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Straight Edge Evangelicalism and DIY Spirituality

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Introduction

When the seemingly irreligious straight edge hardcore band Wisdom in Chains screamed, "All those years I was living a lie / But last night hardcore saved my life" (*Everything You Know,* 2009), and put those lyrics on a t-shirt, they revealed the sometimes incongruous nature of the relationship between punk and religion. The song, "Chasing the Dragon," utilizes ironic drug references and rather less ironic religious references to celebrate hardcore music and community, and their ability to change an individual's life. Although religious language is commonly used in popular culture to signify or satirize moral seriousness (Bruce 2011: 80), and among music fans to signify or satirize subcultural commitment (Till 2010; Moberg 2016: 230), the Wisdom in Chains lyric offers a deeply personal reflection of an almost evangelical intensity. The song, like this chapter, is grappling with the changing nature of religion as it is understood by individuals and communities in the late capitalist West.

Straight edge emerged in the American hardcore punk scene in the early 1980s as a secular humanist ideology advocating abstinence from intoxication, in conflict with the conventional morality of late capitalist society in general, and with the conventional morality of the punk subculture in particular. Drawing on fieldwork in the punk scenes of Australia, the UK, and the USA, this chapter critically analyses two key religious trends in the straight edge movement, which also tell us a great deal about how belief is articulated in punk in general, and

contemporary Western society more broadly. Firstly, evangelical Christianity, the most prominent expression of religion within the global punk subculture, often taking a Pentecostal form. Secondly, the diverse and discordant spiritual subjectivities circulating within punk scenes we have called "DIY spirituality" (Abraham & Stewart 2016: 249-50). Building upon the idea of punk's self-reliant, do-it-yourself ethic, and Paul Heelas's (1996) definition of New Age religion as "self-spirituality," the concept of DIY spirituality also finds affinity with Nicholas Hookway's (2018) theory of "do-it-yourself morality," an ethical system emphasizing "the authority of the self, choice and ideals of authenticity." We will find that in spite of obvious differences between straight edge evangelicalism and straight edge DIY spirituality, in both cases belief is articulated in a highly personal manner, in keeping with the general "subjective turn" in Western culture, as analyzed in philosopher Charles Taylor's (1989, 2007) cultural histories, and as theorized in the empirical research of sociologists Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2005).

The interactions between straight edge and religion within the broader punk subculture have been shaped by these attitudinal changes. As the former head of the Anglican Communion, Rowan Williams (2018: 51), has observed, "Religion today is often understood, from within and without, as having a lot to do with what moral philosophers call 'heteronomy'—that is, the imposition of law, convention, norms from outside, from the 'other'." The anxiety around outside control or coercion has been foundational in the shaping of the punk ethic, a combination of do-it-yourself anti-corporate antagonism, and expressive individualism (Abraham & Stewart 2016; Abraham 2017: 37-50). While many of the pioneering punk bands of the 1970s were enthusiastic participants in the commercial music industry, the creative limitations this imposed, and the fickleness of fame, lead to an ongoing antipathy towards the culture industry that exists to this day (Tschmuck 2006: 143-5). Punk's second decade, the 1980s, saw the development of sophisticated underground cultural infrastructure; amateur

musicians, small record labels, volunteer promoters, and collectively-run, squatted, or borrowed performance spaces created a culture of autonomous self-expression (Moore 2007). Rather than any single radical ideology, it is this value of individual authenticity and creative expression that is foundational to contemporary punk (Lewin & Williams 2009).

This privileging of personal and subcultural autonomy has produced a general suspicion towards religion in most punk scenes, at least in the West. Punk is a normatively secular form of self-expression; even though a variety of religious beliefs and expressions do circulate in local punk scenes, religious values are rarely given deference. In spite of this, in the 1990s and 2000s, the straight edge label was adopted and finessed by many Christians in the punk scene. Christian hardcore bands, such as xDeathstarx, xDISCIPLEx A.D., and xLooking Forwardx, incorporate a straight edge synecdoche in their names, the "X" once drawn on the hands of underage patrons at bars and nightclubs forbidden from purchasing alcohol, transformed from a legal necessity to a symbol of subcultural virtue (Haenfler 2006: 7-8). Although not all Christians in the punk scene who adhere to straight edge prohibitions consciously identify with the movement, for many the values of Christianity, punk, and straight edge are complimentary; some of xLooking Forwardx's tracks, such as "For Those Who Believe," overlay or fuse these identities (*The Path We Tread*, 2005).

Straight edge adherents have also explored "Eastern" religions. The Hare Krishna movement, a youth-focused form of missionary Hinduism gaining prominence in the 1960s Counterculture, was present in the American East Coast hardcore scene in the form of "Krishnacore," and various strands of Buddhism have circulated on America's West Coast (Luhr 2010; Abraham & Stewart 2016; Stewart 2017: 50-7). While some straight edgers wrestled with the rigidity of life in an urban ashram, and others traveled to India to further their religious knowledge (Lahickey 1997: 25-36, 129-35; Peterson 2009: 109-53), the majority of punks who have embraced Eastern religions have done so in a more selective and individualistic

manner. This is in keeping with trends in religion in the West over the past half century. Rather than responding to the frustrations of modern life by sacralizing a close-knit faith community, as the Hare Krishna movement did, the sacralization of the individual self has been more common (Bromley 2012), placing personal autonomy and self-care at the center of spiritual practice.

This chapter will explore precisely how this process of religious individualization manifests in straight edge punk, by drawing on a blended sample of interviews from the authors' research projects, carried out between 2009 and 2015 in the punk scenes of Australia, the UK, and the USA. With straight edge being a "hidden identity" not quantified in any sources, and with religiously or spiritually-engaged straight edge being a floating, conceivably "third-order subculture" (Christopher, Bartkowski & Haverda 2018), with differently policed borders and slippages of meaning and belonging, constructing a representative or random sample is impossible. So while the chapter's findings cannot be generalized in the sense of being standardized, we believe they can be generalized in the sense of enlightening experiences that broadly hold within the assigned categories across the data. The methodologies informing this chapter are unexceptional and rather unadventurous within qualitative social scientific studies of religion; a combination of semi-structured interviews, focus groups, participant observations, and content analysis.

This chapter will begin with an overview of straight edge values, recognizing the tensions that have developed between different expressions of the movement. The chapter will then analyze the process of individualization in contemporary Western religious and spiritual practice, noting how this has manifested among some straight edge punks, emphasizing an ethic of self-reliance. In contrast, the chapter will then analyze the beliefs of evangelical straight edge adherents who, while similarly expressing individualized convictions, differ by grounding their faith beyond themselves.

The Spirit of Straight Edge

The compatibilities and conflicts between spiritual expressions and straight edge values become apparent through exploring the core beliefs of the movement, which began as a response to the hedonistic tendencies in punk's first decade. Straight edge was an act of subcultural self-reflection that sought to differently embody punk's oppositional ideology, disavowing the notion of punk as "all about debauchery and self-destruction" (Adams 2002: 354). Straight edge's ideology of sobriety and self-control was first outlined in the songs of Minor Threat, key protagonists in the early-1980s Washington, D.C. hardcore scene (see also chapter 10), such as "Out of Step" which summarizes the prohibitions on alcohol, drugs, and casual sex as: "I don't drink / I don't smoke / I don't fuck" (*Minor Threat,* 1984). Teenage vocalist Ian MacKaye intended these songs to express his personal beliefs and criticize his peers; "Always gonna stay in touch / Never wanna use a crutch / I've got the straight edge" declared the movement's eponymous anthem (ibid.). Although MacKaye did not intend to start a social movement, or even a subcultural "schism" (Wood 2000), straight edge became a term that a number of individuals and bands came to self-identify with, promoting the movement through recordings, zines, and tours. Quantifying straight edge is impractical, we have noted, but we conservatively estimate the number of adherents today to be in the low tens of thousands worldwide.

Despite its entanglements with religion, noted above, and subcultural and scholarly claims of a religious asceticism animating straight edge (Blush 2001: 26-9; Haenfler 2006: 10), the movement developed as a strictly secular one. The straight edge rejection of intoxicants, and what it considers destructive sexualities, with its corresponding praise of addressing life's challenges with stoic sobriety, echoes Charles Taylor's (2007: 9) description of the ideologies of modern reason, "contemplating the world and human life without illusion, and of acting

lucidly for the best in the interests of human flourishing." Like conventional religions, there is room for reforming, syncretizing, and personalizing straight edge. While abstinence is the core straight edge practice, and the key indicator of commitment and identity, there are a series of secondary and tertiary commitments of spiraling intensity. Adherents often interpret the prohibition on casual sex differently, many adopt vegetarian or vegan diets and lifestyles, and some even avoid caffeine and non-prescription medicine. Some also seek careers connected to straight edge values or the punk scene, as tattoo artists, drug and alcohol counselors, or other careers in the caring or creative professions.

Straight edge is generally characterized by individual commitment to self-improvement, and only rarely is it interpreted as a systematic policy to be imposed upon a local punk scene, let alone wider society. Nevertheless, violent attempts to impose the movement's thou-shalt-nots are not unheard of, especially in the United States, amplifying the aggressive masculinist undercurrents present in hardcore (Haenfler 2006: 81-101; Stewart 2017: 39-42). Laura, from New York, represents the general view of straight edgers in denouncing the "fucking assholes giving us all a bad name" by bullying non-straight edgers in the punk scene; "it is supposed to be a positive individual thing not a fucking gang."

However, as Ian MacKay mused, "for people with a tendency to veer towards fundamentalism, straight edge is a perfect vehicle" (Blush 2001: 28). Part of the problem is that one can more easily profess an identity than perform an identity, especially an identity based on the self-denial of personal pleasures, and especially if those pleasures are also rejected by one's peers. So it is that straight edge reached its violent apogee around the turn of the millennium in Salt Lake City, the orderly heart of the Mormon world, where a "mutant Brady Bunch" of straight edge youth used violence to differentiate themselves from their Latter-day Saint neighbors who inconveniently rejected the same vices (Lopez 1999). Steven, from San Francisco, witnessed these straight edgers at a show in Utah, "stalking the edge of the [mosh]

pit" looking to attack anyone with a beer or a cigarette in their hand. Another extreme example was the adoption of radical environmentalism by a small faction of "hardline" straight edgers which included the bands Earth Crisis and Vegan Reich—briefly renamed Vegan Jihad after its founder converted to Islam—which epitomized the violent posturing and often patriarchal attitudes of the tendency. Ironically, it is these "fundamentalist" straight edgers who are the most likely to "sellout" their values, as they discover militancy and maturity seldom mix, and compromises must inevitably be made (Haenfler 2006: 204).

Sheila is a Punk Rocker

It could be argued that the process of individualization is all about compromise and adaptation. In the late capitalist West, the precise adoption and replication of inherited creeds, whether conventional religions or youth subcultures, runs contrary to the dominant related ideologies of liberalism and expressive individualism. In the case of punk, for example, Azerrad (2007) observed a subjective and introspective turn within punk in its third and fourth decades; the commercial success of grunge and emo were the most obvious examples of inward turns towards personal angst, away from radical politics. The study of punk and related music-based youth subcultures took a contemporaneous turn away from the Marxian studies of the collective politics of youth subcultures in the 1970s, to focus on individual meaning-making through consumerism in the 1990s (Bennett 2011; Abraham 2017: 25-9). In the case of religion, on the other hand, the process of individualization, and the turn away from religious institutions, came to be embodied by a young woman named Sheila.

In the important study *Habits of the Heart* (Bellah, et al. 1985: 219-49), the individualization of American religion, beginning with emerging evangelical norms around personal conviction in the colonial period, coupled with a growing culture of self-reliance,

culminates in the 1980s with "Sheilaism," the self-defined faith of a research participant given the name Sheila Larsen. Described by Sheila as "[j]ust my own little voice," and by the researchers as an attempt to extract "internal meaning" from a history of external conformism, the key tenets of Sheilaism are "just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other" (ibid.: 221, 235). Far from being an amusing footnote in sociological history, Sheilaism is a "perfectly natural expression of current American religious life," the authors argue. Many Americans would, like Sheila, reject any faith prescribing anything more onerous than this basic ethic of self-care and reciprocal decency (ibid.). A generation later, Christian Smith demonstrated persuasively via the National Study of Youth and Religion that a close denominational relation of Sheilaism, which he labelled "Moral Therapeutic Deism," had become the default belief system of American youth (Smith and Denton 2005: 162–70; Smith 2010). Its basic moral teachings, that the "central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself," and that salvation exists for all those who follow God's general desire for us to be nice to each other, emphasizes the therapeutic nature of contemporary spirituality, focused on creating subjective well-being and managing interpersonal relationships (Smith and Denton 2005: 163-4).

This therapeutic culture of self-realization offers a broad normative template for spiritualties incorporating an array of ideas from diverse religious traditions, curated for contemporary Western consumption and strongly shaped by one's peers (Hammer 2010). The DIY spirituality circulating within straight edge punk incorporates many diverse cultural and purely personal references, therefore, but the authority of the self is always central. For Taylor (1989, 2007), this dominant contemporary approach to religion is part of the subjective turn in Western culture, tracing itself back (in the modern era at least) to Romanticism's emphasis on the inner life of the individual. Truth comes to be thought of as something found within, rather than received from without in the form of religious tradition.

Ever since the Baby Boomer generation came of age in the 1960s, it is arguable that the low-intensity spiritual "quest" has become the typical vehicle for religion in America and proximate societies (Roof 1999). A similar analogy is used by Wuthnow (1998: 8), arguing that "[f]aith is no longer something people inherit but something for which they strive." The former system implies permanence and perhaps subordination within an existing institution, while the latter implies impermanence and individual agency, even it if does risk exaggerating the commitment of late capitalist spiritual pilgrims, on their own, "with no direction home" as the author quotes Bob Dylan (ibid: 48). The Counterculture was an extreme example of this; seeking out seemingly uncorrupted belief systems from the East and from the occult margins of the West, the movement eventually moderated in suburbia into more stable and consumable "New Age" forms. Described as a reaction "against the head-dominated, cold, calculating qualities of the rational," it made sense that alongside New Age spirituality, the Pentecostalism of the Jesus Movement also found a home in the Counterculture and its later conservative suburban expressions (Shires 2006), as both could be described in the therapeutic vein as "religions of self-help" (Bouma 2006: 91-3). Within this emerging normative culture of religious individualism, what Bellah, et al. (1985: 55) call "the nervous search for the true self", in which the individual can only be held back by society, develops into the anxiety over heteronomy Williams (2018: 51) identifies in this chapter's introduction. Watts' (2018: 352) study of "spiritual-but-not-religious" millennials explains the hegemonic logic in all this: "if what guides an individual's day-to-day decisions is the cumulative total of their personal experiences—unique to them—then no one, nor any institution, is as fit to govern their beliefs, thoughts and actions as they are."

It is therefore hardly surprising that the conventionally irreligious straight edge research participants Stewart has interviewed hold rather rigid views of religion, especially Christianity, and that they make no attempt to demonstrate awareness of its diversity. These rigid views

emerge from generalizations of their individual experiences, combined with a sometimes starkly unequivocal moral outlook, reminiscent not just of Watts' analysis, above, but also the Countercultural view of the West as utterly corrupt. As Malott's (2009) study of secularist punk opposition to Christianity illustrates, a fear of the reversal of the secularization process, or a fear that the West simply never has been secularized and religion still plays a dominant heteronomous role, is the key source of anti-religious subcultural suspicion (see chapter 9). While we have never encountered evidence of individual Christians or Christian bands under church control in the punk scene, and churches are at best ambivalent supporters of Christian alternative music (Abraham 2017: 135-53), the notion that conservative Christians desire complete control—or at least the right of censure—over creative expression does have an historical basis. Like most other music genres, punk endured a period of attempted censorship from the religious right (Shuker 2001: 217-26), and while some now view censorship as a preoccupation of the secular left (Bestley 2015: 121-2), the hostility of conservative Christianity to punk, metal, and hip hop in the 1980s and 1990s has remained in the subcultural subconscious.

Straight edge adherents of DIY spirituality therefore conceive of clear distinctions between religion and spirituality. Lucy, a former hardcore drummer from California, who was involved with a Dharma Punx study group in San Francisco (Stewart 2015; Abraham & Stewart 2016: 248-9), articulates this distinction by invoking punk's DIY approach to music:

> I have an eclectic approach to my spirituality. I am part of the
> Dharma Punx here and really value it, but they are not a religion
> for me. I am not a religious person, I am a spiritual person. I
> consider my spirituality to be Dharma Punx, yoga, praying,
> crystals, straight edge, my addiction support group and
> increasingly an interest in Wicca. These things are all very,

what's the word, fluid. If they were to be a religion then someone

or something would stop that [fluidity], rules would be put in

place, it would all be out of my control. How would that be any

different than a big record label buying up the independents or

signing punk bands just to make money from them?

Hans, from nearby Berkeley, made a similar distinction by describing religion "as the churches or mosques or temples," with an ethic of "sit down, shut up, and we will tell you what to do." Spirituality, on the other hand, "is what you do day to day, what you choose to do, how you find your answers. It has nothing to do with any institution, any leader. It can't be controlled."

What is central here is the authority of the individual, and the fear of the individual losing that authority. Just as Minor Threat viewed drugs and alcohol as "a crutch" in their song "Straight Edge" (*Minor Threat,* 1984), Watts' (2018: 351-2) spiritual-but-not-religious millennials also view religion as "a crutch" because it is "a form of negative dependency that keeps the individual from being truly independent, free and self-reliant." This emphasis on self-reliance is also a feature of Hookway's (2018: 108) concept of "DIY morality", within which morality "is not sourced from religion, tradition or similar but is understood as rooted in choice, personal responsibility and self-creation."

While the rhetoric of DIY spirituality and DIY morality certainly emphasizes the individual's responsibility for constructing their own systems of meaning and challenging received wisdom, this does not happen in a vacuum. As Rowan Williams (2001: 4) puts it, morality "is not made by a will operating in the abstract, but by someone who is used to thinking and imagining in a certain way." Taylor's (2007: 473–86) later work on expressive individualism came to emphasize the role of popular culture and consumerism in this process of moral formation, recognizing that cultural "styles" play a more important role for many young people than religious or political groups. He therefore judges us to be "co-determiners"

of our beliefs and identities along with the culture industry (ibid.: 481). However, as Watts' (2018: 358-9) observes, citing successful secular pop punk acts Avril Lavigne and Sum 41 along the way, the discourse of what we are calling DIY spirituality is so thoroughly diffused throughout commercial popular culture that it has become hegemonic to the point of invisibility. One cannot point to specific instances of being evangelized by DIY spirituality as one can in the case of a Christian punk band preaching on stage between songs.

Even if we think of morality as merely a matter of doing what we want, a pertinent formulation in the context of DIY morality and spirituality, as Williams (2001: 4-5) argues, we still need to identify what precisely it is that we want, and the social forces that have pushed us in this direction. Following Durkheim's view that whatever is foundational to a society takes on a sense of the sacred, Houtman and Aupers (2010: 14) argue that the dominance of what we are calling DIY spirituality in late capitalist society simply reflects the sacralization of individualism. This can be viewed positively, as a process that "sacralizes human dignity" (Watts 2018: 357), but most analysis of DIY spirituality see conformist consumerism where its adherents see personal autonomy. Carrette and King (2005), representatively, argue there is no net gain in liberty if Christian hegemony is replaced by capitalist hegemony. Scholars of DIY spirituality often express similar value judgments, implicitly or explicitly grounded in normative religious or political critiques (Woodhead 2010). While recognized as a product of late capitalist culture, DIY spirituality is often also looked down upon as superficial and self-centered, undermining traditional ideas of a dichotomy between the sacred and the profane by focusing unashamedly on individual wellbeing and embedding itself within the mundanity of everyday capitalist life (Heelas 2008). A number of female straight edgers were annoyed that "spirituality" or "faith" is not granted the same seriousness as "religion," therefore, while simultaneously echoing the criticisms above of religion as oppressively anti-individualist.

So although, on the one hand, there is nothing exceptional about the circulation of DIY spirituality within straight edge—these punks are following in the footsteps of the baby boomers, whether they like it or not—punk and straight edge values mitigate many of the individualistic and consumeristic features of DIY spirituality. The foundation of straight edge in prohibitions on certain personal pleasures, as well as the networks and identities that straight edgers are embedded within, gives straight edge DIY spirituality a social anchoring and ethical discipline absent from other DIY moralities and spiritualities. Nor, needless to say, is straight edge abstinence akin to Instagram diets or other narcissistic self-technologies. Rather than being another example of the individualistic moralities critiqued by social theorists focused on moral decline in late capitalism (Hookway 2015), straight edge DIY spirituality is often mobilized in conspicuous opposition to elements of individualistic morality—especially if personal pleasure is seen to entail exploitation of people or the environment.

To this end, straight edge lyrics often promote the notion of a coherent, but gendered, community, invoking the language of "brotherhood", "family", and "unity." A symbolic community is created through shared symbols, notably the "X" that features in tattoos, band names, and merchandise. Live shows embody these values in the mosh pit through stagediving and crowd surfing, in which straight edgers set-aside their individualistic tendencies to rely on their "family" to keep them from falling on the floor. Straight edge also continues the punk tradition of breaking down barriers between performers and audience members, sharing the microphone between vocalists and fans. Further, although though there is no single agreed upon way to "be edge," nor is there any straight edge leadership or hierarchy, the subculture certainly judges those who claim membership, and holds members to collective standards, even if these are imprecise or inconsistent standards. A relatedly ubiquitous feature of straight edge discourse is celebration of those who "stay true," and dismay at those who have abandoned the ethos. "So

tired of mangled and broken convictions / Your will stands as weak as your addictions," xDeathstarx complain on "Die to Remain" (*The Triumph*, 2008).

While the overwhelming majority of straight edgers reject the idea of imposing the movement's prohibitions on others, as discussed, there is still hope that the positive behavior of straight edge individuals can become the locus of collective change. "Our approach to chang[ing] the world is by living our life and being proud to say we are straight edge," said Gail, from Leeds. Similarly, while the rituals and symbols of straight edge solidarity are less significant for older adherents no longer active in their local punk scene, when straight edge becomes a "personal lifestyle," commitment to subjectively embodying the objective disciplines of the movement takes on even more importance (Haenfler 2013).

Straight Edge Evangelicalism

As the individualization discussed in the previous section has affected the West as a whole, normative understandings of religion have changed for everyone, Christians included. It is certainly not the case that a moral elite craft DIY spiritualities while the conventionally religious mimic empty rituals. As Bellah, et al. (1985: 236) noted, comparing religious individualists like Sheila Larsen and more conventional born-again religious conservatives, both conceive of their choices as providing the "basis for genuine personal autonomy," because both choices can conceivably liberate individuals from unwanted external pressures. As Wilcox (2002: 498) observed, forms of "Sheilaism" can be found among more progressive Christians, creating forms of "spiritual bricolage" on mainline Protestantism's pastel-colored margins. Most significantly, perhaps, what Greeley (2004: 78) refers to as "selective Catholicism" has become the dominant expression of faith for Roman Catholics in the West. Michael, a straight edge musician and activist from Oakland explained the he "walked away from the Catholic Church"

because he disagreed with official teachings on gender and abortion, but many Catholics still within the church would agree with him. Drawing on congregational surveys, Dixon (2014) observes that only one in five frequent churchgoing Australian Catholics claim adherence all to the church's official teachings and practices, and barely one in twenty of Australia's self-identifying Catholics meet this criteria overall. Pope Francis in fact acknowledges that Catholicism can be expressed in diverse "deep and sincere" ways that exclude conventional practices (ibid.: 271).

It is worth emphasizing the importance of individual experience in evangelicalism, and especially Pentecostalism, in this context. There is a general ontology of "feeling right" in evangelicalism, emerging from the emphasis placed on personal revelatory experience as confirmation of belief (Flory & Miller 2008). Within Pentecostalism, moreover, the exaggerated emphasis on personal experience has a "radically laicizing" tendency (Wright 2002: 253). Because the ecstatic experiences foundational to Pentecostalism occur regardless of rank, Pentecostalism can promote a "do-it-yourself ecclesiology" which devalues ministerial training, undermining institutional authority, especially the authority of the bookish theological education predominating in mainline churches (ibid. 257-8). Tomas, the former vocalist of a Florida-based Christian hardcore band, and later a church pastor, noted the similarity between his vocations. "It was just like being in the band," he said of his church. "Setting up all your equipment then breaking it down afterwards. We were meeting in in movie theatres, rented facilities, homes; it was very similar, very DIY." Young evangelical Christians finding fellowship outside of organized churches, but in the Christian punk scene (McDowell 2018), is therefore a surprisingly logical development.

Encountering a diversity of individual beliefs and institutional doctrines within even American evangelicalism is therefore a given for touring Christian punk bands. Jeff, a former grunge musician and later a church pastor in Nashville, described conflict over conflicting

messages from touring Christian musicians, the church hosting them, and parents supporting youth ministry, as "basic church drama 101." Various controversies were bubbling under the surface of the evangelical churches in the US, and elsewhere, supporting touring punk and metal bands in the 2010s, included debates over what is commonly called the Prosperity Gospel—the belief that Christians can be empowered to achieve worldly wealth, health, and success—and over the influence of the New Calvinism movement associated with Mark Driscoll (see chapter 7). Some Christian punk bands alleviated their anxiety around predictably unpredictable theological differences by removing all but the most basic and positive religious messages from lyrics and onstage statements. This approach is analogous to a trend in evangelical worship music in which simplicity or ambiguity in lyrics allows songs to be utilized by a variety of churches, and subjectively interpreted by a variety of individuals, with conceivably contradictory beliefs (Abraham 2018).

These changes in religious practice are reflected in Christian approaches to straight edge ethics and identity. In interviews, straight edge Christians typically employed experiential or relational language, and only rarely was more traditional expository language used, extracting straight edge ethics in a rational way from scripture. While Christians usually identify with straight edge for personal and experiential reasons, the Christian straight edgers Abraham interviewed were less likely to have personally experienced the kinds of addictions or deprivations found among Stewart's research participants. Their experiences were more about a sense of alienation with the hedonism of late capitalism and a desire to disassociate from that culture, rather than a desire to disassociate from their past.

Two broad positions on straight edge are to be found among Christian punks. A positive view is commonly taken that the straight edge movement is compatible or even complimentary with Christian belief and identity, and at the very least straight edge can serve as a bridge to non-Christians in the punk scene interested in exploring ethical ways of living. For example,

Matthew, a teenage Christian straight edger interviewed by Haenfler (2006: 185), describes Christianity as focused on his inner spiritual wellbeing, and straight edge as focused on his physical outer wellbeing. A negative view also circulates, arguing that straight edge's constitutive prohibitions on casual sex, drug use, and at least excessive alcohol consumption are already present within Christian ethics, but that straight edge values are inferior insofar as they lack any religious anchoring. Some conservative evangelicals also struggle with the idea of an absolute rejection of alcohol, even if they themselves are teetotal, since wine is so ubiquitous in the Gospels and Christian language more broadly. Similar to Wood's (2006: 134-6) analysis of straight edge Krishnacore punks' desires to embrace a "higher" set of beliefs and practices, belief in Christianity's sufficiency in matters of orthodoxy and orthopraxy makes straight edge an unnecessary label and lifestyle, and perhaps even an illegitimate one.

Jono, a Christian hardcore musician and zine editor in his early 20s from the British Midlands, who described himself as "straight edge and almost vegan," explained the development in his thinking and his identity in a rather typical experiential way. The son of a Church of England minister, we can imagine his awakening sense of personal identity and social justice as he transitioned into adulthood:

> Originally I was just thinking, "don't get drunk," because that's not scripture, that's not right. But now I see how alcohol companies try to push alcohol on younger people and how particularly, I think, in the UK more than anywhere else, there's such a heavy binge-drinking culture and to separate myself from that is important to me. I don't want to be a part of a culture that works 9-5 and wastes away their weekends. I want to be a part of a culture that lives every day with a clear head and is living every day to the absolute fullest for Jesus Christ.

Such a statement seems at odds with the rhetoric of individual autonomy found within straight edge DIY spirituality. The idea of living *for* a supernatural being certainly runs counter to the emphasis on self-reliance in DIY spirituality and morality, as well as the desacralization and materialization of salvation in straight edge we have analyzed elsewhere (Abraham & Stewart 2014).

Despite the clear dissimilarities with straight edge DIY spirituality, for Jono and other Christians, straight edge can be an individually adopted and adapted technology for strengthening their ethics and spirituality, and for performing their identity. Jeremy, a Christian musician in a secular hardcore band, argued that straight edge sets Christians an ethical challenge which can remedy what he believes is the "abuse of God's forgiveness" by those who "use Christianity as a safety net rather than a way to make the world a better place." Further, in recognizing the culture of accountability in straight edge, Jeremy recognized that, as in the case of DIY spirituality, straight edge can address the permissive tendencies within contemporary Christianity that are largely a result of the general process of religious individualization and the shift towards the therapeutic this chapter has analyzed. "Straight edge keeps people more honest. It's much less forgiving than Christianity is," he said.

In a few cases, Christian straight edgers articulated a more "traditional" rational and expository approach. Suvi, the female vocalist in an Australian Christian metalcore band, explained her straight edge commitment as a logical application of biblical teaching, applied to her prominent position as one of the few female vocalists in her local punk and metal scene:

> In the Bible it talks about not having anything in excess, and not
>
> doing anything that will cloud your vision or cloud your
>
> relationship with God. The main reason why I chose to take that
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> [straight edge] label, and not just not do those things, is because I
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> believe I'm in a leadership role, and when I get up on stage and

the kids see that I'm edge, they know straight away what I don't

do—they know I live a life not involving drugs, casual sex, or

alcohol. I believe there are Christians out there who are living

lukewarm lives and they're saying alcohol and drugs and sexual

desires aren't pulling them down and they're just living

lukewarm. I don't wanna be like that; I wanna live a life of purity

and sobriety for God.

In addition to hinting at the particular pressures placed on female Christian musicians, this statement embodies quite clearly what sociologist and Anglican priest Gary Bouma (2006: 89, 101) calls the rational "know-it-all" God of modern Christianity "providing the structure to all of life through rules and regulations," as laid out in the Bible and observable in the natural world. As a charismatic Christian, Suvi does not live entirely according to all the strictures of this form of religious life; personal religious experiences and revelations form an important part of her spirituality, but her statement demonstrates how grounding in scripture and tradition— even for a non-denominational charismatic—sets Christianity quite apart from DIY spirituality.

Given that this model of Christian straight edge identity is concerned in no small measure with embodying what is believed to be God's will, even those who do not openly identify as straight edge can locate themselves within its logic. Tim, a hardcore guitarist from the British Midlands, who does not identify as straight edge, quoted Minor Threat in explaining that both Christianity and straight edge call their adherents to live "out of step" with the morals of broader society (*Minor Threat*, 1984). Tim articulated this in a strongly personal and relational way, in familiar contemporary evangelical language that disavows the idea of imposed religious regulations. He argued that it is not the case that becoming a Christian necessarily requires abandoning popular British pastimes like the binge drinking Jono observed. "It's not about a bunch of rules and regulations; it's a relationship, isn't it? So it's sort of saying;

I'm giving up this because I'm devoting myself to what God created me to be. He didn't create me to go and drink myself stupid." In contrast to the straight edge DIY spirituality, this straight edge-like behavior emerges from interpellation into a preexisting religious subjectivity, albeit one conceived of relationally.

This emphasis on one's relationship with God is also foundational to anti-straight edge attitudes found among Christians in the punk scene. These negative approaches to straight edge recognize the importance of self-reliance and individualism within straight edge ethics, just as straight edge adherents of DIY spirituality do, but they find this reason to disassociate from the label. Tomas, a former Christian hardcore vocalist, explained his band decided to disassociate itself from the straight edge label on the basis that "we felt the straight edge movement was something that's done because of self … we weren't positive for self; we were positive for the life and teachings of Jesus Christ." The risk, from this perspective, is conceiving of a path to salvation that is not only wholly material, but wholly individual. Suvi, the Australian metalcore vocalist, refers to this as the danger that "straight edge becomes an idol." Within evangelicalism in general, a vast number of activities or cultural forms are conceivably potentially idolatrous, by providing a source of identity and commitment that undermines one's relationship with God (Abraham 2017: 121-2).

Conclusion

Rather than conceiving of punk as inherently and consistently politically radical, it has been suggested that it is rather more accurate to recognize the desire for self-expression as foundational to punk practices (Lewin & Williams 2009). In this way, even if straight edge abstinence runs counter to conventional liberal practice, punk has perhaps been more attuned to the dominant ideologies of the late capitalist West than its protagonists would probably be comfortable in admitting. In the case of religion, this includes a familiar commitment to

individualized spirituality, or to more conventional religion expressed in thoroughly subjective language. Punk's attunement to the dominant ideologies of the day is also reflected in the wariness toward heteronomy identified by Rowan Williams (2018), and found in most punk scenes in the West.

While recognizing that the process of religious individualization or subjectivization has impacted Western society in general, Christians and non-Christians alike, this chapter has demonstrated key points of differentiation between straight edge DIY spirituality and the evangelicalism that dominants conventional expressions of religion in punk. From the perspective of straight edge DIY spirituality, Christianity's grounding of moral and religious authority outside of the self, undermines the authenticity of its beliefs, even if one accepts the choice to place one's faith outside of one's self is a freely determined one. On the other hand, it is precisely the insistence upon individualism and self-reliance within straight edge ethics that undermines its legitimacy in the view of a minority of Christians in the punk scene, concerned with maintaining a conspicuous difference from conceivably rival moral systems. As this chapter has illustrated, the common criticism of DIY spirituality and morality as individualistic consumerism is undermined by the cultivation of collective identity and self-discipline within straight edge. Punk does not simply mirror its parent society, therefore; even when reflecting the broader social process of individualization, punk's DIY values are arrayed against consumerism such that it creates communities of accountability and authenticity.