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# Rebellious Religion: Christian Hardcore and Muslim 'Taqwacore' Punk Rock

by

Amy Denise McDowell

Bachelor of Arts, University of Colorado-Colorado Springs, 2006

Master of Arts, University of Pittsburgh, 2008

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

the Kenneth P. Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences

in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Pittsburgh

2014

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

KENNETH P. DIETRICH SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

This dissertation was presented

by

Amy D. McDowell

It was defended on

December 17th, 2013

and approved by

Mohammed Bamyeh, Professor, Sociology

Akiko Hashimoto, Associate Professor, Sociology

Paula M. Kane, Associate Professor, Religious Studies

Dissertation Advisor: Kathleen Blee, Distinguished Professor, Sociology

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**Rebellious Religion: Christian Hardcore and Muslim 'Taqwacore' Punk Rock**

Amy Denise McDowell, PhD

University of Pittsburgh, 2014

This study shows how U.S. Christian Hardcore and Muslim 'Taqwacore' (*taqwa* means 'god consciousness' in Arabic) youth fuse traditional religions and punk rock music outside of religious institutions. It is part of a new cultural turn in the sociological study of religion that regards religion and secular culture as potentially interactive and mutually reinforcing. I examine the process by which both groups adapt D.I.Y. (do-it-yourself) hardcore punk to make religion their own; how they present themselves as religious/punk in subcultural settings; and how they define themselves internally as well as externally. To understand how Christian Hardcore and Taqwacore youth bridge religion and punk, I collected ethnographic data from intensive interviews, participant observations, surveys of audience members, and artifacts such as albums, films, images, newspaper articles, and websites about these two music scenes. I find that Christian Hardcore and Taqwacore youth both draw on the oppositional aspects of hardcore punk to combine religion and punk. Yet their relationships to religious and social institutions shape how they use hardcore punk. Christian Hardcore youth are influenced by the white Protestant evangelical institutions that support their music as a ministry. They oppose the "mainstream church" that condemns their punk music and the "anti-Christian" punks who reject them for being Christian. Taqwacores face a much different set of challenges. They are rejected from traditional Islamic institutions, American society, and white dominated punk. Consequently, they oppose the very idea of Islam, America and punk. In conclusion, I argue that subcultural

Christian and Muslim youth rebel against religious/secular boundaries to make religion their own and in effect challenge how scholars commonly study religion and religious identity.

To the memory of Dr. Mary F. Rogers.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

**PREFACE** ..... **XIV**

**1.0 INTRODUCTION** ..... **1**

**1.1 DESCRIPTION OF CASES** ..... **2**

**1.1.1 Christian Hardcore** ..... **2**

**1.1.2 Taqwacore** ..... **3**

**1.2 LITERATURE REVIEW** ..... **5**

**1.2.1 U.S. Religion** ..... **5**

**1.2.2 Punk Rock Music** ..... **7**

**1.3 DISSERTATION AIMS AND OUTLINE** ..... **11**

**2.0 QUALITATIVE METHODS AND DATA** ..... **15**

**2.1.1 Entry into the field** ..... **16**

**2.1.2 Pretest** ..... **17**

**2.1.3 Research Triangulation** ..... **23**

**2.1.3.1 Participant Observation** ..... **24**

**2.1.3.2 Mini-Survey** ..... **29**

**2.1.3.3 Interviews and Interviewees** ..... **30**

**2.1.3.4 Artifacts** ..... **33**

**2.1.4 Data Analysis** ..... **36**

**2.1.5 Research Ethics** ..... **38**

**2.1.6 Reflexivity and Rapport** ..... **38**

**3.0 HARDCORE PIETY: "IT'S ABOUT MAKING RELIGION YOUR OWN"** ..... **41**

**3.1 BELIEFS** ..... **42**

**3.1.1 Christian Hardcore Beliefs** ..... **43**

**3.1.1.1 Authenticity** ..... **46**

**3.1.2 Taqwacore Beliefs** ..... **50**

**3.1.2.1 Authenticity** ..... **56**

**3.1.3 Discussion of Beliefs** ..... **60**

**3.2 PRACTICES** ..... **62**

**3.2.1 Christian Hardcore Practices** ..... **62**

**3.2.1.1 Mainstream Religion** ..... **63**

**3.2.1.2 Punk Religion** ..... **70**

**3.2.2 Taqwacore Practices** ..... **76**

**3.2.2.1 Mainstream America** ..... **77**

**3.2.2.2 Mainstream Religion** ..... **79**

**3.2.2.3 Punk Religion** ..... **82**

**3.2.3 Discussion of Practices** ..... **90**

**4.0 WARRIORS AND TERRORISTS: ANTAGONISM AS STRATEGY** ..... **91**

**4.1 ANTAGONISM** ..... **94**

**4.1.1 Christian 'Warriors'** ..... **95**

**4.1.2 Muslim 'Terrorists'** ..... **104**

**4.1.3 Discussion of Antagonism** ..... **113**

**5.0 DEFINING CHRISTIAN HARDCORE AND TAQWACORE PUNK ..... 115**

**5.1 INTERNAL DEFINITIONS ..... 116**

**5.1.1 Christian Hardcore ..... 116**

**5.1.2 Taqwacore ..... 127**

**5.1.3 Discussion of Internal Definitions ..... 135**

**5.2 EXTERNAL DEFINITIONS ..... 136**

**5.2.1 Christian Hardcore ..... 139**

**5.2.1.1 Christian Bands ..... 141**

**5.2.1.2 Christians in a Band ..... 147**

**5.2.2 Taqwacore ..... 148**

**5.2.3 Discussion of External Definitions ..... 155**

**5.2.4 Conclusion of Definitions ..... 155**

**6.0 CONCLUSION ..... 157**

**6.1 WHO OWNS HARDCORE PIETY? ..... 159**

**6.2 BEYOND RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS ..... 162**

**6.3 FUTURE STUDIES ..... 166**

**APPENDIX A ..... 168**

**APPENDIX B ..... 170**

**APPENDIX C ..... 171**

**APPENDIX D ..... 173**

**APPENDIX E ..... 174**

**APPENDIX F ..... 175**

**APPENDIX G ..... 177**

**BIBLIOGRAPHY ..... 178**

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 2-1: Description of Data ..... 23

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2-1: The Bridge Collective flyer near the entrance ..... 18

Figure 2-2: Pathway to The Bridge Collective meeting ..... 18

Figure 2-3: “19 July 09: Beach Baptism Part II,” The Bridge Collective at Brighton Beach ..... 20

Figure 2-4: Cardboard signs are used to advertise music shows at Cornerstone..... 25

Figure 2-5: Live music show flyers cover the portable restrooms at Cornerstone ..... 26

Figure 2-6: Show flyer for Taqwacore show at the Middle East Nightclub, Cambridge, MA..... 27

Figure 2-7: *Al-Thawra* "Edifice" CD release show ..... 35

Figure 3-1: Jesus with black sheep, London Regenerates zine..... 49

Figure 3-2: In the Blood Tattoo logo, Pittsburgh, PA..... 71

Figure 3-3: *Sunny Ali & The Kid* ..... 86

Figure 3-4: *The Kominas*, live show at the Middle East Nightclub, Cambridge, MA..... 87

Figure 3-5: Tesnim Sayar, Hijab mohawk design ..... 88

Figure 4-1: "The End Is Near" handmade sign, Cornerstone festival 2010..... 99

Figure 4-2: *The Kominas*, "Wild Nights in Guantanamo Bay," 2008 ..... 105

Figure 4-3: *Sunny Ali & The Kid*, "Texistan" t-shirt emblem..... 108

Figure 4-4: *Al-Thawra*, "Chicago no-fly-listed experimental doom crust” event flyer..... 111

Figure 4-5: *Al-Thawra* (The Revolution), "Who Benefits from War?," 2008..... 112

Figure 5-1: Cornerstone promo poster, "The Underground: Only the Finest Circle Pits," courtesy of the artist, Thor Uremovich..... 118

Figure 5-2: Christian Hardcore, Who Fits ..... 135

Figure 5-3: Taqwacore, Who Fits ..... 136

Figure 6-1: Diagram of Christian (CH) and Taqwacore (TQX) Hardcore Punk Scenes..... 164

# PREFACE

This dissertation was supported by a University of Pittsburgh Andrew W. Mellon Predoctoral Research Fellowship, a University of Pittsburgh Sociology Graduate Student Research Grant, and a University of Pittsburgh Women's Studies Graduate Student Research Grant. In addition to these funders, I want to thank many people who helped me carry out this project.

I am immensely grateful for Kathleen Blee, my dissertation advisor. It's hard to imagine going through graduate school without Kathy's research expertise, scholastic support and encouragement. Thank you, Kathy, for putting so much into my intellectual growth. You taught me to think and write more clearly and gave me countless opportunities to improve my research and research skills. I also thank my dissertation committee members. They are terrific. I always looked forward to meeting them and hearing what they had to say about my research. I appreciate Mohammed Bamyeh's theoretical acumen, Akiko Hashimoto's ability to always get me back to the 'big picture,' and Paula Kane's sharp, demanding intellect as well as her emphasis on historical context. Nancy Kasper, the Administrative Assistant for Sociology, also deserves a big thank you. She made me laugh when I needed it and helped me with more things than I can count.

This project would not be possible without my research participants and the music they create. I thank each person who participated in this project and shared a piece of their lives with

me. I also want to thank Jay Howard, a sociologist and Christian Rock Music expert, for securing a tent site for me at Cornerstone and sharing his rich knowledge of Christian rock with me.

Thanks to the Writing Workshop for reading drafts of my dissertation and for meeting with me numerous times to discuss my findings and provide feedback on my writing. You all are an amazing bunch of graduate students. I want to give a special thanks to Kelsy Burke for always giving me thoughtful feedback. I also greatly appreciate my graduate school cohort – Kimberly Creasap, Yole Hernadez-Albujar, and Jane Schuchert Walsh, for being such an incredible group of friends and colleagues. Thanks Ellen Smith for helping me fine-tune my writing and for setting up the dissertation writing activities at the University of Pittsburgh. Also, thanks to the baristas at Tazza D'Oro café; you allowed me to work in your space for hours on end and made stellar cappuccinos that kept me going.

My parents, Ronda and Clyde McDowell, were always there for me, eager to reassure me that I can do this. I thank them for raising me to think outside of the box and for imagining a better, more just world. Because of them, I know a thing or two about music. I also thank my best friend Michelle Fried for taking my mind off of school and making me laugh when I needed it. And thank you Valerie George, my dear friend, for encouraging me to go back to school years ago and take Sociology of Sex Roles with Dr. Mary F. Rogers, a feminist sociologist who radically changed my life virtually overnight. Finally, un abrazo grande (a big hug) to Alberto del Arco González for supporting me in immeasurable ways – you are incredibly generous and thoughtful. Thanks for responding every time that I randomly yelled, "Hey, can you read this for me?" Your smile, positive energy, and search for the "truth" are infectious.

# 1.0 INTRODUCTION

U.S. Christian and Muslim youth are making a subculture of punk rock music on the margins of traditional religion and youth culture. Their music is part of a larger global phenomenon in which youth express religion in such diverse forms of popular music as Hip Hop and Thrash Metal. Scholars show that youth convey religion in subversive music genres for "various cultural and political ends" (Solomon 2011: 28; also LeVine 2008) such as opposing traditional concepts of morality (Hecker 2011), promoting conservative cultural values (Giagnoni 2009) and/or proselytizing to nonbelievers (Ackfeldt 2012; Luhr 2009). But is the relationship between religion and subcultural music unidirectional? Do these music subcultures also shape religious beliefs and practices?

My research on Christian and Muslim punk builds on new scholarship which regards religion and secular culture as potentially interactive and mutually reinforcing. The authors of the edited volume *Religion on the Edge: De-Centering and Re-Centering the Sociology of Religion* (Bender, Cage, Levitt and Smilde 2013) make a compelling case for looking at religion beyond religious organizations and congregations. They argue that a focus on "religion as produced and experienced in congregations" reinforces the "Christo-and US-centricness" of the discipline and they see this as problematic because it narrows the meaning of religion to beliefs and worldviews (Bender et al. 2013: 8). By moving beyond religious institutions and organizations, scholars can better assess how "religious boundaries are actually created and deployed" (Bender et al. 2013:

10), and in turn, underscore how the interactions between religious and non-religious institutions, groups and individuals shape those boundaries (Lichterman 2013). Yet rather than study how religious boundaries are created in secular settings, I push "the edge" of religion in an innovative direction: I study how Christian Hardcore and Muslim 'Taqwacore' (*taqwa* means 'god consciousness' in Arabic) punk rock youth bridge religion and secular culture in subcultural settings where communities are constructed around music and music shows.

## 1.1 DESCRIPTION OF CASES

Christian Hardcore and Muslim Taqwacore punks have dissimilar relationships with their respective religious institutions and mainstream American society, making them exceptional contrasting cases for understanding how both majority and minority youth connect religion and punk.

### 1.1.1 Christian Hardcore

Although Christian punks generally claim to be independent from religious establishments, many Christian punk bands are supported financially and/or ideologically by institutions of white Protestant evangelicals.[1] Christian punk got its start in the 1980s and is typically considered part of the Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) industry that emerged out of the 1970s Jesus

[1] Evangelicals generally believe in the "born again" experience which rests on the individual decision to accept Jesus Christ and value proselytizing to unbelievers (Balmer 1989). Many of the Christian youth I study were raised in Protestant evangelical churches and believe in spirit baptism, faith healing, and End Times theology. Yet they call themselves "Christian" not "evangelical" because they think "evangelical" creates unnecessary divisions between Christians, pointing out that some Catholics are also involved in this music.

Movement (Howard and Streck 1999; Luhr 2009; Stowe 2011). The Jesus Movement was a group of hippie Christians who put a new face on the music and meaning of sixties counterculture rock (Howard & Streck 1999: Luhr 2009; Stowe 2011). The movement sought to take the church out of institutions and intervene in the counterculture by investing 'secular' objects and symbols with religious meaning (Luhr 2009). By making Jesus a rebel, evangelicals diffused denominational differences and unified their moral stance under one common identity: Christian.

Unlike their CCM punk predecessors who made music "to reach the lost" but were only "heard by the found" at youth retreats and Christian rock festivals (Howard and Streck 1999: 71), present-day Christian Hardcore punk bands more commonly play bars and nightclubs with secular bands and release albums on secular as well as Christian record labels. Indeed, after almost thirty years of Christian rock's isolation from the mainstream market, Christian rock, which includes Christian punk rock and metal, is now able to compete with other genres of music (Giagnoni 2009). The shift in media conglomeration, marketing, and consumption patterns help explain why "crossover" bands are on the rise. Crossover bands are Christian bands that are able to blur the Christian and so-called secular music scenes. In fact, many Christian bands refuse to be "pigeonholed and confined into the Christian market" (Giagnoni 2009: 230).

### 1.1.2 Taqwacore

Unlike Christian Hardcore punk, Taqwacore developed more recently and is not supported by Islamic institutions which consider its music to be *haram* (against Islamic law). Mostly

comprised of South Asian Americans, the Taqwacore scene was produced by an online network[2] of youth inspired by *The Taqwacores*, a 2004[3] novel by Michael Muhammad Knight that depicts an imagined Muslim punk house in Buffalo, New York where subcultural youth - ranging from goth to straight-edge - reinterpret the Quran, play loud music and have wild parties. Similar to the novel, real life Taqwacore is not defined by one particular sound[4] or religious viewpoint but rather more as a nonconformist outlook, heretical religiosity, and shared experience of social discrimination. Taqwacores consider artists, musicians, independent writers and journalists who contest war or Islamophobia, or simply identify as "brown," part of the scene not because the sound is punk but because the message is punk. The scene includes a variety of genres –ska, anarchist crust, experimental, riot grrrl, rap and even indie country and western – which attests to punk as a symbolic protest and outsider status rather than a mere sonic quality or style of clothing. Some individuals even use the term "TaqX" instead of Taqwacore so that those not interested in hard*core* punk can replace the 'core' with another subcultural signifier.

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[2] For a discussion of how internet media facilitates the creation of a transnational Taqwacore music scene, see Dhiraj Murthy's (2010) article "Muslim Punks Online: A Diasporic Pakistani Music Subculture on the Internet." In private interviews, Taqwacores report that they met some of their best friends online, stayed up all night chatting with other Taqwacores on Gmail and Facebook and followed Taqwacore bands on Twitter. Sam, a Taqwacore from Sydney, describes her process of meeting some of her closest Taqwacore friends like this: "I started following the bands mostly. I'd write the bands or I would Tweet about it and I'd use the hashtag 'Taqwacore' and I'm pretty sure that's how they found me. I think they might have come across a Tweet that had a hashtag Taqwacore and then re-Tweeted it and then other people followed me. I think it was a back and forth thing because I found other people through that sort of system as well."

[3] The novel was originally self-published in 2003 by Knight.

[4] For a more detailed account of the interaction between Islam and punk rock, see Anthony Fiscella's (2012) article *From Muslim Punks to Taqwacore: an Incomplete History of Punk Islam*.

## 1.2 LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1.2.1 U.S. Religion

Sociologists usually investigate congregations and other types of voluntary religious organizations to understand the life and vitality of religion in American society (Ammerman 2005; Chaves 2004). Certainly, with an estimated 300,000 religious congregations, these institutions are a major way in which religion is socially organized in the United States (Chaves 2004). But religious expression and experience is not restricted to religious institutions and these may not be the best indicator of religion (Bender et al. 2013). A recent study by Mark Chaves (2011) indicates that Americans' involvement in traditional religions is on the decline but that there is an increase in a "diffuse spirituality" (Chaves 2011). This means that while there is a lot of stability in terms of religious beliefs, attitudes, and practices, the proportion of Americans who say that they have no religious affiliation (i.e. what scholars of religion term "NONES") is on the rise and the involvement in religious congregations is dropping. Chaves notes that although the rates of weekly congregational attendance have remained somewhat stable since the 1990s, the number of people who report that they *never* go to a religious service has increased 9 percent and is expected to grow.

Sociologists provide several explanations for the move away from traditional religious institutions. For starters, there is improved tolerance for religious diversity in an increasingly pluralistic America (Chaves 2011; Putnam and Campbell 2010).[5] Young people in particular are

[5] The argument that Americans are becoming more tolerant of religious diversity is complicated by the fact that unlike their Catholic and Jewish contemporaries, American Muslims (and those perceived to be Muslim) continue to face xenophobia in their daily lives.

less likely than their grandparents to believe that their religion is the only true religion. Also, Americans' trust in institutions and institutional leaders is decreasing, especially in the realm of religion and politics (Hout & Fischer 2002).[6]

The shift in American religiosity, from participation in traditional religious institutions to new diffuse forms of spirituality, is most apparent among young people. Studies consistently show that young people are more likely to consider themselves "spiritual but not religious," which is usually taken to mean that they are constructing a spiritual experience that best fits their lifestyle by adopting rituals and beliefs from a buffet of spiritual options (Roof 1999; Wuthnow 1998). But some young people may identify as 'spiritual but not religious' because they do not participate in religious institutions, not because they dropped out of their religion. The young people who leave religious institutions may be spiritual individualists, non-religious, or in-between religions, but there are also youth who leave because they think the religious institutions in which they were raised are too conservative, too lenient, or uninteresting, not because they are snubbing their religious heritage altogether (see Madsen 2009). Some youth may elect to enact religion in unusual forms and venues, a contemporary phenomenon that is often overlooked in survey and congregational studies. Moreover, survey research cannot measure the changes in religiosity among minority faith groups such as American Muslims, whose population is so small that separate quantitative analyses are difficult to execute (Putnam and Campbell 2010). These research gaps are being filled by ethnographies which show that American Muslim youth increasingly adhere to Islamic traditions and are creating an American Islam (Abdo 2006; Haddad 2007; Williams 2011).

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[6] Up until the 1990s, those who had been raised Catholic or Baptist reported their religious backgrounds even if their religious participation was very low. However, after the political activism of the Religious Right, more Americans reported no religious affiliation because of the association of religion with politics and corruption (Hout & Fischer 2002).

Modern individuals and groups, both those who do and do not attend religious services, conceptualize and engage religion in a variety of non-sanctified situations. Accordingly, new studies in the sociology of religion are looking to the 'public' sphere to assess how the very object of religion is produced from and even reinforced by secular institutions and culture (Bender 2003; Lichterman 2013). In studying religion in non-sanctified contexts, scholars can evaluate how "religious ideas and discourse actively permeate culture and politics" (Dillon 2012: 561; Bender et al. 2013), even as more and more Americans report that they are not affiliated with a particular religious tradition (Chaves 2011). Indeed, youth can "do" religion in non-institutionalized spaces because religion is becoming more tied to popular culture than it is to a time and place (Burke and McDowell 2012; Eickelman and Anderson 2003; Einstein 2008; Hendershot 2004; Hoover 2006; Lynch 2007; Steinberg and Kincheloe 2009). This shift is significant because scholars seldom address how young people use popular culture to deinstitutionalize religion, how they use religion to transform popular culture, or how young people make religion and popular culture compatible, even complimentary in "secular" contexts. To explore this phenomenon, it is logical to start with popular music as studies show that young people use music to communicate with God (Wuthnow 2003) as well as to form social identity and solidarity (Frith 1996a; Simi and Futrell 2010).

### 1.2.2 Punk Rock Music

Music is a good tool for bringing religion and popular culture together because music is not merely a product of culture; music is "a process – an activity" that people mobilize "to give meaning to themselves and their world" (Roy and Dowd 2010: 186, 187; see also Eyerman 2002). Culture, or music for that matter, is something people "do" by bringing different cultural

resources together in various circumstances to achieve a specific objective. In an analysis of how social movement groups form, Kathleen Blee (2012: 31) says, “culture is not external to social action; rather, culture *is* meaningful social action.” Indeed, cultural sociologists and social movement theorists alike show that culture is always being contested and remade and it is through this process that social actors pursue their own definitions of reality (Jasper 1998; Johnston 2009; Polletta 2008). Anne Swidler’s (1986: 283) focus on “strategies of action” broke new ground in the sociology of culture because it focuses on the capacity to re-appropriate culture that “gives culture its enduring effects.” She (Swidler 1986: 273) argued culture is a “’tool kit’ of symbols, stories, rituals, and world views” that people use in different situations according to the kinds of problems they want to solve. Expanding this, Jeffrey Alexander and Philip Smith (2003: 12) argue that culture is an ideal resource that “partially enables and constrains action.” As an example, young people who adapt punk rock to make religion their own are constrained by the symbols and attitudes of punk rock in their project of religious independence.

Performers can use music as a platform to express how they feel to audiences with the intention of making audiences feel the same way (see Alexander 2004; Alexander 2010; Goffman 1959; Turner 1987) but a lot of the meaning that gets produced from a music performance stems from the social bonds created from making judgments about it (Frith 1996b). Who is talking and hearing music together can and does change, as does the meanings that get attached to music. Tia DeNora (2000) says music is a resource for doing, thinking, and feeling. The rhythmic, gestural and stylistic properties of music provide participants with “referents or representations of ‘where’ they wish to ‘be’ or ‘go’ emotionally, physically, and so on” (DeNora 2001: 171). People make sense of their lives through music because it is more than ideological

(Eyerman and Jamison 1998); it "inscribes its effects upon the body; tears, laughter, hair-tingling, goose bumps, screams, spine-chilling, eye-closing" are the kinds of visceral responses people experience in relation to music (Grossberg 1992: 79). Music's capacity to make people think and move means that it is constitutive of social experience, not a mere reflection of it (DeNora 2000).

"Music scene" refers to a context-specific community of like-minded individuals who assemble around music to share ideas and experiences (see Bennett and Peterson 2004; Futrell, Simi and Gottschalk 2006; Haenfler 2006; Khan-Harris 2007; Simi and Futrell 2010). To break this term down even more, think about "scenes" as ever-changing (Creasap 2012) expressive social worlds wherein people make meaning through the shared experience of an "activity system" (Irwin 1977: 27) such as live music. Young people can use music to construct and reconstruct "scenes" because as William Roy (2010: 14) points out, "there is never *a* meaning" in music…the "meaning of music comes at least as much from talk about music" as how people hear music.

Punk rock music is notoriously defiant. This music emerged in the 1970s as the post-World War II system of compromise among big business, organized labor, and the welfare state was coming to an end in the U.K. and the U.S. and being replaced by a post-Fordist economy of extended global outreach (Moore and Roberts 2009). This change was accompanied by a shift to the political right in the U.K. and the U.S., culminating in the elections of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 and Ronald Reagan in 1980, as well as a sustained effort to roll back the victories of the 1960s and 1970s social movements (Moore and Roberts 2009). Upon its inception, punk rock symbolically confronted, through sonic quality and style, the "traditions and norms of the powers-that-be" (Clark 2003a: 225; also Hall and Jefferson 1975; Hebdige 1979). Musically,

punk is typically earsplittingly loud, sped-up rock. Many people identify with punk because of its strong association with non-conformist attitudes and ideas (Haenfler 2006; Hebdige 1979; Leblanc 1999; Moore and Roberts 2009; Rosenberg and Garofalo 1998), not because they look or sound punk (Andes 1998; Clark 2003a)[7]. "Real" (non-commercial) punk also operates with an autonomous ethos, a set of do-it-yourself (DIY) practices of cultural production (Moore 2007) that define and nurture religiosity much differently than does traditional institutionalized religion.

Christian Hardcore and Muslim Taqwacore punk youth's amalgamation of a religious signifier with "core" from hardcore (a punk rock subgenre) is significant because of the DIY spirit of hardcore. American hardcore got its start in the 1980s as young white men voiced their disgust with the commercialization of punk rock and the social conservatism during Ronald Reagan's presidency. From the start, DIY punk expressed an anti-consumerist ideology and offered "genuine opportunities for cultural participation and creative expression" (Moore 2007: 468). Old video footage of live hardcore punk shows can be eerily destructive and scary to watch. Young men would hit others with their guitars, or dance wildly on stage, breaking instruments with their feet and fists. The belligerent posturing of hardcore revealed its attitude: young people felt like they had to fight to make their own culture (Blush 2010; Rachman 2006). Sonically, hardcore is typically faster and heavier than 1970s style punk rock bands like the *Sex Pistols* or *The Clash*. But the term 'core' from hardcore punk does not solely reference a particular sound. Several music scenes that fit under the punk umbrella ─ such as queercore, emocore, and Taqwacore ─ adopt the term 'core' from hardcore punk but are not necessarily

[7] Still others will call themselves punk because they like the rebelliousness of the clothing and mannerisms or because they like the music, not because they want to transform society. Indeed, punk culture is widely commercialized in Western societies, a trend that has pushed some individuals to become "post-punk" (see Clark 2003a).

violent, nor do all of them play abrasive sounding music. In these scenes, the suffix "core" captures the fundamentals of punk rock: oppositional attitudes and DIY cultural production.

## 1.3 DISSERTATION AIMS AND OUTLINE

The aim of this project is to study how U.S. Christian Hardcore and Muslim 'Taqwacore' youth fuse traditional religions and punk music subcultures. Specifically, I analyze: 1) the process by which both groups adapt DIY hardcore punk to make religion their own; 2) how they present themselves as religious/punk in punk rock settings; and 3) how they define themselves internally and externally. To do this, I utilize the cultural sociology literature which posits culture as a context-dependent "tool kit" of collective representations that individuals and groups strategically use (often from conflicting and multiple sources) to solve different kinds of problems (Swidler 1986; also Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003).

My dissertation research adds to two broad bodies of sociological scholarship: religion and culture. For the sociology of religion, this study is distinctive in that it shows how majority and minority U.S. youth produce an alternative version of their religious traditions. This is especially significant in an era in which sociologists of religion find that young people are moving away from traditional religions and speculate that because of this the basis for "new forms of religious collective action" are eroding (Chaves 2011: 23; Putnam and Campbell 2010). By using qualitative methods, I show how youth create new kinds of collective religious beliefs and practices outside of religious institutions. My project also builds on the literature in cultural sociology. I contribute to this body of research by illustrating that Hardcore Christians and Taqwacores' strategies of action are shaped by their relationships to larger religious institutions

and American society; and that their strategies of action affect their religious beliefs, practices, and expressions.

In the next chapter, I outline the qualitative methods I used and describe the data collected for this project which include participant observation data, mini oral surveys, intensive individual and group interviews, and cultural artifacts. I also discuss how I got access to these unusual and semi-closed social worlds and how some of my first interactions with Hardcore Christians and Taqwacores influenced my research templates from the very beginning. This chapter also provides an explanation of how I analyzed these various sorts of data through open, closed, and focused coding.

In Chapter 3, I show that Christian Hardcore and Muslim Taqwacore youth are part of a larger trend in which U.S. youth are moving away from traditional religious institutions. Yet, unlike spiritual individualists, these youth are collectively adapting hardcore punk ideas and attitudes to make traditional religions their own outside of religious institutions. I find that both groups use punk to reformulate religious beliefs and practices in ways that both challenge and preserve traditional religions. Hardcore Christians and Taqwacores argue that, unlike religious authorities and institutions, punk culture facilitates an authentic connection to religion.

In Chapter four, I examine how Christian Hardcore and Taqwacore producers (e.g. musicians, bloggers, authors, filmmakers, and ministry groups) use punk ideas, symbols, and rituals to present themselves as punk/religious to other punks in subcultural settings. I find that both cases draw on a punk rock motif of antagonism ─ oppositional, sometimes violent symbols, rituals and attitudes ─ to bond religion and punk. Christian punks use the motif of antagonism to rid the underground of its evil persuasions but condemn other Christians for denouncing punk.

Taqwacores criticize Islam for its conservatism, and at the same time, they scold non-Muslims (punks or not) for stereotyping Muslims as misogynistic religious fanatics.

In Chapter five, I show how Christian Hardcore and Taqwacores define themselves internally and externally. I find that Christian Hardcore youth use aggressive dancing and music to define who fits and who does not fit in their community. White Christian and secular men fit in their music but women and non-whites as well as other religions do not fit. Fitting into the Taqwacore is not so black and white. For example, Taqwacores generally do not think that whites fit because they are not real 'outsiders' but at the same time insist that the whites who contribute to its culture are part of Taqwacore. While Christian Hardcore and Taqwacore youth define themselves internally in very different ways, I find that both groups make reference to religious signifiers when they discuss how they should define themselves in front of outsiders. I show that Christian Hardcore youth do not agree about how to define themselves as Christians in this culture. On the one hand, *Christian bands* believe they are most sincere in their external definitions because they are not afraid to preach about their beliefs. On the other, *Christians in bands* argue that Christian bands who preach from stage actually do more harm than good when it comes to subcultural ministry. I also show that Taqwacores have disagreements about the label "Muslim punk." Some feel as though the media only lets the "Muslim punks" define Taqwacore and that these 'Muslim punks' shamelessly soak in the publicity. Others agree that the media uses the term 'Muslim punk' reductively but think that overall this label effectively reaches other disenfranchised Muslim and brown youth.

In the conclusion, I discuss the contributions my project makes to studies of religion and culture. I argue that U.S. youth are blurring the line between religious and secular culture and that sociologists of religion need to reassess the assumptions we make about what is and what is

not religious. I also make recommendations for studying the religious lives of subcultural youth outside of religious institutions. Finally, I provide four directions for future research.

## 2.0 QUALITATIVE METHODS AND DATA

My research examines how Christian Hardcore and Taqwacore punks combine traditional religions and underground music. The research methods I use are interpretivist, or phenomenological, because the "important reality is what people perceive it to be" (Taylor and Bogdan 1998: 3; also Denzin and Lincoln 2003; Geertz 1973). I analyze Christian Hardcore and Taqwacore punk rock culture from the perspective of participants and examine how participants interpret their experiences of these social worlds.[8] I focus on the particularities of social actors' experiences and interpretations by collecting qualitative data on the beliefs and practices that constitute Taqwacore and Christian Hardcore punk.

In this chapter, I first explain how I got started on this unusual research project. In the subsequent section, I explain the various sources of qualitative data that I collected for the project, which include participant observation of Christian Hardcore and Taqwacore events, intensive interviews with Christian Hardcore and Taqwacore insiders and outsiders, mini-surveys with performers and audience members at music shows, and cultural artifacts such as images, albums and album reviews. Then, I describe how I coded and analyzed these data. The chapter closes with sections on research ethics and reflexivity.

[8] In order to ensure participant confidentiality, I use pseudonyms to reference the interviewees I spoke with in private. However, I use the real names of individuals when referring to publicly available interviews and materials. This means that some sources may have two different names (the pseudonym and real name) in this text.

### 2.1.1 Entry into the field

With the help of a summer research grant in Sociology, I made my first exploratory venture into Christian rock in the summer of 2008 by going to two Christian rock festivals: Creation in Mt. Union, Pennsylvania and Cornerstone in Bushnell, Illinois. Creation is what is expected from a typical Christian rock festival. There were mainstream Christian rock concerts, daily worship services, fund-raisers from Compassion International, several abstinence-only campaign booths, and a lot of teenagers and youth groups. Cornerstone was remarkably different. There were fewer moms and dads, more 20-something year olds, more tattoos and piercings, and lots of Christian Hardcore music. In fact, several indie-rock musicians - the ones who don't scream or crank up their instruments - complained about all the hardcore music. One musician exclaimed that he was "sick and tired" of the noise – he couldn't hear [his] own music over all the "screaming" bands.

The next year, in 2009, I caught a National Public Radio (NPR) story on Taqwacore. Taqwacore reminded me of Christian Hardcore. In much the same way that Hardcore Christians were claiming that "Jesus was Hardcore," Taqwacores were asserting that "Muhammad was a punk rocker." In December of 2009, I traveled to Cambridge, Massachusetts for my first Taqwacore show at the Middle East Nightclub. There I watched *The Kominas* (which means scoundrel or person of low birth in Punjabi) play live and met other Taqwacores in a pizza shop later that night after the show. I started to see that Taqwacores were engaging a two-fold fight (against both conservative Islam and Americans who hate Muslims) and I wanted to know how their beliefs and practices involved this struggle.

Fascinated by the amalgamation of hard*core* punk and traditional religion, I set out to study the music, art, and communities that Hardcore Christians and Taqwacores make. To get started, I looked for live music shows through networking websites. For the Christian Hardcore

scene, I used the Cornerstone Christian rock and Unified Underground (UU)[9] conference websites to identify popular hardcore bands and then searched for their live performances in nearby cities. For Taqwacore, I utilized the Taqwacore webzine website[10] which had links to self-identified Taqwacore bands such as Boston's *The Kominas*, Chicago's *Al-Thawra* ('The Revolution' in Arabic), and Washington D.C.'s *Diacritical*. I checked the Taqwacore webzine twice per week to read new blog posts, find events such as live music shows (although few and far apart), and view photographs, videos and news articles posted by website administrators. Through Christian and Taqwacore websites, I identified events and possible interview subjects as well as collected news articles, songs, and promotional flyers for content analysis.

### 2.1.2 Pretest

The research templates I used were developed from my preliminary study of Christian punks in London, England. There I pre-tested a template for participant observation at the Christian punk Bridge Collective's London service and first baptism on Brighton Beach. Social worlds like Christian Hardcore are not easy to access. Before leaving for London, I had little success getting information from the Bridge Collective leaders about their 'alternative' church. We had exchanged a couple of emails but I had difficulty getting the leaders to tell me about their upcoming baptism. When I arrived to London, the only thing I had was the address and time of their weekly "meeting" in Whitechapel, in a hip arts district just off of Brick Lane. Aware that the area was 'alternative,' I debated about what to wear to my first meeting at the Bridge: a black

[9] The UU is an annual subcultural ministry conference that takes place in Davidsonville, Maryland. UU provides links to groups, organizations, bands and ministries that are Christian punk. These include but are not limited to *The Anchor Fellowship* and *Deliverance Bible Church* (Retrieved October 27, 2013 http://www.unifiedunderground.com/2013/index2.php).
[10]Taqwacore webzine (Retrieved April 23, 2010: http://taqwacore.wordpress.com/).

dress with stockings or jeans and an old punk rock t-shirt?  I settled on my safest bet: blue converse sneakers, dark jeans, and a black zip-up hoodie.

**Figure 2-1: The Bridge Collective flyer near the entrance**

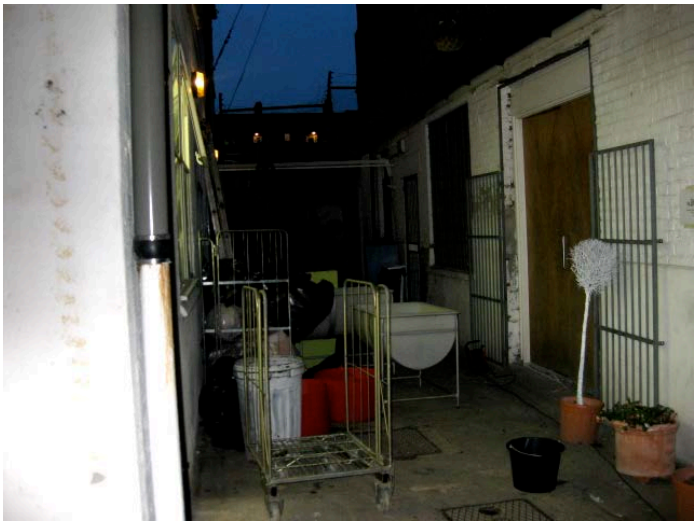

**Figure 2-2: Pathway to The Bridge Collective meeting**

The Bridge Collective was not only socially insular; their physical gathering place was also hard to access. When I arrived to the address, I spent 30 minutes pacing back and forth in

front of an abandoned-looking warehouse. Unable to locate an entrance, I started to think a) I had been misinformed about the location; or b) they moved the meeting and did not tell me. Luckily, I eventually saw a young couple walk towards a small opening at the side of the building. Before they could leave my sight, I rushed to them: "Do you know anything about a group called the Bridge Collective?," I inquired. The couple glanced at me and smiled, "Yeah, its back here." "Awesome!," I exclaimed; "Can you show me the way?" When we turned a corner around the building, I discovered a flyer for the meeting hanging on an exterior wall (Figure 2-1). After maneuvering around paint cans, a ladder, and an assortment of random household objects (Figure 2-2), we reached a small shaky staircase that led to the top floor. There was a group of about 10 people in dark jeans and t-shirts standing around conversing next to an old shabby couch in the loft. The space in which they mingled had a transient quality; it was hard to tell if it was under renovation or deconstruction. I felt like an outsider; I was the only one standing alone. But fortunately my asymmetrical haircut and black hoodie were appropriate for the occasion.

Within a few minutes, the Bridge leaders noticed me and I introduced myself as the persistent Pittsburgher who had been emailing them. I told them about my research on alternative churches and hardcore music but sensed that they were not yet comfortable telling me much about the group as evidenced by the fact that they were not talking much. So, I redirected the conversation to less invasive topics and asked them about the various arts and food markets in the Whitechapel/Shoreditch area and about their flat in Camden Town, a neighborhood that is notorious for its punk rock boutiques and music venues. After the meeting – which consisted of a lesson on forgiveness, a number of prayers, and songs sung in harmony – I stuck around and drank tea with a few of the participants. By the end of the night, I had established sufficient rapport: the Bridge leaders invited me to join them on their train ride to Brighton Beach for their

first baptism. Further evidence of our rapport was that they asked me to use their cameras to document the baptism. The video is posted on the group's website (see Figure 2-3).[11]

**Figure 2-3: "19 July 09: Beach Baptism Part II," The Bridge Collective at Brighton Beach**

My experiences studying The Bridge Collective shaped my participant observation template in three distinct ways (Appendix A). Firstly, I created probes about the physical boundaries of the event/group. For example, the observation template includes items like "What are the physical boundaries of the event/group?; Was the group/event difficult to find?" Secondly, I made probes about the social atmosphere of the event: "Are people socializing in cliques?; Who seems lonely or aloof? Do attendees seem friendly, relaxed, or standoffish?" Thirdly, I made probes about how participants convey religious beliefs and views. These include "What language do performers and group leaders use to describe the event/group (note that The Bridge calls their weekly Sunday gatherings a "meeting" not a "service")? Does the language

[11] For the full Bridge Collective video, go to: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GTzZ9leGfIE&list=PL43EBE81151844F1F

used signal religion?" Bridge members engaged religious beliefs in ordinary conversation. For example, when we were waiting to take the train to Brighton, one member talked about the trouble she was having with an entry exam for a Christian ministry program. She said if she failed, she needed to accept it because it was God's divine plan for her life.

Preliminary analysis of Taqwacore blogs and events also shaped my templates for data collection. In December of 2009, I observed (with IRB approval) *The Kominas* show in Cambridge, MA. After the show, I introduced myself to one young man, Billie, who I had noticed tagging along with *The Kominas* that night taking photographs. Over a beer, I told Billie about my research project and my interests in the Taqwacore movement. Billie met my inquiry with lots of skepticism, asking me about my religious views and proclaiming that his friends, *The Kominas*, are not interested in converting anyone. I soon noticed that James was testing me with his probes. I must have passed his test because, within an hour, he called a friend from the band pronouncing: "There's this grad student here who is really interested in what you are doing. I'm going to bring her with me to the pizza place." At this point, the hour was reaching 1:00 a.m. and everyone looked tired and hungry. So, I just ate my pizza, introduced myself, and told them I enjoyed the show – which I did – and said I wanted to talk with them in the near future.

One thing I learned from my experience in Cambridge with Taqwacores is that there is a time to talk about one's role as a researcher and there are times when ethnographers must try to mingle with the group. The pizza shop was an instance of the latter as my mingling proved worthwhile. Later, when I asked some of these participants for interviews, they obliged. A couple of interviewees commented that they appreciated the fact that I did not just ask a bunch of questions and leave. Instead, they pointed out, I tried to get to know them and participated in conversations. Another thing I learned from this experience in Cambridge was that Taqwacores

were ready to contest assumptions about religious music scenes as evidenced in James's proclamation that "I'm not religious and some of these guys aren't even religious." His disavowal of religious assumptions was not unique; Taqwacores and Hardcore Christians often talked about how they think outsiders perceive them and their respective religion. Hence, when I designed my interview template, I created questions about outsiders' perceptions. I asked, "What is the most common misconception of Christian Hardcore/Taqwacore? How does that make you feel? What do you wish people knew about it?" (Appendix C)

I also pretested my interview research templates with punk artists and event organizers in Pittsburgh. For my Master's Thesis "I'm not sure how much this was about music': Networks, Locations, and Rituals of Identity in Pittsburgh's Grassroots Music and Arts Scene" (McDowell 2009), I explored how women and gender queer artists express feminist politics in a male dominated subculture. From this experience, I learned what kinds of questions are best suited for getting people to talk about what divides the music culture they engage. Asking participants a question like "What do people disagree about in this music?," is not good. Participants of subcultural communities are generally suspicious of outsiders and this question makes it look as though the interviewer is just that, an outsider. For this reason, participant observations were an important first step in this research. From observations, I was able to gauge what issues may be divisive in this music culture. As an example, I noticed early on that some Christian Hardcore bands preach about Jesus from stage and that others do not mention Jesus at all. When I interviewed Christian performers and audience members, I told them about a preaching band I had observed and asked them what they thought about the band. Some of my strongest data on beliefs, practices, and internal conflicts come from this simple question. Likewise, before I interviewed Taqwacores, I noted online debates about the label "Muslim punk." Some used the

label and others said they hated it. When I interviewed Taqwacores, I asked them what the label means, whether or not they use it, and why they think some people detest this label.

### 2.1.3 Research Triangulation

I triangulate my methods to check insights gleaned from participant observation, mini-surveys, intensive individual and group interviews, and artifacts (Taylor and Bogdan 1998; for examples see Blee 2002; Gamson 1998; Taylor and Rupp 2003). These different sources of data are described below.

**Table 2-1: Description of Data**

| | Christian Hardcore | Taqwacore | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Observations hours** | 300 | 65 | 365 |
| **Mini-Surveys** | 20 | 10 | 30 |
| **One-on-One Interviews** | 23 | 20 | 43 |
| **Group Interviews** | 5 | 0 | 5 |
| **Artifacts** | | | |
| ▪ ***Albums*** | 25 | 7 | 32 |
| ▪ ***Books and Films*** | 0 | 4 | 4 |
| ▪ ***Images*** | 80 | 50 | 120 |
| ▪ ***Media coverage*** | 23 | 38 | 61 |
| ▪ ***Webzine*** | 0 | 1 | 1 |

#### 2.1.3.1 Participant Observation

I spent time with Hardcore Christians and Taqwacores to "see how they respond to events as they happen" and I experienced "these events and the circumstances that give rise to them" (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 1995: 2). Participant observation allowed me to establish familiarity with Christian Hardcore and Taqwacore, get to know members, and understand group boundaries (Emerson et al. 1995; Jorgensen 1989). I was not "immersed" in these groups in the traditional anthropological sense but studied a community that comes together in different places and at different times (Crang and Cook 2007). I had intensive introductions with participants but never became part of these groups.

Ethnographers use participant observations to become subjectively and personally involved with the phenomena they study (Jorgensen 1989). One way that I got involved in Christian Hardcore and Taqwacore punk was by listening to its music. I listened to it on the bus, on walks, on runs, and at home.[12] I also listened to it live. More concerned with 'feeling *it*' ─ the *it* being the loud, throbbing music ─ than hearing loss, I observed my first punk show (for this project) up-close, near the stage. My ears rang the next day – without a doubt, I was still feeling *it*. That morning, I decided to follow the advice of a committee member and buy a pair of earplugs. For the next show, I wore earplugs for almost an entire song before plucking them from my ears. I did not like that the sound was muffled; I felt like the earplugs were getting in the way of my experience. I never wore earplugs to a show again. To study the social worlds of Christian Hardcore and Taqwacore punks, I listened to their music at full volume, even if it lasted well into the next morning.

[12] As an example of just how involved with the music I became, for more than a month, I listened to "Portraits" by *For Today*. For another month, I listened to "Wild Nights in Guantanamo Bay" by *The Kominas* almost daily.

In total, I spent 365 hours in the field collecting participant observation data. Due to the sheer magnitude of Christian Hardcore music, I observed many more Christian Hardcore shows than Taqwacore. I spent approximately 300 hours observing live Christian Hardcore shows in secular bars and nightclubs, and at Christian punk events such as conferences and festivals, and at affiliate church services, such as those held at Hot Metal, an emerging church that supports local Christian punk bands in Pittsburgh. The Cornerstone Christian rock festival, which I attended twice, was the most time-intensive observation I performed. I attended Cornerstone twice, both times for 3 nights and 4 days. Cornerstone was a data goldmine. By midafternoon, the festival grounds were overcome with hardcore music. Unable to see all of them, I attended the shows that I heard the most buzz about, took note of popular band T-shirts, talked to vendors and band members, interacted with the young people who were advertising their band on cardboard signs (Figure 2-4), and, on occasion, joined attendees for breakfast and dinner. The days were long at the festival. I rose early and retired to my tent late. Every night I returned to my tent at about 12:00 a.m. and fell asleep to a band playing worship music in the distance.

**Figure 2-4: Cardboard signs are used to advertise music shows at Cornerstone**

**Figure 2-5: Live music show flyers cover the portable restrooms at Cornerstone**

Another time-intensive Christian Hardcore event was the weekend-long Unified Underground (UU) conference, which I observed in 2008 and 2010. At the conference, I conducted formal and informal interviews, watched live bands, participated in workshops and spiritual speaker sessions, and attended the Sunday morning service in the main auditorium of the Baptist church and the worship service that UU organizers held on Sunday afternoon. Although I spent a great deal of time at the UU conference and Cornerstone festival, I never felt fully immersed in the groups I studied. Participants were eager to do interviews, but they did not invite me to join them outside of the public events I observed.

For Taqwacores, I spent approximately 65 hours collecting data face-to-face. Although the Taqwacore events were less frequent than the Christian Hardcore events, I got to know Taqwacores better. Taqwacores do not stop socializing when the show is over. They converse into the wee hours of the night and they generally make sure that everyone has the opportunity to

join them. One night after a show in Cambridge (Figure 2-6), about eight different people waited on *The Kominas* and *Sunny Ali & The Kid* to load up their gear so that we could all go 'party' afterwards. We sat outside of the Middle East venue for over an hour, just talking. By the time everyone was ready to leave, it was too late to buy alcohol for the party. But no one seemed the least bit perturbed. Instead, the group focused on assigning each person to a car headed to the suburbs and encouraged everyone to come out to the party. I got a ride with a second generation Indian American woman, a young white college guy, and a member of *The Kominas*. Most of us did not know one another; we had just met for the first time or only once before. When we arrived to the party in a nice suburban home outside of Boston, one person passed around a bag of McDonalds French fries, another offered homemade curry, and the host handed out ice cream sandwiches. By the time I got a ride back to my hotel, it was 5:00 in the morning. I had spent the entire night talking to different people about Taqwacore, a few of whom had attended their very first punk show earlier that evening and loved it.

**Figure 2-6: Show flyer for Taqwacore show at the Middle East Nightclub, Cambridge, MA**

I followed Christian Hardcore and Taqwacore bands concurrently, studying live shows in the same time frames, especially in the summer months when bands typically tour.[13] To save money, I observed events in the Midwest and along the East Coast of the United States, where most Taqwacore and Christian Hardcore events take place. On two separate occasions, I was at a Taqwacore show one night in one city and at a Christian Hardcore show the very next night in another city. Most of my participant observation of music shows took place in the spring, summer and fall of 2010 and the spring and summer of 2011 but I also attended live Christian Hardcore shows in Pittsburgh as late as 2012. I collected participant observation on the physical and social boundaries of the event space; the visuals aspects (signs, images, videos) of the setting; and how performers talked or did not talk about religious, political or social issues (Appendix A). Additionally, I noted the differences and similarities between religious and non-religious punk performers as well as surprises and/or conflicts that occurred during the performance. When I returned from the field site, I filled out my participant observation template in thematic order (e.g. description of event; visuals; performers; performances; audience) and wrote up a preliminary analysis of my field notes.

Considering that the people I observed were wary of outsiders, I had to be careful about how I took notes in the field. I generally used my cell phone note pad, which has the appearance of text messaging, to type short notes and direct quotes. Typing notes on my cell phone allowed me to both record a lot of rich data and look like everyone else who kills time on their phone. In some instances, I used a paper notepad. I typically used a notepad when I was in the presence of a show promoter or venue owner as I realized these individuals were more willing to talk to me if

[13] The average cost of a Christian Hardcore show was $15 (but some were donation only), while the cost of a Taqwacore show was around $8.

I appeared as though I was doing research. In addition to taking notes on site with my cell phone and a note pad, I regularly recorded small videos of performances with a digital camera and took pictures of performers, the music venue, and the merchandise (such as a wall of T-shirts for sale). For this research, carrying a camera allowed me to "mingle in with the crowd, rather than stand out from it" (Crang and Cook 2007: 107). The videos and photographs were particularly helpful when I conducted a preliminary analysis of the event after returning from the field site. Videos proved to be an irreplaceable source of data; I reviewed the videos several times and discovered things that escaped my attention in previous viewings (Crang and Cook 2007).

#### 2.1.3.2 Mini-Survey

When I started this project, I attempted to conduct mini-surveys of audience members and performers (Appendix B). The idea was to first screen people for age, making sure that all participants were 18 years or older, and then ask them a few yes/no questions. However, people were generally unfriendly to me when I asked them to answer "a few short questions." Therefore, I dropped the script (see Appendix B for Introductory Script) and approached people more informally, asking them questions like "What band is on next?" or "What bands have already played?" Usually the responses opened up the conversation in a way that allowed me to tell them about the project. From that point, I got to ask them a "few short questions" without making it sound so official. I usually ended up talking to a few people for a long period of time as they got interested in learning more about the project. During the course of our conversation, I asked each respondent what drew them to the show, if they thought any of the bands were religious, and what they thought about religion in this music.

#### 2.1.3.3 Interviews and Interviewees

I conducted intensive interviews with Christian Hardcore (N = 28) and Taqwacore (N = 20) members (Appendix C). Most interviewees (from both groups) were between the ages of 21 – 35 years of age but a handful were in their early 40s. There were notable educational differences between the two groups. Many Taqwacore interviewees held college degrees and about half of them were pursuing graduate degrees at the time of the study. The Christian Hardcore youth I interviewed typically had not graduated from college. The ones who were planning an advanced education were looking into ministry, and there were several people that I met who planned to do missions in South America and Africa before considering college.

Semi-structured interviews allowed me to explore the "loosely organized, short-lived or thinly documented" (Blee and Taylor 2002: 93) aspects of religious punk that are difficult to study through structured questionnaires. I chose this method because 1) "themes and categories of analysis are generated from the response" of participants (Blee and Taylor 2002: 93); 2) responses could be analyzed in the "context of wider social understandings and discourses" (Blee and Taylor 2002: 94); 3) participants have an opportunity to talk about their social world and direct the interviewing process; and 4) semi-structured interviews allowed me to evaluate how the group identity was challenged or embraced by those involved.

One-on-one interviews questions were designed to ascertain how (religious and non-religious) Christian Hardcore and Taqwacore youth distinguish themselves from other punks and from traditional religious institutions. In these semi-structured interviews, I loosely guided the participant through the conversation but was mindful to ask for elaboration and clarification of responses (Babbie 2005). These interviews gave me the opportunity to inquire about an individual's level of involvement, when and how they got involved, and their religious, social,

and political beliefs. I encouraged participants to pose additional topics and they often did. For example, during one interview, when I asked a Taqwacore if there was anything that he thought we should cover but hadn't, he explained that the Patriot Act impacted his family – there was suspicion that his home phone was being tapped without reason.

I selected Christian Hardcore and Taqwacore interviewees using snowball and purposive sampling. Purposive sampling requires the researcher to identify people to be interviewed (Babbie 2005). For example, I identified key players in Christian Hardcore by cross-referencing the Unified Underground conference website and the webpages of bands. I contacted central figures in each of the groups such as members of a *Hope for the Rejected* ministry branch and the director of a Taqwacore film. Snowball sampling involves building rapport with one person or a small number of people and asking them to introduce me to others (Taylor and Bogdan 1998). I asked each interviewee to introduce me to another religious punk and/or a non-member, a punk who was not part of these groups but had knowledge of religious punk or a religious leader (such as a church pastor) who supported religious punk but was not involved in punk (Appendix D). While doing this research, I realized the differences between religious and non-religious punk can be difficult to discern. For example, I interviewed a man who was adamant that he was agnostic but bragged that the band he played in, which sings about Christ and repentance, had a lot of "depth." Another man that I interviewed, Jeremy, worked at an all-ages venue and set up shows for touring Christian Hardcore bands. A member of *Hope for the Rejected* recommended that I interview Jeremy because he was someone who supported the music but was not Christian. Through interviews with non-religious punks, I was able to learn more about the values of underground music culture which was important to understanding how these values shape Christian Hardcore and Taqwacore beliefs and practices.

On several occasions, I had the opportunity to interview Christian Hardcore youth in pre-existing groups (Appendix E).[14] For instance, I sat down with a group of three friends at UU and with their permission, recorded the conversation; at that same UU conference, I recorded a group of six people talking outside while smoking cigars; and I interviewed an entire band in their tour van. I also recorded people in pairs – usually married Christian couples. Interviewing already existing groups and couples gave me the opportunity to understand how issues are "normally" talked about while also giving me insight as to what issues and interpretations are contested within the group (Crang and Cook 2007). Realizing that the group conversations take on a different dynamic than one-on-one interviews, I allowed these to be more open-ended than the one-on-one interviews (Taylor and Bogdan 1998). Often times, I spearheaded the discussion by asking the participants to say how they all met, what they had in common, and what they think punk is about. From there, I let the conversation unfold in the direction participants took it, but returned to foundational questions about religion and music.

To establish rapport, my interview template addressed a range of issues but was short enough to be interview friendly (Crang and Cook 2007). One-on-one and group interviews lasted on average about 1 ½ hour each. I followed up a handful of the formal interviews with informal conversation and inquiry, either by phone or by email. Interviews with Christian Hardcore interviews took place in the basement of live music venues, in a tour van, at a coffee shop, a restaurant, at bars, and in a quiet space at the UU conference; one was done via email and two via Skype. Most of the Taqwacore interviews were done over Skype (N = 12); there were 4 over the phone and 4 done in person. None of the Taqwacore interviews were done in pairs or as a

[14] I did not conduct any group interviews with Taqwacores.

group. Before starting the interview, I told each participant that I was recording the interview anonymously and that it would be a conversation, not a question and answer session.

#### 2.1.3.4 Artifacts

Since Christian Hardcore and Taqwacore are organized around artistic expression, social artifacts were important data for this research. Social artifacts are "any product of social beings or their behavior" (Babbie 2005: 99) such as the albums, books, films, album reviews, music show reviews, public interviews, and images that I collected for this project (Appendix F)

In total, I purchased 25 Christian Hardcore albums and 7 Taqwacore albums. I primarily collected albums (and reviews of the albums) of groups that I observed in the field but also purposively selected some albums based on active websites and word-of-mouth recommendations. For Taqwacore, there were less than 10 Taqwacore bands listed on the Taqwa webzine and I was able to acquire songs or albums from these bands (depending on what they had; some Taqwacore artists do not have albums). It was with Christian Hardcore that I had to be more selective in purchasing albums; there are many Christian bands and even more that blur the boundaries of underground and mainstream punk rock. I acquired a few free promotional CDs at Christian Hardcore shows, most of which I received at the Cornerstone festival. I also downloaded free mp3 files from websites and purchased singles from Itunes. Books and films were a major source of a data for Taqwacore but not Christian Hardcore. These included *The Taqwacores* novel by Michael Muhammad Knight (2004); *The Taqwacores: Muslim Punk in the USA* photo book by Kim Badawi (2009); *The Taqwacores* (2009) film by Eyad Zahra (which is based on the novel by Knight); and the documentary film *Taqwacore: The Birth of Punk Islam* (2009), directed by Omar Majeed. Social networking websites were another important source of data for Taqwacore. I collected data on the Taqwacore webzine, an online forum that is

exclusively authored by Taqwacores but can be read by anyone who visits the website. The Taqwacore webzine, which acts as a discussion forum for political, social and religious issues, was active and provided socially isolated punk Muslims (i.e. those living in cities and towns where there are few or no other punk Muslims) with a supportive venue to exchange ideas with like-minded individuals. On the webzine, Taqwacore self-publish articles, album and film reviews, and they post news stories and music videos for readers to view and comment on. Taqwacore Webzine articles include, "Obama's Wooing them Moslems"; and "Redefining Punk My Way."

Album and music show reviews as well as publicly available interviews (print, podcast, and video) with Christian Hardcore (N = 23) and Taqwacore punks (N =38) were significant sources of data. Mainstream media coverage on the Taqwacore scene is more extensive than on the Christian Hardcore scene, likely due to their religious status in the United States. Whereas Taqwacore's interpretations of Islam are magnified and interrogated in a post 9/11 U.S. social context, the presence of Christian Hardcore in punk culture, with its Christian ethos and majority white membership, is less visible, but, ironically more prevalent in punk and metal. Also, media coverage of Taqwacore was extensive because it was a new music movement and because of the wealth of publicity about its two movies and novel. Most of the publicly available interviews that I collected were with band members, such as the *Issue Oriented* podcast interview with Taqwacore band, *The Kominas,*[15] and *HXC Christian.com* interview with *Sleeping Giant*, a Christian Hardcore band.[16] These interviews were valuable as they point to the issues punk scene

[15] *Issue Oriented* is a podcast and website for interviews with punk, hardcore, indie and metal bands. I retrieved *The Kominas* interview on October 20, 2009. For the interview, go to: http://www.issueoriented.com/news/episode-48-now-playing-the-kominas/

[16] *HXC Christian.com* is a Christian Hardcore, Ska, Punk, Oi! music blog and forum. I retrieved the *Sleeping Giant* interview on March 25, 2010. For the interview go to: http://hxcchristian.com/171/sleeping-giant-is-awakened

members care about as well as shed light on the ways Taqwacores and Hardcore Christians talk about themselves in public media forums.

**Figure 2-7: *Al-Thawra* "Edifice" CD release show**

Over the course of 2 years, I collected over 120 images which consisted of flyers, promotional posters, and band merchandise such as stickers, magazines and buttons (Taqwacore N = 50; Christian Hardcore N = 80). Once I identified a music show for participant observation, I collected flyers and promotional posters that advertised the event). For example, Pittsburgh's Christian Hardcore band *The Last Hope* posted 11x14 posters (Figure 2-7) in numerous Pittsburgh neighborhoods and businesses to advertise their "Manifesto" CD release party/music show in December 2009; I found the poster in an Italian grocery store, a laundromat, and on the

window of a record store. In addition to obtaining physical copies of flyers and promotional posters, I also downloaded images and event flyers from the Myspace and Facebook pages of Christian Hardcore and Taqwacore bands, such as the flyer for *Al-Thawra's* "Edifice" CD release show in Chicago (Figure 2-8).

### 2.1.4 Data Analysis

All data was coded inductively and deductively, keeping the Christian Hardcore and Taqwacore files separate, using NVivo 8 qualitative software. The coding proceeded in three different phases: open, closed, and focused coding. To create open codes, or what NVivo 8 calls "free nodes," I read artifactual materials, participant observation notes, and interview transcripts "line-by-line to identify and formulate any and all ideas, themes, or issues they suggest, no matter how varied and disparate" (Emerson et al. 1995: 143). In the process of open coding, I did not use pre-established (deductive) categories to read fieldnotes. Instead, I created codes for events and themes "that could themselves become the basis of categorization" (Emerson et al. 1995: 152). At this stage, I generated as many codes as possible regardless of their theoretical relevance or connections between them.

Listening to and coding the music was a vital first step in open coding. As I listened to the music, I looked for major lyrical and artistic themes. I examined how the bands express religious and political values; and how they link or separate themselves from other punk/metal bands. The images of Christian Hardcore and Taqwacore I collected were also used to create codes. I made full color copies of the images and created separate image binders for Christian Hardcore and Taqwacore. I examined each binder separately – complete with all the images –

and took note of the themes (violence, war) and colors (dark and haunting or playful and bright) of the artifacts as a whole. Once I had identified a dominant theme between the images, I compared my notes for each group, noting the similarities and differences between the groups. Then, I developed open codes in Nvivo that corresponded to the themes in the images. For example, from my preliminary analysis of these, I created an open code called "violence." Later, after reviewing the literate on punk subcultures, I made an addendum to this code by creating a focused code called "aggression." Lastly, after coding my participant observation and interview data, I made a focused code called "warriors" and another called "terrorists."

As I created open codes for interview and participant observation data, I wrote an analytical memo that explained the code. For example, I created an "assumption" code from a band member interview. In my memo, I explained why I coded this text "assumption" and then used my participant observation notes to explain how I think "assumptions" about the audience bear on the band's live performance. Next, I produced closed, deductive codes using my review of the research literature. I re-read all data to find examples of these deductive codes. After exhausting the possibilities of open and closed coding, I reviewed my codes and memos to select themes for focused coding. I made focused codes by connecting analytically significant themes together and by "delineating subthemes and sup-topics that distinguish differences and variations within the broader topic" (Emerson et al. 1995: 160). The "tree nodes" function in NVivo 8 allowed me to connect my focused codes in a hierarchical order, with broader themes such as "gender" at the top of the tree and subthemes such as "masculinity" and "aggression" as the smaller, supporting branches. I structured my trees in NVivo 8 by: 1) organizing trees based on conceptual relationships; 2) using a separate node for each element (who, what, how, when) of what the text is about; 3) encompassing only one concept in each node; 4) coding a particular

passage of text at multiple nodes; and 5) being flexible with the arrangement of the tree (Bazeley 2007: 105). Once I hierarchically arranged my tree nodes, I printed them out, read them over and over again, and wrote and revised my analyses.

### 2.1.5 Research Ethics

This research was approved in advance by the University of Pittsburgh's Institutional Review Board. I collected all data for this project and informed each voluntary participant of her/his right to refuse answering any questions and right to stop the interview at any time. I conducted interviews in both public spaces like a music venue and in private spaces like Skype per the request of my research respondents. Once participants were recruited, they were contacted by phone or email (their preference) to set up the day and time of interview. Interviewees were only interviewed once (exempt) which means no names or identifying codes were recorded. All data was kept in my possession and not accessible to anyone else. Appendix G lists the introductory script I used for all interviews. Participant observations were conducted in public settings. On the occasion that I took part of more private events, I did not take videos or photographs and I only took notes on conversations if I was given permission by those present.

### 2.1.6 Reflexivity and Rapport

Realizing that researchers bring "characteristics, a history, a gender, class, race, and social attributes" into the research setting (Olesen 2003: 350), I am reflexive about my standpoint as a white woman in my 30s who advocates leftist politics, is not religious, has a past with punk rock music, and participated in evangelical churches as a child and teenager. It was in the late-80s to

early 1990s that I spent all my free time going on youth group retreats and attending youth worship services. I was a believer, as much as one can be at age 12, when I asked my parents if I could be baptized in the "Holy Spirit" and become Born Again. In the Southern communities I lived, participating in church was one of the only viable options for socializing but I was not hostile to this arrangement, it was all I knew. When my family moved to Florida in 1993, I stopped going to church and a year later attended my first punk rock show. In many respects, punk shows were my new church, complete with a different set of beliefs and moral philosophy. Within a matter of years, my family opened up a tiny independent record store with a $2,000 budget. For three years I ran the record store (my parents had 'real' jobs), ordered all merchandise, and traveled to different cities buying and selling rare punk albums at record conventions. Do-it-yourself punk, particularly hardcore and indie-rock, was my specialty. A hardcore enthusiast rented the back of the store and held all-ages punk shows there. Ironically, the show that got us kicked out of our rented space was an *Earth Crisis* show, a Straight-Edge hardcore band (admired by many Christian Hardcore youth), which provoked some non-straight edge punks to spray paint vulgarities on the bank building, which our landlord owned. *Earth Crisis* had a reputation for making people mad as there were rumors that they beat people up for smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol at their shows.

The knowledge I gained of DIY punk and its ethos during those years is integral to my research on religious hardcore music scenes. My familiarity with its roots and different political branches helped me establish rapport with the groups I studied. Punks are notorious for testing others on their knowledge of punk music or an album's rarity as this is a way to determine whether or not someone is a 'real' punk or just wearing the outfit (Force 2009). If I did not know the band that they were talking about – which often happened as I have not been involved in

punk music as of late – I was able to bring up another obscure band so as to recover creditability. Often times, Hardcore Christians asked me about my familiarity with older Christian metal and punk bands, none of which I knew anything about. This may have been a way for them to gauge how I identified with the Christian faith. Nonetheless, my familiarity with evangelicalism and white skin did help me establish rapport with Christian Hardcore youth. For Taqwacores, my graduate degree in sociology and advocacy of the anti-war and anti-racist work that Taqwacores do helped me gain their trust in spite of lack of personal connection to Islam or experiences of racial or religious discrimination that so many Taqwacores describe.

Social scientists commonly argue that ethnographic research is bound to change the trajectory of the research just as it can change the researcher. Mike Crang and Ian Cook (2007: 42) explain that 1) taking on the role of researcher means that we sometimes act a bit odd when we enter the field as we are not used to hanging around with strangers and watching what they are doing; 2) meeting new people whom we otherwise would not meet has profound effects on researchers and 3) researchers need to "get on with the people they are working with in a personal, everyday sense." During my field work, I adopted a role that meshes with the values and behaviors of the groups I studied, but I did not compromise my own values and behavior (Crang and Cook 2007). I did not invent an identity or falsify information. On the two occasions that I got asked whether or not I am religious, I simply said "no" and carried on.

## 3.0 HARDCORE PIETY: "IT'S ABOUT MAKING RELIGION YOUR OWN"

U.S. youth are seeking a religious experience that feels "right" to them (Wuthnow 2007) and some of these youth leave traditional religious establishments because they think religious establishments are hollow and oppressive. Indeed, scholars show that young people are more apt to identify as "spiritual but not religious" than previous generations because they think of religious people as "hypocritical, judgmental or insincere" (Putnam and Campbell 2010: 131 see also Chaves 2011; Hout and Fischer 2002). Robert Bellah's (1985) interviewee, Sheila, epitomizes the reluctance of young North Americans to practice religion within institutions. She does not need church, she has "Sheilaism," – the voice insider her head that tells her what is right and wrong.[17] Shelia explains it like this (Bellah 1986: Retrieved 11-07-2012 http://www.robertbellah.com/lectures_5.htm): "I believe in God. I am not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice." For Sheila, and a growing number of Americans, a connection to the sacred is essentially a private matter.

Christian Hardcore and Muslim Taqwacore youth are part of this move away from religious institutions, but unlike their more individualistic contemporaries, they adapt the

[17] Scholars argue that religious individualism is growing in the U.S. because young people have to move around in pursuit of careers (Wuthnow 2007). Oftentimes, they end up moving away from the congregations they attended as children, and once they stop going to church, might not ever return. Nonetheless, surveys consistently show that while congregational attendance is slowly declining, the number of people who believe in God, heaven and hell, remains relatively stable (Chaves 2011).

principles of do-it-yourself hardcore punk to make religion their own and they modify punk to argue that they have a place in their respective religions but not in traditional religious institutions. To understand how they do this, I first show how both groups use punk to formulate non-institutionalized religious beliefs. Then, I show that both groups generate collective practices by defining who they are up against.

## 3.1 BELIEFS

Christian Hardcore and Muslim Taqwacore both believe that their religion thrives off of punk because punk culture values individualism, encourages unconventional thinking, and resists authority. Both groups argue that punk makes them authentic in their respective religion because punk challenges them to question religious conventions. For this reason, I give special attention to *authenticity* in this section on beliefs as it is the biggest issue that Christian Hardcore and Taqwacore youth raise when they speak about their unconventional beliefs and practices. As Christian Hardcore youth see it, Jesus Christ was a 'hardcore' punk because 'He' spoke out against religious institutions and socialized with social outcasts.[18] In effect, many Christian Hardcore youth believe that God commands them to be punk not only because 'He' wants them to make the gospel "relevant" to other social nonconformists, but also because the rebellious nature of punk will make them more authentic Christians. From this point of view, they are more authentic about evangelicalism than Christians in the "mainstream" church because they look to Jesus, not church authorities, for direction in secular subcultures. Similar to the Christian

[18] Christian punks' claim that Jesus was a nonconforming rebel reflects the sentiments of the 'Jesus Freaks' who started Christian rock bands in the 1970s (Luhr 2009; Stowe 2011).

Hardcore youth who claim that the mainstream church hinders a personal bond with Jesus, Taqwacores argue that conventional religious institutions and leaders disrupt an individual's connection to Islam, which they conceptualize in spiritual as well as cultural and political terms. Unlike Christian punks, Taqwacores also appreciate punk because it challenges them to break from traditional beliefs as well as from religious institutions.

### 3.1.1 Christian Hardcore Beliefs

Christian punks believe Christ personally "called" them to be punk. The Christian "calling" is an age-old Protestant concept that was introduced in the teachings of the reformer Martin Luther. Luther believed that each individual has a God-appointed task that s/he must fill in everyday life. Max Weber (1930: 41) argues that the Protestant calling "was one of the most important results of the Reformation" because it morally justified this-worldly activity. To justify their loyalty to punk culture, a culture not oriented towards Jesus, these youth say that God is actually responsible for their punk rock leanings. They do not attribute punk friends they made during their young adult years or their attraction to punk music and style to personal choice or social environment, but, instead, to God. [19]

Craig, a Christian punk musician, employed the Protestant idea of calling to read spiritual significance into his subcultural style. While smoking a cigar outside with friends outside of the Unified Underground (UU) conference, Craig said he liked tattoos because God wants him to have tattoos, not because body art is hip or subversive. He claimed, "If God told me to cut my

[19] Similarly, David Smilde (2007) shows that the Venezuelan evangelicals he studies believe that they are no longer involved in crime or do drugs and alcohol because God intervened in their lives and made them stop, not because of what transpired socially: they started to spend time with a community of Christians who are sober. His research subjects regard the personal changes wrought by their newfound Christian community to be an act of God.

hair and cover my arms [because they are covered in tattoos] and minister to lawyers, I would do that. With him I can do that. But right now…the way that I dress, I feel comfortable." Craig thinks he is most "comfortable" as a punk because God made him that way so that he can befriend non-Christians in defiant subcultures. Expressing himself as punk is proof that God is working in and through his life.

The conversion narrative of Pastor Cleetus, leader of Deliverance Bible Church, the Nation of the Underground ministry school and a UU spiritual speaker, exemplifies how subcultural Christians see punk and Christianity as mutually reinforcing. On TLC's (The Learning Channel) *Miami Ink* television show, Cleetus stated,

> After I was born again I was standing outside of a punk show and all these kids, thousands of kids, were going in and out. And I just keep watching them and I heard the voice of the Lord speak right to me and He [God] says, "These are sheep without a shepherd." And He says: "I want you to start a church."

Once he became "born again," Cleetus said his body and behavior changed: he started covering himself with "spirit filled" tattoos (tattoos of Christian symbols and ideas) and attending live music shows where he passed out flyers for his new punk rock church. As a guest on *Miami Ink*, Cleetus got a blue Jesus tattoo on his leg, which he referenced to initiate a conversation about Christ with the show's tattoo artist. Getting tattooed, he explained is evangelical practice: "When most people see me at first, they are kind of shocked at the tattoos but then it opens up this doorway. People will stare at me and then I'll say, 'Well, what you are staring at?' and that lets me have a conversation. It lets me actually be bold with my witness." Cleetus, like many other subcultural Christians, argued that bodily ornamentation, in the form of piercings and tattoos, is a

radical act of ministry. According to Cleetus, his tattooed body is “bold” because it is a physical representation of countercultural Christianity which he uses to talk to other countercultural individuals about Jesus. And for him, the dialogue that his body affords is essential to letting non-Christians know that not all Christians are stuffy, old-fashioned conformists. Covering oneself in spirit filled tattoos is qualitatively different from wearing a cross necklace or t-shirt with a Christian emblem on it. Tattoos are affiliated with deviant subcultures and criminals and cannot be removed. When a young person gets a ‘spirit-filled’ tattoo, they symbolically mark a permanent commitment to Christ, the subculture at large, and other subcultural Christians.

It is tempting to conclude that Christian punks are no different than other evangelicals who “appropriate” (Flory and Miller 2008) a variety of cultural settings to deliver a Christian message to different kinds of people. Certainly, the participants’ so-called subversive evangelical goal – saving subcultural youth – echoes the mission statements of organizations like Youth for Christ (YFC). Since its inception in the late 1940s, YFC’s “Anchored to the Rock, Geared to the Times” slogan has not changed; the rock refers to a belief in Jesus Christ and the times is the “different cultural settings” the YFC engages to spread the gospel. Reverend Billy Graham, the man who started YFC, “was more interested in effectively teaching the basic Gospel to America than in policing strict standards of doctrinal and associational purity” (Smith 1998: 12). Billy Graham’s “engaged orthodoxy” (Smith 1998) is still very much alive in mainstream evangelical circles today. Indeed, understanding how Protestant evangelicalism thrives in an expanding spiritual marketplace has been the subject of recent books on American religion (see Flory and Miller 2008; Lee and Sinitiere 2009). Richard Flory and Donald Miller (2008) argue that evangelical congregations flourish in U.S. consumer society precisely because they are good at using popular culture in their worship services and Biblical teachings. Through this medium,

they make it “cool” for the baby-boomer and post baby-boomer generations to be Christian.

Yet Christian punks do not merely seek to appropriate punk rock (Flory and Miller 2008) to make Christianity “cool” or to turn culture in a Christian direction. Rather, they see punk as essential to their Christian concept of self. From their point of view, God willed them to be punk and therefore punk rock is not a culture that they simply exploit or put on. Punk is an inherent aspect of their self and their Christianity; they could not be fully actualized Christians without it.

#### 3.1.1.1 Authenticity

Christian Hardcore youth believe that punk makes them better Christians by daring them to be “authentic” about evangelicalism. During private interviews, group conversations, and at ministry gatherings, they suggest that punks have something to offer all Christians. In an interview with me at UU, Paul, a hardcore musician, explains how punks help him be the Christian that Christ called him to be:

> Some of our best friends in the hardcore scene were completely opposite of what we believed. But we loved on them the way that Christ would love on them and we built a friendship [and] to this day they might not believe what we believe but we still love them like Christ. We’re still close friends with them. We’ll still talk to them on the regular and they respect where we stand because they saw that we lived out what we meant. You know, what we said we believed on stage, we practiced off stage.

According to Paul, an authentic Christian strives to be like Jesus, which means that they must witness to people even when they do not see immediate results (i.e. conversions). When Paul says that his secular hardcore friends “saw that we lived out what we meant,” he says this to

prove that he is a genuine Christian, a person who puts love before judgment like Jesus did. Like Paul, other subcultural Christians say that they "love on" secular punks, which is another way of saying that they continue to care for nonbelievers, especially when they balk at the idea of accepting Christ as their personal savior, make fun of them for being Christian, or "backslide" into sin. In fact, rather than see hostility from the secular community as a deterrent, my interviewees indicate that it makes them feel closer to Christ, because like Jesus, they are "persecuted" for their beliefs.

Christian punks believe punk culture is good for them because it makes them accountable to Christ and Christ only. Interviewees complain that the church shelters youth from secular temptations. For example, youth groups offer a laundry list of dos and don'ts. They believe this is counterproductive to Christianity because it trains young people to rely on authorities, instead of themselves, to decipher what is right and what is wrong. If young people depend on youth group leaders, pastors, and parents for moral guidance, Christian punks claim they will never mature in their faith. This is because authority figures essentially obstruct their ability to take responsibility for their actions. Consider, for instance, what Jacob, a hardcore musician, told me.

> The church teaches kids how to be safe. Don't drink, it's dangerous. Don't have sex before you're married. Don't cuss. All these things that are like ─ those are bad but they don't have anything to do with Jesus. Like don't drink; Jesus drank. Someone died for you, and because of that, you get to live. But they don't tell young people that because they don't think they can handle it.

Jacob feels that the protectionist tendencies of the church are bad because these assume that young people cannot hear the voice of God on their own. Later in the interview with me, he goes so far as to say that the church doesn't "trust God" because "they don't believe Jesus can reveal

himself to these kids."  According to his logic, the church is mistaken to teach youth that obedience to rules, not piety, is central to faith. Jacob believes young people grow in their faith in God when they have their beliefs tested by non-Christian situations and people. That is why he thinks participating in secular hardcore culture will cultivate piety. The Christian youth who participate in punk culture look to God, not church authorities, for moral and spiritual direction.[20]

Through the lens of punk, Christian Hardcore youth say they can clearly see the established church for what it truly is: hypocritical, unjust, and insincere. Rob and Vicki, a married couple of "urban missionaries" from the U.S., used punk media to graphically illustrate why Christians should care about London's "underbelly" (Figure 3-1). To get support for this unusual ministry, they put together a polished, hand-screened zine titled "London Regenerates" (Schellert 2011). In it, Rob and Vicki tell (potential) ministry sponsors that, "We've put this into 'zine' format to give you a hands-on experience of how a lot of our friends here communicate through creative self-publication." The zine pairs a story about the forgiving love of Christ alongside snapshots of the alternative looking couple laughing and smiling together. In subsequent pages, Rob and Vicki pair images of graffiti and squatters with mission statements, hand-drawn hearts, and personal prayers. Through this amalgamation of imagery, they inform readers that God called them to befriend nonconformists, the ones who step out of the herd. The zine reads,

[20] The sentiment that a mystical connection to the Holy Spirit can be made individually has a long tradition in American Christianity. In the mid-1600s, Anne Hutchinson argued that she could hear the voice of God and interpret scripture without the help of Puritan ministers. In much the same way that Christian punk rocker Jacob argues that the church is mistaken to put more emphasis on appropriate actions than the voice of God, Hutchinson believed that the church was wrong to suggest that a person could earn their salvation through a "covenant of human efforts" because she believed that salvation came from a covenant of grace, an inward experience of the Holy Spirit (Hollinger and Capper 2006: 28).

> Many of the people we love to work with are considered the 'freaks' of society – expressing radical lifestyles and philosophies, oftentimes scorning the mainstream, and generally religion. Yet we know that Jesus embraces the marginalized, not because of their peculiarness, but because they're equally loved. Frequently the Bible even shows Jesus siding with those who are different because they've caught on to something that most of society hasn't: there's more to life than what advertisers and sometimes even religion leads us to believe.

**Figure 3-1: Jesus with black sheep, London Regenerates zine**

Next to the picture of Jesus holding the black sheep, the zine illustrates who the "freaks'" are: anarchists, squatters, activists, and alternative music subcultures. Notably, Rob and Vicki not only use the zine to teach the church about punk culture and raise money for their ministry, they also use it to credit the "freaks" for making them better Christians. As punk ministers, they have learned that it is Christ-like to challenge the status-quo (in this case, capitalist and religious institutions) and appreciate people "where they are," as Jesus Christ calls them to do. The image of Jesus with black sheep symbolizes the principles of Christian punk: Christians must embrace difference because Jesus created difference and asks Christians to 'love' those who do not, cannot or will not conform to the mainstream.

As this section on 'Christian Hardcore Beliefs' shows, Christian Hardcore youth use punk ideas about individualism to defy religious institutions and reconfigure traditional Protestant evangelical beliefs about the 'calling.' From their perspective, punk is a matter of God: God created them to be punk and 'He' looks out for them as punk. As they see it, punk makes them more authentic in their spirituality than church does because it pushes them to listen to God, not religious authorities for divine direction. In effect, they believe punk does not rip them away from God; it actually makes them more Christ-like.

### 3.1.2 Taqwacore Beliefs

Taqwacores believe that Muslims do not have a right to tell one another what they should believe or how they should articulate membership in the Muslim community. That is, they challenge the idea that some humans have a handle on the *correct* interpretation of myths (orthodoxy) and rituals (orthopraxy). Indeed, their unorthodox beliefs and praxis aligns well with the definition of *taqwa* – a term that refers to the great power and knowledge of God. Taqwacores insist that no single human being can know the 'Truth' of God or justifiably prescribe to others how they should relate to God. They charge that Islam is diverse and should be celebrated as such.

That Taqwacores insist that Muslims do not have a right to tell one another what they should believe or how they should express Islam is shown in a panel discussion about the Taqwacore documentary held at Bowdoin, a liberal arts college in New Brunswick, Maine. "Islam is a mosaic," charged Basim, the lead singer of *The Kominas*, as he peered out at a diverse group of undergraduates in a theater auditorium at the college. His remarks came at the close of Omar Majeed's documentary *Taqwacore: The Birth of Punk Islam*, a film that follows Taqwacore bands on their first U.S. tour and then trails Michael Muhammad Knight and

members of *The Kominas* to Pakistan where they put on a live punk rock show near the Badshahi Mosque (Royal Mosque) in Lahore. After the film, a panel consisting of Majeed, three of *The Kominas* band members, a sociology professor, and the editor of the campus paper opened the floor for questions and answers. There were about 20 college-aged students in attendance and a few faculty members, many of whom had heard about the movie in their sociology class, the campus newspaper, or from the colorful "Muslim Punk and Its Sociocultural Significance" posters that adorned the entryway of residential halls. Curious about Taqwacores' religious beliefs and their place in Islam, students mostly directed their questions to *The Kominas*. When one student wearing hijab asserted that "I'm curious about the ways you 'pick and choose' what is convenient or feels right spiritually…," a member of the band piped up to say, "I don't justify everything on the screen up there [referring to the documentary film], – We're not saying that what we are doing is right for everyone, or even [that] what I'm doing is the right way to do things." The panelists wanted to get their message across that, as Majeed put it, "Islam is not one thing and Muslims are not one thing."

The panelists' claim that people have to define what Islam means on an individual basis is a major theme of *The Taqwacores* novel. In a public interview on Q, a cultural affairs radio show that airs on CBC Radio One, the author of *The Taqwacores*, Michael Muhammad Knight, says the fantasy of the book is that it is "a mosque with no imam" (Ghomeshi 2009). Similarly, in the documentary film (Majeed 2009), Knight explains religion in the novel like this: "In this punk rock house, there's no authority and there's no structure and there's all these different kids with different interpretations of religion. There's no one to dictate what Islam means and therefore you yourself have to determine what Islam means." When news journalists ask Knight what inspired him to write the novel, he frequently comments on his peculiar identity as a white

Muslim, an identity that makes him feel like an outsider in most Muslim and most white social contexts. Knight talks about growing up in a Irish Catholic household with an abusive "white-supremacist" father, reading Malcolm X at the age of 15, and then moving to Pakistan when he was 17 after converting to Islam. Not unlike the Christian punks who talk about how punk rock changed their perception of church, Knight explains that when he returned to the U.S. for college, he socialized with punk rockers and started to question the Saudi Islam he had become acquainted with in Pakistan. Punk rock radicalized the way Knight looked at Islam. As he explains, punk "was an ideology that was completely antithetical to my religious experience ─ punk hailed individualism and non-conformity and being yourself in a very loud, unapologetic way" (Majeed 2009). These sentiments led a blogger for Racialicious, a weblog about the intersection of race and popular media, to describe Taqwacores' Islam like this: "Ultimately, they advocate that the ideas of imams are just that –ideas, and that the ultimate interpretation of Islam lies within the individual" (Peterson 2010).

The characters in the Taqwacore novel embody the mosaic metaphor as each expresses the diversity of Islam through personalized subcultural music genres and styles, ranging from Straight Edge Hardcore to Riot Grrrl punk. The story is told from the perspective of Yusef, a mild-mannered, well-groomed, college-aged man who majors in engineering because of his parents' wishes. Needing a place to stay while in college, Yusef searches for Muslim roommates and ends up in a Muslim punk house. Perhaps in an effort to drive home the point that Islam is big and diverse, Yusef, the novel's only conventional character, is the minority in the house in that he is not a punk rocker and abides by strict Islamic rules and beliefs.[21] In an independent

[21] For example, during one scene, Yusef attempts to leave the kitchen when Rabeya (the only woman who lives in the house) walks into the room. After Yusef asks her if there is anything halal to drink, he tells Rabeya that he needs to go study for school. Rabeya detects that Yusef wants to leave because he believes that unmarried men and women

film based on the novel (also called *The Taqwacores*), Umar, a broad-shouldered Straight Edge hardcore punk with X's on his hands,[22] answers the door and shows Yusef to his room. Yusef inquires: "Is everyone here Muslim?," to which Umar responds, "From a certain point of view." In that same opening scene, the camera moves from Qur'anic plaques and posters to the Saudi flag with a spray-painted anarchy-A, a symbol that in punk rock culture generally signifies nonconformist outlooks and antiestablishment politics. Yusef is caught off guard by the goings-on of the house – this is not what he had in mind when he sought out Muslim roommates. In one way or another, all of his housemates break conventional Islamic rules; they play loud music, have tattoos, dance, drink, smoke pot and/or participate in mixed gender prayers.

The novel stresses what the Bowdoin panelists insinuated: everyone has a right to interpret Islam in the way that s/he sees fit and that people must be open to new configurations of Islam within the context of transnational connections and commitments. Several of the panelists are second generation Pakistani immigrants who say that they do not feel comfortable in traditional environments, especially when they visit their extended families in Pakistan. At the same time, they do not always feel at home in the U.S., where they experience Islamophobia and racism. These experiences of alienation, as discussed in more detail later, lead them to think more deeply about their personal connection to Islam and be open to making it anew. Indeed, the novel ties an anti-authoritarian punk rock ethos to the core principle of Islam when it stresses that God is too grand for simple-minded humans to understand. Consequently, nobody can

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should not be alone together in the same room. She teases him about it and then magnifies her 'impurity' by telling him that she cannot attend the house prayer that evening because she is "ragging it" (menstruating).

[22] sXe or hXc is commonly used to reference the Straight Edge hardcore subculture. Many people in this scene get X's tattooed on their bodies to mark a commitment to a drug and alcohol free life. The idea for the 'X' on the hands, usually done with a thick black marker or tattooed, allegedly came from *Teen Idles*, a seminal hardcore band (two of the members later formed *Minor Threat*). The band was scheduled to play a live show in a nightclub but the management did not want to let them in because they were under the legal drinking age. Rather than cancel the show, the management made a compromise and marked a huge X on their hands to signify that they could not imbibe. The *Teen Idles* later used this symbol on their 1980 album cover for "Minor Disturbance" (Azerrad 2001).

legitimately tell another person how to be Muslim, nor can they define Islam for others. Consider how one of the lead characters, Jehangir, a mokawk-donning Muslim punk who drinks alcohol and has premarital sex among other 'deviant' acts, talks about Islam as he gives *khutbah* [a public sermon] before prayer (2004: 184):

> Islam is fuckin' surrender… Allah's arranging things beyond all our grasps. The earth isn't spinning because you told it to. Your intestines aren't digesting by your command. You're made up of a trillion cells that don't ask your permission before offering their rakats [established movements and words followed during prayer]. And we think submission's about applying a strict discipline to our worship? We think surrender's about not eating a pig? …Allah's too big and open for my deen [religion or code of life] to be small and closed. Does that make me a kafr [disbeliever]? I say Allahu Akbar [Allah is the greatest]. If that's not good enough, then fuck Islam, you can have it…Now let's pray.

Jehnagir problematizes the very notion of Islamic piety by indicating that surrendering or submitting to God is a way to adapt to the changing cultural dynamics in a global world. Since Allah is in control of transformation, not people, believing in Allah does not mean merely following rules set forth by Islamic scholars trained in sacred law. Rather, Allah represents big ideas of God consciousness and piety – the very definition of the term "taqwa." In contrast, Mullahs (religious leaders and teachers) present only one-dimensional interpretations of the Quran.

As the story progresses, Yusef starts to question both his preconceived notions of punk and his own Islamic practices and views. The novel opens with his retrospective reflection (Knight 2004: 7),

> I stopped trying to define Punk around the same time I stopped trying to define Islam. They aren't so far removed as you'd think. Both began in tremendous bursts of truth and vitality but seem to have lost something along the way…Both have suffered from sell-outs and hypocrites, but also from true believers whose devotion has crippled their creative drive. Both are viewed by outsiders as unified, cohesive communities when nothing can be further from the truth.

Yusef learns in this house that Islam, like punk, is a "flag, an open symbol, representing not *things*, but *ideas*" (Knight 2004: 7).

During an interview on Q (Ghomeshi 2009), Omar Majeed, the director of the Taqwacores documentary, says that young Muslims are drawn to the definition of Islam as an open symbol in Taqwacore. It helps them reconcile cultural worlds that might seem incongruous. He explains,

> If you're growing up in Western culture or in the globalized world that we live in and you just don't know how to make sense of, you know, simple things like loving rock music, or wanting to be a bit wild and young and impetuous, but still not feeling like you have to conform to your parents Islam but still wanting to feel some connection to that or defend it when its being thrown back at you in these very stereotypical and racist ways, you know. I feel like it's a way for young Muslims to have a voice and express their confusions.

Even though the novel gave the Taqwacore scene its name, my interviewees have conflicting opinions about the book. Some feel it reflects their spiritual journey, others that it allows them to merge their identity as Muslim and punk, still others that it generates space for "misfit" Muslims. In an interview with me, Saeed, a Taqwacore, clarifies this latter point. He says that Taqwacore is "a bigger idea than any of the people involved," yet when pushed to explain what that idea is,

Saeed does not give a direct answer. Instead, he talks about what it is like to be young and Muslim and "different" in Western countries as well as in Muslim countries, like Pakistan where he spent time as a teenager. He says, "Taqwacore is this thing. By naming something it gave space for all Muslims who kind of felt weird or felt that they were kind of misfit in some way to gather….and create together." Another one of my interviewees, Mouneer, says that "just because it didn't have a name until Michael wrote the book, I don't think it didn't exist." There were already punk Muslims; the novel just gave them a label within which to identify. During a private Gchat interview with me, Saima, a young punk rock woman who is culturally and politically Muslim, makes it clear that she is not religious and does not want to be associated with "Islam (the religion)" but says she "was really excited by the idea of a novel about Muslim punks in a squat house, cos Id [sic] never fucking seen anything like it before." Amina, another interviewee who is culturally and politically Muslim, distances herself from the religious overtones of the novel. Amina was "born into Islam" and never "really paid that much attention to the details." For her, the novel "had a lot of verses from the Quran," She describes the book as "very very Arabicized." Yet whether or not Taqwacores identify with the book, they all read personal, spiritual, or political significance into Islam, which is a key point of the novel.

#### 3.1.2.1 Authenticity

Like the Christian Hardcore youth who feel that authority figures get in the way of an authentic relationship with Christ, Taqwacores think the autonomous spirit of punk facilitates a more genuine connection to Islam. Zahira, a Taqwacore blogger, thinks it is best for people to make religion their own because it turns from a trivial rule book of dos and don'ts into something personally meaningful. In a private interview, she tells me that she feels Muslims are pressured from a lot of different groups – community, family, the media, and even white American culture

─ to do Islam in a specific way. This is problematic, she says, because "You're never allowed to really explore it to make it your own." Taqwacore, Zahira claims, gives her space for spiritual growth. In a matter of fact tone she asserts, "It's about making religion your own. It's about owning it, and about understanding that different people own religion in different ways and you can be respectful of that too."

In an article about the history of Muslim punk, Anthony Fiscella (2012) suggests that Taqwacore is characterized by religious individualism. He writes that Taqwacores believe that "Religion is whatever you want it to be, and no religious authority (scripture) can tell you otherwise" (Fiscella 2012: 277). Rather than look to religious authorities for guidance, Taqwacores use discussion boards, blogs, and news threads to argue that universalizing, orthodox interpretations of the Quran are not a matter of God but a matter of man-mad law. Take for instance an online conversation about the National Public Radio (NPR) podcast, "Taqwacore: The Real Muslim Punk Underground," a news story that provides a brief overview of the book and first U.S. tour (Crafts 2009). One respondent on its discussion board writes, "One of the basic principles of Islam is that a person can achieve peace in their soul only by submitting to the will of God. How can one claim to be a Muslim (literally, one who submits) by contorting the religion to fit their own desires? If someone really wants to please God, they must do it on God's terms." As a devout Muslim, this individual objects to the notion that Muslims can change Islam to fit their lifestyle rather than change their lives to fit Islam. To this post, another weighs in on the side of Taqwacore, arguing that dissimilar experiences and culture logically lead to different readings of the Quran. S/he asks, "How can everyone who has read the Quran all believe in the exact [same] interpretation? We all have different life experiences that reflect our views." S/he continues, "Individuals define God" and it is up to them to "interpret the meanings in the books

they follow." In a private interview with me, Sam, a Taqwacore interviewee from Australia, makes a similar remark about the Quran. She points out that institutionalized Islamic ideas and beliefs are antithetical to her sense of Islam: "For me it's not really the developments that man made from the original texts. In my belief, Islam doesn't have any ranking or hierarchies and I think that's quite essential in punk as well." Sam goes on, "Every single Muslim that I've met through this Taqwacore thing has a similar take on Islam, which is really rad[ical] because growing up in an Indonesian Muslim community you're expected to be one kind of Islam and everyone has that same Islam in their head. And it's like well, Islam is not one, Muslims are not one stream of people."

Like Christian punks, some Taqwacores think that the anti-authoritarian ethos of punk rock brings them closer to a higher power (i.e. God or "truth") as well as to this particular community of Muslims. Navid, a young man who plays a leading role in the fictional *Taqwacores* film (which is based on the novel), describes the scene as a necessary journey into "darkness," which he likens to spiritual inquiry. In an interview with me, he asserts, "You have to go through hell sometimes to see the light. The beauty about [Taqwacore] is that it's so punk, it's so raw and so in your face --- Punk --- stands up for itself." Navid says that when he first read the script for *The Taqwacores* it made him so angry that he threw the script across the room. It made him mad because it forced him to "consider what religion really stands for." Since playing the part in the film, he has redirected his anger from this controversial novel towards the people who follow a set of religious practices and beliefs because they think that is what they are supposed to do. Navid exclaims:

> That's not truth! That's not being honest! What that ends up doing is leading to a lot of very destructive behavior – you have extreme Christians, extreme Muslims,

> extreme Jews, who slaughter people with this mentality, you know what I mean? Because they think that this is right. The punk element almost shakes it up and says woah woah woah – wait a second! Go fuck yourself! Hey hey hey, what are you thinking about right now? How do you know it's true? No, no, no, stop for a second. Wait a minute! Wait a minute! You know what I mean? --- Punk shakes you up.

Navid thinks Taqwacore helps people find "truth" as it "takes these two forms [Islam and Punk] and collides these two forms, bringing them together, challenging the orthodoxy of both ─ you're smashing them together so that when the dust settles you can see what is really happening." By combining punk and Islam, Navid thinks Taqwacores are able to "see through the mist of obligation" and he believes obligation is dangerous because it leads not only to conformity, but also fosters extremism.

To some degree, Taqwacores' individualistic sentiments about religion echo Rhys Williams's (2011) second and third generation Muslim American informants. The youth Williams studies think that their Islam is more authentic than their parents' because they were not born in a society that expects or wants them to be Muslim. Rather, America is a place of religious "choice" and their freedom to choose Islam makes it all the more important to them. That is, they are more invested in Islam precisely because of the religious freedoms that the U.S. affords. Indeed, Williams's interviewees might agree with the spikey-haired, leather jacket donning Jehangir (Knight 2004: 72, 74) when he professes, "The United States can save Islam" because people have the "freedom to be whatever kind of Muslim they want." But the difference with Taqwacores is that they are not using religious freedom to make a claim on Islamic authenticity in the traditional sense. Instead, they use punk rock to celebrate the fact that in the U.S., Islam is "free, shapeless like water" which means they define Islam in ways that have little

to do with traditional religious beliefs or practices. In a public interview with the Chicago Sun Times, Marwan, the lead singer of *Al-Thawra*, speaks to authenticity like this: "It's infinitely more pious to be true to your heart, because that's where religion really lives." Marwan's idea that religion is located in hearts, not institutions, sits well with the spiritual turn in American society. But unlike most spiritual individualists, Marwan and other Taqwacores use punk music to find out the 'truth' of their hearts together.

This section reveals that Taqwacores adapt punk to argue that Islam is diverse and should not be expressed by Muslims in the same way. According to Taqwacores, punk not only pushes them to challenge proscriptions in traditional Islam, it nurtures an authentic connection to various aspects of Islam. In effect, Taqwacores believe punk rock does not pull them from the 'truth,' as some traditional Muslims might think; punk actually helps them in their quest for this worldly and otherworldly answers.

### 3.1.3 Discussion of Beliefs

Christian Hardcore and Taqwacore youth do not just act like punks. As a result of participating in punk, they *think* like punks (see Blee 2010). Both use hardcore punk rock to reconfigure traditional religious beliefs and both believe that punk is good for their religion. Like other modern-day Protestant evangelicals, Christian Hardcore punks believe in Bible inerrancy, consider evangelicalism the quintessential ingredient of Christian commitment (Smith 1998), and think that God determines their vocation. But unlike the majority of evangelicals, Hardcore Christians interpret traditional evangelical beliefs within the context of punk rock. As an example, they believe that God called them to be punk not only so that they can bring the gospel to secular punks, but also because punk makes them more Christ-like. Hardcore Christians argue

that Christian punks are not the same as most Christians and therefore they are independent from religious institutions. Yet they also believe that they have a place in the larger Christian community.

In contrast to Hardcore Christians, Taqwacores' adaptation of punk is not circumscribed by a specific body of beliefs or tied to proselytization. Taqwacores use punk to broaden the spectrum of what Islam stands for. They argue that Islam is not and should not be the same for all Muslims, especially in the face of new cultural configurations and transnational relationships. Some Taqwacores even feel that everyone should interpret the Quran in her/his own way and should not leave it up to Islamic clerics to tell them right from wrong. In short, the emphasis on non-institutionalized religion is common to both Christian hardcore and Muslim Taqwacore youth, but Taqwacore take this a step further as they do not stress a specific set of religious beliefs.

While Christian hardcore and Taqwacore youth's sense of anti-establishment differs in degree, both groups maintain that a withdrawal from religious institutions is essential to authentic spirituality. Christian Hardcore youth think that participating in punk rock makes them better Christians than does a mainstream church because it forces them to look to God, and God only, for spiritual direction. Moreover, without church authorities telling them what to do, they learn to appreciate what other social outcasts have to offer to society. In a similar way, Taqwacores feel that punk rock nurtures an authentic spirituality because it forces them to see the 'ugly' side of mainstream religion and culture, namely in the form of oppression and bigotry. With punk rock tools, they not only question authority but also produce their own 'truth.'

## 3.2 PRACTICES

Christian Hardcore and Taqwacore practices are shaped by the mainstream institutions that they resist. Both groups oppose mainstream religion, but Taqwacores engage an additional challenger: mainstream America. In this section, I examine how both Christian Hardcore and Taqwacore youth define themselves against *mainstream religion* as well as how Taqwacores define themselves against *mainstream America*. Christian Hardcore youth argue that the 'mainstream' church rejects them for being punk, and as punks, they reject the ‘mainstream’ church by using punk music to “be church” in secular subcultures. Taqwacores argue that they are rejected by two main societal institutions: mainstream Islamic communities for being too American (Majeed 2009) and by mainstream American society for being Muslim and/or brown. Taqwacores oppose these societal institutions by creating a cultural mash-up of American, Muslim, and punk in secular subcultures.

### 3.2.1 Christian Hardcore Practices

Christian Hardcore youth de-institutionalize the church while keeping the collective nature of church intact. One of the main ways that they do this is by arguing that the “mainstream church” is disingenuous about ministry. Christian Hardcore youth feel that *real* church is a ministry of worship ─ playing music for or about God, telling others about Christ, and making a Christian presence at live music shows ─ that occurs with people who are not in the traditional church. In this regard, secular punk rock culture is valuable to them: it is music that they can use to exercise their ideal type of church in a collective manner.

#### 3.2.1.1 Mainstream Religion

During conversation and interviews, Christian Hardcore youth talk about 'the mainstream church' as if it is a person. They state that "the church" mistreated, rejected, or judged them for being different, or that "the church" tried to change them or make them conform to the mainstream. Significantly, by characterizing the church as if it is an individual, they point out that it is people, not God, who actually make the rules that limit Christian youth's entrée into larger American culture (do not drink, do not play rock music, do not go to secular bars, etc.) and therefore hinder ministry. This mainstream church, they reason, does nothing to make the Kingdom of God reign on earth when they condemn Christians for being punk. In other words, conventional Christians misrepresent Jesus when they insist that the institutional church is *the* house of God. The institutional church is formed from social hierarchies and rules; the church that Christian punks create is formed from a commitment to evangelism. The text that follows highlights a group conversation I recorded at the annual Unified Underground conference in Maryland. This exchange shows how Christian Hardcore youth describe their quarrels with the "mainstream church."

"I was burned by the church," Andrew declared before taking a long pull from a cigar he smoked outside the back entrance of the Baptist church where the Unified Underground (UU) conference was held. Since 2007, members of Hope for the Rejected, a Baltimore-based subcultural ministry branch of Youth for Christ, have organized UU, a weekend-long event of group prayer, ministry workshops, and hard-hitting Christian punk. The goal of the conference is to "unite the three major underground communities – punk, goth and hardcore – in fellowship and to strengthen the leaders of these communities through discipleship." Andrew, a self-proclaimed punk who looks to be in his mid-20s, and a group of five other UU attendees,

comprised of four men and one woman, invited me to join them outdoors, with my audio recorder in hand, as they puffed cigars and chatted about ministry, music, and church. The crisp blue sky and warm afternoon sun was a striking contrast to the dimly-lit room where we had spent the last hour listening to Michelle, a youth group leader and Hope for the Rejected team member, speak about the return of Jesus Christ as part of UU's numerous "general sessions." After I found my place in a semi-circle of seats, the "cigar club" started talking about how the church rejects young people who like loud music or have an unusual haircut.

As Andrew understood it, the mainstream church "burned" him when they told him that he had to express his Christianity like everybody else in the church. As a teenager, Andrew was the only one in his small town church who listened to loud music and had long hair. Church members told Andrew that skateboarder clothes and punk were wrong in the eyes of God and that he needed to dress like everybody else who goes to church: chop off his hair and wear khaki pants and polo shirts. Other cigar club members also reported that they were "burned" by the church when the church tried to make them conform to the "mainstream." Bradley agreed that the church was mistaken to disapprove of Andrew but that it was frightened by the unfamiliar. He explains that the church misunderstands the punks in church and that the punks get upset with the church for its ignorance. Bradley says,

> I don't think the church was conscious of it happening. It stemmed from love but it got tainted by fear. Everyone wanted the best for their kids so bad that they were just sheltering them and a lot of kids reacted against that and turned to places where they were going to find this idea of being accepted. Because they didn't feel like they were being accepted by the church, by the mainstream church.

As Bradley's remarks indicate, he and his cigar club friends attended churches that protected kids from "mainstream culture by creating a Christian alternative to everything" from Christian music and movies to Biblical-themed video games (see Radosh 2008; Steinberg and Kincheloe 2009). But some of these young people had a taste for music that the church did not offer. When they ventured to make music and friends outside the "Christian bubble," as several interviewees call the parallel universe of evangelical Christianity, the mainstream church insinuated that they were sinners.

Once the church rejected them for their punk rock leanings, the Christian punks were able to better empathize with secular punks and see the church from the perspective of "outsiders." As an example, they think that secular punks are right to doubt the sincerity of Christians because the church holds a lot of ignorant and mean stereotypes about subcultural youth. Several Christian punk interviewees even go so far as to say that the church is insincere about evangelism because it denounces people rather than tries to understand and love them. At UU, this same sentiment was expressed by the Christian Goths, a subcultural branch of Christian punk. As part of the "What is a Christian Goth?" workshop at the UU conference, one Christian Goth said Christians often ask him, "Is it true that Goths actually like to sacrifice goats? Is it true that Goths like to hang themselves on hooks?" As he sees it, the subtext of these remarks is that if Goths like to pierce themselves with hooks and sacrifice goats, Christians have a right to believe that they are not worthy of God's love. Later that day, he spoke from the UU main stage and explained to a youthful crowd of Christian punks, Goths, and metalheads, that "The 'good news' of the gospel is that God's love is inclusive of all people" even people who dress and act like a 'freak.' He continued, "You don't need to conform to someone else's cultural standards to be a Christian. God loves diversity. He made diversity. God wants you to know that you are

highly valued, loved, and appreciated for who you are." According to this Goth minister, Christians who dress strange are gutsy because they challenge the mainstream church to appreciate diversity. "We must follow our Master's example in all we say and do. Always remember that His example was one of courage as He lovingly fought against the hypocrisy of His mainstream culture." He insisted that if "you follow Jesus" someone will "accuse you of being a heretic or a sinner" like they did a nonconforming Jesus.

Christian punks argue that 'love' from the mainstream church is misguided and sometimes cruel. During the cigar club break at UU, Andrew charged, "The mainstream church was two-faced to me. In one sense they wanted to take care of me and minster to me, and in another sense, they were doing that to make me into someone different." In a gesture of affirmation, his friend Sarah nodded her head and declared, "Yeah, as if you were *broken* instead of actually --- growing as a Christian." Sarah's comment suggests that mainstream Christians are mistaken in thinking that Andrew put punk culture before God. She insists that punk culture actually brought Andrew out of a broken relationship with God. Dressing alternatively and listening to loud music forced Andrew to live out Christian principles in the non-Christian context of punk. And according to Andrew and his friend Sarah, these experiences, not the church, taught him how to be the Christian that Christ wants him to be. Andrew's story corresponds to other Christian punks' claims that Jesus made them punk so that they can "love on" people that the traditional church rejects as undeserving.

Christian punks are critical of the Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) industry, which they see as a branch of the "mainstream church," when it only supports music for churches, youth retreats, and Christian radio stations. For them, music made by Christians for Christians is insufficient because the very youth who need the gospel do not go to traditional churches or

listen to religious broadcasting. Furthermore, they point out that this industry tries to keep Christian youth away from non-Christian music and experiences. For instance Jacob, a hardcore musician, argues that while CCM was originally established to "protect young people from the temptations of secular culture," it actually weakens young Christians' faith in Christ. He thinks CCM is too separatist (see Howard and Streck 1999) and hinders devotion to Christ because it keeps Christian youth isolated from those who do not share their beliefs. His views on Christian rock are unabashedly integrationist (Howard and Streck 1999) in that he insists that CCM limits the spirit of evangelicalism which is to share the gospel through relationships and actions. Paul, a hardcore musician, brings up evangelicalism when he says he wants to play music for non-Christians and tour with secular bands. In an interview with me, he remarks, "If you're a flashlight and just flashing your light in a brightly lit room, what's really the point? Just to hang out with other people that are in the light?" Paul not only insist that Christian punks can use rebellious music to spread the gospel, but also that in using this music, Christians breathe new life into the evangelical movement. With this music, they reinvigorate the primary purpose of the church: discipleship and fellowship.

Christian punks claim to be more sincere about evangelism than "Sunday Christians," which they conceptualize as Christians who separate God from culture. Christian punks are better because they dare to do what God has called them to do in rebellious subcultures, and in effect, act out Christian principles in their everyday lives. At the 2010 Cornerstone festival, a multi-day Christian rock event established in 1984 for "Jesus Freaks" (Beaujon 2006; Radosh 2008; Stowe 2011), hardcore youth protested the establishment of religion by carrying a box of T-shirts and a cardboard sign that read "Religion Kills. Jesus Saves." As a young man explained to me, "I'm fed up with the mainstream church. People have put religion above God. They spend

too much time judging people. They don't practice grace and forgiveness enough." Christian punks, he claimed, carry out the divine will of Christ by playing hardcore music at secular bars and venues. Unlike the mainstream church, they give punk and metal kids an opportunity to know Jesus by befriending them through a shared experience of music.

The song "Silence the Oppressor" by *Impending Doom* not only confronts Christians who dismiss the band's music as sacrilegious, but it also suggests that those who pass judgment on punk and metal youth are bad Christians. The lyrics, in part, go:

> To the following Christians listen closely. We bring light to a new realm, a realm you dare not enter, passing judgment behind stone walls, behind your absence of understanding. We will crush your walls that dictate where our ministry goes, don't you ever tell me I'm using God as a gimmick. […] Those venues are our church, we are the gospel in the darkness, and this is our exaltation.

As the producers of this music see it, churchgoers are insincere isolationists as compared to these real enthusiasts of ministry. Nation of the Underground, a subcultural ministries conference that wants "nothing less than total revival in the underground and this nation," also uses daring language to differentiate its event from conventional church happenings. The conference announcement reads, "Pray about attending in July, but be warned in advance...these meetings are not for the Sunday Christian or the mildly religious. They are for the ones that are truly desperate to lay their lives down for the King of kings and Lord of lords." By defining conventional churches as ineffective, punk rock Christians portray themselves as uncompromising soldiers in God's army. *Sleeping Giant*, a popular hardcore group, posted this on their website:

> We are called Sleeping Giant because Christians in the world today are just that, in the world. And they need to wake up! They are sleeping giants of war in this world over-run by apathy, by people who do not see the enormity of their worth and don't realize they live their lives day by day forsaking love, and a just and amazing God who deserves it all.

In rebuking other Christians for idleness, groups like *Sleeping Giant* render themselves fearless combatants in a war against establishment religion.

Hardcore Christians even go so far as to blame Christians for the rise in secularization. An album by *War of Ages* opens with this quote: "The greatest single cause of atheism today is Christians, who acknowledge Jesus with their lips but deny Him by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world finds unbelievable." When asked about this introduction in a public interview, the singer responded (Lee 2006):

> We wanted to put a shock to the Christian world. One of the biggest causes of atheism is Christians not leading life the way they should. They're very judgmental…Christians walk up to you [and say] 'You shouldn't do this, you shouldn't do that.' That's not your call. It's not personal to you.

His sentiments epitomize the opinions of Christian Hardcore youth who think it is un-Christian to judge people for being different. They use the church's condemnation of difference to define themselves and brand their mission. The flyer for Take Hold church, a punk rock congregation and music venue on the U.S. East Coast, sums up their nonjudgmental philosophy this way: "We, as the church, believe in accepting people as they are and where they are on their journey."

#### 3.2.1.2 Punk Religion

Christian Hardcore punks, including those in the cigar club, commonly argue that they use music to "be church" in secular subcultures. They can use punk to enact church in the underground because the "church is inside us." The notion that the church is inside "us," not inside "me" both de-institutionalizes the mental concept of what it means to "be church" while at the same time centralizes the collectiveness of church. Take for example the flyer for Take Hold Church. Its independent, DIY cut-and-paste aesthetic looks like an anarchist punk leaflet (which is usually about politics, not Jesus), and on its opening page deploys the defiant outlook of punk rock to describe church. It reads, in part, "The church is literally "'THE PEOPLE OF GOD,' NOT A BUILDING." This flyer proposes that church is a practice not a place, and therefore church can be enacted in any venue, at any time.

Justun, who has "85%" of his body inked and owns, In the Blood, a Christian tattoo shop, describes his experience in traditional churches as "harsh" because those who pray for him say things like, "Oh Lord let him see you," a prayer which implies that tattoos, and the culture they signify, are spiritually corrosive. These experiences inspired Justun to open up his shop, *In the Blood*. In a promotional video on the shop website, he says that his shop is a "ministry" because it is a community where people with different beliefs socialize and support one another. Justun voices his frustration with Christians who assume that he is a sinner that needs to be saved and says it is hard to "even want to go to church sometimes" (Retrieved February 12, 2012 http://www.inthebloodtattoo.com/mission). He suggests that his tattoo shop provides an alternative for people who are alienated by the established church, curious about Christianity, or are just looking for a friendly place to get a tattoo. His message is that unlike most Christian congregations, this space welcomes everyone. Justun comments,

> It's just about breaking down walls. Just having a place of acceptance. Whether you're tattooed, not tattooed; Christian, not Christian….In the Blood to me is just something that we can use to love people. Pretty simple.

For Justun, using the tattoo studio to "love on" people is the equivalent to ministering to people. It is a ministry because it is a place where Christians and non-Christians can mingle and talk about common interests and tastes. Even the logo for the shop indicates that they are not just changing external appearances: they are making a permanent mark on the hearts of customers (Figure 3-3). The tattoo artist in the image places his needle directly on the heart, not the skin, and this tattoo seemingly results in a burst of light. In this respect, church is the act of tattooing – it is the act of getting to know other people, changing them and being changed by them.

**Figure 3-2: In the Blood Tattoo logo, Pittsburgh, PA**

Unlike the emerging church movement, which focuses almost exclusively on alternative

spaces for worship (Flory and Miller 2008), hardcore youth use punk to be church in preexisting subcultural settings where society's "black sheep" congregate. Rise Above Ministries makes this clear:

> Rise Above is a ministry devoted to the lost and those not comfortable with the traditional church environment. As a body, we feel responsible for continuing the ministry of Jesus Christ by serving the lost and outcast believers using sub-cultural dress and music styles to create an accessible and unique church experience.

The ministry uses hardcore music ─ including their house band *Our Corpse Destroyed* ─ punk rock aesthetics, and an abandoned warehouse to reach "metal kids, scene kids, recovering drug addicts, punk rockers, social rejects, crust punks, hardcore kids, musicians, students, emo kids, pierced, tattooed people and anyone else who, for one reason or another, feels comfortable in our different type of church" (Retrieved September 1, 2009 http://www.myspace.com/riseaboveministries). Their model resembles the emerging church movement: small, culturally-specific congregations that are often set up in places like a skate park or coffee house (Flory and Miller 2008) but Rise Above is also part of a larger subcultural network of bands who take church beyond the warehouse meeting place. In this respect, Christian punks are not just setting up new kinds of churches; they are using music to activate 'church' in diffuse and ephemeral social settings.

Hardcore Christians are not the only ones who insist they are the church in underground music subcultures. In a private phone interview, Linda, a woman in her mid-40s who attended UU as part of Christian Goth ministries, says she helps "people that don't fit into the mainstream." Linda sees her Goth ministry as an art form that she personally identifies with; she

believes God made her Goth so that she can speak the language of the Goth subculture. Her testament to Christian Goth ministries reflects almost verbatim the book she handed out at the UU conference titled *God Loves the Freaks* by Stephen Weese, a self-proclaimed Christian Goth. Weese writes (2006: 33), "People who are different, the outcasts and the freaks, think differently than the average persons. Without knowing about them and their culture, how can we witness to them on a level they will understand? How can we meet them where we they are unless we have some freaks ourselves that are in the culture?" Linda considers herself a "freak" for God because she "will go to places where secular Goths hang out and build a rapport with people." Like Christian Hardcore punks, Linda thinks bonding with people is a better strategy for reaching nonbelievers than "banging people over the head" with Christianity. She believes people will die and go to hell if they are not right with God but maintains that mainstream Christians turn people off when they dress properly and talk righteously about eternal damnation.

Hardcore Christian interviewees feel that music is an expression of Christ and for that reason producers can use it to "be church" in the bars and nightclubs where Christian and non-Christian punks gather to listen to music and have a good time. With hardcore music, they aim to reconfigure the physical structure of church and the mental conceptualization of what makes a church. The publicity agent of a Christian Hardcore label describes the power of music like this: "There are so many people that need to hear the message of the Bible and one of the most crucial ways of spreading the knowledge of Christ's love is through music." Victor, a hardcore guitarist, suggests the friendships he builds at hardcore music shows "plant the seed" for non-believers to get to know and experience Christ. As a teenager, he hung out with the "wrong crowd," drank alcohol, and stopped going to church. By his early 20s, Victor was fully immersed in the Southern California hardcore scene, quit drinking, and made lasting friendships at live music

shows. During this time, Victor turned his life back to Christ and decided to pump all of his energy into Christian Hardcore music. He now uses music to build a place for the excluded to belong and form a relationship with Christ through like-minded Christians.

Jacob, a hardcore musician, suggests that the hardcore music he plays *is* church because it fosters a space between Christianity and culture that is not bounded by time or place. He explains touring from city to city like this: "The music and the shows and the changing tires in the snow and sleeping in the van:  all that is just a bridge. It's just an opportunity to love on people, to serve them, to share Christ with them through actions." The church Jacob describes is not only mobile; it is also a church that encourages everyone to participate. One of the most distinctive features of punk rock is the mantra that "anybody can play music" and should. In theory, anyone can play punk rock because this music is created form passionate, emotional expression, not from technical or compositional skills (Moore 2007). Christian Hardcore youth appreciate this principle of punk rock culture precisely because through punk rock each and every Christian has an opportunity to express their unique relationship to Christ and "be church" in the subculture.

Michelle, who led a 'general session' at UU, seizes the punk rock ethos that maintains "anyone can do it." During her talk, she tells attendees they should use music to worship God but that at a talent for singing or playing an instrument is not essential to making a connection. She insists that "you don't even have to be good…it doesn't even have to be hardcore [music]." Besides, Michelle claims, "He thinks our praise is beautiful – isn't that so cool? If you invite him to invade you, he'll free you." Accordingly, music is the best tool for inviting the Holy Spirit because it "let's your agenda fall by the way and gets you ready for the return of Christ."[23] This

[23] The notion that music enables people to *feel* the Holy Spirit is part of a larger trend in American religion in which more and more people are experiencing and expressing religion through music and the arts. Robert Wuthnow (2003: 89) finds that individuals use music to get out of their "head" and be "totally there" with God.

is why she encourages attendees to “join a band and workshop him.” Notably, Michelle does not mention other methods of music-centered worship like singing at home alone or playing a song to set the tone for prayer. Instead, she encourages attendees to “join a band” which is remarkable because it means that Michelle thinks individuals need to engage the activity of music collectively, not individually, to actualize a supernatural community.

Throughout human history, music has inspired emotional reverence for God(s) and Godly communities (Beck 2006) as music is an essential ingredient of cementing feelings of unity and spirituality (Sylvan 2002). More specifically, among contemporary evangelical churches, music now takes up more time than the actual church sermons as church leaders believe music gets participants emotionally ready for the “word of God” (Luhrmann 2012). The view that music can be used to structure the emotions of listeners is exemplified by this *Sleeping Giant* live music show at the UU conference:

> Swaying to a militaristic drum roll, the tattooed singer of *Sleeping Giant* lifts his arms and opens his palms to get the crowd to worship louder. The beat’s repetitious simplicity intensifies the audience’s emotional euphoria. Some lay on the floor, others stare at the stage, and a few jump up and down, but almost all have their hands lifted to the heavens as they chant in unison: “Oh Praise Him—Oh Praise Him!” As the drum rolls for their “Praise Him” song, the singer, Tommy, cries out,
>
> I’m asking you to sing with us now! There’s no reason to be ashamed or to hold back. If you have a horrible voice, this is so loud, it doesn’t even matter...Just sing with us! Open up your heart, I promise you the Holy Spirit will touch your mind

> and your heart and you will never be the same again. This song is dedicated to Jesus and I hope to sing it for all eternity!

In encouraging each audience member to sing loudly with the crowd, Tommy elicits emotional participation at the individual level and then connects that experience to the power of the collective. Each voice is endowed with unique purpose and each voice is part of a larger body of Christ. Correspondingly, Tommy suggests that as people sing, the Holy Spirit will enter their hearts and minds, an experience that will change them forever. He proposes that sensory excitement signals that an emotional connection to God and Godly community has been made.

Christian Hardcore youth define themselves against the 'mainstream church' because they think the church is wrong to denounce hardcore punk. From their point of view, the mainstream church is not genuine about evangelicalism and is at fault for making Christians look like hypocritical bigots. By opposing the 'mainstream church' on these grounds, Christian Hardcore youth develop their own unique set of practices. They use the music, tattoos, and language of defiant subcultures to 'be church' in the underground. Their Christian Hardcore church is not a structure or a body of beliefs; their church is a *practice*.

### 3.2.2 Taqwacore Practices

Taqwacores see themselves in a two-fold fight: against mainstream Islam and against xenophobia in American society. When asked to explain what conservative Islam looks like, Taqwacores generally point to strict conventions that prohibit drugs and alcohol, forbid premarital sex, punish sexual minorities, subjugate women, ban rock music, and tell others what to think. They distance themselves from these religious prohibitions by pointing out that

Muslims have to trust their own truths, not those of religious authorities. Hence, Taqwacores maintain spiritual ties to Islam even as they reject its conventions. A chief way they do this is by creating art ─ novels, movies, clothing, music ─ to defy established Islam *and* religious/racial discrimination in American culture. Through an amalgamation of Islamic, American, and punk rock codes, Taqwacores practice an imaginative take on American Muslim identity that takes issue with orthodox Islam as well as those who have a problem with Muslims.

#### 3.2.2.1 Mainstream America

To fully appreciate what is at stake in Taqwacore's argument that "Islam is a mosaic," it is important to note that this scene arose partly in response to Islamophobia – the "hostile attitude towards Islam and Muslims based on the image of Islam as the enemy and as a vital, irrefutable and absolute threat to 'our' well-being and even to 'our' existence, irrespective of how Muslims are identified, whether on the basis of religious or ethnic criteria" (López 2011: 570; see also Allen 2010; Esposito and Kalin 2011). Taqwacores relate having personally experienced discrimination after the September 2011 attacks on the World Trade Center. Several report hearing people mutter "terrorist" towards them for the first time in their lives immediately after the attacks. This took place on school grounds, in city buses, and at the supermarket. One young man was told to "go back home" while standing in line waiting to order a donut. A second-generation Pakistani college student said the FBI tapped his family home telephone without reason. Even those who have not been verbally assaulted reported that they are met with stares and glares on a regular basis. Taqwacores regard the media as largely responsible for perpetuating one-dimensional, Islamophobic stereotypes. They point out that most Americans do not know much about Islam other than what they see in the mainstream media which commonly

depicts Muslims as religious fanatics who oppress women. [24]

On the same night of the Bowdoin panel, *The Kominas* were scheduled to play a live punk show at the campus pub. In the Bowdoin Orient campus paper, that was released just a few days before the show, one of its contributors, Steven, wrote a "letter to the editors" asking students to "express their disgust with the Kominas by unanimously avoiding their performance." In the letter, Steven argues that while the campus prides itself on "free speech and artistic expression," he feels that *The Kominas* are too radical and that their "only talent is inciting violence and promoting anti-American sentiment." The letter went on to give a quick rundown of some of their more inflammatory (albeit satirical) song titles such as "Suicide Bomb the Gap" and "I don't want assimilation (I just want to blow $%!# up)." Yet this plea for a boycott ended on an odd note, as it announced the exact date, time, and location of the show. It turns out that Steven, who is known around this liberal campus as the lone conservative "rabble rouser," had staged an Islamophobic plot to promote attendance to the show. As Steven wrote in a follow-up comment, "Any one who knows the Kominas can appreciate this satire," referring to this own comments in the letter. Another student, who helped organize the event, wrote in and said, "I feel satire is always a double-edged sword, and I'm sure Steven did not intend for people to feel targeted by the article." But, he went on to say, the fact that the article is currently the

[24] Non-Muslims' association of Muslims with fanaticism is so widespread that some individuals and groups actually become outraged when the media portrays American Muslims as anything but devout Islamists or terrorists. When TLC (The Learning Channel), started its docu-series, "All-American Muslim," about ordinary, middle-class Muslims (some who are traditionally religious, others who are not) in Dearborn, Michigan, the Florida Family Association (a conservative Christian group), asked advertisers to boycott the series. They called the show "propaganda that riskily hides the Islamic agenda's clear and present danger to American liberties and traditional values." After only one season, TLC cancelled "All American Muslim" and cited a steep decline in viewership as its reason (Bauder 2011). Shortly after the FFA made its request for the boycott, Lowes, a home improvement chain, pulled their commercials from the show. One Lowes representative explained the decision like this: "Individuals and groups have strong political and societal views on this topic, and this program became a lightning rod for many of those views. As a result we did pull our advertising on this program. We believe it is best to respectfully defer to communities, individuals and groups to discuss and consider such issues of importance" (Kaleem 2011).

most viewed piece in the paper shows that there is an "Islamophobic current in this campus that needs to be addressed with the dialogue that the Kominas bring." Eventually, Steven wrote a rather lengthy apology to everyone he might have offended but then went back to suggesting that the Kominas can incite extremism, stating that, "The Kominas are pursuing a noble cause, but I challenge them to show that their musical message is compatible with a free and tolerant society." The controversy that transpired around *The Kominas* live music show at Bowdoin shows just how political it is to express any ties to Islam, even when these are presented in a Westernized format. In a private interview with me, Zahira explained that Islam is a cultural, spiritual, and a political identity ─ but the political one, she claimed, "is the one you feel the most in the U.S….because we're a community that's marginalized."

#### 3.2.2.2 Mainstream Religion

In *Taqwacore: the Birth of Punk Islam* (Majeed 2009) documentary, Michael Muhammad Knight holds up his middle fingers in two different directions and charges, "We're giving the finger to both sides. Fuck you and Fuck you." The two sides he speaks of are the dogma of Islam and Islamophobia in American culture. As Knight's angst indicates, Taqwacores not only see themselves involved in an anti-Islamophobic campaign, noting that *all* Muslims have been unfairly demonized after September 11, but they also oppose Islamic conventions. As it turned out, some traditionalist Muslims were not too pleased about getting the finger from Taqwacores. Writers for an ultra-conservative Islamic publication got upset when they heard the film crew had come to Lahore to screen the film at the National College of Art's Auditorium. They wrote,

> A Pakistani-born Canadian Muslim and director Omar Majeed has made a documentary film called Taqwacore which has made fun of Islam. Shockingly, it

> has been revealed that the film was aired in Lahore….In the documentary, the members of Taqwacore are on one hand shown praying, and on the other hand, they do such things which are considered very bad by devout Muslims. For example, one female band member, who is a Muslim and a lesbian is shown in the film.

The publication ultimately called for a boycott and advocated that those who organized the screening be apprehended. There is no record that the boycott or arrests of Taqwacores actually happened but these inflammatory remarks do reveal what these youth are up against when they intentionally bring Islam and punk together in the public sphere. They are also met with support. In the article in which this controversy over the screening in Pakistan is discussed, the author, Asif Akhtar (2010), argued that "Conservative Islam needs to confront the proliferating diversity of Islam, and needs to come to terms with the fact that subjective interpretations of religion cannot be limited." He feels that Taqwacore is an important cultural movement because it pushes Muslims to live out the doctrine of tolerance and love that Islam champions.

As Taqwacores work to make race and religious politics part of punk, they necessarily defy conventional Muslims who believe that punk rock music is forbidden in Islam. Sanji, a webzine author, who describes him/herself as a traditional Muslim who was raised by imams, says he admires Taqwacore because it "turns around the notion that music interrupts our connection with God" and asserts that music is actually "the very channel through which we assess God." He concludes, "Piety in Islam has always meant more than simply adequate obedience. So it seems appropriate to take punk, music born out of an anti-establishment ethic and a rejection of the mainstream, and make it a matter of God consciousness" (Taqwacore.wordpress.com, Retrieved April 23, 2010). In another Taqwacore webzine post, Imran (a member of *The Kominas*) speaks about how Yusuf Islam, widely known for his former

stage name *Cat Stevens*, picked up his guitar and started writing songs again almost 30 years after converting to Islam. Yusuf believed that playing music was not permissible in Islam, so he quit upon conversion. But now, Yusuf thinks music is "a gift" from God (ColbertNation.com). Imran writes that Yusuf's change of mind was a personal relief: "For so long, all I ever wanted was for someone to say it's okay to bridge these two radically different, seemingly incompatible halves of me so I could be whole again…More and more I'm getting the feeling that identifying yourself as a Muslim and a Musician is no longer Cognitive Dissonance."

When confronted by conservative Muslims who argue that punk music is *haram* [sinful and forbidden], Taqwacores defend their musicianship, arguing that the purest form of Islam does not include religious leaders and scholars who make up rules. Take for instance the exchange between a member of *The Kominas* and an imam [Islamic leader] that the band members met while on tour in the United States (Majeed 2009):

> Imam: Music instruments like a guitar, piano are not acceptable in Islam. Go to any Sheikh [Islamic scholar]…
>
> Basim (of *The Kominas*): There is no Sheikh. There is no imam in Islam …There isn't anyone who is a higher authority than you are.
>
> Imam: Instead of worshipping Allah, glorious and exalted, following his decree…you're listening to nonsense. Music is nonsensical. It's nothing but nonsense. Banging the thing…it's nothing but nonsense! You all know that!

This imam represents the voices of other conservative Islamic theologians who believe that all rock music is *haram* because it invites social chaos and threatens the dominance of Islamic leaders (see Otterbeck and Ackfeldt 2012). But for Taqwacores, their punk music has a sacred

quality in that it expresses and reaffirms the diversity of Islam. One convert writes on a Taqwacore webzine comment thread that the first thing s/he was taught about being Muslim was that music is of the devil. S/he goes on, “It messed with my head for years because I couldn’t reconcile the divine that I wished to know and love with [my] love and talent for music.” Even though it was forbidden, s/he listened to music without anyone knowing, hiding it out of sight like drugs. S/he indicates that the secrecy grew burdensome and so s/he eventually left Islam. “I sometimes think that if some sort of taqwacore had been around when I was in those years, I would have found a different way to be Muslim. But I didn’t, and ultimately, I am very happy and at peace with my decision to no longer be Muslim” (Taqwacore.wordpress.com, Retrieved April 23, 2010).

#### 3.2.2.3 Punk Religion

In *The Taqwacores* (Zahra 2009) feature film a leading character, Jehangir, explains that this is a scene where “all the crazy rejects and fuckups of the community come together…Nobody likes them. Muslims say they’re not really Muslims. The punks say they’re not really punks.” The mantra that “the first rule of punk is that there are no rules” is often referenced by Taqwacores when they talk about their hybrid cultural identity, because for them, rules get in the way of forging unity across differences. In fact, they take this idea to its logical conclusion: individuals do not even have to believe in Allah or be Muslim to be Taqwacore. One Taqwacore webzine editorial describes Taqwacore as a “portrait of struggle…not a genre of proselytization.” The post reads, “The members do not always agree with each other, whether in taste of music or understanding of religiosity. But that is precisely the point: taqwacore is not an ideology, it is the attempt to forge something out of disgruntled experience and artistic inspirations”

(Taqwacore.wordpress.com, Retrieved April 23, 2010).

Zahira, a Taqwacore blogger, draws a comparison between Taqwacore and Christian punk to make the point that Taqwacore is a sociocultural space that welcomes and encourages diversity. In an interview with me, she claims, "Christian punk is all about praising the Lord," but Taqwacore is "this space [that] allows you the safety net to explore what Muslim means or what not being Muslim means. I don't think the Christian punk scene would allow for that." That is why Saima, a Muslim punk playwright tells me, "I want to scream!" every time the comparison is made between Taqwacore and Christian punk. She clarifies,

> Christian punk is all about shoving morals and telling you that you should love Jesus. Taqwacore is just a space for Muslim punks who happen to be immigrants or children of immigrants, who don't feel accepted in the white punk scene, and don't feel accepted by other Muslims or people of color, so the Taqwacores scene was born, for non-white, non-Christian, non-WASP punks to express themselves and sing about culture or identity or politics, something that we can all relate to.

Correspondingly, several interviewees profess, Taqwacore is not about spreading Islam - "Taqwacore is the voice of alienation" that exists between the white hegemony of punk and the restrictions of participants' cultural and religious heritage. During an interview with Jian Ghomeshi on Q (2009), Majeed reiterates that Taqwacore is an "open concept" defined by each individual in her or his own way. He says:

> So the thing about Taqwacore is a lot people think that everyone in Taqwacore is one way. But it's really just an open concept, incorporating people who are

> religious, some people are not. Some people are just much more culturally Muslim. Some people play instruments. Some just like the attitude. There's just a whole range of things in there.

Later in the conversation with Ghomeshi, Knight remarks that he always shied away from "calling it a movement because once it's a movement, everyone has to be on the same page." He says, "We just want to create a safe space where you can be Muslim on your own terms."

One of the primary ways that Taqwacores intervene in Islam and create their own sense of Muslim identity is by constructing a punk "front" (Goffman 1959) that combines different audiences, non-Muslim and Muslim, punk and non-punk, with a single controversial presentation. Before getting into the particulars of this "front," note that Taqwacores consider punk to be essentially a nonconformist attitude, not just a mohawk, fast-paced music, or leather jacket. Imran made this conceptualization of punk clear at the Bowdoin panel. When asked how he defines punk, Imran said: "The *core* of [punk] is being able to express your truth without the fear of judgment." In an interview with me, Navid argues that punk is a "mask" that allows him to say "Hey, I'm a Muslim... I already know you can't accept me so here's a big f**k you to you!" By asserting that punk is a "mask" he uses to defy social rejection, Navid affirms that Taqwacores face hostility from two different sides: their traditional Islamic communities because they are punk (see LeVine 2008; Majeed 2009), and mainstream American society because they are Muslim (see Peek 2011).

Taqwacores take control of the situation as they delimit what spectators see, which amounts to the "limitation and regulation of contact" (Goffman 1959: 67). Although Taqwacores generally agree that punk is not defined by a particular look, appearance is an integral part of their punk "front" as it allows them to gain some control

over how others perceive them (Goffman 1959). *Sunny Ali and the Kid*, the twangy indie-punk duo, is an illustrative example. The two young Pakistani-Americans who comprise dress up in clasp button-up shirts, cowboy boots, and cowboy hats (Figure 3-4). When Sunny Ali was asked what drew him to the country and western sound and style, he responded:

> I was living in north Philly and randomly came across a cowboy hat at a thrift shop. I started wearing it around town because it made me feel uncomfortable and was just surprised at how much attention it would get. Most people would laugh. Some people would actually get pissed off at me for some reason.

Initially, Sunny Ali did not dress in a cowboy hat in order to construct an audience or get a certain kind of reaction from the audience (Goffman 1959). It was only after learning that the hat made others uneasy that Sunny Ali began the active work of attracting spectators by way of disrupting their expectations (De Marinis 1987; also Blee and McDowell 2012). By wearing western clothing, *Sunny Ali and the Kid* invite comparable judgments from two dissimilar audiences: Muslims and non-Muslims who become irritated and/or confused about brown, dark-haired men in cowboy hats. And according to Sunny Ali, making people angry is good because a "little provocation helps people think a little bit." (All Our Noise 2010).

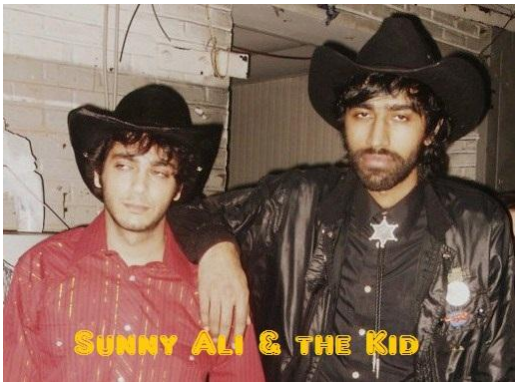


**Figure 3-3:** ***Sunny Ali & The Kid***

Brown-skinned Taqwacores do not have to go to the length of putting on a cowboy hat to rouse most people. In fact, when they wear traditional punk garb such as mohawks and ripped jeans, they think that it not only makes conservative Muslims upset but also other punks like "Harry Fiasco" who commented on a discussion board that "Just like wearing a cowboy hat doesn't make you a cowboy, slapping a cheesy mohawk on your religion does not make it punk." Other punks stuck up for Taqwacores and argued that "punk is the pure expression for the unexpressed, and above all else, being unapologetic about who you are or what you believe" (Crafts 2009). As an example of this latter comment, Taqwacores will showcase their religious traditions on punk rock grounds, the very social spheres that are generally unfamiliar and maybe even uncomfortable with Muslims. Members of *The Kominas* asserted difference when they sported traditional religious garb for their live punk show in Cambridge (Figure 3-5). In the context of this majority white performance bill, a turban was much more defiant than spiked hair. Had the group been wearing ordinary punk clothes, they might not have gotten the entire room's attention when they announced "This next song is called 'Sharia Law in the USA!'"

**Figure 3-4: *The Kominas*, live show at the Middle East Nightclub, Cambridge, MA**

Another way that Taqwacores define themselves against religious and social establishments, while at the same time asserting a shared Taqwacore identity, is by sewing traditional religious symbols and punk rock together. One young Taqwacore designer, Tesnim Sayar, made her own hijab with a cloth mohawk (Figure 3-6) which was posted online for other Taqwacores to see. In a public, online interview, she says she made it because she wanted to wear a hijab to assert her different kind of Islam in the public sphere: one that plays by some religious rules but rejects those that do not match her punk rock style. With this outfit, Tesnim constructs space in-between dichotomous categories as she provokes those who want to place her in a box as Eastern or Western, Muslim or non-Muslim, oppressed or liberated. Tesnim speaks to the oppositional ethos of Taqwacore when she says she got tired of the stereotype that Muslim girls are victims of their religion. With the mohawk attached, she broadens the spectrum of Muslim and punk both of which affirms her status as Taqwacore.[25]

[25] Go to "Postmodernism Ruined Me" to retrieve the article about Tesmin and her design: http://postmodernismruinedme.tumblr.com/post/22164193206/taqwaacore-tesnim-sayar-is-a-muslim-punk-she

**Figure 3-5: Tesnim Sayar, Hijab mohawk design**

Taqwacore style is "obviously fabricated" (Hebdige 1979: 101) as it is precariously positioned between East and West and at the same time goes against the grain of mainstream Islam and mainstream America. Rabeya, a burqa-clad character in *The Taqwacores* novel, epitomizes the oppositional aesthetic that this community thrives on. She wears a clothing item that is traditionally associated with women's subordination and Islamic piety. But Rabeya's burqa is far from traditional. Her burqa is DIY in its most radical form. It is literally a piece of thick cloth that has been hand-cut (likely with a pair of scissors) down the middle front and it does not have an eye screen. Not only is it completely homemade, hers is decorated with punk rock patches, most of which are band logos. Her peculiar marriage of religion and punk on her body mirrors her attitude about Islam. In the film, we discover that she has eliminated some passages of the Quran with a thick black marker, such as the ones that say men should beat their wives into submission. When Yusef, her devout, straight-laced roommate sees the text, he corrects her: "You can't do that!" Rabeya responds, "I don't need that part…and now that it's gone, I feel a whole lot better about it" (Zahara 2009). Rather than give up on Islam, Rabeya

decides to make it hers, keeping what she finds spiritually meaningful and discarding what does not suit her politically and culturally.

Taqwacores, as these amalgamations of style suggests, are not just provoking people for the sake of shock; rather, they feel provocation is important political work that generates a sense of community. Aamir thinks the Taqwacore scene confirms that brown youth are "cool" just as it shows there is not just one way to do Islam, or punk rock, for that matter. In an interview with me, one white punk rock interviewee says *The Kominas* forced him to recognize his ethnic biases. He says, "You're looking at these people, at these dudes, at *The Kominas* themselves and any stereotype anybody might have about the cultures that they belong to… you [end up thinking] 'oh wait, there are different kinds of everyone.'" Sunny Ali of the country-indie group *Sunny Ali and the Kid*, remarks, "It's important that we get out there, just because of the way we look even." In a manner of agreement, Kid interjects, "It's interesting to see like Muslim American kids or like brown kids or whatever being tough asses or being bad asses. Not like the nerd guy and the college crew like you see brown guys being cast as in Hollywood and shit" (All Our Noise 2010). Amina, who sings in one of the first Taqwacore bands, says she listened to punk music and went to shows before learning about Taqwacore but it was not until hearing *The Kominas* that she felt like she could start her own band. She explains, "The stuff they were singing about, because they were also Muslim too, […] we really connected to that. And so we were like 'Hey, what if we started a band?'"

Taqwacores define themselves against mainstream Islam and mainstream America. From their point of view, conservative Muslims do not have a handle on the truth and therefore do not have a right to tell other Muslims how to behave or what to believe. Yet Taqwacores are also distinctively aware that non-Muslim Americans (as well as 'reformist' Muslims like Irshad

Manji) are eager to embrace any artistic movement that calls Muslims "narrow-minded" (see Mahmood 2009). For this reason, Taqwacores carefully balance their criticisms of Islam with criticisms of American society. Through the music, art, performances, and styles they create, Taqwacores minimize a sense of alienation that comes from straddling two cultural worlds at once. That is, their music is a *practice* of American Muslim identity, an identity built on "double vision" (see Narayan 2013 [1989]) as it inhabits America and Islam critically.

### 3.2.3 Discussion of Practices

Both Christian Hardcore and Muslim Taqwacore youth create collective practices as they engage who they are up against. Christian Hardcore youth direct their anger towards 'the mainstream church,' which they loosely characterize as an institution that puts conformity and rules above ministry. Indeed, they claim that they are good Christians because they use music to take church to the people who really need it. In defining their church as a practice of loud music, subcultural tattoos, and relationships with non-believers, Christian Hardcore youth maintain a connection to the evangelical ethos while at the same time defining church on their own terms.

Similar to Hardcore Christians, Taqwacores define themselves in opposition to mainstream Islam and argue that Islamic leaders and scholars put emphasis on rules, not God. At the same time, however, they define themselves against mainstream America, namely because they want to defend Islam against narrow-minded people who attack Muslims or think brown people are not *really* Americans. Unlike Christian punks, Taqwacores do not care about proselytization or about spreading their take on Islam to other Muslims. Rather, they make space for brown youth that subverts the voyeuristic gaze of white America, and at the same time dares American Muslim youth to make religion their own.

## 4.0 WARRIORS AND TERRORISTS: ANTAGONISM AS STRATEGY

The previous chapter shows how Hardcore Christians and Taqwacores use punk tools to generate religious beliefs and practices that they can call their own. This chapter scrutinizes albums, images, and live performances to show how Christian Hardcore and Taqwacore producers (e.g. musicians, Taqwacore filmmakers, and Christian ministry groups) use punk ideas, symbols, and rituals to present themselves as religious/punk to others in subcultural environments. I show that both deploy the aggressive posture of hardcore to bridge the seemingly incongruent worlds of religion and punk.

Consider two vignettes from live performances: "If someone next to you isn't moving, shove them!" ordered the burly singer of *War of Ages*, a longstanding Christian Hardcore/metalcore band. At his direction, a swarm of young men moved toward the stage with their chests bowed, slinging their arms full circle. *War of Ages* was playing at the Altar Bar in Pittsburgh – a church turned into a music venue – for a crowd of about 500 mostly white male youth banging their heads to deafening, ferocious music. The show bill included two other bands: one renowned "anti-Christian" band and another that made no reference to religion. Secular hardcore punks have a history of detesting Christian bands but at this show, *War of Ages* won their respect. The group was applauded by everyone – Christian and non-Christian youth alike – as they used the violent symbols, rituals, and sonic qualities of hardcore and metal to

express a masculinized Christianity, a Christian worldview grounded in hegemonic masculine ideals about physical power and war (see Putney 2001).

In Cambridge, Massachusetts, Muslim punks *The Kominas* (meaning "scoundrel" or "person of low birth" in Urdu and Punjabi) headlined a show of about 100 people at the Middle East Restaurant and Night Club. Taking the stage after a fast-paced punk rock band of white male youth, *The Kominas* singer, dressed in a turban and a kurta (traditional South East Asian clothing) leaned into the microphone to scream, "This is for the brown kids!" To this declaration, the white audience members who had danced all night suddenly paused and stared for a moment, realizing this song was not for them. A shoe flew from the back of the room and hit the stage, landing next to *The Kominas* guitarist. In recognition and gratitude for this seemingly anti-George W. Bush sentiment,[26] he picked up the shoe, shouted "Woo-Hoo!," then proceeded to play the band's daring "Suicide Bomb the Gap," which is audacious because it parodies news media coverage about brown-skinned suicide bombers to poke fun at American consumerism and the idea that all Muslim men are terrorists. Near the stage, a group of young women and men gathered, shouting to call attention to themselves as the "brown kids." Within minutes, dancing resumed all around the room to the provocative sound of "Muslim punk."

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[26] In December 2008, former U.S. President George W. Bush appeared in a news conference with the Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki in Baghdad, Iraq. By this point it had been five years since the U.S. invaded Iraq and Bush was visiting Baghdad to make security agreement between the U.S. and Iraq public. At the event, one Iraqi reporter, Muntader al-Zaidi, hurled a pair of shoes at Bush but failed to hit him. When Mr. Zaidi threw the first shoe at Bush, he shouted in Arabic, "This is a gift from the Iraqis; this is the farewell kiss, you dog!" When he threw the second one, he shouted, "This is from the widows, the orphans and those who were killed in Iraq!" Iraqi security agents swiftly wrestled Mr. Zaidi to the ground and beat him. For the full story, see the *New York Times* "Iraqi Journalist Hurls Shoes at Bush and Denounces Him on TV as a 'Dog'" (Meyers and Rubin 2008). The story made international headlines as flinging a shoe at someone is considered a supreme insult in many parts of the world. It signals that the recipient of the attack is lower than the dirty ground we walk on. It inspired activists in the U.S., Canada, and Iran (among others) to throw shoes at effigies of Bush both in support of Mr. Zaidi and in protest against the ongoing occupation of Iraq.

The *War of Ages* and *The Kominas* live music shows are evidence of how Christian Hardcore and Taqwacore youth draw on a punk rock motif of antagonism ─ oppositional symbols, rituals and attitudes ─ to bond religion and punk. Their specific relationships to religious institutions and larger American society impact how they express themselves as religious/punk.

Christian Hardcore groups know that secular punk and metal youth are generally unreceptive to Christianity, which they associate with passivity and social conformity. Therefore, although The *War of A*ges puts out albums on Facedown Records, a Christian record label, they usually tour with secular bands and play for a mix of secular and Christian audiences. Most audiences realize that the group is Christian because they look it up online, read the band's lyrics, or are acquainted with the religious orientation of Facedown. To attain hardcore credibility from both Christian and non-Christian audiences, the members of *War of Ages* use violent rituals – they encourage their audience to push one another – and in effect, present Christians as fighters who stand up for what they believe. Even the band's bellicose name, *War of Ages*, unites the adversarial nature of hardcore with evangelical beliefs about spiritual war in the End Times. As a result, the band forges a space where secular and Christian youth slam dance and sing together.

Taqwacore youth, like their Christian Hardcore counterparts, receive hostility from both punks and traditional Muslims, but they also face rejection from mainstream American society for being Muslim (Peek 2011). They rebel against both Islamophobic American society and Islamic orthodoxy to generate Taqwacore, a scene made by diverse youth who personify "the dialectics between national and transnational locations" (Aparicio 1999: 234; also Kun 2005). To introduce the dilemmas of being "American and Muslim and punk," groups like *The Kominas*

play on America's fear of terrorism to protest unjust wars in Middle-Eastern countries, the commercialization of religion, and global capitalism. They sing about "suicide bombing" the Gap clothing store, an American-based retail chain that has a reputation for hiring children for minimal pay in developing locations like New Delhi, India. If Taqwacores appear vicious, as white Christian Hardcore groups sometimes do, their ferocity maintains a satirical component to avoid ending up on an FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) watch list or even in prison, a concern that stems from their racial and religious marginalization in U.S. society. Like Christian Hardcore groups, Taqwacores deploy antagonism to integrate religion and punk; but they do it with a twinge of sarcasm, to desacralize dominant ideas of America, Islam, and punk rock.

## 4.1 ANTAGONISM

Hardcore punk rests on a motif of antagonism, built on antiauthoritarian ideas and violent symbolism (Blush 2010; Haenfler 2006; Rachman 2006). As an example, consider *Minor Threat*, a hardcore punk band which started in the 1980s after two of its founding members, Ian MacKaye and Jeff Nelson, attended their first punk show. MacKaye says the show inspired him to become punk because he realized "here was a community that was politically confrontational, that was theologically confrontational, that was artistically confrontational, that was sexually confrontational, physically confrontational, musically confrontational" (Azerrad 2001: 122). MacKaye's remark, like those of other hardcore youth, indicates that opposition is the 'core' in hardcore punk.

In this section, I show how Hardcore Christians and Taqwacores draw on a motif of antagonism to meld religion and punk in punk rock milieus. I evaluate how producers from both

scenes use violent imagery to present themselves as religious/punk in subcultural settings. I show that Christian Hardcore punks present themselves as anti-establishment warriors in a fight against evil so that they can save punks before Christ returns. In contrast, Taqwacores present themselves as terrorists in a humorous manner to express American Muslim cultural identities not yet represented in American popular culture or in traditional Islamic communities. As both groups oppose an array of abstract adversaries (Satan and the 'mainstream' church for the Christian youth; Islamophobia and religious conservatism for Muslim youth), they forge the emotional bonds (see Katz 1999) that structure religious punk music scenes.

### 4.1.1 Christian 'Warriors'

Christian Hardcore is commonly described by its adherents as a "brotherhood" of "independent thinkers" who fight for Jesus with "bone-crushing" music and dance. As scholars of masculinity point out, boys and men of all races, nationalities and classes learn that violence is "legitimate and justified when it occurs within a struggle between good and evil" (Jordan and Cowan 1995: 728). So to enact a space for Christian "brotherhood" in secular spheres, the producers of Christian Hardcore draw on the aggressive tenor of hardcore to depict Jesus as a manly warrior who fights for his beliefs. During a subcultural ministries UU workshop, Rebecca (one of a handful of women workshop leaders) told attendees how to make Christianity appealing to young men: "If you tell guys that Jesus was tough, that he wasn't some white, blue-eyed wimpy, skinny guy that 'Jesus would probably knock you out' that gets them. Little boys don't want to worship a wimpy man --- they need to know he's a Bad-A! If he were here now, he'd be a hardcore kid!"

Christian Hardcore youth's admiration for a masculinized Christianity echoes religious educators of the early twentieth century who believed that "the image of Christianity had suffered among Americans, particularly American boys, because of the emasculation of Jesus" (Morgan 2007: 199; also Putney 2001). To make Jesus relevant to boys and men, revivalists like Billy Sunday promised they would "fight till Hell freezes over" (Morgan 2007: 204). Sunday had this fighting phrase placed on a postcard showing him with a balled fist getting ready to punch his imaginary adversary. In Christian Hardcore scenes, devotion to Christ can sound life-threatening. For example, an advertisement for a subcultural ministries group states, "This group is for people who are grounded in their beliefs for Christ. They are not afraid to stand for what they believe. They would die for their faith they would take a bullet they would become a martyr." The image of the fearless warrior – "take a bullet" – positions male Christian punks as brave believers who will go to battle for their beliefs, a position that defends them against the negative judgments of both mainstream Christians who question their dedication to Christ and the hardcore punks who call them "weak" for obeying the Bible. According to Mattie, the lead singer of *For Today*, devotion to Christ takes courage: "I believe that fear is something that is devastating my generation. Whether it's fear of failure or fear of abandonment, it keeps us in a place of bondage, separated from true commitment to God and His intentions" (Steve 2010).

Christian Hardcore youth use a fearless spirituality to make space for religion in punk because it works well in a subculture that glorifies men who fight for their honor. Hardcore punks are renowned for inciting fights with other punks from other scenes and with each other to defend and purify hardcore honor and values (Blush 2010; Rachman 2006). Victor, a hardcore musician and minister, told me how a "culture of honor" in hardcore nourishes a "mindset of violence." When a scene member is debased, he said, "the masculine, testosterone overloaded

thing to do is be like 'I'm going to stop you from dishonoring me. Physically, I'm going to stop you from dishonoring me.'" The song "Saul of Tarsus (The Messenger)" by *For Today* typifies this confrontational stance. Amid a hybrid of deep bass breakdowns and high pitched metal guitar riffs, the singer roars furiously: "I will proclaim the name of Christ to a dead and dying world – I am not ashamed! I am not ashamed!" This "messenger" is clear: Christians have nothing to be ashamed about; it is both brave and honorable to proclaim your beliefs when others disagree with you, a value that is highly esteemed in hardcore. When *For Today* played a live show in a Pittsburgh nightclub, the lead singer wore a t-shirt that read "Fear Less" in large bold font. As he sang the song, he raised his arms high to the sky and directed a crowd of about fifty youth to shout in a unified hardcore spirit – "I am not ashamed!" Alex, an agnostic 19-year-old who participated in the sing-along, appreciated the message because it was gutsy. In an interview with me, he said: "They aren't afraid to stand up for what they believe!" Alex, like other non-religious hardcore youth who go to Christian shows (some of whom play in Christian bands), might not identify as Christian but he did identity with this combative attitude. "They don't believe in the establishment of religion," Alex explains, but "they are bold about their faith and I respect that."

Music producers dramatize the violent symbolism of hardcore to communicate evangelical beliefs about death and eternal damnation in the End Times.[27] The Unified Underground (UU) announcement for the 2011 conference titled "The End is Near" read:

[27] Scene participants do not claim to know exactly when the end will come but most believe it is imminent. They make reference to terrorist attacks, crime, The Colorado Columbine High School shooting, and conflicts in the Middle East to substantiate their belief that Jesus will soon return for final judgment.

> We are called as Christians to live always with the knowledge that the 'The End is Near.' This sense of imminence calls us to prepare for Jesus' return –whenever he comes—by living fully for the purpose to which he has called each of us, being about the Father's business, and spreading the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

With an eye towards the End Times, Christian Hardcore youth believe they are called to destroy their evil nemesis in the darkest corners of the American underground. Like the believers in Protestant fundamentalist movements of the past (Riesebrodt 1998: 62), they present themselves as "agents of God" in a fight against Satan. In an interview with me, Brad claimed, "There's spiritual war going on in every show we play. I feel like Satan is trying to get a hold of these kids and so is God." Brad's weapon in this war is metalcore music. With this weapon, Brad believes he can transform secular, satanic spheres into sacred ones of redemption.

Producers use images of corporeal death to express an apocalyptic worldview in large part because of the violent undercurrent that structures hardcore and metalcore music shows. At the live shows, it is common to see young men wearing shirts that read "Eat a Bullet," "Hatebreed" and "Life Ruiner." This emphasis on violence and death underscores why the organizers of the UU titled one of their meetings "Resurrection" and decorated their fellowship space with corpses, crossbones, and cemeteries. For this meeting, they also set the tone for Christian fellowship by handing out a skull and cross bone carrying bag, a pack of black tissues, and a glow in the dark skeleton keychain. Even the names of Christian Hardcore/metalcore bands are identifiable by their haunting terms. Metalcore[28] bands *After the Burial* and *With Blood*

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[28] While I set out to study Christian Hardcore, I found that this scene intersects with metal and in some cases they completely collapse into one another to form "metalcore," a new genre of music that Christian youth had a heavy hand in developing. Metalcore mixes hardcore punk with extreme metal, both of which are "based around ideologies of personal empowerment, independence and self-control" (Khan-Harris 2007, 44). Christian metalcore music includes the heavy breakdowns that ground hardcore punk, particularly those found in straight edge hardcore

*Comes Cleansing* adopt the dark, doomsday language of Revelations theology to advise that physical annihilation brings the promise of the afterlife. Likewise, the sonic qualities of Christian Hardcore and metalcore bands are explicated in horrific terms. An advertisement for a live *After the Burial* show described the band's music as a "freight train of brutality and sheer brute force" that makes "your brain to fire on all cylinders in order to process the amount of material that is currently being pounded into your ears" (altarbar.com, Retrieved June 5, 2011).

**Figure 4-1: "The End Is Near" handmade sign, Cornerstone festival 2010**

Producers use these images of corporeal annihilation not only because of their strong association with hardcore/metalcore music, but also because warfare is the most enduring imagery in the popular theologies of Protestantism. As Mark Juergensmeyer (2000: 160) argues, "Protestant preachers everywhere have encouraged their flocks to wage war against the forces of evil, and their homilies are followed with hymns about 'Christian soldiers,' fighting 'the good

(Haenfler 2006), but it also encompasses the speedy, intricate guitar riffs of extreme metal (Khan-Harris 2007). Even the vocals blend the two genres as they move from crisp hardcore chants to haunting, ear piercing shrieks that bring to mind the bowels of hell.

fight,' and struggling 'manfully onward.'" This is not a new phenomenon. Harriet Crabtree (1989/1990) finds that Protestant hymnals, old and new, urge adherents to wage war for Jesus, literally. Baptists, Methodists, and Mormons have all included the processional "Onward Christian Soldiers," an English 19th century hymn, in their worship services. The lyrics, in part:

> At the sign of triumph Satan's host doth flee;
> On then, Christian soldiers, on to victory!
> Hell's foundation quiver at the shout of praise;
> Brothers lift your voices, loud your anthems raise

Christian record labels carefully scrutinize the lyrics of their bands to make sure that they are promoting Christian values. In an interview with me, one publicity agent of a Christian record company said, "Lyrics are the main way we can tell what a band's spiritual intentions are." Consequently, if a band's lyrics are not Godly, they will not be signed onto the record label. The weight Christian record labels put on lyrics is significant because lyrics help define hardcore brotherhood. Hardcore has a reputation for biting social and political commentary as well as a longstanding sing-along tradition. When audience members are not moshing at hardcore shows, they are climbing on top of one another trying to grab the microphone or chanting the lyrics at the top of their lungs in unison. Hence, while Christian producers assert that they "do not shove religion down people's throats," they do compel their audience to scream a Christian message out loud with others.

The Biblical theme most prominent in Christian Hardcore lyrics is that of spiritual war. In Christian Hardcore/metalcore songs, violence symbolizes divine justice in the End Times.

“There will be Violence!” by the metalcore group *Impending Doom*, promises that their God is omnipotent and angry. This is part of the song:

> For the unbelievers
> Who try to retain their
> “Faith in humanity”
> I promise there will be violence!
> There will be violence!

The *Impending Doom* “The Will Be Violence” (Facedown Records, 2010) album cover’s apocalyptic image of the heavens crashing down on earth connotes a supernatural purification process in which Jesus comes back to massacre this-world’s demons.[29] Other songs such as “The Army of One” by *Sleeping Giant*, paint a picture of the darkest and most evil days in the End Times when Christian will be oppressed for their beliefs. In the verse that follows, the band depicts Christians as righteous victims who are persecuted for their beliefs by an authoritarian government but will ultimately win this spectacular war between good and evil when Christ comes back.

> There is an antichrist agenda you will mark that day when you follow the idea of your God in Your Own Way. […] We all knew this was coming but we never thought we'd see the final Christian bound gagged shot on our TV. As the sun sets slowly on that final waking hour you will smile smug and sweetly as you watch believers cower […] Welcome, the New World Order!

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[29] End Times theology is not new to contemporary Christian rock music (Stowe 2011). Songs about the apocalypse, Satan, and redemption were predominant in 1970s Jesus rock music. One important figure in Christian rock, Larry Norman, often sang about the Rapture. He closed his song “One Thousand Years before Christ” (1968) in a way that suggests that the return of Jesus is getting closer and closer with time.

This song opens their album *Dread Champion of the Last Days* and blatantly lays out the Biblical beliefs that structure this music. But the lyrics to "Army of One" are not screamed like most of the songs on this album. Instead, they are delivered as a sermon against an audible backdrop of human roars and pandemonium. *For Today*, a band famous for its "crushing music," depicts Christian suffering and strife as the ultimate expression of liberation. Their song "The Watchman" which includes the phrase "Take up your sword and choose your side" specifically warns American audiences to accept Jesus as their personal savior before Final Judgment.[30] Before playing the song at a secular club called *EMO's* in Austin, Texas, Mattie (the lead singer) told the audience that the song was "for every single person in our country" and that it was the group's hope that their audience will come to "know the same hope, the same fearlessness, the same authority" that they found in Jesus Christ. Steadfastly, Mattie shouted, "We are standing here tonight in the name of freedom; uncompromising, unchallengeable freedom that no one ever, ever will be able to shake and if you don't know my Jesus - Find him tonight!" (YouTube, Retrieved December 25, 2011).

Christian band members personify war between good and evil through their bodily gestures and stage presence, not only in their lyrics and album art. They change from outward victorious, prideful, and sacrificial moves to more closed, inward, sheltering, protective ones. Their formula is to extend arms out and move slightly from side to side – in a manner that resembles the crucified Christ – then draw inwards and end the series of moves bent down, facing the ground, while clutching the microphone and screaming. Akin to military sergeants, performers take directive roles at their shows, telling their audience "move around!" Upon this

[30] These beliefs about the Second Coming indicate that the threat of terrorism, like that of the nuclear bomb, makes some Christians more apt to use Bible prophecy to talk about and express faith (see Boyer 1992).

direction, a cluster of young men will run about in a circular manner, stomping and throwing their fists in the air.

War also is dramatized through the ritual of hardcore dance. Stompers jump up and down with all their strength as they simultaneously spin their arms in a vigorous, exhausting manner. Their dancing looks like a helicopter (widely known as the 'windmill'); arms spin in a swift circular fashion as though preparing for flight. Oftentimes it leads to a spin kick or a jumping spin kick. The rapidity of the stomper moves are periodically punctuated by slow breakdowns which correspond to deep bass drops that structure hardcore music. In these moments, stompers crouch down, picking up their feet from left to right and right to left. Those who decline to join the stompers stay clear of their fast moving limbs by forming a semi-circle that stretches approximately five feet from the dancers. It is rare that someone is knocked in the face or harmed by the stompers. The stompers are generally in control of their forceful performance and usually sensitive to those around them. At hardcore shows, dancing is different than physically fighting. Brawls are seldom accidental. During the set of *Stray from the Path*, a young man paraded around with his chest poked out and his arms bowed to the sides. He randomly shoved others around while no one was slam dancing. Suddenly, he pinned a guy to the ground and punched him several times. Within moments, a bouncer dragged him out of the venue in a headlock. Angered, the guitarist of *Stray from the Path* grabbed the microphone and reprimanded this man for starting fights without reason: "Don't do that shit here! ---Have fun." To this the audience responded with cheers. For the song that followed, they remained calm. No one moshed or moved around. Nor did they sing along. Then, for the next song, the singer told everyone to "make a circle pit." The audience became energetic – as if waiting to be directed about how and when to dance.

Christian producers combine the sounds and codes of hardcore punk with End Times theology to fulfill their calling to perform subcultural ministiries. The warrior imagery they deploy symbolically bridges a subculture grounded in violent, apocalyptic symbolism to Biblical beliefs about the Rapture. Through this peculiar amalgamation, Christian punks enact scenes for the rejected that exist between traditional religion and secular punk.

### 4.1.2 Muslim 'Terrorists'

In a punk rock way, Taqwacores deploy the common fear of terrorism that many U.S. citizens hold to squelch political claims that the West is in the midst of a "clash of civilizations" (Aslan 2006; Hedges 2006) and that Muslims cannot truly be American (Mohamed and O'Brien 2011; Peek 2011). Upset that some Americans suspect that they are terrorists until proven innocent, members of *The Kominas* released *Wild Nights in Guantanamo Bay*, an album that speaks to what it is like to be Muslim in the contemporary United States. In a public interview, Shaj, the co-founder of the group, contends that the album "says offensive things" just to "take the piss out of that whole Pakistani-American thing." On this album, the group takes the sting out of a stigmatized identity by maximizing the stigma employed by media and political pundits to describe Pakistanis (see Goffman 1963; also Waldner, Martin and Capeder 2006). With a tongue in cheek title, the album's independently made Parental Advisory label reads "Explosive Taqwa." Is this terrorist or anti-terrorist propaganda? Is it poking fun at America's fear of Muslims? Blending Western and Eastern symbols, the album cover plays up themes of the unintelligible, inviting viewers to contemplate their fears of cultural hybrids. The gender ambiguous subject on the cover pairs a zebra striped mini-dress with a black burqa. S/he stands

tall and proud as s/he holds the firearm up in a cease fire, a gesture that speaks to her/his capacity to maintain her/his defiant front in the face of assault.

**Figure 4-2: *The Kominas*, "Wild Nights in Guantanamo Bay," 2008**

Like other Taqwacores, the members of *The Kominas* reclaim "terrorist" to make a space for Muslims in popular culture, specifically in punk rock. The band members never received much attention as Muslims until after 9/11. After that point, they were teased as terrorists by classmates and verbally harassed in public spaces and grew angry with both American society and religious fundamentalism. *The Kominas* wrote one of the most popular Taqwacore songs, "Sharia Law in the U.S.A.," a punk tune that blends Bollywood and rockabilly music and uses the satirical depiction of fanaticism to oppose Islamophobia. In a public interview, one member explained, "Sharia Law in the USA" is about being on the defensive. It's the conditions we find ourselves in." This humorous song is part of a long tradition of "gallows humor," a form of "humor that grows out of a tragic situation in which an oppressed group attempts to transform

their misery by poking fun at their oppressors" (Fine 1983: 173). The song begins with an audio recording of the collapse of the World Trade Center. Amidst the audible backdrop of helicopters and police sirens, the vocals raise to a snappy, Rock-a-Billy melody and opens with "I am an Islamist. I am the anti-Christ." After a few lines which allude to how trendy it is to be on America's most wanted list and be spied on by the FBI as a child, the song morphs into a roaring tongue in-cheek-chorus with antagonizing lyrics ─ "Sharia Law in the---U-S-A." The song challenges America and Islam by likening Islamic law to U.S. laws established to obstruct terrorism such as the Patriot Act.

Marwan, the lead singer of *Al-Thawra* (The Revolution in Arabic), suggests that shocking symbols that play up the theme of Islamic radicalism are a practical way to start conversations about religious and racial discrimination in America. He thinks that "pissing people off has a lot more to do with forcing people to think than it really is just about pissing people off" (Majeed 2009) and that making people angry can bring them closer together (see Gould 2009). Yet, those who are perceived as Muslim by non-Muslims do not have to do much to provoke outrage (Read 2008). Thus, Marwan's assertion that he provokes anger to make people think is something that comes with the territory; many Taqwacores are already "pissing people off" because of the way others perceive them.

Unlike Christian Hardcore groups, Muslim members of Taqwacore bands are not at liberty to express anger in public. As Peek (2011: 68) points out, "Since 9/11, Muslims have been treated with suspicion and contempt as they enter public spaces that antiterrorism experts have labeled "potential targets." Potential targets are places associated with drawing large crowds of people such as subways, sporting events, and music concerts. In other words, people

who are perceived to be Muslim are rendered dangerous for simply being Muslim in the public sphere, much less for showing rage or exhibiting violent behavior. Consider for instance a song that plays during *Taqwacore: The Birth of Punk Islam* (Majeed 2009) as Taqwacores drive around in a tour bus and get met with intimidating gazes from white people in neighboring cars.

> I notice that everyone is staring at me
> And I wonder why
> Suddenly a guy in the back stands up
> And he starts pointing at me
> And everyone's eyes turn bright red
> They are filled with rage
> Or maybe it's fear

Since Taqwacores cannot "go off" in the same way that white hardcore punks can, they use satire to transmit opposition in punk settings in ways that re-imagine social life (see Michael 2013). An example is the "Texistan" t-shirt for *Sunny Ali and the Kid*, a Taqwacore group comprised of two Pakistani Americans who play part country, part indie-rock music. Green bold font letters that read PAKISTAN are placed atop a plain white outline of the Texas state. The image constitutes what Knight (2004: 7) calls an "open symbol" – it means what you want it to mean. In a public interview, Kid, the drummer of the band, recalls, "I remember my mom saw the logo for the first time and went 'Oh!' and immediately following that was like 'I'm not exactly sure why that's offensive to me. What is that even saying?'" This is the kind of reaction the group has come to want and anticipates. Sunny Ali says, "Maybe if it's the right amount of provocative you're going to ask yourself: why is it offending me?" (All Our Noise 2010).

For some, the design plays on America's worst nightmare: that terrorist will "win" and Islamic countries will take over the United States. For others, it is simply the group's homage to country music. But for many Taqwacores, the Texistan t-shirt is funny because country music playing Pakistanis defy all stereotypes. As American Muslim punks, they relate to the absurdity, the complete disdain for consistency (see Michael 2013).

**Figure 4-3: *Sunny Ali & The Kid,* "Texistan" t-shirt emblem**

Taqwacore producers also present themselves as religious and punk when they exaggerate stereotypes about Muslims to criticize war. For example, Riz M.C., who played the leading role in *Four Lions,* a comedy about terrorism that followed four ordinary British Muslims in their journey to become jihadist, comments on the reductive, racializing features of Islamophobia. In his provocative song, "Post 9-11 Blues," Riz M.C. raps "Darkie ones are terrorists – How simple can it be?" As pointedly, Riz M.C. borrows the panic over terrorism to talk about how Western governments use violence to secure safety and freedom. In the spirit of the nursery rhyme "Jack and Jill went up the

tree; K-I-S-S-I-N-G," the chorus of the "Post 9-11 blues" in part goes "Bush and Blair in a tree; K-I-L-L-I-N-G."

*Secret Trial Five* draw on the image of religious fanaticism to raise awareness about the wars and national security measures that threaten the lives of Muslim people around the world. The band got their name from five terrorist suspects who were held under a security certificate, a legal device in Canada that allows indefinite detainment and/or deportation of suspected terrorists without charge or trial. Angered by these legislative injustices as well as the U.S.-led wars in the Middle East, *Secret Trial Five* wrote the song "Middle Eastern Zombies" which includes a narrative of revenge: "You've killed so many and now they're out of their minds." This song weds stereotypes of Islamic extremism – "they're out of their minds" – with youth culture's fixation on the supernatural (see Clark 2003b) to alert punk audiences to the death toll in the Middle East.

Taqwacores consider *Acrassicauda* (meaning 'black scorpion' in Latin), a heavy metal band from Iraq featured in the documentary film *Heavy Metal in Baghdad* (Moretti and Alvi 2007), part of the Taqwacore family because they are rebellious Muslim youth who write about the atrocities of war. After years of struggling to secure a safe practice place in their war torn country, the band members immigrated to New York City. On their first U.S. tour, they played a show with *Al-Thawra*, for $8 at the Empty Bottle, an alternative music venue in Chicago. Plastered in vibrant graphic 11x14 posters and hand-drawn black and white flyers, the venue looked like most other rock bars struggling to survive from the music of local and emerging acts. The ambiance was dark, gritty but not filthy, inexpensive but not cheap. Men and women wore black leather jackets, others a dark hoodie, long, shaved or cropped hair. The members of *Acrassicauda* looked like their audience. The slick, bald head singer of *Acrassicauda* paraded

around the stage bare-chested beaming joyously before shouting: “I’m going to ask you a question and you have to give me a straight answer. Can you do that?” – “Yeah!,” the audience yelled. He then threw his head back and lifted the microphone up towards the sky to growl: “Are you ready for the sound of WAR? -- This song is called Massacre!” In this song, the sonic booms of speedy metal guitar riffs do not symbolize a spiritual war which occurs in the supernatural realm as it does in Christian Hardcore/metalcore. For *Acrassicauda*, the consequences of war are depicted in literal terms, “They ripped my flesh. They stripped my bones,” because the wars they have experienced are happening in the here and now. They do not portray war as liberating, as many Christian groups do; for them, war is cruel and unjust.

Taqwacores draw on the violent imagery common to various genres of hardcore, crust, and metal to raise awareness about American imperialism and war. Take for instance the “Chicago no-fly-listed experimental doom crust” event flyer for *Al-Thawra* (Figure 4-7), a multi-racial group who wants to give the impression that its members are a threat to America’s national security. By playing up themes of danger, the group not only appeals to a crowd of curious spectators and allied punk youth but also reminds the audience about the war on terrorism.

**Figure 4-4: *Al-Thawra,* "Chicago no-fly-listed experimental doom crust" event flyer**

On this flyer, the Eye of Providence atop of a hand indicates that greed, not God, determines human destiny. The frightening interaction between the young boys is posed in relation to this U.S. symbol of capitalist domination. It is unclear whether the child's violent act stems from a gun hungry nation or terrorist militancy. Either way, in line with the politics of *Al-Thawra*, the image connects economic empire and consumerist habits to global warfare. "Hatred Thread," a song about economic corruption on *Edifice*, closes with the verse:

> Let's turn blind eyes to all the war crimes
> That we can tolerate to maintain our lives
> So you can live a happy life
> Within ignorant limitations

The 'we' in this song is privileged Americans who can go about their daily lives unfettered by the atrocities of war and extreme deprivation. *Al-Thawra* has used music to promote peace since

its inception. The front cover of their first album reads “Who Benefits from War?” in three languages: Arabic, Spanish and English, referencing the literal wars in the Middle-East and the struggles new and second generation immigrants face in multi-ethnic North America where racial privilege is white and religious privilege Christian.

**Figure 4-5: *Al-Thawra* (The Revolution), "Who Benefits from War?," 2008**

By exploiting the very images that the media uses to demonize American Muslims, producers intend to construct scenes that challenge Islamophobic stereotypes and thereby diversify American Muslim communities. As the Taqwacore webzine states, “Taqwacore includes believers, atheists, and everyone in between, as well as artists and friends from non-Muslim backgrounds who identify with taqwacore on a personal or political level” (Taqwacore.wordpress.com, Retrieved November 29, 2009). As one non-Muslim immigrant Taqwacore put it in an interview with me, “That’s the thing I like about Taqwacore. Those kids are saying: You know what? We’re as American as anybody else and we’re going to show you through music, we’re doing like punk music.”

### 4.1.3 Discussion of Antagonism

Christian Hardcore and Taqwacore producers deploy the anti-authoritarian ideas and violent symbolism of hardcore to present themselves as religious/punk in punk rock spaces, but they use these same tools differently. Christian Hardcore youth realize that secular hardcore punks do not like listening to stories about a passive, loving Jesus Christ; these stories make God seem feminine. For this reason, Christian Hardcore punks adapt anti-authoritarian ideas from hardcore punk to show that God is the ulimate 'Master of the universe' and for this reason 'He' is the only one who hardcore youth should fear and obey. Through violent symbolism in their lyrics, album covers, stage performances and dancing, Hardcore Christians present themselves as brave warriors in a fight against Satan in the End Times. In this scene, the "activity system" (Irwin 1977) is aggressive – people push one another, bang their heads forcefully, and release their frustrations to music that is intentionally made to sound scary. Christian punks use this system to create a scene where Christians and non-Christians alike mosh, sing, and make meaning together.

For the producers of Taqwacore, anti-authoritarianism ideas are rooted in resistance to racism, Islamophobia, and religious conventions, not in orthodox religious beliefs. They draw on the mainstream media's depiction of brown people as terrorists and devout fanatics to resist Islamophobia in American popular culture and, at the same time, extricate themselves from the dogma of Islam. By using violent symbolism satirically, Taqwacores promote social cohesion (see Michael 2013). In effect, they construct scenes where cultural, political, and spiritual Muslims can exchange ideas and express their feelings about what it is like to be excluded from white punk rock spaces and from their traditional religious communities. In short, Christian Hardcore and Muslim Taqwacore youth deploy the same antagonistic tool to present as

religious/punk within the parameters of their social location, but use this tool in different ways to build unique punk music scenes.

## 5.0 DEFINING CHRISTIAN HARDCORE AND TAQWACORE PUNK

Christian Hardcore and Taqwacore punk rock scenes are comprised of "like-minded" individuals who share common outlooks, tastes, and styles (see Futrell et al. 2006; Haunss and Leach 2009; Straw 2004). Scene participants commonly have mutual enemies, share similar beliefs, and like the same music but they also have their fair share of internal arguments about who they are as a group. The previous chapters show that Christian Hardcore and Taqwacore youth modify punk rock to make religion their own and that they adapt antagonistic imagery and performances to fuse religion and punk in subcultural music settings. In this chapter, I look closely at scene definitions. The first subsection examines how both Hardcore Christians and Taqwacores internally define who fits and who does not fit. The second subsection underscores the internal disagreements Christian Hardcore and Taqwacore youth have about defining themselves to outsiders. Disagreements about group definitions matter because they reveal what members feel is at stake in this music, what they care about, and how they envision the way things ought to be. As Blee (2012: 17) puts it, disagreements about group definitions "are strategic," these definitions guide social action.

## 5.1 INTERNAL DEFINITIONS

Race consciousness is absent in white-dominated Christian Hardcore scenes, but in Taqwacore, race is a common topic of discussion. When Christian Hardcore youth are asked to describe what their music culture looks like, participants say it is "diverse" because of the various subcultural scenes that come together at live music shows. Taqwacores also stress diversity within racial categories, emphasizing that they want to make a space that allows different brown youth to unite in their struggles against racism and Islamophobia. But unlike the white Christian Hardcore youth who are racially privileged and leave race out of their talk, Taqwacores openly discuss the racial and ethnic make-up of their group on blogs, discussion forums, and at live music shows. Their music is for "outsiders."

There are also clear differences in the way that Christian Hardcore and Taqwacore youth use gender to build scene cohesion. Christian Hardcore youth use physical conflicts, in the form of aggressive dancing and belligerent mosh pits, to create space for male bonds that surpass secular/religious divides. Taqwacores, on the other hand, make an effort to be more gender inclusive. They encourage alternative visions of Muslim masculinity and femininity in ways that do not conform to the misogynistic caricatures common in mainstream media.

### 5.1.1 Christian Hardcore

Christian Hardcore music is the domain of whites, yet this is seldom acknowledged by adherents. When I ask interviewees to describe the people who attend hardcore shows, Hardcore Christians typically respond that the scene is "really diverse." Yet rather than talk about diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, or class, they speak about how different music scenes, like metal and punk,

overlap and influence one another. In an interview with me, Wes, who works as a promoter at a Christian-owned all ages music venue, describes the live music shows he attends as "really diverse." He remarks, "We're all mutts now…it's like one big lump sum of, I don't even know what to call it – hardcore, metal – I like to just call it all 'underground music.'" This notion of diversity, one defined by subcultural difference, helps explains why the annual subcultural ministries conference is called "Unified Underground."

Hardcore Christians often overlook or downplay the lack of racial diversity in their community. As an example, many scene members will point out that one of their biggest stars, Mattie Montgomery of *For Today*, is black. In doing so, they suggest that people of color have an opportunity to thrive in this music. Correspondingly, some Hardcore Christians insist that this music culture is more racially diverse than meets the eye. In an interview with me, Paul, the lead singer of a straight-edge Christian Hardcore band, says, "Just because that's [white] the predominant [race], doesn't mean that nobody else is involved." He goes on to explain, "Hispanics, blacks, Indians, all different kinds of people are in the scene…and the places that don't accept it, to me, they don't really know the meaning of hardcore." Yet as Paul discusses racial marginalization, he stresses that Christians experience discrimination in this music. He comments that the people who sing the mantra of hardcore unity but "won't accept a Christian or an African American…do not really believe what they say they believe." Here he positions Christians and African Americans as two distinct groups, which defines Christians as white.

**Figure 5-1: Cornerstone promo poster, "The Underground: Only the Finest Circle Pits," courtesy of the artist, Thor Uremovich.**

Hardcore Christians say they want “everybody” to feel welcome to their community, but their posters, flyers, and album covers make whiteness and hardcore music seem synonymous. The promotional poster for “The Underground” at Cornerstone, a Christian rock festival that celebrates “the great diversity of the Body of Christ,” illustrates how evangelical Christians naturalize the connection between hardcore music and whites. The sign, which announces that Cornerstone has “Only the Finest Circle Pits” (Figure 5-1) is a sketch of two young identically dressed white youth with short cropped hair, dancing with their fists and elbows in the air. The poster centralizes whiteness. The three dark shadows in the image provide a contrast to the glowing white arms in the center. Significantly, the white figures are elevated above the individuals whose whiteness is not completely obvious. In the other image, which advertises “Fine Coffee and Good Music,” a similar racial trope is used. The image directs the eye towards the center, to the white hand holding a white cup. Again, whiteness is accentuated by the emphatic blackness of the silhouette.

The racial make-up of the actual “Underground” tent at Cornerstone does not look that much different than the poster. Take for example *The Red Baron*, a straight edge hardcore band,

who played on its stage. The crowd at this show was almost entirely white. Most of the young white youth wore short haircuts, gym shorts and white t-shirts or went bare-chested, making their maleness "apparent" (West and Zimmerman 1987). A few donned Christian punk and hardcore band patches on torn black denim jackets, a style that is commonly associated with thrash metal. Before starting the set, the singer of *Red Baron* said, "let's pray" which prompted all in attendance, straight-edgers and thrashers alike, to remove their baseball hats, close their eyes, and bow their heads. The lead singer asked God to bless "the punks, goth, hardcore kids, and metal kids" and then ended the prayer with a unified "Amen." At that cue, the young men put their baseball hats back on and lifted their eyes towards the stage. Immediately after, the singer screamed, "Alright, let's have some fun!," and in that instant the guitars dropped into a chunky deep breakdown, a sound that instantaneously inspired several individuals to move to the center of the tent, kicking and spinning their arms around in a fast, circular manner. A few hopped to the beat from one side of the outer-limits of the "pit" to the other. Others jumped up and down in place, clenching their fists, swaying back and forth to the beat. Notably, the only black man at *The Red Baron* show danced full force for the entire show. No one got near him.

Christian Hardcore bands work to lessen secular and religious differences solely within the boundaries of race. They pray for punk and metal kids and then mosh madly to brutal hardcore music but their mosh pits are usually controlled by angry-looking white men. Given the history of racial violence in America (Blee 2002; Wood 2009), it is fair to assume that religious or secular men of color are reluctant to join a bunch of mad white guys as they sing and dance about Jesus.

While Hardcore Christians are reluctant to describe their music scene in terms of race, they are unapologetic about the fact that their community is for men. Hardcore music, Christian

or not, is a male dominated subculture (Haenfler 2006; Leblanc 1999). The gender imbalance at hardcore shows is striking, so much so that a secular musician remarked, “If you [a woman] go to a show like that you have to feel awkward because there are so many guys there.” Indeed, contemporary hardcore music is one of the most macho genres in punk rock. Lauraine Leblanc, author of *Pretty in Punk: Girls’ Gender Resistance in a Boys’ Subculture*, argues that from the onset, punk rock culture was more accessible to women than most other rock n’ roll subgenres but that hardcore changed that. She writes, “Punk rock’s disdain for virtuosity, its lyrical focus on topics other than male teenage sexual angst, and its focus on style allowed girls more access to the subculture’s core than they had ever before enjoyed in any British or U.S. youth subculture” (Leblanc 1999: 48). When hardcore bands emerged onto the scene in the 1980s, women got pushed out and men took over. Bored in white suburban America, male youth started going to live music shows to let out their aggressions (Blush 2010). Lyrically, their rendition of punk took on a ferocious tone and the sound became more heavy and face-paced than “artsy” punk rock music. In line with the change in the music, the dancing also became more intense, even violent. Leblanc (1999: 51) explains:

> It was at these hardcore shows that the pogo dance, even in its strangling version, became too tame to keep up with the accelerated pace of the [hardcore] music. Enter the slam dance, which then developed into thrashing, a seemingly more violent form of slam dance, in which, in response to the choppy rhythms of hardcore punk, fans began to thrash in the area in front of the stage, henceforth known as “the thrash pit” or, simply “the pit” […]

The thrash dance was a dance of male hardcore solidarity. Male thrashers, surrounded by male audience members, caught male stage divers as they leapt into the male crowd below them

(Leblanc 1999). Women who ventured into the thrash pit were subjected to sexual harassment in the form of groping and name calling, in addition to elbowing and shoving.

The "Only the Finest Circle Pits" Cornerstone sign (Figure 5-1) reserves mosh pits for men. The only woman on the poster smiles as she looks at the men in the pit from the sidelines, an image that implies women are happy to stay out of the way and watch men mosh. In an interview with me, Joseph P., the pastor of a 2,000 member nondenominational church, claims that hardcore is dominated by young men because of the "whole energy level." "Hardcore is supposed to be angry and violent on some level," he asserts, "I guess that's why they call it hardcore." In equating masculinity with aggression and femininity with passivity, Pastor Joseph talks about "men" and "women" as two distinct kinds of people and implies that women are turned off by the "energy level." He suggests, as another one of my interviewee says directly, that "women have nothing to be angry about" and therefore do not like this music. Pastor Joseph is not alone in his gendered assessment of hardcore. In the company of two male friends at UU, Julia explains, that women do not go to hardcore shows for biological reasons. She thinks women are "naturally weaker" and because of this they settle their grievances with each other through gossip and "back biting," not through physical conflict. Her friend Victor, a man in his 30s who plays guitar for a successful Christian Hardcore group, also believes that women are naturally passive and therefore do not show up to hardcore shows.

Interviewees are aware that women are in the minority at hardcore shows but few see this as problematic. Rather, Hardcore Christians feel it is best that women stay out because that makes it easier for Christian men to abstain from sexual sin. Male interviewees often talk about women purely as objects of lust, and in effect, secular, God-less temptation. Brad tells me that the music he plays helps him avoid improper sexual affairs. He explains that most women do not

like “darker, grungier metal bands” and “the chicks that dig it are not our type anyway.” Later in the interview, Brad implies that the secular “chicks” who do “dig” the harder music genres will ‘get with’ anybody. He thinks these women are unattractive because they pursue men sexually. To Brad, they express what Mimi Schippers (2007: 96) terms pariah femininity, “characteristics or practices that, when embodied by women in the setting, are simultaneously stigmatized and feminized.” His view of secular subcultural women resonates with what Pastor Skip said about subcultural women at Unified Underground. During his sermon, Skip cautioned hardcore men against falling from God’s grace by “womanizing” and “whore mongering” at live music shows. This was the only time that Pastor Skip spoke about women, and he did so in solely sexual terms and in ways that demonized female sexuality.

By assuming that men are biologically predisposed to pursue women sexually and that mixed gender spaces are inevitably sexually charged, Christian Hardcore youth imply that male controlled spaces are good for their Christian community. Some Christian Hardcore men actually feel that the presence of women at hardcore shows can get in the way of hardcore solidarity. In a private interview with me, Victor explains that hardcore is “male chauvinist” because if there is just one woman at a show, all the men will want to “get with her.” Other interviewees indicate that this rivalry hurts the “brotherhood.” Paul tells me that he openly expresses his faith in God because he wants to “avoid certain temptations like um people wanting us to party or girls trying to ‘get with' the guys in our band.” When I met Paul, he was in the process of organizing a team of experienced Christian Hardcore men who take turns mentoring and praying for Christian musicians out on the road. Band members can call the network ‘hotline’ and request a prayer, 24/7, when they feel like they are struggling with “temptations and trials” like sex. To him,

women represent sex and he feels that sex gets in the way of his relationship with the Christian Hardcore community.

Christian Hardcore youth keep women out of their community by engaging in violent rituals. At *The Chariot* show in Pittsburgh, the crowd resembled a swarm of bees trying earnestly to get ahold of the microphone to direct sing-alongs. Young men climbed on top of one another, reaching for the microphone, swirling and kicking madly in a tight space around the band members who had set up on the floor, in front of the stage. The bass player slung his guitar around his body over and again, an act that made it all the more dangerous for the audience to get close to the microphone. The crowd seemed to be energized by the threat of injury. By the end of the show, about 7 different young men had taken control of the microphone. There were a few women present in the pit. One young woman jumped up and down vigorously as she screamed the lyrics. Other hardcore women danced on stage along with their male peers but none of the hardcore women ever held the microphone or played instruments as did their male peers.

Hardcore and metalcore, Christians and non-Christian, men come together in the pit for breakdowns, which might explain why Christian Hardcore/metalcore musicians want to, as a few of my interviewees put it, "get the pit going" when they play live.[31] Present-day hardcore/metalcore music accentuates the "breakdown," a guitar riff comprised of a few single notes that is chugged slowly and rhythmically in a monotonous fashion. It also usually involves a slow crash cymbal / snare combination that contrasts with a cut time pulse on a double bass drum

[31] Chris Leiden, a hardcore enthusiast and gender studies student, reviewed this chapter. Upon reading this section about hardcore dancing, he commented, "With a lot of aggression and few outlets, males frequently get into boxing, football, etc. Moshing (and possibly the actual music) is another outlet and possibly one for the misfits who don't like sports, the religious people that don't fit into their church, and then has the ability to mix the spiritual and the secular crowd." In the pit, outcasts of all stripes are made to feel like they are part of the larger community. In this ritual space, they take pride in their stigmatized identities and find release for their anger with others.

petal or the double bass drum will match the guitar riff note for note.[32] The repetitious vocal line is another prominent feature of contemporary breakdown-laden hardcore music. During the breakdown, the singer will roar the most intense, angry, or meaningful verse of the song. Take for instance the breakdown in "Immanuel" by *For Today* in which the singer roars "Repent or Perish!! --- Repent or Perish!!"

A Google search for the terms "hardcore breakdowns" results in YouTube videos and online forums that list "The Top 10 Hardcore Breakdowns," the "Most Epic Hardcore/Metalcore Breakdowns," and a discussion forum, "What is the best breakdown of all time???" These webpages showcase breakdowns from various bands but typically do not provide the songs in full. This is because hardcore music is often considered "good" if it has "brutal breakdowns," so the rest of the song is not as important. Breakdowns define a song because these incite thrashing and moshing, which take center stage at live music shows. Even the crowds that mosh all night will take it up a notch when the breakdown ensues, especially if they like the band. Ross Haenfler (2006: 20), a sociologist who studies straight edge hardcore, writes, "The kids reserve their most outstanding dance moves for the breakdown, wind milling, floor punching, and kung-fu kicking their way from one side of the pit to the other…Though outsiders may view moshing as violent, dangerous, or anti-social, for insiders it is a fun, communal, and essential element of what sets hardcore apart from other musical genres."

Bands like an active pit because it signals that they play a part in defining who fits into the community. At *The Chariot* show in Pittsburgh, a band member announced that Josh, the singer, had to stay home with his wife because she was having a baby. To this news, no one booed. Instead, the crowd applauded. In a review of the show, Sean explained why he did not

[32] Thanks to Leiden for this rich description of the hardcore breakdown.

miss the singer: “Without a vocalist, they were able to set up on the floor, and used guys from other bands and the audience as a fill-in for Josh. As soon as they started the first song and the microphone got handed into the audience, the raw emotion of that show began to pour out, and didn’t stop the entire time.” Samuel, a tall, stout man with a bald head and scruffy red beard, thinks that a successful show is one in which the audience gets involved by moshing and singing. In an interview with me, he exclaims, “I love it when they just go nuts!” I was struck by his friendly demeanor and warm smile, especially after seeing him scream, “If the person next to you isn’t moving, shove em’!” on stage earlier that night. When I asked Samuel about the pit, he boasted, “It’s always been rough,” but that it seems to have gotten more “rough” in the last four or five years. He encourages an active pit but does not like it when people take it too far and break into fist fights. Samuel, like other scene members, thinks that if you knock someone down with a hard kick or an elbow, you should stop what you are doing, pick the person up, and make sure they are okay. Samuel’s comment about dancing reveals that in this music, shoving one another is not only a formula for having a good time and settling differences, it also makes young men feel like they are looking out for one another (by picking up those who have fallen).

Violent conflicts are a mode of unity in this music culture as it is a way that young men form common ground.[33] Seth, a columnist for the Pacific Northwest Inlander, describes a live *Chariot* show in Spokane, Washington as energetic and unpredictable. After noting that he suffered a compressed joint in his lower back at the show, Seth affirms, “The pain and the doctor’s bill was worth it.” In his review, Seth recommends that the audience sees past the faith of the band and join their mosh pit. He claims, “The Chariot has always been forthcoming about the band members’ Christian faith, and they have addressed it lyrically. At his core, Scogin [the

[33] See Kathleen Blee’s (2002: 171) book *Inside Organized Racism: Women in the Hate Movement*, to see how white supremacists use a culture of violence to instill a “sense of commonality.”

lead singer] is a nice, affable Southern Christian boy who just happens to make killer music to slam to. But a lack of belief in a higher calling shouldn't dissuade listeners — Scogin welcomes everyone."[34] The review of *The Chariot* resonates with Sean's review of their live show in Pittsburgh. Sean writes, "The day before the show is where the mental preparation began, and up until the show, we were all getting ourselves psyched up to throw down, get hit, and face the pit." He continues, "It was the kind of show where you just let everything go, you hit whoever you need to, you scream at the top of your lungs, you dance like it's your last day. For every single one of their ten or so songs, I was in the middle of a crowd of people, being thrown around and throwing people around." Sean does not mention religion in his review; instead, he focuses on how the pit they incite makes him feel free to hit whoever he wants to, which is the mark of male hardcore solidarity.

Young men use the injuries they sustain at live hardcore shows to affirm their membership in the "brotherhood." Sean's review of *The Chariot* live music show at the Altar Bar in Pittsburgh exemplifies how participants use these to define who fits into hardcore. He writes,

> Typing with a broken left thumb is not an easy task, especially when you could have a potential concussion, judging from the size of the bruise and lump on your forehead. (The dry blood under your nose may be a clue as well.) I am not really able to tell you exactly when any of these injuries occurred to my body, besides a general blanket statement that any hardcore music fan would understand, "I saw the Chariot last night."

[34] The "everyone" in this context is male, young, and white. There are seldom women or people of color participating in these scenes. When they do, it is noticeable and usually remarked upon.

Sean references physical injury to show that he belongs to hardcore along several dimensions. First, his injuries (broken thumb, potential concussion, bruises and lumps) prove that he is brave enough to join a violent mosh pit. Second, his injuries, which were inflicted by other hardcore members, affirm that he is part of the broader hardcore community and of *The Chariot* fan base specifically. Third, his injuries indicate commitment to the scene; he blogs about the live music show even as he suffers more (types with a broken thumb).

Christian Hardcore youth define who fits and who does not fit in ways that transcend Christian/secular divides but reinforce racial and gender divisions. Through rituals of aggression, they bring Christian and secular white male youth together.

### 5.1.2 Taqwacore

Taqwacores are explicit about the fact that they want to make it easier for ethnic, racial, and religious minorities to experience punk. At live music shows, Taqwacores will scream, “This is for the brown kids!” and they commonly inject comments about “immigrant,” “brown,” and “desi” youth during informal conversations, at panel discussions, film screenings, and in public and private interviews. It seems that they have succeeded in their multicultural endeavors. At their live shows, it is not out of the ordinary to see Indian Americans, Asian Americans, and Arab Americans dancing alongside one another and most of these youth do not look like stereotypical punks. When *The Kominas* played live at the Bowdoin College campus pub, about 50 students attended the show. Whites were in the majority but there were also young Asian men and women, Indian women, and Black women and men at the show. The friendship groups were not ethnically exclusive; people of different ethnicities were dancing and laughing together. Most were dressed like typical North American college kids, not punk rockers. They donned khaki

pants and button-up shirts or sweatshirts and jeans. The only people there who appeared 'punk' were the band members and a Latino man with black clothes on and an earring in his ear.

In an in-depth public interview with Ronen Kauffman of Issue Oriented (2009), a punk rock podcast, Shaj boasts about the diverse people who come out to see his band, *The Kominas*, play live. He likes that there are "girls in hijab" at his show "rocking out" because they shatter his own perceptions of Muslims. He continues, "We talk a lot about people's perceptions. About what it means to be Muslim. What it is to be desi. South Asian. To be the Other. But I obviously, I think we, we have our own perceptions of the way we think people are." He says his audience shatters his misconceptions of what Muslims are like and talks about the ways in which Taqwacores are expanding who is punk rock. Shaj describes one such audience member: "He was just like me – he wears glasses. Balding. And he's having fun at a punk rock show, and that's not what he's used to." For Shaj, this is remarkable because it provides evidence that they are making punk rock relevant to new audiences, audiences that ordinarily do not think punk is for them. Another Taqwacore elaborates, "It's definitely earth shattering to see people…that you wouldn't expect to be at a punk show. And then realizing that you yourself aren't expected to be at a punk show." Taqwacores are not expected to be there, they imply, because they do not fit the profile of a typical punk rocker: secular white youth who come from Christian backgrounds.

In online interviews, blogs, Facebook posts, and private interviews, Taqwacores say they got involved because the people they met in the scene made them feel like they were not alone in their struggle, whatever that struggle might be. Many interviewees comment that Taqwacore draws a wider variety of people from different religious and ethnic backgrounds together because of their shared sense of disenfranchisement. On one Facebook stream, a Taqwacore wrote, "I can't tell you how many people have told me that Taqwacore makes them feel less alone."

Indeed, the bonds made in the first stages of the movement are cited by interviewees as some of the most fulfilling aspects of this scene. In an interview with me, one Taqwacore says, “For me it’s a platform to get to know other people around the world. I’m very grateful. I don’t discredit it. I got in touch with some really awesome people.”

To make space for the culturally disenfranchised, Taqwacores pit their punk against secular white punk. Many interviewees report that white punks make ignorant remarks about Islam or South East Asian culture and then test Taqwacores about their knowledge of punk rock history, insinuating that brown youth cannot be punk. In a private interview, Sam recollects,

> I remember one time someone came up to me to introduce themselves. I thought, ‘Oh, this is cool. It’s just someone wanting to get to know me.’ But when we sat down later on [to talk], he was just like so, “You believe in Islam, right?” and I was like “Yes.” And he was like “I don’t know, I can’t say I agree with it.” And I said, “That’s cool, I suppose everyone has their own thing going on.” And he was like, “I don’t know, I don’t think you can be a punk and a Muslim.”

Other Taqwacores point out that even though their white punk friends are not hateful about Islam, they are generally ill-informed or indifferent about what it is like to be Muslim. A post on the Taqwacore webzine reads, “I was always the ‘weird’ girl in my group of friends, because of religion, race, and creed or whatever….With my circle of (white girl-) friends that I’d go to shows with, they didn’t understand why I had to be home by sunset so that I could pray Maghrib (evening prayer). They didn’t get why I wasn’t allowed to date, why I couldn’t wear tank tops or shorts, and why they couldn’t bring their boyfriends to my house for my birthday parties.” In a private interview with me, another Taqwacore explains, “You know like for me, I’d be the only brown girl at most of the punk shows I went to.” Taqwacore, she contends, “brings together a

bunch of people that were in isolated communities" and in this community, they talk about racism, Islamophobia, and social rejection on a regular basis.

Taqwacores point out that their punk is not coming from a place of racial or religious privilege and that class should not be the only social injustice that punk concerns itself with. Tanzila makes this evident in her Taqwacore webzine article titled, "Redefining Punk, My Way." She says that "real" punk is often equated with "gutter punk," which is characterized as living in the streets, not voting, and believing in anarchy. But, Tanzila explains, "I always found this contradictory because to me, the people I saw in punk spaces were primarily white. Contradictory because to me, white people epitomized privilege. And how real could 'gutter' punk be, if they were white?" For Muslims, she claims, it is punk to vote because the stakes are too high not to vote. Tanzila points out that brown people are the targets of hate crimes and that white people think that all Muslims were responsible for 9/11. She adds, "I'm going to organize as many brown youth as I can to register to vote and create a political voice that can't be ignored. Fuck them, I'm punk." Tanzila continues, "The privilege of race and the privilege of religious freedom are very real privileges that mainstream punk rockers have not had to deal with. But as Taqwacore, it's something that all of us have had to deal with. Every single one of us."

In an interview with me, Saeed makes a similar remark as Tanzila about race privilege. He said, "Punk is about giving voice to the disenfranchised but it's sort of built on white privilege." Saeed thinks race privilege impedes white punk rockers' ability to understand the political importance of Taqwacore. To make this point, Saeed shared a story about his punk rock co-worker "Roach." He says Roach challenged him all the time about "Muslim punk" and refused to see it different from "Christian punk." Roach felt that Christian punk had "bastardized punk" and he was on the defense when he heard Muslims are playing punk music. After

watching the documentary film, Saeed says Roach finally came around to the idea that "Muslims in this day and age are marginalized and they need a voice to express themselves." Roach "got behind it" (Taqwacore) and began supporting the documentary film through his writing and publicity connections. Saeed thinks that there are "close-minded bigots" in every community but he was happy that Roach sees that "Muslims can be defined in many different ways."

Although Taqwacores report that they think it is important that white punks accept them as punks, some feel as though they need to protect their community from white people, especially non-Muslim whites. They feel that white individuals compromise the racial politics that Taqwacore is built on. In an interview with me, Sam explains that Taqwacore is supposed to be "tight-knit" of people who share similar beliefs and experiences "so it's a little bit odd," she says, "when a white person comes in and says that they want to embrace this culture." Similarly, when I asked Zahira, a Taqwacore blogger, if she thinks that secular people belong in Taqwacore, she responded, "Yeah," but then went on to say that not all secular people "belong to this movement." She insists that to belong a person needs to be spiritually, culturally, or politically Muslim.

> I mean it has been a little weird that there are people who have been identifying as Taqwacore who are not Muslim and not really punk. Um, and, I think it's kind of toes the line of exotifying this movement. And that part makes me uncomfortable. The exotification of this space. I really do think it should be a safe space for people who identify in this way versus the exotification of people in this community and then trying to like fit in.

When I pressed Zahira to specify the people who exotify Taqwacore, she answered in a direct tone: "They are white and they are not Muslim and they don't really listen to punk music." She

explained that she “takes issue” with white, non-Muslim people calling themselves Taqwacore because this is supposed to be a “safe space,” not a place for people to learn about Islam. “We’re doing this for ourselves. We’re not doing this to teach white folks,” she adds. Later, in an email, I asked Zahira to answer a few more questions about Taqwacore that she said I could send along at the close of the phone interview. She responded: “I think I'm going to have to pass on answering any more of the questions and you are going to have to settle with what you got. It feels all a little too com-modified for academia. Taqwacore's a dying scene anyways.” In subsequent emails, it became apparent that she was wary of outsiders and did not want to answer any more questions from people who were not directly involved in the movement, such as me: a white, non-Muslim in academia.

Others argue that the white punks who write and blog about Taqwacore albums, artists, and movies fit into Taqwacore because they *support* Taqwacore not because they *are* Taqwacore. In an interview with me on Gchat (Google instant messaging), Saima writes,

> Well, when i first found out white ppl were involved in the scene, i thought "what the fuck?" and i didnt understand at first, but i figure that if they are part of the scene as an act of solidarity to rally with an oppressed minority group that is widely hated and loathed by society at large, it makes a lot of sense because that's punk as fuck, and I think for white people getting involved with the Taqwacores scene, it's a way to show support for brown artists who are normally ignored by the media, then I think it’s a wonderful thing.

At first Saima did not think white, non-Muslims belonged in Taqwacore but now feels that white people are an important asset to its cultural dissemination. She suggests that white people who stand by socially marginalized groups are punk but she does not say they are Taqwacore. Instead,

these individuals are included because they stand by the 'real' Taqwacores. Some of the white members share this idea. One white musician, Matt, who plays in a prominent Taqwacore band, does not feel Taqwacore is his. Rather, he clarifies in an interview with me, "I always feel like I'm supporting it," which he adds mostly means the lead singer of the band who better fits the Taqwacore profile because of his Middle-Eastern heritage. Matt, who is not Muslim and does not identify as a punk, does not feel like part of the group. He is never asked for interviews, he has no control over where the band plays, and he claims, "A lot of the times fans won't even know who I am." But Matt is fine with the arrangement. In the band, he gets to play musical instruments from the Middle East without looking like he is appropriating Middle Eastern culture. Matt's relationship to Taqwacore shows that some white people are not just standing in solidarity with marginalized youth; they are involved in Taqwacore for cultural reasons.

Many individuals point out that even though Taqwacore is chiefly for Muslims, they think it is important that is not limited to racial and religious minorities. Instead, they go back to the idea that this music is intended for "outsiders." This explains why white people will often invoke their "outsiderness" when speaking about the ways in which they connect to Taqwacore. In an interview with me, Matt pronounces, "I'm from a working class background. I'm usually the only white guy in my group of friends, or I'm the one who doesn't fit into various subcultures. I'm the token me within any of those groups – it's like well, these are all my Asian friends, or all my Black friends, or this group of friends. I'm comfortable being the outsider. I guess it's kind of how I feel about this group as well." Similarly, Monica, a young white woman who has produced several interviews and album reviews for Taqwacore, tells me, "I always [feel] like an outsider…There's nothing in my background that says I should be into this." Even though Monica is "not supposed to feel connected" to it, she feels like Taqwacore opened up her

eyes to a whole range of issues that Muslim Americans face and she makes a point to say "I *really* like the music" because it is an unusual mix of global music and punk. In the end, Monica feels like "an outsider in an outsiders' movement," as other Taqwacores term it, a feeling that enables Monica to define her membership as sincere, not exploitative. Besides, she is, as Isabella put it in an interview with me, "creatively involved in Taqwacore." She is not simply consuming this culture from the outside.

Taqwacores are much more gender inclusive than Christian Hardcore and do not encourage violent mosh pits at their live shows. In fact, they bring mosh pits to a halt when they get too rambunctious. *The Kominas* show at Bowdoin College is a case in point. The crowd at Bowdoin was divided in half, with about 25 young kids (mostly young men and a handful of young women) moshing up front near the stage and the other half standing at the back of the room. The moshers appeared happy, not quite as aggressive as the moshers at Christian Hardcore shows. These moshers were smiling and laughing as they shoved each other. But after a few songs, a couple of young men turned the light-hearted moshing into something more akin to a thrash pit. One young Asian man took off his shirt and started whipping around, making the other dancers uneasy with his flailing limbs. And then a white guy joined him and started pushing people across the floor. Before long, several of the dancers moved away from the stage, far from the rowdy dancers. At the break of the song, the lead singer of *The Kominas*, Basim, noticed that a few men had taken over and pushed everyone away from the stage. He tried calming these men down and said, "Hey, let's just dance." He then demonstrated what he meant by swaying side to side and pronounced with a smile, "This is a dancing song." Basim then commented that sometimes getting wild and pushing each other around is appropriate and fun but that it does not have to happen all of the time. He asked everyone to return back to the front.

In addition to being mindful of women's exclusion from mosh pits, Taqwacores also commonly discuss sexism, homophobia, and the mainstream media's reductionist depictions of Muslim masculinity and femininity. On their webzine and social networking websites, they talk about their music and style as an alternative to the sexism that pervades conservative Islam and mainstream American society.

To make space for outsiders, Taqwacores communicate about the politics of racial, ethnic, gender, and religious oppression as well as about white privilege. Some argue that privileged groups do not fit, especially whites who are not Muslim and/or punk. Others, however, argue that whites who support them politically and/or culturally do fit.

### 5.1.3 Discussion of Internal Definitions

Christian Hardcore and Taqwacore youth define who fits and who does not fit in their communities in different ways. Christian hardcore youth use straightforward categorical identities (Figure 5-2). Taqwacores, on the other hand, are much more nuanced in their internal definitions which allow room for debate (Figure 5-3).

| **Christian Hardcore** | |
|---|---|
| ***Fit*** | ***Does not fit*** |
| Christians | Other religions |
| Whites | Non-Whites |
| Men | Women |

**Figure 5-2: Christian Hardcore, Who Fits**

| Taqwacore | |
|---|---|
| ***Fit*** | ***Does not fit*** |
| Muslims | Non-Muslim whites |
| Browns | Non-punk whites |
| Outsiders | Privileged groups |
| Producers | Consumers |

**Figure 5-3: Taqwacore, Who Fits**

When Christian Hardcore youth define who fits, they speak about white male-dominated subcultural music genres (namely hardcore and metalcore) and aggressive behavior. These youth use physical conflicts, in the form of aggressive dancing and mosh pits, to create a space for white male bonds that bridges secular/religious and subcultural music divides. Taqwacores rarely speak about subcultural music genres but give a lot of attention to cultural and social marginalization. Their sense of solidarity is not built on belligerent mosh pits but rather comes from media accounts of racial/religious discrimination in white dominated punk scenes and American society. Their solidarity welcomes 'outsiders' into the community but positions Muslims, particularly brown Muslim punks, as those who fit best.

## 5.2 EXTERNAL DEFINITIONS

Hardcore Christians and Taqwacores have conflicts about how to define themselves to outsiders. To illuminate these disputes, I begin with two YouTube videos. One comes from the Christian metalcore band *Demon Hunter*. The other is from *Secret Trial Five*, an "ex" Taqwacore band. Both use religious punk signifiers to tell their respective members how to talk about the group in front of others.

"We're definitely a Christian band" asserts *Demon Hunter* in a YouTube video aptly titled, "Is Demon Hunter a Christian Band?" Filmed outdoors adjacent to the front end of a huge sleeper bus, each band member takes a turn in front of the camera to affirm his Christian identity. One member starts the video: "A lot of times [in the past] we'd like to ride the fence just so we could fit in everywhere… You know what? We're a Christian band. We're five dudes and we're all believers. We really don't want to ride the fence anymore." In these opening remarks, this musician stresses that Christian identity is the most virtuous way to get respect in a music culture that accuses Christian punks and metalheads of being frauds. But *Demon Hunter* is not just announcing that they are Christian – their fans likely already know this because of the interviews they have read online or because of the Christian record labels that release their albums. In this video, they tell others how to express Christian membership in music. Their message is that Christians should not "ride the fence" – that is, only mention that they are Christian when it is easy or advantageous to do so and keep quiet about it when they want to 'fit in' with secular youth. In fact, they imply that the Christian bands who "ride the fence" are disingenuous about Christianity, and, in effect, not really hardcore.

In 2010, *Secret Trial Five*, the only all-girl group featured in *Taqwacore: The Birth of Punk Islam* documentary, posted a live performance of their song, "We're Not Taqwacore," on YouTube. The quality of the video is grainy and poor, especially in comparison to the sharp, thoroughly edited video posted by *Demon Hunter*. Before starting the song, the lead singer announces in a matter of fact tone: "We're not Taqwacore…uh…I don't know if any of you saw a documentary called *[Taqwacore:] the Birth of Punk Islam*. We were featured in that. And we think that Taqwacore is not Ok." To these news, only a couple of people applauded and one

person yelled, “It’s bullshit!,” assumingly referring to Taqwacore as “bullshit.” Then, the song begins:

> What the fuck
> Is a Muslim punk?
> Rather hang with Taliban
> Than dick around with drunks
> Muhammad wasn't white
> And neither is this fight
> And we weren't birthed  by Michael Knight
>
> We're not Taqwacore, We're not Taqwacore
> So leave us alone, leave us alone
> We're not Taqwacore,  We're not Taqwacore
> So leave us alone, leave us alone

To make sure everyone understands the song, *Secret Trial Five* posted the lyrics on YouTube with the video. This song does more than state “we’re not Taqwacore.” It insults Taqwacore as a media gimmick, “so leave us alone,” that unfairly puts the spotlight on Knight and makes it look as though brown Taqwacores are followers of this white man’s revelation. Their question “What the fuck is a Muslim punk?” is directed squarely at other Taqwacores who use the media for personal fame. *Secret Trial Five* not only reject Taqwacore but challenge other Taqwacores to drop the term as a label that has been reduced to “Muslim punk.”

The YouTube videos by *Demon Hunter* and *Secret Trial Five* show that Taqwacores do not always share a sense of how to define the group to outsiders. Members of *Demon Hunter* argue that they used to be more reserved about their Christian faith but now realize that this

strategy was wrong. According to them, hardcore Christians should publicly proclaim their Christianity so that others know that Christians are part of the hardcore/metalcore community and they have nothing to be ashamed about. One member explains that he used to keep his Christianity to himself because he wanted to "fit in." These initial efforts to blend in are part of what Goffman calls the "avoidance process" (1967: 13). That is, the band members used to avoid conversations about Christianity because non-Christians might think that Biblical beliefs conflict with, or for that matter compromise, "core" values of social nonconformity. Now, they present themselves as the real champions of social nonconformity: they are not afraid to stand up for their beliefs.

The performance of "We're not Taqwacore" by *Secret Trial Five* shows that Taqwacores have conflicting opinions about how to define themselves in front of outsiders. This band declares that they are "not Taqwacore" and implies that this is because they think that "Muslim punk" pigeonholes the community, invites the Orientalist gaze, and limits who can be part of it.[35] Others think that "Muslim Punk" is problematic but do not reject the label altogether. Instead, they feel that calling Taqwacore 'Muslim punk' can be beneficial, even if that means some will think it is an Islamic version of Christian punk. Without these signifiers, they argue, people might not know that they are hearing the voice of disenfranchised Muslims in a post 9/11 world.

### 5.2.1 Christian Hardcore

Hardcore Christians disagree about how they should present their community to the punk music subculture. As Christian musicians, music show promoters, and subcultural ministry leaders

[35] Even as they reject Taqwacore, in the tradition of Taqwacore, *Secret Trial Five* use terrorist imagery – "I'd rather hang with the Taliban" – to signal a connection to Muslim identity.

recognize, it is difficult for Christian bands to integrate into the hardcore punk subculture because some secular punk and metal youth are "anti-Christian," that is they hate Christian bands solely because they are Christian. Paul tells me that "anti-Christian" bands accuse Christians of being narrow-minded bigots, although he thinks it is really the Christians who are "persecuted." Paul clarifies, "We are told that we're close minded because we believe that Christ is the way and he's the only way. But in the same way, they're close minded in the sense that they never want to hear our side ─ why we believe what we believe." Melinda, who organizes Bible studies at a Christian tattoo shop, says people generally think that punk is the opposite of Christianity and call Christian punks "fake." In an interview with me, she describes a situation in which her husband, Isaac, a Christian punk musician, was treated with intolerance. To set up the story, Melinda explains that her husband's Christian band does not preach from stage (which she likely said to confirm that they do not want to alienate their non-Christian audience). Melinda then goes on to explain that Isaac's Christian band opened for a secular band that he had admired for a long time. During a friendly exchange, Isaac gave one of these band members his band's T-shirt. Later, when a member wore the shirt, someone recognized it and said "Oh, they're an awesome Christian band!" but he had no idea that he was wearing a Christian band t-shirt and reportedly felt tricked. Melinda calls this musician "anti-Christian" because he did not want to wear a Christian band's t-shirt. Like Paul, she concludes that Christians are more tolerant than non-Christians because they are open-minded about secular bands and listen to secular music.

When making a case for how they should define themselves in front of others, members tend to advocate either the "Christian band" or "Christians in a band" label. Christian bands think that Christians have a duty to be open about faith. They profess Christ at live music shows, on websites, blogs, and in public interviews. In contrast, Christians in a band think it is better to talk

about Christ when the time is right. They sing about spiritual matters and release albums on Christian labels, but do not preach from stage and do not embrace the 'Christian band' label.

#### 5.2.1.1 Christian Bands

Some Christian bands preach from stage. *For Today* is a popular Christian Hardcore band that preaches from stage. Their 2013 release, "Prevailer," which has a bloodied, angry looking Jesus on the cover, climbed the album charts, rising to #15 on Billboard's best 200 and #3 on the Independent Chart. The album also topped a number of other Billboard charts, including the Hard Music Chart, Christian/Contemporary Chart, and the Top Christian/Gospel Chart. At a secular nightclub in Pittsburgh, Mattie of *For Today* delivered this sermon:

> Before we go any further just let me declare [as he points down at the stage] that I have been saved and I've been set free and I've been delivered…I come into places like this to offer hope, to offer life, to offer peace and to offer freedom to my family and friends.
>
> And I stand on stage today to tell you that you will never be too broken for Jesus to mend you. You will never be too lost for Jesus to find you. You'll never be too - too - too captive for Jesus to set you free. So I say to every single person in this room, be free right now in the name of Jesus!

Mattie is forthright about his mission: he is a messenger of God in the underground. Some Christian informants applaud *For Today* for combining good music with preaching at live hardcore/metalcore shows. Other Christian punk and metal youth are critical of these practices and argue that all their explicit talk about Jesus and salvation turns people away from Christ.

There are Christians and non-Christians who admire preaching bands because as several of my interviewees put it, "They stand up for what they believe." Brad, a Christian metalcore musician likes bands that preach because they offer their audience "substance." In an interview with me, he says, "There's a realness to it…If they do it right, not like necessarily shoving it down your throat, but just speak with love and…boldness – there's a lot more you can get from that than just a normal metal show." When Mattie of *For Today* preached from a stage in Pittsburgh, no one mocked him or raised a fist in defiance. The venue went silent, which made Mattie's voice loud and clear. The people who made noise were those who cheered him on every time he said "Jesus." The sermon that Mattie gave is striking not only because of the context in which it occurred, but also because of how it deviated from what other bands said from stage that night.

Christian Hardcore bands often use combative language when defining themselves to outsiders because it makes them look hardcore. Hardcore and metalcore bands commonly use this language to define themselves. One band, *The Word Alive,*[36] did not offer "peace"; they offered release. At the start of their set, the singer yelled, "Everyone raise your hands --- Raise your middle finger," and as the audience lifted their fingers in the air, he continued, "This is for those times you've been betrayed. For all those friends who've fucked you over!" Another group, called *Stray from the Path*, that played that night amplified an eerie recording of a small child praying: "I'll do what you want me to do. I'll say what you want me to say. Use me God," toward the end of their set. This recording reminded me of *Jesus Camp* (Grady and Ewing 2006), a documentary film about evangelical Christian children who spend their summers learning to be dedicated soldiers in the fight for Jesus in America. The band members said nothing about it –

[36] In a public interview, a member of *The Word Alive* said that he believes in God and is Christian but does not call his band a "Christian band."

leaving out whether it was intended to be sarcastic or literal. The recording was not easy to interpret, especially in this odd space where Christians and anti-Christians came together. The group then began their song "Damion," which opens with the line – "What gives you the right to think that you can save me?!" One audience member who sang along to the entire song and identified himself as "agnostic" told me, "It's about their religious beliefs…they are Christian but they think that people take religion too far." Whether insulting a friend, preaching the gospel, or criticizing Christian fundamentalists, this show reveals that this music culture is not only structured from physical conflict in the form of moshing and thrashing, but also verbally in the form of contentious statements about religion and relationships.

Christian bands feel that they should be explicit about their faith even if it upsets their audience. They think standing up for what they believe is an effective form of ministry as it forces people to consider the existence of God. Paul, who says secular youth "hated" his Christian band, maintains that Christians should assert what makes them different from secular youth because it sets conversations about Christ in motion. In an interview with me, Paul asserts, "We would share our message on stage not with the expectation that hundreds of people were going to come up and be like [takes a sarcastic tone] 'Oh can I get a CD and can you baptize me in the Holy Spirit? I'm such a sinner!'" Paul thinks it is rare for a conversion to Christ to happen overnight at a live music show, but still feels that explicit talk about Jesus is essential to the process of saving souls. He argues that he preached from stage, not because he thought people would come up to him and accept Christ at his merchandise booth, but for two interconnected reasons: he wanted to show his pride in Jesus; and he thought that being bold for Jesus was essential to saving souls. He explains his ministry on and offstage like this: "We would be like this is what we stand for, if you're interested, please come up and we'd love to talk to you. Even

if you just want to come up to us and tell us that we're idiots for believing what we believe, we just want to chat with you guys. If you need prayer, we'll pray with you." In his experience, once the audience knows that a band is Christian, ministry begins.

Some Christian band's commitment to preaching is so strong that a few of them will put down "Christians in a band" for not being "safe" about Jesus (see Kimmel 2009: Pascoe 2005). In the *Demon Hunter* YouTube video, one member looks as if he is about to get into a physical fight as he nods his head and thrusts his body towards the camera to announce, "We're definitely a Christian band. We're definitely all Christians. We're all believers." Immediately after him, another band member claims, "From the minute we started saying that, we got more respect and even from those other bands, you know, so it was exciting. Now we make no bones about it." And another member remarks, "if you stick to your guns" – which is a military phrase that means to not back down – and proclaim Christ, secular youth will respect you. In an interview with Christianity Today magazine, one of its members summed up the band's philosophy like this: "You have a lot of bands that have a cool factor or you know ─ we're Christians in a band kind of attitude [emphasis added]. I mean, there's no shame in what we believe in. If we were embarrassed of it, then there'd be no sense in believing in it. So why not tell people about it?"

Preaching bands run the risk of taking their ministry too far and turning off their fans. *For Today* has a large fan base that includes both secular and Christian audiences, but when its guitar player, Reynolds, Tweeted a paranoid, homophobic rant about a gay conspiracy in Washington, the hardcore youth got in a heated debate about whether or not religion belongs in this music. In a blog titled "For Today Guitarist Hates Gays for Jesus," Robinjection, a columnist for the Metal Injection website, wrote, "For Today is a metalcore band on Razor & Tie Records. They have a sizable following. For some reason, Reynolds wasn't happy with that so he decided

to speak up and alienate some of his fan base with a recent Twitter meltdown." The tweet by the guitarist of *For Today* follows:

> There IS a state church being formed, there is going to be an exclusive acceptance of preachers who advocate the LGBT. Don't be deceived, homosexuality is a sin. This sin with all other sins is what Jesus died for. He conquered so that we could be free.
>
> No such thing as a gay Christian, the same as there is no such thing as a Christian who loves sin. Don't be fooled by the formation of a state church as though the government is being converted, they only use the name of Jesus for their progressive liberal agenda.
>
> If you are a Christian then separate yourself from this civil religion that advocates sin. Be true to God.

The hardcore community generally accepts Christians who preach about salvation and supernatural damnation but they loathe bands who use hate speech to define themselves as Christian. Robinjection, the Metal Injection blogger, scolded Reynolds, the *For Today* guitarist, for hypocrisy, arguing that the Bible says "everyday things that we do are sins" as are the tattoos that cover Reynolds's body. In the post, Robinjection directs readers to a photograph of Reynolds playing guitar that was photoshopped to include a gigantic erect penis entering his wide-open mouth. In this image, Reynolds is subjected to a sexual act that he allegedly detests – male to male oral sex – which is used to humiliate and make fun of him, in essence make him less of a hardcore man. The comment stream that follows the article is full of statements that scorn Christians on a whole such as, "He and his band are shit, Christian shit, that's even worse"

and tweets from other hardcore musicians like: “Must not tweet about hateful religious bands. Must not tweet about hateful religious bands…”; and “Homophobia is not to be tolerated ever. You are a coward hiding behind a faceless God, propagating a misguided, archaic belief. Get bent.” In other threads, individuals used Biblical passages to condone the homophobic outbursts. One reads, “Matthew 5:11, 12 ‘Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven.” This person argues that persecution is a sign of Godliness. In effect, Reynolds was in the right as evidenced by the backlash he got from “anti-Christians.”[37]

It was at a *For Today* show in Pittsburgh that I met Nick, a 30 something year old music enthusiast who writes for Noisecreep, a hard rock/metal music website formed by AOL music. I asked Nick if he thinks Christians are ministers. Nick responded that Christians are doing ministry “by default” - just by being at live music shows. Christians can build relationships with non-Christians and in effect create an opportunity for more people to learn about God. But, he goes on, “If you’re going to be in a preaching band, be careful…Holding a mike doesn’t mean you’re a minister, you’re in a band.” Nick explained that *For Today* is “close to his heart,” but, that he feels that Mattie does not use the right words all the time. “I remember he said something like ‘Don’t leave this room hopeless’ but I don’t think so. I don’t think these kids are all from broken homes, drug addicted, and hopeless. I don’t think most of them have even thought about that. Most of them are normal suburban kids.” Nick argues that ministry bands need to know their audience before they start preaching from stage. Otherwise, he implies, they will resemble

[37] Criticisms from the hardcore/metalcore community moved Mattie, the lead singer of *For Today*, to post an apology on YouTube, although some felt it was a halfhearted apology, and prompted the guitarist to leave the band.

the “mainstream church” – using false pretenses to tell people that they are going to die and go to hell instead of reaching out to them.

#### 5.2.1.2 Christians in a Band

Contrary to preaching bands, Christians in a band think that preaching reinforces a wall between Christians and secular youth. Clint, a subcultural ministry leader and hardcore enthusiast, told me, “I think a lot of secular hardcore kids, like they're open to the idea of Christianity or…any kind of religion or faith or world view, but you can't get too preachy about it. And I feel like a lot of the bands right now are too preachy and they automatically shut people off and people are just turned off before they'll even listen to what they're saying.” Similarly, in an interview with me, Melinda says, “I think some bands – I don’t want to call out somebody in particular – you know, some bands think they are supposed to do certain things. And that’s fine. That’s between them and God. But if there’s a Christian band playing with non-Christian bands and they’re up there preaching, I think that turns people off.” As opposed to preaching bands, her husband’s band, Melinda feels, is a model of Christian ministry because they put friendships first. She says, “They hang out with people. They get to know people. And that’s how conversations are opened up about what people are going through, their beliefs and stuff...I think that’s a little bit more comfortable for people than someone who is just like ‘I’m a Christian, I believe in this and you should too or you’re going to Hell.’ It’s less threatening.”

A few interviewees suggest that Christian bands openly define themselves as Christian just to make money. One Christian folk-punk musician told me that a band who “prays for people at their merchandise booth” is not doing the work of God; they are selling t-shirts. These youth conclude that “preaching bands” are really only reaching young Christians who are looking for a harder, faster version of what they get in a typical evangelical church service:

music and male-led sermons about Jesus, salvation, and heaven and hell. These speculations about preaching are not ungrounded. There are plenty of Christian parents who refuse to let their teenagers listen to secular punk or metal music. Hence, there is a real incentive for Christian bands to be explicit about their faith – they are able to tap into a secure and stable niche market (Luhr 2009). One conventional church pastor said he thinks it is mostly Christians who go out to see Christian Hardcore bands in order to feel like they are doing something deviant. This may explain why a growing number of Christian owned music venues, often coined "positive spaces," such as The Attic in Ohio and Rocketown in Nashville are opening across North America.

Christian bands and Christians in a band do not agree on how Christians should define their community to others in subcultural settings. Some argue that Christians who are bold about their faith are most respected by secular youth. Others argue that explicit talk about Jesus separates Christians from culture. In the end, both factions face the challenge of fitting into the larger subcultural community without compromising their religious beliefs.

### 5.2.2 Taqwacore

Taqwacores are at odds about how they should define themselves externally. These conflicts come to a head when they discuss media. Media coverage about Taqwacore as music, a movie, a movement, an idea, and a genre is immense. A Google search for the term "Taqwacore" has over 170,000 results. These include film trailers, homemade YouTube videos like the one by Boulderhijabi titled "Taqwacore…Be Your Own Muslim!!!", a guitar forum that calls Taqwacore "Islamic ska," Deaf Muslim Playwright Sabina England's one woman mime comedy show called "Allah Save the Punk!," a blogspot titled "Progressive Scottish Muslims," and a

fast-paced teaser for The Taqwacores film screening in Malmö, Sweden, a video that shows two graffiti artist transform a parking house wall into a vibrant "Taqwa" billboard.

Public interviews, newspaper articles, and Taqwacore websites suggest that Knight is responsible for staring "Muslim punk" in North America and credit him for giving the Taqwacore scene its name. The official synopsis of the film *Taqwacore: The Birth of Punk Islam* reads, "Three years in the making, this feature documentary follows the progression of the Muslim Punk scene: from its imaginary inception in a novel written by a white-convert named Michael Muhammad Knight to a full-blown, real-life scene of Muslim punk bands and their fans" (Retrieved October 31, 2010 http://www.taqwacore.com/). Likewise, the Wikipedia webpage for Taqwacore reads: "Taqwacore is a subgenre of punk music dealing with Islam, its culture, and interpretation, originally conceived in Michael Muhammad Knight's 2003 [self-published] novel, The Taqwacores." On Q TV, Jian Ghomeshi (2009) introduced Knight, by crediting him "for writing the future of the North American punk music scene." Several news media claim that Knight's book inspired Muslim punks to start bands. A BBC news story reads, "The novel inspired Kourosh Poursalehi, a 19 year-old from Texas who had long been into punk music, to start the first Taqwacore band 'Vote Hezbollah' - a name he found in the book. Since then the novel has achieved a cult following and precipitated several Muslim punk bands with the label 'Taqwacore'" (Abdalla 2007).

There are scene members who do not wholeheartedly embrace the label "Muslim punk," but, in general, think that the media buzz about "Muslim punk" music is good for the scene because it shows that Islam is diverse. Moreover, they argue that media coverage about "Muslim punk" gives them a platform from which to voice their anger at Islamophobia and mainstream Islam. Others, however, argue that the media coverage is bad for the scene. They think that the

media buzz about "Muslim punk" limits who speaks for Taqwacore just as it ruins the intended looseness of the term 'Taqwacore.'

Disagreements about whether or not Taqwacore is "Muslim punk" came to a head when Arjun, the ex-guitarist for *The Kominas*, posted a biting criticism of "Muslim punk" on Facebook. His post reads,

> The stupidity of trying to sell a band as Muslim punk is becoming glaringly obvious. What was so Islamic about all of the photogenic gesturing and force-fed story building? Was the music even that good? I guess I'll never know because I will never be a young disenfranchised muslim [sic]: the only valid supporters. Never.

In the post, Arjun expresses his objections to calling Taqwacore 'Muslim punk.' He feels that Taqwacores who go along with the media about "Muslim punk" diminish the contributions of non-Muslims to this scene. In calling out scene members for partaking in the "force-fed story building," Arjun proposes that Muslim punks are not actually using the media to nurture the community but rather are using media to get popular. For Arjun, the problem with marketing "Muslim punk" is "glaringly obvious" in that it threatens internal solidarity, a solidarity that is supposed to transcend religious divides and ethnic identities. Furthermore, "Muslim punk" also makes it seem as though spiritual Muslims are the most Taqwacore. This Facebook post by Arjun struck a nerve. There are over 140 comments on this Facebook thread, most of which weigh in on the argument about what Taqwacore is and how it should be portrayed in the media.[38]

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[38] Arjun directs his message to the Taqwacore community. This is evident in the fact that he posted the comment on his Facebook home page, which his Taqwacore friends read and respond to.

Non-Muslim Taqwacores feel that some of the more well-known members (i.e. the ones who are asked for public interviews) fabricated a story about Taqwacore that mirrors the novel to get media attention. In an interview with me, Matt claims that a lot of people were just doing "something crazy" like praying in front of the camera so that they could get attention. He says there are bands that "profited or benefited from the whole scene, the media wanting things, they kind of just wanted some attention for whatever reason - oh, this person wants an interview and it's like 'oh, ok, I'll get some attention.' They want to interview me because I'm Taqwacore and it's like 'Ok, I'll interview with them and tell them *I'm not Taqwacore*.' But still, it's just that chance for attention." This strategy worked. Consider how the TimesOnline describes Taqwacore: "devout young Muslims and artists" who "demonstrate how they balance morning prayers with sex, drugs and rock n' roll" and the SunTimes reads, "just because they aren't practicing Islam in the traditional way doesn't mean they don't still consider themselves religious Muslims." According to non-Muslim Taqwacores, this media coverage limits what the scene is and who can be a part of it. Specifically, they point out that the media reduces the complexity of the scene down to a rebellious form of Islam. Arjun writes, "Taqwacore shouldn't be so easy as to fit it on a single page with 72 bold font, but Muslim Punk as a rallying call for media coverage has unfortunately done exactly that, and in a repeatedly misrepresentative way."

During private conversations with me, many interviewees express anger about being excluded from Taqwacore because they did not fit the profile of a "Muslim punk." One musician, Miguel, an immigrant from Latin America, recognizes that the scene is "a good thing for Middle Eastern kids here in America" but it bothers him that he does not have an opportunity to voice his personal or political concerns. Miguel references his experience in the documentary film to make his point. He says he was directed out of screen shots, because, he does not "fit the

script." The irony in this, Miguel explains, is that he plays in a well-known Taqwacore band. Miguel is not the only one who feels like he is not given a role to play. Likewise, Patricia says that the media pays her no mind once they find out that she is not Muslim. "I've been to music shows and they'll be covered…And they'll [the media will] talk to me. And as soon as they are like 'so what's your whole name?' and I'm like [XX] and they're like, 'Oh, ok, hold on a minute. You're Hindu?,' and I'm like, 'Yeah.' And they'll take their cameras, and get up, and leave." Patricia tells me that she has "committed Taqwacore suicide." She explains, "I don't want to call myself Taqwacore because number one, it's portrayed as one dimensional, and number two, if we consider Taqwacore 'Muslim punk,' I'm nothing of the sort. If they wanted to categorize me, it'd be more like a Hindu, metalhead Goth person."

Even interviewees who do fit the Muslim punk profile feel this label makes it difficult for them to define their community on their own terms. In an interview with me, Amina, the lead singer of a Taqwacore band, describes a situation in which her punk band made national news before they had even finished writing their first song. Involved in one of the most widely recognized Taqwacore bands from the start, Amina's sexuality, religious heritage, and punk rock music received mass media coverage. She admits that all the media hype about her band was exhilarating: "At first we were like kind of excited ─ it was like 'Hey, we're in the newspaper, the name of our band!'" Amina says that after the first interview, the requests from journalists started "really pouring in." "I was being interviewed by the *New York Times* and *Newsweek* magazine and like *CBC* in Canada. I'd tell my bandmates, 'Hey, guess who emailed me, guess who called me?' and we would just laugh about it because we didn't know how else to react." Amina acknowledges that most punk bands put out numerous albums and play live music shows for years before ever dreaming of reviews or interviews in mainstream magazines. She realizes

that her band was thrust into the spotlight not because of their music but because of their affiliation with “Muslim punk” and Knight’s novel. She goes on, “We hadn’t even done a show by that point.” But that did not matter. The band fit the Muslim punk “script” perfectly. Amina asserts, “They were trying to fit us into this box where it was like ‘Taqwacore’ and you’re a part of this group. You’re with these guys. Your band started the exact same way. All of you read this book and like started this band and Michael Muhammad Knight started it all.” Amina feels the media refused to listen to her when she protested the label “Muslim punk” and even put her safety in jeopardy when it made reference to her sexuality in public interviews. In time, Amina felt like she had lost control of her story and grew angry that her political perspectives and experiences were minimized and commodified by the media.

Whereas some individuals blame some of the central Taqwacores characters for using “Muslim punk” to maximize reach, others argue that the mainstream media and mainstream audiences are at fault. Omar writes,

> To be fair, Arjun, nobody but the mainstream press tried to sell any of the bands as 'Muslim Punk.' The bands and all associated with the scene may have been complicit to some extent in that marketing, but all of them, you included, always stressed the point to reporters that 'Muslim Punk' is a problematic label. […]In the end, those who walk away from either film or concerts stuck on the label "Muslim Punk" also have themselves to blame for that. People often read into things only what they want to see, and a lot of the mainstream and a lot of people in general just want to see rebellious-posturing Muslims right now ─ and whatever you may intend to do, that's sometimes the only way people will interpret you.

In this post, Omar argues that Taqwacores really never have control over their story; the audience is going to see “what they want to see.” And right now, he explains, mainstream

America wants to see young Muslims rebelling against Islam, they do not want to engage in a dialogue about xenophobia or racism in American culture. Likewise, Knight argues that outsiders are the ones actively circumscribing Taqwacore, not Taqwacores like himself. In the photographic book, *Taqwacore: Muslim Punk in the USA* (Badawi 2009), Knight writes that the news media paints Taqwacores as "wild, irrational culture-mutants" who try to "reconcile their social and spiritual schizophrenia." The media, he says, are eager to show how Taqwacores critique Islam but less likely to show how they defy the West. In the opening pages of the photo book Knight says he has been asked to "lay out Taqwacore's mission, as though there ever was a mission – as though before climbing onto the green bus for our tour, we assembled around a long table and discussed how Islam and punk rock might properly integrate. When pushed to define Taqwacore, I draw a blank; is it really Islamic? Is it really punk? I can't speak of Taqwacore as a 'Movement,' and I don't claim my novel to be its 'manifesto'; all I can do is point to these pictures [in the book]."

From the very beginning, Taqwacores got a host of media attention about their music and were soon coined "Muslim punks." Some do not like this label and feel like Taqwacore producers are to blame for 'selling out' the community and marginalizing its members. Others argue that while Muslim punk may be a problematic label, the benefits ultimately outweigh the costs. They ask: If it were not for search terms like "Muslim punk," how could anyone find Taqwacore on the internet?; If there were not media articles about its movies, music, and books, how could anyone discover it and make it their own?

### 5.2.3 Discussion of External Definitions

Both Christian Hardcore and Taqwacore have disagreements about the role religious signifiers should play in their respective group identities. Christian Hardcore youth want to take part in the larger hardcore community but they realize that secular youth are skeptical of Christians. To win the respect of the secular community and at the same time perform as a ministry, some Christian Hardcore bands argue that young people need to be open about their faith, and even preach from stage. There are others, however, who disagree with this tactic. They argue that getting to know people is the best way to convey their faith, not by preaching from stage. Taqwacores work against a different set of circumstances. They are fighting against the stereotype that all Muslims are the same. Some think that media coverage about "Muslim punk" is a good way to fight stereotypes because it both challenges the stereotype that all Muslims are the same and shows that there are different interpretations of Islam. Others argue that media coverage about Muslim punk suppresses alternative understandings of Taqwacore. However, Taqwacores, for the most part, agree that their scene is an "open concept" that should not be defined by any particular members or media. At the same time, they realize that those who fit the media's storyline have the largest impact on external audiences and therefore have more power to define the scene.

### 5.2.4 Conclusion of Definitions

Christian Hardcore and Taqwacore punk scene participants share common goals, but do not agree how to achieve these goals. Christian Hardcore youth want to turn hardcore in a Christian direction but not all try to change hardcore in the same way. Some reason that since hardcore punks respect men who stand up for what they believe, Christian Hardcore punks will blend in

better when they talk openly about their convictions. Others think that explicit talk about Jesus is a bad strategy because it alienates secular punks and makes Christian Hardcore seem inaccessible and insular. Still others claim that all Christian actions have a role in the church, so punk Christian bands and Christians in a band both *save* hardcore for Christ.

Taqwacore youth are not as interested in blending into the larger punk subculture. Instead, they aim to create an exclusive scene for socially, culturally, and geographically isolated youth who cannot or will not fit into mainstream communities. Yet they do not all agree on how to reach this end. Some Taqwacores feel that the best way to keep the community alive and well is by bucking the media, even dropping the label Taqwacore altogether. Others want Taqwacore to be universally recognized as a DIY cultural movement of films, art, music, and books and argue that media attention allows others to find out about the scene. By defining themselves internally as well as externally, both groups generate a sense of common purpose that is informed by their relationship to religious institutions, American society, and punk rock culture.

# 6.0 CONCLUSION

Through the theoretical lens of cultural sociology, I show that Hardcore Christians and Taqwacores not only bridge traditional religions and punk music subcultures; they make these seemingly incompatible social worlds complimentary. Hardcore Christians and Taqwacores are aware of the "particular set of practices" (Goffman 1967: 13) that the punk music subculture stresses and they use this knowledge to express religious identities in a subculture that is notorious for belittling religion. They do so by embracing a set of oppositional practices in punk subcultures. Hardcore Christians and Taqwacores use antagonistic lyrics, music, and rituals to both communicate religion and demonstrate that punk religious youth are socially rejected. These youth fit into punk rock subcultures because they are snubbed and devalued by the larger society as well as by traditional religion. They are genuine punks because they are religious and they are genuine about religion because they are punk.

Going into this study, I expected Christian Hardcore bands to be discreet about their beliefs in Jesus to fit into the larger hardcore punk subculture. My preconceptions stemmed from research on Christian music that shows that "crossover" bands deemphasize faith to market Christianity in secular music (Giagnoni 2009; Howard and Streck 1999).[39] But there are plenty

[39] "Crossover" Christian music got its start in the 1980s after the first wave of Jesus Movement music (Howard and Streck 1999). Amy Grant and Michael W. Smith are considered "crossover" pioneers in that they attracted a mainstream audience and put CCM on the path towards widespread consumption. These artists proved that CCM could move into popular culture as long as it included a 'positive' message but didn't emphasize Jesus. However,

of bands that sing about resurrection and salvation, preach from stage and make videos to profess their Christianity, and still manage to tour with secular bands and attract secular audiences. This is because, in this music, the *manner* in which religious and political ideologies is communicated matters more than *what* is communicated.

Before my study, I expected Taqwacores to be more or less like the youth I read about in independent and mainstream news media: Muslim punks who make Allah part of their wild parties. Certainly there are Taqwacores who think of themselves as "Muslim punks," some of who do drink alcohol. But in the U.S., this scene is much more religiously and ethnically diverse than what is shown in the mainstream media: not all Taqwacores live to pray and party. Nonetheless, the media about Taqwacore cannot be separated from the 'reality' of Taqwacore. From the start, Taqwacores wanted to intervene in American popular culture and to do so they produced their own media, such as the documentary film about their very first U.S. tour, a feature film, and the Taqwacore webzine. They grabbed the attention of the mainstream media virtually overnight. The magazine articles, internet podcasts, radio interviews, and news media about Taqwacore were more abundant than many of its participants ever imagined. Information about Taqwacore was spread across the U.S. and around the world quickly and efficiently. While some Taqwacores were trying to deconstruct representations of Muslims in popular culture, popular culture media was formulating another neat category for American consumption: "Muslim punk." In effect, the complexities of Taqwacore were overshadowed by a new dominant narrative about "good" American Muslims who oppose their parent's conservatize Islamic traditions. In the process, Taqwacores' ability to diversify the image of Muslims in the media was stunted by the very media that they attracted to their cultural cause.

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some evangelicals felt that Grant and Smith were 'selling out' their souls to the mainstream and questioned their commitment to evangelical principles (Howard & Streck 1999).

## 6.1 WHO OWNS HARDCORE PIETY?

Both Christian Hardcore and Taqwacore punks believe that a withdrawal from religious institutions is essential to authentic spirituality but they do not simply leave religious establishments. Instead, these punk youth cultivate new religious beliefs and practices by opposing religious and social institutions.

The degree to which Christian Hardcore and Taqwacore youth oppose religious institutions is remarkably different. Christian Hardcore is not as rebellious as they proclaim because the anger they express towards the "mainstream church" is not directed at the larger evangelical subculture. Rather, Hardcore Christians' sense of the "mainstream" is restricted to religious institutions (which no one ever names explicitly) that refuse to support Christian punk financially or ideologically and/or condemn subcultural Christian styles and music as sacrilegious.

Christian Hardcore youth argue that they are better Christians than "mainstream Christians" because they use hardcore breakdowns, tattoos, and mosh pits to practice church in defiant punk (and metal) subcultures. In these scenes, music is the carrier of church and Christian Hardcore youth use music to practice conventional evangelical beliefs and practices outside of church structures. Yet, their practice of church still perpetuates the white and male dominated hardcore headship in traditional evangelical churches. For this reason, Christian Hardcore youth are best described as religious reformers, not revolutionaries.

Christian Hardcore youth's relationship to the larger evangelical subculture explains why their religious beliefs and practices do not really depart from those of most evangelical Christians. Like their Jesus Movement predecessors, Christian Hardcore youth are backed by youth ministry organizations, established churches, and Christian record labels. Additionally,

churches regularly allow bands to use their facilities and recording equipment free of charge, which is especially attractive to bands that are just getting started and have not yet secured a record deal or following. Likewise, the Christian Hardcore youth who hold Bible Studies in their home or organize hardcore shows often receive funding for their "ministry" from church congregations. Christians also pledge money to bands on websites like Kickstarter, a funding platform for artists, musicians, and filmmakers. Significantly, bands often receive more pledges than they asked for as many people feel that they are supporting a ministry (backers write comments like "I know it [the music] has the potential to change so many lives").

Christian bands have an economic incentive to justify their music as a "ministry." But they have to legitimate their music as a ministry to secure funding. As a ministry, they have to prove that they are living out evangelical principles and spreading the word of God. If Christian Hardcore bands challenged evangelical principles about right and wrong, salvation and eternal damnation, they likely would lose most of their economic support. For many of the bands, this kind of financial loss would drive them out of the music industry and into 'real' jobs. Hence, a band's incentive to be called a ministry may explain why so many young people told me that "there are a lot more preaching bands" now and that the number of "Christian Hardcore and metalcore bands has grown exponentially" in the last several years. Constrained by the ideological demands of evangelical organizations and supporters, Christian Hardcore youth are not moving away from traditional religious establishments so much as making a new home for Christianity in antiestablishment music subcultures.

The Taqwacore scene is generated from a much more do-it-yourself effort than is Christian Hardcore. Indeed, the bands' lack of support from mainstream Muslim communities and their exclusion from larger American society means that they are not as economically stable

as Christian Hardcore and do not have the resources needed to take off work, tour the country, record albums, and produce merchandise. The absence of support not only explains why live Taqwacore shows and tours are less frequent than Christian Hardcore, but also why Taqwacores seek out mainstream media attention. By taking advantage of the larger public's concern about Muslims in the U.S.A., Taqwacores put their books, movies, and music on the public's radar.

Taqwacores do not simply move away from religious institutions, they reject these outright as spiritually oppressive. Taqwacores' independent ethos allows them to use punk rock antagonism in ways that openly challenge public perceptions of Islam, conservative Islamic rules and beliefs, and what it means to be punk. These producers strategically use the stereotype that Muslims are extremists to express opinions and experiences seldom voiced in American punk scenes, and they use the nonconformist stance of punk to craft oppositional Muslim identities. In the process, they enact autonomous spaces for an anti-establishment American Muslim identity that includes believers, atheists, and everyone in between who identifies with Taqwacore on a personal, political, or cultural level. In effect, their sense of religion is more open and flexible than Christian Hardcore as they appreciate the dangers in minimizing what Islam can and should be. Consequently, their openness and flexibility lends itself to being more diffuse and ephemeral than Christian Hardcore.

In asking the question "Who owns Hardcore piety?," I acknowledge that Christian Hardcore and Taqwacore's relationship to religious and social institutions shapes how they make religion their own and to what extent. Both argue that hardcore punk makes them genuine about religion because punks are rejected by the status-quo. Yet, Hardcore Christians are not really rejected by the religious traditions in which they were raised, and as white, male Protestant evangelicals, they do not deal with religious and racial oppression. For this reason, their sense of

persecution is limited to the “mainstream church,” which rejects them for acting like social outcasts, and the “anti-Christians” who reject them for being Christian. In effect, their hardcore piety is a practice of evangelicalism *and* hardcore punk. Their hardcore piety is not independent from Protestant evangelical institutions. Taqwacores, on the other hand, are rejected by their respective religious traditions and do face religious and racial oppression. Their sense of persecution is multifaceted. In effect, their hardcore piety is more akin to an imaginative practice (see Bamyeh 2009) of America, Islam, *and* punk. Their hardcore piety is independent from Islamic institutions.

## 6.2 BEYOND RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

Sociologists of religion must reconsider the assumptions we make about what is and what is not religious and recognize that the boundaries between religion and secular culture are becoming indistinguishable (see Lynch 2007). As this study shows, young people can be inconsistently religious and use religion in different settings to achieve various ends but be as committed to religion as those who sit in a church pew or participate in an imam-led *salat* (prayer). Moreover, people can have a religious identity imposed on them rather than embraced by them, such as Taqwacore who are typically considered Muslim by non-Muslims because of their ethnic heritage and/or skin color. Indeed, some Taqwacores adapt this imposed Muslim identity strategically to contest the very idea that a Muslim identity necessarily means that a person adheres to traditional Islamic beliefs and practices. In some instances, Taqwacores pronounce that they are “Muslim punks” to contest dehumanizing stereotypes or challenge Islamic

conventions. In other situations, Taqwacores downplay any affiliation with Islam and emphasize their connection to punk rock ideas about radical self-expression and anti-establishment politics.

Subcultural Christian and Muslim youth develop two completely different kinds of scenes from the same hardcore punk toolkit, an example of how culture is "not coherent or consistent, and…in most situations, its engagement in actual social behavior is inconsistent and not predetermined" (Smilde 2013: 56; also Blee 2012; Swidler 1986). The punk subculture they engage contains a particular set of aesthetics, ideas, rituals, and values but these do not push these youth in a consistent direction. This is because culture is best conceived as both a constraining and enabling resource (Swidler 1986) that Hardcore Christians and Taqwacores draw on to form their own cultural practices and expressions. By adapting aspects of punk and aspects of religion that best suit their interests concurrently, Christian Hardcore and Taqwacore youth enact their own cultural scenes between hardcore punk culture and traditional religion. As indicated in the Venn diagram (Figure 6-1), Christian Hardcore and Taqwacore youth use cultural tools from a variety of contradictory sources to make their own culture. The Christian Hardcore youth mostly draw on Christianity and hardcore punk; Taqwacores draw on Islam and Islamophobia as well as hardcore punk.

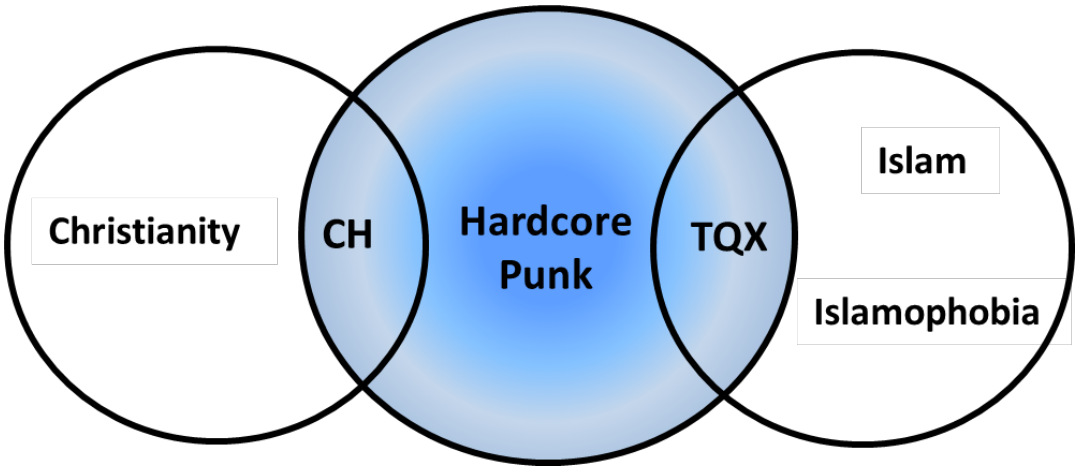


**Figure 6-1: Diagram of Christian (CH) and Taqwacore (TQX) Hardcore Punk Scenes**

Scholars of religion should do additional research on how young people practice religion in non-institutionalized settings and examine how these settings shape their religious beliefs, expressions, and practices (see Bender 2003; Lichterman 2012). For example, by examining how groups express religion in public settings, scholars can better evaluate how religion intersects with secular culture and identities. In a large-scale quantitative study on contemporary trends in religion, Robert Putnam and David Campbell (2010: 135) argue that "religious identity in America has become less inherited and fixed and more chosen and changeable." The people who *choose* their religious identity may think of themselves as part of a religious tradition in some instances, and in others report that they are not religious. According to Putnam and Campbell (2010), these individuals are "liminals" because they have one foot in and one foot out of traditional religion. "Sometimes we catch them thinking of themselves as 'something' (Baptist or Catholic or whatever), and other times they think of themselves as a 'none'" (Putnam and Campbell 2010: 135-6). But are young people merely considering themselves religious when it is convenient or feels right? My study shows that young people are not only thinking liminally

about religion but are creating religious practices, beliefs, and expressions that actively undermine religious/secular boundaries.

Scholars interested in understanding the religious lives of subcultural youth must not only reevaluate what *is* religion beyond religious institutions, but also how to ask people about religion in subcultural settings. I find Christian Hardcore and Taqwacore youth to be typically very defensive about religion. Early on in my data collection, I got the message that directly asking someone, "Do you consider yourself a religious person? Why/why not?" too soon or too directly was not a good way to build rapport. This is because my research subjects did not want to be "pigeonholed" or "stereotyped" for their religion. As an example, during an informal conversation at a live hardcore show, one Taqwacore declared that not all Taqwacores are religious and commented that he was tired of people asking him about religion. Similarly, a Christian punk told me that "all the magazines ask me about religion," a comment he used to let me know that he was fed up with these questions about his religious beliefs and wanted to talk about his music instead.

To find out how young people fuse religion and secular culture, it was necessary to respect that people were ambiguous about religion in some instances and rather explicit about it in others. I decided to use the "Do you consider yourself a religious person?" question only as a follow-up probe and usually got to the same issue by asking questions about controversial songs, outsiders, and about what makes their music different. In other words, I gauged religion organically, as it arose in the conversation. If the subject of religion never came up, I did not push my respondents to talk about it. When it did, I was able to get respondents to elaborate on the matter as I had gained their trust that I was interested in the nuances of their religious beliefs and practices. Most of the time my respondents did talk about religion, just not in the way that

sociologist of religion might expect. A survey about God, the afterlife and religious service attendance will not work in this subcultural world. Instead, a conversation about struggle, religious establishments, and music is a good methodological tool for understanding how subcultural youth make sense of religion outside of religious institutions.

## 6.3 FUTURE STUDIES

My analysis of how youth strategically use punk culture to fuse religion and secular culture raises issues about the creation and recreation of subversive religious music scenes that merit much more scholarly attention. First, future studies might inspect how the producers of religious punk music scenes attract audiences. Doing so can illuminate how perceptions of audience shape religious practices and presentations (Blee and McDowell 2012), revealing why religious music scenes change over time and place, and why some thrive and others die out (Anderson 2009). Second, a particularly necessary line of inquiry is how women participate in religious/punk music scenes. By paying more attention to women in these scenes, we can better understand to what extent the gender ideology of religious traditions is reproduced and in what ways women and men use subversive music to transform and/or strengthen old-fashioned gender hierarchies. Third, to really understand how young people are practicing religion outside of religious institutions, we need to examine social networking websites and how these can be used to obscure the boundaries between religious and secular culture. There are growing bodies of literature on digital religious communities (see Burke 2013; Campbell 2013; Howard 2011), but there is little scholarship on how young people use different media forms and forums to experience religion collectively.

Last, future studies should investigate how a change in the production and consumption of underground music facilitates the marriage of religion and 'secular' music. It is common knowledge that the music industry is in a state of crisis – independent and corporate-owned record companies are having a hard time selling albums due to online pirating, internet radio, and digital file sharing. During my study, I discovered that several relatively successful musicians (meaning they do not have another job and live off of the money they make playing music) told me that they can no longer survive on record sells to make ends meet. These days they depend on tours and merchandise to make money.[40] The importance of live concerts as a source of revenue may explain why there are more and more secular bands inviting Christian bands on tour, and vice versa because secular and Christian bands bring in different crowds. Christian bands draw Christians to the venue and secular bands draw secular crowds. New studies should investigate how a combination of religious and secular tours expands the hardcore/metalcore music market and the extent to which secular record companies, bands, and music show promoters are cooperating with religious institutions to sell more records and secure more concerts.

[40] For this reason, many Christian Hardcore and Metalcore bands tour constantly and bring anywhere from five to ten different t-shirts to sell at their live music shows. After a show, it is common to see fans purchase the band's newest t-shirt design and not so common to see fans purchase the band's latest album.

## APPENDIX A

## PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION TEMPLATE

What is the event?
Where is the event?
How did I hear about it?
Date:
Time of arrival and departure:
Cost:
All ages, 18 or 21+
Race/ethnicity, gender of participants
Number of participants (audience, performers, promoters)

**Physical setting:**

a. What are the physical boundaries of the space/venue?
b. Is the space clean and refined or grubby and unkempt?
c. Was this place difficult to find? Why?
d. How is the performance space made (stage, arrangement of seating, standing room)?

**Social atmosphere:**

a. How do the staff/organizers treat people when they enter the event? (friendly, cold)
b. Where are people congregating?
c. Are people socializing in cliques? Describe the cliques.
d. Are social cliques demarcated by style?
e. What style is most prevalent? Describe clothing (particular band t-shirts, outrageous or regular dress, gender differences/similarities in dress).
f. Do attendees seem friendly, relaxed, or standoffish?
g. Who appears lonely or aloof?
h. Are audience members talking with performers? Purchasing their merchandise?
i. What are people talking about?
    - Is anyone talking about the event? Are they disappointed, excited, mad?
    - Is anyone talking about religion?

**Visuals:**

a. Describe the kinds of media utilized in the space (projectors, video, film).
b. What events (if any) are advertised in the space?
c. Describe the visuals used during each performance.
d. How do the visuals change from one performer to the next? (Stage lighting, signs, props)?

**Religion**

a. What language is used to describe/advertise the event? Does this signal religion?
b. How do I know this event involves religion? What did I need to know beforehand?
c. Are there religious symbols in the space (on the walls, on signs)? Explain.
d. How do people visually express religious, political or social views?
e. Are people wearing political or religious patches, religious clothing, t-shirts or patches with religious emblems, distributing leaflets or flyers that include religious symbols?
f. Do performers talk about religion directly or indirectly?
g. Describe how performers present religion (song, chants, sound, symbols, stories)
h. How is religion disclosed, obscured and/or concealed in the presentation style?

**Performers and Performance**

a. Who is headlining the event? How do I know?
b. Are the event headliners religious or secular? How do I know?
c. Who draws the largest crowd?
d. What emotions are displayed in the performance?
e. Do performers explain the meaning of their art?
    - Do they describe the meaning of a song?
    - Introduce a song?
    - Share a personal story?
f. What personal, political or social topics do performers talk about? How?
g. What did I expect of the performance before coming to the event?
    - How did the performance challenge or confirm my expectations?
    - What is most surprising about the performance?
h. Did anything out of the ordinary happen?
    - How do I know it's out of the ordinary?
    - How did people react (anger, excitement, [dis]approval)?

**Performer and audience interactions**

a. Did the audience appear bored, fun, quiet, loud, supportive, or angry? Explain.
b. How do performers encourage audience enthusiasm?
c. How do performers treat oppositional audience members?
d. How do performers treat enthusiastic audience members?
e. How is the audience interacting differently with different performers?
f. Do any audience members mock or berate the performers? How?
g. How does the audience's response influence the course of the performance?

## APPENDIX B

## MINI-ORAL SURVEY TEMPLATE

Introductory Script: My name is Amy McDowell. I am conducting research on the integration of religion and punk for my Ph.D. in Sociology at the University of Pittsburgh. Are you willing to answer a few short questions about what drew you to this show and your familiarity with the bands? It will only take a few minutes and I will not record any identifying information.

**Audience**

a. How did you hear about this show?
b. Who are you here to see?
c. How far did you travel to get here?
d. Did you enjoy the show? Why?
e. Do you think religion is expanding in this music?
f. Do you think any of the bands are religious? Why?
g. Are you religious?
h. Do you think religion belongs in punk/hardcore (or metal) music?

**Performer**

a. Have you ever played here before?
b. Did you enjoy the show? Why?
c. How far did you travel to get here?
d. Have you performed with these other bands before?
e. Is this crowd religious?
f. Are you religious?
g. Is religion expanding in this music?
h. Do you think religion belongs in punk/hardcore (or metal) music?

## APPENDIX C

## INTERVIEWS WITH HARDCORE CHRISTIANS AND TAQWACORES TEMPLATE

***On tape:***

**Warm-up**

a. What kinds of shows do you like attending? Why?
b. What was the last show you went to?
c. How often do you play or see bands play live?
d. How do you find out about shows? (friends, websites)
e. Can you describe the people that usually go to these shows?
f. Where do these shows usually happen? Can you describe those places?
g. Do you contribute to any online communities connected with this music?
h. What kinds of things do you talk about?

**Christian Hardcore/Taqwacore Punk**

a. What do you like about punk/hardcore/metal music?
b. What sparked your interest in this music?
c. How did you discover this music?
d. What do religion and punk have in common, if anything?
e. What does Taqwacore/Christian Hardcore mean to you?
   - How did you first get involved in this music?
   - How is your involvement different now from when you first started?
f. What is the most common misconception of CH/TAQX?
   - How does that make you feel?
   - What do you wish people knew about it?
g. Is Christian Hardcore/Taqwacore diverse? How so?
   - Some people have said there are racial tensions in this scene. Do you think that is true?
   - I've noticed that there aren't many women on stage. What do you think about that?
   - Do you think many women are involved in this music? Why/Why not?
h. What is most important to you about this music?

**Other punks**

a. How are Hardcore Christians/Taqwacores different from other punks?
b. What is your relationship to other (non-Taqwa/CH) punks?
c. What is your involvement like with these other punks?
d. What do you have in common with them?
e. What don't you have in common with them?
f. Do these scenes accept what CH/ Taqwa is doing?

I want to shift gears and talk specifically about your religious views.

**Religious beliefs and practices**

a. Tell me about your religious upbringing.
b. Do you consider yourself a religious person? Why/why not?
c. Have you ever felt bad about being religious *and* punk? Who made you feel that way?
d. Are you currently involved in any religious community?
    - What is your role in it? How often do you get together?
e. What inspires you spiritually?
f. What do you consider conventional (Christian/Muslim) religion?
g. Do you have any problems with mainstream Christianity/Islam? Explain.
h. Does the music you enjoy challenge any religious conventions? How?
i. Is it important to share your religious beliefs with others? Why? How do you do it? ?

**Conclusion of interview:**

a. Is there something that I should have asked you but didn't?
b. Do you have any questions for me?

***Off tape:***

Date/Time/Duration of Interview:
Location of Interview:
Demographic Information (Age, Gender, Race):
Highest level of education/Degree:

## APPENDIX D

## INTERVIEWS WITH NON-MEMBERS TEMPLATE

***On tape:***

**Warm-up**

a. What kinds of religious/punk community do you participate in?
b. How did you get involved?
c. Can you describe the people in this community? What are they like?
d. How did you first get involved in this music? (if applicable)
   - How is your involvement different now from when you first started?
   - Have you noticed any big changes since you first got involved? What?
   - What does this music mean to you?
   - What sparked your interest in this music?

**Perceptions of Christian Hardcore/Taqwacore**

a. How did you first hear about Christian Hardcore/Taqwacore music?
b. Do you like this music? Why/Why not?
c. How is this music different from other punk music (or spiritual music)?
d. What do you have in common with Christian Hardcore/Taqwacore?
e. What do you think about the combination of religion and punk?
f. Do you think religion belongs in punk? Why/ Why not?
g. Do you think religion is expanding in punk and metal? If yes, why?

***Off tape:***

Date/Time/Duration of Interview:
Location of Interview:
Demographic Information (Age, Gender, Race):
Highest Level of Education:

## APPENDIX E

## GROUP INTERVIEW TEMPLATE

***On tape:***

a. How did you all meet?
b. How long have you known one another?
c. What does punk mean?

I want to ask you about Christian Hardcore/Taqwacore…

a. What makes Christian Hardcore/Taqwacore different from other punk (and religious) music?
b. What do you wish people knew about Christian Hardcore/Taqwacore?
c. Do you think traditional religious conventions are problematic? Why?
d. How does Christian Hardcore/Taqwacore challenge those conventions?
e. Who are your biggest critics?
f. What is a common misconception about Christian Hardcore/Taqwacore?
    - Why do you think this misconception is so common?
    - How did this misconception come about?

***Off tape:***

Date/Time/Duration of Interview:
Location of Interview:
Demographic Information (Age, Gender, Race):

## APPENDIX F

## ARTIFACTS TEMPLATE

**Albums**
Artist_____
Name of Album_____
Format (CD; Digital)_____
Release Date_____
Record Label_____
Identify bands that sound similar:
What genre (hardcore, indie, metalcore, punk) does this fit in?
Are lyrics included in the album?
What songs are about religion?
How is religion conveyed?
Is religion tied to social problems? Explain.
What is the major theme of the album (alienation, partying, politics, relationships, religion)?
What songs are ironic/ odd/ out of place?
Why do I consider these strange?
Does the band mention religion in the liner notes?

**Books and Films**
Publication/ name/date/author/director:
What is this book or film about? Provide a synopsis.
Who is the intended audience?
Who are the main characters (male/female)? What are they like?
Do the main characters change? When?
How are religious beliefs addressed?
How are religious practices depicted?
How is punk talked about? Is it loud, angry, grassroots, mainstream, hip, subversive?
How are sex and drugs discussed?
How are gender and sexuality talked about?
Does this piece reinforce or challenge traditional gender / sexual expression?
What major conflicts transpire in the book/film? Who are the subjects of conflict?

**Album, Book, and Film Reviews (external)**
Source/date/author of album review:
Is the review good/bad? Explain
What is the focus of the review? (beliefs, music, originality)
Are religious, political, or social values discussed in the review?
What is it (the album, book, film) compared to? Why?
Are particular songs/scenes/characters referenced? What is said about them?

**Event Reviews (external)**
Name of event/date/location:
How is the event described (controversial, fun)?
What is emphasized (mosh pit, music, religion)?
How is religion talked about (negatively, neutral, positively)?
Are references made to similar events? Explain.
Is the event depicted as ordinary or extraordinary? Explain.
Does the review include 'expert' or 'insider' voices? Who are they?

**Images (includes album, book, and film cover art; event flyers; promo posters)**
Describe the emotion (angry, dismal, cheerful).
Does it have a DIY or more polished, professional aesthetic?
What are the dominant colors?
What is centralized on the cover?
How does the image illustrate the content/event?
Does the image evoke a theme? Explain.
Is religion visible? Explain.
Is the image gendered? Explain.
Is the art work controversial? Why?

**Media about Christian Hardcore/Taqwacore (publicly available)**
What aspect of this music gets the most attention (controversy, politics, religion)?
What aspect of this music is mentioned in passing, getting the least attention?
How is the religion of Christian Hardcore/Taqwacore discussed?
What political, religious, or social issues are raised?
How are core values of CH/TAQ portrayed? Are their values described as defiant or decent?
Are the voices of Christians/Muslims included? What are they responding to/commenting on?
What was most surprising about this news story/interview?
What was the least surprising?

## APPENDIX G

## EXEMPT INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD INTERVIEW SCRIPT

My dissertation research explores religion and subcultural music. It examines how religious punk music challenges religious and social conventions. This interview will take about one hour. There are no foreseeable risks or benefits to you that are associated with this study. You will not receive any payment for your participation. Your participation is completely voluntary and you may end it at any time. To maintain your confidentiality, no identifying information will be recorded and all recordings and transcripts will be kept in a locked office. I will be audio recording this interview with a digital voice recorder. Therefore, in order to insure anonymity, please refrain from using your name and the names of others during the interview. I am the only one with access to these records.

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