

Introduction: Cross-Fertilising ‘Popular’, ‘Sacred’, and ‘Youth’

Antti-Ville Kärjä & Kimi Kärki

The collection at hand is based on a series of selected papers that were delivered at the August 2014 conference by the name *Holy Crap!* that was, according to its subtitle, dedicated to interrogating the intersections of the popular and the sacred in youth cultures. While this formulation subordinates the first two aspects to the third, they should be treated as equal. The reason for this particular order was merely an institutional one, as the main organiser of the event was the Finnish Youth Research Society and Network. Indeed, in the conference call the aim was formulated also by emphasising the need to interrogate understandings of popular and youth cultures in relation to the contested phenomena of (post)secularisation, re-enchantment and the emergence of alternative spiritualities. Seeking to analyse the social and cultural changes accompanying these phenomena, the conference aimed to facilitate interdisciplinary dialogue between youth studies, cultural studies, religious studies and the broader social sciences.

Regardless of the order of the conceptual markers, the conference was – and by extension, the present collection is – predicated on the possibilities the intersection of these three concepts provide for re-assessing and questioning their mutual interrelationships. Regarding the notion of the sacred, recent years have witnessed a growing interest in scrutinising the relevance of popular culture for the fields of religious studies and theology. Youth, for its part, has lost its privileged status as an age-based category within studies of popular culture, but young people remain vital (sub)cultural agents and at the forefront of new religious movements. There has also been renewed interest in the ubiquitous contestations and ambiguities around the notion of the “popular” in light of the increasing commodification and standardisation of culture, the opposition this engenders, and the cultural drift into virtual worlds.

The first chapter of this collection contains some general theoretical insights by Dr Antti-Ville Kärjä, even if he unravels them by reflecting his own personal experiences in New Zealand, Hong Kong, Brazil, and elsewhere, at the holy sites now swarmed by hordes of tourists. Kärjä considers the role of popular, especially in the youth research context, where popular culture is the basis for a lot of shared cultural signifiers. He recalls the crucial importance of the critical theories of religion in our secular, material and digital era, where a lot of religious practices continue to flourish in new and sometimes surprising cultural contexts. Ideologies are not dead, the sanctification of race within the white supremacists groups being a primary example of the more alarming current reactions to global migration. Interdisciplinary analysis and expertise is needed badly.

Celtic music is often regarded to contain sacral and sublime aural elements, retaining a romantic and paganist heritage during the Enlightenment and towards the current seemingly secular era. In his chapter, Javier Campos Calvo-Sotelo traces the young celtic music listeners’ identity processes, and especially the idea of de-secularisation of the genre. He claims that there has been and still remains a lot of countercultural power in Celtic music – the current ongoing economic, political, moral, collective and individual crisis has led a lot of young individuals to struggle and search for deeper meanings and simultaneously work on their identities via spiritual study and self-development.

Clare Diviny’s chapter reflects the popular television series genre that could be labelled as supernatural teen television. Series like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, *Charmed*, *Supernatural*, and *The Vampire Diaries* offer a good target for genre analysis. Diviny approaches the genre via generic themes such as mystery, humour, presence of supernatural elements, and the gendered depiction of the main characters. These core generic elements offer the viewer a ‘spiritual smorgasboard’, which is often profoundly philosophical and complex.

Death touches us all. Ina Magel’s chapter deals with the ceremonial quality of mourning the past ones. The ancient death rituals are compared to contemporary youth culture versions of mourning, the most extreme version being the ‘Cannibal Cocktail’, a party drink containing some ashes of a lost friend. Magel argues that ancient pagan practices could and should still retain some relevance in the contemporary ritualistic mourning, and proposes that ‘Death Cafés’ could work as sites of knowledge and learning about the ancient ways of dealing with death and dying.

Nina Maskulin observes the film reception among Finnish teenagers, in particular in the context of the apocalyptic action film *2012*. The chapter is based on one particular interview, which works as a case study of a larger

qualitative survey amongst the Finnish teens. In particular Maskulin wants to understand how the interviewed teen, 'Tim', frames historical, cultural, and social beliefs and attitudes that are represented in the film. Rather than a target of the study as such, the film works as a communicative tool that helps to understand and open the teenager's perceptions.

Our relation with the nature has changed in the digital era. Jonathan Rova discusses the adventure tripping as a tool for the formation of 'authentic identity'. Popular culture's relevance is in its powerful role as a mediator of cultural beliefs and values, but Rova suggests that the immersive digitalised social environment does not offer enough tools for identity formation. His solution is a retreat to wilderness, to a Levinasian face to face meeting across the campfire, a group adventure trip. Authenticity, according to Rova, is reached by touching and feeling the natural world, by experiencing concrete human relationships, away from urban and especially digital experience.

Sissel Undheim analyses the spiritual side of Lego toys by analysing the Lego Ninjago and Lego, Legends of Chima series. Both toy series are based on eastern/new age mythological settings, using for example the actual concept of chi / qi as a philosophical basis for the mythological narratives. Undheim traces the development in the use of religious references, starting with the more general imagery in the first series of Ninjago to the more complex theological/philosophical concepts addressed and redefined in Lego Chima.

Emily Winter explores the youth engagement strategies of UK-based Christian social action groups, more specifically in Christian Aid Collective, Tearfund Rhythms, and the SPEAK Network. The research on young people of religious faith is here focused on their attitudes towards social justice issues and politics, and their relation to popular culture – this relation being often referenced as the key site of sacred meaning-making among young people. But Winter offers us a more complex relation, more instrumental one, where popular culture is used as an expression of the religiously-inspired politics of everyday.

We hope that you enjoy this brief collection of refereed research papers, and that the multidisciplinary commentary and combination of the conceptual trinity of 'Popular', 'Sacred', and 'Youth' has added value and new meaningful insights for the discussions in cultural studies, comparative religious studies, and, especially, youth studies.