Abstract: Music has played a central role in Indian religious experience for millennia. The origins of Indian music include the recitation of the sacred syllable OM and Sanskrit Mantras in ancient Vedic fire sacrifices. The notion of Sound Absolute, first in the Upanishads as Šabda-Brahman and later as Náda-Brahman, formed the theological background for music. Sangita, designed as a vehicle of liberation founded upon the worship of Hindu deities expressed in rāgas, or specific melodic formulas. Nearly all genres of music in India, classical or devotional, share this theoretical and practical understanding, extending to other Indic religions like Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. What is less documented is how rāga music has been adopted by non-Indic communities in South Asia: Judaism (Bene Israel), Christianity (Catholic), and Islam (Chishti Sufi). After briefly outlining the relation between religion and the arts, the Indian aesthetics of Rasa, and the basic notions of sacred sound and music in Hinduism, this essay reveals the presence of rāga music, specifically the structure or melodic pattern of the morning rāga known as Bhairava, in compositions praising the divinity of each non-Indic tradition: Adonai, Jesus, and Allah. As similar tone patterns appear in the religious experiences of these communities, they reveal the phenomenon of “shared religious soundscapes” relevant to the comparative study of religion and music, or Musicology of Religion.

Keywords: comparative religion; comparative musicology; Indian music; Hinduism and music

1. Introduction

When audiences first hear the enchanting rāga melodies played on the sitar and sarod, few may be aware of their links to the Vedic syllable OM (ॐ) or to ancient Indian notions of sacred sound. Yet just as “classical music” in the West is indebted to Biblical traditions and Greek music theory, Indian rāga music is grounded upon sonic metaphysical principles and worship. Representing a continuity over many centuries, nearly all genres of Indian music, whether classical or devotional, share this theoretical and practical understanding. But while it is generally known how the ancient Indian principles and practices of sound and music have influenced the Hindu religion as well as other Indic religions like Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, what is less understood is how Indian rāga music has been utilized by
non-Indic religions in South Asia. This essay documents the presence of a melodic pattern known as a *rāga* in these three traditions with examples of compositions. In fact, these songs display similar melodic structure across otherwise distinct religious communities in South Asia as part of morning meditational practices, hence exhibiting the phenomenon of “shared religious soundscapes”. After referencing the notion of divine sound in religion and introducing the field of Musicology of Religion and its application, Part I describes how aesthetics, both Western and Indian, including the theory of Rasa, contributes toward a cross-cultural understanding of the relation between religion and the arts, specifically music. Next, Part II briefly describes the ancient and medieval Indian concepts of sacred sound and music associated with OM and Nāda-Brahman. Part III then presents examples of Dhrupad and Khayal songs from the Hindu repertoire and shows how similar *rāga* music has been adopted by three non-Indic religious communities in South Asia, namely Judaism (Bene Israel), Christianity (Roman Catholic), and Islam (Chishti Sufi). Accordingly, a composition with a melodic pattern resembling the early morning *rāga* Bhairava is cited in each community in praise of their respective divinity: Adonai, Jesus, and Allah. The discussion closes with reflection on “shared religious soundscapes” and future directives for research in Musicology of Religion, or the comparative study of religion and music.

What are “religious soundscapes”? In the present-day comparative study of religion, where differences between religious traditions are routinely over-emphasized at the expense of similarities, the idea of “shared religious soundscapes” may seem out of place. Yet the tide is turning. In a rebuke to “cultural relativism” and non-universalism, anthropologist Donald E. Brown, in *Human Universals* (Brown 1991), has identified several hundred universal features of humanity, including many related to religion and music. Our purpose here goes beyond merely comparing different types of religious music to, in fact, identifying shared musical structures among otherwise distinct religious traditions. The term “soundscape” was introduced by R. Murray Schafer (1994, pp. 274–75) to refer to “any portion of the sonic environment regarded as a field of study”. Although his notion also included natural and non-human sounds, our use of “shared religious soundscapes” focuses solely on human culture as applied to collective understandings of preferred “religious sounds” shared among different communities.

The basic premise of “religious sounds” used here is supported by the idea of an intrinsic bond between sound and the divine, as attested by David Burrows in *Sound, Speech, and Music* (Burrows 1990, p. 25): “The link between sound and the supernatural is profound and widespread”. Accordingly, the significance of sound as a medium of the divine is vouchsafed in each of the religions examined here. First, it is by now well-known that the Hindu tradition of India and South Asia has given high priority to sound as divine in both theory and practice, as explained by Guy L. Beck (1993, p. 3): “As the Hindu experience of the divine is shown to be fundamentally sonic, or oral/aural, the theological position of sacred sound constitutes a kind of *mysterium magnum* of Hinduism. Consequently, ‘Hindu theology’ contains a necessary sonic realm built into its structure and substance”. The Jewish tradition of Biblical chant is also intrinsically enveloped in divine sound understood as musical, as confirmed by Jeffrey A. Summit (2016, p. 4): “Biblical cantillation possess qualities that we think of as belonging to music and musical experience: the importance of melodic elements and structure, the possibility for aesthetic evaluation, goal-oriented preparation and a sense of community participation”. In fact, in both Jewish and Christian experience, the divine is best represented sonically through music, as explained by Janet R. Wilson in her introduction to Lawrence A. Hoffman (Hoffman and Walton 1992, p. 1): “More persuasively than words alone, music expresses what we believe about God. It proclaims the terms of our relationships with each other. It connects our faiths to the tangible concerns that confound our world”. And in traditional Islam, where non-religious musical sounds may be seen as suspect, the chanting of the Holy Qur’an maintains its own melodic and rhythmic dimensions, as explained by Regula Qureshi (2006, p. 91): “In Islam, to maintain the ‘abiding intrinsic orality’ of the Qur’an, an exclusive and exquisite melodic-rhythmic system has been developed to sound the divine word and articulate its
uniqueness, different from any other words or music. This sonic form stands in conceptual opposition to all non-religious musical sounds, both vocal and, especially, instrumental”.

Since the “religious soundscapes” described in this essay are limited to musical manifestations and specifically to a certain type of music structure, our main challenge is to elucidate how it is possible for two or more religious traditions to incorporate similar musical structures, regardless of the theological or practical differences between them.

To proceed with this challenge, we enlist the aid of the academic field, Musicology of Religion, which approaches the study of religion and music in a wide comparative context across all cultures and time periods. Musicology of Religion focuses on the visible or invisible connections between religion and music in the broadest sense, with the methods necessarily geared toward finding cross-cultural patterns and insights. It is designed to rise above the empirical methods of ethnomusicology associated with what we term “musical relativism”, the idea that “musics” (each culture’s music) are specific in kind without the need for comparison. Instead, the field takes a “holistic” view and draws upon disciplines like aesthetics, phenomenology, theology, and even cognitive studies. A main prerogative is to advance a “meta-conversation” involving religion and music that takes place above specific geographic areas and historical time periods, involving a more theoretical approach to the seemingly universal and abiding connections between music and religion throughout the human condition without ignoring the important differences. The general themes of and resources for Musicology of Religion are found in the new book by Guy L. Beck, *Musicology of Religion: Theories, Methods, and Directions* (Beck 2023). Focusing on aesthetics, Part I explores the relation between religion and the arts.

2. Part I: Religion and the Arts

Our topic of “shared religious soundscapes” through the agency of music requires some preliminary discussion regarding the issue of aesthetic experience and the notion of beauty. A principal debate in aesthetics has been over the nature of beauty and its relation to the divine. On one end of the spectrum, beauty has metaphysical status (Plato’s “ladder of beauty”), while on the other, beauty is but a matter of personal taste (Kantian “subjectivism”). What is unopposed is the universality of human aesthetic experiences of beauty, as confirmed by Denis Dutton in “Aesthetic Universals” (Dutton 2001, p. 203): “Art itself is a cultural universal”. In our case, the question addressed is how music, and the experience of beauty in music, rises to the level of divine contemplation of the Absolute, or God, in different traditions. Does music have a connection with an ultimate Truth that can be shared? The examples given in this essay offer us some answers.

We first look at the relation between religion and the arts. Statements about their equation appear in the work of a prominent Indian theorist as well as that of a Western scholar. Referencing Western and Asian traditions, art historian and philosopher Ananda K. Coomaraswamy proclaimed in 1934, in *The Transformation of Nature in Art* (Coomaraswamy [1934] 2014, p. 62): “Art is religion, religion art, not related, but the same”. Later, Thomas R. Martland, in *Religion as Art* (Martland 1981, pp. 1, 5), argued that religion and art are largely indistinguishable in terms of function: “What art does, religion does… religion does what art does”. There is a long history behind these statements.

In ancient Greece, aesthetics was the perception of beauty through the arts. Plato identified the truly beautiful with the ultimate Good, positing the “ascent” of the mind to the divine, or God, from the beauty encountered in the physical world. In the *Symposium*, we find the analogy known as the “ladder of beauty”, whereby earthly beauty is the bottom rung of a ladder from which one ascends to perfect Beauty. The reasoning is that in the physical world, there are no perfections of truth, goodness, or beauty, only gradations. For example, a perfect triangle does not exist in nature but exists only as an “intelligible,” as an abstract entity seen with the “mind’s eye.” So just as the perfect triangle exists, there must be perfect Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. The natural connection between beauty and divinity was developed further by the philosopher Plotinus (204–270 CE), who dedicated a section of his work, *Enneads* (I. 6), to Beauty. According to Richard Viladesau, in *Theological
Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty, and Art (Viladesau 1999, p. 107), the notion of divine beauty became a cornerstone of Western aesthetics for centuries through the teachings of St. Augustine: “Combining the Platonic tradition with a Christian awareness of creation... Augustine argues for the necessity of God from the incompleteness of the intelligibility that the mind finds in itself; and he explicitly connects this reasoning with the steps of the Platonic ‘ascent’: from external beauty to the beauty of the soul, and finally to the supreme source of all beauty, which is also the ultimate truth”.

However, by the eighteenth century, a schism arose between religion and the arts. When the philosopher Kant postulated a separate realm of aesthetics from religious experience, he created a distinction that endured into the early twentieth century. For Kant, beauty was a matter of individual “taste” within the world of phenomena, while the object of religion was beyond human inquiry. This meant that religion and music were distinct, one for the church and the other for the concert hall. Yet in the past century, the Kantian dichotomy has been overturned and beauty has been restored to religion and spirituality, especially by theologians and historians of religion who assert that the sacred is detected in all dimensions of culture. The re-unified study of theology and the arts in recent times, known as “theological aesthetics,” drew upon the Greek traditions of an ascent to divinity through beauty. For example, in A Natural Theology of the Arts: Imprint of the Spirit (2003), Anthony Monti proposed new methods for viewing the arts as theological by nature.

Regarding music, theology is believed now to be so intertwined with culture that music, as a “religious soundscape,” simply cannot be ignored. This is affirmed by Clyde J. Steckel, in “How Can Music Have Theological Significance?” (Steckel 1994, p. 13): “Music expresses and mediates the dominant values of a culture and... is an encounter of encounter with whatever is taken to be divine or of ultimate importance”. In Theology and the Arts: Encountering God through Music, Art, and Rhetoric (Viladesau 2000, p. 41), Richard Viladesau outlined an approach for a cross-cultural theological approach to music: “The ultimate reason for music’s ability to mediate the spiritual is... that its object is the beautiful, which itself is godly and thus leads toward God”. Theologian Don E. Saliers, in Music and Theology (Saliers 2007, p. 4), connected music with our innermost being: “Music is the language of the soul made audible”. More recently, Martin Hoondart, in “Musical Religiosity” (Hoondart 2015, p. 128), affirmed the equation of music and religious experience: “I want to defend the thesis that music is by its nature religious, or rather, that it has qualities that correspond well with what religion aspires to be... Music can be heard in many different ways in relation to religion, but music is always there, whether it is the recitation of Psalms or verses of the Qur’an, the communal singing of a strophic hymn, the listening to a melodious motet by Bruckner or the singing of a Mantra”. Moreover, the vital role of music in all the world’s religions is now virtually uncontested, as confirmed by Philip Sheldrake (2014, p. 24): “Music plays an important role in all the major world religions... it is considered to be a spiritual expression in itself”. Thus, all music becomes a potential window into the divine across a variety of traditions, not only because it partakes of the numinous (divinity), but that it has functioned as a ubiquitous vehicle of spiritual upliftment through ritual and private devotion.

In ancient India, the arts were considered divine by their association with the metaphysical Absolute known as Brahman. The aesthetic experience of the arts in India is expressed by the term Rasa (“essence”, “flavor”), and proclaimed to have divine status in the Upanishads. Brahman (Absolute or God) is said to be full of aesthetic delight (raso vai sah) in the Taittirīya Upanishad (2.7.1). The great medieval philosopher and aesthetician Abhinavagupta (950–1016 CE) taught that all Rasa is transcendental (alaukika) and a vehicle for self-realization. Among Western scholars, James A. Martin, in Beauty and Holiness: The Dialogue between Aesthetics and Religion (Martin 1990, p. 146), has explained how the arts are tied directly to the joy inherent in the highest metaphysical reality, Brahman: “The experience of the joy of Brahman as Ananda. As such, it is the goal and guide of poetic instruction, musical composition and performance, painting, and all the other arts”. Earle J. Coleman, in Creativity and Spirituality: Bonds between Art and Religion (Coleman 1998, p. xvi),
connects the arts with spirituality: “As the ultimate, undifferentiated reality that sustains all being, Brahman is as all-pervasive as salt dissolved in water. Hence, artworks, like other kinds of objects, cannot be devoid of spirituality”. According to Susan L. Schwartz, in Rasa: Performing the Divine in India (Schwartz 2004, pp. 97–98), the divine realm and the performing arts are closely bound together through Rasa: “Religion is the performance, and the performance is religion, not in its character or setting, its plot or content, but in its essence. . . India’s diffuse and diverse religiosity makes this approach to performing arts viable and unique. To the extent that music, dance, and drama retain their divine association, their Rasic character continues to resonate and compel”.

Based on his 1988 lectures, esteemed scholar Dr. V. Raghavan, in The Concept of the Beautiful in Sanskrit Literature (Raghavan 2008), gathered numerous citations from Vedic literature, the epics, Purāṇas, and Bhagavad-Gītā that reflect a sustained confluence between the Absolute and the Beautiful in Indian thought. Moreover, in this work (Raghavan 2008, p. 7), he engaged the comparative study of aesthetics as a means of providing deeper insight into Indian wisdom: “Such a comparative study of [the] Indian concept of the Beautiful would reveal the intrinsic value of many of the Indian ideas; their value would indeed get reinforced when we note that there are many parallels in ideas and lines of investigation and orientation between the Indian and Western systems of aesthetics, and fresh light is thrown on several of the old Indian concepts from modern writers on the subject in the West”. Raghavan, lastly, advocated for a “holistic” approach to the study of aesthetics, as in this essay.

In pursuit of the comparative study of religion and music, this essay will show that, wittingly or not, devout practitioners of religious traditions construct their own “religious soundscapes” by drawing upon the structures of other musical traditions that are amenable and sustainable in their own communities. In the creation of shared sonic environments through music, the examples given reveal a mutual melodic pattern of songs within differing religious traditions relevant to meditation and devotion. The context for our analysis consists of the shared religious soundscapes found among distinct communities in India, whether Hindu, Jewish, Christian, or Islamic. And while Islam has had a more intense engagement with Indian music, both classical and devotional, over the years, we follow a chronological scheme starting with Judaism, followed by Christianity and Islam. As preliminary background, however, we present a brief history of Hindu sacred chant and music that will help to explain the evolution of rāga music on the Indian subcontinent.

3. Part II: Indian Music from OM to Rāga

The history of Indian sacred music began several millennia ago when seers and priests contemplated the essence of the universe and discovered profound connections between the heavenly regions and the earth. These connections were generated and enhanced by the sounds of chanting Sanskrit Mantras in association with oblations as part of Vedic fire rituals intended to interact with deities in various sectors of the universe. The rituals were prefaced by the recitation of the mystical syllable OM, said to embody all the potencies of language in relation to divine creation. The meaning of OM was later expanded into the metaphysical notion of the “Sound Absolute,” first articulated as Śabda-Brahman in the Upanishads and later as Nāda-Brahman in medieval Tantric traditions as well as in the Hindu theistic traditions of Vaishnavism, Saivism, and Śaktism. While these same ideas were given prominence in the texts and practices of Nāda-yoga, medieval musicological treatises affirmed Nāda-Brahman to be the source of music expressed in terms of rāgas or melodic formulas forming the basis of Indian music.

Described first in the Natya-Śāstra (ca. third century BCE), music, or sangīta, was considered to have been performed originally by the gods in heaven and thus to be of divine origin. Building upon earlier jātī scales in this text, the concept of the rāga and its relation to the eternal principle of Nāda-Brahman appeared in a ninth century text imbued with Tantric philosophy, the Brhaddeśī by Matanga. Gradually, rāgas, defined as unique patterns of ascending and descending notes, were codified, classified, and identified with
times of the day and seasons. The Saṅgīta-Ratnākara of Śāṅgadeva (thirteenth century CE) proclaimed Nāda-Brahman as the source of all musical sound and language, and identified it with the Hindu gods Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva.

Scholars have also traced the evolution of the seven-note musical scale from OM. In ancient Vedic ritual, OM was chanted in a monotone, followed by verses from the Rig Veda in roughly three distinct tones or accents. These were expanded to five or seven descending notes in the hymns of the Sāma Veda (ca. 1000 BCE), and the standard scale of seven musical notes (sargam)—Sa Re Ga Ma Pa Dha Ni—was eventually established in the Nātya-Śāstra. Later music treatises continued to affirm that music originated in OM via the principle of Nāda-Brahman, which may be either unmanifest (anāhata) or manifest (āhata). This principle is enacted in musical performance, whereby singers begin with the tonic (Sa) in the form of OM, rendered in a steady drone-like sound, and then expand this sound to the cluster of notes relevant to a specific rāga in the introduction (ālāp), followed by the composition (bandish). At the conclusion, the voice or instrument fades away on the tonic drone sound in recollection of the initial OM. Classical musicians in India continue to hold to this practice in performance. In this way, the musician serves as a conduit for Nāda-Brahman: the voice as the access point for singers, and the hands and fingers for string, flute, and drum players. The sacrality of the history of Indian music remains uncontested despite modern efforts to approach it as a secular art.

Yet the above sacred principles of OM and Nāda-Brahman are conspicuously absent from the literature and practices of South Asian Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. However, rāga patterns and the music derived from these principles are nonetheless utilized by specific devotional subgroups of the three traditions: Judaism (Bene Israel), Christianity (Roman Catholicism), and Islam (Chishti Sufi). For more information on the presence and utilization of OM and Nāda-Brahman within the Indic or Hindu-derived religions of South Asia like Sikhism, Jainism, and Buddhism, see Beck (2019).

4. Part III: Shared Religious Soundscapes

There are multiple examples of songs of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic communities in India that resemble the rāga format, but our study is focused on songs that are set to a specific melodic formula or rāga, rāga Bhairava. The use of typical Indian instruments in their rendition as accompaniment is also documented. For context, the first examples are from the Hindu tradition, where the rāga Bhairava is believed to have originated. Possessing a unique structure and melodic movement, this rāga is normally rendered in the early morning before sunrise to evoke an atmosphere of piety and deep contemplation. Hailed as the ādi-rāga, or original rāga in Indian music, students of classical music routinely begin their training with this rāga. It is most often associated with Lord Śiva, but it is also found in relation to other divinities like Krishna and the Goddess Durgā. The melodic structure of Bhairava appears in songs of the three non-Indic communities cited below, which are also utilized for “morning meditation” relative to their respective deity: Adonai, Jesus, and Allah. As such, diverse yet shared “religious soundscapes” can be demonstrated.

5. Hinduism: Dhrupad and Khayal

Dhrupad is the oldest continuing genre of north Indian Hindustani classical vocal music, having flourished in the northern ruling courts of Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Bengal, and Uttar Pradesh from ca. 1400–1700 CE. Many forms of temple music in the Bhakti traditions of Hinduism share structural aspects and stylistic features with Dhrupad. Dhrupad and Khayal songs often contain descriptions of deities and theological reflections on music. The popularity of Dhrupad was followed by Khayal in the eighteenth-century courts and eventually on concert stages in the twentieth century.

Each classical song from the Dhrupad and Khayal genres cited below displays the structure of rāga Bhairava. The pattern of notes is relatively simple: the major scale with flatted second and sixth notes. However, the phrasing of the notes and the length of time spent on each note are critical to its desired effect. In Indian notation, the notes of the scale
are as follows: Sa Re Ga Ma Pa Dha Ni sa (upper tonic), shortened for convenience as S R G M P D N s. The flatted notes are underlined. In the Western C scale, the notes are C C♯ E F G G♯ B c. This essay will show how similar phrases of Bhairava appear in worship songs or hymns in South Asian Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. And while several of these traditions label their songs as “bhajan” or “kirtan”, suggesting lighter styles of execution, the classical foundations, as in Dhrupad and Khayal, are evident in the strict rāga format. The phrases of Bhairava include GMPGMR S, SRGRSR, SGMR, MPGMP--GMRS, MPDNs, and sN D—P.

Audio Sample 1:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1PVei5TTjS0ivIBUy03oCU9-jWIumAmN/view?usp=drive_link


This is a sample of a classical Dhrupad song in rāga Bhairava, composed by the sixteenth-century Hindu poet Chaturbhūj Dās, and is cited to represent the standard format. It is composed in the Braj Bhāṣa language and describes the morning worship of Krishna. This composition is set in twelve beats (Cautal) characteristic of Dhrupad. The pattern of notes for the first line is as follows: DDDDP, PPMPGM, RRRGMP, MMMRRS.

The selection is sung by Pt. Askaran Sharma from the audiotape Krishna Leela Keertan (Courtesy of HMV, Krishna Leela Keertan 1993). The text is from Nitya Kirtana: Rasa Ratnakara (1990, 42, song 146).

Ratana jadita kanaka thāla, madhya sohe dīpamāla
agara ādi candana soñ ati sugandha soñ milātī māt
“The golden plate is studded with gems, and the middle of it are the earthen lamps.
And there is the extremely pleasant aroma of sandalwood and incense”.

Audio Sample 2:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/19djQIL3tX9OPl8lbeOnFoQfexEOVC/view?usp=drive_link


Next, two compositions of Khayal in rāga Bhairava from the classical repertoire of Hindustani vocal music are referenced together. The subject is surrender to God and Guru in the Hindu tradition. Khayāl represents a smooth transition from the Dhrupad of the older temple and medieval court music to a free-flowing genre with more improvisation. Yet the spirituality of Dhrupad is not lost, according to Lalita Ubhayaker, in “The Search for Divinity in Khayāl” (Ubhayaker 1992, p. 16): “The transition from dhrupad to khayāl appears natural and spontaneous because it holds within its orbit the origins of our musical tradition, continuity of its idiom, and the basic character of its aims and objectives. The search for truth, the contemplation of the beautiful, sangeetha [music] as yogasadhana [Yoga practice] and the Rasa theory are all absorbed in it. Its prime purpose is to give spiritual, aesthetic, sensual and emotional satisfaction”.

Both songs are in sixteen beats (Teental), the first in slow tempo after a short introduction (alāp), and the second in faster tempo. The textual sources are the standard anthologies, Rāg-Viṣṭāṇ (1962–1970, 3.123–124) and Kramik Pustak-Maṭlakā (1953–1964, 2.181–182). The compositions are performed by this author from the double CD, Wisdom of the Khayal Song (Courtesy of Bihaan Records, Wisdom of the Khayal Song 2016), CD 1, Track #2.

Prabhu Dattā re
bhajare mana īvāna ghari pala china
jotu cahe ana dhana lacchamī
“The Lord is the Supreme Giver! Therefore worship Him every moment of your life.

One who desires all the blessings of this life and the next should take Guru’s name”.

“Oh Lord, You are the giver of everything
Let my mind recall You at every moment.
Whatever one desires from You, material or spiritual,
the highest blessing is the pleasure of chanting the Lord’s name”.

6. Judaism: Bene Israel

Although smaller in demographic terms, the Jewish presence in India predates Christianity and Islam. The Jewish adoption of Indian forms of music thus begins our discussion in this section. Shirley Berry Isenberg (1988, p. vii) states the historical sequence: “India, herself the cradle of several great religions, has for centuries been hospitable to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, all of which originated in the Middle East, in that chronological order. And it is most likely that devotees of these religions made their appearance in India in the same order. These religions took root and became part of the rich fabric of Indian civilization”.

The Jewish adoption of Indian forms of music is most apparent in the religious tradition known as Bene Israel. While there are presently three main Jewish groups in India, including the Cochin Jews of Kerala and the Baghdadi Jews (late eighteenth century) from Iraq who settled in Bombay or Calcutta, Bene Israel is the largest, centered in the Konkan area of Maharashtra. Shalva Weil (2006, p. 171) has described the general arrival of Jews in India: “The ancestors of their community were members of the lost tribes of Israel who had stayed in the Kingdom of Israel. They set sail around the year 175 BCE from Israel to escape persecution by enemy conquerors. Their ship capsized off the coast of Konkan, south of present-day Mumbai. The survivors lost all their possessions, including their holy books”. Nonetheless, the Hindus welcomed them: “Welcomed by the local Hindus, the Jews took up the occupation of pressing vegetable oil... They remembered the Jewish prayer ‘Hear O Israel!’ declaring monotheism; they observed some of the Jewish holidays and fasts. However, they did not know the Oral Law, had no rabbis, and were isolated from the practices and customs of mainstream Jewry”.

Elsewhere, Shalva Weil (2001, p. 3) explained how the Bene Israel became assimilated into Indian culture and society while maintaining their separate identities: “The Bene Israel were fully absorbed into Indian society, yet still retained a separate sense of identity; however, they remained isolated from the mainstream of Judaism for centuries”. Gradually, local Hindu inhabitants ushered them into their community, where they took on Indian names and embraced the local culture, including the language of Marathi. Over the past few centuries, the Bene Israel have developed a unique process of bringing Judaism into conformity with Hindu practice and culture, as noted by Weil (2006, p. 181): “Hinduism and Judaism have elements in common as orthopraxis that have developed complicated systems of law, purity codes, and dietary restrictions that serve to define the religio-ethnic boundaries of the community. Nevertheless, unique customs adapted from Hindu practices...
characterize the Judaism of the Indian Jews, including the prewedding henna ceremony among the Bene Israel, the rites of and belief in the prophet Elijah, and the festival of Shila San on the day after Yom Kippur, when the souls of the ancestors departed, and alms were given to the poor”.

Over the past two centuries, the Bene Israel in India have also conformed with Indian forms of devotional music. Accordingly, they adopted kirtan, which is sung in the local Marathi language. Sara Manasseh (2001, p. 14) has explained the emergence of Bene Israel kirtan: “The Hindu form of Kirtan (religious song; narration through song) was also adopted by the Bene Israel during the nineteenth century for religious education. Bene Israel kirtans were Bible stories presented in Marathi verse and sung to Hindu tunes by the kirtankar (singer) either solo or with a choral and instrumental accompaniment and were inspired by Marathi translations of the Bible by American and Scottish Christian missionaries in the first half of the 19th century”.

The Bene Israel kirtan maintained links with the Biblical narrative. According to Shalva Weil (2006, p. 175), “Oral tradition bolstered the written word in keeping alive the sacred life of India’s Jews. Between the Bene Israel, the kirtana is just one form of communication, along with ballads, folk songs, and short songs, which served as an educational tool repeating refrains from the Bible”. By the nineteenth century, Bene Israel kirtan gained in popularity by presenting biblical stories composed in Marathi verse, the vernacular of the Bene Israel, and sung to Hindi tunes by the kirtanakar (lead singer of the kirtan), usually with musical accompaniment. Bene Israel singers and musicians also employed traditional Indian musical instruments, according to Sara Manasseh (2001, p. 12): “Where musical instruments are used to accompany Bene Israel song performance the Hindustani (North Indian) instruments are the preferred choice. These may include the harmonium, sitar, violin, the bulbul tarang (plucked board zither with mechanized keyboard), and tabla (asymmetrical pair of tuned drums)”. Manasseh (2001, pp. 12–13) also described how the singers employed Indian styles of singing and ornamentation: “A significant aspect of acculturation is the strongly articulated and rhythmic use of melodic embellishment, perhaps derived from the gamakas and alamkaras (grace notes and ornaments) in Indian vocal and instrumental music”.

Audio Sample 3: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1xeWJUWZeUhZaLELIm6mqZ3kSglvbbHN/view?usp=sharing

Two “Kirtan” hymns of Bene Israel to the Lord (Adonai) are cited here from the CD Eliyahu Hanabee: The Musical Tradition of the Bene Israel of Bombay (Courtesy of Beth Hatefutsoth, Eliyahu Hanabee: The Musical Tradition of the Bene Israel of Bombay 2001). In the liner notes, Sara Manasseh (2001, pp. 12–13) describes the free instrumental and vocal introductions heard on some tracks on the CD, which are, as stated, “very much in the Indian musical tradition (as in the Indian raga), where a metric composition is preceded by an un-metered prelude that explores the notes of the melodic mode”.

The first verse from Track #6, “Yedid Nefesh” (“Beloved of the Soul”), by the poet Eliezer Azikri (1533–1600 CE), is given below. Manasseh (2001, p. 15) states: “The North Indian melodic scale, bhairav, is a possible basis for YEDID NEFESH”. Also, liner notes to the song describe it as a morning prayer with a structure expressive of raga Bhairava: “This hymn appears in the bakashot (“Supplications”) section of the morning service. Sung by a soloist, this hymn is introduced by a short, free improvisation in the melodic mode sung in sargam syllables, accompanied by the harmonium. The introduction, encompassing the notes of the octave, explores all registers of the Indian melodic mode bhairav [Bhairava].. the hymn is followed by a short recitation, part of the morning prayer, supported by a drone on the harmonium”. Resembling the Hindu examples, the pattern of notes is as follows: SRS GRSSS RSRSSNNN, SRSGRGRS.
Yedid Nefesh av harachamam, meshoch avdechah el retzonechah, ya’arutz avdechah kno avel, vi’shtachave mul hadarecha, ki ye’eray lo yedidotecha, minofet tzuf v’chol ta’am.

“Beloved of the soul, Compassionate Father, draw Your servant to Your will. Then Your servant will hurry like a hart [deer] to bow before Your majesty. To him Your friendship will be sweeter than the dripping of the honeycomb and any taste”.

Audio Sample 4:
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1gT4bvlbX9zfZu9IWhZVIiDeQRh4Y_KdX/view?usp=s haring

Accessed on 7 November 2023

The second sample from this CD is the title song. At Track #12, “Eliyaho Hanabee” (“Elijah, the Prophet”) is in praise of Elijah, and is also characteristically close to Bhairava. Set in six beats, the song is noteworthy in that the lyrics contain Indian words like rāja, rakha⇓al⇓a, darshana, and garib. Moreover, the tune of this refrain resembles the title song of the popular Hindi film Dil Ek Mandir (1963), which involves a Hindu temple.

Éliyaho hannâbût, wôta tumachî
ôza pâhâte hi sâri makkâbît

“Elijah the Prophet—all the Jewish people
Constantly await your coming”.

7. Christianity: Roman Catholicism

While communities of Jews came to India in the centuries before the Common Era, early Christians were not far behind. A first-century Apostle, Apostle Thomas, is believed to have come to India, where he spent the remainder of his life conducting missionary work. This view is supported by religious historian M. Thomas Thangaraj (2006, p. 186): “There is a strong historical tradition claiming that Saint Thomas, the disciple of Jesus, came to India during the first century and established churches. The most recent historical scholarship supports this view”. Another first-century Apostle, Apostle Bartholomew, is also said to have helped to establish the Syrian Orthodox Church on the western coast, whose membership included both Persians and local inhabitants.

During the European Renaissance and the Age of Exploration, Roman Catholic missions entered the subcontinent. Mughal Emperor Akbar (1556–1605 CE), promoting a form of Sufi universalism in his court, sought reconciliation between Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. While the Jesuits representing Christianity did not continue at his court, a pioneering Jesuit named Roberto De Nobili came to Madurai, South India, in 1606, and, as part of his missionary strategy, adopted the lifestyle of a Hindu monk, mastered Sanskrit and Tamil, and composed hymns in both Telugu and Tamil. De Nobili had also referred to the Bible as the “Fifth Veda”, lost in antiquity.

The reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) led the way for the adoption of vernacular culture into Roman Catholic worship around the world. The reforms were applied in India as described by M. Thomas Thangaraj (2006, p. 189): “Vatican II brought a significant change in the worship life of the Roman Catholic churches in India. These changes included the use of vernacular languages for liturgy, the employment of local musical traditions, and the adoption of Indian architectural patterns in the building of churches. There have been genuine attempts to present Christian worship through local cultural idiom”. In fact, India has remained at the forefront of post-Vatican II reform, with a renewed interest in the adoption of Indian classical, folk, and popular music in many churches. Some churches even went as far as adopting Indian rāgas for bhajans pertaining to certain times of the day, as explained by H. Joy Norman (2008, p. 89): “During the twentieth century, in the Roman Catholic liturgy in India, bhajans were composed which
used specific rāgas relating to the divine hours”. This corroborates the Christian use of Bhairava in morning services.

Protestant missions began their work in the modern era with the Bible being translated into Tamil, and with congregations expanding around certain focal points in the south. Several Protestant groups were successful in making inroads into eastern India, including William Carey, who established the Serampore College in Bengal in 1818 and had the Bible translated into other languages. Recent events have accelerated the assimilation process among Protestant missions in India. The formation of the Church of South India in 1947 led to an ecumenical process that included the various Protestant traditions. Thangaraj (2006, p. 189) describes the new version of the liturgy, published in 1985: “It encourages people to conduct the service in as authentic an Indian style as possible [note the Sanskrit terminology]. The liturgy is organized around five stages: Entry (praveśa), Awakening (prabodha), Recalling and Offering (smaṇa-samarpana), Sharing in the Body and Blood of Christ (darsana), and Blessing (preśana)”. Hindu forms of rites of passage, such as marriages and funerals, have also been absorbed into Christian ritual life.

While the Syrian Orthodox and Eastern Orthodox churches in India have resisted the translation of the Bible into Indian languages, in some circles, the Bible was considered a type of “Veda” and/or “Āgama”. According to Thangaraj (2006, p. 191), “The early Protestant missionaries while translating the Bible named it as the Veda or Vedāgama (a combination of Veda and Āgama, the two major scriptural corpora in Hinduism)”. As mentioned above, the Catholic Robert De Nobili had recognized the Bible as the “Fifth Veda”, which has since been lost.

One important way in which Indian music factors into the ritual and devotional life of Indian Christians is in the composition and performance of hymns and spiritual songs for worship. The significance of this activity is underscored by Thangaraj (2006, p. 191): “Indian Christians have been prolific in the writing of hymns, epic poems, apologetic writings, and theological treatises, both in English and in vernacular languages. These writings were heavily influenced by Hindu ways of thinking, imaging, and articulating. . . These poets reflected bhakti (devotion) sentiments similar to those found in Hindu bhakti literature”. With the preaching of the early Jesuits in Goa and the British Protestants throughout North India came several attempts to synthesize the European style hymn singing with Hindu bhajan (devotional song) and instrumentation. Following the translation of the Bible into Indian vernaculars, several different volumes of Christian hymns in those dialects have been in use, with the appropriation of Indian melodies to those hymns. In fact, the harmonium, ubiquitous today in nearly all forms of Indian music on the subcontinent, was originally brought to India by Christians for this very purpose.

Unique forms of syncretism between Christian and Hindu worship developed in the Ashrams, or monastic centers, that have been established in India. These institutions have sought to provide an authentic Hindu ambience for Christian experience that include the embrace of many cultural and artistic elements. As described by Thangaraj (2006, pp. 192–93), “One of the unique features of Indian Christianity is the establishment of Ashram (Sanskrit, āsrama), patterned after the Hindu ascetic and monastic traditions. Ashrams were places where the residents practiced regular and intense spiritual discipline, followed a simple lifestyle, and adopted Hindu cultural and religious patterns in worship, prayer, and architecture”. All forms of Protestant and Roman Catholic Ashrams have prospered throughout the subcontinent.

In terms of music, the Catholic Ashrams have sought an authentic Indian ambience by emphasizing the singing of Hindu-style bhajans or devotional songs, especially nām-kīrtan, a type of bhajan with repetitive singing of divine names in succession. As attested by H. Joy Norman (2008, p. 104), “Compositions by contemporary artistes have introduced the nām-kirtan into worship in India and the Americas within a Christian context”. An interesting example of borrowing has also arisen within the Indian Christian “Ashram Movement.” Since the mid-1960s, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), the Hare Krishna Movement, has popularized the Mahā Mantra (“Great Mantra”) as a form of
devotion to Lord Krishna around the world. As part of a living Vaishnava tradition, it is chanted on beads or sung melodiously as follows: *Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare, Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare*. Under the ISKCON influence, Indian Christians seem to have created their own “Mahā Mantra” by inserting the names of Jesus as Yesu and Christa in place of the names Krishna and Rāma, with “Hare” meaning “Oh Lord” in both contexts: *Hare Yesu Hare Yesu Yesu Yesu Hare Hare, Hare Christa Hare Christa Christa Christa Hare Hare*. This is also sung melodiously in the Christian Ashrams accompanied by harmonium and Indian percussion instruments.

The Hindu *bhajan*, like the *kirtan* (“praise song”), often follows a simple call-and-response format. It is not only utilized in South Asian Christian worship and meditation but has been adopted as an effective tool for missionary work throughout the subcontinent. According to H. Joy Norman (2008, p. 75), “In order to carry out the work for which they were trained... the missionaries had to find some vehicle to reach their potential flocks. The simple style of the *bhajan* from the Bhakti movement appeared to fulfill this requirement. Its repetitive call-and-response form was to lend itself to the teaching of Christian theology in text and in music.”

Audio Sample 5:
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1wt5XUNRH7g5OiyBy-aHH0PrZ4Xi3YY/view?usp=sharing

A devotional song of Indian Catholic Christians is “Prabhu Nām Yesu Nām”, sung in rāga Bhairava by this author. Set in an eight-beat rhythm (Keherwa), it is part of early morning prayer and devotion addressed to Lord Jesus (Yesu) and His Name. Resembling the second Hindu example, the pattern of notes of the refrain are given below, as follows: SS MM—MG PMG R S, GM D—NN s—ss D—DD P.

*Mana mere tu bhaja Prabhu nām*
*Prabhu Nām Yesu Nām*
*jai jai nām Yesu nām*

“O Mind. Worship the name of Lord Jesus.
All glories to the Holy Name of Jesus”.

This song, including additional verses, is part of a larger collection of Indian Christian devotional songs by Rev. Sister Louisa Machado S. R. A. (Madhur-Vâni 1983). There are many songs in this collection set to different rāgas, many of which were shared with this author by Father Joseph Currie, SJ, of Loyola University New Orleans in 1996.

8. Islam: Chishti Sufism

Since the arrival of Islam on the Indian subcontinent, there has been active engagement between Islam and indigenous forms of music. Muslims, however, distinguish music from recitation of scripture. While resembling music in several ways, the recitation of verses of the Islamic sacred scripture, the Holy Qur’an, is not regarded as music within the orthodox tradition. In fact, a general prohibition against music for religious purposes has persisted in the branches of Islamic law and theology, both Sunni and Shi’a. As such, in the general Islamic world, music is viewed as a secular occupation not suitable for religious experience. However, there are exceptions to these restrictions within the mystical branches of Sufi Islam. Several Islamic rulers adhered to Sufi tenets and were patrons of Indian music, including Akbar (1555–1605 CE), Jahangir (1605–1627 CE), Shahjahan (1628–1658 CE), Bahadur Shah (1707–1712 CE), and Muhammad Shah (1719–1748 CE).

Many forms of Muslim devotional music influenced by Sufism are found on the Indian subcontinent. Indo-Muslim music may be liturgical (Arabic verses chanted or performed in assemblies or on Muslim holidays) or non-liturgical (vernacular songs, mostly Urdu, sung
in religious assemblies and accompanied by instruments), the latter derivative of Hindu and other Indian forms of classical (rāga-based) and folk music. While liturgical music of South Asian Islam is reserved for religious assemblies and holidays, non-liturgical music includes roughly three types (Shi’a Majlis, Sufi Qawwali, and Sunni Milad). Ethnomusicologist Regula Qureshi (1972, pp. 18–19) has described the non-liturgical music and its relation to Indian musical forms: “The form of non-liturgical music is built on an adaptation of the standard patterns of North Indian song, that is, the shāyī-antarā [refrain-verse] principle with extensions and improvisations—to the formal schemes of Urdu poetry... Melodically, non-linguistic belongs in the context of North Indian classical and light classical music, both with regard to scalar and motivic characteristics. The tonal inventory is generally limited to the diatonic modes”.

The Shi’a and Sunni branches of Islam each have their own form of non-liturgical music in South Asia. To express mourning for their assassinated martyr Husain, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, Shi’ia practitioners have developed five forms of Majlis: Soz, Salam, Marsiya, Nauha, and Matam. According to Regula Qureshi (1972, p. 19), “Majli music combines classical and folk elements of North Indian music. Soz, Salam, and even Marsiya derive from classical song using specific Rāgas and even substitutes a vocal drone (ās) for the instrumental drone of classical song”.

While not all mystical Sufi brotherhoods have embraced music equally, it was the Chishti Order within Sunni Islam that has elevated music to a spiritual practice and incorporated many Indian forms of music to accomplish their goal of ecstatic communion with God. The Chishti Brotherhood, founded in Afghanistan in the tenth century and brought to India by Khwaja Moiuddin Chishti in the twelfth, elevated music to a spiritual practice (sama) and incorporated Indian musical forms to accomplish their goal of ecstatic communion with God. One of the great Sufi-inspired forms is Qawwali.

Qawwali is now the most popular form of Sufi music in South Asia. Qureshi (1972, p. 20) links it directly with the classical tradition of Khayal, a derivative of Dhrupad developed by both Muslims and Hindus: “Musically Qawwali is linked with the classical Khayal tradition. The formal scheme combines metric group refrains and rhythmically free solo improvisations including rapid ‘coloratura’ passages”. Qawwali readily utilizes the Indian drum [tabla], harmonium, and hand clapping, and is the most professionally “musical” form of Muslim non-liturgical music in South Asia. Associated with the Chishti movement of Sufi mystics going back to Amir Khusrau in the thirteenth century, this order, rather than proscribing music, has elevated music to the level of divine contemplation. Qawwali music involves the group singing of Sufi poems in the Urdu language, often at a tomb or shrine of a Sufi saint. Though based on structured melodies and group refrains, the actual singing contains improvisation centered upon melismatic passage work and rapid coloratura that resemble Hindustani classical music. Elsewhere, Regula Qureshi, in Sufi Music of India and Pakistan: Context and Meaning in Qawwali (Qureshi 1986, p. 3), conveys the Qawwali experience of rāga music in congregation: “A more effusive mood suddenly arises when, imperceptibly, the singers [of Qawwali] have moved on to a devotional Hindi song with a rāga-like melody full of pathos”. Furthermore, students of Qawwali begin their training by singing Hindustani scales, the basis of rāga music (Qureshi 1986, p. 49): “In their standard version, as used for instance in teaching beginners, the seven scale degrees correspond to the standard scale arrangement of present-day North Indian classical music (bilavāl thāt) which is equivalent to the Western major scale”. In the twentieth century, Pakistani Sufi Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, trained in traditional Indian classical music, made Qawwali a worldwide commercial success.

The embrace of Indian music by Muslim musicians readily extends to the vocal classical realm, including Dhrupad, Khayal, and Thumri. Dhrupad, prominent in both the Hindu and Muslim courts during the Late Medieval Period, expresses religious and royalist themes and is accompanied on the Pakhavaj drum. The most famous Dhrupad singer associated with the court of Emperor Akbar was Tansen (1500–1589 CE), a Brahmin
from Gwalior trained in music by the Hindu saint Swami Haridas. Tansen later converted to Sufi Islam when at Akbar’s court in Fatehpur Sikri.

Throughout its history, Hindustani music represents a bridge between Hindu and Islamic traditions, such that renowned vocalist Pandit Kumar Mukherjee (personal communication, July 1993) frequently repeated the adage, “There is no Pakistan in Hindustani music”, meaning that there are no divisions in classical Indian music as there are in religion or geography. Yet an important exception is found in Pakistan, where Dhrupad has been redefined as a distinctly Islamic form of classical music. Musicologists Khalid Basra and Widdess (1989, p. 1) have described this phenomenon: “Hafiz Khan presents a distinctive ideology of Dhrupad [in Pakistan], in which Islam entirely replaces the Hindu frame of reference adopted by most musicians (both Hindu and Muslim) in India. Nayak Khanderi and the Nayaks who succeeded him were all Muslims according to Hafiz Khan, and they received their inspiration directly from God; there is thus for him no elements of folk or [Hindu] temple music in the historical background to Dhrupad”.

Yet an extraordinary example of friendly collaboration between Hindu and Muslim musicians is found in the Agra Gharana of Hindustani vocal music. Despite the gradual decline of the Mughal Empire under Akbar and his descendants, many Muslim musicians of the Dhrupad tradition held fast to their repertoires of compositions expressing devotion to Hindu deities while preserving and developing their unique musical styles. The nearby Muslim capital city of Agra became a nexus for this interchange. In fact, the Agra Gharana musicians were originally performers of Dhrupad and claimed descent from Hindu Rajput singers. Though they took to singing Khayal in the nineteenth century, Agra Gharana musicians have always kept a strong link with Dhrupad. Indeed, many Muslim musicians of Agra Gharana have sung and composed songs in praise of Krishna, Śiva, Sarasvatī, and other Hindu deities, while Hindu singers have frequently composed and rendered compositions in praise of Allah or Sufi masters. Many famous Muslim singers of Agra Gharana in the twentieth century even used Hindu “pen names”: for example, Ustad Faiyaz Khan (“Prem Piya”) and Ustad Vilayat Hussein Khan (“Pran Piya”). Moreover, when visiting the homes of great Muslim musicians (“Ustads”), one invariably finds a picture of the Hindu Goddess Sarasvatī on prominent display.

Audio Sample 6:
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1P2ZQC6FU7sZsXZWfjD0pug8A_-azmd4N/view?usp=drive_link

The following sample is a classically based composition of Islamic devotion, “Allā ho allā”, from the Khayal repertoire of the Agra Gharana. Taught to this author by Pandit Vijay Kichlu in 2010, it is sung in rāga Bhairava to a rhythm of ten beats (Jhap Tal). In praise of Allah, the composition is a song of morning devotion. Resembling the first Hindu example, the pattern of notes for the first line is as follows: DDDPD, PMPGM, GRGMP, MGMRS. This composition is performed by Vidushi Smt. Shubhra Guha on the CD, Bandishes on Morning Rāgas (Courtesy of Hindustan Records, Bandishes on Morning Rāgas 2014), Track #6.

Allā ho allā, jalle śāna allā,
terā nāma liye merti, hove tasallā
tū karīna tū rahīma, tū sattāra tū gaphāra
terā nāma liye merti, hove tasallā

“Allah. You are the One and Only, the Ocean of Glory.
Faith in Your name brings eternal peace.
You are the Generous One. You are the Compassionate One.
You are the Truth. You are the Forgiver.
Faith in Your Name brings eternal peace”.

9. Concluding Remarks

This essay has focused on the interaction between Indic and non-Indic religions in terms of their music on the Indian subcontinent. With the presentation and discussion of selected devotional songs, it is demonstrated that specific forms of Indian or Hindu rāga music have been embraced by Jewish, Christian, and Islamic communities in South Asia: Judaism (Bene Israel), Christianity (Catholic), and Islam (Chishti Sufi). While the foundations of Indian music are based upon ancient Vedic concepts of sacred sound and chant, embodied in the syllable OM, as well as in metaphysical notions like Nāda-Brahman, it is the music itself, exemplified in the melodic pattern or rāga known as Bhairava, that finds a new home in these non-Indic religious communities. We have labelled this phenomenon as “shared religious soundscapes,” whereby similar musical structures are experienced across differing theological and ethnic identities. Such interaction reveals the crossing of otherwise rigid boundaries, perhaps unconsciously, both in the context of morning devotion and worship and as part of private religious practice. In this study of the influence of Indian (Hindu) music on multiple non-Indic religious traditions that are presently well-established in India, it has become clear that Indian music has a special appeal, both for private and collective spiritual advancement and for outreach work. We recall the statement by one of the foremost authorities on Indian arts and culture, Dr. Prem Lata Sharma (2000, p. 80): “The Indian approach to the problem of artistic experience is fundamentally spiritual”. This is perhaps why nearly all Indic religions have drawn from the same corpus of music and integrated it well within their own practices, whether in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, or Sikhism. This includes the widely appreciated aesthetic theory of Rasa, which knows no sectarian boundaries. As herein demonstrated, religions of non-Indic origin like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have adopted and embraced certain aspects of Indian music as part of their devotional experience. This phenomenon should not be surprising, since, regardless of ethnicity, race, or religion, religious communities in India have found multiple opportunities for crossing over to indigenous cultural mainsprings. Devotional music in India offers a freely shared, common heritage which has enabled all residents, new or old, to trespass sectarian boundaries while at the same time maintaining their own religious observances. Moreover, the revival of worldwide interest in all forms of Indian religious and devotional music in the past few decades, especially in commercial recordings, concerts, television, and radio broadcasting, has made the topic of shared religious soundscapes timely and relevant.

The notion of “shared religious soundscapes” also invites deeper reflection on the possible ways religion and music have intersected, not only within one tradition but between several in the same geographic space. What is most noteworthy here is that an original “religious soundscape” in the form of the musical structure or pattern from one tradition is replicated in other contexts that are also “religious”. Yet to ensure successful investigations into religion and music, in this case into shared religious soundscapes among diverse communities, something more is required than empirical methods and approaches to data in order to uncover, from a totality of sounds, viable equivalences and hidden structural connections. We recall the words of Martin Clayton (2003, p. 67): “My point is not that we need more comparison, but that we could be more conscious of what we compare, and on what basis”. To pursue credible comparative studies across diverse religious traditions, a more “holistic” approach is thus required. Besides ethnomusicology, the fields of history of religions, phenomenology of religion, theology, aesthetics, and cognitive studies are invaluable. And regarding the study of religion and music, advancement will also require researchers to develop a refined “listening sense” to successfully undertake investigations into how certain forms of religious soundscapes are preferred, and shared, sometimes inadvertently, across a wide spectrum of worship and devotion.

We close with reference to one of the pioneers in the academic study of religion, Protestant theologian and philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), followed
by a few questions posed for further research. In his writings, Schleiermacher equated religious experience with that of music (see Beck 2023, pp. 68–69). Drawing upon German scholarship on Schleiermacher, Albert L. Blackwell (1991, p. 137) offers an innovative direction through analogy into an important nexus between music and religion: “In a most intriguing simplification, Schleiermacher suggests that in music the octave is given by universal nature, while various scales are relative to particular cultures. Analogously in religion: the fundamental religious feeling of absolute dependence is given in our universal relation to God, while the varieties of religious expression are as diverse as the varieties of human culture”. This analogy about religion and music suggests new possibilities for research into types of religion vis-à-vis types of music. That is, do certain musical scale configurations appeal to certain kinds of religious communities? How is it that certain styles of vocal performance relate to forms of deity worship? Can musical structures themselves inform us about the nature of religious consciousness?

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.


Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

Hoondart, Martin. 2015. Musical Religiosity. Temenos 51: 123–36. [CrossRef]


Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.