

## *Unveiling Satan's Wrath: Aesthetics and Ideology in Anti-Christian Heavy Metal*

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### *Abstract*

Unlike many heavy metal bands that utilize blasphemy, sacrilege, and evil images for superficial shock value, the wrath of anti-Christian heavy metal bands is rooted in authentic sources. The anti-Christian aesthetic within the Black Metal and impious Death Metal scenes derives from the ideology of popular satanism and the subordinate structural position of the scene. In addition to the defiance engendered by the scene's resistance to Christianity, the masculine imperative within the genre of heavy metal influences the extreme nature of the anti-Christian aesthetic.

### *Introduction*

[1] Wearing corpse paint and gauntlets, Akhenaten stands in an aggressive pose with "God Is Dead" written in black paint across his torso. He declares, "I have no other wish than to defame the name of christ. I will take every opportunity to spread nihilistic propaganda. I live in Satan's wrath."<sup>1</sup> So speaks Akhenaten, sole member of *Judas Iscariot*, an American Black Metal project now defunct. Like other Black Metal bands, Judas Iscariot views Christianity as the cause of many social problems: "The ideas of christianity do nothing more than support weakness and continue to pervert and distort rationality."<sup>2</sup> When asked about the primary purpose of his band, Akhenaten responds, "Judas Iscariot seeks to spread propaganda which in part is a stepping stone on the long path to the ultimate, inevitable and permanent demise of the christian moral disease."<sup>3</sup> He continues, "The time has come that all sheep, all benevolent subspecies must be thrown into a pit of everlasting fire. The subhuman emotions of compassion, benevolence, and mercy shall no longer be tolerated. We must never again allow Christianity to suffocate the human spirit and potential."<sup>4</sup>

[2] Sensationalism aside, Akhenaten's ideas represent the main thrust of Black Metal and of impious Death Metal<sup>5</sup>—both are vehemently anti-Christian and extreme forms of heavy metal music. This essay examines the social sources of the anti-Christian aesthetic (i.e., sacrilege, blasphemy,<sup>6</sup> and evil) in the traditional Black Metal and impious Death Metal bands of the late 1990s.<sup>7</sup> The homology<sup>8</sup> among the aesthetic, ideology, and social structure suggests an authentic form of resistance rooted in the subordination of a deviant music scene. The anti-Christian aesthetic resonates with the supporting ideology of popular satanism and with the subordinate structural position of the scenes.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the sensationalistic nature of the anti-Christian aesthetic derives from an additional ideological influence—the masculine imperative within the genre of heavy metal.

### *Evil Images and Popular Satanism*

[3] Black Metal and impious Death Metal CD artists communicate anti-Christian sentiments by indicating alliances with ideologies and themes conventionally understood as antithetical to Christianity. While Black Metal and impious Death Metal scenes incorporate a variety of ideological sources, the most prominent is popular satanism.<sup>10</sup> Popular satanism, a self-as-god philosophy, serves as the reigning ideology that supports the evil images found in the CD cover art of the anti-Christian heavy metal scene.

[4] Satanic symbols, especially the inverted pentagram and the Baphomet, appear frequently. The pentagram in its simplest form, a star, is generally “associated with mystery and magic” and is a “protection against evil and demons.”<sup>11</sup> Over time the pentagram became a part of occultism with the human body’s limbs and head representing the five points on the star. The five points then became “symbolic of the pure consecrated essence of anything (or the spirit) to the four traditional elements of matter—earth, water, air, and fire.”<sup>12</sup> The first association of evil with the pentagram “appears . . . in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Eliphaz Levi Zahed<sup>13</sup> illustrates the upright pentagram of microcosmic man beside an inverted pentagram with the goat’s head of Baphomet.”<sup>14</sup> Eventually, the Church of Satan incorporated the inverted pentagram as their official symbol; it represents the primacy of human nature over the spirit.

[5] In its emphasis of human nature over and above the spirit, the pentagram represents the antithesis of Christianity—Satanism. Satanic alliances among Black Metal and impious Death Metal include a range, from membership in the Church of Satan to the idiosyncratic application of satanic principles. While few members of the bands are official members of the Church of Satan, most tend to agree with its principles. In order to use the Baphomet pentagram in an official capacity most bands have to ask permission of the Church of Satan to use it. In fact, Vincent Crowley of the now defunct *Acheron*, a Magister in the Church of Satan, uses Satanic symbols to represent both an anti-Christian attitude and an allegiance to the Church of Satan. Regardless of affiliation, however, the inverted pentagram in its many manifestations, official or otherwise, has come to represent an anti-Christian perspective.

[6] Symbols representing evil appear frequently and constitute a significant component of anti-Christian expression. Demonic figures, shown in dominant positions, represent the antithesis of pious figures. For example, on Thornspawn’s *Consecration of Evil Flesh* a demonic figure stands with wings spread in front of a throne raised above a room of demons. Incantation’s *Diabolical Conquest* shows angelic figures being carried off in a war of spiritual beings; Averse Sefira’s *Homecoming’s March* shows a shrouded demon in the foreground with two subordinate demons on either side; and Immolation’s *Failures for Gods* depicts a serpentine demonic leader in a victorious stance. These demonic images affirm a satanic realm that is antithetical to the social order of Christianity and normalize an anti-Christian perspective.

[7] As its most recognizable visual elements, a band’s name and moniker must possess the same qualities as the band’s music—they must be dark and extreme. The following

list includes the names of the bands sampled in this study along with their meaning: Deicide (murder of god), Immolation (complete destruction), Incantation (an evil, ritualistic chant), Morbid Angel (self-explanatory), Vital Remains (self-explanatory), Averse Sefira (avenging angel), Kult ov Azazel (cult of the wild demon—Old Testament reference), Judas Iscariot (self-explanatory), Noctuary (diary of nighttime events), and Thornspawn (seed of the crown of thorns). As Jeff Tandy of Averse Sefira asserts, “Every band that we have ever listened to has had some distinctive extreme logo. [Our] logo looks like a ragged pair of wings bound by a pentagram.” According to Tandy, people recognize the logo “even if they cannot read it.”<sup>15</sup> The Averse Sefira logo was created by fellow band mate Sanguine who drew it by hand. Since its creation and use, the evil logo has become a recognizable symbol in the Black Metal community.

[8] Various other images that convey darkness and nihilism appear less frequently, typically as landscapes or as background art. Judas Iscariot’s CD art, for example, has little sacrilege and instead the portrayal of austere and cold landscapes communicates darkness and desolation. Judas Iscariot’s *The Cold Earth Slept Below*, *The Dying Light*, and *Of Great Eternity* are intended to convey feelings of nihilism, emptiness, and stark isolation. Other CD artists use images of death—skulls, skeletons, and graves—to communicate an association with the darker side of life.

[9] The variety of images mentioned above function as the symbolic vehicles that express alternative perspectives. Sources for alternative ideologies include Satanism, mythology, nihilism, the occult, paganism, vampirism, and Darwinism as well as corresponding texts like LaVey’s *The Satanic Bible*, Lovecraft’s *The Necronomicon*, and Nietzsche’s *Will to Power*. While some band members like Deicide’s Glen Benton practice Satanism, others borrow ideas from various sources, often adding their own fictions to form idiosyncratic and eclectic philosophical compilations. All of Deicide’s band members, for example, ritualistically practice Satanism with utmost seriousness: “All of us are into Satanism, “boasts DEICIDE guitarist Eric Hoffman. “We’re into it everyday; it’s not just a show. You’d have to be serious about it to burn an upside-down cross into your forehead.”<sup>16</sup> In contrast, Trey Azagthoth from Morbid Angel uses ideas from the *Necronomicon*, ideas from non-Christian religions, and *Kabbalah* to construct a philosophy that essentially places humanity as a lower form of life, alienated by its imperfections from the Spirit. Judas Iscariot’s Akhenaten combines ideas from Satanism, nihilism, and mythology. In most every case, band members are able to articulate their beliefs in a relatively coherent manner. Their philosophies typically, but not always, embrace the self as the source of knowledge and place ultimate value on a person’s human capabilities to determine truth.

[10] In the end the majority of band members construct philosophies that mirror the general perspective of Black Metal and impious Death Metal—popular satanism.<sup>17</sup> At the heart of popular satanism is the idea that individuals should be able to think for themselves and to follow their own desires. This form of popular satanism or the self-as-god philosophy derives from the Satanic Bible’s Law of Thelema (i.e., “Do what thou wilt”) and is indicative of the perspective of most Black Metal and impious Death Metal band members. The combination of independent thinking outside the constraints of authority and the pursuit of human passion are based in part on the nihilistic beliefs that

the only reality of life is death and that human beings are inevitably fallible creatures. In other words, anything created by humans, like religion, will limit human potential, and since life is short, enjoy it while you can. These ideas in all their various configurations place the individual as supreme: as a completely autonomous entity who makes decisions regarding truth in conjunction with one's personal beliefs and desires. Akhenaten puts it this way: "Life is meaningless and absurd. Christian conceptions of good, evil, and morality are illusions. Take what you want from life. ... You are your own god."<sup>18</sup> Incantation's John McEntee agrees: "our music's lyrics [are] not just stupid blasphemies on religion; it's more about freeing yourself and finding the true person within yourself, and you going with your own instincts and not being restricted by religion."<sup>19</sup> Finally, Xaphan of the Kult of Azazel sums it up: "I bow down to no one be it mankind or god. I am my own god and create my own path."<sup>20</sup> The perspective advocated here encourages individuals to look inside themselves in order to determine what is true rather than to passively accept truth from authoritarian institutions.

[11] Popular satanism is an ideology that is consistent with the individualism and anti-authoritarian ideological values inherent in popular culture. Individualism, one of American society's dominant cultural values, refers to the freedom to pursue one's interests without interference by others. According to Jeffrey Arnett, in heavy metal music "the right of the individual to do whatever he or she pleases is enshrined among the highest values."<sup>21</sup> Arnett describes the belief system that undergirds the radical individualism of metalheads: "Most metalheads do not have a religion, but they do have a belief system of sorts, an ideology," which Arnett calls "the ideology of alienated individualism."<sup>22</sup> Briefly, the ideology of alienated individualism is rooted in an intense belief in the primacy of the self above all else, the collective devaluation of conformity to the mainstream, and the celebration of the disenfranchised.

[12] The pursuit of one's self-interests unhindered by repressive institutions constitutes a fundamental cultural value in the majority of heavy metal songs and social rituals. This anti-authoritarian orientation is a pervasive component of the Black Metal and impious Death Metal scenes' general orientation. While the derision of religion is not new to heavy metal, the existence of two sub-genres of heavy metal music that explicitly subvert Christianity is unique.<sup>23</sup> Christianity has become the target of songwriters and CD artists who express disdain for the social and moral constraints imposed by Christianity. Freedom from constraint is therefore conveyed along with a critical interrogation of the beliefs and practices of its presumed adversary. This critical tendency reinforces the value of individualism by pointing out the ineptitude of Christianity as a constraining institution, thereby throwing all responsibility for fulfillment upon the self.

[13] As indicted above, popular satanism is a self-as-god philosophy whose radical form of individualism<sup>24</sup> and anti-authoritarianism fits well within the parameters of popular culture. Popular satanism serves the scene as an authentic ideological basis for the representation of evil symbols, in contrast to the superficial use of evil symbols for the purpose of shock value in popular culture more generally.

### *Sacrilege and Structural Subordination*

[14] Sacrilegious images in CD cover art—those that profane Christian symbols or that invert the symbolic order of Christianity—constitute a second type of anti-Christian expression in the Black Metal and impious Death Metal scenes. Sacrilege derives its aesthetic power from the subordinate structural position of Black Metal and impious Death Metal. The metaphor of war against Christianity best expresses the scene's structural subordination and supports the consequent defiance it engenders.<sup>25</sup>

[15] The Christian symbols most common in the sacrilegious CD art include Jesus Christ, the cross, and the crucifix. In most instances, the images and symbols are presented in a manner inconsistent with traditional and conventional portrayals. For example, Noctuary's *For Salvation* shows a skeletal reaper resurrecting Christ to a satanic salvation. Judas Iscariot's *To the Triumph of Evil* and Noctuary's *Where Agony Prevails* show Christ being disemboweled or dissected, sometimes by demonic figures. Inverted crosses and crucifixes can be seen in many band logos, in various locations on CD art, or hanging from band member necklaces. For most bands, it is evident that inverted Christian symbols represent an antagonism toward Christianity in its various manifestations, including its beliefs and practices, believers, deity, and institutions. A cross or crucifix, understood in this manner, functions as the symbolic representation of Christianity—in other words, the only recognizable way to symbolically point to Christianity is by using its common symbols.

[16] The disdain for Christianity, achieved by profaning or inverting sacred symbols, derives from specific criticisms held in common by members of the Black Metal and impious Death Metal scenes. Like other public criticisms levied against Christianity, especially in the culture wars of the last 30 years in the United States, sacrilege has not been intended directly to indicate hatred for Christianity or Christians. While bigotry and hatred may be nonetheless viable interpretations for some, sacrilege is primarily an overt and intentional form of cultural criticism. Black Metal and impious Death Metal band members criticize Christianity for its hypocritical practice, for its limited capacity to foster a critical attitude in its adherents, and for manipulating its followers. These criticisms underlie the general anti-Christian perspectives offered in the CD art of Black Metal and impious Death Metal bands.

[17] The first criticism involves the issue of hypocrisy. Many musicians view the contradiction between believed principles and their inconsistent enactment to be wholly unacceptable and indicative of falsity. Ross Dolan of Immolation declares, "Most so called devout Christians are no more than hypocrites, not practicing what they preach."<sup>26</sup> Because the charge of hypocrisy is "one of the most frequent" criticisms made "against organized religion", it should not be surprising to find it among the most prominent critiques of Christianity.<sup>27</sup> Arnett, for example, claims that "contemporary adolescents ... who are contemptuous of [religion] ... cite the hypocrisy of televangelists and the acquisitiveness of organized religion as evidence that all religion is a sham."<sup>28</sup> Robert Vigna of Immolation relates a similar complaint: "We were all brought up as Catholic

ourselves, and you're taught one thing when you're younger and when you get older you see things a different way. We see a lot of negativity in religion."<sup>29</sup>

[18] The second criticism relates to the blind or uncritical conformity of weak-minded Christians. Tom of Incantation says, "We hate hypocritical religions that want non-thinking followers to just obey without any thought involved."<sup>30</sup> Ross Dolan of Immolation adds, "Our bitterness is directed towards the narrow-minded, those quick to judge others before their own self-scrutiny, and of course the absurdity of this entire belief system known as Christianity."<sup>31</sup> Again, "People are afraid to be free thinkers; they just accept what is handed to them, never questioning and never looking beyond this."<sup>32</sup> In this manner, religion is considered to be a crutch for the weak-minded, an easy answer for those without the motivation to find answers within themselves. Ross Dolan again: "All I believe any of us needs is inside of us, the power, the strength, drive, or whatever we have, and all we need to do is to look within ourselves."<sup>33</sup> Dolan and others propose that the need for meaning and guidance in life can be found within the self and that religion is simply a means of social control exercised by religion over weak individuals.

[19] The third general criticism denounces Christianity's control over its adherents. Nearly all of the interviewees claimed that Christianity is nothing more than a fiction used to control and manipulate adherents for non-Christian ends and in ways detrimental to society. For example, Wrath Diabolis identifies the Vatican as one source of control: "I am anti-Christian, and I support action against them. The Vatican is the center for controlling a cult of weak-minded individuals who can't make their own decisions."<sup>34</sup> Ross Dolan of Immolation explains,

Probably our disgust with the whole concept of religion, the fact that people allow themselves, mind, body, and soul, to be controlled and manipulated by an imaginary force, is really absurd and saddening. It's sad that people can't look to themselves for strength and inspiration, they have to turn to things that don't exist.<sup>35</sup>

And,

It is disturbing how easily people allow themselves to be manipulated by something that is not real by stories, instead of looking within themselves for strength and guidance.<sup>36</sup>

In fact, the title of Immolation's CD, *Failure for Gods*, is a result of this observation. As Dolan states, "people who allow themselves to be controlled by these imaginary 'gods' are failures for not seeing through the lies, and in turn these 'gods' are failures because they never deliver on what they promise."<sup>37</sup> Christianity is viewed as a pervasive and powerful authoritative institution that controls the weak-minded and limits the development of free thinking individuals.

[20] The ideological strategy that most effectively expresses the disdain for Christianity identified in the above sentiments is the metaphor of war. By using the metaphor of war

Black Metal and impious Death Metal bands express a combative relationship with their perceived oppressor. Perhaps the best visual image conveying the subcultures' war against Christianity can be found in the CD cover art of Immolation's *Failures for Gods*. On the back cover a serpentine, demonic leader stands victorious above a conquered Christ. This symbolic inversion of the existing social order clearly indicates that the Black Metal and impious Death Metal scenes view themselves as positioned in a subordinate place in the social structure. In the visual aesthetic of CD art, waging and winning the war against Christianity requires both combative engagement with an oppressive entity and the depiction of victory. The victorious stance of a demonic figure upon victory over Christ clearly depicts a reversal of the existing social order and directly expresses the defiance of the scenes' members. Symbolic inversion, illustrated by the metaphor of war, subverts the dominance of Christianity by reversing stigmatization, that is, by assigning deviance to Christianity and normalcy to the perspectives of the Black Metal and impious Death Metal scenes.

[21] Although the criticisms of Black Metal and impious Death Metal bands derive in part from its defiance of the imposed social control by Christianity, which is clearly political, the significance of sacrilege is itself not primarily political. Sacrilege appears to have little effect on the symbolic order of Christianity. The sacrilege of the Black and impious Death Metal subcultures has not generated, for the most part, the tremendous public discourse indicative of other sacrilegious art and film in the culture wars during the same era. Few members of the subcultures actively engage Christianity in a direct manner, and critiques for the most part remain in the heavy metal underground.<sup>38</sup> The political effectiveness of sacrilege resides less in its capacity to challenge the social order and more in its capacity to assist semiotically in maintaining cultural identity distinct from and oppositional to Christianity. Maintaining cultural identity is therefore a more significant function of sacrilege than is its political function.

[22] It will come as no surprise, then, that the symbolic inversion of religious symbols functions as a symbolic marker of cultural identity and is used as a device to empower scene members. First, the collective defiance of Christianity functions as a unifying social force against an imposed social control. Sacrilege serves as a symbolic marker of difference; it communicates cultural identity by clearly expressing difference from a dominant group. Second, the aesthetic combines a collective defiance with vocative symbols<sup>39</sup> in order to elicit feelings and experiences of power. Collective defiance is "embedded in relations of power and conflict."<sup>40</sup> By advocating ideas from a subordinate perspective—achieved derogating out-groups and by affirming the in-group—metalheads express superiority. The visual images in particular derive their expressive power from the defiant and self-affirming posture of the subculture. In addition, the aesthetic dimensions of the subculture operate as "vocative symbols": aesthetic elements that evoke "affectively charged modes and dimensions of being—from within subjects."<sup>41</sup> The combination of defiance and vocative music empowers scene members.

[23] Resistance to an oppressive Christianity, as is evidenced in the metaphor of war, fortifies defiant images with evocative power. Defiance inevitably produces, at least as an explicit directive, a rejection of dominant moral and ideological values. Thus the

deviance expressed in the visual dimensions of heavy metal can be identified by the transgression of the dominant culture's symbolic boundaries and by the symbolic inversion of its symbols. The violation of codes serves as a source of empowerment in heavy metal music by drawing upon the emotional energy and social positioning generated by symbolic inversions and contradictions.<sup>42</sup> Through the visual dimensions of heavy metal music, bands are able to express and evoke meanings that resonate with the defiant perspective of the subculture.

### *Brutality, Evil, and the Masculine Imperative*

[24] The progression of shock within the masculine genre heavy metal influences its extreme musical forms and shocking lyrical and visual content. Continual innovation toward increasingly more extreme heavy metal music derives from the masculine imperative, which inevitably produces the “profane articulations” that challenge the dominant symbolic order.<sup>43</sup> Brutal music and evil lyrics constitute the masculine-influenced cultural values identified by CD reviewers who function as the institutional gatekeepers.

[25] The underlying cultural impulse that generates increasingly more extreme forms of music is what I call the masculine imperative: the self-referential impulse within particularly male dominated scenes and genres that encourages innovation in ways that bolster and expand masculine codes. Each subsequent genre expresses its superiority by constructing a definition of masculinity that escalates antecedent masculine codes. As Walser asserts, “metal is overwhelmingly concerned with presenting images and confronting anxieties that have been traditionally understood as peculiar to men, through musical means that have been conventionally coded as masculine.”<sup>44</sup> In the Black Metal and impious Death Metal scenes, aggressiveness is the trait of masculinity used to express and maintain dominance within the genre of heavy metal and among competing genres of popular music. For the most part innovation in anti-Christian heavy metal music occurs in conjunction with masculine codes, especially with aggressiveness, moving metal toward the extremes—to be more brutal and more evil. As a result, male codes propel innovation in heavy metal music.

[26] The development of the genre of heavy metal music attests to the continual progression of shock in alignment with masculine codes. Since the early 1980s, the genre has become more extreme in all its aesthetic dimensions, with emerging sub-genres outdoing its predecessors on all counts. Sub-genres of heavy metal alter the conventions of previous genres' music in a typically more masculinized fashion—that is, by continuing to take heavy metal musically, lyrically, and visually to the extreme.<sup>45</sup> The recent rise of Death Metal and Black Metal illustrates the movement toward more brutal musical forms and a more sinister and grotesque content. Dismemberment, blasphemy, and necrophilia represent only some of the lyrical and visual content of extreme heavy metal. Inevitably, the masculine defiance endemic in adolescent subcultures converges with the cultural impetus toward perpetual innovation to produce extreme music. Extreme metal is not for the weak.

[27] Death Metal developed from speed and thrash metal to become the self-acclaimed most extreme form of heavy metal to date. Lyrically, Death Metal songs focus upon two themes: “blasphemous tirades”<sup>46</sup> and “murder, torture, rape, and dismemberment.”<sup>47</sup> Musically, the genre is characterized by low growling vocals, “down-tuned guitars, and double-kick drums.”<sup>48</sup> In order to achieve the extreme wall of pummeling sound, Death Metal bands drummers employ blast beats (i.e., “bass/snare/bass/snare/etc. played really fast”) and a double bass (i.e., “alternating full bass hits of oppositional kick drums”).<sup>49</sup> The guitar technique involves “whipping your pick lightly across the bottom three strings of the guitar (mostly) for power chord tremolo action that, with the influence of distortion, creates enough tremolo for an atmospheric/melodic effect.”<sup>50</sup> The effort required of band members to growl lyrics, blast beat and double bass kick, play complex chord progressions while wearing seven-pound gauntlets and headbanging is physically demanding. Describing the genre as extreme refers not only to its musical attributes and lyrical content but to the physical endurance required to play it.

[28] Black Metal developed alongside Death Metal, but became popularized in Norway in the early 1990s with bands like Mayhem and Burzum, while Death Metal dominated the extreme music scene in the United States. The British band Venom “took the heaviness and dark mysticism of “their predecessors (i.e., Black Sabbath, Judas Priest, Deep Purple, and Motorhead) and brought it up to date, adding an “elaborate endorsement of Satanism.”<sup>51</sup> The American band, Slayer, used satanic images and ideas in the early 1980s, but like Venom their satanism was used for its shock value. At this point in heavy metal history the use of satanic themes, with a few exceptions, was superficial with no authentic belief to support it. Mercyful Fate changed the apparent lack of seriousness by endorsing La Veyan Satanism as a philosophy that permeated his music and lifestyle. The fundamentals of the La Veyan church were based not on shallow blasphemy but on an opposition to herd mentality and dedication to a Nietzschean ethic of the anti-egalitarian development of man as a veritable god on earth, freed from the chains of Christian morality.<sup>52</sup> The genre developed first in Europe, especially in Norway and Sweden, with bands like Bathory, Mayhem, Burzum, Celtic Frost, Satyricon, Emperor, Immortal, and Marduk. In the United States, Black Metal began to develop early in the 1990s with band like Profanatica, Grand Belial’s Key, and Black Funeral.

[29] As a sub-genre of heavy metal, Black Metal is uniquely marked by its anti-Christian perspective, by the Rasp—a vocal style best defined as “rasped screeching”—and by more atmospheric music.<sup>53</sup> Because anti-Christian sentiments are a natural rather than exceptional part of Black Metal, authentic satanic and anti-religious themes tend to be less overt and tend to pervade the genre. On the other hand, since impious Death Metal tends to be an exception rather than the rule in the sub-genre of Death Metal, anti-Christian themes tend to be more overt to differentiate this sub-genre from others.

[30] The masculine imperative is legitimated in Black and Death metal scenes by CD reviewers who function as institutional experts and gatekeepers. CR reviewers develop a relatively informal system of descriptive criteria used to analyze, evaluate, and categorize a band’s music within a set of genre conventions. Genre rules shape the generic expectations of musical styles, while descriptive criteria form its discursive and common

language. Reviewers perform the fundamental gate-keeping tasks of incorporating innovation, and distinguishing among the good, mundane, and bad bands. As a result, CD reviewers legitimize the genre. As with most underground genres, formally established conventions and descriptive criteria cannot be found in codified form but circulate within the subculture as common knowledge. The criteria used by reviewers to establish cultural value demonstrates the cultural progression of a deviant and masculine heavy metal genre toward increasingly more shocking forms. In other words, reviewers assign cultural value to works and in doing so invoke, for example, the cultural impetus toward progressive and perpetual innovation.<sup>54</sup>

[31] CD reviewers<sup>55</sup> do not usually analyze CD art, and so the criteria they use develop from an analysis of the music and lyrics, the latter of which fall in the realm of blasphemy as opposed to sacrilege. Nonetheless, the criteria used to evaluate music and lyrics apply equally to the visual dimension of the scene. In general, Black Metal and impious Death metal CD reviewers use two general categories to evaluate the music and lyrics: “brutal” for music and “evil” for lyrics. The following is a sample of adjectives that appear in reviews as descriptive criteria. *Music* (in general): intense, extreme, violent, barbaric, aggressive; *drums*: fast, pounding, pummeling, blasting, relentless; *bass*: heavy, crushing, degenerative, throbbing, killer; *guitar*: dissonant, pulverizing, raging, destructive, shrieking; *vocals*: raspy, screeching, roaring, guttural, harsh; and *lyrics*: unholy, blasphemous, satanic, anti-Christian, nihilistic. This list includes those criteria that fall under the broad category of brutal (i.e., violent, raging) and those that fall under the category of evil (i.e., unholy, satanic). Incidentally, the two categories often overlap in meaning, as synonyms for brutality can often be used in place of evil and vice versa.

[32] The following brief review by Tom Wren of *Delirium Magazine* illustrates the use of adjectives as criteria for assessing the cultural value of a particular release:

One of the oldest and hardest working bands ever to emerge from the Death Metal underground, Immolation ... craft what is now known as the New York style of Brutal Death Metal. Blasting guitar riffs, complex time changes, scorching vocal roars, and an overwhelming sense of aggression make *Failure for Gods* a truly unholy mesmerizing experience. Tracks like “Unsaved”, “God Made Filth”, and “Your Angel Died” leave no doubt as to the religious views of this hateful quartet and don’t expect to see them listed on the bill for The Billy Graham Crusade anytime in the near future. Absolutely blow-away cover art and interior by Andres Marschall ranks right up there with the best works of Dan Segrave and Wes Benscoter making this a virtually irresistible package.<sup>56</sup>

Reviews such as this underscore the cultural significance of extremes, locating value in what would normally be considered deviant. Brutality and evil comprise the fundamental cultural values for the Black Metal and impious Death Metal scenes; the criteria reinforce the masculine cultural impetus toward more shocking music.

[33] Reviewers laud a band's lyrics for their evil and blasphemous nature and discount lyrics for being obvious or for lacking creativity. Phil of *Brutalized Zine* writes of Deicide's *Serpents of the Light*, "The lyrics aren't as blatantly 'Satan glorifying' [Songwriter Glen Benton is a professed Satanist] on this album; they're more 'anti-christian' ... Satanic death metal fueled by hatred for the almighty king of falseness. Join the extinction."<sup>57</sup> Another review of the same album addresses lyrical quality: "The lyrics are a little cheesy, as all Deicide's lyrics tend to be. The whole evil Satan thing gets a little old after a while."<sup>58</sup> More common reviews of lyrics tend to approach the following review of Immolation's *Failures for Gods*: "Each song plays like a hymn for the damned, the lyrical theme being generally anti-God/religion, but aren't really Satanic. It's basic death metal lyricism, but it's written so well it'll have you growling 'Death to Jesus' right along with it."<sup>59</sup>

[34] An example of both overt and subtle forms song lyrics will illustrate blasphemous content. First, Morbid Angel's "Blasphemy" from *Altars of Madness* (1989) illustrates the overt form of blasphemy in lyrics: "Chant the blasphemy/Mockery of the messiah/We curse the holy ghost/Enslaver of the weak/God of lies and greed/God of hypocrisy/We laugh at your bastard child/No god shall come before me." Second, a more subtle example from Averse Sefira's "Homecoming's March" (*Homecoming's March*, 1999): "Vainglory's light has blinded thee thinking you the one, true god/but forget not who carved thy thrones and who shall pull them down." Both types of blasphemy in lyrics point to the cultural value of evil in the lyrical content of songs and demonstrate its anti-Christian perspective and its pro-satanic counterpart.

[35] In sum, reviewers recognize the cultural significance of the sub-genres' general orientation and philosophical perspective, and write reviews that favour the combination of brutal music and evil lyrical content. While reviewers often fail to review CD art, the emphasis on increasingly more extreme music legitimates and reinforces (the masculine-coded) brutality and evil as culturally valuable. Thus, the anti-Christian aesthetic—sacrilege, evil, and blasphemy—derive not only from popular satanism but from the influence of masculine codes as well. The former influences the choice of images, while the latter affects the extreme nature of its form.

### *Conclusion*

[36] Traditional bands tend to adhere closely to essential characteristics in order to establish the genre and scene. The transgressive nature of the anti-Christian aesthetic, influenced by both a subordinate ideology (i.e., popular satanism) and by a dominant ideology (i.e., masculinity), does not belie its underlying ideological foundation: Black Metal and impious Death Metal bands' structural position and supporting ideology authenticate the anti-Christian aesthetic. Further, the homology among the anti-Christian aesthetic, the ideology of popular satanism, and subordinate structural position indicates an insularity found among many emerging underground scenes that is necessary to support their extreme ideological orientations. Though not a part of this analysis, it is interesting to note that while newer bands have moved away from the more overt anti-Christian orientation, these bands have tended to retain popular satanism as an ideology.

The radical freedom advocated by the ideology of popular satanism and indicated in its critiques of Christianity point to an alternative vision for social life; however, recent research shows that the ideology's influence appears to be limited to the scene and that the anti-Christian aesthetic appears to have little impact upon institutionalized religion.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> "Interview with Judas Iscariot." *Brutality's Pulse*.  
[www.blackmetal.com/~mega/JI/inter1.html](http://www.blackmetal.com/~mega/JI/inter1.html)

<sup>2</sup> "Interview with Judas Iscariot. *Black Metal*.  
[www.blackmetal.com/~mega/JI/inter4.html](http://www.blackmetal.com/~mega/JI/inter4.html)

<sup>3</sup> "Interview with Akhenaten." *Unchain the Underground*.  
[www.unchain.com/current/judasiscariot/html](http://www.unchain.com/current/judasiscariot/html).

<sup>4</sup> "Interview with Judas Iscariot. *Black Metal*.  
[www.blackmetal.com/~mega/JI/inter1.html](http://www.blackmetal.com/~mega/JI/inter1.html)

<sup>5</sup> I use the term "impious Death Metal" to denote the anti-Christian sub-genre of Death Metal; the sub-genre has no informal or formal designation among members of the scene.

<sup>6</sup> Sacrilege is a violation of the codes that govern the meaning and use of typically physical and visual forms of the sacred. Sacrilege differs from the more familiar charge of blasphemy only in form: blasphemy is written or spoken; sacrilege is physical or visual.

<sup>7</sup> Data for this article include a total of 100 pre-published and original interviews with the following bands: in the Death Metal genre—Deicide, Incantation, Immolation, Morbid Angel, and Vital Remains; in the Black Metal genre—Averse Sefira, Kult ov Azazel, Judas Iscariot, Noctuary, and Thornspawn. Nearly 100 CD reviews (about 10 each) were selected, as well as CD art from the bands' collections of CDs.

<sup>8</sup> Homology has been traditionally understood to refer to the fit among three basic elements: style, ideology, and social structure. See Paul Willis, *Profane Culture* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978); Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (New York: Routledge, 1979): 92; Chris Barker, *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2003), 379.

<sup>9</sup> I use the term scene as opposed to subculture or tribe to communicate the transient nature of community life among band members and fans who unite briefly in various locations yet who share similar ideological beliefs, practices, and perspectives. The term scene also includes various others involved in the production, distribution, and consumption of Black Metal and impious Death Metal music, images, etc. For more

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information, see Keith Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal* (New York: Berg, 2007), especially Chapter 1.

<sup>10</sup> See also Natalie Purcell, *Death Metal Music*. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2003), 166.

<sup>11</sup> Amulet. [www.amulet.co.uk/symbolic/pentagrams/pentagrm.htm](http://www.amulet.co.uk/symbolic/pentagrams/pentagrm.htm).

<sup>12</sup> Amulet.

<sup>13</sup> Actually the pen name of Alphonse Louis Constant, a defrocked French Catholic abbé.

<sup>14</sup> Amulet

<sup>15</sup> Jeff Tandy, interviewed by the author.

<sup>16</sup> Hoffman, *Hell on Earth*. Unknown URL.

<sup>17</sup> See also Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal*, 40.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Akhenaten. *Fiend*. Unknown URL.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with John McEntee of Incantation.  
[http://diemia.com/creation/issue\\_2\\_3/interviews/incantation.html](http://diemia.com/creation/issue_2_3/interviews/incantation.html).

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Xaphan of Kult of Azazel. *Funeral Moon*. Unknown URL.

<sup>21</sup> Arnett, *Metalheads*, 33.

<sup>22</sup> Arnett, *Metalheads*, 127.

<sup>23</sup> Arnett, *Metalheads*, 122-3.

<sup>24</sup> See also Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal*, 40.

<sup>25</sup> See also Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal*, 38.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Ross Dolan. *Mourning the Ancient*.  
[www.mourningtheancient.com/noct.htm](http://www.mourningtheancient.com/noct.htm).

<sup>27</sup> Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985), 234; Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998), 25.

<sup>28</sup> Arnett, *Metalheads*, 117.

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- <sup>29</sup> Interview with Robert Vigna. *Hell Frost*.  
[www.hellfrost.com/immolation96.html](http://www.hellfrost.com/immolation96.html)
- <sup>30</sup> Interview with John McEntee and Tom. *Legion Magazine*.  
<http://home.nestorminsk.by/emn/interview/incantation.html>.
- <sup>31</sup> Interview with Ross Dolan. *Grimoire of Exalted Deeds*.  
[www.immoliationdirect.com/Interviews/Invw\\_Grimoire01.htm](http://www.immoliationdirect.com/Interviews/Invw_Grimoire01.htm).
- <sup>32</sup> Interview with Ross Dolan. *Mourning the Ancient*.
- <sup>33</sup> Interview with Ross Dolan. *Mourning the Ancient*.
- <sup>34</sup> Interview with Wrath Diabolus. *Artifin Zine*. Unknown URL.
- <sup>35</sup> Interview with Ross Dolan of Immolation. [www.nerosismag.com/immolation.html](http://www.nerosismag.com/immolation.html).
- <sup>36</sup> Interview with Ross Dolan. *Trident Netzine*.  
[www.trident-netzine.de/Immolation/Immolation.htm](http://www.trident-netzine.de/Immolation/Immolation.htm).
- <sup>37</sup> Interview with Ross Dolan. *Trident Netzine*.
- <sup>38</sup> Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal*, 67.
- <sup>39</sup> Robert Witkin and Tia DeNora, "Aesthetic Materials and Aesthetic Agency,"  
*Newsletter of the Sociology of Culture* 12,1 (1997): 3.
- <sup>40</sup> John B. Thompson, *Ideology and Modern Culture*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 135.
- <sup>41</sup> Witkin and DeNora, "Aesthetic Materials," 3.
- <sup>42</sup> John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*. (New York: Routledge, 1991), 53.
- <sup>43</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, 92.
- <sup>44</sup> Walser, *Running*, 110.
- <sup>45</sup> Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal*, 33.
- <sup>46</sup> Purcell, *Death Metal*, 43.

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<sup>47</sup> Weinstein, *Heavy Metal*, 288; Michael Moynihan and Didrik Soderlind, *Lords of Chaos: The Bloody Rise of the Satanic Underground* (Venice, CA: Feral House, 1998), 27.

<sup>48</sup> Weinstein, *Heavy Metal*, 288.

<sup>49</sup> Spinoza Ray Prozak, "Heavy Metal FAQ: Introduction to Metal Music and Culture." [www.anus.com/hsc/hcl/mfaq.html](http://www.anus.com/hsc/hcl/mfaq.html).

<sup>50</sup> Prozak, "Heavy Metal FAQ."

<sup>51</sup> Moynihan and Soderlind, *Lords of Chaos*, 12. See also Keith Kahn-Harris, "The 'Failure' of Youth Culture: Reflexivity, Music and Politics in the Black Metal Scene," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 7,1 (2004): 95-111.

<sup>52</sup> Moynihan and Soderlind, *Lords of Chaos*, 8.

<sup>53</sup> Weinstein, *Heavy Metal*, 288.

<sup>54</sup> See also Simon Frith, *Performing Rites* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), especially chapter 4.

<sup>55</sup> In addition, Black Metal and impious Death Metal reviewers utilize conventions that approximate those of popular music in general—intelligible vocals, harmonious melodies, meaningful lyrics, and clarity of production.

<sup>56</sup> Tom Wren. Review of Immolation's *Failures For Gods*. *Delirium Magazine*.

<sup>57</sup> Phil. Review of Deicide's *Serpents of Light*. *Brutalized Zine*. [www.members.xoom.com/XMCM/brutalized/reviews3.html](http://www.members.xoom.com/XMCM/brutalized/reviews3.html).

<sup>58</sup> Review of Deicide's *Serpents of Light*. *Roadrunner*. [www.ahhfr.com/reviews/deiciderev.html](http://www.ahhfr.com/reviews/deiciderev.html).

<sup>59</sup> Review of Immolation's *Failures for Gods*. *Eternal Frost*. [www.surf.to/eternalfrost](http://www.surf.to/eternalfrost).