Chapter X

What If the Way You Hold Me Is Actually What's Holy?

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In her 2024 volume *God Gave Rock & Roll to You*, historian Leah Payne suggests that the end of CCM (Contemporary Christian Music) pop stardom properly arrived in the form of Taylor Swift. Whilst for a number of decades there had been a market for explicitly Christian alternatives to mainstream popular music, by the early 2000s, a figure such as Swift, "who wore modest clothing and wrote chaste country songs with plenty of adolescent longing and Christian imagery" (Payne 2024: 145) was able to take over the role of female Christian pop stars relatively seamlessly. Her music offered a safe alternative to potentially-threatening forms of popular music and integrated relatively easily with conservative evangelical imaginations of life, romance, and sexuality. While this may well have been true for a portion of her career and for a particular segment of her audience, Swift's Christian identity has often been a somewhat contested issue and one that is subject to a degree of speculation. While Swift has described herself as a Christian, her reluctance to talk publicly about potentially sensitive issues and the wider range of readings that a wider public can draw out of different parts of her musical output mean that it is sometimes hard to make sense of what exactly she might mean when she refers to herself in this way.

Swift has reinvented herself many times over the years, and whilst she has rarely been without controversy, it is notable how much of a stir her 2024 album *The Tortured Poets Department (TTPD)* caused online within parts of the same American Christian public for whom her work had once appeared so inoffensive. Following her announcement of her relationship with Travis Kelce in 2023, Swift attracted increasing scorn from right-wing commentators as part of broader American culture wars, but the release of *TTPD* brought with it a new set of arguments, many of them focussed on the album's religious dimension.

DRAFT

Outspoken right-wing worship leader, anti-lockdown protestor, and Donald Trump ally Sean Feucht protested on Facebook and Twitter that "Almost half the songs on Taylor Swift's new album contain explicit lyrics (E), make fun of Christians and straight up blaspheme God" (2024). A range of reactions circulated from different directions, both criticising Swift's attitude to religion in the songs of this album and defending her against potential over-reactions and misinterpretations of her wider agenda. Whether or not one takes the same side as her more-reactionary critics, it is easy to see why some might find her output easier to reconcile with Christian traditions than others. Swift's use of Christian imagery may not always be directed explicitly at a Christian public, but it is also hard to disconnect it from the wider American struggles around Christianity and culture within which she can be situated. In the pages that follow I want to explore more deeply the relationship between God and romance in one of the tracks on this recent album, situating Swift's usage in a broader popular music landscape, in religious/political contestations around evangelicalism and purity culture, and in her own developing trajectory as a public figure who has cultivated different personas over the course of her career.

An Evolving Trajectory

How, then, do romance, sexuality, and the divine intertwine in Swift's different albums? What is theological imagery doing there in the first place? And what exactly might Swift be trying to achieve in her role as a wild and public theologian?[1] (cf. Roberts 2017). From her early albums onwards, romance and the divine are closely entangled. "Our Song", one of Swift's earliest hits, playfully evokes images of God creating the soundtrack to her relationship, conjuring up an image of a deity who sees and helps out with romantic stories and destinies.

[1] Swift herself would likely not own this label. I apply it here to emphasise the way in which her evocations of religion and the divine intervene in a broader realm of theological discourse and imagination. Through her engagement with this imagery Swift is doing theological work in a manner that has significance for a broader public, but she is not constrained by the same institutions as e.g. a scholar or a priest.

DRAFT

“Holy Ground” accomplishes something similar, evoking the feeling that, despite it later falling apart, there was something about a romance that might appropriately be described using religious terminology. Other songs identify prayer and the divine with the struggles of relationships. In “Enchanted” Swift prays that there are more pages to be written in her love story, whilst in “State of Grace”, a morally ambiguous struggle in love is depicted in terms of a holy fight where fighting on the side of good and right is important and worth hanging on to.

Her use of religious imagery in relation to love doesn’t follow an entirely linear trajectory, and there are many different ways to read the journey that Swift embarks upon through her different repertoire, but we can, perhaps, trace a general tendency to move from a more playful and innocently rebellious evocation of God and religion in her earlier repertoire (“thankin’ God that you weren’t here”; “And when I got home ... /’fore I said, ‘Amen’ / Asking God if he could play it again”; “But if you only knew me / We could be a beautiful / Miracle”) a sense of lost innocence (“She’s not a saint / And she’s not what you think / She’s an actress / She’s better known / For the things that she does / On the mattress”; “So you were never a saint / I’ve loved in shades of wrong”) through a phase of greater liberation and indulgence (“Magic, madness, heaven, sin”; “I thought, / ‘Heaven can’t help me now’ / Nothing lasts forever / But this is gonna take me down”; “We might just get away with it / The altar is my hips / Even if it’s a false god”) towards a more self-conscious reflection, reworking, and critique of the ways that religion is imagined (“I just learned these people only raise you to cage you / Sarahs and Hannahs in their Sunday best / Clutching their pearls, sighing /, ‘What a mess’”; “They shake their heads, saying, / ‘God help her’ / When I tell ’em he’s my man / But your good Lord doesn’t need to lift a finger”).

By the time we reach *The Tortured Poets Department*, the sense of friction and contestation has grown, and the singer herself is now in a position to take greater ownership of her relationship with religious and spiritual dimensions of existence. She no longer fits into the

scripted coming of age narratives that society has bestowed upon her but operates with a neoliberal feminist sense of individual agency. The songs on *TTPD* continue Swift's habit of mixing theological and romantic imagery. Rather than assuming a straightforward connection between the two, however, Swift insists on questioning and reimagining the relationship between the narratives impressed upon her by others and the reality that potentially lies beyond them. These songs' sense of moral ambiguity goes further than many of Swift's earlier albums. After having deliberately sought to disrupt a sense of her "good girl" image through her *Reputation* era, Swift has emerged out the other side not so much as someone who has turned dark and bad, but as someone who has deliberately attempted to escape an image of herself she no longer wanted to own. As a result, she is now able to wrestle with a wider range of her own impulses, situations, and desires than she was able to at an earlier stage in her career.

An evolving sense of the role of God and religion in her repertoire comes alongside an evolving sense of self that develops simultaneously across multiple dimensions. As Swift has moved from teenage country star to urban pop megastar her work has incorporated a greater level of self-reflection, a more critical relationship with particular publics, a sometimes less-idealised version of love, and a move from the innocence of the small town to the reinventive space of the city. As Phoebe Hughes describes it: "Swift's early career as a country artist was marked by a public persona of a timid and people-pleasing teenager. As she grew up and became more outspoken, both about her autonomy as an artist and various socio-political issues, Swift's music grew up with her. She left behind neutral language about her age and accomplishments, instead moving through marketing categories and negotiating industry-enforced genre boundaries" (2025). As Hughes rightly highlights, Swift strategically constructs a particular persona that negotiates these things in a particular way. However, it seems to be a persona that bears some kind of relation to her broader life, even if this relationship is more complicated than is immediately apparent from the outside.

The Role of the Religious

Swift's use of religious imagery hasn't gone unnoticed by fans, and a number of Reddit users have commented on and reflected on her allusions to sacred themes in the Taylor Swift subreddit. In 2022, user Sampleswift asked other redditors to list religious allusions, and a number chimed in with allusions that they'd identified. Beyond the immediate list of references, it is clear that some have done some deeper reflection around the theme. One user points readers to the *Queer Themes in Taylor Swift's Music* Google doc, which suggests both that religious language is pervasive in Swift's repertoire and that a large proportion of her output frames "the narrator, her muse, or their relationship in a negative way" (Chaser 2022). The document develops a stronger thesis than this, proposing that "Society tells LGBTQIA+ people that our identity and relationships are 'sinful' and 'wrong'. For those of us who are raised religious, breaking that mindset takes a lot of time and work. Many of us have had to choose between love and the faith we were raised in. So our relationships and community become a surrogate for the religious structure we once believed in. Much like reclaiming words like queer that were once used to insult us, equating love and sexuality with religion is an empowering act of rebellion" (ibid.). The writer doesn't clearly identify with Swift's own position or situate themselves within any kind of religious community. Rather, it is the lasting impact of religious and theological narratives on queer individuals and the opportunity to re-use this language in a different way that has the potential to serve in a liberative manner. It is clear that different communities will receive Swift's religious overtones in a variety of different ways and, as with a great deal of music, they are open to varying forms of engagement, interpretation, and appropriation.

Whilst theological themes are far from the main driving force behind Swift's output, they play a crucial role within the broader logic of her music. Swift is a weaver of enchanted narratives, of stories that take the frustrations and joys of romance, questions of personal

identity, and social struggles and endow them with a deeper meaning and significance. Indeed, this is one of the reasons that many listen to her output, for the way her music reflects their own experiences and transfigures them into something more. Swift's narratives often have a strong sense of right and wrong, a sense that life is moving towards a goal, and a poetic imagination which bestows meaning on the world precisely through taking different kinds of imagery and overlaying them on the experiences of life. Her music is there to interpret the everyday and thereby to elevate it above its mundanity.

Anna Baugher interprets *The Tortured Poets Department* as a whole through the lens of rhetorical coping. Baugher proposes that:

> Religious motifs throughout the album suggest that it may be difficult to not only *cope with* but also *make sense of* things that happen to us. Christian imagery has become a type of shorthand for coping throughout Swift's lyrical discography; *TTPD* is no exception. Praying or looking to a higher power is often portrayed as a coping strategy, and because of its cultural ubiquity, this depiction may be just as consolatory for those who only turn to religion only during a last resort-type of desperation as it is for those who consider themselves devout in their faith. Without being sure of authorial intent, one primary explanation for why Swift often compares her experiences with love to religion is of the depth and intensity of her emotions. Swift frequently likens love to a divine occurrence that transcends human modes of logic. (2025: 40)

She draws attention to the different roles that religious imagery takes on over the course of the album, pointing to the way in which love–religion metaphors are sometimes used when "when the narrator's feelings transcend morality" (ibid.); the way in which the writer is sometimes positioned as part of a religious outgroup; the complicated relationship between the narrator

DRAFT

and a sense of Christian virtue; the use of religious actions and concepts to heighten the stakes of a situation through "exaggerative caricature that listeners can scale down to fit their needs" (ibid.: 41); and her use of religious imagery laced with sarcasm and irony to draw attention to those who act antithetically to righteous ideals.

The use of Christian imagery in singing about themes of love is far from unique to Swift. Magdalene Cybulska has drawn attention to the varying ways in which contemporary female pop stars make use of this combination in their music, suggesting that:

> Artists […] rely on traditional Christian images of love, sex, relationships and worship as templates for their romantic and sexual affairs. Through the deification and/or demonisation of their lovers, their sex acts and even the relationships themselves, they play with the power dynamics within the partnerships, exploring the effects their connections have on their self-esteem and lives as a whole. While the worship of one's partner may appear to be an obvious expression of love and devotion, representations of lovers as satanic highlight a desire for something other than perfection, an attraction to danger and sin. While one can place the God of Christianity in an erotic role […] this gravitation towards wickedness is incompatible with the worship of a truly pure deity. This void left by the Christian God is filled easily by either a human counterpart who can be both exalted and defamed, or by the devil himself, a powerful but immoral creature capable of satisfying the artists' lust. (2024: 86)

For Cybulska, it is a combination of the ability to draw parallels between divine and human relationships and the way in which religious imagery can be used to portray power dynamics which really serve to make Christian imagery useful within the broader pop music repertoire. The imagery is not necessarily significant in itself so much as it is something which serves to

DRAFT

illustrate and process the different struggles with love and sex that songwriters describe and express. I want to suggest, however, that there is often also a dimension to theological imagery which goes beyond the simple drawing of parallels. Embedded within the use of religious imagery is an implicit imagination of the way in which God relates to the world and a human reaching out towards a sacred or enchanted dimension of life. In amongst this, we also find an understanding and appreciation of the different logics according to which religious systems can operate – both internally and in relation to the lives of individuals and society as a whole. When religious imagery is invoked, particular theological or religious narratives can be embraced or critiqued – or even subverted to suggest an alternative imagination of the world – and through this invocation, the singer's understanding of life or romance comes into dialogue with theological traditions. Likewise, through invoking a spiritual dimension, an additional layer is added to the music which doesn't serve as an unrelated addition so much as it intertwines and intersects with the dimension of love and romance as both form part of a broader project to live in and make sense of the world.

Guilty as Sin?

Whilst theological imagery is found throughout *The Tortured Poets Department*, "Guilty as Sin?" is perhaps the song where it comes most forcefully to the foreground. Beginning in a world coloured by feelings of captivity and frustration, the song quickly transitions into a realm of sexual longing and fantasy. As this transition takes place, the song reworks C.S. Lewis' famous Trilemma (is Jesus mad, bad, or God?) to ask whether the visions that Swift is indulging in make her bad, or mad, or wise. Her fantasies intensify in the chorus, with writing on thighs and top-lip kisses firmly cementing the scenario in a bodily physical world. The question posed here is again strongly influenced by the sayings of Jesus, asking whether mental fantasies without physical action can really make someone guilty. Verse three and the following chorus

DRAFT

move through fantasies of lovemaking and the physical ecstasy which accompanies them before reaching something of a theological climax in the bridge.

Having pondered on her guilt throughout the verses, the bridge is where Swift turns things around. Transitioning through an imagined experience of crucifixion and resurrection, Swift emerges out the other side. Here, instead of pondering the potential guilt which has been imposed on her from outside, she allows a new way of thinking to emerge out of her own experience. The still-ambiguous question which she now poses "What if the way you hold me is actually what's holy?" turns the tables on a group of imagined critics as she asks what it might be like for the love which she is fantasising about not to be a location of guilt and shame, but one of true holiness. She doesn't ask this question simply on an abstract disembodied level; human embrace, the holding of one person in your arms, becomes the action through which the sacred can become present, and forms a grounded tangible alternative to the hollowness of the "long suffering propriety" which might otherwise be asked of her.

In common with much of the exvangelical movement, and recent critiques of American purity culture, the song wrestles with a sexual ethic that seems for many to hit its limit when the authorised path leads only to the imposition of needless suffering and the forbidden path leads to encounters that seem infused with grace. Many in the Swift fandom have understood "Guilty as Sin?" to describe Swift's experiences of getting back together with Matty Healy, quick on the heels of a long-term relationship with Joe Alwyn (see e.g. Gonzales 2024; Pettibone 2024; Capital FM 2024). Healy's often divisive reputation and the speed with which their romance came to an end can make this relationship an easy target for criticism and judgment. Swift the public theologian, however, asks us to take her lived experience seriously; not to interpret it in advance on the basis of well-thought-out religious frameworks, but to use it to question them, and to reflect upon them. Importantly, the complexity of her experience does not lead to abandoning the sacred completely, but involves searching for it in the realm

DRAFT

of authentic bodily experience and desire, whether or not that search ultimately works out the way that the seeker might have hoped for. Connection with others is potentially something holy which can be desecrated; bodies are sacred sites; and voices which insist on empty moral frameworks are voices which fail to perceive the depth of true holiness.

It is important to bear in mind that there are more actors in the song than Swift and her real and imagined lovers. The imagined critics are relatively easy to read as a depiction of a wider society in which the lines of religious and social/cultural judgment have once again become somewhat blurred; where a sense of what is holy or what belongs rightly to the values of a particular tradition can be weaponised and deployed against a whole range of political and cultural others. Theological and religious judgments are not always to be read at face value, and the song is as much about commentators and critics who judge and condemn from outside as it is about private relationships which might, in theory, be possible to separate from this. The song implicitly contrasts the judgment from outside with the knowledge of what is within. Who is in a better position to judge what is holy in this situation? And who deploys that knowledge in a genuine and authentic way? Religious framing can give the impression of being in the right, but is far from a guarantee of being so. The album, and Swift's repertoire as a whole might tend to the more-individualised end of the spectrum, focussing on personal issues and attitudes over and above structural or political dimensions of life. However, this broader field is never completely absent, particularly to the extent that Swift herself is subject to broader cultural policing.

Swift the Exvangelical?

Swift's attitude in *TTPD* ties in with a broader cultural movement in which those leaving conservative Christian institutions have been particularly visible, and her framing here is symptomatic of many who wrestle between conservative and more-liberal, progressive, or permissive values. Narratives and imagery from the more-conservative realm (holiness, for

DRAFT

example) are still taken seriously, but they are re-worked and re-deployed in ways which allow the narrator to move on without fully having to break from the broader narrative world that has given meaning to their life.

A recent thread by user Statchmo1965 (2024) praises Swift's juxtaposition of the sacred and the sexy in *The Tortured Poets Department*: "I'm a very new swiftie but I just had to gush a minute over the way Taylor Swift writes about the intersection of the holy and the horny, the sacred and the sexy, the religious and the ROWR! […] Her clapbacks -- to the Hannahs and Sarahs, the elders, the saboteurs, the prayers that are just white noise -- are feeding this ex-vangelical's soul!!". Other redditors chime in: "I'm christian but I LOVE sacreligious themes!! I'm so done with Christian's persecution complex."; "I really didn't know anything about her background, but as someone who is in the process of de-constructing my own faith, I'm finding a lot of the imagery in TTPD resonates."; "The religious imagery throughout TTPD is so interesting. I'm still fathoming it. I think there's no doubt that it represents a reckoning of sorts: it feels almost like she is throwing off the shackles in this album." It seems clear that her more recent use of religious language has particular power to resonate with those in a process of deconstruction.

In the exvangelical movement, narratives of politics, sexuality, and theology come closely together in such a way that it is difficult to completely disentangle any one aspect from the others. As Bethany Gull describes, the "term [exvangelical] gained traction during the 2016 Republican National Convention in protest of Donald Trump's elevation as the party's candidate" (2025: 5). Gull suggests that "exvangelicals are former members of white evangelical churches in the United States whose theological, political, and social positions have pushed them out of evangelicalism. [They are] [i]mpelled to action by their negative personal experiences with the doctrines, practices, politics, and/or culture of white American evangelicalism[.]" She goes on to propose that emergence/redemption narratives are an

DRAFT

important part of exvangelical reframings, and that addressing past beliefs and conduct relating to sexuality are a key part of this (ibid.: 13). At a moment when Christian nationalism has come unavoidably to the foreground, and where this form of politics is bound up closely both with questions of sexuality and of religious imaginations and theology, it is perhaps not surprising that Swift's lyrics are able to resonate with this particular way of thinking. Swift doesn't approach the issue primarily as an exvangelical herself, but engages with the same swirl of issues through her own move away from a more conservative musical and cultural image. The prospect of a second Trump presidency is one of the few issues that has motivated Swift to make an explicit political statement, and it is perhaps not surprising that some of her most anti-conservative musical sentiments were released around a similar time. Observing these constellations of attitudes and interests, we are forced to confront the fact that theological statements about the body, romance, and sexuality are often also political statements, positioning individuals in relation to broader social groupings, orderings, and patterns of power. And this, as much as any matters of doctrine or sexual licentiousness, is part of the reason why Swift's lyrics attracted the reaction that they did.

Karly Poyner-Smith's analysis of exvangelical wrestlings with rhetorics of impurity offers insights that can be useful in examining Swift's writing. Poyner-Smith highlights the way in which purity discourses can be understood as political religious discourse (2024: 131, 177) and emphasises how many exvangelicals understand their previous experiences to have constructed a form of disembodiment, something which they continue to wrestle with after their exit from evangelicalism (ibid.:147). An embrace of embodied living is thus understood as an important corrective to a devaluing that has taken place to them in a previous situation. Rhetorics of impurity are embraced as a corrective to these earlier experiences (ibid.: 173) and are an important part of the extrication from a culture from which they now wish to escape. As Poyner-Smith describes it: "in the ExVangelical role of unweaving oneself from evangelical

purity discourse, ExVangelicals partake in impure and 'indecent theologies'. In doing so, they purposefully excavate purity to encounter impurity […] excavating acts as an intentional uncovering of information kept hidden, and encountering is locating ways to engage with what has been excavated" (ibid.: 203). These narratives need to be understood in relational terms, and not necessarily as free-standing absolutes. In providing a corrective they engage in rhetoric in a way that serves to dismantle harmful ways of viewing and experiencing the world.

The Body's Grace

It is by no means necessary to take the perspective of any individual song in Swift's repertoire as definitive or as her only word on the subject. Even within *The Tortured Poet's Department* we see different twists and turns, different perspectives, and what seems good and right at one point in the narrative may well turn out to be toxic at another. Likewise, it is clear that Swift as the narrator doesn't trust all of her own experiences or evaluations, and she is right not to do so, which is why the posing of questions throughout the song is crucial to what it is able to offer. In the narrative of "Guilty as Sin?" the issue is not so much an insistence that one option is right and that the other is wrong. Rather, the imagined moral voices raised against her refuse to even countenance that there might be a genuine tension to deal with or that any dimension above and beyond that of duty might be important to wrestle with. In a famous and controversial essay, theologian and former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams wrestles with similar questions, asking what it means to enter into the body's grace, what situations this might be found in, and how those might relate to ecclesiastical frameworks for regulating marriage and intimate relationships. Williams argues that:

> Decisions about sexual lifestyle, the ability to identify certain patterns as sterile, undeveloped, or even corrupt are […] decisions about what we want our bodily life to say, how our bodies are to be brought into the whole project of "making human sense" for ourselves and each other. To be able to make such decisions is important. A purely

> conventional (heterosexual) morality simply absolves us from the difficulties we might meet in doing so. The question of human meaning is not raised, nor are we helped to see what part sexuality plays in our learning to be human with one another – to enter the body's grace – because all we need to know is that sexual activity is licensed in one context and in no other (2002 [1989]: 313–4).

Williams insists on the importance of our search for meaning and bodily grace within the realm of human sexuality and connection. Whilst Swift's lyrics point to a dilemma and seek to pose a potential solution to it, however, Williams seeks to go a little further. For Williams as for Swift, an insistence on empty commitment and convention do nothing to uphold the true meaning of Christian sexual ethics; these are not in themselves a source of grace, and are not always the place in which it is found. In looking for the ways in which sexual relationships and human bodies can become locations of grace, Williams insists on the importance of mutual vulnerability and risk; dynamics of desire and being desired; the space to perceive and be perceived by the other; acceptance; nurturing; the ability to discover and give oneself as a source of happiness to another; and the importance of time and commitment in enabling all of this to be able to take place. For Williams, there is something about the way in which all of this is able to come together in human encounter that can make sexuality into a location of grace. The gift of time and the promise not to run away in which traditional commitments are rooted can enable the vulnerability and discovery within which grace can flourish, but these structures serve as a means to an end. This grace can be found in other situations, and commitment in itself can ring hollow if other elements are not nurtured and developed.

If Swift poses "long suffering propriety" on one side of her dilemma and the potential holiness found in a new lover's embrace on the other side, Rowan Williams insists on the importance of both elements, and more alongside, highlighting the reasons why Swift may indeed narrate a genuine moral dilemma over the course of this song. Swift offers us something

DRAFT

important in her sacralisation of romantic bodily embrace and connection, and through her wrestling with the question of what is and what might really be holy. In order to fully work this through, however, we need to take this challenge a step further and delve even deeper into the complexities, the vulnerabilities, the risks, the disappointments, the joys, and the commitments that come when we intertwine our lives with the divine and with each other. It is through this wrestling that we might eventually learn to encounter places which are genuinely and authentically sacred in our relationships with one another and with our bodies.

Writing from a Reformed perspective, Kyle Dieleman suggests a number of different stances that can be taken on the theological content *of The Tortured Poets Department*. Dieleman suggests first of all that, whilst "Swift's critics might dismiss her desires as impious and misguided, [they miss] the extent to which the biblical narrative permits the questioning of God's providential purposes" (2024: 12). Swift's wrestling, in other words, is encouraged and permitted within Christian traditions. Dieleman suggests, however, that Swift's analysis of her own sexual desires fails to align with Reformed tradition, which would indeed understand them in terms of sin, and would be highly critical of the level of authority she attributes to human experience. Despite this, he ultimately, he decides that Swift's encouragement to thoughtful engagement and questioning is something that does indeed deserve to be taken seriously.

Analysing the broader ways in which many of Swift's listeners use her music to make sense of their own lives, Anna Baugher draws attention to the less socially acceptable coping strategies depicted in some of the songs, suggesting that:

> The coping in Swift's lyrics can be consolatory to listeners who have engaged in more "taboo" coping strategies such as addiction, self-doubt, or breaking down. The resulting rhetorical discourses help normalize the discussion of these coping strategies. For fans of the album, this work is consolatory; it gives them something to point at and say, "Me

DRAFT

> too.” This supports the idea that music can serve a remedial function by normalizing public coping and reducing the shame around talking about certain coping strategies. (2025: 61)

It is, in other words, a way of bringing into public a range of strategies and situations that many engage in but would otherwise be too ashamed to talk about. Her work serves to legitimise discussion of potentially difficult or problematic issues by her own identification with equally difficult and problematic situations.

Williams’ essay on sexuality was published before his appointment as Archbishop of Canterbury, and it is in this movement to a position of political power that we can, perhaps, see an important parallel to Swift. Williams expresses a relatively liberal and progressive sexual ethics in his analysis, one that attempts to get to the root of the matter, but which conservatives are, at the same time, likely to feel goes a little too far. After becoming Archbishop, some felt that Williams failed to carry through on the agenda outlined in his essay, particularly in regard to church handling of homosexuality. In a 2006 interview, Williams suggested that “Twenty years ago I wrote an essay in which I advocated a different direction. That was when I was still a professor, to stimulate debate. It did not generate much support and a lot of criticism—quite fairly on a number of points. What I am saying now is: let us talk this through. As Archbishop I have a different task” (Houtman 2006). Caught up in the public negotiation between different groups, Williams seems to have felt the pressure to keep more conservative positions on board a lot more keenly. In this role, his task of holding together a communion of churches takes greater precedence over a provocative attempt to get others to think deeply about and question the rules and ordering to which they have grown accustomed. Many of those who had a personal or theological investment in the political issues being resolved differently felt wounded or disappointed by this decision, while others either sympathised with the pragmatic

DRAFT

pressures that lay behind it or were glad to maintain the status quo. We see the twin pulls of personal experience and group dynamics being mediated and contested through the lens of theology in a way that Williams ultimately seems to resolve differently from Swift, partly as a result of his movement to a different position within the struggle. We see, in other words, a vivid depiction of the importance of subject position for the way in which these issues are negotiated and narrated, and we see Swift the pop star and Williams in his role as academic theologian able to negotiate these in a very different way to Williams the archbishop or Swift the country musician.

In Swift's twists and turns, as with those of Williams, we see some of the ways in which a particular position in life and society serves to enable the articulation of a particular imagination of the relationship between self, romantic desire, and the divine. These imaginations can be connected both to one's own life experience and the possibilities available for presenting oneself in a particular way to others. This imagination is both politically contested and tied up with the deepest realms of inner personal wrestling and experience. As such it is both highly contested and incredibly significant. Swift's articulations of the relationship between religion and romance in her songs may or may not relate to her own sense of spiritual identity; regardless of whether or not this is the case, they contribute to the wider contestation of the religious imagination which has consequences both for many individuals and for the political movements that shape the world on a much larger scale.

DRAFT

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DRAFT

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