

## Review

# Sound, Music, and the Study of Religion<sup>1</sup>

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The study of religion has been greatly enhanced in recent years by the new emphasis on lived religion and materiality (Meyer et al. 2011). It also impels us to consider how the aesthetic factors into the interpretation of religious worlds (Meyer 2009). Moreover, the shift in academic focus from beliefs and texts to practice and the sensorium has generated stimulating new questions about religious communication and mediation (Morgan 2009). Surprisingly, music and extramusical sound receive scant attention despite the significance of sound and hearing in our lives. Scholars of religion have been slow to engage the multidisciplinary boom in sound studies of the last few years (Keeling & Kun 2011).<sup>2</sup>

In what follows I discuss some of the historical biases and methodological challenges related to studying religion from an acoustic and auditory perspective. I review the work of some authors who have overcome what Isaac Weiner calls our 'disciplinary deafness' (2009, 897) and made the 'sound of the sacred' a centerpiece of their research and publications.<sup>3</sup> In the course of the essay, I identify some of the topics that are arguably integral to the development of a more sonically aware religious studies, as well as areas that await more study.

The undervaluation of sound in the academic study of religion is linked to the privileging of sight over sound in Western modernity, whereby the aural as a spiritual sense is diminished (Chidester 1992; Schmidt 2002). Furthermore, listening is held to be the most passive of the senses, and

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1 My work on sound and music in religion has been greatly aided by a course I taught on this topic (spring 2011) and by the assistance of Jeremy Spiers. I also acknowledge the contributions of the 'Sound In/As Religion' symposium' that I organized at the 2010 World Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) in Toronto.

2 On this topic, see the excellent blog, *Sounding Out!* <[www.soundstudiesblog.com](http://www.soundstudiesblog.com)>.

3 Cf. Morgan 2012 on 'the look of the sacred'.

musical expression to be derivative rather than determinative of culture (Chernoff 2002). Veit Erlmann questions the heuristic value of continuing to associate modernity with visuality (Erlmann 2004, 3–4), notably when the technologies of our age have led to a ‘resurgence of the ear’ (ibid., 2). Yet he is careful not to propose a ‘countermonopoly of the ear’ but rather that ‘hearing culture’ offers new ways of conceptualizing cultural knowledge and social relations (ibid., 3–4).

Describing and analyzing sound—whether in terms of how it is produced, perceived, used, or transmitted—requires a variety of disciplinary perspectives from the natural, social, and human sciences. In particular, the ethnomusicologists, cultural anthropologists and historians who have pioneered research on acoustic and auditory practices all underscore the risks of abstracting particular sound objects from their social contexts or utilizing Western understandings of music in cross-cultural settings.

From a definitional standpoint, it is important to clarify from the outset that the study of sound in relation to religious ideas and practice is not forcibly about music. Music has been defined as sound that is culturally organized and culturally meaningful (Chernoff 2002; Shelemay 2006) or ‘sounds with patterned acoustical characteristics’ (Ellingson 2005 [1987]). Just as for the concepts of ‘religion’ and ‘art’ there are languages that do not reflect the concept of ‘music’ as understood in Western cultures. Instead, they may privilege vocalized forms of expression, such as recitation in Islam. In Siberian shamanic traditions the drum and other instruments may take precedence over the human voice. It is more productive, therefore, to operate with an expanded notion of sound as it is variously perceived and conceptualized to mediate divine presence (Schulz 2008, 172–3).

### **Methodological Challenges**

In addition to the historical and epistemological factors influencing the under-theorizing of the acoustic and auditory dimensions of religion (see Weiner 2009, 899–900), there are several methodological challenges that were the focus of an earlier publication (Hackett 2011).<sup>4</sup> To begin with, sound is difficult to capture as it is ephemeral and variable in nature, although technological improvements have improved reproducibility such that sounds can now be heard outside of ritual and performance contexts. The source of sound may be indiscernible or difficult to access as it may be too loud

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4 Portions of the current essay are drawn from this publication.

or off-limits to non-initiates, plus it is easier to see someone looking than to see someone listening. Listening is essentially an individual act, even while shaped by social processes, rendering it challenging to investigate communal hearing practices (Wolvin 2009).

Deciding on a research focus can be bewildering: the nature of sound, its generation, mediation, reception, perception, interpretation, effects, preservation, transmission, remediation, use, etc. So too is the multi-disciplinarity potentially required (ethnomusicology, acoustic theory, acoustic ecology, architectural and film studies, sound art, history of science, philosophy of music, neuroscience, cognitive psychology, etc.). Others can be deterred by a lack of training in formal musical or sonic analysis. The insider/outsider question, so familiar to scholars of religion, also comes into play here, so to speak (Jensen 2011). Are musical skills and knowledge an aid to studying religious musics? A group of ethnomusicologists advocates actively joining in a society's music-cultural practices so as to achieve the levels of dialogue and reflexivity required of post-colonial and post-modern ethnography (Cooley & Barz 2008). The majority of the contributors to Guy Beck's edited collection are also musical performers of one type or another (2006). David Turner's understanding of how the *didjeridu* linked inner spirits and the 'other side' of existence only came after decades of initiation and participation among the Aborigines of Arnhem Land in northern Australia (2000).

Historical research on sonic forms or experiences pertaining to religion can prove problematic in the absence of auditory archives. The work of aural historians such as Mark M. Smith (2004) raises pressing questions about how to reclaim the sounds of the past, whether as objective facts or as they were subjectively heard, interpreted, and imagined by people in particular historical settings (see, also, Promey & Brisman 2010). Moreover, extraordinary and unusual sounds were more likely to be recorded, rather than the ordinary and mundane (Corbin 1995).

Finally, it is difficult to write about sound, music and sonic experiences, including silence and noise. In the following section, I highlight the work of those scholars who have risen to these challenges and provided us with exemplary research on the range of possible interrelationships between religion, sound, and music.

### **Scope of the Field**

In terms of scope, it is perhaps not surprising that comparative studies of religion in relation to music and sound are few and far between. They also

tend to focus on the 'sacred music' (usually pertaining to liturgy) of selected religious traditions and how these generate communal identity and spiritual experience (Beck 2006; Sullivan 1997). There are also studies of particular religions (Friedmann 2009), or types of religion, such as indigenous religions (Ralls-Macleod & Harvey 2000) or particular forms of musical practice in these religions, such as chanting in Hinduism (Beck 1993) or sacred song traditions in Christianity (Marini 2003). Others focus on the musical dimensions of a religious landscape more generally, such as the United States (Stowe 2004; Weiner 2009), or of a specific type of religious orientation, such as esotericism (Wuidar 2010; Godwin 1995) or trancing (Becker 2004).

### Pioneering Studies

Anthropologist and ethnomusicologist Steve Feld began a lifetime career of doing anthropology in and through the medium of sound following his field experiences in the rich aural environments of the Bosavi people in Papua New Guinea during the 1970s (Feld & Brenneis 2004). Through his experimental sound recordings, such as 'Voices of the Rainforest' and 'Rainforest Soundwalks', he explored the relationship of sound to materiality and sociality in the Bosavi world, working with the forest-dwellers in their primary medium, which was aural. He went on to develop the concept of an 'acoustic ecology' or 'acoustemology', a sonic way of knowing place, a way of attending to hearing, a way of absorbing that would do justice to the layered complexity of the human and environmental world of sound.<sup>5</sup> In countering the notion of sound as ephemeral, he later became interested in how one can hear history and transformation in European bells.<sup>6</sup> This turned into a multi-CD project on the worldwide culture of bells. He is also known for challenging the academy to take sound more seriously in academic presentations and publishing.

In his book on listening practices among Muslim communities in Egypt, *The Ethical Soundscape: cassette sermons and Islamic counterpublics* (2006), anthropologist Charles Hirschkind demonstrates how the soundscapes produced through the circulation of the Qur'an and sermon tapes reshape moral aptitudes and the moral economy of revival in Cairo. He tracked the use and circulation of these popular media tapes in markets, public transportation, and in domestic spaces, noting that listening is an embodied practice that occurs in changing urban soundscapes. Hirschkind's research

5 <<http://acousticecology.org>> See also <[www.earthear.com](http://www.earthear.com)>.

6 See his CD series, 'The Time of Bells' with VoxLox.

has proved influential as it prompts the broader question of what shifts in hearing practices in a religious tradition might reveal about that religion in its specific temporal and spatial context.<sup>7</sup>

In the history of religions, two scholars stand out in terms of their contributions to this emergent field. Leigh Eric Schmidt's book, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment*, represents a paradigmatic history of hearing in American religion. It examines how auditory experiences and hallucinations of people 'hearing God' were re-imagined and marked with illusion during the American enlightenment and its aftermath (Schmidt 2002). Schmidt emphasizes the need to 'broaden attention beyond preaching, communications media, and musical performance to the whole of the devotional soundscape' (2002, 35). A study of the auditory, according to Schmidt, must take into account 'attentiveness to noises, joyful and awful' that might comprise 'sobbing, sighing, groaning, and laughing' as well as 'psalms, bells, and trumpets' (2002, 35). Along similar lines, it must recognize the corporeal, dialogic, and participatory aspects of hearing through examination of the historical accounts and representations of the 'rituals, disciplines, performances, and commodities' in particular cultural settings (2002, 36).

In the case of Hinduism, Guy Beck (1993) argues that even though sound is central to Hindu theology and ritual practice this reality is missed by Western scholars who tend to emphasize the visual components. Hindu worship is sonically enhanced by an array of instruments (drums, bells, gongs, conches, flutes) and vocalizations. Moreover, Hindu scriptures (such as the Sabda-Brahman of the Upanishads, and the Nada-Brahman of Yoga, Saivism, Saktism, Vaishnavism) talk of the cosmos being originated and permeated by sound. Beck writes as an 'insider', having spent several years learning vocal classical music in India, before going on to earn degrees in musicology and religious studies. In studying the myriad expressions of sacred sound given by Indian texts, artifacts, and informants, he is able to test hypotheses about sound across a number of Hindu traditions (1993, 10–11). His work demonstrates that this 'sonic theology' constitutes an important nexus between otherwise distinct religious communities.

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<sup>7</sup> Earlier work by scholars of religion made important contributions regarding the oral aspects and auditory interpretation of scripture (Graham 1993; Hall 1986). New scholarship on listening behavior emphasizes the complexity of the listening process, not least in relation to spirituality and religion (Schnapp 2009; Wolvin 2009).

## Research Areas

In this section I discuss selected areas within which some of the recent scholarship on the intersections of religious, musical, and sonic practices can be clustered. Neither the topics nor the authors are exhaustive.

### *Linking Sounds and Spirit Worlds*

The perceived relationship between particular sounds (environmental or produced by voices or instruments) and specific divinities or spirit beings, what Ter Ellingson calls 'isoformalism' (2005, 6253) is a rich area of inquiry for the sonically aware or curious. Anthropologist Rodney Needham, in his classic article 'Percussion and Transition' (1967), asks why is it so widespread that noise-making instruments and devices (such as a shaman beating a drum) are deployed to establish contact with the spirit world. Through his comparative research, he discovers that the affective effects of percussive sounds are linked to rites of transition in many cultures.

A similar cross-cultural example is the eerie, whirring sound of the bullroarer that has long been associated with ancestral spirits in Aboriginal Australia, Oceania, and parts of Africa. Anthropologist Donald Tuzin contends that to understand the links between 'the auditory apparatus and a particular sensation that is widely interpreted as signifying a supernatural presence' (as in the case of bullroarers and large drums) the researcher needs a 'biocultural' approach (1984). This combines the study of the physiological impact of aural stimuli (such as the anxiety created by the unsettling sound of the bullroarer) and its religio-cultural interpretation (or resolution) in particular environmental settings (such as where thunder is prevalent).

Ethnomusicologist and performer Katherine Hagedorn has written on how *Santería batá* drums in Cuba are critical elements of the performance process, as they are believed to speak to the *orichas* 'in their own language' (Hagedorn 2001). In the contemporary North American context, sociologist of popular culture Charles Brown demonstrates how Christian speed and thrash metal music has an affinity for apocalyptic ideas and imagery, and that their musical structures convey rebellion through dissonant riffing and power chords (2006, 134).

In the course of many years of research on the sounds of African cultures, Philip Peek encountered 'significant silences' (2000). These could be silent or voiceless creatures serving as divinatory agents or trickster figures or non-speaking divine kings. In all instances (and he also surveys Native American and Asian cultures), silence was 'positively valued' and could have curative

functions. It might mark the arrival of a deity at a shrine (unheard as unseen) or be linked to funeral or initiation ceremonies because of its association with the Other World of deities, spirits, and ancestors (*ibid.*, 23). Peek also notes that many African musical instruments are made from the skins (usually reptilian) or shells (often tortoises) of 'silent' animals (*ibid.*, 24).

### *Traditions and Compositions*

An area that is particularly germane to the study of religion is research on the historical and cultural factors that led to certain sounds becoming emblematic of (or rejected by) particular religious traditions, whether *om* in Hinduism, throat-singing in Buddhism, vocalizations in Islam, the *shofar* in Judaism, or the church organ or bell in Christianity. Ethnomusicologist and Jewish Studies scholar Judah Cohen traces the adoption of the guitar in the liturgical and paraliturgical settings of Reform Judaism, as well as the incorporation of sound-bearing objects into Jewish recreational activities, such as 'singing' toys and music boxes (2007).

Similarly, the lives of contemporary composers and musicians can be examined biographically to discern the religious and social forces that have shaped their music. John Cage, influenced by Indian aesthetics and Zen Buddhism, was prompted to develop an aesthetic of spiritual silence and non-music as a radical modernist response to the conditions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Kraut 2010). John Coltrane's conviction (notably in 'A Love Supreme') that unstructured sound and improvisational music were the most effective expression of the divine can be traced to the influence of the music of the black Church in the U.S. (Bivins 2010; Imbert 2010). 'Holy minimalist' musician and composer John Tavener was marked by his conversion to Eastern Orthodoxy (Maas 2008). On a broader scale, a group of ethnomusicologists has explored the traditional ritual roots of contemporary African musical compositions (Floyd 1999).

### *Soundscape(s)*

Rather than focusing on specific sounds, performers or musical traditions, some scholars now prefer to explore large-scale acoustic environments or 'soundscapes' (Schulz 2008). The capacity of music to structure spaces and mark boundaries as with trumpet voluntaries in Christian services or conch-shell trumpet notes sounded before and after many Hindu rituals is well established (Ellingson 2005, 6254). Alain Corbin's study of how bells

serve as auditory and defensive markers in nineteenth-century France is oft cited in this regard (1998; see, also, Weiner 2011). Anthropologist Dorothea Schulz (2003) focuses on the urban soundscape of the predominantly Muslim West African country of Mali, whose contemporary public arena is in part defined by the broadcasts of the local and national radio stations (see, also, Tong Soon Lee 2006).

The actual soundscape concept derives from the work of R. Murray Schafer on sonic environments (Schafer 1993). Emily Thompson describes a soundscape as simultaneously a physical environment and a way of perceiving that environment (2004, 1f.). In other words, it is both a world and a culture to make sense of that world. The concept connotes both the omnipresence of sound, enabled now by new acoustic and auditory technologies, and its localization and embodiment, according to Dorothea Schulz (2008, 185). In her understanding, it conveys a time and space emplacement where both sound production and sound perception combine for powerful religious experience and communication with the divine (2008, 185).

An exciting new area of research that connects with the spatial turn in religious studies is that of archaeoacoustics or acoustic archaeology (see, e.g., Scarre & Lawson 2006). Focusing on the sites and sounds of prehistory, this growing sub-field examines the acoustical effects of ancient monuments.<sup>8</sup> These percussive echoes were believed to generate altered (shamanic) states or to reproduce the sounds of sacred birds and animals. Nowadays, music therapists lead pilgrimages to such sites (Hale 2007).

### *Experience and Healing*

While the experiential dimension is not limited to trance, two works on this topic stand out in particular. *Traveling Spirit Masters: Moroccan Gnawa trance and music in the global marketplace* (2007), by performance studies expert Deborah Kapchan, examines how the trance music of the Gnawa transfigures musical and racial identities for this Moroccan people as well as the global musicians with whom they collaborate. She provides rich analysis of both the aesthetic and affective strands of Gnawa possession trance ceremonies as well as the transculturation of trance and sacred music more generally. The work of ethnomusicologist Judith Becker also focuses on trance; she combines both scientific and cultural approaches to the study of music and emotion, and music and trancing in her book, *Deep Listeners* (Becker 2004).

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<sup>8</sup> See especially Steven Waller's Rock Art Acoustics page <<http://sites.google.com/site/rock-artacoustics>> accessed March 4, 2012.

Becker maintains that people who experience deep emotions when listening to music are akin to those who trance within the context of religious rituals. Using new discoveries in the fields of neuroscience and biology, the book proposes an emotion-based theory of trance using examples from Southeast Asian and American musics. Psychological studies generally involve self-reports of the emotions experienced by the participant while listening to music. In a more recent study, Joshua Penman and Judith Becker study physiological responses (galvanic skin response [GSR] and heart rate) among two target groups (Pentecostal Ecstasies and Deep Listeners) (Penman & Becker 2009).

Any consideration of the effects of religious sounds and music takes one into the realm of healing, whether past or present. For historical studies of the beliefs and practices relating to music's emotional and healing powers, whether categorized as 'musical healing', see the work of Penelope Gouk (2000) or as 'medicine' or 'therapy' see that of Peregrine Hordern (2000). Ethnographic studies of music healing or therapy in contemporary communities focus on the discourses about sonic effects, their cosmological framing, and specific practices such as drumming and chanting (Barnes & Sered 2005). Shamanism often features in these studies (Gioia 2006). With the mass circulation of world musics (see Feld 2000, 175–81), the development of radio programs<sup>9</sup> and websites devoted to 'sound healing', there are now manifold resources for studying the perceptions, practices, and experiences relating to officially sanctioned or complementary healing practices that involve the sonic realm. In his study of 'world music' and the appropriation and marketing of musical difference, Timothy Taylor demonstrates how particular sounds (e.g. drumming, droning, chanting) in advertising music signify vague, unthreatening forms of spirituality or mysticism, echoing 'centuries of western notions of other places as spiritual, in contrast to the modern West' (2007, 196).

### *Materiality and the Sensorium*

The new focus on the senses as mediators of experience has been labeled a 'sensual revolution' by David Howes (2004; 2006). The research promoted by Howes and other scholars such as Constance Classen (1993; 1997) has emphasized the cultural construction and agency of the senses, and their

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9 E.g. Hearts of Space <<http://www.hos.com>>.

dynamic interplay.<sup>10</sup> The task of the scholar, according to Classen, is to uncover the sensory meaning and practice of particular cultures (1997, 401). While there have been several publications on the individual senses in the Berg Sensory Formations series, *The Auditory Culture Reader* (Bull & Back 2003) is the most germane to this essay.

Paul Stoller's sensuous ethnography among the Songhay of Niger in the 1980s broke new ground in multi-sensory approaches to the study of culture and religion (Stoller 1997; 1989). More recently, Marleen de Witte has called for a more embodied, tactile approach to African religious life and its sonic dimensions, rather than the more symbolic interpretations of religious sounds (Witte 2008, 692; see also Schulz 2008). Her ethnographic studies of the spatial practices of sound and silence by religious groups in Accra, Ghana demonstrate the perceived power of these sounds to communicate with and access the invisible world of spirits. She advocates closer attention to the ways in which spiritual touch and embodiment can be mediated by sound (cf. Maas 2008), as has been done so productively for the visual realm (e.g. Meyer 2008; Morgan 2012).

Isaac Weiner is particularly attentive to how one can study sounds as material culture (2011). In addition to their physical properties, one must consider the 'historically specific processes through which broadcasters and receivers invest sounds with significance' (ibid., 109). He underscores the salience of social context in forming listening audiences, arguing that '[s]tudying sound implies a theory of religion that is inherently communal and intersubjective' (ibid.).

### *Sound and Music in Relation to Power and Conflict*

Because of his emphasis on the way in which sound mediates contact among diverse religious groups in the U.S. context (2009), Isaac Weiner's research has also extended to investigating disputes about religious sounds in public places. Sounds such as church bells and calls to prayer identify religious communities and territories in public spheres, but they may also signal unwelcome intrusions (2011, 114). This may devolve to legal conflicts and attempts to suppress or restrict what is perceived as the 'noise' of the religious other. As Weiner trenchantly notes, responses to religious sounds are influenced by 'attitudes toward the sound-producers as much as by the sounds themselves' (ibid.).

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10 See the Concordia Sensoria Research Team (CONSERT) website <<http://www.david-howes.com/senses>>.

In an article that explores the 'sonic sacralization' of urban space in Accra, Ghana, Marleen de Witte (2008) describes the clashes between Ga traditionalists and born-again Christians over the traditional 'ban on drumming and noisemaking' (2008, 690). She explored the conflicting ways of conceptualizing sound in relation to space, personhood, and spiritual power in a competitive urban soundscape (2008, 707). Vicki Brennan is similarly interested in tensions between musical forms belonging to distinct religious traditions in West African urban spaces. Her research examines how the production and circulation of commercially recorded gospel music draws on a diverse array of musical genres, producing new conceptions of Christian practice in modern-day Nigeria (forthcoming; see, also, 2010).

The control of sound, who produces the sounds, and who is capable of or is allowed to hear or interpret them can also have a gendered dimension (Moisala & Diamond 2000). Anne Carson explores the association of female sounds with 'monstrosity, disorder and death' from antiquity to the present (1995, 121). She argues that the collapsing of quality of voice and use of voice, together with the claim that women lacked *sophrosyne* or self-control, constituted a patriarchal strategy to limit women's public utterances.

### **Concluding Reflections**

In this brief discussion of emerging scholarship on the imbrications of sound, music, and religion, I hope to have demonstrated that some of the areas that scholars of religion traditionally describe and analyze, such as practice, experience, identity, liturgy, performance, mediation, embodiment, and spatiality, lend themselves to acoustic and auditory analysis. Whether we subscribe to Steven Friedson's claim that '[i]t is first and foremost in musical experience that the varieties of religious experience [...] take hold' (2009, 153) and his efforts to redress the epiphenomenal status of musical sounds in the (anthropological) study of ritual, or whether we simply want to promote a more multi-sensory approach to the study of religion, both full-scale (case) studies and acoustically enhanced research are feasible. Moreover, the increase in globally commoditized sounds and musics raises fresh questions about the nature and location of religious practice. Modern media technologies amplify, transform and even re-enchant the sonic experiences of religious actors. In sum, we have greater opportunities than ever before to compare musical and non-musical sounds within and across cultures and religious traditions.

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