

Heavy Fundamentalisms: Music, Metal & Politics  
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## **Draft paper**

### **Turn or Burn? The Peculiar Case of Christian Metal Music.**

#### **Introduction**

Metal, it is often said, is all about the music. And yet, like all major and global popular music genres, it is about much more than that. As Andy Bennett (2001, 1) puts it in the introduction to his *Cultures of Popular Music*, “popular music is a primary, if not *the* primary, leisure resource in late modern society”. To a greater extent than many other forms of popular culture, popular music is characterized by its *collective* quality; “people forge new friendships and associations based around common tastes in music, fashion and lifestyle” (Bennett 2001, 1). Particular ideologies, values and styles are bound up with particular forms of popular music, creating *popular music cultures* that, for many, become important markers of personal and cultural identity. Indeed, metal has often been interpreted as providing its audiences with resources for the shaping of subversive counter cultural identities, thereby constituting a form of rebellion against the hollowness and confines of post-industrial Western society and culture (e.g. Weinstein 1991; Walser 1993). Looking at metal in the Islamic world, Mark LeVine (2008) has recently offered a largely similar account of metal as providing growing audiences with tools and resources for carving out their own alternative cultural space within otherwise strongly tradition-bound, oppressive, and potentially explosive societal and cultural climates.

Metal’s fascination for the world of religion, particularly the dark and evil forces of the Judeo-Christian tradition, has always been one of its most characteristic lyrical and aesthetic traits. Quite unlike any other contemporary form of popular music, metal is replete with themes, topics, terminology, imagery and symbolism inspired by the world of religion, mythology and legend. As I have argued elsewhere (Moberg, forthcoming), viewed in relation to today’s increasingly close relationship between religion and popular culture, metal has come to play an important role in the dissemination of a wide range of ‘dark’ alternative religious/spiritual themes and ideas such as those found in different strands of occultism, esotericism, paganism and Satanism (see also Partridge 2005: 246-255). However, metal bands have far from always explored religious themes and ideas in a positive light. Instead, metal’s dealings with religion, and Christianity in particular, is perhaps best described in terms of a love-hate relationship. Although some bands within extreme sub-genres such as death- and black metal have explored Satanism and anti Christian sentiment in an apparently very serious manner indeed, others have mainly used such themes as a means of investing their music with an aura of mystique and ‘otherworldliness’ or just dabbled with them in a spirit of playfulness and humour.

Although the ‘religious element’ in metal is exceptionally pervasive, different metal groups have nevertheless explored various religious themes in a wide range of different ways. This makes it difficult, if not altogether impossible, to determine in which sense, to which extent, or

to which degrees, metal can really be said to be ‘about’ religion. Moreover, as many metal-researchers have pointed out, much of metal culture is permeated by a loosely defined ethos of individualism which constitutes a barrier against attaching the music to any particular ideology. That said, one can nevertheless find numerous examples of metal scenes which at the very least *seem* bound to particular ideologies, including religious ones: e.g. Satanist, pagan, national-socialist, ultra-Zionist, and Christian. Despite their marginal status these scenes all attest to the malleability of metal music and culture as a vehicle for the expression and articulation of a wide range of disparate world views, ideologies, and identities.

The peculiar case of *Christian metal* (also called *white metal*) is perhaps *the* clearest example of this. Christian metal emerged in the U.S. in the late 1970s as a means of evangelism in the secular metal community. During the 1980s it gradually developed into a distinct Christian music culture in its own right and eventually gained a foothold in some European and South American countries such as Sweden, Finland, Norway, Germany, The Netherlands, Brazil and Mexico. Not surprisingly, these are all countries with long-standing ‘secular’ metal scenes. Recent years have seen the development of a highly independent and largely Internet-based transnational scene with its own infrastructure of record labels, promotion and distribution channels, specialized media, and festivals (Moberg 2008). In addition, the prominent Swedish scene has even produced its own special edition of the New Testament, the *Metalbible*, which at the time of writing is being translated into numerous languages. In Finland, which also has a vibrant Christian metal scene, metal has also been picked up by the Evangelical Lutheran Church (the former state church of which approximately 81,5 percent of the Finnish population are members) in the form of *Metal masses* held regularly across the country. In these otherwise traditional Lutheran masses, all liturgical music and hymns are accompanied by a metal band which in itself makes for a very different Church experience.

Whether Christian metal can be said to have gained any real foothold within the ‘secular’ metal communities of these countries is an altogether different matter. By forming its own separate scene, Christian metal has remained confined to the very margins of the broader metal community. However, it has become widely known throughout global metal culture in spite of this. Although they may not approve of it (and many do not), secular metal audiences still tend to know that there is such a thing as Christian metal. Because of its explicitly religious outlook and more or less pronounced evangelistic agenda, Christian metal has often been ridiculed, discriminated against, and at times, vehemently opposed within metal culture as a whole. In many ways, Christian metal may seem totally antithetical to what metal is ‘supposed’ to be about. Be that as it may, Christian metal still deserves to be treated fairly since its very existence warrants serious academic attention – not least from within the ‘field’ of metal studies itself. It might not be possible, or even desirable, to attempt to explain what metal as a whole is ‘really’ about. Focusing on the peculiar case of Christian metal, the aim of this paper is to shed some light on how metal may indeed become ‘about’ some rather specific issues when used by particular groups as a vehicle for the expression of particular identities and world views.

### **Approaching Christian metal**

One could approach Christian metal by asking “what is it?”. I would argue that it is possible to provide a relatively straightforward answer to that question: First, Christian metal is metal with a Christian *message*, with lyrics dealing with either explicitly Christian theological topics or other social or cultural issues from a Christian *perspective*. Much like secular metal, Christian metal often explores various Biblical eschatological and apocalyptic themes such as the ongoing spiritual battle between good and evil (so called ‘spiritual warfare’), the fall from grace or the

last judgment. Many bands also choose to focus more on Christian faith and everyday personal or social struggles. Second, Christian metal is metal produced *by* people who are professed Christians (and it is sometimes principally produced *for* Christians as well). Third, and of lesser importance nowadays, it is metal produced and distributed through various Christian networks guided by an evangelistic agenda.

Of course, these ‘requirements’ leave much room for interpretation. Still, even though they are constantly debated, the overwhelming majority of Christian metal musicians and fans hold the view that, in order to be considered *Christian*, a band would have to meet at least the second requirement, and preferably the first as well. This view stems from the notion that, in order to produce music in a truly Christian spirit with a truly Christian content, it needs to be grounded in the personal Christian faith of its creators. It is also worth pointing out that this notion constitutes a central component of the world of evangelical popular culture more generally (see for example Howard & Streck 1999; Hendershot 2004). Christian metal has gone further than any other form of Christian rock in fully embracing the defining musical, rhetorical, stylistic and aesthetic characteristics of its secular equivalent. Apart from the content of the lyrics, it is virtually impossible to distinguish between Christian and secular metal. Today’s transnational Christian metal scene comprises all metal sub-genres and styles. However, in order to distinguish themselves from their secular counterparts, Christian metalheads have also come up with some, admittedly humorous, labels of their own. For example, Christian black metal is sometimes referred to as ‘unblack’, Christian metalcore/hardcore as ‘Christcore’ and Christian death/grindcore as ‘goreship’. Moreover, Christian metal has also produced its own slogans such as “Faster for the Master!”, “Turn or burn!” and “Support the war against Satan!”. As the rhetoric of these slogans illustrate, Christian metalheads have also created their own variant of the uncompromising attitude that metal has been associated with since its early days.

Apart from a handful of academic articles (e.g. Brown 2005; Luhr 2005; Moberg 2008), Christian metal has received almost no scholarly attention. Although these articles have all provided accounts of what Christian metal ‘is’, they have also addressed another question that I view as being of crucial importance for gaining a fuller understanding of Christian metal, namely, “what is it *about*?”. What do Christian metal musicians and fans get out of their involvement with the Christian scene culturally, religiously, identity-wise etc.? One needs to ask what meanings and functions Christian metal music and culture has for the people who play and listen to it, who administer Internet-sites, produce magazines and fanzines, organize festivals and so on. And if metal, partly in the West at least, is about constructing counter cultural identities and rebelling against the stifling confines of post-industrial late modern society and culture in a spirit of “Fuck you, I won’t do what you tell me!”, as Rage Against the Machine famously put it, then what is Christian metal about?

Eileen Luhr (2005: 107) has argued that the evangelistic efforts of Christian metal bands in the U.S. from the mid 1980s to the mid 1990s “confirmed the fluidity of oppositional cultural themes such as ‘rebellion’ and ‘alienation’”. These thoughts are echoed by Charles M. Brown (2005) who argues that, although in a much transformed sense, Christian metal bands also seem to express feelings of alienation and rebellion through their music. But such rebellion and alienation is of a very different kind from that found in secular metal.

In Christian metal, the issue of rebellion has more to do with Christian opposition to the perceived sinfulness and immorality of a late modern society and culture in which traditional ‘family values’ have been eroded through such things as the legalization and increasing acceptability of abortion and pornography and the rise of gay rights and feminist movements. The issue of alienation, in turn, has more to do with the fundamental Christian struggle of being *in* but not *of* the world. Luhr discusses in detail how influential U.S. evangelical Christian metal

bands of the mid 1980s and mid 1990s strived to “redefine ‘rebellion’ as resistance to sin and obedience to parental, church, and divine authority” (Luhr 2005: 118). Turning the ‘conventional’ understanding of rebellion on its head, Christian bands such as Bloodgood and Barren Cross proclaimed that, in late modern Western society and culture, it was in fact Christian faith and morals that constituted the true and ultimate form of ‘rebellion’; “obedience was the true transgression, and personal morality became the basis for reform” (Luhr 2005: 199). However, Christian metalheads were also confronted with the difficult task of legitimizing their mode of evangelism within their own churches – an issue that has remained relevant to this day.

However, as Luhr (2005: 124) points out, these observations need to be understood in the context of the broader cultural struggles or ‘culture wars’ that raged throughout U.S. society from the mid 1980s to mid 1990s. Indeed, when looking at the later development of Christian metal in Europe, a more multifaceted picture emerges. For one thing, the American strand of evangelical Protestantism (often referred to simply as ‘evangelicalism’) has so far remained marginal within the Christian milieu of countries such as Norway, Sweden and Finland whose religious climates are all still dominated by the increasingly liberal Lutheran former state churches (in Norway the Lutheran church retains the status of state church). In such relatively homogeneous and increasingly secularized social and cultural environments Christian metal has become characterized by somewhat different concerns. In contrast to 1980s and 1990s Christian metal in the U.S., today’s Nordic scenes seem only marginally concerned with debates on whether the music should be used purely as a means of evangelism or if it can also be adopted wholeheartedly as an alternative Christian lifestyle. Interestingly, almost without exception, the members of the Nordic scenes have chosen the latter.

Of course, Christian metal can still be interpreted as an internal detraditionalizing force that, so to speak, rebels *inward* by challenging traditional notions about ‘suitable’ forms of Christian expression and evangelism. Importantly, when Christian metal is adopted as a lifestyle that combines religion with a particular form of popular music, its rhetoric, style, and aesthetics, Christian faith becomes expressed in not only a particular popular cultural form but also a in a particular popular cultural *way*. For many Christian metalheads, this can be seen as having led to the forming of an alternative way of engaging faith and religious life as a whole.

There is thus a sense in which the Christian metal scene may be seen to provide its members with an alternative and non-traditional way of ‘being’ a Christian and an alternative way of ‘doing’ religion. Arguably, the view of Christian metal as an alternative Christian lifestyle has been strengthened through the development of a transnational scene that brings together people with a range of different cultural backgrounds and Christian affiliations. That said, the overwhelming majority of Christian metalheads worldwide are *protestant*. This is not surprising considering Christian metal’s roots in North American evangelicalism. Particular national scenes do need to be understood in their respective local and national religious and cultural contexts but as Christian metal has spread on a transnational level it has also become increasingly detached from the cultural struggles characteristic of the U.S. Today’s transnational scene is not controlled by any particular Christian group or institution and advocates no particular denominational creed.

One potentially very fruitful way of approaching how particular meanings are attached to particular kinds of popular music by particular groups of people is through focusing on how such meanings are constructed *discursively*. With specific reference to metal, Robert Walser (1993: 27) has pointed out that the texts produced within music genres “are developed, sustained, and reformed by people, who bring a variety of histories and interests to their encounters with generic texts”. Being produced by people in particular historical and cultural

contexts, they “come to reflect the multiplicities of social existence” (1993: 27). Music in itself has no intrinsic meaning, rather, its meaning is informed by the *discourses* that surround it, or as Walser (1993: 29) puts it, “Musical meanings are always grounded socially and historically, and they operate on an ideological field of conflicting interests, institutions, and memories”.

Simon Frith (1996) makes a similar point arguing that engaging with popular culture entails an act of *discrimination*. For example, in many ways, we use music to express *who we are*. We also often assume that other people’s tastes in music will tell us something about *who they are* and what they are like. This, argues Frith, is most clearly evident in the ways in which we *talk* about popular music through making *value judgments*. However, these “are not about likes and dislikes as such, but about ways of listening, about ways of hearing, about *ways of being*” (Frith 1996, 8, my emphasis). In order to understand the cultural value judgments people make, we need to pay attention to the social and discursive contexts they are embedded in. Hence, we need to examine the situated discourses that invest music with certain meanings. Disputes about music are not about music in itself but, as Frith (1996, 26) puts it, “*about something with music*”. (Frith 1996, 22-27) This is particularly important to keep in mind when looking at the presence of such a thing as Christian metal within a broader metal culture partly characterized by a critical, and sometimes openly hostile and antagonistic, stance towards institutional Christianity in particular.

Christian metal may thus be approached by focusing on how its meaning and function is constructed discursively by its musicians, fans and other people involved in maintaining today’s transnational scene. To delineate a more specific area, one might focus on Christian metal’s discursive construction in various forms of Christian metal *media* such as magazines, fanzines, and Internet-sites such as webzines and forums. Importantly, such forms of media have played, and continue to play, a crucial role in spreading the central discourses that surround Christian metal on a transnational level. Various forms of Christian metal media are also easily accessible to people unfamiliar with Christian metal. Put another way, if a person with only little or no prior knowledge about Christian metal would like to find out more about it, this person would probably start out by looking into various forms of Christian metal media.

### **The discursive construction of Christian metal in specialized media**

Today’s transnational Christian metal media play an important role in circulating a set of key discourses pertaining to the basic meaning and function of Christian metal. Of course, one may find any number of musical, non-musical or otherwise related discourses circulating within the specialized media of any music scene. In the following I will focus on some recurring and overlapping key discourses which play a particularly important role in expressing the meaning and function of Christian metal *from the perspective of its musicians and fans*.

First, we have what could be called the ‘Christian metal as an *alternative* form of religious expression’ discourse. Here, Christian metal is represented as a non-traditional but equally sincere way of expressing Christian faith. Arguably, this discourse constitutes *the* most commonly used general representation of Christian metal today. Second, we also have another closely related key discourse which could be called the ‘Christian metal as a *legitimate* form of religious expression’ discourse. Both of these discourses are mainly directed *inward* as they confront the criticism still levelled at Christian metal within some conservative Christian circles. The latter also underlies the practice of writing so called ‘Christian metal apologetics’ which is a relatively common feature of many Christian metal Internet-sites. Indeed, one can find numerous examples of the simultaneous and overlapping use of these two discourses on large and transnationally well known Christian metal Internet-sites. For instance, the following

excerpt from the “Frequently asked questions” section of Sweden-based *The Metal for Jesus Page* clearly draws on both:

Why the need of Christian metal?

First of all because many Christians love metal music, and since we are Christians it's only natural to combine it with our faith. Just because you are Christian that doesn't mean that you have to listen to gospel or pop music! God is much bigger than the regular church music. Great music also deserves a great message, so why not combine them and take the best from both worlds. The reason that we want to spread the message of Jesus is because we care for people and don't want anyone to burn in hell, but instead find a living relationship with God (cause that's what the real Christian life is all about, it's a living relationship with God and not a boring religion!). Christian metal is also needed to encourage and help believers that love metal to grow in faith and come closer to Christ through the lyrics. (<http://www.metalforjesus.org/faq.html>)

In passing, this excerpt also draws on a third key discourse which could be called the ‘Christian metal as an effective *means of evangelism*’ discourse. Although Christian metalheads nowadays rarely view the music purely as an evangelistic tool, the general notion of a ‘metal ministry’, of representing a Christian voice in the metal-world, has remained important. This discourse thus continues to be drawn upon by many established and well known Christian metal acts in particular. However, not all Christian metal bands share the same evangelistic fervour. Many would like nothing more than to gain acceptance within the broader metal community and thus choose to consciously downplay or ‘cloak’ their Christian message in order to better their chances in this regard. Perhaps rather surprisingly then, many contemporary Christian bands appear to seek such acceptance on purely *musical* terms. However, this approach has also been contested within the world of Christian metal itself. For example, when asked about the importance of conveying a clear Christian message in an interview for the fanzine *Heaven's Metal*, Steve Rowe, frontman of well known Australian Christian death metal band Mortification, explained:

We have always been accepted in the secular market /.../ We always play with secular bands in Australia. We have sold more than any other metal act from this country. Men who stand for Jesus in their lyrics are the meat of what is going on. Any band that does not have a strong Christian message should not be sold in Christian bookstores or play at Christian Festivals. The world needs Jesus and the Christian fans need encouragement in their faith and walk with Christ. It is too easy to say you're a Christian and get easy sales in the Christian market /.../ If you don't have the message you should do the honorable thing and take the hard road like all secular acts do. Don't scam Christians who think they are buying Christian music and get no food. What has happened to The US “Christian” Rock scene is a disease. (*Heaven's Metal* 62/2006: 10)

In this excerpt, Rowe draws on both the ‘Christian metal as an *alternative* form of religious expression’ and ‘Christian metal as an effective *means of evangelism*’ discourses. He seems to say that, in order for Christian metal to be ‘Christian’ in any true sense, it first of all needs to offer Christians “encouragement in their faith”. He also clearly states that Christian metal should be produced, not only *by* Christians, but principally *for* Christians as well. Moreover, he goes on to argue that Christians have the right to expect Christian bands to deliver spiritual “food” in the form of a truly Christian content. In addition to this, though, Christian bands also need to cater to the world's ‘need for Jesus’. So, even though spreading the word is important, Rowe appears to regard Christian metal's evangelistic element as secondary to its edificational functions. Rowe can thus be interpreted as expressing the commonly held view that Christian metal culture should be regarded as something more than just a means of evangelism. In a way,

Rowe also draws on a fourth key discourse which could be called the ‘Christian metal as a positive *alternative to* secular metal’ discourse. This discourse is aimed at distinguishing Christian metal’s ‘positive’ message from the perceived potentially destructive messages presented by many secular metal bands. For example, some Christian metal Internet-sites (for example *The Metal for Jesus Page* mentioned above) contain detailed comparison charts designed to aid Christians in finding ‘positive’ Christian sound-a-likes of popular secular bands. But since the most obvious difference between Christian and secular metal lies in the content of the lyrics anyway, this discourse is basically about distinguishing Christian metal *culture* from secular metal culture more generally. A typical example of this discourse at play can be found in the following excerpt from the Christian metal Internet site *JesusMetal*:

Here at JesusMetal we will introduce you to the Extreme Side of Christianity, or the safe side of Metal, it's both really. Here you'll find all about positive metal, with sometimes christian lyrics, sometimes a band just has a christian background. We try to keep the site 100% christian, but it might happen that accidentally a secular band is added, because it was promoted by a christian company. If you find any band on here that is not christian, please e-mail. We will dig deeper into a band and decide whether or not we'll delete the band from our archives. (<http://home.wanadoo.nl/kemman/homer.htm>)

The administrator of another site, *Christian Xtreme*, provides a very similar description of his main purposes:

Our Mission at Christian Xtreme is to help lead people to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ through music with positive Christ centered lyrics. I strive to keep this website Christian based so if you find any content on this site objectional please feel free to contact me /.../ Also feel free to give me any suggestions to make this site more christian based to suit my visitors needs. (<http://65.61.12.97/mission.html>)

Even though Christian metal is commonly distinguished from secular metal in this way, not all Christian metalheads are as concerned about actually *replacing* their favourite secular bands with Christian alternatives. Many Christian metalheads are avid fans of secular metal as well, but this is not so say that they always approve of its messages. While some Christian metalheads deliberately eschew all secular metal, others avoid only the most overt satanic and anti-Christian lyrics while some just simply ignore the whole issue altogether. This is a much debated issue at larger online discussion forums such as *Firestream.net* or *Christian Metal Realm*.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have focused on four key discourses on the basic meaning and function of Christian metal that recurrently appear in various forms of Christian metal media. Of course, a wide range of other discourses also circulate within the scene. However, the four closely related and often overlapping discourses explored here play a central role in expressing and encapsulating the essence of what Christian metal is all about *from the perspective of its musicians and fans*. They can thus be seen to constitute the basic building blocks for the discursive construction of Christian metal on a transnational level. Again, approaching today's transnational Christian metal scene through these key internal discourses essentially means approaching it from *within*, that is, from the perspective of scene members themselves. It has been my argument here that, in order to gain an adequate understanding of the phenomenon that is Christian metal, such an approach is necessary. I would also argue that these key internal

discourses are highly revealing of the ongoing processes of meaning making that underpin this peculiar combination of Christianity and metal music.

However, we should not lose sight of the various ways in which the Christian scene also is discursively constructed from 'outside' of itself. For example, the discursive construction of Christian metal within the broader secular metal community has so far presented a rather different picture of what Christian metal is all about. From this vantage point, Christian metal is typically represented as being an appropriation of metal music and style for purely evangelistic purposes, as being 'treason' to metal or simply dismissed as a joke. Such external discursive construction also affects the internal discursive construction of the Christian scene to some degree. However, as already noted and further illustrated by the key internal discourses explored here, today's Christian metal scene seems primarily concerned with constructing an understanding of itself as an alternative way of 'doing' religion. As such, its engagement with the broader secular metal community has so far largely remained outweighed by its engagement with itself. Even so, Christian metal can still be viewed as an exceptionally good example of how today's increasingly close relationship between religion and popular culture has bearings on traditional and institutional religion as well.

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