

## Article

# Finding Freire: Punk, Praxis and the Quest for Spirituality in Krishnacore

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**Abstract:** Building upon earlier research, this paper unpacks the complex relationship between punk and Krishna Consciousness, in this instance through the lens of Paulo Freire's notion of praxis. Here, the intersection between punk, the Hare Krishna movement and the corresponding relationship between auto-didacticism and spirituality are examined as a means of interrogating subcultural participation and the hegemonic dominance of the anti-religious sentiment within punk. Freire's approach is examined within the context of this relationship, specifically regarding the inquisitiveness of the individual as they begin the process of engaging with Krishna Consciousness and spirituality, especially from the standpoint of punk. The importance here lies in the learning process being in a state of flux, where the continual re-creation of knowledge and inquiry becomes a means of consolidating the dialectical relationship between the self and the world around it. Here, punk becomes a valuable space in which to discover new ideas, a means of developing an aesthetic and subcultural/religious/spiritual membership within a framework of auto-didacticism; of illuminating the dialectical, hermeneutic relationship between consciousness and the world around us, central to Freire's concept of praxis.

**Keywords:** punk; praxis; Krishnacore; critical pedagogy



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## 1. Introduction

One could contend that punk's complex and often derisive relationship with organised religion began in 1976 with Siouxsie and the Banshees' recitation of 'The Lord's Prayer', (Siouxsie and the Banshees 1979) at the London-based 100 Club Punk Festival. Soon followed by Public Image Ltd.'s sneering 'Religion' (Public Image Ltd 1978), British punk began a disparaging tirade against religion, with The Damned's 'Anti-Pope' (The Damned 1979), Crass' 'Reality Asylum' (Crass 1979), and The Subhumans' 'Religious Wars' (The Subhumans 1982) contributing to an ever-growing oeuvre. Often riled by the Evangelical Right, US punk took a not too dissimilar stance. Here, one need only turn to the Dead Kennedys' 'Religious Vomit' (Dead Kennedys 1981), Propagandhi's 'Haille Sellasse, Up Your Arse' (Propagandhi 1993), Minor Threat's 'Filler' (Minor Threat 1981), Leftöver Crack's 'Atheist Anthem' (Leftöver Crack 2001) and NOFX's 'I'm Going to Hell for This One' (NOFX 2006). Specifically, one can turn to the California-based No Religion, a band whose oeuvre is littered with anti-religious songs, and whose lead singer, Greg Graffin is well-known for his intelligent and critical stance on religion (see Jones 2006; Graffin and Olson 2010). Beyond the Anglo-American tradition, evidence of such a stance can also be seen in the Wollongong-based the Leftards' 'Fuck Religion' (The Leftards), the Paris-based Guerilla Poubelle's 'Quand le ciel sera tombé' (Guerilla Poubelle 2007), the Belgian-based the Kids' 'Jesus Christ (Didn't Exist)' (The Kids 1978) and the Croatian Audio Nitkovs' 'Pišam na vas' (Audio Nitkovs 2012).

With punk being built upon an atheistic, often misotheistic foundation, to be 'shocking' or controversial around the notion of religion became the 'norm'. With the shock value of the punk canon—and specifically its relationship with religion—having been cemented

over decades, there is an expectation of often exaggerated anti-religious sentiment within any punk band's repertoire. Therefore, to lend controversy to religion lay not in a punk ethos as a bearer of anti-religious sentiment but rather the opposite: if 'punk' is synonymous with insurgency, then the polemic lay not in punk bands singing about the antichrist, but instead in *embracing* religion, evidence of which can be seen in the formation of Krishnacore, a sub-genre that grew out of a growing relationship between punk and the Hare Krishna Movement in New York in the 1990s.

Krishnacore came to prominence primarily through the work of two bands, Shelter and 108, with the subgenre forging a 'new, conscious aesthetic', where participants 'began to sing of reincarnation, the concept of the "paramatma" (or the supersoul) and "saranagati" (surrender to Krishna)' (Dines 2014, p. 150). Importantly, by drawing upon an array of traditional Indian texts—including the *Puranas*, *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad-gītā* and the *Śrīmad-Bhagavatam*—Krishnacore also became a medium in which to study and practice a spiritual lifestyle. As such, 'lyrical references were not mere empty references or shallow gestures towards subcultural values and membership; nor were they simply the expression of an ethereal anger aimed at others' (Dines 2014, p. 150). Instead, with 'close references to Vedic texts [and] obvious allusions towards Indian philosophical ideals', individuals began to 'articulate a relationship with Krishna, *bhakti-rasa*, through musical expression, using the punk idiom as a means of cultivating and executing devotional service to Krishna' (Dines 2014, p. 150).

This work aims to build upon earlier research (see Dines 2014, 2021), unpacking the complex relationship between punk and Krishna Consciousness, in this instance through the lens of Paulo Freire's notion of praxis. This work therefore seeks to further interrogate subcultural participation (in this case the intersection between punk and the Hare Krishna Movement) and the relationship between auto-didacticism and spirituality. I would contend that firstly, Freire's work is useful in unpacking the hegemonic dominance of the anti-religious sentiment within punk. Surprisingly, and in an extraordinary twist of fate, punk, previously a 'radical' movement 'nourished by a critical spirit', turned towards what Freire calls 'sectarianism', where 'because it is mythicizing and irrational, turns reality into a false (and therefore unchangeable) "reality"' (Freire 1996, p. 19). As noted, to be 'punk' (and I realise the clumsiness of my nomenclature, the over-generalization of the individual) is to often express atheistic and often misotheistic sentiments. Therefore, to use punk as a means of expressing the spiritual raises the question of what was (and perhaps still is) the epitome of the punk 'ethos'. In other words, how more 'punk' could you get in rebelling against the authority of punk itself: the apotheosis of disobedience.<sup>1</sup>

Second, I believe that Freire's work can be seen through the lens of the transcendental. As Freire notes, the 'mechanistic concept of consciousness' (Freire 1996, p. 60), one that sees an 'empty vessel' to be filled via the 'banking method of domination', stands in direct contrast to 'authentic liberation' (Freire 1996, p. 60), and where 'knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other' (Freire 1996, p. 53). Here, whilst the banking system sets forth the construction of a 'narrative'-led pedagogy, for Freire, 'libertarian education, on the other hand, lies in its drive towards *reconciliation*' (Freire 1996, p. 53, my emphasis), a process that reconciles the dialecticism between student and teacher.

As such, Freire's notion of the 'restless', the 'impatient' and the 'continuing' process of pedagogy illuminates and assists in framing the inquisitiveness of the individual as they begin the process of engaging with Krishna Consciousness and spirituality; or, as Freire notes, the continual strive for the '*emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality*' (Freire 1996, p. 62, emphasis in original). Here, the importance lies in the learning process being in a state of flux whereby the continual re-creation of knowledge and inquiry becomes a means of consolidating the dialectical relationship between the self and the world around it. As Freire notes, the everyday 'consists of action and reflection' and a 'transformation of the world' (Freire 1996, p. 106). Here, punk becomes a valuable space in which to discover

new ideas, a means of developing an aesthetic and subcultural/religious/spiritual membership within a framework of auto-didacticism: of illuminating the dialectical, hermeneutic relationship between consciousness and the world around us, central to Freire's concept of praxis.

## 2. The Path towards Krishna: A Brief History of Krishnacore

The trajectory of Krishnacore, and, in this context, the spiritual influences of hardcore, began in the late 1970s with the Washington D.C.-based group Bad Brains. Being of Afro-American origin, a rarity in hardcore circles at the time (and still is), the band were vocal about their spiritual beliefs and practices, specifically regarding Rastafarianism. The group's guitarist, Dr. Know, for instance, notes how 'our spiritual search brought us to Rastafari. We knew about reggae through the Clash and the whole English thing, but we didn't know about Rasta' (Blush 2010, p. 52). He continues, 'back then, we were young and had lots of questions about life. Then some Rasta brothers schooled us on the real deal, and all that helped us find the answers. . . Our minds got opened to a totally new way of thinking that I never would've found had I not travelled this path. It was a natural progression' (Blush 2010, p. 52).

This in turn influenced several hardcore musicians, most notably the lead singer (John Joseph) and the bass player (Harley Flanagan) of the punk band the Cro-Mags. Joseph first saw Bad Brains in the New York punk venue CBGBs and was later to become friends with the band's singer, HR. He told Joseph that the 'world needed more spirituality, more Jah and that Babylon, which meant the materialistic planet that Earth was becoming, was a spiritual slaughterhouse for the youth'. Instead, notes HR, 'we didn't belong in this material. . . we belonged in Zion (the spiritual world) with Jah'. For Joseph, 'it just made sense. We're prisoners in this material world' (Joseph 2016, p. 254). The next step in the journey came when Joseph found a job in Prana Foods, a health food shop run by the Hare Krishnas. Here, Joseph became friend with Vinny Signorelli, drummer for the Dots (a punk band from the 1970s), who had personally lived for a short time in a Hare Krishna temple. For Joseph, Signorelli helped put together Joseph's 'hodge-podge philosophy' (Joseph 2016, p. 254). And these discussions were solidified when Signorelli gave Joseph a copy of Srila Prabhupāda's (2003) *The Science of Realization*, a book that fed Joseph's curiosity and fascination and where, however much he looked for inconsistencies, 'believe it or not, I found none' (Joseph 2016, p. 254).

The Cro-Mag's album *The Age of Quarrel* (1986)—the title referring to Kali Yuga, a world characterized by illusion and spiritual and material degradation—further consolidated Krishna Consciousness into hardcore, with songs such as 'Do Unto Others', 'Seekers of the Truth' and 'We Gotta Know'. In turn, Joseph influenced the Cause for Alarm vocalist Keith Burkhardt, whose 'In Search Of...' (1983) was written 'thinking about Prabhupāda and [which] had a spiritual vibe', a track that he admits 'was pretty much going against this punk rock movement's bible' (Rettman 2019). In the same year, Antidote's *Thou Shalt Not Kill* was released (whose leader singer Louie Rivera was a roadie for Bad Brains), with the track 'Real Deal' consisting of backing vocals from 'Johnny (that Hare Krishna) Joseph', whilst 1987 saw the formation of the band Fed Up!, formed by Caine Rose and Jai Nitai Holzman, both of whom were involved with the Hare Krishna Movement.

The relationship between hardcore and Krishna Consciousness was further strengthened through its alignment with the lifestyle and philosophy of straight edge (for a definition and overview of straight edge, see Lahickey 1997; Wood 2006; Haenfler 2006; Peterson 2009). On the one hand, the Hare Krishna movement's four 'regulative principles', which included an abstinence from intoxicants (including caffeine), gambling, illicit sex and meat eating were like those of straight edge punk. On the other, musicians such as Ray Cappo of the band Shelter felt that straight edge was a means of articulating a new transcendental energy within the punk movement. 'In 1983, a common punk slogan to paint on your jacket was "No One Rules,"' he notes. 'I laughed to myself in 1986 when I saw a similar motto on the back of a sweatshirt. It read "Rules!" The pendulum of liberalism swung from

“No Rules” to “Rules are good” (Lahickey 1997, pp. ix–x). In contrast to the stereotypical destructive persona, straight edge offered a lifestyle choice that affirmed positive living and individual and social responsibility. As such, lyrical content mirrored a carefully defined lifestyle of clean living and social awareness, articulating an awareness of animal rights, veganism and, later on, ecological issues.

From here, the 1990s saw Krishnacore embedded within the punk canon, primarily through musicians such as Ray Cappo (Shelter), Vic DiCara and Robert Fish (both from the band 108) beginning to engage with ideas drawn from ancient Indian texts key to the Hare Krishna movement, such as the *Bhagavad-gītā* and the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*. All three became devotees, living as *brahmacharis* (monks). ‘I liked the way Eastern philosophies approach religion and spirituality as if it was something logical and scientific’, notes Vic DiCara. ‘There are lengthy, detailed explanations of just about every aspect of what they talk about. And these explanations are right out in front, not hidden away for debate in some seminary or some “mystical” version of the scripture’ (Peterson 2009, p. 119). If DiCara was drawn to the scientific, then Cappo was drawn to the idea of the soul: ‘what I understand about reincarnation is that I know that I’m not a body. . . I am an observer; that’s all I am—I’m a passenger’ (Peterson 2009, p. 114). And, for Robert Fish, there was the relationship between discipline and spiritual realization: ‘. . . at some point the practitioner of any discipline, philosophy, or lifestyle will hit that stage where there is a deep and life-altering moment where you step back, examine life, and find your person within, and at times maybe outside of that given lifestyle’ (Peterson 2009, p. 117).

Krishnacore also began to spread its wings, encompassing bands from Argentina (Confort Supremo, Sudarshana, Enquirer and Las Palabras Queman) and Columbia (Radheya, Resplendor and Entre el Karma y el Dharma) to Poland (Agni-Hotra, Nyshynga and Omkara), Italy (Fumbles in Life, Safe and Traces of You) and Hungary (Vishnu Formation and Mantra). Many continued to draw upon a conscious musical aesthetic, with the Argentinian grindcore band Bhakti recording an arrangement of the Mahā-mantra for their album *Acharya* (1996), and the Russian-based Sober including arrangements of the mantra ‘Om Namō Bhagavate Vasudeya’ and the traditional devotional song ‘Sri Narasimha Pranama’ on their album *Bhakti* (2019), both sung in their original Sanskrit. Similarly, album covers also continued in the same vein; the Italian band Traces of You incorporated Narasimha, the lion avatar of Vishnu on the front cover of their album *Deliverance* (2015), while Safe’s *Ride the New Season* (2014) depicted Krishna showing Arjuna his Universal Form in the *Bhagavad-gītā* (see Prabhupāda 2006, pp. 455–500).

From the early incarnations of Krishna-inspired bands such as the Wuds, Cause For Alarm and the Cro-Mags to the developing relationship between ISKCON<sup>2</sup> and bands such as Baby Gopal, Shelter and 108, and the global expansion beyond the 1990s, the fusion between the Hare Krishnas and punks helped formalize a music that encouraged punks to think about transcendental and religious ideas. For Madhu Brata Das, a leading authority on Krishnacore, and keeper of the website *Sonidos de Liberacion*, this growing relationship between punk and spirituality helped individuals ‘build a relationship with Krishna, an intimate relationship with God’ (Das 2019). In particular, the earlier Krishnacore bands gave individuals access to literature that asked questions around the existence of God, the description of the universe and the purpose of life. In other words, the Hare Krishnas taught that ‘life is not just about study, work, getting married and then dying’ (Das 2019), but instead provides an explanation of the transcendental nature of the world. And for Madhu Brata Das, this was key. ‘For we are all searching for something’, he says,

‘we are all searching for something more, because nothing of this world can give us a 100% satisfaction because everything is temporary, everything is conditioned by the material world. Through our connection with Krishna we find out that we are eternal, and we should find a connection with God, we become his devotees, and start to develop a spiritual life’. (Das 2019)



### 3. Finding Krishna: The Spiritual Evolution of Punk to Monk

For Freire, 'human activity consists of action and reflection: it is praxis; it is transformation of the world. And as praxis, it requires theory to illuminate it' (Freire 1996, p. 107). Here, the emphasis is placed upon 'reflection' and 'action', where praxis reveals an authentic world able to 'transform reality' (Freire 1996, p. 68) via both theory and practice. Without either, he notes, praxis—or transformation—is 'reduced to either verbalism or activism' (Freire 1996, p. 106). Praxis, therefore, provides a framework for the exploration of the codification of Krishnacore via a collection of visual and sonic artefacts underpinned by a clear process of experiential reflectivity. Here, album covers, the development of a distinctive Krishnacore aesthetic, the production of fanzines, and the engagement with both the wider punk community and the Hare Krishna community make for a transformative process that works beyond the boundaries of subcultural relationships towards a theoretical understanding of a complex theological system. Negotiation and transformation here is key, not only within the context of punk musicians 'getting to grips' with complex theological and philosophical ideas from the Vedic tradition, but also with regard to an increasingly antagonistic relationship with the hegemonic, atheistic traditions of punk.

Furthermore, praxis helps in unpacking the antagonism and conflict between punk per se and individual punks wishing to begin a spiritual journey within the Hare Krishna Movement; a perfect example of which appeared in December 1989, when Ray Cappo was interviewed by Tim Yohannon, the editor of the American punk fanzine *Maximumrocknroll* (MRR). It was obvious from the very start that the feature was going to be antagonistic. Entitled 'Ray of Yesterday Meets Ray of Tomorrow: It's Enough to Make Me Start Drinking!!!!!!', the interview was accompanied by a damning indictment of the Krishna Consciousness Movement entitled 'The Truth, The Whole Truth, And Nothing But The Truth, So Help Me Krishna'. A brief overview of the latter will be useful in contextualising Cappo's interview for the reader.

'The Truth, The Whole Truth, And Nothing But The Truth' opens with a case study written from the viewpoint of Annabella, whose husband Ed became involved in the Hare Krishna Movement. Annabella begins the story with Ed returning home one day with a copy of the *Bhagavad-gītā*. She notes how Ed, who already had an interest in Eastern philosophy, was curious about the Hare Krishnas, but was reassuring of his wife's concerns. 'This seemed like a benign enough book', she writes; '[Ed] told me not to worry about it because he had no intentions of joining a cult' (MRR *Maximumrocknroll* 1989).<sup>3</sup> In the following weeks after Christmas, however, Ed lost his job and Annabella noticed how he began to immerse himself in the writing of the Movement, fuelled by his first visit to the temple. She notes how Ed seemed flattered that they would be interested in him, encouraging him to read the *Bhagavad-gītā* at all hours, begin chanting and to attend the regular Sunday feasts at the temple. His obsession with Krishna increased. 'He was taking money that we needed to pay our bills with to buy books, clothes, tapes, records, incense, pictures, etc... He would deny himself food if he could buy something Krishna related' (MRR *Maximumrocknroll* 1989). He chanted constantly and became increasingly verbally and psychologically abusive. Annabella noted how he would 'insult [her] until [she] cried, telling [her] how crying was woman's weapon against man' (MRR *Maximumrocknroll* 1989). He also cut off all sexual relations with her and dropped his friends due to them being 'karmis', or non-devotees.

Annabella contacted FOCUS, a Cult Awareness Network, who told her that she was acting in the wrong way, pushing Ed away by spiritually holding him back. They decided that, to play for time, she would also get involved with the Krishnas. She began to visit the Sunday feasts, buying her own set of japa beads and telling Ed that she was chanting at work every day. Ed also thought she was reading the *Bhagavad-gītā*, but she was merely moving the bookmark forward a few pages each night. 'During the day', she concludes, 'I took constant notes of Ed's behaviour and finalized the plan for deprogramming' (MRR *Maximumrocknroll* 1989). The time came when Annabella told Ed that she would move to Boston with him to be nearer the temple on the proviso that they would talk to friends of her parents who were knowledgeable about critical religions. She told Ed that it was a mere formality, putting both their parents' mind at rest.

When the two deprogrammers arrived with Ed's mother, he knew immediately who they were. But, with Annabella's apparent interest in Krishna Consciousness, it seemed that the deprogrammers were speaking to them both: 'we watched hours and hours of videotapes', she notes; 'we saw examples of mind control in various other cults including footage on Nazi Germany' (MRR *Maximumrocknroll* 1989). Interestingly, noted Annabella, as the day wore on, Ed was beginning to get more and more frustrated, concluding how 'they were obviously triggering off independent thought' (MRR *Maximumrocknroll* 1989). The next day, the deprogrammers returned, but this time with 'Steve', an ex-Krishna; whilst on the third day, they were accompanied by 'Phil', an ex-Krishna from the same temple that Ed belonged to. To conclude, Ed was admitted into a rehabilitation clinic for ex-cult members and was successfully 'deprogrammed'. 'I have the old Ed back', concluded Annabella, '[but] I still find it difficult to believe that we went through this experience' (MRR *Maximumrocknroll* 1989).

What follows in MRR is nearly eight pages of anti-religious sentiment specifically aimed at the Hare Krishnas. Here, Krishna Consciousness is described as 'an abhorrent form of Hinduism'; notes how Prabhupāda's translation of the *Gītā* incorporates terms such as 'service', 'submission' and 'devotion', terms that 'are slanted towards his way of wanting to run the organization'; how devotees would steal from those who would buy books from them; and how the Hare Krishnas believed in the order of 'man-cow-woman-dog' (MRR *Maximumrocknroll* 1989). It also listed several criminal activities in the movement, including murder, paedophilia, kidnapping and drug running (see Hubner and Grusen 1990), and a critique of the Krishnacore punk fanzine *The Razor's Edge*.

The interview proper between Cappo and Yohannan begins well, with the latter asking Cappo for his reasons for joining the Krishna Consciousness, enquiring as to when he became a devotee proper and with Yohannan giving Cappo time to reply fully. Yet, as Yohannan becomes more forthright in his questioning, tensions arise. 'There are two things that bother me about religion', he notes. 'One is that people claim to "know" the truth. The other is that most religions, in the way they view history or strife or contradiction, is to say, "accept it, and you will be rewarded in the afterlife"' (MRR *Maximumrocknroll* 1989). According to Yohannan, this stops people placing energy into the present. Moreover, 'if you're working on the assumption that maybe this is all there is, and it sucks, then maybe you'll put your energy into trying to change reality' (MRR *Maximumrocknroll* 1989).<sup>4</sup>

As the conversation becomes more involved with the theological and philosophical, Cappo also begins to get bogged down by the complexity of Vedic scripture. When Cappo notes how he has been 'a living entity in a material body for billions of years', the dialogue continues:

MRR: I'm not an atheist, but it's eerie to hear someone say with complete confidence that they've been around for billions of years.

R: [Replying in a facetious manner] Well, if all these religious scriptures all over the world parallely (sic) made up some lies. . .

MRR: I don't think they're lies, but that human existence is a painful thing and understanding your own death is very scary and people come up with any amount of reasons or beliefs or rationalizations to make that more palatable and less painful and give their life meaning.

R: Are you saying there is no meaning?

MRR: I don't know if there's a meaning or not, but anyone who comes along and says that they know (sic) there is a meaning and know what has happened and will happen, I think is crazy. A crackpot, just as insane as someone who says they absolutely know that there is no God. (MRR *Maximumrocknroll* 1989)

As a conclusion on the theme of reincarnation, Yohannan retorts, 'I think anyone who says they know what happens after death is full of fucking shit. As much as you can point to scriptures in the Bible or other books, there's no proof. It's then a matter of faith because some humans need that security' (MRR *Maximumrocknroll* 1989). In another instance, the interviewer tells Cappelletti that the belief in an afterlife 'seems to be as much of a drug as anything else', noting how 'it's a way of easing your pain and rationalizing your existence to make some sense out of life. When you talk of being high on materialism or drugs, what you espouse seems to be another kind of high and escape' (MRR *Maximumrocknroll* 1989). One could contend that Yohannan's sentiments are not specifically anti-Krishna Consciousness but instead more concerned with the impact that religion may have on the hardcore punk scene. 'But you do push your religion', he notes at one point, 'you do proselytize, you're trying to make people aware of this and convert them, and you believe that you know and understand God' (MRR *Maximumrocknroll* 1989).

The MRR interview is certainly a difficult read. On the subject of sex, for instance, Yohannan accuses Cappelletti of repressing sexuality, of 'sexual fascism' and, whilst on the topic of religion fighting poverty, Yohannan notes how 'there are a lot of people who feel that way who are not religious. You don't have to be locked into a religious dogma to come to that kind of understanding' (MRR *Maximumrocknroll* 1989). Furthermore, Cappelletti continues to struggle to get to grips with several complex theological ideas. Even though he notes how the mystical contemplation and repetition of the holy names can be found in monasteries from all faiths, all over the world, Cappelletti believes that Christianity is 'watered down', and how, 'if you go to a Christian monastery, they don't know things about how to control the mind' (MRR *Maximumrocknroll* 1989).

#### 4. Finding Freire: Krishnacore, Spiritual Auto-Didacticism and Praxis

Although at times complex, one could contend that Cappelletti's auto-didactical curiosity throughout the interview echoes the reflective, theoretical and transformative notion of praxis (Mayo 2020, p. 457). Here, theory becomes 'a codification of reflection on experience', a means of relating theory to practice, of aiding a 'unity of consciousness and praxis' (Mayo 2020, p. 457). Cappelletti's initial explorations into the spiritual—'I always believe there was more than the eye could perceive', he notes, and therefore 'I started checking out types of Eastern philosophy and studying types of yoga and Buddhism' (MRR *Maximumrocknroll* 1989)—echo the ethos of praxis as a 'learning process intended to improve one's relationship with these surroundings' (Mayo 2020, p. 458). A means of initial pedagogical negotiation where, in terms of Cappelletti, he begins to uncover previous curiosities. Further, naivety can be informed by Cappelletti being only twenty-three at the time of his interview, and just beginning his spiritual journey, and it would not be surprising to any reader that an inexperience in his reading of the Vedas was apparent.

I would contend, therefore, that Krishna Consciousness allowed Cappelletti to stand back, to critically distance himself from his relationship with punk and spirituality. If Cappelletti was frustrated with gaining an inner sense of 'self', then he was equally frustrated with the punk scene. During his time with his previous band, Youth of Today (YOT), he notes how 'we ended up playing the same old clubs to the same old people'. He continues, 'I felt the straight edge scene was getting real stupid. They may not be intoxicated on drugs, but they're intoxicated on tons of other things. Just material life' (MRR *Maximumrocknroll* 1989). Indeed, it is here that Cappelletti outlines his disillusionment, and his decision to leave Youth of Today. The interview, therefore, and Cappelletti's spiritual journey took a critical distance from the scene itself, in 'extraordinarily re-experiencing the ordinary' (Mayo 2020, p. 458). Or, in other words, 'educating through praxis was intended to help people stand back and view the familiar from a different vantage point—a codification into something strange but which, through probing, begins to appear eerily familiar' (Mayo 2020, p. 459). Importantly, Cappelletti's codification of the familiar was unique in this setting, not least because of the relationship between punk and spirituality and, on the whole, the auto-didactic nature of that praxis, a process which led to the reflection, theory and transformational nature of Cappelletti's thinking.

In his interview with Yohannan, Cappo reveals how, upon his reading of spiritual texts and his discussions with fellow devotees, he ‘joined’ the Hare Krishna Movement after reflecting upon his ‘realizations’. Cappo recites how the Buddhist sutras first led to his studying of Vedic scriptures. He recounts that

‘YOT was getting bigger and my life was doing pretty good. . . I had a nice situation, lots of friends, nice girlfriend, a waiter in a restaurant. . . a pretty simple life and I had money, but I was really miserable [ . . . ] I was getting really sick of material life, didn’t feel that I was accomplishing anything major with the band and though there were higher things in life to do. I wasn’t interested in settling down. . . I wasn’t interested in family and thought there were higher truths to be found before I accepted a slot in society’. (*MRR Maximumrocknroll* 1989)

Cappo’s spiritual explorations led to a codifying of experience, which allowed him ‘to act on [his] material surroundings and reflect upon them’ (Mayo 2020, p. 458). Importantly, the process of action–reflection–transformative action is dialectical, and just sequential. ‘For Freire’, notes Mayo, ‘action on its own, isolated from reflection, is tantamount to mindless activism. Reflection, divorced from action, constitutes empty theorising’. Instead, praxis is the process by which the two join together, ‘rendering them independent in a dialectical manner’ (Mayo 2020, p. 458).

However naïve (and again, we must be aware of Cappo’s age and stage of spiritual journey at this point), praxis allows us to uncover and further interrogate the complex relationship between spirituality and subcultural discourse based upon an anti-religious ideology. Cappo’s negotiation, therefore, lay not just in his pedagogical approach in relation to the Vedas, but also in the barrage of criticism he received from the punk movement itself. Freire’s model here is useful as a retrospective framework, as a means of unpacking the complex and often fraught environment that Krishnacore participants found (and still find) themselves in. As an aside, and a pertinent point for this paper, it was not just the Hare Krishnas who were criticised in the global punk scene, for Yohannan’s punk-based, anti-religious antipathy was equally meted out towards other religions. For instance, McDowell (2020) notes the difficulty for Christian bands to be accepted in punk and, whilst ‘the integration of Christian punk into hardcore scenes is of interest because it reveals [how] American evangelicalism has made a space for itself in some of the most resistant corners of American popular culture’ (McDowell 2020, p. 53), McDowell’s research also highlights the stigma attached to Christian punks. Drawing upon ‘Paul’, the lead singer of a straight edge band in Florida, McDowell notes that ‘most of the resistance comes from what he and others term “anti-Christian” punks, who do not like Christians, or want to be affiliated with them’ (McDowell 2020, p. 55). Interestingly, Paul notes how ‘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’ (McDowell 2020, p. 55).

Another of McDowell’s interviewees, Melinda, an organiser for a Bible studies group at a Christian tattoo shop in Pittsburgh, recounts a story of when her husband, Isaac, supported a local secular punk band. During ‘a friendly exchange’ with one of the secular band members, Isaac gave him one of his band’s t-shirts but, ‘when he later found out that he was wearing a Christian band t-shirt, he reportedly got angry and called Isaac a “phony”’ (McDowell 2020, p. 55). Interestingly, and key to this work, is how Paul and Melinda believe that ‘they are the ones who genuinely embrace the idea that punk is a space for radical self-expression’ (McDowell 2020, p. 55). Sentiments that would not seem out of place with the beliefs of Cappo where, ‘being ‘Christian in punk is radical. . . because it breaks the mold of what others think punk is or should be’ (McDowell 2020, pp. 55–56). Moreover, echoing Russ Bestley’s (2015) thoughts regarding censorship and the secular Left, Ibrahim Abraham (Abraham 2020, p. 170) highlights the important tensions between punk and tolerance.



The often antagonistic relationship between punk and spirituality, therefore, has created a pedagogical dynamic through which individuals can explore new ideas beyond the punk scene per se, and key to this was the growing 'Krishnacore aesthetic' that, amongst other examples, blended samples of the Mahā-mantra chanted by Srila Prabhupāda, the movement's founder (see [Shelter 1992](#)), the use of the Pancha-Tattva ([Shelter 1993](#)) and the inclusion of kirtan ([Shelter 1993](#)) into the music of Krishnacore bands. For Freire, literacy was key within his opposition towards what he terms the 'banking education', a 'top-down approach to learning devoid of critically reading words and the world simultaneously and understand the situations the latter offers' ([Mayo 2020](#), p. 461). I would contend that the notion of 'literacy', specifically around the idea of language and the transcending of functional literacy, may be extended to the auto-didactic and pedagogic space of Krishnacore; specifically via the reading of fanzines, and lyrical and political content on record sleeves (see the author's own experience at [Dines \(2015\)](#)).

As an example of this process, the author would like to turn to his own interview with Krishna Das of the Krishnacore band Invocation ([Dines and Das 2023](#) who, alongside the bands Back to Godhead, Anti-Material Worlds and the Russia-based Sober, are part of a contemporary wave of Krishnacore. Krishna Das' interview is an insightful comparison to Cappelletti's; whilst the notion of reflection, theory and transformation are still present, Krishna Das has no real need to critically distance himself from punk. Although there is still a degree of hostility towards Krishnacore bands (in the same way that contemporary anarcho-punk bands are still, on the whole, anti-religious), there is now a well-trodden Krishnacore canon established within the punk scene thanks mainly to the likes of Cappelletti et al.

With regard to Freire, it is clear to see Krishna Das' encompassing a sense of what the writer terms *conscientização*, what Peter Roberts calls 'perspective transformation' (quoted in [Mayo 2020](#), p. 460). For Freire, 'a critical analysis of a significant existential dimension makes possible a new, critical attitude', whereby *conscientização* 'introduces or begins to introduce women and men to a critical form of thinking about their world' ([Freire 1996](#), p. 85). Here, alongside critical literacy and the notion of praxis, *conscientização* becomes key in critically transforming the individual's world. For, *conscientização*, praxis and critical literacy allows for a 'critical reading of the learners' world' ([Mayo 2020](#), p. 461).

Krishna Das opens the interview by conveying how the title of the band was inspired by a song of the same name by 108. 'The lyrics of that song always felt really inspiring and powerful to me', he notes,

'and I think that name really summarizes what this band is about: an attempt to call upon the mercy and strength of Sri Caitanya Mahāprabhu [the most recent avatar of Sri Sri Radha-Krishna] to rise above the trap of material life and attain Krishna Prema [Divine Love] as well as inspire others to do the same'. ([Vanderpol 2021](#))

Furthermore, and according to Das, the title of their EP, *Clarion Call* (2021), is a reference to the title of a magazine that his guru, Srila Bhaktivedanta Tripurari Swami, both edited and published. He continues, 'my great-great-great-grandfather guru, Srila Bhaktivinoda Thakur, also wrote a bhajan titled *Jiv Jago*, which means "wake up, sleeping soul", and I felt that had a similar vibe to the phrase *Clarion Call*' ([Dines and Das 2023](#)). This also gave Krishna Das the inspiration in including a sound-byte of the bhajan on the last song of the EP.

Krishna Das' intricate awareness of the spiritual import of Krishna Consciousness within his writing is more than apparent. Yet, critical literacy—as noted above—moves beyond the functional, into the realm of the aesthetic. The lyrical function of music is apparent: his knowledge of scripture and how they inform his own work is obvious throughout the interview. With regards the first track on *Clarion Call*, entitled 'Rebirth', he notes how the first and second verses focus specifically on how the 'material world is intertwined with suffering, illusion and impermanence' ([Dines and Das 2023](#)), whilst the chorus 'speaks to the soul's (the true, eternal self beyond material aggregates like the body and mind) awakening to the reality of its predicament in the wheel of birth and death and its yearning to be reborn for the last time, in its true, eternal spiritual nature beyond the false ego' ([Dines and Das 2023](#)).

However, the spiritual refers more than just the lyrics, and Krishna Das' choice of artwork for the EP further reflects the depth of understanding. This consists of an image of Caitanya Mahaprabhu dancing with a group of devotees who are performing kirtan, the congregational singing of the Mahā-mantra. To provide emphasis, the picture (an early traditional Indian depiction of Caitanya and devotees) is set on a red, flamed background. 'There's another bhajan from several centuries ago (you might have heard it in the beginning of Shelter's song "Shelter")', notes Krishna Das, 'that describes the material world as a forest fire, so I felt that was a good choice for a background'. Moreover, 'the image of the kirtan in the centre is meant to appear as a window of hope and mercy to see beyond the material world', as one of Krishna Das' grandfather-gurus often described depictions of Krishna and as 'windows to the spiritual world' (Dines and Das 2023).

Within this context, therefore, *conscientização* and critical literacy are used as a means of moving beyond the material towards a spiritual and transcendental understanding of scripture. Here, one could contend that punk becomes a means of devotion; the aesthetic (specifically the sonic) becomes a means of religious practice akin to the singing of bhajans and kirtan. With the incorporation of bhajans and specific references towards scripture, punk has become a means by which individuals not only explore their relationship with Krishna, but also a means of devotion: an act of worship or prayer.

## 5. Conclusions

This article has examined the notion of subcultural participation—and its relationship with auto-didacticism and spirituality—via the lens of Paulo Freire's praxis. Here, the author drew upon two participants in the Krishnacore movement as case studies for examining the reflexive relationship between the hegemonic position of punk (specifically regarding its relationship with religion/spirituality) and those exploring philosophical and spiritual ideas drawn from the Hare Krishna Movement. Of course, there are tensions with using the work of Freire in this context. One cannot ignore the accusations of those expressed in the MRR interview, and many would argue that, whatever denomination, religion has its own issues with regard to control, specifically around women and sexuality.

On the other hand, however, Freire's notion of praxis is a useful framework with which to unpack the complex pedagogical, artistic and spiritual foundations that underpin the formation and development of Krishnacore. There is no doubt that Cappo's earlier comments come from a place of naivety (he is not the only one to have espoused such views thirty years ago), but this must be seen in context as an individual who had just started out on his spiritual journey. Indeed, Cappo still follows Gaudiya Vaishnavism today, as is evident from his informative and respected podcast *Wisdom of the Sages*, and his teaching of yoga and Indian philosophy. Yet, I would contend that, from a place of naivety (and constant criticism), Cappo's auto-didactic approach, alongside sangha (association with other devotees and learned individuals), created a place of 'authentic dialogue', and of a 'dynamic pedagogy where knowledge becomes a focus of epistemological curiosity and an object of co-investigation' (Mayo 2020, p. 462).

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> As is evident in punk studies, the definition of ‘punk’ is a frequently contested issue. For an excellent overview, turn to Worley (2017, pp. 24–47). For an overview of contemporary punk, turn to Bestley et al. (2019, 2021a, 2021b). For an excellent introduction to punk and religion, turn to Stewart (2017).
- <sup>2</sup> Although there was a close relationship between ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness) and the emerging Krishnacore bands, there were also tensions, not least in what many saw as ISKCON’s ingrained misogyny (see DiCara 2016, pp. 76–80, 152–53 and 217–20; Muster 2001, pp. 171–75), and the emerging evidence of child sexual abuse, drug dealing and murder within the Hare Krishna movement (see Muster 2001; Hubner and Grusen 1990).
- <sup>3</sup> *Maximumrocknroll* omitted page numbers. Therefore, only the date is provided in the reference. For ease of reference, I have placed Cappo’s interview and Anabella’s article under (*MRR Maximumrocknroll* 1989).
- <sup>4</sup> I make no apologies for the extensive referencing of the interview, for it provides the reader with a sense of the tone set by the interviewer.

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