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Sacred music is an intrinsic element of virtually every religious culture, yet it remains one of the most difficult aspects of religion to convey to students. Up to the recent past, one could assign technological reasons for that difficulty. While slide projection technology had made religious iconography and architecture relatively available in the classroom, the means for providing sacred music lagged far behind. Recordings of any but the most popular Christian sacred music – works of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms from the ‘classical’ repertory – were hard to come by and cumbersome to use. Vinyl discs were easy to scratch; cassette tape tracks were hard to find.

The advent of the compact disc, however, has rendered these technical drawbacks moot. High quality digital recordings are now available for the sacred musics of many religious traditions, and finding the correct track on compact disc is effortless. Similarly, videos of ritual performances including music have proliferated over the past decade. The advent of the ‘smart classroom,’ moreover, has made it possible to pre-program and present a selection of audio, or video music examples at the touch of a finger. Yet sacred music still has far less currency in the religion classroom than does iconography or architecture. Why?

If the answer is not a matter of technology, then it most probably lies either in the perception that special skills are required to present music, or in the interpretive framework the instructor employs. Some training is indeed required if one expects to present music as a sacred art. Such an approach entails knowledge of how to read and perform music, as well as an acquaintance with appropriate academic disciplines, including musicology and history of music. But interpretation of sacred music as an art form is not what the pedagogy of religious studies requires. Our task is to present the religious meaning of sacred music, not its technical history and performance standards. For this agenda, teachers need not possess special musical training.

The musical mastery needed to present a hymn, chant, cantillation, or sacred song from most religious traditions is in fact quite minimal. Teachers who have sung in a chorus or taken basic

lessons on an instrument can likely explain the elementary melodic and rhythmic contours of such musical forms well enough to include them in their presentations of religious traditions. Those teachers who are musically inexperienced, tone-deaf, or as one of my recent students called himself, 'musically challenged,' however, will consider even the most elementary attempt to explain sacred music to be an impossible task. Yet these colleagues can and should use music in their classrooms. They can, after all, at least play some sacred music on a boom box and say something about how it expresses a religious tradition and how it is used in ritual practice.

The primary reason why sacred music is largely absent from our courses is not the need for special training. The problem lies elsewhere, in the inadequacy of our interpretive and pedagogical models of what religion is in the first place. Most of us have been trained in a logocentric approach to religion that focuses on religious thought, especially belief systems and moral teachings. The perusal of any recent AAR Annual Meeting program book will confirm that we devote overwhelming attention to sacred literary texts and discourse about them. This interest advances our scholarship and the standing of our field, but it is inadequate for addressing the full range of what David D. Hall has recently termed 'lived religion': the reality of religion as it is practiced.

Logocentrism especially limits our teaching in the undergraduate classroom, where our first task is descriptive. There, our logocentrism fails us by tending to exclude the ritual and popular dimensions of religious culture, especially sacred music. A great irony attends this situation because sacred music often sets texts that have been included in the canon of religious thought. Consider in this regard the Vedic hymns, the Psalms, or the song cycles of Native Americans. We regularly invoke these works as religious texts but ignore the musical dimensions and ritual contexts in which they were created and performed. Some sacred music has gained immense popularity because of the simple yet representative qualities of its words and music. These songs are of special usefulness in the classroom because they articulate so well the everyday religiousness in which most human beings live.

Sacred music, and especially sacred songs can readily be used in the classroom to teach the ritual and popular dimensions of religious culture. In my own work as a teacher of American religious history, I have used the rich trove of Protestant psalms and hymns to punctuate my presentation of the Puritan, Evangelical, Fundamentalist, Liberal, and Pentecostal movements. The literalistic translations of *The Bay Psalm Book* and their unison singing in worship alert students to the Word of God as a foundational category of Puritan religion. The rival hymnodies of Ira Sankey's *Gospel Hymns* and Washington Gladden's *Pilgrim Hymnal* give voice to the emotional and doctrinal sensibilities of Fundamentalism and the Social Gospel,

respectively. Recordings of Thomas Dorsey's gospel songs by the Rev. James Cleveland convey the power of the Black Pentecostal and Holiness tradition.

My favorite use of sacred music, however, is the presentation of colonial and antebellum Evangelicalism through the music of the Early American singing school. Evangelicalism was a profoundly hymnic religious movement, driven by the powerfully emotional lyrics of Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley. After its spectacular eruption in the Great Awakening, Evangelicalism spread across America assisted not only by its doctrine of the New Birth and the emotional preaching of its ministers, but also by the hymns of Watts and Wesley. Their lyrics were set to a new musical style created by itinerant singing masters, beginning with Boston's William Billings around 1770, who convened local singing schools to teach music literacy. By 1800, the singing school had become a fixture of American religious culture, aided greatly by a unique system of music notation called shape-notes. Notes were printed in four different shapes corresponding to syllables used in sounding out the musical scale.

Thousands of singing school compositions were published in hundreds shape-note collections before 1850. The music's sturdy harmonies and powerful rhythms articulate the fervor of the itinerant evangelists and camp meeting revivals of the Second Great Awakening, and its full-throated style of performance has been preserved by traditional singers in the rural south. I can present to students a selection of singing school source materials including the original lyrics, reprinted shape-note scores, and recent recordings that teach the style and sensibility of Early American Evangelicalism in ways that the texts of Jonathan Edwards, Lyman Beecher, and Charles Finney simply cannot.

Not every teacher of American religious history will feel comfortable presenting such materials, but their courses will be impoverished if they do not. Sacred music, especially popular hymnody, can provide access to realities of religious culture otherwise unavailable. The inclusion of sacred song informs students that religion is an embodied ritual phenomenon, that believers actually worship their divinities, and use their bodies as well as their minds to do so. Sacred song is perhaps the most potent, and popular, synthesis of head and heart in American religious culture. To exclude it is to disembody religion artificially and inaccurately. To include sacred song, on the other hand, invites our students to confront religion for what it has been in human experience: a synergy of belief, ritual, institution, and spirituality that always remains beyond the reach of logocentric inquiry. When our students hear how a religion sounds, their study of it, and our teaching of it, can be fundamentally transformed.

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Resources

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