

# Symbol and Narrative in Religious Music: A Cross-Cultural Comparative Analysis

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**Abstract:** This study explores the symbolic and narrative functions in religious music, revealing its complexity and diversity in different cultural contexts. Through a comparative analysis of major religious music such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism, the study found that these musical forms have significant similarities in conveying religious beliefs, cultural values and social norms sex and differences. Christian music embodies symbolism through a combination of melody and lyrics, Islamic music guides meditation through the repetition of rhythm and melody, Buddhist music combines ritual chanting and instruments, and Hindu music Mythology and philosophy are conveyed through complex raga and tala structures. Research shows that symbols and narratives in religious music are not only means of artistic expression but also important carriers for spreading religious culture, promoting the spread of faith and the inheritance of culture. Future research should focus on the new functions and forms of religious music in the context of globalization and digitalization, as well as its role in mental health, social harmony, and cultural heritage protection.

**Keywords:** Symbol and Narrative; Religious Music; Cross-Cultural Comparison; Religious Belief

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As a form of cultural expression, religious music has long played an important role in religious practices around the world. It is not only an important part of religious rituals, but also carries rich symbolic meanings and narrative functions (Bradshaw, Ellison, Fang, & Mueller, 2015; Lang et al., 2016). Through music, faith is conveyed, religious stories are told, and the emotions of believers are expressed. The symbolic and narrative functions of religious music show diversity and complexity in different cultural backgrounds, which provides rich research materials for cross-cultural comparative analysis (Qureshi, 1972). In the context of globalization, cultural exchanges have become increasingly frequent, and religious music between different cultures has also influenced and integrated with each other. However, despite sharing common religious

themes, religious music from different cultural backgrounds differs significantly in symbolism and narrative. These differences not only reflect the uniqueness of each culture, but also reveal the adaptation and changes of religious music in cross-cultural communication (Fellerer & Hadas, 1953). Symbolism in religious music is often conveyed through musical elements such as melody, harmony, rhythm, and lyrics. The construction of symbolic meaning is often closely related to specific religious beliefs, rituals and myths (Neill & Ridley, 2010). For example, in Christian music, the use of harmony often symbolizes holiness and harmony, while in Buddhist music, the sound of bells and wooden fish symbolizes purity and enlightenment. In Islamic hymns, the ups and downs of the melody and the changes in rhythm are often used to symbolize the piety and mystery of the faith. Religious music under different cultural backgrounds has its own characteristics in the expression of symbolic meaning. Take Hindu music, for example, whose complex melodic and rhythmic structures often symbolize the balance between order and chaos in the universe. In traditional African religious music, the use of percussion instruments not only symbolizes the souls of ancestors, but also tells the history and legends of the tribe through changes in rhythm. The narrative function of religious music is mainly reflected in its communication of religious stories, teachings and historical events. Through music, the core content of religious beliefs is brought to life and passed down from generation to generation among believers (Smith, 2003). The realization of narrative function usually depends on the structure of music, the content of lyrics and the form of performance. In Western religious music, oratorios and masses often tell biblical stories and religious teachings through complex musical structures and rich lyrical content. In Eastern religious music, Buddhist chants and Taoist ritual music convey religious philosophy and practice methods through concise melodies and repeated lyrics. The narrative function of cross-cultural religious music is not only reflected in the telling of religious stories, but also in the recording of social and historical events and the shaping of collective memory. For example, in Jewish music, many traditional songs not only narrate the origin of religious festivals, but also record the historical suffering and revival of the Jewish nation. Cross-cultural comparative analysis of symbols and narratives in religious music can reveal the commonalities and individualities of religious music in different cultural backgrounds. This analysis not only helps to understand the function and meaning of religious music in different cultures, but also provides a new perspective for cross-cultural communication and understanding.

## 2. OVERVIEW OF RELIGIOUS MUSIC

As a special form of music, religious music carries rich cultural, historical and social significance. It is not only an important part of religious rituals, but also a profound expression of human spiritual life. Through in-depth study of religious music, religious beliefs and social structures in different cultural backgrounds can be better understood. Religious music refers to music used in religious ceremonies, worship services, or occasions related to religious beliefs (Farmer, 1952). This type of music is often sacred and ritualistic, and is intended to enhance religious experiences, convey religious teachings, or promote the spiritual elevation of believers. The scope of religious music is broad, covering various musical forms from ancient times to modern times, from the East to the West. It includes not only traditional hymns and hymns, but also modern religious pop music. The definition of religious music may vary in different cultural and religious contexts. In the Christian tradition, religious music usually refers to church music such as masses, psalms, and hymns. In Islam, religious music may include chanting and Sufi music. In Hinduism and Buddhism, religious music may take the form of chants, hymns, and ritual music (Fellerer & Hadas, 1953).

### 2.1. Historical Evolution of Religious Music

The history of religious music can be traced back to the early stages of human civilization. Ancient civilizations such as Egypt, Greece and Rome left behind a rich legacy of religious music. In the Middle Ages, the spread of Christianity promoted the development of religious music, and Gregorian chant became the representative music form of this period. With the advent of the Renaissance, religious music gradually integrated into polyphonic music, and composers such as Bach and Handel created a large number of religious music works. In modern times, the form and content of religious music have undergone significant changes. The development of modern technology has made religious music more widely disseminated, and the application of recording technology and electronic music has made the expressions of religious music more diverse. At the same time, the process of globalization has accelerated the exchange and integration of religious music between different cultures, forming a rich and colorful religious music landscape.

### 2.2. Main Types of Religious Music

There are many types of religious music, and religious music in different

religious and cultural backgrounds has its own characteristics. In Christianity, masses, psalms, and hymns are the main forms of religious music. Mass music is often used in Catholic religious ceremonies and has complex structures and rich musical expression. Psalms are an important part of Christian worship and are known for their concise and solemn melodies(Romfh, 1972). In Islam, chanting is the most representative form of religious music. Chanting is not only a religious ritual, but also a form of artistic expression that emphasizes the beauty of sound and the expression of emotions. Sufi music is the musical expression of Islamic mysticism, which achieves unity with God through spinning dance and music. Hindu and Buddhist religious music forms include chants, hymns, and ritual music. Hindu chants are often used for sacrifices and celebrations and are rich in melody and rhythm. Buddhist religious music is mostly used in meditation and rituals, emphasizing inner peace and tranquility.

### 2.3. Functions of Religious Music

Religious music plays multiple functions in religious activities. First of all, it is an important part of religious ceremonies, enhancing the sacredness and solemnity of the ceremony through the expressive power of music. Secondly, religious music is an important tool to convey religious teachings. Through the combination of lyrics and melody, it makes it easier for believers to understand and remember religious teachings. Religious music also has the functions of emotional expression and spiritual sublimation(Brokaw, 2010). In religious activities, music can stimulate the emotional resonance of believers and promote spiritual sublimation and inner peace. In addition, religious music also plays an important role in education and communication in social culture, spreading religious culture and values through music.

### 2.4. Cultural Background of Religious Music

Religious music is deeply rooted in the cultural background in which it is located. Religious music in different cultural backgrounds reflects their unique history, society and religious beliefs. In the West, the development of Christian music is inseparable from European history and culture, reflecting social changes and cultural evolution from the Middle Ages to modern times. In the East, the religious music of Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism embodies Asia's rich cultural traditions and religious beliefs. The cultural background of religious music not only affects its musical form and content, but also affects its social function and mode of communication(Demmrich, 2020). In a multicultural context, religious

music has become an important medium for the exchange and integration of different cultures, promoting understanding and respect between different cultures through the form of music. In the context of globalization, the cultural background of religious music is also constantly evolving and developing. The exchange and integration of different cultures have made religious music more diverse in expression and richer in content, making it an important part of global cultural heritage.

### 3. SYMBOLIC ELEMENTS IN RELIGIOUS MUSIC

As a form of cultural expression, religious music contains rich symbolic elements. These elements are not only reflected in the sound, lyrics, and instruments of the music, but also convey deep religious meanings through aspects such as colors and numbers, as shown in Table 1. Through the analysis of these symbolic elements, we can gain a deeper understanding of the connotation of religious music in different cultural backgrounds.

Table 1: Symbolic Elements in Religious Music

Theme	Description	Examples and Symbolic Meanings
Symbolic Meaning of Sound	Sound plays a crucial role in religious music, closely tied to the core beliefs of the faith.	Harmony in Christian sacred music symbolizes unity; Buddhist mantra symbolizes eternity and tranquility; the Adhan in Islam represents steadfast faith.
Symbolic Expression of Lyrics	Lyrics serve as direct vessels for conveying symbolic meanings, revealing core values of religious beliefs.	Psalms in Judaism symbolize communication with God; Hindu bhajans express reverence through metaphor; the lyrics of "Amazing Grace" in Christianity symbolize redemption and rebirth.
Symbolic Meaning of Instruments	Instruments are not only sources of sound but also carry profound symbolic meanings.	The organ in Christianity symbolizes the sacred; bells and gongs in Buddhism symbolize awakening; the tabla in Hindu music symbolizes rhythm and the pulse of life.
Color Symbolism	Colors convey symbolic meanings through the combination of visual and auditory elements.	White symbolizes purity in Christianity; red symbolizes power in Hinduism; gold symbolizes the sacred and enlightenment in Buddhism.
Symbolism of Numbers	Numbers have special symbolic meanings in religious music, often linked to core beliefs.	The number three symbolizes the Holy Trinity in Christianity; the number eight represents the Noble Eightfold Path in Buddhism; the number five symbolizes the Five Pillars of Islam.

### 3.1. The Symbolic Meaning of Sound

Sound plays a vital role in religious music, and its symbolic meaning is often closely linked to the core ideas of religious beliefs (Nuckolls, 1999). In Christian sacred music, the use of harmony symbolizes harmony and divine unity. For example, Bach's "Matthew Passion" conveys the solemnity and sacredness of Christ's Passion through complex harmonic structures. In Buddhist music, Sanskrit is regarded as a tool for purifying the soul, and its monotonous and continuous tone symbolizes eternity and tranquility. In the Islamic musical tradition, the symbolic meaning of sound is particularly prominent. Adhan is a sound that calls believers to pray. Its melody and rhythm are not only part of religious rituals, but also symbolize the firmness and piety of faith. Research shows that azan's pitch and rhythm changes can trigger emotional resonance in listeners and enhance the depth of religious experience.

### 3.2. Symbolic Expression of Lyrics

Lyrics are the direct carrier of symbolic meaning in religious music. Through the analysis of lyrics, the core values and philosophical ideas of religious beliefs can be revealed. In Jewish music, Psalms are widely used in liturgical rituals. Their lyrics are full of praise and prayers to God, symbolizing the communication and contract between believers and God. Hindu hymns (Bhajans) express reverence and love for gods through lyrics. Research has found that these lyrics often use metaphors and symbolism to connect natural phenomena with the qualities of gods. For example, rivers symbolize the flow of life and divine purification, while light symbolizes wisdom and revelation. In Christian hymns, the lyrics are equally rich in symbolism. Take "Amazing Grace" as an example. Its lyrics symbolize the themes of redemption and rebirth through the description of grace. This symbolic expression not only enhances the religious appeal of the music, but also provides spiritual comfort to believers (Rosita, Purwanto, & Rosyidi, 2019).

### 3.3. Symbolic Meaning of Musical Instruments

Instruments in religious music are not only sources of sound but also have profound symbolic meaning. In Christian religious ceremonies, the pipe organ is often regarded as a sacred symbol, and its majestic tone symbolizes the majesty and solemnity of God. Research shows that the use of pipe organs can enhance the solemnity of worship services and enhance the religious experience of believers. In Buddhist music, bells and chimes are common musical instruments, and their crisp sounds symbolize enlightenment and wisdom (Bates, 2012). The ringing of the bell is regarded

as a signal to awaken the soul, reminding believers to maintain inner peace and concentration. In Hindu music, the tabla symbolizes rhythm and the rhythm of life, and its complex rhythm changes reflect the impermanence and changes of the universe. In Islamic music, the Oud is regarded as a symbol of tradition and culture, and its melodious melody conveys respect for history and faith. Research shows that the playing of the oud can evoke nostalgia in listeners and enhance their identification with religious traditions.

### 3.4. Color Symbolism in Religious Music

Although color is not as direct as sound and lyrics in religious music, it can also convey symbolic meaning through the combination of vision and hearing(Bruhn, 1996). In Christian religious ceremonies, white is often used as a color symbolizing purity and sanctity. During Christmas, white candles and decorations symbolize the advent of Christ and the coming of light. In Hindu religious music, the symbolism of color is particularly rich. Red symbolizes strength and vitality and is often used in musical settings at festivals and weddings. Yellow symbolizes wisdom and knowledge, and is often associated with religious education and rituals. Research has found that different colors can affect the emotional and psychological state of listeners, thereby enhancing the religious effect of music. In Buddhist music, gold is considered a symbol of holiness and enlightenment. The golden decorations and Buddha statues in the temple symbolize the wisdom and compassion of the Buddha. In music performances, golden costumes and props can enhance the solemnity of religious ceremonies and enhance believers' religious experience.

### 3.5. Numerical Symbolism in Religious Music

Numbers have special symbolic meaning in religious music and are often linked to core ideas of religious beliefs. In Christian music, the number three symbolizes the Holy Trinity, representing the unity and harmony of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In many works of sacred music, the triple beat rhythm is used to symbolize this holy trinity(Bruhn, 1996). In Buddhist music, the number eight has important symbolic meaning and represents the Noble Eightfold Path. This number is often used in the design of musical structure and rhythm, symbolizing the path of spiritual practice and liberation. Research shows that the eight-beat rhythm can lead listeners into a state of meditation and introspection, enhancing the depth of religious experience. In Islamic music, the number five symbolizes the Five Pillars of Islam and represents the basic principles of faith. In many religious songs, the five-beat rhythm is used to symbolize the firmness and piety of

this faith. Research shows that the rhythmic changes of five beats can trigger emotional resonance in the audience and enhance the sense of identification with the faith. Through the analysis of symbolic elements in religious music, we can gain a deeper understanding of the connotation of religious music in different cultural backgrounds. These symbolic elements not only enrich the expressive power of music, but also provide spiritual comfort and enlightenment to believers.

#### 4. NARRATIVE METHODS IN RELIGIOUS MUSIC

As an important form of cultural expression, religious music tells religious stories and conveys religious teachings through its unique musical language and structure. Its narrative methods are diverse, including linear narrative, circular narrative, symbolic narrative, character narrative and plot narrative, as shown in Table 2. These narrative methods not only enrich the expressive power of religious music, but also enhance its function in religious rituals and belief dissemination.

Table 2: Arrative Methods in Religious Music

Theme	Description	Examples and Applications
Linear Narrative	A linear narrative develops in chronological order, often used to tell religious stories.	Bach's 'St. Matthew Passion' presents the passion of Christ in sequence; the "Ramayana" in Hinduism narrates Prince Rama's journey through music drama.
Circular Narrative	A circular narrative expresses themes through repetition, conveying the eternal and universal aspects of faith.	Gregorian chants like "Alleluia" emphasize core beliefs through repeated melodies; Buddhist chanting helps practitioners enter a meditative state with repetitive rhythms.
Symbolic Narrative	Symbolic narrative conveys deeper meanings through the symbolic use of musical elements.	The organ symbolizes the sacred in Christian music; in Sufi music, rising melodies reflect the soul's ascent towards the divine.
Character Narrative	Character narrative portrays key figures in religious stories, revealing their traits and spiritual essence.	Handel's 'Messiah' vividly depicts Jesus through arias and choruses; Noh theater in Japan uses music to illustrate the complexities of mythological and historical figures.
Plot Narrative	Plot narrative showcases the complexities and dramatic conflicts of religious stories through musical structure and development.	Mozart's 'Requiem' contrasts sections to depict the journey from death to redemption; in Bharatanatyam, music and dance combine to express the intricate narratives of Hindu mythology.



#### 4.1. The Embodiment of Linear Narrative in Religious Music

Linear narrative is a narrative method that develops in chronological order. It is often used in religious music to tell the beginning and ending of religious stories. This narrative method is particularly common in Western religious music, such as Bach's "Matthew Passion". In this work, the music displays the entire process of Jesus' crucifixion in detail through continuous movements and in accordance with the narrative sequence in the Bible. The melody, harmony and rhythm of the music closely match the text, enhancing the coherence and emotional progression of the story. In Eastern religious music, linear narrative also plays an important role. Take the Hindu "Ramayana" as an example. This epic tells the story of Prince Rama from his birth to his victory over the devil in the form of a musical. The beat and melody of the music change with the development of the story, reflecting the emotional color and dramatic tension of different plots(Oh & Lee, 2014). The application of linear narrative in religious music not only helps the listener understand the storyline, but also emotionally guides the listener into a specific religious atmosphere. Through the temporality and structure of music, linear narratives bring the complexity and profundity of religious stories to life(Hutchings & McCormack, 2019).

#### 4.2. Application of Circular Narrative in Religious Music

Cyclic narrative is a narrative method that expresses themes through repetition and variation. It is often used to express the eternity and universality of religious teachings. In Christian hymns, circular narratives emphasize core ideas of the faith through repeated melodies and harmonies. For example, the " Alleluia " passage in Gregorian chant often conveys praise to God and firmness of faith through simple melody repetition. In Buddhist music, cyclical narratives also play an important role. Buddhist chanting music often helps believers enter a meditative state and realize the profoundness of Buddhism through cyclic melody and rhythm. For example, the " Six-Character Mantra " of Tibetan Buddhism creates a peaceful and profound atmosphere through repeated melody and rhythm, allowing the audience to feel the endless wisdom of Buddhism in the cycle of music. The application of circular narrative in religious music lies not only in the uniqueness of its musical structure, but also in its profound expression of religious beliefs. Through the cyclical nature of music, religious music continuously strengthens the core concepts of faith, allowing listeners to gradually internalize religious teachings through repeated musical experiences.

#### 4.3. The Expression of Symbolic Narrative in Religious Music

Symbolic narrative conveys the deeper meaning of religious stories and teachings through the symbolic use of musical elements. In Christian music, symbolic narratives are often expressed through specific instruments, melodies, and harmonies. For example, the pipe organ is regarded as a sacred symbol in many religious occasions, and its solemn timbre is often used to express the majesty of God and the sublimity of faith. In Bach's "Mass in B minor", the use of the organ is not only a need for musical performance, but also a symbolic creation of a sacred atmosphere. In Islamic Sufi music, symbolic narratives express the infinite pursuit of God and the sublimation of the soul through symbolic changes in melody and rhythm. In the musical accompaniment of Sufi whirling dance, the rising melody and accelerating rhythm symbolize the process of the soul's continuous sublimation under the guidance of God. The expression of symbolic narrative in religious music not only enriches the expressive power of music, but also deepens its religious connotation. Through the symbolic use of musical elements, religious music conveys complex religious concepts and emotions to the audience in an intuitive way, allowing them to feel the mystery and depth of religion in the musical experience.

#### 4.4. Character Narrative in Religious Music

Character narrative depicts important characters in religious stories through music, revealing their character traits and spiritual connotations. In operas and oratorios, character narrative is particularly prominent. For example, Handel's "Messiah" vividly depicts the image of Jesus Christ through arias and choruses of different voices. The music expresses the compassion, tenacity and holiness of Jesus through different melodies and rhythms. In Eastern religious music, character narrative also plays an important role. Take Japan's Noh play as an example. This traditional theater form depicts the character and destiny of mythological and historical figures through music and dance. The music in Noh expresses the complex emotions and spiritual pursuits of the characters through delicate melody and rhythm changes. The application of character narrative in religious music not only enhances the drama and expressiveness of the music, but also deepens its religious connotation. Through the musical portrayal of religious figures, religious music closely combines the characters' spiritual world and religious beliefs, allowing listeners to feel the characters' inner world and the profound meaning of religion in the music experience.

#### 4.5. Plot Narrative in Religious Music

The episodic narrative presents the complex plots and dramatic conflicts of religious stories through the structure and development of music. In religious dramas and oratorios, plot narratives often express the tension and climax of the story through contrasts and changes in music. For example, in Mozart's "Requiem", the plot development from death to redemption is shown through the comparison of music in different movements. The melody, harmony and rhythm of the music change with the plot, enhancing the drama and emotional impact of the story. In the Indian Bharatnatyam dance drama, the plot narrative shows the complex plot of Hindu mythology through the combination of music and dance. The melody and rhythm of the music change with the movements of the dancers, showing the ups and downs of the story and the emotional conflicts of the characters. The application of plot narrative in religious music not only enhances the expressiveness and appeal of the music, but also deepens its religious connotation. Through the structure and development of music, the plot narrative vividly presents the complexity and profundity of religious stories, allowing listeners to feel the mystery and profundity of religion in the musical experience.

### 5. COMPARISON OF THE SYMBOLS AND NARRATIVES OF DIFFERENT RELIGIOUS MUSIC

As a form of cultural expression, religious music carries rich symbolic meanings and narrative functions. Different religious music shows unique characteristics in its symbols and narratives. These characteristics not only reflect their respective religious beliefs and cultural backgrounds, but also reveal the important role of music in religious practice. A comparison of the symbols and narratives of different religious music is shown in Table 3.

Table 3(a): Symbols and Narratives in Different Religious Music

Religion	Symbolism	Narrative
Christianity	Elements of symbolism are conveyed through lyrics, melodies, and rituals. Sacred hymns and psalms communicate divine teachings.	Clear musical themes and structured lyrics narrate religious stories, such as Bach's "St. Matthew Passion," which details the Passion of Christ.
Islam	Sufi music symbolizes unity with the divine and the purification of the soul through repetitive melodies and rhythms.	Quranic recitation, while not considered music, uses precise intonation and rhythm to convey the teachings and stories within the Quran.

Table 3(b): Symbols and Narratives in Different Religious Music

Religion	Symbolism	Narrative
Buddhism	Symbolizes inner peace and the awakening of wisdom; chanting and mantras represent the eternal nature of Buddhist teachings.	Music narrates the life and teachings of the Buddha, often through complex instrumental arrangements and multi-part chants in Tibetan Buddhist ceremonies.
Hinduism	Ragas and talas symbolize cosmic order and the cyclical nature of life; ragas convey specific emotions and times.	Epic narratives express mythological stories and religious philosophy, with bhajans and kirtans praising deities and conveying deep spiritual meanings.
Other Religions	Jewish music symbolizes historical heritage and faith through ritual music and traditional songs, while Taoist music reflects Taoist philosophy and cosmology.	Jewish cantorial music narrates biblical stories and cultural history, while Taoist music is used in rituals to convey teachings and guide listeners into meditation.

### 5.1. Symbols and Narratives of Christian Music

Christian music has a deep tradition and complex structure in symbolism and narrative. Symbolic elements are often expressed through lyrics, melodies and rituals. Hymns and hymns are an important part of Christian music, conveying sacred teachings and beliefs through music. Symbols in Christian music are often closely linked to biblical stories, the life of Jesus Christ, and the liturgy of the Church. For example, the "Hallelujah Cantata" in "Messiah" not only symbolizes the glory and victory of Christ, but also narrates the story of Christ's resurrection through its magnificent musical structure. In terms of narrative, Christian music often tells religious stories through clear musical themes and structured lyrics. Bach's "Matthew Passion" is a typical example, which details the crucifixion of Jesus through music. The changes in melody, harmony and rhythm in the music cleverly reflect the development of the storyline and the ups and downs of emotions.

### 5.2. Symbols and Narratives of Islamic Music

Islamic music exhibits unique characteristics in terms of symbolism and narrative, mainly reflected in Sufi music and chanting. Sufi music symbolizes union with the divine and purification of the soul through the repetition of melody and rhythm. The music in Sufi spinning dance (Sema) is not only part of religious rituals, but also symbolizes the rotation of the universe and the cycle of life. Quranic recitation is one of the core forms

of Islamic music, and although it is not considered music, its precision in tone and rhythm has strong symbolic significance. The sounds and rhythms of the chanting are considered sacred and can lead believers into a state of meditation and prayer. In terms of narrative, Islamic music conveys the teachings and stories in the Quran through repeated melodies and rhythms, emphasizing divine revelation and the power of faith.

### 5.3. Symbols and Narratives of Buddhist Music

Buddhist music has unique Zen and philosophical connotations in terms of symbolism and narrative. Buddhist music is often used in rituals and meditation, symbolizing inner peace and the awakening of wisdom.

Chanting and chanting are important forms of Buddhist music. Through simple and repeated melodies, they symbolize the eternity of Buddhism and the harmony of the universe. In terms of narrative, Buddhist music tells the story of the life and teachings of the Buddha through the rhythm and melody of the music. Tibetan Buddhist ritual music often narrates Buddhist stories and legends through complex combinations of musical instruments and multi-part choruses. Every note and beat in the music is given a profound religious meaning and is designed to guide the listener into a state of meditation and enlightenment.

### 5.4. Symbols and Narratives of Hindu Music

Hindu music displays rich mythological and philosophical connotations in terms of symbolism and narrative. Hindu music often symbolizes the order of the universe and the cycle of life through the structure of Raga and Tala. A raga is not only a melodic framework, but also symbolizes specific emotions and time, while tala symbolizes the eternity of time through the cycle of rhythm. In terms of narrative, Hindu music tells mythological stories and religious philosophy through epic narratives. Bhajan and Kirtan are important forms of Hindu music that convey praise and belief in gods through simple yet infectious melodies. Every note and beat in the music is given a profound religious meaning and is designed to guide the listener into a state of meditation and enlightenment.

### 5.5. Symbols and Narratives of other Religious Music

Other religious music also shows its own uniqueness in symbolism and narrative. Jewish music symbolizes the history of the nation and the inheritance of its faith through its rich ritual music and traditional songs. Jewish Hazzanut narrates biblical stories and national history through

complex melodies and emotional singing. Taoist music symbolizes Taoist philosophy and cosmology through its unique musical instruments and melodies. Taoist music is often used in rituals and meditation to convey Taoist teachings and philosophical ideas through music. Melodies and rhythms in music are believed to lead listeners into states of meditation and enlightenment. In these different religious music, the symbolic and narrative features not only reflect their respective religious beliefs and cultural backgrounds, but also reveal the important role of music in religious practice. Through a comparative analysis of the symbols and narratives of different religious music, we can gain a deeper understanding of the multiple functions and meanings of music in religious culture.

## 6. CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN RELIGIOUS MUSIC SYMBOLS AND NARRATIVES

As a profound form of cultural expression, religious music's symbols and narratives show significant differences in different cultural backgrounds. These differences not only reflect the unique values and belief systems of their respective cultures, but also reveal the profound influence of regional, historical and social environments on religious music.

### 6.1. The impact of Cultural Values on Religious Music Symbols

Cultural values are an important factor in shaping the symbols of religious music. Different cultures have different understandings of the sacred and the secular, interpretations of the meaning of life, and emphasis on moral ethics, all of which are reflected in religious music. In Western Christian music, symbols often revolve around God's omnipotence and love. Music conveys the firmness of faith and the brightness of hope through the solemnity of harmony and the sublimity of melody. For example, Bach's "Matthew Passion" symbolizes the holiness of Christ's passion and the greatness of redemption through its complex polyphonic structure and emotionally rich melody. In contrast, Eastern religious music, such as Buddhist music, emphasizes inner peace and detachment. Its symbols often convey the values of meditation and introspection through simple melodies and repetitive sound patterns. Japanese Buddhist music "statements" symbolize the understanding of the impermanence of life and the pursuit of inner peace through monotonous and deep tones. This symbolic difference not only reflects the different understandings of religious experience between Eastern and Western cultures, but also reveals

the core values of their respective cultures in religious practice.

## 6.2. The Shaping of Religious Music Narratives by Religious Beliefs

Religious belief is the soul of religious music narrative, and different belief systems shape their own unique musical narrative structures. In Christian music, the narrative often revolves around biblical stories, with the music conveying the core teachings of the faith through the narration of the life, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus. This narrative structure is not only reflected in the lyrics, but also through the succession and transition of the music.

For example, Handel's "Messiah" tells the complete story of Christ's birth, crucifixion and resurrection through the climax and trough of music. In Islamic music, narrative is more often reflected in the recitation of verses from the Quran. Islam emphasizes absolute faith and obedience to Allah, and music conveys the piety and awe of faith through the chanting of scriptures. This narrative method is not only reflected in the ups and downs of the melody, but also through the emotional expression of the chanter. In contrast, the narratives in Hindu music often revolve around mythological stories, and the music conveys the diversity and inclusiveness of beliefs through praise and prayers to gods.

## 6.3. The Influence of Regional Culture on Religious Music

The influence of regional culture on religious music is reflected in music style, instrument selection and performance form. The natural environment, language characteristics and national traditions of different regions have had a profound impact on the development of religious music. In Africa, religious music often incorporates rich rhythms and polyphonic choruses, which is closely related to the emphasis on collectivity and rhythm in African culture. Drums and dance in African religious music are not only part of musical performance, but also an important component of religious rituals. In Europe, the development of religious music is deeply influenced by the classical music tradition. Organs, choirs and symphony orchestras have become important forms of religious music. The choice of this musical form not only reflects the European culture's emphasis on harmony and structure, but also reflects the solemnity and sacredness of religious rituals. In Asia, religious music is more influenced by traditional musical instruments such as zither, pipa and erhu. These instruments give religious music rich cultural connotations through their unique timbres and playing techniques.

#### 6.4. The Influence of Historical Background on Religious Music

Historical background is an important dimension in understanding the differences between symbolism and narrative in religious music. Social changes, religious reforms and cultural exchanges in different historical periods have all had an important impact on the development of religious music. In medieval Europe, religious music mainly existed in the form of Gregorian chant, and its monophonic melody reflected the strict control and regulation of music by the church at that time. However, with the rise of humanistic thought during the Renaissance, religious music gradually incorporated polyphonic choruses and instrumental accompaniments, and the symbols and narratives of music became richer and more diverse. In China, the development of Buddhist music is also profoundly affected by historical background. The Tang Dynasty was the golden period for the development of Buddhist music. With the spread of Buddhism, music forms gradually became richer, forming a unique Buddhist music system. During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, with the convergence of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, Buddhist music further incorporated elements of Confucian and Taoist culture, and its symbols and narratives became more diversified.

#### 6.5. The Influence of Social Environment on Religious Music

The influence of social environment on religious music is mainly reflected in the function and communication mode of music. In times of social turmoil, religious music often plays the role of soothing people and gathering strength. In the United States in the 20th century, black spirituals, as a form of religious music, were not only an expression of faith, but also a protest against social injustice and a desire for freedom. Its symbolism and narrative are reflected in the music through strong emotions and determined rhythms. In modern society, the way religious music is disseminated has also undergone significant changes. With the development of technology, religious music has been widely disseminated through recordings, radio and the Internet, which has not only changed the way music is disseminated, but also has an impact on its symbols and narratives. In this context, the symbols and narratives of religious music must not only adapt to traditional religious rituals, but also need to face the diverse needs and challenges of modern society. By analyzing the differences in the symbols and narratives of religious music in different cultural backgrounds, we can gain a deeper understanding of the important role of religious music in global cultural exchanges. These differences not only reflect the uniqueness of each culture, but also provide rich material



for cross-cultural understanding and dialogue.

## 7. CROSS-CULTURAL EXCHANGE OF RELIGIOUS MUSIC SYMBOLS AND NARRATIVES

### 7.1. The Bridging Role of Religious Music in Cultural Exchanges

Religious music plays an important role as a bridge in cross-cultural exchanges. It is not only an expression of religious beliefs, but also a medium for cultural exchanges. Through music, people can transcend language and cultural barriers and experience religious emotions and spiritual connotations in different cultural backgrounds. The symbolic nature of religious music makes it an effective tool for cross-cultural communication. For example, Gregorian chant was not only part of religious rituals in medieval Europe, but also became an important carrier of cultural exchanges between different countries and regions. Its melody and harmonic structure have been absorbed and adapted by different cultures in the process of dissemination, forming diverse musical styles. In modern society, religious music continues to play its bridging role. Take gospel music, for example, which originated in the African-American community but whose influence has spread across the globe. The emotional expression and spiritual power of gospel music attract people from different cultural backgrounds and become an important part of cross-cultural communication. Through gospel music, people from different cultures can share each other's religious experiences and emotional resonance, promoting understanding and respect between cultures.

### 7.2. Integration and Innovation of Religious Music in Cross-Cultural Exchanges

Religious music is not only a one-way communication in cross-cultural communication, but also the integration and innovation of multiculturalism. Musical elements from different cultural backgrounds influence each other during the communication process, forming new musical styles and forms of expression. The fusion of Indian Bhakti music and Western classical music in the mid -20th century is a typical example. This fusion is not only reflected in melody and rhythm, but also involves the use of instruments and innovation in musical structure. In the context of globalization, the integration and innovation of religious music have become more significant. Take world music as an example, which absorbs elements of religious music from different cultures to create a new form of

music. Not only was the musical form a commercial success, it also sparked discussions about cultural identity and musical innovation in academia. Through integration and innovation, religious music not only retains its traditional symbolic meaning in cross-cultural exchanges, but also acquires new vitality and forms of expression. Challenges and opportunities in cross-cultural communication of religious music. Although religious music plays an important role in cross-cultural communication, it also faces many challenges during its dissemination. Cultural differences, language barriers, and diversity of religious beliefs may all be factors that hinder the cross-cultural spread of religious music. For example, during the spread of Islamic Sufi music, it is often misunderstood and rejected because of the particularity of its religious background and musical form. However, these challenges also provide opportunities for the cross-cultural communication of religious music. By overcoming these barriers, religious music can be understood and accepted within a wider cultural context. The development of digital technology has provided new platforms and channels for the dissemination of religious music, allowing it to be disseminated faster and more widely. Through the Internet and social media, religious music can break through geographical and cultural restrictions and reach a wider audience.

### 7.3. Aesthetic Experience of Religious Music from a Cross-Cultural Perspective

From a cross-cultural perspective, the aesthetic experience of religious music has unique value. People from different cultural backgrounds may have different emotional reactions and aesthetic experiences when listening to religious music. This diverse aesthetic experience not only enriches the expression of religious music, but also promotes understanding and exchanges between cultures. Research shows that the aesthetic experience of religious music depends largely on the cultural background and religious beliefs of the listener. For example, when Western listeners appreciate Indian bhakti music, they may be attracted by its complex melodies and rhythms, while Indian listeners may pay more attention to its religious connotations and spiritual meanings. This difference not only reflects the impact of cultural background on aesthetic experience, but also reveals the complexity and diversity of religious music in cross-cultural communication.

### 7.4. Case Analysis of Cross-Cultural Exchange of Religious Music

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the role of religious music in

cross-cultural communication, specific cases can be analyzed. A typical case is the fusion of Western classical music and Eastern religious music. At the beginning of the 20th century, Western composers such as Debussy and Ravel began to become interested in Eastern music and incorporated elements of Eastern religious music into their works. This fusion not only enriches the expression of Western music, but also promotes the exchange and understanding of Eastern and Western cultures. Another case is the spread and development of African religious music in the Americas. With the migration of African slaves, African religious music spread and developed in the Americas. Through the fusion with Native American music, new music forms such as jazz and blues were formed. These musical forms were not only artistically successful, but also had a profound impact on society and culture. Through the analysis of these cases, we can see that religious music is not only a carrier of culture in cross-cultural exchanges, but also a driving force for cultural innovation and development. Through the study of religious music in different cultural backgrounds, its role and influence in cross-cultural communication can be better understood.

## 8. CONCLUSION

This study reveals the complexity and diversity of symbols and narratives in religious music through in-depth analysis of religious music in different cultural backgrounds. Research shows that religious music is not only a form of artistic expression, but also a profound tool for cultural exchange. Through comparative analysis of the symbolic and narrative structures of major religious music such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism, we found that these musical forms have significant similarities and differences in conveying religious beliefs, cultural values, and social norms. Through cross-cultural comparative analysis, this study reveals the uniqueness and universality of religious music in different cultural backgrounds. Data analysis shows that although there are significant differences in the form and content of religious music, its core function is to promote the spread of faith and the inheritance of culture through symbolism and narrative. Future research should continue to deepen the cross-cultural comparative analysis of symbolism and narrative in religious music, especially in the context of globalization and digitalization, and explore its new functions and forms in modern society. With the development of science and technology, the way religious music is transmitted and received has undergone significant changes, and research should focus on the impact of these changes on the symbolic and narrative

functions. In addition, the role of religious music in mental health and social harmony can be further explored. Existing research has shown that religious music can help people relieve stress and enhance psychological resilience through its symbolic and narrative functions. Through interdisciplinary research, we will reveal the potential application value of religious music in psychotherapy and social work.

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