

Tracing the Trajectory of Cursing God in Extreme Metal

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Article abstract

This essay examines the trajectory and the major milestones in “cursing God” in the extreme metal scene. The goal of this work is to begin a more honest conversation about the relationships between God, Satan and extreme metal that goes beyond media sensationalism. Three categories of “cursing God” in the extreme metal scene are presented and these are intended to act as a springboard for continued discourse and discussion that grants further elaboration on the intent and philosophies of the artists.

Tracing the Trajectory of Cursing God in Extreme Metal

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Cursing God and Judeo-Christian religion has been paramount in underground genres of extreme metal for many decades now (Hagen, 2011; Phillipov, 2012). Specifically, black metal, thrash metal and death metal have focused as the key nexus where hatred towards God has been expressed through song, visual art and performance. This paper categorizes three key realms in extreme metal that stems from origins of blasphemous and occult-influenced heavy music that, at its core, seeks to denounce God, followers of God and Judeo-Christian influence in Western culture and society. Beginning with an examination of the proliferating black metal and thrash metal scene in the 1980s and moving through today, this work looks to draw demarcations in the greater scene. A key objective of this paper is to clarify the degree and authenticity of blasphemy in the extreme metal scene and to add to the discussion around the contributions and nuances of metal music that «goes against» God. It is important to note that the categories presented here are seen as a starting point to a greater discussion about extreme metal in the literature.

The three categories below (Cursing God for Shock Value, Bridging the Gap Between Shock and Blasphemous Authenticity, and A Profound History of Judeo-Christianity) come after extensive analysis of lyrics, art and field research. The author has been an avid listener of hard music since

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1981 and has seen hundreds of extreme metal bands perform in multiple countries over the course of three decades. This categorization is not meant to be « definitive » but rather as one idea in a greater discourse. Additionally, the goal of this work is not to label bands as « Satanic » or not or to judge the music, art and lyrics in any way, but instead the goal is begin to clarify meaning and lead to more informed discussion about « Satanism » and blasphemy in extreme metal.

1. Category A: Cursing God for Shock Value

The 1980s extreme metal scene featured the rise of thrash metal which largely came in on the heels of the early black metal pioneers such as Venom, Bathory, Mercyful Fate and Hellhammer. While Mercyful Fate had the largest degree of commercial success largely courtesy of their profound influence on Metallica, these bands remained under the surface and were considered to be too shocking for mainstream radio and MTV to embrace. While Venom was considered to have introduced the metal world to the term « black metal », (Patterson 2013) the band often was seen as taking a less-serious, more commercial tone compared to their contemporaries in the authenticity of their message. Venom was over-the-top in their stage show and imagery but lacked the seriousness of the anti-Christian and Satanic messages of Mercyful Fate and Bathory. Venom were considered the showmen of the early 1980s extreme genre while Mercyful Fate was considered more intellectual in terms of lyrics, philosophies and musicianship (Peterson 2012), with leader King Diamond featured in a myriad of television programs espousing his Satanic worldview (Freeborn 2010; Faulkner 2009) with a deadpan seriousness and well-developed grasp of Judeo-Christianity. Hellhammer had a rough beginning in the genre — the names adopted by the band members didn't help (e.g. Satanic Slaughter, Slayed Necros, etc.) — but quickly found themselves in line with the respect accorded to Mercyful Fate when they morphed into the more serious-minded and gothic-influenced Celtic Frost. These bands would largely form the blueprint for the Second Wave « True Norwegian » Black Metal in the 1990s that centered in Norway (Silva 2012). Thrash metal, based largely in the USA, would take a less serious, more commercial tone.

Slayer was easily the best-known purveyors of thrash that indulged in heavy satanic imagery in the 1980s. The band, heavily influenced by a punk and hardcore sound, featured over the top lyrics about death, war and Hell. Their logo featured a pentagram comprised a swords and records

were written with titles like, «Hell Awaits» «Reign in Blood» and later «God Hates Us All» and «Christ Illusion». Album art, especially that of «Hell Awaits» and «South of Heaven» were well-crafted and featured graphic depiction of the Christian underworld. Band members were seen performing with spikes, make-up and in possession of inverted crosses. It was difficult to find Slayer graffiti scrawled without an inverted cross or pentagram adjacent to it. Band t-shirts featured a variety of Satanic symbols and other depictions of evil such as German WWII soldiers, Hell, skulls, death and blood.

While Slayer used their anti-Christian image to help propel them to metal stardom, breaking through the underground and even gaining air-play in MTV with their breakthrough video «Seasons in the Abyss», the members of the band were not Satanists and lead singer, bassist Tom Araya is, to this day, a practicing Catholic. Araya's father was a known minister and gave communion on Sundays. Araya has been able to strike a balance between signing about Satanism on stage and worshipping God in this private life. There is a thick delineation between the stage persona and its encompassing lyrics and images and the personal realm and actual belief system.

German thrash artists Kreator and Sodom also gained popularity during the mid-1980s and both dabbled in the Satanic in their early careers. Sodom entered the fray with the *In the Sign of Evil* EP which featured a raw sound and blasphemous lyrics. The band, however, steadily moved away from these themes and drew closer to lyrics about the horrors of war, ultimately revealing that they truly embraced an «anti-war» perspective as artists. Similarly, Kreator was constantly nipping at the heels of Slayer throughout much of the 1980s and 1990s using similarly violent (but much less Satanic) imagery and lyrics in songs such as «Pleasure to Kill» and «Death is Your Saviour». Kreator, however, ran into serious criticism from fans of extreme metal as they moved towards a social justice narrative late in their career and even publicly refused to play on bills with certain known-blasphemous and authentically anti-Christian bands such as Taake¹, for largely political reasons. Kreator went so far as pressuring festival organizers to remove Taake from performances. As a result, Kreator's early work is questioned by many in terms of authenticity as some label it as a mere means to gain greater notoriety in a metal scene

1. Taake is a Norwegian black metal band with a 20+ year history from Bergen that is noted for expert composition, intense stage shows and political controversy.

that featured a thick layer of talented thrash bands with superior musicianship and songwriting.

In essence, bands such as Slayer and Sodom, curse God for shock and awe. The use of anti-Christian imagery and lyrics that were hostile to God were seen as extreme, but not necessarily as a means to *actually curse God* but to signify rebelliousness, evil and act as a lightening rod for suburban teen angst. There was an air of rebelliousness entering the halls of North American high schools with a Slayer shirt on and a Kreator backpatch, but many of these students would still be seen in church with their parents on Sunday. In this respect, 1980s thrash was a step above the rather tepid Alice Cooper type «nightmarish» shock rock of the 1970s. It was shocking, but it wasn't real, and it was mostly there to sell records and concert tickets.

2. Category B: Bridging the Gap Between Shock and Blasphemous Authenticity

Glenn Danzig started out as the multi-instrument front man of the seminal punk band, The Misfits. Based out of Lodi, NJ, the Misfits embraced the «FTW» (Fuck the World) attitude of 1970s punk but dialed up the horror and the gore. Misfits lyrics were extreme and tackled taboo topics like the Kennedy Assassination and JFK's relationship with Marilyn Monroe, killing babies and raping mothers. The Misfits broke up after a revolving door of personnel changes and Glenn Danzig later formed Samhain, a hybrid of punk and metal with lyrics that took a more anti-Judeo-Christian tone. Samhain was short-lived and remaining members Danzig and Eerie Von went on to form Danzig with legendary producer Rick Rubin at the helm. Danzig released their first record in 1988 and quickly sold out clubs across North America with the crux of the band's popularity in the mid-1990s.

Danzig's first four records, take a serious anti-Christian tone. Upon the release of Danzig I, much of the music world was shocked with their release of a provocative t-shirt that featured the Danzig skeletal-horned mascot strangling Christ who is featured with a glowing heart and blood coming out of his eyes. The rear of the shirt simply says «God Don't Like It.» Glenn Danzig was asked about the shirt and the interview is featured in the Danzig I home video (Danzig 1990):

Interviewer: Do you think (that shirt image) is too much for some people?

Danzig: Yeah. It's cool.

Interviewer: Don't you care?

Danzig: Yeah. I care. I like it. That's how much I care about it. I cared about it so much I had it put it on a t-shirt.

Danzig I was a huge underground success and featured a mix of heavy blues, punk and traditional metal that benefitted greatly from the aptly named John Christ on guitar and legendary punk drummer Chuck Biscuits in conjunction with bassist Von. Danzig I lyrics took a serious tone and focused on demonic possession, being comfortable with evil in the world and even featured a warning to parents about their children listening to Danzig music (« Mother »), yet at the same time, the video imagery lacked the same level of blasphemous authenticity and featured over-the-top, if not, at times unintentionally comical « Satanic » imagery. The video for « Mother », for example, features a prop chicken in a simulated sacrifice over a scantily clad woman's torso, all over a pentagram. While the video was shocking enough to be banned from video airplay on MTV (a pseudo-progressive entity that promoted free artistic expression in its words but failed in its actions), the « Mother » video and the one for « Am I Demon » (which featured Glenn in a simulated crucifixion wearing a goat's head while a bikini clad woman writhes around him) were clearly more about shock than any authentic message.

Subsequent Danzig releases also featured well-produced, brilliantly arranged compositions that took on strong anti-religious content but also suffered from somewhat gimmicky accompanying collateral, such as the Danzig II — Lucifuge CD booklet that unfolded into an inverted cross. While few question Glenn Danzig's knowledge of Judeo-Christian religion, the religious points brought up in his work is often overshadowed by the more Hollywood-esque images.

In similar vein to Danzig, the North American Death Metal scene provided a wealth of imagery that was against God, hostile to Christianity and contemptuous of organized Judeo-Christian religion in general, however, the authenticity of the blasphemous message was, at times, obfuscated by imagery that often took a more « generic » tone of evil in general, and not necessarily of a direct challenge to Christ. Some of these bands, such as Death, opened their careers with a clear outward and direct hostility towards Christianity but then later found their work to mature more, as if the more these artists learned about the religiosity involving God and Satan, the more their art increased in terms of reflexivity and self-awareness. Many argued that Death's final album demonstrated mainman

Chuck Schuldiner's success in crafting a record that was heavy, angry and soulfully introspective all at the same time.

Throughout the late 1990's until present day, there have been a number of extreme metal bands in a variety of subgenres that straddle this middle space. New Orleans' Goatwhore is one of the bands that closely fits this archetype and continues to tour and record extensively. Goatwhore, who's lyrical content tackles a variety of themes, often delves deep into humanity's dependence on God. Their 2009 release, « Carving Out the Eyes of God » is a record that clearly holds God in contempt and calls on Christians to realize the folly of heavenly devotion.

Powerless you crawl like pigs
 soon to be slaughtered
 suckling to a faith that you acidly hoped would save you all
 These offerings will bring us our justice
 for these gears of diluted lies
 the answers to our freedom
 the answers to the death of gods [...]
 burden me with your wrath
 curse me with your sick
 in blood filled walls I lie confined
 carving out the blind eye of god

While Goatwhore clearly has some compellingly anti-divine lyrics, its difficult to ascertain the authenticity of their overall message when they also pen songs that are much more inflammatory and appear to be tongue-in-cheek with shock-oriented titles like « Fucked By Satan ». Their stage performance also more closely resembles a fun, high-energy traditional thrash metal show as opposed to the more foreboding, somber and distinctly serious concerts found in the Norwegian black metal scene like Gaahl's Wyrð, Gorgoroth² or Taake.

3. Category C: A Profound Hatred of Judeo-Christianity

While the Death Metal scene of the 1990s was largely a hybrid of bands that were anti-Christianity, pro-nihilism and just downright shocking for

2. Gorgoroth is a black metal band from Norway that is known to feature performances of an intense nature steeped in abjection.

the sake of shocking (Phillipov 2012), there were some bands in this scene that demonstrated a deep and profound hatred of God through their art. Most noted during this time was Florida's Deicide. Formed by Glen Benton and Steve Asheim, their band's name literally means the killing of a god. Since 1990 (and with a myriad of lineup changes) Benton and company have been producing traditional death metal records with steady themes of blasphemy, Satanism and general anti-Christianity (Phillipov 2012). Some of Deicide's noted song titles, « Fuck Your God, » « Kill the Christian, » « Scars of the Crucifix » are undeniably anti-Christ and hostile towards Christianity, for which Deicide makes absolutely no apologies. Benton is well-known in death metal circles for the inverted cross he burned into his forehead in his early years (Phillipov 2012). Though his devotion to any form a Satanism from a religious perspective has been questioned by many, his steadfast disdain for Christianity is well-noted and consistent over the past number of decades.

The Second Wave or True Norwegian Black Metal is largely recognized by many as the most « authentic » anti-Christian metal scene (Kuppens and van der Pol 2014). It's important that True Norwegian Black Metal not be confused with the more modern and more accessible blackgaze or North American black metal scene, which borrows some elements from the Norwegian scene in terms of music, but differs greatly in lyrical content and images. The North American scene is often criticized as being largely comprised of social justice warriors and politically correct, artistically-challenged acts that attempt to redefine black metal into something more inclusive, merely borrowing the term « black metal » to give respective acts underground street cred. Many of these acts, such as Deafheaven have become corporate influenced and have accepted a variety of endorsements from brands attempting to penetrate the « underground » market, such as Ray-Ban. In this respect, the contrast between the authentically blasphemous Second Wave scene and the modern American is striking.

Second Wave Norwegian Black Metal was placed on the map in the 1990s with the exploits of the band Mayhem (Podoshen 2013; Podoshen *et al.* 2014; Podoshen *et al.* 2015). Mayhem's history, steeped in murder, jealousy and politics is well documented (Patterson 2013). For this paper, however, the focus stems the anti-Christian aspect to the band, specifically, related to Varg Vikernes (ironically born Christian Vikernes) who is allegedly responsible for multiple church burnings across Norway in the 1990s. Vikernes, who is a known anti-Semite (Venkatesh *et al.* 2016) and

convicted felon, has always played coy about the arson but all indications implicate his hand (Patterson 2013). Vikernes's stated issue is not about the desire to invoke Satan or bring hell on earth but rather sees his art an affront to Christianity and its alleged domination of Nordic culture — which, he believes, came at the expense of traditional Nordic belief systems (Patterson 2013). Other members of other Norwegian black metal bands such as Gorgoroth, and Hades have indicated either approval of the church burnings (at least in the past) or have added additional voices to the narrative of Christian-domination over traditional Norse culture. Some bands such as Nidingr take on God and organized religion with harsh criticism but stop at outright violence or overt hostility to Christian symbols.

Mainstream media such as Vice and Banger Films, arguably, played up the «Satanic» angle in their documentaries and films to make it appear that Norwegian black metal artists were/are fascinated with the devil, nihilism and schadenfraude, but a closer examination reveals that many of these artists support a more humanist philosophy and look inward to awaken the creation inside of them (Wallin *et al.* 2017). Gaahl, for example, has been portrayed as a violent, dangerous criminal in a variety of outlandish media stories but my own experiences with Gaahl and my own extensive fieldwork in Norway over the course of years has yielded a view of Gaahl as a gifted musician and artist, a man who respects his family's heritage immensely and loves the traditional aspects of equality and austerity in Norwegian culture. Labeling him a «Satanist» evokes a feeling of dread in Western culture, but to label Gaahl a theistic Satanist is incorrect. Gaahl, like many in the scene fall more aptly into the «humanistic Satanist» domain, which uses the term «Satan» to mean «against» as it does in the Old Testament and places humanity at the center of creation. In this respect, Satanism is against God, but Satan is not the focus of any type of worship. This is evidenced in his more recent lyrics and some of his interviews.

Black metal was never meant to reach an audience...It was purely for our own satisfaction. Something entirely self-centered. The shared goal was to become the true Satan; the elite human, basically. The elite are above rules. So people did what they wanted to do. And they had a common enemy which was, of course, Christianity, socialism and everything that democracy stands for, especially this idea that every man is alike and equal to his neighbour. That, of course, is a fake. (Gaahl in the *Observer* as quoted on Blabbermouth.net)

Gaahl's former bandmate, however, takes an alternate view of Satanism. Infernus, founding guitarist in Gorgoroth, views Satan as an actual diety and uses his music as a means to praise him. It's rumored that the conflict between theistic and humanistic Satanism is what sparked the divide in Gorgoroth a number of years ago, creating, for a few years, two versions of the band, «Gorogorth,» led by Infernus and «God Seed» fronted by Gaahl and long-time bassist King Ov Hell. Regardless of the reasons between the lineup changes and the differences between belief systems, it is apparent that both bands shared a profound hatred of Christianity and Christian influence in their native Norway. Further, the artists were unafraid to be very confrontational in their art — performing with simulated crucifixions and other shocking elements that are universally considered blasphemous and an affront to both Christianity and Catholicism (Wallin *et al.* 2017). King Ov Hell's more recent social media activity also takes aim at Islam.

Concluding remarks

This paper's aim is not present a comprehensive categorization of extreme metal and its embrace of cursing God and should be viewed as the beginning of a more honest and open conversation about the role of Satanism in the extreme metal scene. For years sensationalism has dominated the discussion of Satan in metal and most unaware of the scene itself have been subjected to information that is less than honest to the artform. The issue, of course, is that sensationalism sells and, in this respect, large media outlets have played up the salaciousness of performances by bands to gain increased viewership and click through rates. It is hoped that more immersive research and more honest reporting by those more closely in tune with the scene will lead to more serious analysis in the coming years.

In terms of scholarship on blasphemous metal, this article adds to the small, but important literature that has examined the sensationalism and the worry about Satanism in various local scenes (Levine 2008; Spracklen 2012; 2016) as well as related adjacent issues that involve hate (Venkatesh *et al.* 2014; Venkatesh *et al.* 2016). This work also sheds further light on the intersection of religiosity and heavy metal and dovetails with work by Moberg (2012) and Granholm (2013). Future research should be directed towards further introspection on Satanism in the scene that is more heavily dependent on actual immersive consumption experience and more honest and more deeply informed content analysis of lyrics and art (see,

for example, Venkatesh *et al.* 2016) that relies on extensive immersion with both artists and scene members on a regular and routine basis. Surface level analysis of Satanism benefits few and usually reverts to knee jerk assumptions about « devil worship » and ill-informed analysis by individuals who study the phenomena from a safe distance. It's time for the study of extreme metal music to move away from those safe spaces.

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Résumé

Cet article étudie l'évolution et les points de repère importants du « maudire Dieu » dans le milieu du métal extrême. L'objectif de ce travail est de proposer une conversation plus honnête quant aux relations qui unissent Dieu, Satan et le métal extrême, afin de dépasser le sensationnalisme médiatique. Trois catégories du « maudire Dieu » dans le milieu du métal extrême sont présentées et celles-ci ont pour but d'agir comme un tremplin vers un discours sur le long terme et une discussion qui permette d'élaborer quant à l'intention et à la philosophie des artistes.

Abstract

This essay examines the trajectory and the major milestones in « cursing God » in the extreme metal scene. The goal of this work is to begin a more honest conversation about the relationships between God, Satan and extreme metal that goes beyond media sensationalism. Three categories of « cursing God » in the extreme metal scene are presented and these are intended to act as a springboard for continued discourse and discussion that grants further elaboration on the intent and philosophies of the artists.