"Me and the Devil Was Walking Side by Side": The Sacred/Secular Dichotomy and Its Inability to Comprehend Spirituals and the Blues

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At least since its entrance on the national stage – in the early 1920s - and likely before then, the blues was referred to as "the devil's music" by church folk[1] and Christian ministers. New scholarship has argued that the blues approaches theological issues, but the degree to which scholars consider it a religious endeavor varies. Conversely, scholars and non-scholars alike typically assumed the slave spirituals to be of a religious nature; and while some analysis acknowledges their nonreligious functions, it often suffers from the assumption that the spirituals are almost completely religious. The nonreligious slave music (i.e., songs not called "spirituals" by those who first recorded them) was usually aggregated under the heading of "Slave Songs" because the categories for "sacred" music cannot incorporate "secular" music. These interpretations frequently ignore the fundamental debate over whether our characterizations of the spirituals and the blues as either sacred or secular are appropriate or useful. This distinction provides little help in the way of understanding the whole of religious expression by the singers and producers of these songs. The central problem in the sacred/secular dichotomy rests in the fact that neither term is defined enough to handle ambiguous versions of the music or overlapping purposes in the use of an idea that is typically considered "sacred" or "secular." This is specifically true for the study of the spirituals and the blues and it may indicate larger problems with the way scholars use categories to interpret the world.

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[1] An interesting anecdote demonstrating to the animosity of Christianity towards the blues relates to none other than the self-proclaimed "Father of the Blues," W. C. Handy (1873-1958). As a young man, his father discovered his guitar prompting him to cry, "A guitar! One of the devil's playthings. Take it away. . . Whatever possessed you to bring a sinful thing like that into our Christian home? Take it back where is came from. You hear? Get!" (Handy 10).

Methodological Approach and Difficulties in Accurate Analysis

The definition of secularity and sacredness can be tautological: that which is "secular" is "not sacred" and likewise, the "sacred" has been defined as that which "is *the opposite of the profane*" (Eliade 10). If we define the "secular" as being "this-worldly" while the "sacred" is "otherworldly," we can clarify the scope of these terms ("Sacred" def. 3a, "secular" def. AI and 2a). But even with this added elucidation, the definition is simply a contrast between what is "otherworldly" and "not-otherworldly." Another approach to understanding the spirituals and blues in light of the sacred and secular is to revise these definitions to mean something closer to the difference between the "holy" and the "profane." Holiness and sacredness can roughly equate, while profanity incorporates the definition of secularity plus a sense of "disregard" or "contempt for the sacred" ("Profane" def. 1 and 3) Such a re-definition provides little contribution toward understanding whether a song is sacred or secular, holy or profane, because it fails to consider how different groups understand these terms.

Of particular importance for this subjective-definition problem is the historical context of those making claims about what is sacred or secular. For effective scholarly analysis, it is necessary to consider the differences in social thought for those within the period as well as examiners of the period. The analysis in this paper is loosely confined to the period between the Civil War and the rise of the blues in the 1920s. This period is somewhat large for the length of a paper, but a necessary for two reasons. Firstly, one of the most important dividing factors between the blues and spirituals is the social context that facilitated the growth of each. As James Cone points out, the spirituals are *slave* songs and address the historical realities that are pre-Civil War; the blues was conceived of by freedmen and ex-slaves who, though they faced similar

ostracization from white society, were capable of autonomous action of a higher order than in antebellum society (112). In 1867, two major works were published documenting 'slave songs' (generally) and 'Negro spirituals' in particular. The first was Col. Thomas Wentworth Higginson's "Negro Spirituals," which recounted his study of spirituals that were sung by the African American regiment he commanded during the Civil War. Shortly thereafter, William F. Allen, Charles P. Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison published *Slave Songs in the United States*, which was the most comprehensive collection of slave songs (mostly what Allen, Ware, and Garrison called spirituals and a few 'secular' songs) to date. During the final year of the Civil War and the year after, these Northern abolitionists traveled to South Carolina, Georgia, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Arkansas, the Mississippi River, Florida, and Louisiana attempting to transcribe the lyrics and melodies of slave songs. After the war new styles of religious music superseded the spirituals, which many African Americans associated with slavery and a dark past – the spirituals represented something to be forgotten (Allen et al. xx, Cooper 54). These two texts are the earliest and best documentation of spirituals available and, imperfect though they may be, are a marker of the spiritual tradition up to that point.

The second reason I couch the discussion in the post-Civil War/early twentieth century era relates to the lack of blues records dated before the 1920s. Blues was likely well developed by the turn of the century (according to Big Bill Broozny (1898-1958), it was already developed by the early 1890s when his uncle sang the "Joe Turner Blues") (Ferris 123). Because the origins and development of the blues went largely undocumented (save anecdotal reports by blues artists about when they first heard the blues) a discussion of the blues is necessarily going be speculative (*ibid* 122). The only texts and records we have to analyze came nearly twenty years

after it was fully formed. Much like the spirituals, the lyrics used in this paper are a reflection of many decades of formation and growth – while there is some indication of traditions in each musical form, the degree of originality in the works is indeterminable. Both blues and spirituals were subject to revision given the speakers and the audience to whom the song was delivered. This may be a reason why there appear to be hardly any secular slave songs. In his description of these "sorrow songs" (referring to slave songs collectively), W. E. B. Du Bois remarks that "Purely secular songs are few in number, partly because many of them were turned into hymns by a change of words, partly because the frolics were seldom heard by the stranger, and the music less often caught" (14). Du Bois explains that the "veiled and half articulate" messages of the sorrow songs were the slave's way of communicating with the world (*ibid*). Though they were not religious in nature, the words and music marked a dimly understood theology – the remnants of which were lost because few people transcribed them in that form. Texts were often changed to hold a "contemporary" sacred purpose.

Defining the blues and spirituals (as with any form of music) is no small feat. A few authors assume the reader understands the terms and provides no qualification as to how those terms relate to their scholarship; most of what is said about the spirituals and the blues is about their reception from churchgoers. Another small group tries to simplify the matter by defining them through their musical structure and forms (i.e. twelve bar form for blues or the absence of instrumentation, save percussion, in the spirituals). But, of course, this approach hardly avoids the question as to the extent variations can still be considered one form of music or the other. The larger portion scholars either attempt more abstract definitions of the terms or borrow abstract definitions form others. An example of this can be found in the oft-cited Cone quotation: "The spiritual, then, is the spirit of the people struggling to be free; it is their religion, their

source of strength in a time of trouble" (32). And the blues? They are "secular spirituals"; secular because that are focused on this world, but spirituals because "they are impelled by the same search for the truth of black experience" (112). Even more abstract explanations come from the musicians themselves, such as Memphis-born bluesman Booker T. Laury who famously stated, "I am the blues – I'm the truth about the blues" (Spencer xxv).

This is not to say these approaches are necessarily wrong or that abstraction leads to useless definitions. Any attempt to define the (arguably) indefinable will result in either vague descriptions or a variety of different points that in some ways at least describe part of the term. In this paper, I do not seek to define either the spirituals or the blues beyond a rudimentary historical context. The spirituals are a communal response to the collective woes created by slavery; the blues is an individualistic response to the communal woes produced by the "burden of freedom." Both musical forms are historical records and endeavors to proclaim the humanity and *somebodiness* of the African American being in a culture that views them as objects (Cone 17). These simple definitions are intentionally leaving out traditions, forms, and customs (which are common in nearly all styles of the music) so that initial assumptions that one form is typically more religious than the other do not muddy the attempt to better understand their sacred and secular natures.

African Origins for the Spirituals and Blues

We can speak generally about the nature of music and spirituality in West Africa in the period before and during the slave trade because tribes such as the Yoruba, Ibo, Ashanti, Gabon, Fulani, and Dahomean Fon (which supplied a large number of slaves to the Americas) shared similar musical and religious characteristics (Marini 108). However, because musical narratives

were the primary means of historical documentation, the accounts are subject to change for the same reasons change occurs in other non-written traditions (as the stories musically get passed on to each successive generation, the interpretation and text shifts). In many ways, our historical understanding will be conjectural. Whenever Africans assembled, it is likely that the assembly was accompanied by song and dance. The use of music in West African society seems ubiquitous. Miles Mark Fisher lists some of the various uses of instrumental expression employed for various life situations (both ritualistic and festival). For example, music was utilized "during love-making, at marriage, at the birth of a child, at the child's initiation into the tribal cult; in farming, fishing, and hunting; in the educational process, including counting games with fruit and seeds or magical designs; for recreation such as telling tales, proverbs, riddles, and enigmas; and for promoting the military spirit… [as well as] at feasts for the dead, at wakes, and at funerals" (Fisher 5).[2] Rather than serve as art for its own sake, music in West African culture was purposefully functional (Reed 4). The importance of functionality plays an important role in the development of both the spirituals and the blues as African Americans attempted to understand their place in a society that did not accept them.

There are no indications that West African cultures confined music to a specific space. This characteristic was a systematic feature of these cultures, claims Teresa Reed. Religion, too, was absent of definitional borders; moreover, music and religion were so thoroughly ingrained in one another that to imagine one without the other would be impossible (Reed 4). According to Reed, "In the West African worldview, music is intrinsically spiritual, the sacred intrinsically musical, and both music and the divine permeate every imaginable part of life" (5). The inseparable nature of music and spirituality in West African culture meant that when the slaves

[2] The extent of musical employment goes even further depending upon the tribe observed. For instance, the Dahomean had a song for the loss of the first tooth and the Ashanti had a song to celebrate when a girl reached puberty and first menstruated (Fisher 6).

were transplanted to the colonies, the conception of "sacred" and "secular" musical traditions would have been foreign to them (Reed 5, Trulear and Weems, 2007). The absence of this distinction becomes apparent, in part, by the use of spirituals for nonreligious activities such as rowing songs, field songs, and social songs (a matter further explored later in the paper). As African Americans began to assimilate into West-European culture over the course of the nineteenth century, it was primarily the West-European form of worship (i.e., church attendance) that informed the black understanding of the sacred/secular dichotomy.

Complex conceptions of the divine and spiritual presence in the West African's cosmos further complicates how scholars understand the ways these cultures interpretation the sacred and secular. In the religion of the Yoruba, the mischievous divinity Ésù deceives villagers into acting immorally. Resultantly, some Christians and Western anthropologists equate Ésù with Satan. But such a characterization of "the trickster" overlooks a) the fact that he deceives people so that they can gain favor by their expiation (which Ésù takes to feed the other divinities) and b) that Ésù serves a more fundamental role of being a messenger between everyday life and the divine. The world of the divine as perceived in Yoruba culture is not a realm of isolated, supreme good as is largely interpreted in Christianity. Good and evil correspond, and indeed cooperate, in the achievement of higher moral progress: "Ésù uses mischief as a way to organize morality" (Reed 2). In Dahomean Fon, there is a similar African trickster-god named Legba who is simultaneously malevolent and benevolent, disruptive and reuniting, thisworldly and otherworldly and, like Ésù, the attitude toward him is appreciation rather than fear or disapproval (Spencer 11).

These two trickster gods are of particular interest for two reasons. Firstly, their roles in the lives of the Yoruba and the Dahomeans generally illustrate the inclusive nature of West

African theologies. As divine messengers, Ésù and Legba are both critical figures in the correspondence between this world and the divine realm. West Africans lived in a cosmos composed of the spiritual power of all entities in nature and presided over by gods and ancestors – Legba and Ésù represent the connection between the world of humanity and the immediacy of the divine realm (Marini 108). Because the Dahomeans and Yoruba were a considerable portion of the slave market in the Americas, their traditions were particularly prominent in the African American religious tradition (Spencer 11). Secondly, the model of the trickster divinity was critical for the development of the wandering "blues person" and partly the source of anti-blues sentiments from religious figures at the turn of the twentieth century because of the associations to voodoo and the devil.

Secularity in the Spirituals[3]

A historical case has already been made the spirituals are "sacred." The religious references and aspirations for divine deliverance typically separate the spiritual from the slave song. This view tends to overlook the "secular" role the spirituals play in slave life and instead focuses on the philosophical claims that are made in light of the fact that the slaves are not only bound spatially by chains, but also temporally by the uncertainty of when God will act a liberator. Understanding the psychological philosophy of the slave based on accounts before many African Americans were able to document their thinking can be a tenuous venture. Higginson, attempted to describe this complex philosophy based on what he was told by his black regiment about religion and the spirituals. He concludes that the mindset of the African

[3] Not all of the lyrics utilized here are the complete versions of the songs. As well, sequentially repeated lines were removed. I tried to reprint the spirituals as near as I could to the versions found in the *Slave Songs of the United States* and "Negro Spirituals" bearing in mind the difficulties those editors faced in trying to transcribe musical sounds for which there was no standardized music notation. Save cutting and some readjustments to punctuation for ease of reading, the blues texts have likewise been altered little. Any changes by me will appear in brackets ([ ]).

Americans "is always the same, and, as a commentary on the life of the race, is infinitely pathetic.[4] Nothing but patience for this life, nothing but triumph in the next. Sometimes the present predominates, sometimes the future; but the combination is always implied. In the following, for instance, we hear simply the patience" (Higginson 154):

> "This World Almost Done"
> Brudder, keep your lamp trimmin' and a-burnin',
> Keep your lamp trimmin' and a-burnin',
> Keep your lamp trimmin' and a-burnin',
> For dis world most done.
> So keep your lamp, &c.
> Dis world most done. (*Ibid*)

The final reward for patience is proclaimed as plaintively.

> "I Want to Go Home"
> Dere's no rain to wet you,
> O, yes, I want to go home.
> Dere's no sun to burn you,
> O, yes, I want to go home ;
> O, push along, believers,
> O, yes, &c.
> Dere's no hard trials,
> O, yes, &c.
> Dere's no whips a-crackin',
> O, yes, &c.
> My brudder on de wayside,
> O, yes, &c.
> O, push along, my brudder,
> O, yes, &c.
> Where dere's no stormy weather,
> O, yes, &c.
> Dere's no tribulation,
> O, yes, &c. (*Ibid*)

The most common secular uses for the spirituals were to alleviate the tedium and difficulty of physical labor and to convey coded messages. Field songs and work hollers are among the songs that writers simply refer to as "slave songs." However, a number of rowing

[4] Higginson is almost certainly using the word "pathetic" to mean "evoking pity or sympathy" rather than "inferior or inadequate."

songs avoid the "secular" label because of their use of Biblical references. Higginson transcribed "The Coming Day" and mentioned that it as being well timed to match the tug of the oar:

"The Coming Day"
I want to go to Canaan,
I want to go to Canaan,
I want to go to Canaan,
To meet 'em at de comin' day.
O, remember, let me go to Canaan, (*Thrice.*)
To meet 'em, &c.
O brudder, let me go to Canaan, (*Thrice.*)
To meet 'em, &c.
My brudder, you-oh !-remember (*Thrice.*)
To meet 'em at de comin' day. (Higginson 155)

The 'non-sacred' function and intent of this song indicates that the originators had something more than hope and patience to reach their Promised Land. While passively waiting for their freedom (i.e. "let me go to Canaan") on figurative, lyrical level, they actively sought to improve their ease of their work on a literal, worldly level. (To be clear, the song itself is not active, but its real world function of synchronizing the rowers to a steady beat makes it a tool for alleviating the struggle of rowing.) This spiritual is similar to the line "O Canaan, sweet Canaan,/ I am bound for the land of Canaan" from "Canaan" which Frederick Douglass asserts symbolized "something more than a hope of reaching heaven. We meant to reach the *North*, and the North was our Canaan," and he wrote that the lines of another spiritual, "Run to Jesus, shun the danger,/ I don't expect to stay much longer here," had a double meaning which first suggested to him the thought of escaping from slavery (159-60). Allen et al. recorded the popular spiritual "Michael Row the Boat Ashore" which he describes as being the only "pure boat-song" (xvi):

"Michael Row the Boat Ashore"
Michael row de boat ashore, Hallelujah!
Michael boat a gospel boat, Hallelujah!
I wonder where my mudder deh (there).

See my mudder on de rock gwine home.
On de rock gwine home in Jesus' name.
Michael boat a music boat.
Gabriel blow de trumpet horn.
O you mind your boastin' talk.
Boastin' talk will sink your soul.
Brudder, lend a helpin' hand.
Sister, help for trim dat boat.
Jordan stream is wide and deep.
Jesus stand on t' oder side.
I wonder if my maussa deh.
My fader gone to unknown land.
O de Lord he plant his garden deh.
He raise de fruit for you to eat.
He dat eat shall neber die.
When de riber overflow.
O poor sinner, how you land?
Riber run and darkness comin'.
Sinner row to save your soul. (Allen et al. 23-24)

What is meant in claiming this is a pure boat song is unclear, but it is likely that he means that this is the only spiritual about boats and for the purposes of rowing. Exactly where home is in the song is unclear. It could plausibly be referring to Africa, which might explain the Garden of Eden reference: having been taken from the garden and not banished, it would be possible to return to Paradise. Or it might be referencing Canaan/North metaphor. But then again, it could be neither of these and instead a tool the slaves used to simultaneously drive the ships faster and instill religious zeal.

An example of the spirituals as a coded message is described by Lawrence Levine who relates the story of an ex-slave that told Lydia Parrish that “when he and his fellow slaves ‘suspicioned’ that one of their number was telling tales to the driver, they would sing” lines like the following while working in the field:

O Judas he wuz a ‘ceitful man
He went an betray a mos’ innocen’ man.
Fo’ thirty piece a silver dat it wuz done
He went in de woods an’ e’ self he hung. (Levine 79)

It is possible, as many writers have argued, that “Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus!” and other such spirituals were used as explicit calls to secret meetings. Most messages were coded for the safety of the slaves, but some were symbolic because of perceptions similar to Douglass’s Canaan/North connection, as illustrated in the following spiritual recorded by Higginson:

> “We’ll Soon Be Free”
> We 'll soon be free,
> We 'll soon be free,
> We 'll soon be free,
> When de Lord will call us home.
> My brudder, how long,
> My brudder, how long,
> My brudder, how long,
> 'Fore we done sufferin' here?
> It won't be long (*Thrice.*)
> 'Fore de Lord will call us home.
> We 'll walk de miry road (*Thrice.*)
> Where pleasure never dies.
> We 'll walk de golden street (*Thrice.*)
> Where pleasure never dies.
> My brudder, how long (*Thrice.*)
> 'Fore we done sufferin' here?
> We 'll soon be free (*Thrice.*)
> When Jesus sets me free.
> We 'll fight for liberty (*Thrice.*)
> When de Lord will call us home. (Higginson 169)

A young drummer boy in Higginson’s regiment explained to him that “De Lord will call us home,” was figurative because "Dey tink *de Lord* mean for say *de Yankees*" (168). It should be clear that the spirituals, while religious, are not solely religious. And there is even evidence to suggest that some spirituals are not “sacred” at all. While trying to understand exactly how spirituals formed, Col. Higginson asked an oarsman how he thought they started. The oarsman confessed, “‘some good sperituals,’ he said, ‘are start jess out o' curiosity. I been a-raise a sing, myself, once.’” Higginson, overjoyed by finding not only a poem, but the poet implored him to

proceed. "'Once we boys.' he said, 'went for tote some rice, and de nigger-driver, he keep a-callin' on us ; and I say, "O, de ole nigger-driver!" Den anudder said, "Fust ting my mammy tole me was, notin' so bad as nigger-driver." Den I made a sing, just puttin' a word, and den anudder word'" (Higginson 170). The oarsman then began the following song leading a group that had never heard the song but were quick to catch on:

"The Driver"
O, de ole nigger-driver!
O, gwine away!
Fust ting my mammy tell me,
O, gwine away!
Tell me 'bout de nigger-driver,
O, gwine away!
Nigger-driver second devil,
O, gwine away!
Best ting for do he driver,
O, gwine away!
Knock he down and spoil he labor,
O, gwine away! (Higginson 171)

Although the song would certainly be classified as "secular" based upon its content, its author seems to have been quite clear that this song was a "'spiritual'" (*ibid*). It is possible that a greater number of secular slave songs were considered "spirituals" by the blacks who first sang them. That tradition would have almost completely disappeared if those who recorded the songs had categorized all of the songs based on their standards. This incongruity between what is typically perceived as "secular" and what the artist considers "sacred" reflects the fact that the decision of whether a song is holy or profane ultimately rests on the interpreter of the music and cannot be used to classify these forms of music (even in a broad sense).

One important claim to avoid is the notion that the spirituals were completely secular, as Fisher asserts: "not one spiritual in its primary form reflected interest in anything other than a full life here and now" (157). The understanding that spirituals were mainly intended to mark

historical events is the basis for this claim; a large number of the spirituals use revival camp meetings, the colonization of Africa, the Civil War, and their education and evangelism as their subject material (Fisher 179). But as Levine accurately points out that "it is not necessary to invest the spirituals with a secular function only at the price of divesting them of their religious content" (79). Interpreting the spirituals and blues in light of the sacred/secular dynamic makes it difficult to reconcile the fact that many of these songs are simultaneously "sacred" and "secular."

Blues Theology and Criticism

During secret slave meetings, the congregation member who could speak and sing the best to fulfill the emotional needs of the audience was often made the preacher. The preacher was responsible for leading the formal churches services at these secret meetings and then was accompanied by a group of other shouters who led the group through a sing and dance call a "ring shout" (Allen et al. xiv). Higginson points out that *who* actually made the spiritual is irrelevant because they were soon attributed to the minister of the parish where they formed (170). And although the individual ("preacher") who led the group of slaves in service may have also been an originators for a spiritual, it is important to note that this preacher was not a preacher in the Christian sense of the word of a figure publicly set apart to follow the ministry (Fisher 181). Instead, the preacher usually attempted to reiterate the emotions of the congregation where he was equally a member.

The bluesman was the foil to the preacher. He was an individual that did not need the audience to perform, yet sung of their feelings when they were there. After the Civil War, the public separation of the preacher from the community (as he moved further into the ministry) increased. Newly acquired legal freedom allowed for the possibility of travelling bluesmen. The

preacher had the church; the bluesman, the juke joint. Both attempt to "preach" the truth. For the preacher, the truth was the word of God and Jesus Christ. For the bluesman,

> Truth is experience, and experience is the Truth. If it is lived and encountered, then it is real. There is no attempt in the blues to make philosophical distinctions between divine and human truth. That is why many blues people reject the contention that the blues are vulgar or dirty. As Henry Townsend puts it: "If I sing the blues and tell the truth, what have I done? What have I committed? I haven't lied." (Cone 119)

While criticism of the blues and its sinful ways was widespread among different denominations of Christian preachers – both white and black – blues musicians disparaged the elevated position the preacher received from his congregants. Many blues lyrics illustrated the black preacher as being thoroughly human and fallible. One common approach was to retell the story of the womanizing preacher, as Hi Henry Brown does in "Preacher Blues" (1932):

> "Preacher Blues," by Hi Henry Brown
> If you want to hear a preacher curse
> Take his bread sweet mama; and save him the crust
> Preacher in the pulpit; Bible in his hand
> Sister in the corner; crying there's my man
> Preacher comes to your house; you ask him to rest his hat
> Next thing he want to know; sister where your husband at
> Come in here Elder[5]; and shut my door
> Want you to preach for me the same text you did night before
> See that preacher walking down the street
> Fixin' to meddle with every sister he meets
> Preacher, preacher you nice and kind
> Better not catch you at that house of mine [.] (Reed 51-52)

In this song, the preacher abuses his authority and seduces the women of his congregation. Because slaves during the antebellum period were property, their white owners could quickly dissolve their marriages (if they existed). This tenuous relationship meant that black men were in a perpetual state of hopeless rivalry with white men. After emancipation, black men had to worry about competition from their own community – the charismatic, popular

[5] Reed points out the use of the term "Elder" as a common title for clergymen in black Holiness/Pentecostal churches, particularly Church of God in Christ (52).

preachers. The following is an excerpt from Kid Wesley Wilson's "The Gin Done Done It," recorded in New York in 1929:

> "The Gin Done Done It," by Kid Wesley Wilson
> I went to church; to do the holy roll
> Grabbed me a sister; to convert her soul [.]
> Two minutes later; preacher came in
> She stopped rollin' with me; started rollin' with him [.] (Reed 53)

Here too is a reference to the Pentecostal church, "I went to church; to do the holy roll"; the high-energy worship style of Pentecostals earned them the name Holy Rollers. As with "Broke Down Engine," a connection between the sexual and the spiritual is found in the phonetic similarity between "holy roll" and "jelly roll" (which is slang for sexual delight). Like with "Preacher Blues," we see the licentious preacher use his influence to sexually dominate women.

The simplest arguments that the blues is a "secular" art are born out of a conception that the "blues lifestyle" is solely gambling, drinking, and womanizing. The blues' characteristic approach to sex and sexuality was to view it simply as a part of life and not as the taboo subject that it was in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Discourse on sex is rife throughout blues lyrics (a fact which helped earn the blues the title of "the devil's music"). Because it deals with sex in a way that most Christians disapproved of, it was automatically disqualified from being categorized as "sacred." What is left out of this construction of the "sacred" is the possibility for sex to be intertwined with spirituality. "Broke Down Engine" (1933) by Blind Willie McTell explains his response to the loss of his woman:

> "Broke Down Engine," by Blind Willie McTell
> Feel like a broke down engine; mama ain't got no driving-wheel
> You ever been down and lonesome; you know just how Willie McTell feels
> I been shooting craps and gambling; good gal and I done got broke
> I done pawned my thirty-two special; good gal and my clothes in soak
> I even went to my praying ground; dropped down on bended knees
> I ain't crying for no religion; Lordy give me back my good gal please [.] (Reed 41)

There is a strong emotional connection between sex and salvation in the mind of the speaker. The speaker attempts to rid himself of world things by gambling his money away and selling his gun to barter with God. Losing everything does not make him want religion, but he still believes a God exists. The audience is stuck in suspense or disappointment as the power the poet turns to fails to respond. A similar effect occurs in Robert Johnson's "Cross Road Blues," but instead of having lost a woman, he has lost himself:

> "Cross Road Blues" by Robert Johnson
> I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees
> Asked the Lord above, "Have mercy, save poor Bob, if you please."
> Standin' at the crossroad, I tried to flag a ride
> Didn't nobody seem to know me everybody pass me by.
> The sun goin' down, boy; dark goin' catch me here
> I haven't got no lovin' sweet woman that love and feel my care.
> You can run, you can run, tell my friend-boy Willie Brown
> Lord, that I'm standin' at the crossroad, babe, I believe I'm sinkin' down. ("Harry's Blues" 1)

The issue of unheard prayers is made more poignant in this song by the fact that the speaker asks "the Lord above, 'Have mercy, save poor Bob, if you please'" and no response is given. The liberating God of the Old Testament is nowhere to be found as the poet 'sinks' further at the crossroad. In blues mythology, the crossroad is the place a musician goes to sell his soul to the devil to get unholy skills at an instrument (typically a guitar) (Spencer 9).[6] The speaker underscores the immense difficulty of being a black "blues person" in white society. Not only is one alienated by society ("Didn't nobody seem to know me everybody pass me by") but the divine realm is ignorant (or unresponsive) to that suffering. The text deals with complex

[6] Indeed, this mythological tale was most famously ascribed to Robert Johnson himself. Spencer remarks that "What led to the initial suspicion regarding Johnson's possible supernatural connections was neither his 'evil' behavior toward his woman, nor his suggestive lyrics, but both of these in connection with his rapid acquisition of musical skill and his mysterious death at the young age of thirty-six" (10).

theological issues thereby making categorization into the solely sacred or solely secular impossible.

Complications in the sacred/secular categorization arise as it becomes clear that anti-blues sentiments were, in part, derived from anti-black attitudes and misconceptions of non-Christian mythologies and theologies. An example of this is the confusion of the blues own association with trickster figures and the Christian understanding of Satan. Robert Johnson's "Me and the Devil Blues" (1937) can help us make sense of this:

> "Me and the Devil Blues" by Robert Johnson
> Early this mornin', when you knocked upon my door
> And I said, "Hello, Satan. I believe it's time to go."
> Me and the devil, was walkin' side by side
> And I'm goin' to beat my woman, until I get satisfied.
> She say you don't see why, that you (I) will dog me (her) 'round[7]
> It must-a be that old evil spirit so deep down in the ground.
> You may bury my body, down by the highway side
> So my old evil spirit, can catch a Greyhound bus and ride. ("Harry's Blues" 2)

Johnson made two separate recordings of this song in 1937. In the first take, his woman does not understand why Satan dogs the speaker; in the second, why the speaker dogs her. The lyrics from the first take almost suggest a sort of possession by the devil occurs and that the narrator does not have much control over it. But in the second take, the speaker has much more autonomy and is more blameworthy for his abusive behavior. In either case, this behavior could be a reflection on what happens when one sells his soul to the devil: he either becomes a slave of the devil or he already had his view of the world in the same frame of mind and is more complicit in his actions. An understanding of African American mythology would suggest that the second perspective is the one that best reflects the deeper underlying sentiments of the text. The fact that the speaker will beat his woman "until [he] get[s] satisfied" implies that it is of his

[7] To "dog around" meant to put down or ridicule relentlessly.

own volition to act this way. The speaker aligns himself along the "badman" tradition in African American folklore.

A badman was someone who could defy the rules and laws because of his manipulative abilities as a trickster. His power was derived from the devil, but not the devil of Christian theology. This devil was rooted in the mythology of the trickster gods, in particular Legba of the Dahomean and (to a lesser extent) Ésù of the Yoruba. As previously mentioned, these travelling divinities signified the crossing of barriers and the reality of what it meant to be people of African cosmology (Spencer 12). The badman embodied the synthesis of conjurer and trickster traditions and was a figure that used his guile to manipulate the oppressors of his people, which was in some ways similar to Legba who used deception to bring about moral action; the badman was essentially a "supernatural trickster" (*ibid* 7). Spencer borrows an important point about the trickster persona from Robert Pelton:

> "The trickster's doubleness becomes both the source of his transforming power and the reason for his banishment from the community; as profaner of the sacred he becomes a sacred being, yet remains an outsider, the victim of his own violations. Radically impure by reason of his unbounded sexuality, gluttony, and mendacity, the trickster nonetheless helps to give the individual access to the sacred power by which his society is built." (12)

In other words, the otherness of the trickster, badman, and bluesman allowed them to critique the workings of established religion because they were at a distance. The black church attempted to widen that distance with its ongoing attack on the morality of "blues people" and doctrinal teachings that the badman was fundamentally a sinner who either paid for his sins in hell or in this life through conversion. Moreover, Legba's and the blues singer's "badman" qualities – duplicity, unpredictability, lack of control, and rampant sexuality – have been, from the Victorian or Eurocentric perspective, interpreted as demonic rather than as holistic (Spencer 8). The African American understanding of these devil figures went ignored as Christians conflated their conceptions of Satan with the African traditions. Hence, an association with the

blues was automatically an association with the Devil – this model even went as far to claim that instrument used in the blues were the devil's work.[8]

Disapproval of the blues stems not only from the associations with the devil, but the further associations with witchcraft, magic, and voodoo. The introduction of hoodoo (the name Southern blacks preferred to voodoo) to the French South, especially Louisiana, must have occurred soon after the shipments of slaves arrived from the French colonies of Guadeloupe, St. Dominigue, and Martinique during the last half of the eighteenth century (the vast majority of slaves practiced voodoo in all of these areas) (Sonnier 75). As hoodoo customs and superstitions spread throughout the nineteenth century, they were incorporated (or rather "reincorporated" or "continued") into the belief systems of a large number of slaves who shared a similar set of beliefs as the newly arriving slaves. An appropriate place for the magical and spiritual world was a common feature of African religions (*ibid* 74). The knowledge and language of charms like John the conqueror root, goofer (goober) dust, and black cat bones became part of the vernacular of late nineteenth century America (as did other forces like gris-gris and mojo). Of course, the numerous conversions of slaves to Christianity following the Second Great Awakening limited the extent to which hoodoo practices were accepted as a form of worship (Spencer 14). Alternatively, for many African Americas, there was a conflation of theologies and mythologies where the boundaries between Christianity and African spirituality were unclear: "folks back then were religious and superstitious; they believed in divinities and ghosts as well as in signs and hoodooing" (*ibid* 13).

[8] Church folks of the old South believed that the devil taught wayward Christians to play the "devil's instruments"; these instruments were supposedly ones the devil himself played and among Africans enslaved in American and their descendents, those instruments were the banjo, fiddle, and guitar (Spencer 27). Some even went so far along this belief that it was thought that black women and men who played these instruments were actually in communication with the devil – they were viewed as the "devil's preachers."

By the time the blues was popular across the nation, hoodoo had a place in blues compositions. The blues served as a peripheral location of openness and mythical potentiality for hoodoo as it allowed the often unarticulated religious retentions of the native homeland, Africa, to come out. A number of blues song titles reference hoodoo culture such as “Black Cat Hoot Owl Blues” by Thomas Dorsey (1899-1993), “Hoodoo Blues” by John Lee Williamson (1914-1948), and “Mojo Hand” by Muddy Waters (1913-1983).

The voodoo references only helped fuel Christian disapproval for the blues as any association with ‘witchcraft’ would. Robert Johnson’s “Little Queen of Spades” (1937) is an excellent example of the intersections of sin (gambling, lust), hoodoo, and the blues:

> “Little Queen of Spades” by Robert Johnson
> Now she is a little queen of spades, and the men will not let her be
> Every time she makes a spread, fair brown, cold chills just run all over me.
> I'm goin' get me a gamblin' woman, if it's the last thing that I do
> Well, a man don't need a woman, fair brown, that he got to give all his money to.
> Everybody say she got a mojo, now she's been using that stuff
> But she got a way of trimmin' down, fair brown, and I mean it's most too tough.
> Now, little girl, since I am the king, baby, and you is a queen
> Lets us put our heads together, fair brown, then we make our money green.
> (“Harry’s Blues” 2)

This kind of lifestyle description would have historically placed this song in the “secular” section regardless of the fact that it does deal with beliefs in good luck charms and the hoodoo religion. The key distinction here between the sacred and the secular, is the fact that the religion featured in the song is not Christianity. It seems that Christian (or possibly West-European) interpretations of what should go into the sacred and secular categories influences much of the modern scholarly analysis of these musical forms.

While forms of hoodoo blues were developing, by the turn of the century, a younger generation of African Americans began to question the traditional beliefs in haunts and signs and the antiquated practices that often accompanied them (Reed 59). This challenge came in the form

of works as grand as Scott Joplin's ragtime opera *Treemonisha* (1911) and as quaint as a blue tune; Ida Cox's "Fogyism" (1928) directly confronts the superstitious customs of previous generations:

> "Fogyism," by Ida Cox
> Why do people believe in some old sign [?]
> You hear a hoot owl holler; someone is surely dying [.]
> Some will break a mirror; bad luck for seven years
> And if a black cat crosses them; they break right down in tears [.]
> To dream of muddy water; trouble is knocking at your door
> Your man is sure to leave you; and never return no more [.]
> When your man comes home evil; tell you you are getting old
> That's a true sign he got someone else bakin' his jellyroll [.] (Reed 59-60)

This song would certainly be considered "secular" without qualification. The speaker questions the logic of the old-fashioned religious customs by sarcastically reiterating the overblown cause-effect relationships; this is shown in the line, if "You hear a hoot owl holler, someone is surely dying." The only dependable 'signs' are man-made and they are not a reflection of supernatural awareness. Dreams of muddy water do not portend evils to come – the fact that "your man" tells you he's tired of you does.

Though "Fogyism" and other blues songs are critical of the church, superstition, and preachers, they are not atheistic. Rather, they are indicating that the historical transcendence of blacks can "only be meaningful when it is made real in and through the limits of historical experience" (Cone 127). The speaker then, is saying that in order to improve the status of African Americans in society, attempts to look into the future are going to be useless – what matters most is what we can see in the present.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have tried to show that when analyzing the blues and spirituals, the sacred/secular split cannot accommodate the complex philosophies and ideas that the African Americans who created the music had. While this dynamic may not be useful, related questions that are offshoots from it might be. Rather than ask whether the spirituals are sacred or secular, we might ask whether it was appropriate or inappropriate for church service, as C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya do. They surveyed 2,150 black churches nationwide and asked pastors what types of music are approved for church music:

Table 39: Church Music: Type of Music Approved for Use in Worship Services

	Total	Urban	Rural
I. Gospel music?			
Yes	2,084 (96.9%)	1,489 (97.3%)	595 (96.2%)
No	33 (1.5%)	21 (1.4%)	12 (1.9%)
No response	33 (1.5%)	21 (1.4%)	12 (1.9%)
II. Spirituals?			
Yes	2,002 (93.1%)	1,486 (97.1%)	516 (83.4%)
No	114 (5.3%)	24 (1.6%)	90 (14.5%)
No response	34 (1.6%)	21 (1.4%)	13 (2.1%)
III. Other black music (e.g., jazz, blues, etc.)?			
Yes	448 (20.8%)	408 (26.6%)	40 (6.5%)
No	1,595 (74.2%)	1,030 (67.3%)	565 (91.2%)
No response	107 (5.0%)	93 (6.1%)	14 (2.3%)
Total N=2,150			
Urban N=1,531			
Rural N=619			

(Higginson 379)

The vast majority of African American churches 2,084 (96.9 percent) approved of the use of gospel music during service. 2,002 (93.1 percent) also approved of spirituals. The greatest ambivalence was shown toward the other types of black music like jazz and the blues. Only 448 (20.8 percent) said that they approved of jazz and blues during worship services. As well, there was a significant difference between urban and rural churches, with 408 (26.6 percent) of the 1,531 urban churches approving and 40 (6.5 percent) of the 619 rural churches approving the use of jazz and blues during worship (Lincoln and Mamiya 378-79). This data certainly does not

paint an accurate picture of African American church opinions around the turn of the twentieth century. If anything, it is highly probably that the approval percentages of the blues and jazz would be lower across the board (assuming the polls were taken at a time when people would have recognized the blues and spirituals as distinctive musical forms). It is more difficult to say whether the spirituals would have higher or lower percentages as the popularity of spiritual singing groups like the Fisk University Jubilee Singers grew in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. By probing the question of whether the songs are church-appropriate, we can better know why some music (namely the blues) can deal with religious themes, but not be suitable for worship.

The blues and spirituals, as somewhat abstract concepts, are extremely difficult to define without excluding important characteristics of their forms. Likewise, our conception of the sacred and the secular is 1) not clearly defined and 2) assumed to exist. It seems likely that the slaves that were transplanted to North America generally did not concern themselves with separating the holy and profane, the good and evil, or music from all parts of life. By imposing the sacred/secular model on the historical experience of the blues and spirituals, many ignored the intelligent criticisms the blues had for spirituality and ignored the sophisticated ways in which spirituals were used to cope with the alienating reality of slavery. We need to carefully consider whether categorization is a useful tool for making sense of the religious and nonreligious qualities of a culture. Categories allow us to organize ideas so that we can find patterns and draw conclusions. As well, they can help us order our questions and manufacture new ones (such as in the question of church-appropriateness of the music). But we should certainly be more wary of using it in the future as our ability to categorize is limited to what we understand as the possible categories. Christian/Western theories of the sacred and secular as

distinct fields have stymied our comprehension of the spirituals and the blues, and continue to distort efforts to understand these musical forms.

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