

The Youth Worker as Secular Priest

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'The western world is in a perpetual state of crisis, and the crisis is always spreading.' (Violence and the Sacred).

In Australia, it is estimated that out of 105 000 homeless people, nearly half are under the age of 25. This represents a tragedy on a scale shared in relative terms by the US and the UK. The stereotypical forms of homelessness cover over the reality of homeless youth who are the invisible victims of the crisis of western urbanism. Drawing from my experiences as a youth worker alongside some of Sydney's marginalised youth, this paper seeks to apprehend the emerging cultural forms and the role of religion in the lives of a minority who continue to suffer social violence. In an attempt to cover over the loss caused by systematic violence, youth in crisis tend to develop novel schemas of 'good' and 'evil' with religious inflections. This paper will also explore the role of the youth worker as a mode of secular priesthood, working amongst the victims of western urbanism who have been expelled from the family.

Through the example of youth homelessness, this paper will argue along with Girard that philosophers who approach societies through the rubric of the 'social contract' fail to grasp the essence of the religious. Being myopic to this aspect, they tend to cover over the traces of society's victims. I conclude by arguing that a more sufficient approach to the problem of youth homelessness will need to be grounded in community and orientated towards the non-violence of the gospels.