Cardinal Ratzinger, Rock Music and Liturgy:  
Is Christian Rock Appropriate for Liturgy?  

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At various points throughout its history, the Catholic Church has spoken out against different genres of music. In recent years, Cardinal Ratzinger has openly condemned rock music on the basis that it promotes a notion of freedom irreconcilable with that of the Catholic faith. This condemnation comes at an interesting time, given the growing popularity and use of Christian Rock music in liturgical worship in the West, particularly amongst younger generations. In light of this seeming contradiction, one must ask whether this “Christianized” form of rock is as inappropriate to liturgy as its secular counterpart, or whether Christian rock presents a “redeemed” form of rock appropriate for Christian use. In order to do this, we shall look first at Benedict’s condemnation of rock and at the particular characteristics of rock culture which make it unsuitable for liturgical use. Then we will look at the ways in which Christian rock music differs from popular rock (if at all) in order to determine whether this genre is indeed suitable for liturgical use.

In his lecture *Liturgy and Church Music*, Ratzinger (now Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI) tackles the age-old question as to which style of music is appropriate to liturgy. In order to do so, he first looks at what liturgy ought to be. At the heart of liturgy, he affirms, is “the question of the correct concept of freedom”.¹ In current Western culture, the notion of freedom has become greatly distorted. In *Evangelium Vitae*, Blessed John Paul II contrasted the world’s “self-centered concept of freedom” which reduces freedom to “absolute autonomy” to true

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freedom, which is rooted in the truths of the gospel and “which possesses an inherently relational dimension”.\(^2\) According to the Church, freedom does not mean separation from institutions or from conscience, nor does it equate to “autonomy and emancipation”\(^3\); on the contrary, true freedom comes from becoming more fully human, which is essentially to exist socially, to receive and partake.\(^4\) To be fully human also implies achieving the proper balance between the physical and spiritual.\(^5\) Christian liturgy must fully reflect and participate in this freedom, as must liturgical music.

Ratzinger claims that, far from promoting and reflecting the freedom found in Christ, “rock music seeks release through liberation from personality and its responsibility” and so is “completely antithetical to the Christian concept of redemption and freedom, indeed its exact opposite”.\(^6\) Instead of fostering the wholeness of the person, which constitutes true freedom, rock creates “the illusion of salvation in liberation from the ego... [and] from the burden of consciousness”.\(^7\) Cardinal Ratzinger cautions that freedom is not merely a feeling of release achieved through “sacred delirium induced by frenzied instrumental rhythms”.\(^8\) Indeed, freedom is not an emotion at all, but a way of being in which the “the sensitive powers [integrate] with the spirit, so that both together become the complete person”.\(^9\) The promise of freedom sought in sensual ecstasy brought on by rock music is what Jeremy Begbie calls “Escapism”,\(^10\) which is

\(^3\) Ratzinger, “Liturgy and Church Music”, 17.
\(^4\) Ibid, 18.
\(^5\) Ibid, 20.
\(^6\) Ibid, 19.
\(^7\) Ibid.
\(^8\) Ibid.
\(^9\) Ibid, 20.
not freedom at all but merely denial. Music which promotes such freedom would therefore
directly conflict with the spirit of the liturgy.

Nevertheless, the emotional release promised by rock is enticing. Ratzinger understands
that true “redeeming release is more toilsome than that sought in ecstatic frenzy”.11 In a culture
ever hungry for the Infinite12 but often unwilling to sacrifice, rock presents an alternate form of
religion which appeals to the “weak religiosity” of the masses. Deena Weinstein shows that rock
has in fact taken on many of the characteristics of a religion. She looks at the “religiosity of
rock” from three angles: the textual and non-textual musical elements, the relationship of
musicians and fans, and finally the concert experience.

According to Weinstein, rock conveys its dogma through its lyrics, band names and song
titles.13 These textual components are taken together as keys to interpreting the meaning and
message of the music. However, the textual elements in rock are normally secondary to the non-
textual elements, subject to them. Weinstein says that

...It is a false abstraction to separate rock lyrics from the rest of the music, all the
components of sound, from the rhythm to the timbre of the voice. All of these
non-textual elements surround the lyrics and signify them in a ‘musical language',
at times to the point that the singer’s words cannot be deciphered by the listener.
Rock is, after all, primarily ‘music’ and not poetry.14

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12 Ibid, 19.
14 Ibid.
According to Ratzinger, this primacy of the music over the word is problematic, given that “the relationship to a text, the rationality, the intelligibility and the sobriety of Christian liturgy have always been [sic] presupposed as the basic norm of liturgical music”.\textsuperscript{15} In Christianity, music must be “subordinate to a message, to a comprehensive spiritual statement”\textsuperscript{16} while in rock the message is derived from the music. Furthermore, the non-textual elements of the music are what give Benedict cause for concern. It is precisely the “rhythm and melody” of rock which Ratzinger holds responsible for the sensual release facilitated by rock music.\textsuperscript{17} Given that the non-textual is given primacy over the word in rock music, and that these non-textual elements enable an escape from the senses which is directed to no higher purpose than itself, it is clear that rock does not conform to the spirit of the liturgy or the expectations of liturgical music.

The second feature of rock that contributes to its “religiosity” is the relationship between the musicians and their fans. This relationship is comparable to that of “charismatic leaders and their followers”.\textsuperscript{18} The “charisma” of the musician is expected to take a form which embodies the Western notion of freedom: “What is necessary is that the charismatic leader ‘rejects all ties to the external order’”, that he or she “adhere to his/her artistic vision without regard to any other considerations”.\textsuperscript{19} The fans, on their part, are “expected to love and appreciate the rock star’s music and to adore the star: this is a form of worship”.\textsuperscript{20} As an alternate religion, this relationship seems to mirror that of God and believer. Of course, it represents a much weaker relationship because there is no true covenant between musicians and fans: the rock star may be

\textsuperscript{15} Ratzinger, “Liturgy and Church Music”, 17.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Joseph Ratzinger, "On the Theological Basis of Church Music," \textit{Feast of Faith}, (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986), 118.
\textsuperscript{18} Weinstein, “Rock Music”, 189.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
charismatic only in image, which would make the basis of the relationship a lie;\textsuperscript{21} on the part of the believer, there is no “demand that fans change their life patterns or make significant sacrifices”, no “threat or punishment” for disobedience, and most importantly no lasting reward for subscribing to the religion of rock.\textsuperscript{22} There is also no exclusivity about this relationship: a person may be a fan of many rock artists at once.\textsuperscript{23} On the whole, this relationship represents a form of idolatry: the fans idolize the artist and make him/her their god. Far from being appropriate to liturgy, the relationship between artist and audience makes rock a competing religion with radically different values and expectations than those in Christianity. Rock music would thus be utterly inappropriate to liturgy, as the congregation may be tempted to worship the performer rather than God.

Finally, Weintsein presents the rock concert as the culmination of the religion of rock. It is here that the musician-fan relationship “materialises in a ritual enacting of the artist’s gift and the fan’s worship”.\textsuperscript{24} The concert also strengthens bonds between fans, creating a sense of community intrinsic to religion.\textsuperscript{25} Finally, it is at the concert that the promise of “freedom” through sensory release is delivered: “The fans are carried on waves of music and other stimuli into, at peak experience, deliverance to moments of intense sensory excitement [which are] heightened by kinaesthetic participation”.\textsuperscript{26} These elements would be inappropriate to liturgy since, as mentioned above, the musician-fan relationship represents a form of idolatry and the promise of freedom through sensory pleasure that is false and unfulfilling. The communal bond created between fellow fans is neither negative nor positive in and of itself. On a whole,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 191.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 192.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 193.
\end{itemize}
however, the rock concert is unbefitting to liturgy as it represents an alternate space of worship in which fans pursue an idolatrous relationship with the rock artist and the false freedom promised by rock.

Initially, rock music seems utterly irreconcilable with Christian piety. However, in light of the recent boom of Christian Rock music, it is necessary to consider whether rock can be properly turned to the service of Christianity. It would seem that any form of rock which seeks to be “Christian” would indeed require some form of “purification”. Let us examine in detail each of the features of rock and the ways in which Christian Rock bands have tried to turn them to the service of God.

Recall that the textual and non-textual elements were the first of Weinstein’s characteristics of the religion of rock. While the relationship between text and music in rock seemed inappropriate to Christian liturgy, Weinstein notes that “Christian rock artists are explicitly using non-textual elements of the music to spread the word, to preach. The (non-textual) music here, as it does rarely elsewhere in rock, serves the words, that is, the Word”. In making the music subservient to the Word, that is, to Christ and His Gospel, Christian artists have attempted to harness the powerful rhythmic drive of the music for the purposes of evangelization. On the one hand, this is an answer to Ratzinger’s demand that the liturgy be Logo-centric: in Christian Rock the Word has once again become central, thus making Rock appropriate for liturgy. On the other hand, one may question whether it is appropriate to use a musical tool known to induce a “sacred delirium” for the purpose of liturgy. It is necessary to underline therefore that Ratzinger does not condemn outright the “ecstasy of the senses”, but

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only that which would seek to “swallow up the spirit in the senses as a means of release [rather than] elevating the senses into the spirit”. \(^{29}\) Indeed, he speaks positively about both the sensual and the spiritual, affirming the need for proper integration of both: “music of faith seeks the integration of man...[and] bequeathes joy and a higher type of ecstasy which does not extinguish personality, but unites and thus liberates”. \(^{30}\) Ratzinger makes it clear that this integration, this higher ecstasy, can be achieved only when the Word becomes primary. \(^{31}\) Thus, the ecstasy induced by rock, its rhythm and melodies are indeed purified and made appropriate for liturgy by the primacy of the Word in Christian Rock. In its subservience to the Word, Christian rock proclaims true freedom rather than promising sensual ecstasy for its own end; this “expansion of the Word into the corporeal and into the sphere of all our senses” enables the integration of body and spirit so that the faithful may offer true worship. \(^{32}\)

The second characteristic of “Religio-rock” as outlined by Weinstein is the relationship between musicians and fans. It would be highly inappropriate to make use of music which inspired adoration of the artist in a liturgical setting. In order for rock to be appropriate for liturgy, then, this relationship must also be “purified”. The personal testimony of various Christian Rock artists gives some insight as to how this can be achieved. In an article by Tim Stafford, members of the band *White Heart* said that they “go out and talk to kids after every concert because they want to break down the distance between themselves and their audience”. \(^{33}\) Christian rock artists want their fans to know that they “are just normal people”; \(^{34}\) they do not want to be idolized, but rather seek to inspire reverence of God via their music. Furthermore,

\(^{29}\) Ratzinger, “On the Theological Basis of Church Music”, 118.  
\(^{31}\) Ibid., 18.  
\(^{32}\) Ibid.  
\(^{34}\) Ibid.
these artists are not simply playing a part, as are many rock stars. Rob Hartman, among others, testified that “he doesn’t know one person in the industry who is insincere in his or her faith”.\(^{35}\) This shows a distinctive difference between rock and Christian rock cultures: while rock artists often advertize a false image of themselves in order to sell records, Christian rock artists are attempting to share their true beliefs with others. This relationship is not directed to financial profit, but to evangelization; it is a relationship based in truth and the desire to share the Christian faith. On the part of the fans, there is also a distinctive difference of role. While the fans are dissuaded from worshipping the artist, they are encouraged to take up their beliefs. Taking it on good faith that Christian rock artists are in fact promoting a message in line with the gospel, this is tantamount to an invitation to conversion along with all the real sacrifices and lifestyle changes required of a Christian. The audience-artist relationship is thus considerably different in Christian rock as it does not constitute an alternative to a relationship between God and believer. Rather, it is a relationship between equal members of the Body of Christ.\(^{36}\) Steven Chapman, one of the big names in Christian rock, expresses this ideal from the position of both musician and fan: “I hope what happens [to those who hear my music] is what happened to me when I went to the Dallas Holm concerts...it challenged me. I always walked around saying, ‘Man, I want to live my life like he’s singing about’”.\(^{37}\) Thus, in Christian rock, music becomes a tool of evangelization, and even more a “pedagogical tool”, where praise inspires praise and leads to “redemption and liberation”.\(^{38}\)

The final element in the “religion of rock” is the rock concert, the live performance. We saw that the rock concert is the place where artist-to-fan and fan-to-fan relationships are

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 18.
\(^{36}\) Ibid., 16.
\(^{37}\) Ibid., 19.
\(^{38}\) Ratzinger, “On the Theological Basis of Church Music”, 117.
strengthened. It is where the promised “liberation” is delivered, if only momentarily, through music. Given that in Christian rock the artist-fan relationship is transformed, the performance of Christian rock music is no longer geared toward solidifying this relationship. Instead, the live experience of Christian rock is simply a moment in which musician and fans praise God together. Although the musician may lead and guide worship, his actions are no different from the role of a choir in leading the congregation. There should be no reason, based on the refutation of Ratzinger’s arguments, why Christian rock music could not be played by a band in liturgy. Since liturgy is indeed directed toward “communion”, it is also appropriate that liturgical music express “the mutual relationship of all members of Christ’s body”;\(^{39}\) the lived experience of Christian rock meets these qualifications as it strengthens the bond between those hearing and participating in the music. The kinaesthetic participation brought on by rock can also be incorporated into liturgy. Furthermore, given that in rock the live performance is tied to the moment in which liberation is attained, it is most suitable that Christian rock be played in liturgy, in the presence of Christ, who is true liberation. When the relationship between fans and musicians is purified and when the non-textual music is governed by the Word of the gospel, the worship inappropriately given to the musicians can be redirected to God, and the temporary freedom promised by the music can lead to the hope and experience of true freedom. The live experience of rock music thus purified can then indeed serve as a “foretaste of that freedom which does not destroy, but which unites and purifies”.\(^ {40}\)

Thus, the intrinsic features of rock music, along with the religiosity it generates are rechanneled in Christian rock so that the music may facilitate and participate in the worship of God and the pursuit of true freedom. Jeremy Begbie affirms that “the lasting antidote to idolatry

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\(^{40}\) Ibid.
is not to spurn what is God-created but to do all in one’s power to turn it to the praise of God, to release it to sing the goodness of the creator”.

In this essay, I have shown that rock music has been so purified and embraced by Christians in the West. Furthermore, I have suggested that Christian rock music can be – and in some cases, already has been – successfully inculturated for liturgical purposes. Unfortunately, exploring the exact theological nature of the liturgy and its relationship to music is beyond the scope of this essay. Liturgical theology aside, I am content to propose that Christian rock music, despite its apparent similarities to secular rock, does not have to be mutually exclusive with liturgy. The fact that Christian rock music exists at all is a testament to the inculturation that has already taken place among younger generations in the West. Cardinal Ratzinger’s criticisms of rock music cannot be applied in all fairness to Christian rock music, which, transformed in its subordination to the Word, can be an appropriate means of offering praise to God, both within and without the liturgical context.

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41 Begbie, Resounding Truth, 219.
Bibliography


