

“My Church”: Challenges to Tradition and the Rise of the Secular Praise and Worship Anthem

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Abstract

Maren Morris’s song, “My Church,” is hardly controversial, with harmonies, form, and lyrics that give reverential honor to country music’s conservative and sacred traditions. “My Church” fits well within this conservative tradition, yet evangelical websites were replete with warnings of the dangerous threat planted by Morris’s secular restructuring of the traditional church and included strategies for how to thwart such threats. This article analyzes Morris’s song and music video, searching for musical, lyrical, and cultural reasons for that negative response and explores the meaning of religion through the reaction to the song.

Keywords: Feminism, Country Music, Religion, Conservatism, Maren Morris

Introduction

Maren Morris’s debut single “My Church” from her album *Hero* (2016) hardly seems controversial. Its lyrics fit comfortably within the societal and religious traditions of the Southern United States, referencing many of country music’s symbolic pillars such as church, falling from grace, redemption through the washing away of sins, Hank Williams, Johnny Cash, and long therapeutic drives listening to country music. Its musical content is also not controversial. It might be questioned whether music itself can be controversial; however, many country music purists lament the introduction of pop, rock, hip hop, and other musical elements into a narrower definition of what constitutes country music. [1] While some of Morris’s music leans toward a more pop-like sound, the stylistic and musical elements of “My Church” fit solidly within country music tradition. The meter of “My Church” is the traditional meter of 4/4 with somewhat simple rhythms. The final line of the chorus, in this case the punch line, “Yeah, I guess that’s my church,” is straight quarter notes with a slight syncopation that emphasizes the last word, “church.” The catchy and singable melody is mostly pentatonic, and its harmonies move mostly between the diatonic pillars I,

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IV, and V with an occasional strategically placed vi to extend a phrase. As such, it sits snugly within Harlan Howard's "three chords and the truth." [2] These are not controversial components, and yet, with its lyrics, music, and images from the music video combined, that is just what "My Church" was—controversial.

This article explores ways in which Maren Morris's "My Church" stretches and explores the ideological space of religion and church. It addresses the musical and religious traditions honored by country music and many of its listeners and how Morris's "My Church" interacts with those traditions. These traditions are explored through an examination of not only the lyrics and music of the song, but also the music video, which enhances and clarifies the meaning of Morris's song. In doing so, it seeks to uncover the source of these evangelical reactions to Morris's challenge of the traditional definitions of church and religion. It points toward Morris's "My Church" as a secular praise and worship anthem, a replacement hymn for an alternative church to challenge the traditional church of the evangelical South, resulting in broad discussions in evangelical circles of the song's controversial challenges to their cornered market on the idea of church. These evangelical discussions will return at the close of the article.

Religious tradition in country music

To locate Morris's song within church and country music tradition, we must first review the well-known connections between country music and religious conservatism. The nature of such conservative ideals is both musical and religious, and these ideals must be explored both individually and as they relate to each other. Namely, there are three important ways in which Morris's "My Church" pays homage to tradition and conforms to traditional country music ideals: 1) a conservative approach to its musical content and structure, 2) its portrayal of a salvation message—both in religious and secular forms, and 3) the leadership role taken by a woman in both music and religious contexts.

Bill Monroe describes the conservative aesthetic in country music regarding both lyrics and musical styles. He ties the social conservatism and tastes of the rural U.S. South to the simplification of harmony, melody, and lyrics, each of which facilitated the oral transmission and preservation of country music. Monroe and Neal see a strong influence of religious conservatism as one of the strongest influences on country music's own brand of conservatism, both musically and topically. "Country music evolved in a society where religion was pervasive and where the church and its related functions touched the individual's life in a hundred different ways" (Monroe and Neal 2010: 10). Monroe and Neal tie 19th-century congregational singing at camp meetings, with their familiar and popular texts and melodies, to the evolving style of country music. "Simple, singable melodies and song texts characterized by choruses, refrains, and repetitive phrases have always been obvious characteristics of [religious music and] country music [alike]" (Monroe and Neal 2010: 11). They also note the spiritual and emotional experience of congregational singing in these large-group camp meetings, an experience that certainly resonates with Morris's experience in "My Church."

Parallel with the simplicity and familiarity described by Monroe and Neal, Curtis Ellison notes the connection of country music to the religious message of salvation from both sin and the wiles of daily life on earth. He notes the ceremonial and ritual qualities encountered

during a country music concert through the congregation-like singing experience and the quasi-religious message present in many of the songs. "Most [fans] are aware that country music culture offers opportunities both to acknowledge a sense of living in hard times and to renew their faith in earthly love, religious salvation, or both. So country music culture has a working dynamic: It deliberately means to move our attention *from* hard times *to* heaven" (Ellison 1995: xix). Morris's song turns our attention in a similar manner, but her "heaven" is an alternative one, inciting the controversy mentioned above. Morris invites her followers to an alternative terrestrial salvation through the power of music.

Notable for addressing Morris's alternative call to church, Ellison addresses the important role that women play in the salvific turn toward heaven. "Being saved by the evangelist's Jesus is the persistent subject of sacred country music" (Ellison 1995: 118). Ellison documents the history of evangelical revival meetings and the prominent role women took as vocal soloists and in giving testimonies about salvation from sin and malady. He notes that most family musical groups in these services featured women as lead vocalists and worship leaders, much as Morris is the leader of the call in her music video. This history is significant. The evangelical church in the Southern United States is well-known for misogynistic views of women's roles in both ordination and church leadership. In worship music, however, there is a history of leadership by women, especially in connection to the religious folk music that Monroe, Neal, and Ellison mark as leading toward the broadly-defined genre of country music.

Ellison also notes the blurred lines between religious salvation and romantic salvation in country music, a notion explored in other genres as well. Hozier's "Take Me to Church" is a prime example. Hozier's church, like Morris's, is also a common competitor for the church's religious market. His object of worship is a woman, his place of worship is the bedroom, and his religious experience is distinctly sexual. "There is a parallel tradition in secular country music culture that relies on the motif of salvation but replaces the love of Jesus with the love of women" (Ellison 1995: 118). Ellison highlights country music's, as well as Hollywood's, portrayal of women as steadfast and wholesome savior-figures for wayward men in what he calls "the tragic troubadour's life." "It's likely, too, that the salvation motif, borrowed from gospel traditions to enhance the power of women's domestic and romantic love, has fueled the growth of the distinctive fan culture associated with country music" (Ellison 1995: 118-119). The idea of Williams and Cash as "tragic troubadours" saved by women is significant in the context of Morris's "My Church." Not only does she mention both Williams and Cash directly, but she also highlights this idea of a secular salvation. Indeed, in many ways, the song and video present her as a type of savior figure, very much in line with that described by Ellison. "My Church" portrays Morris as both troubadour and savior.

There is also a tradition in country music of empowered women, fighting back against the misogynist patriarchy within both country music and the Southern evangelical church. This represents a change from the era of Tammy Wynette's "Stand by Your Man." Jo Dee Messina's "My Give a Damn's Busted" and Carrie Underwood's "Before He Cheats" are prime examples of this type of anthem that fights back against manipulative and dishonest love interests. Maren Morris sits solidly within this tradition. "Rich," the song that immediately proceeds "My Church" on *Hero*, continues this tradition as does "Drunk Girls

Don't Cry." The men croon about trucks, beer, patriotism, and women. The women are the ones that usually fight back and instigate progress. In "My Church," not only does Morris declare and redefine what church is for her, but she becomes a savior figure for the stranded and presumably for many of her listeners as well—a position that likely initiated some of the response from the evangelical community. Morris is a woman, leading others to the redemption of driving with the radio blasting, much as June Carter led Johnny Cash away from drugs and back to God. Indeed, Morris has pointed toward being "fascinated by Johnny's story with June Carter. I grew up listening to their records" (Morris 2015).

Tradition honored and challenged through lyrics and images

The lyrics of "My Church" pay homage, not only to the traditions of country music, but also to the traditions of the religious faith with which country music often seems so intimately linked. However, they portray a new secular form of salvation, not tied to the traditional church. Morris notes a shift from religion toward a broader, less confined spirituality parallel to one often seen in current society. "I didn't write this from a religious perspective or place—it was more spiritual—my version of church has always been through songs. I was on a writing trip to LA, and I didn't have an idea for the next write. So I went driving around on the PCH [Pacific Coast Highway], and was really inspired by the beautiful surroundings and the music on the radio—I'm a huge country fan and am always inspired by classic country. That's perfect road songs. The title, "My Church," just popped into my head. Music's my version of church" (Morris 2015). Indeed, Morris's spiritual experience in her church is a deeply personal one. "Honestly, I didn't send ["My Church"] to anyone. I didn't even send it in to my publisher. I was being overly protective. I've seen instances in the past where songwriter friends want songs for themselves that they've written and another artist hears it on accident and loves it so much and takes it. I didn't want that happening. I think if it had ended up with someone else's voice on it I would have been devastated" (Hyman 2017).

This article filters Morris's lyrics through the lens of the music video as its images add an important layer of interpretation to the meaning of the lyrics. In this way, the lyrics, music, and video are seen as a symbiotic whole, each working with the other unit to create a network of meanings. The video opens with a black and white image of Morris seated in front of a church. Ringing church bells, chirping birds, and a rushing breeze frame the opening soundscape as Morris takes a final puff of her cigarette, puts it out on the concrete step, and rises to the song's opening. The final puff of smoke before Morris's exit from both church and cigarette presents a metaphorical finality to traditional images of church and religion. As Morris begins to sing, images of black and white switch to color, representing a transition from the traditional past toward a new alternative. This transition is reinforced by the church and choir in the background as Morris walks away, confessing and leaving her sins and the church behind as she smiles and departs on her new path toward salvation. She honors the traditional past while quite literally leaving it behind. She "finds holy redemption" in the escape of driving through the country singing along with the radio.

The chorus of "My Church" takes place completely within Morris's car, which serves as her place of worship. She equates the rushing air through open car windows and the sound from the radio's turned up dial with the metaphorical wind of the Holy Ghost, an experience

most certainly equated with the full-bodied shiver often experienced during intensely emotional experiences. [3] Morris's path to salvation and redemption is singing along with her praise and worship leaders, Williams and Cash, substituting for the traditional paths of faith and good deeds. She evokes the traditional emotional outbursts of "hallelujah" and "amen" as responses to her heightened religious experience. The chorus closes as she realizes that this physical and emotional musical experience has a spiritual element as well, an experience so fulfilling that it incites her to declare that this is indeed her church.

Despite her substitutive religious experience, images of crosses hanging from her rearview mirror retain the memory of her traditional religious roots. These images frame the act of turning up the dial on her "highway FM," increasing the volume and intensity of her religious experience. Before she puts her hand out the window to feel the rushing air, she raises it toward the ceiling, mimicking the raising of hands during traditional religious praise and worship services. These images, matched with the lyrics of the song, display both a knowledge of tradition and a replacement of those traditions with newly found means of redemption. In addition to the substitutive salvation through musical escapism, Morris substitutes the wind of the Holy Spirit for the actual wind rushing through her open car window.

In the second verse, Morris transitions from exploring a new mode toward salvation to becoming Ellison's tragic troubadour—a missionary or even savior-figure herself—as she picks up a blue-haired wanderer, seemingly converting her to her church of sound and motion. References to Williams and Cash and images of a jukebox and raised "praise and worship" hands pay homage to the traditional. Meanwhile, tradition is countered as Morris and her convert achieve salvation from the wiles of life through alternative means, even breaking through a barricaded bridge, embodying the freedom and acceptance their new church provides for chronic rule-breakers. Indeed, this imagery points toward a rejection of the religious church's concept of sin. The images of the religious church are absent from the second verse and the second iteration of the chorus. The sole remnant is the image of the cross hanging from her rearview mirror, now fully supplanted in traditional religious meaning by Cash and Williams as new icons of Morris's church. Indeed, the saints of country music replace religious saints, as Morris references Williams's "Cold, Cold Heart" and Cash's "Ring of Fire" as new praise anthems for her church. Like the hymns of the church, Morris declares these new hymns as vessels of escape from the weight of the world. The second verse closes with a reminder of her path to salvation as she relies on her new avenues to the cleansing of her sins—her car as a physical means of escape and radio as a psychological escape.

Following an instrumental bridge, acapella and full-band versions of the chorus introduce the image of a stranded motorcyclist whom Morris also invites to her path toward redemption. Images of a classic stage setting, vintage microphone, and driving through the country pay homage to tradition against the contrast of Morris serving as a savior-figure, leading her followers toward her new form of redemption. Indeed, the stranded motorcyclist is shown kneeling next to his broken classic Triumph motorcycle and strumming his fingers atop the gas tank as he ponders what to do about his transportation predicament. Flirty glances and a teasing car-side chase add an element of attraction between Morris and the motorcyclist that hint at an additional level of redemption beyond just the brief roadside

rescue, reminiscent of the romance of June Carter and Johnny Cash and harkening to country music's well-worn image of a woman's role as a dually romantic and spiritual savior figure. Scenes of Morris on stage with her hands held high in the air are interspersed between this narrative of roadside redemption and create the image of Morris as praise and worship leader for her new congregation, an image that fits neatly within the church's tradition while simultaneously challenging the patriarchal views of many Southern evangelical congregations. Strengthening this interpretation, the closing repetitions declaring that this is, indeed, her church are reminiscent of a modern praise and worship anthem as they repeatedly emphasize the main point of the anthem and provide Morris's congregation with an opportunity to join her in praise to her newly found path toward spiritual redemption.

Tradition honored and challenged in music

Much as the lyrics and images of the music video represent a nod to conservative country music tradition and its religious underpinnings, the melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic content of "My Church" should also be considered conservative. However, they too provide brief and often covert glimpses of rebellion against these traditions, glimpses that may have served to rile religious pundits. While much of country and popular music alike involve a fair amount of syncopation, the melodic rhythms of "My Church" align mostly on the beat in a regular and predictable pattern. As a result, syncopations become salient moments of emphasis within the song. Perhaps the most notable example falls on the final line of the chorus with Morris's often repeated declaration that country music is her church. Here, each word is given a single quarter note that falls directly on the beat in a simple, declarative manner. The word, "my," however, is held over for an additional eighth note, disrupting the declarative flow and signaling the listener for the final statement of the chorus and the primary point of Morris's song. As a result of this disruption and brief augmentation of the flow, the final word, "church," occurs on the off-beat eighth note between beats two and three and gives both Morris and her congregation an emotional point of rhythmic emphasis as they declare their reverence to the pillars of country music as an escape from the world's problems.

Much like the melodic rhythm, the harmonic rhythm is consistent throughout, grouped into four measures of 4/4 for each phrase of verse and chorus. The only exception to this consistency is found in the second half of the second verse when Morris seeks escape from the weight of the world. The word, "escape," falls on the third beat of that measure and would otherwise progress directly into the redemptive act of driving with the radio. Instead, this second verse adds two extra beats on "escape," providing a suspended metric emphasis on the only occurrence of a minor chord in "My Church." This durational augmentation contrasts with the last lines of the first verse, which simply declare for the first time Morris's path to redemption through driving with the windows rolled down and the radio blasting. This augmentation also provides a point of repose, an opportunity for the actual meditative act surely involved in Morris's musical redemption. Much like the previous references to both the blowing wind from the open car windows and the Christian tradition of the Holy Spirit's rushing mighty wind, this pause gives Morris a chance to catch her breath, a breath that is audible on the commercial recording.

The melody's pitches remain largely pentatonic, avoiding scale degree 4 and utilizing scale degree 7 only during a brief scalar descent in the fourth line of each verse. It does nothing to go outside the bounds of either country or praise and worship music traditions. Written in the guitar-friendly key of A, the harmony remains diatonic with no chromatic inflection. It hovers around the harmonies A, D, and E—I, IV, and V in A major—with an occasional f# minor vi chord. This singability and harmonic simplicity are reminiscent of the religious traditions documented by Ellison, Monroe, and Neal.

The second verse of "My Church" specifically references two pillars of the country music corpus: Williams's "Cold, Cold Heart" and Cash's "Ring of Fire." Morris notes her inspiration from these icons as well as Dolly Parton. "I love Johnny Cash and Hank Williams. I grew up listening to them. I just grew up on classic country. Hank is so classic, Dolly is so classic, but they all totally pushed the envelope with their honesty and their song writing, and I'm a fan of that" (Mastrogiannis 2016). These two hymns of the country music church are honored musically as well as lyrically in "My Church." The harmonic content of "Cold, Cold Heart" consists of I, IV, and V chords in D major. "Ring of Fire" closely follows the trajectory of "Cold, Cold Heart" and "My Church." Its harmonic content is also exclusively I, IV, and V chords in G major. Even in its harmonic structure, "My Church" shows reverence to tradition, using primarily I, IV, and V chords. It does, however, rebel against these two country music hymns via its use of the vi chord. In a larger musical context, the vi chord's regularity of usage and diatonic context hardly stand out as significant, much less controversial. However, within the local context of Morris's song, the vi chord's limited and carefully-placed usage sets it apart as a salient feature, clearly marking moments of salvation that enhance its controversial reception.

In "My Church," the vi chord highlights two notable lyrics. In the chorus, the word, "verse" is harmonized by the minor vi. In context, "verse" occurs at the precise moment when Morris finds her redemption, the *raison d'être* of her church's establishment. The minor chord veers away from the harmonies of the Williams and Cash songs Morris references precisely on the word "verse" at the climax of the line, demonstrating that the act of singing along to each verse is, for Morris, a salvific act. In the second verse, this interpretation is strengthened by the other use of vi, which is made even more significant by its location in the metric expansion discussed above. Not only is the word "escape" made salient through the metric expansion, but it also is harmonized by vi, the chord of redemption and escape, in the context of "My Church." The aural association with salvation, created in the chorus by the commingling of this harmony with the act of singing each sacred verse, is again associated with the idea of redemption, here seen as an escape from the burdens of everyday life. The moment in "My Church" where the vi occurs, lyricized by the singing of every single verse, becomes the song's moment of salvation, the actual act of redemption via singing and driving.

While the addition of the minor vi chord rebels ever so slightly from the homage to these traditional hymns, Morris's song honors these country music hymns in a significant metric way as well. As noted, Morris's actual moment of redemption, her church's new path to salvation, is described in the second verse. Through the musical stretching of the word, "escape," this moment of redemption honors country music tradition in two important ways. The addition of an extra measure within the regular four-measure harmonic rhythm is

discussed above. Its placement in this second verse that mentions Williams and Cash is more significant than just a mere moment of repose, as it serves as a musical homage to tradition in addition to the obvious lyric homage. For example, an extra measure is also inserted in “Cold, Cold Heart” in the third line of each verse. The extra measure in “My Church” provides a direct musical tie to the lyric’s reference to Williams’s song. Likewise, the meter of “Ring of Fire” contains an extra metric beat during each iteration of the well-known trumpet riff. This extra beat acts much like the extra measure in “Cold, Cold Heart,” augmenting the metric regularity of the song. At the precise moment that Morris finds her escape from the burdens of life, at her moment of salvation, a rhythmic and metric homage to the metric augmentations of Williams and Cash pays reverence to the sacred verses of country music tradition that have led her to this redemptive point—the verses through which she finds her escape.

God’s Church or My Church: Can Music be a Religion?

This article posits that one of the reasons “My Church” was controversial in any manner is connected to its close resemblance to a praise and worship song—in other words, that it struck a tone just a shade too close to home for some evangelicals. While a large portion of country music audiences are both conservative and religious—as demonstrated by the 2003 reaction to the criticism of George Bush and the Iraq War by Natalie Maines of The Chicks (formerly, the Dixie Chicks) and their sudden decline in radio plays (Leahey 2014)—it may seem odd that any negative attention was given to a song focused on honoring country music tradition and, in a manner of speaking, bringing more people to church, however broadly defined and secularized.

From an evangelical perspective, the main controversy in “My Church” seems to orbit around its direction of the object of worship away from the Christian God. Blogger Joseph Weyel describes it as “not remotely Christian; it is the latest in a dangerous trend which seeks to transform the essential elements of religion and spirituality by substituting an inferior mix of emotionalism and vice” (Weyel 2017). Tyler Zach shares Weyel’s view of the threat emanating from Morris’s alternative church. Zach is an evangelical pastor and author of the blog, *Culture Reader*, which is “dedicated to reading pop culture trends through a gospel lens” (Zach 2017). Zach accuses song writers—specifically Morris and her co-writer busbee (the professional name of Michael Busbee) as well as Hozier—of a sort of bait-and-switch, drawing people into a familiar religious experience but filtering it away from the Christian God and toward other objects such as music and human relationships. Zach ascribes intent to these songwriters to create alternative worship experiences, experiences of which he says Christians should be wary (Zach 2017).

Music reviewer Joshua Andre agrees. In analyzing “My Church,” Andre finds a “scary and dangerous thing” in finding “spiritual solace” and worshipping something beyond the Christian God himself. He sees this worship as idolatry. While Andre sees a threat in songs like “My Church,” he notes its importance, and thus silver lining, in bringing discussions of this threat to light (Andre 2019). Chris Queen, an evangelical journalist, sees country music as “the last bastion of safe music for Christians outside of actual Christian music” and describes “My Church” as sacrilegious and disrespectful. He joins other country-music-

loving Christians in cherry picking their offences. "It used to be that we could count on country music to hold up the value of religion. Even among the cheatin' and the drinkin' and the laments of the poor and working class, fans of country music knew that there was an undercurrent of hope and faith" (Queen 2016). Kyle Peart, an evangelist and apologist, disagrees with Queen's assessment of country music as being a Christian safe-haven of sorts. Peart laments any blurred lines extant between the church and the world and sees "any attempt to discuss redemption apart from Christ [as] blasphemy" (Peart 2016). Peart joins Zach, seeing intentional misdirection away from a focus on God, and sees Christians' acceptance of this misdirection as "spineless" and evidence of naïve "baby Christianity" (Peart 2016).

Morris's church expands the idea beyond its commonly-accepted definition of structures made of either brick-and-mortar walls or the community of "the body of Christ," found both inside and outside those walls. In fact, it weakens the requirement that church even be religious, clearly the primary notion that sparked the ire represented in evangelical discussions. These reactions to a secularized version of church, a reconstitution of religion as a spiritual or even just emotional escape achieved through music and driving, invite an exploration of what defines "religion" itself. In reaction to Morris's declaration that country music is her church, Tobin Grant asks, "Can music be your religion?" Grant defines religion "as something that—at a minimum—involves a belief in the supernatural." However, Grant also recognizes the functionalist view of religion, in which religion is a part of society, like the family or politics. "Most functionalists see religion as something that gives people shared meanings and helps bind people together. Religion also helps people cope with stress and the inherent uncertainties in life. So, religion isn't defined by gods or other supernatural beliefs; religion is as religion functions" (Grant 2016). Grant notes that the line between what is and is not a religion can get blurry in this view. He ponders whether anything that feels like religion, such as being a baseball fan or a coffee lover, is indeed a religion. Ultimately, Grant falls for a stricter definition of religion that requires a supernatural component (Grant 2016). From Grant's point of view, when Morris drives her car with her windows rolled down and the radio blasting, that activity cannot be her church.

Adopting a more functionalist view, evangelical journalist Jeff Brumley, also responding to "My Church," takes issue with Grant's strict definition of religion. "Given the documented rise of those with no religious affiliation and those who have abandoned organized faith..., it's become increasingly common for seemingly secular pursuits and interests to take on spiritual auras in American culture" (Brumley 2016). Brumley sees an opportunity in this change, rather than a threat. His main source is Eddie Hammett, president of "Transforming Solutions," a consulting company that specializes in mentoring both ministers and congregations so they can grow and remain functional in an increasingly secular environment. Hammett's books include *Reaching People under 30 While Keeping People Over 60*, *Making the Church Work: Converting the Church for the 21st Century*, and *The Gathered and Scattered Church: Equipping Believers for the 21st Century*, which focuses "on marketplace ministry, discipleship and penetrating the secular world for Christ" (Transforming Solutions website). Such an approach toward a business-minded "marketplace ministry" and "making the church work" in the 21st century, seems to take a song like Morris's "My Church" as a threat, or at least competition in the marketplace of

society's religious and/or spiritual leanings. In this paradigm, the music industry competes with what might be viewed as the church industry, both striving for attention, devotion, and ultimately money. While an exploration of church profitability is beyond the scope of this article, the well-documented, tax-protected wealth of many churches demonstrates the business-industry composition of these organizations. Nevertheless, Brumley and Hammett note that, rather than seeing these trends as threats to the church, Christians, their focus-audience, "should look for creative ways to bridge the gap between the church and those seeking spiritual fulfillment outside organized faith." Hammett reveals the threat, stating "we have no choice in this culture but to find other venues to have faith-based conversations beyond the local church. We are going to have to figure this out and if we don't, we are going to be in serious trouble" (Brumley 2016). In their exploration of the fragility of the church's stronghold on its markets, Hammett and Brumley admit that individuals may indeed place their faith in non-supernatural entities, both artists and the musical works they create. While also alarmed by Morris's claim on their market corner, Hammett and Brumley take an optimistic approach and welcome the challenge presented by Morris as an opportunity to identify a demographic ripe for marketing.

The self-interests or, if I may, business-interests of religious organizations, scholars, and journalists aside, there may be something to this question of Morris's church and whether music can indeed be a religion. Most purveyors of country music are on some level religious or at least spiritual. Their object of worship, however, seems curiously variable. Many are certainly religious in Grant's sense of requiring a supernatural deity. With a more open definition, others might be considered religious, paying reverence to country music "saints" such as Williams and Cash. Country music also inspires reverential feelings toward objects such as trucks and guns and activities such as fishing and front-porch sitting. Finally, there are the quasi-religious confines of melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic grammar. The sinful ways of using parallel fifths still sting for anyone who has ever studied the part-writing rules of classical music composition. In light of these considerations of tradition and controversy, "My Church" serves as a type of secular praise and worship anthem, positioning music itself as religion. The song's primary features—simplicity, repetition, singability, gospel choir clapping from the opening, invitations for proclamations of hallelujah and amen, the rising and declarative ending that this is certainly Morris's new church—all point toward common religious themes. But that is likely exactly what riled evangelicals. Perhaps they are right. Perhaps Morris's experience is a bit close to religion.

The neuroscientist, musician, and writer Daniel Levitin notes several features of religion and religious music that are certainly mirrored in Morris's "My Church." Such features include the use of music in religious ceremony to reinforce doctrine through repetition and to incite "intensely emotional" religious experiences. "Three emotions in particular are associated with religious ecstasy: dependence, surrender, and love" (Levitin 2008, 222-223). The burning of Morris's cold, cold heart and her feeling of the Holy Ghost running through her, along with the clapping and the praise-and-worship-style acapella section near the end, point quite directly toward a sort of religious ecstasy. Levitin observes the transcendent ability of music to "stimulate emotional centers" and take us beyond ourselves, qualities that make it a powerful tool within the religious experience (Levitin 2008: 225-

226). These qualities of escape and emotional attachment are certainly present in Morris's song as she finds redemption in driving with the radio.

Levitin notes two connections between religious music and human nature: "its ability to *motivate* repetitive action, and to bring what psychologists call *closure*" (Levitin 2008: 192). He interprets this repetitive action of singing as serving to bring closure to our stress and often obsessive concern with our daily problems, many of which are out of our capacity to resolve. "Music helped to infuse ritual practices with meaning, to make them memorable, and to share them with our friends, family, and living groups, facilitating a social order. This yearning for meaning lies at the foundation of what makes us human" (Levitin 2008: 192). The idea of leading toward a sense of meaning might pinpoint exactly what instigated concern amongst evangelicals. Through the repetitive nature of going for a drive, the emotional exhilaration of putting one's hand out the window of a moving car, singing with full lungs to the songs we know so well, and finding that psychological closure and escape from the stresses of daily life, Levitin's components of religion, previously held close by the church, might indeed have alternate means of attainment. For Morris, that attainment is through the specific combination of driving and music. Levitin warns that "it may not be possible to cleanly distinguish ritual from religion, and perhaps the distinction is not as important as understanding the continuous nature of how they relate to one another, of how rituals became bound up into religion in the first place" (Levitin 2008: 192). Morris's rituals—driving, singing, gaining release from the worries of life—may indeed be her church, a new substitutive religious construct. The blurry line about which Grant raised concerns, "religion is as religion functions," returns here as the traditional definition of religion has been replaced. Maybe evangelicals are right to be worried.

Endnotes

[1] For more on the stylistic controversies in country music's evolution, see Tony Scherman, "Country Music," *American Heritage*, Vol. 45, Issue 7, 1994 and James C. Cobb, "How Nashville 'Killed' Traditional Country Music—and Then Reinvented It." March 28, 2018.

[2] This ubiquitous Harlan Howard quote is part of country music lore. Its origin is difficult to trace, but Trevor de Clercq (2022) notes that it is a notion Howard often repeated. The quote is found in Howard's *Rolling Stone* obituary (Dansby 2002), but Dansby omits any citation.

[3] Acts 2 of the Bible describes the experience of the Holy Spirit as "a rushing mighty wind" (King James Version).

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