

Subcultural Identity as a Surrogate- or Quasi-Religiosity*

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Abstract

As contemporary postmodern societies attain increasingly more complex forms, the previous markers of belonging and identity also expand and incorporate new elements. Through this process, new alternative forms of belonging emerge, emphasizing the individuals' uniqueness within the masses. Scholars agree that the wide range of sub- and countercultural affiliations - emerging since around the late 20th century - are becoming just as important identifiers of belonging in our contemporary society as formerly religious or congregational affiliations were. In certain conditions, the combination and interaction of these new markers of alternative belongings and subcultural self-definitions with former religious-social complexes have the capacity to create unique - maybe even seemingly self-contradictory - constellations. Inspecting these peculiar cases, one could argue that a devout Catholic should not read fantasy- and sci-fi literature or an Evangelical protestant should avoid listening to heavy- or black metal, as these kinds of pastimes and their possible secondary affiliative markers might undermine

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the primary (religious) identity of the individual. However, in this paper, I will bring examples of such combinations where the subcultural affiliations are just as equally normative - if not more important - as the religious ones are. Considering these, I present an initial perspective for approaching the combination and interactions of subcultural spheres as part of a larger system containing surrogate or complementary elements for established religiosity, as well as - in certain conditions - manifested autonomous forms of quasi-religiosity.

Keywords: Quasi-Religiosity, Contemporary Identities, Subcultural Movements, Counterculturalism, Surrogate Religiosity, Sci-fi & Fantasy, Heavy Metal, Event Religion

1. Introduction

Scholars of advanced Western societies and contemporary religiosity, like Danièle Hervieu-Léger,¹⁾ Dominika Motak,²⁾ Kathryn Lofton,³⁾ and Jean-François Lyotard,⁴⁾ often point out a foundational dynamic regarding today's religiosity: as societies advance into more complex forms, the markers of collective identity and belonging gain an increased significance. Parallel to these observations, one can also note a specific element of postmodernity: the emphasis on individualism. Hervieu-Léger refers to this as the *culture of individualism*.⁵⁾ To stand out and

1) Danièle Hervieu-Léger, "The Role of Religion in Establishing Social Cohesion," in *Conditions of European solidarity*, ed. Krzysztof Michalski (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2006).

2) Dominika Motak, "Postmodern Spirituality and the Culture of Individualism," *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 21 (2009).

3) Kathryn Lofton, *Consuming Religion, Class 200: New Studies in Religion* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017).

4) Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, with the assistance of translation from the French by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, and foreword by Fredric Jameson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

5) Danièle Hervieu-Léger, "Individualism, the Validation of Faith, and the Social Nature of Religion in Modernity," in *The Blackwell Companion to Sociology of Religion* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007),

express the uniqueness within the collective is a driving force through which one may express oneself and articulate one's own claims for existence. Jean-François Lyotard also refers to this specific element, however, in quite different settings: in his framework, as humanity enters the postmodern era, – besides the driving force for uniqueness and individuality – societies also attain an *'incredulity towards metanarratives.'*⁶⁾ While in the modern age, sciences, rationality, or any notions from the Enlightenment created a general common ground, in the postmodern age, the construction of what is considered as 'truth' is no longer monopolized by one set of metanarratives. Hence, there is no definite 'truth' in the postmodern age, but parallel – sometimes even opposing – narratives⁷⁾ competing against each other.⁸⁾ According to Lee McIntire's interpretation, this post-truth viewpoint is deeply rooted in postmodernism's general view on demolishing metanarrative structures.⁹⁾

2. Postmodernity and its Effects

Through a shift from a modern- to a postmodern era¹⁰⁾ – strengthened by consumerism,¹¹⁾ globalization,¹²⁾ and exponentially accelerating technological advancements¹³⁾ – David Lyon also asserts that religiosity becomes a commodity,

pp.161–175.

6) Lyotard, *The postmodern condition*, xxiii-xxv, pp.31–37.

7) Lee C. McIntyre, *Post-Truth* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2018), pp.127–151.

8) Raymond W. Radford, "‘You People Don't Know What the Truth Is... Truth Is Obsolete’: New Religious Movements and Possible Future Scenarios," *Wuhan Journal of Cultic Studies* 2, no. 1 (2022).

9) McIntyre, *Post-Truth*. pp.127–151.

10) David Lyon, "Post-Modernity," in *Understanding Contemporary Society: Theories of the Present* (London: SAGE, 2000), pp.222–237.

11) Lofton, *Consuming religion*.

12) Jeffrey Kaplan and Heléne Lööv, "The Cultic Milieu: Oppositional Subcultures in an Age of Globalization," *Nova Religio* 8, no. 1 (2004).

13) Victoria Carty, *Social Movements and New Technology*, First edition (London: Taylor and Francis, 2018).

similar to other market products – selectively chosen and compiled according to the particular individual’s needs and preferences.¹⁴⁾ Through the processes of postmodernity, as former borders and rules of mono-narratives are gradually erased or abolished, sets of alternative ideals may manifest a new type of market¹⁵⁾ for finding and incorporating new components to one’s identity. In this new market, one can extend their interests and inspirational spectrum even beyond the conventionally agreed settings of religiosity and identity and draw ideas and inspiration from various sub- and countercultural complexes, incorporating only the preferred elements. The process of creating (or recreating) one’s identity brings forth an even more fitting environment, where the palette for ‘commodities of identity’ – tailored specifically for and by the individual – may expand indefinitely. Utilizing the toolkit provided by the disciplinary field of new religions studies (NRS), researchers may have an opportunity to contextualize and analyze these processes of creating such bricolage religiosity.¹⁶⁾ To navigate within this alternative market, we also require novel approaches and inclusive thinking. To achieve this, it is best to focus first on the key points of integrating new components into one’s identity complex from a phenomenological-functionalist perspective.

First, we can state that individuals in postmodern societies typically incorporate new elements into their identity primarily to express authenticity.¹⁷⁾ Should these elements be complementary structures to an already established complex or an entirely new system, the process itself follows analogous structural steps. Starting with an initial phase of articulated distress – generated either by some sort of self-understanding crisis¹⁸⁾ or existential fears of losing one’s authentic self within

14) *Understanding Contemporary Society: Theories of the Present* (London: SAGE, 2000), pp.221–237.

15) Jan Stievernann, *Religion and the Marketplace in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

16) Véronique Altglas, “‘Bricolage’: Reclaiming a Conceptual Tool,” *Culture and Religion* 15, no. 4 (2014), pp.474–493.

17) Danièle Hervieu-Léger, “Individualism, the Validation of Faith, and the Social Nature of Religion in Modernity,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Sociology of Religion*, pp.161–175.

18) John Lofland and Norman Skonovd, “Conversion Motifs,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*

the mass¹⁹⁾ – the individual attains a so-called “seeker attitude,”²⁰⁾ aiming to find solutions to particularly visible elements of said systematic crisis. To achieve this, the seeker chooses one of five possible coping mechanisms through which one may reposition oneself and integrate seemingly new, highly personalized, and/or innovative types of “products” from the accessible wider cultural market.²¹⁾

3. Coping Mechanisms

The aforementioned five possible coping mechanisms are the *return*, *reform*, *reinvent*, *reorient*, and *redefine* strategies. **Return** allows the individual to draw inspiration from overemphasizing elements of seemingly declining traditional social (or religious) structures. Seeking such solutions in established systems explains the emergence of Christian conservatism and traditionalism, or the increasing popularity of returning to historical gender-and-family structures (i.e., the *tradwife* and *tradhusband* movement²²⁾) in the past five years. This strategy is typically articulated with an expression to preserve ‘classical or traditional values’ and is typically positioned against postmodernity’s ‘too progressive’ or ‘fuzzy’ ideals. By essentially doubling down on the already known systems – should these be social or religious ones – individuals who choose this method may find ways to establish or maintain authenticity and authority in changing sociocultural settings. Nevertheless, because of the lack of flexibility, partakers in this strategy eventually isolate themselves and prevent any meaningful further innovation from coping with later internal crises, limiting the available future methods to the

20, no. 4 (1981), pp.373–385.

19) J. M. Yinger, *Religion, Society and the Individual* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), pp.73–125.

20) Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (1991), pp.35–70.

21) William S. Bainbridge et al., *Sacred Markets, Sacred Canopies: Essays on Religious Markets and Religious Pluralism* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

22) See: <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&geo=US&q=tradwife> (Accessed: 2023.08.31.)

sphere of the return strategy. The *Reforming* strategy is structurally similar to the return strategy; however, as it is a targeted method, it aims to innovate only to a certain, limited extent while also maintaining close connections to its incorporating macro-systems. These attempts yield new, inventive, and adaptive offshoots within an established and socio-culturally embedded framework. The reforming strategy can be considered as a flexible, 'in-between' approach, providing both the inventive properties for combatting the dissolution of individuality within the collective, while also maintaining close connections to one's collective identity within a system, successfully avoiding isolation or separation. The *Reinventing* strategy offers ways to utilize romanticized former social/cultural/religious complexes – similarly to what the return strategy does – but articulates these in an active and aimed manner. This method emphasizes 'nostalgia elements' – an extremely powerful conveyer of authority that connects the individuals to a (mostly pseudo-) historical lineage – and establishes a completely new meaning system rather than reforming an existing one or returning to a previous state. With aimed resemblances to former value- and meaning-provider systems, the reinventing strategy can fill these structures with new meanings and personalize these entirely. Perfect examples of the utilization of this strategy would be the indigenous and native faith movements (such as neopaganism and ethnic pagan formations). *Reorienting* might be the most diverse strategy, as this method puts emphasis on the individual as a „seeker.” Here, the individual actively seeks and finds new, complex, predetermined meaning systems and solutions, typically outside their former socio-cultural matrix. The simultaneous novelty – provided by the external socio-cultural matrix – and familiarity – by the emphasis on individuality – of such innovative strategies prove to be a highly effective system of proving a coping mechanism for both spiritual homelessness (a.k.a. the loss of collective identity) and the loss of individuality. Most followers of neo-Vedic, guru-centered charismatic movements utilize this adaptive strategy. By inhabiting already pre-established meaning systems centered around a charismatic leader, reorienting strategists are offered a new worldview basis, which solves their

existential crisis by redirecting their perspectives on the issue at hand. However, rather than offering exact solutions, the utilizers of this strategy “find their own ways” to cope with said crises, selectively choosing from the loosely connected ideas offered by the charismatic leader.²³⁾ Finally, the *Redefining* strategy offers ways to completely reshape one’s meaning-systems. Starting with the abolishment of terms such as religion, religiosity, and spirituality, this strategy creates a ‘blank canvas’ on which individuals may formulate their own definitions or even non-definitions for particular terms. In practical reality, these strategies manifest in non-religiosity, event religiosity, fandom, and conspiracy beliefs. Foundationally, these new formations fulfill the same functionalities of former religious structures but with the added benefit of being able to individualize their meanings completely and in an entirely divided manner from all previous religious traditions and systems. The absolute openness of this method also invites the attention of researchers and puts emphasis on the question of whether we should revisit our own terms when discussing religion and religiosity in relation to individuality and collective identity in contemporary postmodern societies.

4. Approaching through the Lenses of Surrogate– and Quasi–Religiosity

To investigate further, in parallel to the theme of the Korean Academy of New Religions’ 2022 conference,²⁴⁾ titled Quasi-Religiosity in Contemporary Society, I propose to approach the issue – or at least one segment of it – by paying close attention to two terms: surrogate-religiosity and quasi-religiosity. In

23) Lewis F. Carter, *Charisma and Control in Rajneeshpuram: The Role of Shared Values in the Creation of a Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

24) See: https://kanr.jams.or.kr/co/com/EgovMenu.kci?s_url=/acm/config/accnConf/acAcnInfo>CreateList.kci&s_MenuId=MENU-00000000030000&accnId=null (Accessed: 2023.08.31).

this approach, the former refers to the various forms of nonconventional extensions for particular, established religious traditions. These typically open up institutionalized and socially embedded forms of religiosity towards new, formerly avoided, or even taboo systems. The achieved innovation provides a sense of variety and an opportunity for expressing one's – especially the youth's – uniqueness in 'controlled' and 'protected' settings while also providing a required 'consumer-friendly' environment.²⁵⁾ On the contrary, quasi-religiosity – in our approach – means autonomous religious complexes that can entirely detach themselves from other religious traditions and essentially provide the same religious-like functionalities and structures in alternative and innovative ways.²⁶⁾ Approaching these formations from a functionalist perspective allows us to successfully differentiate between these two and designate some new mechanisms in contemporary religious developments of Western consumer societies. Approaching our topic – subcultures and religiosity – it is beneficial to start our investigation by examining various forms of surrogate religiosity.

5. Surrogate Religiosity – Books, Roleplaying, and Musical Subcultures

In most conservative Orthodox, Catholic, neo-Pentecostal, and even charismatic Protestant religious communities, the reading or even possession of fantasy and sci-fi literature is generally frowned upon. In the aforementioned circles, titles such as the *Harry Potter* books, the *Wheel of Time* series, J. R. R. Tolkien's, Asimov's and Frank Herbert's books (just to mention the most impactful authors) were often associated with occultism, atheism, deviancy, or out-loud anti-Christian

25) Lofton, *Consuming Religion*, pp.17-34.

26) John E. Smith, *Quasi-Religions: Humanism, Marxism and Nationalism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan Limited, 1994), pp.1-15.

notions.²⁷⁾ Furthermore, with the growing popularity of roleplaying games, such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, since the early 1980s, most Christian congregations faced an internal crisis. These games – and the roleplaying subculture – were (and still are) widely popular among the youth – especially between the ages of 18 and 24²⁸⁾ –; however, the guidebooks and supplementary materials actively utilize depictions of occult rites, ancient monsters, and evils – and other narratives which are ‘unacceptable’ from a Christian perspective –, to establish their game narratives and assist worldbuilding. Here, we also need to reflect on the moral panic of the ‘80s – also known as the Satanic Panic – fueled by authors such as Lawrence Pazder,²⁹⁾ Bruce G. Frederickson,³⁰⁾ Arthur Lyons,³¹⁾ and even televangelist Bob Larson³²⁾ – which effectively prevented any interaction between fantasy enthusiasts and devout Christians. Although the claims of the Satanic Panic were fabricated and were refuted or walked back in later years, the effects of this period and the notions of angst and distress remain in most conservative Christian families when discussing such things.

Nevertheless, in the past decade, initial openings towards such subcultures have been made in some inventive – not necessarily progressive – Christian congregations. One such example could be Doxacon, a “Comic-Con for the Orthodox youth.”³³⁾ At a yearly Doxacon, one may find fantasy writers promoting their most recent titles,³⁴⁾ role-players competing against each other for

27) Jeffrey S. Victor, *Satanic Panic: The Creation of a Contemporary Legend* (Chicago: Open Court, 1993), pp.155–179.

28) Trygstad Maegan L., “Dungeons and Dragons and Data: The Demographics of Players and Their Impact on Character Creation and Game Play: A Capstone Submitted to the University Honors Program in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Baccalaureate Degree with Honors,” (Northern Illinois University, 2019), pp.6–15.

29) Lawrence Pazder et al., *Michelle Remembers* (New York: Pocket Books, 1980).

30) Bruce G. Frederickson, *How to Respond to Satanism* (St. Louis: Concordia Pub. House, 1988).

31) Arthur Lyons, *Satan Wants You: The Cult of Devil Worship in America* (New York: Mysterious Press, 1988).

32) Bob Larson, *Satanism: The Seduction of America's Youth* (Nashville, TN: T. Nelson Publishers, 1989).

33) See: <http://www.doxacon.org/> (Accessed: 2023.08.31.)

34) See: <http://www.doxacon.org/media-we-recommend.html> (Accessed: 2023.08.31.)

prizes,³⁵⁾ card- and book- collectors showcasing the results of their acquisitions, and even cosplayers dressing up as their favorite characters from fantasy and sci-fi shows.³⁶⁾ However, the very thing that differentiates this event from a generic Comic Con is the presence and active partaking of representatives from the Orthodox Church of America. Prominent public figures, priests, monks, and affiliated “influencers” hold roundtable discussions and panels about the connections and impacts of Christianity on fantasy and sci-fi literature, essentially creating a narrative turn about this formerly avoided subculture. In Doxacon, one may find Q&A panels about whether faeries of certain fantasy series could enter the Christian afterlife and discussions about the role of hope and identity in connection to the paradoxes of the DC multiverse. There are also theoretical and practical theological discussions about whether Orthodox Christianity has any adequate answers to the many questions raised in futuristic and transhumanist sci-fi series such as *Star Trek* or *Stargate*. There are panels with even more visible ties to Orthodoxy, like Rev. David Subu’s presentation about Frank Herbert’s *Dune* series and its parallels to the activity of Desert Fathers and the monastic tradition of *Philokalia*.³⁷⁾ The expo also includes religious services in the form of communal Akathist at the start of the event and a Great Vesper as a closing ceremony.³⁸⁾ Doxacon can be interpreted as a prime example of manifested surrogate religiosity. Here, the careful approach of Orthodoxy towards a formerly avoided field of interest results in meaningful interactions and a controlled environment for Christian youth to be included in this – formerly forbidden yet so-intriguing subculture. With some narrative changes and thematic appropriations, Doxacon successfully fills the legitimate market need in Christianity’s surrogate religiosity.

Other examples of surrogate religiosity can be found in musical subcultures.

35) See: <http://www.doxacon.org/games.html> (Accessed: 2023.08.31.)

36) See: <http://www.doxacon.org/2015-photo-gallery.html> (Accessed: 2023.08.31.)

37) See Doxacon 2021’s panel presentation titled, *One More Blasphemy Remains: Memory, Prescience, Possession, and Abomination in Frank’s Herbert’s Dune Saga*.

38) See: <http://www.doxacon.org/schedule.html> (Accessed: 2023.08.31.)

Over the past three decades, Christian Heavy- and Black Metal gained a massive following. Bands like *August Burns Red*, *Mortification*, *The Devil Wears Prada*, *Demon Hunter*, and *Deliverance* incorporated Christian themes and narratives into their lyrics and stage acts. Even though the black metal scene is famous for anti-Christian or even out-loud anti-religious notions,³⁹⁾ bands like *Horde* and *Antestor*, *Arch of Thorns*, and *Ascendant* may offer unique ways for the religiously affiliated youth to get involved in the metal scene. Through fulfilling a seemingly contradictory need in the musical market, adequately open religious congregations may also gain new ways for proselytization and can exclude elements of the ‘metalhead lifestyle,’ which parents and concerned clergy members might deem as “potentially harmful.” Through providing means for expressing counterculturalism, subculturally limited defiance, and even a sense of extremity and rebelliousness, the inventive religious formations may gain new means of retaining their youth through the transitional periods of pre-adolescence – which is the most prevalent time of religious disaffiliation.⁴⁰⁾ The integration of radical subcultures as surrogate religiosity may also lend ways for expressing intense personal faith. Such examples are the testimonies at the aforementioned concerts. During these, band members may invite inspired participants from the audience to declare their unwavering faith in Christ.

Moreover, similar trends can be observed outside the religious sphere of Christianity. As an example, on the other side of the musical spectrum, we may find Nissim Black,⁴¹⁾ who fused Jewish religious themes and melodies with traditional hip-hop beats and the countercultural aspects of American gang culture. The charismatic figure of Nissim Black – who himself was a former gang member representing the Gangster Disciples gang – is now a first-generational follow of Breslov Hasidism. The authenticity of his character as a ‘gangster-rapper’ and a

39) Kennet Granholm, “Ritual Black Metal: Popular Music as Occult Meditation and Practice,” *Correspondences - Journal for the Study of Esotericism* 1, no. 1 (2013), pp.5-33.

40) Daniel Enstedt, ed., *Handbook of Leaving Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), pp.67-81, 186-200.

41) See: <https://www.nissimofficial.com/> (Accessed: 2023.08.31.)

devout Hasidic Jew proves to be a successful tool for bringing the same sort of “controlled rebelliousness” into Hasidism that Christian Heavy- and Black metal does. The artist also proves to be a successful proselytizer, delivering an accepted – and to some extent even supported – the genre of unique and innovative youth music into Hasidic traditionalism.

Considering these examples, it is evident that the mentioned phenomena can only exist as marginal parts of established religious traditions. These formations actively utilize the semantic structures of their containing macro-systems while also functioning as secondary normative meaning systems, offering a much-needed tool for expressing one’s individuality and uniqueness without leaving the protective and surrounding collective. This way, the involved may retain their religious affiliations, as the subcultural belonging does not interfere negatively with their belief systems but rather refines and intensifies it in a way that allows the incorporation of religious meanings into seemingly non-religious subcultural atmospheres as well.

6. Quasi-Religiosity – Taking that “One More” Step

However, in the case of quasi-religiosity, subcultural affiliation may develop into – of course, to some extent limited – placeholders, forming religious-like traits and functioning as such for the involved. By approaching these cases from a strictly functionalist perspective, we could point out phenotypical elements of religiosity emerging in seemingly alien contexts: quasi-priesthood may manifest in the form of performers at a concert or around charismatic pop-culture figures. Quasi-rituals – offering a sense of transcendence, togetherness, and intensive personal and communal experiences – may take forms in non-religious events, like festivals, brand events, and even in simple day-to-day life practices like listening to a particular type of music. To further inspect these cases of

alternative religious-like structures, it is best to examine concrete examples:

One of the most apparent manifestations of quasi-religiosity can be found in communal events. Sára Heidl, a fellow Hungarian researcher, coined the term *event religiosity*, to refer to the religious elements of particular gatherings. In her view, contemporary festivals and mass events may function – to some extent – as religious events. She contextualizes the phenomena as follows:

Where the human-transcendent relationship weakens within the institutionalized religious settings, individuals seek and find new connections at occasional, temporary events. A festival is an event that is easily accessible, provides intense experiences, and helps you break away from everyday life.⁴²⁾

As Heidl notes, musical, art, and subcultural festivals may take up some of the traditional religiosity’s functionalities in today’s age. The intertwining elements in these instances are the emphasis on a communal sphere, the importance of private – religious-like or religious – experiences of partakers, the limited spatiality and temporality, and the usage of symbols as conveyers of complex and powerful meanings. Heidl analyzed the Hungarian Everness Festival, a yearly mindfulness expo dominated by New Age, esoteric, and spiritualistic thought. In her study, she concluded that to some, this festival period offers intense personal religious experiences, a strong, almost tribe-like sense of community, spiritual fulfillment, and a detachment from the profane, outside world. These descriptions and experiences can definitely qualify the Everness Festival as a quasi-religious system. These traits could be found in other, seemingly more “secular” events as well. One such example could be the American Burning Man Festival.⁴³⁾

Established in 1986 as a countercultural “communal exodus”⁴⁴⁾ and organized

42) Réka Szilárdi and Sára Heidl, *Vallásdömping: Ezoterika, Spiritualitás És New Age Az Alkalmazott Valláskutatás Perspektívájából*, *Vallás a társadalomban 7* (Szegei Tudományegyetem Vallástudományi Tanszék, 2017), pp.11–13.

43) See: <https://burningman.org/> (Accessed: 2023.08.31.)

44) Graham St John, “Civilised Tribalism: Burning Man, Event-Tribes and Maker Culture,” *Cultural Sociology* 12, no. 1 (2018), pp.3–21.

since the 1990s in the Black Rock Desert, Nevada,⁴⁵⁾ the Burning Man Festival is a perfect example of event religiosity as quasi-religiosity. It bears all the markers Heidi emphasizes. It is most certainly an intense and temporally limited event, carrying a unique sense of community and belonging. The accepted – and to some extent even mandatory – usage of psychedelics and mind-altering substances creates a fertile state of mind for transcendent or spiritual experiences. The importance of symbols is also evident, with a giant statue burnt to ash every year, standing in the middle of the festival. Black Rock City, the ad-hoc town that forms around the Man every year, consists of several distinct parts. The camp is circled around the giant statue. However, it is open towards the desert – the “Wholly Other,” a wordplay on Rudolf Otto’s *das Ganz Andere*.⁴⁶⁾ Between the open desert – or Outer Playa, as Burners refer to it – and Black Rock City lies the “Playa,” the actual festival grounds.⁴⁷⁾ The entirety of this area is filled with artistic installations and experiments.⁴⁸⁾ These interactive statues gain new lives during the nighttime with light and laser shows, creating a strange feeling of motion and presence, as if the statues were actually living otherworldly creatures walking amongst the Burners at night.⁴⁹⁾ Festivalgoers also dress up in unique decorative clothing in an attempt to express their worldviews, alternative ideals, and personal uniqueness, but also to cover their ‘secular’ identities and to blend into this colorful flow of oddities. This vortex of strange colors, creatures, and sounds has the capability to invoke the feeling of the so-called *das Ganz Andere*, or “*w(h)ol(l)y other*,” associated with numinous experiences.⁵⁰⁾

45) Before this time, the first Burn Nights were organized in Baker Beach, San Francisco.

46) Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational* (S.I.: OUP, 1950 (1977)).

47) Graham St John, “At Home in the Big Empty: Burning Man and the Playa Sublime,” *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 13, no. 3 (2020), pp. 286-313.

48) In the past years, a new recurring installation was also built exactly on the edge of the Playa and the Outer Playa. This construction – a temple – is made out of scrap items collected throughout the year, and it’s dedicated to a changing theme, closely connected to every particular Burn’s major theme. About the 2023 Temple, see: <https://www.temple2023.com/> (Accessed: 2023. 08. 31.)

49) Simon Ferdinand, Irina Souch and Daan Wesselman, *Heterotopia and Globalisation in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Routledge, 2020).

50) Otto, *The idea of the Holy*. 1950.

Considering this, it isn't surprising that for a certain segment of the attendees, the combination of the aforementioned elements means more than a simple festival. With the isolation provided by the desert and the sense of freedom and strangeness – this festival functions similarly to the antique *festums*, hosted in the sacred groves of *temenos-es* – which were restricted to non-worship personnel during secular times –, or the carnivals of medieval city-states like Venice. Like at the aforementioned carnivals, during Burning Man's period – and especially Burn Night – attendees may get a feeling as if conventional rules and regulations may cease to apply to them, and for a limited time, new – transcendent – rules would take their place. The liminal phase created by the carnivalesque settings abolishes societal differences and creates a sense of undivided community without status imbalances or personal privileges. Partakers of Burning Man may also take up strange roles and odd personalities alongside their attires for the duration of the event, depicting themselves as tribesmen, magicians, kings and queens, non-humans, strange mystical creatures, gods and goddesses, and many other forms of otherworldly creatures. From a scholarly perspective, these combined elements definitely have the capacity to manifest the temporally and spatially limited aspects of a functional quasi-religious structure. Burners – most of whom unknowingly and instinctively create and take part in these rituals, may genuinely experience religious-like experiences and, for the festival's time, enter a quasi-sacred time and space.

7. Conclusion

Each of the former examples of quasi-religiosity had a common trait: they were temporally and/or locally restricted, meaning that their effects would cease after a certain time or beyond a certain action radius. However, there are cases of when the limiting aspects of temporality and spatiality do not occur. One such example was introduced to me while attending the Masaryk University's and the MSCEE's conference in September 2022 in Brno, Czechia. The conference's opening keynote, – Professor Marcus Moberg from Åbo Akademi University Turku – discussed various ways to approach the scholarship of metal music and religiosity. One of these possible ways was considering “metal as religion.” Marcus argued that the intense engagement in pop cultural and subcultural formations may result in similar communal experiences as religious ones do. He quoted Deena Weinstein – a professor of sociology from DePaul University, Chicago – who stated that the intense and overwhelming sensory overload experience of a classic heavy metal concert “*bears a striking resemblance to the celebrations, festivals and ceremonies that characterize religion around the world.*”⁵¹⁾ The phrasing “*striking resemblance*” means that Professor Weinstein does not imply that being a metalhead *always* means that any individual who listens to metal can only listen to it ‘out of religious motives.’ Professor Weinstein suggests that for some, these affiliations may function as alternative ways for experiencing a feeling of shared meanings and a common moral universe, manifesting in structural forms that can create a sense of cohesion and belonging – similar to what religiosity and religious practices do for others. This “*striking likeness*” may grasp the essential criteria for categorizing the metalhead lifestyle and subculture as one type of quasi-religiosity. Although Professor Weinstein limits her statement to concert experiences, emphasizing that these

51) Deena Weinstein, *Heavy Metal: A Cultural Sociology* (Oxford: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1991), pp.231-232.

events –once again – bear liminal capacities only for a short duration. In my view, however, this interpretation could take a step even further: one should inspect the metalhead lifestyle as a system of manifested quasi-religiosity. In this case, the researcher could find other “*striking resemblances*” to religiosity.

To illustrate this, I chose to utilize Ninian Smart’s 1998 “*dual model*.”⁵²⁾ Using this framework, one could easily designate elements of a common material dimension: in metalhead living rooms, band t-shirts, flags, signed drumsticks, and guitar picks may be displayed – resembling an altar of some sort – surrounded with musical equipment and other collected relics from previous concert experiences. The ritual dimension (interconnected with the experiential dimension) would manifest in a multitude of forms, creating increasingly more intense rites. Starting from listening to music alone in silence – as a form of tranquil meditation – followed by playing it on one’s sound system at ear-shattering decibels while headbanging and shouting the lyrics – seemingly entering a trance-like state. Of course, the most visible realization of communal rituals would be concerts and metal festivals, where the doctrinal dimension may be most observable. The “gatekeeping” mechanism of wearing proper attire and behaving accordingly filters out any “posers.” This gatekeeping can also be considered a tool for expressing one’s devotion: being able to differentiate from fakes and finding genuine enthusiasm and moral verification while doing so. Elements from the doctrinal dimension establish one’s general self-definition as a metalhead while also offering ways for more nuanced expressions through representing a chosen sub-genre of metal music. The most interesting aspect of this approach would be designating the whereabouts of an ethical dimension, although to find this, one would need to enter the so-called mosh-pits. Here, the daring researcher, would see the collective of protective measures to prevent harm while offering a way to freely “rage on” – as the audience almost instantly picks up anyone who has fallen, avoiding trampling and, if necessary, even crowd surfs

52) Ninian Smart, *The World’s Religions*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp.10-21.

the injured out of the ‘danger zone.’ The narrative and mythical dimensions are more elusive, as these are closely tied to the particular subgenre. Power metal bands, as such, usually create their own mythology, presenting themselves as valiant knights or noble barbarians, bringing forth ancient knowledge in their musical tracks. Differently, in gothic metal tracks, one may find interpretations and re-takes on peculiar issues, like love, mortality, death, attitudes towards the unknown, unknowable, and so on. Finally, the social/institutional dimensions would be found outside the aforementioned festivals – verifying this thought experiment and proving that the metal subculture can – in fact – be interpreted as a quasi-religious structure.

As metalheads return to non-liminal times, they maintain their representation and show their belonging to their particular subcultural or quasi-religious formation. Semi-religious or even surrogate religious spheres may manifest in this spirit – like metal pubs, online forums for thematic discussions, etc. Interactions between metalheads – the usage of typical phrases, internal language, and gestures – create the cohesive elements of a social dimension, similar to what religious gestures do in established religiosity. In parallel with Professor Weinstein’s notions, common gestures of belonging and shared values outside the temporally and locally divided ritual times may have the capability to develop a quasi-religious system in the metalhead subculture.

Needless to say, this short outlook to possibly temporally and locally unlimited quasi-religious formations is far from proven or complete. A legitimate criticism could be the broad usage of the term *religion* – not considering its substantial elements in this paper. Nonetheless, the former thought experiment and the introduction of the term ‘surrogate religiosity’ may yield some promising ways in the paradigm of contemporary postmodern identity- and meaning-system formations and offer valuable contributions to our understanding of changing social cohesive functionalities of religiosity and quasi-religiosity.

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■ 국문요약 ■

대리종교 또는 유사종교로서의 하위문화 정체성

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현대 포스트모던 사회들이 점점 더 복잡한 형태를 이루면서, 소속감과 정체성의 이전 지표들 또한 확장되고 새로운 요소들을 통합하게 된다. 이 과정을 통해, 대중 내에서 개인의 독특함을 강조하는 새로운 대체 소속 형태가 나타난다. 학자들은 광범위한 하위 문화 및 반문화적 소속들이 이전의 종교적 또는 회중적 소속들이 그랬던 것처럼 현대 사회에서 소속에 대한 중요한 지표가 되고 있다는 것에 동의한다. 특정한 상황에서, 이러한 대체 소속감의 새로운 지표들과 하위 문화적 자기 정의들의 이전의 종교적-사회적 복합체들의 조합과 상호작용은 독특하고 심지어 자기 모순적으로 보이는 별자리들을 만들 수 있는 능력을 가지고 있다. 이러한 독특한 사례들을 조사하면서, 독실한 가톨릭 신자는 판타지 및 공상과학 문학을 읽지 말아야 하거나 복음주의 개신교 신자는 헤비 메탈이나 블랙 메탈을 듣지 말아야 한다고 주장할 수 있는데, 이러한 종류의 여가 및 가능한 2차적 소속 지표들은 개인의 1차적 (종교적) 정체성을 훼손할 수 있기 때문이다. 그러나 이 논문에서 연구자는 하위 문화적 소속들이 종교적 소속들만큼 중요하지는 않더라도 동등하게 규범적인 그러한 조합들의 예들을 들겠다. 이러한 점들을 고려하여, 하위 문화적 영역들의 결합과 상호작용에 대한 초기 관점을 확립된 종교성에 대한 대리적 또는 보완적 요소들을 포함하는 더 큰 시스템의 일부로서 그리고 특정한 상황에서 나타나는 유사종교성의 자율적인 형태로서 접근하는 초기 관점을 제시한다.

주제어: 유사종교성, 동시대 정체성, 하위문화운동, 반문화주의, 대리종교성,
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