

Religion in Popular Music or Popular Music as Religion? A Critical Review of Scholarly Writing on the Place of Religion in Metal Music and Culture

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The highly conspicuous interest in “dark” religious themes and ideas found throughout metal music and culture has received increased scholarly attention in recent years. This article offers a critical review and evaluation of scholarly writing on the place of religion in metal music and culture produced thus far. The article highlights how this scholarship has interpreted metal music and culture principally as either providing its followers with important resources for religious/spiritual inspiration or, in quite different terms, as constituting a religion in itself.

Introduction

What are popular music cultures “about”? What functions do they fill in the social and cultural everyday lives of their followers? Depending on the answer offered, what is their function within and influence on wider society and culture? Questions such as these have long attracted the interest of a large number of scholars from a range of different disciplines. As Andy Bennett (1) observes, particularly because of their collective quality, popular music cultures offer their followers a basis on which to build friendships, a focus of community, belonging, and important resources for the construction of identities. Various popular music cultures have also become connected with more particular social and cultural issues, different forms of political activism, and resistance against dominant cultural flows. A few have also become particularly connected with the social and cultural force of *religion*. If there is one among these that stands out particularly well, it is the world of *metal music* (these days, the term “metal” is widely used as a general term for a large number of closely related sub-genres and styles that have developed out of the “heavy metal” rock genre since the late 1960s).

The history of metal is complex and ridden with controversy. Ever since its emergence and initial development during the late 1960s and early 1970s, metal has

been characterized by its fascination with the world of religion, and particularly various types of “darker” religious/spiritual themes drawn from a range of different sources, including the apocalyptic visions of the Bible, the world of mythology and legend (primarily as found in Norse, Celtic, and Germanic traditions), different strands of occultism, esotericism, paganism, and Satanism/the Satanic. Here, drawing on the work of Christopher Partridge, the epithet “dark” is understood broadly and is primarily used to denote two things. First, it is used to denote stark and austere biblical themes, Judeo-Christian demonology, the subversion of central Christian narratives and symbols, and anti-Christian sentiment. Second, it is also used to denote certain forms of religion or spirituality, such as various forms of esotericism, occultism, paganism, and Satanism, which, to the extent that they are willing to view existence in terms of dualities or polarities at all (e.g. in terms of light versus darkness, harmony versus discord, life versus death), nevertheless tend to stress the need for the darker aspects of life to be embraced as integral components of authentic subjective spiritual development (for more on these religious/spiritual currents see, for example, Hanegraaff). In large part because of its long-standing interest in these types of themes, metal has also been the subject of a great deal of controversy and moral panic (e.g. Walser 137–71; Weinstein 237–74). As a consequence, the view of metal as a subversive, destructive, and potentially dangerous particular cultural and social environment has lived on. Partly as a response to this controversy, metal’s interest in darker types of religious/spiritual themes has also steadily intensified over time.

Metal’s long-standing interest in these types of themes and ideas has received increased scholarly attention in recent years. The aim of this article is to offer a critical review and evaluation of the scholarly accounts that have been produced on this topic thus far (found in sections in books, chapters in anthologies, and journal articles). My review will include only accounts that go beyond general observations of metal’s close relationship with religion and that offer some more explicit arguments by way of how this relationship could or should be interpreted. I have, therefore, deliberately omitted a few contributions which could have been included in an evaluative review of this kind (e.g. C. M. Brown; Dyrendal; Epstein and Pratto; Luhr; Martens; Moreman). Thus, my aim is not to examine the relationship between metal music and religion as such. Rather, it is the *scholarship* that directly deals with this subject that is the main focus of this article. As we shall see, there is quite a degree of variation between the accounts that have been offered on this topic thus far, with most having interpreted metal as providing its followers with important resources for religious/spiritual inspiration, and some having argued that metal can or should be viewed as constituting a religion *in itself*. A critical review of this area of scholarship is now clearly called for.

As will become evident, my evaluation will be more critical at some points than others. Some readers might well disagree with some of the arguments and opinions that I present in this article. Admittedly, an evaluative review of this kind can never do full justice to all aspects and subtleties of the arguments presented in the accounts under evaluation. My intention is, however, to focus on points that I regard as being central to these accounts and to highlight not only weaknesses but also strengths. It is important to

recognize that scholarly accounts of the relationship between metal and religion play an important role in the construction of metal as a particular form of cultural expression. Such accounts often also become directly implicated in wider debates on what metal is “about,” and what social and cultural functions it fulfills for its followers. I shall, therefore, also highlight more generally the ways in which different academic interpretations of the place of religion in metal music and culture serve to construct and underpin different pictures of metal as a particular cultural and social environment.

I shall begin by briefly outlining some main areas of interest within the study of religion and popular music. This is followed by a short overview of the scholarship on metal music and culture. These brief introductory overviews will help us situate the following discussion of scholarly interpretations of the relationship between metal and religion in relation to some broader debates. Since arguments advancing an understanding of metal culture as *in itself* fulfilling functions for its followers that can be directly compared to religion have already appeared in the early scholarly work on metal, I shall begin with a discussion of two such arguments. This is followed by a discussion of some more recent work by other scholars who have instead interpreted metal as providing its audiences with important *resources* for religious/spiritual inspiration and the construction of religious and cultural identities.

The Study of Religion and Popular Music: A Brief Overview

During the previous two decades or so, the study of the intersection between religion and popular culture has grown rapidly and developed into an interdisciplinary area of inquiry in its own right. Although the field so far has remained somewhat fragmented, a set of main areas of interest and commonly used approaches has nevertheless emerged over time. These include what Bruce Forbes has termed the study of “religion in popular culture” and the study of “popular culture as religion” (9–17).

With regard to the study of religion and popular music, these two main areas of interest could be described as follows: Studies of religion and popular music falling within the area of “religion in popular culture” have mainly concentrated on the appearance of religious themes, ideas, symbols, imagery, language, and so on, in various forms of popular music and their surrounding cultures. Most existing studies of the relationship between metal and religion are characterized by this approach as they have concentrated mainly on the ways in which particular religious/spiritual themes appear in and inform the lyrical subject matter, imagery, or aesthetics of particular metal bands, sub-genres, or the genre as a whole. In the context of this article, these will be called studies of “religion in metal music and culture.”

Studies of the relationship between religion and popular music falling within the area of “popular culture as religion” have instead typically argued that different popular musical forms and their surrounding cultures, subcultures, or scenes have *themselves* effectively come to constitute “religions,” or substitutes or surrogates for religion or religiosity, for their most devoted followers. As noted, this article will

discuss two examples of metal having been approached in this way. Here, these studies will be called studies of “metal music and culture as religion.”

The Scholarship on Metal Music and Culture

Although metal has a four-decade-long history and enduring popularity on a global scale, scholarly interest in metal has been modest when compared to that devoted to most other major and long-standing popular music cultures (A. R. Brown 209–10). Scholarly interest in metal has, however, increased markedly during the past decade, although the field remains fragmented and lacking in any coherent terminology (Kahn-Harris 9). Moreover, wider awareness of both earlier and more recent contributions to this field, as well as general knowledgeability about metal music and culture on the whole, sometimes varies considerably between individual commentators.

Although the field of “metal studies” has remained small, there has nevertheless been an uneven flow of scholarly explorations of metal music and culture since the early 1990s. These include book-length works such as Deena Weinstein’s seminal work *Heavy Metal: A Cultural Sociology*, Robert Walser’s *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*, Jeffrey Arnett’s *Metalheads: Heavy Metal Music and Adolescent Alienation*, and Keith Kahn-Harris’s *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge*.

Both Weinstein and Walser offer more detailed accounts of the religious themes that most commonly appeared in the “classic” heavy metal of the 1970s and 1980s in particular. As will be discussed below, Weinstein also makes some more specific arguments. Arnett’s brief discussion of religion in relation to the heavy metal culture of the 1980s and early 1990s is different in this regard as it approaches religion as one of many “sources of alienation” and concentrates on the *actual* attitudes towards religion found among a sample of American metalheads. Indeed, Arnett (121–219) concludes that, when viewed in the context of an increasingly individualized general American religious landscape in which religious socialization has long been progressively weakening, young American metalheads appear to be even more dismissive of organized religion than their peers.

As noted, since these studies all focus primarily on the more widely popular and commercially successful heavy metal of the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s, the later development of so-called extreme metal styles from the mid-1980s onwards, which also brought with them a far more sustained engagement with darker types of religious/spiritual themes and ideas, largely fall beyond their grasp. These have, however, more recently been extensively explored by Kahn-Harris in his study of today’s global extreme metal scene.

Kahn-Harris (34–43) mainly discusses issues related to religion in relation to his exploration of the practices of “discursive transgression” that constitutes a central feature of extreme metal culture on the whole. As he argues, in contrast to most “classic” heavy metal, the extreme metal scene is marked by its own consciously extreme discourse characterized by its “active *suppression* of reflexivity” or “reflexive-

anti-reflexivity” (145). This essentially means that extreme metal discourse typically, so to speak, consciously ignores the often negative effects of expressing such things as anti-religious, racist, or anti-Semitic sentiment in insensitive and inconsiderate ways (145). In this way, Kahn-Harris is able to argue convincingly for the importance that extreme metal’s often deliberately provocative use of Satanist, anti-Christian, and other subversive religious ideas should be understood in relation to the extreme metal scene as a particular discursive environment.

Finally, we should also note Thomas Bossius’s doctoral thesis *Med framtiden i backspegeln: Black metal och transkulturen: Ungdomar, musik och religion i en senmodern värld* (With the Future in the Rear-view Mirror: Black Metal and Trance Culture: Youth, Music, and Religion in a Late Modern World) from 2003, which, in addition to trance music culture, also explores the use and function of religious/spiritual themes within the extreme black metal sub-genre. Indeed, this study is of particular note here since it explicitly deals with the relationship between metal and religion. Unfortunately, as it is written in Swedish, it has received relatively little attention within the wider scholarship on metal. Bossius’s study will, however, be discussed in some detail below.

A significant number of scholarly articles and anthology chapters on different aspects of metal music and culture have also appeared over the years, many of which note the pervasiveness of religious themes within the genre as a whole and some of which have specifically focused on this topic. As we shall see, however, some of these article-length explorations have offered quite different interpretations of the relationship between metal and religion.

Metal Music and Culture as Religion

In addition to highlighting the ways in which religious themes and symbolism appear in metal lyrics, imagery, and aesthetics more generally, some commentators have also suggested that the popular music culture of metal *itself* can be seen as functioning *as* a religion for its most devoted followers. In very general form, thoughts of this kind are present already in the seminal work of Weinstein. In this view, metal culture is taken to provide its most devoted followers with a particular worldview and way of interpreting their place in society, a cultural identity, collective rituals, and a sense of community and belonging—all typical traits of classical *functionalist* understandings of religion. Popular music cultures undoubtedly do indeed provide their followers with important resources for the construction of personal and cultural identities and also significantly serve to foster a sense of community and togetherness among them, and metal can well be viewed as a very good example of this. However, to argue that this equals “religion” raises many problems pertaining to conceptual clarity and sensitiveness to the lived experiences of metal audiences themselves.

When approached from a functionalist perspective, religion is basically understood in terms of a “socio-cultural system which binds people into a particular set of social identifications, values, and beliefs” (Lynch 129). Religious ideas and practices are seen

to be oriented towards the “sacred” and set apart from the ordinary or the “profane.” In this view a shared understanding of the “sacred” serves to bind people together within a single moral universe and thereby to underpin and strengthen social cohesion (Chidester 16). Functionalist understandings thus highlight the social and communal function of religion, emphasizing the ways in which it offers people structures for everyday life, sources for the construction of identities, and a sense of purpose and meaning with life as a whole (Lynch 127–29). In some cases, functionalist understandings have also been combined with phenomenological so-called *sui generis* understandings of religion which argue for the “uniqueness” of religious experience as such and its “irreducibility” to sociological, psychological, or any other factors. Sometimes such understandings also presume the actual existence of some form of transcendental force which individuals are able to “experience” in various ways. Here it is enough to note that *sui generis* approaches have long been widely contested within the broader study of religion since they are not only ahistorical and context-insensitive but also “untestable, and thus unprovable” (McCloud 193).

Substantive understandings have provided another way in which the concept of religion has long been approached and understood. While functionalist understandings primarily concentrate on what religion “does” or on how it “works,” substantive understandings instead focus on what religion “is” as they strive to outline sets of “externally observable” generic or “substantive” elements to serve as a basis on which to determine when a socio-cultural system may “count” as a religion (Lynch 128). The respective virtues and weaknesses of functionalist and substantive approaches continue to be the subject of much debate. Functionalist understandings of religion might seem particularly suitable for studying the increasingly individualized and subjectivity-oriented character of much contemporary Western religiosity/spirituality. However, like all understandings of religion, functionalist understandings have a number of problems associated with them, problems which also surface in accounts by commentators arguing for the religious functions of metal music and culture as such.

As noted, such an argument was most probably first suggested by Weinstein. Discussing the intense and overwhelming “sensory overload” (214) spectacle of the heavy metal concert, Weinstein argues that “From a sociological perspective, the ideal heavy metal concert bears a striking resemblance to the celebrations, festivals, and ceremonies that characterize religions around the world” (231–32). She bases this view on the classical thoughts on the social function of religion offered by Emile Durkheim and Mircea Eliade—both influential early developers of functionalist perspectives on religion (and in the case of Eliade phenomenological perspectives as well). As she argues, the traditional heavy metal concert setting in which “audience and artist encounter one another directly in a ritual-experience, is itself the peak experience, the summum bonum, the fullest realization of the subculture” (194). Elaborating further on this idea, Weinstein then comes close to explicitly equating the heavy metal concert with a religious event when she writes that “ideal metal concerts

can be described as hierophanies [a term developed by Eliade] in which something sacred is revealed. They are experienced as sacred in contrast to the profane, everyday world" (232).

It is important to note here that these observations are made through drawing *parallels* between the heavy metal concert experience and that which is deemed to be particularly characteristic of religion according to a functionalist view (cf. McLoud 199). Notably, the "religious" dimensions of metal are represented as surfacing most clearly when metal fans gather in large numbers to appreciate their music *collectively*. More generally, this line of argument also connects with a longstanding body of scholarship on the "ritual" and quasi-religious dimensions of different forms of media reception and appreciation (e.g. Couldry). However, in Weinstein's case, it does appear that the religion parable is employed primarily for the purposes of illustrating the intense atmosphere that undoubtedly does characterize large metal concerts. It thus remains unclear as to whether the intention really was to argue that metal should be interpreted as a religion or as providing its followers with "religious" functions.

One exceptionally good example of functionalist arguments being driven much further can be found in Robin Sylvan's *Traces of the Spirit: The Religious Dimensions of Popular Music*. In this book, Sylvan explores what he regards to be the essentially "religious" functions or dimensions of popular music as such in the light of a few distinct popular music cultures, including metal. Notably, Sylvan also adds a strong phenomenological *sui generis* element to his understanding of religion as he postulates the existence of an undefined "numinous" which is the subject of what is claimed to be humanity's "religious impulse" (6) and which also functions as the "ordering structure for human beings" (Sylvan 5; cf. McCloud 190–92).

In applying this functional-phenomenological understanding of religion to metal music and culture, Sylvan directs particular focus at the collective musical experience. Drawing heavily on Weinstein, he writes of metal concerts as "the key ritual form which brings metalheads together as a community" (163). Moreover, he goes on to argue, "It is not only the music, however, but an entire meaning system and way of looking at the world, a surrogate of religiosity if you will, that explains the enduring power of heavy metal" (163). A musical subculture, writes Sylvan, "provides almost everything for its adherents that a traditional religion would," such as encounters with the "numinous," rituals, "communal ceremony," a "philosophy and worldview," a cultural identity, and a "social structure" which serve to foster a strong sense of belonging (4). However, he does not leave it at that. These arguments stem from his more basic claim that popular music cultures as such provide their followers with these types of essentially "religious" functions in "an unconscious and postmodern way" (4). As he contends,

many people in these subcultures (and in general) do not think of these phenomena as religious ... rather, the music is often seen as a form of entertainment with aesthetic, social, and economic dimensions. The musical subculture functions as a religion in these people's lives, but they do not consciously recognize it as such; thus, it is unconscious. (Sylvan 4)

This claim also serves as the basis on which Sylvan interprets the “religious” functions of metal. However, it is a claim that is highly problematic for a number of important reasons. Let us consider his line of thought a bit more closely. If devoted followers engage with their respective popular music cultures in an essentially “religious” manner unconsciously, then must one not draw the conclusion that they also do so *unknowingly*? Put another way, how *reasonable* is it to argue that a popular music culture provides a person with a worldview, an avenue through which to experience transcendence, or a sense of community and belonging without this person realizing or acknowledging any of this? Indeed, as Sylvan goes on to argue, “the specifically spiritual and religious implications of the musical experience in heavy metal are often not so explicitly recognized and consciously articulated by metalheads” (164). Even so, following from his presumption that metal provides its followers with a vehicle to experience the “numinous,” this does not hinder him from continuing to argue that “[n]evertheless, there is strong evidence from their testimonials that metalheads do have such experiences, and that these experiences are also very powerful and lifechanging” (164).

It needs to be noted that Sylvan does indeed include a few excerpts from interviews with metalheads who invoke the term “religion” when they describe the musical experience of metal and the sense of community they experience during concerts (e.g. 166, 167, 168). However, as noted just above, Sylvan openly acknowledges that it is uncommon for metalheads to invoke the term “religion” in this regard. What metalheads actually mean when they *do* use the term religion as well as how this relates to their attitudes towards the category of “religion” more broadly are also questions left unexplained. Sylvan further adds to the confusion regarding this as he simultaneously also bases his argument on the “religious” dimensions of metal on interview excerpts in which metalheads simply state that metal concerts provide them with powerful experiences or express their appreciation of metal culture more generally (cf. McCloud 191–92). Sylvan’s highly functionalist-phenomenological understanding of religion thus easily runs the risk of itself producing “evidence” of metal fans experiencing their music in essentially “religious” ways. Moreover, as is aptly demonstrated by his argument about how popular music cultures function as “religions” for individuals “unconsciously,” such an understanding of religion effectively, and in this case also quite expressly, invests the individual academic with the authority to determine when a person engages in cultural practices in an essentially “religious” way irrespective of whether that person actually describes his/her activities in such terms or not.

Finally, as already noted, although Sylvan mostly links his argument on metal’s “religious” dimensions to “the musical experience” (164) of metal, he also argues that metal provides its followers with an “entire meaning system and way of looking at the world” (163). However, although this issue is loosely discussed in relation to youth rebellion and Satanism, Sylvan does not provide any clear answer as to what this “entire meaning system” actually consists of. So, even though his assertion that metal culture is characterized by a stance that “is almost diametrically opposed to peace and

love and a positive outlook on life" (152) is highly suggestive, the general picture presented of metal culture is nevertheless left open to a wide range of different interpretations. The many criticisms that can be leveled against Sylvan's *sui generis* understanding of religion aside, his argument illustrates with all clarity the many problems and ambiguities that easily arise if academics make *generalizing* arguments about the lived meanings of popular music culture participants regarding such a sensitive issue as religion on the basis of theoretical presumptions which grant them the authority effectively to ignore or arbitrarily interpret the expressed views of these very participants themselves.

Evaluating "Metal Music and Culture as Religion" Arguments

As noted above, contemporary Western societies are generally marked by a progressive weakening of religious socialization and an increasing privatization of religious life and practice. In such a situation, for increasing numbers of people, religion/spirituality is ever more frequently explored outside the borders of traditional religious institutions and in more direct connection to the wider cultural/popular cultural realm (e.g. Partridge). Viewed in this broader context it might certainly be the case that some individual metalheads could indeed describe and understand their own involvement with metal culture in terms of it resembling a religion or as providing them with what could be described as equivalents of religious functions. Functionalist approaches could, therefore, clearly have much to contribute to a broader understanding of such contemporary transformations in Western religious/spiritual sensibilities. Even so, as illustrated by Sylvan's sweeping and highly generalizing arguments, if employed uncritically, and especially if a much contested phenomenological element is added, highly functionalist understandings also introduce a strong element of conceptual vagueness into the arguments that they are intended to underpin since they can easily blur all distinctions between "religion" and other cultural meaning-making practices of various sorts (Lynch 132–34).

Sylvan's arguments on the "religious" functions of metal culture are made possible by his uncritical—and I wish to stress *uncritical* here—use of a highly functionalist-phenomenological understanding of religion which, in crucial ways, serves to predetermine how this presumed dimension of metal culture is approached and understood. This, in turn, also greatly affects the general picture that is presented of metal as a particular social and cultural environment. However, as illustrated by Weinstein's more suggestive thoughts on these issues, such arguments can be made in different ways. Again, this is not to say that functionalist concerns have no merit; they no doubt do. But it *is* to say that every understanding of religion becomes more nuanced and sensitive to the actual lived lives of people, and in this case to followers of metal culture, when different perspectives are allowed to be combined with and enriched by each other. The main point I want to make is this: If functionalist arguments are to be made convincingly, they need to be empirically substantiated and work from the "bottom up" rather the other way around so that individual academics

are neither intentionally nor inadvertently invested with the authority to decide *on their behalf* what “religious” functions metal culture provides its followers with purely on the basis of unsubstantiated theoretical assumptions.

As has been pointed out in many studies of metal, although metal culture generally displays an obvious fascination with dark and subversive religious themes and ideas, it is also characterized by a broadly defined individualist ethos. Indeed, the complex relationship between these two components has only rarely been explored in direct relation to what thoughts and views metalheads actually express regarding religious institutions and the category of “religion” as such (with the exception of the short examination provided by Arnett). When metal’s individualist outlook is viewed in direct relation to its fascination for (or indeed love-hate relationship) with religion, this would perhaps suggest that more thought-out views on religion in general would be relatively common among wider metal audiences. However, as virtually no information exists on this, it is a question that remains to be empirically investigated. Future studies aimed at highlighting parallels between contemporary metal music practices and religion could usefully investigate this question more closely since that could add more substance to their arguments or, alternatively, further challenge the premises on which such arguments have been based in the past.

Religion in Metal Music and Culture

A handful of accounts focused on highlighting how the pervasive religious/spiritual themes within metal culture provide its followers with important *resources* of inspiration for the construction of worldviews and religious/spiritual identities have also been produced during recent years. The majority of these accounts have directed particular attention to metal’s interest in what is variably referred to as “Satanism,” the “Satanic,” or the “figure of Satan.” Because of this, most of them have focused on the extreme and “Satanic” black metal sub-genre in particular.

Thomas Bossius’s detailed study, which explores how (mostly Swedish) young people involved with black metal and trance music culture consciously combine religious/spiritual ideas with their popular musical tastes and lifestyles, constitutes a good example of such a study. Bossius approaches the use and exploration of dark religious/spiritual themes and ideas within black metal culture using a combination of functionalist, substantive, and psychological perspectives on religion. He also views black metal culture in direct relation to a broader Nordic contemporary social and cultural environment marked by accelerating processes of de-traditionalization, individualization, and privatization of religious/spiritual life and practice (137–40). Drawing on a wide range of sources and using both text-based and ethnographic approaches, Bossius offers an interpretation of black metal culture as essentially constituting a form of rebellion against the confines and demands of post-industrial society. As such it is also interpreted in terms of a particular attempt at a re-enchantment of culture and everyday life. However, instead of viewing black metal culture as constituting a religion in itself, Bossius is careful to point out the important

role that the music as such plays within this context as the locus around which particular religious/spiritual themes revolve. Even though he devotes most of his attention to black metal's focus on Satanism/the Satanic (or rather its own version of it in the form of a radical inversion of Christianity), he also highlights many important intersections with Norse pagan themes.

Bossius's analysis is complex, interesting, and informative, but it also contains a few problematic aspects, most of which concern his understanding of "youth" as a transitional phase in life during which uncertainty about one's own identity and a corresponding need for rebellion against the adult world becomes particularly acute (137). This view tends somewhat to downplay the reflexive agency of black metal musicians and fans themselves, at times making their engagement with Satanist/Satanic and pagan ideas seem like little more than a way of rebelling against adult society. Despite this, however, Bossius's study can well be regarded as a particularly valuable contribution to the study of metal music and culture since it provides the most comprehensive exploration of the relationship between metal and religion produced to date.

Another, in some ways similar although much shorter and less detailed, exploration of the relationship between metal and religion more generally is offered by Partridge in the second part of his two-volume work on religious change and transformation in the West (246–55). Partridge views metal culture as an important site for the *dissemination* of a wide range of dark alternative religious/spiritual themes and ideas. As he argues, popular culture as a whole has developed into an increasingly important medium and resource for the dissemination and circulation of a wide range of different religious/spiritual beliefs and ideas and has significantly contributed to the emergence of a broad bank of religious/spiritual resources or "constantly evolving religio-cultural milieu," which he terms "occulture" (2). Within this "constantly evolving religio-cultural milieu" one also finds evidence of rising interest in different forms of "dark occulture" sourced from, among other things, Judeo-Christian demonology and different strands of Western esotericism, occultism, paganism, and modern Satanism. Indeed, the long-standing pervasiveness of dark religious/spiritual themes and ideas within metal culture on the whole leads him to argue that, as a genre, metal has had "an enormous occultural impact" (251). However, in contrast to a "metal music and culture as religion" view, Partridge views metal instead as an exceptionally good example of a popular music culture that circulates and disseminates a more particular set of dark, and often closely related, religious/spiritual ideas. As such, it is interpreted as offering its followers a wide range of *resources* for religious/spiritual inspiration and the construction of alternative religious/spiritual identities. The reflexive agency of metal audiences themselves is thereby also brought to the fore.

Metal's interest in dark religious/spiritual themes has also recently been explored in a few anthology chapters and scholarly articles. Helen Farley has concentrated on metal's early developed interest in the "Occult," which in this case implies Satanism as well. She rightly points out how metal bands have traditionally employed darker

religious themes such as Satanism and the occult in a deliberate, and often successful, attempt to raise the shock value and rebellious edge of their music. However, as she devotes a considerable portion of her chapter to tracing metal's interest in the occult to its roots in Southern US blues, its tales of musicians' "Faustian pacts" with the devil, and its subsequent influence on central figures within the British "blues boom" of the 1960s, not much room is left for any deeper analysis of later and contemporary metal bands' engagements with occult and other types of dark religious/spiritual ideas. The observations Farley does make regarding these issues also unfortunately largely echo the rather simplistic view that metal bands' explorations of these types of themes tends to be frivolous and superficial almost by default. Even so, it is important to note that Farley does aspire to interpret the relationship between metal and religion in closer connection to contemporary currents in the Western religious/spiritual landscape. However, despite being recently published, her chapter contains no references to Partridge's thoughts on metal's "occultural significance" or Kahn-Harris's highly useful thoughts on discursive transgression within extreme metal culture.

A very different view from that presented by Farley is provided by Jonathan Cordero in an article focusing on "anti-Christian" themes within what is called the "anti-Christian" black metal and "impious death metal" scene. According to Cordero, far from being characterized by a superficial interest in Satanist and anti-Christian themes, this scene is instead marked by an austere seriousness in this regard. Cordero is right to note the commonness of self-elevating "popular satanist" themes within these metal subgenres. Somewhat similarly to Partridge, he also makes the additional and interesting observation that the pervasiveness of such themes also serves to "normalize an anti-Christian perspective" (6) within this scene as a whole. Cordero offers a detailed discussion of the many different ways and forms in which anti-Christian themes appear within this scene, arguing that they essentially serve to underpin it and to provide it with a basis for a more or less coherent and seriously taken ideology characterized by a directly antagonistic stance towards Christianity and the hypocrisy and suppression of individuality it is seen to represent. However, most of the time, Cordero seems to take the appearance of these types of themes as well as statements on these issues made by individual band members in metal media at face value. One could well say that, if commentators such as Farley tend to downplay the seriousness with which metal bands explore these types of themes, Cordero instead tends to exaggerate it. However, although he relies heavily on Kahn-Harris's study of the extreme metal scene, he makes no use of his thoughts on the "reflexive anti-reflexivity" that characterizes extreme metal discourse. Taking this into account would surely have been of much help in making his analysis more nuanced.

The issue of Satanism/the Satanic has also recently been explored with specific reference to the Norwegian black metal scene of the early and mid-1990s in a chapter by Gry Mørk. As she observes, the "Satanism" found in black metal culture often intersects with a range of other types of darker religious/spiritual ideas: "The so-called 'Satanism' of Black Metal rather points to a general attraction towards Occultism,

dark and evil urges, forces and powers within the universe, as well as other hidden and repressed parts of man, culture and history" (179). In this way, Mørk also wishes to highlight the interconnectedness of various forms of darker religious/spiritual themes and ideas within one particular metal sub-genre. Moreover, somewhat similarly to Cordero, Mørk also points out the meaning-making potential of black metal's particular "Satanist" and anti-Christian ideology (174). As many scholars of contemporary religion (e.g. Partridge) have observed, many forms of paganism and Satanism in particular are generally characterized by highly critical attitudes towards institutional Christianity and its perceived suppression of individuality. As argued by Mørk, this is essentially the light in which the black metal sub-genre's great interest in the figure of Satan and often violently adversarial stance towards Christianity needs to be understood (180–82). Although Mørk also briefly connects all this to the issue of youth rebellion, the general picture presented of the relationship between Satanism/the Satanic and black metal culture is that of a complex intersection of Satanist/Satanic ideas and the search for authentic identities and sources of meaning in late modern society and culture (193–95). Mørk's account thus occupies something of a middle ground between the other accounts discussed above. Once again, however, very few connections (with the exception of Bossius) are made to already existing work on metal music and culture and the study of religion and popular culture/music more generally.

Finally, similar points to those presented by the commentators discussed above have also recently been raised in a forthcoming article by Kennet Granholm. Focusing on the pervasiveness of pagan themes in black metal and so-called neo-folk music, Granholm argues that the early 1990s Norwegian black metal scene, in spite of being widely regarded as having been particularly preoccupied with Satanism (or its own version of it), is instead more appropriately described as having been "heathen" as it was clearly more characterized by its engagement with Norse paganism. Granholm delves deeply into the historical roots of this interest in "heathenism" and suggests that it reflects the strong and widespread appeal of that which lies "far away in time and/or place" which has long characterized the Western esoteric milieu more generally. As he goes on to argue, within certain contemporary metal scenes such as black metal, heathen ideas may be taken to function as important resources in the quest for authenticity and the construction of new discourses of rebellion in a time in which the old Satanic themes have become increasingly exhausted. As such, argues Granholm, metal cultures such as black metal "can provide sets of ideology, meanings, and practices for its adherents, and in essence function as a 'cultural system'—largely due to the heathen Esoteric foundation of the scene". This interpretation of particular metal scenes as constituting "cultural systems," of which certain sets of religious/spiritual ideas constitute integral parts, again emphasizes the central place of religion throughout much of metal culture and also highlights the ways in which popular culture as a whole has developed into an increasingly important arena for the exploration of alternative religious/spiritual ideas. It should be pointed out, though, that Granholm's argument is of a very general character. Even so, he does not fail to

make many important connections to earlier work on metal music and culture, the study of contemporary religious change, and recent contributions to the study of the intersection between religion and popular culture.

Evaluating “Religion in Metal Music and Culture” Arguments

As seen above, different studies within what has been called the “religion in metal music and culture” category have offered some rather different interpretations of how the relationship between metal and religion is to be understood. While some commentators (Bossius; Farley) tend to question and downplay the seriousness with which metal bands explore dark religious/spiritual themes, arguing that this is most appropriately described as a form of youth rebellion against adult society, others (e.g. Cordero) instead argue in quite the opposite direction. Yet others (Granholm; Mørk; Partridge) are more careful in their interpretations and interested primarily in exploring the ways in which certain types of dark religious/spiritual themes circulate and intersect within metal culture more generally, and particularly within certain more extreme sections of it.

Although to different degrees, there is also a tendency in all of this work to, in some way or other, raise the issue of youth rebellion when pondering the sincerity with which metal bands and audiences explore and engage with Satanist/Satanic themes and ideas in particular. Indeed, the Satanist/Satanic element in metal should certainly not be exaggerated or overstated. But, on the other hand, should it *automatically* be reduced to merely an “unimaginative” falsetto cry of adolescent rebellion? Although many metal bands have indeed dabbled with Satanism/the Satanic and other types of dark religious/spiritual themes in obviously instrumental ways in order to enhance the shock value of their music, as argued in many of the accounts discussed above, one also finds cases of such themes and ideas being explored in ways that are marked by much higher degrees of ideological substance, sophistication, and apparent seriousness (Cordero; Granholm; Mørk; Partridge).

Notably, the issue of rebellion has always constituted a central theme in the scholarship on metal and been interpreted both as a symptom of metal audiences’ general alienation towards dominant Western society and culture as well as a means of empowerment. However, as already noted, detailed empirical/ethnographic information on metal audiences has always been in very short supply indeed, and this has undoubtedly had its consequences for how scholars have approached and dealt with the issue of rebellion as well (cf. Kahn-Harris 10–11). Indeed, clearer specifications of what is actually meant by terms such as “youth” or “adolescent rebellion,” what such rebellion actually consist of, who exactly it is that such terms are meant to apply to, and how issues related to rebellion play out across different social and cultural contexts have too often been lacking. Future work could usefully examine more critically how issues of rebellion actually surface in the everyday lives and practices of contemporary metal musicians and audiences themselves as well as how this relates (or does not relate) to their explorations of dark religious/spiritual themes

and ideas. This is to say, therefore, that, although the issue of rebellion remains a legitimate focus of metal studies, it too, is a question that needs to be investigated on an empirical basis.

Unless studies are firmly fieldwork and ethnography based and attentive to the expressed views of participants themselves (which accounts such as Bossius's, and to some extent Mørk's, aim to be), when analyzing the ways in which darker types of religious/spiritual themes such as Satanism/the Satanic are explored by individual metal bands, there is not much to be gained through speculating about whether such bands are "really" serious or not, or whether an interest in such themes "actually" mirrors the views and attitudes of musicians and audiences themselves. A much more important point to note is how the exploration of such themes and ideas, irrespective of whether they are considered to be "seriously" explored or not, contributes to the dissemination, popularization, and intersection of these themes and ideas within, and indeed beyond, metal culture more generally (Moberg 141).

It is also worth noting that, even though these accounts clearly offer different interpretations from that of a "metal music and culture as religion" view, it is equally clear that they all, to varying degrees, also contain elements that bring functionalist concerns to mind, and particularly so when they highlight metal culture as an important resource for the construction of meaning and cultural and religious/spiritual identities. Future studies within this area would surely benefit from aspiring to do two things in particular: First, to ground their explorations more firmly in broader current debates on changes and developments in the contemporary Western religious/spiritual landscape and more directly relate these explorations to contributions already made within the growing scholarship on metal music and culture; second, and more importantly, in order to be able to provide more persuasive arguments about what followers of metal culture themselves *actually get out of* their participation in metal culture in ways that relate to religion/spirituality, studies would clearly also benefit from striving to ground their arguments on the expressed views of musicians and fans themselves (and this concerns the issue of "rebellion" as well). Only then can one more confidently speak of metal providing its followers with an "ideology," a "cultural system," or a resource for the construction of worldviews and identities.

Conclusion

This article has offered a critical review of eight more explicit scholarly interpretations, of varying length and detail, on the place of religion in metal music and culture. These accounts were divided into two main areas or types of studies, called respectively studies of "metal music and culture as religion" and studies of "religion in metal music and culture."

I discussed two studies of the first type which were both based on highly functionalist understandings of religion. It was argued that, in one of these accounts in particular (Sylvan), the very idea of metal functioning "as" a religion, or as

providing its followers with essentially “religious” functions, emerged as a result of the uncritical employment of such a highly functionalist approach (which in this case contained a problematic phenomenological element as well). This approach was criticized on the grounds that it effectively equated the very concept of “meaning” with that of “religion” without sufficiently basing this interpretation on the expressed views of audiences and participants themselves. It was argued that, while functional aspects surely can be considered or suggested (Weinstein), this should be done in a reflective and critical way.

Studies within the area of “religion in metal music and culture” have been more careful in their interpretations and mainly argued that metal’s interest in dark religious/spiritual themes and ideas provides important sources of inspiration for many metalheads’ construction of worldviews and cultural and religious/spiritual identities. The majority of the accounts discussed above were situated within this category. In this regard, however, studies of “religion in metal music and culture” also tend to display some similarities with studies of “metal music and culture as religion.” For example, while none of these scholars argued that metal should be regarded “as” a religion, they nevertheless argued that it could (and perhaps also *should*) be interpreted as providing its followers with a means of cultural and everyday re-enchantment and meaning-making (Bossius; Mørk), important resources for the construction of religious/spiritual worldviews and identities (Partridge), a subversive ideology (Cordero), and a “cultural system” (Granholm).

Whether metal is interpreted as providing its followers with any or all of these things or whether it is interpreted as constituting a religion in itself, in order to be more persuasive, *any* such interpretations would need to be firmly empirically substantiated. While it is certainly interesting to explore the highly conspicuous ways in which certain religious/spiritual themes and ideas circulate within metal culture, future studies might well want to focus more directly on the possible bearings this actually has, or does *not* have, in the lived lives of audiences and participants themselves. Importantly, as I have tried to highlight more generally, we need to recognize that all interpretations of the place of religion in metal music and culture construct different pictures of the world of metal as a particular social and cultural environment as well as of its relationship to wider society and culture. Too often the many controversies surrounding metal continue to be underpinned by ill-informed and simplistic views about metal’s relationship to religion in particular. Therefore, as has been repeatedly stressed throughout this article, it is crucial that academic accounts on this subject aspire to be as informed as possible and sufficiently attentive to the lived meanings of metal audiences and participants themselves.

In addition to the issue of empirical grounding, this examination has also illustrated more generally the need for future studies on the place of religion within metal music and culture to recognize more openly and embrace the interdisciplinary character of this type of research. Future research would thus clearly benefit from interpretations being more firmly grounded in both the broader scholarship on

contemporary religion and the study of metal music and culture as well as from sufficient connections being made between them.

At various stages in the development of any particular area, field, or sub-field of research (no matter how small) it becomes necessary to take a step back and reflect critically on the general state in which it currently finds itself. Such an endeavor involves locating, assembling, and organizing existing literatures, identifying and differentiating between different main approaches, critically assessing their respective strengths and weaknesses, and evaluating their overall contribution to the field or sub-field as a whole (and indeed beyond it). Maintaining that such critical assessments should be considered vital to the ongoing overall development of any area, field, or sub-field of research, this is precisely what this article has aimed to do.

Surely, some of the individual scholars whose work has been critically discussed in this article might want to comment on and challenge my views and arguments. This would be welcome since one more general aim of this critical review and evaluation also has been to inspire further debate among researchers active in or otherwise interested in studying the place of religion within metal music and culture. Indeed, this article will itself ultimately need to become evaluated on the basis of how successfully it will be able to do so.

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