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Ņikita Andrejevs
University of Latvia

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CHRISTIAN RAP IN LATVIA: A NEW PAGE IN THE HISTORY OF CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN MUSIC IN BALTIC CHRISTIANITY

By Nikita Andrejevs

Nikita Andrejevs, mg. theol. is a research assistant at the University of Latvia Faculty of Theology. He is currently working on a PhD project that explores the religious references in the lyrics of Latvian and Russian rap artists. He has published two articles that deal with the works of contemporary musicians and has contributed to other publications concerning spirituality and religion in the post-secular context.

Introduction

The Baltic Sea region is a territory rich in history, cultural diversity, and conflict. That is especially true if we employ the broad perspective and study the various relationships that have developed in the political and social history of the whole region. But it is as much a valid point when we take a closer look at the processes within single countries or even smaller sub-regions or cities of those states. The various cases of cultural or political tension can become a stimulus for individuals or groups that experience them to develop new ways of expressing themselves in emerging contexts to refine, update, or reiterate their ideologies—and to find new and perhaps unexpected allies or ways of expression. The study of how religious groups in the Baltic Sea region deal with the challenges brought about by the contemporary popular culture shows a complex relationship, which includes both rejection and appropriation rather than total separation between the “church” and the “world,” that is, certain Christian groups and contemporary popular culture. The unlikely alliance discussed in detail in this article is the appropriation and usage of the contemporary hip-hop music genre by Christians in Latvia. This study is a part of a broader project that is concerned with the religious function of hip-hop music as an element of popular culture in the post-secular society via the work of Latvian and Russian hip-hop artists. The article explores rap music within the Christian context in Latvia and demonstrates the connection between Latvian Christian rap artists and ecclesial, church-related institutions while comparing it to historical instances of how Contemporary Christian music used to be appropriated by the Baltic churches during the Soviet occupation period.

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Is it so Unlikely?

On March 29, 2019, the Latvian Christian Radio—a theologically conservative interconfessional Christian radio station based in Riga—hosted its regular “What does the Bible say about it?” show. The first question posed by the listeners was: “What does the Bible say about the Christian rap, and can it be a part of worship music? How does God look at it?” Out of the three men that participated in the discussion, two expressed the opinion that rap can be a part of worship music, provided it is done in a proper way. The proper way means saying the proper things, which means the Christian message. One speaker compared the situation with rap to the past rejection of drums and guitars in the church, then referred to Psalm 150 as proof that any kind of music is good to worship God. Conversely, he admitted that he doesn’t listen to Christian rap himself and does not want to explore Christian rap music if provided the opportunity. The other opinion is that worship is like approaching God’s presence and, thus, should be done in a holy way. According to that person, there should be much care about the holiness of worship, but rap songs are “Black people¹ folk songs” and he considers those to have “dirty” content. That person also expressed a concern that the beats of pop and rock music can lead people into a magical trance as those that come from Africa. The host of the show, Tālvāldis Tālbergs, who was also a pioneer of contemporary worship music² in Latvia, concluded the interview with the opinion that rap music with words written by a proper Christian can be a legitimate part of Christian worship music and stated that the Latvian Christian Radio airs Christian rap music. Yet, to persuade his audience of the possible efficiency of evangelization via Christian rap music, he gave an example of a drug addict turning born-again Christian and, thus, being able to give witness of his salvation through rap. This may be just an example, yet it reflects the common stereotype of rap music being associated with drugs, violence, and criminal acts.³

The verdict of the host seemed to be in favor of the legitimacy of Christian rap as a form of worship. However, the very fact that the question was even brought up, and that one of the speakers expressed deep discontent banded with racist statements concerning rap’s unholy essence, displays that it can be difficult for some Christians in contemporary Latvia to accept rap music as a valid form of worship.

¹ The speaker used the word “nēģeris” that according to the recent Latvian State Language Centre ruling, in Latvian is neutral and does not have any racist connotations. Latvian State Language Centre; <https://www.vvc.gov.lv/>

² Jānis Tervits, *Latvijas Baptistu vēsture: faktu mozaīka* (Rīga: Latvijas Baptistu draudžu savienība, 1999), p. 507

³ The Latvian Christian Radio updated their homepage during the composition of this article and the radio show that is discussed here is no longer available.

The Popular Music in Baltic Christianity: Some Notable Examples

The best studied case of the relationship between Baltic Christian denominations and contemporary music is the appropriation of rock music that started in the late 1960s. The first Christian rock band in the Soviet Union, named Selah, formed in Tallinn in 1969 by Jaanus Karner of the Tallinn Methodist Church. By 1975, the Tallinn Methodist provided daily worship with traditional, folk, and gospel rock music. According to a contemporary eyewitness, the gospel rock services were extremely popular, and “the youth from Estonia and even from Russia were able to understand the message of Jesus for the first time in their lives.” The Methodists expanded the use of rock music to other events like peace rallies and youth camps, which proved to be successful among the target audience – the youth – but led to clashes with the Soviet authorities. These clashes typically resulted in prison sentences and other forms of state oppression against the organizers of these events.⁴

Toivo Pilli states that some Methodist leaders were pragmatic towards the inclusion of contemporary music because it brought young people into the church. According to him, those Methodist preachers that came from a Moravian Brethren background were more critical toward contemporary music.⁵

The other significant event in the history of Christian rock music in Estonia is the charismatic worship services at the Tallinn Oleviste (St. Olaf’s) church, which started in 1968. By 1976, they included gospel rock music performed by the Effataa Choir that targeted the younger audience and people interested in contemporary music, which was hard to access in the Soviet Union. The charismatic services also included speaking in tongues and healing ministry. The Oleviste church became increasingly popular and attracted people from other parts of Soviet Union, making an impact on the charismatic movement outside Estonia. The Effataa Choir was so central to this evangelistic effort in the Oleviste church that it was dubbed the “Effataa revival,” “Effataa movement,” or “Effataa evenings.” The charismatic worship in Oleviste church was noticed by the Soviet authorities, both due to its Pentecostal influences, and to the fact it included services in Russian languages and became a Union-wide phenomenon, not to mention that the charismatic evangelistic patterns of worship were spreading in other Baptist churches in Estonia. The services in Russian were stopped by state

⁴ Mark Elliott, “Methodism in the Soviet Union Since World War II” in *The Asbury Theological Journal* 46:1 (1991), pp. 10-11.

⁵ Email from Toivo Pilli, sent on July 5, 2022

authorities in 1981. The Oleviste church was also a place where Billy Graham preached in 1984 and Living Sound –a gospel band from the US–performed in 1978 and 1979.⁶

This period, according to Pilli, was the time when youth became significantly more involved in the musical side of worship in Estonian Baptist churches. The first youth choir formed in secrecy at the Oleviste church in 1967, and afterwards, several other youth choirs and ensembles (including Effattaa) became an integral part of Estonian Baptist worship in 1970's and 1980's. He notes that the use of Christian gospel and rock music was oriented towards evangelism; and the use of music, overall, strengthened the Estonian Baptist identity as it allowed for the participation of believers on the grass-roots level. It is also significant that musical recordings produced in the Oleviste church included music by young Estonian composers. Though the new style of worship was effective and popular, it caused debate among Estonian Baptists, both because of the charismatic elements and new musical styles and instruments. Electrical musical instruments and drums were considered by some believers to be “non-Christian” and a sign of the world invading the church.⁷

The *Maranata* ensemble from Latvia started to perform in 1974. They came from the Baptist church and performed in a “manner that was unusual for churches,” which means Christian rock music. They were popular among the young audience and performed at different congregations “stressing their independence from the working agendas of any local congregation” that, according to then Baptist bishop, led to conflicts between him and the ensemble.⁸ It is notable that in the book its nowhere stated that *Maranata* performed rock, gospel, or contemporary music, which probably reflects Tervits’ general attitude towards contemporary music. However, he includes the band in the list of notable Baptist musical groups and acknowledges their effect on the young audience. That represents a pragmatic attitude towards new styles of worship, in general, that often include contemporary music.

What is Christian Rap?

In the nascent Christian rap scholarship, there exists a diverse terminology for what is “Christian rap.” It used to be “Christian hip-hop,” “Holy hip-hop” or “Gospel hip-hop/rap.” According to Erika Gault and Travis Harris, “Christian rap” was the label given to the genre

⁶ Ringo Ringvee, “Charismatic Christianity and Pentecostal churches in Estonia from a historical perspective” in *Approaching Religion* 5:1 (2015), pp. 61-65; Toivo Pilli, *Dance or Die: The Shaping of Estonian Baptist Identity Under Communism* (Colorado Springs: Paternoster, 2008), pp. 89-95.

⁷ Pilli, *op. cit.*, pp. 89-90.

⁸ Tervits, p. 325

by the music industry, but the actual artists define themselves as “Christian Hip-hop.” However, Gault and Harris propose that “the most accurate description to identify this phenomenon is Christians and Hip-hop,” as there are many viable options for what can be called Christian rap. Within the Christian hip-hop community, there are two major trends in music production. One side that is represented by the Tunnel Rats band prefers to be subtle about proclaiming Jesus’ name and being overtly Christian in their lyrics, whereas the other side, exemplified by the Cross Movement band proclaims Jesus’ name constantly in their songs. This divide is also represented in Latvian Christian rap that will be discussed in the following sections. Yet, even though there is a difference in style, what unites those sides of Christian rap is the primary target audience – Christians. Though, many Christian rap artists originally viewed their music as an instrument of evangelization. Then there is a host of rap artists that identify as Christians and produce their music with reference to Christian themes yet market and address their songs to the broader audience. In their discussion of the possible facets of Christian rap, Gault and Harris pose another question, “What about those in other countries?” because both hip-hop and Christianity are not singular universal entities but have different meanings and nuances depending on the culture that is being studied. This is best illustrated by the fact that Gault and Harris discuss the influence of Black culture, history, and theology on Christian rap that is essential for understanding Christian rap in the United States. Yet, in the study of Christian rap in Latvia, it is crucial to explore the local context and how the original meaning of hip-hop culture had been adapted to it;⁹ although, the Latvian Christian radio interview discussed above demonstrates that some Christians in Latvia perceive rap music as essentially connected to the Black culture.

The first commercially released Christian rap song and album “Bible Break” was recorded in 1985 by a Black American preacher Stephen Wiley, who was at that moment a member of Kenneth Hagin Ministries, led by Kenneth Hagin, the leader of the now-worldwide Neo-Charismatic and Neo-Pentecostal non-denominational Word of Faith movement. Wiley came from the African Methodist Episcopal Church, a historically black denomination, and was licensed as a Baptist minister at the age of 19 after his involvement as a drummer for a youth choir. Originally, Wiley was put off by the Word of Faith movement due to its predominantly White image, yet after encountering the works of Fred Price, the movement’s most prominent

⁹ Travis Harris & Erika Gault, “Introduction,” in Erika Gault, Travis Harris, eds., *Beyond Christian Hip hop: A Move Towards Christians and Hip hop* (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 3-5.

Black preacher, he gradually embraced the Word of Faith movement and its theology.¹⁰ Gault writes that “the rise of conservative neo-evangelicalism in America by the 1980s can account for the early style and content of Christian rap.”¹¹

Wiley described his transition into the Word of Faith movement as renewal. He embraced the ideology of “racial reconciliation” that was central to its ministry. It is significant that Wiley’s Christian rap was mostly popular in Word of Faith churches that were predominantly white, whereas according to him, black churches at times were hostile to his music. For the Word of Faith movement, according to Sorett, the presence of Wiley and other Black preachers in the movement was seen as proof that racial reconciliation is happening and provided an image of cultural diversity.¹²

He also began to understand Christian rap production as a ministry of its own. Several Christian music labels approached him, and he came to believe that successful production of Christian rap music would facilitate the conversion of people and has theological value. This was combined with the practical fact that Wiley realized his music reached young people irrespective of their race. He embraced the prosperity gospel theology of the Word of Faith movement as well, believing that his huge income from music production and performances was God’s will.¹³

To sum up, Wiley’s career of a pioneer Christian hip-hop performer set the model for what Christian rap still is these days. Christian rap is perceived to be a distinct kind of ministry: the production, performance, and every aspect of the same process in secular music is now a legitimate part of Christian praxis. That can be seen in the discussion of trends in Christian rap as mentioned above and will also be discussed in the context of Latvian Christian rap music. This is facilitated by the fact that many Christian rappers see their work or at least present it as evangelistic, although this trend has lessened recently. Nevertheless, Christian rappers continue to minister to Christian audiences. Latvian hip-hop artists that will be discussed in the following sections are still mostly interested in evangelistic activity via rap music. The other aspect of Wiley’s work, namely the racial reconciliation theology, also must be considered. Although it is of a lesser significance as such when studying Latvian Christian rap, it is still thought that rap is seen by many to be of Black origin, and those in Latvia who support Christian rap seem

¹⁰ Joseph Sorett, “‘It’s Not the Beat, but It’s the Word that Sets the People Free’: Race, Technology, and Theology in the Emergence of Christian Rap Music” in *Pneuma* 33 (2011): pp. 209-211.

¹¹ Travis Harris, “A History of Christians and Hip Hop,” in Erika Gault, Travis Harris, eds., *Beyond Christian Hip hop: A Move Towards Christians and Hip hop* (London: Routledge, 2020), p. 31.

¹² Sorett, pp. 212-213.

¹³ Sorett, pp. 210-214.

to need an explanation for how Black music can be done by Latvians, or indeed White people, as such. The Latvian Christian radio discussion exhibits this as much as the words of Rolands Če that will be discussed later in the article, where being explicitly Christian or expressing an abstract notion of “protest” is what makes rap music a viable genre or type of activity for Latvians.

Christian Rap and the Churches

The actual contemporary cases of Christian rap being used in a church context are somewhat rare and the negative opinions presented by the Latvian Christian radio are common to worldwide Christianity. Caleb Kudlo, in his research of Christian rap in Cleveland, sums up the trends in the anti-hip-hop thought. It is a kind of music that makes people focus on themselves rather than on God; it is a sign of conformism towards the world; it cannot be disentangled from its musical heritage, where heritage is perceived to be “worldly” or “sinful.” Kudlo also refers to an opinion of an American pastor, G. Craig Lewis, who describes rap culture as “a way of life that is leading a generation astray” or even as a “supernatural beast that is destroying our nation today.” In his opinion, hip-hop is equated to sins and must be discarded by those redeemed.¹⁴

Kudlo also presents the opposite opinion, which is the view that Christian rap is fundamentally theological. Rappers that are frowned upon by the institutional church are challenging the institution that is incapable of responding to the suffering and injustice that is present in the modern urban environment. The Jesus of institutionalized Christianity is “corny” for the hip-hop culture. “Theological” here means “pertaining to the study of God,” proposing that hip-hop can contribute to the understanding of what God and his work is in the modern urban society.¹⁵

The *Hip Hop Prayer Book* that was published in 2006 by Church Publishing Inc., which is the main publishing house of the Episcopal Church in the US, is an example of a liturgical approach towards rap within a mainline Protestant church. Timothy Holder, the priest of Trinity Episcopal Church of Morrisania in the South Bronx, New York, developed the hip hop liturgy in collaboration with rap artists and other priests to reach individuals and churches that hope to reach a new audience. It is not an official Episcopal church publication, but it uses elements of Episcopal liturgy in a different interpretation. Holder considers that it is not “entertainment,”

¹⁴ Caleb Kudlo, *New Urban Liturgy: Making a Lane for Hip-Hop in Multicultural Worship*: doctoral thesis (Lynchburg, VA, Liberty University: 2021), pp. 47-51.

¹⁵ Kudlo, pp. 51-55.

but “the vernacular of God.” Holder claimed that the liturgy was effective and continued this practice, while Nathaniel Peters of *First Things* commented on the language of the *Prayer Book* and stated that no one speaks the way the book’s liturgy is supposed to represent the urban audiences’ language. He also suggests that Fr. Stan Fortuna, a Catholic priest that is also preaching through rap and other musical genres, might be an example of how Jesus would sound “if he were a rapper.”¹⁶ This suggests that the *Prayer Book* lacks style and would not be able to fulfill its intended goal to “draw in the young and speak to those not generally spoken to by the Church.”

There also exists a global “Hip-hop Church” network that exists “to connect, network and provide resources for churches that use Hip-Hop in their church services and outreaches.” Their website does not provide a date for the start of this movement. The website itself has been active since at least 2016, whereas members like “Holyhiphop.com”¹⁷ claim that they have been active since 1997, with the mission to “Take the Gospel to the Streets through the global proliferation of Spiritually-Enlightening Holy Hip Hop Ministry, Music & Entertainment Glorifying Jesus Christ.” The network was created by Kurtis Blow who is a famous¹⁸ rapper and music producer who became a minister of a “Hip Hop Church” in New York.¹⁹

Brad Vermurlen lists an array of Calvinist or Evangelical hip-hop record labels in the US. Most of those have a stated Christian mission, e.g., “presenting the gospel of Jesus Christ and a biblical world view through hip-hop culture” (Lamp Mode Recordings) or to “leverage [...] talents to see the Gospel go out into the community and transform lives” (Humble Beast Records). According to Vermurlen, some of these artists distance themselves from the “Christian rap” definition while still considering themselves Christian. It shows that the artists wish to present their music without a special description and be a legitimate part of the mainstream hip-hop music.²⁰

To sum it up, hip-hop in contemporary Christianity has acquired this dual nature. Some perceive it as the ultimate expression of worldliness that is thus irreconcilable with the

¹⁶ Shout-Out to the Lord; <https://www.beliefnet.com/faiths/christianity/2006/07/shout-out-to-the-lord.aspx>; Nathaniel Peters, The Hip Hop Prayer Book. <https://www.firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/2008/04/the-hip-hop-prayer-book>

¹⁷ Holy Hip Hop; <https://www.holyhiphop.com/>

¹⁸ Kurtis Blow’ 1980 rap song “The Breaks” was the first certified gold rap song in history.

¹⁹ Hip Hop Church Global; <https://hiphopchurchglobal.com/the-network>; <https://web.archive.org/web/20160530031300/http://www.hiphopchurchglobal.com/the-network.html>. Rapper Turned Minister Kurtis Blow Is 50; <https://www.npr.org/2009/08/09/111696980/rapper-turned-minister-kurtis-blow-is-50?t=1661178880744>

²⁰ Brad Vermurlen, “Structural overlap and the management of cultural marginality: The case of Calvinist hip-hop,” in *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 4:1 (2016): pp. 72-79.

Christian way of life and message. Others still hope that hip-hop is a viable tool of the evangelistic effort, being the language that most people in the perceived audience should be able to understand. It must be noted that although these perspectives show a completely different attitude towards the inclusion of Christian rap into the lives of the churches, they represent the same general approximation of what the rap culture is. It is “of the world,” but for some Christians it leads to a necessary rejection of this musical genre. Yet, for others it gains appeal for the same reason, as worldliness is seen to be relatable for people and capable of discussing issues that may be beyond the scope of traditional or traditionalistic Christianity.

What Happened to Rap in Europe?

The special context does not mean that hip-hop in Latvia or elsewhere in Europe has some source other than Black culture. Yet the appropriation of rap music in Europe is like a formation of a new cultural territory. This process consists of “deterritorialization, i.e., the extraction of a cultural pattern from its original social context; its endpoint is reterritorialization, i.e., integration of this cultural pattern into a new society.” According to James Lull, between the starting and the final stages of this process there is a crucial middle stage of cultural melding and mediation. It consists of three distinct cultural interactions: transculturation, hybridization, and indigenization. In the early 1990s, the global popularity of hip-hop artists like Chuck D, Public Enemy, NWA, and others led to transculturation of hip-hop, that is, the interaction of previously separate cultural forms that lead to mutual influence and production of new cultural forms. This process was possible through the emergence of many new media genres in the 1980s—records, films, video clips, magazines, which facilitated the spread of hip-hop music and culture in Europe. The following stage is hybridization that, in the case of rap in Europe, means the mixture of local pop music and hip-hop in the 1990s, and “the hybrid character of rap music in Europe is manifest in different facets of sound and text, including local sound elements, native vernaculars and references to local topics and institutions.” The end of melding is indigenization, when a cultural pattern “is integrated into the artistic repertoire of the host society, and [...] is not felt to be alien anymore.”²¹

In the Latvian context, it is described in the words of a prominent rapper Rolands Če spoken in a 2022 interview: “At this moment there is a rapper coming from every corner of Latvia, which means hip-hop most certainly is not a big city phenomenon.” When asked whether rap

²¹ Jannis Androutsopoulos, Arno Scholz, “Spaghetti Funk: Appropriations of Hip-hop Culture and Rap Music in Europe” in *Popular Music and Society* 26:4 (2003): pp. 467-469

music fits the “Latvian mentality,” which is “completely different” than that of “Black American gangsters,” Če stated that “our mentality is not the same, but for those people who write rap the spirit of the protest was always central,”²² which is an illustration of how rap music is perceived after its transition into another cultural context.

Christian Rap in Latvia

“The only famous Latvian Christian rapper” in 2009, according to the news website Delfi.lv, was Kaspars Jansons who goes by the name Āķis. Āķis composed and released the first Christian rap album in Latvian, *Lūpa (The Lip)* which was published in 2007.²³ The album is currently available on YouTube.²⁴

In the interview with the Latvian Christian Radio, Āķis stated that the central message of the album is the “meaning of life that each person can find in Jesus Christ, as everything is from him, through him and for him.” He sees the value of his album in that it “calls things their proper names and that it would be available outside the Christian bookstores, which is to those who are ashamed to visit a church.” Apparently, his wish was to reach a non-Christian audience through the medium of hip-hop music. He describes the making of the album as a process directed by God, as for him, “there is more satisfaction in the fact that finally God as well wants this CD to be published.” His previous three attempts were unsuccessful “because those were not a part of God’s plan.”

Edavārdi, an accomplished Latvian rap artist published an opinion on the album via an independent blog about the Latvian hip hop music scene, *Tintezobs*, in 2014. He praised the album and its themes and stated that it was ahead of its time due to speaking of positive transformation that later became a common theme for many rappers in the Latvian hip-hop scene. Though, he admitted that the album didn’t become popular with the public, due to its overtly Christian message. He also comments that “Christian rap, then and now, still is something outside the “norm” for the local public, because the characteristic rebellious attitude of the hip-hop music is sometimes expressed as confrontation with the church authorities.”²⁵ It

²² Sandris Vanzovics, Rolands Če – par repa fenomenu Latvijā, dzīvi Talsos un savu "Visurgājēju" [Rolands Če – concerning the rap phenomenon in Latvia, life in Talsi and his offroad]; <https://neatkariga.nra.lv/lasamgabali/380241-rolands-ce-par-repa-fenomenu-latvija-dzivi-talsos-un-savu-visurgaju>

²³ Kristīgais reperis Āķis radījis pirmo videoklipu [Christian rapper Āķis produced a first music video]; <https://www.delfi.lv/izklaide/popmuzika/melomanija/kristigais-reperis-akis-radijis-pirmo-videoklipu.d?id=22885767>

²⁴ Āķis, Lūpa; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G7xpYg0__aM&list=PLrbh4xVYeERAxK-CVEKbPHc2m5dM2balQ&ab_channel=Jorens

²⁵ This corresponds with the opinion of Rolands Če that rap music is perceived to be that of protest.

is also important to note that although Edavārdi essentially sees Āķis' music as common with other artists—it “calls people to be brave, to reassess the meaning of the material world in their lives and become a better person” just as other rappers do. He recognizes a distinction between the two solutions: faith in God that Āķis raps about and faith in himself that most other rappers, including Edavārdi,²⁶ promote. Yet, he considers that eventually “Latvian rappers mostly publish songs with very similar morals to the Lūpa album.”²⁷

The second Christian rap album in Latvian was published in 2010 by 1:16 Kliķe, a musical group led by youth pastor Dāvids Gleške.²⁸ He is the son of Vilnis Gleške, the leader of Prieka vēsts (Message of Joy), a non-denominational Christian *megachurch* that was founded in 1990 by active Baptist church members that, according to the history page on their website, were dissatisfied with the church leadership that did not support charismatic worship and contemporary music.²⁹

The name of the band is a reference to Romans 1:16, that says: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith” (NRSV). The band states in their press release that their aim was to “introduce Christ to other people, popularize Christian values and lifestyle and to worship Jesus in a modern way that is accessible to the youth.” The name is borrowed from 116 Clique—a Christian hip-hop band from the US. Gleške says that his band wanted to show that they identify with “this global movement that is based on Romans 1:16.” Elsewhere, from the band’s page on the Latvian social media network draugiem.lv, it is stated that they “invite the youth to join the movement started by (apostle) Paul.” Among the goals on the same page, it states that the band wants to “reflect the radiance and greatness of Christ and change the fossilized stereotypes that show Christ and his Church to be something boring and impractical.”³⁰

It seems though that although there is a strong evangelistic aspect in 1:16 Kliķe’s original mission, they have mostly participated in explicitly Christian music events, along with Christian musicians of other contemporary music genres, mostly those organized by the Prieka

²⁶ For the analysis of his lyrics concerning faith unto himself, see: Nīkita Andrejevs, “Ikonas, ticība un grēki: kā 21. gs. hiphopa dzejnieki izmanto reliģisku valodu,” *Latvijas zinātņu akadēmijas vēstis* 76:2 (2022): pp. 67-78.

²⁷ Edavārdi, “Dieva spēks latviešu hiphopā,” [The Power of God in Latvian hip hop]; <https://tinteszobs.tumblr.com/post/89344182293/dieva-speks-latviesu-hiphopa>

²⁸ “1:16 Kliķe” izlaidusi CD “Kristīgā Glance” un aicina uz albūma prezentāciju, [1:16 Kliķe has released the CD Christian Style and invites to the album presentation]; <http://spektrs.com/audio-gramatas-lasijums-mp3/%E2%80%9E116-klike%E2%80%9D-izlaidusi-cd-kristiga-glance-un-aicina-uz-albuma-prezentaciju/>

²⁹ History; <http://new.priekavests.lv/vesture/>

³⁰ 1:16 Kliķe; <https://www.draugiem.lv/116klike/biography/>

vēsts church. It's also notable that one of the 1:16 Kliķe's members, Elijs Goba, has started his own Christian music project.³¹

The album is called *Kristīga Glance (Christian Style)*, meaning that the band wants "to be like Jesus with style." The album consisted of 11 tracks, eight of which are currently available on Dāvids Gleške's YouTube channel.³² The band's draugiem.lv page hosts even more tracks.

The other notable Latvian Christian rap artist that released his first track "Cītādāks reps" (*The Other Kind of Rap*), is Pieci-O. With this title, he wished to distance himself from the mainstream rap. He states that "there is not much rap music to listen," because the mainstream rap is "degrading to people," while his rap is "other in the sense of values" because he is a follower of Christ. Nevertheless, he does not wish to identify himself as a "Christian rapper," but instead calls himself "a Christian that raps" and says that "it does not automatically mean that I rap the Christian rap." He distances himself from "worship rap," which he thinks is made to "entertain Christians." Just like the two musicians mentioned above, Pieci-O means to reach non-Christians with his music, "attempting to preach Christ to them in a way that might be understandable for them" via "Christian life values." For this reason, his songs lack phrases like "Praise Jesus" or "Hallelujah."³³

Pieci-O's style and approach to Christian rap corresponds to the Tunnel Rats' attitude. He writes that his brand of Christian rap aims to be accessible to non-Christians and presumes that worship music or "worship rap" that is overloaded with Christian lingo would be off-putting to such an audience. It must be noted that although he is the only one that expresses this idea, all the above-mentioned Christian rap projects were created to reach people outside the church framework via this popular musical medium.

Out of the three Latvian Christian rap projects that are discussed in this article 1:16 Kliķe's music is the closest to what Pieci-O calls "worship rap." Their lyrics are full of phrases that originate in worship context and contain positive, affirming Christian statements. Āķis' album stylistically is closer to Pieci-O's work, and while it is not "worship rap" in his opinion, Pieci-O includes explicit Christian statements in his lyrics as well, perhaps slightly less than Āķis. Structurally, most of both artists' songs introduce elements of Christian theology as solutions to different existential questions that they first sketch out in the respective song.

³¹ Various events with 1:16 Kliķe's participation; <https://tv.priekavests.lv/muzika/dazadi/ka-no-jauna-116-klike-elij-goba/>; <http://tv.priekavests.lv/apskati/darza-svetki-ziedondarza-rigas-svetki-2017/>; https://www.ventspils.lv/lat/izklaide_kultura/3592-jauniesu-briva-laika-pavadisanas-projekts-laiks-muzikai; <http://priekavests.lv/epicentrs/>

³² Dāvids Gleške; <https://www.youtube.com/user/davidsgleske>

³³ Cītāds reps. Pieci-O, [The Other Kind of Rap. Pieci-O]; <https://tuvuma.lv/pieci-o/>

It is also notable that 1:16 Kliķe is the only project out of three with a clear connection to a certain type of Latvian Christianity, whereas, both Āķis and Pieci-O don't speak of a connection to a certain church. Pieci-O states that he participated in the History Makers³⁴ project, which is a Latvian non-denominational Christian youth organization that aims to unite all Christians along their presumed core values. He speaks of the History Makers as of the environment where he realized that he had to do Christian rap. According to him, the other influence that directed him towards writing Christian rap was the Fusion International³⁵—a worldwide Christian association of youth choirs and musical ensembles that is coordinated by Josiah Venture, which is an Evangelical Christian “movement of God among the youth of Central and Eastern Europe” with the mission of “equipping young leaders to fulfill Christ’s commission through the local church.” Josiah Venture also does not connect itself to any specific confession but maintains a broadly Evangelical profile.³⁶

History Makers and Fusion International are another example of how contemporary music in Latvia (including rap) is like a vehicle of evangelistic activity. While Christian rap artists maintain a ministry that allows their audience to consume Christian music, such organizations focus on involving people in active performative ways of participation like singing, rapping, or dancing.

The Theological in Latvian Christian Rap

The general attitude towards rap displays a tendency to transform what is perceived to be worldly or sinful and making its message Christian. Theologically, it implies an inclusive relationship between Christ and the world, though, worldly rap music must purify itself of unwanted influences or content. The degree of this purification is seen through how Christian rappers write their lyrics.

In terms of 1:16 Kliķe, it means to compose hip-hop music with lyrics that are clearly Christian: describing Christian faith, living a Christian life, providing affirmative theological statements. Pieci-O, while composing “The Other Kind of Rap” (which means he presents himself in opposition to mainstream rap), mostly alludes to Christian themes and theology. He relies on lyrics that would not be out of place in mainstream rap music. In that sense, Pieci-O’s Christian rap is closer to mainstream rap and, theologically, he is more inclusive of the world. Although, he opposes what he presents as the worldly values of mainstream rap. If Christian

³⁴ History Makers; <https://www.historymakers.lv/>

³⁵ Fusion International; <https://fusionjv.eu/>

³⁶ Josiah Venture; <https://www.josiahventure.com/>

rap is a way of proclaiming the gospel, but the difference also represents a different attitude towards the language used in preaching, in order to introduce people to Christ. In 1:16 Kliķe's case, Christ must be proclaimed via clearly Christian and theological statements, in line with their whole attitude of "not being ashamed of the gospel." Conversely, Pieci-O's and Āķis' work that alludes to Christian topics, and is more subtle about theology, invites the listener to discover Christ in hip-hop music that can be considered worldly.

Is Rap the New Rock?

It is of no surprise that all the Latvian Christian rap artists mentioned in this article perceive their musical production activity as Christian ministry. That is in line with the general profile of Christian rap artists, regardless of the style of Christian rap that is employed by a certain person. That is, while 1:16 Kliķe and Pieci-O produce two different kinds of Christian rap—one that is saturated with explicit Christian references and the other that is more subtle about its core message—the goal of musical production for both artists/production collectives is evangelistic.

This aspect of Latvian Christian rap music defines its stage of development. While many of US Christian rap artists have largely gone over to producing music for audiences that are already converted, the mentioned Latvian Christian rap projects at least originally aspired to bring new people to the church through rap music. That, and the general scarcity of Latvian Christian rap artists, or even a scene for this genre of music, signifies that Christian rap in Latvia has not acquired a stable place in Latvian Christianity.

The evangelistic focus as much as it did with gospel and rock music could make Christian rap passable in the eyes of other Christians or church leaders. Meanwhile, evangelistic activities that use contemporary music and rap in a participatory way, such as Fusion choirs, must be considered as well. These activities, as well as Christian rappers Pieci-O and 1:16 Kliķe, clearly connect to Evangelical Christianity, which is the original locus where Christian rap was developed and became a kind of Christian ministry.

A notable difference between the cases of gospel and rock music in the Soviet occupation period and Christian rap in the recent years in Latvia is neither theological nor church related. The gospel and rock music provided by various Baltic Christian ensembles and groups, and visiting Western artists, was something scarcely available to most people in Soviet Union. Thus, it managed to attract substantial numbers of people outside the church. The same cannot be true in case of modern Christian rap, for fans of rap music or hip-hop culture have instant

access to a multitude of worldwide and local artists. The case of Fusion Choirs illustrates this well, too, as that specific activity provides an opportunity that might be otherwise inaccessible or facilitate an individual's introduction into the world of music production or Christian rap as such.

It is also important to note that the perception of rap by Latvians is as music of protest that is incompatible with their perception of the church and Christianity. This is true of Latvian Christian rappers themselves, as they oppose the worldly mainstream rap and its values, but also the perception of Christianity as boring or out of date. Other Latvian Christian leaders have expressed critical opinions about the inclusion of rap in church services, or the possibility of worshipping God or producing a Christian message through the medium they consider to be inherently sinful. The introduction of new styles of contemporary music in church worship during the Soviet period also met with such opposition, particularly for that time, as it was untraditional for the church electrical musical instruments and drums.

In the context of the Soviet period and the huge effectiveness of Christian gospel rock as a vehicle of evangelization, however, these innovations' proximity to "worldly" music, and the notion of protest and/or renewal that came along, provided the necessary attraction for Christians, converts, and people interested in contemporary Western music. Christian rap in Latvia, on the other hand, has developed in a context where popular culture including rap music was readily available to the audiences, and rap acquired the notion of protest that to most rappers and listeners, religious or not, is incompatible or even in conflict with Christianity. It is also important to note that Latvian rappers may employ religious references and explore existential topics in their work, thus fulfilling the hermeneutical function of religion and responding to the demand for this function among the audience. In this situation, Christian rap is a marginal phenomenon both to the Latvian rap industry and to Christian circles—too worldly for many believers and too Christian for many in the general audience.