

## Article

# Encountering God in “The Circle”: Examining the Grand Ole Opry as a Religious Experience through the Lens of Circular Theology

Jodi Hunt 

Theology Department, The University of Dallas, Irving, TX 75241, USA; jhunt@udallas.edu

**Abstract:** Although many religious experiences occur within the walls of churches, mosques, synagogues, etc. and the sacred spaces that surround them, many more are encountered in the secular spaces and experiences of our everyday lives. Working out of the critical correlative method of theological reflection and circular theology, this paper proposes that the community, pilgrimage, and storytelling aspects of the Grand Ole Opry offers poignant opportunities for religious meaning making or inspired paths in connecting people to the sacred, no matter their religious background or upbringing. It is out of this exploration that the Grand Ole Opry arises to be a religious experience.

**Keywords:** community; pilgrimage; religious education; storytelling; theological reflection



**Citation:** Hunt, Jodi. 2022.

Encountering God in “The Circle”: Examining the Grand Ole Opry as a Religious Experience through the Lens of Circular Theology. *Religions* 13: 135. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13020135>

Academic Editor: Terry Lovat

Received: 9 August 2021

Accepted: 14 January 2022

Published: 30 January 2022

**Publisher’s Note:** MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



**Copyright:** © 2022 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## 1. Introduction

After a long week of working on the farm, caring for children and keeping the family home in order, there was nothing else in the world that Dovie Bradshaw looked forward to more than sitting in her green, worn-out easy chair to listen to or watch her favorite American country variety show, the Grand Ole Opry. Dovie sitting down to take in the sights and soulful sounds of Nashville signaled to the rest of the family that the Sabbath had begun; the work was done, and now it was time to rest.

Some of my earliest memories are of me sitting at the feet of Dovie, or Granny Bradshaw, as she was known by her grandkids and great-grandkids, gazing at her while she took in the Grand Ole Opry, smiling and laughing at the sights and sounds. Anyone who stopped by on a Saturday night took a backseat to the Opry, and if country recording artist Randy Travis was on air, Granny Bradshaw would ignore everyone until he was done performing. The Sabbath began with the first call at the Opry, and Granny Bradshaw relished every minute. Even as a young child, I could sense God’s presence in Granny Bradshaw’s laughter and singing along. She had a special way of inviting everyone to take part in the joyful gifts that God had offered us through country music. It was this same invitation that also reminded us to prepare the way to worship and give thanks to God on Sunday morning for the gifts we enjoyed Saturday night at the Grand Ole Opry.

I first formed an idea of God existing outside of church while watching Granny Bradshaw enjoying the Grand Ole Opry. Before that time, I had only encountered God in the pews, statues, and religion classes that my Catholic mother would drag my sister and me to on Sunday mornings. But when I entered Granny Bradshaw’s house on a Saturday night, God’s presence was strongly felt. The exuberant joy encountered as she, the rest of the family, and any evening guests had in celebrating the end of a work week and the start of rest was incredible. It was here that I saw God come alive; the laughter, singing, and sharing of stories in and around the Grand Ole Opry animated him in the creative and tangible ways that my young soul longed for and needed.

The religious educational experience encountered on those Saturday nights in my Granny Bradshaw’s home was brought into even more clarity when I visited the Opry stage for the first time. Upon entering the Grand Ole Opry tour, twenty-five years after the death

of Granny Bradshaw, I was immediately struck by the pews and adorning stained-glass windows, evidence that I had entered sacred ground. As the tour walked from one room to the next, listening to the stories of how the Opry came to be and the trials it had to endure over the years, I quietly cried as I remembered Granny Bradshaw praying for the grace needed to get through some of those same kinds of troubles. The most sacred moment of the tour, however, came at the last step. Before leaving the auditorium, we all were invited to step into ‘the Circle’, the most sacred, as this paper will outline, stage in all of country music. It was there, in ‘the Circle’, that a new understanding of God and his people emerged for me, and so as I stepped out of the sacred ground and back into the secular, I quickly dived into researching the Opry, her people, and storied past. I yearned to uncover what God was teaching me through the Opry, then and now. The following paper results from that work. In sum, this paper offers an outlining of the religious educational experiences encountered at (and along the paths towards) the Grand Ole Opry by all those who are blessed enough to be gifted an opportunity to find ‘the Circle’ on the radio, TV, or in person in the heart of Nashville. Working from the method of theological reflection and through the lens of religious education, this paper proposes that the community, pilgrimage, and storytelling aspects of the Grand Ole Opry offers poignant opportunities for religious meaning making, inspiring path connecting people to the sacred, no matter their religious background or upbringing. It is out of this exploration, as this paper will show, that the Grand Ole Opry arises to be a religious educational experience.

### 1.1. Methodology

As outlined in Heather Walton’s *Writing Methods in Theological Reflection*, the critical correlative method is a theological reflective method that “emerges out of a conversation (or correlation) between Christian revelation and human experience expressed through contemporary culture”. The goods of “culture (including the arts and sciences and popular modes of expression) are having revelatory potential alongside the faith tradition” (Walton 2014).<sup>1</sup> In other words, when a contemporary experience is placed into deep conversation with Christian teachings, traditions, or understanding by the Christians who encountered the contemporary experience, new insights or meanings arise. It is out of this examination, the placing of experience into the Christian story, that a revelatory potential for a better understanding of God’s teachings also arises.

In relation to exploring the contemporary experience of the Grand Ole Opry as a religious experience, this paper proposes that, at the center of the dialogue between the religious revelatory potential and the Grand Ole Opry lies three primary religious frameworks: storytelling, pilgrimage, and community. And when one approaches this intersection through personal experience and narratives, as shared by those who have encountered the Opry, the Grand Ole Opry as a religious experience comes forward in a manner that offers new insights into a “theology that emerges out of the interaction between them” (Walton 2014). These primary points of analysis, which will be explored in more detail as this paper develops, are centered upon the development of ‘circular theology’. That is, in using the critical correlative method as a guide, this paper will present the Grand Ole Opry as a religious experience through the lens of circular theology.

Although a traditional theological reflective method was employed for the construction of this paper and subsequent rendering of the Grand Ole Opry as a religious experience, I would like to add that this paper’s examination of the Grand Ole Opry as a religious experience was also completed through an adaptation of Lucretia B. Yaghjian’s “the Reflection on Paper” process: “identifying a question from an experience, describing the experience, correlating the experience with a religious tradition, and constructing a new experience out of this process” (Yaghjian 2004). In the adaptation of this process, the correlative method of theological reflection that arose in constructing the following paper was as follows:

1. Revisiting past experiences in conversation with a new one (watching the Grand Ole Opry with Granny Bradshaw and visiting the Opry stage several years later).

2. Describing personal experiences in conversation with a more extensive description of the history and cultural context that gave rise to modern Opry experiences (describing what I encountered and the history of the Grand Ole Opry and Nashville).
3. Correlating the experience to religious understanding or insights (breaking open the Grand Ole Opry through the lens of circular theology).
4. Constructing the Opry as a religious experience (creating and exploring new forms of encounter: storytelling, pilgrimage, and community at the Grand Ole Opry).

### 1.2. Limitations

Before spring boarding into the main discourse of this paper, it is necessary to add a note in relation to the limitations of this paper, as doing so will offer some clarity in relation to the appearance of some areas of this paper needing further development. Foremost, this paper should be read and engaged in a manner of understanding that this work is an introductory piece to a larger long-term project highlighting the Grand Ole Opry as a religious experience. Although this paper outlines well my experience, the historical background of the Opry, and some experiences of others who have encountered it, there is still much work to be done in as far as painting a full portraiture of the Grand Ole Opry experience. The primary voices of those who have lived, worked, and experienced the Grand Ole Opry are not fully represented here, and so there is a gap in the story that will be attended to as this introductory work is furthered fleshed out into future articles and, hopefully, a corresponding book.

The second limitation of this paper lies within the lack of research in relation to the Grand Ole Opry experienced as a religious encounter or an encounter with the sacred. Although much has been written on music and its religious meaning and inspiration in our lives, little has been written on the Opry as an extension of that experience. Researching and writing on the Opry has largely been limited to historical accounts and pop culture portraitures that highlight the ‘who’s who’ of country music. The integration of the faith of the early preaching on the Opry stage (via the Ryman Auditorium) and of the people of Nashville and the surrounding Appalachian communities is only introduced here, but there are many more encounters, stories, and experiences yet to be uncovered and explored. I hope that this introductory exploration will offer a foundation for a larger conversation to be formed in a broader volume of writing. One that not only attends to the above but also offers religious ministers, educators, leaders, etc. some insights into how to guide others in exploring secular experiences in conversation with their religious beliefs.

## 2. Nashville, Tennessee, the Cultural Home of the Grand Ole Opry

To theologize about experiences like those encountered at the Grand Ole Opry is to engage in the contextual depths of the music, performers, and people who encounter them at the Opry. As Tom Beaudoin notes, “there are so many ways of putting music and theology in relationship with each other that the possibilities can seem daunting, but it also means that there is a great deal of room for specific engagements and pushing out new frontiers”. According to Beaudoin, there is no right or wrong way to theologically engage music. One can “enter the conversation” out of or into any direction that makes the most sense to them (Beaudoin 2013). As Beaudoin contends, the two forces that constrain theology are history and culture. Any discourse that theologically examines music (i.e., the lyrics, sounds, performers, stages, etc.) should first attend to the history that surrounds the experience, as well as the culture that influences it (Beaudoin 2013). To better understand why a flashy American country radio, and now TV show, continues to inspire generations regarding their religiosity, this paper will begin by illustrating the history of Nashville, Tennessee (specifically outlining its founding, cultural influences, music, and religious practices), as it is this history that has and continues to serve as the contextual pillars for the Grand Ole Opry. Out of this historical analysis, the sources and narratives that have and continue to line the pathways between the past, present, and future of the Grand Ole Opry will offer

the roots needed to better understand the Grand Ole Opry through the lens of circular theology.

### 2.1. Nashville's Early Days

As mentioned above, to understand the religiosity of the Grand Ole Opry, one must go back to its roots, which are deeply embedded in the history of Nashville, Tennessee. Before the Grand Ole Opry first hit the airwaves of Nashville, the entertainment scene was a vibrant wellspring of enjoyment for riverboat dock workers and wealthy entrepreneurs. The untouched hills and waterways of Nashville also offered Native American tribes (Shawnee and Cherokee) and French traders a wealth of opportunities to not only sustain their day-to-day lives but flourish in them. Although the French explorers birthed many challenges for the Native tribes, as their ways of life were disrupted by the foreigners, by the late 17th century, the Shawnee tribe was still able to successfully form many villages along Tennessee's Cumberland River. It was these villages that offered both Natives and the French a firm place for creating new trading opportunities, and as a result, the trading village 'French Lick' easily took form in the foothills of what was to one day become the home of modern-day Nashville.

The early prosperous days of Nashville and its surrounding hills have been chronicled in many historical writings and journals. But perhaps the best encounter of what these days were like, as well as how this prosperous and now world-famous city came to, can be found in J.G.M. Ramsey's *Annals of Tennessee*. First published in 1853, Ramsey's re-telling of first-witnessed accounts of Nashville and the early pioneers that settled the land offers some insights as to the religiosity that settled Nashville and thus continues to serve as the underpinning of its music scene and performances like that housed on the stage of the Grand Ole Opry. In his account of the founding of Nashville, Ramsey offers that the founding of Nashville came out of the opening of a store:

[In 1714], M. Charleville, a French trader from Crozat's colony at New Orleans, came along the Shawnees, then inhabiting the Cumberland River, and traded with them. His store was built upon a mound near the present site of Nashville, on the west side of Cumberland River, near French Lick creek, and about seventy yards from each stream. M. Charleville thus planted upon the banks of the Cumberland the germ of civilization and commerce, unconscious that it contained the seminal principle of future wealth, consequence, and empire (Ramsey 1853).

By the mid-18th century, the Shawnee tribe would be pushed out by the Cherokee tribe, who would later make several treaties with the pioneers from the American Eastern seaboard. These treaties opened Tennessee to a new generation, as, once they were signed, thousands of families steadily moved into the mid-Tennessee hills. Carrying with them their own ideas of virtuous living, Ramsey described these early Tennessee pioneers to be people of great joy and honor. Families "trained up [their children] to thought and virtue . . . addressing them as rational beings, preparing them to become men and women in turn" (Ramsey 1853). And although the early pioneer families did not have the luxuries enjoyed by grand plantation estates or East coast mansions, the quaint log homes, according to Ramsey, were filled with the most joyous people anyone could have imagined. "Never were the story, the joke, the song and the laugh, better enjoyed than upon the hewed blocks or puncheon stools, along the roaring log fire of the early [Tennessee] settler." (Ramsey 1853). It is these same, simple, and deeply religious moments found in the joyful souls of these early settlers that would later become part of the religious soul of the Grand Ole Opry. Several decades after the first settlers arrived near modern-day Nashville, frontier explorer and soldier James Robertson arrived in the same area around 1779 with a group of men who would later establish Fort Nashborough during the American Revolutionary War. Seeing that the area was already one of great prosperity and commerce, Robertson quickly sought opportunities to strengthen Nashville's cultural aptitudes. By the time he took over as a territorial manager, as appointed by President George Washington, Robertson established an esteemed all boys' school, the Davidson Academy, to expand and preserve the high

culture encountered in the Tennessee hills and classical world. Because of his contributions to the city of Nashville, Robertson is revered as the official founder of Nashville (Rus 2021).

From the late 18th century onward, Nashville enjoyed great prosperity and growth, as entrepreneurs, politicians, and educators moved westward in search of new opportunities for making a name for themselves and their families on the American frontier. Because of Nashville's location along the Cumberland River, it quickly was recognized to be a fruitful place to house an iron industry. After the American Civil War, Nashville was not only the cultural center of the South, but it was also home to the largest and most profitable iron industry in America. The shipping industry would continue to feed the cultural center of Nashville for many decades, offering a limitless audience for religious services and music halls by men and women who followed commerce up and down the river.

Although industry, education, and entrepreneurship played instrumental roles in the development of Nashville's cultural scene during its early days of development, the African Americans who came to Nashville as workers and slaves of pioneer families also played a pivotal role in helping to frame the city into the great cultural center it became to be. Unlike many other counties in Tennessee, Nashville's African American people enjoyed more freedom and independence than most African Americans did in the antebellum and post-antebellum South. As noted by historian Bobby L. Lovett, because of the "small slaveholdings" of the early pioneers and "the mutual support" needed to "survive the harsh frontier, blacks and elite whites lived in an integrated slave society, with a paternalistic, close-knit environment". Instead of being chained to gangs, to work the fields, or build buildings, "slaves in Nashville generally engaged in a task-system which required each person to complete daily tasks, a system that gave them more incentive and greater independence" (Lovett 1999). Lovett explains that, unlike other cities in the South, Nashville's African Americans were largely treated with respect and often enjoyed opportunities unimaginable by many enslaved blacks in the south:

The separation of the races seemed more invisible than visible, more metaphysical than physical, and more psychological than social. Local residents operated like one big extended family, a complex racial peculiarity during antebellum times. The elite whites and their slaves often lived peacefully together, suffering the same conditions on the frontier, where early houses consisted of log and plank cabins reinforced with mud to keep out the rain and the wind. Slaves either lived nearby in similar structures, slept in the loft, or on the kitchen floor of the owner's home. During the harsh winter months, one could often find blacks and whites huddled around the same fire, socializing and exchanging stories, tales, folklore, and other elements of European and African culture (Lovett 1999).

One can imagine the impact that these harsh wintry nights had upon the development of religious experiences among the early settlers in Nashville. Sharing each other's stories, offering witness to the faith they cherished, religion was encountered, expressed, and taught about on the floors of these old log homes, allowing African and European cultures to converge and arise anew in the hearts and souls of those who were gathered around the fire. This is the place where the cultural soul of Nashville was born. It was here that the religious circle, the same one encompassing the Grand Ole Opry, arose.

## 2.2. History of Nashville Music

Music has and continues to be an important part of Nashville's culture. So much so that, when one examines the history of Nashville, they will find music to be the primary force driving many of the major developments, secular and spiritual, that this city has experienced over the years. Music not only founded a well-ordered business venture in Nashville, but as will be explored below, it became an essential form of religious expression among the pioneers who settled in and around the city. Music has been, and continues to be, the beating heart of Nashville; it is the expression of its soul.

The Nashville music scene was formed out of "new influences and cultures on traditional musical material converged in Tennessee". As the pioneers continued to play songs



from home, using the instruments that they had been handed down through their families for decades, like that of the Irish fiddle, they founded new musical “accommodations” like that of the ‘African banjo’ (Sharp 2008). As more immigrant cultures clashed in the Tennessee hills, the old music styles were refashioned into new ones; yet, at their heart, many things remained the same. “The music from all of the converging cultures held this expression”, the need to express human feelings and imagination, “in common”. The early pioneers “carried with them the need to sing and express their feelings of despair and hope, as well as their Old-World memories and New World desires”(Sharp 2008).

Most music, songs, and instrument playing were passed generationally from one family member to the next. Although some singers and musicians composed some of the folk ballads, much of the music in middle-Tennessee, and around Nashville, were old folk ballads that the settlers brought with them that reminded them about certain British and early American events. “A song usually told a story about the event—giving date, place, and often gruesome detail—and concluded with a moral to be drawn from it all” (Wolfe 1997). Once the religious revivals of the 1800s took hold in and outside of Nashville, however, religious music became the most popular form of song in the area. So much so that it was “religious music that was commercialized and adapted to modern mass media as fast or faster than secular music; Tennessee became the center for commercialized gospel music far sooner than it did for commercialized music” (Wolfe 1997). Given the deeply rooted religious convictions of the early Nashville pioneers and their use of music for not only entertainment but as a form of honoring the past, it is no surprise that the pioneers chose music to be a favored form of religious expression.

Although some of the more conservative churches and preachers in Nashville “fussed and fumed”(Davenport 1937) at many of the Nashville music halls and auditoriums, which hosted secular dance troupes and musical shows, they did little to stop them. Nor did they find meaningful ways to encourage locals to find better ways to entertain themselves. In the late 19th century, however, as more and more gospel performances were replaced with burlesque shows, religious leaders came to realize that Nashville was no longer connected to or concerned with religious-oriented expression. Nashville’s music and entertainment district had instead become an expression of sinful desires. Nashville’s working class showed, moreover, a “dislocation of old customs and mores”. As soon as these trysts caught the eye of religious ministers in Nashville and across Tennessee, they flocked to the city to “preach against the resulting sins” of Nashville’s entertainment scene. The circle needed to be cleansed.

In 1885, Samuel Jones, an already well-known Methodist preacher, arrived in Nashville betting that his sermons would attract crowds too large to be contained by any of the churches that lined the city streets. Soon after arriving, Jones proved he was right in his first sermon. At a church on the corner of Nashville’s music boulevard, Broadway, Jones attracted a crowd of several thousand. Even so, many of Nashville’s local business owners were not happy that Jones was in their beloved city, as his preaching was successful in driving away business from bars, brothels, and music halls. To add, local ministers also were challenged by Jones’s preaching in as far as he did not hesitate to point out that it was the religious who were also at fault for the sinful state that Nashville had found itself in:

In [Nashville], Mr. Jones had fired some of his biggest and hottest shots. The stiff and solemn church members laughed in spite of themselves while some of the fastidious were unmercifully shocked. The backsliders and sinners were held up to such ridicule and their backsliding and sins were so pictured to them, that they stood condemned as they saw themselves. Then his pathetic appeals softened and stirred every heart and the large audiences were completely broken up. The preachers hardly knew what to think or say. While they were friendly to the evangelist and desired to see great work done in Nashville, they were really shocked, and some of them went away very angry, while others defended the bravery of the minister. Mr. Jones was the subject of the conversations of the majority of the people of Nashville (Jones and Holcomb 1907).

Interestingly, Jones' fiery sermons would play an instrumental role in framing Nashville's music scene in ways that he could never imagine. It was Jones's preaching that led to the founding of Nashville's famed Ryman Auditorium, the spiritual and musical soul of Nashville and home of the Grand Ole Opry for over thirty years.

#### 2.2.1. Ryman Auditorium

One person who was overcome with Jones's preaching was wealthy riverboat entrepreneur Tom Ryman. Ryman, whose steamboats were well-known for their bars and gambling casinos, as he first attended one of Jones's sermons with the goal of confronting the preacher on the matter of his condemnation of Ryman's business interests. Upon hearing Jones preach, however, Ryman's heart was changed, and he left the religious meeting a loyal follower of Jones ([Henderson 1968](#)). According to Jones's wife, Ryman "became a Christian in dead earnest. He cleaned out the bars on his steamers", throwing all of his liquor overboard. Ryman then converted his saloon to a religious meeting hall ([Jones and Holcomb 1907](#)). It was during this time that Ryman also decided to support the buying or building of a tabernacle<sup>2</sup> that Jones and others could preach at regularly. In 1889, just four years after hearing Jones preach for the first time, Ryman's dream came to fruition. The early walls of the Ryman Auditorium, then named Union Gospel Tabernacle, were erected, and on 25th March 1890, the first religious meeting was held ([Henderson 1968](#)). The soul of Nashville had been converted back to Christ, a religious movement that would continue to influence and inspire Nashville's Grand Ole Opry for generations to come. The religious circle that would eventually become the birthplace and spiritual home of the Grand Ole Opry had been restored.

Before Jones returned to Ryman's tabernacle in 1892, the auditorium hosted programs that were "not strictly religious." Most notable, Nashville's May Music Festival was hosted in the tabernacle, as this was the largest space in the city that could host such an event. It was Jones and other revivalist preachers who primarily occupied the space up through the early 20th century, contributing not only sermons but resources for the completion of the building of the tabernacle. By 1920, after many years of hosting world-class entertainers and lecturers, the Ryman auditorium "became the sole concert auditorium or the city of Nashville" ([Wolfe 1997](#)). And although it shifted from hosting preachers to musical acts and traveling troupes, it was, and still is, hard to walk into the Ryman and not feel the presence of God as one takes in the beauty of the stained-glass cathedral windows and old, worn seats enjoyed by believers seeking Truth among the people and streets of Nashville. It is this religious history and experience of the Ryman Auditorium that would give rise to the religious educational experience that is encountered today at the Grand Ole Opry.

#### 2.2.2. The Grand Ole Opry

About thirty-five years after the Ryman Auditorium first opened its doors, a new kind of preacher arrived in Nashville, country music announcer George D. Hay. Known as the best radio announcer in the United States, Hay was attracted to Nashville by a lucrative job as a station manager by a new radio station founded by Nashville's National Life and Insurance Company and the great opportunities the city offered in building the best radio program in the country. Gathering inspiration from the live music dances other radio shows hosted in Chicago, Illinois and Fort Worth, Texas, Hay decided that if he were to ever have the best radio show or bring any notoriety to Nashville country that he too would need to bring live music to the Tennessee airwaves. Fortunately, at the same time that Hay was piecing together the radio show, the Southern US was "in the middle of a fiddling craze; everyone wanted to hear old-time fiddles and re-capture America's lost folk arts." Hay was inspired by the revival and used it as an opportunity to find a captive audience for his new show ([Henderson 1968](#)). It was out of this inspiration that the religious circle formed on the floors of old homes through song and storytelling during Nashville's early days found its way circling back towards a new era of country music and religious expression.

On 28th November 1925, one Saturday evening just after the annual America's Thanksgiving holiday, Hay's bridge between folk country and the religious experience of the people who embraced and performed it was finally built. That Saturday night, Hay turned the microphone on to well-known fiddler Old Jimmy Thompson and let him play for over an hour. Far outside the National Life and Insurance Company building, anyone and everyone who could get the radio signal listened attentively; they, like Hay, knew something special was happening. Something more meaningful than just hearing a recorded song on the radio. This was God preaching to the hills through the soulful sound of American folk country. The Grand Ole Opry was born. "They soon had," Hay would later recall, "a good-nature riot on [their] hands" (Wolfe 1997).

By 1928, the grand Ole Opry radio show was running for three to four hours every Saturday night. Remarkably, the show gathered a cast of regulars who stayed in rotation on the show up through 1935. At that time, the Opry lost its unstructured performances and instead embraced a new professional approach in delivering country music to homes across America. Once the Opry was embraced by Americans, country folk performers across the United States grew eager to perform on the show, as doing so not only offered them a chance at fame, but stepping into the footsteps of those who came before them became, as this paper will later explore, a deeply moving circular religious experience.

As far as location, the Grand Ole Opry had many homes in the beginning, as it floated from place to place looking for the right venue to host the radio and eventual TV show in front of a large audience. In 1943, the Opry, which had just turned fifty-one years old, finally found a long-standing home at Ryman Auditorium, and it would stay there until 1974. It was at the Ryman that the Opry's connection to the religious experience of the South would come to full fruition. When performers stepped onto the Opry stage, they stepped into the footsteps of the revivalist preachers who also graced the same stage. It was impossible for them not to feel the power of God as they looked out over the large auditorium and took in the stained-glass cathedral windows that shined above them; it was a heavenly home for past, present, and future country music. As country music artist Ricky Skaggs shares, "[the Ryman] is ground zero for the spiritual part of Nashville . . . because this was and still is a church—the Union Gospel Tabernacle. They can change the name . . . [but] the intent for this building, its purpose has never change." Those who perform at the Ryman seem "intent to call upon" the spirits of those who came before them and "are sometimes overtaken by them". It is not uncommon to see artists weep, ignoring setlists in favor of letting the spirit move them, and sharing stories out of the emotions that they encounter on the stage at the Mother Church of Country Music (Justus 2021).

By 1974, however, the Ryman Auditorium had fallen into a state of disrepair. Time had taken a toll on the once magnificent venue, and the Grand Ole Opry had outgrown the space. Even so, Opry entertainers and the people who adored them were adamantly opposed to moving the Opry out of the Ryman, as doing so was nothing short of ripping the soul of Nashville and country music out of its heavenly home. After much debate, however, it was finally determined that there was no other choice than to build a better home for the Opry, Opryland U.S.A., a theme park roughly ten miles outside of Nashville city limits. "The size of the new complex—as well as its multiple commercial options, extravagant rides, and live animals—stood in stark contrast to the staid cathedral-like old Ryman auditorium." Although the Opry's producers understood such a move did not sit well with the entertainers and fans, the corporate sponsors saw the profitable opportunities of expansion more important than keeping the Opry in its beloved home (Hill 2011). To gain support for the move, a new rhetoric of the ills of urban decay and how a new place can be formed to honor the old was created. It worked; Opryland was born (Hill 2011), and the circle continued moving.

Today, the Grand Ole Opry has been on the air for over 4600 consecutive (and counting) Saturday nights. Notably, even during the darkest days of US history, the Opry has continued, making sure that the light of music carries on to the brokenhearted and abandoned, just like the early preachers at the Ryman aimed to do. In 1994, after being bought by the US



company Gaylord Entertainment, the Opry returned to its ‘Mother Church’, the Ryman Auditorium, and began a new tradition that, during the winter months, November–February, it would visit its home, the place that continues to breathe life into its soul (Hill 2011). But that is not the only way that the Grand Ole Opry and the Ryman remain religiously connected, as pieces of the old were brought into the new by way of ‘The Circle’.

### 3. Discerning: Spiritual Awakenings, the Grand Ole Opry’s Religious Experiences

According to renowned religious educator Gabriel Moran, the two primary aims of religious education are: “1. to teach people to practice a religious way of life and 2. to teach people to understand religion” (Harris and Moran 1998). Moving onward from his claim, Moran opened wide the intersections at which this type of teaching and learning takes place. For Moran, learning to be religious and learning about religion can happen in any place, at any time, and among any people. So much of the religious experience is centered upon sorting out what one has encountered and making meaning of it. In a way, it is this circular movement, between learning to be religious and learning about religions, that has fashioned the religious circle of the Grand Ole Opry, as the historical narrative shared above has shown the circular movement between the people, music, and religious expression.

Placing Moran’s insights into conversations about the past, present, and future of the Grand Ole Opry and the inner core of “The Circle”, which will be fully explained below, it is not surprising that, beyond the flashy stage lights, emotional songs, and audience laughter, that one can indeed find a profound religious experience among the people lost in the encounter. As this paper moves onward, it will examine the religious experiences found at the Grand Ole Opry and the circular theological underpinnings that have, and continue to, thread them together.

#### 3.1. ‘The Circle’

As one is aware, circular shapes have no end or beginning, and their outer edge harbors an inner core. Because of the strength and protection that circular shapes offer, their inner core, sacred spaces (physical and metaphorically), are often housed in the inner core of circular shapes. A good example of a physical circular shape that protects a sacred space and the journey of sacred discovery is a labyrinth. Although appearing to be maze-like, the winding paths of labyrinths are not meant to confuse those who journey them. Instead, their circular paths, which are formed to move outward, guide walkers from the old to the new, encouraging them to take their sacred encounters to the greater world that awaits outside the labyrinth. At the core of the labyrinth stands the old spiritual reckoning, housing the inner core of what is and what was, as well as a vision of what can be. In the journey outward, walkers often gain a clarity of thought, not only new insights into the past but how the future can be paved with spiritual awakenings left behind by the footsteps of others; for Christians, there is especially an understanding of what it means to connect to and walk in the footsteps of Christ, winding, turning, and repeating steps in a manner of trusting that Christ will guide always be present to guide them towards Truth and light.

Christ is also situated at the inner core of a circle. In traversing through the written Gospel narratives, one finds that crowds, disciples, and his intimate friends and family form a circle around him; thousands of people met in the streets, giving way to the Twelve Disciples, the Beloved Disciple, and Mary and, then, into the one Body of Christ. In Luke’s account of a young Jesus in the temple, for example, after three days of being lost, he is found by Mary and Joseph “sitting in the midst of the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions” (Luke 2:46 New American Bible) It is here that we are offered an image of Jesus positioned as the inner core of the temple with a group surrounding him, listening to his words and forming an intimate circular connection to his life and works. The sacred inner core of Christ is protected and cherished by those who surround him, each holding strongly onto the circle that binds each of them in the faith community and Body of Christ.

Using the same image of Christ as the center of the temple, the circular theology also guides a deeper understanding of Eucharistic theology forward. That is, the Eucharistic table, the center of life for Christians, is the physical core of Christ's church. Architecturally, the ciborium, or structured columns and canopies placed around the sacred Eucharistic altars, form a protective core around the inner circle, Christ in the flesh. From out of these sacred spaces, the Church flows forward and outward. The light of Christ is carried onward out of the inner circle, shared among believers, and carried to those who come into the circle as Truth-seekers or lost sheep yearning to find a home. Like a labyrinth, the light of Christ navigates through twists and turns, returning to the core when needed to find the strength and renewal to overcome cultural nuances and dead ends that sometimes present themselves along the way.

Keeping in mind the circular theology that presents itself in the labyrinth and in the social circles of Christ, the religious experience at the Grand Ole Opry becomes clearer. At the inner core of the Grand Ole Opry, as noted above, at the center stage, lies 'The Circle'. And like that of the circular theological understandings outlined above, 'The Circle' at the Opry also houses a deep spiritual connection between the past, present, and future. Its physical presence remains a reminder of what came before and what may lie ahead. In a way, 'The Circle' is the beating heart of the soul of Nashville, American country music, and the gospel sounds that still play through the rural hills across Appalachia.

One of the most interesting aspects of 'The Circle' at the Opry is that, like a labyrinth and Eucharistic table, it too is a physical place. When the Opry moved into its current home from the Ryman Auditorium, so that the history of the Opry would never be forgotten and always kept in mind, a circle from the Ryman's stage was cut for the purpose of placing it on the Opry's new stage. On the day of its delivery to its new home, Opry patriarch and American country music legend, Roy Acuff, made sure that the old Ryman circle was placed center stage and even suggested that 'Ryman' be painted at the top so that no one would ever forget those who had graced 'The Circle' before them. Acuff was the first person ever to step foot in 'The Circle'. Although the Ryman name was never painted onto the Opry stage, the "scuffs and scars of the greats and dreamers who walked it still are" (Grand Ole Opry 2021).

'The Circle' is sacred ground; there is no beginning or end to the marks left behind by the gospel preachers and mountain fiddlers that walked across the worn wooden planks, nor a lack of space for new entertainers to make their mark. Today, 'The Circle' is the most sacred point in all of country music. It is a testament to a time and place when Nashville was finding its way in the world, looking for hopeful horizons to guide the city away from sin and into the light of God's presence. And although much of today's American country music largely appears to be secular in nature, it is, in some way, difficult not to see the sacredness of 'The Circle' bring the artists who are invited to grace its planks to a place of deeper connection with God. It is a spiritual moment for them as they feel God's grace, a connection only sacred ground, an inner core, could ever offer. As country music artist Vince describes it, the first time he played at the Opry, he'd "never had a feeling like [he] had that night on stage". In Gill's words, "there was this warmth that went through me. I'd never had that happened before. It was an incredible feeling" (Sgammato 2013).

It is the experience of stepping into 'The Circle' that continues to move outward and religiously inspire not only the performers but their fans as well. Connecting to the past through the stories shared on stage, the pilgrimages taken to get there, and the community that has and continues to form out of the experiences from the Opry offer religious educational moments that not only teach outsiders about what a religious experience is but how to be a religious Truth-seeker or practitioner. It is this intersection that inspired Roy Acuff to ponder:

Will the circle be unbroken  
By and by, Lord, by and by  
There's a better home a-waiting  
In the sky, Lord, in the sky

As this section continues, it will examine the Opry's rendering of storytelling, pilgrimage, and community as religious practices encountered at the Grand Ole Opry that exist as poignant moments in connecting the sacredness of 'The Circle' to the audiences who inhabit its outer edge.

### 3.2. Storytelling

From its first broadcast to today, the Grand Ole Opry has been anchored by storytelling. When Opry fans tune in on Saturday nights, the music and banter that greets them offers them rich stories to ponder, stories that remind them of God's blessings and the way life used to be. To add, the life lessons offered at the Opry often come by way of humor, drawing listeners into the sacred through laughter and joy. Within the storytelling at the Grand Ole Opry lies sacred opportunities to connect to religious understanding. It is these stories that listeners are invited to encounter the past and make sense of the world around them, moving them to connect to the sacred moments of their lives in the hopes of better understanding themselves as religious people or truth-seekers. As the following sections will explore, even the nonreligious stories shared at the Opry can have a profound impact in connecting the audience with the sacred, teaching them how to be religious and, especially for the nonreligious, about the religiosity of the people and culture that inhabit the Grand Ole Opry and greater American South.

Jerry Clower was one of the best-known comedians and storytellers to ever perform at the Grand Ole Opry. Clower's stories came from his own life and 'real-life happenings' that he encountered traveling across America. In 1973, he joined the Grand Ole Opry just two years after his first record, a record that came out of a chance encounter with a radio director at a fertilizer conference at Texas Tech University. Besides making Americans laugh, Clower also served as a deacon in the Baptist church and was an active member in the Gideon Society, an association of Christian business executives most well-known for placing Bibles in hotel rooms across the world. Although not all his stories were directly related to Christian witness, Clower often shared the importance of good storytelling and humor when sharing the Good News: "Christian folks are supposed to be happy. You laugh, you giggle, and you grin. The Good News of the Gospel makes people happy. God don't expect folks to go around with their lips pooched out. Even if I wasn't a country comic, I'd be happy, looking forward to the blessed hope" (Jones 2008). It was Clower's own religious experience that would, in a way, continue the preaching that began at the Opry back in its early days at the Ryman, as some of his most well-known stories, that often brought audiences the greatest joy, were from his life as a Baptist deacon:

They called a deacons' meetin' [sic] at the East Fork Church. Uncle Versie Ledbetter was up in years, and he didn't get too many of the deacons' meetin' [sic] no more, 'cause [sic] he thought that the young folks, them about fifty or sixty, could take care of the church's bid'ness [sic]. But he got word they's [sic] fixin' [sic] to spend some money, and he got Newgener, his grandson, to take him over to the church house in a mule and wagon for the deacons' meetin' [sic]. And they got in a big discussion about buyin' [sic] a chandelier.

Many said, "I move you, Sir, a chandelier for the church." Another deacon said, "I second the motion." The moderator said, "is there any discussion?" And Uncle Versie said, "Sir, I'd like to speak. I want all of you to know that if we buy a chandelier, they ain't nobody [sic] got enough education that when we order it from Sears that they could spell it. Then, if we ordered the chandelier, and it got here, there's nobody in our church that knows how to play it, and what I'm concerned about is we don't need to spend this money on no chandelier as bad as we need lights in the church! (Jones 2008)

Clower was one of many who shared stories like the above, good-natured stories out of the lives of those who lived and worked in the South. But the Opry storytelling was not only limited to comedic storytelling. Songs of hope, joy, sadness, and love continue to

be shared every Saturday night, inviting everyone who listens to ponder and reflect upon life's deepest mysteries and greatest joys: faith, hope, and love. One such recent example of this kind of storytelling can be found in the encouragement and songs shared onstage after the Grand Ole Opry was forced to keep its loyal live audiences away due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As country music stars Vince Gill, Brad Paisley, and Marty Stewart took the stage, Gill and Paisley began the night offering words of encouragement to healthcare and frontline workers, offering a reminder that the Opry would keep playing for them "one way or another". Gill further reminded the audience that "we are our best during the hard times . . . country music really excels in times like these. We will persevere in the face of this" (Sexton 2020). In reflecting upon the beginnings of the Opry and the empty pews Gill, Paisley, and Stewart were greeted with when they stepped onstage, Stewart, in remarks made to the local news, reminded Opry audiences that the Opry "was designed to be theater of the mind. (To) Inspire and entertain people. For my mind," Stewart added, "it was for the working man and the woman who shouldered a lot of burden, who needed a place to be entertained and to get their minds off their troubles" (Leimkuehler 2020). Stewart's performance of his original song 'A Hobo's Prayer' on the Opry stage that March 2020 evening not only offered a story of hope for them to consume, but his lyrics also served as an invitation to the audience to trade in their troubles for hope, just as the great Opry storytellers did before him:

Under bridges, beneath trestles in the boxcars of dead trains  
 Livin' to beat the cold of the pouring driving rain  
 A silent society moves out in the night  
 Ragged rebels, homeless hobos and those like me who've lost the light

St. Peter is a prophet to all the hobo world  
 An expert on everything from caviar to girls  
 I met him west of Memphis on the eighth of July  
 He handed me a can of beans and a rusty knife  
 And he said "Everything out here ain't what it seems  
 And when you're down to nothing, just go ahead and dream  
 Face the fact that you're circle in a world full of squares  
 Trading sorrows for tomorrows, now that's the hobo's prayer"

Mother Mary is a lady from down in New Orleans  
 She's seen a lot of living since she was seventeen  
 She said, "I'm bona fide and worldly wise, with original parts  
 'Cept for what set me to traveling, I'm talking about my heart"  
 She said, "I can spot a broken heart from twenty miles away  
 So are you passing through or have you come to stay  
 You're running from a woman" she said with a grin  
 "So what've you got to say" and I said, "I am a pilgrim"

Where everything out here ain't what it seems  
 When I'm down to nothing, I just go ahead and dream  
 And face the fact that I'm a circle in a world full of squares  
 Trading sorrows for tomorrows, that's the hobo's prayer

In discerning the Grand Ole Opry's storytelling as a religious experience rooted in circular theology, Thomas Groome's 'Shared Christian Praxis' explored in his works *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision* and *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry: the Way of Shared Praxis* offers an approach that allows for a deepening of understanding Opry stories as expressions of the sacred and circular religious experiences that are still present at the core of 'The Circle' of the Grand Ole Opry. In short, Groome's approach "invites" us "to recall and share

experiences (secular or otherwise) on a given topic, a telling of the appropriate religious normative story, and sharing of the life vision this implies" (Collins 1991). The invitation that Opry storytelling offers to participants is one that invites them to "name or express in some form their own or society's" (Groome 1998) experience, producing a realization of what they understand to be really going on. That is, when the audience listens to songs like that of 'A Hobo's Prayer', they are invited to reflect upon not just the words but the context, the 'whys' and 'how's' of the story as situated within and outside of their own experiences. The audience, in other words, is offered an invitation to go to the circular core of their lives, to wind through the guided paths of a living labyrinth, circling through guided questions posed by stories in the hopes of finding Truth and wisdom.

From this point, again using Groome's model as a guide, participants are engaged, often guided by the artists' sharing the meaning of what is being told, in a movement of critically reflecting upon their own "stories and visions" (Groome 1998), drawing upon the experience as a circular guide for better understanding the hermeneutical lens/lenses they hold as they enter 'The Circle'. For the Christian, encountering these stories offers an opportunity to make connections between their own experiences and, in Groome's words, "the Christian story" (Groome 1998). It is, at this moment, a movement to place their experiences into a dialectic dance with the 'Christian Story' taking hold. In a way, this dance has moved in and out of 'The Circle' for decades, allowing the stories told by preachers and musicians to religiously form and transform audiences by pondering God's grace and everlasting presence in their lives. Through the process of this circular reflection, participants are invited to look back upon what they have encountered (the stories of their lives) and make sense of what has been experienced through their religious understanding. Although storytellers at the Grand Ole Opry do not instruct the audience to reflect on what is being shared, the stories encountered provoke a deeper exploration of what it means to be a Southern American, a child, lover, and even a deacon. It is this invitation, to ponder the deeper meaning behind the laughter and emotion these stories offer, that moves audiences to seek answers as to why they feel as they do.

The stories shared move the audience to think more deeply about who they are and the sacredness that surrounds them, no matter their faith or lack thereof. According to Alice Collins, the value that storytelling brings to religious experiences can be summed into four key points: "1. Storytelling provokes curiosity; 2. Storytelling provides contact with our roots (social, nationalistic, religious, and personal); 3. We learn through story because every story—every good story—is our story; 4. Storytelling engages and captures our imagination; it allows us to see the world in its totality" (Collins 1991). According to Collins, these four primary points are that storytelling houses a sense of mystery. "In the story's recounting, the mysteries of the sacred, of the religious, are revealed. Thus, a good story with a beginning, a middle, and an end, allows one to preserve the pedagogically sound principle of closure, yet it defies another kind of closure—that of giving definitive answers to those areas that defy finality" (Collins 1991). Breaking down the stories shared at the Opry, one can find religious meaning making expressed through their telling. Looking back at Clower's 'Chandelier' story, for example, the mysteries and curiosity left after its telling largely rely upon: "Why does an elder deacon not know what a chandelier is?" As humorous as this might be to an audience, the deeper mystery of knowing, education and church politics arise in teaching about religious experiences among the ordained leaders of the church. There is much to learn about human interactions and the humor that often begets a deeper understanding of church political debates over things as silly as church lighting. The simple mystery of not fully knowing what lies as one turns around the labyrinth circles of the experience offers a sense of excitement, or 'awe and wonder', as one is led to ponder: "Where will this lead me next?"

When diving into the storytelling that shines out of 'The Circle' at the Grand Ole Opry, one uncovers a circular religious experience that guides audiences, of all ages, to ponder the things they do not understand and the sacred mysteries that grace our lives. At this intersection, Opry stories invite us all to engage in truth-seeking from the joy, humor, and



even the sadness we feel when consuming the stories of the performers. Better understanding ourselves as spiritual beings and encountering God's divine providence and his everlasting love is not something foreign to Grand Ole Opry audiences. When performers enter 'The Circle', their gifts and talents move outward through their storytelling, and like the Labyrinth, the journey outward teaches all who listen a little more about the sacredness that continually surrounds us. Encountering the sacred by religiously exploring the mysterious is at the heart and soul of the storytelling at the Grand Ole Opry.

### 3.3. Pilgrimage

At the start of the Grand Ole Opry Tour, an interactive experience that allows fans to explore the backstage, stand in "The Circle", and see the dressing rooms that Opry members use prior to their performances, tourists sit in a small auditorium and watch a short film about what it is like to be invited to join the Opry and step into the heels of the history of country music. Hosted by country music stars Garth Brooks and Trisha Yearwood, the film journeys not only through the history of the Opry but how several of its music legends came to be part of the famed show. In his own sharing of what it was like to be invited to be part of the Opry, Garth Brooks explains to the audience that getting to the Opry was a long journey that started in the small bars he played in across his home state of Oklahoma. And although he was thousands of miles away from "The Circle", every performance was a small step closer to the soul of Nashville. Garth Brooks was a pilgrim on the way home and always felt that he would get there, someday, by the Grace of God.

Returning to circular theology, the connectedness between the pilgrimage and the physical spaces of the labyrinth or Christ as the inner circular core offer points of direction in as far as guiding pilgrims back to the sacred grounds at which they feel most connected to God. In a way, circling through experiences as a pilgrim is how circular theology is placed into motion, moving through generations, gaining strength, and keeping the circle unbroken. Another point of the Opry's circling through physical spaces, interconnecting pilgrims to the sacred, is the city of Nashville and the buildings that line its path. It is out of the pilgrim's circling through the city streets that the sacredness of the Opry becomes even clearer. Much in the same way that circling through the streets of Rome does the same for the Christian pilgrim on their way to the feet of Saint Peter's final resting place.

In *God and Enchantment of Place: Reclaiming Human Experience*, David Brown proposes that "cities are more than just the sum of the individuals who happen to live there. Buildings and the layout of cities can also help initiate experiences of God" (Brown 2012). Brown goes on to add that it is these kinds of experiences, pilgrims moving in and out of buildings and cities, that "draw individuals out of themselves" and into the presence of God (Brown 2012). What made seem ordinary fixtures to some are extraordinary invitations to others to look beyond what is present and instead towards the sacred, often hidden by the present by way of a thing veil. As noted above, 'The Circle' of the Grand Ole Opry is much more than ordinary planks, or parts of a city, lifted out of the old Ryman Auditorium. 'The Circle' is the beating heart of the Opry, the bridge between the old and the new, the present and the sacred. To step into 'The Circle' is to step into the footsteps of all who came before. 'The Circle' is sacred ground, and like all other sacred places, as Garth shared, those who understand the sacredness of the place, both performers and fans of the Opry, journey as pilgrims towards the soul of Nashville. 'The Circle' is where God dwells. It is at this crossroad of experiences, where the religious history and understanding of the performers and pilgrims meet, that a religious educational experience is formed. It is at these points of pilgrimage that one finds profound teachings, as "each pilgrim and every pilgrimage imprints the landscape and communicates with a legacy and fellowship that has a past and future which continues to be fashioned and shaped" (Egler 2019).

In her work on exploring pilgrimage as a religious educational experience, Alexandra Egler noted that pilgrimages offer many developmental and pedagogical implications that further invites a deepening of the understanding of how pilgrimages can teach us about the sacred and Divine. For one, according to Egler, "pilgrimage offers an awareness of the path

of one's life. It is a deliberate and conscious movement towards attentiveness and openness to others, the environment and the Divine" (Egler 2019). It is at these intersections, the moving inward and outward of the circle, that pilgrims not only learn more about where they are going but about the deep religious convictions they have that continually guide them towards fulfilling the desire to journey to this sacred place. Egler also noted that pilgrims are also religiously formed through the people "encountered along the road", an encountering that "fashions [pilgrims] towards a transformation that reveals itself religiously. Pilgrimage is the intersection and celebration of divine presence revealing and renewing life within and around every person" (Egler 2019).

As one journeys towards Nashville and then onward to the Grand Ole Opry stage, they are religiously formed and inspired by the people they meet along the way. Even the nonreligious or those whose pilgrimage is centered upon finding a good time along the streets of Nashville cannot deny that they are in the same way formed by the people who they meet along the way, the dreamers and the audiences who love and dream along with them. Take, for example, the hundreds of acts that flow in and out of the local bars of Nashville on the city's storied Broadway Street. Walking from act to act, a common practice among tourists and Nashville regulars, audiences are guided down a road paved by performers sharing their big failures and Opry dreams. As pilgrims travel from one lunch and dinner show to the next, they not only encounter the sharing of losses and dreams in these stories and music but also the pieces of the spiritual world in which they surround and arise from. For "when one hears music and it stirs the spiritual impulse within", according to Robin Sylvan, and "one is reminded of the spiritual realm; one is given a small taste of what that realm is like" (Sylvan 2002). It is these sounds, the connecting back to the sacred, that draw pilgrims towards to 'The Circle', the center of where faith and music meet and dance at the threshold of the entryway to the Divine. Upon this entryway, a spiritual path is further revealed, in which, in the words of Sylvan, "music is seen as the stuff out of which the universe is made" (Sylvan 2002). It is at this point that the sacred and Divine are fully revealed. When pilgrims encounter music, fully emerged in the experiential sounds, "they step into a unified field", according to Sylvan, "where the spiritual dimension is directly experienced in a powerful phenomenological mode that is integrated with other dimensions" (Sylvan 2002). It is these experiences that fully reveal the Divine realm, teaching pilgrims how to and where they can encounter the sacred at the inner core of 'The Circle'.

It is along these paths that pilgrims learn from each other, with many finding that "these encounters are anything but chance" (Egler 2019). As this history of Nashville, the Ryman Auditorium, and the Grand Ole Opry has unveiled, the pilgrim people met along one's journey towards 'The Circle' offer mirrors into our souls, unveiling the Divine, sacred moments of our lives, challenging us to make sense of it all. This is where religious understandings of who we are as pilgrim people and how we are interconnected through the sacred experiences that guide us to our destination, the inner circles of our lives, are formed.

### 3.4. Community

When one encounters the history of the Grand Ole Opry, especially the people who have made it their and other's home, the community that has been formed out of the Opry's history and context begins to take form. The Grand Ole Opry is a community of believers, people who believe in God, country, and each other. Even the nonreligious are drawn in, eager to encounter others who are like them. Eager to encounter someone who understands their journey and love for country music. As this paper has already noted, the community housed alongside 'The Circle' is one like no other. While other entertainment communities struggle to connect with new audiences and generations of young people who are disinterested in the past, the Grand Ole Opry continues to defy the odds, and people of all ages continue to flock to its performance hall. It is in this interconnected community, the people who walk in and out of and surround 'The Circle', that people

find an interconnected religious community. People of all faiths, backgrounds, and beliefs become one community united through a love of country music.

It is also the country music itself that has also served as a binding tie in building the Opry community. Opry music on a Saturday night often invites those listening in to think about those who are sitting on the other side of the audience or radio or those who they pass as they circle through life's experiences and how they too encounter the same struggles and joys. In *Redneck Liberation: Country Music as Theology*, David Fillingim offers the music of Garth Brooks as a host to the theme of 'community'. According to Fillingim, Brooks' "black gospel-inflected song, 'We Shall be Free'", which was written after Brooks encountered the Rodney King Riots while traveling through Los Angeles, is a song pleading for all people to come together, to unify within community in the face of adversity (Fillingim 2003):

This ain't comin' from no prophet,  
Just an ordinary man.  
When I close my eyes,  
I see the way this world shall be  
When we all walk hand in hand . . . .

Then we shall be free.  
We shall be free, we shall be free.

Fillingim goes on to note that, even in Brooks' "more humorous" songs, the audience is inspired to reach out and find support in a community. "One finds solace" in the words of Fillingim "in life by visiting with 'Friends in Low Places' or consulting with the local chapter of the 'American Honky Tonk Bar Association'" (Fillingim 2003).

Brooks' invitation to set aside individualism in favor of community is even more present in his rejection of the traditional cowboy image. As Fillingim observed, instead of embracing the cowboy as a rugged individual, Brooks shows his audience that a true cowboy understands that he cannot make it on his own, the "lone cowboy is a pitiable soul, incomplete and out of control". In his retelling of the creation story, for example, Brooks offers to his audience that God created woman because the "lonesome cowboy could never make it on his own" (Fillingim 2003):

On the eighth day God noticed a problem  
For there below Him stood a cowboy alone  
Stubborn and proud, reckless and loud  
God knew he'd never make it on his own  
So God looked out all over creation  
And listened as that cowboy prayed  
God took passion and thunder  
Patience and wonder then He sent down  
The best thing that God ever made

It is through Brooks's songs and others that Opry audiences are invited to consider the importance of community. To live alone is to live an isolated, out of control, and desolate life, a life void of joy. But when one reaches out and make connections to others in a community, whether it be because they need a friend to lean on during a breakup or someone to help them keep the right path as they travel through the West, life is joyful and, perhaps most importantly, doable, no matter the hardship one faces. It is through these poignant invitations to the community that Opry audiences are connected to the deeper value of friendship. It is through songs like these that audiences are also invited to contemplate the deeper meaning of friendship and love and "how", borrowing from the words of Pope Francis, when we deeply love others, we are "moved to seek the best for their lives" (Pope Francis 2020). Opry audiences, that is, are offered an opportunity to explore the deep meanings of love, friendship, and community. And for the religious, this intersection of the religious understanding of community and country music offers an insight into how to live the faith during the various points of life they might find themselves.

In this community, religious experiences are not only embraced but questioned and explored. As the people who gather under the lights of the Grand Ole Opry make meaning of their experiences, they embark on a journey of understanding and knowing the religious world around them. And the community formed within and out from ‘The Circle’ is filled with the presence of God.

#### 4. Conclusions

All of us, religious or not, are pilgrim people, journeying towards the profound and mysterious, towards places and communities and stories that many of us cannot even imagine at the time of starting our journeys. The Grand Ole Opry’s history and appeal is just one of many places that one can find pilgrim people journeying to as they seek a better understanding of who they are or why, as explored before, they feel how they do when they hear an Opry performance for the first time sung within ‘The Circle’.

This paper has offered the Grand Ole Opry as the image of a religious experience as seen through the lens of circular theology. As it examined the history and religious foundations of the Grand Ole Opry, this paper used a correlative method of reflection (revisiting the past, exploring the experiences, constructing understanding, and correlating what was encountered with sacred understanding) as a guide in showing how secular spaces like the Opry continue to serve as sources for religious understanding and knowing. Rooted in its own religious past and the experiences of the people who have interacted with the Opry through its formation, it is clear that ‘The Circle’ has, and continues to offer, a wellspring of religious experience. And as noted in the limitations of this paper, it is my sincere hope that what has been discussed above inspires a deepening of conversation not only in relation to the religious roots and encounters found at the Grand Ole Opry but that the lens of circular theology continues to develop into a broader conversation in relation to how this theological approach can help guide believers in better understanding God’s interactions with us even in what appears to be some of the most secular of places. May the circling of this conversation remain unbroken.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declare no conflict of interest.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For a more detail examination of the correlative method of theological reflection see (Graham et al. 2019).
- <sup>2</sup> In early American southern Protestantism, tabernacle was a commonly used term to describe auditoriums reserved for travelling preachers and other religious gatherings. Unlike churches, these auditoriums were also used for other community events and often were funded by wealthy community leaders who wanted to promote and share their special interests.

#### References

- Beaudoin, Tom, ed. 2013. Theology of Popular Music as a Theological Exercise. In *Secular Music and Sacred Theology*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, pp. ix–xxiv.
- Brown, David. 2012. *God and Enchantment of Place Reclaiming Human Experience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Collins, Alice. 1991. Storytelling and the Religious Imagination: An Approach to Religious Education. In *Dimensions of Newfoundland Society and Education*. Newfoundland: St. John’s Newfoundland, vol. 1, pp. 348–51.
- Davenport, F. Garvin. 1937. Cultural Life in Nashville on the Eve of the Civil War. *The Journal of Southern History* 3: 326–47. [CrossRef]
- Egler, Alexander. 2019. “Pilgrimage as Religious Educative.” Essay. In *Pilgrimage as Transformative: The Movement from Fractured to Integrated*. Edited by Heather A. Warfield and Kate Hetherington. Leiden: Brill/Rodopi, pp. 23–32.
- Fillingim, David. 2003. *Redneck Liberation: Country Music as Theology*. Macon: Mercer University Press.
- Graham, Elaine L., Heather Walton, and Frances Ward. 2019. *Theological Reflection: Methods*, 2nd ed. London: SCM Press.
- Grand Ole Opry. 2021. The History of the Grand Ole Opry’s Iconic Circle of Wood. Available online: <https://www.opry.com/story/the-history-of-the-grand-ole-oprys-iconic-circle-of-wood/> (accessed on 21 May 2021).
- Groome, Thomas H. 1998. *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry: The Way of Shared Praxis*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers.
- Harris, Maria, and Gabriel Moran. 1998. *Reshaping Religious Education: Conversations on Contemporary Practice*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, p. 30.

- Henderson, Jerry. 1968. Nashville's Ryman Auditorium. *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 27: 305–28.
- Hill, Jeremy. 2011. 'Country Music Is Wherever the Soul of a Country Music Fan Is': Opryland U.S.A. and the Importance of Home in Country Music. *Southern Cultures* 17: 91–111. [CrossRef]
- Jones, Loyal. 2008. *Country Music Humorists and Comedians*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press.
- Jones, Mrs Sam P., and Walt Holcomb. 1907. *The Life and Sayings of Sam P. Jones*. Tennessee: Franklin-Turner Company.
- Justus, Jennifer. 2021. "Where the Soul of Nashville Never Dies". The Bitter Southerner. Available online: <https://bittersoutherner.com/soul-of-nashville-the-ryman#YaVpUvHMK3K> (accessed on 2 November 2021).
- Leimkuehler, Matthew. 2020. "Grand Ole Opry Circle Remains Unbroken This Weekend with Brad Paisley, Marty Stuart and Vince Gill". *Tennessean*. Available online: <https://www.tennessean.com/story/entertainment/music/2020/03/20/grand-ole-opry-brad-paisley-vince-gill-marty-stuart-coronavirus/2880397001/> (accessed on 20 March 2020).
- Lovett, Bobby L. 1999. *The African American History of Nashville, Tennessee, 1780–1930: Elites and Dilemmas*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press.
- Pope, Francis. 2020. *Fratelli Tutti*. The Vatican. Available online: [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20201003\\_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html) (accessed on 23 March 2021).
- Ramsey, James Gettys McGready. 1853. *The Annals of Tennessee to the End of the Eighteenth Century*. Charleston: John Russell.
- Rus, Randal. 2021. Robertson, James. In *Tennessee Encyclopedia*. Available online: <https://tennesseencyclopedia.net/entries/james-robertson/> (accessed on 1 June 2021).
- Sexton, Paul. 2020. Vince Gill, Brad Paisley & Marty Stuart Keep the Grand Ole Opry Playing. Udiscovermusic. Available online: <https://www.udiscovermusic.com/news/vince-gill-brad-paisley-marty-stuart-grand-ole-opry/> (accessed on 23 March 2020).
- Sgammato, Jo. 2013. *For the Music: The Vince Gill Story*. New York: Ballantine Books, Available online: <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=724367> (accessed on 23 March 2020).
- Sharp, Tim. 2008. *Nashville Music Before Country*. Mount Pleasant: Arcadia Publishing.
- Sylvan, Robin. 2002. *Traces of the Spirit: The Religious Dimensions of Popular Music*. New York: New York University Press.
- Walton, Heather. 2014. *Writing Methods in Theological Reflection*. London: SCM Press.
- Wolfe, Charles K. 1997. *Tennessee Strings: The Story of Country Music in Tennessee*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.
- Wolfe, Charles K. 2021. *A Good-Natured Riot: The Birth of the Grand Ole Opry*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Yaghjian, Lucretia B. 2004. Teaching Theological Reflection Well, Reflecting on Writing as a Theological Practice. *Teaching Theology and Religion* 7: 83–94. [CrossRef]