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Studying religious music at the grassroots level

A look into the discourse practices of Christian metal bands online

Religious issues are studied in various ways, most prominently by sociologists of religion. This paper suggests that in today's world of globally intersecting webs of people, places, ideas and action, scholars and readers interested in religion will find themselves benefiting from cross-disciplinary approaches which help them to conceptualize and describe today's phenomena at different levels. This paper describes how the emerging discipline of the sociology of language and religion may be applied to studying Christian metal bands' discourse online.

Background

Towards the end of the twentieth century, the world was being described as a global village. It has not been until the twenty-first century, however, that this has truly become the state of the art: never before has the world seen such an amount and variety of transnational mobilities (cf. Vertovec 2009). The media and ICTs play a central role for the formation of network societies (Castells 1996) as well as for today's religiosities (e.g. Campbell 2010a, Cheong *et al.* 2012). For researchers, this has meant the need to conceptualize traditional issues in new ways. For example, 'spirituality', once seen as a counteraction to traditional religions, is now defined as a term covering a diversity of 'spiritualities' expressed in various ways in different places (e.g. Vincett and Woodhead 2010). On the other hand, some forms of religion have extended globally with 'intensified transnational links' (Lehmann 2010: 415) being created between different localities.

Simultaneously with and following on from the 'discursive' turn in social scientific thought from around 1960 onwards, increasing attention has been paid to an analysis of discourses, narratives, communication and interaction. This move foregrounded interdisciplinary approaches touching on social

psychology and media and communication studies, among others. Moreover, especially in the field of religion and popular culture, the fields of cultural studies as well as music, film and art studies come close to each other. As a result of the discursive turn, sociolinguistics (especially at the macro level, therefore often called sociology of language) has also started looking more closely into how language was in fact used in different types of situational contexts. Distinguishing religion as a domain of its own, one of the major outcomes in such studies was the observation that language use varied between religious and non-religious settings: in church, the so-called 'high' language variety (e.g. centuries ago, Latin in many European churches) was the norm of use, while the 'low' variety (e.g. English, German, etc.) was used within the private sphere.

Further, towards the end of the twentieth century, interest in the social dimensions of language had led to the recognition of discourse studies as a discipline of its own. However, in this line of inquiry only a small amount of research is done today on the language practices related to religion and popular culture. One example is Tope Omoniyi's (2010a) work on 'holy hip-hop', the appropriation of hip-hop music and subcultural styles of performance for religious purposes by Christian and Muslim youths in Britain. Omoniyi locates this piece of work in the emerging interdisciplinary discipline of the sociology of language and religion (SLR), which he, together with the well-known scholar of the sociology of language, Joshua Fishman, has been influential in developing (Omoniyi and Fishman 2006, Omoniyi 2010b). Fishman (2006) sets the agenda for SLR to study questions related to both language and religion in his foundational paper, which is summarized in the following.

1. 'The language of religion always functions within a larger multilingual/multivarietal repertoire.' This means that there are also other ways of speaking, other registers, and diverse discourses available for the members of any socioculture. Thus, one thing SLR does is that it analyses patterns of how language uses vary between religious and non-religious contexts (Fishman 2006: 14).

2. This variation happens both within societies and between them, and it varies over time as well, as does the degree of religiosity versus secularism within and between sociocultures (Fishman 2006: 15).

3. Religious languages/varieties are more stable than others and impact their secular counterparts more than the other way round. Therefore, for example,

'revised and updated translations of sacred texts . . . make them more under-standable, but in the minds of some, make them less suitable for the sacred functions with which their predecessors were long associated' (Fishman 2006: 16–17).

4. 'A by-product of all the foregoing characteristics of long-standing ver-nacular translations is their acquisition of a degree of sanctity of their own' as they come to be associated with holy contexts – they become sanctified (Fishman 2006: 17; see also Fishman 2002).

5. The rise and spread of these newly sanctified varieties within the socio-linguistic repertoire of a speech community is met with varying degrees of acceptance and utilization – or of rejection and detachment. The pressure on religion to change (or not) in line with the surrounding social structures and reality fuels language shift but also language maintenance (Fishman 2006: 17–18). Relatedly,

6. 'All sources of sociocultural change are also sources of change in the so-ciolinguistic repertoire *vis-à-vis* religion, including religious change *per se*.' This is of course a two-way process, as language dispersal is 'the most com-mon carrier of sociocultural change' (Fishman 2006: 18–20).

7. However, social and sociocultural change is a long process and not evenly spread, which is why multiple religious varieties may co-exist within the same religious community (Fishman 2006: 20–1).

8. The sanctified and co-sanctified languages have a major conservative in-fluence on the speed and direction of corpus planning and frequently serve as a counterweight to modernization emphases in the language-planning arena (Fishman 2006: 21–2).

9. 'The languages and varieties of religious functions are not as eternally unchanging as their custodians often imply.' However, the constant efforts at updating the variety of Englishes in which the Bible is published are 'self-defeating, not only because language change will never cease – but also be-cause the act of rendering mysteries more understandable also demystifies and desanctifies them' (Fishman 2006: 22–3).

10. Religious emphases and varieties ebb and flow and so do their impact on non-religious usage, and vice versa (Fishman 2006: 23–4).

Fishman's Decalogue, as he wittily calls it, is a fruitful framework for scholars studying the use(s) of language(s) in religious settings and religious discourse more generally, also. It is a framework which, similar to the sociology of language and to the sociology of religion, tries to analyse and describe macro-level phenomena related to the interconnectedness of language and religion. Some of Fishman's principles may appear challenging or irrelevant for others than (socio-)linguists, which is because of the strong influence of the sociology of language on this paradigm. For example, language maintenance/shift and language variation and change are key concepts within the sociology of language. However, Fishman successfully combines these issues with questions of religion as a form of social organization, which is why sociologists of religion may also find them useful and relevant.

From the perspective of discourse studies, perhaps the most important aspect in Fishman's framework is the view of language as constitutional and constructivist. This means that language is here seen as both reproducing and transforming prevalent ways of grasping the world and established social practices (e.g. the practice of religiosity). This shows most clearly in the way the dialectics of language change and sociocultural change are posited in principle six: 'All sources of sociocultural change are also sources of change in the sociolinguistic repertoire *vis-à-vis* religion, including religious change *per se*', and, *vice versa*, language dispersal is 'the most common carrier of sociocultural change' (Fishman 2006: 18). Examples of a sociocultural change relevant from the perspective of this paper include the mediatization of the daily lives of many (Western) people and the establishment of Christian metal music scene. Following Fishman, while these are expected to have their impact on language practices, they also result from changes in the way people use language to engage with the world today.

The framework of SLR provides a theoretical background for research set-ups and a reflective base for discussing the findings. However, not all principles may be equally important in each study: as Fishman argues himself, the framework should be tested and, if need be, modified, as it is an 'opener' for the emerging discipline. Elsewhere (e.g. Jousmäki 2013), I have applied some of the principles of SLR and combined them with a view of ethnography as a theory: according to Jan Blommaert (2005), although ethnography is often understood as a methodological tool especially for collecting research data, the term lends itself for a more theoretical understanding, as well. Relying on

'critical' anthropology (e.g. Hymes 1974), Blommaert interprets small phenomena as *indexical* of more general issues. Within religious studies similarly, Kim Knott (2010: 29) encourages a focus 'on particular, small-scale examples', the analysis of which 'can help us to see larger questions, movements and relationships' related to religious issues. Also David Lehmann (2010) differs from those who view social change as the outcome of top-down processes (e.g. Beyer 1994) and recommends also taking into account bottom-up, grassroots action as (possibly) leading to wider practices – even, perhaps, to social change. In the following section, I review the potential of SLR to the analysis of the discursive construction of religious music in online media, with a particular focus on the construction of subcultural identities.

A discourse approach on Christian metal

Apart from Omoniyi (2010a), religious music has thus far been mostly studied within musicology (e.g. Bossius *et al.* 2011, Bossius 2003, Harper 2003) and the sociology of religion (Häger 2001, Moberg 2009). Young people, language and religion online have been of interest, for example, to Heidi Campbell (2010b) and Saija Peuronen (2011). However, religion, music and online media discourse have not been addressed previously. The literature on Christian metal is not very extensive, either. Apart from Marcus Moberg's (2009) extensive analysis of the Christian metal scene and its menings and functions, most writing on the topic is somewhat outdated and tends to focus either on metal music in general, thus marginalizing Christian metal at the outset (e.g. Larkin 1992, Walser 1993, Weinstein 2000), or on the societal and historical position of the phenomenon (e.g. Gormly 2003, Luhr 2005). Although previous studies thus give a good idea of the structures, practices and tendencies in and related to Christian metal, little is reported on what happens at the very micro-level of Christian metal – for example, how they represent themselves to their audiences, what they sing about, and what else they say and, importantly, how they say it. To fill this gap, I have examined Christian metal bands' online presence with a particular interest in how the bands utilize online spaces to build up Christian metal identity and culture with the help of textual, discursive, and multimodal resources. This has included a look at the online self-representation of Christian metal bands, a more detailed investigation of the uses of the Bible on bands' websites, as well as perspectives on an important part of Christian metal; namely the lyrics.

Analysing small-scale phenomena does not mean that their wider sociohistorical context is neglected. In the case of Christian metal, its roots go back

to the 1980s in California, USA, where (Protestant) Christian music was already widening in scope and taking in the sounds of popular music (see e.g. Howard and Streck 1999). Metal music, however, was deemed inappropriate by conservative Evangelical churchgoers (Moberg 2009: 129), which drove the 'metal missionaries' (Luhr 2005) to form their own community, the Sanctuary Movement, which allowed its participants to practice religiosity through the sounds and habitus they enjoyed (see Moberg 2009: 128–31).

While it is important to acknowledge this historical and religious background of Christian metal, in an ethnography-driven application of SLR this context should not be taken as final and eternally fixed, however. The notion of 'context' is problematic also more generally because what it exactly means necessarily depends on the researcher. Therefore, a more self-conscious term is 'contextualization'. (Cf. Blommaert 2005: 39–67; Jousmäki 2012; Silverstein 1992). As regards Christian metal, the diversification of metal music genres (Weinstein 2000), the increase of mediatization and transcultural flows (Pennycook 2007), as well as the different space-times (Fairclough 2003, Harvey 1990) and religo-cultural backgrounds between bands in and outside the origins of Christian metal are only some of the factors that shape the understanding of what 'context' means as regards specific aspects of Christian metal today.

Along these lines, I have examined the discourse practices of fifteen North American and Finnish Christian metal bands on their official websites and, to some extent, also in their Myspace, Facebook and Twitter profiles. 'Discourse practices' here refers to what Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (1996: 34) describe as the 'new realities of the semiotic landscape' – the multimodal and multisemiotic nature of online discourse. Attention is thereby drawn not only to language, as suggested in SLR, but also to the visual aspects of the discourse (photographs, colouring, graphics) and, to a limited extent, to sound. Moreover, it should be emphasized that whereas Fishman uses the terms 'language' or 'language varieties' in his formulation of SLR, I have focused on analyzing 'discourse' as *language-in-use*. This makes it possible to consider language and the visual as two interconnected modes that contribute to today's semiotic reality in Kress and van Leeuwen's sense above.

The semiotic realities of Christian metal in the virtual world

Overall, an online presence seems to form some of the basis of being a band today, and this goes for Christian metal as well: Christian metal bands navi-

gate the world wide web in a fashion similar to other bands, in order to make themselves known and to represent themselves as metal musicians. In different forms of online (social) media, they find contemporary niches to promote their work as a band. The so-called 'band hood'; being a group of metal musicians, shows itself particularly well in the ways the bands are depicted in the photographs published online: meant for press release, promotional band photos on these sites typically involve a frontal, low angle, which constructs the band as superior to the audience. The *metal* band hood is also constructed through using specific typeface, logos, and colours, as well as through complying with the band homepage genre as regards the contents of the site: they most often feature band biography, a store, a section for the latest news, plus audio material (see Jousmäki, forthcoming a). The *Christian* metal band hood is brought forward through reproducing song lyrics online. It is exactly in the realm of lyrics where the music is made 'Christian' – musically, there is no notable difference between Christian and non-Christian metal bands. This makes it possible for listeners to check what the bands establish in and through their lyrics, since the style of singing specific to metal – also called growling – makes it at times difficult to make sense of what the vocalists are, in fact, saying.

Inclusion of the lyrics on the homepage is a way for some bands to indicate their ideological anchoring and to explicitly promote Christian values. Often, the lyrics involve various ways of using verses and ideas from the Bible, but the Bible is also manifest elsewhere on several homepages, most notably on the opening page. While the Bible is sometimes quoted word for word, especially on the opening page, at times the biblical origins of Christian metal 'texts' are more explicit. This is the case for instance when lyrics are thematically built around the Bible but delivered in the words of today's metal musicians. In analysing such practices, two things help: first, the analyst being acquainted with the Bible, in order to recognize themes, ideas and sayings stemming from the Bible, and two, the simple fact that Christian metal lyrics often end with explicit references to the Bible which then become clues for the analysts' empirical exploration. As a result, the Bible seems to play an important role for these groups: at times, it is used as a source of inspiration for songwriting and for the creation of other textual and multimodal artefacts. Sometimes it is also used as an authoritative source for the thoughts expressed in songs and a landmark for manifesting the spiritual stance and identification of the bands. Finally, biblical passages are also used as a tool in practising religiosity, as is the case when ancient, Bible-based prayers are embedded in songs and made thereby relevant for today's spirituality, as well (see Jousmäki 2012).

Another aspect of how Christian metal lyrics work as religious practice is concerned with the sharing of 'good news'. A recurrent theme in Christian metal lyrics is the construction of spiritual quest. This may be interpreted as a conscious, dialogical act through which bands address their listeners both searching for the meaning of life and fascinated by (what is supposedly) the evil, thereby explicitly guiding them towards a spiritual conversion – in the evangelical Christian sense, where 'the individual enters into a personal relationship with God's only son, Jesus Christ, and is saved through the latter's atoning work on the cross' (Woodhead 2010: 225). Moreover, such songs are dialogic in Mikhail Bakhtin's (1984) sense of the word, in responding to subcultural and ideological debates around metal music and in society more widely. Analysis of dialogicality may be carried out for example through analyzing the uses of pronouns and different voices (cf. Jørgensen and Phillips 2002) in written lyrics, as well as through paying attention to the aural voice, that is, to the sounds and vocal practices in the songs to understand dialogicality at different levels (see Jousmäki 2013).

Despite this missionary agenda (cf. Luhr 2005), Christian metal is also constructed as a rather closed community in some song lyrics. This is the case when less favourable alternatives are presented for those who do not repent in the manner described above. While such drawing of boundaries between 'us' and 'them' is essential for the construction and maintenance of identities (Lehmann 2010: 409; Woodward 1997), the issue becomes problematic when it involves the idea of the Other as inherently different and inferior – in Stuart Hall's (1997) terms, as spectacular. Viewing the Other in such a way lends 'them' the position of the subordinate, the target of action (the extreme examples of this are colonialism and racism). Paying attention to such micro-level phenomena as the use of pronouns and word choices shows that, in Christian metal lyrics, 'othering' works through describing 'us' as superior to 'them'; through portraying 'our God' as better than 'their god' (note the difference between the initial letters); and through depicting 'us' with a bright future whereas 'theirs' is represented as a dead end (quite literally, too) (see Jousmäki 2011). Christian metal thus seems to encourage a categorical worldview with binary oppositions such as good–evil, heaven–hell, and, importantly, us–them. In doing so, Christian metal resonates with conservative Christian values on the one hand and with the uncompromising register of metal music on the other.

Discussion

The four cases discussed in this paper illustrate how a small-scale analysis is helpful for shedding light on wider practices and ideologies (cf. Knott 2010: 29). The particular small-scale interests included visuality (e.g. colours, photographs, images, and symbols), biblical discourse, dialogicality and voice, as well as pronouns. Analysing them shows that Christian metal is what it says to be – a fusion of Christian beliefs and values and the musical and aesthetic conventions of metal music culture. While this has already been recognized in previous literature (e.g. Moberg 2009, Luhr 2005), nothing has been said on the question *how* this shows at the grassroots level of discourse where self-representation and communication take place. This is the gap the cases discussed in this paper fill, through showing that the fusion of Christianity and metal involves particular ways of re-using the Bible, a tendency towards binary thinking, a missionary nature, as well as metal-style soundscapes, visuality, and embodied habitus.

What, then, of the potential of SLR in the analysis of the discursive construction of religious music in online media? Although Fishman (2006) does not acknowledge online media *per se* in the proposed framework, his discussion on the dialectic relationship between language and sociocultural reality and change makes SLR also relevant for the study of online contexts. This said, the online context does not alter Christian metal as a phenomenon, but intensifies the translocal character of the scene (cf. Jousmäki forthcoming b). From a research perspective, however, the online media context necessitates a focus on the *re*presentational character of Christian metal: Christian metal bands not merely 'are' online – they do so in certain, more or less self-conscious and professional ways, all of which contribute to their performance as and to the discursive construction of Christian metallers.

Following from the neglect of online media and technological devices in Fishman's framework, whereas SLR emphasizes 'language' as the main object of interest, the analysis of religious music online discourse calls for a more multi-dimensional analysis which puts less emphasis on 'language' in the traditional sense. Instead, analysis needs to be conducted (albeit eclectically) from multimodal and multisemiotic perspectives, on linguistic, textual, visual, aural, and discursive levels. This is crucial to an understanding of the formation and practices of contemporary religious music subcultures in their mediated semiotic realities.

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