

Epiphanies of a commercial age

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Some years back I was living in Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand, and one sunny late summer morning (in April) I decided to jog to the top of one of the extinct volcanoes. The place in question is Maungawhau, also known as Mount Eden, and it is a well-liked vantage point as it offers a 360-degree vista over the city – and of course, to see the breathtaking scenery can be easily connected to breathtaking physical exercise, involving 212 steps plus various more or less steep pathways if one takes the eastern Glenfell Place entrance. I had been there before, but now I was equipped with more proper equipment in order to take some scenic pictures of and from this volcano in the heart of a metropolis.

I did just that, but there was one moment in particular that stopped me, both literally and figuratively. As I was leaving the site, I witnessed a hearse with its procession departing the parking lot at the crater rim, suggesting that it had been someone's last will to visit the location. But in juxtaposition to this sombre situation, there was at the same time a busload of tourists visiting the site. (Figure 1.) This suggests clearly that there were different sensibilities at work in relation to the location, one associated with the seriousness of death and mourning and another linked with exuberant enthusiasm and possible exoticisation. The situation reminded me of the fact that many locations that have a religious significance or are otherwise considered sacred, are often frequented by hordes of tourists. Any major cathedral serves as an example, not to mention such monumental constructions as Tian Tan Buddha in Hong Kong or Cristo Redentor in Rio de Janeiro (Figures 2 and 3).



Figure 1. Maugawhau (Mount Eden) in Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand. Photograph by Antti-Ville Kärjä.



Figure 2. Tian Tan Buddha in Hong Kong. Photograph by Antti-Ville Kärjä.



Figure 3. Cristo Redentor in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Photograph by Antti-Ville Kärjä.

But there is yet another dimension of sacredness to be considered in the case of Maungawhau, namely the status of its crater in the Maori mythology as the homestead of a divine being. Thus, belief systems of indigenous populations enter the equation, creating a set of additional questions about cultural and by implication religious difference, assimilation, appropriation and domination. Around the crater rim track, in fact, there are numerous signs

indicating that it is prohibited to enter the crater, on the basis of its fragility as well as its sacredness. Yet the lure of the pit is apparently irresistible, as every now and then people climb down to form their initials with the rocks that lie there. (Figure 4.) While I never saw anyone actually do it, my assumption is that the people in question tend to be in their youthful years. After all, the practice is not that different from ‘tagging’ associated with hip hop culture, and while there are by now also middle-aged graffiti artists, it has been pointed out that the impromptu ‘illicit’ aspects of graffiti-making diminish as the practitioners enter their twenties and criminal liability (eg. Kimvall 2015: 58, 64). Also, the steepness of the crater suggest that those who climb down – and eventually up – need to be fit and nimble.



Figure 4. The Maungawhau crater. Photograph by Antti-Ville Kärjä.

As I told about my Maungawhau experience to a colleague, he deemed it an epiphany – and I am not disagreeing with him. What the early morning visit to the crater clearly represented was a concrete and real situation where different belief systems and attitudes to life (and death) intersected in ways I had not considered before. The most important revelation for me concerned the inextricability of the notions of the ‘sacred’ and the ‘popular’ in certain situations; in the case of Maungawhau, the former manifests itself in explicit religious practices and the latter in the form of tourism industry. Yet equally important for me was to realise that these two aspects are both based on experiences of transcendence, whether stemming from issues of life and death or from the awe of facing monumental proportions – and the possible physical effort needed to reach the location in question.

Furthermore, the initials at the crater bottom induced me to consider the intersections of the sacred and the popular in relation to generational dynamics involved and particularly to the category of youth. This is directly linked to the so-called postsecularisation thesis that maintains that while institutionalised religions attract less people nowadays, alternative forms of spirituality have emerged, and often it is young adults who are the most active agents within these ‘new religious movements’ (NRM) or ‘pop cults’ (see eg. Till, 2010: 173–4). On the basis of this, then, I aim at a theoretical musing over the possibilities the intersection of the popular, the sacred and the youth provide for re-examining and re-evaluating the dynamics within and between cultural phenomena prefixed with these three concepts. At issue is also the way in which the concepts can be of use in questioning them further; for instance, what kind of additional dimensions of the popular may be unearthed when the notion is approached in terms of the sacred and/or the youth? And just to be crystal clear, this question can be reformulated by interchanging the three constituents in any which way. As a result, it is possible to produce a conceptual triangle where the notions of the sacred, the popular and youth are at the apices, conditioning the trajectories of

various cultural formations (Figure 5). The immanent question here pertains to the ways in which these three concepts are interrelated and maybe of aid in theorising each of them further in their respective fields of scholarly enquiry – or maybe more importantly, in an interdisciplinary manner.

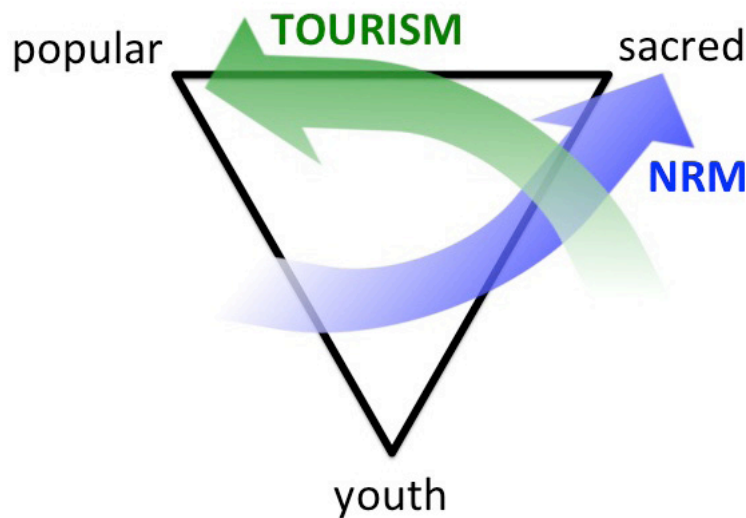


Figure 5. The popular/sacred/youth triangle, with the hypothetical trajectories of tourism and new religious movements (NRM).

Resources, deviance and disciplines

Following the so-called classical sociology of religion and especially the early considerations of the sacred, it may be noted that the sacred is something that requires usually quite significant social investments, both in terms of human and other material resources (eg. Durkheim, 1965; Eliade, 1961). For instance, while in the case of tourism to sacred sites the personal physical effort required is sometimes minimal, as indicated by the bus – and the parking area to begin with – at the top of Maungawhau, the visit cannot take place without expenditure of some kind of resources. Here one of the most obvious forms of these is constituted by monetary assets available for travelling. Indeed, the ubiquitous commercialism and consumerism associated with tourism, not only with respect to travelling itself but also to various merchandise often made available at the sites (Figure 6), links the phenomenon to definitions of the ‘popular’. In his influential accounts on the topic, John Storey (2006) for instance maintains that a sociological definition of popular culture rests on a stress of commerce as well as on mass production and consumption.



Figure 6. Items on sale in the window of a tourist shop in the centre of Helsinki, including several church miniatures: the Rock Church (a green top, middle left), the Lutheran Cathedral (white, middle right) and the Orthodox Uspenski Cathedral (right). On one plate (left), these three Christian landmarks of Helsinki are accompanied by the House of Parliament, bringing in also additional dimensions of the sacred (democracy, sovereignty, patriotism, nationalism etc.). Photograph by Antti-Ville Kärjä.

Indeed, there is a tendency to equate ‘popular culture’ with the market place, although in a world system based on global capitalism it is hardly meaningful to distinguish between spheres of culture on the basis of economic imperatives alone. In a related manner, with respect to the notion of the sacred, one should not overlook the importance of institutional religions as financial systems; once it was thought to be possible to secure one’s place in the Christian heaven by investing in indulgences, and also contemporary religious authorities may regulate for instance loan interests. And of course, the monumental locations associated with religious transcendence have often required hefty amounts of both physical and financial resources – the construction of Cristo Redentor, for example, took nine years (1922–31) and cost approximately the equivalent of three million current euros. The title of the most expensive temple ever built however goes to the Buddhist Shwedagon Pagoda (Figure 7) in Yangon, Myanmar, that is covered with golden plates and diamonds worth more than two billion euros.



Figure 7. Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon, Myanmar. Photograph by Ralf-André Lettau (<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Shwedagon-Pano.jpg>).

Another habitual way of defining popular culture is to link it to mundane everyday practices. From the outset, this locates the ‘popular’ somewhat opposite to the ‘sacred’, inasmuch as mundane aspects of life are considered to be the counterpart of the religious ones. Moreover, if this juxtaposition is pushed further towards the ‘profane’, the separation from the ‘sacred’ becomes even more pronounced. Yet this detachment calls for caution, as the ‘profane’ has often an essential role in marking the boundaries of the ‘sacred’ (eg. Eliade, 1961; Lynch, 2012: 26–8).

That what is deemed profane is further connected to definitions of popular culture through subcultural theorisation in particular. Originally the notion of subculture was taken as a reference to delinquent or otherwise deviant ways of life, and while this kind of moral component has lost much of its currency in subsequent theoretical reformulations, the prefix ‘sub’ still connotes dimensions of profound cultural difference. Predominantly,

these differences are linked to generational dynamics, meaning that subcultures tend to be conceived as youthful spheres of activity. Thus one may ask, to what extent are conventional and institutional religious ideas, ideals and practices maintained, transformed, challenged or questioned within subcultural settings and by young people in particular?

In this respect, one might even reconsider the Maungawhau crater initials as a collision of two belief systems and ritualistic behaviour associated with them. What I mean by this is that on one hand the act of entering the crater constitutes a breach of sanctity in terms of Maori spirituality, but on the other it may signal a presence of subcultural value systems and rites of passage – ‘to be part of us, you climb down and form your initials!’ Admittedly, the latter possibility is based on mere speculations, and I would in fact bet my money rather on a momentary whim than the existence of an organised ‘crater initialist’ subculture. Yet the supposition serves to point to the overall societal dynamics at issue, especially with respect to religious hegemony, pluralism and indigeneity. In other words, there are differences in how societies value institutional religions and other belief systems, and consequently in what kind of resources are available for the maintenance and protection of various sacred sites. The history of any major religion also attests to this.

Conceptual contestations and politics

Critical sensitivity towards conventional religious or any socio-cultural ideas for that matter is of course the bread and butter of cultural scholars, yet one would be wise also to recognise the conventional modes of academic thinking and their inherent risks. Thus it is instructive to pay attention also to the multidimensionality or outright ambiguity of the popular, the sacred and the youth to begin with. Often they are used, even in academic writings, as if they were self-evident and self-explanatory categories. Yet on a closer examination they all prove to be fluid and contestable, and therefore very easily politically charged. In other words, a crucial aspect in questioning them is to consider their usage and the usually more than less concealed purposes behind it.

For instance, the Metal Mass (Figure 8) organised by the Lutheran church in Finland might very well be labelled with each of the terms in question: it constitutes a sacred event on the basis of its explicit religiousness; it may be considered an instance of popular culture due to its reliance on the stylistic aspects of metal music; and for the same reason it may also be taken as a form of youth culture. But from a more conservative religious standpoint, and because of its association with popular cultural sensibility, it might be dismissed as profane or even blasphemous. In a similar vein, for some its explicit religiousness may mean it is not to be conflated with ‘authentic’ popular or youth culture. And, to push the idea further, one may ask what kind of definitions and dimensions of the popular, the sacred and youth are operationalised if a conventional Lutheran mass was conceptualised in a similar fashion.



Figure 8. Metal Mass in the Temppeliaukio Rock church. Photograph by Yaffa Tuhkanen.

Be it as it may, within the study of religions, a predisposition to ‘rescript the sacred’ through popular cultural phenomena has emerged only relatively recently (eg. Santana & Erickson, 2008). Arguably, within sociology and anthropology of religion, popular culture in general has been conventionally shunned, and the shift from the study of abstract belief systems and practices of religious elites to exploration of everyday functions of religion has taken place primarily during the twenty-first century. This has led to theorisations about “multiple sacreds” (Lynch, 2012), as well as to recognising the broader implications of the notion of the sacred, especially in relation to identity construction. Anthropologist of religion Veikko Anttonen (2000: 204), for instance, defines the sacred as that which “comes into being as a category in any value-laden situation to mark the inviolability of the boundaries of an entity in times of crises or in periods of transformations taking place in temporal or spatial categories of the society.” This idea is also evident in Gordon Lynch’s (2012: 29) rumination over the concept’s relevance in the modern world, as he defines it as “what people collectively experience as absolute, non-contingent realities which present normative claims over the meaning and conduct of social life”. Furthermore, according to him, “it is the sacred that generates the idea of human society as a meaningful, moral collective” (Lynch, 2012: 128).

Purposes of the popular

While many scholars who aim at rescripting the sacred appropriately point to the problems in defining and conceptualising both religion and popular culture, in this body of research one can however note an emphasis on equating popular culture rather straight-forwardly and often equivocally with ‘everyday life’ (eg. Lynch, 2005). Another prominent strand in this field of study is to define popular culture on the basis of mass media (eg. Clark, 2012). To some extent, these two approaches are methodologically at odds with each other, as an emphasis on everyday life entails almost a dogmatic reliance on ethnographic research methods, and a stress on mediated representations indicates fidelity to textual analysis. In both cases, however, the decidedly lax definition of popular culture leads to a situation where almost anything can be treated under the rubric, which then makes the usefulness of the whole notion questionable. An instructive example is provided by Christopher Partridge in *The Lyre of Orpheus* (2013), as he includes also avant-garde jazz in his conception of popular music when examining it in relation to the sacred and the profane.

As a consequence, suspicions over purpose-oriented usage of the concept emerge. To be sure, the notion of popular culture is notoriously context-specific and multidimensional, and to operationalise it meaningfully in an analysis requires a definition. Yet to celebrate the ‘re-scriptures’ that are based on loose or intentional definitions of the popular uncritically is to disregard the possibilities a more nuanced and multidimensional approach would yield. Following Storey (2006), it is possible to distinguish between at least six dimensions of the popular: quantitative, aesthetic, sociological, folk, political and postmodern. This kind of taxonomy enables a more subtle investigation into the multiple forms of the sacred than a fixed, monolithic definition of popular culture. Furthermore, it facilitates the exploration of additional links between the popular and the sacred, for instance by postulating that there might be also a religious dimension of popular culture. After all, religious movements tend to be quite popular in the quantitative sense, and certainly not devoid of aesthetic, sociological or political significance. In addition, when opposed especially to science, religions may be associated with yet another kind of popular sensibility; the kind that favours everyday beliefs over systematically proven facts. In relation to this, Storey’s (2006) words are once more useful, as he stresses the centrality of ideological components in any definition of popular culture. In other words, no matter how the popular is conceived, there are value judgments, conceptualisations of reality and issues of power involved. The same applies to any religious system in the world.

Multigenerational mysteries

The same can also be said of the concept of youth, though here it becomes paramount to recognise the difference in the level of abstraction. This is to say that, unlike the popular and the sacred, youth is inextricably tied to a certain aspect of human existence and physiology even, namely ageing. In Finland, for instance, the legal system considers anyone under the age of twenty-nine to be youth. Yet in recent decades, however, this kind of rigid age-based definition of youth has been supplemented by another one whereby emphasis has been laid on attitudes, values and ways of life. In their introduction to the edited volume on *Ageing and Youth Cultures*, Andy Bennett and Paul Hodkinson (2013: 2) note that since the 1980s, “the straightforward equation of youth cultures with the

young has become more difficult to sustain. Many of [the] groupings once unproblematically referred to as *youth* cultures are now increasingly multigenerational.”

Alongside internal generational issues, youth cultures become complicated when examined against the notions of the popular and the sacred. Regarding the former, there is an obvious risk to treat all forms of youth culture as instances of popular culture – which would downplay not only the generational dynamics of popular culture but also the cultural variety of young people’s activity. Here, any cultural grouping of young people that is organised around or within conservative religious strands, provides a case in point.

Regarding the sacred aspects, in turn, the social category of the youth is crucial in notable ways. As Sylvia Collins-Mayo (2010: 1) notes, young people are the agents of change and therefore “[i]t is their engagement with religion, religious ideas and institutions that tell us how resilient beliefs and practices are, and how religions might adapt, transform and innovate in relation to wider social and cultural trends.” Furthermore, in all societies and communities, the youthful years constitute a transitional phase in one way or another, a phase that is conditioned by diverse age-based regulations; in Finland, for example, the general age of majority is eighteen, but one is allowed to drive a moped and a tractor at the age of fifteen, and to buy hard liquor not until twenty. Thirty in turn is the limit for those wishing to be sterilised without a medical reason. Issues of procreation are indeed significant when discussing youth as a transitional social category and in relation to the sacred. Traditionally, there have been numerous rites of passage associated with the coming of age, one of the most well-known of these being the Jewish *bar-* and *bat-mitzvah* (Figure 9). One might also note that the current ‘hit product’ of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland is the equivalent confirmation class or preparation; in recent years, more than eighty per cent of Finnish fifteen-year-olds have participated in it, while the percentage of formal belonging to the Church has diminished gradually closer to seventy. Thus the confirmation preparation, especially the form that includes a week-long confirmation camp, provides another example where youth, the popular and the sacred intersect intricately.



Figure 9. Mazel tov hats at a bat mitzvah. Photograph by Flickr user Selena N. B. H. (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rockin%27_the_mazel_tov_hats.jpg)

Adolescence and questions about sexual maturation that surround it have in addition frequently constituted a basis for moral concerns or outright panics on the part of the adult establishment. A case in point is the Parents [*sic*] Music Resource Center (PMRC) that was formed in 1985 in the USA by a group of influential women, lead-

ing to a Senate hearing and eventually to the introduction of the 'Parental Advisory: Explicit Content' sticker to be attached on the cover of recordings that were deemed morally dubious. The PMRC even released a list of songs they found the most objectionable, known as the 'Filthy Fifteen'; the grounds for this denunciation included sex, violence, alcohol and drugs – and occult.

Links between youth, the popular and the sacred do not end here. Alongside the general moral concerns over young people's cultural activities and products, the younger the humans in question, the stronger the protective and/or prohibitive attitude tends to be. In this sense, it is possible to note the existence of 'sanctity of children' specifically, which rests on the idea that children are by definition morally 'pure' creatures who should be protected from the evils of the world. Yet when discussing the interrelationships between children and (commercial) popular culture, it has been suggested that in recent years the tension between 'sacralised' children and 'profane' markets has diminished, and in fact that because of the elision of toys and other forms of children's entertainment with "the enchanted landscape of childhood", the children's market becomes naturalised and sacralised. Put another way, currently "the 'dark secrets' from which children's innocence must be protected are not sexual, but industrial" – whether the latter have to do with exploitation of labour or maximising copyright control (Langer, 2004: 253, 264).

Theoretical transgressions and mundane materiality

Conceptual conundrums represent in the end only the tip of the intersectional iceberg of the popular and the sacred in youth cultures. On a theoretical and methodological level, one can continue the scrutiny by focussing on the dynamics between theology and secular scholarship, and between evidence and authority, for example. Here, also further discussion on interdisciplinary methodologies and critical theories of religion has still much to offer. It is also important to recognise that there are more intersections to be investigated than the above three; they themselves accrue different meanings and constitute different practices when measured against social class, (dis)ability, gender and sexuality. Moreover, and quite crucially in relation to the contemporary global migration, intersections with ethnicity and national belonging are worth a closer examination. A particular point of interest here is constituted by the sanctification of race, especially in the context of white supremacist ideology.

The ideological component is indeed a significant aspect of the analysis of the intersections of the popular and the sacred in youth cultures. This entails questioning not only the conventional religious tenets, political doctrines, value systems and moral judgements, but also interrogating the convictions that guide consumerism and economies of pleasure. Furthermore, the entanglements between the (post)modern and the (post)secular form a pertinent area of scrutiny.

But as the world is not of concepts and ideas alone, to focus on the discursive, institutional and material levels is equally appropriate and valuable. And once again, choices abound; alongside the mythologies of popular and youth cultures, one can focus on the fundamentals of (national) histories and (invented) traditions. Discourses of authenticity, transcendence and transgression are also auspicious objects of analysis, as well as are those linked to consolation and affect. Furthermore, in a world of heightened commercial and racial tensions, there is an urgency to delve into the peculiarities of freedom of speech and expression.

On the institutional level, in turn, the dynamics between the popular, the sacred and youth can be examined in the context of families, congregations, denominations, corporations, educational organisations, gangs, (neo) tribes, subcultures, municipalities and the state. And finally, with respect to the most material forms of existence, one can analyse how the interrelations in question manifest themselves in art and media, shrines and memorials, rituals and pilgrimage, and so forth. Regarding the contemporary conceptualisations of popular and youth culture, specific phenomena for probing possible aspects of the sacred include stardom and fandom, as well as religious or spiritual practices taking place in the virtual worlds.

Conclusion

Lest the choices appear overwhelming, I can highly recommend a jog around an extinct volcano crater, not only because of the cardiovascular workout but also the possible advantages it offers for brainwork. For some, my Maungawhau epiphanies might represent an encounter with transcendent powers, but I myself want to stress the very basic human condition of trying to make sense of the world. An extinct volcano is a good example due to its association with literally incredible natural forces that can be the source of fertility but also extremely destruc-

tive. It is truly a matter of life and death, and thus leads to emphasising the importance of the material qualities involved and their repercussions; at issue is the materiality of the sacred site in question to begin with, but also forms of human corporeality involved – both living and dead – as well as various forms of indirect resources and the modes of thought that affect and direct the use of these resources.

Another fundamental lesson I learned – or reminded myself of – concerns the centrality of remaining attuned to the multidimensionality and valency of any conceptual and classificatory markers used, whether in private, public or academic contexts. As any textbook on research methodology instructs, at the core of academic inquiry is the simple act of questioning, and thus scholars and scientists should be by definition wary of axiomatic terminology and lines of reasoning. Yet at the same time, research fields are dominated by their own paradigms and traditions that in the course of time may accrue sacred, absolute, non-contingent, normative qualities of their own, and as a consequence researchers may forget the fundamental ontological questioning that is needed. This in turn, as in the attempts to rescript the sacred quite often, may lead to purpose-oriented arguments that in the final analysis reveal the most about their presenters than the phenomena under scrutiny.

It is understandable that the temptation to challenge the conceptual creed of one's own field is so strong that the nuances of other pastures remain unnoticed. However, given the extent to which interdisciplinarity nowadays is at the crux of the academic credo as it were, to overcome and resist those temptations is pivotal if one wishes to enjoy the scarce mundane material resources that the academia has to offer. The intersections of the popular, the sacred and the youth purvey one possibility, one where cultural studies, the study of religions and youth studies cut across each other meaningfully.

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