## Blurring the Boundaries – Punk Rock And Religion

Francis Stewart

Ever walked into a music shop? What did you find? Most likely you found shelves or boxes—depending on your predilection for large stores or small independents—labelled with types of music found within: metal, jazz, country, rock, pop, opera, classical and everything in between.

Music is often sorted this way on the simple premise that it makes it easier to find the music you want and so increases the likelihood that you will spend money in the store. The danger of presenting music in this manner is that it makes discovery much harder and exploration much less likely. You go straight to the genre you like, find what you want, have a quick look around for anything else in that genre and then head straight to the tills, potentially missing out on undiscovered gems, such as classics that influenced the music you like.

The music genre of punk is replete with subcategories, despite its proponents’ love and promotion of various notions of anarchy. Terms such as crusty punk, surfer punk, skater punk, street punk, hardcore punk, 77 punk, and straight edge punk abound. I imagine this is to delineate borders, to define identities, and to attempt to create order and control in a world which can all too easily be wrested from young punks by profit-focused companies.  The danger of presenting identity in this manner is that it assumes that identity, behaviour and presentation is rigid and definable. It assumes a shared understanding and therefore tradition of these identity labels and creates a necessary ‘other’ within a subculture. Finally, it actually results in co-option and control being easier to obtain for large companies.

Identities are fluid and not static as cultural theorists John Storey and Dan Laughey, and sociologist of religion Gordon Lynch have argued. The boundaries between cultural and/or subcultural affiliation have become significantly less rigid and defined. It is now quite common, almost expected, that individuals will merge one or more sometimes disparate identities within their overall sense of self.  The multi-faceted sense of self and identity formation is partly a feature of the consumerist, choice-based West, partly a feature of the rise in significance of the self/individual, and partly a result of globalization. This has forced a reconsideration of what we mean, understand and intend in using terms such as ‘world religions’, ‘religion’, ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’. From 2009 to 2011, I conducted interviews with straight edge punks in the UK and the USA. ‘Straight edge’ punks are a subset of punk in which adherents abstain from drugs, alcohol and casual sex. During my interviews, questions of what we mean by terms related to the category of religion were repeatedly raised, discussed in depth and featured prominently in graffiti, tattoos, flyers and band imagery.

As much as punks utilise labels, these labels are carefully chosen and carry a deep significance. Each label denotes an important political or musical derivation that enables deviance and recognition. For example, surfer punk was the term attached to the punks who came from the Huntington Beach area of Orange County USA and were involved with the sport. ‘Surfer punk’ acknowledged the difficulty and danger of surfing that particular area of the California coast. The ultra-aggressive stance of these punks represented a new culture of physical extremism, which they rode as one would ride a wave. In my research, I wondered if the same careful labelling would be applied to terms and concepts such as ‘religion’. During my interviews, a sharp distinction was expressed between ‘religion’ and ‘faith’ (UK) or ‘spirituality’ (USA). This is perhaps unsurprising given the punks stance of rejection of tradition – both real and imagined – in favour of creating something new.

The term ‘Religion’ was used when interviewees were referring to traditional religious institutions, texts, authority figures and evangelising individuals. In contrast the terms ‘faith’ and ‘spirituality’ were used to describe the individual believer(s), specific practices which were not attributable to one religion or another, personal beliefs, and, interestingly, to punk rock itself!

Punk clubs were spoken of as ‘sacred spaces’ and attendees got agitated with those whose behaviour ‘desecrated’ this status, in their opinion, or disrespected it. Bands, specific musicians and other individuals important to the local scenes were spoken of with reverence and defended vehemently. Punk rock itself was interpreted as a form of desacralised salvation for many interviewees, and described as a secular yet sacred good with both personal and collective benefits and ramifications. One could argue that the straight edge punk is the result of refusing to accept the boundary between sacred and profane, religious and secular. The movement relies on muddying the waters and blurring the boundaries.

Straight edge punks share many practices—or abstentions—with what one might call ‘practicing Christians’, like renouncing casual sex, for example, but the Christian community does not appeal to the punks I interviewed who defined religion as practices, rituals, authority figures and to an extent ideology. Charles Taylor writes that neoliberal post-Christian societies are moving from a position of belief in a specific god as the only option available to a belief in any god (or none at all) as one option among many. Concurrently society is wresting authority from the hands of the institutions that function under the auspices of the divine, placing it instead in secular institutions and communities. We now face a vast range of human practices which are overlapping and do not function as religious or secular solely or discreetly.

Much like a growing subculture or indeed a music shop, we have to ask, are new labels now needed, or can we do away with labels once and for all? The punk ethos of “question everything, accept nothing” seems somewhat apt here!

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**The Marketization of the Academy for Profit – Is it Founded on the Myth of Religious Violence?**

*Francis Stewart*

“The Arts and Sciences, essential to the prosperity of the State and to the ornament of human life, have a primary claim to the encouragement of every lover of his country and mankind.” –George Washington

We are all too aware that there has been a growing sense of higher education as a marketplace, indeed a global marketplace, and that has brought some benefits. Increased access for researchers and students to wider and more diverse cultures, emerging academic schools of thought and discipline that rely upon globalisation, and some opportunities for the development of multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-class interaction for a wider range of students. The benefits are based on the global aspect, so what about the marketplace aspects?

There we find a less positive picture unfortunately.

Multiple articles, newspaper columns and blog posts have been written about the over-saturation of administrative staff,[[1]](#footnote-1) the cuts in funding[[2]](#footnote-2) and the burden of time detailing and cost efficiency that results in increasing number of casual contracts for staff, especially young staff.[[3]](#footnote-3) Often this is articulated as an attack on the humanities. While acknowledging that STEM subjects have received their own funding cuts, it is undeniable that the humanities have taken a stronger and more sustained attack for a greater period of time and is now, perhaps, reaching crisis point.

In the USA in 2011 humanities subjects received less than half of one percent of the amount of funding that STEM subjects received.[[4]](#footnote-4) In the UK the situation is not quite that severe, but it is moving in a general downward trend. The implied meaning behind such an approach is that studying the humanities is not profitable because it cannot be sold on and therefore studying it at university level is some form of self-indulgence that should not be funded by the public purse. Accepting this relies upon accepting that higher education, indeed learning itself, has moved from a good (something for the value of the individual, community or society writ large) to a good (a commodity for sale) to use Charles Taylor briefly.[[5]](#footnote-5)

There are multiple indices beyond funding that one can point to which also reveal this shift in global marketization of higher education into a profitable good.

During Thatcher’s time (incidentally the only UK Prime Minister thus far who also served as Secretary of State for Education) there was the creation of the RAE (Research Assessment Evaluation) which later became the REF (Research Excellence Framework) used now to categorise, rank and centrally mandate the value of research. There are now endless performance reviews, peer reviews of teaching, student questionnaires and funding goals to be attained. These are all means of creating something marketable and profitable far in excess of student fees. Those departments which are seen to be less profitable or sellable, those subjects not so easily quantifiable in their outputs, are being pared down or closed down. Typically, these are the arts, social sciences and the humanities, especially in the UK.

So why is this and what does it have to do with critical religion? Obviously the first question has been partly answered above and in the links; it is for profit and global market forces. However, that is only part of it; the narrative of progress heralded since the Enlightenment that requires what William Cavanaugh refers to as a dichotomizing clash of civilisations that necessitates a myth of religious violence to be perpetuated ad infinitum. According to Cavanaugh this “serves a particular need for their consumers in the West… [And] constructs the former as an irrational and dangerous impulse that must give way in public to rational, secular, forms of power.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

In the 21st century those ‘secular’ forms of power are capitalism as understood by neo-liberal governments and shaped by the interests of huge multinational corporations. We should ask if the interests of those corporations and the forms of power they maintain benefit from creating binaries and categories in much the same way as ‘religion’ and secular’ have been created and used in the West for half a millennia? It is not much of a stretch to argue that language used to make STEM more desirable over the humanities, social sciences and the arts is really the next step along the path that began with the myth of religious violence. In an apparently liberal, multi-cultural society it is deemed impolitic to use language which would suggest that those in power are devaluing or denigrating religious beliefs – unless, of course, they are seen as extremist and / or a threat to Western liberal democracy (read power).

Why is it then acceptable to do so for those subjects that study religion; a key part of everyday life, or those subjects that seek to understand how we create, organise, negotiate and recreate our world around us? Must everything be reduced to value added, and if it must why is developing an critical approach to thinking, developing a broader sense of what it is to be human not adding value to the lives of many students, staff and wider society? I would argue that it is adding precisely that value, but that value, that profit cannot be easily quantified, categorised and sold off and so is negated. I would further argue that the sustained attack on the arts and humanities occurring throughout the West is a reuse of the language and categories such as to artificially separate ‘religion’ from the ‘secular’ and ensure the power remains firmly in the hands of those in one corner.

Stifling and closing down arts and humanities departments are not the march forward of the drive to progress, they are a repeat of the mistakes and prejudices of the past, they are a misuse of categorisation for the purpose of profit and a continuation of a false narrative about society: that it runs on dollars and pounds and not the ability, passions and skill of a myriad of different people. Collaboration and support should be the narrative, not division and destruction and if we fail to turn it around then we must, surely, stop calling places of higher and further education “seats of learning” and refer to them as what they have shown themselves to be – places of business.

“It is in Apple’s DNA that technology alone is not enough—it’s technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields us the results that make our heart sing.” –Steve Jobs, in introducing the iPad 2 in 2011.

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6. William Cavanaugh. *The Myth of Religious Violence*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)