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Singer/songwriter Cameron Winter blurs sincerity and irony with the religious language employed in both his own music and that of his rock band, Geese. ([Lygonstreet](#) via Wikimedia Commons)

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Indie musician Alex Cameron is known for his transgressive lyrics. So when he started singing passionately about Jesus during his concert in a trendy Los Angeles neighborhood, the crowd seemed unsure if he expected them to laugh or worship.

"Jesus never had no porno / Jesus never had cocaine / Jesus never had Ibiza / He never even went to Spain," the Australian singer-songwriter crooned, prompting sporadic chuckles across the venue.

This mix of the absurd and sincere reflects a kind of artistic engagement with existential questions that is increasingly resonating with people, many of whom are disconnected from organized religion. Some scholars even have a name for it: "reverent irreverence."

When Cameron reached the chorus, the laughter stopped. "But every time he spoke / The people gathered round / When he washed their feet / The demons all came out / So when's he gonna come again?" he sang over a wistful electric guitar.

Funny to some, potentially offensive to others, there's a palpable earnestness to "Jesus Never Had No Porno" and other Cameron songs invoking similar themes.

"You've been disarmed with laughter. Now you're kind of open to anything. You're open to profound sadness or hope," Cameron said in an Associated Press interview ahead of his album, "Late to Set," dropping July 24. "That's my entire life. It's serious, but it's funny."

This phenomenon of irony collapsing into sincerity is being interpreted by some as a way for younger generations to grapple with ritual, meaning and authenticity, even as participation in organized religion in the United States has dropped dramatically in recent decades.

"Religion is understood as a source of power, whether or not you believe in it," said Kathryn Lofton, who studies religion and pop culture at Yale University.

As the world feels increasingly chaotic and stripped of moral boundaries, Lofton is seeing more skeptics seeking out sacred settings where they can experience transcendence and community.

Despite the rise of people unaffiliated with an organized religion — so-called ["nones"](#) — it remains a creative touchstone. Its enduring usefulness as a shared language extends to the upper echelons of popular culture, from Beyoncé's engagement with Yorùbá religion and other African diasporic spirituality, to Rosalía's 2025 [concept album, "Lux,"](#) inspired by Catholicism, female saints and mysticism.

These themes are not siloed to overtly evangelistic channels, like contemporary Christian radio. But when religion is invoked by comedians or artists whose work is assumed to be funny, it can have a distinct appeal to people who see themselves as impervious to the cultural and political associations with traditional faiths.

"Someone who is playing with it, is humorous about it, has a sense of irony — it's a way for them to engage these kinds of questions and at the same time retain plausible deniability that they really are interested in religion," said Leigh Eric Schmidt, a professor at Washington University in St. Louis.



Reverend Billy and the Stop Shopping Choir perform from the Colchester Arts Centre in Colchester, England during their Fabulous Unknown UK tour on Oct. 23, 2024. (RNS/AP photo/Miranda Zhen Yao)

Throughout Nathan Fielder's HBO docuseries, "The Rehearsal," religion is a recurring theme as he explores ideas surrounding interfaith relationships, antisemitism, forgiveness and numerology.

"I was raised Jewish and I still do all the holidays and stuff," he narrates in one episode, adding he "hadn't been to synagogue in years because it's so boring."

For some fans, ambiguity is what attracts them to Fielder's humor. "You never know if he's serious or not," said Shelah Marie, a 41-year-old wellness influencer from Atlanta.

"There's an increasing level of disassociation that we have to feel in order to maintain sanity. It is psychotic, the amount of information that we receive," she said. "Maybe being absurd is our protection."

Cameron Winter, the front man of the rock band Geese, blurs these lines in his debut solo album "Heavy Metal." "God is real, God is real / I'm not kidding, God is actually real," he belts.

Though saying one is "not kidding" may invite skepticism, his commanding voice carries such gravity that it's hard to dismiss his proclamation as mere sarcasm.

"It's a fine line," said Schmidt, who co-organized a series of lectures in 2024 titled "Reverent Irreverence: Parody, Religion, and Contemporary Politics." "You're not going to convince people that you're not just making fun of them sometimes."

One of those talks was on The Church of Stop Shopping, led by director Savitri D and the character of the Reverend Billy, played by actor and playwright William Talen. As this anti-consumerist collective satirizes tropes surrounding conservative Protestant denominations, "irony gives way to an articulation of communal values that are sincerely held," said sociologist George González, who wrote a book on the group.

In a testament to that sincerity, Neil Young had the Stop Shopping Choir open for him on his 2024 tour.

"We're an adopted church for lots of post-religious people," said Talen, reflecting on what it means to be "seriously full of God at the same time that you're seriously full of bull(asterisk)(asterisk)(asterisk)(asterisk)."



Themes of Catholicism, saints and mystics are the inspiration behind pop star Rosalia's album, 'Lux.' (Noah Dillon/Sony Music)

Christian theologian Harvey Cox wrote in the 1960s about how effectively humor can be used to attract people to church, noting that when society's icons are used "to say something different in an ironical manner, we heap nuance upon nuance and combine satire, hope and playfulness."

Now these artists are exploring the relationship between humor and faith with audiences that are feeling the impact of artificial intelligence on creativity and culture.

"We can no longer tell surface from depth and treasure from knockoff," González said. "Is my art real or did an algorithm produce it?"

Cameron is acutely aware of this tension, joking that humans are on track to exist solely in the service of tech companies. "Aren't we all just eventually going to be in

gestating pods where they fill up every orifice with a way to extract experience out of us?"

But that anxiety has coincided with a search for transcendence. Although he didn't grow up going to church, Cameron has tried to make a habit of it as an adult.

"Just to try and ground myself in something ritualistic," he said. "Magic is real and God is real, and you know those things are pretty widely accepted, I think."

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