

The Transnational Christian Metal Scene Expressing Alternative Christian Identity through a Form of Popular Music

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Christian metal music emerged in the late 1970's as a means of evangelization among secular metal fans. In recent years it has grown significantly and developed into a trans-national Christian music-based youth culture. In addition to the music, Christian metal has adopted the metal style, rhetoric and attitude. At the same time, Christian metal is as much about religion as it is about music or style. This paper examines some of the most important ways in which Christian metal scenes in a number of countries all over the world have come together with the formation of a trans-national scene. Particular focus is put on the ways in which a trans-national scene supports the spreading of central discourses about the function and meaning of Christian metal as a way of expressing an alternative Christian identity.

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Today's pluralistic Western societies are characterized by a myriad of different religions and world-views, all existing, and often competing, on the same social and cultural arena. This situation is often regarded as posing a great challenge to traditional and institutional religions, in Western societies especially, but not exclusively, to many Christian groups. Widespread secularization and a reduction of interest in traditional and institutional forms of religion have gone hand in hand with increased interest in alternative and highly individual forms of spirituality. (e. g. Lynch 2006, 481) This is reflected in all forms of popular culture which, in turn, function as important sources of inspiration in the creation of alternative spiritual identities. The important role played by popular music in the context of identity formation, as well as in the transmission of alternative spiritual and religious identities, has in recent years been explored in detail by scholars such as Christopher Partridge (2004, 2005), Graham St. John (2004) and Tia De Nora (2000) (Lynch 2006, 483-487).

The need for many Christian groups to compete on the "spiritual marketplace" can thus be said to entail an active engagement with popular culture. While some groups holding strong conservative and fundamentalist-type views tend to regard popular culture as morally depraved and sometimes eschew it altogether, others opt for a more open approach. Generally speaking, more positive attitudes toward popular culture often reflect a willingness to adapt to the present-day religious and cultural climate. Contemporary Christian Music, Christian films, comics or computer games, clearly reflect a willingness to take on popular culture.

An alternative largely U. S.-based evangelical popular culture concentrated on producing "inoffensive" or more "wholesome" alternatives to different forms of secular popular culture has long since emerged (e. g. Hendershot 2004; Hoover 2006, 166). Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) that emerged in the U. S. in the end of the 1960's as a Christian alternative to "secular" popular music is a clear example of this. CCM comprises all forms of popular music and should not be regarded as a genre in itself. Instead, it is characterized by three non-musical elements – (1) lyrics, (2) artists, and (3) organization. The music in itself, be it blues, rap or rock, is in general regarded as neutral. The (1) lyrics, however, should only deal with Christian themes such as evangelism, praise, or relevant moral and social issues from a Christian perspective, (2) the artists that create and perform the music should themselves be Christians, and (3) the music should be produced on record labels guided by Christian principles and a religious agenda and sold and distributed through Christian networks such as Christian bookstores or Internet-sites. (Howard & Streck 1999, 5-13)

Metal is perhaps the most controversial popular music genre of our time. Its frequent use of different types of extreme themes and imagery, such as death, war, the satanic and the occult, has made it the subject of numerous moral panics and continuing criticism from a number of Christian and other groups within mainstream culture. As *Christian metal* emerged in the late 1970's it quickly became the most debated and controversial form of popular music within CCM. Today, it has developed into a transnational Christian music-based youth culture and adopted most elements of its secular counterpart, including its often criticized rhetoric and aesthetics.

The aim of this paper is to shed some light on how today's Christian metal *scene* brings together Christians with different institutional affiliations and backgrounds by functioning as a space that offers its members an *alternative* form of religious expression and Christian identity. I will direct particular focus at how this notion of Christian metal as an alternative to traditional views on Christian life, religious expression and worship, is supported by a number of central scenic discourses, the most important and easily recognizable being (1.) Christian metal as an *alternative* form of religious expression and identity, (2.) as a *legitimate* form of

religious expression, (3.) as an effective *means of evangelism and fighting and standing up for the Christian faith*, and (4.) as a positive *alternative to secular metal*. Jointly, they emphasize Christian metal as an active and necessary engagement with both traditional notions of Christian religious expression and popular culture on the whole. These discourses are clearly present in all forms of transnational *scenic institutions*, for example, in Christian metal lyrics, different forms of Christian metal media as well as gatherings and festivals. The focus of this paper is not to describe the spreading of a particular kind of popular music culture, but the ideology, in this case a *certain view on the Christian life*, that has spread as a part of it.

The Concept of Scene

Today, most popular music genres can be found in countries all over the world. The continuing development of new forms of media such as the Internet and the MP3 format, as well as media-technologies such as the iPod, has made music more easily accessible, transportable and reproducible than ever before (e. g. Schofield Clark 2006, 475). The resulting rapid flow of information has come to ensure that new trends and sounds spread throughout the (at least Western) world almost as soon as they are conceived. Nevertheless, popular music is still produced and experienced in different local, national and regional settings. New sounds spring from one place and are simultaneously appropriated, interpreted and reinterpreted, defined and redefined, in a number of other.

The concept of *scene* is an increasingly used theoretical construct within contemporary popular music culture studies and particularly suitable for recognizing different spatial and temporal relations and circumstances within the production, consumption and experience of different forms of popular music. (Kahn-Harris 2007, 19; Stahl 2004, 51-52). It has been used in various, more or less theorized, ways and often been highlighted as having more analytical value than that of subculture. The term is also frequently used by members of popular music cultures, most often as a means of conceptualizing being part of a community of shared musical passions and interests. Arguably, all popular music cultures can be viewed as scenes. Here, I am mainly interested in the ways in which the concept can be used to make the relationship and interconnectedness between the local, national and trans-national dimensions within Christian metal easier to describe. Here, looking at Christian metal, I will be using the theoretical framework of scene as developed by Keith Kahn-Harris (e. g. 2007) in his extensive studies of the global extreme metal scene. Kahn-Harris describes scenes in the following way:

The term scene is rarely applied to a particular space unless there is a substantial degree of both scenic structure and construction. The term scene is meaningful to members when it describes a space that is both institutionally distinctive to some degree and has some degree of self-consciousness. Scene is most frequently and unanimously used in cases where geographical boundedness (embodied in civic institutions such as cities or nation states), institutional and aesthetic distinctiveness, and scenic discourses coincide. (Kahn-Harris 2007, 101)

Different forms of scenic *structure* and *construction* constitute crucial elements of all music scenes. Kahn-Harris outlines three main forms of scenic construction through which "scenes are discursively and aesthetically constructed through talk and a range of other practices". First, *internal discursive construction* refers to the degree to which scene members "discursively construct that scene as a distinctive space", making it "visible" and "recognizable" to other members of the scene. Second, *external discursive construction* refers to the ways in which scenes may be discursively constructed from outside of themselves. The third main form by which scenes are constructed is that of *aesthetic*

construction. Scenes develop "particular aesthetics, musical and otherwise, that become both internally and externally visible". (Kahn-Harris 2007, 100)

Kahn-Harris goes on to discuss five main forms of scenic structure. First, and perhaps most important, are different forms and degrees of *infrastructure* within scenes, e. g. record labels, distribution-channels and scenic media. Some scenes develop more independent institutions and thereby also a higher degree of autonomy while others remain "more weakly institutionalized" (Kahn-Harris 2007, 100). Second, there is the question of *stability* and how scenes manage to last as distinct scenes without disappearing or being assimilated into other scenes. Third, scenes also vary in their *relation to other scenes*. Scenes with similar musical aesthetics are more likely to have a closer relationship and be mutually inspired by each other. Fourth, drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Kahn-Harris also underlines that members' possession of non-scenic *capital* may be more common in some scenes than in others. Fifth, scenes differ in *production* and *consumption*. Vibrant and highly productive scenes do not necessarily constitute the largest markets for the music they produce. (Kahn-Harris 2007, 100-101)

In addition, scenes are also reproduced on *place-based* scales: locally, nationally, trans-nationally, regionally and globally. Local scenes form national scenes. Through contact and shared scenic structure and construction trans-national scenes may develop. Sometimes, as in the case of extreme metal, a global scene is developed. One can also speak of regional scenes, e. g. the Nordic Christian metal scene. Kahn-Harris points out that even though this may resemble a neat series of Russian dolls, the relations between these different levels are much more complex. Scenes not only overlap, they also differ discursively and institutionally. This is complicated further by scenes also being reproduced along a *genre-based* scale. Different scene members and scenic institutions may direct themselves at particular sub-genres and their particular aesthetics. Within metal then, sub-genres like death- and black metal can be viewed as separate and to some extent independent generic scenes. In this sense, the Christian metal scene can also be viewed as such a generic scene. Scene members are thus never confined to one particular scene at one particular level. Instead, members interact "within a complexity of overlapping scenes within scenes". (Kahn-Harris 2007, 99)

There are a number of very noteworthy differences between extreme metal and Christian metal, the most obvious being the role assigned to and played by religion. Even though this account of scenes outlined by Kahn-Harris on some points refers to extreme metal more directly, it can also readily be applied to Christian metal since it has developed the same types of scenic construction and structure discussed above and is likewise reproduced along place based scales. Here, particular focus will be directed at internal discursive construction and infrastructure within the Christian scene. In order to better understand some of the most important elements of Christian metal, I will first give a brief account of the wider musical and cultural context in which it needs to be understood.

Metal Music and Culture

Heavy metal music emerged in the late 1960's and early 1970's with the fusion of psychedelic rock and blues-based hard rock by groups such as Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath. Even though it originally sprung from within a 1960's countercultural musical and ideological environment, in heavy metal, the lyrical themes of tolerance, peace and love were replaced with their opposites, evil, death and destruction. Many early bands used *religion*, particularly the dark and evil forces of the Judeo-Christian tradition as well as a range of occult and satanic themes, as a primary source of inspiration. (Weinstein 1991, 15-18; 34-39) These types of themes were explored a great deal further within *extreme metal* sub-genres, like *death-* and *black metal*, which developed in the 1980's and 1990's. Death metal lyrics commonly deal with explicit gory themes such as graphic descriptions of rotting, mutilated

corpses, torture, and murder. *Black metal*, on the other hand, is mostly known for promoting a strongly anti-Christian and satanist ideology, in some cases also incorporating national-socialist discourses. (e. g. Bennett 2001, 42-56, Kahn-Harris 2007)

Through the years metal has engendered a great deal of controversy, perhaps more than any other contemporary genre of popular music. The fascination and customary use of the types of themes mentioned above is the main reason why metal also continues to run into resistance from Christian groups. During the years metal has been accused of the glorification of violence, the promotion of suicide and self-destructive behavior, extreme rebellion, drug- and alcohol-abuse, sexual perversion and, last but not least, satanism and Devil-worship. (Wright 2000, 370) The old and widespread notion of metal as satanist, “Devil's music”, was further reinforced in the beginning of the 1990's when a large number of church-burnings and some instances of violence and murder were linked to the Norwegian black metal scene (e. g. Moynihan & Söderlind 2003). These extraordinary events attracted renewed academic interest in metal music and culture. A number of analyses of what possible meanings and functions metal has to its artists and fans have been produced in recent years (e. g. Bossius 2003, Purcell 2003, Kahn-Harris 2007). In spite of the more nuanced accounts presented in these studies, metal continues to meet resistance from a number of different groups within mainstream culture.

If one can speak of such a thing as an ideology of metal, it is one of individualism, of thinking and standing up for oneself. Rejection of traditional social and cultural authorities is another clearly visible feature of metal music and culture, at least on a symbolic level. Metal has often been interpreted as presenting a critique of a society and culture that is viewed as false and hollow by consciously transgressing the boundaries of the socially and culturally acceptable (e. g. Kahn-Harris 2007, 141-156, Weinstein 1991, 42-43, 53-57). A critical stance toward religion, especially Christianity, is a common feature of metal culture on a general level and closely related to its broadly defined ethos of individualism. Whether these kinds of transgressive themes actually reflect the views of artists or fans themselves is quite another matter since there are also lyrical genre-rules at play. That is, the lyrics are supposed to be extreme, the worse the better, often coming across as pure humor. Above all, extreme themes and imagery raise the chock-value of the music. The lyrics are usually not meant to be taken literary even though there are cases where highly transgressive themes clearly *do* reflect the views of artists and fans, at least to some degree. Although it has lost most of its earlier violent aspects, the radical anti-Christian sentiments held by some members of the infamous early 1990's Norwegian black metal scene have been carried on by contemporary acts such as Gorgoroth and Marduk. An even clearer example of lyrics reflecting the views of artist and fans can be found in so called National socialist black metal, with bands such as Der Stürmer and Kristallnacht advocating anti-Semitism and racial separatism. It is, however, important to keep in mind that these types of radical ideas are marginal within metal culture on the whole.

Christian Metal

Christian metal, or *white metal*, appeared in the U. S. in the late 1970's in close connection to the California-based evangelical *Sanctuary*-movement (nowadays *Sanctuary International*), an alternative church created for spreading the gospel in the secular metal community using metal with a Christian message (e. g. Brown 2005, 124-125). Christian metal bands were virtually ignored by mainstream popular music media with the exception of glam metal act Stryper that achieved worldwide success in the 1980's. Christian bands started to embrace extreme metal styles in the late 1980's. Today, all metal sub-genres are represented, including black metal, or “unblack”, that has become one of the most popular styles in recent years.

Outside the U. S., scenes quickly developed in the Nordic countries Sweden, Norway and Finland as well as in other parts of northern Europe, mainly Germany, Belgium and The

Netherlands – all countries with longstanding and significant secular metal scenes. Christian metal is firmly rooted in evangelical Protestantism but still not uncommon in predominantly Catholic countries. Whereas secular metal has gained considerable popularity in many Islamic countries (Kahn-Harris 2007, 118) as well, Christian metal has for the most part remained confined to Northern Europe and North America. A notable exception is the growing scene in Brazil, again a country with a significant secular metal scene (and a large protestant minority).

The idea of the music as an effective means of evangelism remains an essential feature of Christian metal even though it has gradually developed more into a distinct religious popular music culture. Christian metal has embraced the metal style and aesthetic, and in a somewhat transformed sense its uncompromising rhetoric, attitude, and lifestyle as well. As in secular metal, fans are encouraged to stand up for their faith, think for themselves and not blindly follow authorities, including religious ones. Christian metal differs little from secular metal regarding aesthetics, usually avoiding only overt satanic or anti-Christian imagery. The similarities extend to a considerable degree of interest in the same types of lyrical themes, such as war, struggle and battle. Christian metal bands often portray the “spiritual warfare” being waged against the destructive influence of Satan. They also stress the implications of the crucifixion of Christ and the importance of accepting him as one’s personal savior before the final apocalypse and judgment of all sinners and enemies of God.

The only clear difference between Christian and secular metal is found in the content of the lyrics, but with growled, guttural or screamed vocals, this difference is not always that easily discernible without consultation of the lyric-sheet. As in other forms of Christian rock, concerts are usually marked as such (that is, as Christian) in a number of ways and principally attended by members of the Christian metal scene (Häger 2003, 41-42). A Christian band may, for instance, read passages from the Bible or lead the crowd in prayer as part of their concert, something guaranteed to catch the attention of someone thinking he was attending an “ordinary” metal-show. Indeed, many bands preach during their concerts, but some hardly make any reference to religion at all, thus blurring the notion of a clear division between “secular” and “Christian” metal. Today, an increasing number of bands choose to downplay their religious message in order to increase their chances of success outside the Christian scene. Still, many bands stick to their evangelist approach and continue presenting their message in uncompromising and often militant-type terms.

Construction and Structure within the Christian Metal Scene

Christian metal scenes are marked by a high degree of internal discursive construction by which they are constructed as distinctive spaces. The most important and easily recognizable discourses are those mentioned earlier: Christian metal as an *alternative* form of religious expression and identity, as a *legitimate* form of religious expression, as an effective *means of evangelism and fighting and standing up for the Christian faith*, and as a positive *alternative to secular metal*. One could, of course, argue that the Christian scene is reproduced along “ideological” or “religious” scales, not least since it has thrived in countries with considerable differences in religious mood and milieu. However, a high degree of uniformity between scenes in different countries regarding the meaning and function of Christian metal has developed in relation to these discourses, making it largely reproduced along one general and widely shared ideological and religious scale. Even though debates and disagreements on religious topics constitute an important part of internal scenic discourse they become secondary to a widely shared notion of the scene as space in which Christians with different religious affiliations can shape an alternative form of religious expression and Christian identity. This, of course, does not mean that ideological and religious differences play no role, only that they remain within scenic discourse and are overshadowed by the notion of the scene as a particular type of Christian space. As a result, even though the scene consists of

members from different countries with different religious backgrounds, they express remarkably similar views on what Christian metal is all about.

The spreading of these central discourses on a transnational level has been made possible through the development of a highly independent, and largely Internet-based, scenic infrastructure consisting of a number of central *scenic institutions*, including own record labels, promotion and distribution channels, magazines, fanzines, online discussion forums and festivals. They are particularly drawn upon by core scene members involved in maintaining these scenic institutions, especially artists themselves or people involved in various forms of Christian metal media. Articles and reports in scenic media such as U. S.-based magazine *Heaven's Metal* or webzines like *Devotion Hardmusic Magazine* often highlight Christian metal as an effective tool for evangelism and an alternative way to express the Christian faith. Many general information websites, such as *The Metal for Jesus Page*, feature elaborate so called "Christian metal apologetics" and stress Christian metal as an alternative to secular metal by offering detailed comparison charts. At online discussion forums like *Firestream.net* or *The Christian Metal Realm* all of these issues are continually debated. For record labels like *Fear Dark* or *Endtime Productions* the central discourses function as principles or guidelines and at larger Christian metal festivals, such as *Elements of Rock* in Switzerland and *Endtime Festival* in Sweden, they come alive and strengthen the sense of community that exists within the scene. In 2005, the first edition of the *Metal Bible*, a special printing of the New Testament featuring a large number of testimonies from both Christian metal musicians as well as a metal inspired layout was published in Sweden. At the moment, the first volume of 20,000 copies has already been distributed. An English edition is now in print and editions in Portuguese, Spanish, German and Dutch are planned to appear by the end of 2007, making the *Metal Bible* on the way to becoming the latest new scenic institution.

Of course, different national scenes have developed their own smaller scenic institutions concentrating on bands and events in their own respective countries. All scenic institutions have to start on a local or national level. However, through using the Internet as the principal means for communication, an increasing part of scenic infrastructure has become transnational in scope. Some national scenes are more vibrant than others, with more bands, fans and events. Through the Internet, artists and fans in countries with comparatively insignificant scenes or no scene at all, can still keep up to date with news and take part in scenic discourse.

Shaping an Alternative Christian Identity

Because of their choice of music, rhetoric and look, many Christian metal artists and fans experience some degree of estrangement from their own churches. Popular music has always played an important role in the articulation and expression of religious identity. In an article discussing some of the most influential recent scholarly research on the role of popular music in the construction of religious identities Gordon Lynch (2006, 482) writes:

From the heretical songs of Arius, to Wesleyan hymns, and the spiritual songs of African Americans, music has served a number of functions, such as reinforcing religious identities, establishing a sense of collectivity within religious groups, acting as a means of theological expression, celebration, protest, and lament, providing a subcultural resource and practice against dominant religious identities and orthodoxies, and serving as a focus and stimulus of religious experience and sentiment.

Looking at Christian metal, all of these roles played by music in the construction of religious identities are highly relevant. By constructing an alternative subcultural-type space, Christian metal scenes function as a means of both constructing and reinforcing an alternative

Christian identity and form of religious expression that is often directed against traditional or orthodox notions about appropriate forms Christian worship and evangelism. Johannes Jonsson, a central scenic figure who, among other things, works as project coordinator for the *Metal Bible* and administrates *The Metal for Jesus Page* mentioned above, explains:

Christian metal is a complement to other ways of spreading the Christian message. Through this music it is possible to reach out to many who would never take the message to themselves served in a more traditional way /.../ There is quite much contact with like-minded people in other countries and growing by the day. We are like a big team working together since we have the same faith and like the same music. It is important and it means a lot to meet like-minded people and exchange experiences and have fun together /.../ The important thing is the heart of the Christian message which all Christian metal bands share /.../ It is the fundamentals of the Christian faith, the gospel, that is the important and central message the bands wish to spread, not specific “denomination-teachings”. (IF 2005/5: 1-7)

Jonsson highlights how the scene functions as an alternative Christian space in which different “denomination teachings” become secondary to expressing and spreading the “fundamentals of the Christian faith”, although in an alternative way. The questions posed by Jeremy Begbie (2003, 95) in an article on the relationship between music, media and religion, brings to the fore some equally relevant issues regarding the relationship between Christian metal and traditional forms of Christian worship:

Why assume, as many seem to, that spiritual music has to be slow? Why assume that being close to God necessarily entails suppressing change and movement? Why assume that simplicity is necessarily more spiritual than complexity? Why assume that true spirituality is marked by the evasion of conflict?

Christian metal is complex music and often very fast indeed, as the classic slogan “Faster for the Master!” commands. Christian metal advocates change by creating an alternative form of religious expression and Christian identity. It is confrontational in its struggle for acceptance in all Christian circles as well as in its efforts to bring the Christian message to a sometimes “satanic” secular metal culture in the spirit of another uncompromising slogan, “Turn or burn!” There is no doubt that a particular form of music itself will affect the content of its lyrics. Lyrics and singing are often, as Begbie underlines, “valued more for their sound than for their obvious verbal reference”, more “part of a total sound mix of which music is a determinative element, and that sound mix is itself part of a composite multi-media experience” (Begbie 2003, 99). While this is certainly true for secular metal it is only partly true for Christian metal. The words constitute its most important element and are thus never chosen just for their sound. But the style in which they are sung is, however, fully in line with a “metal sound mix” and, especially in live performances, also part of a “metal multi-media experience”. Christian metal musicians not only want to express Christian faith in an alternative form, but also give Christians the opportunity to be part of a “metal multi-media experience” that is neither satanic nor “morally depraved”. In this way, Christian metal also engages with secular metal culture on the whole.

Concluding Remarks

Christian metal challenges traditional Christian notions about the appropriate ways to express and spread the Christian faith by combining it with an aggressive and controversial form of popular music. A number of discourses on the meaning and function of this particular combination of religion and popular music have spread as local and national Christian metal scenes have come together through the construction of a transnational scene. The spreading

of these discourses has enabled Christian metal artists and fans with different religious affiliations, living in countries with different cultural and religious environments, to shape largely one shared notion about what Christian metal is, or should be, about. By looking at Christian metal using the concept of scene, we have been able to focus on how a number of institutions interact in bringing together the local and national in the transnational.

The notion of Christian metal as an alternative to traditional forms of Christian religious expression and worship has recently led to Christian metal fans even forming their own alternative metal parishes in Brazil and Mexico. In some rare cases this concept has also been picked up by larger traditional Christian churches. An example can be found in the “Metal Mass”, a conventional Lutheran mass in which the hymns are accompanied by a metal band, organized by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (of which approximately 83% of the Finnish population are members). The many forms of Internet-based scenic media ensure that information about these practices and events spreads swiftly throughout the transnational scene, making scene members in other countries aware of, and perhaps inspired, by them. This is perhaps a result of the scene having developed into something of a religious community of its own. Christian metal has struggled for its own space within institutionalized Christianity for three decades. Accepted in some churches but rejected in others, it has functioned as a forerunner in opening the doors for a future closer relationship between Christianity and a wide range of popular music cultures.

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Interviews

Interview with Johannes Jonsson

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