

SACRED OR PROFANE

or

How do you know if it's OK to use in the Service?

You might wonder, at the outset, why I chose the word *profane*, as opposed to the word *secular*. The two words do share a common definition, i.e. not concerned with religion or religious purposes, but the word base for *profane* is *pro-fanum*, literally, *before the temple*, or, might we say, in front of the temple, or before going to temple, and not usually associated with what one encounters *in the temple*. Another definition of *profane* is irreverent, serving to debase or defile what is holy. This can get very sticky!

There was a time when I think I understood, for myself at least, what I thought was appropriate or inappropriate in church. The more I learn, and the more I live, the more inclusive becomes my definition. I will take the last definition of *profane* as an example. Something that is sacred *for me* cannot be made less so by anything anyone else says or does. I may be annoyed that someone else does not share my own views, but that does not change or damage them. If I am truly free to believe and to worship as I choose, then I must allow others to be free also in what they choose to believe and to honor in worship. Having said that, however, I must admit that I really do like to worship in a particular way, because that is what I have become *accustomed to* over the years.

When speaking about music, deciding between the sacred and profane, or appropriate and inappropriate, we are joining a historical debate. In some centuries the hotly contested issue was the use of melodies associated with secular, or even vulgar texts, as the basis for motets and masses sung in church. The most famous melody used in this way was *L'homme arme'* The song has a martial text and very muscular rhythm and melody. Composers such as Josquin and Palestrina and many others used the melody in long notes (whole notes or longer), usually in one voice, and wove their own music around those notes in the other voices. The text for these works was from the liturgy. There are thirty-three extant masses from the period of the Renaissance on that one tune! It would be about like taking the tune for "You Ain't Nothin' But A Hound Dog" and stretching it out in long notes, then weaving a motet, or anthem around that tune, with a sacred text, and presenting it in church. The Council of Trent, which met from 1545 to 1563 (how's that for a long meeting!), put a stop to that. Because the church employed the composers to write settings of the liturgy, the church could dictate what it would and would not tolerate.

During all of the early period of the church, up until the late nineteenth century, the use of women in any capacity except sitting in a pew with their heads covered, was prohibited. They could not even sing in the choir, much less read scripture or pretend to clergy positions. Hence the use of choirs of men and boys. This became a tradition promoted by the church, if not dictated by scriptures (which it was not!). Traditions such as this become the zone of comfort for particular communities but should not be construed to be the only way worship should be done. In our main line Protestant tradition, we are used to choirs and congregations singing with organ accompaniment. In Protestant churches in the Caribbean or Latin traditions, guitar and drums, often with brass instruments, are the norm. The music that grew up in those traditions works best with those instruments, not with a pipe organ.

Then there are those legions of hymns, well-known and much-loved by us, the origins of which may be found in barroom ballads, drinking songs, and ethnic and national folk melodies. Fortunately, most of those tunes with shady beginnings are so old that they have been homogenized into the general hymn repertoire. No one takes offense at them because no one remembers what the old words used to be! And, what are we to do about the music which has been heavily influenced by jazz and Latin music? Does assimilation of secular flavors preclude its use?

What it comes down to is this: are we justified in using elements drawn from other traditions in order to enrich our own expression of worship? When we use jazz or gospel music in our services of worship are we honoring the many faces of God's children, or are we profaning the name of God by stepping outside our *tradition of worship*? No one of us can answer these questions for another because the answer has everything to do with who we are, what has been our life experience up to now, what has been our worship experience, and what helps us give expression to our praise of God..

For me, quality is what matters most. Where there is a text there should be a meaningful message. But whatever the music or the style, if it is sung or played with heart and soul, it touches me deeply. It is a gift from on high to be able to witness through beauty and I am grateful for the opportunity. As for the choice of music, I concur with Duke Ellington, who said, "If it sounds good, it *is* good!"

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