Negotiating the popular, the sacred and the political: a case study of three Christian social justice youth organisations

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Despite a burgeoning literature considering religion and young people (cf. Collins-Mayo & Dandelion; Lynch; Flory & Miller), little has considered the engagement of young people of religious faith with politics, particularly issues of social justice, and furthermore how this might intersect with popular culture. Within the last three years, two of the most established Christian development charities and advocacy organisations in the UK, Christian Aid and Tearfund, have set up their own youth initiatives – Christian Aid Collective and Tearfund Rhythms. An examination of these two initiatives, alongside the SPEAK Network, a grassroots Christian youth movement that campaigns on social justice issues, enables an analysis of the intersection between young people, religion, political issues and popular culture. This article, drawing upon website analysis and ethnographic research on SPEAK, will explore the ways in which Rhythms, the Collective and SPEAK use and deploy popular culture, categorising their various utilisations (or lack of) as either innovation, appropriation, resistance or reclamation. Finally, the article will account for these different attitudes to, and uses of, popular culture by reference to the groups' varying relationships with their members and supporters – and the identity that they subsequently project – and their diverse religious positioning.

Introducing the organisations

Tearfund Rhythms was established in 2012 by Tearfund, a UK Christian relief and development organisation. It described itself, upon launching, as "Tearfund's latest initiative to help people explore how to live a life of justice every day", through the encouragement of "small, everyday steps to change the way we live"[1]. Christian Aid Collective was launched the same year by Christian Aid, another major UK development charity. The Collective was launched through a series of regional events throughout the UK aimed at young people aged 18-25. It aims to "wrestle with the big issues surrounding global poverty; driven to inspire mutual learning, collective passion and joint action in solidarity with the world's poor"[2]. Unlike these two organisations, the SPEAK Network did not emerge from an established non-governmental organisation, but was formed by a small group of students prior to the millennium. These students aimed to bring together features of both People and Planet, a student environmental and human rights campaigning network, and UCCF (University and Colleges Christian Fellowship), an evangelical student organisation[3]. SPEAK describes itself as a "network connecting together young adults and students to campaign and pray about issues of global injustice"[4]. In contrast to Rhythms, both SPEAK and the Collective have a more explicit campaign focus. SPEAK targets specific issues of climate change, the arms trade, agribusiness and trade justice, while tax justice is a major campaign for the Collective.

The three groups function differently in terms of the outlets they offer for participation, and whether this is primarily online or offline. The websites of both the Christian Aid Collective and Tearfund Rhythms host multi-authored, participatory blogs, which are updated regularly. Online participation is also facilitated through the Rhythms online, and mobile, application, which enables members to sign up and complete designated actions. Members are also encouraged to "share" their actions on Twitter and Facebook. Whilst Rhythms has so far not held any national events, there is some evidence of Rhythms Hubs, defined as "local expressions and out-workings of the Rhythms community"[5], suggesting that online participation may be supplemented by some form of local face-to-face groupings. Christian Aid Collective, by contrast, organises regional activist training days and held its first national conference in March 2014. Christian Aid Collective also encourages supporters to set up monthly Eat, Act, Pray groups, local groups that mirror the Rhythms Hubs. The Collective provides resources for these groups each month, including recipes, discussion points and suggested actions[6]. Central to both Christian Aid Collective and Tearfund Rhythms, however, is a rhetoric of online community, as seen in the name "Collective" and Tearfund Rhythms' first blog entitled "the Village Square". This can be understood, however, following Bauman, as community as project, rather than reality (169). The SPEAK Network functions alongside its online

59

presence through the medium of local groups, many of which are based in universities as student societies, and SPEAK links, which mobilise a group that they are part of – for example, a church or university Christian Union[7] – to engage with SPEAK's campaigns. The SPEAK network also hosts a national gathering twice a year, alongside biannual meetings of Flower Model, SPEAK's national, participatory decision-making body.

Popular culture

Much literature on religion and young people stresses the important role played by popular culture in the ways that young people understand and interpret religion, citing popular culture as a key arena of meaning-making. Collins-Mayo and Beaudoin, for example, highlight "the multiple and creative ways in which pop culture can be used to simulate, explore and critique religion" (21), while Lynch has also identified popular culture as a significant site of meaning-making (21). Of importance here is the fact that popular cultural sources do not have a stable array of meanings, but rather can be interpreted in varying ways, thus rendering them inherently mutable and fluid. This corresponds with popular culture theory, which asserts the instability of popular culture, even as a conceptual category (Storey, 1). In the midst of considerable academic debate as to how popular culture might be defined, it is worth bearing in mind Storey's contention that the term "popular culture" always implies an otherness, explicit or implicit, *against which* it is defined (1). In the context of the groups studied here, popular culture's "other" is understood to be the more explicitly religious texts and references of a particular religious tradition. In this way, popular culture is defined as the "secular" other, encompassing, in the examples below, popular chart music, celebrity culture, Hollywood film and elements of consumer culture. However, as will be demonstrated, even this "otherisation" is unstable, given that the meaning-making activities of the groups explored serve to destabilise this secularity, understanding and interpreting popular cultural sources through their own religio-political lenses.

A key theme that emerges then is how the Collective, Rhythms and SPEAK use popular culture in relation to both their religious identity and their social justice goals. Flory and Miller, in their consideration of the spirituality of the post-boomer generation in the US context, suggest four key emerging forms of spiritual expression - the "innovators", the "appropriators", the "resisters" and the "reclaimers". Whilst these terms are used by Flory and Miller to describe the relationship of this generation to inherited forms of Christianity, these terms can also be usefully deployed here to help describe the relationship of the Collective, Rhythms and SPEAK to popular culture. Thus, "innovation" is used to describe the ways in which groups eschew popular culture in favour of self-created cultural forms and "appropriation" to consider the use of popular culture to both create a sense of relevance and draw meaning related to the group's aims. "Resistance" is deployed to refer to the use of popular cultural sources as a starting point for societal critique, while "reclamation" refers to the destabilising of popular cultural meanings through the drawing of alternate, and subversive, meanings. While there is inevitable overlap between these categories, they nonetheless represent a useful starting point for considering the different ways that popular culture is used by these groups.

Innovation

The act of innovation is particularly demonstrated by the SPEAK Network and exhibited in its Tumblr account, which showcases the art, photography, poetry and music of the network's members[8]. The SPEAK Network's national events are also dependent on the creative talents of its members, who are involved in leading worship, making videos, organising art workshops and providing musical entertainment[9]. This indicates a preference for a Do-It-Yourself culture, in which the network's creativity and talents for cultural innovation are prized. This mirrors the observed contemporary concern with the notion of "authenticity" (Taylor), leading, in this case, to a rejection of mainstream cultural products. This corresponds with SPEAK's counter-cultural ethos and its stress on such values as creativity, which are explored further below. Neither Rhythms nor the Collective exhibit this tendency in any comparable way.

Appropriation

The clearest examples of appropriation are blog articles on both the Collective and Rhythms websites inspired by *The Hunger Games,* the popular young adult dystopian novel and film series. The following lines from the book – "what must it be like, I wonder, to live in a world where food appears at the press of a button?" – are used by the Collective blogger to lead to a reflection on how poorer communities must regard the affluent:

> After reading these lines in the hunger games, it suddenly struck me how they must see us; what questions they must ask themselves about us: 'What must it be like, I wonder, to live in a world where food appears at the press of a button?' Or with one order, or available in abundance upon shelves, and then thrown away just as easily once they've passed a certain date?" (Dedji).

In this blog post, a popular culture reference is thus used to reflect upon real-life poverty and the blogger goes on to raise awareness, and support, of the Enough Food IF campaign, the 2013 follow-up campaign to 2005's Make Poverty History. The popularity of *The Hunger Games* is thus appropriated in support of the campaign goals of Christian Aid as a broader organisation.

Rhythms also makes use of *The Hunger Games,* one blogger reflecting on the similarities between the problems of this world and those of the fictional dystopia of *The Hunger Games*: "*The Hunger Games* tells a story of a future that doesn't exist … yet. But themes of hunger, violence and poverty do exist, right now, all over the world". This leads to a reflection of what this means "for us as Christians", and the statement that the "church needs to lead the way in a social revolution that sees people make lifestyle changes in a world of increasing population and finite resources, ensuring that all who are made in the image of God are treated equally" (Westlake). Another blogger comments on the relevance "of the themes in *The Hunger Games* to our 21st century reality, from the threat posed to our natural resources by climate change to the divide between rich and poor; from the reality of poverty leaving people hungry, to the loss of human dignity". She goes on to reflect on one of the character's statements that "I keep wishing I could think of a way to show the Capitol they don't own me. That I'm more than just a piece in their Games" and emphasises with this feeling: "there are times when I want to scream at the oppressive systems and structures that keep people in cycles of perpetual poverty, that they don't own me; that I don't buy into their games". This leads to the recommendation of "small acts of resistance" (McCallum). Thus, in both these blogs, a popular cultural reference is used to provoke comment on the inequality and power structures existing in our own world, which, by implication, is not too far removed from the dystopian society depicted in *The Hunger Games.* This results, in the former example, in a discussion of the role of the church, while, in the latter example, in advocating forms of politically-informed lifestyle action.

Resistance

There are also examples of resistance to the meanings and values suggested by popular culture. Christian Aid Collective, for example, voices its opposition to mainstream consumer culture, demonstrating a scepticism towards both popular culture and sub- or counter-cultures: "we are positioned to be consumers of the system, consumers of the latest crazes and trends and "alternative" waves, we are consumers of entertainment and experience in our culture of choice" (Swaffield). Engaging with the cultural medium of Christmas advertisements, a series of blog posts on the Rhythms website also serves to resist their consumerist messages: "I'd really like to claim back my celebrations from the claws of big business ... So it's time for no more KFC, and lots more carols, homemade decorations and real human connections" (Leach). This has some parallels with the Do-It-Yourself culture of the SPEAK Network. A further example of resistance to popular cultural meaning-making is provided on SPEAK's website, where a blogger makes reference to Robin Thicke's contentious chart-topping single *Blurred Lines* as a starting point for a blog post on a feminist conference attended by the blogger, providing resistance to the lack of sexual consent implied by Thicke's lyrics and video and pointing the reader to various feminist causes and campaigns (Andrew).

Reclamation

As well as appropriating popular cultural sources in the cause of the groups' values and demonstrating resistance, there are also examples of meanings being reclaimed. Rhythms uses the UK comedian-turned-polemicist Russell Brand's viral tirade against the current political system and call to revolution in order to reclaim the word revolution, considering what a "true" revolution might look like:

> Our revolution will have a voice filled with the joy of hope ... this revolution must be rooted in restored relationship; taking seriously the beauty of shared responsibility, accountability, and activity ... Could we dare to have a revolution of weakness and humility? Of love? That sounds like the sort of revolution that God is crying to see. And it sounds a whole lot harder than even the upturn of our democratic system which got Russell Brand jumping out of his seat" (Rose).

Here, then, the word "revolution" is reclaimed in spiritual terms, prompting reflection on the notion of a Godly revolution.

Rhythms' series of blog posts around Christmas adverts also functions as a type of reclaiming – "we should always be aware of what we are being sold" (Clifford) – becoming the means for reflection on such issues as giving and connecting with others. As one blogger writes, "who will you connect with? Will it be someone you haven't seen in a while, someone you would normally pass by on the street, someone you need to forgive?" This motivates theological discussion: "our deep longing for intimacy can only be completely met by the one who, born into the dust and dirt of humanity, comes to extend the hand of friendship to all he meets". The blog post thus concludes: "let's not overdo it in the shops but go wild on kindness, hospitality and generosity" (Maxwell-Cook). In this way, the messages of generosity implied by the Christmas adverts are reclaimed from consumerism, and used to reflect upon the Christian faith of Rhythms' supporters. These examples provide support for Lynch's contention that, though popular culture may be a site where young people seek meaning, this may involve subversion of cultural sources' intentions, including "using them to serve their own interests and commitments" (64).

Comparison

As shown by these examples, attitudes to popular culture vary between, and within, the three organisations. Rhythms exhibits the most thorough utilisation of popular cultural sources of all three initiatives. Their website featured the most widespread references to popular culture and there were whole blog posts based around deriving meaning from popular cultural sources, the trend being towards both appropriation and reclamation. Both these involve deriving meaning from popular culture, even if this is to some extent subversive, and deploying popular culture in support of certain values. By contrast, the SPEAK Network demonstrated the least engagement with popular culture, using it, if at all, to lead into social critique and generally negating it through the embracing of a Do-It-Yourself counterculture. Christian Aid Collective stands somewhere in the middle, with medium levels of popular cultural engagement, ranging from criticism to appropriation.

These differences reflect wider diversity among the three initiatives. The remit of Tearfund Rhythms, as explained by Christopher Wigan, Creative Director of the Rhythms app, was to engage "a slightly rudderless Christian youth community and incentivise them to find ways to make small changes to their lifestyle that would result in the world being a better place". This starting point, which assumes a lack of socio-political engagement on the part of young people, perhaps explains the more extensive popular cultural engagement of Rhythms, attempting to get the attention of this "rudderless" community by appearing contemporary, fresh and relevant. The emphasis on "small changes" in Wigan's statement is also important. In encouraging small, everyday actions, Tearfund Rhythms cultivates a form of social justice-orientated activity that can still fit fairly comfortably within mainstream society, drawing on the same cultural references and galvanising change through the means of a smartphone app.

SPEAK, by contrast, has a more critical attitude to popular culture and the identity that it consequently projects is more challenging:

> It's about being a motivational catalyst in areas of Christian community. It's about lifestyle. It's about moving into action. It's about getting things going, creating an infectious movement that seeks to change unfair power structures. It's about following Jesus. It's about modelling something new, sharing our faith with people disillusioned by institutional models of church and Christian community. It's about reaching people who are searching spiritually.

This list illustrates SPEAK's complex and multi-faceted identity. A sense of challenge is also demonstrated in their activities being "not served up to you on a plate – it is up to you to take initiative".[10] This contrasts with Rhythm's discourse, which is more one of encouragement. For example, Rhythms is described as "a fun way to start making some of the changes that you want to make but don't know how"[11]. The social justice actor that Rhythms cultivates thus has a somewhat "cosier" identity, albeit containing aspects of anti-consumerism. SPEAK's ethos of self-initiative is perhaps more challenging and also reflects its identity as an autonomous youth-led movement, contrasting with the status of Rhythms and the Collective as component parts of large NGOs.

The differences can also be considered in light of the groups' religious identities. Both Tearfund Rhythms and Christian Aid Collective assume a religious identity based on the religious positioning of their parent bodies – Christian Aid, broadly ecumenical with considerable support from mainstream Protestant churches, and Tearfund, an explicitly evangelical organisation. The SPEAK Network, by contrast, has its own elaborate set of thirteen core values, which include: being Jesus-centred; believing in the Bible as "inspired by God and…there to Guide us in all matters of faith and conduct"; the Holy Spirit, whose gifts "are for today"; sharing faith; discipleship, through the cultivation of "radical personal holiness"; campaigning for justice, understood as "part of the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations"; and arts and culture as a way of "communicating God's truth and justice"[12]. The reality of SPEAK's membership, however, belies this official evangelical discourse, national events often demonstrating a wide range of religious influences, such as Anabaptism and liberation theology, and bringing together evangelical Christians and "spiritual seekers". This more eclectic religious positioning and identity seems to be reflected in, and mirrored by, the more multi-faceted and somewhat fluid identify that SPEAK projects. The currents of liberation theology within SPEAK can also be seen to lead to a sense of unease with popular culture; and this is evident in the comparative lack of popular cultural references on SPEAK's website.

Tearfund, by contrast, has a more straightforward evangelical positioning and this is important in understanding Rhythms. In the UK, the charismatic movement is increasingly popular and influential among young evangelicals, with charismatic Christian summer conferences aimed at young people, such as Soul Survivor and Momentum, dominating the evangelical calendar. Peter Herriot identifies that many features of the charismatic movement share similarities and agreement with contemporary popular culture, asserting that "the romantic words of the love songs to Jesus, the celebrity status of the worship leaders, the stand-up comic style of the talk, and the individualised and self-contained ecstasy of the prayer ministry are all derived from different forms of popular entertainment" (249). Though the context here is the borrowing of popular cultural formats for religious purposes, this also demonstrates the ease with which the charismatic movement sits alongside popular culture, perhaps explaining Rhythm's more thorough usage of popular cultural sources. There is a sense that Rhythms expects the readers of their website to be familiar with such sources, even as their meanings are negotiated in various ways.

Despite these differences, however, we should not erase the similarities between the three groups. The way in which each group deploys popular cultural sources, albeit in different ways, feed into what can be understood as a religiously-inspired politics of the everyday. New social movement theory, in particular, has greatly emphasised the importance of the everyday in contemporary politics, such as the "attempt to practice alternative lifestyles" within the "everyday network of social relations" (Melucci, 71). Whilst the groups studied here cannot accurately be designated as new social movements, they too demonstrate this politicisation of everyday life (see also Hetherington), and the use of popular culture represents one way in which they do this. The "everyday-ness" of popular cultural sources is used as a springboard for the recommendation of various alternative forms of everyday activity and lifestyle action. In the case of the SPEAK Network particularly, the rejection of popular culture in favour of a Do-It-Yourself counter-culture represents a further politicisation of everyday life, the very act of creating alternate cultural products being a political statement.

Concluding remarks

Much of the contemporary literature on religion and young people suggests that popular culture is a key site of sacred meaning-making among young people. Gordon Lynch, for example, identifies "active engagement" with popular culture as a significant characteristic of young religiosity (65). The picture that emerges here, however, is not so much one of deep engagement with popular cultural sources, but a rather more instrumental one, encompassing a variety of uses that serve the groups' religious and political goals. While the different emphases of the three groups correspond with, and can be partially explained by, the groups' varying collective identities and their differing religious positioning, there are also important similarities. Most strikingly, the varying uses of popular

culture demonstrated by these groups serve to illuminate an embodied religiously-inspired politics of the everyday. Research into the relationship between youth activism and popular culture, comparing secular political groups to their religious counterparts examined here, could prove instructive in further exploring the intersections between popular culture and forms of youth political engagement.

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Endnotes

[1] Initial research carried out on Tearfund Rhythms was conducted before their website was rebranded in March 2014. This description is taken from their former website (http://village.rhythms-dev.handsupstaging.com/), which has now been replaced by a new one (http://rhythms.org/). Later examples and quotations in this article are from both the former and new websites. This statement by Rhythms on "what's new" (http://rhythms.org/whats-new/) indicates the extent to which this rebranding is primarily about ease of use and a fresher design, rather than any substantial change in ethos.

[2] See http://www.christianaidcollective.org/who-we-are (accessed 8 January 2015)

[3] Based on an interview with an early SPEAK member

[4] See http://www.speak.org.uk/about-us (accessed 8 January 2015)

[5] See http://www.charityjob.co.uk/jobs/295671/Emerging-Individuals-Follow-Up-Coordinator (accessed 8 January 2015)

[6] The extent to which these resources are utilised is unclear. By contrast, there is evidence on Facebook of Rhythms Hubs existing in various UK cities, though the degree to which these Facebook groups are actively used is also uncertain.

[7] Christian Unions are the member bodies of the University and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UCCF)

[8] See http://speaknetworkarts.tumblr.com/ (accessed 8 January 2015)

[9] This is based on my own observations, having attended 10 national SPEAK events over the last six years

[10] See http://www.speak.org.uk/about-us/our-vision (accessed 8 January 2015)

[11] See http://rhythms.org/about/ (accessed 8 January 2015) [12] See http://www.speak.org.uk/about-us/our-values (accessed 8 January 2015)