

# D I S K U S

The Journal of the British Association for the Study of Religions ([www.basr.ac.uk](http://www.basr.ac.uk))  
ISSN: 0967-8948

*Diskus* 16.1 (2014), 49-67

## **Straight Edge Punk – Religious Mutation or Over-reaching?**

Dr Francis Stewart, University of Stirling  
Critical Religion Department, [francis.stewart@stir.ac.uk](mailto:francis.stewart@stir.ac.uk)

### **ABSTRACT**

A mutation is often thought of in negative terms, that is, as a damaged or altered gene that can no longer fulfil its purpose as intended. However if we reverse our view and consider the whole as the vehicle that is incapable of fulfilling its purpose then the mutation becomes a new possibility. For the purposes of this paper, religion in its traditional sense will be considered as the 'faulty whole' and Straight Edge punk rock as the mutation that creates new pathways for religious and spiritual experiences and understanding. This paper will demonstrate, through interview extracts, lyrics, music and visual images created by interviewees during field work in both the UK and the US, that such religious mutations create a spiritual identity located firmly within a secular (indeed one could argue profane) subculture. Yet they develop an approach to religion and spirituality that seeks a return of a sense of immanence without a necessity for transcendence. Their wilfully syncretic approach to spirituality is co-mingled with secular practices and ideas as they refuse a lack of distinctions. The paper aims to explore and locate this phenomenon of post-secular approaches to religion and spirituality, both as it is found and practiced within Straight Edge punk and within the wider theoretical concerns of religious migration and mutation.

[In the interests of full disclosure the author is an sXe punk.]

\* \* \*

Well you get your entertainment  
Through a corporate plan  
Via 5 young athletes in a dancing band,  
Who are trained to act moronically  
And smile on demand,  
Cos it makes more money for the company man.  
Well it might make all the young girls hearts beat faster  
But it don't amuse this cynical old bas'tard, 'cause

I believe.  
I believe in the power of guitar & drum  
I believe in the hope held in a song,  
I believe that the music makes you strong  
I believe in the power of guitar & drum.

(Stiff Little Fingers, *Guitar and Drum*, 2003)

Literary theorist Theodore Ziolkowski (2007, ppX) argues that “Faith is, of course, not limited to religion. To believe in something – a deity, a nation, a race, art, sex, money, sports teams – appears to be a fundamental human need.” The lyrics above – Guitar and Drum – outline Jake Burns’ (lyricist and lead singer of Stiff Little Fingers) sense of belief, of faith. He states quite explicitly that he believes in the power of guitar and drum, in the hope found within a song, and that music makes you strong. These are powerful sentiments, and while the song is a rail against corporate rock and ‘X-factor’ type commercialisation of music, it also reveals a lot about how belief is understood and expressed within punk music.

Stiff Little Fingers are by no means the only punk band to express these sentiments. Wisdom in Chains express similar ideas in their song “Chasing the Dragon” (2013), Rancid’s “You want it, You got it” (2009) and G.B.H.’s “Power Corrupts” (2010). These are some quick examples from the plethora that exists. The concept of what you believe in is an important issue in punk, as indeed elsewhere in life, your beliefs determine your behaviours and your identity. So the ability to find belief in a few chords and words is an intriguing one – why is that belief the foremost one rather than a belief in God or a religion? What exists, for them, in punk that doesn’t in religion or at least isn’t accessible in religion?

To engage with these questions we must first understand what we mean when we discuss punk, specifically in this paper Straight Edge (sXe) punk, and this will form the first section of this paper. Following that, there will be a discussion on the question of belief which will be framed around a questioning of what religion is and the means by which we can study and analyse it. The final section will focus specifically on belief within sXe punk before drawing some final concluding comments.

### **What is punk?**

The question of what punk is, and is not, has raised vociferous debate and generates a seemingly endless supply of books. Lauraine Leblanc (1999, pp33-34) identifies that the significant majority of texts on punk are split into two camps, as it were. The first being historical guides to punk in 1970s London and New York, some spreading further to Los Angeles; the second being focused on broader cultural meaning of punk. The second is typically takes a (frequently unacknowledged) Western perspective on both culture and punk, with notable alternatives being *Tricksters and Punks of Asia* by Phil Nicks (2010); *Maisbier & Buttertee: Leben und Überleben in China* (Corn Beer & Butter: Life and Survival in China) by Tanja Trash (2008, first chapter only).

The reasons for the ongoing debate, increasingly framed in what Lentini (2003) terms as “nationalist tones”, is that of ownership and power. Punk is a powerful cultural rupture and lucrative commodity. Control and profit are determined by such definitions. For many who self-identify as punk the debate and the attempt to control punk is somewhat disingenuous given the core ethics of do-it-yourself and anarchy / no rules (not necessarily the same thing). Furthermore, the frequent attempts to frame punk within historical

antecedents (Marcus, 1989), socio-political eloquence or indeed lack thereof (Sabin, 1999) and cultural significance (Hebdige, 1979) do not always match the understandings given by punk participants within empirical studies. As a result the tug of war over definition and ownership continues unabated.

What is generally agreed by scholars and practitioners of punk is that it arose as a response, in the USA and the UK, to two specific things; the failure of the 60s hippie counterculture and the reduction of rock music to a banal consumer-driven aesthetic. The rock music that dominated the airwaves had become pompous and overblown, live performances did not forge connections between performer and audience, and lyrics were perceived as cliché driven or facile and pop like. It did not resonate with the lived experience of many young people who were faced with family breakdowns in unprecedented numbers, unemployment as an increasing reality, the dissolution of community and an education system that had become a political football.

In 1975 John Holstromm and Ged Dunn created a magazine which they entitled "Punk" (Savage, 1991, pp.130-131). This was crucial in codifying the term in relation to a specific, stripped down form of musical expression. Consequently punk as a descriptor became synonymous with bands who played a bare, basic rock and roll that preferenced amateur qualities and political statements. These were bands such as The Ramones, Richard Hell and Vivoids, The Cheap Nasty, The Damned and The Sex Pistols.

The musical essence, though crucial, was the sum total of punk, for it also embodied a particular attitude and approach to life: that of non-conformity and anti-authority. This will be crucial shortly in examining straight edge and belief. Richard Hell describes punk as "an idea, an ideal, that no one band, or even ten bands, can fully embody" (George-Warren, 2007, foreword). Punk was about loudly questioning accepted norms or even the new as it was presented to society. For many of those involved with punk as a movement, it was, and remains, an individual experience bound collectively through certain rituals and *mores*. Ultimately punk is a refuge, a feeling of belonging, a community. It is an umbrella term – largely media created – for a music-based oppositional subculture characterised by expressions of estrangement, frustration and disenchantment. As a form of resistance it has evoked a sense of identity, authenticity and community for its followers and adherents (Stewart, 2011, p.71).

### **Straight edge**

Punk is not a static entity, it evolves and mutates as any subculture does. There are numerous permutations and interpretations of it, with sXe being one of these. sXe began in 1981 as a song penned by 19 year old Ian MacKaye, then lyricist of Minor Threat. The lyrics are:

I'm a person just like you  
but I've got better things to do  
than sit around and fuck my head,  
hang out with the living dead,  
snort white shit up my nose,

pass out at the shows.  
I don't even think about speed  
that's something I just don't need.

I've got the straight edge.

I'm a person just like you  
but I've got better things to do  
then sit around and smoke dope,  
cause I know that I can cope.  
Laugh at the thought of eating ludes,  
laugh at the thought of sniffing glue.  
Always gonna keep in touch  
never want to use a crutch.

I've got the straight edge

The 50 second song was both an indictment of the drug and alcohol fuelled behaviour of the punks around MacKaye and his own personal life statement. Although not intended to be a call to arms or a coalescing point, many young punks who heard it recognised their own attitude or the lifestyle they wanted to live and so began to use it as a self-identification marker. 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). Being sXe means following three rules or tenets which are all based on abstinence;

1. Do not drink alcohol,
2. Do not consume drugs (including tobacco),
3. Do not engage in casual sex.

These rules or tenets are self-regulated for the most part, but in some sXe communities, often online, there is a process of monitoring. The commitment, comparable with some evangelical approaches or a wedding vow, to sXe can only be undertaken once and is typically known as 'claiming edge'. There is room for personalising one's edge, some adherents will interpret no casual sex as meaning sex should only occur within a marriage setting while others will restrict it to committed relationships. An increasing number of adherents will voluntarily include additional abstinence to their sXe identity, the most common being the following of a vegetarian or vegan diet or an anti-consumerist practice. Breaking edge removes an individual from the sXe identity but it does not exclude that individual from the hardcore scene nor from encountering, interacting with and remaining friends with other sXers.

The symbol of sXe is that of an X; it is found not only in how straight edge punks write their name (i.e. sXe) but also on their person. Typically this is in the form of tattoos or a large black X on each hand drawn with a marker pen, see fig. 1 below.



*Fig 1. sXe adherents with the X symbol on their hands.*

The X was chosen as their symbol because it was the mark placed upon them to indicate that they were too young to be served alcohol. In choosing to mark themselves they “transform the X from a stigma to a symbol of pride” (Haenfler, 2006, p.8). Those old enough to drink choose to wear it to symbolise both their choice not to drink and to indicate solidarity with younger members in their love for the live performance of music and the gathering of community.

### **Straight edge and religion**

All Religions make me wanna throw up.  
All religions make me sick,  
They all claim that they have the truth, they'll set you free.  
Just give 'em money and they'll set you free.  
Free for a fee.  
(Dead Kennedys, 1981, 'Religious Vomit')

The lyrics above by California band The Dead Kennedys are a good example of the predominant relationship between punk (in all its variations) and religion in the latter half of the 70s and into the 80s, particularly in the UK and the USA. Religion was thought of as a pernicious influence upon society. This resulted in a desire to question, expose and then dismiss religion in the belief that it would dissipate or at the very least become so private as to have no influence on wider society. This was not mitigated by the scandals of religious leaders such as Jerry Falwell, Jim Bakker and Pat Robertson that plagued the 80s.

Equally this attitude to religion was analogous with a broader, political notion of religion at that time and since. That is the argument outlined by Talal Asad that the power of secularism as both a political tool and construct and as a means of structuring society relies upon the acceptance – tacit or otherwise – that religion and secular are two distinct and interconnected concepts. Furthermore, it also requires the implicit belief that religion should be controlled (by secular political power) as it is based on irrationality and is

therefore dangerous while secular provides the reasoned, rational system of power (Asad, 2003, pp.10 -12). Those two assumptions will be engaged with in more detail in the next section of this article.

Attitudes towards religion did not remain static or fixed within punk, and during the early 90s there developed an increasing interest in what religion and spirituality had to offer. This was concurrent with a significant rise in support of sXe and was fuelled by sXe bands such as Youth of Today, 108, Project X, Focused, Living Sacrifice and Focal Point. Members of these bands were actively engaged in spiritual discovery in their personal lives and brought that onto the stage with them in the speeches they made to the audience and in the lyrics of their songs.

Religion within sXe was predominantly based on the Krishna Consciousness movement and Christianity (specifically Protestant orientation), but there was also a smaller engagement with Rastafarianism (following on from a well-established cross-pollination within early UK punk, see Partridge, 2010, and Lydon, 1994), Islam and Buddhism (Haenfler, 2006, p.10; Peterson, 2009, p.109). There has been a long history, particularly in the USA, of religious movements targeting youth culture in an effort to evangelise and the strict moral code and black and white worldview cultivated by sXe might seemingly make the two compatible. However, it is important to note that sXe was not targeted by religious groups, but instead religious ideas were brought in by band and audience members themselves. Religious leaders and institutions were still not tolerated, and were largely unwelcome.

Not everyone within sXe was welcoming of religion entering the shows and great debates, and at times violence, ensued. Some felt that the bands were being used as a means of covert proselytising, others that religion had no place as it was a part of mainstream culture, others that religion could not be kept out because of the 'no rules' ethic and others were genuinely curious.

We were passionate about Krishna consciousness and being punks we liked to argue and be righteous. We were new to the philosophy, but we did our best. Kate Reddy, 108 band member (quoted in Peterson, 2009, p.145)

Not everything has a place in hardcore. That's the point of it. Racism, sexism, homophobia etc those things don't have a place in hardcore. Most organized religions have those things in spades, and dressing them up in the guise of 'spirituality' doesn't change this. Vique Martin, Simba Fanzine / Records (quoted in Peterson, 2009 p.109)

A lot of people thought it was okay as they promoted vegetarianism and a healthy lifestyle, but as people dug further into the religion they saw there was stuff they found questionable. A lot of people into punk and hardcore stand in opposition to a society where people blindly accept ideas without question, which most religion asks you to do so in the end did not stick around. Brian Lowit, Lovitt Records (quoted in Peterson, 2009, p.123)

What sXe adherents and hardcore participants were effectively engaging in during these debates and while exploring the notion of different religions and spirituality was the very question of what religion actually is. What role it has in life and society. I would argue that most were unaware of the larger academic debate surrounding this issue but nonetheless they have made important, if under-examined, contributions. The question of “what is religion” is what we turn to now.

### **What is religion?**

There have been innumerable attempts to ‘define’ religion which typically focus on elements, patterns and principles, as for example Durkheim’s understanding of religion as society (1912), Eliade’s notion of religion as a sacred cause rather than effect of individual human behaviour (1957), and Freud’s conception of religion as a symptom of a personality disorder and therefore an illusion (1927).

However, none of these, nor other important theories provide a satisfactory or complete definition of religion. Perhaps this is because of three important factors; first, the attempts of many to reduce religion to a component part(s) which assumes a universalism of humanity and the human experience; second, the reification of religion itself, that is seeing it as something separate and distinct (and often, though by no means always, more important) than other aspects of life and society; and third, the modern, globalised, technology dependant world of today does not resemble the early and pre-modern civilisations on which many of the great works on religion are based.

In other words, too often assumptions about religion in and of itself are made when trying to answer this question and yet those assumptions are not acknowledged by the theorist, nor their followers or extollers. Utilising the term ‘religion’ unreflexively to mean something separate from other categories and influences on life is disingenuous and problematic as Fitzgerald argues:

For the myth of religion and religions as essences and even intentional agents in the world has many ramifications, some of them potentially dangerous ones, for example in directing homeland security operations or in foreign policy decision-making by state agencies. (2011, p.1)

Consequently there must be a coherent challenge to uncritical usages of the term ‘religion’ and equally to ‘secular’. If religion does not exist as a *sui generis* category then neither can secular as the term is understood and utilised today. Historical analysis of the terms religion and secular does not hold up to the assertion that they are binary opposites (Fitzgerald, 2007, p.14).

Instead, religion and religious are categories, and quite modern western categories at that, no different from other categories such as secular, ethnicity, gender, education, age and so on. It should not be seen as something separate or reifiable, equally it should not be seen as something separate to be feared or suppressed. It is one of many social constructed

markers of the human experience. The natural extension of that argument is that all collective representations, such as these categories, have boundaries at which intersections power relations and struggles are most obvious.

One needs only to examine boundaries other than religion and the secular to illuminate this argument. Fitzgerald proffers such varieties as religion and society, religion and economics and argues that these divisions make up our modern Western ideological configuration (2007, p.15). This is found in its most potent form in the religious secular division, where is it used to ensure the domination of political power through a secular agenda.

Asad demonstrates this by asking an important question – “Can secularism then guarantee the peace it allegedly ensured in Euro-America’s early history – by shifting the violence of religious wars into the violence of national and colonial wars?” (2003, p.7) In other words, in making a distinction between the violence of religion as irrational and the violence of secularism as unfortunate but necessary for the greater good and so therefore ‘rational’ can a move towards ensuring, if not creating, peace occur? In answering his own question Asad reminds us that:

The difficulty with secularism as a doctrine of war and peace in the world is not that it is European (and therefore alien to the non-West) but that it is closely connected with the rise of a system of capitalist nation-states – mutually suspicious and grossly unequal in power and prosperity, each possessing a collective personality that is differently mediated and therefore differently guaranteed and threatened. (2003, p.7)

In essence, the violence caused by one is no different to, and indeed often related to, the violence caused by the other. This is because they are not separate, distinct, stand-alone categories nor are they untouchable, ethereal quantities. Rather they are a part of human experience and a category that can be analysed and used or misused, as any other category can, because categories are constructed. Religion need not be a threat to secularity, but it can be seen as a threat to those who seek to use secularity as a means of pushing a specific agenda be that economic, political or military based (or indeed all three). E.S. Bates notes that “to make a rigid division between the sacred and the secular is surely to impoverish both” (quoted in Asad, 2003, p.9).

There is a natural call therefore to reconsider how we examine and analyse the appearance and expression of religious ideas, doctrines, practices and responses. That is, we must look to analytical tools that seek not to separate, negate or reify the religious and the secular but rather have a starting point of deconstructing the categories.<sup>1</sup>

With imagery such as figure 2 below prevalent within all aspects of punk including sXe it immediately becomes apparent that frameworks and analytical tools that allow for a broader understanding of religion that focuses on it as a constructed category is a necessary part of ensuring subcultures



such as this can be a part of the discourse. Furthermore, those utilised have to work alongside the understandings and expressions found within sXe in a way that does not smother their voices or speak for them. There has to be room for fluidity and variety as sXe is ideologically disposed to disparity rather than non-conformity, largely due to their anarchic roots.



Fig 2. Flyer for the 9<sup>th</sup> Annual Johnny Ramone tribute event with Johnny Ramone depicted in Roman Catholic imagery typically associated with Mary.

In his book *Modes of Faith* (2007), Ziolkowski proposes the notion of surrogates, that is, that which can act in the place of religion for individuals and groups when religion is unable to. In other words, where does one find solace and meaning when traditional religious faith has been lost or failed in a substantial sense? He examines five so called secular surrogates – art for art's sake, political movements and revolutions, travel (primarily in relation to India in the text, with the undercurrent of 'the East'), myth, and utopias.

There are a number of issues that need to be addressed in relation to Ziolkowski's surrogates. First of all, he perpetuates the notion that religion and the secular are distinct spheres and that one only turns to secular when

religion has failed or been lost. There is no interaction between the two for Ziolkowski and as such this results in a reification of religion. That is, that religion is about meaning and solace and so when lost, it must present itself as a loss rather than a potentially new way of thinking or an evolutionary step. Secondly, there is a strong sense that religion is, in essence, Christianity although this may have more to do with literary figures he explores his ideas through. Finally, I wish to raise an objection to his use of the term 'surrogate'.

Ziolkowski utilises 'surrogate' to mean replacement or empty vessel. That is, he uses the word in a manner similar to how it is used in fertility terminology – a surrogate is used because the original (or preferred) cannot be, however, all things being equal, the original would be used. In this case then, the surrogate is imbued with the qualities, respect or faith that religion once held.

They often function as surrogates when religious faith has been lost – surrogates to which individuals transfer the psychic energy formerly reserved for religion and in which they seek the same gratifications, and often the same forms and rituals, as previously afforded by religion. (2007, p. X)

However, etymologically the word 'surrogate', as a verb, derives from the word 'subrogate' which came into usage in the early 1530s and meant 'to appoint a successor' (Oxford English Dictionary). The surrogate is what comes after, it is not an empty vessel or a stand in; rather it is something new and valuable in its own right. In this paper sXe is being examined as such a surrogate, that which its adherents have turned to or utilised as a means of making sense of and finding purpose in their lives. However, to be clear, sXe is not a religion, it was not turned to as a replacement for loss of religious faith. That is, the punks did not 'try' religion first and then turn to sXe; rather sXe is valuable to them in its own right.

What I am arguing here is that in focusing on something located outside of the dominant norms of what is viewed as 'religious', a constructivist approach and discussion enables a new way of thinking about religion in line with what Fitzgerald and Asad propose. Other tools have been developed that seek to enable, or even encourage, the exploration of the sacred in the so called secular realm while also allowing space for the acknowledgment that religion and secular are not only bedfellows but equally constructed concepts for the purpose of power and control.

Implicit religion is an analytical tool that is based on the premise that so called secular life contains, within itself, elements or forms of religiosity. In asserting this implicit religion seeks to challenge, perhaps even alter, the conventional academic and political distinction held – and outlined above – between the sacred and the secular. At the same time it acknowledges that "some kind of religiosity could be seen as a natural and inevitable dimension of any kind of secularity" (Bailey, 1998, p.14).

The term 'implicit' directs attention to areas of human behaviour usually seen as simply secular; 'religious' is applied here because it is holistic and exemplifies commitment. The concept of 'religion' here is seen as uniting the various levels of sociality (such as the individual, social and corporate) and of consciousness (subconscious, conscious and self-conscious); so the concept of implicit religion likewise reflects the symbiotic relationship between the sacred/profane and the secular. The overall concern is with the means by which people search for and find spiritual or extensive meaning in their lives outwith of religious institutions. While open to a broad range of exploration of locus, it is not simply the case that everything can be seen as 'religious'. There is a clear criterion for considering if something should be analysed through the lens of implicit religion. The criteria are:

- Commitments – not limited to one religion or practise, can be commitment to a range, including those which are not specifically religious.
- Integrating foci – various ways in which people integrate their experience, with the plural 'foci' signifying that for many it involves more than one object of commitment.
- Intensive concerns with extensive effects – for most people life does not exist or function within the realms of extremes (purely religious, purely secular) but in the neutral ordinariness of everyday life, so that which is a key concern will have a rippling effect into other aspects of their life and behaviour as well as their overall faith. (Bailey, 1997, p.41)

These two approaches are examples of how we can deconstruct without negating religion. Both are used, though not referred to explicitly in the following analysis of belief and faith within sXe.



Fig 3. sXe tattoos demonstrating a mixture of apparently 'religious' and 'secular' imagery co-mingled to create one complete image and statement.

### **Belief and faith in sXe**

The above tattoos are there to illustrate the variety of so called religious imagery that is appropriated or utilised to create broader statements of identity, belonging and belief / faith within sXe. On one level, the message of sXe is simple: you do not need alcohol, drugs or a preoccupation with pursuing sexual gratification to have a good time or even escape, temporarily, from your life. Instead a better time can be had with a clear head, friends and music. Furthermore, one should not seek to escape life, but take steps to improve it.

However, as with many subcultures there is significant depth beneath the surface. sXe is structured around following the three rules or tenets of abstinence from alcohol, drugs and casual sex but it is important to realise two key factors. First, claiming edge is an activity typically undertaken during the individual's teen years so sXe can be a powerful tool in resisting peer pressure (Haenfler, 2006, p.37). Secondly, a significant majority of those who claim edge have a family background of alcohol and / or drug addiction and the attendant issues and problems that entails, so they are seeking a means to change their path in life, to break a cycle of abuse or create a new possibility (Azerrad, 2001, p.132; Stewart, 2011, p.110).

An argument could certainly be made that the propensity for sXe adherents to live according to strict rules would indicate an openness or compatibility with religious beliefs or spiritual searching. However such an argument would be specious as adherents were, and are, punks and as such have typically cultivated an attitude of distrust for traditional sources of authority. Spirituality may have been brought into the scene but churches, temples, priests and vicars were not.

While a few sXers will connect their sXe identities with a Christian faith, the group advocates no form of religion and remains deeply suspicious or critical of organised religion, a remnant of their punk roots (Haenfler, 2006, p.22).

Interviewees would typically malign traditional religious institutions and approaches while happily accepting the desire for a personal belief structure or system, in varying degrees of fluidity and coherence. For example:

I hated the [Catholic] church, stopped going when I was a teenager and went to [punk] shows instead and there was family there, it was fun. I learnt a lot but there was always something missing for me, a sense that there was something more as well as just the immediate and the fun. I guess it was a sense of the spiritual in the world but I didn't know how to express it or explore it. Then I found bands like Youth of Today and the whole Krishnacore thing which turned me onto the eastern faiths which was fascinating and this whole new world opened up. (Marc, 32 year old sXe musician from Bay Area, California, interviewed 7.11.09 in San Francisco)

I am a full blooded atheist. Have been ever since early high school, around the time I became sXe. 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. sXe is not a religion. It's a way of life, and a way of thinking, but you're not blindly following someone else. (Nate, a 31 year old sXe musician and author, interviewed by email on 5.05.10)

I don't like religion, don't agree with it. I agree with ideas, philosophy, thinking and that's what sXe lets me do, encourages me to do. I think. (Chris, 30 year old unemployed artist, interviewed 07.11.09 in San Francisco)

When someone says they have a faith, I wanna see how that goes cause they could be like two sentences away from saying 'yeah I'm a strict Christian'. Faith is definitely or should be something different, it's trusting in hope or something. I just think to say you are strictly religious is defining all your beliefs and all your systems into something so restrictive. I guess punk is like a new religion, well I wouldn't say religion but it is something that people put their trust in, have hope in, I do. So definitely I think punk rock is a faith. (Ewan, 28 year old musician and tattoo artist, interviewed 26.02.10 in Glasgow)

sXe adherents are deeply inured with the use of terminology surrounding 'religion' and 'secular' that forms a part of the dominant discourse in Western culture. Although a subculture, sXe is still influenced by the broader culture and society – as indeed most subcultures are. However, many interviewees did attempt to make a clear distinction between what they perceived as 'religion' and a personal faith or spirituality. This is very obvious in the above quote from Ewan, although it is also countered in the quote from Nate.

Typically the term 'religion' was used by interviewees to describe institutions, dogmatic approaches and ideas, uncritiqued thinking and those who claimed positions of power on the basis of sacred texts or institutional positionality. Spirituality (USA predominantly) or faith (UK predominantly) was utilised to describe those who created their own path, those who followed a syncretic practice, everyday moral decisions and open discussion. This is comparable to work carried out by Heelas and Woodhead (2005) on what they describe as the "holistic milieu", those who consider themselves spiritual but not religious. Equally it is comparable to similar research carried out amongst a broad range of groups and individuals by Lynch (2007), Partridge (2004), Ostwalt (2003) and Davies (1994).

To understand sXe it is necessary to engage with the music that is so integral to it, often the focal point.

Being sXe is being part of a group, physically or mentally. The vast majority of that group of kids got into sXe by listening to a certain type of music. (Nate, 05.05.10)

The music is that of sXe hardcore punk and consists of both local bands and 'household' names such as Minor Threat, Gorilla Biscuits, 7 Seconds, Youth of Today, Earth Crisis and Ensign. It is very specific in sound, based on the premise of being faster, heavier, thicker and louder than traditional 3 chord punk music.

Music, for some, can be a spiritual modality, sacred in the Durkhiemian sense, in that it is a raising above the ordinary to the super ordinary. For a few hours a night, the individual can attend a sXe or hardcore show and leave aside their ordinary, mundane work-a-day lives and for a short time step into, and be part of, something much larger than themselves. They are afforded, or create, an opportunity to see themselves in a new way, to realise new potentials and connections.

That's what sXe is, you know, that's what the music does, like it gives you hope that you don't have to live your life the way everyone else does, that you don't have to stay fucked up. You can be greater than the whole of your parts in a way. Your past doesn't own your future. You are a part of something else now, that's what I get outta the music anyway. (S.T. 37 year old tattoo artist, Bay Area, 10.11.09)

A hardcore show is an extremely visceral experience: loud music, screaming and shouting back and forth between the band(s) and audience, 'sing-alongs', stage diving, head walking and extremely physical dancing which could, to an outsider, closely resemble an out of control riot. Participants will emerge dripping with sweat, exhausted, often bruised, occasionally physically hurt but usually feeling happy and fulfilled.

Musicologist Tia DeNora posits that individuals engaging in music in this form of social setting are attempting to "regulate, elaborate and substantiate themselves as social agents" (2000, p.47). That is, they are not partaking in this music to experience a rapturous connection with the divine but rather as an emotional release and a fulfilment of a deep longing to connect with the communal dimension of music. What they perceive themselves as connecting with as extra-ordinary is not the divine, but the sXe community itself, the belief that punk rock can achieve more than some songs to dance to, that it can be a riotous catalyst for social and personal change.

I still love Minor Threat and am so thankful that Ian [MacKaye] wrote that song [Straight Edge]. I remember hearing Earth Crisis for the first time and thinking how perfect a fit their music was for me – their lyrics are so positive and the music so hard, it's ironic. I remember feeling such a release when listening to them ... I remember seeing Paths of Resistance in 1997 and feeling the same thing. (S.G. 32 year old after school volunteer, interviewed by email 30.04.10)

I love that part, like the music has grabbed you and is shaking you with the urgency of what it has to say, that's what music should be, that's what art should be and that's what punk does best. (Anna, 25 year old

sales assistant in independent book store, interviewed in Santa Cruz, 12.11.09)

sXe is definitely part of my identity, sXe shaped my views of the world ... I was hanging out with a lot of people who were racist, sexist, homophobic idiots. It was really starting to bleed over into my life without me even knowing it. My family moved to [place name removed for purposes of anonymity]. I got into sXe and all the politics that came with it. If that hadn't happened, I don't know who I'd be today, I certainly wouldn't be as open-minded. (Nate, 05.05.10)

I got shown all these cool bands and stuff and then ya know, next thing I know I get obsessed with it and it just becomes more of a belief than anything else ... It's everything positive about it, eh, you've gotta live your life positive ya know. (Karl, 28 year old tattooist from Durham [UK] interviewed 07.05.10)

In reaching for the sXe community as that to which they give their commitment and devotion, many bands and audiences make use of ostensibly 'religious' songs which further highlight that the concepts of 'religion' and secular are not discrete. One such example is the widespread use of the song "Amazing Grace" which shall be examined in detail momentarily. It is expedient to note that I am arguing here that the use of these songs by sXe adherents and performers, along with the use of hardcore music in general is an example of what Bailey terms integrating foci. Analysis of how the song is utilised will, I hope, draw out why I am making the argument for surrogacy as that which comes next.

Amazing Grace was originally written by John Newton and first published in 1779 (Rivers & Wykes, 2011). The hymn has strong crossover cultural power and is utilised in a number of settings from funerals to sporting events to a backdrop for visitors to the Scottish Loch Lomond and many movie scenes. Kevin Lewis makes a notable point, that in popular (American) culture it is typically the first three verses that are used and no mention of a deity exists in those three.

The countering, comforting emotional-spiritual power of this evangelical-biblical popular song in our midst would seem to rise out of persisting needful personal and local community negotiation with identity-strengthening (or identity-threatening) traditional beliefs and values which are all the more appealing and conflicting emotionally for touching on remnant memories of instilled childhood beliefs and values. The song plays over and over again, does it not, into the construction, re-construction, the maintenance and repair of adult identities: fluid, shaky, and threatened, as of course identities must be, in a free market culture of free-for-all individualism. (Lewis, 2013)

Lewis concludes that the song has become a functional means of purging (grief for example) or rendering passive (we are less and need to be saved, be that in a theological sense or otherwise) and does not urge the singer or listener to improve oneself, instead it indulges the individualistic 'I'm all right

just as I am'. However while this may be true in certain areas, I wish to argue that, contra Lewis, the use and appropriation of Amazing Grace within sXe actually serves to reinforce the connection to the community and the individuals duty to improve the self to further the community.

During the performance of Amazing Grace, which is musically given a punk rock make-over, certain markers or tropes are utilised at key points in the song. Lyrically the only addition some bands make is to add "hey, hey, hey" as a gang chant (audience and band sing or shout together) in between the verse and the chorus. However it is in action that meanings are changed or created during the performance of this song.

The line in the first verse "saved a wretch like me", is no longer seen as a marker of humility, the word wretch becomes infused with pride and the fist is clenched and held over the chest as a signifier of that. Typically the first verse is sung by the crowd and then repeated by the singer who will then sing either the first three verses through or the whole song (the former being more common) with the audience singing along.

During the singer's repetition of the first verse, the audience will literally crawl across one another to either get onto the stage or to get as close to the microphone as possible. It is the line "saved a wretch like me" that they are desperate to declare publically. During the chorus the microphone is typically thrust out to the audience to sing along with, signifying a dialogical relationship and a sense of solidarity in what is being sung. Equally the words of the third verse:

Through many dangers, toils and snares,  
I have already come;  
'Tis Grace that brought me safe thus far,  
And Grace will lead me home.

are sung while the guitar is held aloft and audience members will either hold their t-shirts out (t-shirts of other bands are worn to gigs to further symbolise support of the community and the underground music scene) or wrap their arms around one another. What is being demonstrated here, I would argue, is that Grace has changed from the divine meaning of the writer into being sXe or hardcore punk. That is what has saved them from their past, has offered them what they view as a new future and given them a community to belong to. In singing the song and altering the meaning through action these individuals are not only signifying their membership to the subculture, they are demonstrating that the sacred can be located within the secular.

For these sXe punks, Amazing Grace does have resonance on a cultural level as a song about God saving someone from a life they don't want but that meaning is not static. Therefore they have no qualms in changing it or placing alongside God the notion of sXe or hardcore punk music as containing salvational qualities. Although they are repackaging a song that is understood as 'religious' within a non-religious context they are also demonstrating Fitzgerald's and Asad's assertion that religion is a constructed concept and



category and as such the boundaries are fluid. Deconstruction of the category of 'religion' must take into account the complexities of human life, that which we use to create meaning, purpose, or enjoyment within life. They do not exist as a simple and / or binary but are found in the multitude and minutiae of a variety of experiences, narratives and the repackaging of both. This complexity is not reducible to a religious secular constructivism narrative which inevitably privileges one over the other rather than acknowledging the symbiosis which can, and is, utilised by many individuals and groups.

Definitions of reality have undergone transformation by sXe adherents in relation to finding meaning in their own life. Frequently, interviewees would talk of punk, sXe saving their lives. For example, Frank (15.05.10, Manchester, England) relayed how his entrance into sXe was at a time when he was homeless. Those in the local scene took him to a squat, showed him where to get free food or where it could be easily stolen from. He was incredibly grateful and expressed it as a form of salvation. Likewise, Terry who was homeless when interviewed had this to say:

It's in your head, it's in your heart, it's in your soul. I didn't choose to be a punk, punk chose me to be a part of it, saved my fucking life I can tell you. (05.11.09, Berkeley)

While Ann, a 38 year old community college attendee, expressed it as:

That's the difference between punk and religion, punk accepts that we are all fucked up, celebrates it even, but with like sXe and stuff there is a chance to redeem it or to stop it in some way, you know. To change how you behave, become a better person without having to sell out or buy into shit. I dunno, to me, I guess punk has done far more to improve the world than religion ever did. If I hadn't become sXe I wouldn't be doing the course I am now, wouldn't be getting my life sorted, wouldn't be the person that I am. Thank fuck that punk choose me, you know? (07.11.06 Bay Area)

One could argue that there is an egocentricity to these statements, however there is also an attempt to fuse and refuse different elements of life to create a unified whole, including "the sacred and profane, the spiritual and sensual, orthodox and blasphemous" (Beaudoin, 1998, p.122).

### **Concluding comments**

sXe adherents do not separate the sacred and the profane, the religious and the secular; rather they locate the sacred within a conception of the profane to ensure a cessation of fragmentation. This is not to say that there are no sharp distinctions and separations, of course there are and a number of them are evident above. Instead what they are seeking to do, it could be argued, is attempt to create some form of synthesis of culturally separated categories. Furthermore, they structure their entire lives around this synthesis through conceiving of sXe as sacred - that which takes them out of themselves and opens the world to them - whilst locating the mundane daily life within the subculture. The two are intrinsically intertwined and co-reliant,

because religion is not a separate, reified sphere or category; the sacred and the profane, religious and secular are part of one another and together create and sustain the whole.

To summarise, sXe adherents are enacting principles that they perceive as sacred and in so doing they are refiguring notions of religion and secular in light of new insights that can point the way towards a potentially limitless theology. Understandable only through acknowledgement of Fitzgerald and Asad's argument that religion is not a unique, untouchable, ineffable thing but rather a constructed and constricting category no different in approach from any other. Utilising Ziolkowski's surrogates, although changing its meaning, and Bailey's Implicit Religion tools this paper has sought to demonstrate how sXe adherents are engaging with these ideas and expressing them in their subculture. Effectively they are a mutation in the sense of the "X Men", that is a new step in the evolutionary process of how we can understand, engage with and deconstruct in a meaningful way the categories of religion, secular, sacred, profane and spirituality.

### Note

1. In the PhD thesis (Stewart, 2011) that this paper is based upon, models such as Theodore Ziolkowski's surrogacy and Edward Bailey's Implicit Religion were utilised for this purpose. Ziolkowski's framework is analysed and critiqued below. Bailey's Implicit Religion has been dealt with in detail elsewhere in relation to whether sXe can be considered a form of Implicit Religion (Stewart, 2012) and so does not feature prominently within this paper. However the three criteria of Implicit Religion – commitments, integrating foci and intensive concerns with extensive effects – are apparent throughout the exploration of sXe within this paper and should be borne in mind by the reader.

### Bibliography

- Asad, T. (2003) *Formations of the Secular*, Berkeley CA, Stanford University Press.
- Azerrad, M. (2001) *Our Band Could Be Your Life*, New York, Back Bay Books.
- Bates E. S. (ed.)(undated) *The Bible Designed To Be Read As Literature*, London, Heinemann.
- Bailey, E. (1997), *Implicit Religion*, Leuven, Peeters.
- Bailey, E. (1998) *Implicit Religion in Contemporary Society*, Leuven, Peeters.
- Beaudoin, T. (1998) *Virtual Faith*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.
- Davies, G. (1994) *Religion in Britain Since 1945*, Malden, Wiley-Blackwell.
- DeNora, T. (2000) *Music in Everyday Life*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Fitzgerald, T. (ed) (2007) *Religion and the Secular: Historical and Colonial Formations*, London, Equinox.
- Fitzgerald, T. (2011) *Religion and Politics in International Relations*, London, Continuum.
- George-Warren, H. (undated) *Punk 365*, New York, Abrams.

- Haenfler, R. (2006) *Straight Edge*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press.
- Hebdige, D. (1979) *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, London, Routledge.
- Heelas, P. & Woodhead, L. (2005) *The Spiritual Revolution*, Malden, Blackwell.
- Leblanc, L. (1999) *Pretty in Punk*, New Jersey, Rutgers University Press.
- Lentini, P. (2003) *Punk's Origins: Anglo-American Syncretism*, *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, vol. 24, no. 2, pp.153 -74
- Lewis, K. (2013) *America's Heirloom Song*, *Implicit Religion Journal*, vol. 16 no. 3, pp.277 – 288.
- Lydon, J. (1994) *Rotten*, London, Plexus Publishing.
- Lynch, G. (2007) *The New Spirituality*, London, I. B. Tauris.
- Marcus, G. (1989) *Lipstick Traces*, London, Picador.
- Nicks, P. (2010) *Tricksters & Punks of Asia*, Thailand, Fast Track Publishing.
- Ostwalt, C. (2007) *Secular Steeples*, London, Trinity Press International.
- Partridge, C. (2004) *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, London, T&T Clark.
- Partridge, C. (2010) *Dub in Babylon*, London, Equinox.
- Peterson, B. (2009) *Burning Fight*, Huntington Beach, Revelation Records Publishing.
- Rivers, I. & Wykes, D. (2011) *Dissenting Praise*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Sabin, R. (ed) (1999) *Punk Rock So What?* London, Routledge.
- Savage, J. (1991) *England's Dreaming*, London, Faber & Faber.
- Stewart, F. (2011) *Punk Rock Is My Religion*, PhD Thesis (unpublished), University of Stirling.
- Stewart, F. (2012) 'Beyond Krishnacore: Straight Edge Punk and Implicit Religion,' *Implicit Religion Journal*, vol. 15, no. 3, pp.259-288.
- Trash, T. (2008) *Corn Beer and Butter: Life and Survival in China*. Self-published.
- Ziolkowski, T. (2007) *Modes of Faith*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.