<u>"Save my soul from the poisons of this world"[1]: Straight Edge punk and Religious Re-Enchantment</u>

Abstract: *Religion and punk (of any iteration) are not often words found in sympatico and yet, although implicit, religion is a key component in identity construction and performance of Straight Edge punk identity. It is a form of religiosity that is predicated upon notions of individuality and authenticity rather than meta-narratives and future gain. It is deeply enmeshed within popular culture, analogous with the rise of the ordinary within religion. (Taylor 2007: 539 - 556) As such, Straight Edge culture can embody a wider social approach to religion and spirituality that has taken root within modern western societies for a myriad of reasons, some of which will be explored in this chapter. The focus of this chapter will be on demonstrating that Straight Edge punks have, through their musical subculture, found a way to re-enchant their world that enables them to articulate notions of the divine, the ineffable, the sublime and salvation within both themselves and their Straight Edge scene, in a way that marks them as different from other, more well-known iterations of punk. This chapter will argue that religion in Straight Edge is more than the appearance of a religious metaphor within the lingua franca or a sublimation of worship into fandom as is often argued about appearances of religion within aspects of popular culture. (Doss, 1999; Forbes & Mahan, 2017, p9) Rather, this chapter will demonstrate that this Straight Edge engagement with religion is part of a wider approach that necessitates or desires a relocation and re-articulation of religion as a concept and in praxis.*

<u>Intro</u>

In 1966 John Lennon famously stated "Christianity will go. It will vanish and shrink. I needn't argue about that; I know I'm right and I will be proved right. We're more popular than Jesus right now." (London Evening Standard, 4.3.66) This was a time when the secularisation thesis – the idea that traditional religions are in terminal decline in the industrialised world – was perhaps the central

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[1] Carpathian "Monochrome", Wanderlust, 2010

debate in the sociology of religion and in religious studies in. (Parsons, 1966; Berger, 1967) As a theory it was capturing the attention of the wider public, being featured in national newspapers and televised debates and on early OU television programmes from 1971 onwards. (ER1) This occurred at a time of huge social upheaval and change – civil rights movement, the availability of the pill for many women, continuing women's rights movement and the ending of global Empires as they had traditionally existed. Therefore an assertion that religious institutions and teaching would continue to decline in their social significance and influence until it became a private matter that occurred in the domestic rather than public sphere did not seem unrealistic. (McLeod, 2007)

Lennon articulated the same ideas of the time in his infamous statement noted above. He was not speaking directly of the Beatles, but rather of popular culture in general as having more influence and significance than Christianity or even the figure of Christ. In other words, he was articulating the notion that religion as a concept (in his thinking notably Christianity) was diminishing in power, influence, purpose and public positions. Religion was believed to be, for Lennon like so many others, shrinking to the private realm through "the pervasive influence of science" (Berger, 1967: 110) resulting in what Charles Taylor refers to as "the automization of the different spheres driven by a process of rationalization." (2007: 779) This is not to say that Lennon was not spiritual, or even religious in his own way – he absolutely was, very publically so, rather that this was the emergence of new ways of thinking about religion as an identity and its public influence.

In reality, those who put forward the secularization thesis were ultimately wrong, as Berger came to acknowledge. (1999) Religion has not become wholly private, it remains an influence within various parts of the public sphere such as education, politics and welfare. However the articulation of the secularization and its prominence has given credence to the notion that religion is insufficient as a means of an identity marker, or of fully understanding the spectrum of how people are articulating and locating their individual approaches to it. Increasingly we are finding that people in the West are turning to or utilising aspects of popular culture, especially popular music, as part of

their 'religious' identity construction or approach. Therefore when we consider the notion of popular music as being sacred, we are also interested in how it can be utilised as an individualised form of faith.

It is important to note that some theorists have argued that these types of individualized religions are, in fact, a confirmation of secularization. Bryan Wilson (1976) has argued that, far from being a resurgence of religion, they are actually evidence of the trivialization of religion. Similarly, Steve Bruce has argued that they are little more than the dying embers of religion in the concluding stages of the history of the secularization of the West (2000). I would respond to such approaches by noting that they have ignored the power of popular culture, especially music, and so cannot, or will not, see that Western culture is increasingly characterised by forms of religion that do not claim absolute truth, do not require devotion to one religious leader, do not insist on the authority of a single set of teachings, but rather encourage exploration, eclecticism, an understanding of the self as divine, and, consequently, a belief in the final authority of the self. This paper is drawing upon Christopher Partridge's notion of occulture and re-enchantment and Edward Bailey's notion of Implicit Religion to demonstrate that sXe is functioning, for many of its adherents as an individualized religion or an implicit religion that helps to re-enchant the world for its adherents. It will do this by examining the rise of indivialized religions from a theoretical perspective, giving a brief note on the methodological approach of the case study before focusing in detail on sXe as an example the arguments being put forward.

Individualized religions

"Today's modern science is your modern religion." (Shelter, "In Defense of Reality", 2006)

When Max Weber (1904) borrowed the expression 'the disenchantment of the world' from Schiller (Die Götter Griechenlandes, 1788) he was offering a sociological provocation which still resonates today as it continues to lie at the very heart of modernity (or indeed postmodernity). Weber

understood disenchantment to mean two distinct but interrelated processes: the first the removal of

religion from public spaces and influence and thus a removal of a sense of magic, wonder or

inexplicableness from those spaces, and the second the continually increasing scale, scope, and

power of the formal means–ends rationalities of science, bureaucracy, the law, and policy-making.

(2005: 18 – 31) For the most part Weber was ambivalent in his assessment of the disenchantment

process, seeing both positive and negative in it, with the most negative consequence being that of

the development of anomie, which Durkheim considered to be "an un-mooring of the individual

from the ties that bind in society." (Bell, 1997: 26)

The mechanising processes and increased bureaucracy did not result in some 'glorious'

secular world and instead we are in the midst of a growing desire for a re-enchantment of the world.

This desire is feeding into current attempts to individualize religion and the rise of spirituality as both

a marker of identity and a means of "believing without belonging" to traditional religious

institutions. (Davie, 1990: 455 – 469) Primarily what is being witnessed or created are personally

tailored forms of 'self-religion' that seeks in various ways to reinvigorate the sense of wonder,

magic, that connect with and seek to preserve nature (especially in relation to climate change) and

somehow transcends the mundane without denying the empirical aspect of human life. For

example, Gordon Lynch notes that the increase in Wiccans and Pagans (self-designated and

designated by the Covenant of the Goddess) as a religious designation on census data and other

official forms is increasingly detached from covens or other group structures because of the

proliferation of information and resources available elsewhere and the conviction that one can

shape this as best suits the self. (2007: 72)

Christopher Partridge argues that such attempts at re-enchantment are often defined

against traditional religion and are thus articulated by those involved with them in ways that either

reduce or remove the baggage of traditional religion. Drawing instead upon and simultaneously

shaping popular culture, provides a large constantly replenishing reservoir of ideas, practices and

methodologies to utilise, that he refers to as occulture. (2005) One need look no further than the pilgrimage and religious devotion of the dead heads who followed The Grateful Dead, or the site of Graceland as sacred place of pilgrimage for those heavily invested in the religiosity of Elvis. In particular amongst those fans who believe Elvis had mystical power and his apparent resurrection after death, and call upon him in prayer or devotion to perform miracles for them. (Windsor, 1997: 58; Tharpe, 1983:11) Christine King notes of Elvis, "[h]is image encompasses issues of myth, modernity as well as identity." (2016: 98) Within the fandom of Elvis, some are using his life, legacy and music to re-enchant or given sacred / spiritual / religious meaning and structure to their lives.

This re-enchantment and drawing upon popular culture should not be seen as a superficial secondary development in the shadow of Christianity, nor dismissed as fandom taken to extreme lengths. In many ways it is a religious phenomenon in its own right driven by fundamental questions of what it means to be a human being, often manifesting as new versions of what Charles Taylor refers to as "modern social imaginaries" (2003). Partridge notes that:

> [P]eople are, from their own particular perspectives, developing religious and metaphysical ideas by reflecting on themes explored in literature, film and music. … Popular culture both reflects and informs ideas, values and meanings within society as well as providing a site for the exploration of ideas, values and meaning. Hence the relationship is rather a complex one. (2004: 121)

Such meaning and exploration should not, therefore be dismissed, simply because of its complex relationship with popular culture. Likewise it should not be assumed to be suitable for analysis or understanding through standard lens applied to the study of more traditional or institutional based religions. It necessitates an approach that can take seriously the meaning and value of popular culture as a site for learning about or developing new understandings and approaches to the concept of religion, this is where Edward Bailey's Implicit Religion is most apt.

Implicit Religion is a set of analytical tools developed by Edward Bailey that aims to provide a means to consider seriously and comprehensively, emically and etically, that which is often dismissed, in other studies, as simply a form of popular culture rather than a site of meaning or meaning making. It seeks to see and understand "the sacred-in-the-secular / the secular – in-the-sacred." (Keenan, 2016: 41) It is based on three areas of focus:

- "Commitment(s) – to what do people, groups, communities, professions, institutions, corporations commit themselves and why? What meaning does that commitment provide for them?

- Integrating foci – what do people, groups, communities, professions, institutions, and corporations use to integrate their commitment into the rest of their life and its vagaries? In what ways are the integrating foci related to or born from the commitment?

- Intensive Concerns with Extensive Effects – what arises from the commitment that matters / excites / stimulates / moves the individual, group, community, business, or corporation to such an extent that it changes and shapes their actions, behaviours, attitudes and opinions?" (Stewart, 2017: 12)

It is important to be clear that this is not a set of tools intended to enable the scholar to artificially layer existing understandings of religion as traditionally understood over an apparently secular activity or pursuit in such a way that the people involved would not recognise or accept it, or in such a way as to demonstrate that "true" or "authentic" faith can only be located within a narrowly defined conception of religion. For example, Implicit Religion should not be used to look for indicators of Christianity within football or hip hop, but it should be used to meaning, value and purpose of football or hip hop for its respective participants and creators.

Implicit Religion directly refutes, then, the viewpoint noted above by Bruce and Wilson that the rise of popular culture derived, or secular based faiths and spiritualties reveal no more than the

dying embers of religion. To take the approach to Bruce and Wilson is to assume that religion can have a fixed definition of what it actually is and therefore its texts have a static, unilateral meaning. If once applies such an approach to something of meaning outside of traditionally defined religions (such as those liked with an institution) one quickly finds that the static, unilateral meaning is either contorted as to be unrecognisable by its followers or is entirely inapplicable. Consequently the very thing being examined is reduced in status and its importance to the individual or community is disregarded or dismissed. It is not taken seriously because it has failed to reach some mythic (and specious) level of being "a religion". In contrast, Implicit Religion takes the approach that religion is not a distinct, singular category that is, or indeed must be, separate/different from the secular or popular culture. The "religion" within the term Implicit Religion cannot be seen as coterminous with Christianity or any other religion, and that as a consequence "the secular is thus no less viable at helping us to understand the nature and location of contemporary religious debate than the traditionally religious" (Deacy, 2016: 126) Likewise, "the implicit should not be conceived of as subordinate to or as a substitute for explicit religion. Just because someone's religion is not as explicit does not mean that they don't have one. All it may mean is that the main force of their commitment is directed elsewhere" (Deacy, 2016: 138).

A brief note on methodology

The case study will draw on 9 years of interviews undertaken by the author, an insider participant within sXe, from across the USA, the UK and Ireland, with a small number from Europe. All interviewees are between the ages of 25 – 60, male, female, transgender, genderqueer and non-binary, most self-identify as working class with no higher education qualifications and most identify as white. They were interviewed in person as much as possible but some interviews were conducted online via skype, google hangout and other similar means due to time or funding constraints. All interviewees are given the choice as to how they want to be identified in their quote attribution, their choices have been honoured here so the reader will see that some have more details than

others, those who choose a pseudonym are marked by '…' around the name they created. All interview quotes are as articulated; they are not tidied up or edited. Hesitations, repetitions, pauses, colloquial terms, self-corrections and emotional reactions are all a necessary component of human interaction and cognitive processes. To fully understand what someone is saying it is important that we listen to how they say it as much as to what they say. In part this approach is a direct response to the criticism of subcultural studies put forward by scholars such as Chambers (1985), Bennett (1999) and Miles who notes that specific theory was fronted "at the expense of the actual meanings" for participants. (1995: 35) However, in part it is also a response to my own experiences as a female, disabled, working class academic who was frequently spoken over and for in academic settings in part because I have a regional accent, a working class vocabulary and my disability makes articulation difficult at times. These experiences led to a realisation of the importance of how people articulate, confirmed by the work of Jackson on storytelling amongst refugees, asylum seekers and displaced persons in which he notes that language and how we tell our own story directly disrupts the power relation between the public and private spheres. (2013: 67)

What is sXe?

"I'm a person just like you, but I've got better things to do, than sit around and fuck my head …I've got the straight edge." (Minor Threat, "Straight Edge" 1981)

The above song was penned in 1981 by Ian MacKaye, lead singer and lyricist for Washington DC hardcore punk band Minor Threat. Intended as a statement of personal philosophy and his own lifestyle choices, it became a rallying cry for those within the hardcore scene who either recognised themselves and their choices in the lyrics or saw within them the life they wanted to live. Taking their inspiration from the title of the song, these individuals began to self-identify as straight edge punks. This spread to bands using it as a descriptor and eventually it became its own community within a community. Today it is estimated that sXe has a worldwide membership in the tens of thousands. (Haenfler, 2006 p.10) These bands and individuals took on the symbol of the X as a

marker of that identity. At the time an X was stamped onto the hands of underage patrons of bars and clubs to prevent them from purchasing alcohol. Using it as a symbol was a reclaiming of the mark, a statement of intent (of abstinence) and a means of demonstrating that punk is supposed to be for all, including the youth. Typically the X is drawn on both hands in strong marker pen, but it is also common for sXe adherents to have it tattooed on their bodies as either a single X or a triple XXX.

Insert Fig 1. Here

Fig. 1 Photo of one of the author's sXe tattoos

The XXX symbol marks the 'code' or behaviours of being sXe which all adherents commit to and self-monitor, this is called "claiming edge". Each of the X's represent one of the three things that adherents abstain from: drugs (including tobacco), alcohol and casual sex. Some adherents will also add veganism, caffeine or even pharmaceutical drugs. The purpose of abstaining is two-fold; first to have a clear or better understanding of the world, the belief being that intoxicants prevent you from fully paying attention and the second to ensure that one does not contribute to the profit and power of companies who exist solely to make money from products that are considered poisonous or harmful, or who profit from toxic representations of sex, the pursuit of sex and gender expectations. Claiming edge can only be undertaken once in a lifetime, akin to a wedding vow it is irreparable if not adhered to (called breaking edge) although breaking it will seldom result in ostracism from the community. Although the claiming of edge is often talked of in regards to resistance, anti-captialism and taking responsibility for one's actions and choices, it is often, though not always, also connected with long family histories of alcohol and / or drug addiction and the abuse that can be a part of that. It is also not uncommon to have sXe adherents talk about being sXe as part of their own recovery plan from addiction. (Stewart, 2017: 111)

Addiction runs in my family; my great grandmother died of an opium overdose, my grandmother spent her life an alcoholic. I was 14 when I discovered that my mother, who raised me and my sister as a single parent, is a drug addict… I don't remember what time of year it was, but I remember the day I became straightedge. As I was clearing empty bottles and drug remnants [after an unauthorised party]out of the garage, all of a sudden, it struck me that I actually was all alone, and I wasn't happy with or proud of the life I'd found myself living. I realized at that moment that no one else is going to change the course of my life for me – no one else was even around to notice what the course of my life had become. I knew that something needed to change and that I needed to be the one to change it. I didn't really know then how to do that, but I did know that if I chose to live without the poisons that had destroyed my mom's life and her mother's before her (and so on), and that if I coupled that with cutting ties with the unhealthy people I'd chosen to surround myself with, that a healthy path would become more clear and that my decision making would improve. Essentially, I had to become my own parent and I couldn't do that unless I dedicated myself to a clean and sober lifestyle. (S.G. New York 2010)

The sXe rejection of intoxicants and what it conceives of as individually and socially destructive sexualities, with its corresponding praise of addressing life's challenges with sobriety and responsibility echoes 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.' sXe desires nothing beyond 'human flourishing' and invokes no supernatural assistance or sanction to that end (Taylor 2007: 84). Yet it is not entirely self-sufficient nor immune from the same patterns as the rest of society in regards to notions of religion and secular, disenchantment and re-enchantment. This can be evidenced in the relationship between sXe and religion.

sXe and religion

"We're all together, In life's familiar grind, Searching for answers, Or whatever else we can find."

(The Faith, "Aware", 1983)

From its beginnings punk, both as a musical genre and a social movement positioned itself as the voice of the disenfranchised and potentially uncommercial. (Unterberger & Hicks, 1999: 433) A positioning solidified by the anti-establishment actions and demeanour of its members, some of whom stole their instruments, played without ability or embarrassment, supported one another in local scenes, created their own record labels, created their own means of internal communication, and promoted to the point of idolisation the concept of D.I.Y. Punk did not emerge with the purpose or intention of being 'religious' in any sense, nor did it have any interest in engaging with traditional religious institutions and teachings beyond challenging, critiquing, arguing or dismissing them. Yet in the 1990s a shift occurred and there was a growing sense of disillusion and disappointment with a disenchanted world within the sXe scenes in particular. Individuals and bands began expressing a desire for something that would help them re-enchant the world as they experienced it through connections with the Hare Krishna's and later Buddhism and Islam which became known respectively as Krishnacore, Dharma Punx and Taqwacore. (All three groups have been examined in much greater depth in Stewart, 2017: chapter 3; Stewart, 2015; Abraham & Stewart; 2017)

Insert fig 2 here. Fig. 2 sXe religious tattoos

Whilst there had been a previous connection between punk and Christianity, and to a much lesser extent punk and Judaism, that sought to use the music in a missional, cynical or playful way it seldom stepped outside of evangelical norms. For example, the call to proselytise is understood as fulfilled through their lyrics, performance and band names (The City in Crisis, The City HE Loves and Ekklesia for example), the conviction that Christianity is the means to prevent moral degradation and crisis, holding to conservative doctrines, and behavioural codes being set and enforced by the church. (Abraham, 2014: 92 – 93) Christian punk functioned on the premise that "punk provides an amenable youthful template for evangelicalism's encouragement of exuberantly embodied religious

celebration, and the sharing of one's beliefs with one's peers through often church-supported creative self-expression." (Abraham and Stewart 2017: 243). However, this is a contested group within punk in relation to their status as 'authentic' punks (variously understood) due to their refusal to move away from the belief that the answers to all or almost all questions about life are ultimately to be found in the Protestant biblical scriptures and therefore that truth can only be conceived of as ultimately biblical. (Stewart, 2017: 49) Ibrahim Abraham's work on evangelical and Christian punks demonstrates that many who participated within the Christian punk scenes saw themselves as authentically punk. (Abraham and Stewart, 2014; Abraham 2017) Many of my interviewees struggled to accept them as 'authentic punks' because they understood them as deriving answers and social structures that were still biblically orientated and saw them as little more than marginalia.

> *I dunno, I can't say if they are or aren't punks can I? I mean who am I to say that, but I don't think they are, in my opinion, you know. How can you call yourself a punk and be tied to an institution that hates on women, gays, people of colour and basically anyone who isn't a male WASP because of a book? That doesn't make sense to me at all.* (Dan, 39, Manchester, 2010)

> *What are they doing but peddling someone else's lies, agendas or prejudice in the name of a God who, if he exists, probably hates how they think and act. These so called Christian punk bands challenge nothing, offer no solution beyond trust and obey; if anything they fucking promote the neoliberal capitalist structures that only profit the powerful and the wealthy.* (Phil, 49, Belfast, 2012)

Whilst there is not space here to examine the issues of authenticity at the core of this dispute over the 'right' to call oneself a 'punk, it is worth noting that Christianity has had a significant influence over the development and shape of punk, especially in the West. sXe emerged at a time in which there was the rise of the new Christian right, fundamentalism was on the rise as global migration increased, there were a number of youth evangelical movements and the launch of Nancy

Reagan's 'Just Say No' anti-drugs campaign. According to Haenfler, "Straight Edge's unyielding, black-and-white strictures on behaviour were similar to fundamentalist religion's rigid clear-cut beliefs." (2006: 10) The response of some sXe adherents was to seek out new ways of engaging with religion by aligning themselves with religions that they felt, for various reasons, did not carry the same baggage or problematic teachings as Christianity – namely Hinduism and Buddhism, and post 9/11 Muslim teenagers began to seek ways to articulate their own Islamic punk identities. (Donaghey, 2015; Fiscella, 2012) Realistically some of the interest in these groups was driven by an unaware orientalist perspective on what those religions or philosophies were, especially in relation to Hinduism and Buddhism. Partridge elaborates:

> It is also important to understand that Eastern spirituality is not parachuted into Western culture – it is inhistorized, inculturated, contextualized. It should therefore come as no surprise to learn that the spirituality taught by Western gurus and masters is distinct from that taught by their Eastern counterparts … because Eastern thought is being processed in Western minds, shaped as they are by a late modern context, an eclectic, bricolage approach to religion and neo-Romanticism. (2004: 106)

Interviewees were explicit in regards to the extent of musical content, lyrical content and 'preaching' of bands in their introduction to these religions and making them want to explore them further – not all were happy with what they found, as they explained.

> *First I knew of it I heard Shelter, 108 and all. I asked those who had been around longer than me all about it and discovered it was called Krishnacore. I read up on it in fanzines and then one day my friend invited me to go to the temple. I wrote out a bunch of questions to ask the monks and they sat and talked with me for ages. No gods, no masters. I stand by that but that doesn't mean I can't have spirituality – I just gotta always think it through for me.*
> (Chris, 33, Boston, 2016)

It was appealing but I was suspicious. I talked to Porcelly and all and got their ideas, then I talked to my friends. Finally I started going to the temples and watching what was what. Eventually I talked to the monks. Some of it I choose to take on for me, some of it I discarded as religious, misogynist bullshit. (C-Ann, 38, New York, 2015)

These groups, especially Krishnacore, were the beginning point of sXe engaging with and taking seriously the concepts of religion, secular, sacred but also of many of the adherents beginning the process of finding ways to re-enchant their lives. A significant proportion of interviewees talked about this in a very interesting way, by describing sXe as their religion, by locating spirituality (sometimes referred to as faith in the UK) within sXe, and in so doing noting the centrality of the music for the success, longevity and potentiality of a re-enchantment.

An essential component of hardcore is the spirit invested in the music. Every form of music comes from within, but the passion displayed at a hardcore show can be similar to what is seen at a religious ritual. At nearly every hardcore show, bands play their songs with the utmost intensity, singers testify to an issue that is close to their hearts, and fans struggle to reach the stage in an effort to be a part of the experience. To many, hardcore is a religion – it can have its own values and belief systems (e.g. Straight Edge, vegetarianism / veganism, D.I.Y), classic texts (e.g. records, zines), and leaders (e.g. band members, zine writers, show promoters) who speak their minds and sometimes find themselves wrapped in controversy. (Peterson, 2009: 109)

What the interviewees were expressing and thinking through was their own notions of what is sacred, and whether their commitment to sXe punk was providing a new means to re-enchant their world or personal experiences. A significant number of interviewees referred to Straight Edge punk as their religion or their faith because it enabled them to be their authentic self and forced them to be held to account for their own actions or inactions.

I guess punk is like a new religion, well I wouldn't say religion maybe but it is something that people put their trust in, have hope in, I do. So definitely I think punk rock is a faith. Like I said everything I have done has been influenced by it … The more people that get influenced by punk rock as a faith the better! [laughs] … like a lot of people I know their whole lives have been changed by punk rock. It's too much of a coincidence; it's too many people for it not to be something real. (Ewan, 28, tattoo artist, Glasgow, 2010)

Straight edge is absolutely mint [laughs] I don't know any other way of lifestyle now, cause it seems to be that long now so, I seriously would not go back … to me it's a personal thing … if anything I find it kinda is a religion, cause like, well it's just my way of an upbringing, the way I brought myself up. (Karl, 28, tattoo artist and drummer, Durham, 2010)

It is worth noting, however, that not all interviewees agreed with this sentiment or perspective.

I am a full blooded atheist. Have been ever since early high school, around the time I became Straight Edge. So, for me, the two are pretty closely related. Spirituality is just a weak willed way of saying you want a religion, but you're not sure which one works for you. Straight Edge is not a religion. It's a way of life, and a way of thinking, but you're not blindly following someone else. (Nate, USA, interviewed via email 2010)

A key feature of the positive life view of much of Straight Edge is the continued attempts to associate consumption and production with the relentlessly "civilizing" process. Many Straight Edge punks believe that production and consumption is inherently linked with the norms, rationale, and desired behaviours of corporate-capitalism and imperialism. Therefore resisting the consumption of alcohol, drugs and casual sex is a means of resisting corporate capitalist dominance and searching for a more authentic way to live. Such resistance and authenticity is mediated through the music, the live performances in particular and further accessed through the fanzines, clothing, tattoos, websites and books. Ultimately they all lead to the community of Straight Edge; a community of like-

minded individuals which participants often frame as a brotherhood. (The hyper-masculinity of sXe is dealt with in detail in Stewart 2017)

> *Listen to 'Hurts to Ask' [by Chain of Strength] in a crowd and everyone sings along and it is a real moment of solidarity. When I listen to it by myself it forces me to confront the negative feelings and depression that I sometimes struggle with a little bit. It challenges me to not wallow in it or allow it to take me under. That I have to be better than that, stronger than that.* (Sarah, 39, Chicago, 2011)

> *Everyone singing along, united through this music. You feel your heart beating in time with the music, it's like we all beat as one, em, you know. We become this mass that for those minutes has a singular purpose, em, like a real brotherhood. It's what I imagine people used to get at those like, em, things, oh what where they called, you know the old like church meetings in a big tent? … Yeah, yeah, revival meetings. Like them."* ('Chloe', 33, Edinburgh, 2017)

When the music of the sXe subculture was talked about by interviewees (often the longest part of the interview) it was done so in terms that made it evident they considered the music sacred in a Durkheimian sense, in that it is a rising above the ordinary to the super-ordinary. (2001 edition: 160) Attendance or performance at a sXe show gives them an opportunity to leave aside the everyday and become a part of, something much larger than themselves. It affords an opportunity to see themselves in a new way, to realise new potential and connections as part of their search for an authentic self. It is important to understand that they are not undertaking or partaking in this musical experience with the express purpose of obtaining a rapturous experience or connecting with the divine or spiritual in some way, but to enhance their own emotional state and satiate a deep longing to connect with the communal dimension of music. Consequently, what they connect with as extra-ordinary is not the divine but the Straight Edge community, the belief that punk rock can achieve more than some songs to dance to, and an opportunity to develop an authentic self.

(Stewart, 2017: 90) In other words, sXe as a musical subculture is functioning as a means of re-enchanting the world through the implicit religion of sXe punk rock.

> *You can go to a gig and feel like you are on top of the world when you leave, like you've had a religious experience, how can you beat that? Go and see Stiff Little Fingers or Toxic Waste and we would come out saying 'that was like going to church'. It was like having your faith revived, your strength renewed.* (Patrick, 44, Belfast, addiction counsellor, 2013)

> *Religion is the human effort to understand and order the self, society, the world and transcendent reality. Faith is different, it doesn't try to understand in order to control, rather faith is about beliefs which are concepts that are too deep to be called ideas. What's my faith? My faith is me, my faith is my sXe community, it's the music, it is sXe, sXe is my faith. D'ya know what I mean?* (Dylan, 36, Belfast, teacher and musician, 2012)

Accepting sXe as an implicit religion means acknowledging that the importance of the subculture is far beyond what it is often assumed to be. It functions on a collective level enabling adherents to create a familial bond they often experienced as fractured within their own home lives. Furthermore, it is linked with political and social issues in a way that encourages action and enables them to see beyond a selfish view of the world. It promotes thought and justification that, spurred by their suspicion of authority, in turn promotes the challenging of one another and of themselves, in no small way through the music of their subculture.

> *The music of sXe demonstrates a struggle with, promotion and expression of modern Western ideals and society. It contains a strong emphasis on challenging oneself, a desire for improvement, and a call for action that necessitates commitment with cost. There is a refusal to back away from uncomfortable issues such as domestic violence, suicide, rape, child abuse and self-harm. Lyrically and in images, concepts such as acceptance, community and referring to the local scene as one's family abound. Furthermore, there is a transcendent and*

salvific accent with many artists and adherents declaring that 'I didn't chose punk, punk

chose me' or 'punk saved my life'. These are all markers of what is often traditionally

considered important to a number of 'religions' and 'religious' communities. sXe music could

arguably be understood as an attempt to reintegrate or unite body and soul [in a world that

increasingly calls for a new understanding of what religion is or could be and seeks to find

new ways to challenge the perception of an a priori religious – secular binary]. (Stewart,

2017: 94)

It is important to note that this is by no means unique to sXe communities and individuals. Similar

objections and priorities are amongst the many of those who identify as belonging to or practising

new puritanism, or progressive spirituality as Gordon Lynch terms it. (2007) Lynch notes that they

are responding to four perceived needs: credible understandings of faith that are compatible with a

modern, scientific, technological age and provide a more inclusive experience for women, and

focused on the environmental crisis. (2007: 22) This could be viewed as both their commitment to

changing religion and their intensive concerns for the encroaching potential environmental disaster

as worked out through their actions and behaviours of abstinence, self-sustainability instead of

consumption and reliance upon industrial production.

Outro

"Some live a life of indecision, strung out over petty schisms. I heard G.B.H. I made a decision, punk

rock is my religion." ("You want it, You got it", Rancid, 2009)

Christianity is on the decline in the UK and many parts of Europe is a headline grabber that we have

become used in seeing in recent years when new census data is released or polls are taken. Since the

20th century the credibility of Christianity has declined (in direct correlation with the rise of

technology and instantaneous access to knowledge) and in more recent years has markedly lost its

influence. The declining influence of Christianity is often tacitly assumed to mean a decline in

religion writ large, which does not bear true in ethnographic based work or even broader statistical analysis. One of the reasons for this is that too often such an assumption not only correlates Christianity as *the* marker of religion but also fails to account for the rise of non-traditional understandings of what religion could be within the lived experiences of individuals and communities. Paul Heelas notes that traditionally understood religious designations and identities are in decline, whereas designations such as spiritual, holistic and quest are increasingly being used by a range of people and communities. (2017: 2) Such markers are as likely to be driven or catered for by high street consumption and availability as they are by religious or spiritual yearning. Not every religious expression fits within identifiable borders or boundaries. There is an increasing popularity for individualised approaches to or understandings of faith, religion, or spirituality, this chapter drew upon a case study of the music based punk subculture of sXe to illustrate such approaches by focusing on why they are seeking to re-enchant their world, and using the tools of Implicit Religion to outline how they are achieving it.

Within sXe there was a move towards embracing carefully chosen aspects or traditions such as Hare Krishna, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity by a minority of adherents, whilst many others sought some way to create a sense of wonder, awe, mystery, community, identity and even the numinous through sXe itself. Interviewees often explained this as wanting to find something that would help them find or recapture something larger than themselves, or something they couldn't easily explain. Their implicit religion of sXe is a re-enchantment understood as something which enables them to be caught up, either momentarily or for longer, both within the moment and in an acute awareness that they are a part of something larger than themselves. It is the animation of nature and the cosmos that delights and charms us in a way nothing else can and that leaves us altered from the experience. A significant number of interviewees referred to Straight Edge punk as their religion or their faith because it enabled them to be their authentic self and forced them to be held to account for their own actions or inactions.

This chapter has sought to demonstrate that when we consider communities such as sXe and their desire to re-enchant the world to varying degrees, critically and consciously, it is more productive to move outside of traditionally bound notions of what religion is, can be or how it should be studied. Instead it demonstrates how valuable approaches such as Implicit Religion can enable a more nuanced understanding of what sXe adherents are doing and why.

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