

The Band Lordi as Rock 'n' Roll Angels

Staging Religion in the Eurovision Song Contest

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Figures in demonic masks enter the stage and start their *Hard Rock Hallelujah*. The audience in the hall celebrates the performance and flags from different countries are waved in the auditorium. Many more viewers sit in front of their TV screens and watch the show. It is the year 2006 and the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) takes place in the OAKA Olympic Indoor Hall in Marousi, a suburb of Athens, in Greece, the home country of the previous year's winner. The band Lordi competes in the final for Finland in seventeenth position in the running order. The performance of this band wins the ESC 2006 with a mixture of Hard Rock, horror costumes and religious references. In this contribution, I explore Lordi's performance as an example of the interaction between religion and music on a European stage, with a particular focus on the role of religion in this European popular show and its interplay with values. I argue that religious symbols are not only used in this show to create a fantasy world, but they also form an idea of European commonality and unity. I will first briefly introduce the ESC as part of popular culture, then analyse the use of religious symbols by the band Lordi and finally focus on the values that are associated with this European show.

1. The Eurovision Song Contest and popular culture

The Eurovision Song Contest is a music competition held among the members of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU). This show was created in 1956 and has been broadcast annually (with only one interruption) to Euro-

pean television networks since its inception.¹ The ESC was initiated by Marcel Bezençon (1907–1981), the General Director of the Swiss Radio and Television Company (SRG-SSR) from 1950 to 1972 and Chairman of the Programme Commission of the European Broadcasting Union from 1954 to 1969. The first ESC took place in 1956 in Lugano in Switzerland. Since 1958 the competition has been staged annually in the home country of the previous year's winner. All countries that are members of the EBU are eligible to participate. Currently, in 2022, the competition comprises 72 broadcasting stations from 57 countries from Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East as full members with a further 33 associated members from 21 other countries. Due to the large number of participants, a preliminary round has been held since 2004. Since 2008, two semi-final shows have served as preliminary rounds.² The so called Big Five, the UK, France, Germany, Italy, and Spain, however, are exempt from these rules and are each guaranteed a place in the final without having to go through the pre-selection process. The ESC is a popular show that is widely broadcast and watched by several million viewers via TV and the internet. Thus, it can be considered an important part of European popular culture.

According to Terry Ray Clark, a US-American scholar of religion, popular culture refers to »widespread and well-liked products, practices, themes, and values that have achieved their popular status as a result of their dissemination through the vehicles of modern technology, including mass marketing strategies«.³ The German sociologist of religion Hubert Knoblauch emphasises that given its broad dissemination popular culture bridges the differentiated systems of a society and provides the common knowledge shared across them.⁴ Popular culture can thus be seen as a kind of »glue« of a society; it conveys collective ideas and offers a space where values are formed, communicated and practiced. In this respect, popular culture indicates fundamental expectations and ideas and mirrors current issues, questions and social processes. As Clark points out:

- 1 The only exception is 2020 because the competition was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 2 For more information see the website of the ESC: <https://eurovision.tv/> (accessed August 30, 2021).
- 3 Clark 2012, 8.
- 4 Knoblauch 2009, 236–237.

a culture's popular ideas, products, and practices have much to teach its own members about themselves, including their religious assumptions, their foundational beliefs, and their motivations for certain behaviours.⁵

The ESC competition shows that popular culture not only functions as a mirror of a particular society, but also connects people in a transnational sense. The ESC addresses audiences of different nationalities, generations, professions, genders, and social backgrounds. It provides a common – in our case musical and performative – language across these differences and offers shared knowledge in a global sense.

Religion is an important part of the language and the shared knowledge of popular culture.⁶ I understand religion here as a part of culture. With Clifford Geertz, religion can be considered as a symbol system, which »creates strong moods and motivations and provides comprehensive orientation and sense«.⁷ Religion as a symbol system is therefore connected with an emotional level and with processes of meaning making. These processes of meaning making relate to questions of transcendence. Religion creates a reference to transcendence, making it symbolically apprehensible and communicable through metaphors, words, images, and music. This symbolic shaping of the world through religion does not happen randomly, but is elaborated by traditions in which religious symbols are formed and transmitted from one generation to another. In this way, religious ideas are symbolically condensed and passed on. However, such symbols are not tied to religious communities or organisations but are passed on in other cultural spaces, such as in popular culture as we will see in the following example.⁸

In the performances of the ESC, religious symbols play a role on different levels: on the one hand individual artists integrate religious symbols in their lyrics and/or their stage performance as we will see below. On the other hand, the ESC stages itself as a fantastic world that floats into a transcendent dimension. This tendency in dealing with religion is evident in the show's slogans. Since 2002, the show has advertised itself with different tag lines and themes. Some of them contain religious references and point to an exception-

5 Clark 2012, 1.

6 On religion and popular culture see Lyden 2015; Schlehe/Sandkühler, 2014.

7 Geertz 1993, 90.

8 See Fritz/Höpflinger/Knauss/Mäder/Pezzoli-Olgati 2018.

al or even supernatural sphere. Such slogans include: »A Modern Fairytale« (2002)⁹ or »Dare to Dream« (2019).¹⁰ These emphasise the special nature of the ESC, taking this competition out of the everyday realm and turning it into something fantastic and extraordinary that is closely linked to national as well as transnational identities.

In the following section I will focus on the band Lordi in order to analyse how religious symbols are connected to the ESC, how this idea of something extraordinary is formed, and which values are thereby conveyed.

2. Rock 'n' Roll angels

When Lordi won the ESC in 2006 with 292 points – a new record at the time – they were the first winner from Finland, as well as the first participating Hard Rock band.¹¹ At first, it is surprising that this genre of music was so successful, because in 2006, as the Serbian musicologist Marija Maglov points out, Hard Rock »was miles away from the expected ESC (winning) sound«.¹² She argues:

Regarding trends, it is obvious that [...] the ESC stood firmly on its own traditional and expected sound and performance. [...] It was the music that could appeal to diverse European audiences. Thus, we can argue that until the »New« Europe era,¹³ (or from 1956 as the founding

9 The slogan can be found in the last paragraph of the text on the following page: <https://eurovision.tv/event/tallinn-2002> (accessed July 26, 2021).

10 See <https://eurovisionworld.com/esc/slogan-for-eurovision-2019-revealed-dare-to-dream> (accessed July 26, 2021).

11 Lordi are sometimes categorised as a Hard Rock band, sometimes as Heavy Metal and sometimes as Hard Rock/Heavy Metal or Metal Rock. I categorise them here in the genre Hard Rock, but emphasise the proximity of Hard Rock and Metal. The band has a long history before the ESC. Initially formed as a solo project in 1992, Lordi became a band with several musicians in 1996. In 2000 they got their first record deal with BMG Finland. The first single *Would You Love a Monsterman* was released in 2002 and became a hit in Finland. For all releases see <https://www.metal-archives.com/bands/Lordi/2976> (accessed February 10, 2022). For the Finnish context and the impact of winning the ESC on Finland see Jordan 2014, 125–133.

12 Maglov 2016, 60.

13 Maglov refers here to Gerard Delanty and Chris Rumford and the post-Cold War context with new ESC participants integrating new musical traditions and genres.

year of ESC, to Insieme by Toto Cutugno's winning in 1990) the main tradition of the ESC is embracing the sound of mainstream music, styles and genres, capable of uniting as many countries in the form of »light entertainment«, as imagined or expected by its founders.¹⁴

Even if Hard Rock and Metal cannot be called »light«, in 2006 they already looked back on a decade-long history and were both globally and economically important music genres.¹⁵ Nevertheless, Lordi's performance in 2006 appealed to a new ESC generation: the band impressed with its elaborate costumes, its Hard Rock song, its stage presence and its religious references. Therefore, in my analysis I will first consider the lyrics, as they explicitly play with religious motifs.

While the music in the song *Hard Rock Hallelujah*¹⁶ is catchy, the lyrics are about a Rock apocalypse, or more succinctly »a rockalypse«, as described in the first verse:

The saints are crippled
On this sinners' night
Lost are the lambs
With no guiding light
The walls come down like thunder
The rock's about to roll
It's the Arockalypse
Now bare your soul.¹⁷

In the song's bridge, the false prophets are overthrown and the true ones are raised up – under the moon (the night and the moon are typical motifs in Hard Rock and Metal songs):

14 Maglov 2016, 62–63.

15 Lücker 2011; Wallach/Berger/Greene 2012.

16 The melody and lyrics of *Hard Rock Hallelujah* are written by Mr. Lordi. The song was released in the album *The Arockalypse* (Drakkar Records, 2006).

17 The quoted excerpts all follow the transcript on Metal Archives: https://www.metal-archives.com/albums/Lordi/The_Arockalypse/105545 (accessed August 4, 2021). These first verses could be an allusion to Revelation 6:12–17.

All we need is lightning
With power and might
Striking down the prophets of false
As the moon is rising
Give us the sign
Now let us rise up in awe.

In the chorus, the Rock 'n' Roll angels offer their Hard Rock Hallelujah. Hereby, Hard Rock is explicitly elevated to a tool of divine praise:

Rock 'n' Roll angels, bring thyn hard rock hallelujah
Demons and angels all in one have arrived
Rock 'n' Roll angels, bring thyn hard rock hallelujah
In God's creation supernatural high.

The second strophe promises salvation to the true believers (i. e. the Hard Rock fans) and a transformation of society (the jokers as kings):

The true believers thou shall be saved
Brothers and sisters keep strong in the faith
On the day of Rockoning it's who dares, wins
You will see the jokers soon'll be the new kings.

And the third verse reveals the messiah of this apocalypse, namely Mr. Lordi,¹⁸ the band's singer, who compares himself to Lucifer as the fallen angel and includes a call for discipleship:

Wings on my back, I got horns on my head
My fangs are sharp and my eyes are red
Not quite an angel or the one that fell
Now choose to join us or go straight to hell.

18 Fun fact on the side: at the ESC 2012, Mr. Lordi was the points announcer for Finland in his monster costume, taking on the role of the herald.



Fig. 1: Mr. Lordi at the ESC 2006, film still, 02:16.¹⁹

Mr. Lordi sings these lines in a costume with huge bat-like extending wings (fig. 1). Especially during the last chorus pyrotechnical effects were used to underline the apocalyptic atmosphere. These lyrics declare Hard Rock to be a religion, coupled with an apocalyptic promise of salvation, the band's singer a messiah figure and the fans the believers who must decide between good and evil. The verses refer to religious symbols throughout, the matrix for this symbolism being a kind of common idea of Christianity (and not a specific community or denomination). The serious yet self-deprecating comparison of

Hard Rock and religion is quite typical for Hard Rock and Metal. Elevating music to the status of a religion is a theme one encounters again and again in this genre, particularly prominent examples being *The Gods Made Heavy Metal*²⁰ by the US-American Heavy Metal band Manowar or *Heavy Metal Is Our Religion*²¹ by the Slovenian Heavy Metal band Metalsteel. The music is elevated to something transcendent, thus emphasising its importance in the lives of musicians and fans. This transcendence of music is often expressed through symbols from religious traditions.

19 Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gAh9NRGNhUU> (accessed July 27, 2021).

20 From the album *Louder Than Hell* (Geffen Records, 1996).

21 From the album *Taste the Sin* (Independent, 2005).

While the lyrics of Lordi's song take up references to apocalyptic ideas, the costumes, designed by Mr. Lordi, refer to a mixture of horror films²² and other popular cultural ideas of demons, zombies, and monsters. The whole staging emphasises the performance's extraordinary (and non-everyday) character. Lordi realises the ideas of another world – a fantastic Europe – in which music, specifically Hard Rock, is a religion and separates the believers from the unbelievers. It is a playful transcendental horror fantasy of order in chaos and chaos in order.

The Greek ethnomusicologist Dafni Tragaki explains this as follows:

Lordi, following the tradition of Scandinavian metal rock, wished to be experienced as supernatural creatures living in a mythical cosmos popularly associated with a mysterious and timeless European antiquity imagined as a gothic fairy tale.²³

This extraordinary world is aesthetically shaped by Gothic novels of the 19th century as well as by horror films and other popular cultural media of the 20th century on the one hand, and, on the other hand, by a Hard Rock and Metal tradition. In this fictional dream, the usual social hierarchies are turned upside down, good becomes evil, death becomes life, and, as Lordi sings in the second verse, the jokers become the kings.²⁴ This idea of turning hierarchies upside-down is pictured in the official music video for *Hard Rock Hallelujah*, which was released in 2006 and published by Sony BMG Music Entertainment.²⁵ In this clip, a shy and bullied Hard Rock fan (fig. 2) is empowered by Lordi so that she ends up taking over the school, followed by cheerleaders turned into zombies (fig. 3). In this clip, the beautiful cheerleaders are transformed into undead monsters, the monsters of Lordi become figures of liberation from oppression and dominant social rules. The whole scene of zombies in the high school again refers to horror films as for example *Nightlife* (David Acomba, US 1989), but in Lordi's video the sympathies are on the side of the »bad guy«.

22 Mr. Lordi is not only fascinated by horror films, but also produced some himself. See https://www.metal-archives.com/artists/Mr._Lordi/11272 (accessed August 6, 2021).

23 Tragaki 2013, 243.

24 This idea of turning hierarchies upside-down is also quite common in apocalyptic texts.

25 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-6Xl9tBWt54> (accessed July 27, 2021).

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Fig. 2: The Hard Rock fan (left) is bullied by cheerleaders. Official music video clip of *Hard Rock Hallelujah*, 2006, film still, 00:31.²⁶

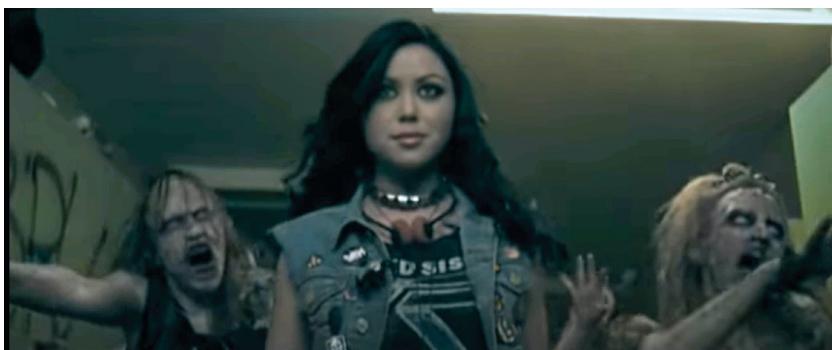


Fig. 3: The outsider becomes queen of her school, followed by cheerleader zombies. Official music video clip of *Hard Rock Hallelujah*, 2006, film still, 02:55.²⁷

The lyrics and the staging create a portrayal of a specific and extra-ordinary fantasy. This fits the ESC, since a show is *per se* a fantasy performance. While the ESC propagates a world of glitter and »light« music, Lordi turn this upside down and proclaim an apocalyptic realm of demons and monsters. But both fantasies are lifted out of everyday life and form in their theatricality a liminal space.²⁸ We find here an artificial and theatrical liminality that is explicitly created to shape certain moods and motivations. This liminality creates a space for experimentation with cultural values and norms.

26 Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-6Xl9tBWt54> (accessed July 27, 2021).

27 Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-6Xl9tBWt54> (accessed July 27, 2021).

28 See Turner 1982.

As the official video clip for *Hard Rock Hallelujah* claims, it can therefore also empower people. The ESC is known for breaking stereotypical gender binaries at the level of performance and offering a playful approach to other possibilities of expression. Lordi do not blur gender; they rather blend common assumptions linked to religious worldviews and values.

With Lordi's victory, this reversal of familiar expectations is projected onto Finland as a nation. It is Finland, a marginalised region in the European imaginary, that wins the competition. Because the ESC »is an event ultimately linked with national prestige«,²⁹ this unexpected outcome had, according to the ESC-expert Paul Jordan, an impact not only on the European reputation of this country, but also on Finland's own national imagination: »[u]ntil its victory in 2006, Finland was one of the least successful competing nations in the ESC, finishing in last place eight times (nine as of 2009) and never reaching the top five.«³⁰ Lordi winning the ESC »engendered a sense of national pride and provided an opportunity for the commemoration of Finnish nationhood.«³¹ This manifested itself in the frenetic celebration of the band after their return home from Athens, and in acts such as the renaming of a square in Rovaniemi, Mr. Lordi's hometown, in honour of the band.

The liminal theatrical fantasy on stage and in the video-clip performance, as well as of Finland as a new force of popular culture in the European imaginary, can both be seen as aspects of an inversion of current stereotypes. Lordi's song enhances a new idea of Europe, as Dafni Tragaki argues: »This spectacle of neomedieval horror-glam rock fed a fantasy of a Europe that could also be obscurely majestic, dramatic and eternal.«³² With this song – so goes the thesis – a new idea of Europe enters the ESC: it is no longer the Europe of love songs, but a Europe that has shaped gothic novels, horror films and apocalyptic ideas. In this context it is interesting that at the beginning of the show the band's leader wears a top hat with a Finland flag painted on it. After the first chorus he takes it off. Does this indicate the change from the representative of Finland to the Hard Rock messiah? Or maybe from a Finnish to a European figure?

29 Jordan 2014, 129.

30 Jordan 2014, 129.

31 Jordan 2014, 130.

32 Tragaki 2013, 244.

3. The Eurovision Song Contest, religion, and Europe

In Lordi's show in the ESC, Europe is represented in two different, but interlinking ways. On the one hand, Europe is a union of individual and clearly defined nations that participate in a broadcast competition. On the other hand, Europe is a common popular culture that extends beyond the borders of a geographical subcontinent. Europe is symbolised by a multitude of flags representing countries competing in the musical contest; at the same time Europe is staged as a transnational popular culture sharing music entertainment and genres. Especially on this second level, religious references play a striking role. They are part of the ESC as a transnational European popular culture with shared religious symbols and traditions.

The US-American ethnomusicologist Philipp V. Bohlman argues that the representation of religion at the ESC is interlinked with a staging of Europeanness:

Religion, however, has not disappeared as a marker of Europeanness in the Eurovision song. The winning songs in 2006, 2007, and 2008, Lordi's *Hard Rock Hallelujah*, Marija Šerifović's *Molitva* (Prayer), and Dima Bilan's *Believe*, explicitly employed reference to religious practice. Spiritual beings from angels (Georgia, Germany) to spirits of the sea (Portugal) to the symbolism of national religious holidays (Serbia) populated the stage in Belgrade.³³

In more recent competitions this has not changed, and religious symbols are still relevant. A prominent example of this is the artist Tix, who took part in the ESC 2021 in Rotterdam representing Norway with the song *Fallen Angel*.³⁴ He sang the song clad in huge white angel wings while six demons with black wings, horns and pointed tails danced around him (fig. 4).

33 Bohlmann 2011, 256. The ESC was held in Belgrade in 2008; Dima Bilan won for Russia.

34 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F0r3vmGLzZU> (accessed August 4, 2021). The song lyrics are about depression and being rejected by a woman, and are loaded with religious references.



Fig. 4: The artist Tix as an angel. ESC 2021, film still, 00:11.³⁵

Like in Lordi's *Hard Rock Hallelujah*, on the level of media these references to religious symbols as a transnational European marker can come into play in different ways: as lyrics, in the stage performances, as a slogan for the show, but also in the sense of lifting the ESC out of everyday life by presenting a theatrical space (evening dresses and elaborate costumes, spectacular shows and so on) and forming a liminal fantasy. Thus, through religious symbols a European unity is performed.

With these references to shared religious traditions and transnational religious symbols collective values are conveyed. In conclusion, I focus on these values transmitted by the ESC.

4. Conclusion

The Austrian historian and ESC expert Dean Vuletic argues that the three fundamental values characterizing the ESC are diversity, democracy, and commercialism – and that they are closely linked to the political, economic, and social issues specific to that time.³⁶ The ideal of diversity is expressed not only in the various countries that participate, but also in the different

35 Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bp2kfhu8ZU> (accessed August 15, 2021).

36 See Vuletic 2018, 163–199.

languages, the different musical styles, and gender diversity (e.g. the winner of the ESC 2014 for Austria, Conchita Wurst).³⁷ The ESC thereby takes up current issues, as Vuletic points out, such as migration: »While migration patterns were always reflected in the ESC through the biographies of artists who have had transnational careers, after the end of the Cold War the contest more consciously reflected migration waves.«³⁸

The second value according to Vuletic is democracy. A democratic ideal shapes the basis of the competition insofar as the participants are given the same stage and the same time for their performance and the winners are democratically chosen through an allocation of points. The fact that the Big Five have a small advantage only marginally breaks this ideal. According to Vuletic with the Big Five we are already in the sphere of the third important value: commercialism. The five states have, as already mentioned, a guaranteed place in the final. They not only have a financial stake in the EBU, but also bring in a lot of viewers for both audiences, the one present in the auditorium, but above all the people watching the show on TV or via the internet. If these countries were absent from the final the audience numbers and viewer ratings on TV could significantly drop. The ESC is an entertainment show, needing the audience, especially those in front of the TV and computer screens. And last but not least, it's a show that not only costs a lot but can also bring in money and prestige (or even fame), for the broadcasters and the countries winning and staging the contest. Especially for the winning artists, the ESC can be a prestigious and financially lucrative stepping-stone. So, the ESC is a show charged with consumerist ideals.

In addition to these values elaborated by Vuletic there are also religious values, for example a competitive, but peaceful coexistence based on love and charity and, as argued in this chapter, the power of a (religious) fantasy. These religious values are connected to European identity:

Religious images and themes do not so much challenge the secularity of the Eurovision itself. Rather, they draw our attention to Europe and its identity, tenaciously sacred and Christian even twenty years after the fall of communism.³⁹

37 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QRUIava4WRM> (accessed August 4, 2021).

38 Vuletic 2018, 166.

39 Bohlmann 2011, 256.

The religious references form a common language and normative visualisation based on European symbols and traditions, but also on a popular idea of religion.

The symbolic representation is thereby closely linked to a fifth value, that forms one of the cornerstones of the ESC: unity. Or to use a term of Marija Maglov, »unity in diversity«; the fact that the slogan of the European Union since the year 2000, »United in diversity«, is very similar is certainly no coincidence here.⁴⁰ The common religious symbols used in popular culture, which are understandable to all, help unite the diversity of countries, people, genders, musical styles and cultural ideas. Thus, the staging of an extra-ordinary fantasy and of religious symbols is definitely system-strengthening in the sense of playfully performing a unified Europe whose tensions can be explored on stage and – according to the performance of the ESC – also resolved there. This is, of course, again a fantasy, but still one that shaped and continues to shape European popular culture.

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