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Reading the Phenomenon of NDX AKA and Denny Caknan as a Challenge and Opportunity for Contextual Theology in Indonesia: An Inductive Analysis

Sugianto
Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Reformed Indonesia, Jakarta, Indonesia
Email: sugianto.halim@reformedindonesia.ac.id

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Abstract:
The phenomenon of the popularity of contemporary Javanese music as performed by NDX AKA and Denny Caknan shows a significant change in the way Indonesian society articulate emotional experience, identity, and existential longing within the sphere of popular culture. Rather than assuming this phenomenon as inherently transformative, this study critically examines how such music functions simultaneously as a medium of cultural resonance, commercial consumption, and public negotiation of meaning in contemporary Indonesia. This type of music, which circulates across social class and religious boundaries, increasingly operates as a public cultural space where emotional narratives, communal belonging, and forms of implicit spirituality are expressed and contested. This study analyzes selected lyrics and audience-related narratives as representations of everyday experience using an inductive approach within the framework of contextual theology. The study does not treat popular culture uncritically as a theological source, but instead evaluates the extent to which theological concepts such as locus theologicus and common grace can legitimately engage secular cultural expressions without collapsing the distinction between theological normativity and cultural sentimentality. Analysis of themes, symbols, local language, and existential motifs shows that this folk-pop phenomenon presents emotional closeness, simplicity, and articulation of life struggles that resonate widely with audiences, while at the same time exposing tensions between ecclesial discourse and the symbolic language of everyday society. The findings also indicate that the popularity of such music may reveal both opportunities and limitations for public theology, particularly regarding the risks of superficial spirituality, commodification of emotion, and fragmented moral narratives within digital popular culture. These findings suggest that public theology in Indonesia requires a more dialogical and critically discerning model capable of engaging lived culture without losing theological depth and fidelity to the Gospel. Accordingly, this study proposes an inductive-dialogical framework of contextual theology that positions popular cultural narratives not as theological authorities in themselves, but as interpretive entry points for theological reflection, pastoral engagement, and public communication within plural Indonesian society.

Keywords:
contextual theology; popular culture; public spirituality; Javanese music; NDX AKA; Denny Caknan; inductive analysis.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Indonesia has witnessed the phenomenon of regional-language music with everyday themes, such as the works of NDX AKA and Denny Caknan, which have topped the national charts and transcended social and religious barriers. They have succeeded in conveying the emotional experiences, struggles, and commercially resonant representations of everyday life in simple and memorable language. Songs such as "Kalih welasku," "Los dol," and "Sayang" have become symbols of emotional solidarity between generations, reflecting what could be called the spirituality of the people, namely the search for meaning and comfort amid the harsh realities of life.[1] Nevertheless, this study does not assume uniformly that all listeners experience these songs in identical spiritual or existential ways. Rather, the argument developed here is limited to a textual and cultural reading of the narratives embedded within the songs and their broader public resonance in Indonesian popular culture.

This phenomenon poses unique challenges for the world of theology. On the one hand, the Christian theological tradition has deep ideas and reflections to discuss various human and social issues. However, on the other hand, theology is often limited to the academic sphere and fails to understand the inner language of the people.[2] This observation should not be interpreted as a dismissal of practical, pastoral, or narrative theological traditions that have long attempted to engage ordinary human experience. Instead, the critique is directed toward forms of theology that remain predominantly confined within institutional or academic discourse and therefore struggle to communicate meaningfully within rapidly changing cultural spaces shaped by media and popular expression. As John Swinton pointed out, one of the greatest crises of modern theology is its inability to truly incarnate itself in the cultural context in which people live and struggle.[3]

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[1] Bayujati Prakoso, "Identitas Budaya Jawa dalam Lagu Denny Caknan: Studi Visual Culture," *Chronologia* 5 no. 1 (2023): 45-62. http://dx.doi.org/10.22236/jhe.v5i1.11466. See also: Fazlul Rahman, "7 Fakta menarik NDX AKA, dari Kuli Bangunan Hingga jadi Hip Hop dangdut Terkenal, Banyak Tawaran Manggung," *Bacakoran.co,* 12 September 2025, https://harianrakyatbengkulu.bacakoran.co/lifestyle/read/44446/7-fakta-menarik-ndx-aka-dari-kuli-bangunan-hingga-jadi-hip-hop-dangdut-terkenal-banyak-tawaran-manggung#goog_rewarded, accesed November 2025.

[2] Richard J. Mouw, *Consulting the Faithful: What Christian Intellectuals Can Learn from Popular Religion,* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 11.

[3] John Swinton, *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil,* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 25.

In the Indonesian context, this challenge is becoming increasingly apparent. Data from Antara News (2024) shows that in the last five years, consumption of local music on streaming services has increased significantly from around 30% to 40% of total national listening.[4] This trend signals a resurgence of appreciation for Indonesian and regional music, which not only serves as a cultural expression but also as a new space for the formation of meaning and identity among the younger generation. At the same time, this increase in popularity should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of spiritual depth or theological significance. Factors such as digital algorithms, the commercialization of regional identity, nostalgia, linguistic familiarity, and the accessibility of popular melodies may also contribute significantly to the widespread reception of contemporary Javanese music. This situation shows that popular culture, especially local music, has a strong appeal in building a space for reflection and inner expression, where values and meanings are often conveyed in a way that is closer to people's daily lives than formal theological approaches.

However, this kind of popularity cannot be considered a sign of secularization. Rather, as Clive Marsh explains, popular culture often functions as a "hidden space of religious experience," where people achieve a sense of connection, hope, and transcendence without resorting to formal religious language.[5] Even so, the present study recognizes that such interpretations remain contested within theological discourse, particularly because experiences of emotional attachment or communal resonance in popular culture do not necessarily constitute religious experience in a normative theological sense. This means that the songs of NDX AKA and Denny Caknan can be read as forms of popular faith narratives, articulations of faith that grow from concrete experience, not from dogmatic contemplation.

The fact that their work has reached millions of listeners from diverse social and religious backgrounds demonstrates the need for down-to-earth values that speak the language of culture without losing their spiritual depth. Nevertheless, this article does not claim direct empirical access to the personal motivations or spiritual interpretations of listeners, since the study primarily focuses on textual analysis and theological

[4] Ahmad Faishal Adnan, "Musik lokal makin disukai di layanan 'streaming'," *Antaranews.com*, 21 Juni 2023, https://www.antaranews.com/berita/3599298/musik-lokal-makin-disukai-di-layanan-streaming?utm_source=chatgpt.com accesed November 2025.

[5] Clive Marsh, *Theology and the Experience of Popular Culture,* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 44.

interpretation rather than ethnographic audience research. Therefore, this study seeks to uncover how the Gospel can speak the language of the people, articulated through symbols, narratives, and cultural expressions present in the daily lives of Indonesians. This study does not intend to reduce the Gospel to a cultural product, but rather seeks to examine how Christian faith can dialogue with cultural expressions, thus producing a form of theology that is communicative, contextual, and remains faithful to its essential truth. Thus, this study positions itself at the intersection of contextual theology, cultural studies, and popular spirituality.

The study of the relationship between religion, theology, and popular culture has been a serious academic pursuit since the 1990s, particularly in the West. Gordon Lynch, in his work *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture,* asserted that popular culture serves not only as entertainment but also as a "space for the production of meaning" that reflects and shapes religious values in society.[6] Although Western scholars provide important conceptual frameworks for understanding religion and popular culture, the Indonesian context possesses distinct socio-religious characteristics shaped by local languages, communal traditions, pluralism, and postcolonial dynamics that cannot be fully explained through Western theoretical categories alone. This discourse has also inspired similar interest in Indonesia, where a number of studies have begun to link religious experience with contemporary cultural expressions. Nindyo Sasongko, for example, shows that spirituality in Indonesia tends to be rooted in everyday experiences and local cultural practices, rather than mere dogmatic constructions.[7] Another study by M. Qomaruzzaman and Busro on the hijrah musician community confirms that music can be a medium for da'wah (Islamic preaching) and an arena for the search for authentic religious meaning amidst popular culture.[8] Meanwhile, Trahnata et al., through their study of the contextualization of contemporary ethnic music in the liturgy of the

[6] Gordon Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture,* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 104.

[7] Nindyo Sasongko and Febrianto, "Sebuah Ilmu Menghasrat: Topografi Studi Spiritualitas di Indonesia," *Indonesian Journal of Theology* 9, no. 2 (December 2021): 132–149, https://doi.org/10.46567/ijt.v9i2.231.

[8] Bambang Qomaruzzaman and Busro, "Doing Hijrah through Music: A Religious Phenomenon among Indonesian Musician Community," *Studia Islamika* 28, no. 2 (2021): 385–412, https://doi.org/10.36712/sdi.v28i2.13277

charismatic church, highlight how artistic expression can open up space for the expression of faith beyond formal theological forms. [9]

However, most of these studies still focus on musical expressions or spiritual practices, and none have explored the theological dimensions within popular cultural narratives, thus providing a starting point for theological readings relevant to the Indonesian context. Therefore, the research gap that needs to be filled is the integration of studies of local popular culture, particularly contemporary Javanese music such as that of NDX AKA and Denny Caknan, with inductive theological reflection within the framework of Christian faith. Furthermore, this article seeks to bridge two separate research streams: first, the study of theology and contextualization of faith, which tend to operate within academic and normative spaces; second, studies of Indonesian popular culture, which are generally descriptive without adequate theological elaboration. The inductive approach adopted here opens up space for theology to learn from below, from narratives and folk language that are not theological but rich in meaning, thus producing a form of faith reflection that is faithful to the Gospel and relevant to contemporary society.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses an inductive approach that begins with popular cultural phenomena as a starting point for theological reflection. This approach allows theology to refrain from judging culture externally, but rather to listen to the expressions of society and then weigh them in the light of the Christian faith. At the same time, this study recognizes the methodological risk of theological projection, namely the tendency to impose predetermined theological meanings onto cultural texts. Therefore, the analysis seeks to maintain a critical balance by first examining the cultural narratives, emotional motifs, and symbolic structures of the songs within their social context before engaging them in theological reflection. In line with Amos Yong's view that contextual theology "grows from the soil of culture itself," this approach opens space for Christian theology to rediscover

[9] Fiqri Agam Trahnata, IGN Wiryawan Budhiana, and Tanesya Hotris Samosir, "Kontekstualisasi Musik Etnik Kontemporer dalam Liturgi Gereja Karismatik Indonesia: Studi Kasus pada Tiga Gereja di Kawasan Urban," *Tehilla: Jurnal Seni Budaya dan Musik Gereja* 1, no. 1 (Mei 2025): 39–55, https://doi.org/10.54793/jsb.v1i02.

expressions of God's common grace and providence in narrative and musical forms familiar to Indonesian society.[10]

The primary data for this study comes from an analysis of the lyrics of songs by NDX AKA and Denny Caknan, which are popular among urban and semi-urban youth. This study is primarily textual and interpretive in nature; therefore, it does not claim to provide direct empirical conclusions regarding the personal spirituality or psychological experiences of listeners. Rather, the study focuses on how theological and existential themes are represented within the lyrical narratives and how these narratives publicly circulate within Indonesian popular culture. This analysis focuses on three aspects: dominant themes in the lyrics, representations of social and spiritual values, and the use of local symbols and language. Methodologically, the analysis employs a qualitative thematic and narrative reading of selected song lyrics, with particular attention to recurring emotional patterns, symbolic expressions of suffering and hope, relational language, and cultural idioms rooted in Javanese everyday experience. This interpretive framework is complemented by contextual analysis drawn from media discourse and cultural studies literature in order to reduce purely impressionistic interpretation. Secondary data in the form of journal articles, online media coverage, and popular culture studies were used to strengthen the contextual reading.

Thus, modern koplo and campursari dangdut music are no longer treated as mere entertainment, but as an alternative theological space where people express their longing for meaning, justice, and hope. [11] Nevertheless, the study does not assume that all consumers of this music interpret or internalize these meanings in identical ways, since audience reception may vary according to social, religious, generational, and personal contexts. From a contextual theology perspective, this popular music phenomenon is interpreted as a manifestation of common grace, a place where human values and public spirituality are symbolically articulated without formal religious labels. [12] However, the category of "public spirituality" used in this study refers primarily to symbolic and

[10] Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity,* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 45.

[11] Nunni Megasari, "Lirik Lagu Ropang (Roda Panguripan) Denny Caknan feat NDX AKA, Lagi Trending!" *Detik.com,* 2 Oktober 2025, https://hot.detik.com/music/d-6961430/kartonyono-medot-janji-denny-caknan-berikut-lirik-dan-arti-lagunya, accessed November 2025.

[12] Cornelius Plantinga, *Engaging God's World: A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living,* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 45.

cultural expressions of existential longing in the public sphere, not to normative claims about genuine religious transformation or theological orthodoxy.

Referring to Calvin's concept of semina veritatis (seeds of truth) and Robert Schreiter's concept of local theology, this study affirms that reflections on faith can grow from the concrete experiences of society. In order to avoid selective interpretation, the selection of NDX AKA and Denny Caknan is based on several considerations: their consistent popularity across digital platforms, the broad social reach of their music beyond specific religious communities, the dominance of everyday existential themes in their lyrics, and their significant role in shaping contemporary Javanese popular music discourse in Indonesia. An inductive approach encourages dialogical theological reflection, to find echoes of the Gospel in cultural spaces that are often overlooked by formal theological discourse.[13] Even so, the study does not position popular culture as an equal theological authority alongside Scripture, but rather as a contextual conversation partner through which theological reflection may critically engage contemporary human experience.

RESULT

Conceptual Framework: Music, Narrative, and Popular Spirituality

Phenomena such as NDX AKA and Denny Caknan show that popular music is not only a reflection of culture, but also a means of shaping public spirituality. Simon Frith, in Performing Rites, asserts that music always creates an "imaginary community" in which listeners feel they share an emotional experience that gives meaning to their existence.[14] In the Indonesian context, this community is formed across social classes and even across religions, because these songs use warm language and express life contexts without heavy ideological pressure. However, this study recognizes that the formation of emotional communities through music may also be influenced by commercial trends, digital circulation, and entertainment consumption patterns, not solely by spiritual motivations.

This phenomenon can be interpreted as common grace, a space where human values, loyalty, suffering, and hope are culturally represented and emotionally circulated

[13] Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 12; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), II.2.15.

[14] Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 158–160.

without having to be labeled as formally religious.[15] John Calvin himself emphasized that outside the church, seeds of truth (semina veritatis) can be found in every cultural expression.[16] Nevertheless, this interpretation does not imply that all cultural expressions automatically possess theological authority or spiritual authenticity. This approach opens up space for the church to view folk narratives not as a threat, but as an opportunity to articulate the gospel in a language that society can understand.

Thus, inductive theology is not a doctrinal compromise or even syncretism; rather, it can be a hermeneutical bridge that brings reflections of faith into conversation with secular narratives. Craig Detweiler, in *Into the Dark: Seeing the Sacred in the Top Films of the 21st Century,* proposes that the task of theologians is to "hear the echoes of the Gospel in unexpected places." [17] In the same spirit, this study explores this idea in the folk and digital music that shapes the spirituality of Indonesia's younger generation. At the same time, theological engagement with popular culture requires critical discernment to avoid reducing the Gospel into merely emotional or consumer-oriented narratives.

The selection of NDX AKA and Denny Caknan is not merely based on their popularity, but also on their unique position as conveyors of everyday narratives in the local language. Their music combines the simplicity of the Javanese language with universal themes such as loss, loyalty, economic struggle, and longing for home.[18] In the lyrics of "Kartonyono medot janji," for example, expressions of failed love not only reveal personal emotional experiences, but also reflect a fragile society searching for emotional support amid social change.[19] Even so, these interpretations should be understood as theological readings of cultural texts rather than definitive explanations of the songwriter's intentions or audience reception.For public theology, this phenomenon is important because it shows how people talk about suffering without formal theology, thus providing opportunities for more empathetic dialogue about faith. As Robert Schreiter points out, local theology is born from "the encounter of faith with concrete human

[15] Plantinga, *Engaging God's World*, 47-48.

[16] Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.2.15.

[17] Craig Detweiler, *Into the Dark: Seeing the Sacred in the Top Films of the 21st Century*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 18.

[18] Arido Laksono, "Representasi Budaya Lokal dalam Musik Kontemporer Indonesia," *Endogami: Jurnal Ilmiah Kajian Antropologi* 4, no. 1, (2020): 50-54. https://doi.org/10.14710/endogami.4.1.50-54.

[19] Rindang Krisnawati, "Kartonyono Medot Janji - Denny Caknan, Berikut Lirik dan Arti Lagunya," *detik.com,* 23 October 2023, https://hot.detik.com/music/d-6961430/kartonyono-medot-janji-denny-caknan-berikut-lirik-dan-arti-lagunya diakses, accessed November 2025.

experience."[20] In this context, music becomes an arena for practical theology where the church can relearn how to speak about grace in a language that is familiar to the community.

This inductive approach has the main strength of being open to empirical data and cultural sensitivity, although it also has limitations, especially in the risk of interpreting cultural expressions too freely without a normative theological framework. To avoid this, this study continues to use the corrective framework of Reformed public theology, which emphasizes the tension between common grace and special grace.[21] Thus, this inductive process does not end in relativism, but rather leads to theological reflection that acknowledges universal values without losing the uniqueness of the gospel.

Music as a Reflection of Society's Spiritual Needs

This expression describes the relational and existential nature of popular spirituality, which does not require a theological system, but rather an experience of meaning and emotional closeness. The popularity of NDX AKA and Denny Caknan's music is inseparable from the changes in how Indonesian society interprets spirituality. Amidst the secularization and commercialization of popular culture, expressions of faith are now increasingly present in daily life and experiences, not just in formal religious spaces. Denny Caknan's songs, as analyzed from a semiotic perspective, show how the Javanese language and local cultural symbols are used to express the values, emotions, and identity of the community, thus making pop music an alternative channel for the spirituality and existential experiences of society.[22] However, this study does not deny that the same songs may also function primarily as entertainment products shaped by market demand and digital popularity.

For many listeners, this type of music serves as a secular liturgy, where they find comfort, remorse, and even hope in simple yet touching melodies. Nevertheless, the phrase "secular liturgy" is used metaphorically to describe emotional participation, not as a literal equivalence to religious worship. As Jeremy Begbie said, music has a unique

[20] Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies,* 12-14.

[21] Abraham Kuyper, *Common Grace: God's Gifts for a Fallen World,* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 34–35.

[22] Elsabe C. Kloppers, "Singing and Sounding the Sacred - the Function of Religious Songs and Hymns in the Public Sphere," *Journal for the Study of Religion,* 33 no. 1 (2020): 27-49. https://doi.org/10.17159/2413-3027/2020/v33n1a2 .

capacity to "shape human experience of time and emotion in such a way that it opens up space for an encounter with mystery." [23] In the Indonesian context, local music such as that of NDX AKA or Denny Caknan opens up space for people to reflect on their suffering and hopes amid harsh realities. This is where the power of popular spirituality lies: it does not require a creed, but offers a profound experience of life itself. However, this experiential dimension should not be interpreted as replacing doctrinal faith or formal religious commitment, but rather as reflecting the emotional and existential dimensions of contemporary public culture.

If public theology wants to reach out to people like this, it can no longer speak only in dogmatic categories. Theology must learn to speak in the language of experience, not just propositions. This argument does not reject doctrine or propositional theology, but emphasizes the need to integrate doctrinal depth with communicative and experiential forms of engagement. The failure of most churches to interpret popular symbols has led to a void in the representation of meaning in the public sphere, which has ultimately been filled by other forms of expression such as local music, digital memes, or even viral narratives on social media.[24] Thus, this study affirms that the digital public sphere and popular music are new theological fields, where the meanings of faith, love, and human suffering are openly negotiated.

Narratives of Simplicity and Incarnation in Popular Culture

The hallmarks of NDX AKA and Denny Caknan's music are simplicity of language and emotional honesty. In songs like "Aku ra mundur" or "Los dol," listeners are invited to accept life as it is, without imagery or artificial morality. At the same time, such simplicity may also function as an effective commercial strategy that increases accessibility and emotional appeal among mass audiences. This value of simplicity is strikingly aligned with incarnational theology: God is present in the lowest form, most intimate with humanity. Christian theology, rooted in the mystery of Christ's incarnation, finds contextual resonance in the ways people express faith and hope through simple narratives. Hans Urs von Balthasar wrote that the beauty of the incarnation lies in God's

[23] Jeremy Begbie, *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 66.

[24] Elsabe C. Kloppers, "Singing and Sounding the Sacred - the Function of Religious Songs and Hymns in the Public Sphere," *Journal for the Study of Religion,* 33 no. 1 (2020): 27-49. https://doi.org/10.17159/2413-3027/2020/v33n1a2.

willingness to become ordinary, even to appear a failure in the eyes of the world. [25] This expression finds resonance in the aesthetics of folk music, which rejects complexity in favor of honesty. Even so, this resonance should not be understood as a direct theological equivalence between popular music and the doctrine of incarnation. A theology that separates itself from folk simplicity loses its incarnational element. Therefore, this study demonstrates an anthropological correspondence between the simplicity of popular culture and the essence of theology rooted in the incarnation. This means that true awareness of faith is not always present in complicated theological language, but in the most sincere and genuine human experience.

NDX AKA often uses the term "*ndeso bangga*" (countryside pride) to describe pride in a simple local identity. [26] This expression may reflect cultural affirmation and emotional belonging, although it should not automatically be interpreted as a conscious resistance movement against modernity. For the lower-middle class, this represents a form of resistance against the hegemony of urban modernity, which often demands image and efficiency without room for human warmth. From a theological perspective, such expressions affirm the value of the *imago Dei* in every human being, including those considered "ndeso." Thus, folk music serves as a spiritual affirmation of human values suppressed by modern social structures.

Fragmentation of Meaning and the Church's Narrative Crisis

One important finding of this research is the fragmentation of narratives of meaning between the church and society. On the one hand, the church still tends to maintain propositional and formal forms of teaching, while society is more connected to emotional narratives easily accessible on social media. This phenomenon aligns with the findings of Heidi A. Campbell, who noted that digital media has created a new epistemology in which emotion and experience become the primary sources of authority for meaning. [27]

[25] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 53.

[26] Edy Purwanto, "Merangkai Arena Menuai Kuasa: Romantika dan Perjuangan Group Musik Dangdut Hip-Hop NDX A.K.A Yogyakarta," *Journal of Social, Culture, and Language,* 1 no 2, (2023): 111-117.

[27] Heidi A. Campbell, *Digital Creatives and the Rethinking of Religious Authority*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2021), 45–46.

However, emotional accessibility alone cannot replace the importance of theological depth, doctrinal discernment, and long-term spiritual formation.

The church often fails to respond to this shift, allowing non-religious narratives to become more effective in shaping the public's moral orientation. At the same time, uncritical adaptation to popular culture may also risk reducing faith into consumer preference, emotional immediacy, or fragmented spirituality. It is at this point that popular music, particularly the works of NDX AKA and Denny Caknan, serves not only as entertainment but also as an alternative moral narrative for society. Through simple and emotional lyrics, both present values such as loyalty, honesty, and steadfastness amidst life's hardships. NDX AKA's "Nemen," for example, expresses steadfast loyalty despite betrayal, while Denny Caknan's "Los dol" encourages listeners to accept life's harsh realities with open hearts. Messages like these resonate widely because they directly touch the moral and spiritual dimensions of humankind, without the need for a formal belief system.[28] If theology wishes to speak publicly again, it must acknowledge this epistemological shift. Truth is no longer accessed solely through propositions, but through experiences that can be shared emotionally and narratively. Nevertheless, Christian theology historically integrates doctrine and experience together rather than opposing one against the other. Public theology must therefore rebuild a communicative narrative capable of bridging the gap between doctrinal depth and the existential simplicity of society. In this respect, folk music exemplifies how simple narratives can hold extraordinary spiritual depth.

The Church's Responsibility: Moving Compassion

Lyric analysis also shows that this folk music expresses a longing for social empathy. Many NDX AKA songs speak of loyalty to friends, life's struggles, and solidarity amidst suffering.[29] In an increasingly individualistic world, messages like these serve as a moral oasis. In Christian theology, the idea of "solidarity in suffering" reflects Christ's work in

[28] Rani Siahaan, "Bikin Baper! Ini Makna Tersembunyi di Balik Lirik Lagu Nemen yang Dibawakan NDX AKA," *Mediaindonesia.com,* 8 February 2025, https://mediaindonesia.com/hiburan/742046/bikin-baper-ini-makna-tersembunyi-di-balik-lirik-lagu-nemen-yang-dibawakan-ndx-aka#goog_rewarded, accesed November 2025. See also: Elang Riki Yanuar, "Arti di Balik Lagu 'Los Dol,' Ungkapan Legawa Seorang Denny Caknan," *Medcom.id,* 11 October 2023, https://www.medcom.id/hiburan/musik/9K5e1qnK-arti-di-balik-lagu-los-dol-ungkapan-legawa-seorang-denny-caknan, accessed November 2025.

[29] Agustinus Rustanta, "Dangdut Koplo as a Manifestation of Popular Culture in Indonesia," *Jurnal Komunikasi 15* no. 2, (2023): 259-269. https://doi.org/10.24912/jk.v15i2.20684.

sharing human suffering.[30] Therefore, this expression of popular solidarity can be read as a form of common grace, a manifestation of moral values derived from God, even if not explicitly religious.

In pastoral practice, the church can learn from this form of solidarity by developing an empathetic ethic, an approach to ministry that listens rather than simply teaches. James Smith, in *Desiring the Kingdom,* asserts that faith formation occurs not only through cognition, but also through emotional and imaginative participation.[31] Folk music fosters such sensitivity: it moves hearts before changing minds. However, emotional resonance alone is insufficient for long-term spiritual formation without ethical reflection, communal accountability, and theological grounding. A church that wants to be relevant in society needs to be present not only as a teacher of truth, but as a companion who walks alongside people in their emotions and suffering.

Down to Earth Theology: Folk Music and Public Spirituality

The phenomenon of digital folk music in Indonesia can be understood as a new public theological space, a place where human values, suffering, and hope are negotiated through shared narratives. Miroslav Volf writes that public theology is when faith speaks not only to the church, but also to the world. [32] In this framework, folk music becomes a social arena where people express their longing for a meaningful life, faithful love, and hope amid complex realities. If the church fails to read this space, it will lose its relevance in a society that continues to seek a language of faith that is close to everyday experience.

The inductive approach allows theology to find the divine presence in things that are often considered profane, even in music that is called "unspiritual." [33] Nevertheless, such theological interpretation requires critical discernment so that cultural appreciation does not become an uncritical legitimization of all popular expressions. Thus, contextual public theology is not an attempt to legitimize all cultural expressions, but rather to develop an hermeneutic of engagement: reading the signs of the times with sensitivity to

[30] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Sin and Salvation in Christ*, vol. 3, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 318-319.

[31] James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 25.

[32] Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good,* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011), 21.

[33] Detweiler, *Into the Dark: Seeing the Sacred in the Top Films of the 21st Century*, 15.

the language of the people, while recognizing God's grace at work through human narratives.[34] A church that is sensitive to this cultural language will be able to present the gospel in an incarnational and communicative way, not getting caught up in rigid and abstract forms of proclamation.

Popular music such as the works of NDX AKA and Denny Caknan can be seen as a tangible manifestation of the spirituality of the people who are seeking an earthy form of faith.[35] When urban and semi-urban communities long for a space to acknowledge their suffering and hopes, music becomes the primary medium that bridges personal and social narratives. This is where public theology meets folk spirituality, where both affirm that true faith experiences are born from a wounded world, not from conceptual ivory towers.[36]

The messages of classical theology, laden with dogmatic terminology, often fail to reach this space of experience. The epistemic distance between academic theology and the lives of the people demands a more empathetic approach. As Volf says, theology should be born from the experience of a wounded world.[37] In the Indonesian context, this wound manifests itself in social inequality, structural poverty, and the marginalization of regional cultures. Through folk music, people express spontaneous and authentic faith, as a form of "street theology" that is not systematically formulated but touches on the existential realm of humanity.[38]

By recognizing folk music as a form of public spirituality, the church is not lowering its doctrinal standards, but rather expanding the horizon of its mission.[39] The church is called to read music, art, and folk expressions as a field of grace, where the Spirit of God works beyond institutional boundaries. When theology dares to take to the streets and listen to the voice of the people, that is where the gospel finds its own way across the dangdut stage, koplo melodies, and human hearts longing for true love.[40] This statement

[34] Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 15.

[35] Nindyo Sasongko and Febrianto, "Sebuah Ilmu Menghasrat: Topografi Studi Spiritualitas di Indonesia," 132–149.

[36] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Faith Speaking Understanding: Performing the Drama of Doctrine,* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014), 49.

[37] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation,* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 12.

[38] Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture,* 88.

[39] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society,* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 144.

[40] James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 33

should be understood metaphorically as a reflection on cultural engagement rather than as a claim that popular music possesses salvific or doctrinal authority.

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS: THEOLOGICAL, PASTORAL, AND CULTURAL, ACADEMIC

Theological Implications: From Doctrine to Dialogue.

One important theological implication of this study is the need for cultural engagement hermeneutics, namely, a way of reading the signs of the times with a theological eye but an empathetic heart.[41] The church cannot simply assess culture from a moral perspective; it also needs to listen to the voices contained within it. Popular folk music, in this case, is not merely entertainment, but a social testimony of humanity's longing for true relationship, meaning, and salvation. Kevin Vanhoozer emphasizes that theology must be a form of cultural literacy, namely the ability to read culture theologically without falling into cynicism.[42] Such an approach will help the church understand how God works even through simple narrative structures.

In this context, the music of NDX AKA and Denny Caknan can be read as an expression of the *imago Dei* that emerges from human honesty in facing the reality of suffering and imperfect love. This interpretation remains a theological reading of cultural narratives rather than a claim regarding the conscious theological intention of the artists themselves. Thus, public theology is called to dialogue, not to dominate, so that the Gospel can be rooted again in concrete human experience. Furthermore, a theology oriented toward people's lives needs to revive the incarnational dimension of the Christian faith. The Incarnation is not simply a doctrine of God becoming human, but also a paradigm for the communication of faith: God speaks in a language that humans understand.[43] A church faithful to the principle of incarnation will dare to speak in the language of the people, without losing its theological depth. As Lesslie Newbigin emphasizes, the Gospel must be translated into the home language of local communities to be truly understood and lived.[44] In this context, the home language of modern Javanese society could be the simple yet honest lyrics of popular songs. Thus, this research encourages the emergence of a new

[41] Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 16.
[42] Vanhoozer, *Faith Speaking Understanding*, 50-51.
[43] N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is,* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 60.
[44] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 144.

paradigm: a humble and communicative theology that is not distant from human suffering.

Pastoral and Cultural Implications: A Church that Listens to the Voice of the People

On a practical level, this study suggests that the church develop an empathetic and narrative-based pastoral approach, rooted in listening to the life stories of the congregation. Popular music is an important model for understanding how emotional language and simplicity can move people's hearts. Nevertheless, pastoral engagement with popular culture requires discernment so that emotional immediacy does not reduce the depth of Christian discipleship. James K. A. Smith argues that human faith is shaped by habits of the heart more than by rational knowledge.[45] Thus, liturgy, sermons, and social services need to pay attention to the affective dimension of the congregation, so that faith does not stop at the intellectual level. The church can also act as a cultural mediator, helping the community to reinterpret local values in the light of the Gospel.

In the Indonesian context, this means supporting cultural expressions that strengthen solidarity, loyalty, and hope. Folk music that is honest and touches everyday life can be a starting point for more authentic conversations about faith. As Schreiter asserts, local theology grows from the encounter between the Gospel and real human experience.[46] A church that listens to the voice of the people will rediscover its calling as a witness to God's love in a wounded world. Furthermore, this research also opens space for interfaith and intercultural dialogue. Because popular music often crosses religious identity boundaries, it can be a medium for social peace amid the polarization of Indonesian society. This is in line with Miroslav Volf's vision of public faith that serves the common good, not merely fighting for exclusive truth. [47] The church can participate in this public space not by competing with popular narratives, but by offering them new direction and depth through liberating love.

Academic Implications: Crossing Theology and Cultural Studies

These findings indicate that public theology in Indonesia needs to develop a pattern of dialogue that not only describes popular cultural phenomena, but also interprets these

[45] Smith, *You Are What You Love,* 33.
[46] Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 18.
[47] Volf, *A Public Faith,* 21.

dynamics as a theological space where struggles, consolation, and the search for meaning take place in a tangible way. Therefore, this study proposes a model of contextual theology that departs from the experiences of the people, through the language, symbols, and narratives of local music to enrich the church's understanding of contemporary spirituality. By placing contemporary Javanese music as a locus of faith reflection, this study offers a conceptual contribution to the development of a theology that is more communicative, sensitive to the dynamics of popular culture, and remains rooted in the integrity of the Gospel. Thus, this study not only reads the phenomenon of music as cultural data, but also shows how theology can rediscover its prophetic and pastoral role in the Indonesian public sphere.

These implications also open up space for further study. There is still room for further research on how other forms of art and digital expression, such as short films, memes, or online poetry, can become the locus of contemporary public theology in Indonesia. In addition, a more in-depth exploration is needed on how the concept of common grace can be understood dynamically in a pluralistic and digital cultural context. Further research can use participatory qualitative methods to explore religious experiences that arise in the interaction between music, media, and the faith of the community. Thus, a theological reading of popular culture can become a new inductive method for understanding the dynamics of the faith of today's Indonesian society.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that living theology is theology that remains rooted and relevant. Christian teachings, with their depth of biblical and dogmatic reflection, have tremendous richness, but that richness needs to be translated into forms of expression that resonate with the daily experiences of the faithful. The musical narratives of NDX AKA and Denny Caknan show that Indonesian society has not lost its spiritual sensitivity; on the contrary, they continue to seek an honest language to voice their longings and struggles. In this context, the church is called not only to preach, but first and foremost to listen, to pay attention to the cries, emotions, and hopes that are manifested in the cultural expressions of society.

Through an inductive approach, this study finds that grounded public theology must arise from careful observation of human experience and the longings that drive it. The church is invited to recognize that God's work of love often takes place outside

institutional boundaries, in popular expressions, digital media, and cultural spaces where people negotiate meaning in the complexity of modern life. The task of theology, therefore, is not only to uphold truth, but also to recognize the presence of Christ in the humanity of ordinary people who are present in simplicity, honesty, and imperfect but sincere love. When the church and theologians dare to learn from the voices of the streets, theology can rediscover its relevance as good news and continue its calling as a compassionate witness to those who are often unheard.

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