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Singing in the Immanent Frame: Contemporary Christian Worship Songs and the Complex Relationship Between Christianity and Secularisation in Britain

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Abstract

In this paper, I explore the complex relationship between Christianity and secularisation in Britain through the small, but illuminating, window of contemporary Christian worship songs. My focus is on Christian worship songs that utilise battle imagery. To explore changes in British Christianity over the last 30–40 years, I compare Songs of Fellowship with the most popular songs sung in British churches in May 2025. My findings reveal resonance between the shifts observed and key aspects of Charles Taylor’s analysis of secularisation. Therefore, my analysis suggests an ongoing impact of secularisation on Christianity in Britain, specifically evangelical charismatic churches, while also highlighting churches’ resistance to secularising trends. I also consider the roots of secularisation in Christianity and contend that the philosophical and phenomenological limitations of secularisation may be contributing to an increased interest in Christianity, particularly amongst young adults. There is, therefore, a paradoxical relationship between Christianity and secularisation in Britain, with each influencing (and, in some regards, inextricable from) the other. I conclude by considering theological and contextual dilemmas for churches using songs that utilise military metaphors, including how such lyrics may be perceived in a postcolonial context and at a time when concerns about violent expressions of Christian nationalism are a key topic in public debate.

Keywords: evangelical sung worship; charismatic Christianity; secularisation; Christian nationalism; battle imagery; contemporary congregational songs

1. Introduction

‘In heavenly armour we’ll enter the land, the battle belongs to the Lord.’ Jamie Owens-Collins published these lyrics in 1984, one year after Graham Kendrick wrote ‘Rejoice!’ (Kendrick 1983; Owens-Collins 1984). Both songs utilise the imagery of taking land as an analogy for Christian mission—albeit this theme is more explicit in Kendrick’s lyrics. Owens-Collins’ lyrics also emphasise the theme of spiritual warfare, with singers encouraged to ‘take courage’ and ‘not fear’ because God is stronger than ‘the power of darkness’ and ‘your enemy’.¹ Battle imagery continues to be prevalent in contemporary worship songs. However, in the most popular songs currently sung in British churches,² such imagery is less commonly connected to mission and is largely framed in relation to the individual worshipper (“I”, “me” etc.) rather than the corporate body (“we”, “us” etc.). My aim in this paper is to explore the reasons for and significance of this shift. I argue that subtle changes in the use of battle imagery, such as these, provide a small yet illuminating window into how Christianity in Britain has adapted to its secularised context over the



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last 30–40 years. More specifically, I draw on Charles Taylor’s analysis of secularisation to suggest that an emphasis on personal fulfilment within secularised societies has influenced Christian worship music. Christianity’s belief, inherited from Judaism, in the creation of humanity in God’s image (*imago Dei*) has contributed to this emphasis (Gregory 2012, chap. 4).³ Therefore, the impact of a secularised conception of human flourishing on Christian sung worship illuminates the paradoxical relationship between secularisation and Christianity in Britain. Exploring this relationship highlights both theological and contextual dilemmas for churches reflecting on their place and role in Britain today.

2. A Turn to Self

Grace Davie notes that the rebuilding of churches following the Second World War led to a sense of revival, or at least restoration, within churches (Davie 2015, p. 29). This buoyancy did not last long, however, and by the 1960s, societal changes, including the sexual revolution, led churches to feel increasingly out of step with their wider context. In response, following initial confusion and loss of confidence, churches determined to ‘shake off their image of belonging essentially to the past’ and, instead, ‘present themselves as modern, up to date and, above all, relevant.’ (Davie 2015, pp. 30–31). In their search for relevance, Davie observes, ‘churches looked to the secular world for a lead and borrowed, in some cases rather uncritically, both its ideas and forms of expression.’ (Davie 2015, p. 31). Pete Ward notes that, within Christian sung worship, the form adopted was the popular music genre (Ward 2005, p. 13). Ward echoes Davie’s contentions regarding the uncritical nature of churches’ search for relevance, arguing that changes in worship style have unwittingly impacted Christians’ perceptions of their faith. In adopting the popular music genre, churches overlooked the relationship between medium and message. More specifically, he contends, popular music’s focus on romance and intimacy, alongside its conveyance of composers’ inner worlds, has led to an emphasis on these themes within the Christian worship music that utilises this genre. This, in turn, Ward argues, has resulted in an increased focus on subjective experiences of God and a decreased emphasis on the objective truth claims that have characterised Christianity in the past (Ward 2005, pp. 206–10; 2017, pp. 71–78, 176–78).

I have argued elsewhere that Ward’s assessment is enhanced by attention to Taylor’s analysis of secularisation (Morris 2022). As Davie observes, terminology relating to secularisation is confusing and contested. At one end of the spectrum, secularism is used normatively to insist on a separation of religion and state (which is the approach taken, for instance, in France). Elsewhere, such as in Britain, less sharp distinctions are made (Davie 2022, p. 269). Jörg Stolz and David Voas define secularisation as ‘the decline of the importance of religion and religiosity in a country or region on a societal, organizational, and individual level’ (Stolz and Voas 2023, p. 2). While secularisation is commonly defined in this way, Davie argues that such definitions flatten the reality, wherein conflicting trajectories regarding the influence and prominence of religion are present in any one locale (Davie 2022, p. 281). Taylor agrees that the removal (or, in some contexts, relegation) of religion from the political sphere and a decrease in religious commitments are aspects of secularity. His focus, however, is on a third sense of secularisation, which is a shift ‘from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others.’ (Taylor 2007, p. 3). In contrast to seeing secularity as simply the subtraction of religion from public and, to a lesser extent, private life, Taylor contends that secular beliefs and values have positive content that is, ironically, built on a Christian foundation. More specifically to my argument in this paper, Taylor argues that secular societies have adopted a Christian belief in human flourishing but, via the intermediary of providential deism, detached this concept from God

such that the ultimate good is now perceived as human flourishing without the allegiance to anything external (Taylor 2007, pp. 18–22). Or, as Ward puts it, ‘the self’ has become ‘the primary concern and central project of life.’ (Ward 2020, p. 4).

Martin Schlag notes that Taylor, in some places, defines human flourishing in purely humanist terms (e.g., relating to health, prosperity, and a subjective sense of happiness or fulfilment) even though, elsewhere, he reveals his own conviction that human flourishing devoid of transcendence is not real flourishing—and that, from a Christian perspective, the ultimate good is loving and worshipping God, not flourishing, although the two are connected (Schlag 2015, pp. 116–19). Humanist notions of human flourishing have influenced a range of religious expressions within contemporary Britain, including Christianity. Davie notes, for example, the emphasis on self-discovery and fulfilment within a diverse array of new age or ‘self-spiritualities’ (Davie 2015, pp. 158–59). Chapman et al. concur, noting the focus within new spiritualities on realising one’s potential (or the ‘[g]od within’) (Chapman et al. 2012, p. 183). An influence on Christianity has also been observed. Andrew Yip, for example, refers to Taylor’s analysis in his research into the Christian faith of over 500 gay, lesbian and bisexual Christians in the UK, undertaken in 1997–98. He observes that respondents’ Christian faith was both based on and orientated towards the self, albeit more traditional Christian doctrines and practices still played a role. Respondents’ ‘self-based spirituality’ was prompted, in part, by negative experiences of ecclesial authority. However, Yip predicts that people beyond this group are increasingly likely to construct their faith in accordance with their own preferences and sense of identity (Yip 2017, pp. 143–44). Resonant with Yip’s findings, Miroslav Volf and Matthew Croasmun note a tendency for Christianity to be reduced to a set of resources to help people pursue their own vision of flourishing—whether framed around emotional health, success, relational fulfilment, or entertainment (Volf and Croasmun 2019, p. 31; Morris 2022, p. 77).

Other expressions of Christianity emphasise human fulfilment while seeking to maintain a more orthodox Christian faith. Davie, for instance, observes synergy between charismatic renewal and the ‘subjective turn’, noting that for some but not all church expressions, ‘expressivism, acceptance, self-awareness and reflexivity are seen as aids rather than barriers to evangelism.’ (Davie 2015, p. 142). In addition, when exploring the relationship between Christianity and self-spiritualities, Davie concludes that, although most churches reject new age ideas as dangerous, it is forms of Christianity that help people attend to their subjective sense of self that are growing (Davie 2015, pp. 159–60). So too Chapman et al. contend that Christianity in Britain has had an ambivalent relationship with new spiritualities. While churches have largely rejected aspects that are seen as contrary to orthodox doctrine (such as the feminisation of God), many have adopted a more immanent conception of God. Thus, Chapman et al. argue that, overall, perceptions of God have changed in post-war Britain from ‘a distant, judge-like God who maintains order and holds the nation together’ to, within evangelical and charismatic expressions of Christianity, ‘an intimate friend who loves and cares for the individual, and supports their personal journey through life and the finding of their unique purpose.’ (Chapman et al. 2012, p. 179). Expressions of intimacy with God are evident in traditional hymns sung in post-war Britain, suggesting that Chapman et al.’s dichotomy is exaggerated, at least as regards churchgoers.⁴ Nevertheless, as I argue below, my analysis of battle imagery in contemporary worship songs supports their contention that an emphasis on intimacy has increased in recent years.

3. A Turn to Intimacy

Brendan Stuart and Christopher Partridge highlight the important role that music plays within British Christianity. Moreover, they note that Christian music, especially Pen-

tecotal varieties, has influenced popular music, particularly in the US and Britain (Stuart and Partridge 2012, pp. 265–66). This observation further complicates the relationship between Christianity and secularisation in Britain. Christian music, alongside its values and traditions, has shaped Britain’s secularised society which has, in turn, influenced Christianity. Analysing shifts in the content of Christian worship songs can illuminate changing theological emphases at different periods (e.g., Ruth 2015; Cowan 2017). Ward, writing in the early 2000s, analysed the lyrics of popular worship songs from the 1960s onwards, which is when, influenced by the Jesus Movement in both the US and UK, the contextualisation of sung worship into the popular music genre became prominent. He draws on Lionel Adey’s classification of Christian hymnology to divide lyrics into three categories: ‘objective’ accounts of biblical events and revelation; ‘subjective’ depictions of the implications of God’s acts and revelation for the singer; and ‘reflexive’ lyrics, which aim to facilitate encounter with God. He observes over the period analysed a decrease in objective lyrics and a corresponding increase in those that are subjective and, even more so, reflexive. Thus, lyrics that help facilitate singers’ personal experience of worship became more prevalent than those conveying universal truth claims (Ward 2005, pp. 35–47, 206–10; Ward 2017, p. 146; Morris 2022, p. 74). Ward’s findings affirm Chapman et al.’s observation that, particularly within the charismatic renewal movement, the doctrinal emphasis of traditional hymns has been gradually displaced by a focus on intimacy with God, albeit articulations of his majesty are still present. They cite, by way of example, the 1981 hymnal Songs of Fellowship (Chapman et al. 2012, p. 176). In a more recent study, based on an analysis of contemporary congregational songs (CCS) across multiple geographical regions, Daniel Thornton contends that an early ‘swing in CCS lyrics to personalise salvation and the Saviour has shifted in more recent years to also acknowledge God’s holiness and otherness; a trait that at the origins of CCS was more associated with traditional hymns.’ (Thornton 2021, p. 148) While not disputing Thornton’s claim regarding his broader analysis, I contend below that changes in the use of battle imagery in contemporary worship songs align with the trajectory that Ward and Chapman et al. identify.

4. Battle Imagery

The language of ‘espoused’ and ‘operant’ theology has become popular within practical theology to distinguish between the theological convictions that individuals and churches articulate (espoused) and the theological convictions that are evident in their practice (operant) (e.g., Watkins 2020, p. 39). The two are interrelated, but attention to discrepancies between them, for instance in a church setting, can be illuminating. As Glenn Packiam demonstrates in his study of eschatology in contemporary worship songs (Packiam 2020), as a central Christian practice, sung worship provides an important window into the operant theology of contemporary churches. However, alongside revealing churches’ latent theology, as Robin Parry notes, worship songs also form this theology—indeed, he argues that communal worship influences church goers’ theology more than teaching and preaching does (Parry 2012, p. 8; Kalveks 2020, p. 115). Therefore, examining shifts in sung worship can provide an illuminating window into how British churches are adapting to an increasingly secularised context.

To examine how the content of sung worship has changed over the last 30–40 years, I compare Songs of Fellowship (Kingsway Music 1998) (SoF) with the most popular worship songs sung in UK churches in May 2025, as identified by Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI).

SoF arose in the UK in the late 1970s when Kingsway Thankyou Music collated songs arising from the charismatic renewal movement with material that they had already published. SoF was revised and expanded several times and quickly became the most

popular collection of congregational worship songs in the 1980s and 90s, particularly amongst evangelical charismatic churches (Ward 2005, pp. 67–69).

CCLI was founded in the US by Howard Rachinski, a music pastor, to ensure that his own church was acting legally. He founded Starpraise Ministries in 1984 which, in 1988, became Christian Copyright Licensing Incorporated (CCLI). CCLI claims a database of 600,000 songs and to serve more than 230,000 churches worldwide (CCLI n.d.). The CCLI website does not break this number down by region but, elsewhere, CCLI has claimed that, in September 2025, it was used by more than 24,000 churches in the UK (CCLI 2025). In 2020, Peter Brierley projected that there would be fewer than 45,000 churches in the UK by 2025 (Brierley 2020, p. 9).⁵ Assuming Brierley's projections were broadly accurate, CCLI data represents a significant proportion (over half) of churches in the UK (and, therefore, in Britain). CCLI does not indicate on its website which proportion of CCLI-registered churches are from different denominations. Based on his work in Australia, Thornton notes that Catholic churches do not use CCLI (Thornton 2021, p. 37). It is likely that the same is true in the UK. Therefore, given Brierley's prediction that, in 2025, 9% of churches would be Catholic (Brierley 2020, p. 9), excluding Catholic churches from Brierley's total of 45,000 suggests that just under two-thirds of protestant churches are represented by CCLI. CCLI produces two different types of Top 100 to indicate the most popular congregational songs in a given period. The first is a quarterly Top 100, which is based on the self-reporting of CCLI license holders. Thornton notes that the sizes of reporting churches are taken into consideration in this ranking (i.e., larger churches' reports have more influence on song rankings than smaller churches) (Thornton 2021, p. 36). Secondly, since 23 September 2024, CCLI has produced a weekly Top 100, which is based on the number of downloads of song music and lyrics by worship leaders (Worship Leader Research 2025). To best gauge the most popular songs in the period of analysis (May 2025), I selected the 81 songs that were contained in both the quarterly and weekly Top 100s for that period.

Comparing SoF songs with those in the CCLI Top 100s is not a comparison of like with like. Although SoF was widely used in the 1980s and 90s, it is impossible to ascertain which, from more than 1000 songs contained in its most recent version, churches sung most often. That said, as I demonstrate below, the prevalence of battle imagery within SoF, and the similarities in how this imagery is used across the corpus, grant confidence in asserting that at least some of the songs analysed were regularly sung in churches when SoF was at its most popular.⁶ Regarding CCLI, selecting the 81 songs contained in both the quarterly and weekly CCLI Top 100s⁷ in May 2025 gives a strong indication of the most popular songs amongst CCLI UK licence holders at that time. The difference between the two sources means that statistical analysis is of limited value and, indeed, may be misleading. Therefore, I will reference quantity only in broad terms and focus, instead, on specific examples by way of illustration.

Within my comparison, I focus on song lyrics that utilise battle imagery. This focus was prompted by my own observations as a churchgoer that military metaphors are increasingly utilised in contemporary worship songs but are used differently than in the songs I remember from my youth. As Nelson Cowan notes, however, a song's meaning cannot be ascertained from its lyrics alone. Other aspects of its liturgical expression, including musicality and setting, are influential (Cowan 2017, pp. 93–98). Thornton agrees, warning that, 'When divorced from their musical context, lyrical analysis can fabricate rather than elucidate the intended meaning(s).' (Thornton 2021, p. 144). Therefore, there is a growing movement towards holistic explorations of contemporary worships songs. For example, in her analysis of Bethel Music, Tatiana Kalveks argues that 'texture, timbre, rhythm and melody' combine with the songs' lyrics to assure worshippers of God's immanent and approving presence (Kalveks 2020, p. 182). Samuel Ng observes that the

future-orientated eschatology within the lyrics of Keith and Kristyn Getty's 'There is a Higher Throne' is complimented by a musical structure that utilises 'tentative' endings to engender 'a heightened sense of promise for further and ultimate fulfillment.' (Ng 2022, sect. 3.1.3). Thus, focusing only on lyrics means that my analysis is partial and conclusions provisional. Such a focus is necessary because of limitations in my own expertise (I am an amateur musician and worship leader but lack the skills required for robust musical analysis). However, I suspect (albeit tentatively) that analysis of the songs' musicality would support rather than contradict my contentions.⁸

Relevant lyrics were selected using reflexive thematic analysis undertaken primarily at the semantic level, focused on words such as army(ies), fight, shield, sword, weapon, armour, enemy(ies) and stronghold (Braun and Clarke 2022, pp. 57–58).⁹ Given the prevalence of such imagery, I narrowed my purview further to language and imagery portraying an ongoing battle that the singer is, in some way, involved in.¹⁰ Around a thirteenth of SoF (see Appendix A) and a fifth of the songs found in both CCLI Top 100 lists (see Appendix B) fit within my criteria. As Thornton highlights, as a poetic form, the singer's context plays a key role in how song lyrics are interpreted. More specifically, he observes that Christian worshippers interpret songs in line with their conception of doctrinal orthodoxy (Thornton 2021, p. 153). Therefore, where there is a lack of clarity in how military imagery is being used, I have assumed meanings that are compatible with charismatic evangelical theology. From analysing the lyrics of these songs, I observed two shifts over the last 30–40 years that are suggestive of churches' adaptation to their secularised context: the 'battle' has become more individualised and the 'enemies' less overtly spiritual. In addition, within SoF, comparing 18th and 19th-century hymns with contemporary songs reveals a further shift which is continued within the CCLI Top 100s: a move from future to present-orientated eschatology.

Battle Imagery in SoF and CCLI Top 100s

The use of battle imagery in Christian sung worship has an ancient history. In the Psalms, some references to 'enemies' and 'armies' likely refer to literal, military battles (e.g., Ps 108:11–13) but, more often, battle imagery is used metaphorically (e.g., Ps 7:10–13; 8:2; 18:13–14). Traditional British hymns, influenced by the missionary movements and colonial expansion that accompanied this period, also employ battle imagery, most famously 'Onward Christian Soldiers' (Baring-Gould 1865). Moreover, within Pentecostal Christianity, particularly in Majority World contexts, spiritual warfare language is prevalent in contemporary worship songs (Ajose 2025). Therefore, examining SoF and the CCLI Top 100s in May 2025 provides only a snapshot of a complex and diverse picture.

As noted above, I focus on songs referring to a battle in which the singer participates. In SoF, there are four main contexts in which battle imagery is used, which sometimes overlap: mission; personal struggles; eschatological victory; and spiritual warfare. The latter two contexts are largely absent in the CCLI songs analysed. It is important to note, however, that context is difficult to ascertain in the CCLI songs. This is, in part, because they are shorter than many of the SoF songs. In addition, Nick Page criticises SoF songs for adopting a 'pick and mix' approach to biblical themes and quotations, wherein, often, a coherent connecting narrative is lacking (Page 2004, pp. 87–90). Recent worship songs have continued this trend, such that the nature of and context for the battle is often unclear.

Within SoF, mission is the main context in which battle imagery is employed. For instance, in 'Raise Up an Army' (Cook and Cook 1988), the army bears witness to God so that his mission is fulfilled amongst the nations. In the context of mission, battle imagery is frequently combined with the metaphor of taking/claiming/entering/marching on ground/land (Ward 2005, p. 140). For example, in 'Rejoice!' by Graham Kendrick

(Kendrick 1983), an army is empowered by Christ to march over land, receiving the ground claimed, so that the world sees Christ's lordship. Often, too, the spiritual nature of the opponents is specified. For instance, in Kendrick's 'For this Purpose' (Kendrick 1985a), ground is claimed as singers overcome Satan through their allegiance to Jesus and trust in his salvific sacrifice. Appropriately, given the spiritual nature of the battle, the weapons described are spiritual in nature, including truth, faith, proclamation, prayer and praise (e.g., Kendrick and Rolinson 1986). For example, 'There is Power in the Name of Jesus' (Richards 1989) celebrates demons' flight as the sword of Jesus' name is wielded. Less commonly, the church is also armed with God's judgement (e.g., Garratt 1982; Kendrick 1985b).

In contrast, there are only four songs in the CCLI songs analysed that employ battle imagery in relation to mission. Moreover, the missional context is not as explicit as in the SoF songs analysed. In 'I Speak Jesus' (Benton et al. 2019), the call to proclaim Jesus from mountains and in streets suggests a desire for strongholds to break beyond the life of the individual worshipper. So too in 'The Lion and the Lamb' (Brown et al. 2015), a reference to all chains breaking in response to singers' praise suggests a missional impulse. 'Build Your Kingdom Here' (Llewellyn et al. 2011) is the most explicitly missional, but battle imagery is only present at a latent level, suggested through the metaphors of winning back the nation, laying down lives, and the release of captives.¹¹ In none of these CCLI songs is the spiritual nature of the opponents explicit (as was the case in SoF songs), although 'Build Your Kingdom Here' refers to 'darkness' which could be understood spiritually. Indeed, 'I Speak Jesus', while also referring to 'darkness', depicts the captors and strongholds in psychological terms, with Jesus' name bringing deliverance from fear, anxiety and depression.

The nature of and context for the battle imagery in the remaining CCLI songs was hard to ascertain and is therefore likely to be interpreted by singers as referring to personal struggles. For example, in 'Bless God' (Lake et al. 2023a), the singer is urged to praise God 'when the weapon's forming' and 'walls are falling', but it is unclear what this refers to. Singers can therefore relate this imagery to any obstacle or struggle that they face. In 'Raise a Hallelujah' (Stevens et al. 2018), the 'enemies' may be the 'darkness' and 'fear' referred to in verse 2. Again, though, the context is sufficiently ambiguous that the singer can relate the battle imagery to any challenges that they experience. In 'Praise' (Lake et al. 2023b), as in 'Raise a Hallelujah', praise is depicted as a weapon against enemies. However, neither the nature of nor context for these enemies is clarified. Thus, they could be whatever 'enemies', or difficulties, the singer is experiencing. Two of the songs analysed present God as enabling personal fulfilment. In 'Graves into Gardens' (Brown et al. 2019), the world is searched for meaning but no fulfilment is found until encounter with God's love leads to the satisfaction of all desire.¹² 'I Thank God' (Moses et al. 2021) expresses gratitude to God for transforming the singer's life (who previously could not 'win the fight'), bringing healing and freedom.

Only a small proportion of SoF songs utilise battle imagery in the context of personal struggle. 'I Walk by Faith' (Falson 1990), resonant with the CCLI songs referred to above, does not specify the nature of the weapons formed against the singer. Arguably, the context is clearer, however, with the remainder of the lyrics focusing on the singer's life of faith. Graham Kendrick's 'For the Joys and for the Sorrows' (Kendrick 1994) specifies doubt, worry, burdens and regrets as the context in which 'strength to fight and win' is required.

Within the CCLI songs utilising battle imagery, only 'I Thank God' (Moses et al. 2021) and 'Amazing Grace (My Chains Are Gone)' (Tomlin et al. 2006) look forward to the eschaton.¹³ Aside from the bridge, however, the lyrics of 'Amazing Grace' were published in the 18th Century, when future-orientated eschatology was a prominent theme within

Christian hymns. Notably, within SoF, most songs utilising battle imagery in the context of persevering until Christ's return are also 18th or 19th-century hymns. In Charles Wesley's 'Soldiers of Christ, Arise' (Wesley 1749), for example, Christ's soldiers are urged to put armour on, wrestle, fight and pray so that 'through Christ alone' they can 'stand complete at last'. 'We Shall Stand' (Kendrick 1988) is one of a handful of SoF songs written in the 20th Century that use battle imagery while looking forward to Christ's return. In this song, the singer commits to 'fight on through' until they 'see [Jesus] face to face'. Lester Ruth attributes the immanent eschatology of contemporary worship songs to increased living standards. He argues, 'Longer lives, consumerist expectations, and a middle-class lifestyle for lyricist and congregation alike have created a desire for immediate fulfillment. We do not sojourn, we arrive. We now flee from meaninglessness, not an impending judgment.' (Ruth 2015, p. 75) As I note below, other factors have also contributed to this shift. In particular, I will argue that Taylor's analysis of secularisation is illuminative.

In summary, I have discerned two shifts in the use of battle imagery between SoF and the CCLI songs analysed: the 'battle' has become more individualised and the 'enemies' less overtly spiritual. Moreover, compared to 18th and 19th-century hymns, the use of battle imagery in contemporary songs is more present-focused. My contention, below, is that all three changes resonate with Taylor's analysis of secularisation, specifically regarding the 'buffered self' and 'immanent frame'.

5. Singing in the Immanent Frame

Taylor's analysis of the 'secular age' has been influential. His aim is to identify the religious and philosophical shifts that, he argues, account for why disbelief in God is often perceived as the default, whereas in previous eras the reverse was true (Taylor 2007, p. 3). Despite its influence, Taylor's analysis has not escaped critique. Gregory criticises Taylor's 'magisterial account of secularization' for aligning too closely with 'supersessionist' models of historical change, within which 'the distant past is assumed to have been left behind, explanatorily important to what immediately succeeded it but not to the present.' (pp. 9–10). Carl Trueman is among those who argue that Taylor's approach neglects the 'material factors', particularly the rise in technology, that influence people's perceptions of both their own lives and the world around them (Trueman 2017, p. 18). Similarly, in greater depth, Joseph Minich contends that the development of 'technoculture' best explains the 'divine absence' that both theist and atheist alike perceive. By 'technoculture', Minich means not just the development of new technologies, but how these technologies shape the lives and perceptions of those who use them (Minich 2023, p. 3). While not addressing Taylor, Chapman et al. highlight the synergy between a focus on self-realisation within new spiritualities and the 'aspirations engendered by consumer capitalism' (Chapman et al. 2012, p. 183), which suggests that consumerism has played an influential role, not just a corresponding one. One can, however, critique Taylor's analysis of the journey secular societies have taken while agreeing with his conclusions on their arrival point (or, more likely, temporary stop off). Central to these conclusions are Taylor's contentions that secularised societies perceive the self as 'buffered', defined via its interiority, and located within an 'immanent frame' (whether this frame is 'open' or 'closed' to the existence and experience of the transcendent) (Taylor 2007, pp. 27, 539, 542). The notion of human flourishing without allegiance to anything external (as highlighted earlier in this article) is only conceivable within a social imaginary in which the self is perceived in these ways.

The shifts identified above in the use of battle imagery within Christian sung worship resonate with Taylor's analysis. As noted earlier, the external outlook of many traditional hymns, with their focus on doctrinal articulations about God (alongside expressions of pietistic devotion), is displaced within SoF (in part, not in full) by an increased emphasis

on the singer's personal experience of God (Chapman et al. 2012, p. 176). The reduced emphasis on mission in the CCLI songs analysed (compared to SoF) is likely influenced by appreciation of how military metaphors in relation to taking land may be perceived in a postcolonial context, alongside heightened concerns about violent religious extremism (see 'Reclaiming the Land?' below). However, mission is also largely absent from the CCLI Top 100s songs that do not contain battle imagery.¹⁴ This dearth of missional references suggests that the shifting focus from the external to the personal has continued over the last 30–40 years. Indeed, it is interesting that, within the CCLI songs analysed, half include more personal pronouns (predominantly in the singular) than words (either pronouns or titles/descriptions) referring to God in either a generic sense or a particular person of the Trinity.¹⁵ No definitive conclusions can be drawn from this, given the importance of literary context for words' meaning and the prevalence of personal pronouns in traditional hymns and biblical psalms.¹⁶ Moreover, in his analysis of a wider range of CCLI songs than has been undertaken here, Thornton found that only a small proportion (less than a fifth) had more references to the singer(s) than to God (Thornton 2021, pp. 164–65). Nevertheless, my findings, although only relating to songs utilising battle imagery, alongside a dearth of songs looking beyond the singer to the church's engagement in mission, resonate with the shift to the personal (the 'subjective turn') that has been observed within secularised societies.

Attention to Taylor's arguments regarding the 'buffered self' also sheds light on the shifts observed. Taylor contrasts the 'buffered self' with the 'porous self' that is 'vulnerable to a world of spirits and powers', and which has characterised perceptions of personhood through most of human history (Taylor 2007, p. 27). The continuation of porous perceptions of self around the world today demonstrates that buffered conceptions are not simply a product of time's march forwards. For example, in identifying perceptions of 'sin' in Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity, Joel Robbins and Leanne Williams Green observe two distinct conceptions—albeit, often, 'the two patterns appear in mixed forms' (Robbins and Williams Green 2018, p. 32). In one, 'best documented ethnographically among several charismatic Christian groups in various parts of sub-Saharan Africa, people's failures are closely tied to their possession or direction by evil spirits'. In the second, 'Sin is a personal problem that follows from an individual's failure to control themselves or to seek the good in the present by aligning their wills with that of God' (Robbins and Williams Green 2018, p. 22). Conceptualising sin in this second way is not, itself, demonstrative of a buffered view of self. Robbins' research amongst Christian Urapim in Papua New Guinea reveals that they accord with this second view, even though they pray for God to deliver them from spirits that bring ill health (Robbins and Williams Green 2018, pp. 26–27). The first (evil as an external force) is indicative of a porous view of self. Moreover, the predominance of this perception of evil in sub-Saharan Africa illuminates Toyin Samuel Ajose's conclusion that, in Nigeria, through its military metaphors and rhythmic 'military march-like' musicality, 'Pentecostal musicking empowers worshippers to engage in spiritual warfare as they play, hear and respond to the "drumbeat of war".' (Ajose 2025, pp. 10, 21). The solution, to drive out the devil and demons through praise, fits the problem.

In SoF explicit references to spiritual opponents occur largely in the context of mission, placing the focus on the spiritual forces that must be overcome for initial conversion rather than believers' ongoing battle with evil. Most noteworthy, however, is the absence of any explicitly spiritual opponents in the CCLI songs analysed (unless 'darkness' and 'hell' are construed in this way). Indeed, as noted above, when 'stronghold' is used in 'I Speak Jesus' (Benton et al. 2019), which traditionally refers to spiritual bondage in Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity, the named enemies are expressed in psychological terms. Therefore, while porous conceptions of self may be evident in some SoF lyrics, the CCLI songs analysed present the self as buffered and located in an imminent frame that is open to

God and his Spirit but not beset by the demons and devil that Dunsin Oyekan, for example, urges singers to fight against (Oyekan 2018).

Taylor's secularisation thesis may also shed light on the imminent eschatology that is evident within both SoF and, more so, the CCLI Top 100. As noted above, Ruth attributes this shift to increased living standards (Ruth 2015, p. 75). There is likely more than one contributing factor, however. Ward notes the impact of charismatic renewal on the development of contemporary worship songs in Britain, which spread amongst young people through the influence of the Jesus Movement (Ward 2005, pp. 40–43). Regarding this renewal, Andrew Walker highlights the centrality of eschatology within British Restorationism (Walker 1998, p. 133). The early Restorationists saw themselves living in the end days, with a responsibility to restore the church ready for Christ's return (Walker 1998, pp. 134–36). Such expectations are evident in some SoF songs. For instance, in 'We Will Tear Down Every Stronghold' (Bilbrough 1991), Christ's defeat of Satan enables singers to tear down strongholds through proclaiming truth and, in doing so, prepare the way for Christ's return. As Nigel Scotland observes, however, as the years progressed without these eschatological hopes being realised, 'the ministry of American evangelist John Wimber helped to move the focus away from a Kingdom of God that was primarily future to one that was also a present reality.' (Scotland 2011, p. 275) As Scotland notes, this led to the coining of the popular phrase 'the already and the not yet', referring to manifestations of Christ's kingship in the present alongside hope for the full realisation of God's kingdom on Christ's return. This present expectation is evident in many of the SoF songs analysed. For example, in 'Here We Are, Lord' (Richards et al. 1996) despite (or, perhaps, because of) their lack of strength, Christians are 'a dangerous people' who 'take the world by storm' and are those through whom God works as 'history is made'. Scotland notes that the present 'foretastes' of God's kingdom were initially construed primarily as spiritual blessings. From the 1990s onwards, social action (such as alleviating poverty) and transformation (for instance, addressing systematic injustices) were also incorporated within this revised eschatological framework (Scotland 2011, p. 275). Thus, an increased focus on the present in contemporary worship aligns with broader changes to the church's eschatological focus within evangelical charismatic Christianity.

There is likely, however, one further factor contributing to a focus on the present in contemporary worship songs, a shifting perception of time. John Swinton observes that conceptions of time vary between cultural contexts. He observes that, 'Within Western cultures and those influenced by the West, one particular kind of time has been particularly influential and formative of perceptions of time: the time of the clock' (Swinton 2016, p. 22). The clock, Swinton argues, presents time as linear, forward-moving, measurable, controllable and fractured. He concludes,

Time is created as a series of dislocated fragmented moments held together by the transient necessities of human desire. The temporal anticipation of external meaning and eschatological hope so central to religious perceptions of existence are presumed to belong to a different age, a different time. (Swinton 2016, p. 23)

Taylor agrees, contending, 'We have constructed an environment in which we live a uniform, univocal secular time, which we try to measure and control in order to get things done.' (Taylor 2007, p. 59) He contrasts 'secular time' with 'higher time', of which there are different varieties due to differing concepts of eternity. In Christianity, God is seen to hold all time (and, therefore, eternity) together, as if within an instant. However, God also enters into time, affording reality and significance to historical events. Therefore, encounter with God enables Christians to connect with God's eternity and such encounters happen in history through concrete human action. Higher time is not, therefore, contradictory to ordinary (or secular) time. Rather, it gathers, reorders, orientates and punctuates ordinary

time (Taylor 2007, pp. 54–57). Lived belief in higher time means, Taylor argues, that ‘Good Friday 1998 is closer in a way to the original day of the Crucifixion than mid-summer’s day 1997.’ (Taylor 2007, p. 55) Similarly, the celebration of Eucharist (Lord’s Supper) also draws Christ’s crucifixion nearer and, so too, his future return. In contrast, secularisation, Taylor contends, causes even Christians to live ‘exclusively within the horizontal flow of secular time.’ (Taylor 2007, p. 59) By this, he does not mean that Christians disbelieve in eternity, or the eschaton, but that they no longer experience closeness to these realities through either ritual or festival. Alongside increased wealth and (as yet) unfulfilled eschatological hope, this shifting conception of time may explain the predominant focus on the present in the songs analysed. A lack of felt connection to God’s past and future acts can prompt increased focus on his acts in the present.

In summary, I contend that the shifts observed between the SoF and the CCLI songs analysed, and traditional hymns versus contemporary songs, resonate with Taylor’s analysis of secularised societies, specifically the perception of self as buffered and located within an immanent frame. This changed perception of self, in turn, creates the social imaginary in which purpose can be conceived as self-determined individual flourishing. The complexity of people and the societies that they live within means that, in any cultural analysis, reductionism is hard to avoid. Therefore, my claim is not that the secularisation of British society is the only influence on the shifting use of battle imagery in the songs analysed. Nor that Charles Taylor’s analysis of secularisation is the only, or even most accurate, portrait. Rather, that the resonance suggests causation. In moving my argument forward, I address the paradoxes and dilemmas that my analysis may illuminate.

6. A Persistent Paradox

This heading derives from the subtitle of Davie’s *Religion in Britain* (Davie 2015). In this second edition, Davie highlights several paradoxes arising from her research, the central being ‘the decrease in religious activity measured over a wide range of variables, alongside the growing significance of religion in public debate.’ (Davie 2015, p. 232). I will return to this paradox in ‘Reclaiming the Land?’ below. In this section, I highlight a different ‘persistent paradox’ illuminated by my analysis: the inextricable relationship between secularisation and Christianity in Britain.

I argue above that shifts in the use of battle imagery in Christian worship songs over the last 30–40 years resonate with key features of secularisation that Taylor identifies, specifically the ‘buffered self’ and ‘immanent frame’, which create a framework in which individually determined conceptions of human flourishing can flourish (the expressive self). As Taylor argues, however, this secularity has arisen (albeit not exclusively) from developments in Christianity (Taylor 2007, p. 19). Others also highlight Christianity’s role in the developments that Taylor observes. Trueman, for example, sees synergy between Taylor’s ‘expressive individual’ and Philip Rieff’s ‘psychological man’. Trueman affirms Rieff’s presentation of the contemporary self as ‘characterized not so much by finding identity in outward directed activities . . . but rather in the inward quest for personal psychological happiness.’ (Trueman 2020, p. 46). However, although the dominance of psychological categories and inward focus is unique to contemporary times, Trueman observes that ‘the apostle Paul’s development of the concept of the will is what facilitates the rise of inner psychological narrative as a means of reflecting on the self.’ (Trueman 2020, p. 46). Trueman and Taylor also highlight Augustine’s focus on the inner self. This turn inwards provides a key step towards the exclusive humanism that, contra Paul and Augustine, detaches the search for meaning from the search for God (Taylor 1989, ch. 7; Trueman 2020, p. 46). Moreover, as noted earlier, Gregory identifies the doctrine of *imago Dei* as the shared foundation that enabled the establishment of individual human

rights. He also argues that the pluralism resulting from the Reformers' pursuit of *sola Scriptura* set the stage 'for Enlightenment emancipation and the postulation of Western modernity's autonomous individual selves.' (Gregory 2012, p. 373). Thus, there is an inextricable relationship between Christianity and secularisation: secularisation has arisen from Christianity and shapes its forebearer. Definitions of secularisation that focus on the removal or relegation of religion fail to account for this connection.

Highlighting the relationship between Christianity and secularisation in Britain does not, however, answer a question I am yet to address. Rieff discerned the emergence of the 'psychological man' in 1966. Taylor traced *The Making of the Modern Identity* in 1989 (Taylor 1989). Their observations illuminate the turn to intimacy that Chapman et al. observe in SoF compared to traditional hymns (Chapman et al. 2012, p. 176). My contention, however, is that further movement towards secularised conceptions of self is suggested by changes in the use of battle imagery between SoF and the CCLI Top 100s in May 2025. What is the reason for this development? Have I simply observed a continuation along the same trajectory and/or are there other influential factors? As with all social change, the factors are too complex and numerous to distil into one or two causations. Nevertheless, I shall posit some.

The relationship between Christianity and secularisation in Britain is one of resistance alongside influence. As I have argued elsewhere, the church is inherently countercultural as well as adaptive to its environment (Morris 2019, pp. 119–29). Conceptions of self can be neither fully buffered nor constrained to the immanent frame when there is belief in a God who became incarnate in his Son and who indwells believers by his Spirit. Indeed, as Ruth and Swee Hong Lim observe, a key factor in the development of contemporary sung worship is the belief that God is encountered through praise (Ruth and Lim 2021, p. 3). Therefore, although I have argued that the CCLI songs analysed suggest closer resonance with Taylor's analysis than SoF, God is still the focus in these songs. He is, for example, looked to (Johnson and McIntosh 2010), praised (Lake et al. 2023b), thanked (Moses et al. 2021), called upon (Ligertwood 2006) and blessed (Lake et al. 2023a). It may be that such resistance slows the influence of secular humanism on Christianity in comparison to other arenas of British culture, such as the rise in self-spiritualities. However, given technology's influence on secularisation, it follows that recent advancements, particularly in social media and Artificial Intelligence, have intensified the changing conception of self that Taylor observes (e.g., Trueman 2020, p. 425). In other words, British culture itself has continued further along the trajectory that Taylor plots and, therefore, it is unsurprising that the church might follow suit, albeit while simultaneously resisting this wider trend.

It is also possible that secularisation's limitations contribute to its continued advancement but also, paradoxically, the renewed interest in spirituality and Christianity. Reflecting on technology's tendency to speed up the pace of life, Andrew Root points out the irony of turning to meditation apps to experience relief and temporary slowness. Such apps, he argues, suggest that 'a new dose of technology will be the best medicine for our time sickness induced in the first place by technological acceleration' (Root 2021, p. 68). A similar vicious circle may be created by exclusive humanism. Reflecting on the immanent frame, Taylor observes, 'a widespread sense of loss . . . if not always of God, then at least of meaning.' (Taylor 2007, p. 552). Root highlights the pressure that people feel to keep finding and performing their true selves. He argues that, while a focus on authenticity provides release from duty, maintaining authenticity can be more demanding than duty. People have to chart their own path but need this path, and their perceived identity, to be recognised and affirmed by others in order to have meaning (Root 2021, pp. 7–10). In addition, Root maintains that despite modernity's efforts to free people from guilt, guilt has been moved (not removed).

We've escaped the hands of an angry God to live instead within our own selves. Living for ourselves, we find something shocking, something we were told we wouldn't find. We discover that our very own self condemns us. We still feel guilty, but not because we're sinners needing to enter a process of restoration and communion (finding mercy and absolution). Rather our guilt endures because we cannot be the selves we wish we could be. . . . We fail to be who we feel we should be. Our age shifts guilt's source from a transcendent personal force, whose law we fail to obey, to our own selves. We are guilty to ourselves by our self. (Root 2021, p. 23)

When freedom and satisfaction prove elusive, some progress further down the same trajectory, seeking fulfilment through a further turn to self. Conversely, Taylor contends that others 'are haunted by a sense that the universe might after all be as meaningless as the most reductive materialism describes.' (Taylor 2007, p. 593) This 'haunting' prompts a search for spirituality, even God.

Subtraction theories of secularisation are therefore complexified by a growing diversification and fragmentation of religion in Britain, including increased interest in Christianity. YouGov's biannual tracker reveals that, in Britain, belief in God doubled amongst 18–24-year-olds from August 2021 to August 2025, while remaining largely static for other age groups. In addition, in January 2025, belief in God amongst men matched women, having previously been significantly lower (YouGov 2025). Drawing on Nielson Book Data, SPCK note that annual UK Bible sales nearly doubled between 2019 and 2024, crediting Gen Z's spiritual openness with driving the increase (Barry 2025). The Bible Society, working with YouGov, have identified accompanying trends in church attendance, with 16% of 18–24-year-olds surveyed indicating that they attend church at least once a month compared to 4% in 2018 (the increase amongst men in this age bracket was 4% to 21%) (McAleer and Barward-Symmons 2025, p. 6). The report also reveals that '31% of non-churchgoers say they would attend church if invited by a friend or family member, rising to 34% amongst 18–24-year-olds.' (McAleer and Barward-Symmons 2025, p. 10) While based on a significantly smaller sample size,¹⁷ Fusion reports that 76% of participants (who were mainly undergraduate students born after 1996) would attend church if invited by a friend (Fusion 2024, p. 6). It is too early to know if such statistics are the start of a longer-term upward trend or a temporary anomaly. Moreover, David Voas has challenged the reliability of the Bible Society's data, arguing that their findings are inconsistent with the most recent British Social Attitudes survey and other YouGov data (Voas 2025). As Peter Brierley et al. counter, however, 'the number of stories across a wide selection of ministers and churches also suggests that there is a real turning to faith especially in some of the non-institutional and independent churches.' (Brierley et al. 2025, p. 2) Moreover, in exploring recent converts' routes to Christian faith, Ruth Perrin and Joe Warton observe that, '[v]ery often, people's journeys towards Jesus start with a deep sense of dissatisfaction with how life is. They are looking for something true and deeply satisfying.' (Perrin and Warton 2025, p. 7) Therefore, to paraphrase the lyrics of one of the CCLI songs analysed, perhaps younger adults, in particular, are turning to Christianity having searched the world for meaning and not being satisfied with what they have found (Brown et al. 2019).

7. Contextual and Theological Dilemmas

7.1. Resonance and Dissonance

Christianity is inherently contextual (Morris 2019, pp. 119–29). Dean Flemming, for instance, contends that 'the activity of expressing and embodying the gospel in context sensitive ways has characterized the Christian mission from the very beginning.' (Flemming 2005, p. 15) He argues that the New Testament texts themselves are informed by and

orientated towards a diversity of contexts. Churches' adaptation to wider cultural trends is therefore inevitable and, from a missiological perspective, desirable. Indeed, Ruth and Lim contend that a desire to overcome the gap between the church and wider society was a core theological imperative prompting the development of contemporary sung worship (Ruth and Lim 2021, p. 3).¹⁸ Such adaptation raises questions, however, as to how 'Christian' different expressions of Christianity are, and how this can be ascertained. Regarding the New Testament, Flemming concludes that despite diversity between texts, they all 'in one way or another bear witness to the transforming story of God's self-giving love, revealed above all in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.' (Flemming 2005, p. 297) Though there may be points of synergy, this story challenges aspects of every cultural context. Therefore, resistance (as noted above) is a hallmark of thriving churches. As Davie observes, the success of church expressions exhibiting dissonance with wider culture surprised earlier social commentators. She notes that the World Council of Churches (WCC), for example, was founded on two assumptions: 'that the world would become an increasingly secular place and that the forms of religion most likely to survive in these circumstances would be those that resembled the "world" most closely'. Reflecting back 65 years after WCC's founding, Davie observes that neither assumption proved true: 'the world is by no means a secular place and the forms of religion that thrive in the twenty-first century are . . . more rather than less conservative' (Davie 2015, p. 143). The influence of secularised social imaginaries on contemporary Christian worship songs thus creates contextual and theological dilemmas for the churches that sing them.

Regarding contextual dilemmas, the importance of both resonance and dissonance between the church and wider culture is illustrated by Davie's observation that, in Britain, Cathedrals and charismatic evangelical churches are thriving in a context in which choice, rather than obligation, determines religious behaviour (Davie 2015, p. 136). She posits that this is because, though different from each other, both facilitate spiritual experience. While, on the one hand, an emphasis on experience accords with expressive individualism, Davie also notes that,

the cathedral and the charismatic service embody religion in the sense of the sacred or 'set-apart'. It seems that late modern populations respond warmly to this feature. Fewer people go to church than was the case in previous decades, but those who do want something distinctive. What happens on Sundays should be different from, rather than an extension of, the everyday. (Davie 2015, p. 143)

The reorientation of battle imagery in contemporary worship songs from mission to personal struggles likely resonates with those searching for meaning and wholeness. Moreover, the Bible Society's research reveals that churchgoers more commonly see their lives as meaningful (McAleer and Barward-Symmons 2025, p. 24). Nevertheless, a dilemma contemporary churches face is to enable points of connection with their wider context while heeding Jay Kim's warning that non-church goers are not looking for relevance, but transcendence (Kim 2020, p. 7).

In terms of theological dilemmas, as noted earlier, the use of military metaphors to depict (or entreat) security and purpose in relationship with God is evident in Psalms (e.g., 18:2; 27:1; 33:20; 35:1–3). Therefore, in the CCLI songs analysed, descriptions of God as, for example, 'an almighty fortress' (Wickham and Johnson 2020) or 'fighting our battles' (Brown et al. 2015) are not theological novelties. However, as Ward notes, even if the theological articulations of individual songs accord with normative Christian doctrines, the 'overall diet' may raise concerns (Ward 2005, p. 210). Regarding songs utilising battle imagery, though surely not the songwriters' aim, in a 'therapeutic age' committed to 'the gospel of self-fulfillment' (Rieff 1966, p. 252), a 'diet' of songs overly weighted towards God fighting the singer's battles (particularly if the singer is required to define what these 'battles' are)

may contribute to instrumental perceptions of God wherein, in the most extreme forms, God is sought primarily as a means of self-enhancement (Morris 2022, pp. 76–79). As N. T. Wright observes, however, the aim of Christian living is not the individual's happiness, fulfilment or self-realisation. Rather, the goal is participation in God's plans and purposes, which involves 'generous love which constantly refuses to take center stage' (Wright 2010, p. 70). Paradoxically, he argues, this self-giving—recognising 'God and God's kingdom' at the centre of the picture—is the route to fullness. Therefore, as contemporary Christian worship music adapts to wider cultural trends, churches risk theological distortions if analysis of the lyrics of individual songs is not combined with consideration of the suite of songs that are sung.

7.2. Reclaiming the Land?

I have cited the shifting context of battle imagery, from mission to personal struggles, as suggestive of a continuation of the 'subjective turn' between SoF and my analysis of the CCLI Top 100s in May 2025. The sparsity of references to mission in the CCLI Top 100s beyond songs utilising battle imagery supports this contention. However, as regards the use of military metaphors in relation to mission, there are two other factors that have influenced this trend: the rise in violent religious extremism and growing awareness of how such metaphors might be perceived in a postcolonial context.

As Michael Jagessar and Stephen Burns observe, the meaning of 'postcolonial' is contested. They note that it is not so much a chronological descriptor (describing the period after European colonisation) as a critical stance towards current colonial attitudes and behaviours that are either latent or manifest (Jagessar and Burns 2014, pp. 24–25). In this regard, Jagessar and Burns affirm Ward's critique of the military framing of mission in SoF. Ward contends that the 'continual use of "the nations" and "the land" has the effect of distancing those outside the Christian Church' and that, through military metaphors, 'Christian mission and witness becomes closely connected with victory and triumph.' (Ward 1996, p. 140) Such a critique, Jagessar and Burns contend, should be applied to traditional hymns too, many of which were written at the height of British expansion (Jagessar and Burns 2014, p. 57). While the context of military imagery in SoF is evangelism, not colonialism, growing awareness of how the language of taking or claiming land is perceived in a postcolonial context is surely an important reason for the move away from this imagery in relation to mission.

Michael Tinker identifies a second reason why military imagery 'fell out of favour': 9/11. He contends that, with increased awareness of violence undertaken by religious extremists, it is important to ask how people may perceive military metaphors in Christian worship songs (Tinker, 2025). Turning to contemporary examples, he highlights 'Praise' (Lake et al. 2023b), specifically the line 'praise is the water my enemies drown in'. While he is confident that the authors are speaking metaphorically and not intending a violent interpretation, he cautions that these lyrics could be misunderstood and so misapplied. This possibility, Tinker argues, is enhanced by the association of Christianity with some calls for violence on the internet and at events such as the Unite the Kingdom rally.

Peter Lynas cites the Unite the Kingdom rally as an example of Christian nationalism (Lynas 2025). Increasing concerns about Christian nationalism in the UK, including the influence of similar factions in the US, is an apt example of Davie's observations regarding an increased focus on religion in public debate (Davie 2015, p. 232). As with postcolonialism, Christian nationalism is a contested term. Helen Paynter identifies it as one of five main strands of far-right ideology but notes that it may also contain elements of the other four (elitism, nativism, authoritarianism, and anti-corruption). Drawing on definitions derived in the US, Paynter identifies reactionary and antidemocratic authoritarianism

combined with beliefs regarding historical heritage and ethnic superiority, alongside desire for political and moral influence, as its key features (Paynter 2024, pp. 5–7). Lynas identifies ‘four orientations of Christian nationalism’ in the UK, in which ‘Christian’ and ‘nationalism’ play a larger or smaller role. At the ‘Christian’ end of the spectrum, he argues, are those whose patriotism flows from their Christian faith and is characterised by a commitment to justice, truth and love. At the ‘nationalism’ end, Christianity is simply ‘a handy prop’ (Lynas 2025). Distinguishing committed churchgoers from those who never, or rarely, attend church services is important for accurate analysis. So too is the recognition that the term ‘Christian nationalism’ means different things to different people. However, as Strømme and Schmiedel maintain, dismissing far-right claims to Christianity as instrumental can lead to an unhealthy denial of the role that violence has played in historic Christianity (Strømme and Schmiedel 2020, pp. 5–6). Paynter agrees, concluding,

We need to be honest about the Church’s historic and contemporary complicity with violence and othering, whether it is done through a theology we would wish to disclaim, or whether the rhetoric lies uncomfortably close to our own theological position. This non-defensive stance will be the indispensable first step in cultivating a faithful and useful response to the problem. (Paynter 2024, p. 175)

It may be that, within the US (where a high proportion of contemporary worship songs are produced), a rise in Christian nationalism has contributed to the recent increase in battle imagery (the majority of the CCLI Top 100 songs that utilise battle imagery were published in the last ten years) even though, as noted above, the predominant context of this imagery is individual and personal. Moreover, Christian worship songs have been utilised in events associated with Christian nationalism, including the Unite the Kingdom rally in the UK (Peacock 2025; Sacerdoti 2025) and subsequent carol service (Allchorn 2025). Reflecting on Sean Feucht’s public worship events in the US during the COVID-19 pandemic, Adam Perez argues that the history of both evangelical public engagement and contemporary sung worship is important in understanding the fusion of praise and politics that was evident in these events. He highlights, in particular, the theological conviction (noted earlier in this article) that God’s presence, and so power, is manifest through praise. Therefore, for Feucht, Perez argues, and others utilising Christian praise music in the context of political protest, ‘The performance of music does spiritual and political work.’ (Perez 2022, p. 4) God’s presence and power is sought through praise to bring political change (Perez 2022, p. 6).

This exploration of Christian nationalism is intended to complexify, not contradict, my earlier analysis. As argued above, although the meaning of battle imagery in the CCLI songs analysed is often unclear, the context of both the songs and wider cultural trends suggests that churchgoers in Britain are most likely to relate such imagery to their own personal struggles. Moreover, public Christian worship might be undertaken for a whole array of reasons, with even those falling under the broad umbrella of Christian nationalism having markedly different conceptions of what this consists of. However, given that some expressions of Christian nationalism include calls for violence, in singing songs utilising military imagery, churches face the contextual dilemma that such lyrics could be misapprehended or, even, misappropriated.

8. Conclusions

In this paper, I have explored the complex relationship between Christianity and secularisation in Britain through the small but illuminating window of contemporary Christian worship songs, focusing on songs that utilise battle imagery. To explore changes in British Christianity over the last 30–40 years, I have compared Songs of Fellowship (the most popular hymnal in the 1980s and 1990s) with the most popular songs sung in British

churches in May 2025. My findings reveal resonance between the shifts observed and key aspects of Charles Taylor's analysis of secularisation: specifically, further movement towards a 'buffered' view of human personhood that is located within an 'immanent frame' (e.g., Taylor 2007, pp. 27, 539, 542). My analysis therefore suggests an ongoing impact of secularisation on Christianity in Britain, specifically evangelical charismatic churches. It also highlights, however, churches' ongoing resistance to secularising trends. Conceptions of self can be neither fully buffered nor constrained to the immanent frame when there is belief in a God who became incarnate in his Son and who indwells believers by his Spirit. Indeed, a desire to encounter God through praise is a core theological impetus behind the development of contemporary sung worship.

In addition, as I have argued above, exploring the impact of secularisation on Christianity involves consideration of secularisation's Christian roots. Moreover, recent surveys suggest that the philosophical and phenomenological limitations of secularism may be contributing to an increased interest in Christianity, particularly amongst young adults. There is, therefore, a 'persistent paradox' (Davie 2015) between Christianity and secularisation in Britain, with each influencing (and, in some regards, inextricable from) the other. Highlighting this paradoxical relationship challenges subtraction theories that depict secularisation as simply diminishing religious commitment and/or the removal (or relegation) of religion from public and, to lesser extents, private life.

I have concluded by identifying theological and contextual dilemmas for churches using songs that utilise military metaphors. These dilemmas include consideration of how such lyrics may be perceived in a postcolonial context and at a time when concerns about violent expressions of Christian nationalism are a key topic in public debate.

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Appendix A

Songs of Fellowship

Below are the SoF songs (1998) that I adjudged utilise battle imagery (at either a semantic or latent level) in the context of a battle that the singer participates in.

2 'Abide with Me' by W. H. Monk, 1847

8 'All Hail the Lamb' by Dave Bilbrough, 1987

11 'All Heaven Waits' by Graham Kendrick and Chris Rolinson, 1986

19 'Amazing Grace' by John Newton, 1772

20 'An Army of Ordinary People' by Dave Bilbrough, 1983

25 'A Safe Stronghold Our God Is Still' by Martin Luther, trans Thomas Carlyle in 1831

29 'As We Come with Praise' by Dale Garratt, 1982

42 'Be Thou My Vision', dates back to Ireland in the 6th C translated into English in 1905

- 60 'Christ Is Risen' by Chris Rolinson, 1989
- 78 'Darkness Like a Shroud' by Graham Kendrick, 1985
- 107 'Fight the Good Fight' by John Monsell, 1863
- 109 'For All the Saints' by W. W. How, 1864
- 113 'For the Lord Is Marching On' by Bonnie Low, 1977
- 114 'For This Purpose' by Graham Kendrick, 1985
- 135 'God Is Working His Purpose Out' by Arthur C. Ainger, 1894
- 139 'God of Grace and God of Glory' by H E Fosdick, 1930
- 174 'He Who Would Valiant Be' by John Bunyon, 1906
- 198 'I Am a Wounded Soldier' by Danny Daniels, 1985
- 216 'I Hear the Sound of Rustling' by Ronnie Wilson, 1979
- 217 'I Hear the Sound of the Army of the Lord' by Dave Moody, 1984
- 237 'In Heavenly Armour' by Jamie Owens-Collins, 1984
- 313 'Join All the Glorious Names' by Isaac Watts, 1707
- 367 'Lord, You Are Calling' by Simon and Lorraine Fenner, 1989
- 404 'Not Without Cause' by Bill Anderson, 1985
- 442 'Onward, Christian Soldiers' by Sabine Baring-Gould, 1864
- 476 'Raise up an Army' by Steve and Vikki Cook, 1988
- 480 'Rejoice!' by Graham Kendrick, 1983
- 486 'Rise Up' by Mark Altrogge, 1982
- 506 'Soldiers of Christ, Arise' by Charles Wesley, 1747
- 513 'Stand Up! Stand Up! For Jesus' by George Duffield, 1858
- 534 'The Lord Has Given' unknown author and date
- 539 'The Nations Are Waiting for Us' by Mark Altrogge, 1986
- 545 'There Is Power in the Name of Jesus' by Noel Richards, 1989
- 547 'There's a Sound on the Wind Like a Victory Song' by Graham Kendrick, 1978
- 558 'Through Our God' by Dale Garratt, 1979
- 568 'We Are in God's Army' by Ian Smale, 1987
- 587 'We Rest on Thee, Our Shield and Our Defender' by Edith G Cherry, 1895
- 589 'We Shall Stand' by Graham Kendrick, 1988
- 607 'Who Is on the Lord's Side' by Frances R. Havergal, 1877
- 637 'Your Mercy Flows' by Wes Sutton, 1988
- 642 'All Around the World' by Paul Oakley, 1997
- 661 'As We See the World (Every Place)' by Lex Loizides, 1996
- 670 'Bells They Are Ringing (Name over All)' by Jim Bailey, 1996
- 671 'Be Still and Know that I Am God' by Lex Loizides, 1995
- 681 'Called to a Battle (Thunder in the Skies)' by Noel and Tricia Richards, 1992
- 692 'Come, Let Us Worship Jesus' by Graham Kendrick, 1992
- 694 'Come out of Darkness' by Noel Richards and Doug Horley, 1996
- 698 'Day of Favour' by David Fellingham, 1995
- 700 'Did You Feel the Mountains Tremble?' by Martin Smith, 1995
- 712 'Father in Heaven' by Jim Bailey, 1996
- 714 'Father of Creation (Let Your Glory Fall)' by David Ruis, 1993
- 715 'Father, You Have Given (Not to Us)' by Robert Critchley, 1996
- 721 'For the Joys and for the Sorrows (For This I Have Jesus)' by Graham Kendrick, 1994
- 723 'From Every Tongue (We'll Be Set Free)' by Wayne Drain, 1996
- 731 'God Is Raising up an Army (Children of the Cross)' by Jim Bailey, 1997

- 736 'God Sent His Son (Because He Lives)' by William J. Gaither, 1971
 751 'He Has Been Given' by David Fellingham, 1992
 760 'He Reigns' by Rick Ridings, 1990
 764 'Here We Are, Lord (Dangerous People)' by Noel Richards, Tricia Richards and Gerald Coates, 1996.
 765 'Here We Stand in Total Surrender' by Charlie Groves and Andy Piercy, 1995
 770 'Holy Ghost' by Bjorn Aslakson, 1992
 797 'I Have Heard (I Won't Let Go)' by Stuart Townsend, 1997
 819 'In These Days of Darkness (Carry the Fire)' by Sue Rinaldi and Steve Bassett, 1994
 839 'I Walk by Faith' by Chris Falson, 1990
 883 'Let the Church Arise' by Phil Wilthew, 1996
 889 'Let Your Word' by David and Nathan Fellingham, 1992
 915 'Magnificent Warrior' by Graham Kendrick, 1985
 917 'Make Us a House of Prayer' by Daniel Brymer, 1990
 953 'O God, Most High (You Have Broken the Chains)' by Jamie Owens-Collins, 1991
 955 'O God of Burning, Cleansing Flame' by William Booth adapted by Lex Loizides, 1994
 959 'O Lord, Arise (Lord of Every Man)' by Craig Musseau, 1992
 966 'Open the Doors of Praise' by Ian White, 1997
 967 'O Righteous God' by Maldwyn Pope, 1989
 971 'Our God is Awesome in Power' by Noel and Tricia Richards, 1992
 1008 'Sound the Trumpet' by Dave Bilbrough, 1991
 1014 'Teach Us, O Lord' by Kevin Prosch, 1981
 1018 'The Battle Is the Lord's' by Doug Horley, 1994
 1028 'The Lord Has Spoken (Raise up a Church)' by Paul Oakley, 1991
 1064 'Throughout the Earth Your Glory Will Come' by James Wright, 1996
 1065 'Thy Hand, O God, Has Guided' by Edward Hayes Plumptre, 1865
 1073 'Wake Up, Wake Up O Sleeper' by Nathan Fellingham, 1996
 1077 'We Are Marching to a Different Anthem' by Lex Loizides, 1997
 1078 'We Are Salt' by Bob Fitts, 1992
 1079 'We Are the Army of God' by Kevin Prosch, 1990
 1105 'We Want to See Jesus Lifted High' by Doug Horley, 1993
 1107 'We Will Tear Down Every Stronghold' by Dave Bilbrough, 1991
 1132 'You Are Worthy to Receive' by John Pantry, 1990
 1143 'You're the Lion of Judah' by Robin Mark, 1993

Appendix B

CCLI

Below are the songs included in both the CCLI Top 100 published on 1st May 2025 and the Top 100 for 19 May 2025 that I adjudged to contain battle imagery (at either a semantic or latent level) in the context of a battle that the singer, in some way, participates in. They are ordered alphabetically not by popularity.

'Amazing Grace (My Chains Are Gone)' by Chris Tomlin, John Newton and Louie Giglio, 2006 (CCLI Song # 4768151)

'Battle Belongs' by Brian Johnson and Phil Wickham, 2020 (CCLI Song # 7148126)

'Bless God' by Brandon Lake, Brooke Ligertwood and Cody Carnes, 2023 (CCLI Song # 7206380)

'Build your Kingdom Here' by Chris Llewellyn, Gareth Gilkeson and William Herron, 2011 (CCLI Song # 6186078)

'God I Look to You' by Ian McIntosh and Jenn Johnson, 2010 (CCLI Song # 5858163)

‘Graves into Gardens’ by Brandon Lake, Chris Brown, Steven Furtick and Tiffany Hudson, 2019 (CCLI Song # 7138219)

‘Hosanna’ by Brooke Ligertwood, 2006 (CCLI Song # 4785835)

‘I Speak Jesus’ by Abby Benton, Carlene Prince, Dustin Smith, Jesse Reeves, Kristen Dutton and Raina Pratt, 2019 (CCLI Song # 7136201)

‘I Thank God’ by Aaron Moses, Chuck Butler, Dante Bowe, Enrique Holmes, Jesse Cline and Maryanne J. George, 2021 (CCLI Song # 7169680)

‘No Longer Slaves’ by Brian Johnson, Joel Case and Jonathan David Helser, 2014 (CCLI Song # 7030123)

‘Our God’ by Chris Tomlin, Jesse Reeves, Jonas Myrin and Matt Redman, 2010 (CCLI Song # 5677416)

‘Praise’ by Brandon Lake, Chandler Moore, Chris Brown, Cody Carnes, Pat Barrett and Steven Furtick, 2023 (CCLI Song # 7213077)

‘Raise a Hallelujah’ by Jake Stevens, Jonathan David Helser, Melissa Helser and Molly Skaggs, 2018 (CCLI Song # 7119315)

‘Thanksgiving’ by Alex Hart, Nick Herbert, Taku Mudere and Zo Ross-Waddell, 2023 (CCLI Song # 7199589)

‘The Lion and the Lamb’ by Brenton Brown, Brian Johnson and Leeland Mooring, 2015 (CCLI Song # 7038281)

‘What a Beautiful Name’ by Ben Fielding and Brooke Ligertwood, 2016 (CCLI Song # 7068424)

Below are the remainder of the 81 songs that were contained within both the quarterly Top 100 songs published on 1st May 2025 and the Top 100 for 19 May 2025. They are ordered alphabetically not by popularity.

‘10,000 Reasons’ by Jonas Myrin and Matt Redman, 2011 (CCLI Song # 6016351)

‘A Thousand Hallelujahs’ by Brooke Ligertwood, Phil Wickham and Scott Ligertwood, 2022 (CCLI Song # 7190270)

‘Agnus Dei’ by Michael W. Smith, 1990 (CCLI Song # 626713)

‘All Hail King Jesus’ by Jeremy Riddle, Peter Mattis, Ran Jackson and Steffany Gretzinger, 2017 (CCLI Song # 7097216)

‘Be Still’ by David J. Evans, 1986 (CCLI Song # 120824)

‘Before the Throne of God Above’ by Charitie Lees Bancroft and Vikki Cook, 1997 (CCLI Song # 2306412)

‘Blessed Be Your Name’ by Beth Redman and Matt Redman, 2002 (CCLI Song # 3798438)

‘Build My Life’ by Brett Younker, Karl Martin, Kirby Kaple, Matt Redman and Pat Barrett, 2016 (CCLI Song # 7070345)

‘Cornerstone’ by Edward Mote, Eric Liljero, Jonas Myrin, Reuben Morgan and William Batchelder Bradbury, 2011 (CCLI Song # 6158927)

‘Everlasting God’ by Brenton Brown and Ken Riley, 2005 (CCLI Song # 4556538)

‘Firm Foundation (He Won’t)’ by Austin Davis, Chandler Moore and Cody Carnes, 2021 (CCLI Song # 7188203)

‘Forever’ by Chris Tomlin, 2001 (CCLI Song # 3148428)

‘Glorious Day’ by Jason Ingram, Jonathan Smith, Kristian Stanfill and Sean Curran, 2017 (CCLI Song # 7081388)

‘Good Good Father’ by Anthony Brown and Pat Barrett, 2014 (CCLI Song # 7036612)

‘Goodness of God’ by Ben Fielding, Brian Johnson, Ed Cash, Jason Ingram and Jenn Johnson, 2018 (CCLI Song # 7117726)

‘Gratitude’ by Benjamin Hastings, Brandon Lake and Dante Bowe, 2019 (CCLI Song # 7158417)

- ‘Great Are You Lord’ by David Leonard, Jason Ingram and Leslie Jordan, 2012 (CCLI Song # 6460220)
- ‘Great Big God’ by Jo Hemming and Nigel Hemming, 2001 (CCLI Song # 3373437)
- ‘Great Things’ by Jonas Myrin and Phil Wickham, 2018 (CCLI Song # 7111321)
- ‘Great Is Thy Faithfulness’ by Thomas Obediah Chisholm and William Marion Runyan, 1923 (CCLI Song # 18723)
- ‘Here for You’ by Jesse Reeves, Matt Maher, Matt Redman and Tim Wanstall, 2011 (CCLI Song # 5925649)
- ‘Holy Forever’ by Brian Johnson, Chris Tomlin, Jason Ingram, Jenn Johnson and Phil Wickham, 2022 (CCLI Song # 7201044)
- ‘Here I Am to Worship’ by Tim Hughes, 2000 (CCLI Song # 3266032)
- ‘Holy Spirit’ by Bryan Torwalt and Katie Torwalt, 2011 (CCLI Song # 6087919)
- ‘Holy and Anointed One’ by John Barnett, 1988 (CCLI Song # 164361)
- ‘Hosanna (Praise Is Rising)’ by Brenton Brown and Paul Baloche, 2005 (CCLI Song # 4662491)
- ‘House of the Lord’ by Jonathan Smith and Phil Wickham, 2020 (CCLI Song # 7168995)
- ‘How Deep the Father’s Love for Us’ by Stuart Townend, 1995 (CCLI Song # 1558110)
- ‘How Great Thou Art’ by Stuart Wesley and Keene Hine, 1949 (CCLI Song # 14181)
- ‘How Great Is Our God’ by Chris Tomlin, Ed Cash and Jesse Reeves, 2004 (CCLI Song # 4348399)
- ‘I Give You My Heart’ by Reuben Morgan, 1995 (CCLI Song # 1866132)
- ‘I Will Offer Up My Life’ by Matt Redman, 1994 (CCLI Song # 1083764)
- ‘In Christ Alone’ by Keith Getty and Stuart Townend, 2001 (CCLI Song # 3350395)
- ‘King of Kings’ by Brooke Ligertwood, Jason Ingram and Scott Ligertwood, 2019 (CCLI Song # 7127647)
- ‘King of Kings Majesty’ by Jarrod Cooper, 1996 (CCLI Song # 1581778)
- ‘King of My Heart’ by John Mark McMillan and Sarah McMillan, 2015 (CCLI Song # 7046145)
- ‘Living Hope’ by Brian Johnson and Phil Wickham, 2017 (CCLI Song # 7106807)
- ‘Make Room’ by Evelyn Heideriqui, Josh Farro, Lucas Cortazio and Rebekah White, 2018 (CCLI Song # 7122057)
- ‘Mighty to Save’ by Ben Fielding and Reuben Morgan, 2006 (CCLI Song # 4591782)
- ‘My Lighthouse’ by Chris Llewellyn and Gareth Gilkeson, 2013 (CCLI Song # 7002032)
- ‘O Come to the Altar’ by Chris Brown, Mack Brock, Steven Furtick and Wade Joye, 2015 (CCLI Song # 7051511)
- ‘O Praise the Name’ by Benjamin Hastings, Dean Ussher and Marty Sampson, 2015 (CCLI Song # 7037787)
- ‘Oceans (Where Feet May Fail)’ by Joel Houston, Matt Crocker and Salomon Ligthelm, 2012 (CCLI Song # 6428767)
- ‘Open the Eyes of My Heart’ by Paul Baloche, 1997 (CCLI Song # 2298355)
- ‘Psalm 23’ by Stuart Townend, 1996 (CCLI Song # 1585970)
- ‘Reckless Love’ by Caleb Culver, Cory Asbury and Ran Jackson, 2017 (CCLI Song # 7089641)
- ‘Refiner’s Fire’ by Brian Doerksen, 1990 (CCLI Song CCLI Song # 426298)
- ‘Rest on Us’ by Brandon Lake, Elyssa Smith, Harvest Bashta, Jonathan Jay, Rebekah White and Tony Brown, 2019 (CCLI Song # 7126736)
- ‘Shout to the Lord’ by Darlene Zschech, 1993 (CCLI Song # 1406918)
- ‘Spirit Break Out’ by Ben Bryant, Luke Hellebronth, Myles Dhillon and Tim Hughes, 2010 (CCLI Song # 6058450)
- ‘The Heart of Worship’ by Matt Redman, 1997 (CCLI Song # 2296522)

- ‘The Power of Your Love’ by Geoff Bullock, 1992 (CCLI Song # 917491)
- ‘The Blessing’ by Chris Brown, Cody Carnes, Kari Jobe and Steven Furtick, 2020 (CCLI Song # 7147007)
- ‘There Is a Redeemer’ by Melody Green, 1982 (CCLI Song # 11483)
- ‘This I Believe (The Creed)’ by Ben Fielding and Matt Crocker, 2014 (CCLI Song # 7018338)
- ‘This Is Amazing Grace’ by Jeremy Riddle, Josh Farro and Phil Wickham, 2013 (CCLI Song # 6333821)
- ‘This Is Our God’ by Reuben Morgan, 2008 (CCLI Song # 5060834)
- ‘Trust in God’ by Brandon Lake, Chris Brown, Mitch Wong and Steven Furtick, 2023 (CCLI Song # 7206001)
- ‘Waiting Here’ for You by Chris Tomlin, Jesse Reeves and Martin Smith, 2011 (CCLI Song # 5925663)
- ‘Way Maker’ by Osinachi Kalu Okoro Egbu, 2016 (CCLI Song # 7115744)
- ‘Who You Say I Am’ by Reuben Morgan and Ben Fielding, 2018 (CCLI Song # 7102401)
- ‘Worthy’ by Chris Brown, Mack Brock and Steven Furtick, 2018 (CCLI Song # 7111931)
- ‘Worthy Is the Lamb’ by Darlene Zschech, 2000 (CCLI Song # 3217555)
- ‘Worthy of It All’ by David Brymer and Ryan Hall, 2012 (CCLI Song # 6280644)
- ‘Yet Not I (But Christ in Me)’ by Jonny Robinson, Michael Farren and Rich Thompson, 2018 (CCLI Song # 7121852)

Notes

- ¹ While not explicit, the language of ‘your enemy’ suggests that Satan is in view. This is in contrast to the language of ‘enemies’, which has a less clear referent.
- ² Based on the CCLI Top 100 quarterly results released on 1 May 2025 and one particular week in May 2025 (see §4 for more details on this).
- ³ Utilising Brad Gregory’s arguments in support of this contention requires justification since his purview is the US and his concern in the chapter cited is morality. Gregory notes that, despite the plethora of doctrinal and institutional disagreements within Christianity before, during and following the Reformation, belief in the creation of human beings in God’s image was shared by all (Gregory 2012, p. 213). This doctrine provided the theological and philosophical foundation for the concept of human rights. Due to irresolvable disagreements between different Christian groups, this notion of rights became increasingly individualised (Gregory 2012, pp. 215–16). Moreover, while initially rooted in Christian understandings of virtue and teleology, it proved possible for ‘millions of people’ to detach the concept of human rights from a shared Christian foundation and exercise their rights ‘to convert to substantially different beliefs, choosing different goods and living accordingly.’ (Gregory 2012, p. 218) Although Gregory is a critic of Taylor in some respects, his description accords with Taylor’s notion of ‘self-sufficient humanism’, which Taylor defines as ‘a humanism accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing.’ (Taylor 2007, p. 18). Moreover, without wanting to flatten the differences between the US and UK, on the topic of human rights and flourishing, there is much resonance between the two.
- ⁴ ‘What a Friend We Have in Jesus’, for example, was published in the late 19th century and John Wesley’s ‘Jesu, Lover of My Soul’ in the 18th century.
- ⁵ His projection was 44,409 compared to 46,550 in 2015 and 45,492 in 2020 (Brierley 2020).
- ⁶ This claim is supported by my own experience as a churchgoer (I remember singing several of the songs included in my analysis in the 1980s and 1990s) and Michael Tinker’s reminiscence about the use of battle imagery prior to 9/11 (Tinker 2025). While this is admittedly anecdotal, I am confident that these experiences would resonate with others who attended evangelical churches in Britain during this period.
- ⁷ As noted previously, the weekly and quarterly CCLI Top 100 lists are based on different data sets. The weekly Top 100 is based on user downloads. The quarterly Top 100 is based on churches’ self-reporting. I selected for analysis the 81 songs that were included in both the quarterly report published on 1 May 2025 and the Top 100 downloads list for one week in May. My assumption was that being present in both lists was a strong indicator of a song’s popularity in the UK church at the time of the analysis.
- ⁸ The SoF songs that I remember singing generally have a more metrical driving rhythm than the CCLI songs I analysed, which are usually slower in tempo and less rigid metrically. A slower and less rigid tempo is more conducive to the conveyance of intimacy with God than a faster and more metrical beat which is, in turn, musically apt for a call to mission.

- 9 Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke distinguish semantic from latent coding as follows: ‘Semantic codes capture explicitly-expressed meaning’ whereas ‘[I]latent codes focus on a deeper, more implicit or conceptual level of meaning’ (Braun and Clarke 2022, pp. 57–58). While most songs included in the analysis contain battle imagery at the semantic level, some were included that only contain such imagery at the latent level. ‘What a Beautiful Name’ (Fielding and Ligertwood 2016) is an example of latent battle imagery. ‘Rival’ does not necessarily evoke a battle. However, combined with the depiction of Jesus silencing ‘the boast of sin and the grace’, the ‘roaring’ of heaven, and the exhortation that nothing can stand against Jesus’ name, I concluded that this song implies a battle that Christ has won and that singers participate in as they proclaim Christ’s name.
- 10 For example, I excluded songs/hymns that refer to Christ’s victory but do not also indicate a battle that the singer in some way participates in (aside from celebrating Christ’s victory). It is on this basis, for instance, that, regarding CCLI songs, I included ‘What a Beautiful Name’ (Fielding and Ligertwood 2016) but not ‘All Hail King Jesus’ (Riddle et al. 2017), even though both songs refer to the heavens ‘roaring’/‘roared’. While battle imagery is only present in both at a latent level, I concluded that (as noted above) ‘What a Beautiful Name’ implies that believers participate in an ongoing battle through proclaiming Jesus’ name. In contrast, while Jesus’ victory is celebrated in ‘All Hail King Jesus’, it is not as clear in this song that singers participate in an ongoing battle through their praise (although the bridge may imply this). ‘No Longer Slaves’ (Johnson et al. 2014) utilises battle imagery through its reference to ‘enemies’. Although most of the song refers to a completed victory, I concluded that the line ‘Till all my fears are gone’ implies that, through encountering God in praise, the singer participates in an ongoing battle over fear. ‘Reckless Love’ (Culver et al. 2017) utilises battle imagery. However, the song regards God’s actions towards the singer and does not reference the singer’s participation in an ongoing battle. Therefore, I did not include it. These deliberations illustrate that, although most of the SoF and CCLI songs selected clearly met my criteria, there are some for which it was difficult to decide on their inclusion or exclusion. Nevertheless, I am confident that, even if others come to different decisions regarding some songs, my overall conclusions are not impacted.
- 11 The use of battle imagery in the fourth CCLI song that I put in the category of mission is also only at the latent level (‘Hosanna’ by Ligertwood 2006). After deliberation, I decided that the opening imagery, ‘coming on the clouds with fire’, which evokes biblical passages such as Psalm 68 and Daniel 7:13–14, paints a picture of God/Jesus riding out as a victorious warrior, providing a battle context for the remainder of the song.
- 12 The only military reference in ‘Graves into Gardens’ (Brown et al. 2019) is when God is celebrated as the one who turns bones into armies (a reference to Ezekiel 37). Aside from revealing something of the character of the God whom the singer has encountered, it is not entirely clear how this military imagery relates to other aspects of the song. It seems likely, however, that singers are intended to see themselves as part of the armies that God forms.
- 13 In ‘I Thank God’ this looking forward is subtle: ‘From now till I walk streets of gold’ (Moses et al. 2021). Several songs in the Top 100s for May 2025 exhibit a future-orientated eschatology but do not utilise battle imagery. These are: O Praise the Name (Hastings et al. 2015); 10,000 Reasons (Bless the Lord) (Myrin and Redman 2011); In Christ Alone (Getty and Townend 2001); How Great Thou Art (Wesley and Hine 1953); Cornerstone (Mote et al. 2011); Yet Not I But Through Christ In Me (Robinson et al. 2018); There is a Redeemer (Green 1982); and This I Believe (The Creed) (Fielding and Crocker 2014). Ruth’s analysis of traditional hymns and contemporary worship songs suggests that the total proportion of CCLI Top 100 songs containing lyrics that look forward to Christ’s return is significantly lower than in traditional hymnals (Ruth 2015, pp. 74–75).
- 14 The theme of mission is evident in ‘King of Kings’ (Ligertwood et al. 2019) in reference to Jesus’ work. ‘Build my Life’ concludes with the line ‘lead me in your love to those around me’ (Younker et al. 2016). In ‘Reckless Love’ the line ‘leaves the ninety-nine’ evokes the theme of Christian mission, although the primary focus of the song is God’s love for the singer (Culver et al. 2017). ‘Mighty to Save’ (Fielding and Morgan 2006) refers to mission in its bridge. These songs do not contain battle imagery but are in the 81 songs that were contained in both the monthly and quarterly Top 100s for May 2025. Based on his analysis of a larger range of CCLI songs (32 songs that were contained in the Top 25 songs for at least two of US, UK, Australia, Canada and New Zealand during his research period), Thornton finds that the majority have ‘Prophetic/Declarative’ and/or ‘Praise/Thanksgiving’ as either a primary or secondary focus. He argues, ‘An important feature of Praise/Thanksgiving and Prophetic/Declarative is their evangelistic, or at least externally focused, potential. They have the capacity to be testimonial, which in certain contexts could be directed to those who do not yet know Christ, although whether they are directed to the unsaved or not, their testimonial nature is cathartic for Christians.’ (Thornton 2021, p. 162) The word ‘potential’ is noteworthy here. My contention is not that CCLI songs could not be utilised missionally by Christians but that, generally, they do not contain the call to mission that is prevalent in the SoF songs analysed.
- 15 In ‘Raise a Hallelujah’ (Stevens et al. 2018), for example, ‘the King’ is the only explicit reference to God while I/me/my appear twenty times. However, ‘heaven’, repeated twice, may also refer to God and, for the singer familiar with its meaning, the repetition of Hallelujah (‘God be praised’) also references God. If these are counted, the total number of references to God is thirteen.

- ¹⁶ For instance, ‘Amazing Grace [My Chains Are Gone]’ (Tomlin et al. 2006) has more personal pronouns than references to God although largely based on an 18th Century hymn. Regarding Psalms, Psalm 3, 6, and 139, for example, have, in the NIV 2011 edition, more references to the psalmist (in the first-person singular) than God.
- ¹⁷ 1274 participants in contrast to 19,101 (2018) and 13,146 (2024) in the Bible Society’s research.
- ¹⁸ Alongside, as noted above, ‘a particular biblical theology that saw God revitalizing the church by restoring praise as the way worshipers experience God’s presence.’ (Ruth and Lim 2021, p. 3).

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