Negotiating the popular, the sacred and the political: an extended case study of three UK-based youth Christian social justice initiatives

The engagement of young people of religious faith with global injustice has been little explored in studies either of youth religiosity or youth political participation. The recently-established youth initiatives of Christian Aid and Tearfund, two of the UK's most widely-recognised Christian non-governmental organisations, offer a way to explore this, alongside the SPEAK Network, a grassroots Christian student and youth movement that campaigns on social justice issues. Analysing the blog posts of these three initiatives, this paper will focus particularly upon the ways in which Tearfund Rhythms, the Christian Aid Collective and SPEAK use popular culture, categorising their various uses as either innovation, appropriation, resistance or reclamation. It will then explain the groups' differing emphases by considering their varying relationships with their members and their different religious positioning, before critically assessing what it means for young adults to "do" religion and politics online.

Key words: popular culture, religion, politics, lifestyle, youth

Despite a burgeoning literature considering religion and young people (cf. Collins-Mayo & Dandelion, 2010; Lynch, 2002; Flory & Miller, 2008), 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 few years, two of the most established and most widely-recognised Christian development charities and advocacy organisations in the UK, Christian Aid and Tearfund, have set up their own youth branches – Christian Aid Collective and Tearfund Rhythms. An examination of the blog posts of these two initiatives, alongside those of the SPEAK Network, a grassroots Christian youth movement that campaigns on social justice issues, consequently provides an interesting opportunity to analyse the intersection between young people, religion, political issues and popular culture.

Religion, young people, politics and popular culture

There is a small but growing recent literature on religion and young people, a common starting point of which is the acknowledgement of young people's agency. James Beckford,

in his foreword to Collins-Mayo and Dandelion's influential collection *Religion and Youth*, asserts that this emerging literature recognises young people's 'high degree of critical autonomy in making their own decisions about what to believe and how to translate their beliefs into action' (2010: xxiii), marking a turn away from prior study on religious socialisation. Beckford identifies social and digital media as particularly important in this, due to their capacity to enhance 'creative responses' to religion (ibid.), and this is especially relevant for this paper, due to its focus upon the websites and blogs of the three chosen initiatives. The theme of agency has also been stressed by Madge et al. in a recent work (2014) and although it is not a central theme here, it is worth bearing in mind throughout the analysis to follow. Whilst this paper does not go so far as to consider the agency exercised by the blogs' readers, the blog posts themselves, being generated predominantly by young members of the initiatives, do offer opportunities for the expression of young people's religious, and political, agency.

This paper also reflects another key theme within the emerging literature on religion and young people: the important role played by popular culture in the ways that young people understand and interpret religion, popular culture often being understood 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' (2010: 21), while Lynch has also identified popular culture as an important site of meaning-making (2002: 21). The significance of popular culture has been stressed even more strongly by Beaudoin, who situates popular culture as the 'surrogate clergy' of Generation X (in Lynch, 2002: 54). The findings of this research, however, demonstrate that popular culture may not be as central to the religious meaning-making of young people as such scholars contend. Also important 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, 2012: 1). In the midst of considerable academic debate as to how popular culture might be defined, it is consequently worth bearing in mind Storey's contention that the term 'popular culture' always implies an otherness, explicit or implicit, against which it is defined, for example 'high culture' (ibid.). In the context of the groups studied here, I have taken popular culture's 'other' to be the more explicitly religious texts and references of a particular religious tradition. Popular culture is

thus 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 these groups serve to destabilise this secularity, popular culture being understood and interpreted through their own religio-political lenses.

A key theme considered here is thus how the Christian Aid Collective, Tearfund Rhythms and SPEAK use popular culture in relation to both their religious identity and their social justice goals. This reflects Lynch's assertion that popular culture does not provide stable texts, but texts 'open to a wide range of uses and interpretations, depending on other values, beliefs and commitments that the reader or audience holds' (2002: ix). Despite this recognition, however, the literature on religion and young people, perhaps surprisingly, contains little sense of the political. In two of the most significant works on this topic within the UK context, *Religion and Youth* (Collins-Mayo and Dandelion, 2010) and *Youth on Religion* (Madge et al., 2014), for example, politics scarcely features.

As well as this absence of the political, the experiences of young people within institutional Christianity, or the Christian tradition, appear to have been comparatively marginalised in the study of young people and religion, much of which is concerned with the meaning-making activities of young people more generally. Thus, in many cases, popular culture is interpreted as an alternative site of meaning-making to traditional modes of religion, rather than as something that can also be embedded within more recognisably Christian religious expressions. This focus is partially understandable given, for example, the considerably diminished numbers of young people within churches. However, it also means that the experiences of young people within this one part of the rapidly changing religious landscape are side-lined. Studying young people that are actively engaged within the Christian tradition also has the potential to offer valuable insight into the nature of contemporary Christianity. In combining the study of three Christian politically-orientated, youth-focused groups with an analysis that focuses on their use of popular culture, this paper thus hopes to advance a more integrated approach to these four key areas - youth, religion, popular culture and politics – rather than considering youth's relationship to these in isolation.

In addition, this paper offers an analysis of three initiatives that have been little studied. This is understandable in the case of Christian Aid Collective and Tearfund Rhythms, given their recent occurrence. However, more surprisingly, their parent bodies, two of the most widely recognised Christian organisations in the UK, have also garnered little attention. Academic attention that has been given to them has been fairly superficial and of a factual rather than analytical tone, such as descriptions of Christian Aid's role in social movements such as Jubilee 2000 (Dent and Peters, 1999). SPEAK's more grassroots nature explains the lack of focus on this organisation, but even a recent work on student Christianity in the UK only devoted one sentence to SPEAK's existence (Guest et al., 2013: 157).

Methodology

This paper is based on website analysis of the blogs of Christian Aid Collective, Tearfund Rhythms and the SPEAK Network. The blogs of Rhythms and the Collective both launched in April 2012. I subsequently chose to begin my analysis of all three websites from this date and, first considering this theme in the early months of 2014, took 31st December 2013 as the end point. A time period of over a year was deliberately chosen in order to allow time for the blogs of Rhythms and the Collective to become more established. Of all the blog posts published by the three initiatives during this chosen 20 month period, I noted those that demonstrated engagement with, or use of, a popular cultural source. These were categorised into two distinct groups: those that discussed a popular cultural source in detail; and those that included merely a passing reference. The results of this are provided in the subsequent analysis. Over the course of this research, I also conducted interviews with Christian Aid and Tearfund staff, as well as young people who had participated in their internships or youth programmes, and long-term members of SPEAK. I do not draw heavily upon this material in this paper; however, it naturally has informed my analysis and interpretation. During the last 6 years, I have also attended over 10 national SPEAK events in a personal capacity and my participant observations from these events are also drawn upon here.

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'[i]. 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'[ii]. 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 the University and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UCCF), an evangelical student organisation[iii]. SPEAK describes itself as a 'network connecting together young adults and students to campaign and pray about issues of global injustice'[iv]. In contrast to Rhythms, which considers many different social justice issues, both SPEAK and the Collective's websites state 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 Collective and 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. In addition, Rhythms has hosted events in collaboration with other organisations and there is some evidence of Rhythms Hubs, defined as 'local expressions and out-workings of the Rhythms community'[v], suggesting that online participation may be supplemented by face-to-face interaction. Tearfund also has an Emerging Influencers programme, a mentoring scheme for young adults seen as 'exceptional individuals who have the potential to bring real change through their sphere of influence'[vi]. Christian Aid Collective organises regional activist training days and held its first national conference in March 2014. The 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[vii]. In addition, the Collective has an internship programme, employing on a voluntary

basis, about 15 interns per year, based in different regions of the UK to facilitate face-to-face encounters with local youth and student groups.

Central to both the Collective and Rhythms, however, is a rhetoric of online community, as seen in the name 'Collective' and also through Tearfund Rhythms' first blog site entitled 'the Village Square'. This can be understood, however, following Bauman, as community as project, rather than reality (2000: 169); furthermore, the concept of the 'village' demonstrates a strikingly romanticised notion of the community ideal (see Dawson, 2004: 76). SPEAK, by contrast, functions alongside its online 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[viii] – to engage with SPEAK's campaigns. SPEAK also hosts a national gathering twice a year, alongside biannual meetings of Flower Model, SPEAK's national, participatory decision-making body.

Group demographics

From their online manifestations, it is relatively difficult to assess the numbers of people involved in these initiatives and their demographic characteristics. On Facebook, Rhythms has over 7000 'likes'; Christian Aid Collective has over 3000; and the SPEAK Network has over 1000. It is difficult, however, to establish how active this involvement is and what proportion of those that 'like' an initiative identify strongly with it. Furthermore, from their online profiles, the demographic characteristics of their supporters and members are hard to ascertain. My attendance at SPEAK events (see discussion below) suggests that around 10% of SPEAK's Facebook supporters are actively involved in an offline capacity, with SPEAK's national gatherings attracting up to 100 people. These events also suggest a largely middle-class membership basis, with high proportions being university-educated (and furthermore at Russel Group or red brick universities). Interviews with Christian Aid Collective interns and Tearfund Emerging Influencers would also confirm this impression. However, the overall difficulties of establishing the demographics of these communities highlights some of the problems associated with studying the 'virtual world'.

Analysing the blogs of Tearfund Rhythms, the Christian Aid Collective and the SPEAK Network

During the selected 20 month period (from April 2012 to the end of 2013), the SPEAK Network published 147 blog posts; Tearfund Rhythms, 225; and the Christian Aid Collective, 101. As well as looking for references to popular culture, the website analysis also took note of the number of different individual authors and furthermore categorised each blog post by key words, to get a sense of particularly prevalent themes. The former exercise found that 8 of Rhythms' blog posts were attributed to 'admin' or 'Rhythms', leaving 217 blog posts that were written by a total of 94 individual authors (including one that was anonymous). The Collective had 18 blog posts attributed to the 'Collective', leaving 83 that were written by 40 individual authors, while SPEAK's 147 blog posts were written by 29 separate authors. SPEAK thus had proportionately far fewer authors than either Rhythms or the Collective.

This can be partially explained by the differences between these initiatives. Owing to their rhetoric of online community, both Rhythms and the Collective place emphasis upon their blogs being multi-authored and participatory. The Collective, for example, writes that 'we're always looking for strong, passionate writers, photographers, film-makers and generally creative young people to contribute to our Collective community'[ix], while Rhythms asks 'got a suggestion of a brilliant new action? Or want to join the conversation by writing an article about something you're passionate about? We'd love to hear from you.[x]' The Rhythms site also links to a downloadable writing guide, which situates the Rhythms blog as a 'hub of brilliant content produced by people like you; the dreamers, thinkers and activists of this community' and provides a list of guidelines and tips[xi]. The SPEAK website, by contrast, does not invite participation in this way. If a visitor to the website clicks on 'make a difference', they are instead directed to other options: to donate; to join a SPEAK group; to join a Flower Model petal team (Flower Model being SPEAK's participatory decision-making body); to challenge their church; and to work for SPEAK.

The three initiatives also have different purposes, something which is illuminated by the blogs' content. Categorising each blog post by key theme, certain trends emerged. The table below highlights the top four themes, by number of blog posts, for each initiative.

Tearfund Rhythms		**Christian Aid Collective**		**The SPEAK Network**	
Topic	Number of blog posts	Topic	Number of blog posts	Topic	Number of blog posts
Trip abroad with Rhythms	30	Trip abroad or internship with Christian Aid	20	SPEAK updates (news, resources, job and event advertisements)	77
Ethical living	28	Tax justice (combating tax evasion)	15	Agribusiness, food justice and food sovereignty	22
Reflections on faith/theology	15	The Enough Food IF campaign	9	The arms trade (including drones)	12
Climate change	14	Climate change	6	Trade justice (or corporate accountability)	11

Table 1

These different key themes indicate the three initiatives' different purposes and functioning. Most notably, a significant number of SPEAK's blog posts provided updates on what was going on within the network, implying that the SPEAK blog's target audience is the already interested or, more specifically, its own members. In focusing on personal experiences of trips abroad with Christian Aid and Tearfund, the Collective and Rhythms blogs instead serve to create emotional and personal links to people in poverty overseas, as well as promoting the opportunities to travel abroad through these initiatives' parent organisations. Whilst all three initiatives emphasised ethical living (or lifestyle action), this was particularly prevalent on the Rhythms blog. SPEAK, by contrast, had more focus on campaigning, including direct action. There was also difference in social justice issues addressed. Many of the issues reflected upon by Rhythms correspond with the Millennium Development Goals (poverty and hunger; education; gender equality; child mortality; maternal health; HIV/AIDs and malaria; environmental sustainability), though they were not presented as such. The Collective's strong focus on tax justice provides it with a more distinct campaigning focus, whilst SPEAK's key campaign focus on food sovereignty positions SPEAK more to the left, given

the origins of food sovereignty as a concept with Via Campesina, the international peasant movement.

Prevalence of references to popular culture

The table below demonstrates how many of these blog posts referred to popular cultural sources in passing or in more detail. Included in these tallies are references to particular mainstream consumer culture products (for example, specific adverts), but not more general references to consumer culture, though some of are quoted, in order to provide useful context, in the examples given below.

	Christian Aid Collective	**The SPEAK Network**	**Tearfund Rhythms**
Number of blog posts (April 2012-end of 2013)	101	147	225
Brief references to popular culture	3	None	6
More thorough discussion of a popular cultural source	2	1	13

Table 2

As can be seen from this table, Rhythms demonstrated the most extensive use of popular cultural sources, and SPEAK by far exhibited the least engagement. Among all three initiatives, however, references to, and discussion of, popular cultural sources were fairly sparse. Whilst much scholarly work has asserted the centrality of popular culture for the meaning-making activities of young adults, this indicates that this is in no way universal, and raises interesting questions regarding the significance of popular culture in different youth spaces.

Innovators, appropriators, resisters and reclaimers

Whilst references to popular culture were not as prevalent as might be expected, the blog posts that did engage with popular culture were nonetheless interesting and demonstrated various different ways in which popular cultural sources were discussed or used. There are several ways in which these could have been categorised, but I found the work of Flory and

Miller to be particularly useful in this regard. 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' (2008). Whilst these terms are used by Flory and Miller to describe the relationship of this generation to both mainstream 'secular' culture and inherited forms of Christianity, these terms can also be usefully deployed here to 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 used 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, potentially subversive meanings. While there is inevitable overlap between these categories and it was rare for a single blog post to be characterised by just one of these, they nonetheless represent a useful starting point to consider the different ways these groups used popular culture.

Innovation

The act of innovation is particularly demonstrated by the SPEAK Network and is exhibited in its Tumblr account, which showcases the art, photography, poetry and music of the network's members[xii]. The SPEAK Network's national events are also dependent on the creative talents of their participants, who are involved in leading worship, making videos, organising art workshops and providing musical entertainment[xiii]. This indicates a preference for a Do-It-Yourself culture, in which the network's own creativity and talents for cultural innovation are prized. This mirrors the observed contemporary concern with the notion of 'authenticity' (Taylor, 1992), 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 to such an extent. SPEAK's identity perhaps reflects the definition of sub-cultures that has been suggested by Brown and Lynch: 'structures of feeling which define a cultural way of being in opposition to an imagined cultural mainstream which is profoundly different from, and usually hostile to, that sub-culture' (2012: 341). Whilst Brown and Lynch are referring to conservative forms of religion, the notion of an 'imagined cultural mainstream' is I think a useful one, for explaining the primacy that SPEAK places on cultural expression, which

becomes a way of creating distance from more mainstream cultural values, and, similarly to conservative groups, thus feeding into identity construction . Unlike the defensive or oppositional stance that might be observed in more conservative Christian traditions, however, this manifests itself in a creative 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, 2013).

In this blog post, a popular cultural 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, 2013's 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, Christian Aid being a key member of the Enough Food IF coalition.

Rhythms also makes use of *The Hunger Games,* one blogger reflecting on the similarities between the problems of this world and those of this fictional dystopia: '*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, 2012). 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, 2012). 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, in advocating forms of politically-informed lifestyle action. This reflects the contention of Knott and Mitchell that:

> The symbolic resources that film, television and other media offer are often appropriated and recycled as people attempt to define their own identities, narrate their own life stories and understand the traditions and communities of interpretation to which they belong' (2012: 245).

Resistance

There are also examples of resistance to the meanings and values suggested by popular culture. Christian Aid Collective 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, 2013). 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, 2013). This has some parallels with the Do-It-Yourself culture of the SPEAK Network, though not going so far in its cultural innovation. A further example of resistance to popular cultural meaning-making is provided by a SPEAK blog post, in which a blogger makes reference to Robin Thicke's contentious chart-topping single *Blurred Lines* in order to describe a feminist conference attended by the blogger, thus providing resistance to

the lack of sexual consent implied by *Blurred Lines* and pointing the reader to various feminist causes and campaigns (Andrew, 2013).

Reclamation

As well as appropriating popular cultural sources for 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, 2013).

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 provides an example of this reclaiming, the adverts 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, 2013). 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 support 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' (2002: 64).

Comparison

Differences

As shown by these examples, attitudes to popular culture varied between, and within, the three organisations. As the figures above demonstrated, Rhythms exhibited the most thorough utilisation of popular cultural sources, particularly given its number of blog posts that considered popular cultural sources in more depth. The trend was 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 just once to feed into societal 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 resistance 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'[xiv]. This starting point, which assumes a lack of socio-political engagement on the part of young people, perhaps explains Rhythms' more extensive popular cultural engagement, attempting to capture the attention of this 'rudderless' community by appearing contemporary, fresh and relevant. The emphasis on 'small changes' 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.

The comments about this community being 'rudderless' are to some degree supported by academic work on student Christianity in the UK, which suggests that most Christian students 'do not volunteer for political causes and show few signs of developing a politico-moral

stance out of their Christian convictions' (Guest et al., 2013: 147). Guest et al. also point to the marginal nature of politically-orientated Christian societies (2013: 197). Whilst we should be wary, following the advice of Marsh et al. (2007), of imposing externally-defined notions of what it means to be political onto young people, the very fact that Christian Aid and Tearfund felt the need to establish initiatives specifically aimed at this age group does suggest that there was a perceived deficiency, amongst young people, of the kind of political engagement that these organisations hoped to see. 'Rudderless' can perhaps also be understood through conceptual notions such as Arnett's 'emerging adulthood' (2000), which defines the age considered here (approximately 18-25) as one of change, uncertainty and an awareness of numerous possibilities.

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 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'.[xv] 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'[xvi]. The social justice actor that Rhythms cultivates thus has a somewhat 'cosier' identity, albeit containing aspects of anti-consumerism, and reflects Warner's comment that contemporary entrepreneurial evangelicalism focuses upon 'finding and fulfilling my own potential' (2007: 69). Whilst, however, Warner sees this as a shift from 'serving others' (ibid.), in the discourse of Rhythms serving others and fulfilling one's potential are not mutually exclusive, but intrinsically interlinked. This was expressed by Tearfund's then Global Volunteering Manager, Sarah Wriglesworth:

> I think the focus has been a lot more in recent years about what person are you becoming. What person will you become? … I think Rhythms attracts an audience of young people with a lower bar than just a big corporate "give money to Tearfund", but hey, we're interested in discipleship, what are you doing with your life and how are you doing it? What are your doing with your thought life? What are your doing with your prayer life? How are you doing with your consumerism life?

However, 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.

SPEAK's focus on cultural innovation can thus be partially seen to result from its more grassroots nature. SPEAK has very few employed members of staff and limited financial resources compared with Tearfund and Christian Aid. Despite, however, the difficulties of such constraints, one early SPEAK member, Rebecca, commented on how people think 'more creatively with less resources and more passion'. Rebecca also highlighted SPEAK's creative campaigns: 'they're bonkers, but they're symbolic and engaging and creative'. She commented further on how 'people would sometimes say to us things like "woah, that's an amazing idea, we'd have to pay advertising consultants thousands to come up with that" and it's like "what?"'. Whilst limited resources do not on their own explain SPEAK's disengagement with mainstream culture, which also stems from its counter-cultural identity, this does provide further understanding of SPEAK's Do-It-Yourself culture.

The differences can also be considered in light of the groups' religious identities. Both the Collective and Rhythms assume a religious identity based on the religious positioning of their respective 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 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'[xvii]. 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'. As James, a long term SPEAK member commented to me, 'I've never, ever, ever known anything anywhere as ecumenical as SPEAK and I probably never will if I'm being completely honest'. 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. Both the influence of liberation theology and the explicit identification of arts and culture as a core value perhaps also lead to a sense of unease with popular culture and subsequent cultural innovation.

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' (forthcoming: 249). This is echoed by Warner's comments on entrepreneurial evangelicalism, which he asserts 'assimilated to mass culture, providing commodified religion repackaged for the TV age' (2007: 81). Though this refers to 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.

The notion of negotiation is an important one, as Rhythms does not have a simplistically affirming attitude towards popular culture. Lövheim has highlighted how popular culture helps young people 'negotiate between a diversity of perhaps conflicting values and norms'

(Lövheim, 2004: 62) and Rhythms demonstrates an active negotiation of this conflict, exploring popular culture through a lens of 'what can be learnt here? What needs to be rejected?'. Of all three initiatives, Rhythms perhaps demonstrates the most thorough awareness of the conflicting values that young adults may experience in their lives. This manifests itself in the political stance they take, whereby this conflict can be negotiated through small everyday actions. It also can be seen to reflect the paradoxical nature of evangelicalism and its relationship to popular culture, whereby it is both more likely to feel its values challenged by popular cultural norms *and* more likely to borrow formats and styles from popular culture.

Christian Aid's traditional support base is mainstream Protestant churches, such as Anglican, United Reformed and Methodist churches, many of which are experiencing a decrease in their numbers of young people. The Collective to some degree reflects this change in circumstances for Christian Aid. Prior to the Collective, Christian Aid pioneered a youth project called Ctrl.Alt.Shift., which, partly due to these shifting Christian demographics, focused less on Christian Aid's church links and Christian ethos and instead targeted 'those young people that we might not be reaching through our church contacts and through youth group contacts' (Pippa Durn, Church Youth Manager, Christian Aid). This initiative was deliberately experimental, culturally relevant and 'risky' and was successful in engaging its target market of non-churched youth. However, Ctrl.Alt.Shift also 'used to get themselves in a little bit of trouble by not fitting in with the rest of the organisation and we're [the Collective] unashamedly part of Christian Aid and trying to mirror what the wider organisation is doing'. This seems to have translated into a slightly safer approach, less explicitly counter-cultural than the SPEAK Network and less 'modern' in its engagement than Rhythms. This can be understood in an organisational context in which 'for the first year or so of the Collective happening, we spent a lot of time saying "we're not Crtl.Alt.Shift"' in order to build up trust.

Similarities

Despite these differences, however, we should not erase the similarities between the three groups. The ways in which each group uses popular cultural sources, albeit differently, 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, 1989: 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, 1998), 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 SPEAK, 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 expressions being a political statement. Furthermore, the various way in which these groups use popular culture function in some similar ways. Collins-Mayo and Beaudoin contend that 'young people use popular culture to mediate between real life and the ideal' (2010: 23). This appeared fairly strikingly in all of the initiatives studied here, their sense of 'the ideal' being strongly influenced by their particular religio-political perspective. Popular cultural sources often provoked discussion concerning the reality of inequality and consumer society, compared with the ideal of god's justice, or the Kingdom of God.

The initiatives also share similarities in the way that they reflect contemporary changes to the religious landscape, demonstrating resemblance to, for example, Linda Woodhead's definition of 'the new entrants to the spiritual marketplace' as being 'more focused on supporting individuals in their everyday lives, fostering new kinds of identity and lifestyle, and linking the like-minded and like-hearted to one another' (2012: 27). These initiatives also resonate with the findings of research that has looked at contemporary Christianity among young people. An important work in this regard is Guest et al.'s study of student Christianity in the UK, which found that the prevalent view of Christianity among students was that it was 'something primarily shaped by and expressed in social relationships, rather than in assent to doctrine or belief' (2013: 13). Thus, they found that faith was predominantly spoken about in subjective and relational terms (2013: 103). This is apparent in the websites of the three initiatives studied here, which primarily target a student age demographic. Even Rhythms, the most explicitly evangelical, is not doctrinal. The fluid nature of SPEAK's religious identity, the slightly more understated nature of the Christian

Aid Collective's, and the more taken-for-granted evangelical identity of Rhythms all suggest that community is emphasised over and above religious institutions or 'right belief'. This parallels the findings of Flory and Miller regarding post-Boomer spirituality (2008: 10).

'Doing' religio-politics online

There has been much concern, both in popular and academic work, that young people's political participation is declining. The contribution of Marsh et al. is a useful entry to this field, in that it cautions strongly against imposing externally-defined conceptions of the political onto young people (2007: 4). The work of Henrik Bang, drawn upon heavily by Marsh et al., provides a useful counter-balance and identifies an emerging form of political orientation found to be particularly prevalent among young people- the Everyday Maker. The Everyday Maker can be thought of as a political 'way of doing', which encompasses the following characteristics and principles: acting locally, thinking globally; minimal interest in party politics; focus upon feeling involved and self-development; concrete, short-term involvement; and an absence of strong ideology (Bang 2004 in Marsh et al., 2007: 49, 50, 101). Everyday Makers are informed about the 'high politics' of government, but they 'do not primarily gain their political identities from being citizens of the state or of an autonomous civil society, but from being ordinarily engaged in the construction of networks and locales for the political governance of the social' (Bang 2004 in Marsh et al., 2007: 102). There is a sense in which Rhythms, the Collective and SPEAK provide an outlet for this form of emerging political identity – far removed from traditional conceptions of citizenship and political involvement – on online platforms, supplemented to various degrees by offline activity. Though certain campaign actions might target policy-makers, for example through lobbying and petitions, this was not a predominant theme, SPEAK demonstrating a more oppositional stance to the state and Rhythms and the Collective focusing more upon lifestyle action.

The online spaces of these three initiatives fulfil a dual purpose and embody a dual identity in terms of their religiously-informed politics: they provide an online community with the capacity to reach out to large numbers of people and they simultaneously encourage the cultivation of community-building in face-to-face spaces. SPEAK does this most actively

though its local groups and national events, but this is an increasing priority for the Collective and Rhythms. It is thus potentially useful to consider the internet as both 'mirror and…shadow' of the offline world (Dawson and Cowan, 2004: 6), though this serves to create a distinction between 'offline' and 'online' that in an increasingly internet-saturated society may be less relevant and meaningful.

Returning to Flory and Miller- concluding remarks

A revisit of Flory and Miller, having begun this discussion through utilisation of their post-boomer categories, reveals some interesting similarities despite their different focus. Flory and Miller's 'resisters' and 'reclaimers' refer to very specific 'types'- the former to conservative Christians who resist postmodernism and place strong emphasis upon the Bible and the latter to the rediscovery of Christian traditions and rituals, such as those of Orthodox Christianity (2008: 15). Among the Christian social action groups studied here, the 'resisters' similarly resist the meanings of consumer culture. However, these two original categories have less parallels to this study than do Flory and Miller's 'innovators' and 'appropriators'. Flory and Miller's innovators are those that have an evolving approach to religious belief and practice and put particular stress on creative expression (2008: 14, 41). SPEAK– the innovators in this context – mirror this emphasis upon artistic forms of expression, as a means to communicate both their spiritual identity and their social justice concerns. The appropriators in Flory and Miller's work, by contrast, are characterised by a concern with cultural relevance and demonstrate appropriation of 'trends found in the larger culture', leading to a form of 'pop Christianity', in which it becomes 'both cool and relatively unobtrusive to be a Christian' (2008: 14, 82). This has certain resonances with Rhythms particularly, its advocated small lifestyle actions possessing a similar unobtrusiveness to some degree.

Much of the contemporary literature on religion and young people suggests that popular culture is a key site of sacred meaning-making among youth. Gordon Lynch, for example, identifies 'active engagement' with popular culture as a significant characteristic of young religiosity (2002: 65). The picture that emerges here, though, is not particularly one of deep

engagement with popular cultural sources. Instead, references to popular culture were sparser than might be expected and, in addition, rather more instrumental, encompassing a variety of uses that serve the groups' religious and political goals. However, this does reflect Lynch's view that 'popular culture may not be the Scripture that provides meaning to a passive audience, but a complex and colourful array of building blocks out of which individuals may construct part of their understanding of life' (2002: 65).

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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[i] 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.

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

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

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

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

[vi] See http://rhythms.org/emerginginfluencers/#video (accessed 31 August 2015)

[vii] 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.

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

[ix] See http://www.christianaidcollective.org/got-longer (accessed 31 August 2015)

[x] See http://rhythms.org/contribute/ (accessed 31 August 2015)

[xi] See http://village.rhythms.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/How-to-write-for-the-Rhythms-website.pdf (accessed 31 August 2015)

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

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

[xiv] See http://www.christopherwigan.com/brand/tearfund-rhythms-6-47.html (accessed 8 January 2015)

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

[xvi] See http://rhythms.org/about/ (accessed 8 January 2015)

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

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