There is a strong connection between religion and popular culture, and their interdependency is heard in music from many different eras. Generally, the inclusion of popular culture in religion (or vice versa) is intended to enhance the communication of a message. In the case of popular culture in religion, pop culture may be used to connect the audience with a religious theme that may seem abstract or dated. When religion appears in popular culture, it can be used to affix a sense of morality and spirituality to a song’s overall message.

Kesha includes religion through lyrics and symbols in her pop culture song (and accompanying music video) “Praying” (Joslyn, Manusama, Lewis) to connect her message of self-empowerment with self-spirituality. Because the “I” in “Praying” is Kesha herself, it is important to consider the context that, at the time of writing this song, Kesha was suing her producer, Dr. Luke, alleging that he had abused her verbally, physically, and sexually. With a backdrop of abuse, the lyrics “Oh, but after everything you’ve done I can thank you for how strong I have become,” are understood to be Kesha addressing her abusive relationship with Dr. Luke and emerging self-empowered. The second verse continues Kesha’s message of self-empowerment as she sings “No more monsters, I can breathe again.” In the music video, these “monsters” are represented by men in suits with pig heads harassing Kesha and can be interpreted as her abusive producer. The pigs-in-suits starkly contrast Kesha who is dressed angelically, and the symbolism of pigs being associated with filth and avarice further the message that Kesha, as an angel, is “rising” above the “hell” of her abusive relationship. Here, religion underscores Kesha’s message of self-empowerment. The inclusion of religion in the *lyrics* of “Praying” occurs in the chorus and third verse where Kesha sings, “I pray for you at night…but some things only God can forgive…I hope your soul is changin’, changin’ I hope you find your peace.” These lyrics are juxtaposed with the image of Kesha with a cross tattoo floating on driftwood in the ocean in a position analogous to the crucifixion. This strong symbolism suggests that Kesha was *martyred* through her abusive relationship and *resurrected* through finding her own sense of spirituality and self-worth. She communicates that she has healed through her faith, and that her abuser, if he is to find peace, must do the same. Religion is a vehicle for Kesha’s message of healing and self-empowerment in the popular song “Praying”.

Larry Norman’s “I Wish We’d All Been Ready” communicates a strong religious message through the usage of popular music. One of the central ideas in Christianity is the notion of rapture. This is the idea that followers of Jesus who adhere to Christian values will ascend to heaven while sinners and non-believers will be left behind on a turbulent and apocalyptic Earth. This idea has inspired books, movies, and songs such as “I Wish We’d All Been Ready”. Larry Norman’s dark and foreboding lyrics warn that when rapture occurs “children died the days grew cold, a piece of bread could buy a bag of gold, I wish we’d all been ready,” which completely contrasts the wistful and calming tone of the vocals and instrumentals of the music. The sound of “I Wish We’d All Been Ready” is comparable to other popular songs around 1969, and this is a deliberate choice by Larry Norman. Given the period of the late 60s and early 70s in America, many (especially young) people were becoming detached from institutional religion. Instead of a reciting a damning sermon, Larry Norman *sings* “the son has come and you’ve been left behind…I wish we’d all been ready”, so that tone and sound of the music lessen the harshness of his delivery while not diluting the subject matter. In addition, because the overall style of “I Wish We’d All Been Ready” is popular, a broader audience receives Larry Norman’s message about rapture. The usage of popular culture in religion makes the grim message of “I Wish We’d All Been Ready” more digestible and accessible to a broader audience.

The most notable difference between “I Wish We’d All Been Ready” and “Praying” as examples of popular culture in religion and religion in popular culture lies in the theme of each song. The purpose of “I Wish We’d All Been Ready” is to issue a religious warning to a broader audience while the purpose of “Praying” is to impart a feeling of self-empowerment that is enhanced by faith. Larry Norman is using popular culture in the form of music to augment his religious directive while Kesha is using religion in the form of lyrics and symbols to strengthen her message of healing and self-worth. In both songs, popular culture and religion complement each other by increasing the depth and range of a theme an artist wants to communicate. What is surprising is the success of the merging of popular culture and religion especially given how often popular culture challenges institutionalized religion and religion condemns popular culture. While there are many critics who believe the merging of theology and popular culture is heretical, the monetary success of the merging of popular culture and religions demonstrates that many people appreciate the combination. Guest Michael Stein described that as a cantor at a conservative synagogue, he had experienced a lot of push back to his usage of contemporary instrumentals with traditional Jewish prayer especially given the state of mourning in Judaism. However, he noted that people appreciated being able to vocalize their religion to familiar tunes, and it is this synthesis of the familiarity of popular culture with the passion and tradition of religion that have made the aggregate of both a fixture in modern society.