An investigation of contrasting approaches to worship within Australian Baptist churches to explore the role Apollonian and Dionysian concepts of art play in understanding the differences. A Case Study approach.

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Signed:

Matthew Field
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Table Of Contents

Abstract
Preface
Introduction
Chapter 1 - The Baptist Movement
Chapter 2 - Apollonian and Dionysian Concepts of Art
Chapter 3 - The Sociology of Bourdieu
Chapter 4 - Methodological Considerations
Chapter 5 - Analysis
Chapter 6 - Conclusions

Appendix A - Case Study Questionnaire Document
Appendix B - Case Study Questionnaire Results
Appendix C - Service Comparisons and Observations
Appendix D - Case Study Respondent Comments
Appendix E - Comparative Analysis of Interview Responses
Abstract

This thesis explores the ongoing and deeply felt tensions between churches that use contemporary music-styles for worship, complete with charismatic influence (hand-clapping, hand-raising, tongues speaking, overt emotional displays, etc.), and those that reject contemporary music and remain rooted in traditional music forms such as hymn singing with restrained physical expression.

This study seeks to identify what role the under-considered issue of Apollonian and Dionysian concepts of art has on the stylistic choices of the various churches. It will then consider, with reference to the work of Bourdieu, whether the collective, “quasi-subconscious” adherence to one of these concepts acts as an automatic filtering process for new attendees at a church, thereby working as a self-validating, self-selecting and self-replicating system.

Forming the core of this thesis is a Case Study involving four Australian Baptist churches. Two of these churches are intentionally contemporary in their service style, including their use of music and two are deliberately conservative or traditional in their style. The Case Study involves three parts including a Questionnaire, a Service Observation and an Interview.

Analysis of the subject groups and of the Case Study data reveals that the subject churches share very similar histories, statements of faith, make virtually identical truth claims, all hold the Bible to be the ‘actual’ word of God and all desire to live ‘appropriate’ Christian lives. The Questionnaire analysis further reveals that the individuals from the churches view themselves in a very similar way and hold to virtually identical theology on key matters. Statistical analysis also removes gender, age and education level as explaining variables.

This research reveals that the most significant factor separating the churches, and the one that most consistently and clearly explains the differences between their worship approaches, is their underlying philosophical disposition towards Apollonian and Dionysian concepts of art.
Preface

My interest in this research topic was sparked many years ago after extended visits from my homeland of Australia to the United States and New Zealand. Ours was a Christian family and as such my parents would look for churches to attend most Sundays, resulting in a variety of church denominations and worship-styles being encountered. As I grew and had chances to travel alone, I was further drawn to this diversity and came to realise the deep and passionately held differences between churches that hold even the same name, for instance, Baptist.

This thesis then is an exploration of why this might be the case. It is the culmination of several years of focussed work preceded by many years of interest, observation and enquiry. The lengthy journey to this point has led me on many unexpected paths and revealed much greater detail, inter-relationship and complexity than I could have expected.

A study like this one collects new data, but also seeks new understanding on its main topic by exploring new relationships within established areas of study. It seems evident that in order to conduct a study of this breadth it is unlikely the author alone will be an expert on all matters covered. The introduction by Bertrand Russell, in his History Of Western Philosophy is, I believe, a suitable, if not overly contrite, reminder of the strengths and limitations of any cross-disciplinary study like this one:

A few words of apology and explanation are called for if this book is to escape even more severe censure than it doubtless deserves.

Apology is due to the specialists on various schools and individual philosophers. With the possible exception of Leibnitz, every philosopher of whom I treat is better known to some others than to me. If however books covering a wide field are to be written at all, it is inevitable, since we are not immortal, that those who write such books should spend less time on any one part than can be spent by a man who concentrates on a single author or a brief period. (Russell 2004, Preface)

Explaining the value, despite the above limitation, in having a single author wrestle with a broad body of knowledge he continues:

If there is any unity in the movement of history, if there is any intimate relation between what goes before and what comes later, it is necessary, for setting this forth, that earlier and later periods should be synthesised in a single mind. (Russell 2004, Preface)
This concept holds true for the current study now being undertaken. In this case, the author is very well acquainted with the Australian Baptist Movement and its diversity of worship styles and music. This combines with the philosophical concepts of Apollonian and Dionysian art and the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu to form the core of this study. Other matters are enquired of when necessary to bring further understanding to parts of this thesis. It is for reasons of practical necessity then that the author defers in these other matters to experts on those fields and hopes to express the key components of those disciplines with enough detail to be accurate, enough clarity to be useful and enough brevity to support rather than confuse the area of investigation.

I hope that this work stimulates discussion and change, not just within specific relation to the subject groups, but also by helping to shed light more broadly on contrasting approaches to music and art within our society.