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Cheetham, David

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Blues and Jazz

David Cheetham

Introduction

In the 21st Century, the fusion or mixing of styles across all aspects of our culture has become a familiar experience. In music, globalisation has caused many different musical forms, styles of performance, cultural idiosyncracies and combinations to gain an increasing prominence in popular media and public events. So, looking at blues and jazz forms - and considering their relationship and impact in the religious sphere - one must acknowledge that this contemporary experience makes more complex the discussion of their interaction. Additionally, one might draw attention to the phenomenon of musical hybridity and its impact on the popular imagination. Think, for example, of Norwegian saxophonist Jan Garbarek's influential partnership with The Hilliard Ensemble with his album *Officium* (1994), a beautiful and haunting fusion of Gregorian choral singing with an improvised ethereal free-form sax providing a shaft of light that seems to connect the 21st and the 10th centuries. Today's 21st century religious individual has multiple musical options - fusions or otherwise - to help connect with and express their faith.

Nevertheless, the history of the relationship between blues, jazz and religion – particularly in the context of Christian churches of various denominations – has often courted controversy about the appropriateness of their presence in the context of liturgy and worship. Historically, this might apply more to the blues (sometimes labelled as the Devil's music) than to jazz, but both forms (blues and jazz) present challenges to 'formal' religious settings. As one example of this, Bill Hall, in a piece entitled 'Jazz – Lewd or Ludens?', relates his own struggles to perform jazz in the north-east of England (Hall 2000). He speaks about opposition from traditionalists who felt that the reverence of the services would be violated. However, the events went ahead and were transformative for many present (195-205). The improvisatory

moments during the services served to greatly augment the religious impact. In one such service in 1966, Hall relates the way that Ron Aspery, a saxophonist, unexpectedly improvised a wailing shriek on his instrument after the account of Jesus' crucifixion. The effect on the congregation was profound (198). Perhaps there is also something about the saxophone as an instrument that appears to vocalise like a prophetic human voice? As one example of this, Jason Bivins, an American scholar of jazz and religion, perceptively observes that the saxophonist Charles Gayle's 'yawps and fierce innovations in the altissimo register seem to match the intensity of his convictions' (Bivins 2015: 4). As another example, Christopher Chase draws attention to a composition entitled 'Imam' by a Muslim jazz player, Abdullah Ibrahim, and asks 'are prayers found in the saxophone?' (Chase 2010: 160).

I can relate to both Hall's enthusiasm and the challenges that he faced in the context of church worship. It was the music scene that captured my imagination whilst at university. Musically speaking, my own personal liberation came when I was asked by a jazz guitarist at university if I would like to set up a jazz band. Up until that point, I was a classically trained pianist with some rather pretentious compositions to my name (I think a 2-hour long symphony at one point, thankfully now lost). However, I was also a keen improviser. Jazz was a whole new world for me. I liked the freedom, the cool...the smoke. However, there was also the enjoyment of improvisation as an individual player whilst simultaneously sharing a joint sense of creativity with the other players. Improvisation became a collective effort – requiring group *frisson*. Dave Brubeck said about jazz improvisation, it is 'the only form of art existing today in which there is freedom of the individual without the loss of group contact' (Brubeck quoted in Hall 2000: 206). Later, when I played in church worship bands, the use of jazz harmonies – and the traditional '12-bar blues' form – were familiar vehicles of lively worship. Nevertheless, like any application of free-form music, there were occasional tensions and delicate negotiations to be had concerning how far the musical freedom of players should dominate a service. Arguably, these

are challenges not just for the blues or jazz but also for *any* form of artistic endeavour within religious gatherings.

The relationship between blues, jazz and religion is a complex one that eschews easy categorisation or sweeping generalisations. Nevertheless, in what follows, we shall briefly highlight some of the historical background and the developments in the 20th Century – for example, the close original relationship between gospel music and blues as well as the question of African and European influences. Whilst doing this, we shall allude to some key figures and events in both blues and jazz music. Finally, we will give some attention to the issues and debates that arise from a consideration of the relationship between blues, jazz and religion.

Background and Contexts

For Samuel Floyd, the origins of blues, gospel and jazz largely stem from an African root (See Floyd 1995). In particular, he draws attention to the phenomenon of 'ring shout'. This is best characterised as a group religious ritualistic activity that was seen in the United States amongst West Indian African slaves. The practice included people moving in a circle whilst clapping and engaging in dance. What is especially interesting, certainly in light of the role of jazz as an important form of identity for African American Muslim musicians in the United States, is that some scholars have drawn a connection between 'ring shout' and Islam. This is something raised particularly by Silviane Diouf in her book *Servants of Allah* (2013). In this book she draws attention to the work of Lydia Parrish and Lorenzo Dow Turner (Diouf 2013: 68), who both see parallels between the ring shout and the Islamic practice of circumambulating the Kaaba during the Hajj. Thus, 'just as the pilgrims do in Mecca, the shouters turn counterclockwise. As in Mecca, they do so around a sacred object...' (69). However, Diouf herself lends to this connection only a conjectural status.

Floyd claims that the 'ring shout' was the root of many musical styles including the 'insistent and characteristic rhythms of "sorrow songs" and blues; and all the musical genres

derived from these and other early forms' (Floyd 1995: 6). Furthermore, for him, the important aspects are not necessarily to be located in the ring shout's connection to one particular faith, but in its fusion of sacred and secular in 'the world of the slaves' (6). In such a fusion he perceives 'African and African-derived tendencies to *eschew distinctions between religion and everyday life*' (6, my emphasis) and this obviously becomes a significant observation when we consider the relationship between religion, blues and jazz, especially as we evaluate how such art forms are naturally (or not) suited to religious expression.

Another important precursor of the blues was the 'spiritual'. There are a number of commonalities between them, including a yearning zeal in expression and lament over the human condition. This being the case, the connection is probably close enough for the two forms to overlap and be identified with each other, and the 'shouts' or 'hollers' so characteristic of African American singing were common to both. Similarly, still on the topic of origins, Don Cusic argues that the perhaps more positive genre of gospel music contains 'the roots of blues, country, modern gospel and rock'n'roll' (Cusic 2002: 49). This is not to imply a simple evolution or timeline from gospel to blues and jazz; rather, many of the singers and musicians inhabited these styles and forms concurrently. Indeed, Allan Moore argues that - given the tendency amongst some early singers to merge blues with gospel music - if one attempts to formally divide the two one can still perceive that there was no obvious separation exhibited in many of the lives of these singers (Moore 2002: 1). Moreover, recalling Floyd's comments about the connections between religion and everyday life in African idioms, there is also a merging between religion and the secular more generally. For example, Christopher Small suggests that there was a considerable amount of crossover: 'there is a good deal of quite secular enjoyment of both spirituals and gospel music, so in blues...there is a strong element of what can only be called the religious' (Small 1987: 191). This perhaps raises an important point about the way that boundaries between music and religion are blurred or challenged by the presence of highly expressive or creative forms of music like blues and jazz. This is a challenge for both secular

performers as they seek to identify deeply with the music and for organised religious institutions as they attempt to delineate the sacred from the profane. The Anglican theologian, David Brown, suggests that even if more conventional religious sensibilities were challenged 'these newer forms did not abandon the religious quest. Instead, that quest moved elsewhere, outside the immediate context of worship' (Brown 2007: 349).

However, even if the early singers themselves managed to hold together these musical forms in their own lives the distinction between them was clearly seen as being of *moral* importance for many churches. If the blues has been labelled 'devil's music' it is because, as David Evans says, it is often 'distinctly secular and worldly, unsentimental, sexually explicit, and ironic, with an undertone of deep dissatisfaction' (Evans 2002: 22). Gary Burnett in his The Gospel According to the Blues (2014) explains that part of the reason for the 'devil's music' label was the mythos about 'musicians going to the crossroads to sell their souls to the devil' in addition to other associations with voodoo and liquor (Burnett 2014: 6). He further suggests that the legend of the crossroads arose in connection with the life and music of the Delta bluesman, Robert Johnson (112-114), particularly as the titles of Johnson's songs included 'Crossroad Blues' and 'Me and the Devil Blues', to mention a few. Going further, in her feminist theology of music, Heidi Epstein colourfully describes the blues as 'arguably the early twentieth century's "painted whore" (Epstein 2004: 166). She links this to the experience of gospel singer Sister Rosetta Tharpe (166-170). Tharpe was both a gospel and a blues singer and performed in both sacred and entertainment venues with equal vigour. For many in the Black community, the fusion of both was acceptable and, in fact, 'the blues' celebration of the erotic served the cultural function of affirming life in the midst of death-dealing oppression' (166). However, Tharpe – largely as a result of her blues partnership with another blues/gospel singer Marie Knight – was eventually condemned by the Baptist and Holiness churches for such dalliances with the blues

and was unable to return to the fold (166). A similar fate awaited others too. For example, blues singer Steve Tracy relates a story of Sam Cooke who was rejected by a gospel audience when he tried to participate on stage: "Get that blues singer down. Get that no good so-and-so down. This is a *Christian* program".' (Heilbut 1971:121 cited in Evans 2002: 98).²

In his Blues and Evil (1993), Jon Spencer offers a penetrating study of the blues and seeks to address the typical caricatures of it as being morally suspect or lacking in spirituality. In fact, these alleged aspects may be interpreted as part of the blues' vivification of suffering itself and the defiant response to it – a 'polemical moment' (xv). So, looking beyond its carnal exterior, Spencer urges us to examine its deeper spiritual offerings. In doing so, he draws our attention to the blues singer as 'the human being as most honestly and ontologically realized' (11). This being so, they embody the wrestling with suffering and evil and their performances serve as a kind of cathartic 'ritual' for the audience (39). In this, Spencer seems to be describing the blues as a type of active liberation theology or a form of protest against oppression and, possibly, as the fount of a specific 'African-American ethics' (xxvii).

Setting aside the popular perceptions of the moral differences between gospel and blues music, there are also differences of style. Moore suggests that, at least ostensibly, one might discern a distinction between the *communality* of gospel music or spirituals and the *individual* guitar blues singer. Thus, whereas gospel is an invitation for group or congregational participation, the blues is often a lone voice of anguish. Additionally, we might say that both forms follow distinctive and recognisable patterns and emotions. Given this, Moore argues that originality of expression tends to be missing (Moore 2002: 5). Or rather, 'I'm gonna sing the

¹ Epstein creatively draws powerful theological metaphors from Tharpe's predicament. Tharpe is a 'prodigal daughter' who is the 'locus of both exploitation and proclamation; a confusing site of pollution and emancipation that mocks naïve devotional demands for purity and integrity' (Epstein 2004:167).

² Nevertheless, Burnett suggests that 'the relationship between the church and the blues...was not quite so one-dimensional...Blues artists went back and forth between careers as preachers and blues performers, and churches hosted blues artists - Blind Willie McTell from Georgia was one who often performed his music is a church setting' (Burnett 2014: 6).

blues' means that a performer is about to give a rendering of something that already has a historical pedigree or genealogy as a 'text' or emotional map being repeated in performances.

This is arguably less true of jazz - which is characteristically centred on improvisation by groups and individual soloists – but it would be hasty to generalise too readily. Think of the jazz 'standard', for example.

As we have already stated, there is a shared origin and close kinship between blues and jazz. Both genres influenced each other and the blues historian Elijah Wald remarks: 'When early jazz musicians described the music of their youth, they frequently mentioned blues' (Wald 2010: 81).3 There is no doubting the importance of blues in terms of creating specific, perhaps what might be called iconic or 'classic' moods, and also a highly adaptable and recognisable musical form (e.g. 12-bar) for jazz composers and improvisers. Nevertheless, Wald thinks that giving sole attention to the crossover and inter-relationship between both musical cultures might obscure a more fundamental observation that both blues and jazz can be viewed as parts of the same culture or tradition. If this is the case, then what we see as 'differences' are really representations of different artists and forms for the sake of an audience, intended or otherwise. That is, one should not underestimate the influence of the music business and its impresarios when it comes to tailoring or promoting certain music and performers. He writes: 'Given its shared history, it is arguably misleading to discuss blues and jazz as overlapping or interpollinating forms rather than as one tradition that has been marketed in different ways to different audiences' (93).

Although there are clear elements that trace back to African-derived sources, there are other voices that seek to emphasise European influences for jazz in particular. Thus, William Youngren asks us to consider a variety of folk or culturally distinctive forms of music, perhaps

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³ Similarly, David Evans remarks: 'When jazz bursts onto the scene in 1917, shifting the focus of interest toward the performer's momentary improvisations, the new musical stylists featured many blues tunes. Audiences could now view blues as a type of jazz' (Evans 2002: 27).

even street musicians or other entertainers, which are part of the sound tapestry that make up the early jazz band. For example, he suggests that Jewish klesmer music 'sounds remarkably like jazz' (Youngren 2000:17). Crucial to his view is that idea that jazz owes its tonality to recent European musical history and its wider influence. That is, its basic musical structure is grounded on the Western tonal system (23). He argues for three important sources such as brass band music - which features prominently in early jazz bands; then there are the highly idiosyncratic meters of Latin America that influence some of the rhythmical invention of jazz, and finally there is classical concert music which has influenced the melodic formation (23). Perhaps the symbolic point of stressing the richness of the origins of both jazz and blues is that the ownership of these musical forms is by no means monopolized by one culture, and many people are thus able to connect with such music and appropriate it into their contexts, religious or otherwise. There is also a diversity to be perceived in terms of class status. Even if blues and jazz shared an origin, they moved in different directions. Blues remained the iconic expression of loss, poverty (financial or emotional) and dissatisfaction whilst some jazz became an acceptable form of 'high' art.4 Again, Brown remarks that by the 1930s jazz 'was already considered highbrow, primarily instrumental and capable of crossover between the races, whereas blues remained mainly vocal, lowbrow and overwhelmingly black. An element of rebellion, however, remained as part of the attraction of jazz' (Brown 2007:358).

One of the most significant figures in 20th century music (of a variety of forms), whose career witnessed a vast number of changes and developments in American music during the 20th C., was Duke Ellington. Ellington incorporated a number of styles into his work including gospel, bebop and swing. He presents a quandary for those who wish to neatly categorise him. He wrote short popular works, concert hall pieces, suites and music for a variety of occasions, art-forms and media. We mention him here because he was also one of the pioneers when it

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⁴ One might call attention to the fact that jazz is given a slot on BBC Radio 3 – a British radio station that promotes mostly classical music and high art. Similarly, the influence of jazz idioms can be seen in the music of many serious 20th century composers such as Stravinsky and Walton.

came to the use of jazz idioms in sacred liturgical music, especially his commissioned work for Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, *Concert of Sacred Music* (1965). Following this, Ellington composed two further similar works, the *Second Sacred Concert* (1968) at New York Cathedral, St John the Divine, and *Third Sacred Concert* (1973), first performed at Westminster Abbey in London. These works continue to be performed. For Ellington, they were not the artefacts of mere musical professionalism but represented his personal expression of faith through art. Furthermore, these works forced people to reconsider both what was considered appropriate in worship and what constituted the identity of jazz itself. As a result, there was no shortage of controversy with some unsure about the use of jazz in liturgy, despite the presence of scriptural references. Ellington defended his music by claiming that 'everything is a part of God's world, and that the old, arbitrary separation no longer makes sense' (Cohen 2010: 468, cited in Bivins 2015: 158). Most importantly, he was blurring the secular/sacred distinction and this was something that made the works both visionary and innovative. His high profile contributions in these sacred concerts only served to widen the perceived acceptability of jazz as an expression of piety and praise in public settings.

Even if Ellington's sacred music was performed within churches, it was not explicitly liturgical or ritualistic (although this author recalls the use of some of Ellington's music during an experimental Eucharist service held at Ripon College, Cuddesdon near Oxford). Work of a more explicitly liturgical character was attempted be another important figure: the Catholic jazz pianist and composer, Mary Lou Williams. Following her conversion to Catholicism in 1956 (and baptism in 1957), she took a much greater interest – with some encouragement from the Church - in producing sacred works. Perhaps most significantly, she had a more concrete drive to see how her work, personal wealth and activity could help others, especially musicians. Her sacred works include the *Black Christ of the Andes* (1963), a *Mass* (1967) for Pittsburgh Cathedral, and a number of shorter liturgical pieces. Regarding the use of jazz or blues in churches, the new progressive liturgical movements that had been ushered in by Vatican 2 -

which included figures who actively encouraged Williams - did not necessarily silence more conservative voices and restraints. Thus, one declaration in 1967 concerning 'rites' was unambiguously negative: 'Masses with novel and improvised rites, vestments, and texts, sometimes with music of altogether profane and worldly character, unworthy of a sacred service. These travesties of worship ...tend inevitably to desacralize the liturgy' (Documents on the Liturgy: 1966:127). These attitudes might have become less prevalent today with the tide of change in favour of liturgical innovation and inculturation, but they nonetheless present obstacles for jazz and blues musicians in these more hierarchical ecclesial settings.

Predating this was the perhaps an even more haunting work of Ed Summerlin whose Liturgical Jazz (1960) was written for his dying infant daughter Mary Jo, especially the 'Requiem for Mary Jo' that is at its heart. Similarly, John Coltrane's A Love Supreme (1964) is widely acknowledged as one of the finest examples of jazz used to express faith and it is also regarded as one of the greatest jazz albums of all time. Some suggest that it represents Coltrane's personal offering to God (Brown 2007: 359) stemming from his troubled life. Although associated with Christianity, Coltrane wrote on the first page of his manuscript 'all paths lead to God'. The music moulds together western and non-western, African and Arabian influences There is also a said repetition of 'a love supreme' towards the end of the first track 'Acknowledgement' which sounds *mantra*-like. Perhaps underlining Coltrane's universal intentions, it is of no small significance that the Muslim jazz pianist McCoy Tyner plays on the recording. Given this, it would not be hard to see the potential for such music to draw together different faith traditions, or inspire musicians to see the potential of their music to speak of something universal. Indeed, the improvisation of players together – sharing the intimacy of their joint creativity - could suggest profound forms of engagement that transcend, or at least suspend, cultural and religious differences.

Jazz musicians are drawn from many faith traditions and none.⁵ Moreover, given the strong presence of African influences – especially in the United States – it is impossible to ignore the connection between jazz and Islam. We have already hinted at this earlier when we speculated about the possible origins of the 'ring shout', however there is probably a much greater significance in the freedom that jazz lends to the search for a distinctive expressive identity. Moreover, for Muslim players, Islam was something that was brought to jazz with a specific agenda to underline cultural identity. Christopher Chase claims that Islam emboldened black musicians determined to establish a counter-identity to the prevailing white American Christian culture (Chase 2010). He writes that 'jazz musicians appropriated Islam in different ways to generate their own nascent discourses' (157). Chase surveys a number of Muslim performers and composers, including Abdullah Ibrahim, Yusef Lateef and Art Blakey. Each of these musicians inhabited their Muslim identity in different ways. For Ibrahim, who emerged from Apartheid South Africa, jazz was a vehicle for deep universal communication or solidarity that acted as a kind of 'anti-Apartheid musical ummah of resistance' (180). Lateef's choice of instrument sometimes evoked Islamic elements, such as his use of the shannai, an Indian instrument that has a very reedy shrill sound which seems to resemble the Muslim call to prayer (172). The famous jazz drummer Art Blakey toured with his group, the 'Jazz Messengers'; the term 'messenger' 'is pregnant with meaning in a Muslim context [...] serving as a channel from God for new dispensations, paradigms...' (166).

Discussion

What is it that attracts religious people to blues and jazz today, and why do such musical forms remain an integral part of the contemporary music scene? We have seen some of the ways in which we might address these questions. There is what might be called the immediacy of the

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⁵ For an excellent text that discusses examples of this, see Bivins 2015.

Looking at the blues and its specific connection with gospel music, Dave Headlam outlines a variety of reasons for this contemporary 'appropriation'. Using nomenclature borrowed from Roland Barthes, he draws attention to the 'grain' – 'texture in the sound and the associated expression' (Headlam 2002: 161). The texture and feel of the blues is ideal for giving voice to the earthy, the everyday and the 'real'. As we saw Gary Burnett argue, the blues can be used as a vehicle for the full expression of human religious experience, good and evil. This is the emotional expressiveness of the genre, the deep communication of the highs and lows of life, the longing and the searching evident in the lyrics and harmonic movement. These are universal themes and the potency with which they are delivered by blues and gospel are worth emulating. Furthermore, looking beyond the immediate context of religious practice and worship, there is also the power of the blues as a metaphor or cultural symbol - not necessarily a musical engagement with the blues at all, but the recognition of its ability to *represent* such themes in the cultural imagination.

The acceptability and use of blues and jazz in the context of religion is complex. In the context of Christian churches, we have seen that the popular prejudice of blues and jazz as illicit forms of music has provoked strong reactions against it in some quarters. Moreover, formal ecclesial practices might find it difficult to accommodate these freer or more visceral expressions. Thus, the difficulties regarding the perceived acceptability of jazz and blues in Christian worship reflects visible and existing differences in liturgical practices that characterise the differences between episcopal, congregational, reformed, charismatic, black, ethnic or free churches and so on. Historically, and most likely stemming from the rise of the charismatic movement in the second half in the 20th century, much church music (in most denominations) has fully adopted more 'contemporary idioms' and the influences of jazz and blues are to be clearly heard in these contexts. Nevertheless, explicit use of jazz *improvisation* in church liturgy

(unless part of church café culture) is still regarded as a novelty within the practice of worship itself.

Setting aside the Christian context, we also noted the phenomenon of jazz as a tool for creating an identity structure for African American Muslims. Here the attraction of jazz was its ability to act as a vehicle for counter-cultural expression and alternative genealogies. Not only has jazz and Islam found a certain kinship, but other prominent musicians have found jazz to be a vehicle for other spiritual expressions. For example, Herbie Hancock sees in jazz the possibility to express his Buddhist tradition – using the rhythms and collective creativity of jazz as a kind of 'chant' which draws people together. Again, Bivins makes a bold statement when he suggests that

the religiosity of jazz is understood as a register of its transcendence of constraints. Even as the music is surely conditioned, many musicians have held the belief that through the open work of improvisation one can cut through the layers of artifice to encounter some kind of musical enlightenment or becoming' (Bivins 2015: 5).

If we take this claim seriously, it not only raises questions about the way that jazz can vivify religious feeling, it may even provoke the possibility of music like jazz as a form of spirituality in its own right. This is certainly a possibility pursued with earnest by Neil Leonard in his *Jazz:*Myth and Religion (1987), and the spirituality of numerous blues and jazz musicians testifies to the reality of this. However, there is a question about how far we ought to press this.

Improvisation (though, not limited to jazz by any means) is a free act of creativity, but whether or not we can use words like 'transcendence' or 'enlightenment' to describe it is not clear. In some ways, the wonder of improvisation is that it captures a unique unrepeatable ecstatic moment that is fulfilling for both the performers and their audience. In addition, one might recall Jon Spencer's defence of the blues as a kind of 'authentic' theology. For him, authenticity was to be found in the whole person – in the human anguish, eros and sin that are part of the

rituality of the blues and its ability to be a means for liberation. The insight here might be that both blues and jazz should *retain* their earthiness. That is, their engagement with the human, their freedom, and their spontaneous creative ecstasies, might be a truer vocation and contribution to religious expression than more transcendent goals.

Bivins also suggests that '...what compels about jazz is precisely its historically identifiable resistance (through improvisation, through its religiosities) to closure as part of its pursuit of the sacred' (22). This is a significant observation, but does it also suggest that jazz is more generous to religiosities that are liberal and open than doctrinally rooted ones? Not necessarily, because to be a good improviser one also has to know the theme well. Thus, Bruce Benson draws hermeneutical lessons from jazz improvisation to propose a method that stresses not just the improvisatory *freedom* in hermeneutics but also respect for structure or the *cantus* firmus (Benson 2011: 303-5). That is, improvisation is most certainly not an indication that structure has been abandoned. Nevertheless, Benson, following Derrida, suggests that there is a 'doubling commentary'. In jazz this refers to the aspiration both to 'get it right' in terms of the theme's presentation, but also the need for the open space of developing ideas and novel spontaneity. Only by permitting both these elements do we head in the direction of 'true hermeneutical justice' (Benson 2006: 206). This kind of discussion is illuminating because jazz – whether we attend to it or not as listeners or players – appears in many recent discussions of theological method.⁶ That is, with the current shift of focus towards 'drama' or performance of theology and hermeneutics the jazz improvisatory narrative itself has been used as a metaphor by many theologians who are seeking new directions for theological innovation.

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⁶ See, for example, the work of Vanhoozer 2004, Vondey 2010 and Benson 2006, 2011.

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