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Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses 2004 33: 397
DOI: 10.1177/00084298043300307

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://sir.sagepub.com/content/33/3-4/397
Rave and religion? A contemporary youth phenomenon as seen through the lens of religious studies

FRANÇOIS GAUTHIER

Summary: This article examines the contemporary phenomenon of raves. Although explicit religious references abound in rave culture and also in scholarly interpretations of raves, these references are generally analogous and avoid direct mention of “religion” proper. In this article, we apply the theory of displacement of religious experience and the sacred to draw out the structural and phenomenological religious homology of raves and set the study of this youth phenomenon and the subculture which surrounds it firmly within the field of religious studies. We also propose avenues for further investigation. The article begins with a brief history and definition of “rave.” Then it turns to the symbolic and religious references found in raves as well as the meanings both participants and commentators attribute to this phenomenon. Third, it presents and discusses the ritual structure of rave, using the theory of the mechanism and dynamics of the transgression-fuelled festal ritual (la fête), as defined by Georges Bataille. Its purpose is to contribute to an understanding of how contemporary religious economy develops, particularly a religious economy that concerns a now largely secularized youth.

Résumé : Cet article puise aux théories de la religion dans l’analyse des raves et de la sous-culture qui les entoure, dans l’optique d’une théorie du déplacement et de la recomposition de l’expérience religieuse. Si les références religieuses explicites pullulent dans cette sous-culture ainsi que dans les essais interprétatifs qu’en font les sciences humaines ou autres analyses, celles-ci se font généralement à un niveau analogique, se gardant par là d’assimiler ce phénomène au religieux proprement dit.

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Cet article entend donc ouvrir une brèche dans cette réserve en procédant à l'excavation de certaines homologies religieuses, structurelles et phénoménologiques opérant dans les raves. Et, par le fait même, ancrer fermement l'étude d'un tel phénomène au sein du domaine d'intelligibilité des sciences religieuses, tout en proposant quelques voies d'analyse. Concrètement, un bref rappel historique et descriptif est d'abord présenté. Puis, en un deuxième temps, les symbolismes et références religieuses que l'on retrouve dans les raves, ainsi que les interprétations de ce phénomène, font l'objet d'une discussion critique. Dans un troisième temps, la structure rituelle du rave est mise au jour et envisagée sous l'angle du rituel festif. S'inspirant des théorisations d'un Georges Bataille, notamment, au sujet de la fête, le texte interroge le « mécanisme » et la dynamique essentiellement transgressive du phénomène. On espère ainsi contribuer au débat autour de l'évolution de l'économie religieuse de nos sociétés occidentales, notamment en ce qui a trait aux jeunes d'aujourd'hui, représentants de ces premières générations largement « sécularisées ».

I can only see myself believing in a God who knows how to dance.
—Friedrich Nietzsche

What does the gathering of thousands of youths on a weekly basis foretell? Forcibly something.
—E. Galland 1997: 8

Even the least in tune with youth culture today have heard of those all-night techno music parties called “raves.” Well over a decade now since the explosive birth of raves in the urban crucibles of London and Manchester (UK) in 1988, techno music continues to fuel vibrant rave scenes weekly in Montréal, in other major Western metropolises and across the world. Largely referred to as “rave culture,” this multi-headed and by now well-established phenomenon constitutes one of the most popular forms of contemporary youth subcultures, yet remains both widely misunderstood (Redhead 1999) and relatively under-examined by the social sciences. This article intends to draw upon religious studies theories to examine this important youth phenomenon. In particular, it will consider rave culture in the light of the theory of contemporary displacements of the religious experience and that of the sacred (see Bastide 1973, 1977 and Ménard 1999a, 2001, especially).

If this effort will appear bold to some, others, on the contrary (namely initiates or those familiar with rave literature), will deem it hardly original. It is in fact virtually impossible to find any publication on rave devoid of reference to religion, be it ritual, myth, spirituality, carnival, festival, shamanism, voodoo, mysticism, etc. Yet these interpretations are generally presented as analogies, and usually shy away from the term “religion” proper. In an effort that parallels some of the discussion found in the volumes edited by the
author and Guy Ménard (2001) and Graham St John (2003), this article intends to excavate the structural and phenomenological religious homology of rave and set the study of such a youth phenomenon firmly within the field of religious studies, while proposing avenues for further research. The definition of religion used here is best summed up as the “administration of the sacred” (following H. Hubert and M. Mauss [Mauss 1968]), in reference to the ritual and narrative structures that permit the experience of the sacred and that, I suggest, are mobilized by today’s youths in their quests for meaning, identity, belonging, intensity, values, community, etc.

This article first sketches out a brief history and definition of rave. Second, it discusses the symbolic and religious references found in raves as well as the meanings both participants and commentators attribute to this phenomenon. Third, the ritual structure of rave is presented and discussed following the theory of the particular mechanism and dynamics of the transgression-fuelled festal ritual (la fête), as defined by Georges Bataille (1949, 1973). Because of the particular nature of the object investigated, a few methodological clarifications are in order. The intent of this article is to speak for the rave phenomenon as generally and as trans-culturally as possible; its purpose is thus not to analyze local specifics. The result is an analysis that works with an abstract “ideal-type” of rave which relies heavily on ethnographical material found elsewhere, in Racine (2002), Gauthier and Ménard (2001), Reynolds (1999) and Fontaine and Fontana (1996). Nonetheless, personal field research on rave subcultures serves as a basis of this study. It consists of various degrees of participant observation in raves and related events from 1991 onwards, in Montréal, New York, London and northern Europe, along with numerous formal and informal discussions with ravers, observers and disc-jockeys (DJs).

Rave history and structural components

Etymologically, rave can mean both wild enthusiasm and maniacal rage. What is commonly referred to as a rave seeks to promote this feeling and stems from the 20th-century history of youth and musical subcultures in the West. For instance, the rise of a type of dance music known as “house,” today part of rave’s extensive technological-based musical web, was both backdrop and catalyst for the thriving gay club scene of the late 70s and early 80s in New York, Chicago and other East-Coast cities such as Montréal (Silcott 1999). Electronic music and the experience of collective unity in a nocturnal environment, fuelled by the consciousness-expanding and ego-dropping laisser-aller of all-out dancing and drug consumption, were all part of this intense experience which became an integral constituent in, among other things, the making of gay liberation.

In much the same way that this club culture had enabled a sense of community and resistance in response to gay (and black) feelings of oppres-
sion and marginalization, a special *mouture* of drugs, dance and music would ignite Britain’s youth in the late 80s. This new social revolution occurred after nearly a decade of Thatcherism and its promotion of a hyper-individualized entrepreneurial model and mobilized an otherwise bored and depressed youth (Collin 1998; Push and Silcott 2000; Redhead 1999). In conjunction with the drug ecstasy (chemically known as MDMA\(^2\) and whose role in catalyzing rave’s ascension cannot be underestimated), acid-house parties spread quickly across London and Manchester, stumbling against England’s archaic club licensing laws, media moral panic and intense police repression. As though propelled by some unstoppable force, acid-house parties spilled out of the clubs and into the countryside and desolate industrial areas, becoming “raves” (Collin 1998).

Created in England in this clandestine and subversive context, the rave format rapidly exported itself through two common scenarios of “techno-evangelism”: (1) British ravers travelling abroad and catalyzing rave’s implantation (as was the case in the San Francisco scene); (2) foreign travellers discovering raves while in England and Northern Europe, and feeling “a calling” to bring back raves to their home town (this was the case for New York with Brooklyner-cum-DJ Frankie Bones, now a major player on the international DJ circuit; the same is true for Montréal). Everywhere and anywhere able to “sustain its decadence” (Collin 1998: 278) rave scenes have since flourished, from Scotland to all of Europe and North America, from Argentina to Brazil, from eastern European countries to Israel, as well as from Australia to New Zealand and the sandy beaches of the ex-hippy colonies of Ibiza, Goa (India) and Thailand.

The typical structure of rave has since been stable, allowing for recognition across time and space. A rave “scene” cultivates esotericism, as special knowledge concerning events and on-goings circulates via certain information networks (web sites, “fanzines,” flyers, specialized record shops, alternative radio stations, etc.) which make abundant use of intra-textual, coded references. Accordingly, introduction to rave scenes follows a highly “initiatic” scenario: initiates act as pontificates for non-initiated friends (Gauthier 2001a; Racine 2002). Raving is a group activity; only rarely do individuals go to events unaccompanied. This social structure, recalling Michel Maffesoli’s (1988) “neo-tribal” sociality (highly affectionate, empathetic, aesthetic, voluntary and non-exclusive temporary associations), is essential to raves and plays a crucial role in the preparation for an event, the generation of expectation, the creation of community solidarity guaranteeing physical and emotional security, and the transformation of the experience into group and individual *narratives*.

Raves offer an enchanted environment, making use of exotic, futuristic or “psychedelic” symbolism and atmosphere enhancers such as stroboscopic lighting, lasers and smoke machines—the whole of which, ravers are prompt to confide, amounts to more than some spectacular, hi-tech form of enter-
tainment, incomparable to regular club atmosphere. Looking to surprise and destabilize, rave ethos dictates that events are to occur in continuously varying locations, in opposition to club establishment. A rave’s location can determine its symbolic economy, a “good location” causing more response from participants, as well as a heightened sense of effervescence and community. What ravers call a good location helps break down the usual relation to both space and time and thus works at conveying a sense of “magic” and entices participants’ imagination. Either “natural” or human-built, favoured locations range from forest clearings, lakes and sea-sides, moors, ruins, derelict wharves, warehouses, industries and silos, hangars, abandoned churches and museums: any place striking this particular sensitivity by promoting a feeling of transgression, re-investment and détournement.

Essential to rave—and amongst ravers’ prime motivations for attending events—is techno music. If the event location acts as a physical canvas, techno music is rave’s virtual or “imaginary” canvas. Originally opening up musical avenues which defied musicologists’ rock-based conceptualizations (Tagg 1994), techno music’s essentially synthetic, percussive structure bursts onto the dance floor at deafening levels, acting as a force urging the body into motion and the mind into release. The overall effect is one of abandon to trance-dance states. As Jean-Ernest Joos writes: “Once the needle touches vinyl, there is no future—repetition has made it obsolete. The revolution of techno has been the creation of music that develops itself in its own interstices, the interstices of the present. The parasites of chronology, narrative, beginning, middle and end are all gone. Listening is pure, pure opening” (Joos 1997: 11-12).

Dancing is the main activity here, making raves spark gratuitousness, excess and participation, according to psychoanalyst and dance therapist France Schott-Billmann (2001). The whole setting, accordingly, is dance-oriented: the dance floor and its all-invading walls of sound become a whole, a “centre-without-a-focus” (to use a Deleuzian formulation). In contrast, Edward Bailey (1997: 129-94) has shown how bar and club sociality structures its community around the purchasing of consumptions. The resulting exchange, Bailey argues, amounts to more than the strictly economic: it is a coded set of actions which orient sociality and implement a norm containing abandon and excess within implicit codes of conduct. No apparent commercial exchange is found in raves. Rather, sociality is structured through individual and collective reaction to music, a “norm” (Schott-Billmann 2001) promoting a bodily response and good-humoured (bon-enfant) excess, disorientation, confusion, inward travel, abandon and shared gleeful glances. There is no recurrent commercial operation that could focus sociality and exchange (gift): the essential purchase of a water bottle (participants are very aware of the dangers of dehydration in this context) is a one-off, subsequently refilled at facilities. Even the acclaimed DJ usually operates from a remote or un-emphasized standpoint in what has been seen as a significant
rupture with the “spectacle” format, a form of representation and community whose history spans the invention of theatre’s scène à l’italienne to the modern-day rock show (Petiau 2001, Gaillot 1998). Instead of consequent uniform orientation towards a stage in an outward process of identification, the dancing bodies of rave appear more as an incarnation of something like the multi-oriented and chaotic Brownian particle movement, with both intensive and extensive projections.

These characteristics, understood as definitional vectors, make up a schematic and partial portrait of a wider rave culture. Still, there is a common, experientially oriented structure here that supports and catalyzes rave’s “quest for bliss” (Silcott, in Push and Silcott 2000: 223): a moment of great intensity from which rave culture defines and promotes itself.

Rave, polysemy and eclecticism

Rave subcultures evolve in cycles, influencing both subjective as well as more objective interpretations of the phenomenon: from their creation in the “underground” to a thriving “honeymoon phase,” then from a plateau to a slow comedown. A twofold movement also accompanies this evolution and influences interpretations in turn. First is the inevitable institutionalization of any marginal-turned-popular phenomenon, which consists mainly of its commercialization and commodification, as events become standardized and commonplace, reinstated as such in the schemes of a profitable leisure economy. Second is a radicalization of rave’s “hardcore” wings which return to underground practices while claiming renewal with the “spirit of the Origins.” Consequently, after nearly a decade of raves in Montréal, a web of close-knit underground subcultures cohabitate with high-brow electronic music festivals such as Mutek, a vibrant techno and house-driven club and after-hour scene, commercial mega-raves and gay “circuit parties” of the likes of the famed Black and Blue event.

Adding to this eclectic ensemble, each of these subcultures brew local flavours. As Mireille Silcott writes in a book that speaks eloquently of geographical diversity: “if the history of rave proves anything, it’s that the rave format is wide open to interpretation and sculpted by set and setting” (1999: 43). Incidentally, while the lowest common denominator uniting rave subcultures could be a quest for intensity and community through a full-on live-for-now hedonism, no single explicit “meaning” can be said to represent their plurality (Gaillot 1998, Petiau 2001). Everywhere rave culture has thrived, it has acted as a symbolic resonance structure for the expression of the needs, frustrations and ideals of local youth.

Explicit religious references in and around rave

Filing through the raver testimonials collected as well as those available throughout rave literature both printed and on-line, I quickly became aware
of the generalized and wide-range use of explicit religious terminology and symbolism. These include more than abundant references to spirituality, neo-tribalism, ritual, shamanism, ecstatic trance, mystical visions, consciousness raising, Dionysian cult, oriental philosophy, self-discovery, New Age, holism, etc.—and even Satanism. Echoing what many ravers confide more or less explicitly, Jimi Fritz, a middle-aged West-Canadian raver, overtly defines rave as religion. In Rave Culture, An Insider’s Overview, he writes:

I have talked to many ravers about this issue and have become convinced that raving does indeed meet all the requirements of a grass roots, people’s religion. Although ravers don’t feel the need to give their superhuman power a name or personality, when rave “goes off,” everyone has a shared experience of connectedness and hundreds or even thousands of people can feel like one being with a shared purpose and direction. This direct experience of oneness is a fundamental aspect of the religious experience and is well documented in all religious doctrines. (1999: 179)

From a more “objective” viewpoint, Simon Reynolds, British journalist, cultural studies author and critical observer of the European and American 90s rave scenes, asserts that this phenomenon amounts to “more than music and drugs; it’s a matrix of lifestyle, ritualized behaviour and beliefs. To the participant, it feels like a religion” (1999: 9). Other similar views and testimonials abound, to the point where any kind of extensive listing becomes tedious.

Of course, prior to any further investigation, we must assume that these claims are analogical. But the fact alone that so many people in and around this phenomenon make such a comparison is of no small significance to the study of contemporary religiosity. Hence, that “rave” and “religion” share enough to be associated in what the Viennese philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstien called a common “language game” should spark research interest in understanding how and why this is so, while also suggesting the possibility of a religious homology. By such references, in this particular cultural context, what are participants (and analysts) trying to say? Which anthropological and semiotic mechanisms and functions are at work (or play) here? We can start answering these questions by first siding with Robert Verreault (2001), who sees participants’ references to the religious as means of legitimizing the experience and their involvement in these subcultures. I would add that this religious language is a manner of expressing and conveying the extraordinary subjective significance and structuring effects of these practices on identity, meaning, worldview, sociality, etc. Furthermore, participants speak commonly of the authenticity that they feel characterizes both themselves and others within these parties. This authentica, tellingly, requires it be contrasted with the “in-authenticity” of the “outside” world and its relations, revealing raves as events where youth can find truth and meaning (compare with St. John 1997).

There are other aspects of rave culture that do not immediately suggest religious content. Noteworthy among them are: childhood references and
aesthetics (from kiddy-candy fashions to pacifiers, cat-in-the-hat hats and teddy bears); sci-fi, techno-futuristic, techno-scientific and cosmic imagery (man-machine, UFOs, spaceships, planet-scpes, fractals, etc.); and militaristic imagery, attitudes and dispositions (such as the “anti-corporate guer-rilla” stance of European “Tech-nomads” and American techno-tribe Underground Resistance, military attires, use of abandoned army bases and outdated material such as tanks, planes and ships). A closer look, however, could reveal implicit religious significance along the following interpretive vec-tors.

We could say that our culture has constructed an ideal of childhood that makes it in mythical terms a “Golden Era”: an individualized time-space both within human life and transcending it, a mythical and meaningful ideal-ized period of liberty and open possibilities. In this light, raver references to childhood are interpretable as a return to plentiful origins and Edenic inno-cence, play and liberty—in contrast to the uncertainties, responsibilities and boredom the youth investigated confess facing in their “regular” lives (on this also see Silcott in Push and Silcott 2000: 184-89, 212-23).

As pertains to futurism and an idealized relationship to technology, these are closely related to the modern eschatological—and profoundly religious (Ménard and Micquel 1988)—ideology of progress and science. Accordingly, the cyborg or man-machine represented in some rave subcultures is the expression of an ambiguity towards technology as a short-circuiting of nature and culture, which provokes a paradoxical response of fascination and apprehension (as in the classical phenomenology of a religious experience). Fascination for UFOs and extraterrestrials, widespread in Anglo-Saxon North-American rave scenes (but apparently not elsewhere, interestingly), could be seen as objectivations through deification of a technologically invested “Unknown” (see Lewis 1995). Reacting to a feeling of apprehension and loss of control, techno music and raves have deliberately diverted threat-ening and “de-humanizing” technology towards pleasurable, (ephemeral) community-founding ends.

Finally, as pertains to the militaristic, this imagery shares in a “mystical” battle-stance also found in certain hip hop subcultures and in which oppo-sition to “the (corporate) System” is channelled through symbolic warrior codes (one may think of formations such as The Wu-Tang Clan in the United States or IAM in France, for instance). In religiological terms, these are means of administering the violent aspect of the sacred by expressing the taboo of violence through aesthetics and esoteric codes of affirmation and belonging, thereby performing an essentially religious function (Girard 1972; Jeffrey 1998).

The ritual of raving

Observers from within rave culture as well as more distanced commentators have repeatedly pointed to its profoundly ritual aspect. A closer look into a
rave’s typical structure does in fact reveal the classical threefold ritual sequence: separation (from normality), marginalization and aggregation (return to normality and reassessment). Gathering information, purchasing tickets and drugs, meeting up with friends, getting to the party location and so forth: all of these actions play out a gradual separation from everyday life. And the more “initiatic” the journey, the more effective these stages become, adding to the intensity and potency of the experience.

The marginal state begins when ravers enter the soundscape, often with feelings of awe and anticipation mixed with a sense of being overwhelmed. Drug ingestion, when it occurs, is also performed in a ritualized and sometimes even solemn manner; focusing attention by providing a frame (Segalen 1998: 19). The manner in which psychotropic substances are distributed and ingested in a group allows for the act to become meaningful and symbolic—ritualized activity which Reynolds (1999: 248) has suggested acts as a sort of horizontal “sacrament in that secular religion called ‘rave’” (with friends replacing institutional pontiffs). As people in the same group often like to ingest the same substances in the same amount at the same time, the act is even prone to becoming an affirmation of the desire for group communion through the synchronic experience of an altered state. The destabilizing effects of drugs, which highlight the rupture with normality, participate effectively in creating the experience of deconstruction, alterity and intensity characteristic of a religious ritual’s marginal state (see Gauthier 2003).

After 10 hours or more (sometimes days!), a typical rave opens onto various “comedown rituals.” Once participants have left the rave per se, end-of-the-party ritual play comprises an array of more personal and “tribal” activities such as attending “after parties,” heading out to a café or restaurant or bar, taking a trip to the countryside or the beach or, more commonly still, returning with new and old friends to someone’s flat and winding down by listening to music, talking and sharing “spliffs.” It is a widely known fact that rave is an intense experience. Borrowing terminology from Maslow, Collin (1998: 8) speaks of a “peak of human experience” from which it can be difficult to return—particularly when psychoactive substances are involved. Acting as makeshift “aggregation” rituals, these collectively-experienced comedowns are more or less conscious but efficient strategies deployed in order to administer this intense and “otherly” experience.

The festal nature of rave

While religious rituals usually accompany transformations or passages, rave consumes in a here-and-now fashion with seemingly no other reason than its own end. Concerned above all with “the immanent seizing of the possibility for transformation” (Schütze 2001: 163, emphasis added), rave generally shuns any explicit transformation, social or individual. Rave refrains from projecting itself into a “Meaning” (Gaillot 1998), while questioning the issue of meaning (sens) in contemporary society. My point here is that the festal
nature of this ritual is its interpretative key and provides for privileged access to its religiosity and underlying axiology (see also Gauthier 2001b, 2003).

The fête, or festal ritual, is a distinct ritual category. In the traditional sense, as with "celebration," a fête required an excuse in the form of ritual re-enactment of mythical content, much as you would expect a celebration to celebrate something. Bataille's works that touch on the matter (Bataille 1949, 1973), however, are insightful critiques of this teleological semiotics pinned on the festal ritual. According to Bataille, these festal rituals are best understood without any exterior determination or reference, as though following their own "inner" (socio-anthropological) logic (Duvignaud 1977 follows a similar reasoning). Expanding on Émile Durkheim's (1990 [1912]: 293-342) statements on the necessity of "meaningless" (gratuitous) bodily expression in ritual, participation in a festal ritual, for Bataille, is its own legitimate end (the Bahian carnival is a good example of this). Consequently, I argue that the festal ritual is by no means a priori reliant on established mythical representations (including representations of "original chaos"), but that it is rather a ritualized affirmation of the pre-eminence of gesture, presence, being (sein) and being-with (mitsein) on the authority and truth-value of an instituted narrative in non-traditional societies such as ours. Essentially, then, the event of the festal ritual, as a religious experience, is to considered in itself and for itself as an advent of meaning (sens) (see Pierre 1992, 1994).

Religion is commonly experienced as what Roger Caillois (1950) called its forbidding aspect (interdit), which preserves and legitimates the cultural order. However, Caillois (a member of the short-lived but prolific Collège de sociologie along with Bataille) also recognized the anthropological need for revitalization through the transgression of the forbidden. The festal ritual, in this respect, agrees to this transgressive function of religion which ruptures, reverses, blurs and mocks the cultural order. Set in Bataille's economy, the festal ritual amounts to the sacrificial consumption of order, and so usefulness and productivity. Its effectiveness is thus reliant on its ability to set up a contrast with the profane order while harnessing the destructive powers of this deconstruction: "And thus this festal outburst is, in fact, if not bound, at least kept to the limits of a reality of which it is the negation" (Bataille 1973: 73).

Through drug-induced altered states, subversive behaviour, loud repetitive techno music and stroboscopic lighting effects, participants are drawn into vivid experiential textures where time is irrelevant and a new "organic"—or immanent—order, takes form. Rave provides a reconfigured time-space where references are diverted to spark creation and abandon. Without any discursive musical structure to hold on to outside its own "differential repetition" (Nietzsche), all senses blurred and heightened, with skin and eye contact replacing verbal modes of communication, with heat-driven bodies-in-motion, the rave experience is that of intense un-focussing, con-fusion and dis-orientation. An experience, in sum, resolutely other—and thus of the "sacred."
The festal ritual appears as a sort of symbolic (non-causal) mechanism seeking to produce the highest intensity of subjective affective experience through participation in collective euphoria. In the classical sense, a ritual is transformative when not conservative: rites of passage redefine an individual's identity with regard to a social body. The festal ritual, however, does not itself transform, but only releases some sort of effective—and affective—"energy." This amounts to a potentiality that can then be channelled (or not), transformed and interpreted by ritualistic processes and post-experience assessment. If ritual is inherently plastic and polysemic (Segalen 1998), then the festal ritual is an exacerbation of this characteristic—its defining and functional characteristic. Such would explain, for instance, rave's synchronic polysemy.

Through transgression, rave offers youth new social strategies for community and transcendence. As stated above, the concept of transgression encompasses a spectrum of actions which contrast with normality through "unproductive, un-use-ful spending" (dépense improductive: Bataille 1949: 23-45) such as excess, pirating, derogation, exploration, risk, etc. It involves an intimate rapport with the forbidden: that which cannot be spoken of (intimate desires, fears, violence, etc.). Transgression amounts to "playing" with the anthropological necessity of social, subjective and even ontological limits: pac-ing, measuring, questioning, confronting and thus acknowledging and manifesting them.

The political dimension of this religiosity, in turn, lies not so much in the promotion of an alternate ideology as in the creation of—temporary—alternate realities. Along with its proclaimed quest for "intense, more abundant life" (Collin 1998: 5), rave is also a place for the (re)discovery, in atomized societies, of a fundamental need for others, touching onto both sociological and anthropological functions of religion (see also Gauthier 2003). And as further and final evidence as to a religious dimension of this festal experience, many ravers confide that they feel truly alive only while participating in these collective events.

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If (gay) house clubs in the very early 80s "offered a sense of communion and community to those whose sexuality might have alienated them from organized religion" (Reynolds 1999: 30), a similar case can be defended here. Having been deprived of the social and ontological security that results from inscription in the continuity of tradition, both religious and cultural, caught betwixt their aspirations and the harsh limitations of reality, hoping to find meaning, intensity and community, contemporary youth has found a relieving and meaningful exile in subcultures such as rave. Reynolds writes, then, that it is "hardly surprising that organized religion has noticed the way rave culture provides 'the youth of today' with an experience of collective communion and transcendence" (1999: 242). Some churches in England, in
fact, have actually installed "rave-style" worship on Sunday mornings for burnt-out ravers coming out of parties and clubs. Similar occurrences have been reported in Montréal and elsewhere (see Gauthier 2001a; Reynolds 1999 and St John, ed. 2003). Significantly, rave subcultures have been increasingly choosing (otherwise nearly empty) churches or church basements as a place de choix for performing their nocturnal rites.

Looking into a youth phenomenon such as rave in terms of its religious dimensions represents a heuristic shift, one which may assist the social sciences in plumbing the true significance, depth and dynamism of the phenomenon. Although partial and programmatic, the "cartography" drawn here adds justification to a theory that postulates the recent flight from traditional religions as not reflecting the death of the anthropological need for religion in our "secularized" societies, but rather its moving and morphing into new areas of cultural expression. In that respect, and while so many discourses point in that direction, as has been shown here, it is indeed worthwhile to consider rave as a crucible for contemporary religiosity amongst youth. For, as traditional religious institutions face tomorrow's adults' indifference, how else are we to grasp how the religious economy in our societies will evolve?

Notes

1 Most of the work published to date in English is journalistic (such as Collin 1998; Silcott 1999; Push and Silcott 2000) or stems from cultural studies or "light sociology" (see Redhead 1999; Reynolds 1999; St. John, ed. 2001). A recent publication (St. John, ed. 2003), however, intends to fill this gap. In French, books published on the subject espouse an anthropological (Fontaine and Fontana 1996), ethiological (Racine 2002) or sociological (Hampartzoumian 1999; Lépine and Morissette 1999; Queudrux 2000; Petiau 2001) perspective. Other social scientists such as Michel Maffesoli (Maffesoli 1998, 2000 and in Gaillot 1998), Claude Rivière (1995), Guy Ménard (1999a, 1999b), France Schott-Billmann (2001), David Le Breton (2000, 2002b) and Denis Jeffrey (1998) have taken note of raves (or "acid house parties" as they were once known) in their works. It is noteworthy that all of these discussions, without exception, make use of religion-related terminology in their theoretical models. For more analysis along the perspective adopted here, see the collected articles in Gauthier and Ménard (2001); this article both summarizes and continues that work.

2 MDMA is the sole composition of pure ecstasy and stands for the chemical compound 3,4 methylidioxymethamphetamine. First patented by Merck in 1912, this drug was rediscovered in the 70s by psychedelic-loving chemist Alexander Shulgin (a true—mythical—hero figure within certain rave scenes from the early days on). The drug was then used as a "spiritual catalyst" as well as an effective tool by psychotherapists in the United States before spilling onto the black market where it remained just another drug among others until its explosive encounter with techno music in the crucible of London's nightlife in the late 80s. MDMA was made illegal in 1985 as a class A substance (judged the most potent) after some heated debate. In Canada as in other countries MDMA also ranks as an illegal substance. For the history and characteristics of ecstasy, see especially Holland (2001) and Saunders (1996), Peterson (1996), Collin (1998), Reynolds (1999) and Push and Silcott (2000).

3 In fact, rave "identity" is often constructed in opposition to club culture. Hence comments such as this young female raver's: "Here [in raves], it's not like in clubs, you know. You
don't come here to show off or try to get laid. As a girl, you don't get continuously hassled. You can just be yourself here." See also Racine 2002.

4 The term “imaginary” is to be understood in a wider, existential and symbolic sense, as in the French *imaginaire* and its conceptual ground instigated particularly by anthropologist Gilbert Durand (1984).

5 On Mutek, see <www.mutek.ca>. On the gay “circuit parties,” see Silcott 1999 and Push and Silcott 2000. On the *Black and Blue*, see the producer's website at <www.bbcm.org>. On a “mycological cartography” of Montréal's prototypical techno-diversity, see Schütze 2002. The repression of more clandestine forms of raves has often lead to a movement back into clubs for sections of the subculture. “After-hour” clubs are direct products of rave’s critique of prior nightlife as a means of expression: established clubs open all night in which no alcohol is served and in which internationally acclaimed DJs are staged. Observation shows the sociality in these clubs to differ greatly from that in raves and demonstrates the successful recuperation of raves' critique of consumerism and spectacle (Epstein 2001a, 2001b). Thus the “techno revolution” is pulled back towards bar and rock show (the DJ—vs. the crowd—as star) forms of being-together.

6 For example, while the San Francisco rave scene is notorious for its back-to-Mother-Earth and recycled spiritualist 60s ideology, pagan imagery and “eco-organic” sounds, that of the American Midwest saw white thrash kids sporting heavy metal music legend Ozzy Osbourne T-shirts headbanging to Northern-Euro hardcore techno (an extremely fast and brutal kind of techno) in rented barn raves while indulging in horrorscape satanic symbolism (Silcott 1999). As in “heavy metal” and “industrial” musical genres, satanic references correspond to a sur-valuation of transgression and profanation. In this scheme, meaning and identity are conquered through simple opposition to a ruling order (see the transgressive mechanics of the festive, below). Interestingly, non-antagonistic Christian (or Muslim or Jewish, for that matter) references are rare in rave culture, contrarily to hip hop. For a more extensive and thorough typology of the rave *imaginaire* and its religious connotations and contents, as well as more on Christian incidences in (Anglo-Saxon) rave culture, refer to St John 2003.

7 For many participants, the use of ecstasy in the rave context has played a large role in motivating religious interpretation. Ecstasy thus follows a Western tradition of “spiritual” use of psychoactive substances ranging from mescaline to peyotl and LSD. Many discussions on the use of psychotropic materials suggest a *theological* point of view (consider the use of the term “entheogen,” for example: “facilitating contact with God within”; see Forte 1997; Roberts 2001; Smith 2000; and Tramacchi 2000); other works, particularly from the field of anthropology, consider induced collective “altered states of consciousness” as aspects of larger social and cultural processes and orientations.

8 The works of Victor Turner have again recently become quite popular amongst scholars when investigating contemporary phenomena such as rave. The “Turnerian landmass” (Graham St. John), regarding such liminoid phenomena is useful. Here, however, I pursue other theoretical avenues, namely Bataille’s *fête*. For the use of Turner’s concepts applied to other marginal/feral/youth phenomena, see St. John (1997, 2001) on the Australian event of Confest, as well as Matte (2000) on Montréal underground alternative music scenes and its rituals. St. John’s (2001) provides an adequate critique and consequent reformulation of the Turnerian model and its ideal of “communitas.”

9 This is heuristic and economical, as it frees us from the problematic search for “the Origins”—a deferral which only postpones the problem at hand. In other words, and to paraphrase Bataille, any narrative reference here is not Ultimate but intimate. Note that Boutin 1976 argues a similar case.

10 This “immanent” creation is a well-documented element of even the most traditional festival ritual. See Boglioni (1981), for example, regarding the Christian world

11 Félix Guattari (1989) defines “cartography” as follows: a process whereby one begins from a situated ground to draw out the changing configurations and shapes of a territory as they occur.
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