



‘The Wisest Man in the East’: The Aesthetics of Gospel Rap Music within the Emotional Regimes of Finnish Evangelical Christianity

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Abstract

This article presents an ethnographic analysis of the performance of gospel rap music as part of Evangelical Christian youthwork in Finland. The article is based on my observations of six onsite and five online events that featured gospel rap music in their line-up, as well as interviews with nine musicians and three event organizers. I address the relationship between the aesthetics of gospel rap music and the emotional regimes of Finnish Evangelical Christianity. I define ‘emotional regimes’ here as cultural, social, and material practices that set normative rules for the expression of collective emotions. I conclude that light-hearted humour and irony are prevalent emotional moods in these Christian rap performances in Finland. The article shows how the emotional sequencing around gospel rap music at these Christian events conforms with the general individualistic and therapeutic emotional cultures of late modern societies. Yet I show how some gospel rappers are also self-critical of this individualism and the spectacular nature of these music events and use self-irony and parody as social commentary tools in their performances. Irony in gospel rap performances also opens opportunities for theological innovations and a reflection of social differences.

Keywords: Evangelicalism, Finland, Christian music, ethnography, emotions, rap music

In recent decades European national churches such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF) have made a significant shift from passively listening worshippers towards multisensorial participation that involves the whole body (Roeland et al. 2012; Moberg 2018). At the same time, audiovisual media and electronic amplification have become increasingly common in Christian musical practices in Europe. One of the main soundtracks

of these changes has been rap music, which is now an established part of youthwork in many Christian communities (Roeland et al. 2012, 245; Nissilä 2019, 88, 100). In this article I therefore ask what the relationship is between the aesthetics of rap music and the emotional regimes of Finnish Evangelical Christianity. In asking this question, I address the presence of humour, joy, and playfulness in Christian music and worship, as well as the creative agency musicians have within religious institutions.

I understand 'aesthetics' here in the broad sense as 'our total sensory experience of the world and our sensitive knowledge of it' (Verrips 2006, 30; see also Meyer 2009, 6–11). I am thus interested in how rap music is performed in Christian contexts not only by sonic and verbal means but also through body movements, fashion, non-verbal utterances, and lighting, amplification, and architectural choices in the performance space. The second theoretical term in the research question, 'emotional regime' is derived from the work of Ole Riis and Linda Woodhead (2010, 10–12, 47–51, 69–73), who use the term for the interrelated social, cultural, and material conditions that govern the hierarchical order and flow of collective emotions. In other words, emotional regimes include understandings of the value of different emotions, and how they are expected to be combined and sequenced in each situation and place. As the word 'regime' implies, there are social rewards and sanctions on what is perceived as the correct display of emotions. Riis and Woodhead (2010, 49–50) note that intersecting and potentially conflicting regimes operate at all levels of society, both at the macro level, for example, within denominations, but also at the micro level, where face-to-face communities such as congregations have their own emotional cultures.

The general historical developments of rap music are closely linked with North American Christianity (Harris and Gault 2020). Christian references are also abundant in the rap genre in Finland, and many rappers are committed Christians. Yet in the ethnography that follows I focus on a very particular intersection of Christianity and rap music, namely the subgenre of 'gospel rap'. I begin the article with a discussion of the cultural context of this musical genre in Finland and an introduction of my research material, as well as my own position in relation to this genre. The article continues with an ethnographic description of various gospel rap music events.

Finnish Evangelical Christianity and Contemporary Christian Music

In its everyday use in Finland, the term 'gospel music' refers to a genre that encompasses various musical styles such as heavy metal and rap, and in

which the personal Christian faith of the performer(s) is the norm (Könönen and Huvi 2005, 8–10). As such, I consider Finnish gospel music a localization of Anglo-American 'Contemporary Christian Music' (CCM), which is defined not by its auditory qualities but by its ideological connection with Evangelical Christianity in particular, as a similar drive for differentiation from the perceived secular music cultures has not been historically present to the same degree in other Christian traditions (Abraham 2020, 8–12). Comparable national variants of CCM are found across Europe, for example, in neighbouring Sweden (see Bossius 2018, 156–157).

I understand 'Evangelicalism' here as a broad and scholarly term for Christians who believe in the importance of being born again, missionary activism, the central authority of the Bible, and Christ's redemptive work on the cross (Bebbington 1989, 2–17). I use Bebbington's descriptive definition of Evangelicalism in contrast with recent North American political definitions in which 'Evangelical' has come to mean 'aggrieved white conservative' (Gushee 2019), and in which CCM is understood as a marketing category mainly for this demographic segment (Lindebaum 2013, 112). In the Finnish context the Evangelical praxis Bebbington (1989, 2–17) describes is found in various Christian groups that have historically defined themselves against the perceived passive and institutionalized Christianity of the ELCF. These groups include independent denominations such as the Finnish Pentecostal movement and the Evangelical Free Church of Finland but also revival movements operating within the ELCF. Despite the existence of these Evangelical groups within its fold, the ELCF as a national church institution does not represent Evangelical praxis in the sense that Bebbington (1989, 2–17) defines the term. To clarify this distinction between Evangelicalism and 'Evangelical Lutheran', I will refer to the latter in this article as 'Lutheran'.

Throughout the twentieth century Finland was marked by 'cultural Christianity', where belonging to the ELCF, but not necessarily participation in church activities, was the assumed social norm. Although approximately 69 per cent of Finns still belonged to the ELCF in 2019, cultural Christianity has lost its relevance, especially among the younger age cohorts, where the majority is no longer Lutheran nor Christian by self-definition. For such young people, who still see relevance in the teachings of the ELCF, Christian faith is increasingly seen as an individual choice and is defined by active participation (Salomäki et al. 2021, 50, 67–90, 257–267). Due to this decline of cultural Christianity and the general weakening of denominational loyalty in the late modern situation, the borders between Finnish Lutheranism and Evangelicalism are increasingly blurred. One indication

of this blurring is that protestants across denominational borders have embraced more world-affirming and expressive musical styles and worship (see Roeland et al. 2012, 254; Moberg 2018). Finnish gospel music therefore also has wide appeal among those Christian listeners who otherwise would not identify themselves as Evangelicals (Salomäki et al. 2021, 142–145; see also Abraham 2018, 2).

Although the gospel rappers who participated in this study represent various theological and political views, most shared a self-definition against what they perceived as ‘secular rap’. At the same time they were also self-reflexive about the secular–sacred distinction and wished to bridge this divide in various ways, as I will demonstrate in my analysis. They generally understood the term ‘secular’ in an approximately similar fashion to social scientific research: a cultural phenomenon, in which Christianity might be present, but which is not regulated by Christian values (see Abraham 2017, 8).

The music events I observed occupied an ambiguous position between a concert and Christian worship (see Bossius 2011, 52; Abraham 2017, 58). In the Evangelical understanding the musicians who appear on stage at Christian events are not considered simply performers but ministers who are key characters in setting the norms for an appropriate bodily worship and display of emotions for the rest of the congregation (Bossius 2011, 67–69; Jennings 2014, 84–92; Abraham 2018, 14–16). In the following ethnography I argue that the emotional regimes at the music events that I observed resembled the general Evangelical patterns E. P. Thompson (1980, 351–374; see also Riis and Woodhead 2010, 167) identified in his classic work on the emotional culture of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British Methodists. For Thompson the Methodism of the time was based on passionate conversion and the bodily display of emotions, which afforded a contrast with the dull emotional landscape of the working class. Yet this passionate emotional culture was carefully regulated and confined within congregational gatherings (see also Jennings 2008, 92–100). In general, the Methodism of the time was based on the regulation of the body and its desires. This contradictory mixture of the excitement and disciplining of emotions by institutions of power later became characteristic of late modern culture in general (Riis and Woodhead 2010, 172–206).

Thus, despite the common ideological claim within protestant communities that they are aesthetically neutral in the sense that any musical style can be used to express Christian truths (Porter 2013, 202), the bodily level of music is a typical source of conflict and negotiation within them (Hendershot

2000, 28–34; Abraham 2017, 140–145). In recent years scholars have shown that the innovations around 'Black' musical styles such as rap (Hodge and Harris 2020) or African American gospel (Blenda Im 2021) have initiated discussions of the inherited colonial theology within Christian communities around the world. I argue that in addition to enforcing the historically established Evangelical emotional and bodily discipline, gospel rap music can also open spaces for postcolonial reflection and theological innovation in Finland (see Miller 2009; Porter 2013, 212–214).

Research material and the ethnographic field

Between 2019 and 2021 I participated in six onsite and five online events that featured gospel rap in their line-up. The onsite events ranged from concerts of individual rappers to the biggest Christian youth festival in Finland, 'Maata Näkyvissä' ('Land Ahoy'), which I attended twice in 2019 and 2021. I documented the events with written notes, as well as with occasional video and audio recordings. Apart from the 'Maata Näkyvissä' festival, I do not locate or name the events in this text to prevent unnecessary attention to the organizing communities or individual participants, many of whom were minors at the time. The five online events were YouTube broadcasts. Three of these online events were live broadcasts from simultaneous onsite events, one event featured a video recording of a live rap concert from 2012, and one consisted of pre-recorded musical performances without live audiences. With the consent of the organizers I also saved these YouTube videos for offline use.

My ethnographic interpretations are also informed by formal recorded interviews, which I conducted with nine currently active or formerly self-identified Christian rappers (namely, Daikini [Lauri Kempainen], Roni Samuel, Pastori Pike [Pierlin Mpaka Makumbu], Joonatan Palmi, Fiskaali [Tuomas Fiskaali], Teku [Joel Johansson] from the group Big Bless, Häiriö [Heikki Mujunen], DJ Panic [Peter Regalado], and Paradox from the now disbanded group Connection Posse), as well as with three organizers of Christian music events (namely, Juha Heinonen, Elise Hasanen, and Jarkko Lindqvist).¹ When establishing informed consent with the interviewees, I asked them if they would like to appear in the research text with a pseudonym, their full name, or with their stage name alone, and I refer to them accordingly in this article, though none of them chose to use a pseudonym.

¹ The ethnographic notes, transcribed interviews and downloaded online streams used in this study are stored in Music Archive Finland for researchers' future use.

All the rappers I interviewed are men and ethnically white Finns except for Pastori Pike, who is a Finn of Congolese origin, and DJ Panic, whose ancestry is from the Philippines.

Both my encounters with the interviewees and my ethnographic interpretations, were affected by my own persona. I generally introduced myself to the interviewees as a 'lukewarm Lutheran', as despite growing up as a white Finn with both Lutheran religious education and the advent of rap music in Finland, I had only passing previous contact with Finnish Evangelical Christianity before the start of this research project.

The gospel rappers that I describe perform across denominational borders: three of the events I observed were organized by local Lutheran parishes, three by Pentecostal congregations, and five by the 'Lutheran Evangelical Association of Finland' (LEAF) ('Suomen Luterilainen Evankeliumiyhdistys' (SLEY)), which is a revivalist organization operating under the umbrella of the ELCF.

My focus on the 'gospel rap' subgenre directed me to these Lutheran and Evangelical communities instead of other Christian communities where rap music might also be present. Such communities include the Awakening Movement ('Herännäisyys'), which is a traditionalist and socially liberal revival movement operating under the umbrella of the ELCF. Paula Nissilä (2019, 88, 100) mentions how the summer gathering of the Awakening Movement's youth programme included live rap music in 2016, but not from the gospel rap genre. This anecdote serves to indicate that in many Christian communities such as the Awakening Movement the perceived distinction between Christian and secular rap music is not framed as a central question in the same way as in the Finnish Pentecostal movement or LEAF.

One also finds great social and theological diversity within Finnish Evangelicalism, and the events and communities that I observed therefore had idiosyncratic emotional regimes. Yet I argue that all these organizing Christian groups expected a similar emotional effect from a gospel rap show. Riis and Woodhead (2010, 48–49, 72), however, note that assigned emotional roles are potentially in a state of constant flux through the agency individuals exercise, with a risk of emotional disharmony. Having described the general role of rap music in the events I attended, in the final section of the article I therefore focus on the performance of an individual rapper, Joonatan Palmi, who balances his creative ambitions and the structural requirements of these Evangelical performance settings.

Evangelical joy at Maata Näkyvissä Festival

Hundreds of teenagers jump up and down as the rap group NNS is about to end their midday concert at the festival. The multiple video screens behind the stage and on the ceiling of the ice hockey hall flash with the yellow capital letters 'BOUNCE'. Flames and smoke explode from the front of the stage, and the MC shouts at the crowd, 'It isn't enough, bounce harder!' As this last song reaches its climax, one of the band members shoots colourful streamers and a T-shirt at the crowd with a cannon. This is the T-shirt that the band has promised to 'the best jumper in the audience'. A high row of flames rises once more at the front of the stage as the rap group retreats from the stage. The music suddenly stops, and the show is over. The festival hosts walk to the stage and address the audience: 'You did very well; very well indeed! Now we have to empty this hall. Please go outside calmly and in good order.'

This ethnographic vignette is from my fieldnotes from the Maata Näkyvissä festival in 2021. The annual event is held in the city of Turku in the Turkuhalli indoor arena, which is known mostly as a venue for ice hockey games. The festival is organized by LEAF in conjunction with several local Lutheran parishes. When I interviewed rap musicians, they frequently mentioned performances at the Maata Näkyvissä festival as the highpoint of their musical careers or their desired goal. Rappers were indeed among the headline acts of the Maata Näkyvissä festival in both 2019 (the rap artists Mikaveli, Roni Samuel, Big Bless, NNS, and the UK rap group Social Beingz) and 2021 (NNS). The festival is the central event for the gospel genre in Finland, and in its heyday in the first years of the new millennium the festival weekend drew approximately 30,000 visitors annually, making it one of the biggest music festivals in general in Finland at the time (Vähäsarja 2017). Most of these attendees are underage youth groups from various ELCF parishes around Finland.

In recent years the number of visitors at the festival has dropped steadily to 18,000 in 2019 and only 2,000 in 2021, when the festival was shortened to a one-day event (Maata Näkyvissä 2019; 2020). Although 2021 was severely affected by the Covid-19 restrictions and included an online stream, there is a significant downward trend in attendance that reflects the decreasing religious participation of young Finns in general (see Salomäki et al. 2021, 105–106). In 2017 the festival also received a wave of negative publicity in the national media because of the open rift between the ELCF and LEAF on the ordination of women (Vihavainen 2017; see also Nissilä 2019, 107–108): LEAF does not accept women as ordained ministers; the ELCF has ordained

women since 1988. The director of LEAF youthwork, Juha Heinonen, explained to me that these disputes meant the festival organizers actively discouraged social or theological commentary at the event. Heinonen stressed that the festival sought to convey 'only the message of the gospel', thus implicitly aligning it with the self-professed apolitical stance of the North American CCM (Hendershot 2000, 75; Lindebaum 2013, 155).

Riis and Woodhead (2010, 199) note that in the late modern situation conservative religious movements especially face increasing pressure to adapt their emotional cultures to the demands of the consumer society. LEAF is indeed facing such pressures and has invested in the Maata Näkyvissä festival to such a degree that it not only parallels the spectacularism of secular music festivals but in many ways exceeds their production values (see also Roeland et al. 2012). Performances feature intense strobe lighting and pyrotechnics carefully synchronized with the music, and most performers have elaborate visuals or video segments as part of their show. The video segments include occasional Christian references like images of the cross or Bible passages that accompany the short talks musicians give on the stage. Yet there are no physical symbols of Christian traditions or authority in the festival hall during the music performances, though there is a separate Lutheran service at the festival on Sunday morning. The functionalist architectural choices in the performance space follow the general Evangelical praxis, which generally seeks to highlight its rupture from local religious traditions and instead foregrounds individual autonomy in one's relationship with Christ (Abraham 2018; see also Hovland 2016).

Like most secular music festivals, Maata Näkyvissä is a 'spectacle' (Debord 1987; see also Roeland et al. 2012, 246; Abraham 2018; Nissilä 2019, 49–54) in the sense that it seeks to arouse carefully pre-planned collective emotions at certain moments. For example, there is a memorial altar with flowers and pictures of a young man and a tombstone assembled in a relatively quiet spot in the arena corridor. The altar is to the memory of Timo Vainio, a young believer, who died suddenly of a heart attack in 1984. The festival began as his memorial event in 1985, and Vainio's tragic death is also regularly presented in the festival programme as performers speak of the ultimate reunion with lost friends in heaven. Similar serious and sad themes are routinely present not only at the Maata Näkyvissä festival but at all the music events I attend. All the rap artists I meet also discuss themes of death, longing, and depression in tunes such as 'Nähdään taivaassa' ('See you in Heaven') by the group Bigbless, 'Taakka' ('Burden') by the rapper Fiskaali or 'Taideteos' ('Work of art') by the rapper Roni Samuel.

Yet most rappers close their stage appearances in an upbeat mood that sets longing and grief aside for the joy of salvation. An intimate relationship with Jesus is regularly presented at the Maata Näkyvissä festival as the way to overcome sorrow and pain in similar therapeutic fashion as Luhrmann (2004; see also Riis and Woodhead 2010, 161; Roeland et al. 2012, 249–251) observes in the North American Evangelical context. As one musician assures the audience in the middle of his concert at the 2021 festival, 'Jesus is the answer to all the questions in life'. Overall, the general emotional moods at the events I attend conform with general late modern trends in which a variety of emotions are present in the public sphere, but where happiness is the ultimate value due to its compatibility with the overall consumer logic of society (Riis and Woodhead 2010, 172–206).

The festival rewards and encourages expressive bodily participation in different ways (see also Roeland et al. 2012, 246–248). For example, in 2021 an annual prize for 'the festival congregation of the year' is awarded to a congregation that has equipped its youth group with light sets that the teenagers wear around their bodies in the dark festival hall. I also asked some of the rappers why and how they have developed their performance routines in which they encourage their audiences to participate physically. The rapper Teku, who is from a Pentecostal background, responded by stressing that 'emancipation' is a central Christian value for him:

The short answer is that we want to give the organizers bang for their buck, and we want everyone to enjoy the show as much as possible. [...] On the other hand, I don't want to spiritualize everything, but then again, I would say that emancipation is one of the biggest spiritual values (Johansson, Joel 'Teku' 28.8.2020).²

This quotation shows that gospel rap performances are linked to contemporary Evangelical understandings of Christian music as a bodily form of worship (Roeland et al. 2012; Jennings 2014, 92–100; Abraham 2018, 14–16), but it also hints at how the rappers play a specific role within the emotional regimes of these protestant youth events. It is a given for Teku that the organizers of these Christian youth events expect the rappers to deliver a physically engaging show. At all the live events I attend most of the audiences consist of pre-existing youth groups

² All quotations from interviews and lyrics translated from Finnish by the author.

such as confirmation school classes. I get the sense that the organizing institutions expect rap performances to work as a social icebreaker for the teenage groups, as the socialization of teenagers into congregational activities is an area where Christian denominations face increasing pressure in Finland and beyond (Abraham 2017, 111–153; Moberg 2018; Nissilä 2019, 43–47).

This icebreaking is not always easy for performers: apart from the *Maata Näkyvissä* festival, most of the events I attend offline or online are in churches with immobile pews and altars, offering only limited space for bodily movement. This architectural incongruity between the performances and their venues further highlights the contrasts between the Evangelical stress on the bodily display of emotions and the historical logocentric understandings of worship in Finnish protestant church institutions (see also Roeland et al. 2012). Yet many of these institutions are themselves currently taking the initiative in moving beyond logocentrism by encouraging new kinds of activities in church buildings, of which rap shows are only one indication of this broader change. For example, in 2021 the Lutheran parish in the small town of Lieto renovated its fifteenth-century church as a multipurpose space by removing its pews and pulpit (Törmänen 2021).

The encouragement to participate physically at gospel music events does not include open displays of sexuality. For example, at the 2019 *Maata Näkyvissä* Festival a former member of an erotic male show dancing group gives a testimony on one of the festival's side stages in which he describes how he left the entertainment world after being born again and now considers his former show dancing 'selling sex' and a sin. Romantic references are nevertheless occasionally present in rap performances as references to one's marriage, as rappers mention or joke about their wives during their performances. Again, in this sense Finnish gospel rap is aligned with the North American CCM, where the absence of sexual references and the emphasis of heterosexual commitment are the main performative elements that distinguish the genre from its secular counterparts (Häger 2005; see also Hendershot 2004, 52–84).

To summarize, in this section I have described how the gospel rap events that I attended conformed with the general social trends in which therapeutic individualism and the drive for bodily sensations have become increasingly important for late modern religiosity. In the next section I examine the cultural encounter between this late modern Evangelicalism and rap music's racial and political connotations more closely.

Invisibility and irony in gospel rap music

Because I am invisible, invisible, invisible
 Invisible no matter what I do
 Invisible no matter where I go³

These lyrics are from the chorus of the track 'Näkymätön' ('Invisible') by Jodahe, who is a Finnish rapper of Ethiopian origin and was a 19-year-old debut artist during the track's release in 2019. Melodically, it consists of two short alternating synthesizer or piano loops. The melodies have a metallic and echoing sound, giving the song an eerie feel. The song's beat is formed by deep bass sounds, snare drum hits, and faster but silent hi-hat hits in the background that subdivide the beat. Jodahe's voice is deep and filtered with an autotune effect, giving a mild transhuman or robotic sound to his voice (see Burton 2017, 76–78), which is a sound effect that I also hear him using in a live performance. In the track Jodahe raps actively with an irregular lyrical delivery that creates rhythmic patterns between the bass and drum beats. In the background there is an echoing voice that doubles his lyrics, giving a further sense of eeriness to the track. His lyrics have a generally boastful tone. The only obvious Christian reference that I spot in them comes midway through the track, when Jodahe raps that 'I do this for the one who put me ahead of everything'.

In the rap genre the previously mentioned sonic characteristics fall under the broad subcategory of 'trap music', which became a dominant subgenre in mainstream rap music in the 2010s. 'Trap' refers to a 'trap house', which is a building where the drug trade takes place. Justin Adams Burton (2017, 90) argues that as in the US 'decades of unequal policing and imprisonment have marked drug trafficking as a primarily black or brown endeavor', the musical qualities of trap music are culturally embedded with transgressive blackness that 'plays on the mainstream's willingness to invest blackness with all that is wrong in society'.

With these aesthetics Jodahe's track can be contextualized with the postcolonial moment in Finnish rap music in which a growing number of artists from minority backgrounds came to identify themselves as 'black' or 'brown' in the 2010s and 2020s. Their music is indicative of the coming of age of the first substantial generation of Finns born to African immigrant

³ Koska mä oon näkymätön, näkymätön, näkymätön
 Näkymätön mitä ikinä mä teen
 Näkymätön mihin ikinä mä meen.

parents (Kelekay 2019). The new public visibility of black Finnishness has been a significant shift in Finland, where social diversity was formerly discussed outside the concept of race and through the paradigms of immigration and ethnicity. The Finnish public sphere has thus only recently begun to discuss the historical impact of white supremacy in this Nordic welfare context, whereas the existence of structural racism was previously generally unacknowledged in public discussion (Rastas 2019). This postcolonial shift in Finland has been especially liberating for those young African Finns who have faced racism in their daily lives but have lacked the vocabulary to articulate themselves as black subjects (Rastas 2019, 374).

In 2020 I follow an online stream of a national Pentecostal youth event that takes 'Näkymätön' as its theme song and starts with a live performance by Jodahe. 'Invisibility' is actively given a Christian interpretation throughout the event, starting with the opening of the broadcast, where there is a video montage of natural landscapes and close-ups of humans and animals. During the montage Jodahe's voice says that he is ready to become invisible so that God's will can become visible. 'Invisibility' is thus interpreted through the otherness Pentecostals experience in relation to the secular world, as well as through their conviction that the invisible realm of the Kingdom of God is actively breaking into everyday reality (see Hovland 2016, 348).

Later the event features a segment in which three youth groups from different congregations have each made competing music videos for the 'Näkymätön' track, as it has no official music video. The first video features a series of spectacular and even disturbing scenes: a backflip in a skateboard park, a group of young people posing seriously with dark shades, a moving car with a man posing from the sunroof, and a close-up of a man's face being hit by a boxing glove. The second depicts a black man wearing a face mask, shades, and a leather jacket. The man is shown in various social situations, where he is invisible in the sense that others do not react to his presence, until the end of the video, where they all dance together. The third is built on parodic double meanings. For example, as the rapper states in the song, 'I don't take the easy way out', the video shows a youngster jumping over a high fence and falling in the attempt. When the lyrics declare that 'I play against time', the video shows a ping-pong match in which the other player is hidden under the board and uses a clockface as their racket. After the screening of these three videos Jodahe announces the final video as the winner and awards the youth group with gift cards for a fast-food restaurant.

This ethnographic vignette exemplifies, first, how the organizers and artists seek to frame the sonic qualities of trap music with moods of light-

hearted joy in this Pentecostal event, even though the unawarded videos in the competition imbue the song with a variety of darker emotions. The privileged light-hearted mood is built with a humour that does not make fun of non-Evangelicals but takes the form of self-irony that in this case comments on the Evangelical culture itself by parodying 'Näkymätön' as the event's theme song. The case resonates with the observations of Monique Ingalls (2022), who notes the central importance of self-reflexive humour in the construction of Evangelical identities, which are increasingly voiced through irony and parody in a similar fashion to other late modern identities. Rick Moore (2017; see also Bielo 2011, 47–69) in turn argues that Evangelicals generally prefer self-irony in their mutual use of humour as a logical outcome of their religious conviction in which those who do not share their faith are seen as objects of compassion and outreach, which makes their ridicule largely inappropriate.

Second, the vignette shows how the event organizers, as well as Jodahe himself, align the performance with the apolitical stance of Anglo-American CCM, which has historically sought to flatten social differences such as race and class in favour of a common Evangelical identity (Hendershot 2000, 75; Lindebaum 2013, 155). However, given that the trap genre is associated with transgressive blackness (Burton 2017, 69–100), the song's lyrics could easily be interpreted as referring to the experiences of racial exclusions in Finnish society. One of the young parishioners' unawarded videos is connected with this interpretation by showing a black person as socially invisible. As such, the music video competition shows how gospel rap performances can also open unintended spaces for young Finns to discuss race at a time when Finnish society has only recently begun to assess its colonial past and structural racism (Rastas 2019).

All in all, the described case thus demonstrates the ambiguity of gospel rap music in the sense that one can also read socio-political messages into it, but also how this ambiguity at gospel music events is curbed with a particular Evangelical framing connected with a light-hearted emotional mood and a focus on individual salvation. In the article's final section I discuss how gospel rap artists can also occasionally push against the prevailing therapeutic individualism in the described performance settings.

Theological playfulness with the Young Theologian

The church hall is darkened as the main theme of the Star Wars movie starts to play, and the iconic opening crawl of the movie begins with the rolling

text: ‘Palmi a.k.a Jorski a.k.a Pastor Jorski a.k.a Joonatan Palmi a.k.a The Young Theologian a.k.a Napalm was offered an invitation one day. He was invited to bring wisdom to you.’ The text crawl then continues by praising the rapper and his wisdom with quoted recommendations from the Star Wars characters Darth Vader and Yoda. Eventually, the rapper Joonatan Palmi steps onto the stage and opens his set with his song ‘Wisdomii’ (‘Wisdom’). His rhymes are composed as self-help tips, which are obviously parodic in their self-evident nature, including ‘always remember to breathe, otherwise you won’t be alive soon’, and ‘if your feet are squeezed, your shoes might be too small for you’.

After the track ‘Wisdomii’ Joonatan Palmi introduces the performer of the next track, who is his own alter ego, called ‘The Young Theologian’. He puts on dark sunglasses, as ‘The Young Theologian always wears shades’, and starts his next song ‘Bägissä toivoo’ (‘Hope in my bag’):

[...]
 Then, I was a professional believer
 I was a full-time shepherd and got my pay
 But it gave me only enormous pressure
 [...]
 Preaching a word, for which I had no faith
 Yes, my heart was cold, I just wanted to make quick money
 [...]
 But then I heard a voice of God
 Who said, ‘Just come here boy!’
 ‘Just switch on the lights and come here!’
 And I switched, went, and my heart is still burning like this⁴

When I meet Joonatan Palmi for the first time in 2020, he is working as a youth pastor in the Evangelical Free Church in Helsinki. When I ask him

4 Sit mä olinkin ammattiuskovainen
 Sain palkkani, kun olin vaan paimen
 Siin sai valtavasti vaan paineita
 [...]
 Saarnasin sanaa, johon ite en uskonut yhtään
 Kyllä, sydän kylmä, halusin massit nyhtää
 [...]
 Mutta sit mä kuulin Jumalan äänen
 Se sano tulepa poika tänne
 Se sano poika laitapa valoja päälle
 Ja mä laitoin, ja mun sydän palaa edelleenkin tälle

about his 2019 track 'Wisdomii', he explains that the track was born out of his wish to activate his own social media accounts with daily 'wisdoms'. He soon concluded that his attempted wisdoms were hopelessly clichéd, so he instead took an ironic approach to the Christian self-help culture. Joonatan Palmi further explains to me that he intentionally wrote the song's lyrics to leave room for interpretation. He laughingly mentions the phrase 'Wiseest man in the east, who knew everything about everything' in the hook of the song, which he says may refer parodically to himself 'as the wisest rapper in East Helsinki' or to 'Jesus as the wisest man from the Middle-East'.

James Bielo (2011, 47–69) notes that the use of irony also plays an essential role within the 'Emerging Church' movement, which has sought to renew North American Evangelical culture internally with a community-based approach to worship and an emphasis on social justice. The Emerging movement thus falls under the broader category of the 'Evangelical left', which is characterized by its theological understanding of sin as a collective phenomenon that has led these Evangelicals to address issues such as racism, poverty, and ecological crisis as sins. The Evangelical left stands in contrast with the 'Evangelical right', which has seen sin primarily as an individual concern, resulting in an emphasis on sexual ethics in issues such as infidelity and abortion (Gushee 2008; Strother 2020, 38–41). According to Bielo (2011, 47–69; see also Abraham 2018, 9), 'Emerging Evangelicals' voice irony specifically at the expense of the conservative Evangelical cultural industry and the Evangelical right. The use of irony among Emerging Evangelicals also challenges the historically established literal use of Christian language in Evangelicalism by instead emphasizing 'the processes of dialogue, thinking, and expression from which truths are given' (Colebrook 2004, 110, quoted in Bielo 2011, 61).

Overall, the specific point of the critique for the Emerging Evangelicals is the religious commodification and consumer culture, which they see as an obstacle to authentic Christian faith (Bielo 2011, 55). Joonatan Palmi has similar concerns about the drive towards spectacularism in Christian culture, as he describes his thoughts behind his 2017 track 'Jumalii' ('Gods') to me: 'Perhaps we've been confused to think that God wants to give you just great things in your life, and you can do anything [...] That we just do big things, going big all the time.' Such an internal theological critique is also a common feature of North American Evangelical rap music, where, for example, the rapper Shai Linne attacks the prosperity gospel in his 2013 track 'Fal\$e Teacher\$' in very similar fashion to Joonatan Palmi (Harris and Gault 2020, 21). Whereas Shai Linne's critique is based on specific passages

of the Bible, however, Joonatan Palmi's 'Bägissä toivoo' is lyrically focused on the symbol of the burning heart, which is a central Christian symbol associated with the inner emotional world.

With the symbolism of the heart the performance of The Young Theologian can be further contextualized within the internal critiques circulating in transnational Evangelicalism, according to which the current overemphasis on the spectacle of worship has led many Evangelicals to 'participate in a predictable capitalist ritual' that undermines the emotional sincerity of their worship (Abraham 2018, 9). The described performance took place at a regional event organized by LEAF, and my interpretation is that the satire in Joonatan Palmi's performance refers specifically to the extravagant stage videos used at the Maata Näkyvissä festival. In addition, his vocal gesture of pronouncing 'wisdom' with a Finnish 'ö' in the song 'Wisdomii' highlights the perceived Anglo-American origins of this therapeutic culture within Finnish Protestantism (see Lührman 2004).

Palmi has very consciously created the current humorous tone in his music. He mentions that his 2017 album 'Jumalii' was perhaps too melancholic and dark for Christian organizers, as he got few bookings until he released new, more light-hearted, music. He laughingly tells me: 'Then I heard that some organizers said at some point: "Hey, Palmi has now done something positive and joyful. We could bring him again to our gigs".' Although Joonatan Palmi describes The Young Theologian to me as a satirical character, he does not see this role taking as insincere but as a performative element that allows him to express his Christian faith honestly. When I ask him about the character of The Young Theologian, Joonatan Palmi tells me he created the character to do 'really Christian rap, where you can say things straight and really speak about it [Christianity]'. According to my interpretation when Palmi plays the role of The Young Theologian, he intentionally uses Christian themes and vocabulary excessively to create a critical contrast with the mainstream of Finnish gospel music and Anglo-American CCM, in which specific lyrical references to Christian tradition are often veiled in ambiguity, as we have previously seen in this ethnography (see also Hendershot 2004, 52–84; Häger 2005).

As a musical genre, rap offers specific cultural models for the blending of satire and sincere expressions of faith. For example, Monica Miller (2009) demonstrates that North American rappers have long engaged in theological playfulness, in which they embrace the contradictions of their personal faith. According to Miller (2009, 44) such contradictions create 'complex subjectivities' (Pinn 2003, 86; see also Dehanas 2013, 297), which

trouble 'normative ideas of religious "certainty" and "dogmatism"'. Wind Dell Woods (Hill et al. 2019, 74) in turn notes how a complex use of irony, or 'non-serious seriousness', as he calls it, is a fundamental characteristic of rap music, which uses subversive humour and strategic lyrical ambiguity, especially in restrictive social contexts. Such 'non-serious seriousness' is also audible in Joonatan Palmi's 'Wisdomii', in which he intentionally conflates Jesus with himself and Biblical Judea with East Helsinki. These artistic choices again bear resemblance to the Emerging Church movement, where 'place-work' is considered central to authentic Christianity in the sense that the movement has sought to connect itself with specific local communities and traditions in contrast with the universalized identities of mainstream North American Evangelicalism (Bielo 2011, 178–194; Hovland 2016, 351).

Moreover, other Finnish gospel rappers, and most prominently the rapper Roni Samuel, have set their lyrics to East Helsinki like Joonatan Palmi. Yet the playfulness around the perceived sacred values of Christianity in Joonatan Palmi's performance is an exception among the events that I observed, where artists and organizers mainly sought to maintain the perceived Christian–secular binary in the manner I have previously described in this article (see also Dehanas 2013, 298; Hill et al. 2019, 60). Despite the exceptionality of Palmi's performance, I argue that it shows that rappers can also incorporate critical takes on Evangelical culture into the light-hearted and playful atmosphere that is expected from them. Yet this criticism is only viable in Evangelical culture if the musician comes across as a sincere believer (see Abraham 2018; Ingalls 2022), and I argue that such sincere expressions of personal faith are also valued and developed in rap music's global genre conventions.

Conclusions

In this article I have demonstrated how the advent of gospel rap music in Finland indicates a shift to an increasingly playful, light-hearted, and therapeutic emotional regime in Finnish Evangelicalism (see also Roeland et al. 2012). Scholars (such as Riis and Woodhead 2010, 172–206) have widely observed that late modern societies are marked by growing emotional self-reflexivity and the prevalence of irony and parody in public culture as the major outcomes of this trend towards self-reflexivity. The existing research has also recognized the important role irony and playfulness play in the negotiation of contemporary Evangelical identities (Bielo 2011, 47–69; Moore 2017; Ingalls 2022). My analysis shows the presence of this general trend

towards irony and playfulness in the specific context of Finnish gospel rap music, which, despite its Evangelical roots, has also become an important medium for other Finnish protestant communities in the socialization of young people into Christian faith.

I further argue that social negotiations around emotions in gospel rap performances are linked with two emerging social trends: the decline of Finnish cultural Christianity in favour of diverse and personal spiritual practices and the emerging discussions on racialized inequality (Salomäki et al. 2021, 67–90, 257–267; Rastas 2019). I showed how some gospel rappers and their listeners manage to use playfulness in their own way to voice novel theological constructions, which interrogate and expand beyond the structural limitations of Evangelical communities and their joking cultures, which generally do not encourage the direct commentary of social identities such as class, ethnicity, or race (Moore 2017; Ingalls 2022).

To summarize, I would like to encourage further empirical studies on the future directions of the different forms of young people's theological playfulness in the Nordic context, where Christianity is undergoing drastic change and contestation, both culturally and demographically. One apparent direction for theologians and social scientists alike in tracing this playfulness would be the further study of music and dance in the protestant setting, with the realization that theology and doctrine are not only reflected in aesthetic practices, but that music and dance also shape theology and social relations within Christian communities (see, for example, Porter 2013; Blenda Im 2021).

* * *

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