

“Punk Rock Is My Religion”

An Exploration of Straight Edge punk as a Surrogate of Religion.

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Abstract

Using a distinctly and deliberately interdisciplinary approach to the subject of religion and spirituality as it presents itself within modern Western Societies today, this thesis argues that Straight Edge hardcore punk is a surrogate for religion. The term surrogate is used to denote the notion of a successor and a protector and provider of nourishment. It has been re-interpreted from Theodore Ziolkowski's work on the same term in 'Modes of Faith', in which he examines surrogates for religion which emerged during the early part of the 20th century.

An in-depth study, both theoretical and ethnographic in nature and presentation, of Straight Edge hardcore punk is provided to demonstrate that traditionally held categories of religion, secular, sacred and profane are being dismantled and re-built around ideas of authenticity, community, integrity, d.i.y and spirituality. Through the syncretic practices of the Straight Edge adherents they are de-essentialising religion and thus enabling us to re-consider the question of what religion is or could be.

This thesis relies on theoretical ideas, interview quotes, informant quotes, researcher taken photographs, and interviewee created or utilised images, tattoos, graffiti and flyers. All of these are interspersed with song lyrics from various bands relevant to the time period under discussion and the themes being drawn out. Much like the adherents themselves, this thesis exists very much within the space of the 'in-between', which creates and reacts to necessary tensions throughout.

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Introduction (Never Back Down)

“Right now, if you do not know the person standing next to you, turn to them, shake their hand, make a new friend. This is your family, this is your community. Now let’s sing.”

Hearing Chris #2 saying this during Anti-Flag’s 2005 performance, not only did I do as he instructed, but I became acutely aware of two things. First, everyone in the small room in Manchester was doing likewise in a shared communal intuitive moment of mutual participation. Second, there was something to this experience and communal bond or spirit that transcended the visceral moment. That second feeling did not dissipate upon leaving the venue nor in the coming days and weeks.

It was not until a few months later that it solidified from a nebulous feeling or awareness into a concrete, expressible thought. This was due to the fortuitous, though somewhat disconcerting, intervention of a Buddhist monk. Visiting the Manchester Buddhist Centre at the request of a friend, a monk approached me asking if I was a punk. Standing there with dyed spiked hair, tattoos and a Minor Threat T-shirt on, I had no choice but to reply in the affirmative, whereupon he proffered me a book from the shelves behind the counter in the gift shop area. This was ‘Dharma Punx’ by Noah Levine.

As an adherent to punk music, beginning in my teens, I was very used to Hare Krishna’s stopping me in the street and attempting to bond over the band Shelter before moving into their sales pitch for both their books and their ideology. I assumed this diminutive man was now doing the same and had no intention of buying (into) whatever he was selling, despite his insistence. Upon learning it was a gift, I utilised a tactic I sometimes employ at punk shows: I took it, said thanks and shoved it into my bag without actually looking at it. I forgot all about it until a few days later when I came across it again. This time I noticed the tattoos on the hands on the front cover and flipped through it. I noticed some names of people I respected and bands I admired in the thank you list and began to read it.

'Dharma Punx' tells Noah's life story in his own words. It is the story of an angry and hurt member of Generation X who tries unsuccessfully to block his pain and family situation through drink, drugs and violence. However, it is punk music and the punk community that initially provides him with the solace and place to belong that he seeks. Moving through punk, he discovers Straight Edge, a subset based on three principles of no alcohol, no drugs and no casual sex. He embraces Straight Edge, and begins to realise that his is to be a journey along a spiritual path of seeking and discovery, whilst remaining a part of the Straight Edge punk that had come to be an integral part of his being and identity.

Reading the book I realised that the nebulous feeling that would not dissipate could now be put into words. The transcendent feeling at the Anti-Flag show, a feeling which had been present before and since at other shows and events, was a kind of connection which the multiple meanings of the word 'spiritual' has recently tried to capture. Undeniably there was a spiritual essence or component to hardcore punk. Having been raised in a fundamentalist evangelical environment I was aware of spirituality, religion and all the terms associated with it. I could recognise the irony inherent in the fact that the opening instructions in Anti-Flag's rhetoric are also a standard ploy in many church services. However I also knew that I didn't have a connection with the Almighty at the churches, conferences and meetings I was made to attend. I abhorred the hypocrisy that was very transparent within some aspects of the Christian community. These were some of the reasons that I had turned to punk, *not* to have a spiritual experience!

Surprisingly, delving further within the hardcore scene I was a part of, talking to friends and other adherents, I came to realise that my experience was not unique. A significant number of individuals felt that there was a spiritual dimension or core to Straight Edge and to hardcore punk. Yet at the time none of us connected it with a specific religion and we were not about to attach it to any religious institution.

I began to question further why this link existed, what had happened to religion so that, for some individuals, music had taken its place? This was the start of a journey that is, to some extent, culminating in the production of this PhD thesis: exploring the spiritual connection, identity and practices of Straight Edge punks. The research presented here is by no means either the final or definitive answer to the question; rather it is an initial attempt to acknowledge and engage with these questions and issues and allow them to evolve over time.

This research, its questions and tentative answers are very much defined by a notion of hybridity that presents itself throughout. It arose as such from a juxtaposition of two unique and different areas – a punk show and an encounter with a Buddhist monk – whose fusion began to sow the seeds for an exploration and understanding of spiritual identity and practices found within punk. Such hybridity presents itself in a number of ways within this thesis: the juxtaposition of the two fields of inquiry – religious studies and hardcore Straight Edge punk; the combination of theoretical with practical field-based sociological ethnographic writing; and the dual role or position held by the researcher.

The ethnographic element is contributing to the theoretical shift taking place within the presentation of this research. The two – the theoretical and the ethnographic – need each other at all times in order to properly account for and understand the subcultural phenomenon under examination. We must always have this at the forefront of our thinking to ensure that the voices of those individuals who participated in the research are not considered to be an intrusion into, nor smothered by, the academic discourse.¹

In many ways Straight Edge itself is a hybrid. It is a combination of hardcore² punk and a conservative (one could even suggest religious) moral code of behaviour. This combines for the

¹ This will be dealt with in detail in Chapter One and again in Chapter 6.

² Musically different in terms of sound and speed from traditional punk music, the most significant change is that of the move away from three chords and an inclusion of a breakdown which is a vocal stop at a key point in the song, thus allowing the drum sounds to take centre stage briefly without losing the intensity or momentum of the song. Breakdowns

specific purpose of creating a community that is not communitarian, despite having some characteristics of it, and which can effect a positive change in the world through sober living and thinking. Therefore it is important to have the notion of hybridity firmly fixed within our thinking as we progress through this research, even when it is not mentioned explicitly.

Another key idea that must also be borne in mind is that of a new wave.³ This not only applies to Straight Edge which was itself a new wave or dimension within punk in terms of both attitude and behaviour that 'rode in' as a response to the more typical punk hedonism. Furthermore, in keeping with the theme of hybridity, we are also dealing with a roiling change within different aspects of society, in particular with regards to the construction of and placement or role of religion. There have been numerous attempts by theorists to articulate these 'new waves'. For the sake of brevity and precision I am only going to consider and utilise the works of a small number of these theorists from the broader fields.

New Waves

Responding to a long held Cartesian dualistic individualism within modern society, sociologist Emile Durkheim sets out to demonstrate that

Religious beliefs proper are always held by a defined collectivity that professes them and practices the rites that go with them...The individuals who make up this group feel bound to one another by their common beliefs. A society, whose members are united because they share a common conception of the sacred world and its relation to the profane world, and who translate this common conception into identical practices, is what we call a church...But wherever we observe religious life, its foundation is a defined group.⁴

in hardcore punk tend to utilise the floor toms and snares to create a fast 'rolling rhythm' which is typically accompanied by a single short phrase repeated by all band members and the audience.

³ This term is being used somewhat tongue-in-cheek, as "New Wave" was the term applied by the media to the music that followed from punk and included bands such as Blondie, Talking Heads and The Runaways. However it is a term that also alludes to Shakespeare's 'sea-change' in *The Tempest*, in the sense of describing an incoming surge of new water and in keeping with that theme it symbolises an act of purification and continual renewal which is analogous with how Straight Edge views itself.

⁴ Durkheim Emile. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. 1912. Cosman Carol trans. (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2001) p. 42- 43.

When we think of or about religion, Durkheim informs us that we cannot but think about it in terms of society. Religion is not an exclusive domain that happens to function in society but whose true existence is located elsewhere. Religion is society regardless of what name or description it is given. Therefore by participating in society one is participating, whether consciously or not, in some form of religion, even, it could be argued, within a supposedly secular or secularised context; equally in constructing and moulding society one is also doing the same to religion.

The objective, universal and eternal cause of those *su generis* sensations that make up the religious experience – is society. We have shown what moral forces it develops and how it awakens that feeling of support, of security, of tutelary dependence that attaches the worshipper to his cult. It is society that raises him above himself. Indeed, it is society that makes him. For man is made by the whole array of intellectual goods that constitutes civilization, and civilization is the work of society.⁵

Building on the work of William James,⁶ Durkheim not only argues that religion and society are inherently and intrinsically linked but further postulates that one cannot survive nor progress without the other. This raises an intriguing two-sided conundrum that directly relates to the issues, and indeed the individuals, at the core of this research on the spiritual identity of Straight Edge punks. First, if indeed religion is society then by necessity those who are unable to participate fully within society are precluded from full participation within religion. Second where does the individual stand in relation to religion and society when he or she no longer feels the support, security or guardianship that Durkheim mentions in the above quote? I intend to focus on these issues separately.

To successfully negotiate and fully participate within a society requires a full understanding and acceptance of the notion of the collective, or the community. “Collective thought is possible only through the coming together of individuals, hence it presupposes the individuals, and they in turn presuppose it, because they cannot sustain themselves except by coming together.”⁷

⁵ Durkheim. *Elementary Forms*. 2001, p. 313.

⁶ James William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. (New York: Modern Library Classics 2002) 1902.

⁷ Durkheim Emile. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. [1912] Fields Karen E. trans. (New York: Free Press, 1995), p. 447.

Individuals who are participating in subcultures such as Straight Edge commonly do so because they feel that they have no place or voice within mainstream society, as Straight Edge originator Ian MacKaye argues.

Punk rock in the beginning was so many different people who came from so many different places. They were all these outcasts, all these people who just did not fit in for various reasons. Some people didn't fit in because they had trouble with their families; some people didn't fit in because of their sexuality; some didn't feel normal psychologically; some didn't feel normal politically. And all these sorts of margin walkers, these people who were outside, joined together and gathered under this new manifestation of the underground. And there was a lot to learn, a lot to take in, and there was also a sense of circling the wagons...You create a position of defence. I think that's where a lot of the really tough guy posturing, the spiky hair, and the leather jackets came from. It was basically circling the wagons.⁸

MacKaye raises a pertinent point in suggesting that in seeing themselves in the position of outcast these individuals were forced to create their own culture separate, to varying degrees of success, from the dominant mainstream culture.⁹ Yet the created result followed similar construction in that the subculture has its own rules, rituals, morals, politics, mores, aesthetic expectations and acceptances, each of which carry their own consequences for non-compliance. Of course those social constructions and constraints can be mis-interpreted by those outwith the subculture, which may aid the defensive position of those within all the more.

The subculture created by those on the margins or excluded from mainstream society nevertheless remains reliant upon collective thought and agreement. What has altered are the number of people involved and the removal of institutions with responsibility for ensuring the application of communal agreements. Instead it is the adherents themselves who self-monitor and self-maintain the agreed-upon behaviours, standards and consequences.

⁸ Kuhn Gabriel. *Sober Living For The Revolution*. (Oakland: PM Press 2010), p. 26.

⁹ This is what I understand as and will be referring to when I utilise the, at times contentious, term of subculture throughout this thesis.

Durkheim demonstrates clearly that religion manifests itself only in terms of society, and he suggests that no society had existed that had structured itself outside of sacred / profane division or dichotomy.

All known religious beliefs, whether simple or complex, present a common quality: they presuppose a classification of things – the real or ideal things that men represent for themselves – into two classes, two opposite kinds, generally designated by two distinct terms effectively translated by the words profane and sacred. The division of the world into two comprehensive domains, one *sacred*, the other *profane*, is the hallmark of religious thought.¹⁰

The purpose of polarising social domains by means of the sacred and profane was to ensure that contamination of the sacred did not take place. As we shall discover within this thesis, that concern has largely dissipated and indeed amongst many Straight Edge adherents there is a deliberate step being made towards combining the sacred and the profane, while simultaneously ignoring the notion of religious and secular as separate entities or spheres. Consequently, they are reconfiguring and de-essentialising religion.

Durkheim remains relevant to our understanding of religion within modern society, despite the removal of his notion of fear of contamination, both because his distinction between the sacred and profane still exists, albeit radically altered, and because of his understanding of religion as social. That is the significance of the community or the collective in understanding the unfixed nature of religion. The subculture being examined in this research has its own ideas of what is sacred and what is profane, which they have reached through collective agreement. The difference is that their collective agreements are not always parallel to those found within mainstream society, due to their refusal to conform.

Of course we must acknowledge the emphasis being placed on the collective is not to denigrate the place and role of the individual. Durkheim also addresses the significance of the individual: “Passion individualizes and yet enslaves. Our sensations are essentially individual; but the

¹⁰ Durkheim. *Elementary Forms*. [2001] p. 36.

more we free ourselves from the senses, the more capable we are of thinking and acting through ideas, the more we are persons. Those who insist on all that is social in the individual do not mean to deny or denigrate personality. They simply will not confuse it with the fact of individuation.”¹¹

It is now argued by many that we have moved from a Durkheimian society into a neo-Durkheimian one, where religion is partially disembedded from the traditional social structure, in particular that of kinship or village life. Religion then takes on the role of an expression of a larger social identity, namely the emerging nation state in the West. This shift, or new wave so to speak, will inevitably have an impact upon the spiritual practices of Straight Edge. Therefore we must examine how the emergence of a nation state impacts on the construction of society and religion, through the work of Castoriadis and socialism.

Socialism or communism was created in the wake of the event that was Marxism.¹² Marx and Engels proposed that by ending the role of the capitalist class, society would eventually become classless and thus the state driven by capitalist concern would wither away and die off. The goal was a society exclusively based on egalitarian co-operation. For them the first stage of this was to be found within socialism, followed eventually by communism as the final stage, prompted by a revolt led by the proletariat. Durkheim would differ by positing in numerous works that socialism is rooted within the desire to bring the state closer to the realm of individual activity in countering the anomie of a capitalist society.¹³

The 70s saw Britain struggle with a recession, unemployment and political unrest. Consequently a number of young people were drawn to socialism as an ideal and began to explore it as a potential viable alternative to the capitalist system which they felt was crumbling and eroding

¹¹ Durkheim. *Elementary Forms*. [2001] p. 201 – 202.

¹² French philosopher Alain Badiou would term this as an ‘event’, something previously unforeseen but which on occurrence radically reconstructs society or our perception of an element of society’s infrastructure.

¹³ Durkheim Emile. *The Rules of Sociological Method*. (New York: The Free Press 1938) p. 13, 45 & 71 for example.

around them.¹⁴ As punk emerged it frequently set capitalism as a target for derision and lyrical attack. This led to a number of early punks self-identifying as anarchists, often failing to understand the nuances and differences between anarchy and socialism as ideologies.

Toppling capitalism and replacing it with socialism through the use of anarchy became key concepts in how punk communities functioned -- that is, decentralised autonomous communities and egalitarian support for those who cannot support themselves.¹⁵ Today we find these within hardcore punk and Straight Edge in the form of a lack of leadership, a lack of hierarchy and a strong sense of support for both individuals and the scene to which one belongs. In utilising these two extremes of the political spectrum – the community or the collective, which is the basis of socialism, and self-regulation which is the necessary quality for capitalism to function – Straight Edge, and indeed punk overall, have created a great tension for themselves. This is not a tension they have resolved, but rather reflective of the in-between state in which they exist, and indeed only one of many tensions under which they function, as we shall see below.

The understanding and use of socialism by punks has much more in common with the work of Castoriadis than it does Marx and Engels. Cornelius Castoriadis, a philosopher, political thinker, social activist and practising psychoanalyst who was very much of the intellectual left, turned against the Soviet Union during the 1950's out of a belief that it was not a communist state but a bureaucratic one, which he argued differed from Western powers largely in its centralised power apparatus.¹⁶ In later years he came to completely reject Marxist theories of economies and history.

¹⁴ An indication of its dominance within public thinking was the popular BBC production 'Citizen Smith' which ran from 1977 – 1980. It was written by John Sullivan and relays the tale of Wolfie Smith, a self-styled urban guerrilla who attempts to emulate his heroes Che Guevara and Marx and consistently touts his goals of 'Power to the people' and 'freedom for Tooting'. While the television programme was largely jocular in nature and Smith a character of some derision by others who were seen as mainstream, there is an underlying sense that this ideology posed a significant threat to those in power had it been articulated by anyone other than youth, who could be easily marginalised and ignored.

¹⁵ Savage Jon. *England's Dreaming*. (London: Faber & Faber 1991) p. 204 – 5. Wojcik Daniel. *Punk and Neo-Tribal Body Art*. (Jackson: University of Mississippi 1995), p. 8 and Colegrave S. & Sullivan C. *Punk*. (London: Cassell & Co 2001), p. 14-5, 186 – 7.

¹⁶ Castoriadis Cornelius. *The Imaginary Institution of Society*. (Cambridge: Polity Press 1987).

Castoriadis' thinking helps us to see the structure of punk as a subculture, which finds its definition outside of the mainstream, especially with the notion of self-regulation. This is of particular importance to the argument within this thesis, as it demonstrates a break with the Durkheimian construction of society into a new wave of thinking about the sacred and thus the religious. Durkheim maintains the theory that there remains at all times an external social authority in the form of the sacred which must remain separate from the profane at all times. In contrast, Castoriadis developed a distinctive understanding of historical change as the emergence of distinctive otherness that must be socially instituted and named in order to be recognised. To successfully achieve this, autonomous individuals, who are the essence of an autonomous society, must continually examine themselves and engage in critical reflection of the self and society. Castoriadis argued that this was achieved through reforming education and political systems.¹⁷

He further argued that all developed societies have their own specific institutions, laws, traditions, beliefs and behaviours – which Castoriadis names 'imaginaries'. To obtain an autonomous society, and thereby autonomous individuals, each member or adherent must be aware of their society's unique imaginaries and explicitly self-regulate. This is in direct contrast to a heteronymous society in which the people attribute their imaginaries to some external social authority, as for example, a god.

In Castoriadis's conception of society, it is necessary that extra-social authorities are removed from the position of authority, particularly be they sacred or a divine.¹⁸ Self-regulation, or more accurately self-responsibility, comes to the fore as does the need to critically engage with and examine all aspects of institutions set up within society – government, education, healthcare and so on. Citizens must be prepared to acknowledge when something is failing or corrupted and either repair or replace it. Furthermore, they must also anticipate and act when they realise that something new is needed to ensure the successful continuation of their society.

¹⁷ Castoriadis. *Imaginary Institution of Society*. p. 118-9, 210-11 & 362.

¹⁸ Castoriadis is in agreement with Durkheim that extra social authorities should be removed.

The perpetual self-alteration of society is its very being, which is manifested by the positing of relatively fixed and stable forms-figures and through the shattering of these forms-figures which can never be anything other than the positing-creating of other forms-figures. Each society also brings into being its own mode of self-alteration, which can also be called its temporality – that is to say, it also brings itself into being *as* a mode of being.¹⁹

While it could conceivably be argued that Straight Edge, and to an extent hardcore and punk, are a microcosmic example of a society being constructed as Castoriadis foresaw or at least championed, it would not be entirely accurate. Certainly Straight Edge was a response to the hedonistic and destructive behaviour of punks during the early 1980's, a self-reflexive action that sought to demonstrate a different way of living as a punk which would stay true to the purpose of punk that is maintained through continuous self-regulation. However it would be inaccurate in the sense that they have not only made little to no attempt to remove and replace corrupt institutions and power bases, even if they will directly challenge them, they are also guilty of supporting them. For many Straight Edge adherents, institutions such as governments, corporations, schools and business that attempt to control and modify behaviour should be stringently examined and made to justify their actions. This is particularly the case with businesses that make profits from the production and sale of products such as alcohol and tobacco. However they become significantly more lax with businesses that produce products they utilise such as mp3 players, mobile phones or cd's unless they are widely exposed as being involved in questionable practices such as child labour.

As a part of Western society, Straight Edge, perhaps unwittingly, points to the reality that we have not fully realised Castoriadis' model of social construction. While we have an increasing call for regulation and transparency of institutions, agencies and indeed 'imaginaries', to use his term, it is being responded to in a very cynical and insidious manner. The call for transparency and regulation is being used by politicians and businesses to promote their own agendas, gain votes, etc. under the auspices of giving to the public what it desires and thus placing the success and failure of society on the shoulders of the public rather than the institutions. This is the theoretical principle guiding

¹⁹ Castoriadis. *Imaginary Institution of Society*. p. 372.

British Prime Minister David Cameron's notion of a 'Big Society', in which local people and communities are empowered alongside a removal of power from politicians in order to reinvigorate civic society. Yet his positive rhetoric of the term cannot disguise the cuts in public spending and investment that parallels the redistribution of 'power'.

External authorities not only exist but are rampant at every level of society, and are arguably more coercive than ever. We have so little control over the institutions within our society. We can select which bank we choose to pay our wages or put our savings into but we have no control beyond that; we are not even fully informed about the various levels of investment, and the risks they might entail. When the system recently reached collapsing point and banks had to be bailed out using taxpayers' money there was a brief hope that this would translate into transparency for taxpayers, a hope that has not, as yet, come to fruition.

Castoriadis is not the only one to identify this difference between a self-regulatory society and a heteronomous society. Canadian philosopher, political, social and moral theorist and commentator Charles Taylor also has similar ideas in his work on the social imaginary, which he argues is characterised by three forms: the economy, the public sphere and self-governance.²⁰

Taylor argues: "In the modern ideal, mutual respect and service is directed towards serving our ordinary goals: life, liberty, sustenance of self and family ... The organisation of society is judged not on its inherent form, but instrumentally ... what this organisation is instrumental to concerns the basic conditions of existence as free agents, rather than the excellence of virtue."²¹ This last point is debatable, given that 'authenticity' might in many respects be seen as a new excellence of virtue, though one attached to a certain DIY ethic. We will work out these notions and their relationships later in the thesis.

²⁰ Taylor Charles. *Modern Social Imaginaries*. (London: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 2

²¹ Taylor. *Modern Social Imaginaries*. p. 13

For Taylor, the imaginary is an exploration – both historical and philosophical – of how our basic concepts of meaning have changed and how the moral order of modernity has emerged both within and because of these changes. He is positing that we no longer organise and sustain our society on the basis of pleasing a god, fulfilling rituals or simply because it is a long held tradition. Instead we have now become in many ways far more pragmatic in that we are now concerned with the goals of the ordinary, mundane or daily life rather than grand or lofty ideals.

This is not to declare that everyone within a modern Western society is living with no concern for a deity or living to fulfil religious obligations and rituals -- of course millions are. What has altered is that looking to a deity or religious obligation is no longer the means by which social institutions and their construction functions or finds meaning. The imaginary has, for Taylor, shifted from the transcendent to the mundane. He is demonstrating that society is no longer based on the fear²² of the divine nor on the authority of the institutions that support and promote a god.

Instead, we organise and structure society to enable us to live our daily lives as comfortable as possible, to ensure both ourselves and our families are taken care of. Thus we have access to free education for our children, healthcare which is currently free in the UK, and a social security system to ensure that we can have access to housing, food, clothing, etc, should we be unable to provide them ourselves.

In many ways, we have actually replaced the traditional view of God as the pinnacle of society with ourselves, our families and our rights as contributing members. We do not deny the rights of anyone to worship and believe in their god, but we also no longer rely on their belief in god to construct and organise society. We have moved from a society in which belief in god is the only conceivable construct in our social imaginary to one in which the same belief is merely one

²² In every sense of the word.

possibility among many. Taylor refers to this as a 'new departure'²³ and demonstrates that it is one new departure in a lengthy history of them.

What emerges from this change is an understanding of social and political life entirely in secular time. Foundings are now seen to be common actions in profane time, ontically on the same footing with all other such actions, even though they may be given a specially authoritative status in our national narrative or our legal system. This freeing of politics from its ontic dependence on religion is sometimes what people mean by the secularity of public space.²⁴

Each of the new waves or restructuring of society that have been examined in this brief introduction has presented a way of considering religion and society that has influenced not only wider society but Straight Edge as well.²⁵ Durkheim argued that religion was society and not a separate sphere, and as such any construction of a society or community must by necessity involve religion. He also then argued that because religion and society cannot be separated the sacred and the profane in some delineation must take place to ensure contamination does not occur.

Taylor's thesis, following on from Castoriadis, reveals that this new construction of society – one in which authority is secular rather than religious based- opens up a new space for religion, particularly in public life. The sacred and the profane can now to some degree co-mingle; they no longer have to remain entirely separate for fear of contamination. This is possible because the authority of meaning-making and social construction has been removed from what was once sacred – religion – and placed firmly within the realm of that which is profane – secular institutions.

According to Taylor, God, or the sacred, is now located within the individuals involved in society, in its decision-making, in its politics and so on. This shift in perception and place of religion towards individuals has itself opened a new debate regarding the separation of religion and secular. Individuals such as Marx greatly desired a complete and total separation, believing that in so doing religion would become privatised and largely irrelevant and eventually perhaps even disappear.

²³ Taylor Charles. *A Secular Age*, (London: Belknap Press, 2007).

²⁴ Taylor. *Modern Social Imaginaries*. p.187.

²⁵ And they are indeed brief introductions to each thinker and writer, each of which could, and do, have multiple PhD theses and books written about their work and ideas.

A separation certainly did occur, although it was more akin to Durkheim's notion of separation than Marx's in that religion still held a place within public life, within society, and not relegated to the private sphere alone. Perhaps in part because of a growing realisation of the increasing impotence of religion in terms of social authority, the separation has gradually become less prominent and today we find numerous individuals with a variety of practices that could not be solely labelled as 'religious' or 'secular', but instead are a blending of the two. I will be arguing throughout this thesis that this blending is precisely what many Straight Edge adherents are doing.

In addition to widening the debate on religious and secular, there has also emerged a possibility of the creation or existence of surrogates for religion. Both of these themes will be explored and utilised extensively within all chapters of this research, as its main concern is to explore Straight Edge as a surrogate for religion through an examination of the spiritual identity and practices of its adherents. However, before we can move to that, we must first develop an understanding of what we mean by the term surrogate and its relation to religion.

Religious Surrogates

The notion of surrogates for religion comes from a perhaps surprising source. It is raised by literary theorist Theodore Ziolkowski in his work 'Modes of Faith'.²⁶ He utilises the term as a description for those things, conceptual or otherwise, which people put in place of religion. In brief then, surrogates are those things which are imbued with the qualities, respect or faith that religion once held.

Ziolkowski posits;

"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. They often function as surrogates when religious faith has been lost – surrogates to which individuals transfer the psychic energy formerly reserved for

²⁶ Ziolkowski Theodore. *Modes of Faith*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

religion and in which they seek the same gratifications, and often the same forms and rituals, as previously afforded by religion.”²⁷

Within his book, Ziolkowski focuses on modernism both as a literary or artistic movement and on its specific time period – the first third of the 20th century. In this modernist context he identifies five surrogates for religion: art for art’s sake, the flight to India, socialism, myth and utopian vision. He ultimately concludes that each of the five surrogates were for most individuals unsuccessful. Those who tried them either had to turn back to a traditional religion, explore a new or emerging religion or settle for a life without faith or surrogates.

It is my intention to take this notion of surrogates and argue that it is possible to have a successful surrogate for religion in the 21st century. This notion of success, which is problematic in itself, is contingent upon the roiling changes heralded by the ever-evolving construction of society which we explored in the preceding section ‘New Waves’. Due to modern Western societal structures whereby belief in God is only one possibility among many, surrogates no longer face the same restrictions and oppositions they would have in the early part of the 20th century.

The surrogate being explored within this thesis as potentially successful is that of the hardcore punk subset of Straight Edge. However, we need first to address the nature of this term surrogate, which is by no means straightforward. Traditionally, use of the term ‘surrogate’ in society is within the context of birth, whereby a woman carries and grows a baby in her womb for another woman who is unable to do so. Typically the egg and sperm of the genetic parents are used to create the embryo which is then implanted into the surrogate’s womb. After birth the baby is given over to the woman who has been unable to conceive or carry.

We in no way should denigrate what these surrogate women are doing, nor deny the joy they bring to couples unable to carry their own offspring. But practically in the context of social trends, the surrogate is little more than a neutral vessel temporarily filled for a specified time and

²⁷ Ziolkowski. *Modes of Faith*. p. X

purpose. At the end of the time they are once again emptied and no longer considered a surrogate, except in the past tense or potential future sense should they decide to offer themselves again.

Another common way in which the term surrogate is used in modern society is that of a replacement for something else which came first but cannot represent itself for whatever reason. This has connotations of inferiority, for the surrogate is only being used because the original cannot be, and all things being equal it is the original that would be preferable. In other words, it is nothing more than a second choice. Here any surrogate for religion would by definition be only an inferior substitute, and thereby risk whitewashing the real reason or need for the surrogate in the first place. Therefore if we are considering a surrogate for religion, in any format, we must always address why that surrogate is needed.

German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche repeatedly argued that 'God is dead', that faith in God as we understand Him or the concept has become impossible or, at the very least, no longer worthy. Most commonly, Nietzsche vehemently attacked the institution of the Church, claiming it to have become the very thing that Jesus himself stood against and wanted to abolish. Nietzsche argues: "A religion like Christianity, which is at no point in contact with actuality, which crumbles away as soon as actuality comes into its own at any point whatever, must naturally be a mortal enemy of the 'wisdom of the world'."²⁸

Nietzsche's concern was to demonstrate that Christian morals were being evoked by philosophers on the basis of presuppositions such as truth, knowledge and free will, while simultaneously refusing to acknowledge that they were human moral creations designed to control and predict behaviour. Furthermore, he demonstrates that in so doing these philosophers are enabling the continuation of the master/slave binary, and he offers in its place a will to power which is beyond good and evil and prevents a universal morality being assumed for all of humanity.

²⁸ Nietzsche Friedrich. *Beyond Good and Evil*. trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), p. 175. One could also reference p. 166 – 7 of the same book.

In order for its existence to be *possible* at all, the philosophical spirit has at first always been obliged to disguise and mask itself in the types of the contemplative man *established in earlier times*, that is, as priest, magician, prophet, above all, as a religious man ...Is there enough pride, daring, boldness, self-assurance, enough spiritual will, will to responsibility, *freedom of will* available today for 'the philosopher' to be from now on really – *possible* on earth?²⁹

Commenting on the work of Nietzsche, amongst many others, Taylor demonstrates that religion was not being replaced by an inferior or vacuous surrogate but rather what he terms 'a radical shift'.³⁰ Taylor argues that this radical shift is the move people made from a society in which belief in God was an assumption and any alternative was inconceivable, into a society in which that belief was only one possibility among many and therefore carried no greater authority than secular institutions.

In so doing authority was being shifted from an external force into individuals themselves, and thus one must expect that those feelings that were previously sated by religion and religious institutions would now have to be located elsewhere. Ziolkowski refers to this transference in the manner we have already quoted: "surrogates to which the 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."³¹

Despite the various terms being utilised by theorists we can clearly see that the prominence of surrogacy for religion is an important issue. We can either find a more suitable word to describe the phenomenon taking place or appropriate the term of surrogate for our own use. In turning to the etymology of the term 'surrogate' we find that as a verb, it derives from the word 'subrogate' which came into usage in the early 1530's and means 'to appoint as a successor'.³² This removes the negative connotation of an empty vessel, or as second place or inferior. However while it would in one sense be simpler to use the term successor rather than surrogate, to do so would remove the

²⁹ Nietzsche Friedrich. *On The Genealogy of Morals*. trans. Douglas Smith. (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 1996), p. 94.

³⁰ Taylor. *A Secular Age*. Throughout.

³¹ Ziolkowski. *Modes of Faith*. p. x.

³² All etymology and definitions provided via Oxford English Dictionary online, accessed through the University of Stirling and the University of Glasgow June 2010.

birth connotation which is a necessity for the argument being proposed regarding Straight Edge. The surrogate mother provides nourishment, protection and indeed existence for the child growing within her in a manner that the genetic mother is incapable of.

Therefore, as I intend to propose that Straight Edge as a community and an ideology provides security and, in a sense, nourishment for its adherents, it is more appropriate to continue to utilise the term surrogate rather than successor. But I am also using the term 'surrogate' with the understanding that it is a successor, not a replacement, and it is important that this definition is remembered when the term is encountered throughout the research. This definition allows me to assert that through Straight Edge I am not simply adding a religious offspring, but rather that in the actions, beliefs and ideas of the adherents is to be found a fundamental re-altering of how we conceive of religion and its place within society.

This should be viewed in terms of the difference between lineage and revolution. Lineage is maintained through different people but traceable and unsurpassable in terms of its position or authority. Revolution is an intentional overturning of the power or structure which results in a completely new seat of authority or conception of society. With regards to Straight Edge and religion, there is a tension between the two: once again it exists in a place of the in-between. That is, it follows in a recognisable lineage of philosophical, theological and social concepts and traditions and yet it is also trying to revolutionise and replace that which it views as irrelevant or damaging.

Consequently, the notion of surrogacy should be viewed as a temporary state, a stage in action about which the end cannot yet be predicted. In essence, within Straight Edge the notion of religion is being recalibrated outside of sacred / profane separation while also keeping some of the paradigmatic aspects of religion, such as authority and meaning-making. But it is a stage. Traditional religion will never dissipate fully but what role it will play in the new context of a post secular world remains to be seen and perhaps the surrogate(s) will have a significant role to play in what is reconfigured.

I am proffering Straight Edge as both an example of a surrogate for religion and as the means by which we can radically alter our perception of religion. Thus it would behove me to provide a brief introduction to the subculture and to the reasons for its selection within this research.

Straight Edge

Straight Edge began in 1981 as a song by the hardcore punk band 'Minor Threat'. It was written by the then teenage lyricist and vocalist Ian MacKaye and was intended as his own personal life statement as well as an indictment of the drug and alcohol fuelled behaviour of the punks he was surrounded by. The song stated that he did not drink alcohol, smoke, do drugs or have casual sex because he had "the straight edge", a name he actually took from the ruler lying on his desk.³³

Many young punks heard his lyrics, and regardless of his intentions, they recognised their own lifestyle or the lifestyle they wanted to live. Thus although MacKaye did not intend it as a call to arms, it became a term that a number of punks used to self-identify and describe themselves. This spread to bands using it as an identifying moniker, and the spread continued through extensive touring and the practice of making and swapping tapes for friends or selling through fanzines.³⁴ Eventually it became known within hardcore punk world-wide and developed into a community within a community. It now has adherents in the estimated tens of thousands throughout the world, although it is impossible to get precise numbers due to the flexibility and anonymity of self-identification, self-regulation and the deliberate lack of a leader or figure-head around whom all adherents gather, focus or pledge allegiance to.

Adherents follow three rules, tenants or guidelines (the terminology will differ from adherent to adherent):

³³ The emergence and solidification of Straight Edge will be dealt with in more detail in Chapter 2.

³⁴ These are magazines typically hand-made by fans with the intention of giving or selling them to other fans within the scene. They are cheaply produced and reproduced but often take many hours to make and will include album reviews, show reviews, photographs and interviews, as well as articles about current issues, in particular those of a political emphasis.

- No alcohol
- No drugs (including tobacco)
- No casual sex

These rules are self-enforced or self-regulated, with those who choose to follow them describing themselves as 'claiming edge'. This is a commitment that is undertaken once and for life, and to break it is irrevocable, although it will seldom result in ostracism from the community unless the ex-Straight Edger persistently ridicules or violently attacks those who remain edge.

There is room for personalising one's Straight Edge lifestyle. Some adherents will interpret no casual sex as abstinence from sex before marriage, while others will simply restrict sex to committed relationships regardless of marital status. Some will interpret no drugs as including caffeine while others will not. An increasing number of adherents will voluntarily include additional abstinence to their Straight Edge identity, most common being that of following a vegetarian or vegan diet or an anti-consumerist practice.

As the title suggests, the purpose of this thesis, broadly speaking, is to examine the spiritual identity and practices of Straight Edge adherents. To be more precise, it is an examination of the place and role of the spiritual within the context of a modern Western secular society, through a focused case study on a secular subculture within popular culture, in an attempt to demonstrate that Straight Edge is a potential surrogate for religion.

Straight Edge was specifically chosen as a case study or exemplar because of a number of factors:

- Its heritage, links and place within punk, specifically hardcore punk, a movement traditionally known for their antagonistic and suspicious relationship towards religion and spirituality.

- It is a secular-based subculture which was founded with no agenda (implicit or explicit) towards engaging with religion or spirituality, yet within it we can see the nature of spirituality arising, analogous to some hybridised version within other areas of society.
- Unlike other music-based subcultures, Straight Edge has at its basis a moral code: three rules which are followed for the individual to be considered Straight Edge.
- There exists within the global Straight Edge community a wide spectrum of behaviours, ideas, community structures and varying engagements with society at large, each of which are strongly linked with the notion and pursuit of individual authenticity. This spectrum will allow for an adequate testing of our hypothesis and sufficient variety of responses to ensure a valid analysis.
- The position of the researcher as an existing Straight Edge adherent of many years, an insider with the knowledge and understanding that is only available to those on the inside.

To assert a claim that a subculture like Straight Edge is functioning as a surrogate for religion, we must be able to provide an understanding of religion that clearly demonstrates how the subculture can and does fulfil that role. This will be done in detail over five chapters (2 – 6) and the final subsection of this introduction is a brief outline of what each of those chapters, and the others within this study, are concerned with.

Chapter outline

Chapter One lays out the methodology used within this research, with particular focus on the ethnographic angle and the use of visual images within the interview process. It also lays out the dichotomy of the position of the researcher as both an insider and a disengaged critic. It will also make clear the reasons for the selection of the USA and the UK and make explicit the differences between the two regions.

Chapter Two charts the necessity for the rise of a community of punks and the specific factors that contributed to the rise, in both the UK and the USA. It argues that punk was a necessary reaction borne from a specific confluence of economic, political, social, familial, educational and musical factors during the late 1970's in both countries. Having established the influence of each of these factors, the chapter moves on to describe the evolution of punk as it solidified into a specific genre of music and, more importantly, a social movement and collective. This section argues that the commodification of punk by both the art school students and by music conglomerates was a significant factor in the creation of hardcore punk as an underground reactionary subculture. This is noted as significant in the overall theme of this thesis because it is this same resistance to commercial and aesthetic commodification and the desire for authenticity that has fuelled the nature and approach of spirituality found within hardcore and Straight Edge punk.

Chapter Three is an exploration of the complex and convoluted relationship between punk, in its different forms, and religion. In exploring this relationship we will examine the significance of Charles Taylor's argument that spirituality as it is found and expressed today in modern Western societies is the result of significant 'new departures'. I argue within this context that Straight Edge and hardcore punk represent a new mode of expression of religion, albeit one that is radically different from those proposed by Taylor and Ziolkowski. This is achieved through a focus on four core factors: syncretism, popular culture, globalisation and technology. Having examined this within the broader hardcore punk scene, the remainder of the chapter focuses on Straight Edge's understandings and expressions of the new departure. This involves a significant engagement with such terms as religious, secular, sacred and profane. The argument is made for a need to rethink how we consider, utilise and distinguish between these terms, an argument in concert with the work of theorists such as Fitzgerald³⁵, Ostwalt³⁶ and Sylvan.³⁷

³⁵ Fitzgerald Timothy. *The Ideology of Religious Studies*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

³⁶ Ostwalt Conrad. *Secular Steeples*. (Harrisburg PA: Trinity Press International, 2003).

³⁷ Sylvan Robyn. *Traces of the Spirit*. (New York: New York University Press, 2002).

Chapter Four focuses on the significance of the music within the subculture. It makes explicit links between music and emotion through to the possibility of a religious rapture as it is found in Eastern traditions. This chapter also focuses on specific instances of a deliberate intersection between religion and Straight Edge through a study of Krishnacore, Dharma Punx and Taqwacore. This chapter builds on work previously done in the area of popular culture, music and religion / spirituality by theorists such as Lynch, Sylvan and Ostwalt.³⁸ It also engages with the theory of Orientalism and the construction of the East by the West.

Chapter Five is the first of two chapters which set out an interpretation of the results gathered from interviews, including the visual images that interviewees created and then explained. This chapter examines the notion of place / space and that of community. The necessity for an autonomous and self-created space for the members of the subculture is explored through the 924 Gilman Street Project and the practise of squatting. This is then expanded through an exploration of virtual space linked with a notion of limitless theology. Community is presented as an integral and paramount factor within Straight Edge. Within this section community is both a physical, created element and a symbolic creation, as shown through the use of dress and tattoos, and strongly linked to the punk D.I.Y ethic.

Chapter Six continues the interpretation of results through an examination of authenticity and salvation. The collective is integrally linked to the notion of authenticity, which is ironic because authenticity is the means by which the autonomous self is located and yet it is intricately bound with the notion of community. It is argued that the authentic self is only possible when one is in the collective and the collective is committed. The concept of salvation is then presented to contend that salvation has been removed from the divine and placed within the realm of the mundane, the everyday and, commonly within interviewees' responses, in punk or Straight Edge itself. This chapter has the strongest reliance and interpretation of the visual images created by participants.

³⁸ Lynch Gordon. *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005).

Chapter Seven is the conclusion of the thesis, which serves to summarise and recapitulate the main points raised throughout. It also addresses directly the question of whether Straight Edge is or is not a religion. Finally, it looks to the sustainability of both Straight Edge as a surrogate for religion and the research begun within this thesis. This question of sustainability is raised through the issues of parenthood and technology, and by widening the field of research into areas such as secular countries and countries which are overtly fundamentalist and have even declared music such as punk to be not only illegal but also anti-religious.

Chapter One “Not Just Talk”

“The next generations here and we’re ready to pick up the pace. Side by side we wave the flag of discontent in their face. We might never change the world. AT LEAST WE’VE HAD OUR SAY.”³⁹

Everyone wants to be heard, everyone wants to tell their story in their own words. The purpose of sociology as a discipline is to discover, identify and lay bare the basic structure of human society, to examine the forces that enable cohesion of groups and to learn what the conditions are that transform society, both negatively and positively. Sociology was defined as a discipline by August Comte who stressed repeatedly that all social theories required a basis of observation. Today this notion of observation has greatly widened to include a number of interlinked and disparate methods often culminating in a written ethnography.

Of course the words, comments, thoughts, beliefs and practices of each social group or phenomenon studied is underpinned and subsequently analysed through grounding theories by the sociologist undertaking the research. An important part of the shift discussed in the Introduction is that of the move towards self-authentication. In order to be true to this theme, there has to be a forum or mode by which the self can express and position itself in a manner that retains its integrity and authenticity. As a researcher I want to provide that space, though in so doing I risk being perceived as primarily showing insider bias. Yet such space is integral to what these adherents are discussing and advocating, especially in terms of self-authentication.

The nature of the voice of those who were interviewed or who contributed to this thesis either through providing information, ideas, memories or song lyrics entails a disruption to academic and theoretical narrative. The voice of Straight Edge will always punctuate and intrude for two specific reasons. First because I have adhered to the sociological principle of not censoring the language and tone of those I have interviewed or used the lyrics of. Thus I have not removed what may be considered by some to be the vulgar or profane expletives with which they frequently

³⁹ ‘Chip Away’, Sick Of It All, Built to Last, Elektra Entertainment Group, 1997.

punctuate their speech. To hear the true voice of a group under scrutiny one must be willing to listen to and allow them to speak in their own way. The second reason is that this is a group which has a clear resistance to academia in a variety of ways. Largely this is due to their desire to remain unco-opted and outside the realm of the mainstream. There are also additional social, economic and familial reasons for this resistance, which are explored in greater detail in Chapters Two and Three.

Straight Edge is very much a subculture; one can even justifiably term it an underground movement particularly within the UK. As such it has its own argot, which members do not feel the need to elaborate upon during interviews. Instead it is assumed that as the interviewer and a fellow adherent I not only recognise but also understand it. This is perhaps even more problematic within the song lyrics, as they could easily be misread as a poetic device in which the language is largely symbolic and most certainly open to broad interpretation. Thus there is a further disruption to the narrative when a quote or lyric is used to illustrate or elaborate upon a particular point. There is not only a sudden shift in tone but a language that may require further explanation or illumination before the academic narrative and theoretical engagement can resume and progress.

There is a final point that I wish to make regarding the use of lyrics, and again this reflects back strongly on the voice of the interviewee and informants. Typically song lyrics are perceived as analogous with poetry and are stylistically written in the same manner. Furthermore song lyrics are deemed to be subjective, interpretative and typically revealing or exploring some notion of a grand universal Truth. This presumption in itself is problematic given the current Western move towards a rejection of universal truths and metanarratives. Nonetheless there remains a tradition of viewing the lyricist as a wordsmith or literary artisan.

As will be demonstrated in later chapters, the very notion of punk music was antithetical to this view of the poet.⁴⁰ Instead the purpose of punk was twofold. First it was to provide a voice to

⁴⁰ Indeed many punk musicians would take this further and insist that they are not artists, unlike so many mainstream musicians who do use such a moniker. The reasoning behind this statement by punk musicians is not only a disdain for the notion of an artist as separate from an ordinary or everyday person, but also linked with the concept that artists by nature

the ordinary person regardless of talent or training and to enable them to speak aloud their experiences, needs and frustrations in a language that they understood and spoke themselves. Secondly it was to raise awareness of the state of society, as they saw it, in a manner which demanded attention and opened discourse. This second motivation, which - was largely ignored by the media who simply focus on spectacular image and the former reason - is noticeable within the layout of the lyrics.

Lyrics are written in a linear manner, rather than the poetic format with line breaks. This is because it is not a truth or reality being provided to individuals by an enlightened artisan; it is a conversation between the writer and the audience. This is more obvious at a live show in which there may be a call and response between the two, or when people can actually express their ideas and maintain the dialogue in between the performances.

Voice is significant throughout this thesis, not just in terms of how it disrupts and intrudes upon the narrative, as punk itself did on rock music, the media and society at the time. It also reminds us throughout of the significance of authenticity in the overall argument of Straight Edge as a surrogate for religion. The voice of Straight Edge has to be allowed to emerge and explain itself, and to attempt to do that in its stead would be to denigrate the entire reason for the creation of and longevity of punk in all its form. This is something that will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 6.

This chapter is structured to provide a clear account of the reasons for undertaking an ethnographical approach. Thus I will first examine the validity of ethnography as a methodological tool, from this I will move on to outline the where, when and why of my chosen ethnographical focus; finally, this will lead into an examination of the specific methods chosen for field work, including their history and place within sociology.

grow and develop their work, changing styles and they express themselves. Many of those involved with punk especially hardcore and Straight Edge remain within that genre and while some of them do improve musically they do not typically experiment with other musical genres. The music is not an artistic expression but a means of challenge and a core part of their identity.

Ethnography as a methodological tool

Ethnography as a methodology is the result of a conglomerate of different roots, including British social anthropology, American cultural anthropology, European sociology and the Chicago School of sociology. “Social and cultural anthropology have contributed greatly to the comparative analysis of societies by exploring the ways of life among preliterate communities throughout the world.”⁴¹ During the early half of the twentieth century academics and students within the School of Sociology at the University of Chicago began to realise that human life and diversity could be studied ‘at home’, so to speak. This came about because of a number of localised and wider social changes, such as mass immigration, the growth and sprawl of urban living areas, a population explosion, increased poverty, increased racial divisions and increased crime in Chicago. Thus Chicago had become “a sort of natural laboratory in which social life could be studied first-hand.”⁴²

The Chicago School was itself influenced by three theoretical stances: formalism, pragmatism and social ecology. Formalism was formulated by the German sociologist Georg Simmel,⁴³ who argued that predominantly humans interact repeatedly on the basis of specific overarching forms, and are action based, such as subordination, competition and the division of labour. Much like his contemporary Durkheim, Simmel argued that “neither society nor the individual is thinkable without the other. Individuals engage with one another and thereby constitute the social. Society is not just the sum total of individual acts, but refers to individuals interconnected through social interaction.”⁴⁴

Pragmatism is a US theory that emerged in the 1870s. The goal of pragmatism is to regard things in a practical or realistic manner instead of being led by theory or ideology. In terms of a research methodology for sociologists it involves understanding how people actually make sense of

⁴¹ Broom L. & Selznick P. *Sociology*. (London: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 5.

⁴² O’Reilly Karen. *Key Concepts in Ethnography*. (London: Sage Publications, 2009), p. 29.

⁴³ 1858 – 1918.

⁴⁴ O’Reilly. *Key Concepts in Ethnography*. p. 30.

and articulate the situations in which they find themselves or wilfully choose to be in and the consequential actions of those people based on their own understanding.

Social ecology was very popular with the Chicago School; they often took ideas that one would traditionally find within biological sciences and applied them to the urban setting of Chicago. An example of this is found in the work of Robert Park who utilised the term 'natural area' for "any segregated racial or cultural group and the local zones they inhabited, believing that each zone has its own culture and form of life that distinguished it from the zone next door."⁴⁵

As somewhat of an inheritant of the Chicago School, British sociology also made significant contributions to the development of ethnography as a methodological tool, albeit with a very different theoretical underpinning and approach from the Chicago School. The most influential of British sociology during the mid-twentieth century was the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies based at the University of Birmingham. According to media and popular culture researcher Dan Laughey, the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies tended "to adopt an almost entirely structuralist perspective on subcultures as exclusive signifying systems."⁴⁶

Structuralism, as an academic theory within sociology, rose to prominence during the 1950s. It is based on the premise that any particular field of study comprised elements that are interrelated in systems and structures at different levels with the structures being considered as more important than the individual elements that make them up. In other words, it is the interaction of the structures that yield more information and significance than would be gained from an examination of each of the elements in isolation.

I do not propose that the Chicago School approach and the approach of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies should be thought of as being in opposition to one another. Rather we must remember that they both came into existence and developed their theories and practices

⁴⁵ O'Reilly. Key Concepts of Ethnography. p.31.

⁴⁶ Laughey Dan. Music and Youth Culture. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), p. 14.

at specific times and places which will no doubt have an impact on the direction of the school. In line with British concerns at the time, as will be examined in Chapter Two, the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies focused on issues such as class, particularly working class, deviance, generational elements and gender, especially that of the masculine.

Both schools have contributed much to the use of ethnography as a methodological tool. From the Chicago School we received “a focus in research on the concrete experience of human interaction; the first hand, intimate study of daily life.”⁴⁷ From the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies we received a significant insight into the role and position of mass media in the daily lives of individuals and the reciprocity of produced texts. Both of these influences will be in evidence throughout the analysis and interpretation of collected data in later chapters within this thesis.

As regards both the field work undertaken and the ethnography produced as a result, both the Chicago School and the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS hereafter) have had an influence on this thesis. Crucially the CCCS is largely responsible for the association of subculture with collectives that formed around or were based upon the visual, or upon styles of the spectacle. Punk itself was one of these spectacular subcultures that were examined by the CCCS, most notably through Hebdige’s work.⁴⁸

The CCCS had a predominantly neo-Marxist perspective which led to the argument that subculture was largely a class-based issue and particularly a means for working class youth to retain their working class identity whilst simultaneously indulging their capitalist tendencies borne under a materialistic society. Hebdige argued that to countermand the tension within working class identity and material consumption, subcultures gave new meanings to that which they were consuming. The meanings were often counter to how those objects or symbols were viewed within ‘normal’ society. However, Hebdige continues that despite the reinterpretations attached by the subculture, they

⁴⁷ O’Reilly. *Key Concepts in Ethnography*. p. 31

⁴⁸ Hebdige Dick. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. (London: Routledge, 1979).

would eventually be appropriated, stripped of subcultural or subversive meaning and sold back to the public to create a profit for large companies and ensure control of the market.⁴⁹

While this is certainly true of punk symbols, clothing, hair styles, body modifications and even, to a limited extent, the musical style, the phenomenon requires a wider examination of its impact on the subculture than the CCCS typically produced, certainly during the late 1970's. This is an area the CCCS has repeatedly been criticised for – namely the presentation of an overly simplistic duality between subculture and dominant culture. In both Chapters Two and Three of this thesis I will demonstrate that social factors such as class, race, etc. did have a huge impact on the formation of punk as a musical genre and as a subculture; however, it was by no means the sole nor even the dominant factor – rather it was one among many.

Furthermore, there remains a need to examine the effect of the said appropriation, co-modification and reselling of their subversive subcultural artefacts on that subculture. Hodkinson criticises the CCCS in this area for their assumption that there exists “singular subversive meanings of subcultural styles which, ultimately, reflected the shared class position of participants.”⁵⁰ Thus while I intend to acknowledge the place of class and consumer within this study in so far as it is pertinent to the overall topic of the spiritual identity and practices of Straight Edge identity, I need to take the research and analysis further than this. I need to examine specifically the impact of capitalism on the both the construction of the subculture and on the individuals within the subculture.

Both Chapters Two and Three will show how important the appropriation, re-packaging and selling of their subcultural artefacts and meanings were on the overall sustainability and direction of punk as it became hardcore. I will argue that hardcore was a direct result and reaction to this very interference and interaction with commercial attempts to buy and sell punk for profit. In Chapter Three I will further the argument by beginning to show how important the values of integrity, authenticity, suspicion and subversion were to the beginning of hardcore punk's engagement with

⁴⁹ Hebdige. *Subculture*. p. 101, 122-3, 130-1 for example.

⁵⁰ Hodkinson Paul. *Goth*. (Oxford: Berg, 2002), p. 11.

religion and more specifically spirituality. These qualities will be shown to be at least partially in response to the appropriation of their subculture for mass consumption and profit. In subsequent chapters this will be built upon and, utilising direct quotes from participating interviewees, I will strengthen the argument that contrary to the typical CCCS claim of a loss or subtraction through appropriation, any attempt at commercial gain through the commodification of a subculture can actually galvanise the said subculture into action and growth. In the case of Straight Edge and hardcore punk, it led to a return to the core values of punk, a renewed desire to maintain the D.I.Y ethic and a desire to engage with other aspects of the world, including a spiritual dimension for some.

My own work, as evidenced within this thesis, more closely allies with the Chicago School approach than with that of the CCCS. In stating this I mean that this thesis is a combination of theory and field work which was a cornerstone of Chicago School sociology. Furthermore as regards the exemplar being examined – Straight Edge and hardcore punk – it is certainly an example of the Chicago School conception of subcultures as a deviant group. “Deviant” here is in the sense of a different direction from the dominant culture rather than in the sense of a negative connotation of criminality.

However I do differ from the Chicago School when I come to consider the reasons for the creation of punk, hardcore and Straight Edge. Whereas the Chicago School largely argued that subcultures were created as a direct response to how those individuals were perceived by others within mainstream culture – that is, as having a lesser status⁵¹ -- I argue that in fact the mainstream perception of ‘punks’ was deliberately cultivated to a large extent by the subcultural affiliates themselves. In fact I would go so far as to argue that a negative reaction was strongly desired by many within punk, their purpose being to shock and upset as the most effective way of challenging the norm.

⁵¹ Strongly in evidence in the 1955 work of Cohen Albert. *Delinquent Boys*. (New York: The Free Press, 1955).

An emphasis by the Chicago School in understanding and resolving the issue of status between subcultural affiliation and dominant culture affiliation fails to take into account the dual role that can be held by an individual, whereby they can attain subcultural affiliation whilst also maintaining a certain degree of affiliation with and indeed within mainstream culture. Researchers have repeatedly shown that people, particularly young people – who often form a significant number of subcultural adherents – are capable and willing to have a fluid approach towards identity.

By this I mean that they will move from one subcultural identity to another to another, or they can maintain dual subcultural identities such as a 'Goth punk' or a 'surfer punk'. There is no reason that in constructing their identities as individuals why some people would not feel valid in taking onboard a strong subcultural identity whilst remaining tied to mainstream culture for the purposes of employment, for example a punk who is a teacher. This was certainly in evidence amongst those who participated in interviews. For example, Frank had a number of years of teaching experience behind him, Ewan relied upon government funding to start his clothing company, Billy worked for many years as a welder and Ann relied on office employment to fund her college course.

Hodkinson raises the issue of 'mutual gravitation'⁵² with the Chicago School approach. He objects to their tendency to imply that subcultures were spontaneously formed by individuals reacting to their social status and conditions and uniformly creating and then joining en-masse. Hodkinson is right to question this, as it does not allow for the diversity that is found within any subculture, as shall be evidenced within the analysis of my own field work. This diversity is at all levels and in all areas of each subculture and in many ways is necessary to prevent stagnation and co-option (with greater or less degrees of success).

Ethnography as a practice tends to be holistic in approach, reflecting the belief that people and communities are best understood when examined and observed in the widest possible context. It is within the evaluation of the acquired data that one finds the divergence of approaches

⁵² Hodkinson. Goth. p. 11

appearing. Commonly evaluation is based on a philosophical standpoint such as those discussed above in reference to the Chicago School and the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. The philosophical basis that I wish to briefly consider here are substantive, interpretative, reflexive and expressive.

Substantive ethnography

Substantive ethnography asks of the study, and indeed of the studied: does this contribute in some way to our understanding of social life? Of course every academic (or otherwise in-depth) study of a particular community or group of individuals should strive to contribute something new to human knowledge and to our understanding of human society.

To ensure that any ethnographic research is substantive it is important to do two things: first to continually remember the overall research aim, and second to allow the time and space to develop a relationship of trust that enables those being studied to explain their actions, practices, idiosyncrasies and ideas in their own words. The first is fairly self-evident: one will obviously have certain research questions and aims in mind when approaching and interacting with participants and communities, but one must also bear these in mind when one is confronted with the spectacular within that community and when one is undertaking the analytical section of the research.

There is a potential when one examines a group such as hardcore punk or Straight Edge that the spectacular elements, such as the dancing, the fashion or the activism, take centre stage, when in reality, as Chapter Two will reveal, the truly interesting elements (particularly in relation to the questions being asked in this thesis) lie underneath the surface of the spectacular actions. That is not to say they should not be brought in when relevant and appropriate, but rather that they should not be allowed to dominate.

Primarily it is the voice of the participants in this study that will be the most revealing of the spiritual ideas, identity and practices of Straight Edge adherents. They must be allowed to tell their

own story in their own voices; this is part of the responsibility of the researcher. However, Lynch has identified a potential problem with regards to the voices of the participants. Lynch argues that in recent years, particularly amongst studies involving youth spiritualities, there has arisen a failure to detect clearly articulated beliefs by the participants involved in the study.⁵³ He argues “young people have often been found to struggle to articulate their religious beliefs or the significance of such beliefs in their lives.”⁵⁴ If this is in fact found to be the case during field work then the researcher has to make difficult choices as regards to the level of interpretation they apply to their findings. It is to interpretation, as the second philosophical basis, and as a response to the above problematic, that I now wish to turn my attention.

Interpretative ethnography

Interpretative ethnography, or interpretivism, to give it its proper name, “views individuals as actors in the social world rather than focusing on the way they are acted upon by social structures and external factors.”⁵⁵ This approach has its early basis in the theories of Max Weber who argued that individuals do not simply respond to external stimuli but they attach meaning to what they do by thinking and then choosing how to act and react. The role of the ethnographer is first to observe, second to question and then to interpret those meanings, thoughts and actions. In other words, “ethnographers connect meanings (culture) to observable action in the real world.”⁵⁶

However, this is more problematic than it may first appear. In connecting the meanings you potentially are adding meanings to an action that were not intended by the actor. This is particularly relevant when we refer back to the problem of expression raised by Lynch: the interpreter would have to be wary of putting words and ideas into the mouths of those they are studying and thus invalidating the findings.

⁵³ Lynch, AAR conference, 2008.

⁵⁴ Lynch, AAR conference, 2008.

⁵⁵ O’Reilly. Key Concepts in Ethnography. p. 119.

⁵⁶ Denzin Norman. Interpretative Ethnography. (London: Sage Publications, 1997), p. xvi.

I wish to be clear here that I am not advocating the removal of the voice of the ethnographer from the study, which would be disadvantageous, if not impossible. Instead what I am arguing for is an approach to the participants and to the observed that is respectful of their opinions and is developed enough that one can reliably make connections between their actions and their intentions that are based on a deep understanding and can be validated (perhaps using altered language or methods) through further conversation and observation of the participants.

Furthermore I am advocating that in the practise of interpretative ethnography we should consider including wider texts rather than simple words and actions. Qualitative researcher Norman Denzin argues that interpretative ethnographers should also explore experiential texts such as performance-based text, literary journalism and narratives of the self. He argues, "Language and speech do not mirror experience: they create experience and in the process of creation constantly transform and defer that which is being described. The meanings of a subject's statements are, therefore, always in motion."⁵⁷ Thus I will be referencing and analysing texts such as graffiti, space, audience performer interaction, dancing and clothing, as they are appropriate to the overall understanding of the subculture and the means by which they communicate.

The ability to provide accurate interpretative ethnographies to a greater or lesser extent relies upon one's ability to be reflexive and it is to this philosophical basis that I now wish to turn my attention.

Reflexive ethnography

Regardless of what collective, community or phenomena we are examining we must acknowledge that to some degree at least we are connected to it, more so than researcher and subject. We are a part of the study -- be that simply because of the relationships built up through the field work, a political outcome, or because the researcher was an insider to begin with. Thus because

⁵⁷ Denzin. Interpretative Ethnography. p.5.

of these connections, aims and experiences, we must be willing to ask questions regarding our reflexivity.

Typically debates about reflexivity are concerned with subjectivity versus objectivity. Objectivity is often felt to be maintained when the effect of the researcher on the subject is carefully considered and the research is constructed in such a way as to ensure that the effect is kept to a minimal. Reflexivity clearly relies on some subjectivity, an awareness of one's perceived states during the time and events that one has recorded and is now analysing, but one must not allow this to turn into a form of self-absorption. The ethnographer's voice should be heard but not at the expense of the voices of the studied community or phenomena. What we should hear from the ethnographer are his or hers "awareness of their necessary connection to the research situation and hence their effects upon it."⁵⁸

What is in essence being discussed here is the politics of representation. Ethnographies are created and worked on by individual researchers who have to make selective choices of what to represent and why. These representations will inevitably be informed through a variety of philosophical biases, political concerns, academic traditions and personal interests, and these must be acknowledged, but not used as a means to dismiss the work. O'Reilly argues that this can be achieved through the researcher,

Locating their ethnographies historically, spatially, and structurally in relations to politics and power, time, global political and technological developments, and by including unbounded, fragmented, and mobile communications.⁵⁹

Thus to achieve this in this ethnographic study, I will first examine and present the group to be studied within their wider historical, spatial and structural relationships towards politics, social events and national trends, in Chapters Two and Three. The role of unbounded, fragmented and

⁵⁸ Davies C. *Reflexive Ethnography*. (Oxon: Routledge, 2008), p.7.

⁵⁹ O'Reilly. *Key Concepts in Ethnography*. p.189.

mobile communications will be explored in greater detail in the final section of this chapter when I examine the specific methods I intend to undertake.

Reflexivity is not only to be utilised in preparation for and while out in the field; it is also an important feature within the writing up of ethnography. One has to make selections to use specific pieces of text, specific resources and individuals and also to choose not to use others that were gathered. This should be done honestly with a great deal of reflection on why those choices were made, while how much personal memories, academic strictures or traditions, methodological and philosophical theories influenced that choice must also be made honest and clear. While writing up the ethnographer should locate themselves within the text without making the text about them and should be very aware of who they are writing for and for what purpose. In doing so one is expressing a reality, which brings me to the final philosophical basis that I wish to consider for the purpose of this thesis – expressivist.

Expressive ethnography

Expressive ethnography is concerned with answering the question; does what I am observing and particularly reporting seem true? In other words, is it a credible, intellectual account of a cultural, social, communal or individual sense of idea of reality compatible with both how the participant and the researcher sees it? Of course, philosophically, truth is at best subjective and at worst unknowable, but in the case of ethnography, one is looking for an understanding of the truth of the situation or the reason behind a decision, action or idea from the focus of study. This can only be achieved through an intersubjective approach, gained by utilising the researcher's perspective, the informant's perspective, and the proper context.

Despite this apparent pessimistic reality that we cannot achieve an absolute truth, O'Reilly asserts that through three approaches (or defences, as she terms them) there can be maintained a reasonable level of expressivism:

1. “An *intersubjective defence* says realist ethnographies gain value and significance as they meet other accounts of similar (or the same) settings and contribute to a plausible, collective account.
2. An *epistemological defence* acknowledges that humans who are scholars in the world are no different than humans as citizens in seeing the world as real and having confidence in those perceptions.
3. A *pragmatic defence* argues that it is possible to evaluate knowledge in terms of its outcomes.”⁶⁰

To ensure accuracy and authenticity in the reflection, interpretation and discussion of the truth as it is understood by both the community studied and by the individual ethnographer requires an awareness of how that community perceives itself within wider society and why. Each community studied inherently carries within itself “a set of narratives about itself, some of which are generated internally while others usually more visible and pervasive are developed and deployed in and by society around it.”⁶¹

Another way of describing this is to say that there is a world that is external to the collective being studied and to the ethnographer as researcher within that collective. Thus we must be honest with ourselves and the reader regarding the inherent limitations of the knowledge that is to be found within the actions of collective, the individual, the ethnographer and the voices heard therein. Therefore it is my intention within this thesis to utilise these three defences or approaches as they best fit the information and knowledge gained from field work and the subsequent analysis and interpretation.

The specifics of field work

Having now dealt with the theoretical basis for engaging with ethnography as a valid research methodology, we must now make the next step and delve into field work itself. The purpose of my field work and this thesis in general is to conduct an in-depth qualitative exploration of the connections between religion, spirituality and hardcore punk, with particular emphasis on the

⁶⁰ O'Reilly. *Key Concepts in Ethnography*. p.185.

⁶¹ Gelder K. *Subcultures*. (Oxon: Routledge, 2007), pg 2.

spiritual identity and practices of Straight Edge punks. By the terms qualitative I refer to an understanding of the behaviour of Straight Edge punks and the reasons that inform and govern that behaviour. This approach of qualitative directed research is more appropriate given that it is a relatively small subset of punk that I am interested in examining in depth.

Choosing to pursue a qualitative approach has led to specific decisions having to be made regarding the location and timing of the field work to be undertaken. An interest in understanding the behaviour of Straight Edge punks with relation to religion and spirituality and the reasons that informs and governs said behaviour led me first of all to narrow my field of research to two Western countries: the UK and the USA.

Straight Edge is a worldwide movement, with estimated tens of thousands of followers. However, each country has its own scenes or communities, each of which have a number of variables that are largely informed through national identity, social factors, musical styles and national religious trends. Thus to ensure balanced comparative data I selected two countries that are as similar as possible, but still have enough of a difference to enable an honest portrayal and variables in data that will provide substantive answers to my qualitative concerns.

As I will outline in Chapter Two, both countries experienced similar economic, social, familial, generational and musical journeys and problems during the time in which punk arose and developed. The inevitable variables between the two countries arise in their relationship with religion, although again here there exists a similarity in that what is the official approach is not the approach found in actuality, in daily life. In the UK there exists a connection between religion and state.⁶² However, there are strict guidelines in place that limit the influence and power of religion in the UK which are largely adhered to.⁶³ In contrast to this, the USA has an official separation of the church and state.⁶⁴

⁶² Religion is taught in state schools, has a place within politics and law-making decision in the UK; it is represented in parliament and consulted as local communities by policy makers working for local councils. The ruling monarchy is still regarded as and holds the title of head of the Church of England.

⁶³ No church or religion has final say in any law-passing or legal matter. Religions cannot determine what is and is not taught within the religious studies lessons in state-funded schools.

The separation is based on the principle that religion or faith is a private matter between a person and their god and a matter of opinion requiring no facts for proof, whereas the powers and matters of concern for the US government are in the areas of policy and have no relevance to belief.⁶⁵

However, much like the UK, the separation of church and state in the USA does not follow, in daily life, the official guidelines or standards. In reality there is frequent blurring of the boundaries. In daily discourse and in the media religion is much more embedded in the USA than it is in the UK; it is also much more a part of the public domain.⁶⁶

Thus the USA and UK have enough significant factors in common and a strong disparity on their respective place of religion within the overall culture and daily discourse to form a viable comparative study of the spiritual identity and practice of Straight Edge punks. Of course the UK and in particular the USA are large land masses and it would be unrealistic to expect to cover Straight Edge within all of both countries, so specific areas had to be chosen which required as much careful consideration as the selection of the countries for examination.

Within the UK there exist individual scenes which are geographically based but because of the relatively small size of the overall hardcore scene the UK is generally considered, by itself and by outsiders, to be one cohesive scene. This is not the reality as each individual scene will have bands in ranking order, slight musical variations and influence and different issues that are addressed. For example, Watford based band Gallows released songs on their latest album⁶⁷ addressing the current rise and devastation of knife crime in London, while the Brighton band The Ghost of a Thousand reference the joblessness, the sense of despair and the devastation caused by the recession.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Religion is not taught in any state-funded secondary school. Any assembled groupings in schools would not be religious in ethos or content and would not contain prayers. The first amendment in the US constitution ensures that there remains a separation between church and state, not just in education but in areas such as the law and politics.

⁶⁵ Separation of the church and state was first described by Thomas Jefferson who called it a 'wall of separation'.

⁶⁶ Within popular culture there is a persistent American sensibility towards religion in evidence that accepts the religious as a part of the construct of identity, as seen on television shows such as Jerry Springer or Oprah. Of course these programmes also reveal the insatiable appetite for an exposure of the private within the public domain, which one would also expect to see reflected in the differences between US and UK interviewees with regards to religion.

⁶⁷ 'Grey Britain', Gallows, Reprise Records, 2009.

⁶⁸ 'New Hopes, New Demonstrations', The Ghost of a Thousand, Epitaph Records, 2009.

Being a part of the UK hardcore scene, coming from initially Northern Ireland and then Manchester scenes, I had to consider carefully which areas in the UK to examine. I determined that either through loyalty or unintentionality there was too much of a risk that friend influenced groupings would result in inaccurate data, as I have already discussed my ideas and work at great length with them prior to and during this period of study.

Furthermore, I was very aware that studies on punk in general have tended to focus on London, with Manchester receiving the occasional mention (although that is usually in reference to the post punk scene that flourished there with bands such as Joy Division, Happy Mondays and New Order, and with clubs such as the Hacienda).⁶⁹ This does not provide a fair and balanced overview of punk as a subculture or a musical style, let alone allow for a consideration of the identity and practices of a specific subset within punk.

I also had to take into account that the number of Straight Edge adherents in the UK is significantly smaller than the USA and I have constricted it further by controlling factors such as that of age. I am interested in discovering the development of and the changing nature of Straight Edge as an inherent part of an individual's overall identity and so thus have eliminated from my study teenagers (who compose the greatest number of adherents yet have the highest rate of breaking edge). In addition, I did not interview or involve anyone who is a pre-existing friend or who has discussed my research with my friends. This is to ensure that all responses are as authentic as possible and not tainted with loyalty or a desire to help that exceeds the normal desire of a participant.

Considering all of this I reached the decision to undertake ethnographic work in the UK wherever the opportunity presents itself, although I was most active in seeking out participants in Scotland, were my connections within the scene are minimal.

⁶⁹ Savage, Hebdige, Coleridge & Sullivan.

Areas of the USA to study were somewhat less problematic although required no less attention and consideration. I have no explicit links with any scene in America so I know that my work and ideas have not been discussed in any sort of connection with myself. Within the USA each individual scene is discrete, insular and self-supporting. There is interaction between all scenes and bands will frequently tour the USA criss-crossing one another and one another's home scenes. Each scene has a specific sound, some of which have gained great acclaim in the underground, such as the New York sound or the Bay Area sound. Often these distinct sounds are linked to the musical history of the area in which they are based -- for example, one can hear the blues influence in many Chicago based bands. In other scenes it is their geographical location that most strongly influences the musical sound, such as the surfer punk found in Orange County.

Straight Edge began and is more widespread in the USA than anywhere else globally. It is more common for those outside of the subculture to be somewhat aware of Straight Edge, which is not the case in the UK. However, it is not physically possible nor desirable or productive to examine every scene within America so I had to be selective. Selection was based on specific factors, which will be dealt with shortly; but, it was also controlled and restricted by funding.

Berkeley, Ca has the estimated largest Straight Edge community in the USA; nothing like it exists in the UK in terms of size, cohesion and interaction. As a community they own property which they run as an art space, spoken word performance space, band rehearsal and performance space. It is run as co-operative based on the Straight Edge principles; world famous within hardcore punk it is known as the 924 Gilman Street project. Furthermore there are a number of Straight Edge squats in and around Berkeley, Oakland and the San Francisco area which observation of would enable me gain insight into how they collectively manage the different interpretations of the three Straight Edge 'rules'.

As I am more interested in studying those who have been Straight Edge adherents for longer Berkeley was deliberately chosen for its older demographic. I wish to focus on this older age as it

allows for the fervour of youth to settle into a daily lifestyle and for Straight Edge to manifest itself as an integral part of the individual's overall identity. I also believe that it will enable me to find adherents who will be more willing to discuss and explore the spirituality aspects that I am concerned with. I reached the conclusion that I would be better placed in the Bay Area to examine and question this aspect and that due to the unique place of spirituality within the area it would provide for an interesting contrast to the UK.

The times for travel were also very carefully chosen for two specific reasons. First, it is a time when students are moving in and out of both areas for university and I was very keen to observe how the influx of new members and the ebb and flow are dealt with by Straight Edge communities and what impact it has on their identity as a cohesive unit and as individuals. Second, the more established bands in the area had released new albums in August and September and were scheduled to be on European or UK tours at this time. This enabled me to observe directly how the Straight Edge community encourages local and inexperienced bands. I am arguing that inherent to their spiritual journey and ideas are Straight Edge and hardcore ideals which should manifest themselves with these young bands – ideals such as support, integrity and community.

The data will be analysed and presented by taking account into the theoretical basis examined in the first section of this chapter. Having explicated the details and where I will be focusing on the field work section of this thesis, I now wish to turn my attention to the specific methodology I intend to employ during my ethnographic study and my reasons for selecting it.

Ethnographic methodology

The hardcore and Straight Edge punk scene is multi-faceted and complex in both origin and construction. Thus to adequately study it requires a multi-faceted methodological approach to the ethnographical aspect. Thus in this section I will be examining the variety of methods I will be employed during field work. However, before I do that I wish to briefly acknowledge the importance

and role of another, equally important aspect -- my unambiguous position as a long term genuine participant within both hardcore and Straight Edge. Thus I am analysing the field as an insider, a position which requires a brief unpacking and justification.

Insider status

To be clear from the beginning, this thesis and its underpinning research are what linguist and anthropologist Kenneth Pike coined in 1954 as an 'emic study'.⁷⁰ That is, it is a description and analysis of behaviours, beliefs and ideas in terms that are meaningful to me as the researcher because I am deeply involved with the culture in which they are based. The meaning they hold for me can manifest itself throughout this thesis either consciously – as for example, the image of a graffitied wall in a Manchester squat in Chapter Five – or subconsciously – as for example, most likely in Chapter Four which deals with the music of the subculture. Although the term emic is appropriate and necessary I have decided to utilise the term 'insider' and 'insider status' in conjunction with emic, as 'insider' implies special or particular knowledge which emic does not.

Sociologist Paul Hodkinson argues that “the complexity and instability of contemporary identities and groupings makes the idea that a researcher can occupy the position of 'insider' a little hazardous.”⁷¹ There are two issues that Hodkinson is referring to: first that the construction of identity with reference to subcultural affiliation has in recent years undergone a rigorous redefinition; and second that within the field of ethnography there exists a criticism of insider ethnographies.

Cultural theorist John Storey and other theorists such as Laughey and Lynch have suggested that in recent decades the boundaries between subcultural and even cultural affiliation have become significantly more fluid than previously was found or considered. It is no longer unusual for individuals to not only change their subcultural affiliation as they age but for those within a

⁷⁰ Headland Thomas, Pike Kenneth, Harris Marvin (eds). *Emics and Etics: the insider / outsider debate*. (Sage: London, 1990).

⁷¹ Hodkinson. *Goth*. p. 4

subculture to have affiliation to a lesser degree with other (sometimes linked, sometimes disparate) subcultures. Certainly this is found within hardcore and Straight Edge punk whereby individuals are known as skater punks, surfer punks, gutter punks or Goth punks, meaning that they have successfully merged one or more subcultural identities within their overall identity.

This has an influence on my own research in two ways. First I must remember that the co-opting or co-mingling of different subcultures will undoubtedly have an impact on the overall identity of an individual and in particular on their relationship with religion and spirituality. Thus a part of my analysis will have to focus on determining which subculture their spiritual practices are more closely allied with. This highlights a sense of the 'in-between', a position that Straight Edge occupies within the wider punk culture, and that suggests religion and spirituality is something happening in between traditional religions. To this we can add that potentially it is also happening in between subcultural affiliation and identification.

The second impact comes in the form of the validity of calling myself, as the researcher, an insider, a Straight Edge adherent. If subcultural affiliation is becoming less defined and rigid then I need to consider my own identity as an adherent of Straight Edge, particularly as regards other subcultures or wider and mainstream cultural groupings I might affiliate myself with and carry as a part of my identity. Most significant would be the potential impact that this confluence of identities may have on the research being undertaken. For example, if I identified as a Christian or Buddhist Straight Edge punk, there would inevitably be an impact on the responses received from interviewees, relative to their awareness of and/or opinion of Christianity or Buddhism. I may also find that were I to identify with a traditional religion some Straight Edge punks would refuse to participate in the study, whereas prior to gaining that label they would have been eager to voice their opinions and ideas. Thus despite my overall approach of overt research there will inevitably be aspects that will have to be covert.

However, I still assert that despite such complexities an 'insider' position will be more productive and substantive for a study of the spiritual identity and practices of Straight Edge adherents. In Chapters Two and Three it will become clear that this is a cohort traditionally suspicious of outsiders and their true intentions. This is particularly the case with any outsiders claiming to hold any form of authority. Hodkinson argues that his position as an insider in the Goth scene is a lynchpin within his own research; his reasoning is equally applicable to my own situation as an insider within the hardcore Straight Edge scene. Hodkinson explains: "distinctive shared norms, activities and identities tended to dominate the lifestyles of those involved, and the ways in which they viewed other people...my appearance, social patterns, consumer habits, subcultural knowledge and personal feelings of identity positioned me fairly clearly within".⁷²

The notion of insider ethnography does have its advantages, but it is also not without its criticisms. Commonly these criticisms are founded on the anthropological basis of ethnography as a valid methodological tool. Traditionally, or at least initially, anthropology was a study of preliterate rather than modern cultures, and so the argument has been raised that insider ethnography can hinder a search for the novelty to be found within the culture. However, I have already debated earlier in this chapter the dangers inherent in having too much emphasis placed on spectacle.

A second criticism of insider ethnography from an anthropological standpoint is that traditionally anthropologists viewed culture as something that is static, where preservation of said culture is of paramount importance. This can be complicated when one studies the culture to which one belongs or allies oneself, as it could be interpreted as or indeed even become a conflict of interests. However, punk in its vast array is not a static culture but fluid, and Straight Edge's existence is itself testament to that fluidity.

A third criticism of insider ethnographies exists that does not have a basis in anthropology solely but is rather a generic concern that the researcher becomes too involved with the community

⁷² Hodkinson. Goth. p. 5

and loses the distinction between insider and outsider that must be maintained for analytical purposes. This used to be referred to as 'going native', but the term has since been dropped as it carries potentially offensive colonial overtones. Yet the concern remains valid.

For an individual within a community to critically analyse that community, they have to create something of an outsider distinction or status, even if it is something they only maintain for the duration of the study. To enable that distinction to be maintained within an in-depth study of Straight Edge I made deliberate and careful choices regarding UK interviewees and participants. I also chose to study the USA, a country I had never visited and with which I had no explicit links to within Straight Edge. This enabled the differences and similarities to come to the forefront and ensure enough of a variety to maintain a critical edge to my reflexive and interpretive analysis. To further enable this a specific time period was set, after which a physical distance was enforced as I returned to the UK and to my university in a city in which I have deliberately chose not to pursue any Straight Edge research or links.

Having dealt with the insider approach that I will be basing this thesis upon, I now wish to turn my attention to the specific methodology that I will be implementing in the field. It is my intention to utilise a variety of methods: observation, participant observation, conversations, informal questioning, semi-structured interviews, formal interviews and visual ethnography. Most of these methods are well-known and well-documented, so it is my intention to focus the remainder of this chapter on the relatively new method I wish to employ - visual ethnography.⁷³

Visual ethnography

The tendency within ethnographic work to focus on the written and spoken word is currently being reassessed, and with the constant improvement in digital and visual materials and knowledge there has risen a growing number of ethnographers turning toward visual ethnography. In September 2009, Leeds University held the first ever international conference on visual research methodology

⁷³ O'Reilly, Davies, Fairclough.

and practice. We must consider why this methodology is growing in appeal and use before we can move on to how it is to be utilised within my own research.

We are surrounded and submerged with a visual landscape. We live our daily lives being bombarded, codified and lulled through visual stimuli. For some individuals this is merely an effective form of communication, for some it is entertainment, but for others it is a significant aspect of how they structure and outwardly present their identity. Thus if we are to fully understand the identity and motivations of the collective we are studying we must be willing to examine and provide opportunities for the presentation of all aspects of that identity.

Visual ethnographer Sarah Pink informs us that “Photography, video and electronic media are becoming increasingly incorporated into the work of ethnographers: as cultural texts; as representations of ethnographic knowledge; and as sites of cultural production, social interaction and individual experience that themselves form ethnographic fieldwork locales.”⁷⁴ However, visual ethnography is not without its criticisms, namely that images are entirely subjective and, similar to works of art, depend entirely upon the interpretation of the viewer.⁷⁵

Further problems with visual ethnography are of a more ethical nature, and include the gaining of permission from individuals to be photographed, filmed or depicted in a visual manner. There is also the question of ownership -- who owns the picture taken, the individual participant who took the photo or the researcher who gave the parameters and reason for taking it and will use it within their analysis? Both of these issues are further complicated when the researcher wishes to publish the photos or images in journals or as a part of a book based upon their research, or use them within conference papers or lectures. These issues are not insurmountable but do require careful consideration before visual ethnography is undertaken in the field.

⁷⁴ Pink Sarah. *Doing Visual Ethnography*. (London: Sage Publications, 2001), p1.

⁷⁵ Banks M. *Visual Methods in Social Research*. (London: Sage Publications, 2001), p 7 – 12 for example.

To fully embrace its potentiality, one must acknowledge that it is a medium which can allow new knowledge to be garnered. This has the potential then to not only widen the understanding of a specific culture, but also to create a format through which that culture can enter the field of discourse on an equal footing. It carries the inherent potential of creating a truly public space of discourse. Further, if, as it has been posited, we are a truly visual species then we must not hesitate to explore that aspect. Art in the form of paintings was one of the first forms of communication created by humankind, yet all too often we rely on the word. This necessarily excludes those who do not or cannot communicate through the word, be that through choice, lack of ability or disability. Utilising the visual removes that exclusion and further widens the field of discourse and comprehension. Moreover, it reflects the origins of anthropology in that the visual would have been the dominant mode of cultural communication amongst the preliterate societies they examined.

Spirituality, spiritual identity and the locale or domain of both are shifting. There has been much debate within religious, academic and media-based arenas concerning the rise of the 'secular' and the 'inevitable downfall of religion'.

Since the 1960's the predominant thesis has come from sociologists of religion and has been known as the secularization thesis. The early assumptions of this thesis suggested that secularization is a process that will eventually free humanity from religious manipulation and control, that enlightenment, science, or other social institutions will replace religion or make religion irrelevant or at least less relevant.⁷⁶

Despite this thesis, it is clear that religion has not simply disappeared or been dismissed as the something that belongs in the past, a part of a less evolved society, as Taylor and Frazer claimed it to be.⁷⁷ Rather, what has emerged is an awareness that the place and perception of religion have altered, and that this has happened in two ways. First, the power, wealth and state position that religion held – particularly in Europe and the UK - have diminished. Second, that while looking for religious or spiritual guidance people no longer solely turn to traditional religious institutions.

⁷⁶ Ostwalt. *Secular Steeples*. p 2.

⁷⁷ Daniel Pals. *Seven Theories of Religion*. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996), p 78.

That is not to say, however, that people no longer search for or are interested in the divine, the church, the numinous or the ineffable. Ostwalt argues, based strongly on Durkheim's theory of religion, that "human beings are religious and will express themselves religiously in a variety of cultural forms that have relevance and meaning to them".⁷⁸ Ziolkowski of course takes this further when he demonstrates that if humankind cannot find a suitable or relevant place for religious expression within traditional religious institutions, then they will seek a surrogate in which to place it.

This leads us onto the second point, that in looking for spiritual or religious guidance, people no longer solely turn to traditional religious institutions. This is further thrown into sharp relief when one acknowledges that not only are people looking beyond these but also between them, as Lynch discovered and explored. He explains, "what I was discovering was not so much a mass spiritual movement beyond the orbit of traditional religious institutions, but a new religious ideology that was developing across and beyond a range of religious traditions."⁷⁹

The above is not only an example of a wider space of discourse, a discourse between religions that, it could be argued, has never before been experienced on this scale. It also raises a question of commonality. If one is able to choose from or co-mingle with different religious traditions as well as integrating secular practices, then one needs to find a common communication between the disparate entities. I submit that within hardcore punk and Straight Edge a significant proportion of this common communication is being done through visual methods and can best be approached and understood through visual ethnography.

Another reason for wishing to utilise visual ethnography is that as a collective, and as individuals, punks including Straight Edgers are a visually orientated community. This can be evidenced in a variety of ways. Their striking outward appearance individually modified through haircut, hair colour, piercings, strong make-up, clothing and tattoos is intended to provoke a

⁷⁸ Ostwalt. *Secular Steeples*. p 8.

⁷⁹ Lynch Gordon. *The New Spirituality*. (London: I.B.Tauris, 2007), p 8.

response and make an impact. This is particularly in evidence at demonstrations, protests and indeed punk shows where it is combined with spectacular dancing.

This collective is known for, and strongly relies upon, the punk DIY ethic. This results in producing album artwork, fanzines, books, artwork, clothing and movies which follow a distinct approach and look (known as the ripped up and Xeroxed look). The emphasis is on the live aspect, particularly the shows, rather than the recordings which serve reminders of the live event. Working with and being a part of such a visually orientated and creative collective would be best approached in the medium they clearly feel most at ease within. To remove them from that and instead rely upon word, particularly verbal, recorded word, could result in cautious or wary reactions and thereby prevent a full understanding, insight and discourse.

I am submitting that due to how integral visual means of communication are to this cohort, it must be utilised as a necessary confirmation of the points that people are making. Furthermore, it is a potential means by which adherents can articulate that which they struggle to articulate fully or adequately any other way, even musically.

My second reason for pursuing a visual ethnography is to address the repeated motif of the 'in-between'. This notion of being in-between is important when we examine a subculture such as Straight Edge. Hardcore punk exists in between a subculture and the mainstream. Subsets such as Straight Edge are subcultural, the music is largely subcultural but some bands have achieved mainstream success. In fact it would not be going too far to suggest that hardcore needs the mainstream to exist as a barrier or a constant reminder of what they do not wish to become and what they are against.

Further, the current rise in interest with religion and in particular spirituality exists somewhat uncomfortably in between punk's traditional suspicion of traditional figures of authority and view of religion as a pernicious influence on the one hand and a desire to authentically and

meaningfully engage with an aspect of life that is felt needed on the other. Through means of visual ethnography I wish to explore this notion of being 'in-between', which I am arguing will be a more productive and meaningful method to enable them to explore and explicate their spiritual identity.

Of course, as Pink reminds us, in utilising the visual in ethnographic research, we must not neglect nor dismiss the importance and place of the word. "The purpose of analysis is not to translate 'visual evidence' into verbal knowledge, but to explore the relationship between visual and other (including verbal) knowledge. This subsequently opens a space for visual images in ethnographic representation."⁸⁰ And we have come full circle back to yet another site of the in-between in which Straight Edge locates itself, this time between the visual and the verbal or written sources of knowledge and interpretation, the visual and the word. Here I feel I should emphasise that it is my intention to couple / compliment visual ethnography with recorded and transcribed interviews.

In terms of specifics regarding the visual ethnography I wish to undertake, I am relying upon and inspired by the work of two ethnographers – E. Cavin and Sarah Dunlop. Both researchers are focused on collaborating with individuals to produce and then explore images pertinent to their individual research projects and interests. Cavin "used children's photography to research 'children's perspectives' by giving children Polaroid cameras with which to produce images."⁸¹ Dunlop used a similar method when exploring the search for meaning among young people in Central and Eastern Europe. Again she provided her participants with a camera and the instructions to take pictures that were meaningful to them. She then met with them and allowed them to tell her and discuss why these particular images held or signified meaning for them. These included pictures of bedrooms, friends, bands, school and a door.

In allowing the participant to create their own image, determine the meaning attached to it and take the lead in the interview one is allowing a number of crucial things to happen. First it allows

⁸⁰ Pink. *Doing Visual Ethnography*. p96

⁸¹ Cavin E. "In Search of the Viewfinder: A study of the child's perspective." *Visual Sociology* 9 (1) 1994, p27.

a deeper sense of engagement – physically, mentally and emotionally – with both the topics being examined and in the interview itself. In a meaningful way it enables the participant to have a ‘greater stake’ or at least investment in the proceedings and outcomes, as it were.

Second it engenders a greater sense of ownership for the participants, in relation to both the created image, its symbolic representation and in the overall project in a wider sense. Of course, we cannot neglect to remember the issues that can arise regarding ownership and use of the created images: with a strong sense of ownership can co-exist a desire to control how the images are used. Therefore I ensured that all who participate in the visual ethnography aspect were made explicitly aware of how their image will be utilised by myself in this thesis, in conference papers, and in any possible future publications.⁸²

Third, given the potential family and personal backgrounds of Straight Edge adherents, utilising visual ethnographic means will allow for something else to be concentrated on and to become the focus in a more positive sense than perhaps may be possible in a more formal or verbal based interview. Thus enabling a greater depth of entry into conscious and unconscious motivations and actions.

It is my intention to utilise this method of visual ethnography by acknowledging and allowing space for it to emerge within a natural cadence of the interview. These will not be commissioned responses as such but rather an organic aspect of the interaction between two adherents. Consequently enabling an understanding of how, if at all, through the founding and grounding tenets of Straight Edge – the rules, the sense of community and comradeship, the notion of support, the importance of integrity – they have been enabled and encouraged to pursue spirituality, most commonly in between different religions and in between religion and the secular. Finally this will

⁸² By extension I also had to ensure their understanding that if their images are used as part of an online paper there is a possibility that they could become accessible through a search engine such as Google, in a context not intended by either myself or them as creators.

enable me to understand how within the wider context of hardcore punk, they have been able to combine their punk identity with spirituality.

Another aspect of visual ethnography that I intend to incorporate is that of tattoo design. Tattoos and punk have long shared an intimate relationship. Allegiance to the subculture is often shown through tattoos either of bands logos, lyrics or subcultural specific tattoos such as the lone skanking⁸³ figure or a flaming heart. When punk first emerged it was about pushing the boundaries of social acceptability and the early punks commonly used their bodies in order to do so, through the use of tattoos and piercings, both of which were deliberately highly visible. This will be explored in significant detail in Chapter Five.

Tattoos have not, as yet, become a common feature of visual ethnography. However, they have been examined in relation to spirituality and Christianity by both Beaudoin⁸⁴ and Flory & Miller.⁸⁵ Beaudoin argues that it signifies a move towards locating the body and the inherent physical experience of a tattoo (or piercing) as a source of religious meaning.⁸⁶ Like Beaudoin, Flory & Miller examine spirituality within a Generation X context and argue that the rise and commonality of tattooing amongst this generation are also in relation to body dynamics, in that “the old dichotomy between mind and body has to be discarded”.⁸⁷ Generation X are not only questioning this dichotomy, but are discarding it and arguing that our bodies and minds are intertwined,⁸⁸ a part of our inherent identity, and so can be used as a canvas to tell the story of our lives. Furthermore tattoos are being used as a Durkhiemian group identity, a form of individual expression and a non-verbal means of attracting and ignoring attention. Thus having a strong connection with punk and

⁸³ A form of dancing that involves the use of arms and legs, and is popular at many punk shows, especially those with a strong ska base to the band such as Operation Ivy or Rancid.

⁸⁴ Beaudoin Thomas. *Virtual Faith*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998).

⁸⁵ Flory R. & Miller D. *Generation X Religion*. (London: Routledge, 2000).

⁸⁶ Beaudoin. *Virtual Faith*. p 77. That is as a sense that something has happened in life that needs to be permanently engraved on the body in some way, perhaps to help the person come to terms with the event, accept the event, move on from the event or simply to acknowledge or celebrate it.

⁸⁷ Flory & Miller *Generation X Religion*. p 11. This is in relation to religion / spirituality as much as it is to tattooing. Religion once taught that we should separate our mind from our bodies to overcome desires, wrong thoughts and wrong actions. It also taught that we should keep our bodies pure out of respect for a creator God.

⁸⁸ This will be explored in greater detail in Chapters Four and Five.

having a history of being examined as a means of spiritual expression for this particular cohort I submit that tattoos, in the context of this research and thesis, have a place within visual ethnography and my overall research methodology.

Conclusion

This chapter was concerned with ethnography as a methodological tool, exploring the specifics of the fieldwork and making explicit reference to the qualitative approach. For this section I elected to focus on visual ethnography, given its relative newness in the field of ethnography and the fact that I intend to introduce a new element into visual ethnography, that of the role and place of tattoos.

The next chapter will be a socio-historical view of the UK and the US in the late 70s. The purpose is to demonstrate the significance of social, economical, familial and musical factors on the creation of punk as both a movement and as a musical genre. The chapter will argue that the music of punk emerged as a means to give voice to a disenfranchised, dispossessed and angry youth within a specific time and context. This driving force is the impetus for considering Straight Edge punk as a surrogate for religion.

Chapter Two “Oh bondage, up yours”

“We are the voice of revolution, we are the force for evolution. And we gather our strength from an underground movement, and it’s all fuelled by hardcore music.”⁸⁹

It only takes a few sonorous notes to be played on the bagpipes for everyone to begin singing the words, the united voices growing in intensity, volume and enthusiasm as the drum, bass and finally guitars join in. A crescendo is reached when the vocalist joins in with a repetition of the first verse beginning with “Amazing grace how sweet the sound...” This is a crescendo that does not die until the end of the song, but rather picks up fervour.

Not a remarkable event, one might think; it is to be expected that a Christian group singing in a revival tent or church would respond favourably to such a well-known and loved song. There is just one problem: the above description does not come from a revival tent, a church or even a Christian band, but rather from the Boston Celtic punk band The Dropkick Murphys playing live on St Patrick’s day.

I should add that the song is not being performed or responded to in a derisive or sarcastic manner either, but with genuine engagement and enjoyment. So how could it come to this, a punk band playing a song written in 1779 by a former slave trader – John Newton – which summarises the Christian doctrine of divine grace? This is an important question, especially when one considers the, at best, tumultuous and, at worst, antagonistic relationship that punk has had with religion, and in particular with Christianity. In essence we are asking two things: first, what is the current relationship between punk and religion, and second, what is the religious or spiritual identity and practices of punks today?

To properly answer these questions one must first go back and explore the origins of punk -- the social, political, economic and musical reasons for its creation, leading to its progression and division -- before finally arriving at punk as it exists today. That is the intention and structure within

⁸⁹ ‘Start Living’, Wisdom In Chains, 2009, Everything You Know, I Scream Records.

this chapter, with an overall purpose of answering the question above through a demonstration of the cyclical nature of the genre or movement.

Working definition of punk

Before we can explore the origins of punk, we must first establish a working definition of punk as it will be used in this chapter. Etymology of the word punk in the Oxford English Dictionary reveals that the origin of the word is unknown but that it first began appearing in literature in the 15th century and was used as a description for someone either who traded in sexual favours for money, such as a prostitute, or who was forced to through abuse or coercion, such as prison inmates. During the late 1890s it began to appear in literature as a term to describe a person of no account, a hoodlum or a thug. By the 1920s in America it had crept into use as a word to describe someone who was inexperienced, an amateur or an apprentice. It did not appear as a description of a musical term until the 1970s, and in that denotation it was not used a positive description until the late 1970s.

While all of these definitions are decidedly negative in origin and use, none actually give a true understanding regarding the musical movement. Punk as a word was always a derisive term, often used in films, particularly the film noir of the 1940s, to describe a delinquent or juvenile offender. The first use of the term 'punk rock' in reference to music or a band was in the Chicago Tribune on March 22, 1970. It was attributed to Ed Sanders who was the co-founder of the anarcho-prankster band The Fugs. By 1975 it was being used with great abandon by music critics to label any band that did not fit easily into a prescribed genre.

In 1975, John Holstromm and Ged Dunn created a magazine which they entitled 'Punk'. This was crucial in codifying the term in relation to a specific; stripped down, form of musical expression. Consequently punk as a description became synonymous with bands who played a bare, basic rock

and roll. These were bands such as The Ramones, Richard Hell and the Vivoids, The Cheap Nasty, The Clash, The Damned and The Sex Pistols.

However, punk was about more than just a specific musical style (or in some cases, the lack thereof!) There was a fashion element to it – The Sex Pistols are popularly believed to be so named as Sex was the name of the King’s Road shop owned by their manager Malcolm McLaren, and whose articles they wore in public performances. Ripped clothes, brightly dyed hair worn in gravity defying styles, multiple piercings and tattoos, and outrageous and often over-the-top make-up was worn by both genders.

Yet this was not all there was to punk, for it also embodied a particular attitude and approach to life, that of non-conformity (although ironically the fashion element became a conforming element for many) and anti-authority. Punk was about loudly questioning the accepted status quo or even the new as it was presented in society. There was great creativity involved that spilled over into arenas such as dance, fashion, graphics, design and politics, as can be evidenced in these photographs taken in 1977.



Fig 1. Young punks in the late 1970s wearing self made, layered clothing and hairstyles, supplied by Billy and used with permission



Fig 2. Interviewee Billy, photograph taken during the late 1970's, supplied by Billy and used with permission. Other photographs supplied by Billy are in Appendix 1.

So can we now arrive at a working definition of punk for the purposes of this chapter? Punk archivists and contributors Colegrave and Sullivan define punk in the following way:

Punk was always more than a T-shirt or a piece of loud music: it was an irrepressible attitude. It is this attitude that momentarily rescued the word from its time-honoured place of shame and elevated it to describe a youth movement that dared to rock the status quo beyond the imagination of any previous generation. Although, for the sake of simplicity, punk is described as a movement, it was only ever a collective of individual free spirits.⁹⁰

This does go further into the musical, intellectual and attitude of punk as a movement, but it does not go far enough to serve as a working definition, certainly not as is required for the purposes of this chapter. For many of those involved with punk as a movement, punk has always remained an individual experience bound collectively through certain rituals and mores. For some punk was an outer expression of their inner

⁹⁰ Colegrave & Sullivan . Punk. P 12.

selves, an expression of anger and frustration at the circumstances in which they found themselves. For others it was nothing more than a musical or aesthetic expression. Some individuals viewed punk as salvific or a necessity within their lives.

Ultimately punk is a refuge, a feeling of belonging, a community. It is an umbrella term for a spectrum of bands and individuals with a commonality in two areas: one, they are all underdogs or outcasts and two, every band has something to say, an issue that is important to them and on which they provide a kind of secondary education that was not accessible (certainly prior to the Internet) within traditional educational establishments. These are issues such as apartheid, animal rights, domestic abuse and drug addiction.

My working definition of punk is thus as follows: *a music-based oppositional subculture characterised by expressions of estrangement, frustration and disenchantment, as a form of resistance that has evoked a sense of identity, authenticity and community for its followers and adherents.*

Having established our working definition, we must now move on to consider the origins and creation of punk as a musical genre and a social phenomenon to aid us in answering the overall question of this chapter. Broadly we are questioning the relationship between punk and religion, particularly as it is held and propagated amongst punks as well as mainstream people.

There is great debate, which continues to this day, as to where punk actually began – the UK or the USA. As an attempt at a compromise, some have argued that the music began in the USA and the fashion began in the UK. Realistically, this is a debate which will never have a resolution, due to the fact that both countries are so close together in their punk origins and so interrelated, inspired by and dependent upon one another, that to a large extent the debate is really rather moot. Certainly for the purposes of this chapter, what is more relevant is why punk arose.

There was a great deal of unrecognised hurt and damage in punk
...Much of this hurt and damage was standard teenage stuff: the

usual problems that young people have in getting their voice and perception heard. But there were specific problems in the late 70s: the start of family break-up; the collapse of the 60s hippie dream; hard drug usage following patterns of supply; a new, harsh political and social environment.⁹¹

Each of these factors, in the quote above, requires exploration to create an overall perspective as to the creation of punk. I feel that it is important to state at this juncture that I am primarily focusing on punk as it emerged in the UK and the USA. Although punk is a worldwide phenomenon, with each country having its own unique sound, bands, scene and reasons for creation, it is my intention to compare and contrast only the spiritual identity of Straight Edge punks in the UK and the USA, and therefore I have chosen to limit this background and introduction to these two regions.

Many of the factors that sociologist and journalist Jon Savage mentioned in the above quote are concurrent in both the UK and the USA, although I will be explicit as to which country I am referring in specific examples.

Family break-up

In Britain, "Throughout the 1960s there was a more sustained 'baby boom', with births rising to a peak of 1,014,700 in 1964. This was followed by a rapid decline in the numbers of births in the 1970s, reaching a low of 657,000 in 1977."⁹² In the USA the birth rate from the 1960s to the end of the 1970s took a similar route of decline, dropping steadily from over 4.5 million to 3.76, with the lowest rate being in the late 1970s at 3.06 million.⁹³

While the lower numbers would have an impact in later years, with the demographic being smaller and thus contributing less in taxes, voting numbers, etc., they have also been used as an indicator of social perspective regarding children. In the USA there developed a trend regarding housing policy for renting to families. Nationwide they were decreasing in availability. Holtz, a social

⁹¹ Savage. England's Dreaming. p. xiv

⁹² <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=761> Last accessed June 2010.

⁹³ <http://geography.about.com/od/populationgeography/a/babyboom.htm> Last accessed June 2010.

scientist who researches and writes about Generation X asserts that this demographic was “just one manifestation of society’s sea-change in its attitude toward this newest generation.”⁹⁴

While the birth rate was falling, and those having children were facing difficulties, the divorce rate was soaring in both the USA and the UK. Statistics released in the UK reveal that divorce rates had risen from 33 thousand in the 1950s to 160 thousand by the 1980s. In other words it had gone from being one divorce every 20 minutes to being one divorce every three minutes. Once again the USA has a similar trend. In 1960 the divorce rate stood at 2.2 per every thousand; by 1980 that had more than doubled to 5.2 per every thousand.

It is reasonable to assert that a significant proportion of those divorces, in both the UK and the USA, were between parents of children born between 1960 and 1980. These were children who now not only numbered in a smaller birth rate average than those of their parents, but who now had to contend with the pain, confusion and repercussions that divorce brings, on a scale much higher than their parents had experienced.

The rising number of divorces correlated with a rising number of re-marriages and reconstituted families. This is a trend that has continued to rise to this day. Living in a family of step-parents, step-siblings, half-siblings, restricted access to one or other parent and their new family, it was inevitable that many of the children growing up under this situation would come to have a greatly altered perception of how to pattern or construct and maintain a family.

Holtz goes on to assert that the beginning of family break-up had another devastating impact on the affected young people within the USA. He states, “The initial problem that children in most studies faced when experiencing a divorce was that their parents often stopped parenting. The

⁹⁴ Holtz G. *Welcome To The Jungle*. (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1995), p 12.

children had to confront the sorrow and pressures of the divorce without a great deal of adult support.”⁹⁵

There are a number of factors that could contribute to this perceived lack of parenting following a divorce. A single parent will have to work to provide for their children, leaving less time to spend with the child. Time which will be further robbed due to the exhaustion of working and being a single parent. Furthermore, a parent may be unable to deal with the child’s feelings, as their own are too raw or overwhelming. Or a parent may simply be unaware of what their child is experiencing, especially given that we are dealing with a rise in divorce rates, so it is reasonable to assume that the parent themselves did not come from a divorced family.

Consequently this age group had to look elsewhere for the support, comfort and understanding that they felt their parent(s) were unable or unwilling to give them. Who filled this void? Their peers. Psychologist Abraham Maslow famously identified, in 1943, that human beings have five basic needs (although he asserted that others exist beyond the five, such as spiritual needs, aesthetic appetite, etc.), which he arranged into a hierarchy.⁹⁶ The lowest or basest of these are physiological (food, warmth, clothing); once fulfilled we will look to have security needs met (security of the body, employment, resources, property, health); after that, he argued, we move upwards towards meeting our love/belonging needs, which include or necessitate family, friendship and sexual intimacy.

Essentially this third level consists of needs centred on love, affection and belonging. They drive us to overcome feelings of loneliness, alienation and involve both giving and receiving love, affection and a sense of belonging. If, as Holtz asserts, an increasing number of children being raised in broken or reconstituted families were struggling to find or maintain a relationship with their parent(s), then to ensure this third level of needs is being met, they will turn elsewhere -- in this instance they turned to peer activity.

⁹⁵ Holtz. *Welcome To The Jungle*. p. 29.

⁹⁶ Maslow Abraham. *Towards A Psychology of Being*. (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 1998).

Often their peers were going, or had gone, through the same experience. They could offer advice, solace and a place to rage if necessary or an opportunity to forget the home situation and behave as a child or teenager once again, even if only momentarily. Here is where we can also witness factors that led to the creation of punk as a musical force and creative collective. All the anger, frustration and pain of the divorce, of being ignored, the struggle could all be channelled into and expressed through the explosion of the three chords, the fury of the scathing lyrics or dissipated in the reckless and physical aggressive dancing.

Furthermore, allying oneself with punk, especially in the 70s, meant standing out from the mainstream. But it also meant that there was a group to whom you could belong, from whom you received validation, acceptance, and friendship. In other words, within the realm of punk some young people found a way to meet Maslow's third level of needs. An example of this can be found in the lyrics to the Crass song, 'Walls (fun in the oven)':

Have a child to justify, images that you apply, I won't bury my head in shame, I won't play the game the same. Without your walls, I am alive, without your walls we all survive. Without your walls no guilt to bear, without your love, our love to share.⁹⁷

This is an element of punk that has continued to this day – the sense of family within a scene, bonded by choice rather than genetics or marriage. It was also an element that became fundamental as punk progressed into hardcore, as I shall explore in greater detail later in this chapter.

Collapse of the 60s hippie dream

One of the key characteristics of the 70s generation is the knowledge that we missed out on the Sixties. Growing up the 70s you were aware of this: that the optimistic, idealistic Sixties generation – who'd had a taste of the Cavern and Woodstock – had had it all.⁹⁸

These words of music journalist Haslam succinctly sum up the difference between the teenagers and young adults of the 60s – the Woodstock or Baby Boomer generation – and the

⁹⁷ 'Walls (fun in the oven)', Crass, 1979, Stations Of The Crass. See also 'Mother Love by Crass 1982 Christ Album (All Crass albums produced, recorded and released by Crass) and '100 punks' by Generation X 1978 Generation X, EMI as further examples.

⁹⁸ Haslam D. Not Abba. (London: Fourth Estate, 2005), p 1.

teenagers and young adults of the 70s – Generation X. The difference is that of optimism and idealism.

The 60s was the time of possibility, sustained by the belief that not only is anything possible, but we deserve and can take what we want / need/ feel to be right. Hendrix sang the lyrics; “Nothing can harm me at all, My worries seem so very small”⁹⁹ And Bob Dylan sang “The times they are a changing”.¹⁰⁰ Contrast that with the Sex Pistols who sang “There is no future in England’s dreamland”¹⁰¹ or the Ramones, “Nothing to do, nowhere to go, I wanna be sedated”.¹⁰² It is immediately clear that in the space of a decade, something immense had shifted.

There is no denying that the 60s were an important time of social change, largely wrought at the hands of young adults. It was a time of big gestures designed to make big changes – there were protests about the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, women’s liberation and protests against the draft. This was combined with a new sexual liberation led largely by easily available contraception and abortions becoming easier to procure.

Furek argues that the Boomer generation had been raised with a strong self-belief and indulgent parents which only cemented their belief in their ability to make and demand changes. They unarguably caused great and necessary social changes in both the USA and the UK, as much as elsewhere, but they were also an idealistic group, who found it difficult to cope when the reality of life set in. By that I mean once the noise and dust settled on the protests and on Woodstock, and the individuals found themselves graduated or grown, possibly married and/or with small children, they could no longer hold on to their idealism and integrity and still make sufficient money to provide for either their family or the opulent lifestyle they increasingly felt they were entitled to.

⁹⁹ 1967, ‘May this be love’ (Waterfall), Jimi Hendrix Experience, Are You Experienced? Reprise Records.

¹⁰⁰ 1964, ‘Times are changing’. Bob Dylan, The Times They Are A-Changing. Columbia Records.

¹⁰¹ ‘God Save the Queen’. The Sex Pistols, Never Mind The Bollocks, Here’s The Sex Pistols. EMI. 1977

¹⁰² ‘Sedated’. The Ramones, Mania, Sire Records. 1978

Thus they turned from the anti-materialistic, anti-capitalist message of the hippie era into an embrace of materialism, which reached its peak during Regan and Thatcher's reigns in the USA and the UK respectively. The children born in the 60s and 70s were best placed to witness the turn from the strongly held beliefs of the hippies to the greed of the 'yuppies'. This was combined with a refusal, on the part of a significant number, to relinquish their "antipathy to the hard line against soft drugs taken by the authorities...especially marijuana, amphetamines and LSD."¹⁰³

Events such as the refusal of refuse collectors to work in the UK, police brutality at the Democratic Party convention in Chicago, the increasing public awareness of domestic violence and repeated conflicts between the trade unions and the British government all indicated that the dream of hippies was to remain only a dream -- it was not to come to the fruition they had envisioned. In the eyes of their children, they did not fight for their dream; instead they turned to money, material possessions, drugs and reminiscing. In other words, they sold out.

Of course, we must acknowledge, that to some extent the 60s generation are being judged somewhat harshly, and at times unfairly, particularly by their offspring. Having children necessitates provision of food, clothing, shelter, all of which cost money, money which had to be earned or borrowed and repaid. I feel that it is justified to assert that this role as provider was a major motivating force for some of these individuals, although I will add that for some gaining money, power and status itself became their driving force, not parental responsibility.

The dissolution or collapse of the 60s dream was also an important factor in the creation or birth of punk in both the UK and USA. The 60s and early 70s were marked by revolutions, protests and marches which pointed to the potential for resounding change on an epic scale. This overall feeling was captured and sound tracked by bands such as The Rolling Stones, The Beatles, The Beach Boys, Janis Joplin and the Grateful Dead. Each of these bands or solo artists, in their own way, sang of what had changed, what could change and small aspects of how good life could be. Equally the

¹⁰³ Haslam. Not Abba. p.28.

collapse of the 60s dream had its own soundtrack. As it became obvious that the world had not become a utopia, despite their profound anti-establishment protests, the disappointment and anger found various outlets.

Sociologist Alice Rossi writes of America during the 1960's "There is no overt anti-feminism in our society in 1964 not because sex equality has been achieved, but because there is practically no feminist spark left among American women."¹⁰⁴ Historian and political commentator Howard Zinn elaborates; "In the sixties and seventies, it was not just a women's movement, a prisoner's movement, and Indian movement. There was a general revolt against oppressive, artificial, previously unquestioned ways of living. It touched every aspect of personal life: childbirth, childhood, love, sex, marriage, dress, music, art, sports, language, food, housing, religion, literature, death, schools."¹⁰⁵ However, as Zinn demonstrates,¹⁰⁶ this protest was reacted to, reacted to strongly and left young people feeling an anticlimax, of promise not fulfilled. These feelings, combined with the specific socio-economic factors under consideration in this chapter, solidified as betrayal, disenchantment, frustration, anger, bitterness, disillusionment and mistrust.

Some of the youth who felt anger at having to live in a failing time, in a failing town or city, who felt vitriolic disgust at their parent(s) for having failed them, ignored them or sold out their own dream for the price of a good life, found expression of those ideas in scathing lyrics of punk. Furthermore as this generation began to realise that they would have to look after themselves and create their own dream as opposed to that of the 'hippies', their ideas took shape within the lyrics of punk. For example, The Stranglers sang "No more heroes anymore" in 1977¹⁰⁷, and Northern Irish band Stiff Little Fingers, create a rallying call in their song 'Alternative Ulster',¹⁰⁸ which contains the lines:

¹⁰⁴ Zinn Howard. *A People's History of The United States*. (London: Longman, 2003), p. 504.

¹⁰⁵ Zinn. *A People's History*. p. 536.

¹⁰⁶ Zinn. *A People's History*. p. 539. See also Savage. *England's Dreaming*. p. 27 – 28, 42 -44.

¹⁰⁷ 'No More Heroes', The Stranglers, *No More Heroes*, 1977, EMI.

¹⁰⁸ 'Alternative Ulster' Stiff Little Fingers, *Inflammable Material*, 1979, Rough Trade.

An Alternative Ulster, grab it change it's yours. Get an Alternative Ulster, ignore the bores, their laws. Get an Alternative Ulster. Be an anti-security force. Alter your native Ulster.

Perhaps the most well known is the Sex Pistols 1977 'God Save the Queen', which lead singer Johnny Rotten has explained and defended as "You don't write a song like 'God Save the Queen' because you hate the English race. You write a song like that because you love them, and you're sick of seeing them mistreated."¹⁰⁹

By the mid-70s it was obvious that 60s dream was to remain just that, a dream; by and large it was not going to come to fruition. That is not in any way to denigrate the significant achievements and progress made during the 60s, but they were not enough to create a utopian society based on tenets of 'peace, love and understanding'.

The soundtrack of the times changed from one of idealistic hope and promise to one of disillusionment, anger and a call to question all and any authority. It was primarily based on the edict that any one claiming authority is deceitful or a 'sell out' and so not to be trusted. This soundtrack was a major impetus in the creation of punk as a movement and subsequently has become largely located within the movement. Punk heralded in a new era that required and forged its own soundtrack based on and reflective of very different attitudes and ideas to what had preceded it.

Hard drug usage

We have already seen that prior to the 70s drug use had grown quite significantly, particularly the drugs of LSD, marijuana and amphetamines. LSD is an abbreviation of Lysergic Acid Diethylamide, commonly known as 'acid'. It is a hallucinogenic drug which once taken will cause the user to experience hallucinations and a distorted view of objects and reality for up to 12 years. Marijuana is another name for cannabis, a mild sedative and mild hallucinogenic drug, with similar

¹⁰⁹ Furek M. The Death Proclamation of Generation X. (New York: IUniverse, 2008), p 100.

though milder effects for the user as LSD. Amphetamines are the official chemical name for speed, which as the name suggests is a stimulant.¹¹⁰

These were the drugs of choice in the 60s; however by the mid-70s this was radically and dangerously altered. While the 60s generation continued with usage of these drugs they also indulged in and so increased the demand and market for other harder and more dangerous drugs which infiltrated their way into the lives of many of their offspring, the next generation. Heroin, which had had a convoluted past with musicians was becoming very popular amongst both 'yuppies', socialites and working class youth. Heroin is a natural opiate which is made from morphine.

A viable argument could certainly be made: the harsher times and broken spirits of many individuals were finding solace, of a sort, in heroin usage, which resulted in the addiction and death found within punk. I would argue that this is based equally on reality and mis-perception. Adams argues:

Punk's philosophy was anything but upbeat, jovial, and positive. Punk's sound grew out of the extremes of hard heavy-metal rock and then took on a life of its own, adding to the scene the extremes of an extremely hard lifestyle ... the perception was that the participants – and music's- main nutrient was heavy doses of drugs, heroin in particular (which was later called the 'common cold of rock death') and the punk music was all about debauchery and self-destruction.¹¹¹

Certainly a significant number of punk musicians and then fans succumbed to heroin, either in the form of addiction, repeated overdoses or death. The most well known figure is probably that of Sid Vicious, the bassist for the Sex Pistols, and his girlfriend Nancy Spungen. However, autobiographies such as that of Eater front man Andy Blade, who was only a teenager during the first punk explosion, reveal the increased easy access and acceptance of hard drug use by any and all, in particular that of heroin.

¹¹⁰ All drug information gained from <http://www.talktofrank.com> last accessed September 2009.

¹¹¹ Adams D. Rock 'n' Roll and the Cleveland Connection. (Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2002), p354.

Those associated with punk considered themselves the antithesis of hippies and so were not as interested in taking drugs for any spiritual reason, however spurious, and were very against doing trips. Furthermore, punk attracted many working class youths who could not afford the money required for a frequent supply of LSD, marijuana or amphetamines. On the other hand, heroin was relatively cheap and easy to procure, especially if one was in a band or fraternised with punk band members.

Between the 60s and the mid 70s there was a pronounced shift in terms of what drugs were popular and accessible. There was also beginning to be demarcated drugs for different subcultures, counter cultures and so on. The generation of the 60s had made explicit and extensive use of drugs whose sole purpose was to alter reality and perception and provide a high. For many involved in the creation of punk, they wanted to distance themselves from anything to do with those that they viewed as sell out hippies, and that included the drugs that they used. Furthermore, this new generation accepted reality as harsh, gritty and unpleasant; they felt no need to pretend it was otherwise. Instead they looked for drugs and experiences that would enable them to numb or block out their pain, particularly their psychological pain that was often caused by the other factors we have already considered in this chapter.

Politics

Punk was a savage assault on the political conventions that remained in the UK since the end of the Second World War. In the USA those conventions did not exist or were different, but punk still challenged political structures and strictures. At this juncture it is important to point out that in this section I am only considering the influence and importance of politics on the creation of punk from 1975 – 1979. This period of time marks the first wave of punk, after which it altered in a variety of ways which I will explore in the second part of this chapter, and it is there that I will interlink the changes in punk with the significant changes in politics from the 80s onwards.

In 1975, the USA had Gerald Ford as their president and the UK had Harold Wilson as prime minister, although both of these would change in 1976, with Ford being replaced by Jimmy Carter and Wilson resigning and being replaced within his party by James Callaghan. In 1979 Callaghan was defeated by Margaret Thatcher and Carter was replaced by Ronald Reagan.

All of these leaders were born well before the Second World War, with births ranging from 1911 – 1925. Their political reigns each reveal the ideals that they have championed as having been firmly cemented in the pre-war era. As Tim Cavanagh noted in a review of Philip Jenkins' book "Decade of Nightmare: The End of The Sixties and The Making of Eighties America" those leaders to greater or lesser extents all favoured "Manichean thinking that defined social ills as moral problems and aberrant behaviour as the product of evil rather than dysfunction. Yet these retrenchments did not reverse the gains made in civil rights, feminism, and gay liberation, even though these last two were subject to strident counterattacks."¹¹²

While it is impossible in the restricted and focused nature of a chapter and a thesis to unpackage all of the issues mentioned above, there were a number of significant political events in both the UK and USA which had an impact on the creation of punk as a movement and will be considered here. The USA in 1975 was still recovering from the Watergate Scandal and was still entrenched in both the Vietnam and the Cold War's. It was a time of suspicion and in many ways a time in which the USA grew up as a country.

Two months after coming into power Carter pardoned Vietnam War draft evaders. This is in keeping with his reputation as someone interested in the pursuit of human rights, one of which was the right to refuse to fight. However, it is arguable that this act could have given a different message to some Americans – that the Vietnam war should never have been entered into, that these people were not cowards but in fact right to refuse to fight by avoiding the draft call.

¹¹²<http://www.reason.com/news/show/36684.html> Last accessed September 2010.

In 1977 Harvey Milk was elected as San Francisco's city supervisor, and was the first openly gay elected official. He was sadly assassinated in November 1978 by the previous city supervisor. However his election indicated the beginnings of a willingness to embrace people who were different, be that in gender, race, educational level or sexual preference.

In November of 1979, in response to the Iran hostage crisis, Carter issued orders to freeze all Iranian assets in the USA and US banks and orders a halt to all oil important into the USA from the Iran. This resulted in a vast shortage of oil and rapidly rising prices for oil and petroleum. It is arguable that this event was interpreted by the Boomer generation as something that had to be endured in the short time for the sake of the country, and in the name of freedom, as it were. The generation of the 70s being, in some cases, too young to fully grasp the larger picture and too cynical to accept what they felt was merely a façade, they instead displayed disgust at those they felt were making a profit from the situation, in particular the government, oil companies, etc.

"Xers believe they are being manipulated to think things have improved when in fact nothing important or enduring has happened."¹¹³ The political situation in the UK did nothing to soften or alleviate this feeling amongst youth of the time. In 1975 Harold Wilson was prime minister; he resigned in 1976 and was replaced from within his party by James Callaghan who came from a trade union background, sparking hope that the needs of the working class would take more a priority.

There was great unrest in political circles at this time, and indeed in Britain as a whole. On the 4th March 1975 the Northern Irish coalition was dissolved so that rule of Northern Ireland came solely from London; this caused great discontent and concern in both the Nationalist and Loyalist communities and led to a rise in violence which was now beginning to spill over to the mainland.

A referendum in June of the same year resulted in a Yes vote to remain a part of the European community. In January 1978 the European Court of Human Rights found the UK

¹¹³ Rosen B. *Masks and Mirrors*. (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2001), p 146.

government guilty of mistreating prisoners in Northern Ireland, but not of torture. In the winter of 1978 numerous and lengthy strikes led to a vote of no-confidence in the Commons and no doubt was influential in the March 1979 narrow vote by Scotland for home rule, which led to great anger and resentment when it was not implemented. In May 1979 the conservatives won the British general election and Margaret Thatcher came to power.

All these events highlighted the growing unrest in Britain and it was no longer certain of its identity and its place in the world. Very few people were actually living England's ideal of economic security, sophistication and modernity. Most were struggling to get by and a large number no longer wanted to be controlled by England, specifically London. This was no doubt fuelled by the belief that London was controlled by those who still believed that Britain was the centre of the Empire and could behave in such a way, as evidenced by their treatment of the Northern Irish prisoners who were their own citizens. Indeed it could be argued that in the face of having to give back so many countries it had once ruled England had now turned to controlling, at least politically, those countries that surrounded or were attached to it – Scotland, Northern Ireland – despite the wishes and concerns of their people. For the 70s generation there was great uncertainty as to what exactly it meant to be British, whether it was something to be proud of or something that felt artificial and forced.

Punk music arose out of these feelings of a lack of national identity, of constant political change in leadership, in the refusal to acknowledge the wishes (as evidenced by votes) of people and of a feeling of being let down by the government, by leadership. There was also an element of punk that reflected the growing willingness in society to embrace the differences. Although I should acknowledge that not all punks were accepting of homosexuality, of women or of people of different ethnic backgrounds, there was a sense that as the outcasts of society there was a freedom and a willingness to embrace other outcasts.

Punk was predicated on the basis of no rules and no conformity, which some naturally extended to the lifestyles choices and cultural background of others. Often the co-mingling was forced upon them as punks had to share performance space with rude boys¹¹⁴, skinheads – many of whom were involved in groups such as SHARP¹¹⁵ -- and female performers and participants. This was not always successful and frequently resulted in violence, as is captured by The Ruts in their song 'Staring at the Rude Boys',¹¹⁶ who write:

The skins in the corner are staring at the bar, the rude boys are dancing to some heavy, heavy, ska. It's getting so hot people are dripping with sweat, the punks in the corner are speeding like a jet. Staring at the rude boys, staring at the rude boys, dancing with the rude boys ... The lights come alive in a blinding flash, dance floor clears as the mutants clash, everyone leaves when the heavy's arrive, someone hits the floor, someone takes a dive.

The political landscape of the mid- to late 70s was still very entrenched in a colonial traditionalism despite the UK actually being a post-colonial, post-empire country increasingly made up of ever-widening ethnic backgrounds and experiences. The USA was mired in a time of great uncertainty and questioning, a time of questionable sacrifice and a hesitant wariness to the embracing of what had been previously taboo.

Punk took all this onboard, particularly in the UK, and used it as a motivator and creator to bind its alien existence, as Marxist sociologist Dick Hebdige refers to it:

It was an alien essence, a foreign body which implicitly threatened mainstream British culture from within and as such it resonated with punk's adopted values – anarchy, surrender and decline. For the punks to find a positive meaning in such a blatant disavowal of Britishness amounted to a symbolic act of treason which complemented, indeed, completed, the sacrilegious programme undertaken in punk rock itself.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ A black and West Indian working class youth subculture.

¹¹⁵ Skin Heads Against Racial Prejudice.

¹¹⁶ 'Staring At The Rude Boys', The Ruts, Grin and Bear It, 1980, Virgin.

¹¹⁷ Hebdige. Subculture. p. 64.

Social environment

By July 1975, England was in recession. The unemployment figures for that month were the worst since the Second World War: school leavers were amongst the most vulnerable. Not only had the output shrunk, but public spending had risen to 45 per cent of the national income, and was threatening to unbalance the whole economy ... This didn't seem like a temporary crisis but the acutest angle of a long, slow decline.¹¹⁸

As well as, or because of, a recession Britons also had to contend with numerous blackouts, rolling power cuts as they were known, a seeming decade of constant strikes, water shortages, a three day week and an extremely hot summer in 1975 and 1976 which resulted in the desertification of large areas of Britain.

These home-based problems were combined with a threat of nuclear war from the Soviet Union and the very real and lasting damage being inflicted by the Irish Republican Army, a terrorist group from Northern Ireland who wanted Britain, specifically England, to relinquish control of Northern Ireland and return it to a united Ireland. In Northern Ireland the sectarian violence had been ongoing for a number of decades but had recently escalated from the end of the 60s, and they were no longer holding back from using civilians as targets. This death and destruction was equally caused by both sides – loyalist with groups such as the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), Ulster Freedom Fighter (UFF), Ulster Defence Army (UDA) and the Shankill Butchers, and nationalist with groups such as the Irish Republican Army (IRA), Provisional Irish Republicans (Provo's or Provisional IRA) and the Irish Nationalist Liberation Army (INLA).

Britain had responded to the escalating violence in Northern Ireland in much the same way that America had responded to Vietnam – they sent the army in expecting them to quickly suppress these 'dissidents'. However, they quickly discovered that neither side wanted the army there, especially after the much publicised events of Bloody Sunday. "Bloody Sunday, of course, fuelled the

¹¹⁸ Savage. England's Dreaming. p. 108.

sense of injustice and gave credence to the view that the British Army was an oppressive force.”¹¹⁹In the mid 70s the IRA stepped up their campaign of terrorism by bringing the troubles of Northern Ireland onto the mainland and targeting areas such as Manchester, Liverpool and London with bombings, the first of which was in Aldershot, killing seven people.

The USA was struggling as well with the cost and spectre of the Vietnam War and the constant threat of nuclear attack from the Soviet Union. Concurrently, “in Britain and America, with living standards falling, industries and neighbourhoods in ruin, the struggle became less about changing the world and more about just trying to get by.”¹²⁰ Both the America dream and the British ideal were dying on their feet.

Punk became or was created to be the spokesman for the disaffected, disenfranchised, angry and at times frightened youth having to deal with this declining social environment from which there seemed no possibility of rescue.

Punk was fast, furious and final. Most of the songs, under two minutes in duration, contained anti-establishment messages, such as The Clash’s ‘White Riot’. Others in this company included Generation X, The Buzzcocks and The Damned but it was Johnny Rotten and his Sex Pistols’ ‘God Save The Queen’ released in 1977 during the Queen’s Silver Jubilee that equated Queen Elizabeth II with a ‘fascist regime’ and predicted ‘there is no future in England’s dream land’.¹²¹

The song also lambasts those in power and claims that they use threats of danger as a way to get what they want, likening them to the IRA.

The social environment during the 70s was a bleak one, punctuated with danger and threat from different countries, economic instability, angry workers repeatedly striking, three-day weeks, high levels of unemployment and uncertainty regarding the future, particularly for young school

¹¹⁹ Haslam. Not Abba. p. 97.

¹²⁰ Haslam. Not Abba. p. 99.

¹²¹ Furek. The Death Proclamation. p. 19.

leavers. Punk rose and gave voice to the anger and frustration of the youth caught with all these consequences that were not of their making and could not be resolved by them.

To ignore the obvious connections between the Punk phenomenon and economic and social inequalities in Great Britain would be to deny the validity of the philosophical underpinnings of the movement consisting of underprivileged working-class white youth. Many of them felt their social situation deeply and used the medium of Punk to express their dissatisfaction.¹²²

Socio-economic factors

Although the quote I used from Savage makes no mention of socio-economic factors in the creation of punk, it is as factor that requires brief attention. Obviously a number of the factors already explored fall under aspects of socio-economics in general, but in this short exploration I wish to focus on class.

While to date no-one has carried out comprehensive research into the make-up of punk as regards working and middle class designations, there is no denying that class had an influence. While the US was felt to be made up a relatively egalitarian mix of both working and middle class members, the work of punk activist Mark Anderson and arts writer Mark Jenkins show that there was some tension between the two. They reveal in *Dance of Days* that for some bands it was class aspirations that broke them up.¹²³ When some the middle class band members enter adulthood they leave the band to attend university and embark on a more traditional route in life. This, in some cases, led to feelings of betrayal and accusations of selling out (lacking integrity) and being a fake punk.

In the UK the notion of class was more significant. Hebdige argues that punk began as a white working class subculture. This was the class that in many ways bore the brunt of the political and economic turmoil explored above. It was traditional working class routes of employment that

¹²² Henry T. Break All Rules! (Ann Arbor: University Micro Films, 1989), p. 67.

¹²³ Anderson M. & Jenkins M. *Dance of Days*. (New York: Akashic Books, 2003).

were under threat, it was the working class who had to deal with the reality of council property, and divorce rate was highest amongst the working class. The Sex Pistols sing "I thought it was the UK, Or just another country, Another council tenancy" in their 1977 song 'Anarchy in the UK'.

Of course the working class in London is a very different creature from the working class in Manchester, Leeds, Glasgow or Belfast. Each has their own unique identity and set of problems depending upon their income sources and primary resources, all of which is reflected in the style and lyrics of the bands from each region. In 1978 the Dunfermline band The Skids released a song called 'The Saints are coming', which told the true life story of a friend who had joined the army and was killed during his tour of Northern Ireland -- a tale too sadly familiar for many soldiers at this time and for a number of decades after.¹²⁴ Many of the lyrics of Northern Irish band Stiff Little Fingers explored the troubles of Northern Ireland which were escalating at the time. They were scathing of both sides of the paramilitary divide and claimed that they were exploitative of young and vulnerable people, and equally to blame.

It would be erroneous to assume that all of punk was mired within and created through the social problems and perspectives of the working class alone. There is some validity to the argument that largely middle class youth from art school were attracted to punk primarily for its aesthetic features and that their involvement led to some of punk morphing into new wave music. But this is to ignore two crucial factors. First, there is the role of the media and music corporations in the creation of new wave music. This form of post-punk music was easily digestible, radio friendly and co-optable, with musicians being concerned with fame and money and therefore willing to 'play along' with the media and provide useable sound bites and quotes. It was quickly latched onto and aggressively promoted by the media and music corporations, with few punks having anything to do with them. In fact it was considered almost as mutiny for a punk band to musically move in the direction of new wave.

¹²⁴ 'The Saints Are Coming', The Skids, Scared To Dance, 1978, Virgin.

Second, being middle class does arguably provide a relatively more stable financial buffer during a recession that a working class family would be expected to have. However it does not prevent a young person from experiencing issues such as child abuse, alienation, frustration, anger at social events and problems or a desire to change the status quo. As we have seen these were the motivating forces behind the creation of punk, and so we must conclude that middle class youth had much to contribute to the creation of punk as working class did.

We must acknowledge that there will be differences, perhaps in the quality of instruments that are affordable, or in the fact that some young people wore chains and tape on their boots for aesthetic appeal rather than to make them wearable because they could not afford to replace them. However, these superficial differences would not prevent someone from contributing to and gaining from punk. The perceived place of class within punk was strong, especially during the 70s, and was almost held as a badge of honour -- to such an extent that Joe Strummer from The Clash always felt embarrassed that he had been sent to a private school as a child, feeling that it negatively impacted his punk credentials.¹²⁵ This issue remains an area that deserves more attention and research than can be given in a chapter or in this thesis.

An additional two areas exist that were not found within the Savage quote, but which form an important dimension of punk and so deserve consideration. These are the issues of gender and race. Both existed as a social problem long before, and after, punk and neither were a strong impetus behind the creation of punk, however both featured strongly within the shape and ideals that punk evolved into.

Race

Rebellion by its very nature always entails an 'other', something or someone to react to, rebel against and define oneself as different from. Punk, in all its permutations, was a rebellious movement which attempted to define itself against the mainstream. However in some elements it

¹²⁵ Temple J. 'The Future Is Unwritten: Joe Strummer' [DVD] UK Film Four Productions, 2007.

actually joined forces with the mainstream – albeit uneasily – to protest a common enemy or issue, one such is that of race and racism.

Due to an extensive history of Jewish and Irish immigration, and Scottish and Welsh internal migration Britain had been a multi-cultural country centuries before the mass migration that followed in the wake of the Second World War and the shrinking of the British Empire. It is fair to state that British history is not simply that of imperialism and the slave trade, but that is not to assume that multi-culturalism has easily integrated within a notion of Britishness. Indeed as we are seeing now with the rise of organisations such as the English Defence League, when countries such as the UK are confronted with a major economic downturn or financial recession, immigration is quickly resorted to as an explanation. On occasion emotions, and financial desperation, can reach a fever and result in race riots or individual racially motivated attacks.

As I demonstrated earlier in this chapter, the late 70s and beyond was a period of extreme recession resulting in many millions unemployed, whole communities witnessing the closure of their long held source of employment in mines and pits. In 1979 Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister controversially referred to Britain as being swamped by an alien culture, indicating the political stance on race at the time. Her comments and deliberately emotive statement fed into the fear of working class British people that what few jobs there were left would be taken by ‘immigrants’ and that Britain would forever be divided by those coming into it. This was a time when the far right were close to becoming stronger or more accepted in substantial parts of British society and there was a widespread call for immigration to be stopped.

In the 1970s racist attacks and murders took place in urban areas like Southall, Handsworth, Tower Hamlets, Toxteth or Newham.¹²⁶

A brief glance at popular media, in particular television shows, at the time reveal what could be best described as an implicit consent towards racist remarks. This is obvious in

¹²⁶ <http://www8.open.ac.uk/platform/blogs/society-matters/racist-violence-and-the-uk-night-time-economy>

programmes such as 'Only Fools and Horses' and 'Love Thy Neighbour' in which characters would be described in what today would be considered highly offensive racial descriptors.

Punk has been both upheld and maligned for its approach to racism and racial attacks. Numerous punks - such as Joe Strummer, Jimmy Pursey and Pauline Murray to name but a small few - spoke loudly and publically against racism. Indeed many bands would speak out on stage against racism as their audience were overtaken and attacked by white power supremists. Bands such as Conflict, and others, would react by downing instruments and joining the audience members in fighting against the skinheads and protecting one another.

Combining forces to make a concerted stand against racism, numerous punk bands took part in the Rock Against Racism rally on the 30th April 1978. Hebdige argues that their support for and participation in activities such as this rally indicates "the punk subculture grew up partly as an antithetical response to the re-emergence of racism in the mid-70s."¹²⁷ I can't agree with Hebdige that providing such a response to racism was a creating factor in the emergence of punk as that would necessitate an understanding of punk as a uniform collective and thereby ignore the broad spectrum of ideas and political stances that existed within it. A cursory glance at any number of books on the early punk scene that is constructed of compiled interviews demonstrates not only the wide variety of responses to racism, but also the reality that many attended or participated in Rock Against Racism simply because they viewed it as a gig, a chance to play or an opportunity to see a number of bands. It was not until they heard the messages coming from the stages that they began to understand the purpose behind the event.¹²⁸ One such is political activist Billy Bragg, who was only 18 at the time. He states;

My initial feeling was 'why are these guys at this anti-racist thing? Its about black people.' But the penny dropped. The fascist raving xenophobes were against anybody who was different. It didn't matter whether it was colour, gender or attitude. I made a promise

¹²⁷ Hebdige. *Subculture: meaning of style*. P116.

¹²⁸ Robb John. *Punk Rock: An Oral History*. (Ebury Press: London, 2006). Glasper Ian. *Burning Britain*. (Cherry Red Records: London, 2004). Glasper Ian. *The Day The Country Died*. (Cherry Red Books: London, 2006).

to myself to be as different as possible and annoy those people if I could. It really changed my politics.¹²⁹

However despite this positive rhetoric towards the eradication of racism, there were also those within punk that had no qualms about stating and promoting their own racism. One such example is that of John Cato, the vocalist of Admit You're Shit. Interviewed by punk archivist Ian Glasper for his 2006 book 'The Day The Country Died', Cato has remained staunchly unashamed of his stance, he explains;

Ask me if I'm a racist now, and was I back then? And I'll tell you, fucking right I am! And damn right I was back then too. Like I said, I haven't changed in twenty years; nothing ever does. But my racism is rooted in love – of my own kind – not in hatred in anyone else ... I have never, ever hurt anyone because of their race. And as for those who have, I can think of nothing more vile.¹³⁰

Popular culture theorist Roger Sabin has edited a series of essays on punk rock that includes his own chapter entitled "I won't let that Dago go: rethinking punk and racism". In this article he argues that the concept of punk as anti-racist is purely fictional and media created. He supports his argument that racism existed within the punk fanzines, lyrics and fashions and ultimately criticises those punks who did make a stand against racism as either refusing to go far enough or merely creating a pose with no substance beneath it.

Sabin is certainly correct to highlight some of the racism that did exist within punk, as I have demonstrated above and can be found within fanzines such as 'The Punk Front'. However his conceptualising of punk as a coherent collective is too restrictive and therefore leads him to analyse punks relationship with racism through a very narrow lens that does not allow for the fluidity and broad spectrum of ideas and opinions that existed within it. The consensual areas lay in music and fashion not ideology. Sabin's approach also doesn't allow for the predominant age of those who were partaking – many were still in or had just left high school – in punk and it is reasonable to

¹²⁹ Robb. Punk Rock: An Oral History. p432.

¹³⁰ Glasper. The Day The Country Died. p127.

assume that events such as Rock Against Racism were their first forays into raising their own awareness of issues such as racism.

As a final point on racism, Sabin does raise one particular point of interest regarding Asian communities. He argues that while some punks aligned themselves with the reggae of working class black youth, Asians were all but ignored or excluded and the racial attacks they suffered were marginalised. This is an important point as while there was a shared history of rebellious music between punk and reggae fans and creators, there was nothing to link Asian musical traditions with this and create a camaraderie of any kind.

Having said that, numerous Asians were involved with and participated at the Rock Against Racism rally as can be seen from the plethora of photographs that exist and have made their way into fanzines. A number of Asians were inspired by the punk they saw and heard to either join or create their own punk bands; one such was Alien Kulture, named after Thatcher's evocative statement. What is particularly interesting is that many of these bands felt it was necessary or appropriate to label themselves as Asian punk bands, instead of simply a punk band. This indicates that for many Asians there was still a sense of themselves as an 'other'. While many saw punk as a means to galvanise other Asians into a strong group and a means to prevent others speaking for them, few joined existing punk bands and clearly felt that they were separate from other punks. This notion of the 'other', while being dealt with in the specific context of the late 70s and early 80s of the UK in this chapter, will be returned to in chapter Four when the thesis engages with orientalism and easternisation.

Punk in the late 70s and 80s was typified through the image of the angry white youth. This was anger borne from discontent at the future, or lack thereof, being offered. Anger that traditional working class routes of employment and communities were being torn down, ripped apart and closed by an ideologically driven conservative government. In short, the white working class youth safe in their assured place within society expected more, felt they were entitled to more from those

in authority. When it was not forthcoming they were going to use their music and their punk communities to protest, to force a listening ear regardless of how willing it was or not.

Those who belonged to ethnic minorities did not have the luxury of a secured place and genealogical ancestry within Britain to cling to. Many of the youth from ethnic minorities were the children of immigrants, the first generation of their family borne in Britain, coming of age at a time when they felt a strong upsurge to have the UK purged of them. As I mentioned above immigration was a hotbed political topic at the time with politicians claiming that the general population wanted it dealt with. There may have been an unconscious fear of being deported if one spoke out against authority in the way that punks did, or if one was seen to be aligned with the nihilistic anarchy espoused by punk at this delicate and charged time.

Finally immigration itself lends a sense of hope to the traveller, a sense that the worst is left behind and the new future will be a bright one. Hebdige acknowledges this in his work on subcultures. He states;

The crossing to Great Britain was, like most voluntary migrations, an act of faith: an exodus. It required a peculiar blend of contradictory motivations: desperation or at least impatience with the host country, a belief in the efficacy of action, a desire for increased status, and confidence that the Mother Country would recognise its obligations, would welcome and reward its lost children.¹³¹

Consequently, it is reasonable to assume that migrants instilled in their offspring the desire to aspire, to become more than working class, to make something of oneself. Therefore punks celebration and revelling in the working class status may have been antithetical to the desire and aspirations of young ethnic minorities, thus further distancing them from participation or appreciation of punk. Of course the reality of migration often falls far below expectation and hope and young people of ethnic minorities did have to find their own way to either succeed within the system or create their own voice of protest.

¹³¹ Hebdige Dick. Subculture: meaning of style. P41.

Ultimately punk in the late 70s and early 80s was predominantly peopled by white working class males; the important aspect here is predominantly rather than exclusively. As the next sections of this chapter will demonstrate punk evolved in a variety of ways and more ethnic minorities did become attracted to the subculture. Bands are mentioned within this thesis that comprises members from ethnic minorities – Wisdom in Chains and Downset are two such examples. Typically the ethnic minorities drawn to punk were black working class individuals, as already mentioned and examined in detail by Professor of Religion Christopher Partridge, this is largely due to the musically entwined past they share and the disenfranchised future they foresee.¹³²

Gender

Perhaps more than any other of the factors detailed above that led to the rise of punk, gender is the one that owes the largest debt to the previous generation, to what was achieved for women's liberation during the 60s. The title of this chapter is taken from a song by X-Ray Spex, a female fronted band whose lead singer Poly Styrene (who incidentally was of mixed race origin) speaks the following as an intro to the song;

Some people think little girls should be seen and not heard, oh bondage, up yours!

In other words, nothing is sacred and fixed within the world of punk, boundaries of decency and taste will be traversed and gender roles will no longer (if they ever did) be dictated or set in stone. When the issue of gender is raised, punk is typified by a dichotomy that cannot be resolved. On the one hand it is a male dominated, aggressive form of musical and aesthetic expression that speaks of 'brotherhood' whilst simultaneously utilising and being subjected to violence, it is by no means feminine. On the other hand punk was, particularly in the 70s, was based on the mandate of 'no rules' and this extended to the role of women who were in bands, in the audience and helped

¹³² Partridge Christopher. *Dub in Babylon*. (Equinox: London, 2010).

organise shows, create fanzines and book band tours. These were jobs and roles that within rock had typically been the purview of men.

Boundary lines were not only blurred but on occasions broken into irreparable pieces by various aspects of the punk movement. Gender is one of the most successful instances of that occurring, and yet as we will see, one is which the boundary lines eventually became re-drawn.

The rejection of sexism by the punk movement is a continuing fight to educate those who enter the movement with their stereotypical images still intact. Many punks have taken stands against speciesism, racism, nuclear proliferation, etc only to contradict themselves by practising or accepting sexism.¹³³

Women existed and participated within punk since its inception in various roles as outlined above, but the masculinity which exists as a norm within it does problematise their participation and role. Furthermore, given that many of the young women who participated in the early 70s, with which this section of the chapter is concerned, were in their teens or early 20s they were having to construct their understanding of gender and their own gender identity within a male subcultural identity.

Social order depends strongly on the reinforcement of gender roles, given punks impetus of the destruction of social order, gender roles seemed an obvious means to an end. However that statement implies a more deliberate and intellectual approach to gender than actually occurred. For the most part women's involvement in punk was not from an intellectual informed feminist stance but simply from the desire to respond to what they say and felt, in other words it was an authentic response to the do it yourself ethos of punk.

Thus bands as crucial as Crass had female musicians – Eve Libertine and Joy De Vivre -while their front man took on the female name of Penny. Equally there were all female bands such as Bikini Kill and the Lunachicks. In addition women such as Stormy Shepherd created their own booking agencies for punk bands (Leave Home Booking in this case) while others began opening

¹³³ O'Hara Craig. *The Philosophy of Punk*. (AK Press: San Francisco, 1999) p102.

'anarchy centres' for bands to perform in. In other words, in a male dominated subculture and mainstream culture, women were becoming primary actors, figures of actual and potential social change.

In contrast to mainstream society, women who were admired and respected within the punk scene were not those who adopted masculine traits of strength through force, behaving unemotionally or ruthlessly. Rather they were women who did not hide their femininity but who demonstrated strength through compassion, willingness to 'have a go' and strength in acting upon their beliefs.

This was a concerted effort on the part of women, and some men, to demonstrate and educate men of their equality. It is feminism based upon action rather than on waiting for men to understand or realise the inequality that exists. In other words it was a recognition that change comes about through action not because it is simply the moral or right thing to do. An interesting consequence of this was the intolerance that quickly grew up amongst female punks towards mainstream women who refused to change from stereotyped versions of what a woman should be – that is the 'blonde bimbo', 'the helpless but coquettish girl/woman', for example. Numerous lyrics derided and chastised these women, baldly stating they were as equally to blame for the imbalance of the sexes.

Perhaps the most effective, and certainly the most noticeable, weapon punk utilised in its attempts to redress gender imbalance was that of the body. Men and women alike utilised their bodies as a means to shock, to gain attention and to make a (sometimes profound) statement about and to society. Tattoos, piercings, ripped clothes, messy and colourful hair, bondage straps, chains, safety pins and underwear were all utilised in the bricolage that was punk fashion. This included elements typically hidden from view such as underwear – usually a bra – worn over clothes or unused tampons worn as jewellery. This was the beginning of a discourse on female sexuality and gender roles.

Thus the body was being used as the site of discourse, the body was the text.¹³⁴ Not only was the text questioning the normative of what is and is not acceptable for women to outwardly wear (and consequently behave), it was also a statement on the accepted norm for beauty within mainstream society. Beauty conventions were attacked through a nihilistic destruction with an implied underlying meaning that through destruction new ideals of beauty can be created.

While male punks shocked society through their use and glorification of typical female means of beautification such as makeup and hair, female punks shocked through their refusal to conform their bodies to the social conventions of beauty and acceptance. In addition female performers began to change how they behaved onstage and in front of an audience. They would wear short skirts and still pogo or lean into the audience aware that they were revealing their crotch and cleavage without embarrassment or shame. They were refusing to allow their bodies to dictate their comportment or to inhibit them from performing as authentically and passionately as their male counterparts. During the early 80s this would also be combined with scathing lyrics about female sexuality, issues surrounding abortion and domestic abuse.

Some performers also stuffed their pants with exaggerated labia outlines in parody of male crotch stuffing. The accentuation of the female body as a corporeal entity with fluids, smells, genitals, and uncontained urges allowed female punks to expose standard femininity as a pale imitation.¹³⁵

In essence the female punk used the body as a text to reclaim ownership of her body from both mainstream conventions and suppression of women and from male punk's subjectification of the female form. This was not an entirely successful venture but it was an important step towards gender equality. While for some male punks sexism was a non-issue as they bought into the mainstream ideal of men as tough and women as second class, most rejected this but offered no solution as perhaps doing so was beyond the boundaries of their experience at that time. For

¹³⁴ This notion of the body as a text will be returned to in chapters four and five and will receive some attention in the final section of the conclusion.

¹³⁵ <http://visualvitriol.wordpress.com/women-in-punk-an-essay-punk-aesthetic-uses-to-question-and-reclaim-the-female-gender>

example, when John Lydon's (Rotten from the Sex Pistols) then girlfriend (now wife) suffered a miscarriage while he was on tour, he assumed for a long time that she had simply had an abortion but thought that he had no right to ask her about it or complain as it was her body.¹³⁶

Ultimately punk was and remains a male dominated subculture and the women who navigate within it do so under constrictions, and many as they age do accept more conventional gender based roles within the scene they belong to. This will be particularly noticeable within this thesis as the age of the interviewees is such that women may have small children to deal with and so are not attending as many shows as they did. Consequently there are more male interviewees than female, this is also partly informed through my position as an insider, a female insider who also deals with these issues surrounding gender and participation, as this quote from punk activist and researcher Lauraine Leblanc explains;

Although their disdain for both mainstream and punk girls who do conform to femininity gives them a tool to reject its constricting norms, it also creates impediments to friendship between punk girls, resulting in a form of social isolation ... leading girls to associate almost exclusively with male punks.¹³⁷

Having now arrived at the end of the introduction to the creation of punk, it should now be obvious as to why it was, and indeed remains, so difficult to give a definitive definition of punk – it exceeds both musical and social constrictions, encompassing and expanding beyond both. Hebdige summarises the creation and effect of punk:

Punks were not only directly *responding* to increasing joblessness, changing moral standards, the rediscover of poverty, the Depression, etc., they were *dramatising* what had come to be called 'Britain's decline' by constructing a language which was, in contrast to the prevailing rhetoric of the Rock Establishment, unmistakably relevant and down to earth (hence the swearing, the references to 'fat hippies', the rags and the lumpen poses). The punks appropriated the rhetoric of crisis which had

¹³⁶ Lydon. Rotten. P167.

¹³⁷ Leblanc Lauraine. *Pretty in Punk*. (Rutgers University Press: New Jersey, 2005) p147.

filled the airwaves and the editorials throughout the period and translated it into tangible (and visible) terms.¹³⁸

I began this chapter by asking why a punk band would be playing, and their audience singing along to, a song such as 'Amazing Grace'. So now we have to ask, are we any closer to answering that question? The answer is a very tentative yes, which is qualified by stating that we can begin to have an understanding now that we are aware that punk arose due to a confluence of specific events and social dilemmas, mores, and problems. Furthermore, it was a refusal to conform, to follow laws or cower before authority. It was an important mark and creation of its time, but it has stretched beyond that and become a permanent fixture on our culture's form.

The evolution of Punk

Punk, like religions, philosophy and ideas, did not remain as it was, for had it done so it would have risked stagnation and extinction. Instead it grew, it evolved. Part of that evolution was to challenge new and other traditional sources of authority, such as the music business, religions and in particular Christian churches. But to do this it had to grow up a little.

It is my intention in this section of the chapter to explore the evolution of punk into hardcore and then the diversification into areas such as Straight Edge. The purpose of exploring the evolution of punk is to demonstrate how, due to differences in the construction of punk, there arose differences in approach to areas of authority, faith and spirituality. Finally I will then discuss the theoretical and sociological reasons behind the change in attitude to 'religion'.

I feel it is necessary to point out that not all within punk did change; there are some who have remained with punk as it was from 1975 – 1978/9 and do not wish it to change.

Punk had been almost too successful in disinterring some of the culture's demons which were best left undisturbed...it had used many symbols of totalitarianism – specifically the swastika – within a context that at first was mainly aesthetic and theatrical. It was impossible to get irony as a

¹³⁸ Hebdige. Subculture. p. 87.

concept through to the mass market and, with Punk's successful entry into the social domain, it became obvious that there was some facing up to do.¹³⁹

It was obvious to many that punk could not go on as it had and still remain relevant or indeed even remain punk, and that death knell rang even louder with the demise of the Sex Pistols in 1978. The media was declaring punk all but dead on its feet, essentially ignoring that for a large part they were responsible for the co-opting of punk by and within the mainstream.¹⁴⁰ By the end of the 70s punk had moved on and morphed into other genres of newly created and evolving music – new wave, Goth and so on – but it had also in its truest form returned to the underground it had come from. Punk would not return to the mainstream again until the early 90s when bands such as The Offspring, Green Day and Rancid broke through into the charts and onto MTV.

The 80s signalled a new era in politics, social environment and economics. During this time the UK was being led by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher while the USA had Ronald Reagan as their president. Both had similar approaches to economics which was to privatise as much of public spending as possible and to promote the ideal of living above one's means with the aim of paying it off later – something we are now reaping the consequences of today. This was a time of Reaganomics in the USA and when the credit lending and credit cards really took a grasp in the UK. It was also a time of great uncertainty and perpetual change within the educational systems of both countries, although more so in the USA. There was a great closing of traditional working class employment routes, such as mining, factories and so on. As the 80s progressed many began to feel that punk once again had something important to say regarding the times.

However, this was not to be the punk of the 70s. This time it was louder, harder and faster. The concern with fashion, while not fully dissipated (as would be unlikely in any youth cultural grouping) took a back seat to the message. This form of punk became known as hardcore punk. It is often claimed to have been born and remained most popular in the USA, although recently the

¹³⁹ Savage. *England's Dreaming*. p. 481.

¹⁴⁰ Colegrave & Sullivan. *Punk*.

hardcore scene in the UK has seen an exponential increase in fans and bands. However that claim is somewhat specious as the UK had a thriving hardcore scene throughout the 80s led by bands such as Crass, Napalm Death and Conflict. The early hardcore scene in the UK has been expertly captured by Ian Glasper in his trilogy.¹⁴¹ Consequently commonalities will be explained first and then UK hardcore will be briefly examined before hardcore from the USA, although both greatly influenced the other.

Different aspects of hardcore reacted in different ways to the punk that had preceded it, appropriating some, rejecting others, extending some and mimicking yet others. It was called hardcore punk because it was an affirmation of the true hard core of punk and a complete rejection of the media circus / 'whore' original punk had become and a concurrent rejection of the new wave music it had morphed into.

There arose a great concern to distinguish between the real and the contrived or 'faux punk', and there was a stronger political consciousness and a belief in the necessity to make a difference through action. The political consciousness was different to the somewhat nebulous affiliation punk had originally claimed, in equal amounts, with anarchism and nihilism. Increasingly it was clearly to the left but was concerned with democracy, the environment, human rights and animal welfare.

A fashion element remained within hardcore, although this greatly differed from the flamboyant punks that had attracted so much attention in the 70s and appeared on London postcards. The fashion was no longer intended to shock or gain attention, but now was intrinsically linked with the message and purpose of hardcore; it was supposed to look severe, unfriendly and uncompromising. "You knew someone was hard-core if they had a shaved head or a crew cut, a

¹⁴¹ Glasper Ian. *Burning Britain*. (London: Cherry Red Books, 2004). Glasper Ian. *The Day The Country Died*. (London: Cherry Red Books, 2006). Glasper Ian. *Trapped In a Scene: UK Hardcore 1985 – 1989*. (London: Cherry Red Books, 2008).

threatening demeanour, and a hatred of the mainstream.”¹⁴² This look held true for both genders within hardcore, as these pictures demonstrate.



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Fig 3 Henry Rollins in Black Flag, photograph taken by Daniel Bill and utilised for academic purposes.



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Fig 4 Mia Zapata lead singer of The Gits, photographer unknown, image utilised for academic purposes only.

¹⁴² Blush. American Hardcore. p. 13.

¹⁴³ http://www.sodahead.com/entertainment/my-punk-group/group-6061/?link=ibaf&imgurl=http://1.bp.blogspot.com/_S5nEI3R0wEg/SHvc7WceaUI/AAAAAAAAASo/zbrGbsjUps8/s400/black-flag-bill-daniel.jpg&q=hardcore%2Bpunks last accessed January 2011.

¹⁴⁴ <http://popwatch.ew.com/2008/07/09/gits-zapata-doc> last accessed January 2011.

During the 80s the United Kingdom was a country divided in terms of employment, social mobility, war, economically and politically. Indeed much of that outlined above as the reasons for the emergence of punk in the late 70s simply increased exponentially. Musically little had changed from the pomposity and excess that existed in the 70s.

Bland rock music was huge, with the likes of Def Leppard, Bon Jovi, Dire Straits and U2 dominating the charts; Michael Jackson was busy being 'Bad' and 1985's Live Aid provided a very handy sticking plaster for our consciences whilst being watched by 400 million people across 60 countries. For much the same reasons behind the first and second waves of punk rock then, angry youths vented their frustration at the banality of daily life with guitars, drums and defiant voices.¹⁴⁵

Combining the inspiration provided by the Anarcho punk scene with the revolutionary new forms of punk emerging from the USA and Europe lead to the distinct and varied UK hardcore punk rock sound and ideals. The anarcho punk bands and communities inspired a fiercely DIY stance that stepped beyond anything previously undertaken within punk. Furthermore, bands such as Crass, Conflict and Stalag 17, demonstrated the potential power behind compassionate politics and ethics, particularly in relation to animal rights. However a number of bands also began to question the necessity and proliferation of alcohol and drug consumption as a means to 'have a good time', thus laying the groundwork for what would become Straight Edge. "This wasn't punk for the sake of it ... it was punk saying 'Listen to us, you bastards!' And in no uncertain terms either."¹⁴⁶

Whilst the growth of UK hardcore (UKHC) owed much to the DIY aspects of booking your own venue and bands and the exponentially burgeoning tape swapping, it also owed a tremendous debt to the Radio 1 DJ John Peel, who sadly passed away in October 2004. Peel was enamoured with punk from its earliest beginnings and remained a staunch supporter throughout his life and career. He gave countless UKHC bands an opportunity for legal airplay by providing them with sessions on his show.

¹⁴⁵ Gasper. Trapped in a Scene. 2009 p 8.

¹⁴⁶ Gasper. The Day The Country Died. P425.

Success ultimately came to be one of the factors that led to the demise or stagnation of early UKHC, with lines being drawn between bands who desired it, those who shunned it and fans who were concerned with moral compromises for the sake of it. Glasper describes this as 'being trapped in a scene', which he uses as the title of his book on UKHC. Today's UKHC is also divided although now along the lines of violence - particularly amongst London based bands, gender – with a British Riot Grrl explosion taking place and finally over the issue of major labels or independent labels. Some venues and scenes are making inroads in attempting to overcome these divisions, such as Manchester's 'Say It To My Face' and Mutiny Events, though they acknowledge it to be an uphill struggle.

"Hardcore was the suburban American response to the late-70s punk revolution. But while Hardcore grew out of punk, it would be wrong to say, 'If you can understand Punk, you can understand Hardcore'."¹⁴⁷ Although the first hardcore record put out was by a USA band called The Middle Class in 1978, it is usually L.A. based band The Germs who are accredited with being the first band to consciously incorporate or create their music in a hardcore style or direction. It was another LA band, Fear, who created a hardcore style of crowd behaviour and 'vibe' at their live show or gigs.

However, hardcore quickly developed into something beyond shows and bands – scenes, local communities began to spring up and form. These were or became of fundamental necessity to the survival and proliferation of hardcore. Something that began as a reaction, in essence, to the dilution of punk and the onset of Reagan became something that ultimately fed into and nourished a fundamental human need.

We wanted to have our own clique. We wanted to create our own culture because we didn't feel connected to anything. Here was the perfect opportunity for that. You were instantly devoted to others around you. This was the first time Rock Music was being written by, performed by, shows being put on by, fanzines being put out by, networks being

¹⁴⁷ Blush Steven. American Hardcore. (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2001), p. 12.

created – all by kids, completely outside of the mainstream music business, for reasons that had very little or nothing to do with economic incentive. It was a really important time in music history because music actually rose above businesses; as you know, music has always been a really insidious marriage of art and business.¹⁴⁸

Durkheim informs us that “collective representations are the product of a vast cooperative effort that extends not only through space but over time ...A very special intellectuality, infinitely richer and more complex than that of the individual, is concentrated in them.”¹⁴⁹ The individual is enhanced and expanded through involvement in and commitment to a collective. In other words, we are not only inherently social beings, but also we benefit from interaction with one another – we learn, we test out our ideas and beliefs, we are more willing to stand up for what we believe in when we can rely on the solidarity of others.

These are the principles that guide or are the fundamental core of US hardcore punk, although they will be expressed through different words or descriptors, such as questioning, unconformity, integrity, authenticity and commitment. As Durkheim argues, these qualities or principles are what ensure the longevity of collectives; this is evidenced in hardcore, which has in many ways gone from strength to strength. It is now possible to view some hardcore bands on MTV¹⁵⁰ (although that is a somewhat recent development), and major music magazines will devote column inches to bands such as Sick of It All, the Dead Kennedys and Gallows.

However, for most true US hardcore bands success is not necessarily, or at least primarily or solely, measured by having their videos played on MTV or being interviewed by magazines. Rather it is measured in the respect in which their fans and other bands hold them, in being able to claim integrity in their music and actions, in effecting a change in their local scene and community. These measures of respect are not as altruistic as they may at first appear. Having the respect on one’s fans guarantees a base of sales for one’s album; in today’s world of the Internet, it guarantees a

¹⁴⁸ Ian MacKaye, lyricist and vocalist of Minor Threat, quoted in Blush. American Hardcore. p. 21.

¹⁴⁹ Durkheim. The Elementary Forms. 2001, p. 18.

¹⁵⁰ Typically this is only during their bi-monthly programme ‘The Headbangers Ball’ which is presented by Jamey Jasta, the lyricist and front man of Hatebreed.

core who will promote you worldwide via their blog, MySpace page or whatever other Internet tool they utilise. Being thought of or calling someone a 'sell out', meaning they have not maintained their integrity, is about one of the worst insults to a hardcore punk or hardcore band and will guarantee at least some fans who will stop support and promotion.

As the 80s progressed and hardcore grew in popularity and notoriety, a violent and exclusionary element began to arise in it. "Hardcore's tribalism demanded a new dance. Audience physicality created what became known as slam dancing...Hardcore implied danger...Hardcore was an incredibly competitive milieu. Everyone talked unity but the scene dripped with division and rivalry and conflict."¹⁵¹ This is strongly in evidence in the video for Sick of it All's 'Step down', where they make fun of the mainstream hysteria over punk and hardcore and sneer at their willingness to condemn and judge before experiencing the music, the atmosphere and the community. They also make a point about the influx of new converts into the scene who do not understand the purpose and practise of the dancing, and so for them they include a tongue-in-cheek 'how to' guide. Yet they also cannot resist making fun of West Coast hardcore punks, as they are a New York hardcore band. The scene was not as inclusive as it thought it was, and it was in danger of travelling the same road punk had in the previous decade.

Straight Edge

Another hangover from the 70s punks was the use and abuse of alcohol and drugs. For some this was antithetical to the message and heart of hardcore and destructive to its purpose and potential. Thus when Ian MacKaye released a song through his band Minor Threat that spoke out against the use of drugs and alcohol, likening them to a crutch, many people paid attention. The song was called 'Straight Edge' and outlined MacKaye's personal life philosophy in which he abstained from alcohol, drugs and viewing sex as a conquest. In other songs on the same album he

¹⁵¹ Blush. American Hardcore. p. 23.

spoke out against the 'drunk punk' image that was prevalent within hardcore at the time. These were songs such as 'Bottled Violence' and 'Out of Step'.

Ian MacKaye grew up in a racially, politically and economically divided Washington DC. His father worked for the Washington Post as a religion specialist. According to Henry Rollins, MacKaye's childhood friend, MacKaye's parents "raised their kids in a tolerant, super intellectual, open-minded atmosphere."¹⁵² The dual influence of the city and the family life is reflected in both his lyrics and his personal life stance – not only in regards to Straight Edge, but also his ongoing connections with St Stephen's Episcopal Church, his activism in anti-race, anti-sexism programmes and his willingness to devote so much time to independent music.

However, a lesser acknowledged influence on MacKaye, and consequently Straight Edge, was his early admiration of 70s guitarist Ted Nugent. "We would read about the Nuge and the thing that really rubbed off on us was the fact that he didn't drink or smoke or do drugs, it was the craziest thing we'd ever seen onstage and here's this guy saying 'I don't get high'. We thought that was so impressive."¹⁵³ In addition to the abstinence stance of Nugent, there is also strong evidence of the influence of his outspoken views on a connection with nature (which we can witness as the vegetarian / veganism rife in all aspects of punk and their support of the environmental actions) and of supporting those who are willing to work for themselves rather than depend or expect others to – a core spoke in both hardcore and Straight Edge being that of self responsibility.

Of course these are not slavish reproductions of Nugent's ideas or lifestyle but rather are inspired by and then filtered through punk ideals and approaches. For example while Nugent advocates hunting and killing of animals as a food source that promotes living based on natural instincts, many within hardcore and Straight Edge would argue that a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle promotes a connection with nature and protects the environment.

¹⁵² Azerrad Michael. *Our Band Could Be Your Life*. (New York: Back Bay Books, 2001) p135.

¹⁵³ Azerrad. *Our Band Could Be Your Life*. p. 121.

Despite his strong right wing politics being anathema to many within all aspects of punk who tend more to the left or radical politics, Nugent's political stance has had one final influence on the creation of Straight Edge and hardcore. That is in his outspoken and accusatory approach. During his time in Minor Threat MacKaye would often utilise this in his lyrical construction – something he has since moved away from in subsequent bands. There was to be no compromise, again this is reflected within Straight Edge in the notion of being able to claim edge only once, with no extension of forgiveness should it be broken.

Literally every one of MacKaye's lyrics was addressed to some unidentified second person. So the effect on the listener was simultaneously to feel accused (the singer is hollering at 'you' all the time) and righteous (the 'you' is easily transferred to someone in the listener's own life). The lyrics set up such a well-defined value system that people bonded tightly with MacKaye as an arbiter, a moral compass, particularly for the inordinate number of abused and neglected kids who had embraced the hardcore subculture.¹⁵⁴

Despite the song 'Straight Edge' not being view or intended by MacKaye as a call to arms; many young hardcore fans and bands took it onboard either as how they wanted to live or as the name or banner for the way they were currently living. And thus the Straight Edge movement was born or created. It was an autonomous collective within the wider hardcore collective and has remained so to this day, with adherents currently estimated within the tens of thousands worldwide.

The overall purpose is that you are in control, not being controlled by something or someone else. This was the real tenet behind hardcore – the refusal to be controlled either by an authority figure, an institution, a parent, a society or a lifestyle you do not want – that had been lost or subsumed through the controlling effects of alcohol and drugs. For those who adhered to the Straight Edge way of life, the purpose was to gain back that control, to be answerable for your own actions and to make those actions count, be that in your hardcore scene, your family or your local community. It was also to remove the social excuse of 'I wasn't in control, I was drunk / high

¹⁵⁴ Azerrad. Our Band Could Be Your Life. p134.

so it wasn't really me'. It was a way of searching for integrity and finding yourself without having to utilise the 'hippie ideals and methods' from the 60s, which had already proven a failure.

Furthermore, "Straight Edge brought bands and their lyrics down to a more personal level for the kids facing peer pressure and gave many the support to reject drugs...What these bands offered was a hardcore alternative to both straight society and the English 'drunk punk' we couldn't identify with."¹⁵⁵ In other words, Straight Edge was enabling some hardcore youth to both fulfil Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Durkheim's identified need for a social collective to belong to, to gain from and contribute towards.

Straight Edge adherents are often only physically recognisable from other hardcore punks by the presence of tattooed or drawn X or XXX, usually on the wrist, neck or hand as it is to be displayed. Durkheim incisively comments on tattooing in a way that is not only reflective of this approach to the displaying of the X, but fully explains it. He writes:

Tattooing is the most direct and expressive means by which the communion of minds can be affirmed. The best way of attesting to oneself and to others that we are part of the same group is to imprint the same distinctive mark on the body...The purpose is not to embody and evoke a particular object, but to bear witness that a certain number of individuals share the same moral life.¹⁵⁶

Unfortunately what can begin with the best of intentions and the purest of reasons can become warped, tainted with the agendas of others or simply misconstrued, and all of these happened to Straight Edge in time. "Somewhere along the line Straight Edge evolved into a mean-spirited, super-strict form of morality in Hardcore's temple of doom."¹⁵⁷ While I do not completely agree with this statement, there is no denying that the charge behind it certainly has some merit. While many people who attached themselves to Straight Edge or who claimed edge did so for reasons such as to think clearly without interference, or to break a cycle of addiction – either within

¹⁵⁵ O'Hara Craig. *The Philosophy of Punk*. (San Francisco: AK Press, 1999), p 144.

¹⁵⁶ Durkheim. *The Elementary Forms*. 2001, p. 177.

¹⁵⁷ Blush. *American Hardcore*. p. 28.

themselves or their family – or to be truly hardcore, there arose over time a significant minority whose reasons were somewhat more spurious.

There were some who joined believing or rather utilising it as a funnel for their tendency or desire for superiority, militancy and violence. The band Earth Crisis is commonly blamed as a reason for the attraction of these people. This was a band who publicly advocated waging war with those who abused animals – corporations and individuals – and who themselves dressed in a military manner – camouflage trousers, bandanas, etc. However, it could be argued that their lyrics or certainly their intentions were mis-interpreted by some of their followers, often claiming that they advocated or promoted violence against violence and using it as such to justify physical attacks on individuals associated with causes they disagreed with. This included in areas such as animal cruelty, abortion and drug dealing, yet their ‘attack’ was actually one of education, protest and compassion rather than physical violence. See for example “All Out War” and “Firestorm”.

Regardless, some Straight Edge adherents began to form gangs and roam around looking for people who were drinking or smoking and provoke a fight with them by knocking the beer or cigarette from their hands. T-shirts began to appear and be worn by these individuals with slogans such as ‘Kill your local drug dealer’, ‘Keep smoking, I want you to die’ or ‘If you aren’t straight edge now, you will be’. This conflict caused by and within Straight Edge through the militancy and violence of some individuals has been expertly captured and explored in the movie ‘Threat’.¹⁵⁸

However, it should be made clear that militancy in Straight Edge, while it certainly does exist, is the outlook of a minority. Most who claim edge do so for positive reasons as outlined above. “Though the vast majority of sXers¹⁵⁹ had never abandoned their positive roots, the action

¹⁵⁸ King’s Mob Production, Threat, [DVD], 2005, Halo 8 Entertainment.

¹⁵⁹ This abbreviation is commonly used to describe adherents of Straight Edge, with Straight Edge itself being given the corresponding abbreviation of sXe.

of the militant few overshadowed much of the scene. Individuals and bands...spoke out for a return to positive hardcore and scene unity.”¹⁶⁰

Today Straight Edge is but one of a number of different subsets or collectives which fall under the umbrella of hardcore. Some of these, such as metalcore, are based on the musical inclinations of the bands; others such as Krishnacore or Christiancore are based on allegiance with and missional intent of the bands. Others still are based on lifestyle and moral choices, such as Straight Edge. All, regardless of the label under which they fall or proclaim themselves, were created for the same purpose – community, to be a part of something bigger than oneself.

I wanted to create an imprint; I wanted to be a part of a gang. I wanted to be part of a group...you could identify as a tribe. I never thought of it as exclusive. I was trying to create something inclusive. I was never trying to keep people out of anything. Of course, anytime you're that focused on trying to create something its intimidating to people on the outside.¹⁶¹

The above quote is interchangeable in its application; obviously MacKaye is referring to the Straight Edge community and the wider DC scene he was an integral part of, but equally it could be said of a political group or a religious group. Essentially this is because, as Durkheim informs us, to belong, to be given acceptance and a place within a collective or structure, is an inherent fundamental human need, one we commonly call society. However, he continues with his argument: society, to fulfil that need, is also the basis of religion. “A religion is not necessarily contained in a single and consistent idea, and cannot be reduced to a unique principle that may vary according to circumstances but is basically identical everywhere; rather it is a whole formed from distinct and relatively individualized parts.”¹⁶²

Conclusion

And so our journey of the evolution of punk into hardcore and then the splintering and rising of groups such as Straight Edge leads us back to our original question – why is a punk band

¹⁶⁰ Haenfler Ross. *Straight Edge*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006), p. 92.

¹⁶¹ Ian MacKaye, quoted in Blush. *American Hardcore*. p. 136.

¹⁶² Durkheim. *The Elementary Forms*. 1995, p. 40.

playing a Christian song? The answer, as found in Durkheim's quote above, is a relatively simple one. The drive to create a group to which we belong cannot be ignored or switched off; it is a fundamental part of being human, and so to appease it we create society. Unfortunately, society, being created by flawed beings, reflects that flawed side of us, and so different collectives within society come into being to help us deal with the flaws in society.

Punk grew out of a specific time and place and for a specific purpose. However, it outgrew that and morphed into something new. Ziolkowski informs us that belief or faith is a fundamental human need and if the individual is unable, for whatever reason, to place it within faith he will find a surrogate. For those who have aligned themselves with punk, hardcore or Straight Edge, this becomes their surrogate. As Ziolkowski highlighted, those surrogates are often found in areas more commonly associated with the secular realm or activities, and from this we might deduce that religion is found elsewhere besides sacred texts and sacred spaces.

Straight Edge adherents have remained within their local hardcore scenes; they have not allowed their spiritual journeys to remove them from the apparently secular aspects of punk. Instead they have followed, or rather expanded, the current trend within not only punk but wider society, to merge the secular and the religious, the sacred and the profane. This is why a punk band in the 21st century can overcome the antagonistic relationship punk has had with religion to sing with genuine meaning and feeling a Christian song about the concept of divine grace.

The next chapter will continue the quest begun and partially answered in this chapter – exploring the relationship between Straight Edge and religion, specifically the spiritual identity found within the subculture. I will argue that the antagonism between punk and religion was not solely created by punk's anti-authoritarian, question-everything stance, but rather that it is a generational aspect of the cohort being made up of individuals from Generation X – something already briefly touched upon on this chapter.

Chapter Three – “Days of the Phoenix”

“The water turned black and it’s just getting darker. So be afraid, be afraid, be very afraid of the coming nightmare. The neo-Christian theocrats pray on a Sunday afternoon, then welcome in Pinochet’s men to intimidate and kill.”¹⁶³

The above quote from punk band Anti Flag demonstrates the typical relationship assumed by many to be held between punk and religion. That is, punk sees a hypocrisy, threat and disappointment by and with organised religions. However, all is not necessarily as it seems. Certainly the above quote does represent the historical stance taken between punk and religion, which given that it is taken from a 2008 album demonstrates its persistence. Yet the previous chapter shows that relationship shifting or evolving, and attempts are being made to overcome the lingering antagonism.

The purpose of the this chapter, in pursuing an answer to the question of the spiritual identity of Straight Edge punks, is to further examine the theory that we are witnessing the rise of a new expression of spiritual identity in modern Western societies, and exemplified through many Straight Edge adherents. This chapter will focus on the history between punk and religion, before moving on to explore the factors that gave rise to this new departure. The chapter will then finish by exploring the new departure as it is understood and expressed by Straight Edge adherents, with the specific case study of Christianity.

The history between punk 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.¹⁶⁴

This song by the California punk band ‘Dead Kennedys’ comes from their 1981 album, “In God We Trust, Inc.” for which the artwork features a gold statue of Jesus crucified on a dollar bill bearing the barcode 666. It is not the only song on the album that deals with religion; similar

¹⁶³ ‘The Ink and the Quill’ Anti-Flag, *The Bright Lights of America*, RCA Records 2008.

¹⁶⁴ ‘Religious Vomit’, Dead Kennedys, *In God We Trust. Inc.* Decay Records 1981.

references are made on the song 'Moral Majority'. Both the lyrics and the sentiment behind the song effectively sum up the relationship that existed between punk and religion at the latter half of the 70s and into the 80s. It should be noted at this point that, as in the previous chapter, I am speaking largely and primarily about the UK and the USA within this chapter.

Since the early 60s an increasing number of individuals, academic and otherwise, have declared that religion would be located only within the realm of the private, that it no longer had a place or at least a relevant place within the public sphere. It largely came from sociologists of religion such as Peter Berger and others who argued that due to the process of secularisation religion will be removed, thought of as irrelevant or confined to the private. Of course time has not borne this to be largely true and Berger has reoriented himself and now claims that the core premise of the secularisation theory is wrong and needs to be revised.¹⁶⁵

Of course not all sociologists of religion agreed with the secularisation theory. Mark Chaves argued that rather than expecting a decline in the public appearance of religion what we should expect to witness is a decline in the public authority of religions.¹⁶⁶ This is a debate that is in many ways ongoing to this day, and will no doubt continue for quite some time. Religion and cultural theorist Conrad Ostwalt argues that "all of this suggests that there need not be an all-or-nothing dichotomization of religion and the secular and that in some ways our oppositional presuppositions concerning religion and the secular are misguided and misleading."¹⁶⁷

Initially, similar to punk, hardcore thought of religion as a pernicious influence on society, a view that was in no way mitigated by the scandals of religious leaders such as Jerry Falwell, Jim Bakker and Pat Robertson that plagued the 80s. There was, amongst hardcore devotees, 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.

¹⁶⁵ Berger Peter. Secularism In Retreat, in *The National Interest* Winter 1996/97 : 4.

¹⁶⁶ Chaves M. Secularization as Declining Religious Authority, in *Social Forces* 72 no 3 March 1994, p. 749 – 750.

¹⁶⁷ Ostwalt. Secular Steeples. p. 3.

This particular view of religion amongst punks has a number of origins. There were not only the scandals involving self-appointed religious leaders in the USA, but also the scandals involving money, sex, business dealings and incitement of prejudice and hatred. In the UK religious leaders were being drawn into their own difficulties as there emerged increased accusations of child abuse and homophobic behaviour.

However these were not the only factors that led punks to consider religion and in particular religious institutions as a pernicious influence. This is a cohort that has grown up with the lowest levels of attendance at and interaction with religious institutions.¹⁶⁸ In many cases this is perhaps best explained by the attitudes of their parents who did not want to force a particular world-view or religious perspective upon their offspring, but rather encouraged them to find their own path. Of course, this does not mean that there were clear guidelines or parameters provided for that search, and as we shall see later in the chapter a widening view of and approach towards spirituality has resulted. Furthermore, parental influence was somewhat dampened by the lack of parental involvement and a marked decrease in interaction and communication between parents and offspring. Concurrently many parents were simply too tired or always working for church attendance to become any sort of priority.

A lack of interactions with religious institutions was further compounded, by the apparent overwhelming authority claimed by the church, and other institutions, in realms that punks felt should be wholly secular. In the USA evangelical Christianity was very much in the public domain. For example, it was a right wing government, led by Christian lobby groups, which was strongly leading issues such as abortion, homosexuality and human rights. Furthermore, evangelical Christianity became prominent in popular culture through various television shows, radio shows and through issues such as musical expression and free speech, as evidenced by the PMRC campaign, the suing of

¹⁶⁸ Religious trends 5 Brieley 2005 Table 12.9.1.

musicians claiming that they directly caused the suicide of young people or encouraged unacceptable behaviour.

Thus a lack of interaction resulted in a lack of knowledge and understanding of religious institutions. These were coupled with a sense that religion held too much influence within inappropriate arenas and a belief that the institutions and leaders were founded on pillars of hypocrisy, power, corruption, greed and if not outright hate and bigotry then certainly exclusivist views. When we consider this alongside the issue that this cohort of punks are largely made up from the sociological grouping known as Generation X, then a clear understanding of their view of religion and religious institutions should come into view.

Generation X are, according to the theologian Gordon Lynch, best considered as a group with a particular world or life view rather than the more common – and restrictive – delineations based on birth dates of between 1961 and 1981. An important part of this particular worldview or as Lynch calls it, ‘peer personality’, is a strong sense of suspicion towards traditional sources of authority.¹⁶⁹ One of those sources of authority is that of religious leaders and institutions, be they sanctioned, ordained or self-appointed. The cause of the suspicion is rooted in the factors discussed above, combined with the fact that those leaders and institutions claim their authority based on divine mandate which is itself based on faith not fact. Furthermore it would seem that in a generalised sense a strong sense of suspicion is a part of the overall make up of Generation X, borne from the specific economic, political, social, familial and religious factors that arose during their childhood and adolescence.

Due to this deep-rooted sense of suspicion many of Generation X found it necessary to seek out authority in new places. For many of them some sources of authority were to be located within various realms and activities of popular culture. Once again this is not surprising as it is another feature of the ‘peer personality’ highlighted by Lynch, he writes that Generation X “defines itself

¹⁶⁹ Lynch Gordon. *After Religion*. (London: Darton-Longman-Todd, 2002), p. 20.

primarily in relation to popular culture.”¹⁷⁰ In the introduction, I introduced the work of literary theorist Ziolkowski who argues that because belief is such a fundamental aspect of humankind, when we cannot place it within traditional repositories such as religion, traditional authority figures or institutions, then we will seek out what he calls ‘surrogates’ in which to place it.¹⁷¹ Combining the theses put forward by these two academics it becomes very clear why so many of Generation X turned to popular culture to find a surrogate or replacement for the traditional sources of authority – including religious authority – of which they at best felt suspicious.

Ziolkowski’s work explores the surrogates that were found or created at during the first half of the twentieth century. A significant number of these are located in popular culture – art, literature and travel. Others are firmly rooted in the socio-historic realms of myth, utopia and socialism. Ziolkowski shows how it was the surrogates based within popular culture that functioned successfully for the greatest length of time, although ultimately for some none of these surrogates were effective and they either returned to the traditional religion or resigned themselves to a life of lost faith.

Straight Edge is arguably not the first time that music has been used as a surrogate within modern Western society. If we turn to the mid-to late 19th century we can see such a surrogate arise and fall for Nietzsche in the person and, more specifically, in the music of Richard Wagner. Within Wagner’s work Nietzsche saw a return to the Greek notion of myth-building and believed that Wagner was creating new myths for the current age using the Greek structure-- that is, in breaking the established formats and re-inventing them in the Dionysian spirit.

The importance of the myth creation for the now, or the inventor of the now is what so excited Nietzsche about Wagner’s work. This is because, as Vattimo¹⁷² rightly notes, it allowed for the possibility of a return to the aesthetic power rather than a pursuit of industrial power. Unlike

¹⁷⁰ Lynch. *After Religion*. p. 21.

¹⁷¹ Ziolkowski. *Modes of Faith*. p. X, Xi.

¹⁷² Gianni Vattimo, “The End of Reality”, presented at Gifford Lectures, University of Glasgow. 7 – 10th June 2010.

other European and British countries at the time, Germany had not yet begun total immersion in and dependence upon industrialism in both material form and ideology. Nietzsche was expressing a hope that Germany would not sell out to industrialisation but would instead become the next ancient Greece where emphasis is placed on the aestheticisation of reality, whereby the artist's spirit invents reality for us.

However, as with many of the examples given by Ziolkowski, surrogates often teeter on a dangerous precipice, precariously offering the possibility of the new but not always having enough support to maintain its offering when the user wants to move it on to the next level. This is precisely what happened with Nietzsche and Wagner. They agreed on the common ground of Schopenhauer's assertion of the will to power but as Nietzsche began to draw his own conclusions, Wagner was unable or unwilling to follow him. Nietzsche was forced to realise and recognise that Wagner's myths were a departure in story only; they offered nothing new of substance to maintain an aesthetic Germany. Thus Nietzsche's surrogate became the very thing he felt compelled to attack and expose. Nietzsche saw in Wagner a 'replacement' but ultimately one insufficient, unable to create a new mytho-poetic ground largely because the translation of music into ideas lost the physiological elements.

For Nietzsche Wagner's music and myth-building potentiality was lost because Wagner pandered to a common sense of what it meant to be German, a Germany marked by grand ideas rather than subverting the Dionysian power of creativity. For similar reasons – pandering to the masses - the sociologist, musicologist and philosopher Theodore Adorno rejects and criticises popular music. Adorno clearly is invested in the power and potential of music, but he recognises a difference in music with regards to popular music and what he refers to as 'serious music'. He critiques popular music on the basis that "the whole structure of popular music is standardized, even where the attempt is made to circumvent standardization."¹⁷³ He compares popular music to serious

¹⁷³ Adorno Theodore. *Essays on Music*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p. 438.

music on the basis that serious music conveys meaning through its whole, which according to Adorno is not possible within popular music because it panders to the tastes of the masses rather than creating reality.

This criticism, regardless of whether one agrees with his overall argument and summation of popular music, reveals Adorno's overarching belief in music as a phenomenon, as a potential for greatness and growth. For Adorno true music should have a message, a purpose which it can only be given through its whole – the placement of notes, breaks, lyrics, and the context in which it is listened and experienced within. He argues that popular music cannot contain this purpose because it is based on formulaic reproduction to create financial recompense rather than an experience that can lift and change a person.

While I would argue that Adorno is wrong to blanket all popular music under commercial mass production, I would agree that music should move and lift the individual engaging with it. Adorno is not offering a surrogate to religion within serious music; what he desires is a return to a serious music that has to be maintained. This is a form of music in which the art cannot be subsumed for the sake of commercial appeal or profits.

Of course no-where did the commercial gain of music become an overt aspect than during the 50s as the baby boomer generation emerged as a financial force in their own right. They were the first generation to have a disposable income, and the time, to spend on leisure pursuits. Following the detrimental effects of World War II the 50s saw the emergence of rock and roll as well as the popularity soared for country and western music. Rock and roll was targeted and marketed specifically to youth with the purpose of profit.

In terms of commercialisation the imagery associated with rock and roll was very bright, often in primary colours, designed to evoke feelings of fun and carefree times. It was populated by attractive young people such as Elvis. As well as the records themselves there was also for the first

time a whole industry that grew up providing additional memorabilia for money, such as posters of the stars, clothing, pins or badges, magazines and so on.

Sonically rock and roll artists included elements of gospel and Western swing music and combined them with black blues music, utilising a new instrument, the electric guitar. To maintain the appeal of the music and to distinguish it from the music of previous generations it was played at the faster tempo of around 120 BPM which is significantly faster, resulting in very physical dancing.

Lyrically the songs were typically concerned with promoting or reminiscing about good times, about having fun or were about a girl the singer loved. Despite the 50s being a time of great tension and concern politically and socially, especially in the lead up to the civil rights movement, there was very little in rock and roll songs to indicate this or to comment on it. Instead, perhaps to ensure commercial success, the subject matter was kept light and enjoyable for the most part, and hence its label 'popular music'.

By the late 70s and early 80s this tendency to create music with no real lyrical content – what has become known as bubblegum pop – had reached such an apex that it became a factor in the creation of punk as a music genre. This lack of lyrical depth is something that remains of great concern for hardcore punks, and is often something that is utilised by many hardcore devotees to decide if a band is 'authentic'. New York hardcore band Sick of it all, on their 'Death To Tyrants' album, have a song which includes the lyrics:

How can we be deeply moved by their shallow words? The message is expendable, cheap and mass produced. How could there be influence with quality in short supply?...What do they stand for? What do they mean? What are they saying? Nothing. Nothing.¹⁷⁴

Perhaps Adorno was too quick to completely write off all popular music, but there is no doubting that within popular music there is a level of vapidness that cannot be escaped. One of the purposes of punk and hardcore music was to challenge the concept that to be popular or

¹⁷⁴ 'Make a Mark', Sick of It All, Death To Tyrants, 2006, Century Media Records.

commercially viable there could be no depth to the lyrics, through creating music that was a subversion of popular music. However, while punk music is subversive it still remains a part of popular music; this is another example of the tensions that exist within punk – their position of the in-between.

By the start of the 80s some of Generation X had reached the end stages of adolescence or were in the midst of adolescence and were engaged in a meaningful search for identity, a place to belong and a surrogate or replacement for the traditional sources of authority – including religious authority – that they were suspicious of.

Perhaps one of the best examples of the place that traditional religious buildings or spaces had within the strata of hardcore was the venue called ‘The Church’ which was located in the South Bay of Los Angeles. This was a disused and abandoned church building that was appropriated by hardcore punks. Some lived there as a squat, some used it as a storage space while they were on tour, and bands rehearsed and played shows in it. It was not considered as a sacred space, nor were there any considerations regarding whether their actions were desecrating or defiling it. The fact that it had been a place of worship was a mere irrelevancy, reflective of their view of religion and religious authority as an irrelevancy to be removed from society.

“Many in hardcore have had fairly strong agnostic / atheistic stances due to disaffection with organised religion...Pioneers like Minor Threat derided religion as being ‘full of shit’ (in the song ‘Filler’) and found the corruption stemming from religion had such a negative impact on the world that they saw no place for it in hardcore.”¹⁷⁵ Of course that is not to say that religion did not have any influence upon hardcore - it did, particularly with relation to the movement spawned from the Minor Threat song ‘Straight Edge’.

As with any youth movement the times and wider culture had a strong influence – both as a shaper and as something to be resisted - upon Straight Edge and indeed hardcore itself. This was a

¹⁷⁵ Peterson Brian. *Burning Fight*. (Huntington Beach: Revelation Records Publishing, 2009), p. 109.

time of the rise of the new Christian right, while 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.

Sociologist and Straight Edge adherent Ross Haenfler writes of Straight Edge: "Straight Edge's unyielding, black-and-white strictures on behaviour were similar to fundamentalist religion's rigid clear-cut beliefs."¹⁷⁶ The links and compatibilities between Straight Edge in particular and some aspects of general hardcore became even more obvious as the 90s dawned and something completely unforeseen happened within hardcore.

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. During the nineties, something controversial happened in hardcore: a variety of religious ideas, most prominently from the Hare Krishna movement and Christianity, began to have a very visible presence in the scene.¹⁷⁷

There has been a long history, particularly in the USA, of religious movements targeting youth culture in terms of where they congregate - colleges and media outlets, for example - in an effort to evangelise. They have a reputation, deservedly or otherwise is not to be debated here, for targeting places and individuals where there is a great sense of loneliness and alienation. In this sense, it is immediately obvious the link between the influx of religions within hardcore. Many hardcore punks report feeling great loneliness and alienation from mainstream society, a feeling, they will continue, that is dissipated somewhat upon involvement with and commitment to hardcore. However, in this case there is a caveat.

¹⁷⁶ Haenfler. Straight Edge. p. 10.

¹⁷⁷ Peterson, Burning Fight. p.109.

The difference between the hardcore scene and other arenas in which we are aware of young people being targeted by religious organisations is that in the case of hardcore it was not outsiders infiltrating or bringing in religion, but rather it was sought out and brought in by the band and audience members themselves.

The issue of the place of religion within hardcore was, and to some extent remains, a contested issue. Some strongly felt that hardcore was about rejecting the norms, conventions and institutions of mainstream society, of which religion was a part. Others felt that hardcore was about no rules and therefore religion could not be kept out so long as it did not attempt to impose rules and restrictions. Still others felt a need for religion or spirituality in their lives and wanted to combine it with their hardcore lifestyle and identity.

Religion within hardcore was largely based on the Krishna consciousness movement and Christianity,¹⁷⁸ but there was also a smaller engagement with Rastafarianism, Islam and Buddhism. Perhaps unsurprisingly given their code of ethics, religion and spirituality quickly became more common and comfortable amongst Straight Edge. Members of bands such as Youth of Today, 108 and Project X became very open about their spiritual search, journey and interest with the Krishna consciousness.¹⁷⁹ This was to begin the Krishnacore scene which continues to this day.

Tooth and Nail Records began to assemble a roster of Christian hardcore bands and release their records. The albums were largely sold on the basis of word of mouth – strongly reliant on the fact that they were Christian – an integral part of the hardcore scene and D.I.Y. ethic. These were bands such as Focused, Living Sacrifice and Focal Point. However, this actually developed as a parallel scene to the more traditional hardcore scene over time; it has never fully integrated in the way that Krishnacore managed.

¹⁷⁸ More commonly of Protestant orientation.

¹⁷⁹ Specifically, the Hare Krishna movement which was brought to the USA by A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada during the 1960s.

Punks question authority not only by looking and sounding different (which has debatable importance), but by questioning the prevailing modes of thought. Questions about things that others take for granted related to work, race, sex, and our own selves are not asked by the conformist whose ideas are determined by those around her. The nonconformist does not rely on others to determine her own reality.¹⁸⁰

The above quote from San Francisco based punk Craig O'Hara helps to summarise the somewhat tempestuous relationship that hardcore punk has had with religion and religious authority. It has been the purpose of this section of the chapter to briefly outline and explain the history that has existed between punk and religion.

I stated in the introduction to this chapter that I was arguing that a new departure had arisen which found expression within, amongst other areas, the type of spirituality that can be evidenced within hardcore punk. I have detailed how religion was introduced to the hardcore community, but the new departure was not solely created by nor can be credited to hardcore. Rather it is the confluence of a number of factors, to which I now turn my attention in the second part of this chapter.

Factors leading to the rise of the new departure

Although unintended and unforeseeable, involvement within and commitment to the events of hardcore and Straight Edge enabled a change in attitude to religion. They created a space and a way to approach religion that previously would have been unthinkable. However, they are hardly the sole factors that lead to this new expression of spirituality, or as Taylor names it 'a new departure'. I have already shown the importance of the cohort numbering largely from Generation X, specifically with regard to their peer personality and the importance of the specific socio-economic factors that lead to their creation.

There are four specific factors that have further cemented the creation of this new transformation that I wish to consider within this section of the chapter. Those four factors are:

¹⁸⁰ O'Hara. The Philosophy of Punk. p.28.

- Syncretism
- Popular culture
- Globalisation
- Technology

Of course these four factors are themselves reliant upon and informed by socio-economic factors and the areas covered by Ziolkowski in 'Modes Of Faith' which I have already outlined in this chapter - art for art's sake (including literature), the beginnings of global travel, socialism, utopia and myth. However, they do not have a direct bearing on spirituality as it is found and expressed within Straight Edge, so I have elected not to go into a detailed exploration of them within this thesis. I will at times be referring more directly to specific examples as they arise.

Syncretism

The Oxford English Dictionary defines syncretism as “the combination of different systems of philosophical or religious belief or practice.” A brief glance of the music of hardcore punk alone shows that syncretism is not limited to religion and philosophy. Within the music of hardcore there is a vast array of discrete and sometimes disparate musical styles – ska, reggae, metal, emo and even pop, being combined to create the hardcore sound. The same can also be said of literature, art and even general culture when we consider the use of descriptive terms such as “eclectic”.

Perhaps unsurprisingly when the word syncretism is used in relation to religious belief and practice by an adherent of another religion it is utilised in a pejorative sense. This in spite of the fact that most of the major world religions have at some point in their history utilised syncretism to ensure that newly 'forced' or conquered converts could assimilate without revolt. For example, Catholic Christianity adopted Celtic pagan beliefs and rituals during their Roman spread into Britain and Ireland, as when the feast of Samhain became All Hallows Eve, itself to become Halloween.

However, the sociologist and theologian Gordon Lynch has uncovered and written about individuals and groups who are actively engaging with syncretism as an integral part of their spiritual identity and journey. He writes that “the real story about the ‘new spirituality’ is one that is happening across and beyond a number of different religious and spiritual groups and traditions.”¹⁸¹

Lynch refers to those who identify with this form of syncretism as a part of ‘progressive religion or spirituality’. This progressive spirituality marries well with other aspects of spirituality that have risen to the fore in our modern Western societies. Namely, Durkheim’s¹⁸² cult of the individual, in which the individual becomes sacred, and the work of sociologist of religion Paul Heelas¹⁸³ on the turn to the self. Furthermore, Taylor¹⁸⁴ indicates that the sense that we have inner depths is one of the key fundamental factors in the rise of spiritual identity as we see it portrayed in modern Western societies. The sense that we have inner depths is essentially focusing or turning to the individual or the self.

We first encounter the concept of inwardness amongst the writings of Augustine who argued that it is only through turning inward that we can hope to discover God.¹⁸⁵ There is an explicit demarcation between the inner and the outer person, in which the outer is the body while the inner is the soul. Another term for this approach or thinking is that of radical reflexivity. Descartes gave this concept of inwardness or reflexivity a radical twist and suggested that moral sources are located within us.¹⁸⁶ This means that we do not inherit our moral reality, but construct it from these inner sources. For Descartes, although still focused on God, he viewed these moral sources as evidence or reason. He argued that we have to take a disengaged perspective towards ourselves as immaterial beings in order to arrive at knowledge with certainty. Having done so we can arrive at reason which

¹⁸¹ Lynch. *The New Spirituality*. p.7.

¹⁸² Durkheim. *The Elementary Forms*.

¹⁸³ Heelas Paul & Woodhead Linda. *The Spiritual Revolution*. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005).

¹⁸⁴ Taylor Charles. *Sources of the Self*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) & Taylor. *A Secular Age*.

¹⁸⁵ *De Trinitate* XII.

¹⁸⁶ *Meditations* (1640) and *The Principles of Philosophy* (1644).

can instrumentalise or control our desires or passions. This requires an internalisation of moral sources, so that now “we act to maintain our sense of worth in our own eyes.”¹⁸⁷

This in many ways has become the articulation of the modern view of ourselves as functional beings with an inner depth. The great difference lies in the role of God. No longer are people searching for an encounter with God within but instead they are searching for an encounter with themselves in a way that contains a clarity and wholeness not previously known or accessed. Radical reflexivity or the concept of our self as having inner depths has become central in this construction of ourselves as having inner depths and indeed in our construction of spiritual identity as we articulate it today. This is because radical reflexivity focuses on the first person experience, in both an attempt to gain a form of control and also as a valid source of authority or reason.

A focus on the self or the first person experience rather than an external authority allows for syncretism. This is because an external authority or deity will have laid out a specific route of action for approach and guidance, but if one is accessing the self then no such specific route exists. Instead one can approach a variety of beliefs, practices and ideas to find which is the ‘best fit’ as it were. Furthermore, one can combine a number of disparate and distinct beliefs, practices and ideas, which is to create a wilful syncretism.

This is not to claim that syncretism is a ‘pick n mix’ or ad hoc approach to religion and spirituality. Rather it is individuals recognising a need and being willing to traverse the traditional boundaries of religion to ensure that need is fulfilled. To sincerely and meaningfully undertake this approach requires an awareness of a variety of religious beliefs and practices, a deep self-awareness and a predilection for not only going against the ‘norm’ but for creating new ways of thinking, acting and believing.

Thus we can observe an inherent link between the rise of syncretism in modern society and the desire of some hardcore and Straight Edge punks to reach out to different religions in an attempt

¹⁸⁷ Taylor. Sources of the Self. p.152.

to reconcile and fulfil the needs of the spiritual component of their overall identity. However, while this may be enough to explain the initial interest in religion and spirituality that arose during the early 90s, it does not provide an adequate explanation for the continued presence of religion and spirituality within hardcore and particularly Straight Edge, so we must look for other commonalities within syncretism.

To return to Lynch's work on progressive spirituality, he highlights a number of significant recurring attributes that he discovered in his research and interactions that may provide an insight into the longevity of religion and spirituality within hardcore and Straight Edge. Lynch argues that involvement with and commitment to 'progressive' religion "normally indicates a commitment to understanding and practising religion in the light of modern knowledge and cultural norms."¹⁸⁸ In other words, it is a concern with finding a religious or spiritual path that is applicable, meaningful and authentic for the immediate rather than based on mandates and ideas from a long since past age.

This aspect is brought heavily to bear when we remember that this is a cohort formed from members of Generation X, who are according to a number of writers¹⁸⁹ a generation disengaged from traditional sources of meaning while being very interested and keen to find meaning in their lives. Being disengaged with traditional sources of meaning because they do not see them as relevant to their life or because they think that – as for example in the case of metanarratives, and following a Lyotardian approach – they are simply too open to manipulation thus forces them to find meaning elsewhere, in areas that are about the 'now' as it were. This would be a now that is concerned with areas such as democracy, gender equality, sexual orientation, diversity and syncretism all of which are areas for concern and action not only amongst Generation X but deeply embedded within hardcore and Straight Edge.

¹⁸⁸ Lynch. *The New Spirituality*, p.19.

¹⁸⁹ Lynch. *After Religion*; Holtz. *Welcome To The Jungle*; Furek. *The Death Proclamation*; Flory & Miller (eds), *Generation X Religion*, and Beaudoin T. *Virtual Faith*.

Secondly Lynch shows that involvement with progressive spirituality features “a sympathy with, and often active engagement in, green and left –of-centre political concerns.”¹⁹⁰ Once again although describing a spiritual milieu, Lynch could as easily be describing Generation X or Hardcore and in particular Straight Edge. We can see this in activism found within the subculture, for example, the rock against racism campaign, the punk voter campaign and the rock against Bush campaign, marches against the World Trade Organisation for unfair policies and practices. Furthermore it is evidenced in the lyrics of bands such as, Rise Against’s “Collapse (post Amerika)”¹⁹¹ numerous songs by Avail, Scared of Chaka, Beefeater and Conflict .This is not to mention the numerous column inches and debates devoted to these issues in various fanzines such as MMR, Flipside, Lookout and Assault With Intent To Free. It is also common for these issues to be raised by speakers in between bands performing.

Thus we can see the compatibility between syncretism and Straight Edge with regards to maintaining an interest in religion and spirituality within hardcore. Their concerns and interests ally perfectly, as does the propensity to reject traditional sources of meaning that make claims to authority and usefulness, because those claims are often based on tradition rather than on of immediate relevance to modern society as we live today. This leads us to the second factor that gave rise to the new transformation, namely popular culture, as so many of the new sources of meaning making are located within popular culture for Straight Edge adherents as well as Generation X.

Popular Culture

Popular culture has pervaded our society; it is with us regardless of the task we are performing, or the place we inhabit. It serves both as a reflection and as a shaper of our society. We utilise movies, music and television as mediums in which discourse can occur, discourse which can help to shape and define our values, beliefs, and ideas, even if they are not the primary source.

¹⁹⁰ Lynch. *The New Spirituality*. p.19.

¹⁹¹ ‘Collapse (Post Amerika)’, Rise Against, Appeal To Reason, DGC Records, 2008.

Detweiler and Taylor refer to popular culture as “the lingua franca of the postmodern world”.¹⁹² Yet it should be acknowledged that there is a divisive element to popular culture, not only on a superficial level, in terms of which genre of music or films one is drawn to and finds meaning within and which one abhors, but in a more important level concerning the place of popular culture. This is often summarised by the high and low or mass culture debate.

Over time there has grown a gradual recognition of the social and cultural importance and impact of popular culture and its mediums. Philosopher and literary theorist Jean Francois Lyotard has suggested that one of the symptoms or benchmarks of a postmodern society is that previously unheard voices will rise to the fore and be heard.¹⁹³ It could be argued that the voice of the people, the common masses as opposed to the elite, is being sounded through the various mediums of popular culture.

An example of both the voice of the people rising to the fore and the intrinsic place that popular culture has come to hold within our society is evidenced in the literature of Canadian author Douglas Coupland, who coined the phrase Generation X. In novels such as *Generation X, Life After God, Hey Nostradamus, and Eleanor Rigby*,¹⁹⁴ Coupland uses the voices of ordinary people – his characters – to demonstrate that popular culture has become a viable vehicle for thinking about the bigger questions. These are questions of morality, religiosity, the suffering of innocents, the nature of innocence and family life. Contra Adorno, we have come to realise that these so-called big issues and ideas can be addressed through varying formats found within popular culture, thus submerging the high/low culture debate and blurring such distinctions.

We should acknowledge that this gradual recognition has not occurred everywhere, or even equally, within departments of the same institution or denominations of the Church. “As the

¹⁹² Detweiler C. & Taylor B. *A Matrix of Meanings*. (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2003), p.21.

¹⁹³ Lyotard J.F. *The Postmodern Condition*. in *Theory on history of Literature Vol 10* (1979) 1984 Manchester: Manchester University Press.

¹⁹⁴ Coupland D. *Generation X*. (London: Abacus), 1991. Coupland D. *Life After God*. (London: Simon & Schuster), 1994. Coupland D. *Hey Nostradamus!* (London: Harper Perennial), 2003. Coupland D. *Eleanor Rigby*. (London: Harper Collins Publishers), 2004.

Christian church has often adopted the role of moral policeman, popular culture has assumed the role of spiritual revolutionary, subverting and frustrating those religious authorities who desperately cling to black-and-white answers in an increasingly gray world...Christian efforts to engage with popular culture often end up communicating judgement and condemnation.”¹⁹⁵

Detweiler and Taylor suggest that it is based upon the tendency of the church to rely on the Bible to interpret and therefore engage or disengage with popular culture, more specifically the teachings found in the New Testament. This creates disunity, since those teachings were intended to be addressed to very specific Christians and not culture as a whole. Detweiler and Taylor single out the writings of Peter, Paul and John as those which are more commonly relied upon as barometers of acceptability. However those letters and writings were designed to continue converts along their Christian journeys, not to be filters for viewing mass culture.

If there is such a strong disparity between some aspects of Christianity and popular culture, why then am I proposing popular culture as an important factor in giving rise to this new departure of spiritual identity? In this current culture where the status of the Church is undeniably waning, not only is it important that the Church engages properly with popular culture, it is also important that popular culture engages with what the church represents - beliefs, faith and the consequential action based upon faith. This is an area that is coming more and more to the fore of popular culture, particularly in films and music. We can see evidence of this in films such as ‘The Matrix’¹⁹⁶, ‘Babel’¹⁹⁷ and ‘Dogma’.¹⁹⁸ It is also in evidence in music with the rise in mainstream popularity of Christian¹⁹⁹ bands who play extreme music known as metalcore²⁰⁰ or screamo²⁰¹, for example Underoath, As I Lay Dying, Norma Jean and Still Remains.

¹⁹⁵ Detweiler & Taylor. A Matrix of Meanings. p.9 - 10 .

¹⁹⁶ Wachowski A & Wachowski L. [directors] The Matrix. US: Warner Bros 1999.

¹⁹⁷ Inarritu Alejandro.[director] Babel. US: Paramount Pictures 2006.

¹⁹⁸ Smith Kevin.[director] Dogma. US: Miramax Productions 1999.

¹⁹⁹ Christian in both band members personal beliefs and missional intent.

²⁰⁰ A musical blend of metal and hardcore punk.

²⁰¹ A lyrical delivery based on soft singing of verses and hard screaming of the chorus or bridge usually underpinned with metal music.

While we cannot forget that popular culture is largely driven by profits, a desire to succeed commercially we would be wrong to deny that it enables and provokes responses amongst individuals and communities. “The persuasive power of the popular arts comes from their roles and capacities as art. As representations of life, popular art can influence behaviour, shape attitudes and opinions and inform perspectives.”²⁰² Life cannot be fully represented, even within popular art, without reference, attention and engagement towards faith. Charles Taylor posits the theory that faith and popular arts are two of the most important aspects, alongside the market economy and governing systems that characterises Western modernity.²⁰³

Both hardcore punk and Straight Edge are firmly rooted and located within popular culture. Lynch, and others tells us that Generation X define themselves primarily through popular culture.²⁰⁴ This is how they construct, reference and explain their identity, how they interact with others and importantly how they maintain their hold in a world, in a society constructed on individualism. Once again we are presented with another example of the recurring motif of existing ‘in-between’. Both hardcore punk and Straight Edge are indebted to and yet actively subverting popular culture. This tension is what is ultimately going to recognise and reconstruct religion.

Individualism has the potential to create alienation and loneliness, particularly amongst the young who have yet to find their place and role in different aspects of life. However, those drawn to hardcore and Straight Edge feel that being an individual doesn’t require you to be alone, but rather to form a community from like-minded individuals. A living example of Taylor’s argument: “Modern individualism, as a moral idea, doesn’t mean ceasing to belong at all – that’s the individualism of anomie and breakdown – but imaging oneself as belonging to ever wider and more impersonal entities – the state, the movement, and the community of humankind.”²⁰⁵ To belong to this community, for some, means using any method or medium – including popular culture – to make

²⁰² Romanowski W. *Eyes wide Open*. (Michigan: Brazos Press, 2007), p. 19.

²⁰³ Taylor. *Modern Social Imaginaries*.

²⁰⁴ Beaudoin. *Virtual Faith*; Furek. *The Death Proclamation*; Holtz. *Welcome To The Jungle*; Flory R. & Miller D. (eds) *Generation X Religion*.

²⁰⁵ Taylor. *Modern Social Imaginaries*. p.160.

that community the best it can be. That is often expressed through the rights of the individual, as this excerpt from The Dead Kennedy's song 'Nazi Punks F-K off' demonstrates;

If you've come to fight, get outta here, You ain't no better
than the bouncers, We ain't trying to be the police, When you ape
the police it ain't anarchy. Ten guys jump one, what a man, You
fight each other, the police state wins, Stab your backs when you
trash our halls²⁰⁶

Of course this notion of forming a community through which one finds identity, solace, a place and a role and for some even salvation is a very Durkheimian approach to life. But it does provide a reason as to why popular culture is so important in enabling religion and spirituality to remain within hardcore and Straight Edge and in bringing about this new departure. Durkheim argued that collective thought is what is needed for the survival and longevity of any society.²⁰⁷ He also shows that even in primitive societies collective thought exists because it is needed to maintain moral order. For Durkheim this collective thought functioned under the guise or name of religion. There exists within this Durkheimian model a strong relationship between individualism and collectivism.

A collective is obviously made of individuals who need to remain individual to ensure the longevity of the collective. Any collective that solely functions to enforce a homogenous identity on its participants ultimately signs its own death warrant, for as strictures are put in place, they also form reasons for rebellion, refusal to comply or treason. We clearly saw that rebellion against constricting norms and traditions was a motivating force in the creation of punk as a musical format and as a movement. For hardcore and Straight Edge punks, collective thought is found and expressed through the medium of music.

Music surrounds us, we are immersed in it, it is used to attract our attention in advertisements, to heighten our emotional experience and connection during movie scenes and to

²⁰⁶ Nazi Punks F-K Off, The Dead Kennedys, In God We Trust. Inc, 1981, Decay Records.

²⁰⁷ Durkheim. The Elementary Forms.

subliminally entice us to linger in a shopping centre and thereby increase our potential spending. Music is an incredibly powerful phenomenon, which provokes an emotional response and sometimes a visceral reaction over which we sometimes have no control. It has been with us since early man and was chosen as a representative of humanity to be left in space.

Young people identify with these collective musical representations and use them as guiding fictions. Such symbolic fictions are the folklore by means of which a teenager, in part, shapes and composes his or her mental picture of the world.²⁰⁸

Within the music of hardcore punk, including the Straight Edge component, we can hear a struggle with, promotion and expression of modern Western ideals and society. There is a strong emphasis placed on challenge and a desire for improvement, both of those who claim authority and of oneself. There is a refusal to back away from uncomfortable issues such as domestic violence, suicide, rape, child abuse and self harm. There is a predominance of images focused around acceptance and community, the local scene is often referred to as one's family. 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'.

"The modern era compartmentalized human life. We knew the difference between the sacred and the profane, heaven and hell. But a division of the physical and the spiritual, body and soul, now seems misguided and forced."²⁰⁹ Music, including straight edge hardcore punk, seeks to unite body and soul, and so religion is to be found there. Ekim, the guitarist from the hardcore band 'Of Human Bondage' states, "Music is religion, a medium of sacred exploration that alters consciousness, and allows us to peer just over the abyss, glimpsing beyond the banality of everyday existence."²¹⁰ Thus we can see the importance of popular culture as a factor in the creation of this new departure, and in enabling religion and spirituality to maintain a presence and importance within hardcore and Straight Edge.

²⁰⁸ Detweiler & Taylor. A Matrix of Meanings. p.129.

²⁰⁹ Detweiler & Taylor. A Matrix of Meanings. p.153.

²¹⁰ Ekim, guitarist and vocalist Of Human Bondage in www.xtrememusic.org last accessed September 2009.

Globalisation

As a cohort, Generation X has dealt with globalisation on a scale never before seen or imagined, a globalisation that for previous generations was a desire framed around a colonial or early post-colonial structure, and for subsequent generations is a reality that has always existed. For Generation X globalisation had to be reconfigured into their paradigm at a young age with no guidelines. This is not to suggest that it is a negative or unsuccessful project - quite the contrary - but it is important to remember that Generation Xers are the first to have to deal with true globalisation as young children and teenagers.

“The underlying idea of moral order stresses the rights and obligations we have as individuals in regard to each other, even prior to or outside of the political bond.”²¹¹ This is a seemingly simple statement to make yet it is phenomenal in its implications, particularly in our modern global view of society. We are used to thinking of ourselves as individuals placed within particular communities either through birth (family), geography (home town, place of residence, country) or affiliation / choice (political parties, social groupings with regard to teams or bands or lifestyles we choose to support). We currently have to come to terms with viewing ourselves as a part of a global community in which our actions impact on the world, environmentally, politically and financially. However, it could be argued that although we sometimes think and reach globally, we remain locked within particular communities and can struggle to see our responsibilities beyond such collectives.

If we are becoming global what does that mean for our sense and understanding of community? What rights and obligations does globalisation raise? These are questions that Douglas Coupland explores time and again in his fictional writings, in which we frequently find characters searching for a home, a place to belong, while striving to come to terms with the ever-expanding

²¹¹ Taylor. Modern Social Imaginaries. p.4.

world in which they exist. This includes wrestling with and addressing the potential homogenising effect and nature of globalisation.

These themes and questions have arisen time and again in numerous punk songs for the last thirty years. Stiff Little Fingers wrote about immigration and global movement in 'Harp'²¹², Downset explored the impact of consumerism on the global environment in 'Chemical Strangle'²¹³ The Clash paid homage to the influence of multi-culturalism on music in '(White Man) In Hammersmith Palais'²¹⁴, and Anti-Flags' 'For Blood And Empire', their 2006 album explored numerous aspects of globalisation and what it means in terms of the rights and responsibilities of individuals, organisations and nations. It included songs, essays and interview excerpts on topics as diverse as The World Trade Organisation, depleted uranium being used in the Iraq war, the role and corruption of the press and an updated version of Pastor Martin Niemoller's poem 'First they came'.

Globalisation is raised by Ziolkowski as a surrogate for religion utilised during the first half of the twentieth century.²¹⁵ This was globalisation during its early phases when global travel was only beginning to become available, and yet there was already a potential for the experiences of travel and experiences during travel to replace the lost faith of some individuals. Globalisation has reached an epic scale in our time: we can literally travel the world in a little over a day, we have access to consumables from every corner of the world, businesses deal and trade in a global community and the attitude and behaviour of one country directly affects the rest of the world. Where once the descriptions of other religions were filtered through the authority of the Church they can now be witnessed directly in their own place and context, with elements of them being incorporated into our own lives and practices.

Hardcore punk and Straight Edge are both global phenomenon's and yet each retain their identity on the basis on local scenes – particularly in the USA; the UK is more commonly viewed and

²¹² 'Harp', Stiff Little Fingers, Get A Life, 1994, Essential.

²¹³ 'Chemical Strangle', Downset, Check Your People, 2000, Epitaph.

²¹⁴ 'White Man in Hammersmith Palais', The Clash, 1978, stand alone single, CBS.

²¹⁵ Ziolkowski. Modes of Faith.

described as one scene – which once again feeds into Durkheim’s notion of collective thought and community. Straight Edge forms a loose global community of essentially strangers who will often support one another on the basis of nothing more than the other self-identifying as Straight Edge. In spite of the fact that Straight Edge lacks a formal structure or membership list, scenes have forged a basis for commitment and mutual support, not to mention an encouragement of actions that are inline with the ideology. This sense of community has largely been influenced by Generation X’s exposure to the notion of globalisation.

Furthermore, the aspects of globalisation outlined above – the travel, the exposure to different cultures, ideas, practices, having to think globally while living locally and the sense of community – were a strong factor in ensuring that religion and spirituality remained within the hardcore scene. The involvement with the Hare Krishna movement came because of global travel and migration and was further enhanced by band members such as Ray Kappo, Ray Porcell and others travelling to India and interacting with Krishna monastic’s and then bringing their learned experiences and ideas back to the local scenes with them and sharing them. Of course this is not a new thing within music scenes - the Beatles had already done this very thing a decade or so before.

Straight Edge adherent Noah Levine, who began doing Buddhist meditation in Juvenile hall to calm himself, moved his spiritual journey on a step by combining the meditation with a belief, similar to the philosophy found within the AA or the NA, that “I didn’t need God, what I needed was some real help...by coming to believe in a Higher Power, I could be restored to sanity...It doesn’t have to be a God – it could be anything that I considered to be a power greater than myself...My higher power is the feeling that I have always had that I will be okay, no matter what.”²¹⁶ This understanding of a higher power later became combined with the esoteric practices of Jack Kornfield, Hindu retreats and ideas from trips to India and Buddhist beliefs and meditation practices garnered from a visit to hear the Dali Lama speak and Buddhist retreats in Pataya and Ubon, which

²¹⁶ Levine Noah, *Dharma Punx*, San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2003, p.82.

are both in Asia. Noah went on to found the group known as the Dharma Punx whose beliefs, practices and influence within Straight Edge I outlined in the previous chapter.

Technology

Beaudoin and Holtz both remind us that this is a generation which not only had a much greater access to and usage of technology, but one that in many ways consider technology to have a parental or influential role in their lives and overall identity. “In loco parentis, television provided daily entertainment for those who had to fill time between the end of the school day and the return of working parents. My generation later reported that we spent more time with the television than with our parents during childhood.”²¹⁷

Computers designed for personal use, rather than massive data storage or prediction, began to appear in the 70s, making Generation X the first cohort to have grown up with them. By the 80s computers were in homes as well as businesses and educational institutions. It is hardly surprising that Generation Xers feel so comfortable and at ease around technology. It is not only their trademark, but the hallmark or icon of their generation.

Familiarity with technology can lead, or rather lend itself, to a manipulation or subversion of that technology, enabling purposes for which it was not originally intended. Technology was no longer simply a diversion for Generation X but a means of new communication, new expression and the potential to be heard. “Access to ‘diversions’ meant that the separation became fuzzy not only between work and play but also between different technologies...Subverting this technology while exploring its diversionary value (another characteristic of our cohort).”²¹⁸

Generation X is not only technology literate, but they are so enmeshed within it that they cannot conceive of life without it. They are constantly surrounded by and make use of mobile telephones, laptops and computers, mobile DVD players, mobile music and mp3 players, mobile

²¹⁷ Beaudoin. Virtual Faith. p 5.

²¹⁸ Beaudoin. Virtual Faith. p6 parenthesis author’s own.

internet access - the list is ever-expanding. Yet these are not merely for convenience or entertainment roles; they are imprinted with the identity of the user.

Mobile telephones, internet access, laptops and music players all encourage us to personalise them through the use of photo, images, ringtones, personal taste and popular cultural references. They enable immediate global contact and remove the concept of specific space defining a task. For example, one can carry out work typically found in an office on the train, the plane, at home, visiting someone else and so on. Of course despite the undoubted advantages of technology, we must also acknowledge that technology can exacerbate areas of problems such as alienation, isolation and identity.

Charles Taylor informs us that;

The number one problem of modern social science has been modernity itself: that historically unprecedented amalgam of new practices and institutional forms (science, technology, industrial production, urbanization), of new ways of living (individualism, secularization, instrumental rationality); and of new forms of malaise (alienation, meaninglessness, a sense of impending social dissolution).²¹⁹

This required a new ordering of society and new understanding of our place within it and how best to manoeuvre and function therein.²²⁰ But with change comes the potential for more change, for growth, as well as the possibility of plateau or stagnation.

Hardcore and Straight Edge punks refused to give in to stagnation, to reach a plateau. Instead they utilised what they could to continue their search for a meaning, for sources of authority and a way to accommodate all aspects of their identity, including spirituality. Technology was a fundamental part of this. During the early 90s there had grown up a global tape swapping network which was facilitated by bands travelling, fanzine adverts and writing letters. Individuals would record on a cassette their favourite songs and bands and send them to people in other countries who would reciprocate with tapes of their own. It became common to include literature on topics

²¹⁹ Taylor. Modern Social Imaginaries. p1.

²²⁰ As explored in the Introduction.

important to the individual, such as environmental, animal rights, gender issues, rape, domestic abuse, drug and alcohol abuse and spirituality.

With the onset of personal home computers and email, not to mention recent developments in file sharing²²¹ and web-based social websites, this platform to share and learn has exponentially grown to such a degree that it is now truly global. It is now possible for Straight Edge punks to interact with one another despite never having met and living in separate countries, yet they can share their life stories, their approach to and understanding of Straight Edge and their own life journey's including spiritual aspects. This is further exposing one another to new ideas, beliefs and practices, increasing opportunities for syncretism and exploration, whilst remaining within the safety net and community of their popular culture scene.

The final section of this chapter is concerned with explaining how this new departure which appeared within hardcore and Straight Edge and was enabled to grow and diversify through syncretism, popular culture, globalisation and technology is today understood and expressed by hardcore and specifically Straight Edge punks.

Straight Edge understandings and expressions of the new departure

I'm a person just like you but I've got better things to do than sit around and smoke dope cause I know I can cope, I laugh at the thought of eating ludes, I laugh at the thought of sniffing glue, always want to be in touch, never want to use a crutch, I've got Straight Edge.²²²

The message of Straight Edge is simple: you do not have to drink, smoke or take mind altering drugs in order 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. One should not try to escape life, but take steps to make it better. As I have said before, to be considered Straight Edge, one has to make a personal commitment (sometimes called claiming edge) to live life according to the philosophy found in the song quoted above. This is sometimes described as three 'rules', 'tenets' or 'guidelines':

²²¹ Legal or illegal, as both are engaged in.

²²² 'Straight Edge', Minor Threat Complete Discography, 1981, Dischord.

1. no alcohol
2. no drugs (including tobacco)
3. no casual sex

This is a self-made decision, a self-observed rule, and self-constructed lifestyle. Straight Edge has no leader, appointed or otherwise; it is entirely autonomous. However, to break the rules is to forfeit the identity of Straight Edge. Even if one decides to live a sober life again, he or she will not be Straight Edge, for “edge” can be claimed only once in a lifetime. It is a lifetime commitment.

An argument could certainly be made that with adherents of Straight Edge structuring their lives around a framework based on three rules makes them more open or compatible with religious beliefs and spiritual searching. However, I would argue that this is a simplistic connection and we should instead be considering what spirituality came to mean within Straight Edge and how it presented itself as an identity.

The inclusion of various forms of spirituality in hardcore instilled an even stronger passion for defining one’s place in the world, regardless of one’s spiritual beliefs. This debate paralleled the focus on ethics and politics in the scene ...as well as individual lifestyle choices such as straight edge and vegetarianism / veganism.²²³

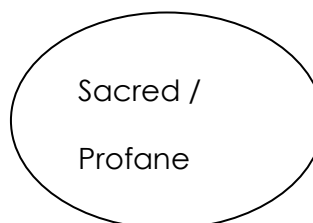
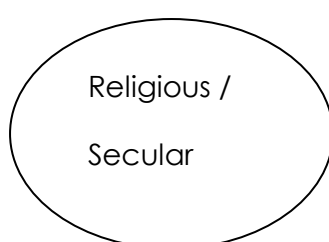
We must not forget that not only are these individuals Straight Edge punks, but they are Generation X Straight Edge punks with the same peer personality or outlook on life that other members of the cohort exhibit. They are distrustful of traditional sources of authority. Spirituality may have been brought into the scene but churches, temples, priests and vicars were not. There can be no debate regarding their deep desire to search for meaning, which they did not discover within traditional institutions. They first found it in hardcore; then with that as a strong base they branched out into other areas. But they did not move away from their popular culture based foundation and community.

²²³ Peterson. Burning Fight. p.132.

Straight Edge adherents, in particular, felt strongly that the purpose of belonging or committing to hardcore was allow or enable the private to positively influence the public. Arguably this is more of a concern for Straight Edgers because the three 'rules' they commit to pervade every aspect of everyday life, and much of this everyday life is lived in the public sphere. Following these three 'rules' commonly leads the adherent to consider and re-evaluate other aspects of their life, such as vegetarian or veganism, political and social activism and spirituality.

In allowing private religious and spiritual beliefs and practices to step into the sphere of the public many Straight Edgers have been enabled to effectively merge the religious with the secular to create a new lived experience of spiritual identity. It is a spiritual identity that is inherently linked with their Straight Edge and hardcore identity and yet one which is intrinsically modern and importantly one that they feel cannot be co-opted or controlled by religious institutions, marketing or corporations. This will be unpackaged further in Chapters 5 and 6 when we interpret most of the fieldwork.

I stated that they have effectively merged the religious with the secular, but this is not to tell the whole story. While on the one hand they see no clear reason as to why the two cannot be combined to create a spiritual path that best fits their need, they have on the other hand created a separate division. In mainstream society it is not uncommon for certain individuals to argue that religion and secular are two separate spheres and 'never the twain shall meet'. This is of course done for a number of reasons and with their own agenda firmly behind it. But Straight Edge adherents have rejected this notion of the religious and the secular occupying separate spheres; instead they view religious/ secular as a separate sphere from the sphere of sacred / profane:



While some Straight Edge adherents would see some room for overlap, most would prefer to conceive of them as two separate spheres. The reason is that the religious / secular sphere is related to institutions, traditional sources of authority and meaning-making, to the potential for marketing, consumer-led approaches and so on. Conversely, the sphere for sacred / profane is related to a journey without answers, to freedom and individual-led searches, and to needs rather than mass-marketing.

Many Straight Edge adherents who claim spirituality as a part of their identity would locate themselves within the sacred / profane sphere, for the reasons outlined above but also from a sense of historical solidarity. For decades they have seen themselves as the outsiders to the mainstream, despite their strong connection to popular culture, and so do not wish to locate themselves within the sphere most connected with the mainstream. Furthermore, and perhaps much to their delight, when hardcore first emerged it was described as a profanity by the mainstream media, and so there is a desire to maintain that identity and link it to their past. Finally they would locate themselves within the sacred / profane sphere because of the qualities that they associate with each, as outlined above.

Straight Edge adherents believe and consider themselves a living example that one cannot be true or have complete integrity to the self when one is under the influence of external substances that either alter our perception, remove a part of ourselves (lowering our inhibitions for example) or give us the socially acceptable excuse of 'I was so drunk or high I can't remember' or 'it wasn't really me'. "The disengaged subject takes sober, adult control of his environment rather than allowing himself to be bewitched or dominated by it."²²⁴

However it does not end there, for as Taylor has shown, a part of 'self' is that of taking a stand.²²⁵ For those who are Straight Edge this is a fundamental part of authenticity or integrity, having the courage to stand for what you believe in and stand up for those who can't stand up for

²²⁴ Smith N. Charles Taylor: *Meaning, Morals and Modernity*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), p 205.

²²⁵ Taylor Charles. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), p 40.

themselves. Be that through questioning, protesting, rallying, direct action, boycotts, diet or many other methods. To initially take a stand one needs points of orientation, which for those who are Straight Edge is initially found in the songs, fanzines, cd inserts, artworks and rallies that form an integral part of the hardcore scene. From that starting position they are enabled to engage with spiritual identity as it presents itself today in our modern Western societies, through the use of syncretism, popular culture, globalisation and technology.

Lynch tells us that Generation Xers “are more likely to value relationships above success, community above fixed goals, and personal authenticity above achievement. Xers are not so much a ‘me’ generation as a ‘we’ generation.”²²⁶ To achieve depth and integrity in relationships, community and personal authenticity requires support for one another. Hardcore and Straight Edge recognise and fully embrace this; in fact it has become one of the central tenets within the community. It has become so integral that it is now believed to be one of the strongest weapons they have against co-option, institutions, businesses and the mainstream, and one of their strongest weapons in finding an authentic private spirituality that when combined with integrity can become a powerful positive force in the public domain or sphere.

Of course, as the cultural theorist Zizek reminds us, fully embracing a community or a collective means giving up possibility for actuality, but therein lies the potential for freedom.²²⁷ Freedom here means self-awareness and self-growth, and for the development of an authentic identity or self, which for some Straight Edge adherents includes an acknowledgement and engagement with the spiritual dimension of their overall identity.

The final section of this chapter is a case study that provides an example of how the perceived inability to provide freedom within the Christian tradition has led to the development of Christian punk as parallel to Straight Edge and hardcore.

²²⁶ Lynch. *After Religion*. p.18.

²²⁷ Zizek Slavoj. *The Puppet and The Dwarf*. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2007).

Christianity and Straight Edge – case study

While many in hardcore and Straight Edge had carried personal Christian beliefs since the beginning of punk it was not until the mid to late 90s that it really became a recognisable sub-genre in its own right, although as I have said before, it largely developed as a parallel scene rather than achieving true integration within hardcore, due to two specific factors.

The first factor is the perceived oppressive systems that were associated with and sometimes promoted both within and by Christianity. These were systems such as patriarchy, fundamentalism, racism, homophobia and censorship. These were all systems that hardcore and Straight Edge punks railed against in their music and rallied against on the streets. The second factor was that Christianity was seen as the epitome of the mainstream - it was the dominant religion for centuries within Western societies, and it held power and money and used its influence in the halls of power to get what it wanted. The self-declared purpose of punk was to stand against the mainstream, to hold a mirror to it and show it how corrupted and bloated it had become. Thus Christianity often became the target for these attacks, musically at least.

They tried it with religion and with Christ, said I'd get to heaven if I acted real nice, but they were just preparing a crucifix for me, a life of guilt, of sin, of pain, of holy misery. They've got the lot, that's what they want you to think, read between the lines, you'll see the missing link. The Bible's just a blueprint for their morality scene, just another load of shit on how its never been. They stand there in the pulpit, doling out their lies, offering forgiveness, then they talk of eyes for eyes.²²⁸

Christianity was, as the Crass lyrics above demonstrate, often portrayed as either a hypocritical morality power play or a crumbling façade for an aged, increasingly irrelevant, institution. As we said in Chapter Two, punk was purposefully trying to enlighten people regarding the situation they were living in with what seemed like a broken country, a corrupt system of authority and the debris from families torn apart and broken down. In a Nietzschean way punk

²²⁸ "I ain't thick, it's a trick", Crass, Stations of the Crass, 1979, Crass Records.

understood that in order to make something new, one first has to destroy the old - creation is a painful birth.

Dave Mandel, the founder and owner of Indecision Records summed up the over-riding sentiment regarding Christianity within hardcore;

There is nothing safer than Christianity as far as mainstream ideology. I never understood how kids got into it. Later on a lot of kids were only introduced to hardcore through their church, but I never really considered them hardcore kids. There would be these shows going on and it would be all Christian bands, and none of those kids would ever come to hardcore shows. It was like that scene existed side by side along the hardcore scene, but I would never really call it the hardcore scene.²²⁹

Christian hardcore was quickly realised to be a huge money earner and attraction for a lot of church-based young people who enjoyed aspects of the music. Most hardcore punks were strongly opposed to this, for hardcore bands should not be started with the intent or purpose of making money but rather making music that has to be made. It was often seen as a further attempt to control and censor their music as well as prove that once again the music had been taken but the message ignored. A small number of bands²³⁰ in the US did play alongside traditional or non-Christian hardcore bands, but these were few and far between and often faced great criticism from both hardcore crowds and Christian crowds.

Similar to the US, Christian hardcore bands in the UK were never fully accepted as a part of the UK hardcore or Straight Edge scenes. Again they formed their own parallel scene, which became financially very successful, although in recent years has somewhat declined due to their persistence in sticking with skater punk, which had a brief popularity in mainstream culture with the release of chart bands such as Good Charlotte, Avril Lavigne, Sum 41 and so on who were marketed as 'pop

²²⁹ Peterson. Burning Fight. p.127

²³⁰ Focused for example

punk', but was quickly replaced with emo.²³¹ For the most part, the UK hardcore and Straight Edge scene views the Christian bands as a thinly veiled attempt at insidious recruitment through passionless music.

Despite their resistance to Christian ideology, Christian imagery is rife within hardcore and Straight Edge music and not just amongst those with a Christian affiliation nor simply in a derogatory manner or as something to protest about – although certainly those two both exist. As for example in Sick Of It All's 'Don't Join the Crowd' which contain the following lyrics:

It's what they say, it's what they do, it's what they believe That makes me not believe in anything at all...A thousand wars, a thousand more will come, because of what they hold so dear ...Don't join the crowd, don't just agree, with their simple versions of reality...You're strong enough to deal with the uncertainty...They speak as if their free, but I don't think so, its mind control...Find your own personal faith, we have to make our own personal space.²³²

Conversely bands such as AFI, Wisdom in Chains, Fucked Up and Integrity all use frequent and recurring Christian imagery and references within their music. Perhaps the most interesting one to have been released recently is that of UK band Gallows. Their album Grey Britain is a scathing indictment of Christianity, yet it at no point condemns Christianity outright. Rather they attack the institution, the leaders, the willingness to accept without thinking and the atrocities carried out by or ignored by the Church. The song 'The Great Forgiver' asks the question of guilt, the question of what happens to the victims and the concept of absolution.

If God is the great forgiver, then all the scum will be delivered. They bury the men but not their sins, they just say a prayer and they take them with them. Heaven is full of fucking scum.²³³

This is in essence the problem that hardcore and Straight Edge had with Christianity: while they understood and to varying degrees respected the notion of free speech, there was too much

²³¹ A form of music shortened from the phrase 'overly emotive'. Emo was originally a part of the hardcore scene with bands such as Fugazi and Rites of Spring. However, this recent trend had nothing in common with either that history or those bands and was largely created by mainstream music media and corporations.

²³² 'Don't Join The Crowd', Sick of it All, Death To Tyrants, Century Media, 2006.

²³³ 'The Great Forgiver', Gallows, Grey Britain, Reprise Records, 2009.

history, too much mistrust and too many unanswerable questions for the two to be able to coexist, despite what they had in common. They were not prepared to submit to the authority of a church, a dogmatic set of beliefs or a deity.

Christianity generates scepticism and persecution in every aspect of society, not just in hardcore. The name Jesus is either the most annoying or most beautiful word in the world, depending on who you're talking to. What makes it even harder for people involved in the hardcore scene is the aspect of submission. This is commonly viewed as weakness. Hardcore and Straight Edge tend to be very pride based; submitting your life to a higher power holds very little place in that mentality.²³⁴

Despite this unwillingness to submit to a higher power or authority such as the church, this section of the chapter has clearly demonstrated that there was a sense of searching and a gradual opening towards aspects of religion and in particular spirituality within both hardcore and Straight Edge. We need to combine this with the Generation X outlook on life (a natural extension of Straight Edge as a way of uncovering the world and finding one's place in it in a sober and meaningful way), curiosity about the spiritual dimension beyond that taught within religious institutions and access to a variety of spiritual practices and ideologies.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to explore religion and spirituality as it has connected and interconnected with hardcore punk and Straight Edge, in order to show how many Straight Edge adherents understand and present or live spirituality as a part of their overall identity. I argued that they primarily expressed it through a removal of any distinction between religious and secular and a construction of a distinction between religious / secular and sacred / profane, locating themselves in the latter for a number of reasons, primarily having to do with traditional sources of authority and meaning-making. The next chapter will explore the relationship between music, specifically Straight Edge punk music and religion.

²³⁴ Peterson. Burning Fight. p.128.

Chapter Four – “Screaming at a wall”

“If you wanna get the feelin’ and you wanna get it right, then the music’s gotta be loud. For when the music hits, I feel no pain at all ... When I got the music, I got a place to go.”²³⁵

Music is integral to the subculture of Straight Edge; in many ways it is the focal point. “Being straightedge is being part of a group [physically or mentally]. The vast majority of that group of kids got into straightedge by listening to a certain type of music.”²³⁶ That certain type of music is hardcore punk and will consist of both local bands and ‘household names’ such as Minor Threat, Gorilla Biscuits, 7 Seconds, Youth of Today and Ensign. Hardcore music is very specific in terms of its sound, based on the premise of being faster, heavier, thicker and louder than traditional 3 chord punk music.

Knowing the sound of the music that commonly draws people into Straight Edge does not really give us insight into the role of that music in the lives of Straight Edge adherents, why it is so attractive (beyond personal aesthetic tastes) and most importantly for this thesis, the necessity of hardcore music in the construction of spiritual identity.

In Chapter Two I outlined the myriad of reasons for the creation of punk as both a movement and a musical style. Chapter Three focused on the evolving and convoluted relationship between punk and religion. I argued in Chapter Three that the spirituality and religion that Straight Edge adherents were pursuing was analogous to the ideals and values promoted within the collective and often promoted through the songs. In this chapter I am taking that argument a step further by positing that Straight Edge adherents are stepping into an extensive history of music as a conduit for religious and spiritual experiences. I am arguing that were it not for the presence and integral core of music within the subculture, then for many Straight Edge adherents religion and spirituality would not have been approached or sought out.

²³⁵ ‘Radio’ Rancid, Let’s Go. 1994 Epitaph Records.

²³⁶ Nate, email interview with author April 5, 2010. Brackets interviewees own.

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate the importance of music as an entity within the lives of Straight Edge adherents, specifically in terms of their spiritual identity and expression. To achieve this aim I will first create a description of the kind of music that hardcore falls into. This is not a discussion of four chords and breakdown versus three chord music, but rather a description that will allow us to place hardcore music within a musical historical context. Finally this will lead to an exploration of the use of hardcore music by Straight Edge adherents within spiritual practices and identity construction.

Description of hardcore music

The first time I saw the band perform live, the amount of energy that they created in that room that very night was beyond belief. Never before had I witnessed a band hit the stage with such an overwhelming, energetic force. Its almost as if a bomb, fuelled by the struggles, discontent and injustices of the world exploded onstage and created a ripple-effect that pummelled through, infecting every person in sight.²³⁷

It is not an easy task to adequately or accurately describe a hardcore or Straight Edge show; it is something that has to be experienced firsthand. Due to the intertwined nature of Straight Edge and music I spent a lot of time during my field research going to shows, but I still struggle to adequately convey the live experience in words. It is where the music comes to life, and is heard as it is meant to be heard. Cds, mp3 files, even vinyl cannot adequately convey the intensity of a hardcore or Straight Edge show, and instead they serve as reminders of the live show, or a substitute for being unable to attend.

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! "The best show is one in which both the band and audience 'go off', losing control, jumping and

²³⁷ Carl Schwartz of First Blood describing the first time he saw Sick of It All. 2007 'Our Impact will be felt', cd insert.

screaming together in a melee of tangled bodies. A great show carries a tense feeling in the air as if a fight or injury could happen at any moment, yet usually neither occurs.”²³⁸

Hardcore dancing is extremely physical and involves hand-eye coordination alongside mind-body connection and control in an environment that necessitates a heightened level of awareness of surrounding and other people. Failure to maintain that awareness is the most common cause of physical injury to either oneself or to others. Participants from a hardcore or punk show will emerge dripping with sweat, exhausted, often bruised, occasionally physically hurt but usually feeling happy and fulfilled. On describing his first attendance at a punk show one interviewee stated:

It was quite daunting at first; I had never seen like a proper pit action before, with everyone just going for it, it was so much fun, totally doing that. Just how horribly sweaty it was, still remember getting a taxi back from it and the whole thing was completely steamed up. Ah it was fantastic and like there was no drinking or anything it was just solid enjoyment, classic times *[laughs]* ...just heaps of generally quite cool people and there is none of that sort of stigma of being like kids at a show and being annoying or anything, it was just good, awesome.²³⁹



Fig 5 crowd shot of a Straight Edge show, photograph supplied by interviewee Frank.

²³⁸ Haenfler. *Straight Edge*. p.19.

²³⁹ Kevin, interview with researcher, Glasgow 31.03.10.

As I explored in Chapter Two punk music exploded out of a specific social context borne from anger, disillusionment and frustration by a disinherited youth.

At that time, at 17, I think there was a lot of angst and a lot of anger you know, because things were dismal and you look back now and you they were dismal, you'd a right to protest, you'd a right to, to say, I'm no taking this shit, I want something better, you know. And it really, I think, eh, punk evolved because of that²⁴⁰

Following in a long tradition of popular art, punk was protest music, but rather than focusing on large-scale events such as the Vietnam War or civil rights, punks focused on the societal ills that directly affected them – as outlined in Chapter One. They also railed against the institutions that they felt were responsible for either creating or maintaining the social problems, including the monarchy, the government, education, military, church (or more generally religion) and law enforcement. Johnny Lydon (Rotten) explains his Sex Pistols song 'God Save The Queen' as thus;

It was worth the risk. Nobody had openly declared any anti-opinions of the royal family in ever such a long time in our ridiculous feudal Great Britain. I thought it was about time somebody stood up and said something – and I was more than pleased that it be me.²⁴¹

The music of punk spans different genres, including hardcore, skater, surfer, metalcore, NYHC, UKHC and so on. All can be defined as being distinctly urban in origin, performance and sound, where the musical and emotional intensity is sustained throughout a live performance.

In a typical rock show or pop concert the set list is designed to induce a gradual emotional build-up to a finale through peaks (usually with a successful chart-breaking song or a song the band is known for performing) and troughs (usually with a slower paced song or an acoustic song). At the apex of the performance the band will leave the stage in a faux finale, only to return when the audience has performed a suitable degree of appreciation and desire (typically through chanting the name of the band) and perform an encore of two or three songs designed to send the audience out of the venue happy. Such entertainment is also a huge factor within a punk or hardcore show,

²⁴⁰ Billy, interview with researcher 4.3.10 discussing the late 70's.

²⁴¹ Lydon John. Rotten. (London: Plexus Publishing, 1994), p.81.

certainly, but it is only one factor amongst others of equal importance, such as community, unity and action.

At a rock or pop concert the music and the experience is fragmented. There are sometimes large gaps of time in between bands or sets on stage, during which the audience either goes to the bar or interacts with whomever they came with. Furthermore, the songs are deliberately selected to enable emotions to ebb and flow, to create an elongated experience that reflects or at least fits into the splintered life that is predominant in modern Western societies.

By using the term “splintered life” I am referring to society’s predilection for compartmentalisation, for example, current talk in education on a work / life balance that stresses keeping the two areas as distinct and separate, which in reality is not possible. We are encouraged to consider our lives as having distinct arenas in which we can behave in different ways, and as some advertisements would have us believe, be different people. These include our work, family, social and online or virtual lives. We are only reminded that these spheres actually interconnect to form a whole when one impacts on the other, usually in a negative way -- for example, people being disciplined at work for posting comments on their MySpace or Facebook pages.

In comparison punk and hardcore shows stress integration. A hardcore show typically eschews the above format of performance. There is no gradual build-up, the intensity level is reached during the first song and sustained throughout. If the crowd begins to flag in energy the lead singer will draw them back in by urging a faster circle pit or instigating a wall of death or by provoking the audience by comparing them to another audience.²⁴² However, if a number of bands are playing, and typically a punk or hardcore show will have between three and five bands playing, the audience may have the chance to catch their breath and relax in between performances as the bands strip down and set up their equipment. It is an aberration for the band to perform an encore,

²⁴² Usually this will happen if the band is established and has a significant number of albums from which to draw material and so will play for over two hours.

as it is seen as 'rock star posturing', although recently this has started to appear in shows by a small number of the more established acts during their headline shows, particularly in the UK.

The time in between bands or performers changing over is kept to a minimum and during this time music will be played through the sound system of the venue or club, usually at a level that requires an individual to shout to be heard over it. The music is a constant, and individuals will interact both with it (dancing) and because of it. The music is also used to maintain the homogeneity of emotional state, or of a single emotional register, and thus potentially prevent fights, by means of a way to remain in the moment instead of considering what one may be returning to in the wider context of their everyday lives.

An emotional register or spectrum is central to this analysis of punk music, particularly with reference to how the music itself is used. Therefore this section of the chapter will focus on the relationship between music and emotion, with specific reference to hardcore and Straight Edge punk.

Music and emotion

Similar to the contentious term 'religion', emotion is a term that has both a precise clinical application – particularly in psychology - and a myriad of meanings within everyday speech. Therefore there cannot be an assumed meaning or understanding of the term. Emotions are more than simply feelings, moods or affective states and yet connected deeply to each. Every emotion has a context, a history and cultural meaning and significance. For the purposes of this thesis then the word emotion is being used to describe *a multifactorial expression of a quantity of a communally agreed or understood response and state of mind.*

The effect of music on our emotional state

Throughout the history of the written achievements of humanity there exists a continuing thread which recounts the powerful effect of music upon the emotional state of a character.

Aesthetics philosopher Jeanette Bicknell charts a number of these in her book 'Why Music Moves Us.'²⁴³ She points to examples such as the tears of Odysseus in response to Demodocus singing, the use of a musical bard by Agamemnon to maintain his wife's disposition, the musician employed by Pythagoras to calm the frenzied youths surrounding him.

There is a long tradition of religious writers engaging with the issue of the effect of music on human emotions. Some, such as Augustine lamented his inability to prevent his distraction from meditation upon God when music was played, while admitting that the music profoundly moved him. Despite the use of music as a form of worship, meditation and ritual marking within numerous sacred texts there remains a hesitance – and at times refusal – to fully utilise it within religious services in some traditions.

Throughout the Islamic tradition writers stressed music's overwhelming and irresistible power over listeners. Music was seen as capable of producing such sensual pleasure or profound excitement that listeners might lose control of their reason and succumb to passion. The word *tarab* referred to a range of possible emotional responses to music – everything from delicate pleasure to strong excitement and even ecstasy. Although this term was originally applied to the emotions stirred by the fine recitation of a beautiful poem, it later became identified with music and its derivatives. A musician is a *mutrib* and musical instruments *alat-al-tarab*.²⁴⁴

Today we find music attached to many rituals – weddings, funerals, graduations and birthdays – and to mundane activities – shopping, doctor's waiting room and sporting activities. It is utilised alongside visual images in movies and television shows to heighten the emotional impact of the scene and draw the viewer in. We are left then with the question, what is that music does to our brain or mind that provokes such a strong emotional resonance?

Music brings about similar physical responses in different people at the same time. This is why it is able to draw groups together and create a sense of unity ... Music has the effect of intensifying or underlining the emotion which a particular event calls forth, by simultaneously co-ordinating the emotions of a group of people. It must be emphasized that making music is an activity which is rooted in the body... It is generally agreed that music

²⁴³ Bicknell Jeanette. *Why Music Moves Us*. (Palgrave MacMillan: London, 2009).

²⁴⁴ Bicknell. *Why Music Moves Us*. P5.

causes increased arousal in those who are interested in it and who therefore listen to it with some degree of concentration.²⁴⁵

Psychiatrist Anthony Storr raises two important issues in the above quote. First, the communal dimension and importance of music and second, the notion of arousal or heightened emotional state. Both of these are crucial to understanding the importance of the music of hardcore punks in their developing of a spiritual identity. To ensure clarity then, both issues will be dealt with separately in the opposite order in which they appear in Storr's quote, as understanding the individual emotional impact will lead to a greater understanding of the communal aspect.

The notion of arousal

First we must be clear as to what we mean by the term arousal. Storr defines it as a condition of heightened alertness, awareness and interest. In other words it is an enhanced state of being. Storr outlines the physiological responses to arousal, including a measureable increase in "amplitude and frequency of brain waves ... the electrical resistance of the skin is diminished; the pupil of the eye dilates."²⁴⁶ In addition there is often an alteration to the heartbeat and blood pressure and specific increase in muscle activity in the legs when music is listened to. These physical affects are also noted by other researchers in this field such as Daniel Levitan.

Storr asserts that these physical responses are more directly linked with our emotions when we are listening to music rather than when we are completing a physical activity. He cites the example of conductor Herbert von Karajan while conducting Beethoven's Overture, Leonora no. 3 and notes with interest that the pulse rate was the highest in sections in which Karajan is emotionally affected as opposed to those in which he is physically exerting himself. Another example can be given from a hardcore punk performance by Henry Rollins.

A moment comes, an instant of transformation, signalled by no subtle shift in light or temperature, but by a queer effect of time itself: the stage lights beat down in hot blues and

²⁴⁵ Storr Anthony. *Music and the Mind*. (Harper Collins: London, 1992) p24.

²⁴⁶ Storr. *Music and the Mind*. P25

reds, the music heaps and staggers around him and Henry Rollins is, quite suddenly GONE – out there, eyes screwed shut, bent double, screaming. The movement in the pit almost stops, coagulates in front of him in a kind of bewilderment. They can't help but notice – Rollins has left them all behind. He crouches crabwise to the audience, naked torso wrenched down against naked thigh, spine curved in the upper orbit of a circle as he turns in on himself. He looks amazingly alone, amazingly upset ...He's been heading here since the music hit, and now it has him transfixed – the great beats lag and throb like almighty syllables.²⁴⁷

This would indicate a strong connection between hearing and emotion. Music researcher David Burrows argues that “we are dependent on background sound of which we are hardly conscious for our sense of life continuing. A silent world is a dead world.”²⁴⁸ Consequently we seek out stimulus to both affirm life and to arouse our sense of self and emotions, music, it would seem, is one of the most effective methods we have available to us.

Therefore it is not unexpected that we surround ourselves with music in our everyday life. the radio being played while we clean the house, the mp3 player on while we walk the dog, the music in the shopping centre, at the gym and subtly being played through our favourite television programmes adverts and perhaps less subtly blasting from a teenagers bedroom all function to remind us that not only are we alive, but we are not alone. However, on an emotional level the music is doing a lot more.

Sociologist of music Tia DeNora argues that utilising and listening to music in our everyday lives enables us to care for our ‘self’.²⁴⁹ She argues of music;

It is a resource for modulating and structuring the parameters of aesthetic energy – feeling, motivation, desire, comportment, action, style, energy. By this, what respondents often mean is that its specific properties – its rhythms, gestures, harmonies, styles and so on – are used as referents or representations of where they wish to be or go, emotionally, physically and so on...When respondents are choosing music as part of this care of self, they are engaging in self-conscious articulation work, thinking ahead about the music that might ‘work’ for them.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁷ Parker James. *Turned On: A biography of Henry Rollins*. (Phoenix House: London, 1998) pxiv.

²⁴⁸ Storr. *Music and the Mind*. P27.

²⁴⁹ DeNora Tia. *Music in Everyday Life*. (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2000) p53.

²⁵⁰ DeNora. *Music in Everyday Life*. p53.

In other words then, individuals are recognising their own emotional state and are selecting music to accompany their mundane tasks that they believe will either improve it or enhance it in some way. This requires self reflection and honesty as well as an understanding of the effect of types of music on the emotional spectrum.

Turning to punk, specifically hardcore punk music, given the social and economic factors that gave rise to the music as a genre it is not surprising to find that punk music typically would be seen as 'angry' or 'venting' music to borrow DeNora terms. This is music that one plays when in an emotional state of anger or dissatisfaction that one does not want to dissipate but do want to express. The playing of this type of music could also be read as an attempt to induce feelings of anger, outrage or dissatisfaction. One finds this within a variety of punk shows whereby the audience are enjoying and partaking of the show as a form of entertainment but as it progresses the music is used to invoke the feelings outlined as a lead up to the band member(s) advocating a particular form of direct action.



Fig 6 Crowd shot at Converge show, G2, Glasgow 14.07.10.

A particular example is that of Syracuse Straight Edge band Earth Crisis. Their music is one of unbridled aggression and sing along chants, but it is coupled with a specific statement during songs (importantly usually while the band provides a background sound). Typically Karl Buechner will make a statement such as, "It is not enough to just be drug free, it has to go much further. It has to

become personal accountability and direct action on those who destroy our world, our society and hurt living beings (animals). Use the clarity of mind to become actively involved in the struggle for human, earth and animal liberation.” Littered around the venue they are playing at will often be tables and people handing out literature about PETA, veganism, Animal Liberation Front (ALF), Greenpeace and others.



Fig 7 Karl Buechner of Earth Crisis performing live, audience faces demonstrating strong emotions at play. Photographer unknown.

Earth Crisis were of course themselves influenced towards using music to effect emotion and lead to direct action through the early anarcho and hardcore bands in the UK during the 80s. In many ways their lack of musical technicality and expertise led to an increase in the ferocity and aggression that was wrought from their instruments and throats. Speaking of seminal Crass record ‘Feeding of the Five Thousand’, music commentator George Berger states;

Crass had produced a record – or more accurately a package – that screamed blue murder in your face: screamed its integrity, screamed its love and screamed a scream that defied you to stand up and be counted.²⁵¹

Having this music screamed in your face (often literally) compels an emotional response, a release of a scream you had held inside perhaps or a scream of agreement or maybe even a scream to urge your body into action. If one is constantly surrounding oneself with music of this emotional

²⁵¹ Berger George. The Story of Crass. (Omnibus Press: London, 2008) p6.

intensity – made significantly easier to toady with portable mp3 players – then either one becomes numb to the emotional impact of the music or one sustains a heightened level of arousal.

Both of these responses – emotional numbness and sustain of arousal – are found within Straight Edge and hardcore amongst many adherents. Emotional numbness is hardly surprising, given that many Straight Edge adherents are seeking to break a cycle of addiction (and abuse) within their immediate family, so numbness maybe appealing rather than dealing with the emotional impact of their personal backgrounds. In these situations it may perhaps be the case that they are utilising the emotional impact and connection of music to put the user in a state of being unable to feel, comparative to how one can with drug use.

One such example was a Straight Edge tattoo artist I interviewed in the Bay Area of San Francisco who is known in this thesis as S.T. Having overcome his own drug addiction he had claimed edge, wanting to return to and remain a part of the punk scene he had grown up in but felt he had lost when he became immersed in drugs. By his own admission he had never cognitively dealt with his personal reasons for his addiction but he was proud of having overcome them, feeling it demonstrated his own strength. S.T. listened to music, solely punk by his own admission, constantly.²⁵² He wore headphones around his neck, often with one in an ear and the other dangling while music blared from speakers in the tattoo studio he worked in. One occasion when I left his studio at the same time as he did, he got into his car and immediately punk music blared from the tape deck. Despite this he did not appear agitated, he did not tap out rhythms as he spoke (even when I did it he did not mirror me) and there was no indication of a change in physiology, in so far as I could tell. When at various points, I commented on a particular song that came on, he was almost unaware that it was playing and that my comment had jolted him to notice the song again – often, though not always, at this point he would stop and listen to it for a line or two and his facial expression would momentarily change.

²⁵² In the time that I spent with him I did notice that it was a variety of punk music that he listened to – Straight Edge, street punk, Anarcho punk, hardcore, metalcore and East Bay punk featured prominently.

More common amongst Straight Edge adherents is that of maintaining a constant state of emotional arousal. This parallels the hardcore ideal of maintaining a constant vigil to prevent authority figures, institutions or mainstream society from 'pulling the wool over one's eyes' as it were. Typically an adherent surrounds themselves with other Straight Edgers outside of the venue and so will talk about the music, the bands, the activism and so on. It is likely that social gatherings outside of music shows will have the commonly admired bands played in the background and certainly activism is underpinned with a musical soundtrack where possible. Bands who join the fans in protest rallies will often play impromptu songs during the march.

However maintaining a lengthy state of arousal is an unnatural occurrence for both human minds and emotional registers and could therefore result in burnout. This could certainly be a contributing factor in the high rate of individuals who break edge as they can no longer maintain that emotional state and as they connect it with being Straight Edge reason that therefore there is no place for them within that lifestyle.

It is arguable that the emotional state reached at a live performance far exceeds any that experienced through personal listening via a recorded means. As I have repeatedly acknowledged throughout this thesis, largely through the work of Durkheim, we are by nature social creatures. We crave communal interaction and activity, and our musical adventures and emotions are a part of that. Therefore the next section of this chapter will deal with the communal dimension of music and our emotions.

Communal dimension

The physiology of singing, as opposed to simply speaking, allows the group to maintain loud voices for a longer period of time because singing uses different throat and diaphragm muscles than speaking...The vocal symphony further conveys that they are not simply acting as independent entities; its demands also indicate that they are aware and

sensitive to the physical and mental states of each member of the group – an awareness that could create a formidable military defence if called to fight.²⁵³

Social existence requires, as Durkheim demonstrates, collective agreement on certain behaviours, ideas, beliefs and mores. However it also, crucially, requires a means to reach that collective agreement and disseminate it to those who are new to the community. Music is the typical means by which this is achieved, and has been for most of humanities known history – perhaps we are not as evolved as we like to consider ourselves!

Babies and small children are taught through songs and lullabies, classical music is often played in the background of classrooms as it is thought to enhance retention of knowledge and to mediate behaviour. Teenagers latch onto songs as the soundtrack to their lives at various points, they also use music as a means to coalesce around a commonality and stake their claim as different from ‘others’. Adults use music to indicate acceptable social behaviour at parties, for example.

Those who belong to subcultures will often use music as a defining parameter of acceptance and as a means of teaching the rules of the subculture. Punk is, of course, no different from other subcultures in this respect. It was through a song by Minor Threat that the Straight Edge movement was born. Songs such as ‘Now or Never’ by Straight Edge band Bold teach the importance of solidarity in the face of adversity and being let down by others, while ‘Sown the Seeds’ by In The Clear teaches the danger of apathy.²⁵⁴ Furthermore bands such as 7 Seconds used their music to teach against the acceptability of sexism and homophobia found in the mainstream society and to therefore teach that it was unacceptable within this subculture.

Straight Edge bands did not utilise music in this manner in a vacuum, they were merely repeating a long tradition within punk, and wider society as we saw above. From the outset punk music was used to teach – both what was acceptable and what was unacceptable and should be

²⁵³ Levitan Daniel. *The World in Six Songs*. (Aurum Press: London, 2008) p48.

²⁵⁴ ‘Now or Never’. Bold. *Speak Out*. Revelation Records. 1997. ‘Sown the Seeds’. In *The Clear*. Steel City Straight Edge. Sure Hands records. 1999.

challenged and changed. Early punk bands such as the Sex Pistols spoke against the greed of record companies in their song 'EMI'.²⁵⁵ Anarcho punk bands were particularly adept at this, utilising music to teach about feminism, animal rights, ecology, hunt sabotaging, communal living and corrupt political systems.

The communal dimension of music has a different impact on our emotions that when we listen to it in isolation. In fact it would not be a stretch to argue that music is inherently social rather than individual, despite the emotional impact and arousal it can and does have on us as individuals. Bicknell argues;

The recognition of music as a human (rather than a natural or supernatural) product goes hand-in-hand with its fundamentally social character. This can be seen in many ways. Music is created (composed, improvised, performed) by human beings, usually for the benefit of other human beings ... Musical culture relies on human transmission.²⁵⁶

DeNora aptly demonstrates how considering and utilising music in this manner enables a social ordering to take place, particularly amongst those who could be potentially disparate.²⁵⁷ Essentially this is because music in a social or communal setting evokes strong feelings of companionship, commaderie, solidarity as well as engendering powerful emotions of belonging and acceptance. This relates back to the work of Maslow that was raised in Chapter Two, in that through music people are enabled to fulfil the human needs required after food, shelter, etc have been met, which is that of security and a place to belong.

I wish to argue that this fulfilment of strong communal emotions of security and belonging is a significant reason in the emergence of punk as a musical genre, particularly when it is combined with the powerful emotions it can evoke in individuals. Music as a form of entertainment was largely a Western creation. In many African, Asian and Latin American cultures music was, and is, a form of everyday communication rather than a commodity. That is that it is an integral aspect of their daily

²⁵⁵ 'EMI'. Sex Pistols. Never Mind The Bollocks, Here's The Sex Pistols. Virgin Records. 1977.

²⁵⁶ Bicknell. Why Music Moves Us. P90.

²⁵⁷ DeNora. Music in Everyday Life. p109.

social lives rather than something they consume. DeNora recounts an encounter with a Nigerian gentleman on the subject of music;

In Nigeria, he concluded, people had a richer and more overt understanding of music's powers, and a knowledge of how to harness those powers was considered to be an important part of common sense. By contrast, in the cold and over-cognitive climate of pre-millennium Britain, people were considerably less reflective about music as a 'force' in social life.²⁵⁸

Examining the music in Britain and the United States of America in the decades prior to the punk explosion and it is very difficult to dispute the gentleman's summation of the understanding and use of music in the West. It was not punk that changed that, by any stretch of the imagination, but rather it was the rock and roll that emerged in the mid to late 50s.

Here we are referring to the music of Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, Chuck Berry and others. This was music that was born, largely, in Memphis at a time of deep racial segregation. Furthermore it was music that was not only influenced by but directly related to the music found in African American communities and churches. While the initial reaction from white parents and those in authority was one of moral outrage and an attempt to censor it in some way.

Aside from the racial element, which will be dealt with shortly, there were two dimensions of this new rock and roll music that they were reacting so strongly and negatively to. First of all, this was the first time that a generation gap was created in popular culture, parents and children were no longer listening to the same music. Secondly, was the introduction of emotion both within and caused by music.

In the year prior to break through of Elvis in 1954 the most popular song was '(How much is) that doggy in the window', written by Bob Merrill in 1952 and recorded by Patti Page. Prior to the release of this song Bob Merrill had penned 'If I'd Known You Were Coming, I'd Have Baked a Cake'. In the same time frame a particularly popular song was 'I've got a lovely bunch of coconuts' by Merv

²⁵⁸ DeNora. Music in Everyday Life. pxi.

Griffin. These novelty songs, will popular and financially very successful, were not intended in any way to offend, to connect with any emotion or to induce any form of arousal in the listener. The same could not be said of the newly emerging rock and roll.

In addition rock and roll broke open the communal nature of music and inspired large gatherings of young people from various races. These young people performed, what was considered at that time, to be very provocative movements and gyrations to the music – largely centred on the movement of the hips. This of course gave cry to it being sexually provocative. Statements such as Presley’s “Rock & Roll, if you feel it, you can’t help but move to it” would have seemed to fan the flames of discontent. However his statement also reveals that what rock and roll was essentially about what emotion, connecting and expressing emotion with music.

Rock and roll was an emotional introduction to music for white people at the time, it had its roots in previously existing Black music such as Rhythm and Blues, Gospel and Soul music. However, as with most commodities before too long success leads to co-option and attempts at ownership and control, in this case through music companies and recording contracts. In the case of rock and roll, the initial attempts to produce it for mass consumption paved the way for bubblegum pop before the power of rock was eventually realised within the 60s generation who refused to allow race barriers to impede their enjoyment and emotional connection with this music.

The bloated behemoth that became rock and roll in the mid 70s stands as a testament to the enduring power of emotion and music and the commodities it can produce. Many who were involved with punk in the early stages of its creation cite the barrier between the performer (the rock star) and the audience as a major stumbling block in enjoyment and engagement. In addition they bemoaned the pomposity and the extravaganza that rock and roll had become. In essence they felt it had lost its emotional connection with the music and was solely being utilised as a means to fame and fortune.

The stagnation of rock music was reacted to vehemently in the form of punk rock music. Punk rock put the emotion – albeit with a focus on the more ‘negative’ emotions – back at the heart of rock music, and hardcore is no different today. The communal dimension was quickly locked in and utilised. Partly this can be explained through their perception of being society’s outsiders, despite actually being in something of a position of privilege in comparison to ethnic minorities. For the first time those on the outside were deliberately attempting to position themselves as the ‘other’. This is something I want to return to shortly in connection with the racism at the core of the reaction to rock and roll mentioned above. First however I want to briefly deal with an aspect that arose as a result of this renewed connection with emotion through music in a communal and social setting, that is the notion of spirituality and music – rapture.

Rapture

Music has a long held tradition of invoking a connection or dialogue with the gods / God, particularly in Eastern religious traditions. This can be attributed to an ingrained notion that music is connected with the spiritual, the divine, the ineffable.

In the Western tradition the attitude to music as a conduit to the spiritual realm goes hand-in-hand with the perception of the composer as creative genius and the virtuoso performer as divinely (or devilishly) inspired...A different kind of connection between music and the spiritual realm is to be found in the close association in many parts of the world between music and certain altered states of consciousness. Whether called trance states, ecstasy or raptures, such states are temporary, more or less prolonged, and usually brought about by sensory over-stimulation.²⁵⁹

What Bicknell is essentially describing is an enhanced state of arousal that cannot be maintained for any significant period of time but can lead to a temporarily deeper connection with the divine or the spiritual. For some individuals, a rapturous experience can even lead to an altered sense of the self, what they may consider to be a more authentic self.

²⁵⁹ Bicknell. Why Music Moves Us. P7

I have argued elsewhere in this thesis that, generally speaking, punk, hardcore and Straight Edge musicians do not align themselves with the Western notion of the artist as a removed creative genius. Therefore, I am going to argue that Straight Edge is more akin to Eastern notions of rapture than Western. I intend to demonstrate that in the remainder of this chapter by examining the notion of rapture as it connects with music and emotion. This will then lead to three case studies from within Straight Edge – Krishnacore, Taqwacore and Dharma Punx. These three are obviously greatly influenced by Eastern religious traditions and the Easternisation that has taken place in the West. Consequently the case studies will also engage with easternisation, the debate surrounding orientalism and finally will return to the thread of racism that was raised in connection with emotional music in rock and roll above.

Rapture, music and emotion

In the Western Christian tradition the term rapture is more commonly associated with the eschatological belief that when Christ returns to earth Christians will rise up into the air and join him. This belief is largely based on 1 Thessalonians 4:15 – 17. Etymologically the word rapture is linked to two separate Latin words. *Rapio* meaning ‘caught up’, which has more in connection with the Christian eschatological belief and *Rapere* means ‘to seize or abduct’²⁶⁰ and has more in connection with the usage and meaning of rapture that we are examining. American mythologist Joseph Campbell “described the ancient myths that emerged as the religions of India as myths of rapture.”²⁶¹ The term rapture in Campbell’s argument denotes the availability and variety of connections with various expressions of life found both in nature and the spiritual realm. In other words rapture in this sense is being used to describe the methods and emotional state by which people can commune and connect with an ineffable force or divine being.

Within some ancient Indian meditation practices music was considered powerful enough to control elements of nature, create specific moods or emotions in the meditating individual or to

²⁶⁰ Oxford English Dictionary, accessed through the University of Stirling and the University of Glasgow.

²⁶¹ www.personadigital.net/Persona/Religion/myths_rapture.html Last accessed July 2010.

influence emotional states. Ancient Chinese meditation was often accompanied by music played on a stringed instrument called a Qin. The strings are plucked on this quiet instrument to achieve a contemplative and ritualistic moment within meditation in which the body and mind become united to allow an engagement with the universe and nature.

Within Buddhism, particularly for those following the Vispanna tradition, rapture is a common translation of the Pali word *piti* which is a factor of meditative absorption. It is believed within some Buddhist traditions that music can influence a state of meditation, although not all traditions will use music within meditation as some believe it can be a distraction. Traditional vocal music which focuses on a Buddhist theme can help to speed up or be a catalyst for meditative states.

The teachings of the Buddha (*Mahavairocana Sutra*) say, 'In all acts of singing there is truth; every dance portrays reality.' In accordance with this, the development of Tibetan Buddhist Music has been allowed to blossom freely, which in turn has helped foster its many distinctive characteristics. In Tibetan Buddhism's larger ceremonies, Lamas can be seen utilizing all kinds of unique and exotic ceremonial instruments such as specialized types of drums, windpipes, spiral conchs, and trumpets.²⁶²

The connection between rapture and music also exists within some Western traditions. Within ancient Greece there was a tradition of honouring the god Dionysius through the use of a dithyramb, which is a hymn sung by 50 men and boys while supplicants dance in a circular formation. Nietzsche proposes that "the most immediate effect of the Dionysian tragedy, that the state and society, and, in general, the gaps between man and man give way to an overwhelming feeling of oneness, which leads back to the heart of nature."²⁶³

The performance of the dithyramb was a frenzied, impassioned affair which often resulted in the partaker reaching temporary heightened states of emotional ecstasy, similar to that experienced by the Buddhist meditator. This influence on emotion would certainly correspond with the work on the effect of music on human beings that is currently being undertaken by neuroscientist Daniel Levitan who argues that "current neuropsychological theories associate positive mood and affect

²⁶² <http://www.blia.org/english/publications/booklet/pages/38.html> last accessed July 2010.

²⁶³ Nietzsche Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy*. WM. Haussmann trans. (London: T.N.Foulis, 1910), p.60.

with increased dopamine levels”. Thus because music stimulates the mesolimbic system within the brain, which controls the release of dopamine into our system, Levitan says “Music is clearly a means for improving people’s moods.”²⁶⁴

Clearly this release of dopamine and its subsequent heightening of pleasurable emotional states is related to the state of rapture being achieved or sought through meditation practices. Levitin persuasively shows that this is due to the effect of music on the cerebellum, which is largely in control of our movements but which is also strongly linked to the emotional centres of the brain.²⁶⁵ In so stimulating them the release of chemicals resulting in heightened sense awareness and aroused emotional state, combined with the belief that this is in honour of a god, explains why, for some people, this type of music-based activity can result in a rapturous experience which on occasion can lead to an epiphanic experience. The question we need to consider now is whether what happens at a hardcore show or when listening to the music can also be defined as rapturous. To properly answer this we must consider the effect of music on emotions as it appears within hardcore and Straight Edge.

Hardcore, Straight Edge and rapture



Fig 8 crowd shot at Duck hunt show, photograph supplied by interviewee Frank.

²⁶⁴ Levitan Daniel. *This Is Your Brain On Music*. (London: Atlantic Books, 2006), p.191.

²⁶⁵ Levitin. *Your Brain On Music*. p.174 – 175.

Music is a spiritual modality, a mode in which you achieve a rapturous state. It is 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 is can attend a Straight Edge or hardcore show and leave aside their ordinary, mundane work-a-day lives and for a short time step into, and be a part of something much larger than themselves. They are afforded an opportunity to see themselves in a new way, to realise new potential and connections as part of their search for an authentic self.

DeNora posits that individuals engaging in music in this form of social setting are attempting to “regulate, elaborate and substantiate themselves as social agents.”²⁶⁶ In other words, 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. Rather their concern is for an enhancement or arousal of their own emotional state, an emotional release and a fulfilment of a deep longing to connect with the communal dimension of music.

This may explain why, although I am arguing that many participants are undergoing a rapturous experience, what they connect with on 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 a opportunity to develop an authentic self. Given this statement then it is necessary to explain why I am connecting it with rapture as I have above.

In the Ancient and Eastern traditions that I very briefly outlined above music was being used to forge and enhance a connection and to provoke an aroused emotional state that is unachievable in the everyday world and unsustainable in the long term. In those examples the connection was with the divine or the spiritual and the emotional experience was labelled rapturous. What I am arguing is that the heightened emotional experience is no different for Straight Edge adherents at a live performance; the only shift that has taken place is their focus or goal of connection. Therefore it can legitimately be labelled as a rapturous experience.

²⁶⁶ DeNora. *Music in Everyday Life*. p47.

The music is providing the mechanism for the arousal of emotions, the altered state. When combined with the lyrics, the conversations, the leaflets, the visual images associated with Straight Edge, the dancing and the self regulation, the whole experience is indicative of what DeNora describes as “an instrument of social stability, of a particular version [and sometimes vision] of order and its associated modes of consciousness and aesthetic agency.”²⁶⁷

Although an important aspect of any live performance for a subcultural affiliate, the live hardcore shows are therefore much more than the social experience of finding people who look and think in a manner similar to oneself. In addition to the safety and emotional acceptance that aspect provides, because of the political dimension of punk, these shows are an integral shaper of adherents in that they are presented with opportunities to act with the goal of changing society into their perceived notion of good. The purpose of a rapturous experience is to connect with that which is larger to improve the self, in Straight Edge the purpose is exactly the same, except with the added impetus to use the improved or authentic self to challenge the flaws in society to improve it.

Through the music the individual is able to gain a sense of themselves as a part of something much larger, an experience in line with that of ecstasy, a standing outside of oneself that also integrates the self into the larger whole.

I still love Minor Threat and am so thankful that Ian wrote that song. 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, its ironic. I remember feeling such a release when listening to them...I remember seeing Path of Resistance in 1997 and feeling the same thing.²⁶⁸

Integration of the self is conducive with the overall purpose of Straight Edge, which is essentially an attempt to adjust our perceptions of normality. A significant number of my interviewees shared with me how they arrived at Straight Edge as a lifestyle for them as an attempt to break a cycle of addiction and / or abuse that was often deeply embedded within their families.

²⁶⁷ DeNora. Music in Everyday Life. p146.

²⁶⁸ S.G.email interview with researcher, 30.04.10.

While they were brought up with a perspective of addiction as being the norm they were using Straight Edge to alter that perspective.

That's what Straight Edge is, you know, like it gives you hope that you don't have to live your life the way everyone else did, that you don't have to stay fucked up.²⁶⁹

In other words, rapture is a feeling in which we are capable of experiencing ourselves in an authentic manner, and in so doing are enabled to connect with that outside ourselves. The notion of an authentic self will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 6. Music comes to life within the spiritual abandonment of the self, which enables individuals to go beyond the ordinary herd-like experience – the very antithesis of punk itself. This is the very reason for Nietzsche's perception of Wagner as a failure when he realised that Wagner, at his most basic, was still invoking the ordinary herd desire for a triumphalist salvation through myth-making.²⁷⁰ Nietzsche writes of Wagner;

Richard Wagner, apparently most triumphant, but in truth a decaying and despairing decadent, suddenly sank down, helpless and broken, before the Christian cross. Did no German have eyes in his head or pity in his conscience for this horrid spectacle? Was I the only one whom it *pained*?²⁷¹

Heidegger has to be brought into the conversation because of our overall interest in the notion of authenticity within the subculture and the argument at the crux of this thesis. Heidegger picks up the notion of rapture from Nietzsche which he then takes into being our authentic self as Dasein. He argues that experiencing the feeling of rapture “achieves from the outset the inherent internalizing tendency of the body in our Dasein.”²⁷² This is a passion not just for the art form, or the message contained within the art, but also a passion for the being or self as a whole.

Authenticity for Heidegger is the descriptive term he applies to an existence in which we as individuals take personal responsibility for our being. To successfully achieve this we have to determine for ourselves how we will live based on the things to hand, and how we might anticipate

²⁶⁹ S.T. interview with researcher, Bay Area, 10.11.09.

²⁷⁰ Kaufmann Walter. *The Portable Nietzsche*. (London: Penguin Books, 1982) p.665.

²⁷¹ Kaufmann. *The Portable Nietzsche*. p.676.

²⁷² Heidegger. *The Will To Power As Art*. p.99.

our utilisation of those things in the future. This is complicated by the human need to understand our life within a context of profound meaning and purpose, which can therefore create an existential struggle.²⁷³

Within the context of hardcore punk and Straight Edge it is clear that those within are struggling to both comprehend and transcend reality, to find or create their place in the world, as well as the community as a means to make sense of and improve their lives. Music is the means by which they do this.

Straight edge 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 really started 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 Straight Edge and all the politics that come with it. If that hadn't happened, I don't know who I'd be today, I certainly wouldn't be as open-minded.²⁷⁴

For Heidegger, rapture is defined in more pragmatic terms than for Nietzsche. Heidegger argues that rapture implies the capacity to reach beyond oneself to connect with other beings in a manner that demonstrates that it is because of this shared feeling of rapture which allows each being to become and be experienced more fully than would ever be possible without the experience of rapture.²⁷⁵

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.²⁷⁶

It is because of the power of the music on the human emotional spectrum that an aggressive form of music can enable or legitimately be offered as a means to achieving rapture. Some adherents will actually take the notion of a religious experience through the music of punk or hardcore further. Rob Miller from Anarcho punk band Ambix aligns it with the Gnostics;

²⁷³ Heidegger M. Being and Time, 1953, Joan Stambaugh trans. 1996, Albany: State University of New York. Sections 289 – 290, p. 266 – 267, Section 332 – 333, p. 304 – 306.

²⁷⁴ Nate, email interview with researcher, 5.4.10.

²⁷⁵ Heidegger. Being and Time. p.338 – 9 & p.350.

²⁷⁶ Anna, interview with researcher, 12.11.09 Oakland, Ca.

So, the heresy of the Gnostics was that one can understand God through knowledge – which was exactly contrary to the Catholic belief that one understands god through subservience to the priesthood and blind faith ...but for a lot of people, blind faith isn't enough. And it's a reflection of the punk thing too – if you like, punk was a form of Gnosticism, because it was saying that through true knowledge of yourself and your surroundings, you can attain a better perception of the world itself.²⁷⁷

For other Straight Edge adherents a comparison was not enough, the rapturous experience at live shows led them to seek a more deliberate connection with a religious tradition. As we shall shortly see this is strongly linked with the rise and appeal of Easternisation in the West, and it raises issues of Orientalism. The final section of this chapter presents three case studies of Straight Edge individuals who sought to extend the connection with music, emotion and community in a more deliberately religious way – Krishnacore, Taqwacore and Dharma Punx.

Easternisation, orientalism and racism

“I'm sorry, for something I didn't do. Lynched somebody, but I don't know who. You blame me for slavery, a hundred years before I was born. Guilty of being white. I'm a convict of a racist crime. And I've only served 19 years of my time. Guilty of being white.”²⁷⁸

19 year old Ian MacKaye, creator of the Straight Edge movement, penned these words for his band Minor Threat in response to his personal experience of attending a high school that was over 70% black at the time in Washington DC.²⁷⁹ During his tenure at high school he was routinely singled out for bullying alongside some of his other friends, who were also white. Amongst the bullying came accusations of racism, in particular his friend Henry Rollins – who later fronted seminal hardcore band Black Flag – recalls being physically attacked for the death of Martin Luther King. This is in spite of his death occurring in 1968

²⁷⁷ Glasper. Day the Country Died. P203.

²⁷⁸ 'Guilty of Being White'. Minor Threat. Complete Discography. 1981. Dischord Records.

²⁷⁹ Wilson High School.

when MacKaye and Rollins were 6 and 7 years old respectively, as indeed were their tormentors.²⁸⁰

These accusations devastated both MacKaye and Rollins, especially as both had been involved in, with their parents, in the civil rights marches of the 60s and had strong memories of the injustices being meted out to black protestors at the hands of the police.²⁸¹ The bullying was made all the worse when they both became involved in the burgeoning hardcore punk scene of DC, as one of their favourite and most respected band was Bad Brains.

Bad Brains were a band of African Americans who fused hardcore punk with reggae, today they are considered with the same respect as the Sex Pistols, The Clash and The Ramones, that is as iconic.



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Fig 9. Bad Brains performing live in the 9:30 club in Washington DC. Photograph taken by Glen E. Friedman.

The most influential aspect of Bad Brains on both MacKaye and Rollins, as well as Straight Edge, is their turning hardcore punk from nihilism and anarchism to positive mental attitude. Bad

²⁸⁰ Parker. Turned On. p1.

²⁸¹ Parker. Turned On. P2.

²⁸² <http://www.badbrains.com>

Brains were a spiritually focused band and frequently cited the Rastafarian religion as integral to themselves as individuals and as a group, they also utilised Napoleon Hill's 'Think and Grow Rich Through a Positive Mental Attitude' into a more punk lifestyle. Such was their influence on MacKaye that Straight Edge has often been thought of or referenced by adherents as the positive side of hardcore.²⁸³ Indeed one interviewee in Durham, Karl the Straight Edge tattooist described it as such;

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.²⁸⁴

The other aspect of Bad Brains that really struck a nerve with MacKaye and Rollins, and made their torment in school so difficult to understand was visual representation of punk as breaking down barriers of race, class, gender and sexual orientation. That is anyone could have a go, anyone was welcome. The race barrier had been broken, for them, through the onset of rock and roll and punk was a herculean effort to maintain the connection between music and emotion that was in Black music and was introduced to White people in the West through rock and roll. Punks put themselves as the 'other' through their appearance, behaviour, music and political stance, rather than the 'other' being based on race, for example.

The notion of the 'other' is one that is at the very heart of post-colonial theory and Said's articulation of Orientalism.²⁸⁵ Literary critic Edward Said argues that Western conceptions of the Orient are a "structure of lies or of myths, which were the truth about them to be told, would simply blow away."²⁸⁶ That is that they have been constructed for the purposes of colonial interest and profit rather than accuracy. In addition the language used to describe people, rituals, ideas, places and art from 'The Orient' is couched in such a way as to ensure that either implicitly or explicitly, they are seen as less than that of the Occident – the West – and thus position those living in the East as 'other' from those in the West.

²⁸³ Anderson & Jenkins. *Dance of Days*. P56.

²⁸⁴ Karl, interview with researcher, 07.05.10, Durham, UK.

²⁸⁵ Said Edward. *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. (Penguin Books: London, 1978).

²⁸⁶ Said. *Orientalism*. P6.

Said argues that images of the Orient are encoded in such a way as to ensure that they appear savage, barbaric, illiterate, uneducated whilst simultaneously exotic – especially women – and beguiling thus rendering them unpredictable and in need of taming or control. Aside from the highly offensive generalisations and untruths being marketed, Said takes umbrage with the refusal of creators or promoters of such imagery to indicate the authority which stands behind it.

There is nothing mysterious or natural about authority. It is formed, irradiated, disseminated; it is instrumental, it is persuasive; it has status, it establishes canons of taste and value; it is virtually indistinguishable from certain ideas it dignifies as true, and from traditions, perceptions, and judgements it forms, transmits, reproduces. Above all, authority can, indeed must, be analyzed. All these attributes of authority apply to Orientalism.²⁸⁷

Music as an art form shares the platform of guilt with regards to how the Orient has been represented and the reasons for such a representation. Ralph Locke, writing in Derek Scott's reader on 'Music, Culture and Society' engages with the notion of culpability in operatic music for creating imagery and musical notions of the Orient as 'other' and beneath or reliant on the Occident. He argues;

Opera is rich in works that construct visions of the non-Western world and its inhabitants...In these operas the representation of what recent critical theory calls 'the other' is most clearly announced in the basic plot, in character's names, and in costumes, sets and props...as regards music ...general stylistic aberrations are often applied indiscriminately by composers to vastly different geographical settings; borrowed tunes and the like tend to lose distinctive features by being uprooted and transplanted.²⁸⁸

Undeniably those who are the focus on this thesis – Straight Edge adherents in the UK and the USA are a part of, and educated within, the dominant occident. As such, the orient was presented to them through the mediating forces and agendas of those in power who had an interest in maintaining the notion of the Orient as exotic, savage, different, unique or 'other'. However this, as I demonstrated in Chapter Three, is a generation for whom global travel was more accessible than any generation previous. Consequently, some were able to travel to destinations such as India, Tibet,

²⁸⁷ Said. *Orientalism*. P20.

²⁸⁸ Ralph Lock p103 – 109 in Derek B. Scott (ed). *Music, Culture and Society: A reader*. (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2000) p103.

Japan, China, Africa and Turkey and so experience those cultures, in their own context, setting and terms first hand. As we shall see imminently for some this lead to a reconfiguration of what religion was or could be – Krishnacore. When we turn to Islam in the form of Taqwacore, there is greater evidence of a position of ignorance with regards to both the religion and the culture.

However it should be acknowledged that orientalism as either an academic discourse or a practise has to date remained an issue that punks of any kind have neglected to engage with. I would argue that this is more because of ignorance rather than complicity with a system designed to subjugate and divide. Given punk’s prevailing desire to remove or improve the prevailing authority based system and their concern with presenting themselves as the ‘other’ combined with their track record of involvement with promoting the abolishment of racism, this is a reasonable assumption to make.

Furthermore punk came into existence at a time when the appeal of the East was on the rise, what Partridge refers to as Easternisation.²⁸⁹ Partridge is right to emphasise that the appeal and interest in the East – particularly with regards to religious and spiritual ideas – does not entail a change from a Western mind set to an Eastern one. Instead, he argues, they adopt or adapt ideas, beliefs and practices that more often than not have a Western counterpart or history but which have become more rationalised and detached over time. Therefore in utilising the Eastern approach, they are enabled to reconnect with those ideas on a more emotional and personal basis – comparative to emotion in music with the onset of rock and roll in the 50s.

This search led far more Westerners to turn east, rather than actually to go east.²⁹⁰

In addition to the rise of, or perhaps as a consequence of easternisation, Partridge argues that an occulture has developed, particularly in the West. The term occulture is used to describe “a reservoir of ideas, beliefs, theories and practices from which new religions, unorthodox spiritualities,

²⁸⁹ Partridge Christopher. *The Re-Enchantment of the West* volume 1. (T & T Clark: London, 2004) p87.

²⁹⁰ Partridge. *Re-enchantment of the West* vol 1. P87.

film and popular music all draw.”²⁹¹ It is primarily, and increasingly, through popular culture that the sacralisation of society, or what Partridge refers to as the ‘re-enchantment of the West’ is occurring. The success of this is partly due to groups such as Straight Edge re-discovering Eastern ideas and then assimilating them with their own ideas, world views and popular culture practices and disseminating them to their adherents, with the resultant spread into wider society where it intermingles with similar experiences from television, film, media, music and so on. The following three case studies are prime examples of this occurring, with Krishnacore and Dharma Punx being the two strongest examples.

Krishnacore

Krishnacore is a somewhat loose term that is used to describe bands whose members personally subscribe to a Krishna lifestyle of one form or another and who use their bands music and lyrics to promote, explain and explore their beliefs and practices. It began in a nebulous way during the early 80s with bands such as Cro-Mags and Cause for Alarm; it was originally a part of the Straight Edge movement but later broke from it to form its own subset as the number of bands grew.

Being so firmly rooted within Straight Edge many band members were interested in pursuing a sense of a full life in a sober and knowledgeable way. A significant number began to talk about how, for them, pursuing spirituality was a natural extension or the next step in being Straight Edge. They did not give up, ridicule or deny the Straight Edge lifestyle and philosophy; rather they were looking to carry it into a new direction.

I became Straight Edge in 1987 ... and the whole thing seemed to fit me perfectly at the time, which it did...My interest in Krishna Consciousness built at a steady and gradual pace ... But Krishna Consciousness is obviously a huge step

²⁹¹ Partridge. Re-enchantment of the West vol 1. P4, p87 – 118.

beyond Straight Edge, in both positive and negative ways, as both a governing religion and a liberating philosophy.²⁹²

Bands such as Shelter and 108 began to incorporate Vedic teachings and philosophies into their music, initially lyrically but later with bands such as Stretch Arm Strong including sitars and chanting on their albums and allowing it to influence the musical construction of their songs. Teachings would form the greatest part of the lyrics, the philosophies and practices would be spoken about openly onstage, and in interviews and the cd inserts would provide further information.

The Philadelphia Krishna temple was the birth place of Equal Vision records, a label which released Krishnacore bands as well as traditional bhajans. This label was later sold and now releases more traditional hardcore fare, although a number of the bands will still utilise the Krishna imagery for their artwork. This label was incredibly powerful in exposing young people to Krishnacore music wider than the bands they had seen locally, and in taking the Krishna message and ideology beyond any one band a significant number of people were drawn into International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) through the label.

Not everyone appreciated this, and there was growing concern that hardcore and Straight Edge was being used as an insidious means of recruitment for the Hare Krishna movement and ISKCON in particular.

These groups were using a music scene to indoctrinate people with their brand of mass opiate and it ran against everything I was interested in about hardcore such as thinking for yourself as an individual and deviation from a flock or herd mentality ... We had some pretty 'lively' debates both at shows and in fanzines and even in our lyrical content.²⁹³

These debates, largely at shows, where a number of bands would play, and in lyrical content, forced many hardcore and particularly Straight Edge people – both those in bands and those as fans – to form an opinion on spirituality. Critical reasoning now entered and you had to be able to argue your point well because you were going to be challenged.

²⁹² Vic Dicara, guitarist for the band 108, quoted in Peterson. Burning Fight. p.147.

²⁹³ Nick Forte from the band Rorschach, quoted in Peterson. Burning Fight. p.121.

As I demonstrated in Chapter Three, the initial approach to religion and spirituality was a cautious and considered one. Punks were not individuals looking for someone to tell them what to think or how to think. They were individuals that were aware of hypocrisy, of recruitment and were by nature suspicious. Thus a number of them that did start to consider Krishna consciousness as a potential way of life did so in a considered and slow manner. They began reading, they began going to temples and observing, they questioned the monks incessantly, and they challenged the monks on areas of teaching or practise that they could not align with their own worldview or experience. They also began to talk to those in bands who were promoting or practising Krishnacore and they talked and argued with their friends.

Some who could afford it travelled to India to understand and explore Krishna consciousness outside of a Western perspective. This led some to embrace it as a complete lifestyle – Ray Porcell, Ray Cappo – while others were led to reject it – 108's public split with Krishnacore – and still others realised that they were either truly atheist or were searching for a more general spirituality rather than a dogmatic belief structure. This is analogous with the travel to India that Ziolkowski offers within *Modes of Faith* as a surrogate for religion during the early twentieth century. Although ultimately declared by Ziolkowski as unsuccessful due to its unsustainability, it did have similar effects to those mentioned above within Straight Edge.

Krishnacore was in equal parts galvanising and segregating specific scenes in America. This was particularly in evidence on the East Coast and it was prompting discussion throughout a lot of other American scenes it never really took root in the UK. Some of the American bands would tour the UK and play cities such as Birmingham and London, and while people enjoyed the music, enjoyed the shows they did not engage with the same level of discourse as was happening in America at the time, although there would have been some awareness of it from fanzines. A significant reason for this lack of interest has to be credited to the Beatles with their very public support of Krishna consciousness. For many UK punks the Beatles were the ultimate symbol of all that was wrong with

popular music. The Beatles had begun as a burst of non-conformity, even being denounced on Church billboards and in sermons, but then they began to experiment with drugs to such an extent that, according to many punks, the music suffered, as did the band. Many punks saw them as sell outs, more interested in money, fame and drugs than in using music to say what had to be said, to change the world. Thus an alliance with Krishna consciousness was not going to be supported when hardcore bands came preaching the same message of support.

Perhaps the strongest reason for a lack of engagement with Krishnacore by the UK hardcore scene is that ISKCON was not well known or prominent within daily life at that time. Outside of London, temples tended to be isolated and unknown; it was unusual to see robed monks on the streets or even in airports. Christianity was a much more pressing issue for UK punks and it was for that religion that their critical thinking and engagement was reserved. In a very real way the Krishnacore scene was the first time that hardcore and Straight Edge punks had to deal with religion on an intellectual and personal level that took them beyond the standard fare of a nihilistic approach to anything resembling authority, an institution or a system.

Inspired in equal parts by the Krishna monasteries they visited in their travels and by the success of the Crass commune at Dial House in Essex a number of Krishnacore proponents and strongest supporters – Ray Kappo, Ray Porcell for example – created Krishnacore communes in upstate New York. These were based on the principles compassion, support, vegetarianism, d.i.y. and spiritual exploration. Anyone was welcome to join them, but had to agree to live a self-sustaining vegetarian, contemplative, clean and sober lifestyle. Partridge effectively explains the reasoning behind the appeal of such communes to groups such as punks in general, and Krishnacore members specifically in this example.

Central to societal modernization is the differentiation and specialization of social units. Commerce and industrialisation have led to the division of labour and thereby to increasing societal fragmentation. Small closely-knit, family-based communities with the Church at the centre, and living under, what Peter Berger has called, a 'sacred canopy', have collapsed. Communities in which people operated with a shared religious worldview, a

shared morality, and a shared identity, and within which an individual's material, intellectual, and spiritual sustenance was provided, have disappeared.²⁹⁴

In other words, it is driven by a desire to recreate a community, which they feel society has stripped them of. This Durkhiemian approach is further appealing to Krishnacore adherents due to their deliberate positioning as an 'other' within society through their allegiance to hardcore and Straight Edge punk. However it would not have been as successful as it has been – they are still in existence and some are flourishing today – had it not been for the rise of Easternisation. Indeed it could be argued, as religious studies reader Richard King intimates, ISKCON itself is a result of an attempt to step out of the shadow of Orientalism and an use of Eastern appeal by the West.²⁹⁵

Tagwacore

It is not unusual at a punk or hardcore show to see brightly coloured Mohawks and spikes, to see numerous tattoos and clothes bearing various slogans, inscriptions and band names, to hear noisy guitar feedback and to hear profanity-strewn lyrics shouted by both band and audience. However it is more unusual to hear the traditional Muslim greeting of Salaam aleikum, to hear mixed in with the guitar noise Bhangra folk music, to hear lyrics directly referencing and critiquing Islam and to see that the tattoos are actually Arabic script. Yet this is all a part of Taqwacore. The name derives from '*Taqwa*', the Arabic word for piety and 'core' short for hardcore punk music.

Taqwacore has existed in one form or another within hardcore since the mid 90s, but only gained its moniker in 2003 following the release of Michael Knight's novel "The Taqwacores", a fictional story about Muslim punk bands. Knight is a 33 year old American convert to Islam from Catholicism, who became disillusioned with Islam due to issues such as sectarianism:

I felt Islam was so black and white and there were no grey areas. These Muslim kids, who are punks, they are in the grey areas.²⁹⁶

²⁹⁴ Partridge Christopher. The Disenchantment and Re-enchantment of the West: The Religio-Cultural Context of Contemporary Western Christianity. *Evangelical Quarterly* 74 (Carlisle: Paternoster Periodicals, 2002): 235-56. P237.

²⁹⁵ King Richard. *Orientalism and Religion*. (Routledge: London, 1999) p117.

²⁹⁶ www.guardian.co.uk/music/2001/apr/28/popandrock.culture last accessed July 2010.

One need not be Muslim to be a part of Taqwacore; the scene spans the religious spectrum from Muslim to atheist to mystic to spiritual seeker. What they share in common is a love of hardcore music, an understanding of the effect that religion has on the world and a desire for a meaningful way to integrate the various aspects of their identity. Many of the songs deal with Islam in both the East and the West and in particular focuses on how one can deal with a dual identity as American born young people with Islamic parents, many of whom are immigrants, in a country still deeply scared by the 9/11 attacks.

It is often political views that provided a common ground for Muslim's initially entering the hardcore scene, but gradually some bands such as Race Traitor began to incorporate Islamic imagery and lyrics into their music. It should also be acknowledged that within some scenes in America the notion of Islam coming into hardcore provoked discreet or covert racial prejudice towards Muslims, and this may partly explain why it never really became as strong within hardcore as Krishnacore did, instead becoming a fringe element of hardcore.

As with many within hardcore and Straight Edge the religion that is practised or found amongst individuals within Taqwacore is not that proscribed by or expected within Islamic dogma. Touring bands do not perform salat five times day and although shows will open with a communal prayer, it is men and women praying together so constitutes haram. They also play Western music, encourage women to play music in public, those individuals who do not adhere to a Straight Edge lifestyle will drink and smoke and many adorn their bodies with permanent markings in the form of tattoos, all of which are considered haram. Yet they still consider themselves Muslim's and some would even describe themselves as religious Muslims.

It's infinitely more pious to be true to your heart, because that is where religion really lies ... It's ok to approach Islam on your own terms...Taqwacore is

more about earnestness in music and earnestness in religion. Different people are in different places in terms of those things.²⁹⁷

Muslim punk dates from 1979 in the UK with the British band Alien Kulture. This south London band took their name from a quote by newly appointed Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher who said that people in Britain were worried about their country being overrun by people from an alien culture. They used their punk sound and lyrics to explore the racism against Muslims and immigrants in general that existed in Britain at the time. They also explicated the problems of being second generation immigrants and what they felt it meant for identity construction as well as tackling subjects such as arranged marriages. "This was a time when Asians were largely invisible in popular culture. It was the emergence of punk, with its ethos of anyone could be in a band, which inspired the young Asians to emulate their musical heroes."²⁹⁸

London teenager Andy Blade, the lead singer of 80's punk band Eater, is from an Asian immigrant background and struggled with the notion of a dual identity and a dual culture which is reflected in his band's single, 'Outside View'. Blade actually turned back to his Muslim heritage after his band dissolved and he spent some time exploring more traditional Islamic culture and practices in an attempt to understand himself and his place in the world. He eventually resolved his dual cultural identity and went on to become a teacher and remains involved with music to this day.

In essence the young Muslim punks of the US today are facing the same problems, identity and religious issues, that faced the Muslim punks of the 70s in the UK. However the world has changed dramatically since the 70s, the world of post 9/11 is a radically different one to that of Thatcherist Britain. Music has long provided a space for people to express themselves and their identities. Hardcore music enables them to discover and challenge their assigned identity both from the culture their parents came from and the culture they were born into and it enables individuals to

²⁹⁷ Kamel, quoted in www.suntimes.com/entertainment/music/1778313,mulim-islam-punk-rock-kominas-092009.article last accessed July 2010.

²⁹⁸ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2010/jan/10/alien-kulture-asian-punk-band> last accessed July 2010.

push for social change. This social change includes not only how the post-9/11 world sees Islam but how Islam views the world of popular culture, particularly youth culture.

Said distinguishes the Western division between the high orient (Buddha, Hinduism, Japanese and Chinese philosophy) and the low orient (Hafiz, Arabs, Turkish, and Islam).²⁹⁹ Presumably this distinction is based upon how the West interacts with each area, controls each area or views it in terms of trading potential or colonial potential. The high orient representing that which is exotic, attractive, beguiling, potential trade routes with spices etc; while the low orient has large areas of unusable land for agriculture but is oil wealthy. Today we see this in terms of Muslim's being portrayed in the media and within other aspects of popular culture as either terrorists, extremists, subjugated or oil rich.

So far as the United States seems to be concerned, it is only a slight overstatement to say that Muslims and Arabs are essentially seen as either oil suppliers or potential terrorists. Very little of the detail, the human density, the passion of Arab-Moslem life has entered the awareness of even those people whose profession it is to report the Arab world. What we have instead is a series of crude, essentialized caricatures of the Islamic world presented in such a way as to make that world vulnerable to military aggression.³⁰⁰

With regards to Taqwacore, then, I stated, with no qualifications, above that because men and women play and pray together it constitutes haram. However that notion of haram and halal is filtered through a Western education and encounter of Islam and furthermore, it does not take into account the wide spectrum of beliefs and approaches to both religion and the position / interaction of the genders that exists within both the religion and wider culture.

The individuals who are involved with Taqwacore are having to position themselves within a notion of the 'other' or the 'orient' that actually renders them rootless or adrift. There are viewed as the children of immigrants, Muslim immigrants and so have to deal with the prejudice that may entail in America where they will be viewed as 'other' to the general American populace. In addition

²⁹⁹ Almond Ian. *The New Orientalists*. (I.B.Tauris: London, 2007) p7.

³⁰⁰ Said Edward. *Islam Through Western Eyes*. The Nation. April 26th 1980.

<http://www.thenation.com/article/islam-through-western-eyes> last accessed 06.08.2011

they are embracing what many Arabs would view as the 'other' – the popular culture of America – and furthermore they are aligning this other with their religion to create a unique understanding and approach to it. Finally they are deliberately stepping into and becoming the 'other' that punk, in all its forms, positions itself as with regards to mainstream society. Consequently they are condemned to a state of perpetual 'otherness', with the result of having no place to belong but the community of Taqwacore – perhaps explaining the intensity with which members approach it.

Dharma Punx

Dharma Punx are unique among the groupings that I have included in this study, in that it is the only group that does not have a specific set of bands that promote or are involved with it. However, I have chosen to include it in this section for two reasons: first, a number of members from prominent hardcore and Straight Edge bands are involved with it; and second, it was formed in large part, although not solely, because of the influence of Straight Edge on the founder Noah Levine.

Chapter Two contained a brief introduction to the Dharma Punx in the section on globalisation. Dharma Punx is in Levine's words "a story about my generation: the punks, the kids all around the world who searched for meaning and liberation in the age of Reagan, Thatcher and the Cold War's constant threat of total nuclear annihilation."³⁰¹ For Levine and others the search for meaning and liberation led them to punk rock music:

As the first band started playing the energy that filled the room was intense; bodies began flying in every direction ... I got smacked with a fist in the back of my head but the pain was invigorating, my whole body filled with a soothing rage, a comforting release of aggression.³⁰²

From his introduction to punk music and its accompanying live shows Levine travelled a path that led him from drug addiction to embrace the Straight Edge way of life as a means of coalescing his punk identity with a new found desire to stay alive and out of jail. Eventually this led to him

³⁰¹ Levine. Dharma Punx. p.ix.

³⁰² Levine. Dharma Punx. p.17.

searching for the next step which he found within Eastern philosophy and in particular Buddhist meditation practices.

Levine was neither the only one nor the first to travel this path. Eastern philosophy and ideology began to emerge within hardcore, and particularly Straight Edge, in the very late 80s and well into the 90s. In some scenes it is still very strong today. This coincided with many eastern faiths finding a place within the Western world and with a strong desire to explore the spiritual unknown within wider society, especially as the feeling of the Church's irrelevancy grows.

However for Levine personally, his introduction to the world of spirituality and in particular to Eastern religion was through that of his father Steven Levine, an American Buddhist practitioner and author. Along with writers such as Jack Kornfield, Steven Levine is renowned for making Theravada Buddhism more widely available, accessible and understandable to Western students and Western minds. Although today his reputation is focused on his work with death, dying and grief, when Noah was growing up it was more on a general notion of Buddhism and meditation practices as well as Native American teachings, Sufism and mystical Christianity.³⁰³

Although Noah initially dismissed his father's work and ideas as "hippie shit", the influence of Steven's multi-religious approach to spirituality is evident throughout Dharma Punx. As I outlined above it is not a solely Buddhist group but has a broad spectrum of beliefs amongst those attached to it. It is also evident in the plethora of tattoos that decorate Noah's body, in addition to the range of religious and spiritual punk(ish) tattoos one observes at Dharma Punx groups.

³⁰³ Meditate and Destroy. DVD. Sarah Fisher (director). Blue Lotus Films 2009.



Fig 10 Noah Levine's numerous tattoos – religious and Straight Edge. Skin Ink magazine. February 2007 p73.

Noah eventually came to embrace his father's teachings, along with the work and teaching of his father's friend Ram Das, a Jewish convert to Hinduism who teaches that spiritual well being leads to better health – physically and mentally. He is also deeply involved with Steven Levine's work on death and dying, in particular the year to live programme in which individuals live a year as though it was their final year alive. At the end of the year they 'die' and re-emerge to their new life and understanding. This is a practise that Noah Levine has undergone and he details some of the journey in his Dharma Punx book. As a result of this Noah has also founded the Mind Body Awareness project which works with incarcerated young people in West Coast of USA.³⁰⁴

³⁰⁴ Meditate and Destroy. DVD. Sarah Fisher (director). Blue Lotus Films 2009.

Of course we must acknowledge that once again we are being referred back to the thesis of Orientalism, because we have here an example of people from the West presenting the 'east' to others. Therefore not only are they determining and mediating the manner in which the information is understood but they are fulfilling the roles that were once the purview of spiritual leaders and teachers from the East. Alternatively they could be viewed as a necessary bridge between the East and West traditions. Partridge argues;

It is also important to understand that Eastern spirituality is not parachuted unchanged into Western culture ... It is inhistoricized, 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... Western teachers of Eastern beliefs and practices ...are both in the tradition and extending it. This, I would argue, is not simply because of the religiously plural context (which is also very evident in the East), but more particularly 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.³⁰⁵

Within hardcore eastern philosophy and ideology such as Buddhism were intriguing because it was the first time many of these individuals had encountered a 'religion' that had no god or deity. This seemed to carry a new potential for spiritual exploration that was outside of the typical hierarchical approach of most traditional religions. Furthermore Buddhism stressed the importance of one's own inner journey towards a realised self rather than relying on dogma for answers or deferring to an unseen deity for explanations to the essentially unexplainable.

The inclusion of various forms of spirituality (Buddhism) in hardcore instilled an even stronger passion for defining one's place in the world, regardless of one's spiritual beliefs...The divide over spirituality was often immense, but the formulation of a position on such issues allowed people to better pursue their own ideas and interests.³⁰⁶

Defining his place in the world led to Levine founding the Dharma Punx, a group whereby spiritual ideas, practices and support can be explored together on the foundational premise of hardcore and Straight Edge ethos of anyone can join, anyone can do it.

³⁰⁵ Partridge. Re-enchantment of the West vol1. P106.

³⁰⁶ Peterson. Burning Fight. p.132.

Dharma Punx groups now exist in a number of cities in the US, a number which is growing, including San Francisco, New York, Washington DC and others. They organise weekly meetings, retreats and even trips abroad to places such as Tibet, India and so on. They maintain strong links as a community via email, sharing of guest speakers and for some attending punk shows together.

Crucially those who self-identify as punks within these groups have not lost the need to question and challenge, whether themselves, each other or the speakers. Indeed the San Francisco group firmly bases themselves in the Vispanna tradition, which I was informed translates as 'seeing the world as it really is'. One young man told me his reason for joining was that "It was not a religious group; it was a group of punks searching for meaning."³⁰⁷ During the question and answer section a number of people challenged the speaker in regards to his talk on how we should not blame ourselves for the fact that our evolutionary biology meant we carried desires within us, such as consumerism which was a mutated form of hunter gatherer. One young man asked the speaker:

Why is it ok to simply excuse ourselves from behaviours and attitudes that are within us as an evolutionary necessity when the Buddha went out of his way to experience the very things those inbuilt behaviours and attitudes are designed to protect us from ... It was through embracing and overcoming suffering that he sought to change the world; shouldn't we be doing the same?³⁰⁸

As yet there are no Dharma Punx groups in the UK, nor are there any significant Buddhist followings within the UK hardcore scene. There are certainly individuals, both those within bands and those who are fans, who follow a Buddhist path and combine it with their punk identity. This may, as with Krishnacore, be largely attributed to the long standing influence of Christianity and the relative newness of Buddhism to the UK.

³⁰⁷ 'John' interview with researcher 6.11.09, Cultural Integration Centre, San Francisco.

³⁰⁸ 6.11.09, Cultural Integration Centre, San Francisco.

Conclusion

Despite the seeming incongruity of punk rock, religion, spirituality, rapture, emotion, community and orientalism what unites them all is the thread of rebellion. What Straight Edge represents and encourages is rebellion against complacency and against the dictation of others, be that in the area of what you can or can't believe, how you react to or emotionally connect with music, or how you understand and appreciate the beliefs and cultures of others.

My spiritual life hasn't impacted me negatively at all...It gives me the opportunity to experience happiness regardless of my external situation, and that's what Straight Edge does too, so its connected with that. So you're Straight Edge and you don't need anything to feel good, that feeling comes from the inside and it's just a deepening of that expression.³⁰⁹

This chapter was concerned with the role of music in the expression of spiritual identity within hardcore and Straight Edge, within the frameworks of music and emotion, music and community and music and 'otherness'. The next chapter will continue to build on this by examining the role of community and the values that are inherent within that which are of integral importance to Straight Edge spiritual identity.

³⁰⁹ Kate Reddy from the band 108 and creator of KRNSA GRRL fanzine, quoted in Peterson. Burning Fight. p.135.

Chapter Five “One Family”

“Can I scream? Or maybe just talk about the lives that we lead and the paths that we walk. There’s a god for the sun and the sea. Monotheism isn’t for me. So ask yourself: What would Zeus do? A pagan life, it just might be for you. Don’t you see, that all faiths are one, but make the right choice and at least you’ll have fun. It’s time for us to take a stand. I say ‘F’ the ineffable plan!”³¹⁰

Time and again the above song by Washington DC Straight Edge band, Good Clean Fun, came into my head as I was conducting the field work for this thesis. Similar to many of their songs, important issues and ideas are addressed and raised with tongue placed firmly in cheek. In doing so the band are enabled to express, alongside the positive elements, the complexities and contradictions that exist within Straight Edge, as indeed they do in any subculture.

These complexities and contradictions also emerged within all aspects of my field work, sometimes acknowledged by interviewees and informants, sometimes expressed with unawareness, and sometimes fortuitously stumbled upon by myself in the form of graffiti, tattoos or song lyrics, for example. In no singular area do the complexities and contradictions come to the fore more than in the overarching theme of this thesis, namely the area of spiritual identity and practise.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore, analyse and interpret the results of the field work, including those complexities and contradictions. I have chosen to focus on four subsections which will enable an understanding both of why they have arisen and how they relate to specific spiritual practices. This will be examined over two chapters to enable sufficient depth and engagement with each subsection. The four subsections are:

- Space / place (chapter five)
- Community (chapter five)
- Authenticity (chapter six)

³¹⁰ ‘WWZD’, Good Clean Fun, On The Streets, 2000, Phyte.

- Salvation (chapter six)

This chapter will be significantly more sociological than Chapter Six, in the areas of content, structure and theoretical basis. The two chapters should be thought of as two halves of one whole rather than discreet chapters within themselves, as themes and concepts will frequently inter-reference and overlap.

Space / Place

When life got rough, we couldn't get enough, it's where we grew up. Down at the matinee...Now CB's is gone, the building has been sold. They took away the heart but couldn't kill the soul New York hardcore lives inside of me.³¹¹

The above lyrics refer to the matinee punk and hardcore shows that were a weekly feature at CBGB's³¹², a music venue located at 315 Bowery Street in New York. It became world renowned as the venue for underground music and legendary amongst punks as a space in which bands such as The Ramones, The Misfits, Agnostic Front, Gorilla Biscuits, Youth of Today and Sick Of It All would play, often gaining their start and honing their craft there. The club was closed in October 2005, with the final show being performed by Patti Smith on October 31st. The closing of the venue was devastating to music fans worldwide, particularly due to the perception that it was being closed so the area could be redeveloped and re-sold at great profit to investors who had no interest in the musical history attached to the space. The venue of CBGB is now a high-end men's fashion store owned by designer John Varvatos.³¹³

The use, misuse and appropriation of space remains a thorny but integral issue within all aspects of punk. In earlier chapters I referred to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the two founding strata's being that of physiological and safety, both of which are related to our physical needs including that of shelter. To feel safe we need a space that we can call our own, regardless of

³¹¹ 'A month of Sundays', Sick of it all, Based On A True Story, 2009, Century Media.

³¹² Named Country, Blue Grass and Blues by its owner and founder Hilly Kristal when he opened it in 1973, based on the type of music he enjoyed and foresaw being played there.

³¹³ The opening of the new store was marked by numerous protests organised by groups such as Take It To The Bridge who argue that Manhattan is becoming a playground for rich people, with "Forty-thousand-dollar-a-month rents, \$1,600 jackets and \$800 pants are closing music spaces in New York".

whether we actually own it or even spend the majority of our time there, it is the emotional connection with the space that is important.

Sociologist Donna Gaines presented the case study of Bergenfield, New Jersey which aptly demonstrated the sometimes devastating effects of being routinely denied or blocked from creating such a space.³¹⁴ In her book *Teenage Wasteland* she repeatedly shows young people trying to create their own space but being denied that ability in anything other than the short term.³¹⁵ Consequently they felt rejected and unwanted, that their own position within society was on the margins, and sadly for some this resulted in suicide.

For many such youth, finding an abandoned industrial building represents an opportunity to create a sanctuary where the rules were created and enforced within the subculture rather than by parental or authority figures from the dominant or mainstream culture. However abandoned buildings only provide this space temporarily, eventually they are sold on, pulled down or made into something else and the subculture has to move on. Thus finding a permanent space to create music, perform, hang out, meet friends and so on is a much desired thing.

Due to the relatively small size of Straight Edge as a subculture the spaces in which adherents sought were typically linked with hardcore in the wider sense. Thus a club such as CBGB would have hardcore, punk and Straight Edge shows and attendees. Closing such a club can have a devastating effect on the group that utilises it, especially if they are unable to find a replacement space.

It is my intention to demonstrate and argue that through the ability to find space, redefine and create it visually to their own aesthetics and purposes, many Straight Edge adherents have been enabled to explore their spiritual identity and practices because of the relative safety of having a

³¹⁴ Gaines Donna. *Teenage Wasteland*. (Chicago: University of Chicago,1990).

³¹⁵ Gaines. *Teenage Wasteland*. p.82 for example.

designated space. I also intend to address how that may be changing with the increase of virtual space within Straight Edge, in line with a notion of limitless space and limitless theology.

Finding space

The importance of finding and utilising space for youth has been well documented, but in examinations of subcultures, the significance of space for those no longer youth has been largely unexplored. The cohort within this thesis, being largely in their 30s-50s are no longer considered – by themselves or society – as youth, yet they remain within the subculture. However they do have greater access to legitimate musical performance space such as pubs and clubs, which are often 18 or 21 and over. Furthermore, they are not constrained by parental presence or rules for creating domestic space to reflect their interests or opening their homes to friends and musical performances.³¹⁶ So how is the notion of space or place relevant to them? As we shall shortly see, space for adult adherents becomes more akin to Eliade's concept of sacred space as a means of transitioning from performance-led concerns to communal desires.

Subcultures not only form a part of multi-dimensional space; they also form an area of cultural capital because they create their own unique forms of knowledge. The gaining of this knowledge is to be found in areas Bourdieu identifies: language, intellect, and art.³¹⁷ Having a space in which one can determine or step into agreed-upon rules – however arbitrary they may seem to outsiders – quickly helps one to find a place within the structure of the subculture, a place to belong and contribute and to learn what are the accepted and expected behaviours and mores. An interviewee, Billy a 50 year old undergraduate student from Blantyre near Glasgow, provides a good example when he tells me about his first experience wrecking in the early 80s in London.³¹⁸

And I remember the first time I was wrecked and it was in this London underground club so the guys would be standing in this big circle and I remember

³¹⁶ Although, arguably this ability could be seriously curtailed once children are born.

³¹⁷ Bourdieu Pierre. *Outline of a Theory and Practice*. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

³¹⁸ A specific form of dancing similar to slam dancing, but much more aggressive, essentially the early form of hardcore dancing.

this guy punched me in the eye so I thought you ain't getting away with that mate. I didn't know the score with wrecking was you just took it, so we came out again and I just banged him on the face and that was it, it all kicked off, so eh we were talking about it after it, me and the guy and he says what did you do that for? You fucking hit me mate, you fucking hit me you'll get hit back. But we were wrecking. So well I wrecked you. Ah we'd a great time at those clubs.³¹⁹

This interviewee had to learn the acceptable behaviour and expectations of partaking in the dancing associated with the subculture and he did so in the spaces they had claimed as their own, at least when able to. In the UK this was and remains somewhat restricted. Most shows are performed in venues³²⁰ that also host other music genre shows or earn their income primarily as a nightclub, and so are not as open to the graffiti, signage, flyering, etc, that makes up an important aspect of communication and knowledge transfer within all aspects of punk. Venues in the UK that are sympathetic to the punk aesthetic such as The 13th Note³²¹ in Glasgow are typically not all-ages clubs. At the 13th Note children are welcome in the bar area (which serves food) until 6.30pm but all shows are 18 and over.



Fig 11 The bar and eating area of The 13th Note in Glasgow, the music venue is downstairs.

³¹⁹ Billy, interview with researcher, 1.4.10 Stirling.

³²⁰ The ABC, The Barrowlands Creation Studios and The Cighthouse in Glasgow, for example.

³²¹ 50 – 60 Kings Street, Glasgow



Fig 12 The exterior of The 13th Note in Glasgow.

Many interviewees did highlight the importance of hearing live Straight Edge music as their introduction to the scene and the ideology, and they lament that the clubs in which that happened no longer exist, as this excerpt from Karl the Straight Edge tattooist from Durham demonstrates.

There was a club called 'The Rowing Club' in Durham which I used to go to when I was a young one and eh, that's were all the Straight Edge bands used to play a lot of, every week, there used to be about five or six bands on a Friday and I got introduced to it by a bunch of BMXers at Belmont, which is in Durham...it was just insane, people on your head, footprints on the ceiling, ya know, like them were good days, but now it's like, I dunno, like (*sighs*) gone.³²²

In the USA they have been more fortunate with regards to all-age venues, particularly on the West Coast. Many cities have at least one, if not numerous venues; although by no means are they all exclusive to punk, hardcore and Straight Edge performances. During the USA aspect of my field work I spent a lot of time at the all-ages venue in Berkeley known as 924 Gilman Street Project. This venue is known and respected within all punk circles worldwide, partially because of the renown of some of the bands to have come from it and partially because of its success as a volunteer run, not for profit, hardcore punk Straight Edge space.

³²² Karl, interview with researcher, 7.5.10 Durham.



Fig 13 The exterior of 924 Gilman Street Project, located on 8th and Gilman, Berkeley, CA.

Numerous interviewees and those I spoke to in a conversational setting spoke fondly of their time in Gilman, emphasising the importance of having a space of their own. Some also spoke of how different they felt their lives had become as they had moved out of Gilman for various reasons. “I was a fucked up gnarly little punk kid, but got really into like dope and shit, the wrong crowd you know after moving out of Gilman.”³²³

Brian Edge, a key early member of Gilman Street Project, has written and edited a book about it, and in his introduction he notes:

Almost everyone comes here initially because of the music, but the ones who work the hardest and longest are the ones who find that ‘rockin’ out’ just isn’t enough – there has to be more. Gilman becomes a part of you, provides options on how to live your life, and shows that it doesn’t have to be a competitive world, it can be a cooperative one.³²⁴

Once again we are being referred back to Bourdieu’s notion of subcultural capital through the use of space. This is even more in evidence once one steps inside the Gilman St. building. The

³²³ S.T. interview with researcher, 10.11.09 Bay Area.

³²⁴ Edge Brian. 924 Gilman. (San Francisco: Maximumrockandroll, 2004), p.4.

first thing you are confronted with is a permanent spray painted list of rules that have been agreed upon and enforced by the members, who are also the patrons.



Fig 14 .The spray painted list of rules on the inside of the front door of 924 Gilman Street venue.

The walls are currently painted black and covered in graffiti, flyers, stickers and various other ephemera. Periodically they are cleaned, repainted and then the patrons recover them in new graffiti, etc. So long as the graffiti, stickers and flyers conform to the rules of the club, for example they are not racist or homophobic, they are left on the walls. In some cases others have made comments underneath someone's graffiti piece, which itself is then commented on, leading to a written discourse of unknown participants. I observed this on issues such as animal rights, veganism, and bullying.³²⁵ In this way not only have the patrons found a space but they are now redefining it, and it is to this issue that I wish to turn my attention.

Redefining space

Historians Ben Rogaly and Becky Taylor argue that "behaviour such as 'hanging out' simultaneously signals an individual's belonging to an area through, in Lefebvre's terms, their performance of a degree of 'spatial competence' and reinforces and reproduces spatial practice."³²⁶ Redefinition of a space has implications on activities such as 'hanging out', for in order to move with competence one has to be able to quickly assimilate subcultural capital from the ebb and flow of the various signage and ephemera, as well as the physical movement and interaction of other users.

Those involved with the emergence of Gilman St were very aware of the need to ease spatial competence transition and so instigated a committee known as the 'mind fuck' committee whose sole purpose was create spontaneous situations which would break the ice and ease newcomers into the environment and force them into appropriate interaction. One such way was by walking up to newcomers and handing them a banana, so that on their puzzled response fun could be made of the situation and creative energy could be reacted to.

An examination of the imagery within Gilman Street reveals that a significant portion of the redefinition of the space is being utilised as a means of exploring and expressing ideas about

³²⁵ Unfortunately this is commonly done in marker pen and so is quite small and my camera was unable to get a picture of sufficient quality to be able to make the discourse out and so make it worthwhile including the image within this thesis.

³²⁶ Rogaly B. & Taylor B. *Moving Histories of Class and Community*. (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), p.17.

spirituality and religion. The first example is from a section of the roof which has been graffitied with the phrase 'Jesus crisis? Devo saves', Devo being the name of an American art punk band.



Fig 15. A section of the inside roof of 924 Gilman Street on which has been spray painted the phrase 'Jesus crisis? Devo saves.'

This comical, pithy remark reveals not only an awareness that such a 'crisis' exists within wider society, but that it may well be impacting on individual punks and patrons of Gilman. While crisis may be a strong term to use there is certainly an ongoing rise of secularism with a concurrent rise of religious fundamentalism, each of which creates schisms within religion and society.

The anonymous writer of this piece of graffiti reveals through their work that they are clearly intrigued by the schism between religion and secularism. In placing the graffiti in a public space they are expecting the same from other patrons. They do not proffer a preference for a particular religion or for atheism, but their solution is that of a secular reference. There is also an underlying theme of punk as salvation, which I wish to return to and engage with in detail in Chapter Six.

The re-appropriation of space through means such as this graffiti piece reveals a connection – though likely unknown by the subculture – with Eliade’s notion of sacred space. The philosopher and religious historian Mircea Eliade argued that for the non-religious person, space is special only in terms of how it relates to their individual associations: the house they grew up in or the hospital their child was born in, for example. Conversely, for the religious (and spiritual) individual space is significant because the world, following Durkheim, is divided into areas which are sacred and those which are profane, with often only a doorway dividing them.³²⁷

Enter through the doorway and, according to Eliade, the sacred centre of the world is located and thus becomes the space humanity wants to inhabit. In addition, the sacredness of the space is revealed through divine signs.³²⁸ While one could certainly make a convincing case for the argument that these Straight Edge venues are sacred in that they provide a space in which the adherents can fully express themselves, interact and engage without overt influence (or contamination) from the outside or mainstream world, one would have to acknowledge that it is limited by the notion of the in-between or the tension we find rife within Straight Edge.

Repeatedly I have demonstrated and argued throughout this thesis that for Straight Edge adherents, the Durkhiemian fear of contamination of the sacred by the profane is irrelevant. In utilising their subculture as a surrogate for religion, they have not only risked but openly embraced contamination, seeing the forced distinction as unnecessary division. However, there remains a tension between allowing a contamination through a blurring of the boundaries between the religious and the secular and a desire to stand against potential contamination by the mainstream culture, who do pose a threat to them. Therefore their signs that a space is sacred are not divinely inherited or received, as Eliade would argue, but rather they are self-created and self-referential.

³²⁷ Eliade Mircea. *The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion*. (Australia: Harcourt, 1959).

³²⁸ Eliade Mircea. *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991).

This interest in a religious / secular divide and the preference for a secular alternative was also in evidence during interviews and interactions, as this excerpt from Chris, an adherent in his early 30s from San Francisco, and Marc, a Straight Edge musician from the Bay Area demonstrates.

Subcultures like punk are so important, they don't sit around in therapy they embrace the pain of the collective, celebrate it and then give you something – music, dancing, protests, whatever – to get over it with.³²⁹

I hated the church, stopped going when I was a teenager and went to shows instead, mostly at Gilman 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.³³⁰

Another large graffiti piece on the walls of Gilman reveals a similar interest in the intersection between religion and secularism and in the self-created and referential nature of the signs of sacred space.



Fig 16. Gilman Street, right side, main wall.

³²⁹ Chris, interview with researcher 7.11.09 San Francisco.

³³⁰ Marc, interview with researcher 7.11.09 San Francisco.

In this graffiti piece there is an intentional blending between religious imagery and references and punk imagery and references. We can see an image of a devil sitting in a traditional Buddhist meditation pose, on one arm the devil wears a typical punk spike bracelet. Various smaller figures at the bottom of the image have jackets with the arms removed and back patches on them, a fairly common form of dress amongst punks. Skulls, which litter the very bottom of the image, are a common image utilised in punk tattoos, band images and t-shirts.

What is particularly interesting about this image is that any figure wearing or referencing punk is not human, but is the devil or demonic in some way. This could be a possible (sub)conscious reference to either the demonising of punk within wider society or to how religious institutions are thought to view or consider punk adherents. In addition pigs wearing various religious and political insignia are being dragged to the devil for devouring, whilst other punks dance in joyous celebration of this.

Reference was made by some interviewees regarding their understanding or presumption of how religious institutions view them. Typically this was linked with Christian churches, which is to be expected given the areas from which interviews were being gathered. "The most powerful now are the Christians and it's people like the punks that speak the truth against them so of course they are going to want to be rid of them."³³¹

Not all interviewees were as negative as K.B., an American adherent in his early 40s, with regard to traditional religion. Some recognised that there was something important in what they could offer, but similar to the graffiti piece shown above they struggled or refused to separate the traditional religious institutions from secular spaces, as this excerpt from Ann's interview reveals.

I do have to admit though that I was more interested in religion when I lived in Europe.

FS: what do you mean?

³³¹ KB, interview with researcher 28.10.09 Berkeley.

Like, I could feel when I walked around those buildings, that history, that culture, that there was something, I couldn't touch it or anything but it was there and I was a part of it you know? ... but then you come back here and it's just all about money and power and dickheads like Bush. It just puts me right off religion, but I think I miss that feeling that I was a part of something bigger. I used to feel it at CBGB's as well which I think is part of the real reason I want to go back there so badly³³²

There is a comparison being drawn between a connection with the communal and the numinous and the use, or rather perceived misuse, of religion. The interviewee is very clear as to which approach to religion she is aligning herself with and her reasoning is linked with authenticity. She is adamant that the pursuit of money and power are not appropriate pursuits, ambitions or uses of or for religion; she appears to want religion to maintain a form of purity, an authenticity. The notion of authenticity will be discussed in depth in Chapter Six.

Within the space that Straight Edge adherents find and utilise we can find a desire to engage with an honest discourse regarding the role of religion and spirituality in everyday life. There are expressions of concern, mistrust and fear regarding traditional religion, especially the institutions associated with them. A strong sense of a blending of the religious and the secular is also in evidence. This concern is often approached through humour and frequently reveals a concern to locate spirituality within the secular. To further test this, I want to explore if the same concerns are being raised in their use of virtual space.

Virtual space

As with all aspects of punk, the significance of printed media forms cannot be underestimated within the Straight Edge subculture. It is obvious in the use and prevalence of flyers, stickers, fanzines and band memorabilia. However within many subcultures, especially music based subcultures, as technology has grown so have their use of it as a means of promotion, communication and a space to exchange and debate ideas. Largely this is comparable with the general rise in use and popularity of social networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook and Twitter.

³³² Ann, interview with researcher, 7.11.09 Bay Area.

My main interest in examining the use of these websites by Straight Edge adherents is to explore how they are using them as a means of redefining space as a continuation of their need to find a safe and appealing place both physically and within the subculture. Of course in stepping into the use of these websites they have to give up some of the autonomy, control and underground status of the subculture. These websites are typically financially free, but they are public forums which anyone can access, contribute or take from.

“Compared to punk, sXe has proven relatively resistant, though not immune to commercialization and co-option. Perhaps the music and lifestyle are simply too extreme to make a full-fledged leap into the mainstream world.”³³³ Of course some aspects of Straight Edge have already become more commercial - for example numerous bands now make music videos for their songs, something once considered the purview of rock bands and corporate ‘sell out’ metal bands. Many of these videos are now freely available on websites such as YouTube, Google videos and so on, alongside live footage filmed by fans and people at the shows.

As these video websites are publicly available there often exists typed conversations by numerous viewers or comments by single viewers underneath the videos. For example, underneath the video for Set It Straight’s song ‘Strikes and Guts’ is the typical comment:

[“chaoticfirearm](#)

1 month ago thanks so much for the upload bro...stay EDGE XXX”

The video for Bane ‘Can we start again’ has the following ‘conversation’:

- [“ChubbsDaHubbs](#)

6 months ago 17

being straight edge and vegan don't make you more hardcore.

- [WinstonVonDouglas01](#)

³³³ Haenfler. Straight Edge. p.168

4 months ago 7

i knew punk wouldnt die just evolve

- [ICUMMUD](#)

2 weeks ago

[@taylorromeo](#)

yeah. that's something we can both agree on haha

- [taylorromeo](#)

2 weeks ago

[@ICUMMUD](#) understandable. its a vicious cycle.

- [ICUMMUD](#)

2 weeks ago

[@taylorromeo](#) i understand what your opinion is. don't apologize for stating that you have every right. mine is just obviously different. Bane has been around for years and still stay true to the reason they started in the first place and i think that deserves respect regardless of genre preference. And these days everybody is labeled. By saying you don't label yourself you're part of a label. All i'm doing is sticking up for a band i've loved since i was 8 years old. it's nothing against you man

- [taylorromeo](#)

2 weeks ago

[@ICUMMUD](#) well i apologize for voicing my opinion. but dude they are labeling themselves. dont get so upset that i dont like the same music as you. these guys are good on cd. but thats it.

- [ICUMMUD](#)

2 weeks ago

[@taylorromeo](#)

i don't know who YOU saw live but i've seen bane damn 10+ times and i've never been disappointed

and to say they're the free-est band in hardcore isn't a label

it's a statement and i think they make perfect sense.

but i understand your urge to bash people more talented than yourself over the internet

In this somewhat antagonistic 'conversation' between 'taylrorromeo' and 'icumud' there is a defence of Straight Edge through supporting the band, and a discussion on who can label people and how. 'Taylrorromeo' is very much on the defensive but does make sound rational arguments that would be analogous to what you would expect to hear within a club or at a show between two attendees arguing over a band or Straight Edge as a label, and it ends much as it would in a club setting.

Thus, as the above is a typical example, it is reasonable to conclude that in terms of public forums the redefinition of space is no different or more expansive than that found within redefined physical spaces such as Gilman Street as an example. By this I mean they have found a virtual space that enables the same sense of safety and encourages self-expression, resulting in similar conversations, arguments and reasons one would also find in a physical space, both in the form of graffiti and between patrons.

This is somewhat surprising given the anonymity provided by the fact that these types of websites use self-selected or created user names. Thereby promoting or at least enabling users to resort to comments and retorts that in person could result in a potentially painful physical reaction! However, it seems that in virtual space, as in a physical space, the rules and mores of the subculture are still adhered to. This raises an interesting question of whether this will remain in the future as more technological savvy and dependant generations engage with punk, perhaps to the extent that their only interaction with and understanding of the community is virtual based. This is something that will be dealt with in the conclusion in Chapter Seven.

Turning our attention then to Straight Edge specific websites, a difference emerges. There are numerous Straight Edge websites; most are simply an overview of what it is, what the rules are and specific Straight Edge bands.³³⁴ There are some notable exceptions to this and these exceptions are growing in number and use. In his study of the Goth subculture and its internet uses, Hodkinson argues that use and access of Goth specific websites “required a clear prior involvement in the Goth scene, both in terms of coming into contact with the information and having the motivation to use it. Although hard to prove empirically, then, the weight of logic suggests strongly that most users of Goth websites were already interested in their themes.”³³⁵ It seems reasonable to assume that the same would be applicable to other subcultures, including Straight Edge.

Below is a screen shot of Straight Edge website

<http://www.straightedgelifestyle.moonfruit.com/#> The website boasts band interviews, tattoos by numerous individuals involved with Straight Edge, articles about Straight Edge, a guest book and clothing for sale. It also has links to other websites and a stream of the BBC documentary on Straight Edge (audio only) from 2008.

Visually it is similar to other media found within punk, hardcore and Straight Edge, such as fanzines, flyers and so on. It has common images such as the raised fists of a crowd, various crowd shots and band images. It also contains specific references to Straight Edge such as the watch prominently on display, the triple X in the far right hand side and the phrase written along the bottom – for myself, my friends & for my family forever true.

On this website is a section called XGuestbookX in which any member or guest can add a comment or take part in an online discussion. Current topics include threads of ‘Can I be catholic and sxe?’, ‘sxe, cult or not?’ Because the email address of the posters is included on any posting and I do not have permission from the users or the owner of the site, I have not included any postings here.

³³⁴ www.straightedge.com for example.

³³⁵ Hodkinson. Goth. p.177.

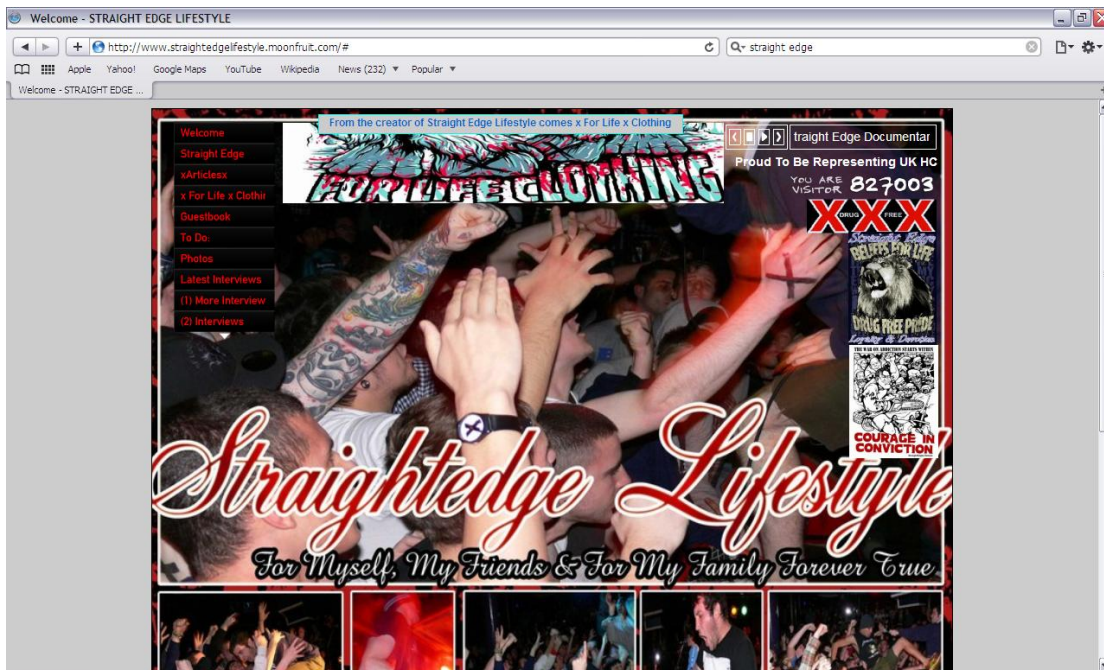


Fig 17 Screen shot of Straight Edge website www.straightedgelifestyle.moonfruit.com

On the Straight Edge website www.xsisterhoodx.com there is also a raising of the topic of religion within the community board. One poster explores vegan / vegetarianism from a religious perspective and a number of other users respond, all expounding their views on both issues, but a significant number also warning one another to be aware of trying to push forward an agenda or idea using religion unquestioningly as a basis for the argument. One lengthy post ends with:

Being vegetarians is a choice that we make and does not have to be approved by religions because religions don't demand us to eat or not eat meat. Next time you use the Bible read a little more, before using it. I am a Vegan but I have two eyes in front, so don't use your way of thinking to misunderstand what the Bible says and use it on you favor. If want to convince people don't use a religion because religions tie, use convictions³³⁶

Analogous with earlier observations we can see on these websites typical behaviour emerging such as self-monitoring, an attempt to strengthen and test engagement and commitment in terms of religion and spirituality. The topics have become more explicit than those evident in the images in the previous section. A significantly higher number of people are prepared to engage with

³³⁶ <http://www.xsisterhoodx.com/op/ed/christianity-and-vegetarianism.html#comments>

the topics being raised than were engaging in written comments that would be seen on walls next to graffitied images, as can be seen in the screen shot below of the religion thread on the discussion board of <http://www.toefur-straightedge.com> The figures on the far right shows the number of responses made to each posting, some of which are well in the 100's, and one in particular entitled 'why do you need God?' has over 4, 000 responses. It should be noted that this is one page of 34 within the religion thread.

Post Title	Author	Date	Replies	Views
GOD HATES FAGS... AND YOU	anthony	05-21-2010 11:52 PM	3	63
First attempt at iconography	James	05-20-2010 04:42 PM	9	106
Time for another quiz!	James	05-20-2010 04:27 PM	11	187
TEH TRUTH VS CHURCHIANITY?!?!?!?	anthony	05-17-2010 04:15 PM	6	126
Glenn Beck warns against churches that preach social justice	James	05-16-2010 06:46 PM	57	575
The shapes of the tablets	B-movie	05-04-2010 07:36 PM	3	121
Giants In the Land of Canaan	Marius	04-27-2010 06:07 PM	4	493
Simultaneously hilarious and cringe-inducing	B-movie	04-26-2010 03:21 AM	20	261
why do you need god?	ila	04-20-2010 06:38 AM	83	4,492
Richard Dawkins: I will arrest Pope Benedict XVI	Pilaf	04-17-2010 04:09 PM	12	249
Christian music singer 'comes out'	xmikeyx	04-16-2010 08:39 PM	10	245
Lady Blames Jesus For Difficult Life	xraindropx	04-09-2010 07:15 PM	33	466
"nowhere in the bible does Jesus have a sword fight"	Pilaf	04-09-2010 07:26 AM	13	277
The Dalai Lama is Not Gay-Friendly	Pilaf	04-09-2010 12:46 AM	9	257
Happy Easter	James	04-06-2010 04:04 PM	8	158
Process Theology and the Problem of Evil	James	04-05-2010 11:44 PM	11	235

Fig 18 screen shot of one of the discussion boards on Straight Edge website www.toefur-straightedge.com

The topics and responses have a significant range of both depth and breath, ranging from homophobia to child abuse by priests, from philosophy to alchemy and from ghosts to hardcore Zen. There is a definite sense of expansion and freedom, which I submit is a form of limitless theology because they have been enabled to redefine space to make it a safe environment with no definable limit, reflected in the theology and spirituality they are engaging with.

The range of topics that individuals post responses to reflects their interest in a wide variety of religious ideas and practices. For example, one poster named 'James' comments on a thread on

Christianity and the truth, another on why do you need God; he also comments on hardcore Zen and one on the myth of redemptive theology as well as others.

William James, referring to the characteristics of religious experiences, reminds us:

“Although some persons aim most at intellectual purity and simplification, for others richness is the supreme imaginative requirement. When one’s mind is strongly of this type, an individual religion will hardly serve the purpose.”³³⁷ As I have been demonstrating through the exploration of space, including the redefinition of space and the use and redefinition of virtual space, many Straight Edge adherents are strongly inclined towards richness, that is, variety and depth together. This is evident in the imagery they create, the graffiti they create, the websites they create and use and the discourse surrounding all three. Thus we can see why so many Straight Edge adherents are attracted to a syncretic approach towards religion and spirituality.

However, demonstrating this in one area is not satisfactory as evidence for what I am proposing within this thesis. Thus I now intend to explore the same question within another area that is central to Straight Edge adherents, that of community. It is to that which the remainder of this chapter will turn.

Community

I was a 15 year old kid with nowhere to fit in I just wanted to skate, listen to my suicidal tape. When someone told me about a place where the strange were accepted, and judged by what’s inside. A scene of truly open minds.³³⁸

The above song by Straight Edge band Bane reveals the dual nature of the punk, hardcore and Straight Edge scenes or communities. They are both open to any and all while concurrently judging those who claim membership or adherence. Those who felt they could fit in nowhere else often found a refuge within punk or one of its subsets, finding it to be a place where the negative judgements made about them by mainstream society was accepted, even welcomed.

³³⁷ James. Varieties of Religious Experience. p.500.

³³⁸ ‘Can we start again?’ Bane, It All Comes Down To This, 1999, Equal Vision.

To enable a full understanding of how the concept and construction of community is significant in regards to the spiritual identity and practices of Straight Edge adherents there are a number of areas to be examined. Those areas will be addressed separately within three subsections:

- Straight Edge community
- Domestic community
- Symbolic construction of community

Straight Edge community

This is a family, I count on you, you count on me. Help each other, put your arms around your brother, help your sister trying hard as any other. Go! Go, go the distance! True, go the distance. This hardcore scene can't live without you. It takes a strong heart to go the distance true.³³⁹

Durkheim reminds us that

Generally, a collective feeling can become self-conscious only by being anchored in a material object. But by that very fact it participates in the nature of that object and vice versa. Thus social necessities have fused together notions that at first seemed distinct, and social life has facilitated this fusion by the great mental effervescence it stimulates.³⁴⁰

While Durkheim is primarily referring to emblems, totems etc I am submitting that the notion of material object in the creation of community can be widened in our understanding. I am arguing that for the Straight Edge community the collective feeling is brought into being by its anchoring through the music and the live performances, and extends outwards from that, as this extract from an email interviewee with a female adherent demonstrates:

Given that Straight Edge as an identifiable group and subculture began with Ian's song, I'd say the music has been very important. To my mind, the music has been especially important to the way sXe has grown as a sort of world-wide movement or community – thirty years ago, straightedge was limited to DC. Now,

³³⁹ 'Family', Throwdown, You Don't Have To Be Blood To Be Family, 2001, Indecision Records.

³⁴⁰ Durkheim. The Elementary Forms. 2001, p.180.

you've got straightedge kids in the most unlikely places around the globe, I'd credit both the music and the internet for that.³⁴¹

As I showed in Chapters Two and Four the lyrical content of many punk, hardcore and Straight Edge songs promotes and exemplifies the notion of community. This is worded through phrases such as 'us versus them', 'brotherhood', 'family', 'unity' and demonstrated through practices such as head walking, stage diving, leaning into the crowd and having them support you, fans sharing the microphone with the singer and most commonly picking strangers up when they fall in front of you whilst dancing.



Fig 19 crowd shot of a Youth of Today show, photograph supplied by interviewee Frank.

Traditionally a community is based on the premise of agreed upon standards and rules with different people fulfilling different roles and positions. Commonly some within the community take on, through force, agreement or vote, positions of authority above the other members. This is not so in both hardcore, and in particular in Straight Edge. There is no leader everyone is equal regardless of whether they are in a band, working merchandise tables, selling fanzines or enjoying the music as

³⁴¹ SG, 30.04.10 email interview with researcher. Various spellings of Straight Edge interviewees own.

a fan. They are united by the music and the autonomous following of the three core rules or principles.

Bands will often set up and break down their own equipment, or those fans who have turned up early may offer to help them. Once a band has finished playing they will remove their equipment and then become a part of the audience to watch and support the other bands perform. It is not uncommon for a band to play on the floor with only a drum riser or for the audience members to spend as much time on the stage as the band. Unlike other art, there is no division between performer and audience. The audience is part of the performance, rather than simply a spectator. The photo below shows the Manchester band 'Flat Back Four' playing at Creation Studios in Glasgow. All the bands playing that night were simply standing on the floor next to the audience.



Fig 20 Flat Back Four playing at Creation Studios, Glasgow, 22.05.10

However there is an element within Straight Edge that we must address. This is a small faction that is not interested in community and instead attempts to promote their own agendas. Largely this comes through in what is known within Straight Edge and hardcore as being hardline or militant. There are those who believe that women have no place within either the pit or hardcore in general, there are others who believe there is no place for homosexuals, and others who are divided on race.

Two points are essential to understand on this issue: first this is a very small minority whom most Straight Edge adherents and hardcore fans will stand against. Second this is something that I have never personally encountered, nor have any of my interviewees or informants, but similar to myself they have heard stories of it happening.

There are too many bands speaking out against it within their lyrics, such as Good Clean Fun in their song 11th Commandment, which contains the lines;

Let's hear for the boy who'll say , 'Get this macho tough guy shit away'. The scene is just like a small town, and we don't want your kind around. I want to see a show without the violence.³⁴²

Partially this has resulted because of the image, the fashion aesthetic that attracted some people who were not interested in nor understood the politics and purpose of the Straight Edge and hardcore community, they appear to be just angry and looking for a way to make others suffer. However it has also arisen as a result of misinterpretation of band lyrics and ideas. For example the band Vegan Reich begin their song 'I, the Jury' with the lines "I'm through with tolerance, no more acceptance of your crimes. I don't care about your 'freedom', 'cos your actions restrict mine." These are easily misinterpreted as a call to individuality at the expense of other's rights. However the song is actually an indictment of the notion of freedom that exists within America which is used to trample over the rights and lives of millions in developing countries. In other words it is a song about using the notion of freedom to hide practices that enable a profit to be made on the backs of others.

³⁴² '11th Commandment', Good Clean Fun, On The Streets, 2000, Phyte.

This is a small minority, but it does have an impact on how Straight Edge adherents construct and understand community. For some it makes remaining within the community very difficult. This is demonstrated in this interview extract with S.G. a Straight Edge woman in her early 30's.

A lot of the sXe kids I've met over the last 10 – 15 years talk and operate like they believe they're better than others – its like they're self-righteous about their choice to live a straightedge lifestyle. While it's great to feel proud of good decision making and accomplishment, a lot of the kids I've met take it further than that, to a level of arrogance, which seems the antithesis of what straight edge is about. This kind of approach to straight edge is counterproductive and really turns people off, which means being able to influence people a lot less of the time.³⁴³

For most adherents it creates a strong urge to re-create and maintain the Straight Edge community as they believe it should be and can be. This is largely done by being open-minded towards those who are within and without the Straight Edge scene but still within punk and hardcore. Thus you might find older Straight Edge adherents who will go to a pub with their friends who drink as an example.³⁴⁴

In their attempt to create the community they want, they are however often presenting a closed or rigid appearance to those who are not a part of the punk or hardcore communities. In an attempt to bond and get to know one another better, I took my sister-in-law to a Bleeding Through, Hatebreed and Machine Head show in Glasgow. She had never been to a punk or hardcore show before and is not a fan of the music. She is also Malaysian; she came to the UK as a university student. During a break between the bands I asked her what she thought of the evening and if she was enjoying herself. Her response revealed just how closed this 'open' community could be.

I've never felt so out of place before. Coming to the UK, being surrounded by white people never really bothered me. Eh, but now, eh, obviously I feel like I don't fit in and I, I feel really out of place because there is such a strong sense of community among the Straight Edge slash hardcore punk people and eh, you know, yeah, I just feel like I don't really fit in or belong to the community.³⁴⁵

³⁴³ SG, 30.04.10 email interview with researcher. Various spellings of Straight Edge interviewees own.

³⁴⁴ Karl, 07.05.10 for example.

³⁴⁵ Suyin, in discussion with the researcher 23.02.10. Glasgow.

As we move on to consider community in more depth, it is important to remember these contradictions of a strong yet closed scene of open-minded individuals struggling to create their own sense of community when they feel that they cannot look to mainstream society as an example.

Domestic community

Take a look at everything we've done, because I feel a sense of pride. All the bridges built and the bonds we've made, will last our lives because they're built on trust.³⁴⁶

The notion of trust is incredibly important within any domestic sphere or situation. For most our domestic spheres are peopled by at least a majority of people that we consider family either through genetics or marriage. However when our domestic sphere is peopled by those with whom we hold no such familial link the level and importance of trust significantly increases.

Within all subsets of punk there is a strong history of squatting. This is the practice of a group of punks taking over an abandoned building, usually a warehouse or disused factory but sometimes a house, and living in it without paying any rent or bills. Electricity, gas, water are tapped from nearby sources if possible. If the space is big enough then those living there, if they are in bands, will also practice and perform there. Those who are artistic may paint and put on showings; others may create their fanzines, do band promotion (made a lot easier with mobile telephones today) and so on. In essence these are punk domestic communities, which rely on key principles to be successful; those key principles are significant in their construction of spiritual identity.

As Taylor reminds us "It is clear that to have any kind of liveable society some choices have to be restricted, some authorities have to be respected, and some individual responsibility has to be assumed. The issue should always be which choices, authorities and responsibilities, and at what cost."³⁴⁷

³⁴⁶ 'Perspective', Champion, Promises Kept, 2005, Bridge 9.

³⁴⁷ Taylor. A Secular Age. p.479.

Those who dwell in punk squats, or indeed in other squats not connected with punk, are doing precisely what Taylor describes in the quote above - they are deciding to ignore or refute those who claim authority over the provision of utilities, lodgings and so on. They do so with the knowledge that their actions are illegal and leave them with very few rights, depending on the country they are in.

The reasons why people choose to live in a squat are many and varied. For some it is the only option they have besides homelessness, for others it is a safe haven from an abusive home situation. For others it is an opportunity for creativity or communal living and for others still it is a protest, a way to raise awareness on specific social issues.

Establishing a squat requires finding an appropriate space and then making sure that others can find or identify it without alerting the authorities. This is commonly done through the use of symbols, such as in the photograph below. Again this reflects back to the earlier discussion on finding and redefining space and the nature of symbols within the community.



Fig 21 Squat in San Francisco taken on 07.11.09

Living within a squat requires an ability and willingness to live within a truly communal space and lifestyle. Depending on the type of building being utilised there may or may not be separate rooms for individuals. There will certainly be common living areas and as the squat fills individual rooms will typically have three or four people living in them, ensuring a lack of privacy or ownership.

On the other hand living in a squat promotes a sense of togetherness, of equality and marginality. Typically the rooms within a squat are reflective of the lifestyle of those who dwell within as well as their position towards what most would consider 'junk', most importantly is the reflection of D.I.Y. ethics. Often strewn around are the discarded remnants of other people's lifestyles and life choices, procured and put to various uses by the squatters, and reflecting a lifestyle that is consciously being lived on the margins of capitalism. This is pictorially best captured in the work of Abby Bank³⁴⁸ who shows the dirty dishes, the destroyed children's toys, the ripped and torn clothing on the floor, the dirty mattresses and the flyers from and for punk shows.

During my field work I was unable to have any real access to the interiors or communities of squats in the US. This is because I was not there long enough to build up the trust and contacts necessary to gain access to what is a necessarily suspicious and mistrustful community. I was shown around one squat in Oakland but I was told beforehand not to take any pictures of either the inside of the building or the people who live there. In the UK because I deliberately avoided using contacts from friends I was also unable to gain access to squats and choose not to use the ones that I previously knew of. The reasons for this were numerous but largely based on the fact that they are occupied by friends that I have discussed my work with in detail and also because where they live is too easily identifiable and therefore risks losing them their home.

I have included one photograph which will not be traceable, from a squat in Manchester, UK. The image demonstrates the importance of the qualities that are necessary for building a domestic space in a squat when we examine the spiritual identity of Straight Edge punks. The graffiti

³⁴⁸Bank Abby & Moore Thurston. Punk house: interiors in anarchy. (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc. 2007).

on the wall was originally sprayed by myself a number of years³⁴⁹ ago in a sense of anger and rage at Christianity. When I returned recently³⁵⁰ to visit some friends I noticed, with surprise, it was still there. Staring at it, I realised that I no longer felt the anger or rage that had spurred its creation but instead I now felt it was an expression of self-responsibility.



Fig 22 Spray painted graffiti in Manchester squat.

On the wall is spray painted the infamous line 'Jesus died for his own sins not mine.' These Crass lyrics are a bastardisation of a song lyric by Patti Smith in her song 'Gloria' which contains the line 'Jesus died for somebody's sins but not mine'. Smith wrote this as a response to her childhood experience of being raised within a strict Jehovah's Witness environment and family and feeling that it was organised as a religion so that no matter how hard you tried you were never 'good enough' for true forgiveness or salvation.

The feeling of inadequacy in Smith's lyrics has been commonly replaced by punks with an expression of sneering dismissal. They are refusing to feel inadequate because they are refusing to live by the same standards as both organised religion and society. The squat is the ultimate expression of that refusal and an expression of self-responsibility. The ideal of the squat was arguably exemplified through Dial House which was the 'commune' that Crass was based in. The varying members of the band, their children, other musicians, artists and activists lived there at various points. They grew their own food and shared the communal aspects of daily life.

³⁴⁹ late 2001, early 2002.

³⁵⁰ May 2009.

To determine one's own reality one must first accept responsibility for one's own life, including the mistakes. Once they have taken responsibility for themselves then they can move onto accepting or taking on responsibility for others. In accepting responsibility for others I am referring to standing up for causes which are supporting or fighting for those who are abused by others or by some impersonal system, the purpose being to enable them to be in a position to take responsibility for their own lives. One of the most radical ways in which this is done is through the rejection of what many punks see as their privileged place within a class system and this is demonstrated through the practice of squatting.

Accepting responsibility for one's own life also entails wresting it from the control held on it by authorities, which feasibly could include religious institutions and leaders, as can be observed in this extract from Straight Edge tattooist S.T. from the Bay Area.

Thought if I went far enough away from all the people who were dragging me down and far enough away from all my problems I could get myself sorted. I started going to AA meetings, but I hated it and I hated the heat and was just miserable.

FS: why did you hate the AA meetings?

ST: agh they are you know all about do it this one way, there is no other way and it is all about God and only God can do it for you, nothing about inner strength or any other idea, I hated it, it didn't work for me. I got no problem people want to believe in God or whatever but not in such a closed minded way, be open to other possibilities. I think I am more of a spiritual person than anything specific really. So it just didn't work for me.³⁵¹

The final aspect of domestic community that I want to briefly explore is that of statement. Sometimes, increasingly in the UK more than the US, the appropriation of space to squat in is a direct statement being made publically towards society. When this is done it is typically under the auspices of anarchy and often inspired by the commune which was created by the band Crass during the 80s in Essex. When this is the case the squatters make no attempt to hide what they are doing, often putting signs or handmade banners to explain or promote their actions.

³⁵¹ ST, interview with researcher, 10.11.09 Berkeley.



Fig 23 Political and social protest as a motivation for squatting.

In the above picture signs are being hung to draw attention to the fact that people, in this case punks (although others who have nothing to do with punk are taking part in the same protest particularly in London) are squatting in empty mansions because they believe that no-one should be homeless while structures are left empty. In essence they are arguing that the needs of the people should come before the wealth of the few or the position of the law. Once again this reflects into their relationship with religion and their construction of spiritual identity, as is demonstrated in this interview extract from K.B, a Straight Edge adherent in his early 40s living temporarily in the Bay Area.

Christianity is focused on compassion it is just that churches are too involved in ritual and shit that they forget that Jesus didn't do any of that, he was out with people, he genuinely cared and wanted to show people how they should be, how the world could be. But the church destroyed that, you had hundreds of years of the fucking inquisition, wars and that shit is still going on even in this country cause people get so caught up in religion without knowing what the religion is really. To busy doing the shit that either doesn't matter or shouldn't be done to actually make a difference in the world, that is why we need groups like punks, like Straight Edge, they do make a difference.

FS: in what ways?

KB: they read, they learn, they think for themselves, they believe in action, go up to people's park there and you see, they give out food just give it out, not asking for anything in return.³⁵²

Oftentimes when we mentally construct our notions of a domestic space we imagine it to be place of rest, where we can get away from the roles and responsibilities we undertake in public life. It is a place where we can feel safe and relax, where we can feel a sense of ownership and pride. For many punks, including Straight Edge punks, ownership and safety are sacrificed for the potential to live with like-minded individuals, to create a community or 'family' from these individuals. More importantly they are sacrificed for the potential to gain control and responsibility for one's own life and to have a space in which the role in which they are undertake in public is maintained in private, because it is more than simply a role - it is who they are, the core of their being. These qualities are reflected and are integral in their construction of spiritual identity and their relationship with and to organised religions. These same principles will also emerge as key as we turn to the final subset to be examined within this chapter, that of the symbolic construction of community.

Symbolic construction of community

Years and years ago went to see Less than Jake in Aberdeen and there was this wee guy, this wee punk kid, having a great time and these Neds came up and started giving him abuse, so this sort of older crusty type punk just came and beat the shit outta this wee Ned, it was fantastic. People had never met before, he just didn't like, fantastic, so when you see stuff like that it is quite reassuring. It's a community you don't see elsewhere, I can't imagine anyway.³⁵³

In relating this tale of punk solidarity this interviewee is demonstrating what social anthropologist Anthony Cohen refers to as "the quintessential referent of community."³⁵⁴: that "members make, or believe they make, a similar sense of things either generally or with respect to

³⁵² KB, interview with researcher, 28.10.09 Berkeley.

³⁵³ Kevin, interview with researcher, 31.03.10 Glasgow.

³⁵⁴ Cohen A. *The Symbolic Construction of Community*. (London: Tavistock Publisher. 1985), p.16.

specific and significant interests, and further, that they think that sense may differ from one made elsewhere.”³⁵⁵

Kevin, in relating his tale, assumes a common understanding of terms such as ‘crusty punk’ and ‘Ned’ by myself as the interviewer. He assumes this because of his prior knowledge of my own position within punk as a member of the community. Furthermore he expects my agreement that the punk community is unique and differs from any found within other musical subcultures.

I went to a festival in Manchester, Newcastle, no Manchester and there I got pulled up by the skinheads because I had a patch on my bomber jacket (*indicates left shoulder*), saying ‘What the fuck is that? That like an anti fascist thing?’ I’m like yeah, so I nearly got my head kicked in for being white and listening to black music.³⁵⁶

This interviewee demonstrates the more negative aspect of Cohen’s argument, that “the symbols of community are mental constructs; they provide people with the means to make meaning. In so doing, they also provide them with the means to express the particular meanings which the community has for them.”³⁵⁷ In the above case Cohen’s symbols are represented by the patch Ewan is wearing on his jacket as well as his bomber jacket which is a common fashion choice amongst skinheads. And as Ewan was wearing a bomber jacket they assumed he held the same ideas and attitudes as themselves. However, on seeing his patch and recognising or interpreting the constructed meaning of it - that Ewan was taking a different stance to them regarding a particular issue, in this case race, they were hostile towards him.

Within punk, hardcore and Straight Edge symbols of the community are commonly seen through the wearing of tattoos. These images worn permanently on the skin not only signify the wearer as a member and supporter of the community but each tattoo bears constructed meaning that can be read and understood by others within the community. The permanent nature of a tattoo

³⁵⁵ Cohen. *The Symbolic Construction of Community*. p.16.

³⁵⁶ Ewan, interview with researcher, 26.02.10 Glasgow.

³⁵⁷ Cohen. *The Symbolic Construction of Community*. p.19.

also signifies a lifetime commitment to the community and to what punk, hardcore and Straight Edge represents and means to the individual.

While punk explicitly threatened cultural boundaries and certain dominant ideologies, it implicitly challenged elitist notions of what art is and who may create art ... Although the style was seemingly random and chaotic, punks were systematically choosing elements that were homologous with their values and constructing these into a meaningful whole that expressed the ethos of the subculture.³⁵⁸

Early punk tattoos consisted of images such as bats, spiders, spider webs, snakes, crosses (though rarely crucifixes) and the punk symbol for anarchy. Gradually it became more and more common to see either the names or the logos of punk bands, song lyrics and band artwork appearing as tattoos within the punk community. This is a tradition that has remained to this day, as has the tendency to create large areas of the body covered in numerous tattoos as opposed to a large singular piece, as can be seen on this photograph of interviewee Karl.



Fig 24 Interviewee Karl in his tattoo shop in Durham.

³⁵⁸ Wojcik. Punk and Neo-tribal Body Art. p.12 – 13.

Many of the interviewees and informants I encountered had punk related tattoos. These included tattoos such as 'Lucky 13', Black Flag bars, Misfits Crimson Ghost, Social Distortion dancing skeleton and phrases such as 'Stay Free' and 'Stay True' amongst others. One interviewee had incorporated his Straight Edge tattoo into his design for tattoo shop. Another had the working tools as an X as the founding base for his company logo.



Fig 25 Interviewee Karl, Stay True Tattoo Studio, Durham, UK used with permission



Fig 26 Interviewee Ewan, Psychoskin clothing, Glasgow, UK used with permission

This is a very Durkhiemian approach to symbols and the symbolic construction of community. "Men do not simply place their emblem on the objects they possess but also wear it on their persons; they imprint it on their flesh, and it becomes part of them. This mode of representation is in fact, and by far, the most important one."³⁵⁹ In choosing to permanently imprint their bodies with symbols and phrases associated with punk, hardcore and Straight Edge they are making a statement through their decorated bodies of what they ally themselves with and what they

³⁵⁹ Durkheim. The Elementary Forms. 1995, p.114.

represent. This is a form of symbolic communication designed only to be fully read and understood by the community, or the cognoscenti, as Kevin a punk from Aberdeen now living in Glasgow demonstrates.

I think sorta tattoos on the knuckles are quite punk or Lars Frederickson's skull and crossbones on his temple ...yeah, if I needed to be seen as punk for any reason, just one of them, everyone would know.³⁶⁰

The explicit and expansive use of tattoos by those within punk begs a question of violence to the body within the subculture. In Chapter Four I described the very physical dancing that is linked with the live musical performances and stated that being unaware of one's surroundings and community can lead to injury while dancing. Here we are seeing a deliberate wounding of the body, an intentional infliction of pain for the purposes of decoration and communication that could painlessly be achieved through the wearing of clothes, as we shall see shortly.

The potential pain involved in entering the circle pit during a show and the intentional pain of gaining a tattoo are being entered into willingly and not purely for the purposes of decoration or showmanship. While injury in a circle pit is not the desired outcome, it is known prior to entry that it is a possibility, however that potential pain is superseded by the emotional connection one feels with the music and the strong desire to express it through the body. Our emotions are held within in and we use our body to express them – gestures, facial expressions etc – this is no different except the emotion is being evoked by the music rather than an event or person.

We must also remember the social factors that caused or were linked to the creation of punk as a movement – the dire economic situation, the collapse of society's infrastructure, the dismantling of traditional educational and work routes for many working class communities, the break-up of the family unit, the arrival and access to hard drugs and the shifting of roles and positions within society by those traditionally considered fringe dwellers such as immigrants and women. As a consequence of these factors many who were, and indeed still are, drawn to punk or

³⁶⁰ Kevin, interview with researcher, 31.03.10 Glasgow.

Straight Edge as a lifestyle felt that the only thing they had control over was their bodies and how they used or abused them.

This goes beyond and much deeper than simply using their body to express anger, to shock the established order or to stand out as separate, rather it is about reclaiming ownership and control. Similar in many ways to those who describe the development of eating disorders – controlling food intake and BMI as a result of being or perceiving oneself to be in a situation over which they had no control – the subjection of the body to a pain which is under control in a sense. That is you are intentionally entering the situation forearmed with the knowledge that pain is possible or definite but you have control over, you can walk away or stop it at any time.

There are of course elements of pain that relate in particular to tattooing that cannot be dealt with in detail here due to the main concerns of this thesis. These are issues such as the addictiveness of tattooing, in which the release of endorphins as the body attempts to fight what it perceives as a wound becomes an addictive feeling. Overall this area of violence and pain on the body and violence within the subculture as a whole require a far greater depth of study than can be afforded here – this will be returned to and outlined in more detail in the conclusion. Ultimately though, tattooing within Straight Edge is a sign of affiliation, a confirmation of the belief of ‘true till death’ and symbolic means of communication that cannot be read by those outside the community.

Of course this form of symbolic communication is not limited to tattoos but also entails the use of the body as a means of communication through the use of t-shirts, specifically band related t-shirts or those of companies related to punk or its subsets.



Fig 27 Psychoskin clothing t shirts owned and run by interviewee Ewan, used with permission

The communication using clothing also extends to the use of patches and back pieces sewn roughly or safety pinned onto external clothing, both common practices amongst punks and Straight Edge adherents. On the surface, and to those outside of the community the purpose of the T-shirts, patches and back pieces are to simply claim allegiance or a liking of a particular band or image, as could easily be interpreted in this picture of three teenage punks.



Fig 28 Three teenage punks wearing self created, hand stitched clothing.

However in wearing the tattoos, t-shirts, patches and back pieces they are making a statement that they agree with or take the same or similar stance as the band is known for. If you examine the picture above closely you can see that all the patches are sewn on by hand; these are not clothes simply bought and donned to create a look. Rather they have taken painstaking hours to create by the individuals wearing them, who will spend a long time deciding where best to place each patch to ensure the maximum number on the clothes. In other words you literally put yourself into your outward construction or presentation of your identity – even to the extent of your own blood being mingled with the stitching depending upon one’s capability with a sewing needle!

During field work in the Bay Area and San Francisco interviews and encounters were typically initiated by individuals walking up to me and declaring ‘I like your shirt’, or words to that effect. As well as being a statement of commonality, they were also expressing and expecting solidarity of particular ideology or morality. For example, a popular shirt in Berkeley was my Dead Kennedy’s one. The Dead Kennedy’s were a popular San Francisco punk band from 1978 to 1986.³⁶¹ Their numerous songs addressed this issue of the end of the American dream at the hands of profit-driven companies, corrupt politics and religious institutions. The band became known for their political and social commentary, both of which leaned strongly to the left. Thus when one comments that they like the shirt of the band, they are not only expressing that they like the band but that they want to know if you take the same political and social stance as the band, as indeed they do.

If they did not agree with the stance of the band the comment would be closer to ‘nice shirt’, but by inserting themselves into the statement with the performative of ‘I’, they are making a stronger statement of intent and communication. They are participating in the symbolic construction of the community. “People cannot strip themselves socially naked into neutral space. Rather, they view it, interpret it, from their own cultural perspectives. The process is similar to the ways in which,

³⁶¹ The name of the band was meant to indicate or draw attention to the death or end of the American dream rather than as anything disrespectful towards the Kennedy family.

we have argued, people interpret symbols: they impute meaning to them in the light of their own experience and purposes.”³⁶²

In the supporting and wearing clothing from companies such as ‘Psychoskin clothing’ punks are making a strong statement that they approve of and support the D.I.Y. ethics that underpins all aspects of punk. Many of these companies are owned and run by ordinary individuals from within the punk scenes. “The D.I.Y. ethic was a huge part of hardcore for me. We didn’t need MTV to play *our* music, and we didn’t need Warped Tour to help gain acceptance by the mainstream. Hardcore was all of the above; an ethic, an ideal, a feeling, a way of life, all rolled into a form of music, but most importantly we felt like we owned it.”³⁶³

The essence of the D.I.Y. ethic is that of independence or freedom which was integral to ensure the integrity of the music, the bands and the participants. Of course this went further than just the music; it was also to be found in record labels, fanzines, music distribution, and clothing and even further into areas such as the issues discussed in between songs and bands performances and their support and creation of grassroots organisations.

We should be supporting these independent labels and not giving our money to the big conglomerations. Rollins does it for the right reasons, so do these writers, we should support them, you know, like united ... punk is about art in so many different forms and art should be appreciated not shoved into digital sound bites and compressed so someone can listen to it through tinny headphones to make some more money for some multi-millionaire who couldn’t give a shit about the music or its power or even the artist usually.³⁶⁴

The D.I.Y. aspect was not limited to the music and within a short time would often crop up in other arenas of daily life. “This simple concept went beyond the boundaries of the scene and became a general philosophy of taking your personal ideas, beliefs, and ultimately your life into your own hands.”³⁶⁵ This is an extremely important concept when we consider the relationship of Straight

³⁶² Cohen. Symbolic Construction of Community. p.98.

³⁶³ Ryan Murphy quoted in Peterson. Burning Fight. p.21.

³⁶⁴ Anna, in discussion with researcher, 12.11.09, Santa Cruz.

³⁶⁵ Peterson. Burning Fight. p.27.

Edge adherents towards traditional religion and spirituality. If they are not willing to accept music, artwork or bands that were not following a D.I.Y. ethic and means of production and distribution, then they were also not going to accept it areas such as faith and lifestyle.

In line with the generational attribute identified by Lynch, that “for those with a ‘Generation X’ view of the world, meaning is not something that can be found in pre-packaged forms in churches, shops or political parties, but rather meaning [if it is found at all] has to be sought in a personal way”³⁶⁶ meaning making requires freedom and independence to search and explore whilst maintaining or gaining control of your own life. This was often reflected within interviews both in what they were saying about organised religions and in the manner in which they said it.

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.³⁶⁷

Both body language and verbal content would typically shift to a more aggressive and dismissive stance when interviewees discussed religion and spirituality. This was not the case in those I interviewed as a base line comparison. These were individuals who choose to live a life of abstinence in the same three areas as Straight Edge adherents but were not in any way connected with punk, hardcore or Straight Edge, often they had never even heard of the latter two.

Ok well I think spirituality is an important part of my overall identity, I guess it’s more important than abstinence if I am honest. I suppose really that’s a big part of why I am not Straight Edge, I don’t value it enough, it’s just a part of me but other parts are more important. It’s only a part of who I am now, it might not be a part of who I am when I am older and that’s ok too.³⁶⁸

An engagement with the D.I.Y ethic, the active engagement with the belief that one should try, should experiment, is linked strongly both with the notion of authenticity that is important to this group and with the symbolic construction of community. “I think the ethos of punk has lived

³⁶⁶ Lynch. *After Religion*. p.31.

³⁶⁷ Nate, email interview with researcher, 05.05.10.

³⁶⁸ H.C. interview with researcher, 25.01.10 Glasgow.

with me since the 70s ... It was a period of great creativity and an explosion of the idea that 'anyone can do anything if they want to', and expression mattered more than having a perfect product or performance at the end of it, it was authenticity of voice and passion which was important. I think those values have remained with me, it was something beyond the music itself."³⁶⁹

In terms of symbolic construction of the community, the most obvious symbol for those who are Straight Edge is that of the X worn on the hands, tattooed on the body and transferred, usually by hand, to other things such as clothing, backpacks, bikes, skateboards and even cars. In so doing, not only are they recreating the symbolic meaning of the X but they are making a statement of intent, of commonality and of community. The X became the symbol for Straight Edge as it was drawn largely on the hands of under-age patrons who wanted to enter clubs and bars in Washington DC to see the bands. The purpose was to prevent them being served alcohol. However those who were old enough to drink also began voluntarily wearing it as a symbol of punk solidarity – that is it for all regardless of age – and to demonstrate that although they are old enough to drink they are choosing not to. It quickly moved from venues to being something that was worn all the time and thus became the symbol associated with Straight Edge. They are quite literally wearing their ideas and beliefs on their sleeves with the purpose of being read by others within the community.

Being able to read the symbolic ideology of, for example, the X or the band t-shirt or the D.I.Y. companies clothing, signals comradeship and potential commonality and widens the space for discourse. Concurrently they also potentially protect the wearer because they can only be 'read' by the cognoscenti. In this way we can see the re-emergence of the closed community discussed in the first subsection on community earlier in this chapter.

³⁶⁹ Pete, in email with researcher, 09.09.09 .

Conclusion

Haenfler reminds us that “while sXe projects a rigid, unyielding identity to the public within the movement members might be more flexible.”³⁷⁰ The purpose of this chapter has been to demonstrate through an exploration of space / place and community that the flexibility of Straight Edge adherents, despite all outward appearances, is a major component in both how they construct and explore spirituality as a part of their overall identity.

A significant theme that repeatedly re-emerged through the exploration of space / place and community was that of authenticity. In finding and redefining their own space Straight Edge adherents were searching for somewhere that could reflect and expand their own ideas, somewhere that they could authentically be what they considered to be themselves. They combined this with a desire to create a truly egalitarian community that also based itself on authenticity and yet was unable to extend beyond itself and was plagued by those who were in essence using it to promote their own agendas. This concept of authenticity will be dealt with in more depth in the next chapter alongside the notion of Straight Edge and punk as a form of salvation.

³⁷⁰ Haenfler. Straight Edge. p.87.

Chapter 6 “Beliefs and Obsessions”

“At the core of my heart this is something more than ink. Something more than ink. On a page, on the back of my hand. Something written in stone, words we wrote in stone.”³⁷¹

When one thinks of or is confronted with the term ‘punk’ a specific image is often brought to the fore of the mind. Typically this is an image borne from the visual elements of punk. An individual with colourful, gravity defying hair, numerous tattoos and piercings adorning the body and face and wearing clothes that consist of layers of ripped remnants or band t shirts and offensive slogans and patches. One may even be able to go further and imagine the facial expression and gestures of such a conjured individual. A contorted face of anger and defiance, shouting and gesticulating in an aggressive and forceful manner, similar perhaps to the image below.



Fig 29 punk protestor during the Poll Tax protest of 1999. Image from London Evening Standard, 17th March 2009.

However, there is an added dimension that we may perhaps only be aware of subconsciously. That is, that typically the standard impression or conjured visual image of a punk is of a young person in their teens to early 20’s. Punk is predominantly considered to be a youth

³⁷¹ ‘Something More Than Ink’, Have Heart, The Things We Carry, 2006, Bridge Nine Records.

³⁷² <http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/standard/article-23648143-anarchists-plan-city-demo-for-g20-leaders-arrival-in-london.do> Last accessed September 2010

movement, with the unstated implication being that it is something people grow out of as they age and find a place in the world. This dominant view requires challenging, not just in punk but in a number of other subcultures, such as Goth or role-playing gamers. While it remains uncontested, both within mainstream society and within academia,³⁷³ barriers exist towards gaining a deeper insight into the multi-layered fluidity of identity construction in adulthood.

It is certainly arguable that a number of individuals who join or adhere to a particular subculture in their youth do extricate themselves as they age. Typically this is due to the loss of the fervour of youth and by the necessity to gain employment, earn money, provide for a family and so on. Others no longer consider punk as a strong influence on their identity but still enjoy some of the music. However, for a significant number of adherents self-extraction would be analogous to a death of the self. They remain so entwined and, in a real sense, reliant upon the subculture for their sense of identity and their way of life, that removal is almost unthinkable. It is in many ways the filter through which they view, understand and live in the world. Throughout this chapter I will be arguing and demonstrating that this is precisely because this subculture is the means, in some cases the sole means, by which these individuals can develop and locate their authentic selves. Their concession to adulthood is subsequently seen through a marked reduction in recidivism,³⁷⁴ through direct action,³⁷⁵ as well as through a gradual moderation of the visual signifiers of punk.

Wearing the Mohawk, the spikes, the chains, etc. is thus superseded by core ideologies that form the basis of punk, as discussed in detail in Chapters 2 and 3. This replacement was noted by a number of interviewees and informants, typically describing the outward signifiers as almost facile while concurrently reminiscing on the importance those signs held for them in their youth. In trying

³⁷³ For example, the very title of Dan Laughey's book makes this presumption: *Music and Youth Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006). The text makes no attempt to acknowledge or engage with how those involved with music in a more than passing consumption continue to do so beyond 'youth', such as he defines it. Instead it is presumed that adults no longer have a role within a music-based subculture but instead fulfil a role of resistance to the emerging music of their offspring.

³⁷⁴ Typically minor criminal offences, such as graffiti or squatting.

³⁷⁵ For example, anti-establishment protest rally. Although the support for the causes would remain, they would typically be supported through small scale individual action such as refusing to buy products tested on animals rather than partaking in hunt sabotages.

to express the significance of the ideologies, adherents would typically use terms analogous with those found in the opening quote of this chapter. Furthermore, they would typically struggle, or claim to struggle, to fully explain the importance or find a phrase that they felt best summed up their experience. Instead they relied upon the argot of the subculture, as this interview excerpt from a 28 year old Straight Edge tattooist in Durham demonstrates.

Yeah basically, ya know, it's not a fashion, you've either gotta make the commitment or you're not true, basically.³⁷⁶

In Chapter One I remarked that interviewees from the US would linguistically demonstrate a significantly higher engagement with religious ideas and expressions than those interviewees from the UK. This was due to the relationship with religion and spirituality of the two countries. Karl makes no use of religious terminology. However underlying his phrase “gotta make the commitment or you're not true” is the idea of discipline, obedience, fidelity and authenticity.

Language can be considered as a paradigm of ideology but it is also the means by which we organise our world, all that we are exposed to in daily life, our social reality. Language can also function as a prohibiting factor in the full expression of our own ideas, as we saw in the interview excerpt above. Therefore we can conclude that due to the difficulties inherent in language interviewees and informants will inevitably rely upon what they are comfortable, safe and familiar with, be that religious in content or specific to the subculture.

Human beings do not live alone in the objective world, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society.³⁷⁷

The reason for raising this issue of language of expression and articulation is twofold. First as we move into exploring the core ideologies of punk, hardcore and in particular Straight Edge that grow in significance as the adherent ages, it is important that we examine the language that is used

³⁷⁶ Karl interview with researcher, 7.05.10 Durham.

³⁷⁷ Whorf B. 1940[1956], p. 217 -- quoted in Broom L. & Selznick P. *Sociology*. (London: Harper Row, 1969), p.58.

by insiders to explain this. We will note that at times everyday speech is insufficient as a means of expression and so in a very organic way visual imagery was utilised by these individuals. The images borne from the minds of the interviewees are placed alongside images I gathered in both the US and the UK during my field work periods and in my dual role of both an insider and a participant observer.

Secondly, it is to bring to the fore once again an issue I raised in Chapter One regarding the notion of a voice. Due to their reliance on argot and linguistic difficulties expressing concepts and ideologies, the voice of the interviewees and informants can often seem to intrude upon the narrative of this chapter, in an abrupt, often jarring, shift in language from the academic to the vernacular, which at times includes profanity. It is worth bearing in mind these voices are not an intrusion or disruption but in fact the very reason for the academic discourse in the first place, and so they bleed through one another.

The core ideologies, then, being explored within this chapter are those of authenticity and salvation. Each of these will be examined separately within their own subsection, but should not be considered as unconnected or detached. Each has its own rich linguistic history and theological connotations and usages. Despite being more theoretical than previous chapters, it will still largely rely upon and utilise quotes from interviewees and informants, visual prompts taken by myself and the visual images provided by some of those who took part in interviews.

Authenticity

If drinking's what it takes to be accepted, I'd rather stay aware and be rejected. I know what it takes to keep my head on straight. Putting shit in my body and mind is not the way. I don't need the drugs, I don't need a crutch.³⁷⁸

The Straight Edge band Uniform Choice are renowned for their vocal stance on drugs and alcohol and their advocacy of clear-mindedness, as is evident in the lyrics above. Straight Edge

³⁷⁸ 'No Thanks', Uniform Choice. Straight and Alert, 1995, Lost & Found Records.

ideology promotes the necessity of a clear mind in order to make informed choices, to take responsibility for one's own actions, to refuse to accept the social excuse of non-responsibility due to impaired facilities, and to make a positive change in the world.

Typically, within the subculture, this ideology is expressed through the terms 'integrity' or 'being true'. These expressions are not only located within band lyrics but also occur in the discourse of adherents with regards to bands and individuals performing. For example, when the band Against Me signed to Sire Records in 2006 there was a huge outcry of 'sell out'.³⁷⁹ This indignation was due to the many years Against Me had spent being publicly outspoken of their hatred and mistrust of major labels, often using Warner Bros, who owned Sire Records, as a target, having built their following whilst signed to small independent punk labels. The anger some fans felt was due to the hypocrisy they perceived Against Me practising, believing, as they did, that the band had not maintained their integrity.

This notion of integrity, or as we shall see shortly, authenticity, is not reserved for bands alone; it is applied to anyone who is involved within the scene in any capacity. The band Bleeding Through made details of their problems with independent label TrustKill public on June 8th 2008³⁸⁰. The band claimed that money owed to them had not been paid for their recording costs, forcing the band to borrow the money. In describing the situation, Bleeding Through repeatedly used terms such as 'lack of integrity' and 'not being true to their word' in describing the situation.

Punk, in all its forms, was intended to be the voice of the common person, the message of the ignored and dispossessed, and to stand against the corporate stranglehold on rock music, an alternative to the mainstream accepted norms and practices. Therefore, the above instances and others similar to them spark fear and outrage. Everyone is starkly reminded of the great potential for

³⁷⁹ <http://www.punknews.org/article/14925>; <http://www.absolutepunk.net/tags/sire-records> last accessed September 2010.

³⁸⁰ <http://www.punknews.org/article/29192>;
<http://www.metalunderground.com/news/details.cfm?newsid=37127>;
www.bleedingthrough.com. All last accessed September 2010.

a corporate takeover of punk should a vigil not be maintained and standards insisted upon. It also serves as a warning of the danger that lurks within, sometimes as a wolf (or perhaps better, a sheep) in punk clothing.

The significance of maintaining a vigil, as it were, lies in the understanding of the concern for integrity as a search or desire for and the protection of their notion of authenticity. Many of those who were involved, wittingly or otherwise, with the emergence of punk in the late 70s were striving for an authenticity of sound as opposed to the pomp and overindulgence that marked rock music of the era. Furthermore they were attempting to create a musical sound and a message that authentically reflected the circumstances they found themselves living in. I am positing the argument that a desire for authenticity in music and message eventually led to a search for authenticity of the self.

To enable this search for an authenticity of the self, the very notion of authenticity itself became embedded within the core of the subculture. Primarily this occurred when authenticity became the barometer by which judgements can be made and protection afforded. In a Durkheimian sense, authenticity is the means by which subculture protects itself for those whom are judged inauthentic can be excised or avoided. Durkheim focuses on society as a larger conception than that of a specific subculture, but taking the view that many subcultures are themselves microcosms of society we can apply a significant number of his principles to Straight Edge. Thus elements of his treatment of the genesis of the notion of the totemic principle have a significant bearing on this discussion:

Generally, a collective feeling can become self-conscious only by being anchored in a material object. But by that very fact it participates in the nature of that object, and vice versa. Thus social necessities have fused together notions that at first seemed distinct, and social life has facilitated this fusion by the great mental effervescence it stimulates.³⁸¹

³⁸¹ Durkheim. *The Elementary Forms*. 2001, p.180.

To relate this more specifically to the world of Straight Edge, punk exists as both an intangible concept -- a polemic against perceived societal ills and against an artistic expression (rock) that has to all intents and purposes lost its way – and concurrently as a material reality in the music, fashion, fanzines, flyers, buttons, etc. Furthermore, apparently incongruous notions such as integrity and rebellion become intertwined in lyrics, collective discourse and the physical dancing that accompanies the music. For example, the DC Straight Edge band Good Clean Fun scream the lyrics to their song ‘What corporate rock can’t say’ over the noise of a writhing audience in a circle pit and receive a call-back response during the chorus. The lyrics are:

When you’re DIY you don’t have to apologise, you can cut the ties. When you’re DIY there’s no need for compromise, you can be yourself. They can’t take it away! Punk will scream what corporate rock can’t say! ... When money’s involved morals are pliable. You can’t be punk and commercially viable. No message survives, once it becomes buy-able. If you want to make a difference keep it DIYable.³⁸²

This experience contains “totemic” elements -- the physical movement, the collective motion that can bring about what Durkheim refers to as the collective effervescence, as well as the band and their presence on stage and in the audience, the t-shirts, tattoos and so on -- at the same time the core principles of punk are being reinforced and agreed upon. They are given verbal consent through repetition and so become embedded in the individual as what it means to be punk. The ethics, the ideology become as integral as the physical dimension, and once the individual no longer feels of an age where they want to / or are able to participate in the physical dimension to the same extent, then the concepts remain as the core of punk and become the sole barometer by which all other dimensions are judged. This is precisely what has happened with the notion of authenticity: the totemic elements are in essence reduced to their core belief, which is articulated through the notion of authenticity.

We would be committing an egregious error to assume a universal definition or understanding of authenticity within the different subsets of punk that exist, let alone within society

³⁸² ‘What Corporate Rock Can’t Say’ Good Clean Fun, ‘Between Christian Rock and a Hard Place’, 2006, Reflections.

and academia. Therefore we must trace the origin of the word, examine its use and connotation within modern Western society, consider its meaning and importance within Straight Edge, and then explore how the Straight Edge notion of authenticity influences their engagement with religion and their spiritual practices. Therefore the remainder of this section of this chapter will be subdivided as follows:

- Working definition of authenticity
- Authenticity and Straight Edge
- Straight Edge and authentic spirituality

Working definition of authenticity

The word “authentic” is Greek in origin and was used to refer to an ‘original’ or an ‘original authority’ as in a master craftsman. A mis-spelling in the 15th century of the Latin *auctor*, meaning authority, was assimilated with the original Greek and the meaning of authentic developed into a combination of original and authoritative.³⁸³ This latter combined meaning is often the assumed definition of the word, both within academia and popular culture.

However, as the philosopher Charles Guignon demonstrates, authenticity has taken more than simply a linguistic journey in terms of how it is used today, particularly within the mainstream media. In his 2004 book, *On Being Authentic* Guignon explores the historical, ideological and theological movements that lead authenticity away from meaning a connection with a larger cosmic picture and into the realm of an inward search for a ‘true self’.³⁸⁴

The notion of the ‘self’ is where our interest in authenticity lies for the purposes of this thesis. As we explore what we mean by authenticity and create a working definition, we will also to some extent unpack this vague term of self. Both Taylor and Guignon demonstrate that the concern

³⁸³ All etymology information provided by OED online via University of Stirling access.

³⁸⁴ This treatment of authenticity and a concept of the self is also explored by Charles Taylor in a number of his writings, most notably *Sources of the Self* [1989], *The Ethics of Authenticity* [1991] and *The Secular Age* [2007].

and interest in authenticity that prevails today did not, to a large extent, exist in pre-modern societies, or certainly not in the same understanding of the term.

Pre-modern societies focused on concepts such as honour, and “people as a rule found their identity through coming to understand their place within the context of society and the wider cosmic order. Finding one’s place in such a context provided the individual with a sense of what is worth pursuing in life, and it gave people a basis for seeing what they ought to do and assessing how they were doing.”³⁸⁵ This explains the concern with honour as it linked with success in fulfilment of one’s social and cosmic place or role.

Modern societies are characterised by the replacement of honour with dignity, to borrow Guignon’s phrase.³⁸⁶ The concern is no longer solely with the outward, how one fits within a wider cosmic order, but instead in finding dignity in being autonomous and self-directed. In other words, one looks inward to discover the ‘true self’ and then allows oneself the freedom to be that individual regardless of the thoughts and responses of others.³⁸⁷

The key words to note are those of outward and inward. This turn is analogous with the departures or shifts that were discussed in the Introduction to this thesis. In *Sources of the Self*, Taylor makes reference to what he terms ‘frameworks’. These are means by which we make our moral judgements. “To articulate a framework is to explicate what makes sense of our moral responses...To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand.”³⁸⁸

What both Taylor and Guignon demonstrate is that during the latter half of the 18th century, the intellectual movement known as the Enlightenment sought to establish an authoritative ethics, aesthetics and fount of knowledge that was based on the principles of rationality. The term enlightenment is derived from the belief that this rationality was enlightened beyond the magical or

³⁸⁵ Guignon Charles. *On Being Authentic*. (Oxon: Routledge, 2004), p.149.

³⁸⁶ Guignon. *On Being Authentic*. p.150.

³⁸⁷ As Guignon demonstrates on numerous occasions, this cognitive and lifestyle approach is exemplified and utilised to make a lot of money by the vast self help culture that exists within modern Western society.

³⁸⁸ Taylor. *Sources of the Self*. p.26 & 27.

spiritual world created by, among other things, religion. Instead it was based on the emerging science and technology which promised answers and ideas based on empirical evidence, reason and logic.

In essence, people were becoming more concerned with the physical, tangible world in which they lived and had their place rather than a vast cosmos that could only truly be grasped within the imagination. Human beings were replacing the centre position that had once been the claim of the divine. Finally, the institutions of the Church were starting to be viewed as divisive, especially following the Reformation, and increasingly to be a symbol of a prior age when people were inherently superstitious and thus relied on religion and its institutions in a way they no longer needed to, for example to provide codes of acceptable behaviour, explanations for aspects of life.

An important linguistic and conceptual consequence of this inward turn was that individuals began to articulate a notion of searching for an authentic self. Eventually the sense of looking inward for moral sources and authority became grounded, so to speak; it did not lead to looking above for the divine or the transcendent but remained immanent within. A basic assumption thus arose, as Guignon expresses: “lying within each individual, there is a deep, ‘true self’ – the ‘real me’ – in distinction from all that is not really me”.³⁸⁹ This notion of a true self lying deep within us relies on a much stronger sense of the internal or inward turn than that which was expressed by philosophers such as Socrates, Plato and Augustine. Theirs was an inwardness that relied upon a hierarchal³⁹⁰ ordering of the universe and a success and contentment borne from knowing one’s place and purpose within that order.

Taylor suggests that with this inward turn makes the self the centre surrounded by a world of objects that this self can then manipulate and use to improve or promote its life. Taylor reminds us: “The search for identity can be seen as the search for what I essentially am. But this can no

³⁸⁹ Guignon. *On Being Authentic*. p.6.

³⁹⁰ Cosmological in the writings of Socrates and Plato and theological in the work of Augustine.

longer be sufficiently defined in terms of some universal description of human agency as such, as soul, reason or will. There still remains a question about me, and that is why I think of myself as a self. This word now circumscribes an area of questioning. It designates the kind of being of which this question of identity can be asked."³⁹¹ Taylor argues that these attempts to understand the self and the insistence of a true or authentic self lying within are the beginnings of the recognisable modern self within today's Western societies.³⁹²

Furthermore, Taylor demonstrates that the modern individualism that has grown out of this development of the self has three facets:

Self-responsible independence, on the one hand, and that of recognized particularity, on the other. A third facet must also be mentioned. We might describe this as the individualism of personal commitment...This three-sided individualism is central to the modern identity. It has helped to fix that sense of self which gives off the illusion of being anchored in our very being, perennial and independent of interpretation.³⁹³

Since the 18th century, modern individualism has continued unabated to search for this almost elusive authentic self, cognisant of the reality that should this self be located and engaged with it will require a moral framework in which to be placed. In other words, it cannot remain abstract, but must become grounded within the day to day reality of action and reaction. Failure to do so would prevent the authentic nature of this self from coming to fruition. This framework will enable the self to locate where it stands in relation to morality and ethical situations and decisions, a moral space that gives meaning and direction to life.

So the question we must ask now is how to draw together the foregoing conceptions of an inward turn and a privatised sense of self in order to arrive at a working definition of authenticity? Guignon argues, and I agree, that Taylor's notion of an authentic self is very much embedded within the narrativist tradition, that is, within the life story that we articulate for ourselves.

³⁹¹ Taylor. Sources of the Self. p.184.

³⁹² Taylor. Sources of the Self. p.185.

³⁹³ Taylor. Sources of the Self. p.185.

Taylor emphasizes the embedded nature of life stories. In order to be a person or agent in the full sense of those words, we must be able to respond to questions about where we stand and who we are in saying and doing the things we do. This ability to give an answer, to be *answerable* or *responsible* in our interchanges with others, is crucial to having an identity...It follows that the horizon of moral questions that defines one's identity must be understood as an irreducibly *public* space of questions about where *we* stand on the issues.³⁹⁴

The narrativist tradition does assume a deep truth that cannot be contested because it lies within the self and therefore privileged access is limited to the individual. It can be shared with others in a public space linguistically, and through other means such as the totemic elements of t-shirts and tattoos we saw above, but it remains within. This has the advantage of removing pre-given criteria or socially constructed barriers for self-creation and expression, something Nietzsche greatly desired and promoted. In reference to the Generation X cohort that have repeatedly been examined within this thesis, the significance of the removal of obstructions to self-creation and expression cannot be over-emphasised.

Flory and Miller argue that "What is distinctive for Generation Xers is that subjective knowing is valued above propositional truth. The quest for higher forms of knowing is not abandoned entirely, but such truths are better embodied in stories and myths than in dogma and doctrine."³⁹⁵ As was detailed in Chapter Three, for many of Generation X, dogma and doctrine represent authority, in particular traditional forms of authority and institutional authority. For this cohort, authority of this ilk is treated with suspicion because it is believed to contain a predetermined set of ideas and attitudes about what the self should be and how that self should function in society. Rather, Generation X are more concerned with that which feels authentically real or true as determined through their own lived experiences and how they relay these experiences in a narrative to others as opposed to deference to an external authority.

³⁹⁴ Guignon. On Being Authentic. p.136.

³⁹⁵ Flory & Miller (eds) Generation X Religion. p.9.

While acknowledging that the narrative dimension and the creation of a moral framework using narrative means are significant factors in understanding authenticity as it is found in modern Western society, we must also address a flaw within this tradition that prevents us using it as the working definition of authenticity. To put it succinctly, the narrativist framework necessarily promotes the individual over the collective, and hence Taylor's focus on a developing individualism. It can also lead to the charge that those seeking authenticity are simply self-centred or even narcissistic, a barb often directed at Generation X by their predecessors and detractors.

The promotion of the individual over the collective is an imperative issue when we are looking at authenticity in the context of Straight Edge. This is a subculture that, in an admittedly paradoxical manner, promotes the individual through adherence and loyalty to the community. It is a community of individuals, but the individuals do not outweigh the community. Taylor's narrativist framework for authenticity is a centring on the self to the extent that it can potentially narrow one's ability to see beyond into the wider world. The consequence of Taylor's portrayal is that the pursuit of one's own meaning and value takes precedent regardless of the needs and viewpoints of others.³⁹⁶

To be clear, stating that Taylor's narrativist framework is centring on the self is not to deny that there is a social element within it. As Guignon reminds us, "It is only through our social interactions that we become selves whose inner episodes are given enough steadiness and cohesiveness so that our relations to others can be built on co-operation and trust."³⁹⁷ Of course being aligned with Communitarianism as Taylor is, he does not advocate for an atomisation of the individual from society.

However the distinction between social and communal must be made. The social involves interaction, telling your narrative to one another, and living out what you narrate within social

³⁹⁶ At its most extreme this can result in only viewing objects or even people as a means to achieving one's own end, what Taylor refers to as a "cost benefit analysis" of the world.

³⁹⁷ Guignon. *On Being Authentic*. p.155.

practices. Of course in so doing one must either accept that to varying degrees the social practices we are involved with impinge upon individual freedoms as selves in order to enable us to live successfully as a collective; or we must choose to reject, if one can, those intrusions upon individual freedom and view the social as simply providing the means by which we develop our selves. The communal involves those social elements but in addition claims shared beliefs and values common to all who remain within the collective and thereby removes or at least severely hampers the impingement of freedom.

The perhaps near obsession with all permutations of community and social action found within Straight Edge are indicative of the Generation X approach to life and search for meaning, as was demonstrated in detail in Chapter Three. Furthermore, common values, social commitment and communal structure are fundamentally important to those who claim allegiance to punk, hardcore and Straight Edge lifestyles, as the following excerpt from an interview with a mid-30's male in the UK demonstrates:

I dunno, it's like, I guess, you know like shared beliefs, well not beliefs but stuff we all agree on. I'm not saying this right. Ok it's like we have these sorta fundamental ideals that we all start with and even though we differ in like small ways it doesn't matter as much cause we have this base in common that we all come back to...Not just the three rules we all follow, though yeah I guess they are a part of it, well yeah they are but like in other things as well, like I dunno, like, [pauses] oh like with the idea of support you know when I heard you wanted to do this degree thing, what's it called, PhD yeah on us, I was like well I don't know about that, it's not really what we do is it, but then when I talked about it with the others I, we, em realised like at the end of the day what we all agree on is support for each other so if this was something you wanted to do and it was for the right reasons and wasn't going to hurt people then we should support it. You know? Or like with politics, like we don't necessarily all vote for the same parties but we all agree that we should vote, we should have a say in the country and how its run otherwise shut the hell up, you don't get an opinion. So yeah like common values that's one of the most important parts of Straight Edge for me.³⁹⁸

In comparison, conversations within the US often demonstrated a similar concern for social commitment and communal structure but its discourse steps out from the parochial view found in

³⁹⁸ Frank, interview with researcher, 15.05.10 Manchester.

the UK and begins to broaden into nationalist language. Partially this is because of Straight Edge's extended existence within the US and the strong ties and communication links the local scenes and individuals have built up with each other over time, which is only in its infant phase in the UK. In addition, there is a greater degree of rootlessness to be found in the US, with a significantly higher percentage of people moving around living spaces within different states, which results in identity being more firmly rooted in being American rather than from the Bay Area or Portland, for example. I also found within a lot of my conversations a strong undercurrent of America trying to find its own national identity as a cohesive and unifying factor following the devastating attack of 9/11, and I submit that this is another element contributing to the linguistic differences in discussing communal values and action.

In on-stage discussion about health care in the US one singer stated "there will be no change or improvement unless it happens here, with us at the grass roots level. We are the future of this country. We are our own community."³⁹⁹ This type of discourse is common both in public⁴⁰⁰, online and in band lyrics, and was discussed in detail in the previous chapter. An emphasis on the promotion of individualism, while a significant part of authenticity as it is understood and utilised within modern Western societies, neglects the importance of communal values and structures that are fundamental to the cohort being examined within this thesis. Therefore authenticity cannot be defined solely using Taylor's notion of self-fulfilment based on individualism within a narrative framework. We must look for a definition that combines the importance of individualism with a communal spirit in order to truly reach an accurate working definition of an authentic self and authenticity for Straight Edge adherents.

³⁹⁹ 16.10.09 Gilman Street.

⁴⁰⁰ Both in communal events within punk and hardcore scenes and also within wider society during direct social action such as protest marches.

It is within the work of Guignon, who charts the rise and changing permutations of the term authenticity, that we find a stronger basis for a definition relevant to Straight Edge. Guignon concludes:

To be fully authentic is to recognize the need to be constantly vigilant in one's society, to be engaged in political action aimed at preserving and reinforcing a way of life that allows for such worthy personal life projects as that of authenticity. If this is the case, however, then the authentic individual cannot be thought of as someone who is simply reflective and candid in acting in the world. Such a person must also be attentive to what is going on in the political arena and politically active at all levels of society. It is through this sort of attentiveness and activism that the authentic person takes a stand not just on his or her own life, but on the community's project of achieving a good society.⁴⁰¹

Guignon is concerned with demonstrating the potential danger contained within the search for authenticity, which is that it can become one-sided or self-involved to the extent that one removes themselves from partaking in the community project of building and maintaining a good society. However, there is another danger implicit within Guignon's definition of an authentic self that must also be addressed.

The danger, as such, can be expressed as an over-concern for the political in all senses of the word. By that I mean that one can become so focused on being authentic in terms of the self's role within the community's project that no attempt is made to address the existential elements of authenticity. It is paramount that the existential elements are not ignored or bypassed, as they are often the impetus for the search for authenticity within the individual.

To address these existential elements of authenticity I want to turn briefly to the work of German philosopher Martin Heidegger, before reaching a final working definition of authenticity.⁴⁰²

⁴⁰¹ Guignon. *On Being Authentic*. p.162.

⁴⁰² Philosophically speaking, one should examine the writings and ideas of Heidegger before turning to those of Taylor. There are two reasons for this. First, chronologically, Taylor draws heavily on Heidegger's thinking to formulate his own hypothesis, which Taylor himself acknowledges. Second Taylor is more the commentator while Heidegger is more the original thinker, even though both have contributed to modern Western thinking in their way. Despite these two reasons, I have chosen to engage with the work of Taylor in the first instance and then move into Heidegger for a very specific reason. Although there is a concern for existential elements of authenticity amongst individuals searching for the authentic self, all too often those concerns remain unaddressed and even unacknowledged. Rather, it is commonly towards the authentic individual in daily life and activities on which many people quickly focus their attention. Therefore I choose to

Heidegger argues that the search for authenticity cannot be conducted outside of the event of being. The German word for 'being', *Sein*, is combined by Heidegger with the word *Da*, which means 'there'. Together they form *Dasein* which means 'existence' or more literally 'to be there'. Existence, for Heidegger, is essentially being there or, to put it in other terms, understanding and accepting the temporality in which we exist. To successfully live an authentic life one must grasp the importance of what has passed, accept the finitude of what is to come, and so embrace the present. Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo has suggested that, following Hegel, Heidegger's *Dasein* contains an element of being prepared to struggle to fully live an authentic life.⁴⁰³

Descartes' notion of the human being as a thinking being was for Heidegger somewhat problematic, although like most he did view it as the departure point for modern Western philosophy. It is problematic because it negates or ignores not only our ability but our predilection towards constant self-interpretation constrained by our sense of morality which is often located within the community.

Historiographically, the intention of the existential analytic can be clarified by considering Descartes, to whom one attributes the discovery of the *cogito sum* as the point of departure for all modern philosophical questioning. He investigates the *cogitare* of the *ego* – within certain limits. But the *sum* he leaves completely undiscussed, even though it is just as primordial as the *cogito*. Our analytic raises the ontological question of the being of the *sum*. Only when the *sum* is defined does the manner of the *cogitations* become comprehensible.⁴⁰⁴

Heidegger was concerned with demonstrating that existence, or *Dasein*, is actually revealed in our 'everydayness', to borrow Heidegger's phrase, thereby making it for our purposes authentic, and intrinsic to a self-narrative. Concerned with how the term 'being' had been misused within philosophy, Heidegger was focused on forcing us to recapture what it should be. In so doing, he

address the broader concerns of authenticity before turning to the existential. Consequentially I have utilised Taylor first as he also deals extensively with the authentic self within the context of mundane daily existence.

⁴⁰³ Gianni Vattimo, 'The End of Reality', Gifford Lectures, 7 – 10th June 2010, University of Glasgow.

⁴⁰⁴ Heidegger. *Being and Time*. p.43.

provides an existential understanding of authenticity as well as being, as the quote directly above suggests.

In essence, Heidegger's concern is to allow being to come out into its proper 'ownness' through an understanding and acceptance of the temporality of existence as a whole. In other words, we as a being did not exist prior to our creation and more importantly we were not concerned with our being or existence until then. Other than learning from the past, what came before us does not concern us. Our lack of existence prior to our birth or conception is not something we care about in a mental or cognitive sense. According to Heidegger, we should accept that we are being for a specific period of time, which remains unknown to us until the moment of death. One could therefore argue that living an authentic life with this existential understanding means that we embed ourselves in the here and now that exists alongside death or non-being.

However that embedding can equally be problematic. In *Being and Time*, Sections 252 – 260, Heidegger rightly acknowledges the unknowingness of death. But an embedding in the present can lead to the outright denial of the reality and existence of death in order to prevent disruption in the wider society. "Indeed the dying of others is seen often as a social inconvenience, if not downright tactlessness, from which publicness should be spared."⁴⁰⁵ Yet in publically considering death, Heidegger argues we acknowledge that it cannot be bypassed, that it is reality, a part of everyday existence and experience. Within the certitude of death there is indefiniteness, and we must exist in the space in-between.

In the parlance of Taylor's narrative framework then, living an existential authentic life means that our life story, our stand or being as it were, should reflect the temporality of the self. We should not shirk from acknowledging the presence of death or non-being within our narrative, nor should we allow it to dominate and render us paralysed by fear or the paradox. In other words the existential cannot remain separate from the mundane daily lives and experiences we encounter.

⁴⁰⁵ Heidegger. *Being and Time*. p.235

Both must be allowed to interact and solidify one another. In so doing we move closer to becoming more embedded and actualised within various group projects for a good society and within the actions one takes politically.

There is one final aspect that requires acknowledgment before we move on to the next subsection, which is a brief examination of the concerns that exist for using Heidegger's notion of being. For this I am turning to the work of Theodor Adorno, specifically his 1964 book "The Jargon of Authenticity".

In this text Adorno takes to task the notion of authenticity within both Heidegger and his great influence, Nietzsche. Broadly speaking, Adorno is concerned that authenticity has become a trigger word that doesn't actually contain the purity that Heidegger thinks it does and indeed argues it does. There is an accusation that Heidegger is in a sense hiding behind his own dense language and furthermore using language to disguise the true reality of the vacuous nature of a term such as authenticity.

Heidegger is by no means incomprehensible, as one might gather from the marginalia of the positivists, but he lays around himself the taboo that any understanding of him would simultaneously be falsification. The impossibility of saving what this thinking wants to save is cleverly turned into its own life element.⁴⁰⁶

Adorno's concern not only lies in the linguistics of the terminology but also in the potential, almost demanded for, solipsism that an existential being can induce, even so far as prioritising one's own death over any other.⁴⁰⁷ This potential threat renders the terms authenticity, authentic life and being open to potential abuse and misuse in areas such as 'pop psychology', as identified by Guignon, or within philosophy itself.

In terms of a market-driven economy the search for an authentic life is big business: there is a plethora of self help books, cds and DVDs that one can purchase, all promising to help us live an

⁴⁰⁶ Adorno Theodore. *The Jargon of Authenticity*. (London: Routledge, 2009) p.76.

⁴⁰⁷ Adorno. *The Jargon of Authenticity*. p.123.

authentic life and find and accept “the real you”. Numerous television shows, particularly in the US, are dedicated and thrive on this very theme, such as Oprah and her team of experts, like Dr Phil, who make many thousands of dollars for their producers and companies. However it is important to note that this popular culture response to authenticity often neglects or on occasion negates the being-towards-death contained within the temporality of Heidegger’s *Dasein*. They try to remove the sting of death and do not acknowledge that existence is implicated in non-being.

Consequently, despite acknowledging that Adorno is indeed correct to be concerned about the consequences of utilising terms such as “being” and indeed ‘non-being’ within philosophy, they do still have a much needed place within a working definition of authenticity because they can provide an impetus for action both politically and within the community at large.

To conclude, then, the working definition of authenticity as it appears and is utilised within modern Western societies and for the purposes of this thesis is as follows. *An existential authentic life means that our life story, our narrativised stand as it were, should reflect the temporality of the self. We embrace our position of in-between – that is, we exist in between non-existences both prior to and subsequent to our short time in existence. The human being exists in the physical, literal and tangible world with an awareness that the world, as such, is much larger than their narrative and experiences. Consequently our options are limited; we cannot experience everything and our selection of experiences is part of what makes us unique individuals. Therefore to live an authentic existential life we must work towards our own potential whilst refuting the prejudices and standards or restrictions within society, simultaneously becoming more embedded and actualised within chosen communities and their projects, towards active political engagement, for the purposes of a better society .*

Authenticity and Straight Edge

I'm still here, I'm still proud and I still know what it takes to be true. For myself. For my friends. For my family. Straight fucking Edge. Forever.⁴⁰⁸

Authenticity as both a term of individual identity and broader ideological concept seeps or bleeds through Straight Edge in numerous ways. It exists in the band lyrics, such as those above which utilise the notion of remaining true. We also find it in the daily discourse of adherents who will refer to themselves and others as maintaining or losing integrity.

Staying true and maintaining integrity are both more than glib sayings or even sloganeering; rather they are a means of expressing the concept of authenticity at the core of the subculture. Authenticity is a crucial idea for Straight Edge, but it remains a muted or under-articulated term, because of its appropriation, or mis-appropriation, by popular culture.⁴⁰⁹ Consequently, the term authentic, while remaining of paramount importance within Straight Edge, is not a term that is fully worked out in any historical and philosophical sense.

For me, a big part of being Straight Edge is that its real, it's true, it's not fake like so much other shitty music and even 'lifestyles' [*hooks two fingers to emphasise quotation marks*] that get churned out at kids and they don't have a clue so they buy into it but it ain't real, that make sense? Like its just made for money not because it's who they really are, It's just an identity they can buy from the selves till the next one comes along. Ok that sounds harsh, but think about it, you don't see them following it through. I guess at the back of it there ain't nothing to help you change your behaviour or change you for the, [*sighs, makes noises*] I dunno how to say this. No substance I guess, nothing at the core of it all it's just for show but you go to punk, Straight Edge and the core is strong, it's life-changing, like the three rules, the community, everything about it. It gives you a way to live that's real.⁴¹⁰

The above interview quote from a 39 year old male from Manchester, UK, articulates a fundamental point that must not be overlooked as we examine authenticity within Straight Edge. That is, for many of these adherents authenticity is intrinsically linked to the questions of morality

⁴⁰⁸ 'Forever', Throwdown, Haymaker, 2003 Indecision Records.

⁴⁰⁹ For example, in 2004 and 2005 the billboard adverts for Wrangler Jeans carried the tag line 'born authentic'.

⁴¹⁰ E.D. interview with researcher, 01.03.10 Manchester.

and behaviour. Despite the anathema of the term 'moral'⁴¹¹ for many within punk, Straight Edge has at its core a moral code of behaviour that is self-imposed and adhered to in order to better improve the individual's life and their functionality within the Straight Edge community.

The moral core is not simply the three rules that Straight Edge adherents follow: no consumption of alcohol, no partaking of drugs, including tobacco, and not viewing sex as a conquest.⁴¹² Rather it is a Durkheimian combination of the three rules of Straight Edge with qualities that promote and sustain the community such as loyalty, support and family. We must certainly acknowledge that within Straight Edge the question of morality has been sublimated under the auspices of authenticity. That is, the self becomes a moral compass through which an authentic self can be located while at the same time adhering to a shared consensus around which the morality provides cohesion for this group beyond all other punk groups.

I began this subsection with some Throwdown lyrics which reveal some pertinent aspects of authenticity as it is understood within Straight Edge. First, being 'true' or authentic starts with oneself, with the inner self, and then ripples out into the collective. This is analogous with the inner journey for the authentic self that was discussed in the previous subsection. The inner journey mentioned here is the search for meaning and answers within oneself rather than deferring solely to external authority. Second, friends are considered prior to family in the lyricist's reasoning, which is reflective of a general Generation X attitude. Finally, the statement ends with the word 'forever' denoting intent comparative with a wedding vow and implying an intention towards commitment regardless of the struggle involved. Therefore this subsection will examine each of these three areas under the following headings:

- Inner Journey
- Generation X

⁴¹¹ For many punks, the term "moral" is thought of as overtly religious and has connotations of constraint by an external authority.

⁴¹² Some Straight Edge adherents will refer to it in this manner, while others will utilise the most traditional and well known 'no casual sex'.

- Lifetime Commitment

Inner Journey

Searching for the answers that we know we'll never find. What's the one thing that could put my soul at ease? A question that we always ask ourselves.⁴¹³

In Chapter Two I briefly mentioned that a significant proportion of the individuals who choose to adhere to Straight Edge bear an accompanying burden of a family history of drug and / or alcohol addiction and in some cases the abuse that can result from such addiction. Consequently it is common upon hearing such details to find that those individuals are consciously looking at Straight Edge as a means to break that cycle of addiction and abuse. Typically this runs concurrent with a pre-existing interest and involvement with the music. As the following interview excerpt from a young woman in her early 30's demonstrates, making the move from fan of the music into a commitment to a lifestyle that could be perceived as alien to their own personal past experiences requires an inner search as well as strength.

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. Like most drug addicts, my mother lied, cheated and stole to support her habit. She put her addictions first, before me and my sister's health and safety. She lied to my face, stole the money I'd saved for college in order to pay for drugs and after I moved out at 16 encouraged my sister's drug use ... I knew that something needed to change and that I needed to be the one to change it ... Essentially, I had to become my own parent and I couldn't do that unless I dedicated myself to a clean and sober lifestyle.⁴¹⁴

To clarify, in stating that these individuals are taking an inner journey I am arguing that they are honestly surveying the life they are leading, the consequences of the lifestyles of those who surround them, and making a conscious decision to alter the path they are on. The concern is that they do not continue to become the same person, making the same decisions and mistakes as their

⁴¹³ 'Perception of Energy', Stretch Arm Strong, Engage, 2003, Golf.

⁴¹⁴ S.G. email interview with researcher 30.04.10.

relatives have. In other words they are seeking a morality and an ethical base that will enable them to live as an authentic, fully realised self.

However it is important to acknowledge that there is something of a 'fly in the ointment' with regards to an inner journey for an authentic self. In addition to Guignon's concern with the narrowing of vision⁴¹⁵ and with self-obsession, and to Adorno's concern with potential misuse of authenticity as a philosophical concern reduced to nothing more than a selling point, there is also a potential for creating the very reason for drug or alcohol addiction.

Taylor's 1991 book *The Ethics of Authenticity* was originally published in Canada under the title of the original radio broadcast of his Massey lectures, which was *The Malaise of Modernity*. Within this text he argues that authenticity is not only a solution to the problems of modernity but it is one of the causes of the malaise that has arisen within it. The concern with self authenticity has led to prevalence of the individual over the communal in the drive for self-realisation. "The dark side of individualism is a centring on the self, which both flattens and narrows our lives, makes them poorer in meaning, and less concerned with others or society."⁴¹⁶

Therefore we risk failure and disappointment with life if our search for the authentic self not only narrows our own life, but disconnects us from both a larger cosmic order⁴¹⁷ and from a community or society. Relatedly if one is then uncertain what authenticity actually is, if for example, one's only understanding is from the deliberately vague rhetoric of talk shows, then pessimism is unavoidable. Consequently a perceived failure in the search for the authentic self could be the very reason, perhaps subconsciously, why some individuals have turned to drug and /or alcohol for solace only to find it has led them to addiction.⁴¹⁸

⁴¹⁵ The inability/unwillingness to see one's life and choices within a wider order or cosmos.

⁴¹⁶ Taylor. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. p.4.

⁴¹⁷ If any such is available these days.

⁴¹⁸ This statement is not in any way intended to denigrate the suffering that some individuals have undergone as abuse victims, for example, from which they have sought solace or relief through addiction. Nor is it

Those individuals who commit to a Straight Edge lifestyle may be, for as long as they maintain edge, removing drugs and alcohol as a factor, but they cannot remove the risk of failure and disappointment that is an inherent part of the inner journey for the authentic self. The one thing that differs is that they are not abandoning the communal; instead they are embracing it and increasing their concern and action for others and for society. However we explain it, it is clear that a rhetoric of 'difference', of diversity (even 'multiculturalism') is central to the contemporary culture of authenticity...

Otherwise put, I can define my identity only against the background of things that matter. But to bracket out history, nature, society, the demands for solidarity, everything but what I find in myself, would be to eliminate all candidates for what matters. Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, of the call of God, or something else of this order matters crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial. Authenticity is not the enemy of demands that emanate from beyond the self; it supposes such demands.⁴¹⁹

Therefore although I am stating that adherents take on an inner journey in the search for authenticity, it quickly and ultimately leads them to the Straight Edge community which prides itself on its status of 'different individuals'. 'Different' is taken here both to represent a variety of individuals and to reflect their perceived status as outsiders in regards to both punk and the mainstream. In always reaching towards the community the potential to deflect or work around a narrowing of horizons is increased because it is never simply a lone individual -- there is always a communal value or project at the core.

Collective projects and communal values also give rise to another potential problem with authenticity based on individualism. This is the potential for a form of liberalism in which all ideologies, behaviours and beliefs are considered as equally worthy and equally weighty and

intended to disregard the current research into addiction being caused or precipitated through genetics. Instead it is merely raising one other possible cause.

⁴¹⁹ Taylor. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. p.37, 40-41.

therefore cannot be challenged. Taylor terms this as “facile relativism”,⁴²⁰ something that punk, hardcore and Straight Edge adherents are unwilling to accept and will fervently challenge. According to Taylor, facile relativism is:

Not just an epistemological position, a view about the limits of what reason can establish; it was also held as a moral position: one ought not to challenge another’s values. That is their concern, their life choice, and it ought to be respected. The relativism was partly grounded in a principle of mutual respect. In other words, the relativism was itself an offshoot of a form of individualism ...

This individualism involves centring on the self and a concomitant shutting out, or even unawareness, of the greater issues and concerns that transcend the self, be they religious, political, historical. As a consequence, life is narrowed or flattened.⁴²¹

Ignoring that which transcends the self, as primarily found within the community, can, as Taylor argues, narrow our life view or flatten it to such an extent that we are unable to understand our place in the world. Consequently we find ourselves potentially vulnerable to anomie or even nihilism of a kind. More commonly we find a narrowed perspective presenting itself in stringent forms of conformity disguised under the mask of individualism.

Straight Edge adherents are at risk of and do occasionally fall victim to such conformity, not just in terms of aesthetic presentation but also in attempts to constrict musical expression by decrying any band who experiments or deviates from the traditional hardcore framework. Furthermore, it can also be a problem amongst those who are of the more militant or hardline scenes who refuse to allow others, Straight Edge or not, a viewpoint or behaviour separate from their own, which can often lead to violent confrontation as evidenced in the Straight Edge gangs.⁴²²

⁴²⁰ Taylor. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. p.13.

⁴²¹ Taylor. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. p.13 – 14.

⁴²² It would be misleading to represent Straight Edge as a unified community whose adherents always function within the constraints imposed upon them by the community. Refusal to accept the imposition of the community can be evidenced in the deplorable actions of the US Straight Edge gangs who deliberately set out to find people who are drinking alcohol and provoke them with the sole intention of fighting and hurting them. However these gangs have engaged in such violence as to cause the death of individuals to such an extent that they have been placed on police gang lists in Utah , Boston and Syracuse as reported by local newspapers – The Denver Post in 2006 for example - and in the documentary by National Geographic in 2009.

The importance of common values to Straight Edge and their appropriation of the concept of authenticity can be seen in the response of the majority of adherents to the above gangs. Many will refuse to acknowledge them as true Straight Edge and most will denounce their activities and attitudes as oppositional and detrimental to the true purpose of the movement, as this interview excerpt from a 38 year old woman living in the Bay Area evidences:

Those assholes that form Straight Edge gangs and go out to make trouble for anyone who isn't Straight Edge, fucking assholes giving us all a bad name when they aren't really Straight Edge at all, they don't get it. That it's about fixing yourself to help fix the world you know, not being self-righteous to bully others. It is supposed to be a positive individual thing not a fucking gang. Gives us all a fucking bad name you know?⁴²³

The final point then to be considered within this section on the inner journey dimension of constructing the authentic self is that of establishing what the common values of Straight Edge in fact are. Haenfler rightly reminds us that "Straight Edge is more to many adherents than just music, more than posing at a show: yet determining what sXe is beyond the style and music is difficult...Straight Edgers are a very diverse group whose members interpret and live the movement's core values in a multitude of ways."⁴²⁴ The individual interpretation of the core values does compound the problem of deciphering exactly what those core values are, but it also reinforces the notion that they are integral to the search for the authentic self.

In addition to the three behaviours that every Straight Edger follows – no alcohol, no drugs and no casual sex – there are a number of values and ideas that have been maintained throughout the lifespan of the movement within all its permutations. Therefore these could legitimately be labelled as the core values of Straight Edge. Those values have become: clean living, positivity, a lifetime commitment, and action for social change and betterment.

⁴²³ Ann, interview with researcher, 07.11.09 Bay Area.

⁴²⁴ Haenfler. Straight Edge. p.57.

Clean living is the summative term used by adherents to describe the extension of the three core principles outlined above. Lifetime commitment will be considered in detail in the third part of this subsection.

Straight Edgers claim that one cannot fully question dominant society while under the influence of drugs, and that once one questions social convention, substance abuse, eating meat, and promiscuous sex are no longer appealing. Therefore clean living and positivity are inseparable; they reinforce one another and constitute the foundation for all other sXe values.⁴²⁵

Positivity is essentially making choices for one's life that lead to a positive outcome, for example, breaking a family cycle of addiction, or finding the help one needs to stop self harming or following a career one is interested in instead of settling on what is easier. Positivity is also held to be in opposition to hardliners or militant adherents whom belong to the gangs mentioned above. The interview quote from Karl, a 28 year old tattoo artist in the UK demonstrates the importance of positivity as a core value of Straight Edge authenticity.

I'd say it's a very positive clean way of life, its good fun and, and, em, if anything it, keeps, you a straight head ya know. One way to look at it, one life, one chance as they say...I seriously would not go back.⁴²⁶

In accordance with their desire to construct and live out an authentic life, many Straight Edge adherents live out their core communal values in their personal lives rather than extensively engaging with more traditional punk political protest. This could be interpreted as an indication of the individualism within modern Western authentic lives. It is also directly related to the fact that the cohort being examined here are members of Generation X, and so it is to that area that I now wish to turn our attention.

Generation X

We are the children you reject and disregard. These aching cries come from the bottom of our hearts. You can't disown us now, we are your own flesh and blood. We don't disappear just because your eyes are shut.⁴²⁷

⁴²⁵ Haenfler. Straight Edge. p.37.

⁴²⁶ Karl, interview with researcher, 07.05.10 Durham.

Attempts to break from their parent's identity and form a unique self are typical and healthy experiences for most normally developing teenagers. Commonly it manifests as a rebellion against their perception of the ideologies and actions that their parents represent or stand for. Generation X bore witness to the fall-out of the death of the cultural idealism amongst Baby Boomers, as the gradual realisation set in that the 'hippie dream' had, in many respects, failed.

Consequently idealism as both an ideology and a means of viewing the world was rejected as false by Generation X. Problems could not be wished away, the world was a cruel and harsh place and survival required acceptance and forbearance. This attitude ensured the development of a strong sense of self-reliance and a refusal to accept simplicity. Generation Xers wanted depth in answers they accepted; no longer would it be enough to assume that 'love' would be enough to 'fix' the problems of the world. Instead they believed it would take direct social action, struggle, compromise and the downfall of greedy corporations.

Of course this is not a generation afflicted with profound altruism; this is a cohort whose access to technology in particular and material goods in a broader sense has vastly surpassed that of any previous generation. They are not generally prepared to deny themselves ownership and usage of available and updated technology despite their dislike of major corporations, or the potential human cost in their production. So enmeshed and reliant upon technology is this group that when deprived of it they feel incomplete or naked. Their familiarity with and submersion in technology on a grander scale than individual goods has also had a profound effect on their world view. Access to global travel, both physically and virtually, has ensured that this is a generation for whom borders are all but meaningless.

Key to understanding authenticity through the lens of Generation X then is the five areas outlined by Lynch. Those five areas are:

⁴²⁷ 'From Heads Unworthy', Rise Against, 2008, Appeal To Reason, DGC Records.

- disengaged from traditional sources of meaning and suspicious of traditional sources of authority,
- A generation whose prospects appear worse than that of their parents generation, yet who do not necessarily equate well-being with material prosperity,
- Traumatized by a social and relational instability,
- Lacks a sense of meaning, but also has a significant interest in the pursuit of meaning,
- Defines itself primarily in relation to popular culture.⁴²⁸

Generation X is itself a late version of the individuated authenticity of the 20th century and as such frequently demonstrates the conflict that exists between the individuation and the authenticity. Those under this label have often been described as detached, uninterested, cynical, unimpressed and more concerned with incidentals⁴²⁹ than people, or at least family. Certainly members of Generation X have demonstrated some of those qualities, at least on the surface or in public; however, that is far from the whole picture. As a cohort they have also proven themselves to be passionate, at times articulate, caring and active amongst one another and for causes they feel strongly about. The conflict and confusion arises because their causes are radically different from those of mainstream society and concerns. Oftentimes their causes aim to expose mainstream society in one facet or another.

Novelist Douglas Coupland, who coined the phrase Generation X, frequently examines and exposes the conflict at the very heart of this group. The title of his novel *Girlfriend in a Coma*⁴³⁰ reveals this in the juxtaposition of the intimacy of the term “girlfriend” with a position of being in a coma in which contact cannot be reciprocal or even acknowledged, but yet carries the potential for a radical reinvention should the individual wake up. Thus the title of girlfriend is contingent upon her remaining in that state of perpetual sleep.

⁴²⁸ Lynch. *After Religion*. p.20 – 21

⁴²⁹ Technology and popular culture in particular. Popular culture would of course include people, but in the form of distanced celebrities and pop icons rather than individuals they would encounter and interact with in daily life.

⁴³⁰ 1998, named after the song of the same name by The Beatles.

Remaining in a coma-like state or refusing to relinquish the distraction of the modern Western world could arguably be one method of avoiding a search for authenticity. Furthermore, the potential for a radical reinvention of the self is the primary goal of an inward journey or quest for an authentic self. Therefore despite their position of a walking contradiction a significant number of Generation Xers realise that while they do not have all (or even many) of the answers in life, seeking them is a necessary part of humanity.

Seeking answers requires a filter through which to sieve them and thus determine those that are worthy of keeping and those which should be discarded. Generation Xers utilise their friendships as a filtering method alongside the groups they choose to belong to and the ubiquitous popular culture. Idealistic answers are rejected alongside a concurrent promotion of more questioning rather than solutions, and typically these will often culminate in direct social action.

Furthermore, answers can be sought from all fields and utilising a variety of resources. The cohorts' dismantling of boundaries – geographical and technical (virtual) – presents itself as a refusal to be contained or controlled in respect to sources of authority and meaning-making. Therefore we can observe a blending of what would have traditionally been considered separate, such as the religious and the secular, or theological concerns emerging within popular culture.

When we move to those in Generation X who are Straight Edge adherents, what emerges strongly in their construction and understanding of authenticity is a rejection of liberal relativism, despite their perception of a lack of boundaries. This is driven, at least in part, by punk's overt concern for the correction of social injustices and the redressing of social imbalances.

One of my interviewees was Tito, a 47 year old man living in the Bay Area. During the course of his interview he took a number of photographs around the area of Oakland and Alameda. Speaking of punks' early years in the Bay Area he drew specific attention to their perception that

liberal relativism was destructive and prohibitive to the creation of a 'good' society, and in a lesser sense obstructive to the desire for an authentic self.

He explained;

UK punk was largely based on anger at monarchy rule and what that not only entails, but also represents and was very politically charged. The US on the other hand did not have a monarchy rule to rebel against, the Vietnam war had already been protested at by the hippies, so American punks turned to their own lives, environment and what they perceived as governmental brain-washing and a cultural insular perspective.⁴³¹

To illustrate his point, he pointed out and then took a picture of a plane which stands in the grounds of Encinal High School in Oakland.



Fig 30 The front entrance to Encinal High School in Alameda, Bay Area, USA. Photograph was taken by Tito as part of his interview on 31.10.09.

Speaking directly of the plane being within the school grounds, Tito said;

⁴³¹ Tito, interview with researcher, 31.10.09 Bay Area.

The message it is sending is that to be successful not only do you have to fit into the boxes predetermined by the school but you had to then join another box, namely the military in some form or other, in order to get the ultimate – the houses that the plane points over and what the punks knew was that the reward was a façade, it wasn't real you know? ...This was the American dream and people did become obsessed, indoctrinated with it and it just made some people, punks, furious, they were the outcasts, they didn't and wouldn't fit into the boxes and they were willing to be themselves, take what come.

The theme of 'fitting into boxes' was a recurring one in Tito's discourse and as his journey continued to Alameda naval base, a short distance from the school, he reintroduced it as a means of highlighting the differences in housing offered to soldiers dependent upon rank and marital status. The following three photographs were taken by Tito on the base.



Fig 31 Standard barracks for unmarried enlisted personnel on Alameda Naval base. Photograph was taken by Tito as part of his interview on 31.10.09



Fig 32 Houses provided for married enlisted personnel and warrant officers on Alameda Naval base. Photograph was taken by Tito as part of his interview on 31.10.09



Fig 33 Housing provided for commissioned officers on Alameda Naval base. Photograph was taken by Tito as part of his interview on 31.10.09

Tito continues:

Many of the original punks in this area were actually the children of these military men. They saw the boxes and the lies that were being forced on everyone and they hated it, they rebelled against it, they found within it a place for anarchy. The other thing they raged against was the class structure that was in stark contrast to the supposed dream that was being pursued in this place, being fought for and defended with the lives of their parents, well fathers.⁴³²

In his recurring images of being forced into boxes Tito is articulating the Generation X belief in the dissolution of restrictive boundaries and the widening of spaces. Furthermore Tito's insistence that the early punks of the Bay Area rebelled against the American dream, against the accepted order of progression – school, military, suburbs – is indicative of the refusal prevalent within Generation X to accept traditional sources of authority and, in particular, meaning-making. Such a stand requires then a substitution: if the traditional is unacceptable, then short of a nihilism, one must find or create a replacement. Tito seems to be indicating that the punk fulfilled the role of the substitute.

Rejecting the path their parents undertook and creating their own community entailed, to varying degrees, a breaking or splintering from the long held tradition of the family imparting the values into the child as they make their way into both adulthood and the world. In addition it was a direct attack on the fundamental Western belief that family values lies at the heart of society. Family was now being superseded by punk and the friends, communal values and lifestyles contained therein.

The following extract from an email interview with Nate, a Straight Edge musician and novelist in his early 30's, implicitly demonstrates both the restructuring of authority and meaning-making and the place of communal values within punk:

Reason for becoming Straight Edge? There are several really. I do it for myself, for my friends and my family. I used to have a bad temper, I don't anymore, and I just didn't like the idea of not being in control of myself. I have so many things that I

⁴³² Tito, interview with researcher, 31.10.09 Bay Area.

want to do with my life, and I don't want to waste my time on drugs. I want to stay as healthy as I can. I do not support the legal drug companies [Budweiser, Marlboro, etc].⁴³³

Nate's initial reason for becoming Straight Edge is for himself, followed by his friends and then his family, an indicator of family being superseded by friends. This mirrors the Throwdown lyrics quoted on page 264 as the introduction to Straight Edge and authenticity, in which the same ordering of importance occurs. Nate then begins to detail some of the reasons why he is Straight Edge for himself – control of temper, achievement of ambitions – before jumping to common values, and the refusal to support major corporations, in this case drug companies in the form of brewers and tobacco providers. This is only one such example but it does demonstrate the significance of a Generation X view of life on how Straight Edge adherents construct notions of authenticity. Consequentially, a radical alteration from family values to communal values is not a temporary state. There are long term implications and this is reflected in the fact that claiming edge is intended to be a lifetime commitment, and it is to that which I now turn my attention as the final aspect of this subsection of the chapter.

Lifetime commitment

They said I'd grow out of it, they said I'd never last. But I'm still standing so fucking proud, now we'll see who laughs last! I'm still proud to be straight. We're still proud to be straight, and we always will be!⁴³⁴



Fig 34 Straight Edge merchandise and tattoos.

⁴³³ Nate, email interview with researcher, 05.04.10, brackets interviewees own.

⁴³⁴ 'Proud To Be Straight', Ten Yard Fight, Back On Track 1997 Plastic Head Music.

As the above articles of clothing, and the tattoos in a much more literal sense, attest, the decision to become Straight Edge is not one that should be taken lightly. Rather it is intended to be a lifetime commitment to both a sober existence and the communal values at the core of the movement.

Claiming edge is often considered akin to a taking a wedding vow: it is a statement of intent until death. That is not to claim or create the impression that everyone who becomes Straight Edge retains that identity or commitment; many do break edge for a variety of reasons – peer pressure, curiosity, or no longer seeing Straight Edge identity as relevant or authentic to their life journey. Typically an individual's decision to break edge results in strong feelings of resentment, betrayal, disappointment and failure within the rest of the community or scene. This is significantly intensified when the individual who breaks edge is a prominent figure or someone who had claimed edge for lengthy period of time, as they are felt to fulfil an almost parental role and to lead by example. There have been instances in which those who break edge turn on those who remain and ridicule or verbally attack them, which can result in ostracism as a means of protecting and maintaining the integrity of the community.⁴³⁵

Submersion within Straight Edge is an intensely potent experience and individuals will often attest to its influence long after they have broken edge. The following interview excerpt from Eli, an ex-Straight Edger in his early 30s, demonstrates the longevity of the experience and influence.

Considering that I'm not drug-free or Straight Edge anymore, it still means quite a bit to me. I look back on those formative years when I wasn't doing any drugs (I had my first drink and marijuana when I was 19 years old) and I am SO thankful for that influence ...I really enjoy the place where I am right now (a casual drug user with no addictions whatsoever) and I thank Straight Edge for that ...In a way, I still identify a little with Straight Edge or drug-free even though no one in the community would consider me edge. The values are still important to me, but they aren't black and white anymore -- they're grey.⁴³⁶

⁴³⁵ There remains little to no acknowledgement of the potential reasons behind the attacks on those who were previously friends, such as embarrassment, guilt or an attempt to cover up feelings of failure.

⁴³⁶ Eli, email interview with researcher, 04.05.10, brackets and emphasis interviewees own.

Eli not only refers to the long-term influence of Straight Edge but also raises the notion that over time the core values alter in their significance or position. Having a stringent or 'black and white' view promotes a deeper commitment but it also results in a complete break when some infraction takes place. This all or nothing approach is indicative of the lifetime commitment involved in pledging adherence to Straight Edge.

Furthermore, this uncompromising approach refers back to the moral structures both at the core of Straight Edge and also the morality that ripples out from it into other areas of life and other aspects of punk. The importance of a lifetime commitment is, at least in part, due to the centrality of the moral framework. In other words, the moral framework of the movement is potentially a form of what Taylor describes as 'a good'.⁴³⁷ In essence, these goods (physical or otherwise) are used as the standard by which judgements can be made to enable the self to locate themselves in where they stand.

The question remains as to whether Straight Edge itself can be considered a hypergood, to utilise Taylor's phrase. A hypergood as Taylor uses it relates to goods – typically one in particular – that are incomparably more important than others and provide the standpoint from which all others can be judged and assessed. The orientation of the individual to the hypergood comes closest to defining their identity, making it of unique importance and thereby determining and shaping their notion of authenticity. It certainly fulfils the criteria of a replacement of a moral code, specifically the dominant notion of family values, social construction designed to maintain the status quo with regards to class, economy and so on. However, a hypergood is typically a commodity, something that can be purchased, in essence a consumer product.

Elements of Straight Edge could legitimately be described as a consumable. For example the music is produced on cd's and vinyl sold at live shows, for which entrance requires the payment of a fee. Bands have merchandise for sale designed to promote their image and improve their sales.

⁴³⁷ Taylor. Sources of the Self. p.62 – 64.

Individuals within Straight Edge make a living from tattooing punk and Straight Edge images, promoting or booking bands, running practise and performance spaces and so on. However, those are not the essential elements of Straight Edge, but rather the minor elements that are associated with and necessary for the existence of any popular culture movement. Therefore it is not quite so straightforward to conclude that it is a consumer product.

Approaching the dilemma from another, less pragmatic, angle might provide for more clarity. Let us briefly return to Generation X's perception of reality and remind ourselves of their notions of 'selling out' and 'buying into' ideologies. They accused the previous generation of selling out their idealistic dreams and buying into the crass and rampant materialism of the 80s. To prevent that from recurring within their own generation they began to create their own goods for determining value and meaning. These goods were not necessarily tangible products, but where instead inclusive of some of the concepts explored in this chapter – the broadening of horizons, the collapsing of previous borders such as those between the religious and secular, the reliance on friends over family, and a saturation of popular culture.

It is arguable that Straight Edge is one example of the creation of new goods for moral guidance and meaning-making by this cohort. Of course neither Generation X nor Straight Edge has initiated the reinvention of moral frameworks; rather they are the late modern consequences of centuries of examination and critique of the concept of morality. Neither set out to directly challenge or reinvent with a deliberate programme or ideology in mind; rather they simply react to what they view as a flawed and pernicious system. This is in contrast to Nietzsche who was one of the first to challenge conventional notions of morality as they existed in his time.

Nietzsche advocated a total break from the founding principles of society in order to truly experience freedom and a completeness in self-authorisation. Nietzsche argued that such a break was only possible when one realised and accepted that founding principles were not divine mandates nor cosmic law but rather human constructions that create a herd mentality, a system of

blind support for the weak, the disinherited and the craven. Others, following on from and relying upon Nietzsche have argued that the founding principles are used for the nefarious purposes of ensuring supplication to law and the power of the few, of correcting behaviour within society to benefit the elite. Furthermore, as these human constructions were carried out under the auspices of good and evil we should then celebrate human ingenuity at creating the notion of good and evil. For Nietzsche the location of this celebration was perhaps best seen within works of art, in the sense that he viewed art forms such as music, literature, drama and paintings as examples of the fundamental creative nature of human beings.

The punk ethic is very much in the vein of what Nietzsche proposes and advocates. The song lyrics demand a questioning of the source of founding principles such as good and evil, right and wrong and so on, commonly arriving at a conclusion that they are human constructs. Straight Edge functions out of Nietzsche's legacy combined with late existential notions of authenticity to form not only a direct challenge to conventional or dominant social moral frameworks but to function as a hypergood for its adherents. A hypergood enables an orientation in what is viewed as a hostile and confusing world, thus enabling one to live an authentic life. For true success this requires dedication and time, and thus requires a lifetime commitment – individuals vow to be true till death, be that their physical death or the death of their involvement with Straight Edge.⁴³⁸

Having now dealt with authenticity as it is found and practised in a more general and theoretical sense within Straight Edge, I want now to focus on an area more specifically related to overall research question at the heart of this thesis. Namely, can we determine in greater clarity if Straight Edge can be considered a surrogate for religion by examining their notion of authentic spirituality?

⁴³⁸ As a side bar I do wish to acknowledge that Eli's comments above raise an interesting question of the ability of Straight Edge to maintain an influence beyond adherence. If this is in fact the case then perhaps those who have broken edge in a popular sense have not broken their original 'true till death' undertaking. This is not a question that can be undertaken in this thesis, as it would require in-depth interviews with a number of ex-Straight Edgers, which was not the focus of research. It is certainly a potential area for further research.

Straight Edge and authentic spirituality

Another day in sorrow, another day in pain. While the efforts of tomorrow has to pay for today's gain. And the children on the battlefields fighting for survival, put their hands towards the sky, to seek help from their Bible.⁴³⁹

The lyrics above serve as a reminder of the approach towards traditional aspects of religion found within punk, as was examined in detail in Chapter Three. Broadly speaking, many within original punk viewed religion with suspicion, and dismissed it as an archaic institution that prevented individuals from living an authentic life. Consequently we find that within Straight Edge a number of those more traditional punk attitudes to religion have seeped into it. This is reflected in the viewpoints garnered from interviews.

Of all interviewees only a small percentage claimed that they were a willing attendee or member of what could be considered a traditional religion. This was less than 8% and consisted of one man who was a voting board member of a Baptist church, a woman who attended but was not a member of the Church of Scotland, another woman who was a nominal member of the Church of England, one woman who self-identified as a Jew and one woman who attended a Quaker church in Glasgow.

Only two interviewees⁴⁴⁰ identified themselves as atheists, although one did say he was currently finding himself being drawn to animism.⁴⁴¹ Interestingly both of those claiming atheism are male; I had no female interviewees self-identify as or express any interest in atheism. This pattern reflects similar patterns found by researchers of religion in terms of religious participation.⁴⁴²

Although most interviewees expressed disinterest in traditional religions, a significant proportion had been involved with a religious institution as a child. This was almost 80%, with most

⁴³⁹ 'Cyberdome' Project X E.P. 2005 re-issue, Bridge 9.

⁴⁴⁰ Nate and Eli.

⁴⁴¹ Eli email interview with researcher, 04.05.10.

⁴⁴² See for example, Forbes B. & Mohen J. (eds), *Religion and Popular Culture in America*. (Berkeley: University of California, 2000); Heelas & Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution*, & Clark L. *From Angels to Aliens*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

moving away from it in their mid-pretens to early teens. The following interview excerpt from a 28 year old male from Glasgow is typical of the description given when talking about self-extraction from religious institutions.

I didn't want to go anymore because I didn't believe what they were telling us. I have vague memories of being in the service or something, being taken in by the Sunday School, must have been for a special service or something. I don't remember anything particularly objectionable about it or anything, I just didn't believe in what they were telling us so I didn't want to go anymore and that was sort of just the end of it really.⁴⁴³

A number of interviewees and informants were directly involved with more esoteric religious practices. Just over 25% were involved with the Dharma Punx in San Francisco in one form or another. Another interviewee was heavily involved in Kabala⁴⁴⁴ and another with paganism, specifically Celtic goddess worship and naturalism.⁴⁴⁵

Almost 65% of interviewees were involved with an active and self-aware practice of syncretic blending of different religions and practices. This included permeations such as Christianity with Judaism and Celtic Paganism or Roman Catholicism with Buddhism. Most interviewees when asked about their relationship with or opinion of religion responded in a manner similar to Chris, a Straight Edge musician in his early 30's from the Bay Area: "I don't like religion, don't agree with it. I agree with ideas, philosophy, thinking and that's what Straight Edge lets me do, encourages me to do, I think."⁴⁴⁶

Furthermore almost 90% of interviewees were adamant that they were more interested in spirituality than religion, seeing a clear distinction between the two, although often struggling to articulate the difference. Those interviewed in the Bay Area of the US admitted a preference for spirituality; those interviewed in the UK often termed it as faith, although their descriptions made it evident that they were describing the same phenomenon as their American counterparts. I have

⁴⁴³ Anthony interview with researcher, 25.01.10 Glasgow.

⁴⁴⁴ Billy.

⁴⁴⁵ K.B..

⁴⁴⁶ Chris, interview with researcher, 07.11.09 San Francisco.

rationalised this as indicative of the place and use of the words 'spiritual' and 'spirituality' within the Bay Area, which is saturated by it, even in areas one would not expect. For example, these two business cards were in the gym I attended, available for all to take.

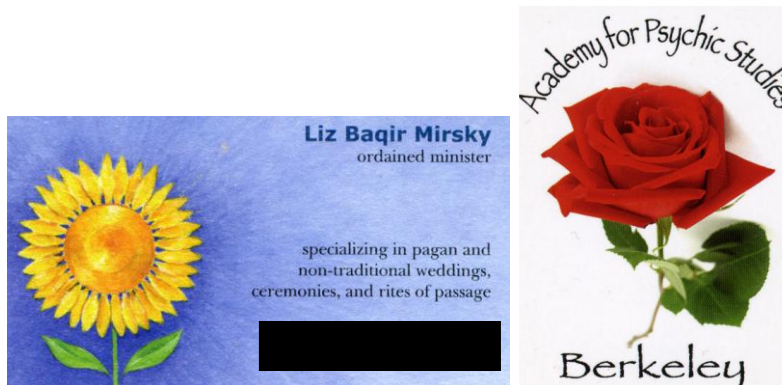


Fig 35 Business cards freely available from Curves gym on Shattuck Ave, Berkeley. They demonstrate the saturation of spirituality within daily life and discourse in the Bay Area.

When someone says they have a faith I wanna see how that goes case they could be like two sentences away from saying yeah I'm like 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, yeah...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. Like I said everything I have done has been influenced by it but I think to call it a religion is iffy by me ...The more people that get influenced by punk rock as a faith the better! [Laughing]⁴⁴⁷

While Ewan, a musician, tattooist and clothing designer from Glasgow, is being somewhat tongue-in-cheek about proselytising in the name of punk rock, he is also raising an important issue which starts to become transparent in the religious or non-religious beliefs and practices of interviewees and informants. Namely, that for the significant majority sole belief and practise in one specific traditional religion is insufficient in enabling them to live an authentic life.

When I examined the significance of the cohort belonging to Generation X I raised the issue of the importance of removal or non-existence of boundaries or borders. This same issue is fuelling the desire to not only explore but wilfully practise a syncretic approach to religion or more

⁴⁴⁷ Ewan, interview with researcher, 26.02.10 Glasgow.

commonly spirituality. Traditional organised religions are viewed as exclusive and limiting, in that they claim to possess the 'true way' either to a divine being, eternal life or reward or enlightenment. In so doing they are thereby excluding the validity of all other faith traditions and narrowing both their life view and their moral framework.

Furthermore there exists a strong hierarchical notion of both the world and / or cosmos and authority within many traditional organised religions. Straight Edge is a wilfully egalitarian construction, highlighted by their lack of leadership, their position of self-identification and their maintenance of the three rules. Consequently adherence to one specific religion could potentially be a site of conflict for their core identity values. This struggle was highlighted explicitly within a spontaneous group interview in San Francisco, as the following extract from two of the participants demonstrates.

Marc: I couldn't ever really get behind the idea that answers are out there, for me it was like if I am keeping a clear mind, learning things, paying attention to the world then why couldn't the answers be in here [taps his head]?

Chris: [nodding in agreement] 'yeah because if the answers are only out there then we have no real access to them only through someone's interpretation, which of course is going to be skewed through their own personal agenda or the agenda of whatever power they bow down to ...But if the answers are in us then collectively we are stronger than the most powerful rich men in the world.'⁴⁴⁸

In addition to raising a genuine concern about the restrictions placed through the issue of interpretation and the consequential agenda that follows from that, the conversation between Marc and Chris also refers back to the sense of the inner journey. That is, the notion of a true or authentic self found within that stands separate from what is not the self. When I examined this during the construction of a working definition of authenticity, I connected it with an existential understanding of authenticity borne largely from the work of Heidegger on 'being'.

The work of Heidegger highlights a further problematic with pursuing or creating an authentic spirituality for Straight Edge individuals. That is the focus on an afterlife – be that heaven /

⁴⁴⁸ Group interview with researcher, 07.11.09 San Francisco.

purgatory / hell, nirvana or other permutations – typically found within traditional religions. While the death of the physical body is acknowledged and mourned the self does not die but rather continues to exist in the notion of a soul which is eternal. Therefore the soul is the concern of many traditional religions, or rather the ultimate destination of the soul. In Heidegger's notion, existence is not working to overcome death, but to acknowledge is what in fact helps constitute existence, in the form of Dasein's own 'being towards death'.

Straight Edge as a movement has no fixation with death. When an individual from within the community dies, they may be mentioned on a cd insert as a dedication. There is typically a memorial show in their honour with the money raised being passed to their families to help cover burial costs or outstanding health care bills. However beyond that no real discourse exists regarding life beyond death. Despite the prevalence of skulls and imagery of death with the tattoos⁴⁴⁹, it is not a preoccupation for these adherents, as it is for other music-based subcultures -- for example Goth, which is itself a progeny of punk.

Instead Straight Edge, and punk in more general terms, aim to overcome and accept the mortality we have by trying to maximise the moment that we have. This can be clearly observed in the music, in the physicality and intensity of the live performances, in the dress and in the purpose of the movement as a whole. This is clearly evidenced in this interview extract from Marc, a Straight Edge musician from the Bay Area.

That was another element of Buddhism that I preferred over the church⁴⁵⁰. We were always being told yes there is pain and suffering in the world but we just have to put up with it and we will get a reward in the next world. Stupidest fucking thing I ever heard of. Like, I have to walk around in agony with this sword sticking outta my chest when I could easily go have it taken out and the wound would heal and the pain would at least to some degree go away. Buddhism admits there is pain

⁴⁴⁹ This prevalence is partially an inversion of the traditional ideas of beauty and acceptable comportment within mainstream society. Partially it was also an attempt to offend as many people as possible and partially a visual expression of the pessimism, fatalism and perceived lack of a future from early punk, and although they lyrically disappeared as hardcore punk gained strides, the sentiment behind them has remained. We must also acknowledge that some of the appeal of skulls and death is that they are traditional tattoo images, which have never declined in popularity amongst subcultures.

⁴⁵⁰ He is here referring to the Catholic church in which he grew up.

in the world, but it says know it is there, understand why it is there and then get over it and get on with your life. I liked that idea, fix what you can but stop dragging it around with you, sort it now, you don't have to put up with it in the hopes of a reward once you are dead.⁴⁵¹

In their search for an authentic means to explore and express the spiritual dimension of their selfhood, many Straight Edge individuals have been drawn to assembling a bricolage of religious ideas, beliefs and practices into a coherent whole. Yet that package is not complete without a secular dimension: in their removal of boundaries these individuals no longer conceive of religion as distinct from or even separable from secular ideas and practices. This process has the aim of creating an authentic spirituality for an authentic self.

However, as Lynch has argued,⁴⁵² creating an authentic spirituality does not ensure that individuals are fully cognizant of it or even able to articulate it within their narrative. In reality articulation within the linguistic sphere can be extremely difficult and limiting for conceptual terms such as authentic spirituality. This can be aptly demonstrated in an interview with S.T. who struggled and stuttered while attempting to explain his ideas of spirituality, particularly with regards to his own practices. When we altered the format to that of an image he visibly changed his body language, and his ability to express his ideas increased exponentially.

S.T. is a 36 year old Straight Edge tattoo artist from the Bay Area. He designed a tattoo for me as a part of his interview, which he subsequently tattooed onto my right lower leg. The wearing of tattoos was dealt with in detail in Chapter Five as part of the symbolic construction of community, but tattoos also play a role in authenticity. Unless one is prepared to undergo the painful process of laser removal, tattoos are a permanent mark on the body. They function as a permanent indication of who and what you are, what you represent and what you are connected with. In other words they are a visual prompt as to the stand you will take within the moral framework that surrounds you. In

⁴⁵¹ Marc interview with researcher, 07.11.09 San Francisco.

⁴⁵² Gordon Lynch. Paper presented at AAR conference 2009.

the language of Taylor, a tattoo can function as a hypergood, or perhaps more accurately as an emblem of a hypergood, much as a receipt or bill would in consumerist terms.

In a culture where we lack shared meaningful rituals, cohesive values or a clear passage from childhood to adulthood, the human body has taken on a greater significance ...In an increasingly secularized and fragmented American culture, we incessantly search for something to satisfy our desires and help us define ourselves and the meaning of our daily lives.⁴⁵³



Fig 36 Photograph of the tattoo ST created on my right calf.

The foremost aspect of the tattoo is that of the banner, which in typical tattoos sits underneath the image. S.T. explained its significance: “so they are a part of the image, not just sitting under it, but wrapping round her. ‘Cause that’s what it does, you know, punk, Straight Edge, whatever, it chooses you, wraps itself around you, gives you protection, helps you heal, like a fucking bandage or something, becomes a part of who you are so it should be a part of the image.”⁴⁵⁴

⁴⁵³ DeMello M. *Bodies of Inscription*. (London: Duke University Press, 2000), pg 40.

⁴⁵⁴ All quotes in relation to this tattoo image are by S.T. interview with researcher, 10.11.09 Bay Area.

He elaborated further on the banner itself, telling me: “not gonna make the banner perfect, gonna put some tears in it ‘cause no-one who comes into punk, into Straight Edge is perfect. We are all fucked up in our own ways, if we weren’t we’d be fucking frat boys or whatever, but we are all fucked up together and it doesn’t matter, punk has a place for us.”

Onto the banner S.T. placed the phrase ‘We Sing for Change’. This phrase, as well as being an appropriate summation of one of the main purposes behind punk music, is also part of a Rise Against lyric which when completed reads as “With hope in our hearts and bricks in our hands we sing for change.”⁴⁵⁵ S.T. explains his reason for choosing to include it: “it sums up the idea that we use our voices and our minds first, but we are willing to fight for what we believe in or stand our ground at least. But it’s not a violent lyric, it’s real hopeful.” Within both the lyrics and S.T.’s explanation of them we can observe the emergence of a framework in which we can make a stand as an authentic self.

Turning his attention to the female form taking shape as he draws, he tells me, “I want the mouth open so that she could be singing or shouting, cause sometimes singing isn’t enough, have to shout to be heard, you know, but singing is so powerful. Music is so powerful. It can speak to and for us in ways we can’t imagine but really need sometimes.”

Interestingly no distinction is being made here between what should vocally be distinct – singing and shouting. Singing has the connotation of pitch, tonality, harmony and talent, which ensures that it is a selective talent, not something all of us can claim to possess. On the other hand shouting is an ability within every person, one generally uncontrolled and often spontaneous, a vocal response to strong emotion or a desire to be heard. Punk music when it emerged utilised the vocals as a means of providing a voice for the disenfranchised, the outsiders and the ignored. Furthermore, talent and ability were of little concern for those creating and listening to punk music; attempting and vocalising their thoughts were of far greater priority. Therefore, shouting became musical, and

⁴⁵⁵‘Bricks’, Rise Against, *The Sufferer and The Witness* 2006, Geffen.

as a musical form was felt to have more power and authenticity behind it, since it was a natural human vocal reaction, rather than something kept separate from daily speech.

S.T. made a number of different designs for the arms and hands before finally settling on crossed arms with an X tattooed on each of the closed fists. He explains, “punk is really all about simplicity, there was no fucking fancy bits to it, it was against that, it was about going back to the real point of music. Plus I like part of her body making an X, you, like, know it, Straight Edge is a part of who we are, you know, like a part of the core of us, not just something we take on and off for a show.”

Once again explicit reference is being made to a sense of Straight Edge having or creating a moral core within the individual. This could be further interpreted as that core being sought when an individual looks inward to locate their authentic self. Furthermore, this aspect of the tattoo contains a tattoo itself in the form of the X’s on the hands. This tattoo of a tattoo forms a self-reflexive emblem of Straight Edge as a ‘good’ in the sense that Taylor utilises the term. It is a visual reminder of the lifetime commitment required within both the subculture and the search for an authentic self: being Straight Edge should be observable not just in the form of tattoos but in how one acts. In other words, to claim an authentic self within the framework of Straight Edge one has to be true in action to phrases and ideologies contained within the good. Ironically this image has been placed on my body in an area I can easily cover but this further cements its role as an emblem. For while I can visually hide who I am my actions should always provide the indication and make my own narrative replete with my Straight Edge identity.

S.T. added wings as the final touch. Responding to my enquires as to why they were of such paramount importance to him for the completion of the image, he explained:

Oh I really dig the idea of flying free instead of flying high, it’s the most important part of Straight Edge to me actually. It’s me now and I am so proud I can say that, yeah flying free instead of flying high.” He elaborated further when I complemented

the image in its entirety. “Thanks, I think the saying⁴⁵⁶ really sums up Straight Edge but also the spirituality I was trying to describe, you know, cause like the two are linked in that sense; freedom -- that’s really what they are both about. Yeah flying free.

During earlier stages in the conversation S.T. had struggled to articulate his thoughts on spirituality. Yet he had expressed a definite belief that his understanding of what spirituality is was constructed based on his prior experiences of growing up within the Gilman Street project, drug problems and alcohol addiction in his early 20’s, AA meetings in an attempt to get sober and the organised religion he encountered as a part of his AA programme.

I think I am more of a spiritual person than anything specific really ... you know like there is something in the universe but it doesn’t have to be called god, doesn’t have to be worshipped in a particular way or anything. Like there doesn’t have to be one religion that is right and the others are wrong. I don’t know how to describe it, just I guess a sense of the bigger than one person idea and lots of ways to access it or something, sorry that is really vague, I dunno how to say it.

For S.T. and others the authenticity at the core of sXe and the strength of the community to explore spirituality without any boundaries provided him with a strong sense of freedom that he was unable to gain elsewhere. This is reflected in both the wings of the image, the phrase he uses to describe them and in his own demeanour and ability to express his ideas.

Utilising visual ethnography methodologies combined with a verbal dimension of conversation not only removed barriers or borders in exploring Straight Edge outside the realm of a typical dialogue between two adherents, but enabled S.T. to explore areas he was clearly unused to articulating and helped to remove his anxiety to further improve this ability to express himself. Through this he revealed a desire for authentic spirituality, which manifests itself in a rejection of the perceived divisiveness of traditional religion, borne from the sense of one being right at the expense of others. This is not to be confused with a desire for or willingness to promote liberal relativism, a certain “anything goes” attitude pervasive in the hippie generation; such promotion would countermand punk’s definition of an authentic life and spirituality.

⁴⁵⁶ Flying free rather than flying high as opposed to the Rise Against lyrics he utilised in the banner.

Instead what is being advocated is two-fold. The first is related to the assumption made by adherents that those who belong to traditional organised religions are making truth claims that have the appearance of absolutism. While this is not entirely accurate, in that most traditional faiths acknowledge that faith cannot be unequivocally proven, hence their moniker of 'faith', the adherents' articulation of 'faith' or 'spirituality' indicates the suspicion with which they are viewed by this cohort. This suspicion is borne partially from their Generation X life perspective, partially from personal experiences and partially from a desire to prevent religion from becoming dominant and thereby potentially destructive to the society the Straight Edge community is trying to build.

Therefore many Straight Edge adherents who are drawn towards an exploration of spirituality are keen to discuss issues such as interpretation of sacred texts, the understanding and role of women and homosexuality within the particular institution, and the possibility of inter-faith dialogue. Adherents are therefore attempting to categorise each institution and religion within a spectrum marked by absolutism on one side and liberal relativism on the other.

The second aspect being advocated is the significance of the inner journey. One can find strength and moral sources within one's self when put in a place or community that helps to overcome the barriers that were preventing one from self-actualisation, be they emotional, mental or even physical. As with so many interviewees, S.T. attributes that place to Straight Edge, and not just the community or scene, but the music, the message, the politics and the moral code. There is something almost Salvationist in the descriptive language utilised when referring to Straight Edge in this way, something I will return to shortly below.

There is also a concurrent stress being placed on syncretistic approaches to religious ideology and practice. Again this was a theme reiterated by numerous other interviewees, as this quote from Marc, the Straight Edge musician, demonstrates: "I decided that just as I liked different

types of punk music I could have different parts of the religions without having to actually just be one and buy into the whole I'm right and everyone else is wrong. Works for me for the most part."⁴⁵⁷

This syncretic approach is something very different, even if connected to, the sociologist of religion Grace Davies' notion of 'believing without belonging'.⁴⁵⁸ Since 1994 Davies has argued that an increasing number of adults in the UK, and in later works Europe, are claiming a belief in God, consider themselves Christian and even carry out actions such as praying, but they no longer express any need or desire to attend a church to maintain or even belong to the religion.

Undeniably there is an element of 'believing without belonging' to be found amongst many Straight Edge adherents. That is, they are taking core beliefs and practices without attending the associated institutions or entering into a discourse with more traditional believers and practitioners of the faith. I submit that what is happening within Straight Edge in relation to spirituality, in particular the pursuit of an authentic spirituality, far exceeds the notion of 'believing without belonging' for a number of reasons.

First, belonging is of crucial importance to Straight Edge, and we cannot separate the communal from the individual when dealing with this cohort, even when examining the concept of the authentic individual. Belonging is a fundamental human need, as was demonstrated by both Maslow and Durkheim in very different areas. For Maslow, as was explored in Chapter Two, the sense of belonging is linked with and helps to fulfil our base human needs such as security. Durkheim demonstrates that when we consider religion we cannot but think of it in terms of society; it is not some abstract concept that exists elsewhere and is worked out through or practised within society, but rather religion *is* society. For society to exist and flourish, and therefore for religion to do the same requires a sense of belonging and commitment from those within it:

A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and surrounded by prohibitions – beliefs and

⁴⁵⁷ Marc, interview with researcher, 07.11.09 San Francisco.

⁴⁵⁸ Davies Grace. Religion in Britain Since 1945: Believing Without Belonging. (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 1994).

practices that unite its adherents in a single moral community called a church... demonstrating that the idea of religion is inseparable from the idea of a church suggests that religion must be something eminently collective.⁴⁵⁹

Many Straight Edge adherents that are actively pursuing spirituality within their lives do maintain allegiance to a collective -- they do belong. The difference is they belong to the Straight Edge community, to the punk collective. What they have effectively⁴⁶⁰ achieved is a symbiosis of the spiritual/religious with the secular/social, a deliberate syncretic blending of the sacred and the profane. The second reason that Straight Edge spirituality exceeds Davies' concept of 'believing without belonging' rests on their selection of social beliefs and practices rather than doctrinal or dogmatic beliefs. At the very least religious teachings are being reinterpreted into social behaviours and norms rather than discourse or doctrine.

The third and final reason is that unlike those sampled within Davies' work, Straight Edge adherents are not merely self-selecting aspects from one dominant faith but rather they are examining a wide variety and fusing elements from both traditional and non-traditional, ancient, modern and newly emerging faiths, to create a spiritual identity that is uniquely theirs. Furthermore this is an identity that is as much reliant upon the secular and popular culture as it is a syncretic blending of a variety of religious faiths.

Thus they are creating an authentic spirituality that addresses their individual needs and personality, their view of life as a Generation Xer, their way of approaching life as a Straight Edge punk and their immersion in and dependence upon popular culture within a capitalist framework. To summarise, authentic spirituality for Straight Edge punks is an individual practise that is rooted within the collective or movement that demonstrates acts of devotion, sacrifice and social concern

⁴⁵⁹ Durkheim. *The Elementary Forms*. p.46. Italics within the original text.

⁴⁶⁰ In both senses of the word, that is, essentially and with great effect.

and contains evidence of contemplation that indicates a world inside the self that can connect with that which is wider than an individual self and life.⁴⁶¹

It should be noted that lacking from the definition of authentic spirituality is that of a notion of working towards redemption or future reward. In this manner Straight Edge is more akin to the Protestant belief that salvation is borne through faith alone, and not by works. However the grace of God has been subsumed by the notion of salvation linked to Straight Edge by its adherents. The salvific qualities of the movement are the final aspect I wish to examine in this chapter.

Salvation

I gotta know what it's like, when your mind is free. Now I know how it feels to fly, got my eyes wide open. And my souls on fire. Before all this I was living a lie, but last night hardcore saved my life.⁴⁶²

I have chosen to use the descriptor salvation rather than redemption for a specific reason. In theological terminology redemption means the act of buying one's soul back from sin, for example through the sacrifice of Christ. It is an act that is carried out on one's behalf but not a debt that one can ever repay and not an action one can take for oneself. While many of those who are Straight edge acknowledge that they were not living a life that was healthy or desirable, they describe punk – an abstract term – as having saved them from disaster rather than having bought them out of a precondition of depravity or moral debasement. Furthermore, they do not see themselves as being in debt towards punk or Straight Edge. Although many will express gratitude towards it, they recognise that it was a move or decision that they made for themselves primarily, and not for anyone else.

Typically the term salvation operates in a theological framework, usually referring to the religious notion of deliverance from sin and its consequences. This concept of salvation is largely

⁴⁶¹ The definition reflects the varieties of searching for spirituality or meaning that is often to be found within the worlds created by Douglas Coupland, some of which have been explored and referenced within this thesis.

⁴⁶² 'Chasing The Dragon', Wisdom In Chains, Everything You Know, 2009 I Scream Records.

Christian in origin and in English dates in 1225⁴⁶³ from the Latin word *Salvatio*. Within Western Christianity there is division regarding how salvation is wrought. Most agree that it is extended through grace by God, but many Protestants believe that salvation comes through faith in God alone, while many Catholic and Orthodox believers argue that it is also gained through works, performing rituals and patient suffering.

However this is not the only meaning attached to the term salvation, nor is it strictly a religious term. Within many Eastern religions, salvation is understood to mean breaking apart or freedom from the old, typically from that which bound the spirit, such as *samsara*, the cycle of re-birth. Furthermore from the mid-16th century salvation began to be used outside of religious terminology and passed into popular phrasing as a word used to describe individuals who demonstrated capability and willingness to be independent and self-reliant in striving towards one's goals. Examples offered by the OED are: "1891 *Anthony's Photogr. Bull.* IV. 88 Only those who have worked out their own photographic salvation can realize the difficulties to be overcome"; or, "1957 A. THWAITE *Ess. Contemp. Eng. Poetry* ix. 142 His [*sc.* Robert Graves'] self-imposed isolation from English literary life has left him free to work out his own poetic salvation and to take an idiosyncratic view of what everyone else is writing."⁴⁶⁴

Perhaps influenced by the popular use of the term, and certainly by their postmodern views on Christianity as a dialogue rather than a set of doctrines, those who belong to the emerging church and the tradition of liberal theology have a different perspective. They argue that salvation can mean a salvific personal and / or social deliverance from the effects of personal and social sins.

During field work almost every interviewee and informant referred to punk and Straight Edge in salvific terms. Typically this was expressed explicitly in terms of a derivation of 'punk rock or Straight Edge saved my life.' Furthermore, these statements were supported implicitly in the images

⁴⁶³ OED online accessed via University of Stirling.

⁴⁶⁴ OED online accessed via University of Stirling.

created by interviewees and the descriptions they gave of their experiences within punk and Straight Edge. Interestingly they were often expressed with the interviewee being fully cognizant that they were imbuing salvific qualities into punk Straight Edge, as in the case of S.T., my tattoo artist above.

Therefore the purpose of this final section within this chapter is to explore how Straight Edge adherents understand salvation, why they imbue Straight Edge with salvific qualities and finally to question whether salvation's location within Straight Edge is a cause or consequence of its status as a surrogate for religion.

Straight Edge understanding of salvation

Now I've buried emotion into the ground. Sacrificed half my life for salvation that will not be found. Now I'm shedding my skin and walking away. Release me from this prison, I'll turn away.⁴⁶⁵

To effectively gain insight into Straight Edge adherents' understanding of salvation, we must first broach the issue of what they believe salvation not to be. As these Bleeding Through lyrics above demonstrate, salvation is not some nebulous, ephemeral notion experienced through emotion. Neither is it something that can be utilised as a means to trap, contain or control an individual, regardless of the motivations for doing so.

The reasons for refusing to accept salvation in either of these terms is linked with their understanding and definition of authenticity. Control and responsibility of life remains one's own based on the moral framework which one constructs upon communal values. In addition, their Generation X life view promotes a primary response of suspicion coupled with a desire to locate meaning outside of traditional structures or sources.

This is evident in their location of salvation within a popular culture movement – Straight Edge, in this case. "Gen. Xers are no longer bound in their self-expression by the print media and linear thinking ... Definitions of reality undergo transformation in the hands of Xers ... critical

⁴⁶⁵ 'Salvation Never Found', Bleeding Through, Bleeding Through, 2010 Roadrunner Records.

challenges to reality are no longer locked away in academic theory but manifested readily in popular culture through media expression.”⁴⁶⁶ Within the following interview extract from Terry, a Straight Edge adherent who was panhandling in Berkeley, there is explicit reference to the positive dimension that is possible when salvation is located with punk.

It’s in your head, it’s in your heart, it’s in your soul. I didn’t choose to be a punk, punk choose me to be a part of it, saved my fucking life I can tell you. I might not have much right now, might be begging on the streets, but I have me, that’s what punk gave me.⁴⁶⁷

Both the idea of punk choosing individuals rather than the other way round and the statement that punk or Straight Edge saved an individual’s life was a common occurrence during field work. Although it can appear contradictory with the above statement that it was their choice, in stating ‘punk chose me’ they are fully aware that punk is not a separate entity but rather the individuals and the community; thus it is merely an expression of gratitude rather than a literal statement. Typically this affirmation was followed by an explanation of how coming into punk or Straight Edge had enabled the individual to overcome in some way a particularly traumatic experience, such as childhood abuse, rape, addiction and so on. Some individuals relayed tales of how in coming into punk or Straight Edge they were given help by others with a situation they felt they were unable to deal with themselves. For example, a UK interviewee relayed how his entrance into Straight Edge was at a time when he was homeless and living on the streets. Those in the scene took him to a squat, showed where he could get free food or where it could easily be stolen from. He was incredibly grateful and expressed it as a form of salvation.⁴⁶⁸

Thus we can deduce that for Straight Edge adherents salvation is very much understood in the mundane realities of life, often of survival. It is much more of a pragmatic notion than one might typically find within religion or religious institutions. Salvation is those element(s) of Straight Edge that enable them to deal with their problems and move into living a more authentic life, as defined

⁴⁶⁶ Flory & Miller (eds), *Generation X Religion*. p.5.

⁴⁶⁷ Terry, in discussion with researcher, 05.11.09 Berkeley.

⁴⁶⁸ Frank, interview with researcher, 15.05.10 Manchester.

above. Those elements may well be the music, the aesthetic, the dancing, the community, and the space, the positioning of punk as a deviant, resistant or anarchistic phenomenon or some combination thereof. This can be seen in the following image created by a participant as part of their interview, the explanation for which is below.

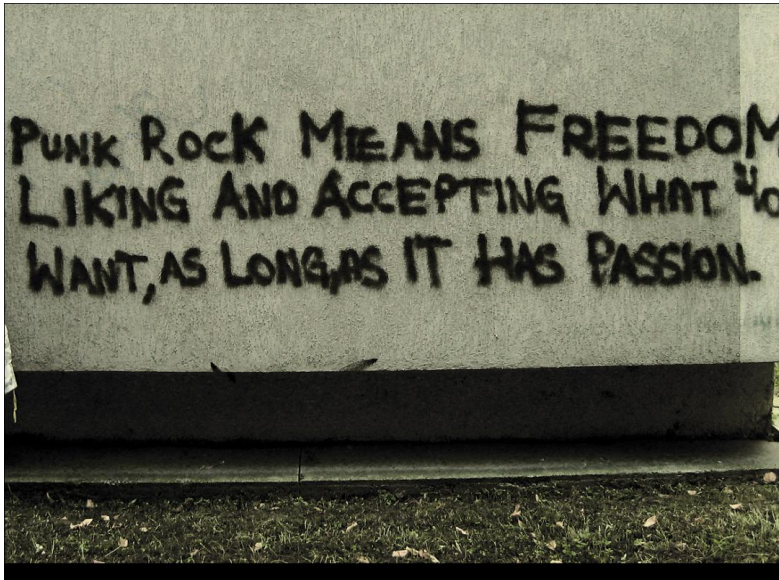


Fig 37 Photograph submitted by E.D. as part of his interview in Manchester on 01.03.10

Punk's whatever you want it to be, that's the point of it, no rules. You shouldn't be trying to put it in a box, the point of punk was to rip apart any box, that includes things that aren't punk as such. Well like religion as we were talking about, religion is about fitting into a box and a narrow box at that, but then it is also a box that excludes others or bits of normal life. Like there can't be anything discussed properly about sex in church. That's just bullshit, it's a part of life, religion should be a part of it, all of life together, you know. What you are passionate about doesn't have to fit into a box or into lots of different boxes. That's why I don't like the idea of organised religions but I do agree with individual faith. I can put my faith in whatever, myself, friends, family, punk, a deity doesn't matter they all come together to be my faith. That make sense?⁴⁶⁹

Again we are seeing a return of the imagery of boxes first raised by Tito. There is a great desire being expressed not to be placed within a box or to have life compartmentalised. Instead there is a desire to be able to take faith or salvation or even life in whatever format it presents itself

⁴⁶⁹ E.D. interview with researcher, 01.03.10 Manchester .

and however it is able to raise passion, excitement or, as I argued in Chapter Four, a sense of rapture.

This is very much a Nietzschean approach to salvation. Even after his disappointment with Wagner, Nietzsche never really sublimated his passion for art and music; he still maintained that freedom from the slave / master binary that had risen was through art. In other words, salvation was possible through engagement with art forms.

Music placed on one side over against all the other arts, the independent art in itself, *not*, like the others, offering copies of the phenomenal world, but rather speaking the language of the will itself, directly from the abyss, as its most authentic, most original, least derived revelation.⁴⁷⁰

Relying on the work of Nietzsche and Heidegger during his 2010 Gifford lectures, Vattimo argued that “art should take you out of your comfort zone; there is anxiety in works of art and it should force us to revolutionise how we see the world.”⁴⁷¹ In successfully achieving those three elements⁴⁷² many adherents began to view Straight Edge as, if not their personal salvation, then certainly imbued with salvific qualities. The question to now be addressed is why they are doing this with Straight Edge as opposed to a religion, for example.

Why adherents imbue Straight Edge with salvific qualities

As a cohort Generation X are both resourceful and innovative when it comes to developing the means by which they can both express themselves and find the spiritual experiences that they seek. One of the paramount ways in which they achieve this is through the creation and adherence to subcultures such as punk, role playing games and the hard-line ecology movement. Given their group and individual feelings of abandonment, incohesion and rejection it is somewhat predictable that a key spiritual experience they would seek to either gain or understand their situation through is the concept of salvation. Of course we must bear in mind that authenticity best defines Straight

⁴⁷⁰ Nietzsche. *On The Genealogy of Morals*. p.82.

⁴⁷¹ Vattimo G. ‘The End of Reality’ Gifford Lectures 7 – 10th June 2010, University of Glasgow.

⁴⁷² Take you out of your comfort zone, demonstrate, create or express feelings of anxiety and force us to revolutionise our view of the world.

Edge's ethic and therefore their concept of salvation is filtered through their notion of authenticity. Consequently, they search for that spiritual experience within their subculture and local communities or scenes.

That's the difference between punk and religion, punk accepts that we are all fucked up, celebrates it even, but with like Straight Edge 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 Straight Edge I wouldn't be doing the course I am now, earning the money I am, wouldn't be getting my life sorted, wouldn't be the person that I am. Thank fuck that punk chose me, you know?⁴⁷³

The above interview extract from Ann, a 38 year old Bay Area resident and community college attendee, demonstrates both the finding of salvation within the subculture and the inability to move beyond the pragmatic or the mundane. Ann makes a grand claim -- 'punk has done far more to improve the world than religion ever did' -- but rather than elaborate, she focuses on examples from her own life -- her college course, her job, her life. This almost egocentric perspective results from Generation X's replacement of the transcendent with the imminent.

Straight Edge adherents fuse and refuse different elements of life to create a unified whole, including "the sacred and profane, the spiritual and sensual, orthodox and blasphemous".⁴⁷⁴ Durkheim's framework necessitated the complete separation of sacred and profane for risk of contamination. He argues: "man cannot draw near to his god while he still bears the mark of his profane life; conversely, he cannot return to his usual occupations when the rite has just sanctified him. Ritual cessation of work, then, is merely a particular incompatibility that separates the sacred from the profane; it is the result of a prohibition."

It is precisely this nature of separation that demonstrates Straight Edgers' break from Durkheim's social construction. They do not separate the sacred and the profane; rather they locate

⁴⁷³ Ann, interview with researcher, 07.11.09 Bay Area.

⁴⁷⁴ Beaudoin. *Virtual Faith*. p.122

the sacred within a conception of the profane to ensure a cessation of fragmentation. Furthermore many structure their entire lives around this synthesis through conceiving of punk, hardcore or Straight Edge as sacred – that which takes them out of themselves and opens the world to them – whilst locating the mundane daily life within the subculture. For example, earning a living or income through being in a band, running an independent record company, a tattooist, or being involved in some other area such as fanzines, clothing companies, show promotion and so on. The two are intrinsically intertwined and co-reliant; the sacred and the profane now rely on one another to create and sustain the authentic whole.

This is aptly demonstrated in the image created by Northern Irish interviewee Frank, who did want it stressed that he did not draw the figure himself. He found it online and altered it via Photoshop, due to his own self-confessed lack of ability to draw, but felt that it perfectly expressed his thoughts and ideas.



Fig 38 Image submitted by Frank as part of his interview in Manchester 15.05.10

He explained his image as follows.

Basically it's me, I gave it my tattoos and all. I even used to be that skinny once, many moons ago now! Believe it or not, but such is age! Yeah anyway, I liked the idea of the figure wrapping his arms around himself, holding and supporting himself while also showing the images of what

supports him, you know Straight Edge, punk. In the tattoos, the belts kinda even the hair though it's a bit emo for my taste [laughs] to be honest, you know.

Yeah like the tattoos, its love and hate and the X same as I have, cause you need both in life; we all have both it's what makes us human. Of course we aren't supposed to have hate, are we? It's not proper or whatever, but fuck it, it's a genuine human emotion so why can't we have it sometimes. Hell sometimes it's justified or even needed. It really bothers me that churches are all promoting the love and well not really rejecting the hate but kinda not acknowledging it. I hate things and that hate gives me strength sometimes, kicks me in the ass makes me get up and do something about it, try to change the world.

The wings, yeah this was the part I had to think about the hardest when picking the image. At first they kinda seemed a bit airy fairy you know, but then I thought well, like, I liked the idea that we all have the potential to be greater or more than we are. Then I thought well mostly I like that you have this punk image with what are typically religious symbols, you know angels and crap and loved the fact that they could be merged. No not just cause it would piss people of, well ok, part of that but also like maybe a way of saying punk, well Straight Edge, no both, yeah both, can be both -- it can be who I am but it can be something more than that as well, like a spiritual bit to it as well. Cause I do think there is a spiritual side to life, I just don't think it can be found in a church or places like that. For me I find it at punk shows. Like it can give me an amazing experience, can build me up, help me find me, be me, give me a community and a family all while being this misunderstood and dismissed grotty little subculture. I love it.⁴⁷⁵

The merging of the sacred and the profane are not only important for a sense of salvation, but as Frank's explanation shows to a certain degree it is also necessary for an authentic life to be led and pursued. The example he gives is that of a punk show, relating back to the sense of rapture that I explored in connection with the music and the live shows in Chapter Four. Furthermore in refuting a distinction between religious and secular or sacred and profane, Frank argues that a wider range of human emotions, in other words a more integrated self, is not only accessible but justified.

In locating the sacred within the profane, the religious within the secular, Frank is unwittingly making a strong case for a radical reimagining of our conception of religion. It can no

⁴⁷⁵ Frank. All three quotes interview with researcher 15.05.10 Manchester. I could only meet with him once so I had asked him in advance to bring an image.

longer be considered as distinct from or 'other' to both the secular and the profane. Here we find a viable example of the merging of the two, though ironically from a cohort who had no original interest in either religion as it is traditionally conceived or in re-working the accepted paradigm.

Salvation, Straight Edge and surrogacy

In this brief final section it is my intention to argue that it is in fact a consequence rather than a cause, that it can offer salvation because it is a surrogate for religion. In so arguing we have to remember that punk did not emerge with the purpose or intention of being religious in any sense. As I demonstrated in Chapters Two and Three, punk emerged initially as a music genre with a political and social agenda. Musicians and indeed anyone who wanted to be in a band used their music as a way of challenging or raising awareness of social and political ills. Religion was merely seen as one of those ills and equal in its potential to be attacked and ridiculed.

From the beginning punk both as a musical genre and a social movement positioned itself as the voice of the disenfranchised, the voice that would not be silenced and could speak without the restriction of a commercialist agenda. Furthermore this position was solidified by the anti-establishment actions and demeanour of its members. They 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, promoted to the point of idolisation the concept of D.I.Y. In maintaining the stance of an unstoppable force willing to speak the truth regardless of the response of others (while at the same time hoping for an extreme reaction) many early punks realised that speaking out against religion enabled them to cross borders previously considered taboo within popular culture.

However, in direct contrast with their verbal stance on religion there remained a fascination with and usage of religious imagery, most commonly demonstrated in band artwork, examples of which can be seen below.

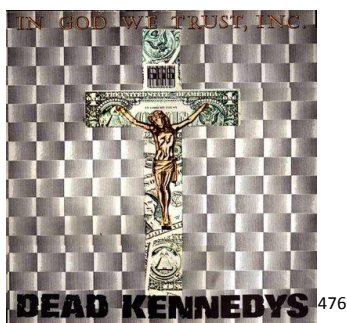


Fig 39 Hardcore album covers demonstrating the use of religious imagery within the artwork.

Over time the ironic use of specific or recognisable religious imagery became evolved into a mingling of typical punk signifiers with religious imagery to create hybrids, which are often barely discernable at first glance. For example, the current image of the Gilman Street project in Berkeley is that of the Virgin of Guadalupe, except that the face and praying hands have been replaced with that of a skeleton. Underneath the statuesque image, where the offering would typically be made by the supplicant, are images from World War II and the Civil Rights Movement, themselves underpinned by punk banners. This suggests not only the alliance of punk with sacrifice and equality and the fight for egalitarianism, but that sacrifices have to be made in the real world by individual men and women.

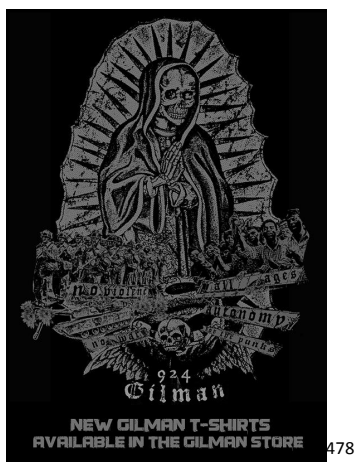


Fig 40 Photograph of poster on the back wall of 924 Gilman Street advertising their new t-shirts.

⁴⁷⁶ Dead Kennedys. In God We Trust, Inc. 1981, Decay Music.

⁴⁷⁷ Throwdown. Vendetta. 2005, Roadrunner Records.

⁴⁷⁸ A full size copy of this image can be found in the appendix 2 better clarity.

The image is significantly more than a reminder of the importance of past events; it is a bold indicator of what punk stands for, the politics of punk and a more direct reference to what punk can offer those who engage with the politics -- that is, autonomy, freedom and equality. This is the salvation that Straight Edge adherents are referring to when they imbue the subculture with salvific qualities.

Salvation, then, is another form of authentic spirituality for these individuals. Earlier I defined authentic spirituality as an individual practise that is rooted within the collective or movement that demonstrates acts of kindness, devotion and sacrifice and contains evidence of contemplation that indicates a world inside the self that can connect with that which is wider than an individual self and life. We can now clearly recognise these qualities being reflected in their understanding of salvation, for they are the very things that made punk appealing, they are what were missing from their lives. For these individuals, that salvation, which enabled them to move beyond their past and their own pain, was located within the subculture to which they aligned themselves as they engaged with and immersed themselves within the community.

For Straight Edge, the community is the lynchpin in this context. Salvation, as it is located within Straight Edge, is thus a consequence of the subculture becoming a surrogate for religion. The formation of a strong coherent community made it easier to organise and distribute information and ideas. For example, flyering at shows, promoting one's own band or raising awareness of issues such as animal rights, safe sex, domestic violence and so on became the norm.

I met a bunch of other kids with Straight Edge, and joined this whole community. It felt really good to be surrounded by other people my age that didn't drink or do drugs and I would say that the prominence of the Straight Edge community there made Straight Edge seem a more a primary part of my identity because Straight Edge was a commonality we all shared, though each of us had our own distinct reasons for arriving at Straight Edge as a way of life. From tabling at shows and volunteering in the substance abuse programmes to teaching in low income communities [names of places removed to ensure anonymity of

interviewee] a big part of Straight Edge for me has been outreach. I credit my decision to live a clean and sober lifestyle for helping me get where I am today.⁴⁷⁹

Within the formation of the notion of community, the sense of outreach and the core politics behind punk, hardcore and Straight Edge we find the origins of its potential as a surrogate for religion. If we return to the source of this notion I have been using, namely the work of Ziolkowski, the need for individuals to find a surrogate was often rooted in either a trivial childhood incident or intellectual questioning. On a broader social scale it was part of an on-going turbulent process.

The history of Western civilization amounts in a significant sense to a catalogue of epochs in which the breakdown of traditional systems of beliefs opened the way for more or less violent conflicts among competing value systems – conflicts that in an inevitable dialectic generated the emergence of a new dominant faith and, often, the concomitant production of cultural monuments commemorating these epochs.⁴⁸⁰

There was no new dominant faith for punk to commemorate, unless one wants to argue that materialism became a religion. Instead punk became a surrogate for religion to its adherents, initially through sating the Durkheimian need for community, then through avenues of exploration for ideology. In Straight Edge there arose a moral code to guide lifestyle and behaviour. The final aspect to present itself as a part of this surrogacy is the language of salvation.

Within early punk lyrics, imagery, symbols, band names and tattoos there is no reference to be found to any form of salvific thinking. No-one then related tales of how punk 'saved their life'; instead there are references made to compulsion, that the music was inside them and had to be released. Salvific qualities begin to emerge in the mid-80s and become *de rigueur* during the 90s rise of youth crew and positive hardcore and Straight Edge. As interviews related here have revealed, these salvific qualities have never really dissipated.

Either the subculture enables them in some way to deal with negative or destructive situations within their lives and thereby frees them to pursue an authentic life and self, or

⁴⁷⁹ S.G. Email interview with researcher, 30.04.10.

⁴⁸⁰ Ziolkowski. Modes of Faith. p.3.

alternatively, in enabling them to find an authentic self as an individual they feel they have been saved in a more abstract sense. This leaves us with one final question to address: is Straight Edge a religion? This will be examined in the next chapter, the Conclusion, which will also draw together the various threads that have been woven throughout this thesis to enable a final examination of Straight Edge as a surrogate for religion.

Conclusion “This time nothing is sacred”

Put poison in your body that’s the way, I will not but others may. Clear is how the world is for me, my horizons broad, now I’m truly free. My mind’s clear, free from hurt. My mind’s clear, I value its worth.⁴⁸¹

The previous two chapters were focused on interpreting, sociologically and theoretically, the information garnered from interviews, encounters and observations both verbally and visually. They covered four key areas of space / place, community, authenticity and salvation. Both chapters, and indeed the whole thesis, has an overall focus of demonstrating that Straight Edge is functioning, for many of its adherents, as a deliberate surrogate for traditional religion. It presents itself as a rich bricolage of practices and ideologies, both religious and secular, based on a wilful syncreticism.

A significant portion of this final chapter will be used to summarise that findings of the previous chapters and the research as a whole and to draw out some clear conclusions. It will also contain an exploration of areas of sustainability, both for Straight Edge and for this research. First, however, we must address an important question that was raised at the end of Chapter Six: can Straight Edge be considered more than a surrogate? Could it be a religion in and of itself?

This question cannot simply be answered within a summarising conclusion. It deserves the full attention of its own section. Therefore I have divided this concluding chapter into three sections:

- Is Straight Edge a religion?
- Conclusions from research
- Further areas of development

Is Straight Edge a religion?

Generation X as a cohort is often criticised, particularly within the media, for being self-obsessed almost to the point of narcissism. Yet it has become clear in both the research presented herein and in the work of others such as Lynch, Beaudoin and Flory & Miller that it is a

⁴⁸¹ ‘Clear’, Bold, The Search, 2005 re-issue, Revelation Records.

specious accusation. There is clear evidence of their deep-seated need for and drive to create and maintain a community to which they can be a part.

That is not to deny that a concern for the self exists within Generation X; it most certainly does and at times can be rampant. This can be most strongly evidenced in their view of religion, in which they are now the centre rather than a divine being or numinous spirituality. This conforms to Taylor's inward turn.

The modern idea of a subject as an independent existent is just another facet of the new, strong localization. We can now think of ideas as being 'in' this independent being, because it makes sense to see them as here and not elsewhere...The shift can be thought of as a new subjectivism. This is Heidegger's description, and we can see why. It can be so called because it gives rise to the notion of a subject in its modern sense; or otherwise put, because it involves a new localization, whereby we place 'within' the subject what was previously seen as existing, as it were, between knower / agent and world, linking them and making them inseparable.⁴⁸²

In other words, authority is removed from the divine or the ineffable and simultaneously wrested from the hands of the institutions that function under the auspices of the divine, and then re-dispersed. In the Introduction to this thesis I looked at the work of theorists such as Durkheim, Castoriadis and Taylor each of whom demonstrate this process and its impact on the construction of society as we move into a world in which belief in a god can no longer be assumed and is instead one possibility among many. Therefore authority is placed within secular institutions and frameworks.

Consequently religion, in terms of practices, rituals and to an extent ideology, can no longer be assumed to be succinctly definable or corralled into a specific notion. Instead we now face a vast range of human practices which are overlapping and do not function as religious or secular solely or discreetly. Therefore in considering if Straight Edge is a religion or not we must also look to destabilise this strained dichotomy of religion and secular.

⁴⁸² Taylor. Sources of the Self. p.188.

Timothy Fitzgerald argues that there is in fact no coherent concept of religion in the world despite attempts by both the academy and the media to convince us otherwise. He further argues the term is nothing more than a mystification and postulates that we should abandon it.⁴⁸³ “Religion cannot reasonably be taken to be a valid analytical category since it does not pick out any distinctive cross-cultural aspect of human life.”⁴⁸⁴

I do not agree with Fitzgerald that the inapplicability of terms such as religion and secular for cross cultural dimension is analogous with the inapplicability of religion as a descriptor. Ultimately there are practices and ideologies that cannot but remain separate from that which is necessarily secular and it requires a term to describe it, and so religion has a valid place, but only if we acknowledge that it is a created term which is problematic and inadequate and cannot in today’s post-secular world be entirely distinct or independent from the secular.

The significance of independence in relation to religion cannot be underestimated as we consider the question of whether or not Straight Edge can be considered a religion. For both Generation X and Straight Edge as a subculture, traditional sources of authority are treated with suspicion at best and ridiculed or attacked at worst, as was demonstrated in Chapters Two and Three.

Furthermore the religious practices demonstrated in Chapters Four, Five and Six reveal a deep entanglement between the religious and the secular. A number of interviewees noted that a distinction between religion and the state⁴⁸⁵ was ineffective and largely irrelevant, as this excerpt from Frank a Northern Irish Straight Edge adherent in his early 30s demonstrates.

I dunno I don’t really think you can separate the two, you know, church and state. Cause like, look at America, they have separation of the two but yet you have those lobbyists who are just religious in essence and they go and basically buy or

⁴⁸³ Fitzgerald. *The Ideology of Religious Studies*.

⁴⁸⁴ Fitzgerald. *The Ideology of Religious Studies*. p.4.

⁴⁸⁵ They would typically refer to it as church and state, but the terms can be easily widened to encompass religion in the multi-faith, multi-cultural society we find ourselves in.

bully to make sure that their perspective is the dominant one. So really saying that is nothing more than lip service you know. So why won't they just admit it, it's a nonsense to say the two can be separate when obviously they can't. Maybe if they stopped all the bullshit then we could get to the real questions, like can they or even should they be separated or does it even matter? You know?⁴⁸⁶

Once again, we can see here the emergence of the significance of authenticity for Straight Edge adherents. Furthermore it is being extended to pre-existing religions as well as the dichotomy purported to exist within society. Authenticity was dealt with in detail in Chapter Six; and we must again acknowledge its prevalence and significance in any notion of religion that exists within Straight Edge. Furthermore if we are to discover Straight Edge is a religion then we would find authenticity at the very heart of it.

In addition to authenticity we would also find community playing an integral role within any notion of religion for Straight Edge adherents. As I argued in Chapter Five, adherents first seek practices which enable them to focus on the self. Hence the repeated references to Buddhist meditation from interviewees and informants. However, the punk sense of community is too strong and over-rides that of the self and we find that even Buddhist meditation is undertaken within a group setting, such as the Dharma Punx.

So having determined what religion would 'look like' within Straight Edge – a confluence of both religious and secular, an individual rather than transcendent framework, a sense of the communal and a concern for authenticity – we are now in a stronger position to consider our question of enquiry. That is, we are asking is Straight Edge a religion.

A number of interviewees made reference to punk or Straight Edge as a religion, or tried to compare it to existing religions. The following is an extract from Kevin's interview, including insertions from myself as I clarified what he meant.

Kevin: I suppose punks do have a kind of spirituality, maybe a different one.

⁴⁸⁶ Frank, interview with researcher, 15.05.10 Manchester.

FS: what do you see that as?

Kevin: [*laughing*] I don't know, like punk spirituality, you know ... em, I imagine it just probably going to shows, exactly what it is, that's their sort of Mecca.

FS: would you take it further then and say that the band is sorta Allah or God?

Kevin: oh no, that's taking it a bit too far! I think the bands are just a sort of by-product of it like, just like the chanting, with a big sweaty, massive prayer ... well there is a message in the chanting. Cause like the community, of punks, like going to see the bands and all and the image, it's all an important part of it, it is presumably the source of it all, the message behind it, behind the band ... punk could be our religion.⁴⁸⁷

The final phrase that Kevin uses 'punk rock could be our religion' was a frequent reoccurrence during field work and interview gathering in both the UK and the USA. At one show in San Francisco it became a mantra that a number of people who were simply queuing and not partaking in the interview began chanting! In addition to being a spontaneous response from a number of interviewees it is also a line from a Rancid song which was released during the time of my USA fieldwork.

Some live a life of indecision, strung out over petty schisms. I heard GBH⁴⁸⁸, I made a decision, punk rock is my religion.⁴⁸⁹

Rancid make a direct reference to schisms, which are ways – theoretical or otherwise – of restricting our understanding of things within the world. Taylor explains further: “the actual experience of living within Western modernity tends to awaken protest, resistances of various kinds. In this fuller experiential sense, ‘living within’ the frame doesn't simply tip you in one direction, but allows you to feel pulled in two ways. A very common experience of living here is that of being cross-pressured between the open and closed perspectives.”⁴⁹⁰

Thus it would appear that the Rancid lyrics are promoting the idea that in choosing punk, hardcore or Straight Edge as their religion they are enabled to live outside of the tension caused by these open and closed world structures. One could pursue the analogy further and argue that

⁴⁸⁷ Kevin, interview with researcher, 31.03.10 Glasgow.

⁴⁸⁸ GBH are an English punk band which formed in 1978 and continue to this day.

⁴⁸⁹ 'You Want it, you got it', Rancid, *Let The Dominos Fall*, 2009, Epitaph.

⁴⁹⁰ Taylor. *A Secular Age*. p.555.

in choosing punk rock they step outside of the rest of society. This is analogous with some religious beliefs that they live in the world but are not of it, separate because of their religious stance.

Of course the analogy is not entirely accurate when we relate it to punk, hardcore and Straight Edge. These subcultures are not only entranced by but fully enmeshed within popular culture. Therefore they cannot but live within and be of the world. Furthermore, they are still an active part of a system which contributes to the cross pressures experienced between the open and closed perspectives of understanding the world.

A more accurate interpretation would be to state that both the Rancid lyrics and the interviewees' assertions are promoting that the statement 'punk rock is my religion' is the making of a selective choice. Making such a choice creates simplicity, in that one now has a clear focus, or a clear path to walk. Therefore, adherents are not claiming punk, hardcore or Straight Edge to be a religion in the traditional understanding of the term, which of course as has been demonstrated is a highly problematic and contested term. What they are then instead acknowledging is that they are putting their faith, hope or belief in punk in a manner analogous with those who choose to place their faith within a particular religion.

This is perhaps best illustrated and explored through the final visual created by an interviewee. This image was created by Karl a 28 year old Straight Edge adherent from Durham who is a tattoo artist. He is not the only interviewee to reference it, as the image is a traditional Straight Edge tattoo which has remained very popular. The picture is a bastardisation of Dürer's praying hands, onto which an X is drawn marking the hands and the tattooed individual as affiliated with Straight Edge. Karl has also added references or copies of his own tattoo

(including 'stay true' across the knuckles) to make it more personal to him and to further denote his own allegiance to Straight Edge.⁴⁹¹



Fig 41 Image created by interviewee Karl, Durham 07.05.10

Explaining his choice of image, Karl informed me:

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 and others around us have helped us and yeah.⁴⁹²

When I asked Karl to elaborate on this notion that Straight Edge is a religion with regards to the three core principles of the subculture – no alcohol, no drugs, no casual sex – he responded very emphatically with “oh yeah pretty much the three core principles are like my faith.”⁴⁹³

Moving into the area of traditional religions and asking him to compare the differences between traditional religion and Straight Edge, Karl had a very definite, if somewhat comical

⁴⁹¹ Albrecht Dürer drew the image in 1508 as a tribute to his brother whose physical work, done to support Albrecht through university, had damaged his hands to such an extent he could no longer draw or paint. His brother sacrificed his skill to support Albrecht. The sketch is a reminder that no one makes it without support from others (<http://www.albrecht-durer.org/Hands-I.html> last accessed September 2010).

⁴⁹² Karl, interview with researcher, 07.05.10 Durham.

⁴⁹³ Karl, interview with researcher, 07.05.10 Durham.

response: “Oh em, cool bands (*laughs*) yeah cool bands, positivity, ya know, there doesn’t seem to be that in them.”⁴⁹⁴ In his answer Karl is asserting that traditional religions seem, for him, to be lacking in positivity – making choices that lead to a positive outcome and maintaining a positive mental attitude – which is an important dimension for Straight Edge.

Frustrated with their lives, environment, social setting, and government, many came to hardcore as an escape. But instead of simply offering an alternative social setting to the mainstream, hardcore created a dialogue that impacted not only the scene but drove people to try to change the world they originally wanted to get away from. Many people’s entire political or personal consciousness was shaped by the debates that occurred. For them, hardcore wasn’t just a rebellion for rebellion’s sake – it was about learning something and making a change in response.⁴⁹⁵

Peterson is here describing what is commonly called positivity within hardcore and Straight Edge: that is, both the ability of hardcore to encourage one to change one’s life in a positive way and the created intention of action rather than passivity. Furthermore it is also used to describe the mental attitude that adherents strive to uphold – the belief that that world and society can be improved and is not doomed.

There is a perhaps unjustified implication in Karl’s answer that, unlike Straight Edge, traditional religion actively encourages a negative mental attitude and inaction or acceptance of a world that cannot be saved or repaired and must instead be made separate from oneself. In the parlance of Straight Edge a negative mental attitude would be one of guilt that cannot be overcome, of feelings of inadequacy and dependency.

Furthermore, Karl’s account demonstrates the relevance of the original story of Dürer’s sketch in his assertion that social involvement within Straight Edge helped him to become the person he is today. In addition in his comparison between Straight Edge and traditional religion he chooses Straight Edge.

⁴⁹⁴ Karl, interview with researcher, 07.05.10 Durham .

⁴⁹⁵ Peterson. *Burning Fight*. p.51.

However, Karl gives no indication that he considers Straight Edge to be a new or emerging religion. Instead he uses words such as 'like' and 'kinda'; there is a comparison and an attempt being made at a description but he makes no effort nor indicates a desire to step over that line and declare Straight Edge to be a religion. This compares with how other interviewees and informants addressed the same issues, as this extract from a group interview in San Francisco demonstrates.

Marc: Straight Edge, well punk, whatever, gives you something else to focus on to try to get rid of the suffering in the world, gives you information like in Dead Kennedys songs or the essays of Anti-Flag or the everyday politics of Stiff Little Fingers just as a quick example. You can take part, you can contribute, whatever, but it stops you thinking of just yourself, gives you a family to be concerned about, to help and to lean on.

Chris: Punk, Straight Edge, whatever subculture you want behaves more like Jesus than Christians do; they are in a way more religious than the religions.

Kieran: yeah, punk rock is my religion (*laughs then starts shouting repeatedly until others join in, then he runs up and down the line shouting this loudly*) punk rock is my religion!⁴⁹⁶

Once again we can observe the refusal to remove religion from secular in terms of a distinct dichotomy as well as the sense that traditional religions do not encourage positivity in the same manner as Straight Edge. Comparable with Karl's comments, Marc raises the significance of community when he refers to family within the scene. What is essentially occurring in this dialogue, and in others that I have not used as examples for the reason of brevity, is an acknowledgement of the necessity for authenticity within anything that an individual puts their faith in.

For many of those who adhere to a Straight Edge lifestyle and identity as well as the wider punk culture, authenticity as they define and understand it cannot be located within traditional religions. Therefore they locate it within the subculture they belong to and construct their

⁴⁹⁶ Marc & Chris, group interview with researcher, 07.11.09 San Francisco.

identity and lifestyle around it. This does not make Straight Edge a religion, be that traditional or newly emerging, simply because it has commonalities.

To declare it a religion one must be able to find within Straight Edge that which cannot be located anywhere outside of religion. This does not mean that all which religion typically is expected to provide – a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature and purpose of the universe – must be present within a religion. While those who adhere to Straight Edge would certainly argue that what it offers they cannot gain elsewhere, but this cannot necessarily be applied to those outside of the subculture. While people may not all follow one religion, the notion of religion itself irregardless of practices is applicable outside of a singular faith or denomination.

Therefore I conclude that Straight Edge is not a religion but in fact a surrogate for religion as was defined in the Introduction of this thesis. That is, it is something that succeeds and replaces that which is no longer viable, and which nourishes and sustains. It is also a demonstration of Ziolkowski's transfer of psychic energy to a surrogate. Of equal importance, Straight Edge provides us with a new model of religion and a new way of considering the construction and understanding of religion within today's modern Western societies.

In essence, Straight Edge is overstepping and purposely ignoring the essentialisation of the religious and the secular that exists within modern Western society in favour of an interwoven structure and approach to belief and faith. The self is fulfilled through the notion of authenticity and the community if formulated through adherence to the moral code, leading to the possibility for salvation articulated through the notions of D.I.Y. and positivity. This will be clarified in the remainder of this chapter as I now turn to drawing out the conclusions of this research.

Conclusions from research

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.⁴⁹⁷

With these words, Ian MacKaye, willingly or not, created a movement, a global community voluntarily bound through a lifestyle choice of abstinence within a subculture famed for its apparent hedonistic, destructive and anarchistic behaviour. While there is no way that MacKaye or indeed any of those young people who were the initial proponents of Straight Edge could possibly have foreseen its future or the potential contained within their message, they were certainly aware of the necessity to speak it.

Furthermore, they were acutely aware of the power of their chosen medium, that of music, as Ian MacKaye argues:

But the thing about music and politics is that music was here *before politics*. Music was here *before language*. This is no fucking joke! I know that the big industries have trivialized music in many ways by making it into entertainment or amusement, but music as a point of gathering is something that goes all the way back to the beginning ... we said 'we're not interested in your politics, what we are interested in are personal politics; we're interested in this music, in this community, in this scene'.⁴⁹⁸

In these words of MacKaye's emerge the key points I have been arguing throughout this thesis. I now wish to draw them into a coherent conclusion as a means of demonstrating that Straight Edge has become, for many of its adherents, a surrogate for traditional religion, one that has enabled its proponents to engage with spirituality as a part of their overall identity in a manner that is not constrained through traditional religious practices and borders. In other words, a new model for understanding religion within modern Western societies.

MacKaye speaks of the importance of music as both an entity and as a means of spreading a message. He also references the D.I.Y. ethic that remains at the heart of punk and finally the importance of community. All three of these elements are crucial to the understanding of

⁴⁹⁷ 'Straight Edge' Minor Threat, Complete Discography, 1981, Dischord.

⁴⁹⁸ Ian MacKaye quoted in Kuhn. Sober Living. p.27.

Straight Edge as a surrogate for religion. Therefore this conclusion will be subdivided into those three areas.

The importance of music

Chapter Four contained an argument that punk and hardcore music were the lynchpin of the subculture, almost to such an extent that they became a character within both the scenes and the narratives that interviewees would relate of their lives. In demonstrating the importance of the music within the overarching question of Straight Edge as a surrogate for religion, I utilised the framework of rapture as it is understood from an Eastern perspective as well as in Ancient Greece.

Partially this was important because of the physical nature of both the music and a live performance which is extremely draining both physically and emotionally. However, of more significance is the promotion of a coherent rather than fractured life which is firmly located both within the lyrics, the music and the performances. The intensity level is maintained from start to finish; it is relentless but consistent, stressing integration.

Integration or wholeness is a vital part of the spiritual identity that is being constructed within Straight Edge, particularly with the emphasis that is placed on maintaining authenticity as a consistent element. Typically our postmodern existence is one of fragmentation, in which we move from one aspect of life to another, from work to family to social life, without integrating them into a cohesive whole or allowing our personality to remain consistent throughout.

Consistency or integration of the self and of life is conducive with the overall purpose of Straight Edge. Thus it is not surprising to find a desire for it within the spiritual search of its adherents. Furthermore we must bear in mind that the cohort under examination is also identifiable as Generation X, who came of age during a time of great familial, social, economic

and political upheaval, and who thus crave the togetherness and stability that such integration affords.

However, the favoured practice of Straight Edge adherents of syncretism regarding religious ideologies and practices could be argued to be anything but a source of integration. This is a logical counter-argument, as selection from one aspect combined with selection from another, all mixed with popular culture, would seem to tend towards fragmentation. Yet from interviews and observations it was obvious that this was not the case and in fact the opposite was true. Selective religious practices and spirituality combined with the secular rooted firmly within popular culture enables an authentic spiritual identity to emerge and form, and thus when implemented consistently in all aspects of life can help create an integrated authentic self.

Perhaps even more surprising was the demonstration by numerous adherents of their ability in combining the sacred and the profane, whilst simultaneously ignoring the religious and secular divide that is typically focused upon within discourses of religion. I have argued that this success was borne because they are based within a subculture that was dismissed and derided – sometimes to the unacknowledged delight of the adherents – as profane by many within different sections of mainstream culture.

While the music is itself a form of entertainment within a long tradition of popular culture, acknowledging its place within the framework of rapture and its importance within Straight Edge provides insight into what adherents consider sacred. The music itself is not sacred, but what it represents is, that is, the message or politics of Straight Edge, the community and the potential to not only locate an authentic self but to then expand that self into something wider than the individual.

Acknowledging the importance of the music must lead us to the same conclusion as sociologist William Shepherd, who argues: “We are witnessing the birth of a new religious life

style in which religious experience is precisely analogous to the aesthetic experience of music.”⁴⁹⁹ In fact I would conclude that we can go further than Shepherd and assert that what is found within this research is a religious experience that is *located* within the aesthetic experience of the music.

The D.I.Y. ethic and authenticity

Punk, in all its permutations, is renowned worldwide for its D.I.Y. ethic. This is the notion and practise that no one owes you or is going to hand you what you want, so instead you have to get up and make it happen for yourself. It is also the strongly held belief that punk as an entity and self-contained community does not need the power and money (and by implication the rules and structures) of massive businesses and conglomerations in order to succeed. Therefore the community has its own small independent record labels which bands can either sign to or create on their own.

The music aspect of the subculture is one area in which the D.I.Y. ethic prevails, with untrained individuals starting bands regardless of talent, knowledge or encouragement. This expands into the making and selling of their own albums at their shows, creating their own record labels and using technology as a means of self and fan promotion to ensure crowd attendance at shows, thus bypassing the need for large music corporations.

D.I.Y. is present in other aspects of punk and Straight Edge such as benefit shows designed to raise money and support for individuals or causes within the scene. Furthermore it is located in areas such as direct action against companies, as for example protests for animal rights, gay rights, transparency and accountability from corporations and government, and so on. A less aggressive form of the D.I.Y. ethic is found within the practise of squatting and in a more abstract form in the creation of family within the scene to take care of and be a part of.

⁴⁹⁹ Shepherd W. “Religion and the Counter-Culture – A New Religiosity”, *Sociological Inquiry* 42:1 (1972), p.6.

In considering Straight Edge as a surrogate for religion, the D.I.Y. ethic is a strong factor. In fact one could argue that it is a powerful motivating factor, which when combined with their Generation X suspicion of traditional sources of authority and meaning making, provides a potent combination. Resultant from that combination then we find many Straight Edge adherents rejecting traditional religious institutions and beliefs, opting instead to search for their own way to answer the mysteries of life. Instead of adherence to one particular traditional religion we see a strong movement toward reliance on the self with a concurrent acknowledgement that it requires an understanding and engagement with an authentic self.

Furthermore, we also observe an increasing trend towards individuals carefully selecting aspects, beliefs and practices of different established traditional and esoteric religions and ideologies. These are diffused by the individual into a workable spiritual identity merged with their Straight Edge identity and other aspects of their overall identity. This reworking of identity enables them to create an authentic self and locate the nature of salvation within the plethora of resources – spiritual and mundane – they have surrounded themselves with. This can be called nothing but a D.I.Y approach to spirituality.

Community

The desire for and support of community is most certainly in the greater degrees of importance for those who choose to belong to Straight Edge. Partially this is because it is a fundamental human need to belong, to have a familial grouping into which one fits and contributes. Partially it is because, as Generation X, some feel that as children and teenagers they did not have the familial experience they crave. Thus as adults they are seeking to replace or make up what they feel they missed out on, and they do so through the creation of a local scene or community within the subcultural framework of Straight Edge.

It is important that we do not remain within a narrow view of community as simply being those individuals who belong to the same scene. For a significant element of the spiritual identity that is being constructed is that of a universal or global reach where there are no limits on what can be taken, or on how much can be utilised and brought together to form a coherent whole.

This is further reflected in the understanding of community found in Chapter Five and in the interviews, in which community expands beyond local scenes, into a global Straight Edge community. It expands in an abstract sense through the symbolic construction of community found in signifiers such as band t-shirts, tattoos and symbolic means of communication, as for example those utilised by squatters.

Community is further expanded through a sense of a limitless, virtual ability to interact, discuss and argue with fellow adherents anywhere in the world. This is particularly important for those adherents in their teens and early twenties, rather than the cohort I choose to focus on. Although technology is a fundamental part of the lives of both, for those who are of a younger generation there is no memory of a time in which the internet did not exist. For Generation X they can remember such a time, and so for them community remains physical first, with the virtual being a supplement rather than paramount aspect.

This expansive view of community enables a limitless theology to unfold. Choice is widened and expanded almost daily as new frontiers in knowledge and discovery are breached. There are no longer limits placed on knowledge, understanding, communication or ideas. Therefore there should not be limits placed on how one can engage with and develop a spiritual identity, even to the extent that one does so on the basis of a popular culture, music -orientated subculture.

In so viewing community, Straight Edge adherents have been enabled to relocate authenticity and salvation within the mundane, the everyday, indeed even the profane aspects

of the subculture that appeals most to them. They also retain control of both because they are no longer subjected to an external or divine authority; punk rock can literally or figuratively save their lives.

A successful surrogate?

This thesis has been arguing that the hardcore punk subculture of Straight Edge is functioning as a surrogate for religion, and what we must ask now is whether is it simply functioning as one or whether we can determine it to be in any way successful. The term 'surrogate' was used from literary theorists Ziolkowski's work on the dramatic re-altering of understanding of religion that took place during the end of the 19th century and the first third of the 20th century. In his conclusion, Ziolkowski determines that "in the final analysis all the surrogates turned out to be inadequate."⁵⁰⁰

The modern Western world of today is vastly different from the period of time explored by Ziolkowski, as is our understanding of what religion is and how it is manifested in the lives of individuals. However, his conclusion does raise a pertinent question for this research, which has so far been unaddressed. If the surrogates he explored were ultimately inadequate, is it possible for there to be a successful surrogate for religion and will the same fate befall Straight Edge?

The desires of the modern society have combined with the marvels of technology to breed many mechanisms of escape, but the surrogates are original only in form, not in substance. Yet beyond those 21st century modes of faiths awaits, inevitably and inescapably, the problematic reality of a world still disenchanted and of lives still unfulfilled.⁵⁰¹

There is no denying that we live in a world that has become or remains disenchanted. But whether that is quite as problematic as Ziolkowski would have us believe is debatable. Some have found science and its ability to provide rational answers to be sufficient,⁵⁰² while others

⁵⁰⁰ Ziolkowski. Modes of Faith. p.237.

⁵⁰¹ Ziolkowski. Modes of Faith. p.238.

⁵⁰² Jones Preston. Is belief in God, good, bad or irrelevant? (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2006) for example.

have found or re-discovered enchantment in areas previously discarded or overlooked, such as environmentalism or paganism⁵⁰³ or in popular culture.

Enchantment is something which enables us to be caught up, either momentarily or for longer, both within the moment and in an acute awareness that we are a part of something larger than ourselves. 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 for the experience. This is certainly possible in the examples given above. What we have to acknowledge is that we have changed the sources for enchantment. It is no longer necessarily linked to the divine and thus accessed through religious institutions; the scope has been significantly widened to encompass that which was once considered secular, profane or even low culture.⁵⁰⁴

Generation X has long been accused of being cynical: not only looking for the negative or ‘the catch’, as it were, but also being unable to recognise the charm or the ineffable within the world. While understandable, given their surface appearance of cynicism, it is an inaccurate description because cynicism is no more than a veneer held up for self-preservation.

What is important to remember, as regards both to this accusation of cynicism and to helping us decide if Straight Edge is a successful surrogate, is that Generation X was the first generation to seek to locate enchantment that has no connection with any sense of the divine. Even their parents’ generation, the Baby Boomers, had some connection, however tenuous, because they would often describe conversations with or wider understandings of God after taking hallucinogenic drugs. Generation X was not interested in escaping reality as their parents had been before them. They accepted that life was harsh and painful and so they instead looked for ways to escape or express the pain they were experiencing. This attitude of escape from and honest expression of pain spilled over into their understanding of enchantment: that which

⁵⁰³ Lynch. *The New Spirituality*. For example.

⁵⁰⁴ With the inherent implication of belief that it carried little if any real worth and was simply created to placate the plebeian masses who would know no better or differently.

charms and delights are those things that can enable them to escape the pain of everyday life. Therefore with this generation we see numerous attempts to locate enchantment within the arenas of popular culture.

Given this shift in understanding of enchantment, it has now become possible to find potentially successful surrogates for religion within the 21st century because those surrogates can offer enchantment that does take away the pain of everyday life. In other words those surrogates offer the salvation that those individuals are seeking and believe they need to enable them to deal with life.

So is Straight Edge a successful surrogate? To answer this we must finally outline what constitutes success. Ziolkowski's proffered surrogates temporarily offered individuals a means to access enchantment, to find meaning and purpose in the world that was not linked necessarily to the divine as they had previously understood it. Furthermore it was not controlled or exclusively accessed through religious institutions. Yet they were unable to sustain individuality as a consistent locus of enchantment. Some surrogates were only unique for a single instance, such as travel,⁵⁰⁵ others failed because they became unsustainable ideologies,⁵⁰⁶ and still others relied too strongly on imagination to have a sustainable impact in daily life.⁵⁰⁷

To be a successful surrogate it must offer sustainability and application outside of its own sphere of existence or location. Furthermore it must be able to replace religion, go beyond it rather than perfecting or mastering it. These are the areas in which an assertion of Straight Edge as a successful surrogate for religion begins to falter or waver somewhat. That is they are not making an attempt, in any manner to perfect religion or to master it in a dominant sense. Instead their focus is to find a replacement for that which they no longer deem useful,

⁵⁰⁵ Ziolkowski terms this the flight to India.

⁵⁰⁶ Such as utopia or socialism / Marxism.

⁵⁰⁷ Ziolkowski terms this as myth.

appropriate or authentic. Ultimately they are not putting Straight Edge, or punk, forward as a replacement religion.

Certainly Straight Edge is in many ways directly targeted at the pain experience by Generation X and offers a salvation for that. 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. For example, if one expresses a view on religion as corrupt, one is expected to explicate justifiable reasons or face derision.

Within the physical responses to the music the adherents are enabled to reach a state of rapture which can, on occasion, lead to an epiphanic moment. It can also be argued that reaching a state of rapture is another way of re-enchanting the world for these individuals. The music often becomes what Bennett describes as “an omnipresent aspect of their day to day existence”,⁵⁰⁸ thus making re-enchantment much more grounded in the mundane realities of everyday life instead of a more abstract connection with a sense of the divine.

Admittedly I have just demonstrated some aspects of Straight Edge that could begin to justify it being termed a successful surrogate. However, when we consider the sustainability or applicability of the subculture then we are on less sure footing. Straight Edge has only been in existence since 1981, less than thirty years to date, and therefore we cannot yet know its sustainability within the long term. There are indications that the next generation are maintaining interest with Straight Edge and indeed are forming an allegiance to it in numbers analogous with those from the late 80s and late 90s.⁵⁰⁹ It is difficult to imagine the hardcore

⁵⁰⁸ Bennett A. *Cultures of Popular Music*. (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2001), p.1.

⁵⁰⁹ The early to mid-90s experienced a significant rise in the number of adherents on a scale that exceeded all previous numbers and has not been repeated since. This is largely credited with the move out of the Regan

scene without some dimension of Straight Edge, admittedly, but this is something that must be left to the sands of time.

In addition the issue of sustainability is further complicated by the fact that we are only now reaching the middle age with the generation of people who began the movement, and to date no study has been conducted examining their adherence as they have aged. While this research began to address this issue, field work in this area was restricted due to finances and time, resulting in significantly less access to those who were older than myself.⁵¹⁰ This is something I would anticipate redressing in future research, which I shall shortly deal with in the final section of this chapter. Indications are that a significant number of individuals have moved away from Straight Edge as they have left their 30s, and for a plethora of reasons.⁵¹¹ However equally those who remain maintain a level of dedication matching that which they displayed when younger.⁵¹²

With regards to applicability outside of its own sphere, Straight Edge is an intense lifestyle choice which certainly has parallels with fundamentalism and a moral code that is similar to that found in many religions. However, it is so thoroughly enmeshed and dependent upon hardcore punk that the two are virtually inseparable. This reliance upon hardcore punk makes it extremely difficult to apply Straight Edge outside of itself, making it unappealing to those who do not enjoy, appreciate or understand the music and punk on a deeper level.

I did interview some individuals who have chosen abstinence as a lifestyle but had either never heard of Straight Edge, or were aware of it but not interested in it in any way.⁵¹³ They expressed no need for community as it is found within the subculture, no sense of having the ability to change the world around them, and no desire for direct action. Interestingly they also

era, the resurgence in popularity of hardcore music, and the rise of positive Straight Edge bands such as Good Clean Fun, Bold, etc.

⁵¹⁰ This was further complicated by the notion within punk that you demonstrate respect for your elders by waiting for them to approach you and signal your acceptance before making requests from them.

⁵¹¹ Lahickey Beth. *All Ages*. (Huntington Beach: Revelation Records Publishing, 1997).

⁵¹² Jones R. *Out Of Step: Faces of Straight Edge*. (Philadelphia: Empire Press, 2007).

⁵¹³ A.B and H.C. for example.

did not foresee abstinence as anything more than how they were living now and were more than happy to acknowledge that they may choose to begin consumption at any time without guilt.

I think spirituality is an important part of my overall identity, I guess it's more important than abstinence if I am honest ...I don't value it enough, it's just a part of me but it might not be a part of who I am when I'm older and that's ok too.⁵¹⁴

Comments such as H.C's would be anathema to Straight Edge adherents; some would even consider them as breaking edge. Given this intensity of dedication, known as true till death, combined with the very specific music and lifestyle, it is difficult to justify claiming that as a successful surrogate for religion Straight Edge would be applicable outside of hardcore punk.

The final area I wish to consider in deciding if Straight Edge is a successful surrogate for religion is that of going beyond religion rather than just perfecting or mastering it. Throughout this research I have repeatedly stressed that adherents are syncretically utilising aspects of different religions – old, traditional, esoteric and newly emerging – and combining them with popular culture and a secular construction of society. Therefore I have to conclude that they are not going beyond religion per se, but are utilising religion as it is. What they are going beyond is the institutions, the authority figures and the perceived normative way of only having one faith.

In conclusion then Straight Edge cannot be justifiably and unequivocally termed a successful surrogate for religion. It is a surrogate that is currently working for a specific group of people, but it has not been in existence long enough nor does it have a wide enough appeal to be considered sustainably successful, at least not yet. It would perhaps be more accurate to describe it as a work in progress. However where it can lay claim to success is in providing us with a new model for understanding religion, an invaluable tool and contribution in its own right.

⁵¹⁴ H.C. interview with researcher, 25.01.10 Glasgow.

Further areas of development

Undertaking this research required that I put myself in the position of making a critical examination of a subculture I belong to and that forms a significant part of my own identity construction. This entailed having to acknowledge and confront the aspects that are less than desirable, such as the violence that can break out at shows and the militant minority. Worse than confronting and acknowledging them, I had to lay them open to those who are not part of the subculture for examination and judgement.

Despite those reservations, it ultimately seems a project worth undertaking to shed light on a much neglected area of subcultural studies, which is that of spiritual identity. I hoped that through acknowledging the negative aspects of the subculture, in this research and in the work of Haenfler and Wood, there would emerge a possibility of discussion and improvement within Straight Edge. Furthermore, it also provided an opportunity to explore an aspect of punk that typically gets buried in the usual attempts to examine it from a Marxist perspective or as a site of rebellion or a youth subculture. That is, an examination of how those who have remained within punk past the exuberance of youth have settled into their identity and found a way to combine it with the need to earn a living and carve a place for themselves within society.

The fieldwork dimension of the research gave insight into areas of Straight Edge that I had not anticipated being raised, such as the notion of salvation. However, some aspects were not able to be explored in the depth I had wanted due to financial constraints. For example, I was unable to spend as long as was initially planned in the US, and therefore was unable to build up sufficient relationships with informants and become well enough known and trusted to gain the depth of interviews that I would have preferred. This has resulted in a definite sense that there is still a significant number of areas in which the work could be further developed. The final brief section of this chapter will lay out those areas.

Throughout this thesis there have been a number of references made to issues which concern the body – dancing, tattooing, clothing – in particular with relation to violence. The nature of violence within punk raises two important questions. First, is the violence, or rather the pain associated with it virtuous, willed or vicarious? Second can violence ever be a positive thing that enables community and meaning making?

As the focus of this thesis was on the notion of Straight Edge as a potential surrogate for religion, with a core emphasis on authenticity, and the questions raised by the issue of the body and pain required a greater emphasis and background than can be afforded here, I elected not to engage with it in detail. However, it is an issue that demands further research particularly if we look at it from the perspective of asking the question; *of can violence be a force of positive creativity, and a means of forming and solidifying community and meaning?*

Further research into this area would enable to me re-engage with the questions of classification that Chapter Four raised in the notion of ‘otherness’ and the theory of Orientalism. Typically within academic work and media representation violence is presented as abhorrent and negative. Those individuals who engage in violence are often condemned at worst and classified as deviant at best. Can this norm be subverted without overstepping the bounds of morality? Could violence ever be a positive thing? How can we understand those who deliberately and willingly engage in violence without classifying them as deviant or fetishists?

The colonial past of the West in which violence was ‘justified’ as a means of saving a person’s soul, or even as a means of making them ‘a human being’, has left some lasting scars. Post colonial theory in attempting to enable societies to gain a rounded understanding of exactly what happened during colonial times emphasise the need to move beyond the past. The strongest tool for doing so lies in enabling a multitude of voices to rise to the fore that were once silenced by the dominant ideologies and powers.

Said's work on the smothering of the voices of subalterns by Orientalists provides a key feature for this research in two key aspects. First in highlighting the problem that exists in allowing a multitude of voices within academia – in particular the voices of those deemed less 'capable' be that through race, economic background or educational achievement. This is further problematised through the paralysis of academics unwilling to speak for the 'other' so resulting in silence, what Spivak refers to as a conscience salve. Secondly Said's work highlights the complicit nature of institutions and organisations in ensuring that stratified structure exists within society.

Further research into the areas of violence, pain and the body would have a clear objective of bringing a new, previously unheard, voice to the academic discourse on religious and secular divide. This was not the dismissed or subjugated voice of the subaltern, but rather the disenfranchised voice of Straight Edge punks in the UK and the USA. Themselves a part of the dominant ideology and power and yet because of the construction of modern Western society, and their refusal of co-option, they occupy a subcultural space that was frequently denigrated and attacked both physically and linguistically. Post colonialism's concern with the 'subaltern' and the suppression of the 'subaltern's voices' would be reflected in attempts to hear the voices of the marginalised, disinherited individuals who adhere to a hardcore punk or Straight Edge identity, in particular through their music and their approach to violence.

As with any movement or subculture, remaining static is essentially a death knell; flexibility and expansion are a necessity to ensure longevity. Adaption is therefore a key concept, one which we already find at work within Straight Edge in the approach they have taken to spirituality. I am interested in following this in the coming decades to monitor if that flexibility and adaption remain, and if so, what they become or morph into in terms of how spirituality is expressed. Will they reach a point which they determine to be a pinnacle, and thus attempt to reach no further?

I suspect that no such pinnacle will be reached. This is a subset of a subculture that exists in opposition to the behaviour and attitudes deemed acceptable and desirable within the punk culture. To maintain a position of opposition whilst still being an integral and contributing part of that culture requires adaption and flexibility. Furthermore it was obvious in the interviews I undertook that while the participants enjoyed and learned from their syncretic approach they were not entirely fulfilled by it. They were aware that they were only at the beginning of a journey. They fully anticipated changes, obstacles, disappointments and unimaginable new ideas.

It is possible that as this engagement with spirituality continues, a discourse could arise within Straight Edge as to whether they should consider it to be a religion. I have asserted within this thesis that Straight Edge is not a religion despite there being a number of comparable dimensions, but there may come a time when this is challenged or overturned by the adherents themselves as their engagement with spirituality continues. If this is the case then it radically turns on its head indeed our understanding of what constitutes a religion. Equally if Straight Edge became much more like a traditional religion then the thesis and conclusions forwarded as a result of this research would have to be radically revised.

A particularly interesting area of potential further research regarding this subculture became apparent during interviews -- that of parenting. The age of those I had chosen to focus on as a cohort was such that they were beginning to have children. Parenthood brings with it much joy but also much responsibility and importantly a need to establish and become an authority figurehead or role. This is a subculture known for its derision and disregard for traditional sources of authority, a reputation they revel in at times. Therefore how does one maintain an authentic self within the subculture if one has to be an authority figure for the sake of a child, who does actually require authority?

Jim Lindberg, the lead singer of Pennywise, has been asking himself the same question, having three small children.

So do we as punk rock parents teach our kids the bumper sticker mentality of 'reject all authority' in every instance, even our own? ...The balance between being the cool parent and the figure of fair and just authority is the balance beam all parents have to learn to negotiate ...it is even tougher for a parent from the Gen X punk scene. We feel so close to our own psycho adolescence, where we wanted to do anything to piss off our parents, and remembering what maniacal taskmasters our parents were and how we hated them for it, that now we overcompensate by trying to be the supercool parent.⁵¹⁵

This is actually a question that goes to the very heart of the notion of authenticity that was explored in Chapter Six. For while we know that respect for authority has to be earned, parents still have to demand obedience in certain circumstances. Thus it makes for an interesting question of how you can authentically and honestly get on a stage and stand in a crowd singing and screaming the words to a song which advocates civil disobedience or rejection of authority, and yet know that you have to insist that your children eat their vegetables, do their homework, go to bed at a reasonable time and so on.

Parenthood may in fact be the reason or means by which some Straight Edge punks are in a sense forced to grow into adulthood. This then begs the question of maintaining subcultural affiliation beyond youth, beyond external pressures and responsibilities, and will doubtless have an impact on identity construction.

As the child ages and enters the teenage years it is natural and healthy for them to rebel against their parents. For Straight Edge parents this can be extremely worrying as rebellion could involve very dangerous behaviour with alcohol and drugs, yet they are also caught in the paradox of being unable to deny the importance of their own rebellion to their current identity. This is an issue that is beginning to emerge within lyrics, fanzines and wider punk discourse.

⁵¹⁵ Lindberg Jim. *Punk Rock Dad*. (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), p.199.

She's my hardcore girl, she's strong and beautiful. He's my hardcore boy, never listens to the rules. You're my hardcore kids and even when you are bad, you make me proud to be your Straight Edge dad. I love you so much; I wanna teach you everything I know, about hardcore, punk rock, rap and rock and roll. Stay away from drugs and always stick together. When the world turns its back, you can count on each other, that's true.⁵¹⁶

In relation to spirituality, this is a generation who predominantly grew up experiencing little by way of parental interference within religion and spirituality. This has led to them finding their own path, which as we have observed within this thesis has resulted in the search for and reliance upon surrogates for religion to find and create an authentic self and life. Having begun to find this with Straight Edge, are these parents then going to insist that their offspring follow suit, or are they going to allow for freedom of choice as they had?

One Straight Edge parent I interviewed in Berkeley who is in his early 40s spoke the following statement regarding the raising of his daughter and spirituality.

She lives with her mom in New York now. I raised her for quite a while. Her mom's Jewish, but I raised her to be pagan Celtic so she wouldn't get all caught up with the bullshit ritual brainwashing side of religion and then not really understand that it isn't supposed to be about that. It is supposed to be about how compassionate you are, how you connect and are a part of the wider world and society and how you have to fight to make it better. Once she got old enough then I told her about all the other religions and told her she had to go and read up on them, find out about them and then she could choose what she wanted to be, but knowledge comes first you know.⁵¹⁷

This would be a fascinating area in which to continue this research, an area that has yet to be examined both from the perspective of punk and from spirituality as it arises and is practiced in modern Western societies. It would necessitate much more in-depth and lengthy field work in both the UK and the USA than I was able to undertake for this thesis. To further expand it one could also use a comparative method by examining the UK and the USA with a secular country

⁵¹⁶ 'sXe dad', Wisdom In Chains, Everything You Know, 2009, I Scream Records.

⁵¹⁷ KB, interview with researcher, 28.10.09 Berkeley.

such as Sweden or an overtly fundamentalist country such as Iran and Iraq, particularly as they have made such “anti-religious” music illegal .

The latter would further test my argument that Straight Edge is a surrogate for religion but has not yet reached the status of a successful surrogate because it relies so strongly on music for its status as a surrogate and identity as a subculture. If the music is not only outlawed but considered anti-religious can the subculture even begin to function as a surrogate, or will it morph into something entirely different Or will it remain simply as a youth based subculture albeit with a radically different meaning to the term underground?

Another area for future development was raised in Chapter Five; this is the place and role of technology. Those that I focused on as a cohort for this research were that of Generation X, a group that has had an immersion from birth in technology to such an extent that it is an integral part of their lives and identity. However, they are also a generation that prefers physical community to virtual community. It is the upcoming generation that appears to prefer a social life based in the virtual world, as much as if not more than the real world.

Technology has a role to play within punk, hardcore and Straight Edge and is particularly important with regards to the D.I.Y. ethic. “In some ways the DIY ethic is a lot more attainable and affordable now with the advent of computer-based recording – this facilitates creative control and distribution possibilities we could only have dreamed about having access to.”⁵¹⁸

I came to punk as a young teenager in the early ‘90s, which was in some ways the second revolution of the wheel, as it were. While D.I.Y. was still very much emphasised the notion of what it was had greatly altered, as the world of technology had progressed at a rapid speed, which seems almost lethargic compared to today. This has happened again with the digital explosion and the advent of sites such as MySpace and YouTube, and D.I.Y. has to be reassessed and redefined once again.

⁵¹⁸ Pete, email interview with researcher, 09.09.09

It will be interesting to examine the notion of community as the technology continues to lead us further into a virtual-based world. Community is of paramount importance to the survival and progression of Straight Edge as a subculture. However, are we now to be faced with a generation who will only experience the music through digital soundbites compressed and then filtered into their iPods or mp3 players? If this is the case we will observe a generation divide, as younger generations eschew live performances.

I do not believe it will reach such an extreme, for ultimately this is music to be experienced live, with other people, and will remain so. Listening to a band such as Knuckledust, The Nerve Agents, Converge, Bold, xTyrantx or 13 Broken Fingers on a computer or stereo is certainly enjoyable, but it is not comparable to the release provided by a live show. It is certainly not capable of providing what is needed to achieve a state of rapture as was discussed in Chapter Four.

Of course there is no way to predict what technology will provide next in terms of home entertainment. There may well be something in the future that enables some recreation of a live show as a virtual reality. If technology expands to such an extent then future generations will have to redefine what it means to be an adherent of a subculture. It will also have a massive impact on how they assess and practice religion or spirituality, as currently they are dependent upon community, interaction, live music and a space to claim and redefine as one's own.

These are fascinating questions which I hope to be able to answer in future research. The purpose of this research has been to argue that Straight Edge is a surrogate for religion because it enables the creation and maintenance of an authentic self and life and the potential for a literal or figurative salvation. It has achieved this through the music which creates a sense of rapture, which in turn can lead to an epiphanic moment or expression. It also relies on community and the punk D.I.Y. ethic, both of which are uniquely resultant from the social, economic, political and moral turmoil that gave rise to both punk and Generation X.

Now is the time for the kids to take a stand, for what is right in our lives. It's up to you and me, to make a change, move forward. We won't be left behind, this is our life, our time. It's time to set things right, no excuses this time, for what's been said and done. Take control of your life, just stand your ground ...and go against the grain.⁵¹⁹



fig 42 cover of Breakout Records Straight Edge compilation album released in 1999.

⁵¹⁹ 'Direction of Things to Come', Ensign, Direction of things to come, 1997, Indecision Records.

Appendix 1

Photographs from the late 1970s.



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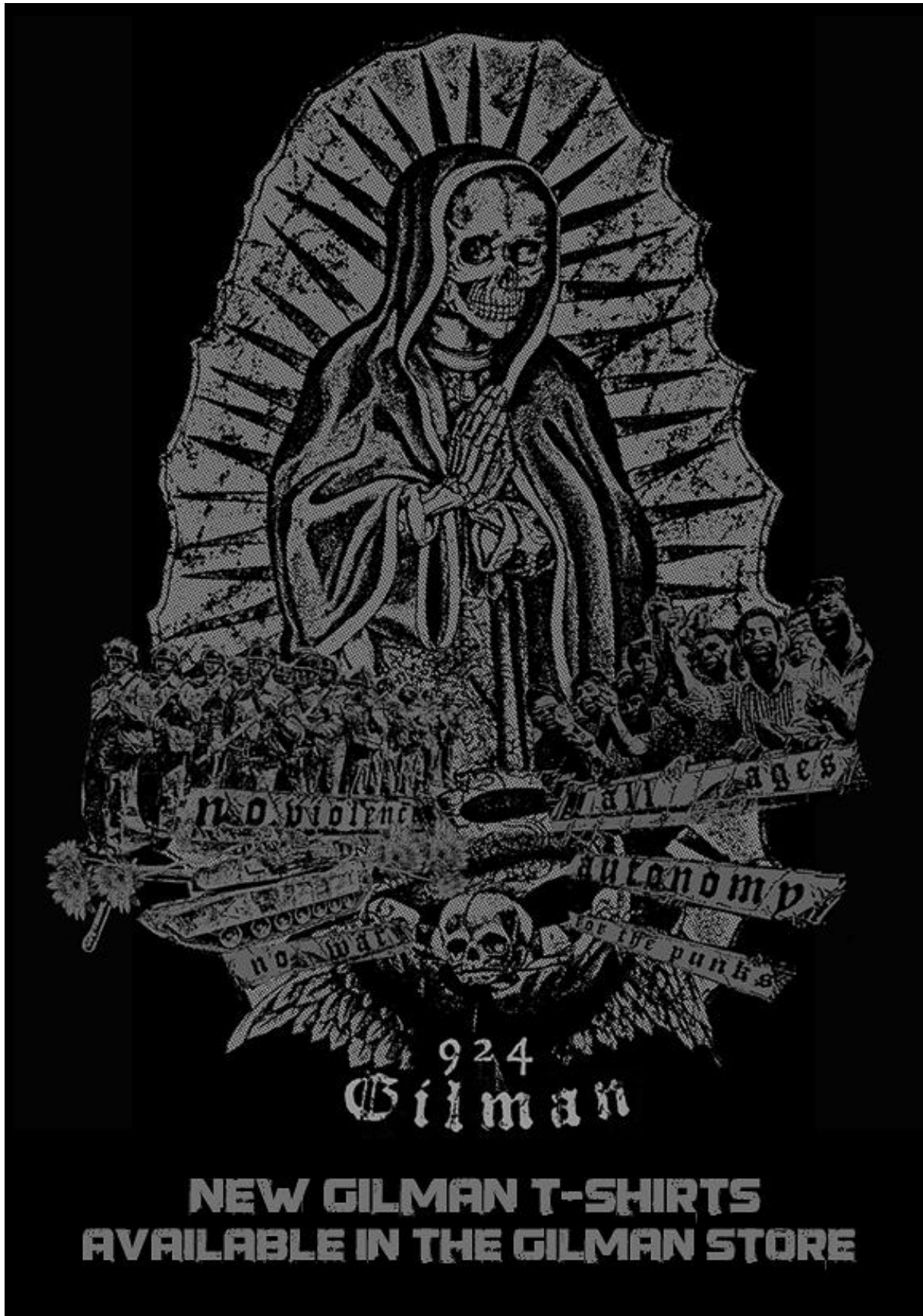


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⁵²⁰ Photograph supplied by Billy and used with permission.

⁵²¹ http://www.bbc.co.uk/leicester/content/articles/2007/09/17/punk_rockers_feature.shtml last accessed January 2011

Appendix 2 Gilman Street Image enlarged



Appendix 3

Interviewees details

All interviewees were given the opportunity to choose how they wanted to appear within the thesis. They were each given the choice of their own name, their initials or a pseudonym. Those who selected a pseudonym are indicated through the use of '___' with the name. The pseudonym's I selected from my family members.

K.B. is in his early 40's, he is separated from the mother of his child but has regular contact with his daughter. He moves around the United States a lot to gain employment and pay child support. I met him when he was panhandling on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley. We spent over five hours in conversation and he left Berkeley the next day to travel to a job in Arizona which he hoped would hold until spring time.

Tito is in his late 40's. He is married with a step daughter, he is the son in law of the woman I stayed with while in Berkeley. He played in one of the first ska hardcore punk bands in the early 80s. He is currently attempting to make a living as an architect and photographer. We spent over six hours together in conversation as he drove me around Oakland and Alameda on Halloween.

Ann is in her mid to late 30's. She is originally from New York but after a period of time living in Europe she is now living, working and going to community college in Oakland. I met her at an show in San Francisco. She had a conversation in between the bands playing and continued it when she gave me a lift home.

Chris is in his early 30's, he was born and raised in the Bay Area and still resides there. He is currently unemployed but is loosely involved with a number of bands in the area, designing their flyers and album artwork. I met Chris while queuing for a show in San Francisco, where we spent over an hour in conversation.

Marc is in his early 30's, he was born and raised in the Bay Area and still resides there. He is best friends with Chris. He makes a living as the lyricist, vocalist and guitarist for a prominent Bay Area Straight Edge band. He was invited by Chris to join in the conversation taking place in a show queue in San Francisco.

Kieran is in his late 20's. He resides in the Bay Area, he gave no information regarding his employment status. Kieran was not a Straight Edge adherent, in fact he had no knowledge of it prior to interrupting and joining in the conversation with Chris and Marc.

Terry is in his early to mid 30's. He is currently homeless and panhandles on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley, which is where I met him. I spoke to him briefly a number of times over a period of days before engaging him in an extended conversation.

Anna is in her late 20's or early 30's. I met her briefly in a book store in Santa Cruz, where she engaged me in conversation regarding a book I was looking at.

'John' was in his early to mid 30's. I met him at the Cultural Centre in San Francisco when I attended some Dharma Punx groups. He had recently moved to the area from Portland and was attempting to

start up a Straight Edge band, he also designed band artwork for his friends and t shirt designs. He had recently split up from his long term partner and had no children.

S.T. is in his mid 30's. He is a tattoo artist in the Bay Area. We spoke for over four hours and then spent three with him tattooing me. He grew up in Berkeley and was one of the early attendees of Gilman Street. He had moved out of state in his 20's but had returned before he turned 30.

Kevin was in his late 20's. He was someone I knew through his friendship with my brother and from seeing him at shows in Glasgow, although we had never really talked much. Kevin had just finished his degree at the University of Glasgow in computers and was planning to go travelling if he couldn't get into teaching. He is originally from Aberdeen but moved to Glasgow to be closer to and more involved with the scene.

Ewan was the ex-boyfriend of Kevin's older sister, he was in his late 20's. He was born and raised in the Glasgow area and remains there. He had been involved in various aspects of the punk scenes in Scotland. He makes his living as a tattoo artist and when I spoke with him he was in the process of setting up his own punk inspired clothing company – Psychoskin clothing. He is also a musician in a number of Glasgow bands.

Karl is in his late 20's. He was born and raised just outside of Durham and lives there today making a living as a tattoo artist who owns his own business. Karl was also a musician and had been in a number of Straight Edge bands in his local area. Karl was not married and had no children but was in a long term relationship.

Hannah is in her mid 30's. She was born in Edinburgh but lives now in Glasgow. She had been in a number of Straight Edge bands during her teens and 20's. She was currently training to become a tattoo artist. She was not married but was considering having her first child with her current long term partner.

Anthony is in his early 30's. He was born and raised in Paisley but now lives in Glasgow. He was trained and worked for many years as a tattoo artist and graphic designer (band artwork and t shirt designs) but had recently given it up to try and take his band to a professional level. He was planning to move to London in the summer of 2010 to achieve this. Anthony is married but has no children.

Frank is in his mid 30's. He was born and raised in Belfast and still resides there. He was someone that I knew from my teenage years and had loosely kept in touch with, I had not discussed my work with him though. Frank had trained as a teacher in Northern Ireland and had spent a number of years earning a living teaching primary school music. When he turned 31 he gave up teaching and decided to make a living out of band promotion, which he was starting to see some limited success with when I spoke to him. He is not married nor does he have any children.

E.D. is in his early 30's. He was born just outside Leeds but he lives in Manchester now. He has been in a number of Straight Edge bands in a variety of roles. Currently he is a guitarist and takes responsibility for booking shows and doing promotion online. He is not married nor does he have any children, he has recently terminated a long term relationship.

Pete is in his 40's. I was given his contact details through a friend and interacted with him online solely. He is not Straight Edge but was involved with the early punk scene and is currently involved with the Rastafarian scene in the UK.

Stephen is in his late 30's and is from Greater Manchester but currently lives in Edinburgh. He works as a drug and alcohol counsellor, although he originally trained as a probation officer. He is a drummer in a Straight Edge band. He is not married and has no children, but he is in a long term relationship.

Eli is in his late 20's, early 30's. I communicated with him solely via email. He is the brother of Nate. He is no longer Straight Edge, having broken edge at 19, however he was happy to be involved with the research.

Nate is in his early 30's. He has played in a number of Straight Edge bands and is currently writing his first Straight Edge novel. He is married with no children. I communicated with him solely via email.

S.G. is in her early 30's she is still very much involved with her local Straight Edge scene although she finds it difficult as she moves rather a lot. She is also increasingly becoming involved or reconnecting with her Jewish faith. I communicated with her solely via email.

'Ian' is in his early 50's. I met him at a Stiff Little Fingers show in Glasgow and we chatted briefly for less than an hour. 'Ian' was originally from London, but had lived in America for a number of years and been involved with a number of bands as a musician and a tour organiser and promoter. He is currently living in Glasgow to take care of an elderly parent.

Matt is in his early 30's. He is from the Greater Manchester area and is a member of a Baptist church. He is divorced and has no children. He makes his living as a drug counsellor for the correctional service and plays in a Straight Edge band as a bassist.

'Heather' is in her late 40's. She is from Blackpool originally but currently lives in Glasgow for her husband's work. She is married and has four step children but they do not live with her and her husband. She is currently unemployed but has taught art and music in the past, she is considering training for qualifications in art or music therapy. She attends but is not a member of her local Church of Scotland, along with her husband.

Billy is in his early 50's. He is an undergraduate student at Stirling University, who I was a seminar tutor for. He is not Straight Edge but was involved with punk since it began in the early 70s. He is from Blantyre but now lives in Edinburgh. He spent a number of years in London in his late teens and early 20's as an integral part of the early punk scene there.

H.C. is in her early 20's. She is from England but is currently studying at the University of Glasgow for her undergraduate degree. She is not Straight Edge but does actively pursue a life of abstinence. She has been involved with Buddhism and is currently attending a Quaker church in Glasgow.

A.B. is in his early 20's. He is from Glasgow and still lives there. He is attending the University of Glasgow to gain an undergraduate degree. He is not Straight Edge, although he is aware of it, but he does actively pursue a life of abstinence. He is not involved with any religious institution or engaged with any faith. He is not married but is in a long term relationship with H.C.

Suyin is in her late 20's. She has been my sister in law for 18 months. She is Malaysian, but is seeking permanent residency in the UK. She is not Straight Edge, but was aware of it before she met me and has a number of friends that are involved with it. She is married with no children, and is not involved with any religious faith or institution.

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<http://www.reason.com/news/show/36684.html>

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<http://www.blia.org/english/publications/booklet/pages/38.html>

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