

A Study of the Role of Music in Religious Rituals Across Major World Religions

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Abstract: *Music constitutes one of the most enduring and universal elements of religious expression across human civilizations. This paper examines the role of music in religious rituals across major world religions, exploring how sacred sound functions as a medium for transcendence, communication with the divine, and community formation. Drawing on historical, ethnomusicological, and comparative religious scholarship, the study traces the origins and development of ritual music in Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, while also considering hybrid traditions and the agency of performers within these frameworks. The analysis reveals that despite significant theological differences regarding the permissibility and nature of music in worship, all major religious traditions employ sound—whether chant, instrumental music, or recitation—to enhance ritual efficacy, articulate belief, and foster spiritual experience. Furthermore, the phenomenon of “shared religious soundscapes” demonstrates how musical structures can transcend religious boundaries, creating points of contact between traditions. The paper concludes that music in religious ritual serves not merely as ornamentation but as an integral component that shapes and enables the very efficacy of ritual practice.*

Keywords: Sacred music, religious ritual, ethnomusicology, comparative religion, chanting, worship, soundscapes

I. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between music and religion is among the most ancient and enduring of human cultural phenomena. Music has played a part in the religious worship of virtually all of the world's religions, from the chanting of Vedic hymns in ancient India to the polyphonic masses of Renaissance Europe, from the recitation of the Qur'an in Islamic tradition to the instrumental ensembles of South Indian temple worship. This universality suggests that music fulfills fundamental human needs within religious contexts: facilitating communication with the supernatural, enhancing emotional engagement, structuring ritual time, and fostering communal identity.

Yet the role of music in religious ritual is far from uniform. Religious traditions vary dramatically in their theological conceptions of sacred sound, the types of music deemed appropriate for worship, and the functions that music serves within ritual practice. Some traditions embrace elaborate instrumental and vocal music as central to worship; others restrict music to unaccompanied vocal chanting; and some, such as orthodox Islam, officially prohibit music in worship while nevertheless employing highly intoned forms of recitation that possess musical qualities.

This paper provides a comparative study of the role of music in religious rituals across major world religions. Drawing on historical sources, ethnomusicological scholarship, and comparative religious studies, it examines the musical traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as well as hybrid and syncretic traditions that emerge at the intersections of these religions. The analysis focuses on three central questions: How does music enhance and enable the ritual process? What theological and cultural frameworks govern the use of music in different traditions? And how does sacred music function to articulate religious identity while also creating spaces of cross-cultural sharing?



II. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

2.1 Music, Ritual, and Religious Experience

The relationship between music and ritual is mutually constitutive: music does not simply accompany ritual but actively shapes its character, efficacy, and meaning. As ethnomusicological scholarship has demonstrated, the contexts, forms, and functions of musical performance are integral to the ritual process itself. In ritual contexts, music serves to demarcate sacred time and space, induce altered states of consciousness, mediate emotional expression, and facilitate communication between human participants and divine beings.

The concept of sacred sound encompasses multiple dimensions: the ontological status of sound as a vehicle for divine presence, the performative power of music to effect transformation, and the affective capacity of music to evoke spiritual experience. In many traditions, sound is understood not merely as a human creation but as a manifestation of cosmic or divine reality. The Hindu notion of *Śabda-Brahman* (Sound Absolute) and *Nāda-Brahman* exemplifies this theological understanding, wherein sacred sound is itself a form of the divine.

2.2 Comparative Approaches to Sacred Music

Comparative study of music and religion has traditionally been approached through musicology, ethnomusicology, and religious studies. Recent scholarship has called for a more integrated "Musicology of Religion" that combines these disciplinary perspectives to examine how musical structures, performances, and experiences function within religious frameworks. This approach attends to both the particularities of individual traditions and the universal patterns that emerge across cultures.

One significant development in comparative scholarship is the concept of "shared religious soundscapes"—the phenomenon whereby similar musical structures, melodic patterns, or performance practices appear across different religious traditions, particularly in contexts of cultural contact and exchange. This concept challenges assumptions of religious musical traditions as isolated and bounded, revealing instead the fluid and syncretic nature of sacred sound.

III. MUSIC IN HINDUISM

3.1 Vedic Origins and Theological Foundations

The origins of Indian classical music can be traced to the Vedas, Hindu scriptures dating from approximately 1700–1100 BCE. The recitation of sacred syllables, particularly the syllable OM, and Sanskrit mantras formed the basis of ancient Vedic fire sacrifices, establishing a tradition in which sound was understood as having intrinsic spiritual power. The Upanishads developed this theological foundation through the concept of *Śabda-Brahman*, which was later refined as *Nāda-Brahman*—the understanding that sound itself is a form of the Absolute.

This theological framework provided the basis for the development of *Sangīta*, a comprehensive musical practice designed as a vehicle for liberation. In this tradition, music is not merely aesthetic expression but a spiritual discipline through which practitioners can achieve union with the divine. The performance of *rāgas*—specific melodic formulas—is understood as a means of worshiping Hindu deities, with each *rāga* associated with particular gods, times of day, and emotional qualities.

3.2 Temple Ritual and Devotional Music

The integration of music into temple ritual has been a central feature of Hindu devotional practice. In South Indian Tamil Hindu temples dedicated to the god Śiva, the *periyā mēlam* ensemble of professional musicians performs during rituals and festivals, with music and ritual understood as mutually constitutive. These performances are integral to the kinetic, sensory, and affective experiences that enable ritual communication with divine beings.

Devotional music genres such as *bhajan* and *kirtan* extend this musical practice beyond temple settings into congregational worship and personal devotion. These forms, which often employ call-and-response structures and accessible melodies, enable participatory engagement and emotional expression. The aesthetic theory of *Rasa*—which



understands art as evoking particular emotional essences—provides a framework for understanding how devotional music cultivates spiritual feeling (*bhakti*).

IV. MUSIC IN BUDDHISM

4.1 Chanting and Meditation in Tibetan Buddhism

Chanting is integral to the practice of worship and meditation in Tibetan Buddhism. Tibetan Buddhist ritual music features dramatic low-pitched male drone singing with overtones, accompanied by an ensemble of loud double-reed aerophones, buzzed-lip instruments, drums, and cymbals. This distinctive sonic aesthetic is understood as a means of creating the ritual environment conducive to meditation and the invocation of enlightened beings.

The role of sound in Tibetan Buddhist practice extends beyond ritual performance to the ontological level. The recitation of mantras—sacred syllables believed to embody the qualities of particular buddhas and bodhisattvas—is understood as a transformative practice that purifies mind and cultivates realization. The sonic qualities of chanting, including rhythm, pitch, and timbre, are carefully prescribed to achieve specific spiritual effects.

4.2 Buddhist Music Across Asia

Buddhist musical traditions vary considerably across Asia, reflecting the diversity of cultural contexts in which Buddhism has been established. Chinese Buddhist chant, which employs distinct melodic formulas and performance practices, has been an enduring feature of East Asian Buddhist practice. In Southeast Asia, Buddhist ritual music incorporates local instruments and performance traditions, creating distinctive regional forms while maintaining connections to shared textual and liturgical foundations.

The study of Buddhist music reveals the complex interplay between textual prescription, local adaptation, and ritual function. While Buddhist scriptures provide guidance on appropriate forms of offering and worship, the actual musical practices of Buddhist communities reflect both continuity with broader Buddhist traditions and adaptation to local cultural contexts.

V. MUSIC IN JUDAISM

5.1 Temple Music and Chant

Music played a central role in the worship of the ancient Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, which was established around 950 BCE. The Temple liturgy employed instrumental and vocal music performed by trained Levitical musicians, with instruments including the harp, lyre, and trumpet. This tradition established music as an integral component of Jewish worship.

Following the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, Jewish liturgical music underwent significant transformation. The rabbinic tradition replaced Temple sacrifice with prayer and study, and the musical practice of the synagogue evolved around the chanting of scripture and prayer. The cantor (*hazzan*) emerged as the primary musical leader of the congregation, employing melodic formulas and modes known as *nusach* to guide the liturgical year and service.

5.2 Klezmer and the Jewish Musical Diaspora

Jewish musical traditions have been shaped by the diverse cultural contexts of the Jewish diaspora. Klezmer, the instrumental music of Eastern European Jewish communities, represents a synthesis of Jewish musical elements with local folk traditions. This music has been adapted for religious contexts, particularly in wedding celebrations and festive occasions, while also developing as a secular performance tradition.

The Bene Israel community of India represents a distinctive case of Jewish musical adaptation. This community, which traces its origins to ancient Jewish settlement in India, adopted elements of Indian *rāga* music for devotional compositions praising Adonai. This adoption of local musical forms while maintaining Jewish liturgical content illustrates the phenomenon of shared religious soundscapes and the adaptability of sacred music traditions.



VI. MUSIC IN CHRISTIANITY

6.1 Vocal Traditions and Theological Debates

Early Christianity inherited musical traditions from the Jewish Temple while also developing distinctive practices. For several centuries, Christian worship permitted vocal music only and rejected the use of instruments, reflecting both theological concerns about the association of instruments with pagan worship and the emphasis on the human voice as a vehicle for prayer. The theologian Gregory of Nazianzus declared: "In place of playing the tympani, let the singing of hymns resound".

This preference for unaccompanied vocal music continues to characterize some Christian denominations. However, in many traditions, instruments came to be used to accompany sung texts, and eventually developed independent instrumental music for worship. The development of polyphony, organ music, and orchestral settings of liturgical texts represents the gradual expansion of musical resources in Christian worship.

6.2 Hildegard von Bingen and Medieval Christian Music

The medieval period witnessed the flourishing of Christian liturgical music, particularly through the development of Gregorian chant and the composition of sacred music by monks and nuns. Hildegard von Bingen (1098–1179), a German Benedictine abbess, composed a substantial body of liturgical music characterized by unison singing with seven-tone diatonic modes, employing melismas and disjunct melodic motion for expressive effect. Her music, which she understood as divinely inspired, reflects the theological conviction that music is a means of praising God and participating in heavenly worship.

6.3 Christian Music in Global Contexts

Christian music has adapted to diverse cultural contexts as Christianity has spread globally. In South Asia, for example, Catholic communities have incorporated Indian *rāga* music into devotional compositions praising Jesus, creating forms of Christian music that are culturally resonant while maintaining Christian theological content. This process of adaptation reflects the broader phenomenon of religious music as a site of cultural encounter and synthesis.

VII. MUSIC IN ISLAM

7.1 The Place of Music in Islamic Worship

The relationship between music and Islamic worship is complex and has been the subject of theological debate throughout Islamic history. While music plays no formal part in orthodox Islamic worship, the *adhan* (call to prayer) undoubtedly possesses musical quality, and the widespread practice of reciting the Qur'an at religious ceremonies is sufficiently intoned that it can be written down in musical notation.

The recitation of the Qur'an employs the Arabic *maqam* system of microtonal melodic modes, which provides a sophisticated musical framework for the oral transmission of scripture. This recitation is understood not as music in the secular sense but as a sacred practice that requires particular training and embodies the beauty and power of the divine word.

7.2 Sufi Music and Qawwali

Sufism, the mystical tradition of Islam, has developed rich musical practices for spiritual cultivation. Sufi music, including the *qawwali* tradition of South Asia, employs vocal and instrumental music to induce states of spiritual ecstasy and facilitate union with the divine. Chishti Sufis in South Asia have particularly incorporated elements of Indian *rāga* music into devotional compositions praising Allah.

The theological justification for Sufi music rests on the understanding that music can prepare the heart for divine contemplation and express the longing of the soul for union with God. While orthodox Islamic authorities have sometimes opposed Sufi musical practices, these traditions have persisted and flourished, demonstrating the capacity of music to serve spiritual needs even within religious traditions that officially prohibit it.



VIII. COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES AND CROSS-CULTURAL EXCHANGE

8.1 Shared Religious Soundscapes

The phenomenon of shared religious soundscapes reveals the fluid and adaptive nature of sacred music traditions. The adoption of Indian *rāga* music by Jewish, Christian, and Islamic communities in South Asia exemplifies this process. Research on the morning *rāga* Bhairava has demonstrated its presence in compositions praising Adonai, Jesus, and Allah across these three traditions, revealing common tone patterns and melodic structures that transcend religious boundaries.

This phenomenon has significant implications for the comparative study of religion and music. Rather than viewing religious musical traditions as isolated and fixed, the concept of shared soundscapes encourages attention to the processes of cultural contact, exchange, and synthesis that shape sacred music.

8.2 Gender and Agency in Ritual Performance

Recent scholarship has examined the role of women as performers and agents within religious musical traditions. Sarah Weiss's study *Ritual Soundings* demonstrates that women in communities across Hindu India, Christian Orthodox Finland, Catholic Italy, and Muslim Morocco actively claim agency through performance during ritual events. These moments, though brief, allow women to move beyond culturally determined boundaries and express critique, lamentation, and resistance within institutional religious structures.

The patterns of similarity between unrelated cultures in this regard—such as the presence of lamentation and mockery during wedding rituals across Hindu and Christian Orthodox contexts—suggest that music provides a universal medium for the expression of complex emotions and social commentary that may not be available through other forms of speech.

8.3 The Question of Universals

The cross-cultural prevalence of music in religious ritual raises questions about the existence of universals in the relationship between music, religion, and human experience. Donald E. Brown's identification of music as a human universal provides a framework for understanding this phenomenon. However, the diversity of forms and functions of religious music across cultures suggests that any universals must be understood at a level of abstraction that accommodates significant variation.

Scholars such as Sarah Weiss have called for comparative work that identifies patterns of similarity while remaining attentive to local particularities. This comparative approach, situated at the intersection of ethnomusicology, the study of gender in religion, and sacred music studies, offers a framework for thinking across disciplinary boundaries and identifying meaningful patterns in the diversity of religious musical practice.

IX. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the role of music in religious rituals across major world religions, revealing a landscape of remarkable diversity and equally remarkable patterns of similarity. Music serves as an integral component of religious practice in Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, enhancing ritual efficacy, articulating belief, fostering spiritual experience, and creating communal identity.

Despite significant theological differences regarding the permissibility and nature of music in worship, all these traditions employ sound—whether chant, instrumental music, recitation, or devotional song—to facilitate communication with the supernatural. The forms of sacred music vary from the simple chanting of the human voice to the complex polyphony of the Christian Mass and the elaborated *rāgas* of classical Indian music. Yet across this diversity, music consistently serves to deepen religious experience and enable ritual practice.

The phenomenon of shared religious soundscapes demonstrates that sacred music traditions are not isolated and fixed but rather adapt and exchange across cultural and religious boundaries. The adoption of Indian *rāga* music by Jewish, Christian, and Sufi communities in South Asia exemplifies this process, revealing common musical structures that



support devotion to different deities. Similarly, the cross-cultural patterns of women's ritual performance suggest that music provides a universal medium for the expression of complex emotions and social commentary.

The future study of music and religious ritual would benefit from continued interdisciplinary engagement between ethnomusicology, religious studies, and comparative scholarship. As Gordon Graham has noted, the historical connection between music and religion is extremely long and the forms of religious music are remarkably diverse. Understanding the role of music in religious ritual requires attention to this diversity as well as to the patterns that emerge across it, including the universal human impulse to employ sound in seeking connection with the divine.

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