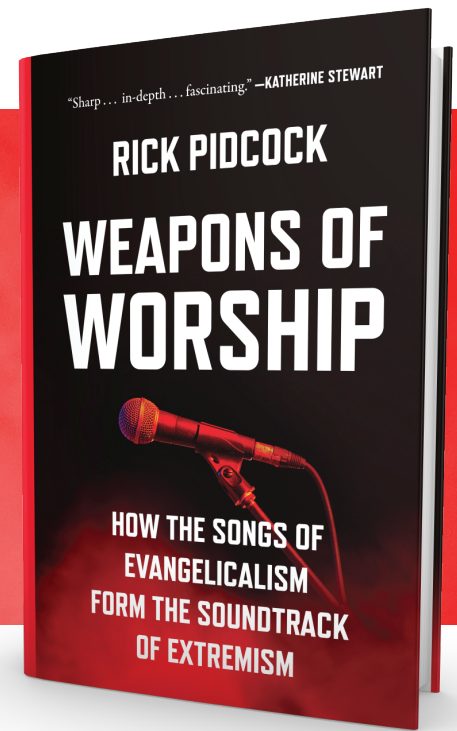


WEAPONS OF WORSHIP: How the Songs of Evangelicalism Form the Soundtrack of Extremism

DISCUSSION GUIDE



CHAPTER 1:

Soundtrack of an Insurrection

1. The author mentions the exodus story of Moses and Joshua, discussing whether the noise from the camp is “the sound of war” or “the sound of singing.” Why might the sound of fighting and singing sometimes be difficult to distinguish, particularly in worship at political rallies?
2. Christian nationalist worship events identify the worshippers as both “an army” and “a family.” How did you see those dual identities play out in the scenes Pidcock describes or in the language the worship leaders he quotes use? Why might that combination be so effective at mobilizing people?
3. Cherry’s formula—*lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi* (“As we pray, so we believe, so we live”)—is central to the author’s argument that worship songs shape political behavior, not just personal devotion. How might worship lyrics that identify the singers as the army and family of God who are fighting spiritual warfare in political contexts affect their beliefs and actions toward themselves and their neighbors?
4. Pidcock cites Levitin’s research on music and emotion—that brain states of listeners can mirror those of performers. Have you ever noticed music shaping your beliefs, sense of conviction, or feelings toward yourself or others in ways you didn’t fully register at the time?
5. PRRI’s authoritarianism and Christian nationalism scales both place roughly two-thirds of white evangelical Protestants in higher-risk categories. What examples of authoritarian thinking or behavior do you recognize in the worship scenes described throughout the chapter?
6. The author describes the “lion and the lamb” tension in worship theology—some leaders emphasizing God’s power/violence, some emphasizing self-giving love, and others subverting assumptions of power by revealing the lion to be a lamb. How might each of these visions of God in worship affect a congregation’s beliefs in God or actions toward their neighbors?

CHAPTER 2:

The Worship Oligarchy

1. How could theology about God's glory, renown, and fame become redirected for financial and political power without the worshippers realizing what is happening?
2. When megachurches centralize institutional power over people's lives, how might that affect the way people perceive smaller churches and the leaders who serve in both megachurches and smaller congregations?
3. What effects could the rise of the megachurch have on the rise of the worship leader, both in the leader's importance to the church and in the leader's image?
4. How might words such as "witness" and "influence of the gospel" take on new meanings within celebrity culture? What potential harms could result when Christian influence becomes intertwined with celebrity?
5. Since thirty-five of the top thirty-eight worship songs from 2010 to 2020 were popularized by just four megachurches, what questions should worshippers consider asking about how worship songs become popular—and about the worship leaders and institutions that benefit from that popularity?
6. When secular corporations select worship songs based on target audiences and then treat the songs as assets to trade, in what ways might the worship industry be mirroring the oligarchy of empire?

CHAPTER 3:

It's On

1. If white evangelicals had responded to the exile they experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic by recognizing and empathizing with the exile former evangelicals experience, how might that season have shaped evangelicalism differently?
2. The author argues that systems of empire strengthen the power of those at the top, dehumanize those below, and wage war against those who won't submit. Where have you noticed those dynamics in the stories about worship we've encountered in the book so far?
3. What parallels do you notice between ancient cosmology, imperial treaties, hierarchies of authority and submission, and the theological language and values of white evangelical worship? How might those things change if we began with a God who identifies with people on the underside of power?
4. Pidcock argues that the soundtrack of the empire is fundamentally different from the soundtrack of the slave. What would be different about the concerns, desires, and values expressed by those in power compared with those living under their power? How might those differences shape the songs they sing?
5. If salvation is understood as simply moving up the hierarchy—from slave to child of the emperor—rather than as liberation from the hierarchy itself, how might that shape the way the "saved" treat neighbors whom their theology categorizes as slaves, outsiders, or enemy combatants?
6. Christian nationalist worship leaders sometimes define worship as taking territory back for Jesus rather than experiencing the presence of God among the empire's "lease of these" through love of neighbor. What's the difference between worship that subverts empire and worship that sacralizes it?

CHAPTER 4:

White Noise

1. When evangelicals become swept up in language about God's glory and goodness toward them, how can worship become co-opted by a particular nation or political party without the worshippers realizing that it is happening?
2. What parallels do you see between the cultural genocide of colonizers silencing the songs of Native Americans and the strategies of Christian nationalist worship leaders today? What are some examples you've encountered in the book so far or in the news?
3. In what ways would the soundtrack of the empire have different values, desires, goals, or concerns than the soundtrack of those living under its power? How did those differences manifest themselves in the worship songs written during the Civil War?
4. Since Black Christians healed their embodied wounds after emancipation through their worship, what might their example teach us about the ways worship can heal us from embodied wounds today?
5. The worship industry remains racially segregated in ways that contribute to money being funneled disproportionately toward white songwriters. What could churches, worship ministries, and the broader industry do to create more equitable opportunities for Black songwriters to be compensated for their work?
6. White worship leaders often talk about how worship breaks down the walls of racism. How can we talk about racial reconciliation in worship without erasing centuries of wisdom that have been forged by Christians living on the underside of power?

CHAPTER 5:

Barbies and Kens

1. How do the dynamics of male authority and female submission in many white evangelical churches affect the way women's bodies are watched, evaluated, and controlled on the worship stage? How might that strengthen the power of men, dehumanize women, and wage war against those who won't submit?
2. How does the "celebrity worship artist" mindset, which mirrors the entertainment industry, contribute to the sacralization of empire without worshippers necessarily recognizing what is happening? What happens when worship becomes more focused on image than on image bearers?
3. In what ways does the "Cowboy Ken" vision of masculinity in white evangelicalism shape the power structures, flow of money, sounds, and lyrics within worship ministries?
4. In what ways does the "Barbie in the Box" vision of femininity in white evangelicalism commodify women's bodies, movements, and voices? How might those expectations differ from what men on worship teams typically experience?
5. When men and women are characterized by supposedly distinct qualities within a gender binary, what happens when that binary is also mapped onto a hierarchy? How might that create a greater emphasis on power over others than on intimacy with others?
6. If an empire built around male authority and female submission depends upon maintaining distinct gender binaries, how might that help explain the intensity with which some people in positions of power respond to LGBTQ people and to challenges to traditional gender boundaries?

CHAPTER 6:

Child Soldiers

1. If the bigness of God is defined in hierarchical rather than universal terms, how might describing God in imperial terms affect the way we respond to people who disagree with our theology? And how might associating God with an ancient emperor affect our ability to trust and love God?
2. What happens when children are taught to see themselves as soldiers in a spiritual battle? How might that contribute to the dehumanization or exile of children and their neighbors, and how is that reflected in children's worship songs?
3. Many children's worship songs pair feelings of joy, happiness, and relief with lyrics describing the violent defeat of their "enemies." What might this combination be teaching children about their neighbors and about Christian identity? How might songs rooted in the Sermon on the Mount or the Fruit of the Spirit form children differently?
4. Children's worship often engages the whole body—from full-body movement to a vocal range that stretches from whispers to shouts. What does it mean when that embodied worship simultaneously teaches children that their bodies must submit to authorities, under the threat of eternal punishment? How might that shape their relationship with their own bodies?
5. If Jesus is presented to children as a kind of "bully on the block" who controls the territory, sets the conditions for belonging to his club, and rejoices at violence toward the enemy, how might that shape the way children understand outsiders—and what it means to belong to the Christian community?
6. Puberty introduces children to sexual desire and a changing relationship with their bodies. What happens when evangelical theology has first taught children to experience their bodies through intensely embodied worship and then demands that they become disembodied from their sexuality under threat of eternal punishment? How might those wounds show up in the sensory nature of contemporary worship? And what might we learn from the ways Black Christians have used singing and dance to heal embodied wounds?

CHAPTER 7:

The End Is Near

1. Because white evangelicals have often interpreted reality through hierarchies of authority and submission involving race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, and age, how might the cultural changes brought about by the civil rights movement have contributed to a growing fascination with the end of the world?
2. Ron Luce asks, "What if we said we want our voice to be heard instead of your voice being heard?" When worship is understood as spiritual warfare against political opponents who are perceived as silencing those who refuse to submit, what connections do you see between this mindset and the cutting down of Donar's Oak in chapter 3, or the cultural genocide, literal genocide, and silencing of enslaved people discussed in chapter 4?
3. What connections do you notice between growing fascination with the end times and visions of warrior masculinity in which God and men are understood primarily through strength, dominance, and conquest? How do those connections show up in contemporary white evangelical worship?
4. Some end-times theologies can contribute to conspiracy theories that produce fear, while others can create a desire to accumulate power. Despite their theological differences, how might these systems work together in worship to cultivate fear and control of evangelicalism's perceived enemies and neighbors?

5. When teenagers are offered positions and opportunities to join “the greatest worship movement ever” in order to save Israel and hasten Jesus’s return, what can make them particularly vulnerable to abuses of power? How might this framework reproduce the empire dynamics of strengthening those at the top, dehumanizing those below, and waging war against those who refuse to submit?
6. At the end of the chapter, Pidcock contrasts two fundamentally different visions of Jesus’s return: one in which Jesus comes to shed the blood of his enemies, and another in which Jesus comes to heal them. How might those different visions shape what Christians celebrate and lament? And how might their visions of final justice influence the ways they pursue justice in the present?

CHAPTER 8:

Bend the Knee

1. Is Sean Feucht’s conversion prayer more reflective of a God who identifies with the empire or a God who identifies with those the empire oppresses? What aspects of the prayer lead you to that conclusion?
2. If salvation is defined primarily in terms of individual punishment and imputed perfection, with little attention to the systemic realities we create together over time, how might that affect a congregation’s celebration, lament, and corporate repentance? What examples of dehumanization and exile explored in this book remain unaddressed within that framework?
3. When conversion carries expectations of perfection while emphasizing the individual, how might those expectations contribute to insecurity, shame, or feelings of inadequacy—even among people who have experienced conversion?
4. If worship lyrics primarily focus on individuals’ fears, dreams, adventures, and battles, how might the highly sensory and interconnected experience of corporate worship obscure the ways those lyrics are forming people toward individualism?
5. How might an individualistic understanding of conversion contribute to a consumeristic approach to worship? And how might that approach affect the way worshippers understand and relate to their neighbors?
6. Pidcock distinguishes an individualistic relationship with God from a personal relationship with God by asking whether we love God through loving our neighbors as ourselves. The spirituals could use the pronoun “I” both to affirm individual humanity and to express a collective consciousness. How might our understanding of conversion and worship be different if we followed the spirituals’ vision of communal healing and wholeness?

CHAPTER 9:

Sunday, Bloody Sunday

1. Given everything you’ve learned so far about the different layers of motivation present in the songwriter, worship leader, pastor, worship industry executive, congregation, and outsiders, how much potential unhealed trauma might exist within a typical white evangelical worship service? How might wounds deepen when individualistic theology leaves people with little awareness of themselves or their neighbors?
2. In what ways might the idea that larger churches offer more transcendent worship experiences be driven by embedded theologies of individualism and consumerism? How might an obsession with continually raising the aesthetic bar contribute to the dehumanization of smaller churches and of worshippers who aren’t considered talented enough?

3. If worship services are shaped by retail-store studies and designed to be fun while directing emotions toward joy, how might atonement and retributive-justice theologies involving blood, trauma, and retribution become obscured in the posture those services form toward self and neighbor? How might worship shaped by the experiences of oppressed people working out their healing toward restorative justice form congregations differently?
4. What is the difference between genuine humility that has a healing relationship with self, neighbor, and God and false humility that builds God up by putting self and neighbor down? How might these different postures toward self, neighbor, and God manifest themselves in worship?
5. How do patriotic worship services blur the lines between Jesus and a politician, and between commitment to the United States and commitment to Jesus? What happens to worship when those commitments become difficult to distinguish?
6. Given the hierarchies between megachurches and smaller churches, as well as those involving race, gender, and age; the individualistic consumerism of celebrity culture; and theological understandings of justice that celebrate violence against the Jesus's body or the bodies of non-evangelicals, how might the worship service embody a wound of belonging? How might that wound fuel dehumanization toward those below, violence toward those outside, and envy toward those at the top?

CHAPTER 10:

Gangsters of America

1. How can combining worship and spiritual warfare blur the lines between demons and Democrats, and between spiritual violence and physical violence? How are these blurred distinctions manifested in stories throughout the book?
2. What do Christian nationalist worship leaders misunderstand about the Bible's use of the term *ekklesia*? Why is understanding ancient empire dynamics important for recognizing how Jesus's teaching to love your neighbor as yourself subverts those dynamics?
3. How does the dissolution of hierarchy into equality around the communion table challenge the power dynamics of empire, and what might that mean for the way we understand worship today?
4. Worship leaders who identify as gangsters are creating emergency-response opportunities to sing worship publicly in order to "take territory back for Jesus" and target specific locations for political goals. How might this approach to emergencies such as wildfires, hurricanes, tornadoes, or shootings affect the neighbors who are suffering?
5. In the scene of smashing the altar, how do spiritual warfare, music style, and chord progressions work together to fuel an all-consuming zeal in worshippers for particular political ends?
6. When worship leaders, accompanied by live bands, yell about "total galactic domination" or taking the entire globe for God at public events in parks and government buildings, who might be in the congregation? What might those people be getting activated to do?
7. The US government and local churches are using artificial intelligence, memes, and hype videos paired with worship songs or songs about revival to highlight violence against immigrants. At the same time, the Pentagon has used worship to justify wars against other countries, including against Islam in particular. In the end, are immigrants the only ones being dehumanized and exiled? What are we doing to our own humanity when we participate in worship that dehumanizes our neighbors?