world, selling millions of records. There is a Christian inspired music, which is close to the ‘singer-songwriter’ style, with some notable exceptions¹⁷. But it has a small audience and very little impact on mass tastes and market¹⁸. Catholics in Italy prefer pop songs by far¹⁹. These are part of a national culture shaped by television in the boom years and, for their emotional content, sound rhetoric, and good sentiments, they constitute a stronghold against the many intruder genres bound to separate rather than unite, from metal to rap, from punk to techno. All these latter have created powerful subcultures anywhere in the world, but in Italy this has happened only in small quantities. It is *canzone*—pop music—that represents the mainstream, independently of age, gender, class, education. Subcultures are a marginal phenomenon in Italy²⁰. Historically, this has to do with the central presence of the Church and its spokesman in the civil society: the Christian Democratic Party that dominated the political scene over nearly half century and put the family at the center of the public discourse. In addition, it must be remembered that Italy is the fifth most Catholic country in the world as for population, and the foremost Catholic country in Europe, besides hosting the Holy See, the world center of Christianity. This matters when speaking of mentalities and national character, as remarked by Cardinal Ratzinger: ‘In Italy this conformation through Catholic faith is undoubtedly still more intensely operating than in many other Western countries. In this sense the gospel here speaks not simply within a totally extraneous frame’ (2003, 177—author’s translation). Add to this a

longtime reputation in music history, which ranks Italian song fourth in the world as for visibility, and you have a unique mix that makes this close encounter with religion one of a kind²¹. Popular culture in Italy owes much to Church. The development of cinema, for example, cannot be disjunct from the contributions given by the Catholic world, both from above (popes and high hierarchies) and below (directors, actors, intellectuals). Many Italians discovered moving images back in 1898, when a smiling Leo XIII blessed technicians and believers under the eye of movie cameras. In both cases—cinema and music—we can speak of a ‘complex and variegated history [...] dominated by a tension to inculturation’ on the part of the Church which, starting from the Sixties, aimed at redefining its relationship with the world in terms of ‘non contraposition and non-extraneousness’ (Eugeni and Viganò 2006, 10). Then it was tv’s turn, which in the last two decades launched the popular figures of *Don Matteo* in the eponymous series that reached its 12th season in 2020, and Suor Angela in *Che Dio ci aiuti* (six editions by 2021). Talent shows (in this case *The Voice of Italy*) eventually turned out to promote Suor Cristina’s talent, putting it among the ranks of the most successful voices of the last few years, with millions of views on You Tube (it was the fourth most-watched video in the world in 2014) which paved the way to an international career as a pop recording artist. In that light, the opening towards popular music favored by the Second Vatican Council was something inevitable for Italian society, a concession that had to be made and that everybody expected. Not only a sign of the times, anyway: the opening to modernity can be viewed as a more ancient gesture, that is the purpose of bringing back Liturgy to its origin, when the distinction between sacred and profane made no sense. In the words of Mons. Massimo Palombella, the idea that God became man broke such a distinction. Consequently, in the new worldview there are no things that are intrinsically ‘sacred’ or ‘profane’ but only different modalities to use them, in different historic and cultural contexts. This determines their ethical coding (2017, vii). I believe that this position—‘finding/inventing the new in/from the old’ (Pompili 2011; Runia 2014)—is more advanced than the one that sees the Church as catching up with the times to increase the efficacy of its messages. It is the view shared by the ‘media, religion and culture’ approach, which poses ‘the need to rethink the dichotomies enveloping media and religion, the dichotomies of sacred and profane, good and bad media as either instrumental manipulation or idyllic communalistic participation’ (White 2006, 335).

The Italian Church, both at the local level and in official documents, has shown awareness for the social relevance of popular music, stating that—since it appeals to so many young people—it cannot remain a stranger to the Church’s pastoral attention (CEI 2004, 119). As emphasized by a Holy See document dated 1971, ‘it should be recalled that many great works recognized as the products of genius, particularly in music, drama and literature, were first presented to the public as entertainment. So, entertainment need not lack cultural validity’ (Pastoral Instruction [Pontifical Council for Social Communications 1971]). After popular music had gained its place in religious practices, it was radio’s turn to grow in importance. Catholic radio has had a long and glorious history in Italy since the mid Seventies, when the State monopoly was broken and a thousand stations began to flourish all over the country. The golden age of Catholic radio spans from the Nineties to the early two thousands, when the

Compagnia di San Paolo and the Episcopal Italian Conference took the field to promote their own networks, organizing and implementing a vast national scene made up of parish, communitarian, and diocesan radio stations, along with private initiatives. In 1994 the Paulines and the Milanese Curia launched Circuito Marconi, based in Milan and involving partners both in Rome and Palermo. CEI followed with InBlu, a bigger syndication which in its early stage united 200 stations. Very few of these stations have ever displayed what one may expect from Catholic radio, that is a schedule centered on devotional programs implying a massive use of sacred music, liturgical and Christian songs. On the contrary, the editorial guidelines coming from both headquarters opted for a different mission: promoting Christian principles in a more generic, uncharacterized culture. In an effort to gain visibility and merge with the wider soundscape, Catholic stations decided to play the same game as the major private networks, choosing to fill most of their schedule with popular music²². Constrained between stressing their identity, with the risk of appearing biased, and disguising it by imitating the more consolidated models, these stations would stand in between: on one hand they privileged information, a priority for the bishops; on the other hand, they relied on popular music to convey a sense of belonging to a broader community which has not necessarily recognized itself in the innermost values promulgated by the Church²³. This attitude not only represents a further step towards the mutual integration of the Church's policies and the global mediascape trends, in line with Vatican II, it also entails deeper implications of leaving aside present times to embrace an ahistorical dimension, having to do with the nature of music as a symbolic language, rather than as means of knowledge and educational medium (Prato 2014).

In his influential analysis of the Don Juan myth in literature and the arts, Kierkegaard emphasizes the aesthetic (passionate) nature of religion by focusing on what he calls 'the spiritual Don Juan', able to ennoble a universal love 'which may be ambiguous in outward manifestation but in its inner quality and expression is paradigmatic for human existence' (Utterback 1979, 635). Music, in its inherently sensuous nature, offers the same kind of experience, that is reaching the spiritual dimensions of life without having to depend on meaning. Being an asemantic art, or 'unconsummated symbol' (Suzanne Langer's phrase), it is not necessary to create a special form of religious music to express the sensuous character of the spirit but only make use of the existing genres (ibid. 637). Utterback goes further to suggest that 'a theology which seeks to affirm spirit through the sensuous needs to give attention to music as a mode of representation' (ibid. 638), thus resuming an association which has been noticed throughout centuries—from the Bible to Greek philosophers, from Augustine to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche—but neglected in contemporary religious thought.

5. Three case studies from Italy

How and when did popular music start to break through into the ecclesial world? My suggestion is to look back to over a century ago, when the prescriptions introduced by Pius X's *Motu Proprio*, implying a restriction of the liturgical music field, were compensated by a few experiences from below. A case in point was Don Sbarra (real name Dario Flori), who pioneered folk singing among the Catholic people of Pistoia and

Lucca via his magazine *La Chitarra*, founded in the dawning years of Italian song (1912). His motto—‘every bell tower a phonograph’—positioned him in the political arena as an antagonist of socialist and materialist hymnody, which he opposed with a good number of successful ditties such as ‘O bianco fiore’, later to become the official anthem of the Christian Democratic Party. However, profane song was opposed until the middle of the century and only in the late Fifties was it introduced into the liturgy as without risks if put under the clergy’s control. ‘We need to be able to distinguish between a purely commercial product, lacking in creativity and depth, and what is instead destined to last, as a creative expression gifted with originality’: this summarizes the Italian Church’s viewpoint on popular music (CEI 2004). The case studies on which I wish to focus my attention fall within this broad category. They belong to secular culture, but this choice of mine does not mean to underestimate the value of a music born within the more restricted Catholic culture. Catholic popular music in Italy flourished thanks to the encouragement of Vatican II. Largely accepted into liturgy—the new songbooks had to be in Italian, no longer in Latin—it spread to many extra-liturgical occasions such as youth meetings, scout camps and peace marches under the organization of youth associations such as Azione Cattolica and the Scouts, along with the central role played by Salesians in focusing their pastoral work on young people (Straniero 1988)²⁴. The increasing integration between the lay and the religious souls of the Italian Church featured the birth of the two leading bands of the Catholic world: Gen Rosso and Gen Verde, tied to the Focolarini movement, while the Pauline publishing house released two albums of Christmas songs performed by a few successful pop groups of the Sixties. Later, the field was occupied by singer-songwriters and movements like the Focolarini and Comunione e Liberazione, inspired by the protest values expressed by the ‘long ‘68’. At the same time as the coming of Karol Wojtyła, many ecclesial movements added to the list—the Neo Catechumenal Way, Rinnovamento nello Spirito, each with its own songbook. A new generation of musicians explored the most popular genres, from pop song to rap, from techno to rock (Mattei 1994). Someone (Fra Cionfoli) even took part in the Sanremo Festival and won the second prize. But what was overlooked was song for the Eucharistic celebration, which had been greatly nurtured by the earlier generation (Baldisserotto and Scolaro 2008). If the official documents encouraged an artistic approach to liturgical music, in practice what took over is a pop-oriented language (Pozzi 2005) that betrays its debts towards commercial music as a product conceived for the youth (Somigli 2005). The Solemn Mass switched from high-brow Renaissance polyphony to a more participatory ritual which, far from being universal, tended to localism (Del Sordo 2002).

The reasons why I chose three secular examples are both quantitative and qualitative. First, they show figures largely superior to those of any Catholic exponent; second, they offer a deeper and more challenging view of the ‘sacred’ than the one expressed by those whose point of view is internal to the Church and rarely inclined to question it. Secular culture, with its contradictions and ambiguities, may be more of a stimulus to faith than religious canon, but first of all it is not biased or conditioned by the need to ‘send messages’ to its audience. The more an art is free from the urge to establish a relationship with its public, the more creative and genuine it is likely to be²⁵. The first case belongs to traditional-turned-into-popular music, the second to committed

intellectual song, the third to mainstream global pop. All of these artists have engaged in a personal relationship with religion and spirituality: both Sparagna and Bocelli are practicing Catholics but they have never transformed their faith into a pretext to reach a wider audience; De André was an atheist who placed the search for God at the core of his work. International stars such as U2, Bob Dylan and Van Morrison, who claim the label ‘Christian’ as individuals rather than artists, ‘are not considered to be CCM, and yet their music is often embraced by Christian music fans who find a Christian viewpoint presented in their lyrics’ (Howard and Streck 1996, 49). These artists, as much as the Italian ones I am going to present, ‘rarely view themselves as ministers’. On the contrary, they ‘usually take great pains to distance themselves from the stereotypes of the evangelic subculture’ (ibid.) and the Catholic one.

5.1. Case study I—Ambrogio Sparagna and sacred folk music

The revival of folk/traditional music began in the mid Fifties in Europe and North America. Italy too was part of a vast enterprise pioneering the rebirth of ethnomusicology on a technological base, thanks to the introduction of audiotape. This allowed researchers to give new life to musical repertoires that had for the most part ceased to exist or survived just in small enclaves. Due to ideological biases, however, the massive sacred traditions long scattered about in Italy were largely ignored: firstly, by the early literary-oriented scholars, who saw in liturgical songs (most of which were in Latin) a mangling of official songs, to be consequently disregarded if not censored; secondly, by the atheist orthodoxy of the traditional music discipline, which always manifested a critical stance towards the Church.

It was only from the mid Eighties that the sacred folk heritage started to be researched and studied, which encouraged a new generation of artists to reshape it and give it a new life. One of the most interesting and dedicated is Ambrogio Sparagna (1956), native of Maranola, a tiny peasants’ and shepherds’ village facing the Gulf of Gaeta, about a hundred miles south of Rome. His father and grandfather played the organ of the church adjoining the family house. With his elder brother ordained, Ambrogio was a direct testimony of worship music’s power in a rural context: long and thundering functions, Masses in Latin where the assembly sang interminable litanies accompanied by the organ and, during Yuletide, by bagpipes too (Prato 2016). A trained ethnomusicologist, Sparagna has released more than twenty albums from 1986 to date (2021) and produced as many, created shows, films, tv documentaries and ensembles, performed all over Italy and abroad—from Mexico to Iraq—often including examples of religious music from his homeland and other areas of the country. His sacred production focuses on Christmas and Marian songs, novenas, pastorals, prayers and *canti di Passione* from Central and Southern Italy, most of which are traditional. If the original lyrics—partly in Italian partly in dialect—are always kept, the music is often recreated, being lost after centuries. This is the case of Sant Alfonso de’ Liguori spiritual ditties (*canzoncine spirituali*), composed in the late XVIIIth century with the aim of teaching the illiterate the fundamentals of Christianity through simple words and concepts. Save for a few major exceptions such as ‘Tu scendi dalle stelle’, the most popular Christmas song in Italy and the only one known abroad²⁶, the music that

Sparagna writes pursues the saint's original spirit and so it often utilizes the *tarantella* rhythm—most popular in those areas—to create a sense of belonging and enhance the meaning of the words. St. Alphonse songbook is the object of three albums: *Fermarono i cieli* (2006), *La Chiarastella* (2008) and *L'Avvenuta profezia* (2002), coupled with a book dealing with 'cribs, novenas and Christmas carols' (Sparagna 2002). *Litania* (2004), featuring the voice of a former punk icon such as Giovanni Lindo Ferretti (ex-front man of CCCP—Fedeli alla linea), includes newly composed music for liturgical standard fare ('Sanctus', 'Gloria', 'Magnificat', 'Pater Noster', 'Te Deum')—some of which are part of an unpublished *Folk Mass* (Messa popolare) commissioned by the Archbishop of Ravenna. Sparagna and his Orchestra Popolare Italiana are largely responsible for the dramatic revival experienced by Christmas and Holy Week songs since the early 1990s. Their show *La Chiarastella*, aimed at reviving the holiday traditions in Italy, is staged every year at Rome's Auditorium Parco della Musica, each time with a renovated playlist and new guests from folk and pop music. As a producer, Sparagna recorded the seminal *Miserere*, documenting the unique rites performed during the Holy Week in the small town of Sessa Aurunca, in the province of Caserta, which has turned to be a major touristic attraction thanks to its scenic dramaturgy. As a composer and narrator, he co-produced *L'Italia che risuona*, a series of tv documentaries for RAI on sanctuaries and processions, and *Lascia stare i santi* (2016), a film (dir. Gianfranco Pannone) on popular devotion in Italy, filled with historical and contemporary footage. A vast array of practices, rituals, processions, sanctuaries, and confraternities disseminated all over the peninsula are responsible for instilling a feeling—or, at least, a respect—for the sacred, profoundly impacting a sacralized peasant world, where 'devotions with an enormous emotive and symbolic substance take root' (Galli della Loggia 1998, 47). Mary and Saints such as San Gennaro, Sant'Antonio or Padre Pio are popular icons evoked even by non-believers in proverbs, paintings, niches, sacred images, shrines, while the *presepio* (crib) remains as the favorite Christmas symbol notwithstanding the impressive fortunes of an imported Santa Claus²⁷. These two audiovisuals demonstrate that sacred folk traditions are well and alive all over the peninsula and have fiercely rejected the destiny of oblivion forecast by many detractors. The revival of traditional music should not be intended as a backward movement to a pre-modern past when society was mainly a peasant one. On the contrary, it brings new life to peoples' aspirations to live a modern or postmodern life. Revival should be seen as 'reconciliation', not as nostalgia or rearguard, as claimed by Philip Bohlman: 'Sacred music provides the Europeans [...] with the power to return to religion along the same routes by which they are turning to modernity' (2007, 17). Sacred songs are essentially a collective practice, unlike popular songs, made for the individual (Maróthy 1974)²⁸. You can pray for yourself, in the intimacy of your room or kneeling in the chapel, but you never sing alone in the church, nor can you sing alone on pilgrimage. Religious songs always imply a community. Sparagna has brought back this urge to sing and dance together, in a time when recorded and liquid music seem to have monopolized the experience of music. His performances at Rome's Auditorium score the same figures as pop stars, showing that the call of authenticity does pay in the long run. As stated by Bithell and Hill 'the elements of activism and recontextualization inherent in revivals necessitate the establishing of legitimacy, in order to persuade

others to accept the musical and cultural changes being promoted and to allow the appropriating group to be perceived as legitimate culture-bearers. The act of legitimization frequently relies upon invocations of authenticity' (2014, 2). Even if he cannot be identified as a Christian artist, for sacred productions represent a minority portion of his work, Sparagna's respectful approach to tradition is a good example of coexistence between past and present values, but in the end what he proposes is something new, which is what seems to happen to things when people revive, exhume, and breathe life into them (Slobin 1983, 37).

'The intensity with which the sacred and the popular interact may seem counterintuitive—wrote Bohlman—especially in an era of late capitalism and postmodernism that has espoused many claims for a global secularism' (2003, 290). The eminent scholar quotes 'the globalization of religious revival and the proliferation of popular religion' (ibidem) as a virtuous outcome of this interaction. But the folk expressions highlighted by Sparagna do not entirely fall within the category of revival, because they have never died: they do not need to be revived as they live on in continuity with the past (Nardini 2016; Weiss 2019).

5.2. Case study II—Fabrizio De Andre's critical view of religion

Most genres that make up the popular music galaxy feature a strong secular, if not anti-establishment orientation, which has led artists to move away from institutionalized forms of power such as politics, family, school, and religion. Since this latter was for the most part identified with its institutional apparatus, it has rarely enjoyed sympathy—pop music has instead favored alternative ways to explore spiritual themes. Indeed, God-related issues are common in plenty of songs and instrumental tracks over the last sixty years, from the Beatles to Santana, from John Coltrane to Dylan, from Nick Cave to Bono. Italy is no exception, and many challenging contributions come from rock artists and singer-songwriters (*cantautori*), who have raised the level of lyrics and the quality of music high above the average pop song. The second case I wish to point out bring us back to the protest years of the late Sixties, when the wind of change blew on an international youth committed to social issues, with the ambition of turning the 'establishment' upside down. One of the most popular icons of the time, along with Che Guevara and Mao Tse-tung, was Jesus Christ, whom a famous musical (and a film) named 'superstar'. The idea that Jesus could be a model for the hippies ('Jesus freaks') was not weird at all and Fabrizio De André (1940-99) elaborated it in a poetic way in his concept album *La Buona Novella* (The Good News, 1970), where he recounts the story of the Sacred Family drawing inspiration from the Apocrypha. The most loved and challenging *cantautore* from Italy was a convinced atheist, critical of the pre-Council Church and its secular management that often colluded with Power. But throughout his entire career he put God at the center of his poetry. Lots of songs by a declared anarchist who in the Sixties was taken—*malgré lui*—as a preacher by the progressive movements, revolve around the quest of God. One of his first hits—'Il pescatore' (The fisher)—is a metaphor of Jesus, disguised as an old fisher facing a hungry, thirsty assassin:

*Gli occhi dischiuse il vecchio al giorno
non si guardò neppure intorno
ma verso il vino spezzò il pane
per chi diceva ho sete ho fame*

[The old man unclosed his eyes at the daylight/he did not even look around/but poured the wine and broke the bread/for he who said I am hungry, and I am thirsty].

In ‘Si chiamava Gesù’, Jesus is depicted as nothing other than a man who passed into history as God,

*Ma inumano è pur sempre l’amore
di chi rantola senza rancore
perdonando con l’ultima voce
chi lo uccide tra le braccia d’una croce*

[But not human is however the love/of he who wheezes without rancor/breathless forgiving/he who is killing him between the cross arms].

In short, Jesus ‘was simply a man but not a simple man [...]: his exceptionality does not lie in his alleged divinity, but in what he did’ (Carbonelli 2017, 81–82). ‘Preghiera in gennaio’, dedicated to his close friend Luigi Tenco, a celebrated singer-songwriter who committed suicide during the Sanremo Song Festival of 1967, is a supplication to God to forgive his error, listen to his voice and save him:

*Dio di misericordia, il tuo bel Paradiso
l’hai fatto soprattutto per chi non ha sorriso
per quelli che han vissuto con la coscienza pura
l’Inferno esiste solo per chi ne ha paura*

[God of mercy/your beautiful Paradise/was mainly made/for he who has never smiled/for those who have lived/with pure conscience/Hell exists only/for those who are afraid of it].

His first concept album *Tutti morimmo a stento* (Cantata in B minor, 1968) was reviewed as a ‘bitter analysis of modern man’s Calvary’ where the author indicates ‘piety as man’s hope’²⁹. Thus begins ‘Cantico dei drogati’ (The junkies’ canticle), one of the album tracks:

*Ho licenziato Dio
gettato via un amore
per costruirmi il vuoto nell’anima e nel cuore*

[I dismissed God, I threw away a love, to build up a void, in my heart and soul].

De André put to music pre-existing prayers such as ‘Deus ti salvet Maria’, the ‘Ave Maria’ in Sardinian dialect, and several times he invoked the Lord’s mercy for the sake of the disadvantaged, whether those convicted to death, dropouts, migrants, blasphemous or prostitutes. *La Buona Novella* is a summa of his thoughts and attitudes towards religion. The work had a great influence on Italian culture at the same level as other products of the decade such as Pasolini’s *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo*, both representing the lay counterpart of the progressive viewpoints that emerged from the Post-Vatican II Church—e.g. Don Lorenzo Milani, Don Enzo Mazzi and the Genoese Don Andrea Gallo, a close friend of the artist. Once the priest and activist said in a tv interview: ‘My

gospels are not four ... for years we have been following the Gospel according to Fabrizio De André, that is a path headed to an opposite and obstinate direction³⁰.

In *La Buona Novella*, Jesus is always in the background. The leading character is Mary, whose growth is narrated from her teenage years until the crucifixion. This female-oriented approach is consistent with the popularity of Marian cults, but at the same time it adds a social and critical dimension in tune with the changing times: ‘De André’s work mediates, therefore, between a deeply rooted and archetypical vision of the woman who sacrifices herself for a supposedly higher cause—be it motherhood or other—and the demands of the feminist movements’ (Carbonelli 2017, 79). In her last appearance—‘Tre madri’—Mary claims her right to cry and suffer for her son as any mother would do:

*Piango di lui ciò che mi è tolto
Le braccia magre, la fronte, il volto
Ogni sua vita che vive ancora
Che vedo spegnersi ora per ora*

[...]

*Per me sei figlio, vita morente
Ti portò cieco questo mio ventre*

[...]

*Non fossi stato figlio di Dio
T'avrei ancora per figlio mio*

[I cry of him what has been taken away to me/the thin arms, the forehead, the face/ every life of his that is still alive/I see passing away hour after hour [...] To me you are child, dying life/This womb carried you blind [...] If you were not the Son of God/I'd still have you as son of mine]³¹

Through the ten songs that make up *La Buona Novella*, De André drew the attention of his audience—mostly middle-class students driven by an anti-Establishment sentiment—to the issue of God, unbelievers’ doubts and more generally to the paths walked by truth seekers (Ghezzi 2003). Central in his critical view of religion is the figure of Jesus as a man, and in this respect De André’s work not only met the protest movement requests but also the ones expressed by Vatican Council II. Not by chance, the events of Jesus and Mary narrated by De André were favorably received in Catholic environments, as other songs by the singer-songwriter (Bianchi 2017, 39). Cardinal Ravasi spoke of a ‘mystic atheism’ and many are the reflections produced by the Genoese *cantautore* within the Catholic media as well, beginning with the theological interpretation of *La Buona Novella* tried by the Jesuit Father Vitangelo C.M. Denora³².

Eventually, his work contradicts the mainstream approach of popular music studies, which states that: (i) the main relevance of pop and rock to religion has relatively little to do with lyrics; (ii) musical use counts as much as musical content; (iii) it is the impact of sound that creates emotional intensity and makes music a potential substitute for religion (Marsh 2017, 232–233). *La Buona Novella* does not fit in any of these categories or principles.

5.3. Case study III—Bocelli, 'Believe'

'I grew up in church, the notes of the organ in the little church of Saint Leonard in Lajatico (where I was born), contributed to getting me closer to music', said Andrea Bocelli interviewed by the Catholic daily *Avvenire* (Calvini 2020). In his childhood memories he remembers the choirs during the processions when he sang popular tunes such as 'Mira il tuo popolo', which he chose to resume with a symphonic arrangement, turning the folk melody into an ambitious hymn. This song is one of the seventeen 'tied up by the common thread of faith' that are included in his latest album *Believe*. The most famous living Italian singer in the world is not new to sacred music, having recorded two thematic albums in 1999 (*Sacred Arias*) and 2009 (*My Christmas Album*), besides performing in several religious events³³. Last, but not least is the traditional Christmas concert in Assisi, organized by the friars of the Saint Francis Basilica, with Giotto's frescos in the background and broadcast every year by RAI after the Urbi et Orbi message from the Pope. *Believe*, released in November 2020, charted no.1 on Billboard after one week, earning him the 10th Top Ten on Album Sales and the 20th on Classical Album Sales. It contains classical arias by Faurè ('Cantique de Jean Racine'), Bizet ('Agnus Dei', from *L'Arlesienne Suite* no.2), and Puccini ('Angele Dei', unpublished), along with pop songs 'laden with religiosity' (ibid.) such as Rodgers & Hammerstein's 'You'll Never Walk Alone' and Cohen's 'Hallelujah'. This latter, one of the most appraised spiritual songs produced by rock culture, is sung half in English half in Italian and Bocelli confirms its acquired status of a classical/operatic standard, a goal long since reached by the traditional 'Amazing Grace', which is performed with country superstar Alison Krauss. This recording, though, does not add much to our understanding of the song, one of the most acclaimed of the international religious songbook. Most tracks are prayers, beginning from 'Fratello Sole Sorella Luna', based on St. Francis' *Canticle of the Creatures* and featured in the eponymous film by Franco Zeffirelli (1972). The song is an early example of pop religious hit, performed by the then emerging teen idol Claudio Baglioni and internationally known in Donovan's cover version. The inevitable comparison with the original makes Bocelli's performance a little bit overstated: too many lush strings to convey the simple message of Francis. The same thing can be said about 'Oh Madre Benedetta!', a vocal rendition of Albinoni's famous 'Adagio'. This embarrassing version of a Baroque instrumental classic was first recorded by the Welsh crossover singer Katherine Jenkins, with whom Bocelli had a duet in her *Believe* album of 2009 (same title) and from whose playlist the Italian tenor picked up another song, 'I Believe', composed by the French rock musician Eric Lévi (himself familiar with Latin and Gregorian chant poured into pop song). These two tracks well represent the essence of classical crossover of which Bocelli is an acknowledged exponent, with its indulging on a virtuoso voice able to transform everything in gold, the accompaniment of a symphonic orchestra that provides the right feel, and an exaggerated use of effects aimed at magnifying simple melodies born to be sung in a simpler way than that. The accent on sentimentality, the negation of the authentic, and the disproportion between the means employed and the purpose of the message is what defines kitsch, the 'art of happiness', according to Abraham Moles (1971) but 'bad taste' for many. However, the album features a lot more balanced arrangements which exalt the sobriety of ancient and contemporary prayers such as

Table 1. Main features: a comparison among the three cases.

	SPARAGNA	DE ANDRE'	BOCELLI
Medium preferred	Live concerts Street performances	Records	Records TV shows Galas
Repertoire	Traditional, partly original	Original	Standards
Language	Italian, Dialects	Italian, Dialect (rarely)	Italian, English, Spanish, German, French
Audience	Local	National	International
Market/Sales	A few thousands	65 millions	85 millions
Main function	Create a sense of community	Convey a message	Aesthetic

'Mui grandes noit e dia' (from *Cantigas de Santa Maria*), the inspirational 'Preghiera (a una mente confusa)', by Paolo Francesco Tosti with lyrics by the poet of the Risorgimento Giuseppe Giusti, 'Inno sussurrato', an unpublished gem by Ennio Morricone, a 'Padre Nostro' and an 'Ave Maria' composed by Bocelli himself and 'Gratia Plena' (by Paolo Buonvino), from the soundtrack of *Fatima* (dir. Marco Pontecorvo). This latter best represents the new face of sacred music, deeply intertwined with popular music and multilingual: Latin alternates with English, in outlining powerful vocal harmonies that evoke Renaissance polyphony. *Believe* wavers between operatic pop and classical crossover, two subgenres which have redesigned melodrama arias and sacred songs of the Western tradition to fit them into a pop format and sensibility. It does so by remaining loyal to a concert approach which conveys 'distinction' and is shared by other successful religious acts such as Frate Alessandro, the Priests (Ireland) and the Benedictine Monks of Santo Domingo de Silos (Burgos, Spain).

I have tried to synthesize the main features of the three artists in [Table 1](#), where I compare a few elements to one another in order to make a better understanding of their work, taking for granted that their success is based on an idea of authenticity which is either legitimated by tradition (folk for Sparagna; classical for Bocelli) or personal charisma (De Andrè).

6. Conclusions

Music and religion can be either rivals or associates, being both expressed primarily through performance and ritual (Rycenga 2003). On one hand, a kind of profane music has long been criticized, and even banned with ideological motivations. On the other hand, though, it has greatly contributed to the spread or reinforcing of cults, especially when such cults were expressions of minorities that needed to affirm themselves. The relationship between popular music and religion is a blossoming area of study within 'critical musicology', which focuses on the ways in which music interacts with society and culture (Partridge and Moberg 2017; Gilmour 2005). More specifically, a new discipline termed 'theomusicology' has emerged at the crossroads between theology and popular music. According to its inventor, all popular music is theological because it connects people with their ultimate questions about the sense of life (Spencer 1991, 1994) and in doing so, it is 'truer or more honest than what is commonly referred to as Christian or religious music' (Basui Watkins 2011, xi)

In situating this article within this frame, I have used a wide lens to zoom in on:

1. The pre-history of mankind, when the sacred was associated with noise and implied intense communitarian rites;
2. Mature Christianity, when worship demanded silence and was mainly represented by art music;
3. The age of technical reproduction, when the sacred has crossed over into popular music.

My attention being primarily on Italy, I have briefly scrutinized three cases from secular culture, representing just as many different perspectives:

1. Sparagna highlights the enduring power of tradition;
2. De Andrè the power of the word;
3. Bocelli the power of the voice.

Even if each of them shows influences from the global soundscape (minimal in the first case; maximum in the third case) they are all distinctive of Italy and have no equivalent anywhere else. In presenting these examples I hope to have once more demonstrated the power of music to expose and open the intimate experience with the sacred, providing ‘a performative context for the public display of religious intimacy, enhancing the popularity of that intimacy’ (Bohlman 2007, 176). Sacred music is by no means confined to sacred places but has enjoyed a vast following anywhere people gather to share music. If this would mean spiritual growth, it is not my job to evaluate. Certainly, it is a sign of the times. Times when music which evokes spiritual themes can also serve as an antidote to mainstream sounds that are difficult to oppose.

Notes

1. On Wojtyła’s innovative gestures see Lovett (2006).
2. On Dylan and religion see Carrera (2017); Häger (2018, chap. 11); and the monumental work by Renato Giovannoli (2017) in three volumes, which explores all of Dylan’s production (1961–2012) from the viewpoint of the Bible.
3. Pop and rock as indigenous forms in Italy relate to international models, while *canzone*—especially in its *auteur* version, that is *canzone d’auteur*, emphasizing the lyrics’ value—is more domestically oriented. All these macro-genres converge in one single approach and the use of ‘pop’ in the title is merely functional to catching the reader’s attention—but that does not mean that my focus is on pop music exclusively.
4. Cox published this book in the year that gave birth to the ‘Woodstock generation’ and that *Zeitgeist* can be felt in many pages as, for example, when he writes that ‘even in the churches, dance, color, movement and new kinds of music dramatize the recovery of celebration’ (1969, 18).
5. After a long tradition rooted in ethnological studies, the theme of the feast became central in the Seventies encouraged by the seminal work of Mikhaïl Bakhtine (1970). This work promoted a revival of the feast in a semiotic, anthropological, and cultural perspective, especially in France and Italy, and in parallel with the growth of a counterculture which interpreted and appropriated the issue from a political point of view. See e.g. Jesi (1977); Cazeneuve (1977); Duvignaud (1973); Ménil (1974); Judy (1976); De Marinis (1977); Villadary (1968); and the classic studies by Caillois (1939) and Huizinga (1938).

6. 'Music has always been the object of suspicion from the standpoint of religious enthusiasm [...] the stronger the religiosity, the more one renounces to music and stresses the importance of words' (Kierkegaard 1959, 71).
7. Since Christianity eliminated the use of the body and of body rhythm which is so essential in other religious worship, it was able to give greater emphasis to other aspects. Accordingly [...] it then developed an interest in instrumental music as a value in itself. (Etzkorn 1973, 35)
8. In the words of an esteemed musicologist, 'it is only since the days of Beethoven and Wagner that people have begun gradually to look upon music as a substitute for religion, and therefore to listen to symphonies and string quartets with a sort of devotional rapture' (Dent 1968, 15)
9. Further on, the Pope underlines the greatness of sacred music as a product by both religious and lay composers: 'This can be more widely appreciated if we look beyond the figurative arts to the great development of sacred music through this same period, either composed for the liturgy or simply treating religious themes. Apart from the many artists who made sacred music their chief concern—how can we forget Pier Luigi da Palestrina, Orlando di Lasso, Tomás Luis de Victoria?—it is also true that many of the great composers—from Handel to Bach, from Mozart to Schubert, from Beethoven to Berlioz, from Liszt to Verdi—have given us works of the highest inspiration in this field' (Pope John Paul II 1999). In the twentieth century, other composers have enriched the repertoire, such as Olivier Messiaen, Igor Stravinsky, Krzysztof Penderecki, Arvo Pärt and Lorenzo Perosi, who permeated their music with their own faith. Others such as Poulenc, Petrassi, Dallapiccola, Britten, Bloch and Schonberg instilled bits of Christian spirituality in many of their compositions while others such as Stockhausen and John Cage, to mention a few, were attracted towards oriental religions (Pasticci 2001).
10. On religious art music see e.g. Mellers (2002) and Bolzan (2017).
11. For a first look at scholarship on popular music and religion see Partridge and Moberg (2017); Dueck and Reily (2017); Sylvian (2002); Partridge (2014); Olson (2011); Lau (2012); McClure (2011); Engelhardt (2017); Gilmour (2005); Häger (2018); Rycenga (2003); Bossius, Kahn-Harris, and Häger (2011).
12. From anti-rock crusades in North America in the Eighties, to the ban on Rai music in Algeria in the Nineties; from the anti-Beatles campaign (after Lennon's statement about Jesus Christ) to Iran's and Taliban's prohibitions against Western music, censorship has played a central role both in the Christian and Islamic world every time religion acts as a 'moral regulator' (Drewett 2017, 43).
13. The *furlana* is a folk-dance originating from Veneto, the region where the Pope came from.
14. The famous poet Trilussa wrote a few verses in Roman dialect ironizing on the episode: *Er Papa nun vô er Tango, perché spesso / er cavajere spigne e se strufina / sopra la panza de la ballerina / che, su per giù, se regola lo stesso* [The Pope does not want the tango, since often / The partner pushes and rubs / Against the dancer's belly / Who, more or less, does the same] (Trilussa, *Tango e furlana* [1914]—author's translation). See Prato (2013), a newspaper article I wrote to celebrate, in an unconventional way, Francesco's assignment, a hundred years after this episode.
15. In 1966 Marcello Giombini's *Messa dei giovani* (Mass of the Young) pioneered the new trend followed by similar experiences by groups such as the Barritas, the Brians and the Alleluja, all belonging to the blooming beat movement, i.e. imitating sound and rhythm from the Beatles, the Rolling Stones and the like.
16. In 2009 there were 2338 choirs in Italy, implying over 150,000 people, but the number was certainly greater, if all parish choirs were added (Beltrami 2009). In 2014 TV2000—the television owned by CEI—produced a talent show devoted to choirs, titled *La canzone di noi*.

17. Claudio Chieffo stands out as one of the most popular authors, providing a few songs to Sunday liturgy like some other Catholic singer-songwriters such as Marina Valmaggi and Adriana Mascagni (Valmaggi 2005).
18. To non-Italian readers this may seem a contradiction: the major Catholic country in Europe is one where Christian Music has hardly caught on, with an insignificant market share, and no visibility on major radio and tv networks. I suggest two reasons behind this: one has to do with an anthropological feature of Italians, who feel reluctant to openly declare their faith and promote it with public gestures; another relates to the Church policy as expressed by the Episcopal Conference: the Italian Bishops have determined to promote Christian culture and values without creating ghettos that may sound self-referential.
19. Catholic youth has always taken in great consideration the work of Lucio Dalla, Franco Battiato, Fabrizio De Andrè, Angelo Branduardi and even Francesco Guccini, later to become a counterculture guru, who debuted live at the Pro Civitate Christiana in Assisi in 1968 2 years after his controversial single 'Dio è morto' was banned by RAI but welcomed by the Vatican Radio.
20. Subcultures have never caught on at a mass level as they have in the North European countries. Although in recent times subcultural genres such as Hip Hop and EDM have reached the mainstream, this does not imply that their cultures share the same bottom-up move. For the most part these globalized genres are as available as others in the big supermarket of the Web, thus representing mere alternative choices for the ordinary consumer rather than life choices as subcultures demand from their members.
21. Italian popular song comes after American/English, French and Brazilian repertoires with respect to the number of songs covered in the world (data elaborated from <https://secondhandsongs.com/>)
22. The first models were the Spanish Radio Cope and the Portuguese Radio Renascença, both supported by their national Episcopal Conferences.
23. Here I am speaking by experience, having performed my duties as Artistic Director of InBlu from 2000 to 2004, and of InBlu Webradio from 2016 to 2020. See Prato (2006).
24. It all began with songs such as 'Povera voce' (1965)—later to become the anthem of Comunione e Liberazione—'Noi canteremo gloria a te' and 'Quanta sete nel mio cuore' (1966), all of them mixing the language of contemporary theology with echoes of the past (Melloni 2005).
25. I do not want to be rude, but it is a fact that no self-defined Christian artist—singer-songwriters, groups, composers, etc.—has ever deserved a mention in the many books published on the history of Italian song, and this has little to do with the supposed ideological bias acknowledged to the critics, inasmuch as it concerns the depth of songwriting. The day Franco Battiato died, Padre Antonio Spadaro S.I.—himself a rock fan rather than a scholar—announced to *Il Corriere della Sera* on 18 May 2021 that he would publish an article on the artist and his spiritual research in *La Civiltà Cattolica*. Incidentally, the old Jesuits' journal he directs has never published anything on Christian music or any of its exponents. Battiato represents another relevant case in this context, marked by a concert given on 18 March 1989 at the Vatican's Nervi Auditorium in the presence of John Paul II. 'take a look to the quotation marks in this citation While he was performing 'E ti vengo a cercare' he became emotional , and after singing "to be a divine image/of his reality' he lost control of his voice and missed the final line of the song ('E ti vengo a cercare/perché sto bene con te' – And I come looking for you/ because I feel good when I am with you)' (Carrera 2014, 137)
26. In 1956 the song was recorded by Bing Crosby and included in his 'A Christmas Sing with Bing Around the World', as *Thou Descendeth from the Star*, but is also known as *Carol of the Bagpipers*.
27. Madonna belongs to people prior to the institutions, wrote a historian (Vauchez 1994). On music and dance on pilgrimage in a gender perspective, see Weiss (2019) who

- focuses on the rituals performed at the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Polsi in Calabria. On the fortunes of Santa Claus in Italy see Prato (2020).
28. Marothy uses the term ‘solo song’.
 29. The quotes are taken from titles in two daily papers that reviewed the album.
 30. Don Gallo explicitly quotes the lyrics of a De Andrè song on migration, which says ‘Per chi viaggia in direzione ostinata e contraria/col suo marchio speciale di speciale disperazione’ (‘Smisurata preghiera’). The interview is included in a 2007 documentary by RAI Tre on street priests.
 31. All authors’ translations.
 32. See e.g. Ghezzi (2003); Denora (2004); Storti (2009); Cannas (2006); Miscio (2016) (prefaced by Mons. Nunzio Galantino, at that time General Secretary of the Italian Episcopal Conference); Salvarani-Semellini 2019.
 33. *Sacred Arias* sold more than five million copies and stands out as the best-selling solo classical album of all time. *My Christmas Album* topped the charts in Italy, Hungary, and Poland.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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