

Popular Culture and the 'Darker Side' of Alternative Spirituality

The case of metal music

Introduction

Recent decades have seen a growing interest in a wide range of alternative religions and spiritualities in the West. This has led to the emergence of an alternative spiritual environment that is often referred to as the 'holistic milieu' (e.g. Heelas & Woodhead 2005) or, more broadly, 'the alternative spiritual milieu' (e.g. Partridge 2004). Commenting on the changing face of religion in the West, scholars such as Christopher Partridge (2004, 2005) argue that contemporary Western society and culture is experiencing a process of 're-enchantment', while Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2005) contend that the West may be experiencing the beginning of a 'spiritual revolution' as a result of the overall 'massive subjective turn' of Western culture and society. In relation to these debates, scholars of religion have also increasingly started to draw attention to the role played by *popular culture* within the overall context of religious change and transformation in the West. Popular culture not only reflects these changes but, in turn, also provides important sources of inspiration for the transformation of religious and spiritual practices and identities (e.g. Partridge 2004, 2005; Lynch 2006; Forbes 2005).

Metal is perhaps *the* most extreme and aggressive form of contemporary Western popular music. Even though it continues to spark controversy and debate, it has also enjoyed enduring popularity for decades and has spread on a global scale. Metal music and culture has always been characterized by its fascination for dark and austere themes and imagery. Commonly dealing with topics such as evil, death, war, alienation and suffering, metal groups have traditionally found much inspiration in the world of religion, particularly Judeo-Christian eschatology and apocalypticism, different forms of paganism, occultism, esotericism and, last but not least, Satanism. These kinds of religious/spiritual themes have arguably developed into an integral part of

metal culture on the whole. They contribute significantly to investing metal music and culture with an apparent aura of sincerity and mystique as well as to raising its shock and entertainment value. At the same time, metal culture is also marked by its high degree of humour and self-irony, its fondness for exaggeration, spectacle and over-the-top theatrics. Even so, metal stands out as a global popular music culture replete with various kinds of often dark and austere religious and spiritual themes, many of which stand in stark contrast to Christianity. As Partridge (2005: 246–55) has pointed out, seen in the wider context of the changing face of religion in the West and the increasingly important role played by popular culture in the transformation of religious and spiritual identities, metal has come to play an important role in the dissemination of a wide variety of 'dark' alternative religious/spiritual beliefs and ideas.

My main aim here is to shed further light on this issue through focusing on some contemporary and successful metal groups from the Nordic countries. In relation to this, I also wish to draw attention to some of the ways in which dark alternative religious/spiritual ideas may be viewed as having become an *inseparable part* of some sections of metal culture as they have become actively and consciously explored, and sometimes explicitly *promoted*, by the well known contemporary metal groups discussed in this article. I will begin by offering a short general account of the contemporary alternative spiritual milieu. This is followed by a brief discussion of the current relationship between religion and popular culture, particularly in relation to Partridge's (2004, 2005) recent thesis on the 're-enchantment' of the West. The final and main part of the article then explores the relationship between popular culture and alternative spiritualities in relation to the world of metal music in light of some contemporary metal bands from Norway, Sweden and Finland.

Alternative spiritualities and religious change

Debates on the emergence of alternative religions/spiritualities need to be situated within the broader context of wider debates on religious change and transformation in the West. The concept of *secularization* has occupied a central position in these debates for decades and has mainly concentrated on the impact of modernization on institutional Christianity in (mostly Western) Europe and North America. Viewed as part of a broader narrative of modernization, theories of secularization have traditionally offered an account of the state of religion in the West, and Western Europe in particular, in terms of a single 'running narrative' of slow but steady decline (Martin 2005: 8).

More recently, though, traditional narratives of secularization have again become increasingly contested and questioned as a result of the emergence and proliferation of alternative religions and spiritualities. Scholars concentrating on these developments often interpret the contemporary Western religious scene in terms of a dialectical relationship between secularization and *sacralization/re-sacralization* (e.g. Heelas & Woodhead 2005: 9–10; Partridge 2004: 44). Scholars adopting this approach seldom refute the overall effects of secularization on traditional institutional religion, that is, Christianity. They do, however, point to the transformation and changing character of religious belief and practice within contemporary society and culture, with religion and spirituality appearing in new forms and sometimes unexpected places.

Generally speaking, alternative spiritualities stress the role of the individual as his/her own ultimate spiritual authority or, as Heelas and Woodhead (2005: 6) put it, they focus on the ‘cultivation or sacralization of unique subjective lives’. Spiritual truth is not to be derived from external religious authorities but from ‘within’ oneself. Individuals are encouraged to seek inspiration in whichever religious and spiritual traditions, beliefs and practices that suit them and their life situation best at any particular time. Hence, spiritual matters are typically approached in a holistic, eclectic, and experimental spirit. Different beliefs, ideas and practices from a range of different religious and spiritual traditions are thus often combined, resulting in the construction of unique individual spiritualities (Partridge 2004: 72–3). Alternative spirituality stands in stark contrast to what Heelas and Woodhead call ‘life as religion’, such as Christianity, characterized by its emphasis on external authority, dogmatism, tradition, metaphysical dualism, absolute truth claims and so on (Heelas & Woodhead 2005: 14–16). This contrast is essentially what makes alternative spirituality viewed as ‘alternative’, that is, as a type of spirituality that is defined over and against traditional and institutional types of religion (Christianity). According to some scholars of religion, these types of attitudes are all typical of ‘postmodern culture’ more generally (e.g. Beckford 1992: 19).

Although the alternative spiritual milieu encompasses a myriad of different and disparate beliefs and practices they often nevertheless share some general basic connections and similarities. So, even though contemporary alternative spirituality is characterized by an emphasis on the authority of the individual and an abandonment of overarching belief systems, a set of key themes have nevertheless come to be widely shared and developed into what Partridge (2005: 11) calls ‘soft orthodoxies’. For example, there is a shared general sense of the West becoming increasingly attuned to ‘the spiritual’, of everything be-

ing holistically 'connected', for example in terms of an all-permeating 'universal energy' or 'life force'. The sacralization of *nature* in particular, stands out as a recurring feature in many forms of alternative spirituality. In relation to these concerns, there is also widespread suspicion towards 'modern invasive technologies' (Partridge 2005: 18) such as those related to irresponsible industrial exploitation of natural resources. Moreover, alternative spiritualities typically emphasize 'the resurgence of ancient traditions' and continuity with an often 'mythical past' as being the key 'to vibrant, authentic contemporary spirituality' (Partridge 2004: 77). This is also connected to a more widespread distrust, suspicion and sometimes outright hostility towards traditional Christianity. On a general level, alternative spiritualities are thus characterized by an open attitude to subjective, pragmatic and experimental exploration of new ('alternative') spiritual ideas and practices (Partridge 2004: 77–81).

The 'darker side' of alternative spirituality

Even though much of contemporary alternative spirituality emphasises harmony and 'well-being', there is also evidence of an increasing interest in various forms of 'darker' alternative spiritualities, such as different forms of occultism, esotericism, Satanism, and various forms of paganism, which are characterized by rather different concerns. Broadly speaking, 'darker' alternative spiritualities tend to stress the *duality* or *polarity* of existence, focusing more on *self-centred* spiritual development (see Partridge 2004: 79). Here, for lack of a better term, I use the epithet 'dark alternative spirituality' as a broad and highly tentative category that is only meant to highlight the fact that these types of spirituality also stress the darker sides of existence in ways which distinguish them from the 'sanguine, saccharine, light-emphasizing view of reality' (Partridge 2004: 79) found within much of the broader New Age movement and holistic milieu. This is not to say that dark alternative spiritualities do not also share many of the 'soft orthodoxies' mentioned above. For one thing, they are all focused on the cultivation of individual-centred spirituality and the sacralization of the self. Nature is also typically invested with sacred qualities, particularly within various forms of paganism. However, the emphasis here is arguably not so much on altruistically caring for 'mother earth' for the sake of the spiritual and physical well-being of all mankind as on utilizing the sacred powers of nature in a spirit of self-centred spiritual development. The practice of magic (magick) within many occult and esoteric traditions can be seen as an example of this. However, not all forms of dark

alternative spirituality emphasize the sacredness of nature in the same ways or to the same extent.

Dark alternative spiritualities also tend to attach particular importance to the notion of continuity with ancient traditions. Although contemporary Western esotericism is itself 'a conglomerate of various different, and often quite distinct, traditions' (Granholm 2005: 61), occult and esoteric groups nevertheless often stress their connections to particular occult and esoteric traditions (for a detailed account of Western esotericism see for example Hanegraaff 1998). Moreover, even though contemporary paganism is a highly diverse phenomenon, it is not uncommon for particular pagan groups to stress their connections to particular pagan traditions such as Celtic Druidism or pre-Christian Norse religion. Generally speaking then, even though spiritual matters are approached in an experimental and eclectic spirit, the type of eclecticism at play here also puts greater emphasis on disciplined, gradual spiritual development through experience, further learning and initiation in closer connection to tradition, community and ritual. In this way, as Jo Pearson (2003: 172) has pointed out with reference to Wicca, it could be argued that dark alternative spiritualities stress 'commitment and dedication' in a way that sets them apart from the general subjective and eclectic ethos that permeates the broader alternative spiritual milieu (for a detailed discussion on paganism see Partridge 2004: 79–84).

Broadly speaking, darker alternative spiritualities thus tend to be marked by higher degrees of *exclusivity*. They also tend to be more *dualist* in that they put greater stress on the duality or polarity of existence, for example, in terms of light and darkness, harmony and discord, life and death. However, darkness, discord and death are not necessarily perceived as forces to be shunned but, rather, as forces for the individual to embrace and utilize in his/her process of spiritual self development. Dark alternative spiritualities also tend to be antagonistic and sometimes openly hostile towards traditional institutional Christianity. This is a characteristic feature particularly of various forms of Satanism which usually adopt an explicitly *elitist* stance to self development and the realisation of one's true potential. As Partridge (2005: 222) points out, on the one hand, contemporary Satanism can be understood as a "cult of opposition", in that its *raison d'être* is the opposition to and the subversion of an established culture or religious tradition. However, on the other hand, some forms of contemporary Satanism, such as that of Anton LaVey and the Church of Satan, essentially build on an atheistic world view. Such a brand of Satanism may also be understood as a 'positive self-religion that encourages egocentricity and personal development' (Partridge 2005: 223)

while eschewing herd mentalities of all kinds, such as those associated with traditional and institutional belief systems like Christianity. Therefore, within some forms of Satanism, self development may be understood in terms of an existential process rather than an expressly 'spiritual' one. Yet, other contemporary Satanist groups sometimes express their understanding of the force of Satan in more theistic terms (Partridge 2005: 221–30).

Alternative spirituality and popular culture

The study of the relationship between religion and popular culture has grown exponentially during recent decades, drawing together scholars from a variety of different fields within the humanities and social sciences with a wide range of particular interests and various theoretical and methodological approaches. So far, most research within the field has concentrated on what Bruce D. Forbes terms 'religion in popular culture', that is, both the explicit and implicit appearance of religious ideas, themes, symbols and language in different forms of popular culture such as film and popular music (Forbes 2005: 10–12). An examination of the dissemination of dark alternative religious themes within metal music and culture could well be situated within this broad area of research.

In his two-volume work, *The Re-enchantment of the West* (vol. 1): *Understanding Popular Occulture* (2004) and *The Re-enchantment of the West* (vol. 2): *Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture and Occulture* (2005), Christopher Partridge provides an extensive and thought-provoking account of the role of popular culture in relation to overall religious change and transformation in the West. Essentially, he argues that the proliferation of a large number of alternative religions, spiritualities and world views, especially since the 1960s, gradually has led to the formation of a bank of religious, spiritual and existential resources which he terms *occulture*. This considerable expansion of the term 'occult' should not be understood as denoting a form of religion or world view in itself, but 'rather a resource on which people draw, a reservoir of ideas, beliefs, practices, and symbols' (Partridge 2004: 84). This 'reservoir of ideas', or 'constantly evolving religio-cultural milieu' (2005: 2), is not only sourced by more specific ideas and practices found in, for example, more established forms of alternative spirituality and new religious movements but also by a wide array of other disparate spiritual and existential ideas and themes, such as beliefs relating to the 'paranormal', 'well-being culture', 'eco-enchantment', 'sacralization of psychedelics', or 'eschato-

logical re-enchantment' (Partridge 2004: 70; 2005). Partridge also highlights the growing interest in different forms of 'dark occulture' sourced by modern Satanism, Western esotericism, occultism, various forms of paganism, various beliefs relating to the Devil, vampires, malevolent extraterrestrials and ideas of mass conspiracy (Partridge 2005: 207–78). On a general level, the concept of occulture or 'occultural milieu' is meant to encompass the broader cultural milieu in which all of these disparate ideas and beliefs circulate, providing the 'unpredictable raw materials' (Partridge 2004: 85) for the construction of alternative spiritual identities.

The main argument is that the proliferation of this vast plethora of spiritual and existential ideas in a supposedly deeply secularized society and culture points to the emergence of a new 'spiritual atmosphere' or 'a dialectical process of the re-enchantment of the secular and the secularization of the sacred' (Partridge 2004: 44). Partridge explicitly relates his notion of occulture to *popular culture*, arguing that it has proven a 'key sacralizing factor' (2004: 119) in the contemporary re-enchantment of the West: 'Motifs, theories and truth claims that once existed in hermetically sealed subcultures have begun to be recycled, often with great rapidity, through popular culture' (Partridge 2004: 119). As popular culture is all around us, so are the religious/spiritual beliefs and ideas it disseminates (Partridge 2004: 126). Through circulating a wide range of religious and spiritual beliefs and ideas, popular culture also contributes to their 'de-exotification', that is, to their integration as part of contemporary Western cultural consciousness (Partridge 2004: 53). As Partridge goes on to argue, 'at a basic level, popular culture both reflects and informs ideas, values and meanings within society as well as providing a site for the exploration of ideas, values and meanings'. Forbes (2005: 5) makes a similar point, arguing that: 'Because popular culture surrounds us, it seems reasonable to assume that its messages and subtle themes influence us as well as reflect us.' As scholars of religion and popular culture have argued for some time, popular culture itself provides one important contemporary arena in which the very understanding and perception of 'religion' is constantly negotiated (Mahan 2007: 51; see also Chidester 2005: 9).

Popular culture has long been an important site for the dissemination of alternative religious and spiritual ideas that challenge the traditional Judeo-Christian world-view. A notable exception is found in popular culture's longstanding interest in essentially Judeo-Christian *demonology*, *eschatology* and *apocalypticism*, which is perhaps most vividly reflected in the enduring popularity and success of films about the Devil, the Antichrist and the end of the world. Moreover, these types of theme have always been important sources of

inspiration within the world of popular music; 'popular musicians and their fans have found dark occulture particularly alluring' (Partridge 2005: 252). Metal, and especially its more extreme sub-genres, is no doubt one of the clearest examples of this. As noted by Partridge (2005: 248), 'the subversive values provided by Western demonology are actually enormously attractive to those wanting to construct countercultural identities'. In this regard, he goes on to argue, metal 'has had an enormous occultural impact' (Partridge 2005: 251).

Dark alternative spirituality within metal music and culture

The history of metal stretches back to the emergence of the *heavy metal* rock genre in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Since then, heavy metal has developed, evolved and diversified in a number of directions. These days, the term 'metal' is commonly used as a general term, coupling together a large number of closely related sub-genres and styles that have developed throughout the years (some commentators also use the term 'heavy metal' as such a general term). Although heavy metal was never 1960s-countercultural in any real sense, it did emerge in close enough connection to that environment in order to become considerably influenced by it, at least during its initial stage of development. Deena Weinstein argues that heavy metal did indeed adopt some of the characteristics of the 'Woodstock generation', such as its deep distrust for social and political authorities, its view of popular music as a serious form of artistic expression and its emphasis on musical authenticity, although in slightly altered forms. Only marginally interested with political or social activism, heavy metal largely abandoned such typical aspects of the 1960s countercultural ethos. Instead, in heavy metal lyrics, imagery and aesthetics, central countercultural themes such as tolerance, peace and love were often replaced with their opposites, evil, death and destruction (Weinstein 1991: 12–18).

With a history spanning four decades, metal has also proven exceptionally enduring and long-lived in the context of a global, fast changing and increasingly fluid world of popular music. Metal music and culture has also spread on a global scale far beyond what has traditionally been viewed as the Western cultural sphere (e.g. Kahn-Harris 2007: 97; LeVine 2008). The extreme character of the music, its lyrical themes and aesthetics, have also sparked a great deal of controversy and made metal a highly polarizing form of music that is as dearly loved and appreciated among its fans as it is detested

and reviled among its detractors. Compared to the interest directed at most other major and long-lived popular music genres, scholarly work on metal, and particularly on the relationship between metal and religion, has so far been very limited.

From the very outset, *religion*, particularly the dark and evil forces of the Judeo-Christian tradition in the form of Satan, demons and the fires of hell, has functioned as one of heavy metal's most important sources of inspiration. The *Bible*, particularly the apocalyptic themes of the Book of Revelation, not only provided early groups with a whole set of religious themes but also an arsenal of religious *symbols* and a rich religious *terminology* (see Weinstein 1991: 36–41). Additional inspiration was also found in different forms of occultism, esotericism, paganism and Satanism as well as in ancient legends and myths such as those found in Germanic, Norse, and Celtic mythology. These days, religious/spiritual and mythological themes of the various kinds mentioned above commonly surface at almost every level of metal culture; in song lyrics, in imagery and aesthetics, in specialized media, in music videos, at live performances etc. These types of themes were explored a great deal further within a number of more extreme and radical metal sub-genres, such as *thrash*, *death* and *black metal*, which developed from the early 1980s to the early 1990s. These sub-genres are usually coupled together under the heading *extreme metal*. Extreme metal styles steered the already highly aggressive and powerful music towards further extremes by, as Keith Kahn-Harris (2007: 6) writes, 'distancing themselves in a self-conscious attempt to explore the radical potential of metal'.

Criticism and rejection of dominant social and cultural authorities constitute a central component of many popular music cultures, and metal is no exception in this regard. In metal, however, such criticism is often expressed through a conscious, radical and deliberately provocative transgression of the boundaries of the socially and culturally 'acceptable' (e.g. Kahn-Harris 2007: 141–56; Weinstein 1991: 42–3, 53–7). The extensive use of radical satanic, anti-Christian or otherwise strongly misanthropic lyrical themes and imagery within many forms of metal can be viewed as examples of this. The apparent seriousness of extreme metal discourse, imagery and aesthetics is greatly fuelled by the use of dark religious/spiritual themes and imagery, particularly those relating to the satanic and anti-Christian, such as the frequently used image of the inverted cross, or satanic symbolism such as the Sigil of Baphomet. However, this apparent seriousness—and especially when it relates to religion—is complicated by the fact that metal generally remains a largely non-political and non-ideological popular music culture. The most

salient ideological feature of metal culture on the whole is that of individualism, of thinking and standing up for oneself and one's beliefs. However, even though this broadly defined individualist ethos also functions as a barrier against attaching the music to any particular ideology wholeheartedly, one can nevertheless cite numerous examples which at the very least seem to suggest otherwise. This is particularly the case within extreme sub-genres such as black metal, which developed in the early 1990s, mainly through the efforts of Norwegian groups such as Mayhem, Emperor and Darkthrone. As Kahn-Harris (2007: 5) writes, 'Black metallers embraced satanism wholeheartedly' and developed a radical anti-Christian ideology as expressed in the black metal slogan 'support the war against Christianity!' Combined with elements of Norse Paganism (e.g. Odinism and Ásatrú) this particular brand of anti-Christian sentiment gave rise to a loosely defined black metal ideology mainly concentrated on ideas of a revitalization of pagan heritage and a return to a pre-Christian culture and society untarnished by the perceived hypocrisy and herd mentality of a historically imposed Christianity.

In the early 1990s black metal attracted the attention of mainstream media in the Nordic countries as some members of the Norwegian black metal scene were linked to, and eventually convicted of, a large number of both successful and attempted church arsons, as well as some instances of extreme violence and even murder (Moynihan & Söderlind 2003). Through these extraordinary events, the Norwegian black metal scene achieved much notoriety within metal culture on a global scale. Indeed, the radical anti-Christian sentiments held by some members of the infamous early 1990s scene are still actively promoted by some bands today. Among these, the openly satanic Norwegian black metal band Gorgoroth, formed in 1992, has sparked repeated controversy and also become widely known throughout global metal culture because of this. In 2007, due to internal disagreements, the band split into two separate line-ups both using the same name. The following discussion will focus on the activity of the band prior to the split. The official website of the version of the band fronted by vocalist Kristian Eivind Espedal, mostly known by his artist-name Gaahl, still contains the band's old 'manifesto' which, among other things, states that Gorgoroth 'was founded . . . as a strategy to perpetrate sonic and spiritual violence upon the world in order to bring forth change in people's perception of being therein.' It also urges readers to 'prepare for a coming of a modern day inhuman and non-secular Satanism channelled through the vehicle of metal music' (<http://www.gorgoroth.org/frameset.html>).

Gorgoroth's radical image has been further reinforced through a number of controversial statements by both its earlier and present members, particularly its vocalist and front man, Gaahl. For example, when asked about his views on the Norwegian church arsons of the early 1990s in an interview for the acclaimed metal music documentary film *Metal. A Headbanger's Journey* (2005), he declared his 'hundred percent' support for them, adding that not only should there have been more of them, but also that there will be more of them in the future. As in many other interviews, he also went on to explain the basics of his highly individualistic world view in which Satan functions as the ultimate symbol and force of freedom and individuality. As discussed above, in general, such an individualistic ideology closely resembles that found in the teachings of more established Satanist groups such as the Church of Satan and other esoteric groups such as the Temple of Set. The Satanist and strongly individualist ideology of the band is further conveyed through the music itself as illustrated by album titles such as *Ad Majorem Sathanas Gloriam* (2006) and *Twilight of the Idols: In Conspiracy with Satan* (2003).

Gorgoroth has also engendered some deal of controversy by making extensive use of anti-Christian and satanic imagery during their live performances. For instance, their 2004 'Black Mass' concert performance in Kraków, Poland, made headline news in both the Polish and the Norwegian press. The concert, filmed live by the Polish state TV station TVP for future release on DVD, featured prominently displayed satanic symbolism, two naked men and women crucified on stage with black hoods covering their heads, drenched in sheep's blood which also covered the entire stage lined with sheep's heads on stakes. As reported by the Norwegian newspaper *Aftenposten* (4 February 2004), the band was even subjected to an investigation for 'religious offence' by Polish police, although no official charges were ever made. ([http://www.aftenposten.no/english/local/article723414.ece.](http://www.aftenposten.no/english/local/article723414.ece))

Far from having a negative impact on the band, it could certainly be argued instead that this type of controversy only serves to raise awareness and strengthen the already radical image that Gorgoroth consciously and successfully has strived to create for itself. Moreover, one would surely not be entirely mistaken to single out the principal source of this controversy, that is, the explicit promotion of satanic and anti-Christian ideas, as a still particularly potent one. Although many metal groups dabble with satanic and anti-Christian themes and imagery in a playful spirit in order to raise the shock-value of their music, in the case of bands such as Gorgoroth, we find such themes and imagery being vehemently and consistently promoted in a way that makes it difficult to brush them off as mere shock-theatrics.

The apparent seriousness of these types of extreme metal themes and imagery has long been a much debated issue among researchers of metal music and culture. As Robin Sylvan (2002: 178) argues: 'Although the scholarship on heavy metal tends to downplay the Satanic element, the Satanic imagery in heavy metal is too pervasive to ignore.' True, some studies of metal may indeed have downplayed metal's satanic element, but one should also be wary of exaggerating or overstating it. As Partridge (2005: 235) points out, 'too often spoof adherence and theatrics, such as that exhibited by . . . heavy metal bands, are misinterpreted by some academics and uninformed observers as evidence of allegiance to Satanism.' In any case, it is worth pointing out that metal's 'religious element' as such has so far received only limited attention within research on metal as a whole. My argument here is that, when exploring the dissemination of dark alternative spiritual ideas within metal music and culture on a general level, to speculate about whether bands such as Gorgoroth are 'really' serious or not is quite beside the point. Here the band is merely taken as an example of how pervasive and explicitly articulated the satanic element in metal sometimes can be.

Although metal has been associated with satanic themes and imagery since its early days, far from all metal groups show any real interest in such things. The world of religion and myth in general, however, has remained an important source of inspiration for many metal bands to this day. Bands interested in exploring religious/spiritual topics often also choose to focus on various pagan themes and ideas. Indeed, various forms of pagan themes and imagery have since long become such a recurring feature of many forms of metal that, in addition to its 'satanic element', one could speak of metal's 'pagan element' as well. Although pagan themes and imagery have long appeared within many forms of metal, they are particularly common within the so called *folk* or *pagan metal* sub-genre that emerged in the early 1990s. Folk/pagan metal groups typically incorporate elements from the folk music traditions of their own native cultures, often adding instruments such as fiddles and accordions to an otherwise traditional metal sound of heavily distorted guitars, bass and drums.

While satanic themes and imagery sometimes seem to be used in a very serious manner indeed, pagan themes are usually explored in a much less confrontational spirit. In some cases, such as in the black metal sub-genre discussed above, satanic and pagan themes may overlap. In other cases, however, some particular pagan tradition instead functions as the primary inspirational source. Although Germanic, Norse and Celtic traditions tend to predominate, certain elements of other pagan traditions, such as the figure of

the shaman, are also relatively common. Some bands choose to focus on the particular pagan traditions of their own native cultures, writing most or all of their lyrics in their own native languages. For example, on the official website of the Finnish pagan metal band Moonsorrow, formed in 1995, one can find a biographical statement explaining that the creation of ‘epic metal art with a good touch of national romanticism and a distinctively pagan approach’ always has been one of the band’s main aspirations (<http://www.moonsorrow.com/moonsorrowcom/moonsorrow.html>). This ‘distinctively pagan approach’ is further elaborated in the band’s song lyrics. For example, their 2001 album *Suden uni* (Wolf’s Dream) contains songs such as ‘Ukkosenjumalan Poika’ (Son of the God of Thunder), ‘Köyliönjärven Jäällä (Pakanavedet II)’ (On the Ice of Köyliönjärvi (Pagan Waters II))’ and ‘Pakanajuhla’ (Pagan Feast). A good example of how the band’s pagan approach finds expression in their song lyrics can be found in the lyrics to the song ‘Pakanajuhla’:

<i>Veljet sekä siskot</i>	Brothers and sisters
<i>kokoontukaamme yhteen pöytään!</i>	Let us gather at the same table
<i>On meidän malja nostettava</i>	A toast we need to raise
<i>uudelle jumalalle.</i>	to the new god.
...	
<i>Ketkä asettivat sankarinsa</i>	Who set their heroes to be
<i>juhlittaviksi</i>	celebrated
<i>aina meidän pyhiemme aikaan?</i>	always at our sacred times?
<i>Ja he toistuvasti julkeavat puhua</i>	And they repeatedly dare to speak
<i>meistä häpäisijöinä!</i>	of us as desecrators!

As noted above, many forms of contemporary paganism stress the importance of continuity with ancient traditions and, hence, often adopt a critical and sometimes openly antagonistic stance towards institutional Christianity. In my interpretation, such ideas and attitudes are clearly expressed in the lyrics cited above. It is quite evident, I would argue, that these lyrics criticize institutional Christianity for having usurped the pre-Christian pagan holidays and replaced them with its own. Moreover, the last line (‘And they repeatedly dare to speak of us as desecrators!’) also takes an apologetic tone as it accuses institutional Christianity of hypocrisy, ignorance, and historical amnesia. Moonsorrow has consistently continued to explore these types of themes on later albums such as *Kivenkantaja* (Stonebearer) released in 2003 and *Verisäkeet* (Blood Verses) released in 2005. However, with some exceptions, the band’s ‘distinctively pagan approach’ seems primarily directed at

investing the music with an 'epic' and 'larger-than-life' quality. Nevertheless, Moonsorrow's lyrics are still replete with pagan themes and references to ancient myth and legend. Indeed, as discussed in relation to the band Gorgoroth above, these themes constitute an integral and inseparable part of the band's image and identity.

The Finnish folk metal band Korpiklaani (Forest Clan), formed in 2003, provides an even clearer example of extensive and obviously playful use of themes and imagery inspired by native Finnish pagan themes and national romanticism. For example, their 2003 album *Spirit of the Forest* contains songs like 'God of Wind', 'Pellonpekko' (the god of ploughing fields, agriculture and beer in pre-Christian Finnish religion), 'Shaman Drum', and 'Mother Earth'. Some lyrics are also written in Kalevala meter used in old Finnish epic poetry. It should be noted, though, that the band often combines their interest in Finnish pre-Christian religion with other themes such as beer, women, and partying. Most of the band's album covers depict a shaman figure (often with reindeer horns on his head) in the midst of a typical northern Finnish natural setting. Other types of frequently used imagery include the reindeer, shamanistic symbolism, and the shaman drum itself. Such imagery also appears on band t-shirts and other band paraphernalia such as the handmade 'Korpiklaani pendant' which can be purchased through the band's official website. At concerts, reindeer horns are also usually attached to the lead vocalist's microphone stand. In this way, Korpiklaani's interest in pre-Christian Finnish mythology and religion surface at every level of their activity, making it an inseparable part of their image and identity as a band.

In addition to Satanism and paganism some metal bands also focus on esoteric and occult themes and ideas. The Swedish band Therion, formed in 1987, is an exceptionally good example of this. The band has created its own majestic signature sound through mixing metal with classical orchestral arrangements and large choirs. Therion's lyrics focus almost exclusively on themes relating to ancient mythology, legends, and Western esotericism. Thomas Karlsson, head and founder of the Stockholm-based dark magic order *Dragon Rouge* (Ordo Draconis et Atri Adamantis) has long functioned as the band's principal lyricist although he is not a formal member of the band (for more on Dragon Rouge, see Granholm 2005). The band also makes extensive use of magical and esoteric symbolism on album covers and sleeves, particularly the hendecagram or star of *Qliphoth* which is also used as the main symbol for the band. It should also be noted that Therion is the name for a god ('The Beast') in the teachings of *Thelema* as developed by the influential British occultist Aleister Crowley (1875–1947).

Therion's interest in esoteric themes is clearly evident on their 2007 double album *Gothic Kabbalah*. Every single song on the album explores some kind of esoteric or mythological theme. The album cover depicts a human figure standing in front of a large eye resembling the symbol of the Eye of Providence (also known as the 'all-seeing eye'). In addition to the title song 'Gothic Kabbalah', the album also contains songs like 'The Perennial Sophia', 'The Wand of Abaris' and 'Adulruna Rediviva'. The notion of perennial wisdom (the idea of an eternal and universal philosophical truth) has for a long time been central to many forms of Western esotericism; the legendary figure Abaris the Hyperborean appears as a sage and priest of Apollo in book IV of Herodotus' *The Histories*; and the concept of Adulruna, or the 'Gothic Kabbalah', originates from the Kabbalah-inspired runic system developed by the Swedish runic scholar Johannes Bureus (1568–1652) (see Granholm 2005: 29).

It is worth noting here that these songs explore rather *specific* esoteric and mythological themes that might not be familiar to listeners with only limited or no prior knowledge of mythology and Western esotericism. There is thus arguably something of an *educational* aspect to Therion's music. To take another example, their 2001 album *Secret of the Runes* offers the listener an excursion through the worlds of the Norse mythological universe. The album starts with 'Ginnungagap' (the empty gap that existed prior to the creation of the ordered universe), continues through 'Midgård' (the world of men) and 'Asgård' (the world of the gods) and eventually ends up in 'Helheim' (the world of the dead). In addition to the lyrics, the record sleeve even contains short explanations of each of these mythological worlds. For example, the explanation to the epilogue track 'Secret of the Runes' begins as follows: 'The runes are the secrets of the universe. Their inner meaning is hidden and concealed to the uninitiated. When you learn the secret of the runes your eyes shall open and you will become a god.' In this excerpt, the mythological themes of the songs are clearly connected to notions of esoteric knowledge. As with the other bands discussed above, esoteric and mythological themes constitute an integral part of Therion's music and image as a band. Moreover, we find such mythological and esoteric themes being consciously circulated by the band and, to some extent, actively *promoted* as well.

Concluding remarks

In this article, my main aim has been to illustrate the ways in which metal music and culture has played, and continues to play, an important role in the dissemination of a wide range of 'dark' alternative spiritual themes and ideas. Of course, it has been beyond the scope of this article to provide anything even resembling a comprehensive account of the relationship between metal music and religious/spiritual themes and imagery. Instead, this issue was approached through focusing on some contemporary and successful metal groups from the Nordic countries which are all characterized by their active engagement with particular sets of dark alternative spiritual themes and ideas. The spirit in which these bands explore such issues ranges from the evidently serious to the apparently serious to the obviously playful. This brings us back to the issue of the views of band members themselves. It could certainly be argued that metal's fascination for 'spoof adherence and theatrics' (Partridge 2005: 235) applies equally to all cases in which religious/spiritual themes and imagery are used in an apparently serious manner. This, of course, is *not* to say that dark alternative spiritual themes are not indeed explored seriously by some bands. Clearly, some of the bands discussed in this article appear to do precisely that, albeit in very different ways. The actual views of band members themselves may indeed play an important role in affording authenticity to the music of a band. Therefore, there is no reason to doubt that at least some members of bands such as Gorgoroth, Moonsorrow, Korpiklaani, and Therion, are indeed serious about the dark alternative spiritual themes and ideas that they explore through their music—especially when they express their views publicly in film documentaries or interviews for various forms of metal media. Nevertheless, my argument here has been that such themes and ideas have become so widely circulated and integrated with metal culture as a whole that they have taken on a life of their own.

In addition to these concerns, we also need to recognize the *commercial* and *entertainment* aspects at play here. After all, metal bands are creators of an art- and entertainment form that is, to a considerable degree, aimed at generating commercial profit through selling records, DVDs, concert tickets, band merchandise etc. Put another way, there is a sense in which dark alternative spiritual themes in metal music and culture are not merely explored and circulated but also *consumed*. Even so, the important point to note is that, through the efforts of bands such as those discussed in this article (and there are countless more), dark alternative spiritual themes and ideas have become widely circulated and familiar within metal culture as a whole. Of course, it

could be argued that many metal bands, including the ones discussed here, only explore such themes in a frivolous and superficial way. However, as increasing numbers of people are starting to look for religious/spiritual inspiration in popular culture, metal bands such as the ones discussed here may be seen to provide their audiences with important resources for the shaping of alternative cultural and spiritual identities (Partridge 2005: 248). And, if the 'messages and subtle themes' of popular culture 'influence us as well as reflect us', as is argued by Forbes (2005: 5) above, then it seems plausible to argue that the dark alternative spiritual themes circulating within metal culture may influence and reflect its audiences as well.

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