

**PLAYING THE MARKET:
CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN MUSIC &
THE THEORY OF RELIGIOUS ECONOMY**

by

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B.A., The University of Calgary, 2007

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

The Faculty of Graduate Studies

(Religious Studies)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
(Vancouver)

October 2012

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Abstract

Contemporary Christian music (CCM) is a fascinating and understudied part of the religious vitality of modern American religion. In this dissertation the theory of religious economy is proposed as a valuable and highly serviceable methodological approach for the scholarly study of CCM. The theory of religious economy, or the marketplace approach, incorporates economic concepts and terminology in order to better explain American religion in its distinctly American context. In this study, I propose three ways in which this method can be applied. Firstly, I propose that CCM artists can be identified as religious firms operating on the “supply-side” of the religio-economic dynamic; it is their music, specifically the diverse brands of Christianity espoused there within, that can allow CCM artists to be interpreted in such a way. Secondly, the diversity within the public religious expressions of CCM artists can be recognized as being comparable to religious pluralism in a free marketplace of religion. Finally, it is suggested that the relationship between supply-side firms is determined, primarily, by the competitive reality of a free market religious economy.

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Acknowledgements

I want to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Cousland for his valuable insight and patience in supervising the writing of this dissertation. I would also like to thank the faculty and my colleagues within the Classical, Near Eastern, and Religious Studies department at UBC. Lastly, I must express a heartfelt appreciation for my family, especially my wife Danielle. Your unwavering support was instrumental in the completion of this project.

1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The rise of the Contemporary Christian Music genre (CCM) is a recent American cultural phenomenon that has birthed a billion-dollar industry devoted to the recording, producing, and selling of CCM.¹ Since its inception in the 1970s, the CCM industry has spawned Christian music stores, Christian music award shows (the ‘Dove Awards’), Christian music magazines, and Christian music-video television channels. Today, “Christian rock stars and music celebrities have replaced television evangelists as the primary media connection between pop culture and pop religion.”² The CCM industry today, far removed from its humble roots within the Jesus Movement of the 1960s, serves to supply a demand by a subculture of American evangelical Christians of a particular product.

Contemporary Christian music, its industry, its genre and its artists, has become a controversial subject of theological debate in the United States. At the heart of this discussion are questions concerning the legitimacy of a genre of ‘Christian music’ as a whole. The Gospel Music Association (GMA) for example, the self-described “face and voice for the Christian/Gospel music community,”³ neatly divides the music industry into its “Christian” and “secular” components, however, such divisions have frequently been criticized as being inadequate or as hopelessly problematic. Throughout the history of the phenomenon, the great diversity of opinions concerning appropriate lyrics, musical style,

¹ Mark Allan Powell, “Contemporary Christian Music: A New Research Area in American

² Ibid.

³ “GMA Mission,” Gospel Music Association, accessed April 20, 2012, <http://www.gospelmusic.org/gmainfo/aboutus.aspx>.

and artistic intent for legitimate 'Christian music' has led to confusion and conflict among CCM artists, record labels, and fans alike. Over the past 40 years, many Christian artists have distanced themselves from the CCM label (U2, Creed, and Bruce Cockburn to name a small few) dismissing any parameters as being unreasonably limiting for their art, opting instead to express their beliefs in whatsoever manner they choose. The roots of such disagreements are undoubtedly theological, Jay R. Howard and John M. Streck explain, "defining Christian music becomes an effort in defining Christianity... this, then, leads to debates over the difference between so-called 'artists who are Christian' and 'Christian artists' and a morass of competing doctrines, religious views, and religious prejudices."⁴

In recent years, CCM has become as an extremely popular subject of discussion by journalists, bloggers, and, although to a much lesser extent, researchers in the area of religion and popular culture. Regardless of the considerable attention that CCM has attracted, today very few serious academic analyses of CCM exist. This study seeks to contribute to the scholarly discussion of this modern religious phenomenon by proposing a novel sociological method for its consideration, namely that of religious economy. The theory of religious economy is a recent sociological study of religion fashioned by contemporary social scientists and historians for the purpose of better understanding American religious trends in their distinctly American context. These scholars have shifted towards a new paradigm within the field, proposing that all religious dynamics in a society can be understood in a way comparable to other forms of consumer behavior. Here it is suggested that, "religion, much like commercial entertainment, depends on innovative

⁴ Jay R. Howard & John M. Streck, *Apostles of Rock* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1999), 9.

leadership to exercise mass appeal,”⁵ Scholars who have adopted the marketplace approach recognize that, as in commercial economies, individuals and groups respond to costs and benefits, religious or otherwise, in a predictable way.

Grounded within the proposal that a true open marketplace of religion is accessible to all would-be religious innovators who may seek to operate within that market, CCM artists will be interpreted in this study as “suppliers” of a religious “product;” a product that exists beyond the physical album sales. The theory of religious economy provides a practical explanation for the presence of religious plurality in the American open marketplace of religion (perhaps more appropriately recognized in this study as *Christian* plurality), as well as a practical means of interpreting the complex relationship between religious “suppliers” in a competitive marketplace. It is the goal of this project to present the theory of religious economy as a valuable methodological lens for the study of contemporary Christian music; to introduce the model as a useful method to help make coherent the modern, perplexing, and under-studied religious phenomenon that is contemporary Christian music in the United States.

1.2 Religion and Popular Culture

The subject of religion and popular culture has received a great deal of attention in the past decade by scholars of religion. Scholars are increasingly recognizing value in the wealth of the new primary source material created daily; material that provides direct access to the pulse of a given society and to the religious climate of a given day. Scholars

⁵ Shayne Lee and Phillip Luke Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks: Evangelical Innovators and the Spiritual Marketplace* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 159.

have also discovered a delighted audience, excited by the growing consideration given to many facets of popular culture in which they are well versed. At the moment, academia is said to be “in the throes of a full-scale infatuation with popular culture.”⁶ Finally gone, it seems, are the days when the study of religion in popular culture was dismissed as insignificant. For many scholars of religion, the spotlight has shifted from an emphasis on notable religious figures and movements of centuries past to an attempt at understanding the contemporary religious lives of contemporary religious people.

Naturally, the scholarly interest in the CCM as a modern religious phenomenon only truly emerged following the industry’s incredible boom of the 1990s. Today scholars from a variety of differing backgrounds have tackled the world of CCM. Writers such as Heather Hendershot, Terry Mattingly, Jay R. Howard, Don Cusic, Randall Balmer, John M. Streck, David W. Stowe and Mark Allan Powell have all produced works on CCM in recent years, and with such notable industry insiders as Mark Joseph, Charlie Peacock, and John J. Thompson also publishing on the subject, the beginnings of a rich discussion of the phenomenon has materialized.

In the study of popular culture, however, the subject can be a moving target; published works on religion and popular culture quickly become outdated. Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy explain, “both the field of popular culture studies and the material it examines... seem to be growing at a pace that outstrips the analytical categories and methods available.”⁷ This is at the same time the curse and the advantage of the study of popular culture. News articles about Christian music artists can be found in virtually

⁶ Mazur, Eric Michael & Kate McCarthy, *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 2.

⁷ Mazur & McCarthy, *God in the Details*, 2.

every popular music magazine on the stands today, and, through the internet, many Christian artists frequently ‘weblog’ on their websites about their music, their lives, and their faith. This wealth of material can be used to paint a fairly detailed and accurate image of the world of CCM today, although it can take a great deal of ingenuity to craft a suitable approach for its analysis.

Ultimately, American Christianity has evolved over the past 40 years, and CCM may be an important measure of its transformation and of its trajectory. Thompson writes, “Most mainstream evangelical churches now use music in their Sunday services that would have been unacceptable 30 years ago. Even the most conservative worship music these days is more aggressive than the most progressive church music was in the 1960s.”⁸ Powell, in his 2004 article “Contemporary Christian Music: A New Research Area in American Religious Studies,” asks, “What does the very existence of this genre, not to mention its success, tell us about the American religious experience? What does it tell us about the integration and segregation of religion and culture?”⁹ As scholarly consideration of the CCM phenomenon grows, and as analytical methods evolve, these questions can be answered.

1.3 What is ‘Christian Music?’

It is logical to begin this study by confronting the most obvious of pertinent questions; what is ‘Christian music?’ This question is of course not as simple, nor as innocent, as it may appear. It is thus valuable to begin this study with a discussion of

⁸ John J. Thompson, *Raised By Wolves: The Story of Christian Rock & Roll* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2000), 37.

⁹ Powell, “Contemporary Christian Music,” 130 .

common competing understandings of 'Christian music,' it is here that many of the conflicts within the history of CCM can be found. In surveying past attempts at establishing an operational definition of 'Christian music,' it is evident that a majority are encumbered by theological baggage owing to the particular tradition from which that definition emerged. While there are many commonalities among American evangelicals, evangelicalism is by no means monolithic. Jay Howard writes, "Among evangelicals music is believed to facilitate a more authentic and active religious experience. Thus, debates over the nature of Christian music and its appropriate manifestations... are to a large degree debates about the nature of Christianity and the Christian experience."¹⁰ The exercise of defining 'Christian music' bends towards defining Christianity itself; debates concerning appropriate 'Christian music' often concern questions of orthodoxy.

In his book *Pop Goes Religion*, Terry Mattingly presents a list of what he identifies as six popular understandings of 'Christian music' that exist in America today. They read:

- 1) Christian music consists of hymns.
- 2) If music can be played or sung in worship services, then it's 'Christian.'
- 3) "Christian music" can be found in all genres of music, except rock. Anything with a strong backbeat is off-limits.
- 4) All forms of music are accessible, even heavy-metal, rock, or rap, as long as the songs contain clear evangelistic messages.
- 5) 'Christian songs' must contain some clear 'God-talk.' Many Contemporary Christian Music industry pros call this the 'Jesus-per-minutes' rule.
- 6) 'Christian music' is music made by artists who are publicly identified as believers, and their art – to one degree or another – reflects this Christian worldview.¹¹

Although these six definitions are hopelessly incongruent, two common themes can be identified: 1) Christian music is performed and/or composed by Christians; and 2)

¹⁰ Howard & Streck, *Apostles of Rock*, 6.

¹¹ Terry Mattingly, *Pop Goes Religion* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2005), 3.

'Christian music' can be identified by its lyrical content. Although these two basic premises do appear straight-forward enough, they are commonly at the core of CCM debates.

Firstly, to identify 'Christian music' by its lyrical content alone is problematic. The most obvious dilemma here is that it necessarily excludes the possibility of instrumental 'Christian music.' It also raises several concerns about what may be identified as appropriate lyrical content. If a Christian songwriter were to compose a song about marriage or a subject that is not explicitly referencing Jesus for example, should the song still be classified as 'Christian?' This was a question that the band Sixpence None the Richer struggled with in 1999 after the success of their hit song "Kiss Me." Although the members of the band professed to be devout Christians and had previously been lauded by the Gospel Music Association, the GMA did not find the subject of the song, a woman desiring to kiss her husband, particularly Christian.¹² Regardless of the song's enormous success, it was ineligible for any of the Dove Awards given out by the GMA. Leigh Nash, the lead singer and songwriter of the group, disapproved of her song's exclusion from the award ceremony. She argued: "We don't experience faith as a compartmentalized, religious aspect of life... I don't feel like I'm more of a Christian when I'm saying my prayers than when I'm kissing my husband."¹³ The Gospel Music Association's definition of Christian music reads,

Christian music is music in any style whose lyric is based upon historically orthodox Christian truth contained in or derived from the Holy Bible; and/or an expression of worship of God or praise for his works; and/or testimony of relationship with God

¹² Randall Balmer writes, "'Kiss Me' had roughly as much spiritual content as a steel-belted radial tire, but because the group had enjoyed initial success in the Christian market it begged the question of whether or not the song was 'Christian' music." Randall Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 306.

¹³ Powell, "Contemporary Christian Music," 134.

through Christ; and/or obviously prompted and informed by a Christian worldview.¹⁴

As experienced by Nash, 'Christian music' can be a subtle, and restrictive, category.

Defining 'Christian music' as songs with lyrics containing "historically orthodox truths" can also be problematic. Songs such as Cake's "Sheep go to Heaven," Depeche Mode's "Personal Jesus," and The Meat Puppets' "Lake of Fire" can all meet the Gospel Music Association's lyrical standards, and yet none are commonly thought to exist within the genre of 'Christian music.' Perhaps the heavy-metal group 'The Sin Destroyers,' a band that masquerade as Christian, is the most obvious example of this ambiguity. They are self-described as "the world's Christianiest rock band", and were voted the "Best Band Jesus Would Do" in 2005 by the Village Voice.¹⁵ Although The Sin Destroyers are sarcastically making the statement that Christianity and rock music should not mix, the lyrical content of their songs could perfectly fit within the GMA's lyrical standards.

There is a much more obvious dilemma in defining 'Christian music' as music written by a Christian, namely, who decides who is a 'genuine' Christian? Is there thus one correct way to be a Christian? The proverbial 'litmus test' for listeners to evaluate the authenticity of Christian artists seems to be a close evaluation of these artists' public lives; often the Christian audience assumes that the lifestyles of the band's members must be, or should be, saintly and holy. Here, these artists' personal lives are often held up to the impossible standard of perfection.¹⁶ If a Christian artist sins in the public eye, they are

¹⁴ "Policy & Procedures Manual," Gospel Music Association, accessed April 24, 2012, <http://www.gospelmusic.org/dovevoting/procedures.html>.

¹⁵ Kate Lanahan, "Meet the World's Christianest Rock Band" *The Bosh*, January 12, 2006, accessed December 1, 2011, http://thebosh.com/archives/2006/01/meet_the_worlds_christianest_rock_band.php.

¹⁶ Mark Joseph, *Faith God & Rock 'n' Roll* (London: MPG Books, 2003), 45.

judged accordingly by their Christian fans. This understanding of 'Christian music' can be unfortunate for both the listener, who may feel deceived when their initial expectations of the artist are shattered, as well as the artist, who faces the threat of a boycott of their music by the CCM audience. When a sex-tape of Creed front man Scott Stapp was discovered on the Internet in February 2006 for example, it left one reporter asking; "will Christian fans forgive?"¹⁷ Similarly, when CCM artist Michael English admitted to an extramarital affair, he was pressured by his fans to return his Dove Award to the GMA. This does not appear to be a fair assessment by the audience in that, at the ground level, the majority of evangelicals in the United States accept the possibility that a Christian will sin after their initial conversion experience.

The 'crossover artist' was a curious phenomenon that emerged in the 1990s. 'Crossover' artists are 'Christian artists' who left the CCM market for the mainstream market, often to seek a broader audience. Perhaps the most famous example of this phenomenon was the mainstream success of CCM darling Amy Grant during the early nineties. Amy Grant outraged many of her fans by 'going secular' with the commercial hit "Baby Baby." Greg Hamm, president of ForeFront records, understands the dilemma of 'selling out' to the mainstream market. He confesses: "It's a real tension – if you crossover, is it Christian anymore? ... The motto we tell our artists to live by is: Don't cross over unless you plan to take the cross over."¹⁸ Underlying criticism of the 'crossover' artist is the assumption that there is only one appropriate way for Christian artists to act. Hendershot

¹⁷ Joanna Molloy & George Rush, "Sex video with Kid Rock will test faithful Stapp fans," *New York Daily News*, February 17, 2006, accessed April 20, 2012, http://articles.nydailynews.com/2006-02-17/gossip/18336748_1_creed-singer-scott-stapp-kid-rock-tape.

¹⁸ Daniel Fierman and Gillian Flynn, "The Greatest Story Ever Sold," *Entertainment Weekly*, December 3, 1999, 59.

explains, “The problem with accusing Christian artists of selling out is that the accusation assumes all Christians operate from an identical spiritual position and that they all have – or should have – the same goals.”¹⁹

Jars of Clay is another band that was frequently criticized for ‘crossing over.’ In a 1998 interview, guitarist Steve Mason explained,

It can start to get to you when people ask over and over again ‘Are you going secular?’ Well, what do you define as secular? Do we want to reach un-churched people? Of course... but the greater our reach becomes, the more suspect our faith and commitment in the eyes of some people. It’s like ‘you’re in or you’re out.’ There’s got to be a third rail where music can just be music. And in the end there’s really nothing we can do but be who we are.²⁰

The fact that Jars of Clay was named Playboy magazine’s band of the month in 1996 for example, likely made some Christian fans uneasy; to the band, however, it was undoubtedly a sign of success.

The definition of contemporary Christian music that will be employed in this study will be extremely inclusive. Powell, in his 2002 *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Christian Music*, writes that genre is always audience-driven and based upon perception, not intent. With this audience-driven notion of genre in mind, Powell states, “Contemporary Christian music is music that appeals to self-identified fans of contemporary Christian music on account of a perceived connection to what they regard as Christianity.”²¹ Thus, if a song is understood to be ‘Christian’ by self-identified fans of the contemporary Christian music genre, it can be understood in such a way, even despite an artist’s disapproval. It is with

¹⁹ Heather Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 33.

²⁰ Balmer, *Mine Eyes*, 306.

²¹ Mark Allan Powell, *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Christian Music* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers Inc., 2002), 13.

this very broad conception in mind that contemporary Christian music will be approached in the following chapters.

2 The Theory of Religious Economy

2.1 The New Paradigm

To begin this study, it is necessary to make clear exactly what the theory of religious economy entails, and to present a case for its value as a method for the study of religion and popular culture. Although this study will inevitably make mention of the financial success of individual CCM artists as evidence of their popularity, influence and marketability, it must be stated that religious economic theory is not primarily focused upon matters of money or financial rewards, rather, this sociological theory of religious activity incorporates the language of economics to help explain the religious dynamics of a given society. Rodney Stark explains that, “Religious economies are like commercial economies in that they consist of a market of current and potential customers, a set of religious firms seeking to serve that market, and the religious ‘product lines’ offered by the various firms.”²² In contemporary American Christianity, the theory of religious economy interprets “churches as firms, pastors as marketers and producers, and church members or attendees as consumers whose tastes and preferences shape the goods and services ministries and firms offer.”²³ With the marketplace approach, all religious activity in a given society can be interpreted in terms of its “supply” and “demand.” Although the conceptualization of economic reward is understandably different than in conventional economic theories, the marketplace approach proposes that religious institutions, groups, and individuals do function in a comparable way to consumers and producers in a secular economy.

²² Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 194.

²³ Lee & Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks*, 160.

In 1993, R. Stephen Warner remarked in an article published in *American Journal of Sociology* that a handful of sociologists of religion had taken significant steps in a new direction for the future of the discipline.²⁴ These scholars, noted Warner, were working towards the modernization of the discipline by formulating new theoretical approaches inspired primarily by religious history in North America. This new paradigm “stems not from the old one which was developed to account for the European experience, but from an entirely independent vision inspired by American history.” These scholars were not necessarily unified by an individual theory, but rather by their radical shift in approach.²⁵

Warner explains:

The older paradigm – identified here with the early work of Peter Berger (1969, 1970) – is still cited by a great many researchers in the field and remains useful for understanding aspects of the phenomenology of religious life. However, those who use the older paradigm to interpret American religious organization – congregations, denominations, special purpose groups, and more – face increasing interpretive difficulties and decreasing rhetorical confidence. The newer paradigm – consciously under development by only a handful of independent investigators – stands a better chance of providing intellectual coherence to the field.²⁶

As scholars of religious history began to give as much of their attention to the rise of new religions as much as to the decline of the old, new analytical approaches were demanded.

Scholars of this new paradigm contend that it was the absence of established religious institutions that allowed for American religion to develop so differently than could have been possible in a European context. Due to the lack of what may be interpreted

²⁴ Stephen R. Warner, “Work in Progress Toward a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States,” *American Journal of Sociology* 98.5 (1993), 1044-1093.

²⁵ According to Warner, “A paradigm is... a way of seeing the world, a representation, picture, or narrative of the fundamental properties of reality.” Stephen Warner, “More Progress on the New Paradigm” in *Sacred Markets, Sacred Canopies: Essays on Religious Markets and Religious Pluralism*, ed. Ted G. Jelen. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2002), 2.

²⁶ Warner, “Work in Progress,” 1045.

as “monopoly” religious institutions in the marketplace of religion (namely the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England), in the new American open marketplace of religion, individuals are no longer commanded nor controlled, but rather persuaded. The free market reality of this new religious marketplace allowed for a striking amount of religious pluralism in American society, as the open market was of course much more accommodating to new firms than could have been possible in a European context. Warner writes, “The remarkable growth of religion in the U.S. – including the many accomplishments that old-as well as new- paradigm thinkers credit it with – began when religion was disestablished.”²⁷ In short, disestablishment of the ‘regulated’ European religious marketplace allowed for new market conditions to accommodate new realities.

In the theory of religious economy, competition can be identified as the true driving force of American religious pluralism. In the open marketplace of religion anyone can open a church or start a religion, and, to that effect, they must compete against each other for attention. Churches or religious leaders who fail to offer a relevant, attractive religious “product” are destined to fall behind those better suited to adapt to market demand. Stark and Finke explain:

Other things being equal, the harder a religious group works to achieve success, the more successful it will be. Second, people will only work as hard as they must to achieve their goals. Thus, competition creates and rewards eager and efficient religious firms as they, collectively, sustain high levels of public religious commitment.²⁸

²⁷ Stephen Warner, “More Progress on the New Paradigm,” 4.

²⁸ Finke and Stark continue: “These points seem so self-evident that only trained social scientists could doubt them.” Roger Finke & Rodney Stark, “Beyond Church and Sect: Dynamics and Stability in Religious Economics,” in *Sacred Markets, Sacred Canopies: Essays on Religious Markets and Religious Pluralism*, ed. Ted G. Jelen. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2002), 54.

The new paradigm, “envision[s] the possibility and potential within a religiously pluralistic environment... a context where firms must be responsive to and flexible with consumer demands.”²⁹ An open marketplace of religion allows room for a true diversity of religious supply.

While the early stages of American religious history have been examined in this way, the theory of religious economy has also recently been employed for the study of contemporary American religious dynamics.³⁰ Wade Clark Roof, in his book *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*, interprets recent ecclesiastical trends in American religion as the result of shrewd religious suppliers. Roof writes:

As the social demographics of religious constituencies change over time, religious and spiritual leaders are in positions to envision beliefs and practices appropriate to changing circumstances. In recent times especially, religious messages and practices have come to be frequently re-stylized, made to fit a targeted social clientele, often on the basis of market analysis, and carefully monitored to determine if programmatic emphases should be adjusted to meet particular needs.³¹

Shayne Lee and Phillip Luke Sinitiere utilize the market approach to examine prominent contemporary religious figures in the America in their 2009 book *Holy Mavericks: Evangelical Innovators and the Spiritual Marketplace*. Here they describe five influential Evangelical leaders (Brian McLaren, Rick Warren, Joel Osteen, T.D. Jakes, and Paula White) as gifted spiritual brokers. Lee and Sinitiere write:

...Religious suppliers thrive in a competitive spiritual marketplace because they are quick, decisive, and flexible in reaching to changing conditions, savvy at packaging and marketing their ministries, and resourceful at offering spiritual rewards that

²⁹ Lee and Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks*, 163.

³⁰ Roger Finke & Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in our Religious Economy* (Toronto: Rutgers University Press: 1993).

³¹ Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 78.

resonate with the existential needs of the public. Religious suppliers carve out a niche in the spiritual marketplace and distinguish their ministries by offering an array of spiritual goods and services that match the tastes and desires of religious consumers.³²

Successful religious suppliers recalibrate their message to fit the market profiles of target buyers, and, as Lee and Sinitiere demonstrate, individuals, and not only religious institutions, can be interpreted as being supply-side firms in the marketplace of religion.

In their book *The Marketplace of Christianity*, Robert B. Ekelund Jr., Robert F. Hebert and Robert D. Tollison also tout the effectiveness of economic analysis in the history of Christianity. They write, “Because religion is a set of organized beliefs, and a church is an organized body of worshipers, it is natural to use economics- a science that explains the behavior of individuals in organizations – to understand the development of organized religion.”³³ Ekelund, Hebert and Tollison also suggest that economic models can serve in predicting future religious trends. They continue, “In religious activity, as in commercial activity, people respond to costs and benefits in a predictable way, and therefore their actions are amenable to economic analysis.”³⁴

2.2 Rational Choice Theory

The question must be asked: how it is that religion can be said to function as a desired commodity in a marketplace of religion? Although identifying the many particular demands of individual religious ‘consumers’ would be a near-impossible task, it is equally helpful to identify the means by which these individual religious consumers ‘consume.’

³² Lee and Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks*, 3.

³³ Robert B. Ekelund Jr., Robert F. Hebert and Robert D. Tollison, *The Marketplace of Christianity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), viii.

³⁴ Ekelund, Hebert and Tollison, *The Marketplace of Christianity*, 2.

Rational choice theory, a theory adapted from conventional economic theories, is at the core of religious economics, and the theory of religious economy functions, largely, as an application of rational choice theory at the societal level.

In the 1980s, a handful of sociologists, led by Rodney Stark, William Sims Bainbridge, Roger Finke, and Lawrence Iannaccone, began to formulate a theory of religion based upon the proposal that religious choice was ultimately a rational one. This was a proposition that stood in direct opposition to established theories of secularization. Today rational choice theory is recognized as “the most systematic recent attempt to provide a general theory of religion.”³⁵ The theory served to provide an answer as to why global religion was not in fact diminishing, as traditional secularization theorists maintained, but rather expanding in many environments.

Rational choice theory rejected the notion that religion is essentially a phenomenon bred of an irrational mind. Warner explains that “the overlapping companies of rational choice theorists and new paradigm analysts of religion have in common a bias that it is a mistake to assume that religious people are, to put it bluntly, benighted.”³⁶ Stark and his contemporaries instead interpreted religion as a choice made for practical and identifiable reasons. As a comprehensive theory, Stark and Bainbridge assert that religion, in the plainest of terms, can be understood as, “the attempt to secure desired rewards in the absence of alternative means.”³⁷ Because religious beliefs and practices provide the individual with anticipated rewards, a religious choice is one that can thus be identified as a considered action. A rational choice, according to Stark, “involves weighing the

³⁵ Malcolm Hamilton, *The Sociology of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 215.

³⁶ Warner, “More Progress on the New Paradigm,” 6.

³⁷ Hamilton, *Sociology*, 216.

anticipated costs and benefits of actions and then seeking to act so as to maximize net benefits.”³⁸ Thus, as in conventional economic theories, the underlying assumption for advocates of rational choice theory is that human beings do in fact endeavor to make rational choices when attempting to satisfy their desires and demands.

The rewards sought by ‘demanders’ of religion can indeed be broad; religious reward in religious economies can include, “very specific and limited things as well as the most general things such as solutions to questions of ultimate meaning and even unreal or non-existent things, conditions or states.”³⁹ Regardless, rational choice theory, coupled with the basics of exchange theory (the proposal that most human interaction can be understood as a form of exchange), allows for a practical and comprehensive framework for the examination of how religion, as a ‘product,’ operates in the religious marketplace, and it is upon these proposals that this study will make its case.⁴⁰

2.3 Religious Economies and Contemporary Christian Music

The theory of religious economy provides the concepts, the terminology, and the methodological scaffolding to make coherent the modern religious phenomenon that is CCM in America. The subsequent chapter will recount a brief history of the CCM genre, beginning with its inception, and tracing its course up to the present day. Here notable disagreements and significant evolutions within the genre will be highlighted. Chapter 4

³⁸ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 169.

³⁹ Hamilton, *Sociology*, 216.

⁴⁰ Social Exchange Theory is a sociological perspective that explains human interactions as reducible to negotiated exchanges; “the longitudinal exchange relation between two specific actors is the central concept around which theory is organized.” Richard M. Emerson, “Toward a Theory of Value in Exchange Theory,” in *Social Exchange Theory*, ed. Karen S. Cook. (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1987), 12.

will identify the phenomenon and its artists, audience, and industry as existing within a religious marketplace; a marketplace subject to economic analysis. Many of the events in the history of the genre will be revisited in this light. A case will be made that the diversity of Christian religious expression apparent in the history of CCM can indeed be recognized as a form of religious pluralism in the American religious marketplace. Secondly, CCM artists will be identified as functioning as supply-side firms in the religious economy. Lastly, competition and the competitive reality of an open religious marketplace will be identified as the true driving force behind many of the significant disagreements in the history of the genre that were identified in Chapter 3.

As discussed in the first chapter, the CCM phenomenon represents a valuable new avenue for American Religious Studies, and I believe that approaching this subject by employing the novel sociological method of religio-economic analysis will be a worthwhile endeavor, both for the study of CCM in the United States as well as for the advancement of the theory itself. In the concluding chapter of *Sacred Markets, Sacred Canopies: Essays on Religious Markets and Religious Pluralism*, sociologist Ted Jelen calls for the marketplace approach to be broadened in order to more easily incorporate diverse forms of social activity, religious or otherwise, lest the theory fall short of its rich potential. He writes,

To put the matter as bluntly as I can, if the market model of religious economies is simply a theory of religious participation, it is ultimately stagnant, and perhaps destined for intellectual obsolescence. However, if the program can successfully be expanded to include other social phenomena, the prospects for economic approaches to the study of religion appear to be much more promising.⁴¹

⁴¹ Ted G. Jelen, "Reflections on the 'New Paradigm': Unfinished Business and an Agenda for Research," in *Sacred Markets, Sacred Canopies: Essays on Religious Markets and Religious Pluralism*, ed. Ted G. Jelen. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2002), 188.

Expanding this program to include the modern intersection of pop-culture and religion in 21st century American society is the purpose of this study.

3 The History of Contemporary Christian Music

3.1 The Birth and Rise of the CCM Genre (1960 – 1989)

Contemporary Christian music emerged during the Jesus Movement in the 1960s both as a popular form of personal religious expression and as a tool for street evangelism. Contemporary Christian music, in its infancy, was fundamentally counter-cultural; its appropriation of the “secular” genres of folk and rock was very much in tune with the Jesus Movement’s personality as a “counterculture of mainstream Christianity.”⁴² After all, the musical genres of rock and folk were often understood to be guilty, at least by association, of promoting drug use and free love, particularly during the 1960s and early 1970s when “rock ‘n’ roll was still relatively new and possessed of its in-your-face freshness.”⁴³ The music of the early Jesus Movement consisted of deeply personal and affective songs, not unlike the emotional, introspective mainstream singer-songwriters that gained fame during this time.⁴⁴ This music was recognized early on by observers as being essential to the movement’s growth and popularity; as early as 1973, Robert Ellwood commented, “It is largely music that has made the movement a part of popular culture... The ability of Jesus rock and gospel melodies to generate rich, powerful feelings in a mood and emotion-oriented age has brought and held the movement together.”⁴⁵

However, unlike the commercially successful rock and folk bands from which Jesus Movement borrowed, the earliest Christian artists found themselves ignored by the

⁴² Don Cusic, *The Sound of Light* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 2002), 279.

⁴³ David W. Stowe, *No Sympathy for the Devil* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 2.

⁴⁴ Cusic, *The Sound of Light*, 280.

⁴⁵ Robert S. Ellwood, *One Way: The Jesus Movement and Its Meaning* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 63.

mainstream music industry. It was the overt and unapologetic Christian lyrical content of the songs that caused the mainstream labels to distance themselves from this Jesus music deemed simply unprofitable.⁴⁶ However, this rejection by the mainstream music industry was not overly discouraging for many early CCM artists. Don Cusic explains that within the Jesus Movement, like the greater American countercultural movement of the time, “there was also a strong anti-establishment and anti-business bias, especially in the music industry, where large corporations were seen as the enemy of ‘pure’ music.”⁴⁷ John J. Thompson suggests that the earliest years of this new ‘Jesus music’ actually served to produce some of the most genuine, heartfelt contemporary Christian music that has ever been written; these early Christian artists understood that their unabashed religious lyrics unavoidably precluded them from any fame or wealth. Thompson writes:

The unsophisticated Christian artists of the 1960s and 1970s believed that they had no choice but to communicate the message of Christ in the language that was most natural to them. The early artists had a passion for what they were doing that is unrivaled to this day. Knowing that they were likely to be chastised by the church, and certain to be ignored by the mainstream music business, these young musicians went underground, and their ‘ministries’ were as spontaneous as their music, often with little or no superstructure around them.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Although it is undeniable that the two musicals *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Godspell* were both financially successful and critically acclaimed in the early 1970s, and both considering Christian subject material, the underlying themes were not overly evangelistic. Neither film depicts a resurrection scene, for example. In *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Judas was in many ways the protagonist of the film, and Ted Neely, who depicted Jesus, describes his character as, “... a theologian and a thinker, not a God. He was a man who got beyond himself and went too far.” Neely quoted in Ellis Nassour and Richard Broderick, *Rock Opera: The Creation of Jesus Christ Superstar, from Record Album to Broadway Show and Motion Picture* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1973), 240.

⁴⁷ Cusic, *The Sound of Light*, 279.

⁴⁸ Thompson, *Raised By Wolves*, 38.

Evangelism was often the driving motivation for these artists; the early songwriters performed free concerts in parks and street corners, playing for any audience that would listen, either selling their albums or handing them out free of charge.

Larry Norman is perhaps the most recognizable figure of the early Jesus Movement songwriters. Norman is often considered to be the “Father of Christian Rock;” his influence is credited today by such artists and bands as U2, John Mellencamp, and the Violent Femmes.⁴⁹ Norman so personified the spirit of the 1960s Jesus Movement that it was in fact for him that the term “Jesus Freak” was first coined.⁵⁰ His 1972 manifesto “Why Should the Devil have all the Good Music?” became a Christian rock anthem for the self-identified “Jesus Freaks” across the continent. He sang:

They say to cut my hair / they're driving me insane / I grew it out long to make room for my brain / But sometimes people don't understand, What's a good boy doing in a Rock n' Roll band / There's nothing wrong with playing the blues licks, If you've got a reason, I want to hear it / Why should the Devil have all the good music? I've been filled, I feel okay / Jesus is the rock and He rolled my blues away⁵¹

Norman quickly found his lyrics and his forceful evangelical style under attack by both mainstream evangelical churches as well as his peers in the broader American music scene; his song is written as a response to those Christians who rejected “Jesus rock” for theological reasons that he deemed simply indefensible. Norman became “marginalized in both the realm of rock music, where he was considered too religious, and in the burgeoning Christian music industry, where his music was believed to be too aggressive.”⁵² Nevertheless, his influence on his contemporaries can not be underestimated;

⁴⁹ Mark Allan Powell, *Encyclopedia*, 633.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Larry Norman, *Only Visiting this Planet*, Verve, 1972.

⁵² Howard & Streck, *Apostles of Rock*, 31.

contemporary Christian music, as it exists today, is in many ways a genre of Norman's creation.

Like Norman, many early Christian rock bands found themselves under siege by their Christian brethren. Bands such as The Seventy Sevens, Crouch, The Resurrection Band, and the All Saved Freak Band faced a two-front war; the earliest Christian artists were scorned by the two worlds they sought to bridge. Thompson explains, "Christian rock was an infant in those days. One of its parents, pop culture, decided that it was irrelevant and old-fogeyish and kicked it to the curb. The other parent, the church, saw too much of 'the world' in it and was frightened by it."⁵³

This all began to change, however, in June, 1972. The Jesus Music Festival in Dallas, 1972, on the last day of Explo '72, marked the most visible event of the Jesus Movement in America, and, ultimately, the beginning of its end.⁵⁴ The International Student Conference on Evangelicalism (the event's official title) was a five-day event organized by Campus Crusade for Christ's founder Bill Bright and geared towards high school and college students. On this day, over 250,000 people came out to Woodall Rogers Parkway to take part in what has become known as "Godstock." Here, participants took in a sermon from Billy Graham and performances by such bands as Children of the Day, Love Song, the Maranatha Band, Crouch and the Disciples, Kris Kristofferson, Johnny Cash, and Larry Norman. The event comprised daytime seminars with the express purpose of instructing youth "how to witness effectively for Christ."⁵⁵ The event's true legacy, however, has proven to be its musical finale; the once-shunned music of the Jesus Movement was given

⁵³ Thompson, *Raised By Wolves*, 28.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Stowe, *No Sympathy for the Devil*, 62.

center-stage and was ultimately embraced by mainstream American Christianity. Larry Eskridge credits the presence of Billy Graham as a key reason for the mainstream acceptance of the Jesus Movement music; he writes, "The fact that America's leading evangelist could tolerate the movement's hippie eccentricities undoubtedly eased its acceptance in many evangelical quarters."⁵⁶ After Explo '72, "churches started to accept the milder Jesus music, soon to be referred to as 'Contemporary Christian music,' though the rockier stuff was still suspect."⁵⁷ In the following years, Gospel music distributors began to make the music more accessible, and in the early 1970s an industry began to emerge with the goal of supporting and promoting the genre.

By 1976, a fledgling infrastructure had emerged to foster the growth of contemporary Christian music. The Christian Booksellers Association, a trade organization networking Christian bookstores across America, had expanded dramatically during the early 1970s. The association had begun in 1950 with approximately 25 stores, and, "in 1976 they represented 2,800 members, who generated \$500 million in sales, up from \$100 million in 1971."⁵⁸ Christian bookstores provided a means for contemporary Christian artists, labels, and marketers to effectively promote their music to evangelicals without the assistance of the mainstream music industry. The Gospel Music Association, the trade organization for Gospel music in America, became well established and their 'Dove Awards' became a serviceable means of bringing nation-wide "recognition and attention to Christian music."⁵⁹ These awards also served as a framing mechanism for the genre; the

⁵⁶ Larry Eskridge, "One Way: Billy Graham, the Jesus Generation, and the Idea of an Evangelical Youth Culture," *Church History* 67.1 (1998): 85.

⁵⁷ Thompson, *Raised By Wolves*, 36.

⁵⁸ Cusic, *The Sound of Light*, 282.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

Dove Awards created a means of identifying, promoting, and encouraging consumption of the most popular and profitable CCM artists. In 1977, for the first time, a gospel recording on a Christian label had been certified 'Gold' (500,000 units sold), a feat accomplished by the Bill Gaither Trio's record *Alleluia, A Praise Gathering for Believers*. In 1978, *Contemporary Christian Music* magazine was first published. By the early 1980s, Christian bookstores had moved from retail stores into shopping malls. Contemporary Christian music had quietly become a fixture of the evangelical America subculture.

Although one of the primary reasons for the initial rise of contemporary Christian music in the early 1970s was the movement's unity, the Christianity advocated by its artists was hardly monolithic. The legitimacy of the Dove Awards, for example, became a target for theological debate by CCM artists. The primary objection by critics of the event was that "all rewards should be 'heavenly' and that, somehow, giving awards to Christians, from Christians, for Christian endeavors, was 'ungodly.'"⁶⁰ In 1981, an editorial was published in *CCM* magazine questioning the integrity of the awards, voicing popular concerns by a growing number of Christian artists who had begun to take offense at the entire event.⁶¹ Keith Green, after his rise to stardom, became one of the most outspoken artists against the industry and the "business side" of contemporary Christian music. After his initial conversion during a traumatic LSD experiment at age 19, and before his untimely death in a plane crash in 1982, Green strived to make his records free and accessible to all, reasoning that, "if the gospel – and salvation – was free, you cannot charge money for an album."⁶² Although many in the industry branded him a radical, his passing "had an effect on the

⁶⁰ Cusic, *The Sound of Light*, 333.

⁶¹ Karen Marie Platt, "The Doves: What Kind of Strange Birds They Are." *CCM*, April, 1981.

⁶² Cusic, *The Sound of Light*, 292.

contemporary Christian music subculture analogous to that which the murder of John Lennon had on the mainstream rock and roll culture two years later.”⁶³ His integrity and his ambition for what he deemed “theologically-sound” lyrics had a significant influence on his peers; today he has attained a near iconic status among contemporary Christian artists.⁶⁴

By the 1980s, the youth of the Jesus Movement had matured and began to emerge in leadership positions in churches across America. These head pastors, or youth pastors, were much more comfortable with Christian forms of mainstream musical genres; they knew full well the effectiveness of popular music as a tool for mass evangelism.

Contemporary Christian music concerts now often took place in church basements as youth outreach, albeit often with “a softer sound to accommodate conservative churches.”⁶⁵ In the 1980s, Christian artists once again borrowed from popular mainstream musical trends, and Christian heavy metal, in the style of such bands as Petra, Barren Cross, Bloodgod, Saint, Leviticus, and Messiah Prophet, was born.⁶⁶ Stryper’s anthem “To Hell with the Devil” became a hit; its album of the same name went platinum. Like the first contemporary Christian artists, evangelism was the driving motivation of these bands. On stage, Stryper became as well known for throwing copies of the New Testament into the crowd as they did for their yellow and black fatigue and “demonic-sounding vocals.”⁶⁷ Despite the fact that many Christian music bookstores were hesitant to stock these Christian heavy metal albums because of their often-disturbing cover art, Christian heavy metal thrived in the

⁶³ Powell, *Encyclopedia*, 382.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Thompson, *Raised By Wolves*, 89.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 226.

⁶⁷ Deena Weinstein, *Heavy Metal: The Music and its Culture* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1991), 54.

independent scene in the 1980s; its music and its message had struck a chord within a subset of the American evangelical subculture.⁶⁸

As contemporary Christian music grew, critics of the genre became more outspoken. Several prominent evangelical pastors and televangelists condemned contemporary Christian music as being overly “worldly,” and thus spiritually unsafe. Televangelists Bob Larson and Jimmy Swaggart became two of the most outspoken critics of contemporary Christian music in the 1980s; Swaggart attacked the music of Petra, Steve Taylor, and Larry Norman, calling rock music “the new pornography.” In 1987, Swaggart wrote *Religious Rock n’ Roll: A Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing* as a treatise against the hazards of the genre.⁶⁹ The fundamentalist preacher Bill Gothard even went as far as to preach that, “the syncopated 4/4 beat of rock and roll collided with the natural rhythm of the human heart” and that it could make listeners physically unwell.⁷⁰ Michael Haynes penned *The God of Rock: A Christian Perspective on Rock Music* with the express goal of “[educating] Christian parents and teens to the spiritual, mental, and physical dangers of being distracted from the Lordship of Christ by the addicting power of rock music.” The book became a Christian best seller in 1983.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Cusic, *The Sound of Light*, 327.

⁶⁹ Jimmy Swaggart, *Religious Rock n’ Roll: A Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing* (Baton Rouge: Jimmy Swaggart Ministries, 1987).

⁷⁰ Thompson, *Raised By Wolves*, 30.

⁷¹ Haynes writes, “Continue asking, ‘do I enjoy the evil and sensuality that my music stimulates?’ If you do, this could be the manifestation of more serious problems that Rock music is only bringing to the surface. Maybe there is excitement at the thought of torture or sadism. Maybe you have frequent thoughts of abnormal sexual activities. Listen, if music excites these types of feelings, do not listen anymore! Cut it off! You are headed for some serious trouble if you do not.” Michael K. Haynes, *The God of Rock: A Christian Perspective of Rock Music* (Lindale: Priority, 1982), 209.

It was also during the 1980s that Christian music artists began to turn against each other in a real way; theological differences among artists, divergent artistic imperatives, and even appropriate musical style became the subjects of intense public debate. Artists also began to publically criticize the industry for promoting artistic competition between Christians and, in doing so, hindering their individual ministries. In 1986 an open letter, signed by sixty-six Christian artists, was published in *Contemporary Christian Music* magazine. It read:

For years we have all realized the incredible growth of Christian music – so much that it is often labeled ‘the industry.’ We who feel called as ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ feel that this label is reflecting an unfortunate trend in Christian music brought on in part by the proliferation of airplay and sales charts and album reviews...

Scripture exhorts us not to compare ourselves with one another nor to compete with one another. We feel that polls such as these create an unhealthy atmosphere of rivalry between ministries. Even though we strive to be men and women of God, in our humanity we often fall prey to the pride or envy which polls such as this create. We can hardly imagine the apostles and prophets being categorized in such a way...

The whole area of reviewing albums and ripping apart one another’s offerings unto the Lord is disgraceful. If you don’t like an album we simply ask that you not review it. It is not right or righteous that an offering which has taken a year or more of our lives and an outpouring of our hearts and labor should be torn down by the subjective opinion of one Christian brother. It hurts and discourages us, and it damages the potential ministry opportunities of our albums.⁷²

The editor’s response to this letter was defensive, asking, “... Is every Christian who writes and performs music automatically involved in ‘music ministry?’” Although some may seek to evangelize, argued the editor, others may provide alternative entertainment or to produce art. According to the editors of *Contemporary Christian Music*, Christian music must “come to grips with the fact that not every artist who is a Christian operates under the

⁷² Howard & Streck, *Apostles of Rock*, 41.

same artistic imperative.”⁷³ In an article published in 2008, the founder of the magazine John Styll commented that these types of debates had been extremely common in the thirty-four year history of *Contemporary Christian Music* magazine; concerns over “entertainment vs. industry,” “God vs. Mammon,” and “Spirit and the flesh,” abound.⁷⁴

3.2 The “Parallel Universe” of Contemporary Christian Music (1990-1999)

It was during the 1990s that the contemporary Christian music industry truly made its presence known in the broader American music scene. By 1998, the contemporary Christian music industry had become a billion-dollar industry; CCM accounted for 6% of overall music sales in America, outselling jazz and classical sales combined.⁷⁵ As testament to the rise of the CCM genre within Christian music as a whole, it is worth noting that by 1991 the Gospel Music Association no longer even televised the black Gospel category of the Dove Awards. CCM Industry insider Terry Hemmings explains that, “The Christian music market changed from an entrepreneurial environment to a corporate environment... [It] substantially and rapidly changed – it didn’t really evolve. It happened almost overnight”⁷⁶ With the expansive growth of the industry there was a clear and dramatic transformation in the underlying theological impetuses of its artists, producers, and marketers, or so it would appear; during the 1990s, the evangelistic motivations of the contemporary Christian music artists of years past were all but replaced by a much more

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ John Styll, “From There to Here...,” *CCM*, April 1, 2008, accessed March 1, 2012, <http://www.ccmagazine.com/article/from-there-to-here>.

⁷⁵ Hemmings quoted in Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus*, 56.

⁷⁶ Deborah Evans Price, “Shake-Ups Hit Christian Labels,” *Billboard*, March 7, 1999.

internal focus within the evangelical subculture. Christian music as alternative entertainment emerged at the forefront of this new CCM, and, “to many who had helped create the Christian rock of the seventies, it had lost its soul.”⁷⁷ Contemporary Christian artists were now primarily performing for Christian audiences alone.

By the early 1990s, the industry had emerged as a true “parallel universe” of the general music market; CCM now offered “wholesome” Christian alternatives to most mainstream genres. Heather Hendershot has observed that within contemporary Christian music, “Rap is dissociated from black culture and becomes a style that can be used to promote any message. Reggae promotes drug-free submission to authority. Rock-and-Roll does not resist norms but rather secular culture’s pressure to have premarital sex. Even a sexy pop song can become a chastity song.”⁷⁸ CCM became a tool for substituting mainstream popular culture, to the best of its ability, with an alternate form for the evangelical subculture. W. D. Romanowski argues that:

CCM has placed religious music in the same non-ecclesiastical contexts as those of secular popular culture – background music during conversation, dance music, or the live-performance spectacle of a rock concert – as opposed to worship, and has furthered a certain commodification of religious faith symbols.⁷⁹

In the contemporary Christian music of the early 1990s, it can be argued that little evangelizing was in fact taking place.⁸⁰ Eric Gormly argues that CCM, as a genre, “provides a musical medium for religious expression that allows its adherents to feel they are

⁷⁷ Stowe, *No Sympathy for the Devil*, 9.

⁷⁸ Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus*, 28.

⁷⁹ W. D. Romanowski, “Evangelicals and Popular Music: The Contemporary Christian Music Industry,” in *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, ed. B.D. Forbes & J.J. Mahan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 105.

⁸⁰ Mark Joseph suggests, “To make narrow, sectarian appeals to fellow believers based on their faith was easier and required less imagination and effort.” Joseph, *Faith God & Rock ‘n’ Roll*, 222.

participating in the broader, secular culture although maintaining the integrity of their religious faith.”⁸¹ This evolution within the genre allowed many evangelicals the ability to retreat from mainstream society, “to live in a world within a world, one that would protect them from ever brushing up against non-Christians.”⁸²

DC Talk was undeniably the most successful contemporary Christian band to emerge during this period. The three members of DC Talk (short for “Decent Christian Talk”) met at Jerry Falwell’s Liberty University in 1987, and over the course of the next decade would be rewarded with one gold record, three platinum records, three Grammy awards, and countless Doves.⁸³ The band found immediate success; within two years of their founding they had become the most successful CCM band in the world, and within three years they became the most successful contemporary Christian group of all time.⁸⁴ Although DC Talk initially began as a rap group (during the years when the Beastie Boys and Run DMC enjoyed success), they later abandoned that genre for grunge (during the popularity of Nirvana and Soundgarden), in an attempt to remain relevant. Powell suggests that DC Talk’s introduction of rap music to the evangelical subculture granted the group their initial success despite the quality of that album; “The group’s first album wasn’t very good and it still became the best selling Christian debut record of all time.”⁸⁵ DC Talk, as musical chameleons, reinvented and revived the genre at the turn of the decade, as the CCM industry became “increasingly sophisticated and market-oriented.”⁸⁶

⁸¹ Eric Gormly, "Evangelizing Through Appropriation: Toward a Cultural Theory on the Growth of Contemporary Christian Music," *Journal of Media and Religion* 2.4 (2003): 262.

⁸² Thompson, *Raised By Wolves*, 172.

⁸³ Powell, *Encyclopedia*, 239.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 240.

⁸⁶ Stowe, *No Sympathy for the Devil*, 8.

The band Audio Adrenaline can also be identified as an example of this trend. Formed in 1992 at Kentucky Christian College, Audio Adrenaline was quickly signed to DC Talk's label in Nashville after Forefront Records president, Dan Brock, listened to their demo. This group also gained success by tailoring their sound to mainstream trends, "Just as the alternative moment was taking off, Forefront was grooming Audio Adrenaline to fit the bill."⁸⁷ Over the next decade, Audio Adrenaline would win two Grammy and four Doves awards before breaking up in 2006. The group had a significant influence on the Contemporary Christian music industry, and the members of the band describe their ministry as, "focused primarily on communicating within the Christian subculture rather than (primarily) on converting outsiders."⁸⁸

It was in the 1990s that the phenomenon of the "crossover" artist first came into the spotlight. As discussed in the first chapter of this study, one of the primary criticisms of "crossover" artists was ultimately their decision to cater to markets outside of the evangelical subculture (Jars of Clay, Michael W. Smith and Amy Grant are likely the most famous examples). The assumptions upon which this charge is grounded are clearly indicative of an inward shift in world of contemporary Christian music. The irony of such a transformation within the genre was apparent to many; David W. Stowe explains:

Music that had been created to break down boundaries between Christians and non-Christians, to offer new sonic wineskins for the teaching of a new counterculture Jesus that would allow his message to reach thirsty nonbelievers, ended up hermetically sealed in its own new niche, the parallel universe of Christian popular culture.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Thompson, *Raised By Wolves*, 216.

⁸⁸ Powell, *Encyclopedia*, 57.

⁸⁹ Stowe, *No Sympathy for the Devil*, 9.

Evangelism took a back seat to Christian entertainment as the 1990s gave rise to what may be, “the most extensive attempt (yet) to merge religious music with the commercial and industrial apparatus of the entertainment industry.”⁹⁰

3.3 “Artists-who-are-Christian,” or “Christian Artists?” (1997-2012)

At the turn of the millennium, many Christian artists began to leave the contemporary Christian music industry in search of a broader audience. By the early 2000s, the phenomenon of the “crossover” artist was quickly becoming obsolete; many Christian artists had chosen to circumvent the CCM industry and sign record contracts with the larger mainstream music labels. One of the reasons for this revolution was a fear of the negative stigma associated with the label “Christian music;” artists had become aware that “the surest way to not be heard by the mainstream music culture was to allow themselves to be branded ‘Christian rock.’”⁹¹ A second, more profound, motive for this change, and one that would become clear in the years to come, was that many of these Christian artists sought to express their Christianity in ways that would certainly have been unwelcome within the contemporary Christian music industry. Contemporary Christian music, as a genre, was in collapse. Mark Joseph writes, “So much for the explosive growth in Christian music: the truth was that Christian music wasn’t growing, but the idea of Christians playing music was growing exponentially.”⁹²

Mainstream record companies had taken notice of the surprising success of contemporary Christian music industry in the mid 1990s, and corporations such as EMI

⁹⁰ Romanowski, “Evangelicals and Popular Music,” 105.

⁹¹ Joseph, *Faith, God & Rock ‘n’ Roll*, 19.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 22.

and Sony began to purchase independent Christian labels at an alarming pace. The hesitation that many mainstream record labels had held for the promotion of overtly Christian artists was rejected in the pursuit of profit.⁹³ Meanwhile, “Christian bands” such as Creed, Lifehouse, P.O.D., Collective Soul, Sixpence None the Richer, Switchfoot, and Blindside chose to sign record deals with major labels, often rejecting comparable offers by Christian music labels.⁹⁴ Some of these artists sought to evangelize in the spotlight of the “secular” music world, and some “didn’t think that their music was the place to give voice to their beliefs.”⁹⁵ Others simply pursued what they regarded as their best chance at a career in music.

P.O.D. was one of the most popular “Christian bands” to emerge during this time, and a band that had a definite distaste for the contemporary Christian music industry and genre as a whole. A “hard-rapcore” group from Southern California, the group began their careers on a Christian label (Tooth and Nail Records), yet only found success, in either market, once Atlantic Records signed them. P.O.D. (short for Payable On Death) reject the classification of Christian music entirely; following their mainstream success the band was given a Dove Awards by the Gospel Music Association but the group refused to attend the ceremony. Sonny Sandoval, lead singer of the band, considers the genre restricting and, ultimately, empty:

We’ve been together for ten years and we just want to play music... now with all the mainstream and everything, we’re just a rock ‘n’ roll band out there. I guess we’re

⁹³ Mark Joseph explains, “This movement of artists out of the Christian music world and onto the rosters of mainstream record labels presented a clear problem for the CCM industry. After all, it had built a business on disgruntled artists who weren’t being given a fair shake at mainstream labels, which were accused of trying to get them to tone down their faith-based lyrics or ignoring them altogether.” Ibid., 20.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 19.

⁹⁵ Thompson, *Raised By Wolves*, 239.

just against the norm, not as music but the lyrical content. It's always been our heart's desire to encourage people with our music and with our walk of life. It does get frustrating at times, but no matter what you do they're going to label you.⁹⁶

P.O.D. are but one of the "refugee" bands that fled from an industry and a culture that "failed to share the artistic dreams of cultural penetration of the artists in their camp."⁹⁷

The group is not motivated primarily by evangelism; Traa, the bass player of the group, explains, "Yes, we have a personal relationship with God, but we're not trying to convert anyone to live like us. We're just a rock band."⁹⁸ P.O.D. strived to exist in a space between the world of extreme rock 'n' roll excess and the isolationism of the CCM industry, and to express their Christianity, as they understood it, however they so desired. Their ultimate success among both the contemporary Christian music and mainstream American audiences may suggest that their mission was well received.

In 1999, Charlie Peacock, a prolific artist and producer in the world of contemporary Christian music since the early 1980s, authored *At the Crossroads: An Insider's look at the Past, Present, and Future of Contemporary Christian Music*. The book was effectively a theological treatise rebuking the CCM industry and its culture that he felt "[bred] apathy and complacency," and held "the most narrow consensus as to what Christian music is."⁹⁹ Peacock pled:

Contemporary Christian music is at a crossroads and the stakes are enormous. In one direction there's conformity to an artificial, market-driven definition of what many of us have come to believe CCM should be. In the other, the subject matter and instrumental style of Christian music is allowed – is encouraged – to range over the entire length and breadth of human emotion and experience. Here and now I ask

⁹⁶ Stated in an interview by Keith Ryan Cartwright, quoted in Joseph, *Faith, God & Rock 'n' Roll*, 39.

⁹⁷ Joseph, *Faith, God & Rock 'n' Roll*, 36.

⁹⁸ As quoted in Joseph, *Faith, God & Rock 'n' Roll*, 36.

⁹⁹ Charlie Peacock, *At the Crossroads: An Insider's Look at the Past, Present, and Future of Contemporary Christian Music* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 7.

you to consider the second path, a new model of Christian music that embraces the whole kingdom – a path that is absolutely faithful to the other Christian mission as well as the mission to provide the church with good and truthful music. This model of music is not defined by instrumentation or specific lyrical buzzwords, but by the fact that it grows from and points toward a life in Jesus Christ as subjects in his kingdom.¹⁰⁰

Peacock and critics of the CCM industry in the late 1990s rejected the limitations, either explicit or implied, upon Christian expression in the business as inappropriate and, in their eyes, un-Christian.

In truth, it is undeniable that a true diversity of religious expression, Christian or otherwise, has existed in American popular music, outside of the genre of CCM, for nearly a century. Steve Turner argues that, “Even avowedly secular rock ‘n’ roll often has at its heart a quest for transcendence that uses a language of religion.”¹⁰¹ Christians have of course been performing in the public sphere by means of popular music for decades, some artists more overtly than others. U2, for example, has been perhaps the most successful band of the past three decades to have overt Christian lyrics and Christian band members (all members except bassist Adam Clayton identify themselves as Christians). Bono, U2’s enigmatic front man, has become the veritable personification of the complex modern intersect of religion and popular culture in modern times. Clive Marsh & Vaughan S. Roberts suggest that U2’s public musing on Christianity and religion have resonated strongly with an audience fascinated by the means of its consideration. They write:

The evidence of the way U2 fans use the band’s music clearly suggests that such use of music creates at the very least a virtual community of enquirers in which religious exploration is explicit, acceptable, and sometimes religion-specific, while not necessarily functioning normatively for those participating in the conversation. Public discussion not simply of religion, but of the subject matter which religions

¹⁰⁰ Peacock, *At the Crossroads*, 202.

¹⁰¹ Steve Turner, *Hungry for Heaven: Rock ‘n’ Roll & the Search for Redemption* (Downer’s Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1995), 12.

address, is thus brought to a new place, a context where the affective, aesthetic, cognitive, and ethical meet, beyond the immediate reach of religious orthodoxies and channels of religious authority.¹⁰²

Bob Dylan can also easily be brought into this discussion; after his conversion to Christianity in the 1970s (perhaps by the influence of his close friend Keith Green), for a time Dylan's lyrics became obviously influenced by his spirituality, particularly in his 1979 album *Slow Train Coming*. It is interesting to note that although Dylan has been placed on the cover of *CCM* magazine several times throughout the magazine's history, he has never once agreed to an interview with the publication.

Shock-rocker and self-proclaimed "Prince of Darkness" Alice Cooper may serve as the perfect example of an evangelical Christian operating in an unexpected fashion in the mainstream music scene. Since the 1960s, Alice Cooper has characterized the hedonistic rock 'n' roll lifestyle; his music and macabre stage performances laid the groundwork for the heavy metal genre of the next 40 years. In his performances Cooper performed gory theatrics – he would often act out his own execution, pretend to murder band members, and dismember baby dolls – and his unsettling, explicit lyrics made him to become a polarizing figure in American popular culture. For much of his career, Cooper claims he was "the most functional alcoholic ever."¹⁰³ Cooper credits his Christian faith for keeping him alive during the wild 1970s when the rock 'n' roll lifestyle famously took the lives of his

¹⁰² Clive Marsh & Vaughan S. Roberts, "Soundtracks of Acrobatic Selves: Fan Site Religion in the Reception and Use of the Music of U2," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 26.3 (2011): 428.

¹⁰³ Lonn Friend, "Exclusive Interview! Alice Cooper: Prince of Darkness/Lord of Light" *KNAC.com*, October 27, 2001, accessed March 2, 2012, http://www.alicecooperechive.com/articles/print_article.php?mag=knac&art=011019.

friends Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin, and Keith Moon.¹⁰⁴ During an interview with online rock magazine KNAC.com in 2001, Cooper justified his evangelical beliefs and his lifestyle:

I think that people fill their lives with other things, whether that be drugs, or cars... whatever. I've filled my life with a sincere, divine love of rock 'n' roll. I will never back down in my rock 'n' roll attitude because I think rock is great! I'm the first one to turn it up. I'm the first one to rock as loud as I can, but when it comes to what I believe, I'm the first one to defend it too. It has also gotten me in trouble with the staunch Christians who believe that in order to be a Christian you have to be on your knees 24 hours a day in a closet somewhere. Hey, maybe some people can live like that, but I don't think that's the way God expected us to live. When Christ came back, He hung out with the whores, the drunks, and miscreants because they were people that needed him.¹⁰⁵

Alice Cooper has been sober for almost two decade now; his dark stage persona has become a fictional character that he plays on stage, one that he has learned to disconnect from his everyday life. Cooper interprets his Christian faith to be perfectly congruent with his gruesome theatrics and his vulgar songs.

In 2008, within the pages of the final print version of *CCM magazine*, Peacock again offered his thoughts on the state of the industry, warning of its inevitable, and looming, demise. He chastised the industry for continuing to follow a self-destructive pattern, namely, "an increasingly unsuccessful business model run by people trapped in a system intent on slow, incremental change in the face of monumental cultural shifts."¹⁰⁶ Peacock predicted that in the near future, "All significant Christian music, apart from worship music,

¹⁰⁴ Alice Cooper contends, "Faith kept me alive, and being alive, after what I've seen and done, makes me a very unique creature in the rock 'n' roll business." Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Charlie Peacock, "Charlie Peacock Predicts the Future of Christian Music," *CCM Magazine*, April 1, 2008, accessed February 10, 2011, <http://www.ccmagazine.com/article/charlie-peacock-predicts-the-future-of-christian-music>.

will be found in the mainstream (with no connection to the Christian music industry)."¹⁰⁷

For Peacock, the primary reason for the demise of the industry is not growing internet music piracy, but the unwillingness of the genre's artists and executives to effectively communicate with the modern world.¹⁰⁸ Contemporary Christian Music, as a genre and an industry, will continue to make itself irrelevant in 21st century America, and, "all the companies will continue to downsize and, ultimately, there may be only one major company left to steward the music of the 'ccm' era."¹⁰⁹

John Styll, as the CEO of the Gospel Music Association, also spoke out in 2008 on the troubles that faced the industry. Styll preached that the financially turbulent time that the industry currently faces could indeed be overcome. In an interview with *Beliefnet.com*, Styll explained: "Well, some in our community, who are faced with tightening budgets, may be inclined to back off from their involvement with GMA... but the truth is, it is more important than ever for us to come together as a community to find the solutions to the challenges that we collectively and individually face."¹¹⁰ He continued, "The real opportunity in this very difficult season is for gospel music to provide the hope and

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Shawn David Young writes, "The result of a collapsing corporate music industry has only exacerbated an already ticklish situation within popular Christian music... As [CCM] groups signed to subsidiary labels reach mainstream success, the very category of CCM as a valuable niche genre is reexamined..." Shawn David Young, "The Future of Contemporary Christian Music," *Patheos.com*, August 13, 2010, accessed September 19, 2012, <http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Future-of-Contemporary-Christian-Music.html>.

¹⁰⁹ Peacock continues, "Ironically, Larry Norman, Bob Dylan and U2 will be remembered as the best of Christian music created during the 'ccm' era." Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Joanne Brokaw, "3 Things You Need to Know About the Christian Music Industry and the Economy," *Beliefnetblog*, October 3, 2008, accessed September 19, 2012, <http://blog.beliefnet.com/gospelsoundcheck/2008/10/3-things-you-need-to-know-abou.html>.

inspiration our culture so desperately needs.”¹¹¹ Less than one year after that interview, however, Styll resigned from his post and the GMA’s full time staff was reduced by more than 50%.¹¹²

¹¹¹ Brokaw, “3 Things.”

¹¹² Skates, Sarah, “John Styll Exits GMA,” *Musicrow.com*, September 2, 2009, accessed October 1, 2012, <http://www.musicrow.com/2009/09/john-styll-exits-gma>.

4 Contemporary Christian Music and the Marketplace Approach

4.1 CCM Artists as Religious Innovators in the Spiritual Marketplace

As observed in the previous chapter, many of the disputes and the disagreements throughout the short history of contemporary Christian music, whether concerning musical style, lyrics, or artistic intent, can very often be recognized as stemming from a diversity of theological presuppositions among its artists and its fans. One way in which the theory of religious economy can aid in interpreting this reality is by analyzing the dynamics of religious pluralism in a disestablished, competitive religious environment. By identifying the diverse public religious expressions of Christian artists as comparable to religious pluralism in a free marketplace of religion, the birth, the evolution, and, conceivably, the trajectory of the CCM phenomenon can be considered in an original way.

Economic principles dictate that in a free marketplace, uninhibited by monopolistic structures, an array of firms can exist alongside each other as they compete for a share of the market. Rodney Stark and Roger Finke suggest that in religious economies, “other things being equal, the inherent diversity of demand requires a diversity in supply.”¹¹³ In a truly open market of religion, the marketplace approach suggests that a demand may be satisfied by any number of firms who seek to participate within that market. Stephen R. Warner asserts that in a disestablished religious environment “barriers to entry” are low for would-be “religious innovators,” and thus, “the religious field is open to anyone.”¹¹⁴ He continues, “The only thing [religious innovators] cannot count on is people being required

¹¹³ Stark and Finke, “Beyond Church and Sect,” 32.

¹¹⁴ Warner, “More Progress,” 5.

to pay attention to them. But the message is theirs to spread.”¹¹⁵ In contemporary Christian music it is the artists themselves that can be identified as religious firms operating on the “supply-side” of this religio-economic dynamic; it is their music, specifically the diverse brands of Christianity espoused there within, that can allow CCM artists to be interpreted as such.

It is undeniable, however, that many contemporary Christian music artists would reject the label of “religious innovator,” or as being a “supplier” of a religious “product,” beyond their music. The lack of such an intent, they might say, must necessarily preclude them from such a conversation. If true, the theory’s value to the study of CCM would be greatly diminished, as the existence of ‘inadvertent salespersons’ operating in the American religious marketplace, one in which they had not sought to operate, might be overly problematic. However, as discussed in the introductory chapter, genres are always audience-driven and “based unapologetically upon perception, not content or intent.”¹¹⁶ As such, regardless of the fact that artists such as P.O.D., Creed, and U2 reject the “Christian” label for their art, if their music is interpreted as “Christian” by their fans, it can be considered as such. And so, curious as it may seem, it is not unreasonable to interpret Christian rock bands as supply-side religious innovators in a religious economy, even despite their wishes, if they are interpreted in such a way by their fans.

Powell, in his foreword to the *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Christian Music*, explains that he has written his volume as first and foremost a work of church history.¹¹⁷ According to Powell, the artists described in the encyclopedia’s pages, their lyrics, their

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 9.

¹¹⁶ Powell, *Encyclopedia*, 13.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 7.

medium, and their reception, play a significant role in the ongoing history of American Christianity.¹¹⁸ Powell writes:

I regard the persons in this book as amateur theologians whose perspectives and insights on life and faith are every bit as valid as those of any Harvard professor or Rhodes scholar. These are real people, attempting to articulate their experiences in the church and in the world, often with a vulnerability that scholars are trained to conceal. They offer no feigned neutrality, no illusion of dispassionate inquiry. And it does not bother me that these poets lack the proper nuances of reflection or expression taught within the guild. Jesus was a carpenter, and Peter, a fisherman. Only Paul was a scholar, and he is generally the most boring of the three.¹¹⁹

Powell also chooses to include several bands in his *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Christian Music* that have outright rejected the label “Christian” for their music; U2 and Collective Soul, as two examples, are found in its pages.

As “amateur theologians” then, operating in a free marketplace of religion with a low “barrier to entry,” it is not difficult to bring the earliest contemporary Christian musicians into the discussion. For those musically “unsophisticated” “Jesus Freaks” of the 1960s and 1970s, their passion to spread the word and the unpretentious means of their delivery lend themselves well to such an interpretation.¹²⁰ On street corners, campuses, and communes these artists “[offered] the radical message of Jesus in a language that the hippies easily understood.”¹²¹ These artists served to supply a demand by the youth of an era for a more relevant and relatable brand of Christianity, and, as history as shown, they did have success. The movement and its music, grew, evolved, and were ultimately accepted, in some form, by mainstream evangelicals after it was legitimated at Explo ’72.

¹¹⁸ Powell writes, “They’re all here: the saints, the pilgrims, the pious, the outcasts, the hypocrites, the prophets, the heretics, and the martyrs; they’re all here in their earthly and spiritual glory.” Ibid., 1.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 8.

¹²⁰ Thompson, *Raised By Wolves*, 38.

¹²¹ Ibid., 29.

As the “barriers to entry” for such “religious innovators” are said to be low in an open marketplace, it is worth mentioning Robert Wuthnow’s comments on the “democratization of art” and its influence on religion in contemporary American popular culture. In his book *All in Sync: How Music and Art are Revitalizing American Religion*, Wuthnow writes:

The introspective nature of the artist is in some ways similar to that of the person who meditates and prays. In theory, at least, the arts are concerned with deep questions about human existence... It is also worth noting that institutional arrangements are creating opportunities for religion to capitalize on whatever interests in spirituality the arts may enforce. Both the democratization of art and the erosion of rigid boundaries between sacred and secular space have played a part. Through the mass media, and through deliberate efforts by art organizations to expand their audiences, the arts are more readily available to a large majority of the public than ever before.¹²²

The modern accessibility of art forms and their effectiveness in communicating religious themes and messages to popular culture serves well to strengthen the proposal that early CCM artists could operate as religious innovators in a religious economy.

4.2 Religious Pluralism, Evangelicalism, and Rise of Supply-Side Firms

Rodney Stark and Roger Finke construe religious pluralism in their model of religious economy as existing on the supply-side of a religious economy. Finke and Stark write, “Pluralistic refers to the number of firms active in the economy; the more firms having a significant market-share, the greater the degree of pluralism.”¹²³ Understanding contemporary Christian artists as firms and suppliers of religion, it is reasonable to suggest that a Christian diversity among contemporary Christian artists may thus constitute a form

¹²² Robert Wuthnow, *All in Sync: How Music and Art are Revitalizing American Religion* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 18.

¹²³ Stark and Finke, “Beyond Church and Sect,” 37.

of religious pluralism in the religious marketplace. The relationship between these firms, which will be discussed later in this chapter, is determined, primarily, by the competitive reality of the free market religious economy. Before identifying exactly what “religious competition” suggests, it is first valuable to consider religious individualism in the United States, the diversity of American evangelicalism, and most importantly, the manner in which new religious supply-side firms emerge into a religious economy.

Just as religious supply in an open religious marketplace can be diverse, so too can be the religious demand. Like other forms of consumer behavior in an open marketplace, if a demand is not met by an appropriate supply, new firms can rise up in the attempt to satisfy that demand. In applying the marketplace approach to significant events within Christian history, Ekelund, Hebert and Tollison suggest that, “Some Christians reject institutionalized religion because they do not find a church that matches their beliefs, or satisfies their wants. These Christians may become both suppliers and demanders of religion – Christian or otherwise.”¹²⁴ It is in this way that new supply-side firms are born in the religious economy. They continue, “Given the wide latitude concerning biblical interpretation that is characteristic of Protestantism, there is no fundamental reason why Christianity cannot be tailored to individual tastes, within limits.”¹²⁵ In a wholly disestablished free marketplace of religion, as is the contemporary American religious environment, the transformation from demander to supplier of religion is sure to happen with more regularity; Finke and Stark contend that, “The degree that a religious economy is unregulated, it will tend to be very pluralistic.”¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Ekelund, Hebert, and Tollison, *The Marketplace of Christianity*, 8.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹²⁶ Stark and Finke, “Beyond Church and Sect,” 36.

It is not difficult to identify artists in the history of CCM who identify themselves as having been driven into the role of a religious supplier of a religious product they had deemed, in one manner or another, deficient. Keith Green's refusal to withhold his albums from those who could not afford to pay, for example, was something he considered essential to all "musical ministry." This was an unusual policy during the early years of the industry, and many in the business branded him a "kook" for this attitude.¹²⁷ Green was fixated upon what he believed to be the correct means of operating for a Christian artist, and he was not shy in his rebuke of his musical peers. Green preached, "The only music ministers to whom the Lord will say, 'Well done, thou good and faithful servant,' are the ones whose lives prove what their lyrics are saying, and the ones to whom music is the least important part of their life – glorifying the only worthy One has to be the most important!"¹²⁸

P.O.D. are another example of this trend. During the band's early years, their members, although unsigned and broke, refused advances by Christian record labels over what were effectively theological objections. Joseph writes, "Their mission was to take their music and their message to the world and that was unlikely to happen through the efforts of a CCM label that didn't share their cultural mission."¹²⁹ After the band signed a deal with Atlantic several years later, the band toured with such hard rock "mainstream" acts as Korn and Sevendust. The band also performed at Ozzy Osborne's Ozzfest in 2002, and regardless of such an unexpected environment for a band with a clearly positive, Christian message, P.O.D. was received positively and they were invited to return.

¹²⁷ Cusic, *The Sound of Light*, 292.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Joseph, *Faith, God & Rock 'n' Roll*, 34.

In truth, contemporary American evangelicalism today, in all of its diverse manifestations, is very much a product of religious “demanders” becoming religious “suppliers” in the religious marketplace. American Evangelicals can be an extremely diverse lot; historian Mark A. Noll contends that evangelicalism, in its earliest years, could be characterized generally as, “a movement away from formal, outward, and established religion to personal, inward, and heartfelt religion.”¹³⁰ This emphasis on individuality and experience remains a common thread for evangelicals today. Evangelicalism, as both a designation and a subculture, has proven not to be stagnant, but rather able to continually evolve and adapt in an effort to remain relevant in the disestablished religious marketplace of its American environment. Joel Carpenter suggests that:

Rather than viewing evangelicalism as a throwback, as a religion of consolidation of those who cannot accept the dominant humanist, modernist, liberal, and secular thrust of mainstream society, perhaps it is more accurate to see evangelicalism as a religious persuasion that has repeatedly adapted to the changing tone and rhythms of modernity.¹³¹

Over the last two hundred years, a host of religious innovators on the supply-side of evangelical Christianity have endeavored to promote a more fashionable and relevant brand of evangelical Christianity - George Whitfield, John Wesley and Billy Graham, to name a small few - and it is the unregulated religious marketplace in which they operated that made such developments possible. Religious innovators “compete in the marketplace of ideas and draw market share from suppliers who fail to change with the times.”¹³²

Hendershot writes, “If today’s thriving Christian cultural products industry illustrates

¹³⁰ Mark A. Noll, *The Old Religion in the New World: The History of North American Christianity* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: 2002), 51.

¹³¹ Joel Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1997), 234.

¹³² Lee and Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks*, 176.

anything, it is that evangelicals continue to spread their messages using the ‘newest thing,’ be it film, video, or the web.”¹³³ Contemporary Christian music, the genre itself and the diversity of the artists that comprise it, is undoubtedly an example of this trend.

Evangelicalism, in its disestablished American religious environment, is effectively a breeding ground for supply-side religious firms. Warner writes, “Americans choose whether and where to be committed to a religious community; this has been implicit all along and especially overt in the early-nineteenth century second great awakening as well as today. Whatever we may think of it, religious individualism is traditionally American.”¹³⁴ Contemporary Christian music is, in many ways, intimately linked to American evangelicalism. Many of its artists identify themselves as evangelicals, and the evangelical subculture has time and again proven to be the largest audience of the genre. The powerful influence of competition in the religious marketplace is central to understanding the religious dynamics of the market, and it is to this question we now turn.

4.3 Competition in the Open Marketplace of Religion

In the same way that competition is said to motivate free market economies in conventional economic theories, competition is critical in explaining the dynamics of a religious economy. Although competition in an open religious marketplace can certainly imply a deliberate and methodical rivalry between supply-side firms, it can also function in a much more discreet manner. Hamberg and Pettersson explain:

As we understand it, the characterization of a religious market as competitive need not necessarily mean that the firms on the market consciously compete with other firms for market shares. They may do so, but a pluralistic religious market may have

¹³³ Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus*, 6.

¹³⁴ Warner, “*More Progress*,” 7.

the characteristics of a competitive market, even if the 'producers' should not see themselves as competing for 'customers.' ... Even if the producers in a competitive market should not consciously compete with each other, inefficiency will be punished and efficiency rewarded, as inefficient producers will lose market shares or be forced out of the market, while efficient producers will gain market shares... Even if the producers in a pluralistic religious market should not see themselves as competing with other producers, the market may still function as a competitive market.¹³⁵

In a disestablished religious economy, a competitive marketplace is an inevitable reality.

Market principles dictate that a multiplicity of supply-side firms (religious pluralism) within a free-market economy will also breed competition. Stark and Finke argue that, "Religious pluralism (the presence of multiple suppliers) is important only insofar as it increases choices and competition, offering consumers a wider range of religious rewards and forcing suppliers to be more responsive and efficient."¹³⁶ Competition thus promotes change in supply-side firms as suppliers attempt to accommodate new realities. Hamberg and Pettersson explain: "Such market adaptation can be expected to result in a rich and diversified supply of religious 'goods' and thus to increase the likelihood that consumers can find religious goods well adapted to their individual tastes."¹³⁷ The end result of this process is a true diversity of religious supply satisfying a full spectrum of religious demand.

Competition in a disestablished religious economy can also contribute to an increase in religious consumption in a given society. Here, "... religious pluralism and competition will ensure the quality and diversity of religious supply and lead to high levels of religious

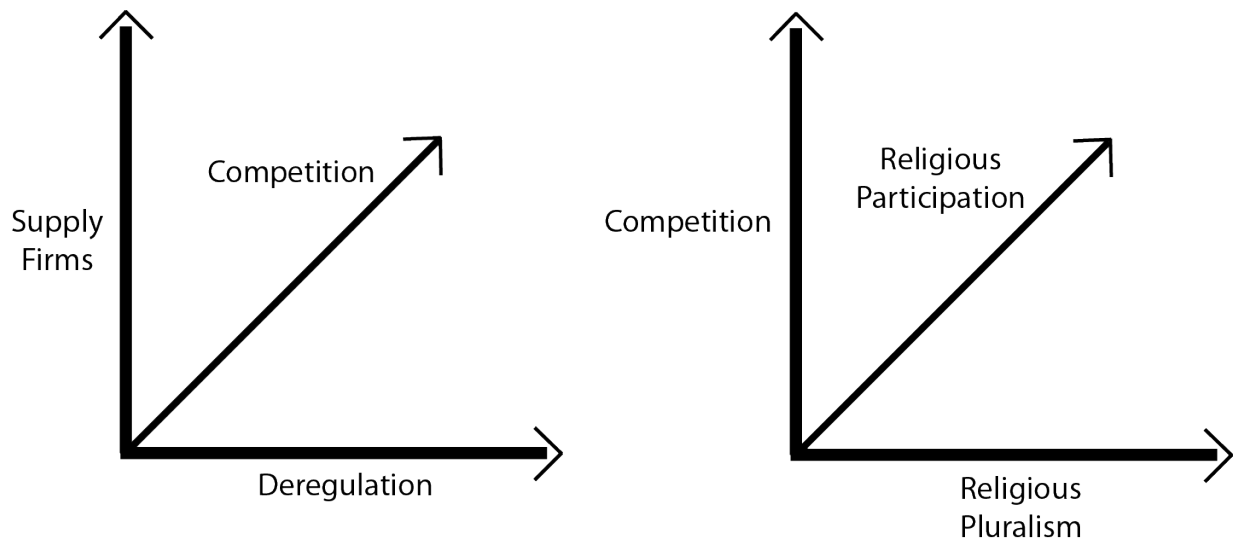
¹³⁵ Eva M. Hamberg & Thorleif Pettersson, "Religious Markets: Supply, Demand, and Rational Choices," in *Sacred Markets, Sacred Canopies: Essays on Religious Markets and Religious Pluralism*, ed. Ted G. Jelen. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2002), 97.

¹³⁶ Finke & Stark, "Beyond Church & Sect," 136.

¹³⁷ Hamberg & Pettersson, "Religious Markets," 97.

participation.”¹³⁸ The greater the diversity of religious products within a market, the more religious products will be consumed. The competitive reality of the market also motivates some supply-side firms to aggressively compete against other supply-side firms, here pluralism increases religious participation because, “it expands the set of options for religious consumers and causes denominations to compete more vigorously for members.”¹³⁹

Figure 4.3.1 Competitive religious economies and religious participation.



Religious pluralism in a disestablished religious economy promoting competition, the end results of which being a general increase in religious consumption, can be seen during the rise of the CCM genre. In a much less obvious way, the proposal may also provide one hypothesis as to why the CCM industry declined at the turn of the millennium, once it had been made obsolete by the emergence of Christian artists within the ‘mainstream’ music industry. As the CCM genre exploded, the debate over what ‘Christian

¹³⁸ Ibid., 98.

¹³⁹ James D Montgomery, “A Formalization and Test of the Religious Economies Model,” *American Sociological Review* 68:5 (2003), 782.

music' exactly entailed was given a much larger stage and a much broader audience. The Gospel Music Association's initial strict definition of CCM and their disagreement with Sixpence None the Richer in 1999, for example, may be indicative of the industry's supply-side firms struggling with the emerging Christian heterogeneity among Christian artists. Howard suggests that the battle to define CCM was an inevitable result of the genre's popularity; he writes:

Perhaps not surprisingly, as these divergent rationales came to be articulated and refined, the various artists, producers, distributors, critics, and audiences that subscribed to a particular school of thought frequently dismissed or criticized those operating in accordance with the assumptions of another rationale. Each group began to argue that they themselves were producing true contemporary Christian music and that the others were falling short of the goal.¹⁴⁰

The religious consumption bred by the huge growth of the industry in the early 1990s gave rise to religious demanders who later became religious suppliers; market principle dictate that the more active firms in the economy there are, the greater the diversity among those firms.

Ultimately, in the 1990s, the CCM industry, and the GMA, can also be interpreted as operating in a comparable way to monopoly structures in secular economies. As the popularity of the genre grew in the early 1990s, the industry sought to define and promote the product they offered. As the criteria for CCM, as a product, became increasingly well defined, many Christian artists found themselves on the outside looking in. Both suppliers and demanders of CCM were thus forced outside of the contemporary Christian music genre and industry, and, with the help of mainstream record companies that had recognized the profit to be made by selling religious music, as well as by the advent of online music distribution, the CCM industry lost ground.

¹⁴⁰ Howard & Streck, *Apostles of Rock*, 40.

Stark and Finke contend that successful monopolistic structures within religious economies will ultimately decrease the diversity of religious expression in that religious economy. They write:

To the degree that a religious firm achieves a monopoly, it will seek to exert its influence over institutions and thus the society will become sacralized. Sacralization means that there will be little differentiation between religious and secular institutions and that the primary symbols, rhetoric, and ritual.¹⁴¹

This phenomenon is very much in line with the critique that was leveled against the industry by Charlie Peacock, both in 1999 and in 2008. To Peacock, it was the narrow consensus of “Christian music” that was advocated by the industry that was creating their product to become increasingly irrelevant in modern times.

Writing in the year 2000, Thompson had a similar reading of the changes he was witnessing before his very eyes. Excited by the growing plurality of religious expression among Christian artists, he wrote: “Until the past few years, the top-selling Christian music has been the least aggressive, adventurous, or challenging.”¹⁴² Thompson suggested that it was in fact digital distribution that allowed Christian artists to skirt the industry and its various parameters. Thompson explained: “With the rise of the internet, fans can now connect directly with the artists who move them. No longer must they rely on the gatekeepers within the church or the entertainment industry.”¹⁴³ He continued: “With the explosion of the Internet, digital delivery of music, and greatly reduced costs of manufacturing, many believe that the future of Christian rock is brightest where the sun of the industry’s attention doesn’t shine.”¹⁴⁴

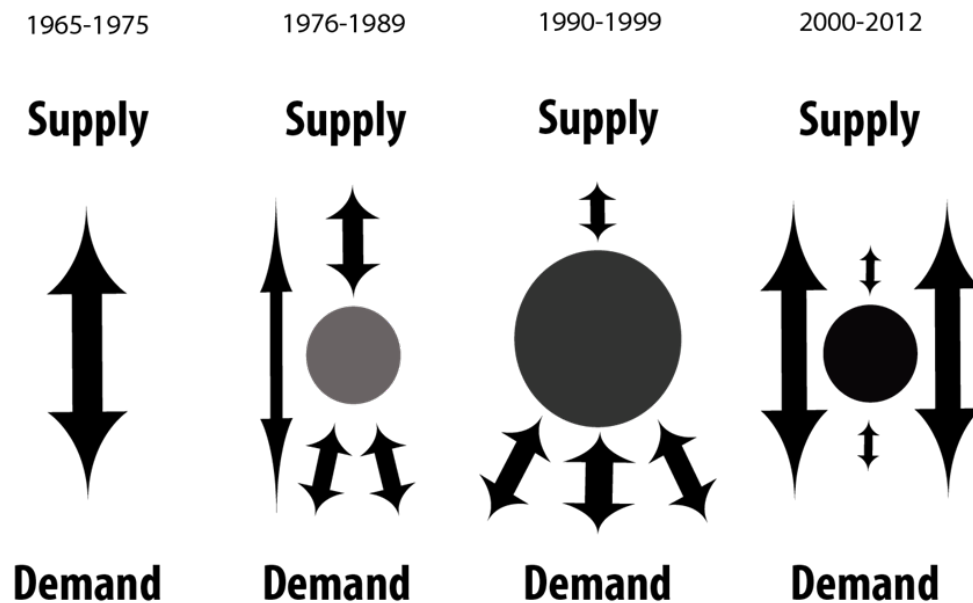
¹⁴¹ Stark and Finke, “Beyond Church & Sect,” 37.

¹⁴² Thompson, *Raised By Wolves*, 243.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 243.

Figure 4.3.2 Monopoly structures and the history of the CCM genre.



Ultimately, the religious demand of the CCM audience evolved. The shrinking of an industry that provided CCM as Christian culture-replacement, and the popularity of Christian artists in the mainstream, suggest that religious demand had shifted away from isolationist and towards a brand of Christianity that was less suspicious of mainstream American popular culture. Joseph writes:

Ironically enough, while the very notion of 'Christian music' was in retreat, people of faith were streaming out of their subcultures and making strong statements of faith in the center of the music culture. And they appeared to be continuing to do so with or without the help from their brothers and sisters on the business side of the existing paradigm of Christian music.¹⁴⁵

Those CCM artists who offered Christian entertainment, DC Talk and Audio Adrenaline for example, had become irrelevant.

Karen Ward's story provides an example of such a shift at the turn of the millennium. Originally of the Lutheran church, Ward left that denomination to begin the

¹⁴⁵ Joseph, *Faith, God & Rock 'n' Roll*, 25.

Church of the Apostles in Seattle. Her new congregation combines Lutheran liturgical services with the contemporary arts. Ward writes:

We are ancient and future. We Bach and rock. We chant and spin. We emo and alt. We write our own church music and incorporate mainstream music as well – everything from Rachel's to U2, Bjork to Moby, Dave Matthews to Coldplay. We have no need to "Christianize" music. God is sovereign, and the whole world is God's, so any music that is good already belongs to God.¹⁴⁶

Here the genre of CCM, and questions about appropriate lyrical content, musical style, and artistic intent, are evidently non-issues.

¹⁴⁶ Karen Ward, "The New Church: Artistic, Monastic, and Commute-Free," in *The Relevant Church: A New Vision for Communities of Faith*, ed. Jennifer Ashley. (Orlando: Relevant Books, 2005), 82.

5 Conclusion

As proposed in this study, the theory of religious economy is a valuable and highly effective methodological approach for the study of the modern religious phenomenon of contemporary Christian music in the United States. The theory of religious economy, as a method, was initially fashioned for the better understanding of American religious trends in their distinctly American religious environment, and by borrowing language and models from economic theory, interpreting American society as free-marketplace of religion driven by competition and the economic forces of supply and demand, the understudied and splintered history of contemporary Christian music can be approached in an original way. Here, theological diversity among Christian artists is recognized as a form of religious pluralism and CCM artists are identified as comparable to supply-side firms in religious economy. Recognizing the competitive reality of the open marketplace of religion, the many arguments and disagreements, and successes and failures, in the history of CCM are better investigated.

This study has focused upon the supply-side of this religious economy – contemporary Christian music artists – and presented ways in which their relations with each other, and with their industry, can be interpreted using economic models. The other side to this story, one that must be considered in future analyses of the splintered world of CCM, is the role of the consumer, or religious demander, in this religious economy. How does a culture affect its artists? To what effect does the religious supply encourage or facilitate change in the demand of a given religious marketplace? Or posed more simply, why does the demand change? Although the emergence of new supply-side CCM firms may have been a cause of the evolution within religious demand over the past 40 years, the

change within popular CCM supply-side firms is, at the same time, undoubtedly a sign of that evolution in demand.

In his book *Sympathy for the Devil: Christian Pop Music & the Transformation of American Evangelism*, Stowe confronts the question as to whether popular music influences, as well as mirrors, its culture. He writes, “But does music do more than reflect; does it actually alter the contours of history by working on people’s conceptions of themselves, their communities, and their nation? The answer is yes – of course it does.”¹⁴⁷ Stowe argues in his study that by the end of the 1970s, Christian music had in fact been influenced more by right-wing politics than the other way around. He proposes that, “The relocation of the fledgling CCM industry from California to rural Texas, and, more importantly, Nashville was part of this larger trend.”¹⁴⁸ With the marketplace approach in mind, it is in this direction that future scholarly studies of CCM should venture. Investigating the influencing cultural forces at a given time can provide a window into the causes of a shift in the demand. Identifying the forces behind a change in market demand can help to elucidate trends in both the past and the trajectory of a market’s supply.

Ultimately, the history of the contemporary Christian music phenomenon is still unfolding, and if critics such as Charlie Peacock are indeed correct, the industry’s best days are now certainly behind them. It need not be argued that CCM is a worthwhile avenue for increased scholarly attention; CCM is a fascinating and understudied part of the religious vitality of contemporary American religion. It is the goal of this study to promote the theory of religious economy as a valuable method for the study of the modern religious phenomenon that is contemporary Christian music in the United States.

¹⁴⁷ Stowe, *Sympathy for the Devil*, 3.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 246.

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