

The Role of Popular Music in the Construction of Alternative Spiritual Identities and Ideologies

GORDON LYNCH

Setting its discussion in the wider context of the decline of institutional religion among young adults, the rise of alternative spiritualities, and the mediatization of religion, the article explores the significance of popular music in the development of alternative spiritual identities and ideologies. A summary is given of leading research conducted in this field by Christopher Partridge and Graham St. John. It is argued that they demonstrate the encoding of alternative spiritual symbols and ideologies into certain forms of popular music, they fail to give an adequate account of how audiences actively make use of this music to construct alternative spiritual identities or frameworks of meaning. The article concludes that researchers in the field of religion and popular music need to draw more on theories and methods developed in ethno-musicology and the sociology of music, and suggests that the work of Tia De Nora on music in everyday life raises important questions about the qualities and context of the act of listening to music that could generate more nuanced accounts of how popular music shapes alternative spiritual identities and ideologies.

INTRODUCTION

During the course of the summer of 2006, I have been working with colleagues in the United Kingdom to develop the parameters of a major forthcoming national research program on religion and society. Reflecting with colleagues on the priority research questions for this program has confirmed some of the fundamental trends that are shaping religion and society in Britain, and that are also evident in many other Western societies.

First, we are seeing the decline of institutional religion—or more specifically, a drop in the numbers of people actively participating in traditional religious rituals (see, e.g., Bruce 2002; Voas and Crocket 2005). This is evident not only in falling church attendances, which are affecting all denominations in the United Kingdom, but also in falling numbers of people bringing their children for baptism and choosing to get married in church. Declining levels of participation are not only evident in Christianity, however, with synagogues and mosques in Britain also experiencing falling numbers of participants. As a consequence, it is not surprising to find that almost half of Britons report themselves as having “no religion,” with this figure rising to around 60 percent for those in the age range 18–34.¹ These trends are clearly more pronounced in the United Kingdom than in the United States, in which levels of religious affiliation and participation are much higher, but evidence of declining levels of church involvement among young adults in America suggests that similar trends may be underway.²

Second, there is the much reported and sometimes overhyped rise of the phenomenon of “spirituality.” Emerging as a set of discourses and practices that are often presented in distinction from “religion”—and certainly as being more inclusive than traditional religious affiliations and identities—interest in spirituality has become more pervasive over the past 20 years. This is evident partly in the growing market for books, magazines, and other media and services that explore different approaches to personal spirituality, and that typically (in the United Kingdom and many other Western European societies) draw on alternative, mystical, or esoteric religious sources in preference to traditional, doctrinal Christianity. But the rise of spirituality is also evident in a

Gordon Lynch is Senior Lecturer in Religion and Culture at the University of Birmingham, UK, and the lead convenor of the UK Research Network for Theology, Religion and Popular Culture. E-mail: g.a.lynych@bham.ac.uk

number of different professional settings (including education, health care, youth work, business, and psychotherapy), in which an interest in the spirituality of the co-worker, client, or patient is seen as a valid and necessary part of professional practice. The numbers of people actually involved in associational activities focused on spirituality may actually be quite small, compared to the grand claims of some writers that we are living through a “spirituality revolution.”³ But it is clear that alternative spiritualities are providing social spaces and cultural resources for religious affiliation, identities, and meaning-construction beyond the walls of the church, synagogue, or mosque.

Third, there is the growing importance of media for contemporary religion and spirituality. This importance extends beyond issues of the representation of religious traditions and groups in entertainment and broadcast media, to the ways in which the expansion of globalized media is providing a new set of practices and resources for conducting religious rituals, shaping and reinforcing one’s religious identity, and refining the religious meanings through which one interprets personal experience and the wider world. As Stewart Hoover (2006), Lynn Schofield Clark (2005), and others have commented, electronic media form an increasingly important resource for the way in which people “do” religion in contemporary society.

It is in the context of these three interlocking issues that the study of religion and popular music can have particular significance in scholarship on contemporary religion and society. Music has, in the past, been an important cultural resource and practice for religious communities. From the heretical songs of Arius, to Wesleyan hymns, and the spiritual songs of African Americans, music has served a number of functions, such as reinforcing religious identities, establishing a sense of collectivity within religious groups, acting as a means of theological expression, celebration, protest, and lament, providing a subcultural resource and practice against dominant religious identities and orthodoxies, and serving as a focus and stimulus of religious experience and sentiment. Yet despite the close relationship that music and religion have often enjoyed, the sociological study of the interlocking trends of the decline of traditional religious institutions, the rise of alternative spiritualities, and the mediatization of religion have tended to neglect the significance of music in these processes in favor of focusing on other media, such as film, television, and the Internet.

A growing number of studies published in the past few years have attempted to address this gap. An important writer in this regard is Robin Sylvan (2002, 2005), who has argued that a broad range of popular music genres serve religious functions—of community, meaning, and experience of the numinous—for a postecclesial generation of young adults. Sylvan’s work is provocative, but open to critique for extending the category of “religion” to cultural practices that often do not make use of any explicit religious discourses and are not necessarily understood as religious by producers or consumers of the music. Sylvan’s use of empirical data to support his case tends to accentuate the ways in which popular music serves “religious” functions, and tends to neglect the much wider range of social and cultural uses that playing and listening to music can have. If popular music is religious—in Sylvan’s sense—then can the term religion be appropriately applied to a wide range of different leisure activities that apparently serve religious functions? The danger with Sylvan’s approach is an overstretching of the category of religion to the point of its dissipation and a disciplinary imperialism that imposes the category of “religion” on cultural practices in ways that distort or obfuscate their lived meaning for those involved in them.

A more limited, but arguably more promising way of thinking about the significance of popular music in relation to contemporary religious change concerns the role of popular music as a resource in stimulating the rise of alternative spiritual identities and ideologies. As Albanese (1990) has noted, alternative religious traditions have historically had their own musical advocates, such as the Hutchinson Family Singers of 19th-century America whose “simple and natural” (1990:1) singing style embodied and transmitted their particular nature-oriented religious beliefs. In the expansion of genres in mass-produced popular music since the 1960s,

there has also been a growing range of popular musical scenes that have made explicit use of nature-based, esoteric, and subversive religious ideas and symbolism. Many of these scenes have become globalized—from the heavy metal fandoms in North America, Scandinavia, and Israel, to the varied forms of electronic dance music focused around the Bay Area, Ibiza, Goa, and Phuket. While these scenes take localized variations, their global reach also creates cultural conditions in which certain alternative religious identities and ideologies can be transmitted across national boundaries to create the possibility of new, alternative religious transnational networks.

The leading research in this field has been undertaken by Christopher Partridge, a British religious studies scholar, and Graham St John, an Australian ethnographer of electronic dance music cultures. I want to summarize briefly Partridge's and St John's contribution to this debate, and also note limitations in their work, as a way of pointing toward a more nuanced exploration of the relationship between popular music and the formation of alternative spiritual identities.

In his recent two-volume work, *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, Christopher Partridge (2005a, 2005b) argues that popular music has been an essential medium in the transmission and popularization of alternative spiritual ideologies in postwar Western culture. Partridge accepts secularization accounts of contemporary society insofar as they point toward the declining social and cultural significance of institutional religion, in particular the Christian church. Where Partridge departs from secularization narratives, however, is in his suggestion that Western culture is undergoing a process of resacralization in which there is a turn from traditional, doctrinally orthodox Christianity to alternative spiritual traditions. These alternative traditions are referred to by Partridge as "occulture," which he conceives of as a heterogeneous cultural reservoir of esoteric, nature-centered, and Eastern spiritual ideologies and the various media and practices that perpetuate and transmit those ideologies. Partridge builds on Colin Campbell's (1972) earlier work on the rise of a "cultic milieu" of alternative spiritualities in the early 1970s, arguing that this alternative spiritual milieu has progressed further from the cultural margins in the 1970s to occupy increasingly mainstream cultural positions. It would have been hard to imagine in the early 1970s, for example, that books teaching Wiccan and Pagan beliefs and practices would be freely available in major chain bookstores such as Borders or Barnes & Noble by the turn of the millennium. As a consequence of this cultural transition, Partridge argues, traditional forms of religious belief and identity are increasingly seen as "uncool" by younger adults, and become confined to specific religious youth subcultures. By contrast, alternative spiritualities and the cultural practices that sustain them have greater cultural capital, and may be regarded as more credible within mainstream youth cultures.

Popular music, Partridge argues, has played a central role as a technology for this occultural process of resacralization. From the Beatles' turn to Eastern spirituality and Western psychedelica in the mid 1960s, Partridge traces a broad range of popular music genres that have been explicitly influenced by occultural ideologies and symbols, including rock, ambient, various subgenres of heavy metal, and electronic dance music (in particular psy-trance). This influence can be found in song lyrics, graphics for album covers, visuals at pop performances, and in pop musicians' own interpretative narratives about their work. It is also encoded in auditory ways through the use of musical sounds (such as the sitar drone on the Beatles' "Tomorrow Never Knows" from their *Revolver* album) that denote a sense of cultural "otherness," mystery, and ancient wisdom. Partridge also gives clear examples of the presence of occultural discourses and symbolism in magazines and other media associated with various popular music scenes, and argues that the evolution of the free festival scene—from hippie festivals in the 1960s to the raves of the late 1980s and early 1990s—were important cultural sites for the transmission of alternative spiritualities.

While Partridge's work demonstrates an authoritative grasp of post-1960s popular music, there are important aspects of his argument that need clarification or further development. It is

arguably premature given, for example, the relatively low numbers of people identifying themselves as Pagan or Wiccan in both the United Kingdom and the United States, to claim that alternative spiritualities are largely displacing more traditional religious beliefs and identities. Indeed, as Smith and Denton's (2005) work on the U.S. National Survey of Youth and Religion demonstrates, American teenagers actually tend to be relatively conservative in their religious affiliations. While Partridge may overemphasize the extent of the rise of occulture in the West, his argument about the role of popular music as a medium for transmitting alternative religious ideologies and identities remains an important one. But although Partridge gives clear evidence of pop musicians adopting alternative spiritual identities and ideologies (albeit for a diverse range of reasons), his current work on this so far has been largely historical, demonstrating the presence of occultural ideas and symbols in popular music recordings and performances. Where Partridge's work is far less detailed, however, relates to how audiences actually make use of this occultural material through the medium of popular culture to shape their own religious identities or systems of meaning.

A similar criticism could be made of the work of another leading researcher in this field, Graham St John. St John has been at the forefront of the study of religion and electronic dance-music cultures. His own research work focuses particularly on the psy-trance scene, but he has also played an important role in drawing together a wider range of scholarship on religion and electronic dance-music, notably through his edited book *Rave Culture and Religion* (St John 2004a), and a recent special edition of the journal *Culture and Religion* (St John 2006). St John (2004b), like Partridge, provides clear evidence of the influence of alternative spiritualities on the production of psy-trance music, on the organization of psy-trance dance events, and on the spiritual interpretations of the scene offered by such influential figures as Terence McKenna and Hakim Bey. Techno-shamanism, the notion of the rave as sacralized tribal gathering, Paganism and eco-spirituality, and even millenarian expectations surrounding the year 2012 as a time of global spiritual transformation are all in evidence in the narratives of psy-trance dance events organizers and various media surrounding the psy-trance scene. Indeed, the timing and location of some psy-trance events (e.g., solstice parties at Stonehenge, or the full moon parties of Goa and the Bay Area, or the global parties of Earth Healing Day) are clearly influenced by such alternative spiritual ideologies.

St John thus provides a substantial account of how the global psy-trance scene operates as a social and cultural network within which various alternative spiritual discourses operate. He also refers to the rave as a "difference engine," a cultural mechanism through which participants may experience some form of transformation, which may be referred to in terms of salvific discourses such as a raising of human consciousness, increased self-empowerment, deeper personal and spiritual integration, or reconnection with the sacred Earth (St John 2004c). Again, St John provides clear evidence of the use of such alternative spiritual discourses in narratives of rave transformation created by various organizers, intellectuals, and other participants in the scene. Like Partridge, though, St John has not yet given a detailed account of the way in which those who attend psy-trance dance events actually make use of such events to shape their religious identities and ideologies. It is clear from St John's work that many organizers of psy-trance events, and indeed many people who attend them, think of such spiritual uses of the rave experience as a possible (indeed, the correct) way to appropriate such experiences. Yet St John has not yet told us much about how people physically do this—either in the time and space of the rave event itself, or in other ways in which they negotiate their beliefs and identities in relation to their participation in the psy-trance scene. With more of St John's research due to be published in the next year or so, based on his extensive ethnographic work in this area, it is to be hoped that this will soon be corrected.

Although exploring a different popular music genre, Keith Kahn-Harris's (2006) forthcoming ethnography of the transnational extreme metal scene also promises to help us understand more about how audiences and fans make use of popular music as a resource for religious

identity-construction and meaning-building. Such studies may have much to offer in terms of complicating our understanding of how media and popular culture may—or indeed may not—be used as a resource for religious identity construction and may tell us more about the kinds of processes through which this happens.

In some of my own recent research, I have attempted to address the question of how popular music “audiences” use pop music as a source of religious identity and ideology (Lynch and Badger 2006). My work in this area involved exploring the meanings that young adults draw from their participation in the mainstream postrave dance scene in the United Kingdom. Rather than adopting a full ethnographic approach to this work, I conducted 39 semistructured interviews with clubbers outside of the context of the clubbing night out. In some respects this research was useful, confirming that the clubbers whom I interviewed tended to use the discourses of what Heelas (2000) has referred to as “expressive humanism” to make sense of why they valued clubbing and how clubbing had changed their lives. In my sample there was an almost complete absence of religious discourses, or even a discourse of clubbing “spirituality.” Rather than acting as a site for transmitting alternative spiritual ideologies, the mainstream dance scene that I was studying tended to reinforce discourses of the expressive self, personal authenticity, and cultural tolerance that are widespread in media and cultural sources in secularized, postmaterialist, liberal democratic societies. In one sense this finding is not surprising as the use of spiritual discourses or symbols in the mainstream dance nights that I was studying tend to be far more superficial and ironic than those to be found in the scenes studied by Partridge and St John; and in this sense, my research here was focusing more on secular British identities than on alternative spiritualities.

My own interview-based research still has significant limitations as well. While it tells us something about the cultural discourses through which these clubbers make sense of their experiences, it has nothing to say specifically about the role of music as a source of identity-formation or meaning-construction for these young people. It has nothing to say about what music does to people, or what people concretely do with music, by way of shaping religious identity, belief, and experience. These basic questions about how music functions as a medium for shaping religious identity and belief remain unanswered so far by the work that has been done by Chris Partridge, Graham St John, or myself.

It is worth noting the important contribution that Partridge and St John have made recently to the study of religion and popular music. Both have offered substantial and theoretically well-informed accounts of how alternative spiritual ideologies and symbols have become an integral part of particular popular music genres and scenes. Their work represents a much more grounded discussion of the religious significance than, for example, the broader claims about the religious functions of popular music made by Robin Sylvan. Both Partridge and St John draw on fuller data than Sylvan has done in some of his work. Furthermore, while Sylvan runs the risk of forcing cultural data about popular music into predetermined religious categories—of community, transcendence, and theology—Partridge and St John are more careful to restrict their claims to examples of popular music in which religious discourse and symbolism are explicitly used. Defining the boundaries of what is and what is not “religious” when analyzing popular culture remains a perilous task, but the work of Partridge and St John is sufficiently well-grounded in an understanding of the history and content of alternative spiritual traditions for them to be able to offer cogent accounts of the religious influences on the music scenes that they analyze.

At the same time, Partridge and St John’s contributions to this area of study (and indeed my own) suffer from significant limitations in their ability to offer concrete explanations of how popular music audiences use musical resources as a means of shaping alternative spiritual identities and belief systems. To offer such accounts, researchers in this field need to turn to theories and methods used in ethno-musicology and the sociology of music, and build their work on rigorous analysis of fieldwork data. Of particular value, in this regard, is De Nora’s (2000)

work on the significance of music in everyday life. Arguing against the view that the meaning and influence of music lies in its structural and semiotic properties, De Nora has engaged in extensive fieldwork to explore the significance and meanings that music can have for people in lived, everyday settings. Through this work, De Nora has argued that music plays an important role as a cultural tool through which people actively manage their identities, environments, and emotional states—and that the meanings associated with listening to music are formed through a complex interplay between the musical sound, the quality of the listener's attention, the spatial and relational environment in which it is heard, and particular memories and other associations attached to the music through the individual's specific biography.

De Nora's work highlights three questions that researchers on popular music and alternative spirituality can usefully explore in the future, and that would help to develop far richer accounts of the role of popular music in religious identity-formation and meaning-building. First, De Nora points to the very different social settings in which people listen to music. Partridge and St John confine their discussion of audience settings to public spaces such as the free festival, the outdoor rave, and the club night. But as De Nora observes, popular music is actively used and passively consumed in many different locations: in the house while waking up, bathing, or doing household chores, in bars, shops, restaurants, and hotels (as a tool to manage customer mood and behavior), or in other privatized spaces such as the car or the privatized sound-scape made possible by the Walkman or i-Pod. Popular music may be consumed privately, or with friends, family, or strangers. The particular social setting in which a person listens to music shapes the nature of the listening experience—both in terms of the physical location and the matrix of social relations (actual, imagined, or remembered) in which the act of listening takes place. If we wish to claim that popular music is an important resource in shaping alternative spiritual identities and meaning-systems, then where exactly does such formation take place? Is it in the public consumption of music at gigs, raves, and festivals? Or can the private consumption of music through the i-Pod or in the privacy of the bathroom or the bedroom be an equally—if not more—important location for religious formation? In cases where popular music transmits occultural symbolism or ideas, are there particular physical and relational contexts in which its audience is more likely to use it as a resource for religious identity-formation?

Second, De Nora's work emphasizes the importance of the aesthetic and affective aspects of the experience of listening to music. Rather than seeing musical aesthetics as incidental to its meaning, De Nora argues that it is precisely the aesthetic and affective qualities of music that make it an effective tool in managing one's identity and environment. It may not, therefore, be so much the cognitive content of song lyrics that are seen as important by listeners, but the entire aesthetic effect of listening to a particular piece of music in a particular setting, with particular people, at a particular time of day that makes popular music an important aesthetic tool for managing one's experience of self and the world. Again this is an important point for thinking about the role of popular music in religious identity-formation. What role do musical aesthetics and the affective dimension of the listening experience play in the formation of religious identity and meaning through popular music? To suggest that such identity-formation takes place simply through a process of absorbing the cognitive content of alternative spiritual ideologies encoded into popular music seems to offer a very thin account of how people actually listen to popular music. What role does affect play in this process? Are there certain kinds of emotion that are important for absorbing occultural ideas and values from popular music? Is the process of religious identity-formation through popular music actually as much a process of learning to *feel* about one's self and the world in particular ways, as one of learning to *think* about it in certain ways? This touches on important questions about the relationship between cognition and affect in the formation and maintenance of religious belief and identity (see, e.g., Wynn 2005). The study of religion and popular music may therefore be able to provide concrete case examples of the significance of cognition and affect for religious identity and meaning that may be helpful to a wider range of researchers and disciplines involved in the study of religion.

A third area that De Nora's work usefully draws attention to concerns the specifically aural qualities of music. De Nora argues that as a primarily aural medium, music has particular properties in terms of the way it can occupy social spaces and the psychological and physiological effects that it has on its listeners. Attention to the aural dimension of cultural practice has also been usefully stimulated by Michael Bull and Les Back's (2003) *Auditory Culture Reader*. Again, attending to the aural qualities of popular music is an important area for development of studies of the significance of popular music as a resource in shaping alternative spiritual beliefs and identities. Identifying the influence of alternative religious ideologies on the production and consumption of various forms of popular music has been an important task, but attention has not yet been properly given to the significance of the aural qualities of this music. In what ways might religious identity-formation through listening to popular music be different to religious identity-formation through, for example, watching film or visiting websites? What difference does the aural quality of popular music make to this process? And are there particular ways in which alternative spiritual ideologies are encoded and decoded through the aural properties of different genres of popular music?

Of course, the three questions that I have raised from De Nora's work are interrelated. The aural qualities of popular music, and the physical and relational contexts in which it is heard, shape the aesthetic and affective experience of the listener. Attending to these different dimensions of the listening experience in the context of studies of alternative spiritualities and popular music might help us to develop much richer accounts of the ways in which music functions as a medium for religious identity-formation and meaning-building. Such work will be of value not simply to researchers interested in the relationships between religion, spirituality, and popular culture, but will also shed more light on how different cultural contexts, practices, and resources play distinctive roles in the formation and maintenance of the religious dimension of human life.

NOTES

1. See the data on religious identity and affiliation in the British Social Attitudes survey, www.britisocat.com.
2. Both the ARIS poll of 2001 and the General Social Survey of 2002 indicate that while levels of self-reported religious identification and affiliation remain relatively high in the United States, adults aged 18–34 are still more likely to identify themselves as having no religion or being secular/somewhat secular than older generational cohorts. Comparison of data from the 1990 NRSI poll with data from the 2001 ARIS survey also indicates aging demographics of church membership and attendance across all Christian denominations.
3. Contrast, for example, David Tacey's (2004) claim that we are seeing an overwhelming rising tide of alternative spiritualities, with Heelas and Woodhead's (2005) in-depth study of the town of Kendal, which found that only 1.6 percent of the town's population were involved in associational activities associated with alternative spiritualities—much lower than the 7.9 percent attending Sunday church services.

REFERENCES

- Albanese, C. 1990. *Nature religion in America: From the Algonkian Indians to the new age*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bruce, S. 2002. *God is dead: Secularization in the West*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Bull, M. and Back, L. (Eds.). 2003. *The auditory culture reader*. Oxford: Berg.
- Campbell, C. 1972. The cult, the cultic milieu and secularization. In *A sociological yearbook of religion in Britain*, edited by M. Hill, pp. 119–36. London: SCM Press.
- De Nora, T. 2000. *Music in everyday life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Heelas, P. 2000. Expressive spirituality and humanistic expressivism: Sources of significance beyond church and chapel. In *Beyond new age: Exploring alternative spirituality*, edited by S. Sutcliffe and M. Bowman, pp. 237–54. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Heelas, P. and L. Woodhead. 2005. *The spiritual revolution: Why religion is giving way to spirituality*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hoover, S. 2006. *Religion in the media age*. London: Routledge.
- Kahn-Harris, K. 2006. *Extreme metal: Music and culture on the edge*. Oxford: Berg.

- Lynch, G. and E. Badger. 2006. The mainstream post-rave club scene as a secondary institution: A British perspective. *Culture and Religion* 7(1):27–40.
- Partridge, C. 2005a. *The re-enchantment of the West (vol.1): Understanding popular occulture*. London: Continuum.
- . 2005b. *The re-enchantment of the West (vol.2): Alternative spiritualities, sacralization, popular culture and occulture*. London: Continuum.
- Schofield Clark, L. 2005. *From angels to aliens: Teenagers, the media and the supernatural*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, C. and M. Denton. 2005. *Soul searching: The religious lives of American teenagers*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- St John, G. (Ed.). 2004a. *Rave culture and religion*. London: Routledge.
- St John, G. 2004b. Techno millennium: Dance, ecology and future primitives. In *Rave culture and religion*, edited by G. St John, pp. 213–35. London: Routledge.
- . 2004c. The difference engine: Liberation and the rave imaginary. In *Rave culture and religion*, edited by G. St John, pp. 19–45. London: Routledge.
- . G. (Ed.). 2006. Electronic dance music and religion. *Special issue of Culture and Religion* 7:1–110.
- Sylvan, R. 2002. *Traces of the spirit: The religious dimension of popular music*. New York: New York University Press.
- . 2005. *Trance formation: The spiritual and religious dimensions of global rave culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Tacey, D. 2004. *The spirituality revolution: The emergence of contemporary spirituality*. Hove: BrunnerRoutledge.
- Voas, D. and A. Crockett. 2005. Religion in Britain: Neither believing nor belonging. *Sociology* 39(1):11–28.
- Wynn, M. 2005. *Emotional experience and religious understanding: Integrating perception, conception and feeling*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.