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The Conference “Metal and Religion”, 7-8 September 2022, Brno

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Although the manifold intersections between the metal music scene on the one hand and the domain of religion on the other have been subject to many academic studies,¹ the topic lacked a specialised conference format that would try to cover all relevant phenomena and bring together the whole international academic community involved in the field. The first brave attempt to fill this lacuna was made by the conference “Metal and Religion”, organised by the Department for the Study of Religions (Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, Brno) with the research network Czech Metal Studies (of which I am also a member) and held on 7 and 8 September 2022 at the aforementioned faculty. Fifteen conference papers and two keynote contributions by established and new scholars from Europe and America touched upon the musical, social, and ideological aspects of this convergence and examined metal and religion not only in localized contexts, but also on a global scale. What follows are summaries of subjectively selected contributions (in chronological order), which, in my opinion, attest well to the thematic and theoretical richness of the conference.

Theoretical reflections were presented in the opening keynote lecture “Metal and ‘Religion’: A View from the Discipline of the Study of Religion” by Marcus Moberg (Åbo Akademi University, Turku). He reminded his audience of the assumption now commonly held in the study of religions (but not so ingrained in other academic fields) that “religion” should not be taken as an analytical explanatory term, but as a mere descriptive designation, adding that “religion” should also be seen as discursively constructed notion operating in the social reality outside academia. Any research on metal and religion needs thus to reflect various discursive constructions of this crucial category; furthermore, the field should now focus more on large-scale projects incorporated into wider research on

1 Most importantly, see Marcus Moberg, “Religion in Popular Music or Popular Music as Religion? A Critical Review of Scholarly Writing on the Place of Religion in Metal Music and Culture”, *Popular Music and Society* 35/1, 2012, 113-130.



religion and popular culture, rather than continue the established trend of producing smaller case-studies.

Similar problems relating to the conceptualisation of religion were also discussed in “Do They Really Mean It? Five Functions of the Reception of Religious Symbols in Black Metal” by Anna-Katharina Hoepflinger (Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich). Incorporating a critique of the older Protestant understanding of religion as a system of sincerely held beliefs, transparently expressed by certain symbols, Hoepflinger outlined five main functions of the usage of religious symbols in black metal (to express convictions, to declare disassociations with certain phenomena, to signal the scene’s aesthetic ideals, to signal the seriousness of black metal, and to identify the carrier with black metal). She also showed that their meanings in black metal are tied only partially to their original traditions and should be thus seen as constantly recreated through performance. In the scene, this performance is paradoxically playful and serious at the same time – although its frame is secured as playful, the frame establishes the content within it as serious.

Music was the main focus of attention in the next panel with Shamma Boyarin’s presentation “Wordless Ecstasy: The Jewish Drone/Doom Mysticism of Dveyekus”, which dealt with the constructions of mystical discourse in the drone metal scene as key elements of its musical and interpretative practice. Boyarin (University of Victoria, Victoria) described the album *Pillar Without Mercy* of the Judaism-inspired jazz/doom metal project Dveyekus as a distinct interpretation of the Hassidic wordless tunes *niggunim* (bringing the practitioner closer to the divine and expressing the mystical ineffability of God).² Although the musicians see the drone aspect only in terms of musical influences (not clearly evident from the music of Dveyekus), fans tend to incorporate the project even more into the drone metal scene because of its mystical orientation.

Metal’s rebellious ethos was examined by “‘Burning the Bridges’: The Pursuit of Authenticity in Norwegian Black Metal” by Stoyan Sgourev (New Bulgarian University, Sofia) in the last panel of the first day. His theoretical understanding of modern authenticity, defined thus as “staying true to one’s identity” and approached as tending to conflict with the need to find a compromise with others, was applied in the research on early Norwegian black metal, a small subculture that defined itself as highly

2 Despite the fact that the album title is purely the project’s invention according to Boyarin, it is tempting to see in *Pillar without Mercy* a reflection of the Western esoteric cabalistic grouping of the sephiroth Binah, Geburah and Hod into the “Pillar of Severity”, opposed to the “Pillar of Mercy” (Chokmah, Chesed, and Netzach) on the Tree of Life. See e.g. Dion Fortune, *The Mystical Qabalah*, York Beach (ME): Samuel Weiser 1984, 55-61.

transgressive and in opposition to the musical and societal mainstream deemed commercialized and tame. Sgourev showed that the escalation of exclusivist transgressivity (church arsons, murders etc.) and the social stigmatization of the genre resulting from it had actually *helped* the spread and commercial success of the genre in the end, since it demonstrated the genre's sincerity and authenticity. Lastly, Sgourev hinted at implications of his model for the study of political populism.

Starting the conference on the second day, a keynote discussion with Niall Scott (moderated by Ondřej Daniel, Charles University, Prague) mainly provided some important considerations for future research. Scott (University of Central Lancashire, Preston) reminded us that the prevalent focus on studying Evangelical Christian metal does not reflect the complexity of the relationship between metal and Christianity, with the latter being present and innovatively re-shaped also in creative inversions of anti-Christian metal acts. As a step towards filling this lacuna, he opted for theologically informed approaches to metal (e.g. using biblical hermeneutic techniques to investigate blasphemous metal lyrics). Furthermore, according to him, the inclusion of marginalized voices (in terms of gender, religion etc.) and the focus on the body in metal will uncover overlooked dimensions of the scene.

The last paper discussed in this report demonstrated the contributions of philosophy to the research field. In "Metal and the Sublime", Marek Vodička (Charles University, Prague) described metal's main aesthetic object as an incomprehensible greatness beyond any limit resisting any representation and producing both awe and fascination, which is discussed under the notion of "the sublime". Metal's (essentially futile) depiction of it could be seen in the "heaviness" of the music, producing feelings of massiveness (evoking the limitlessness of the sublime) and powerfulness (evoking the omnipotence of the sublime), as well as in romanticist album covers confronting the individual with the vastness of the cosmos. Since, as Vodička remarked, the conception of the sublime is also found in descriptions of God and the spiritual, his contribution hinted at some possible factors influencing the reception of metal music as mystical (e. g. in drone metal) and worthy means of spiritual expression and practice.

The conference ended with a roundtable discussion titled "Metal Studies in Central and Eastern Europe: Status, Vision, Perspectives", which highlighted the need to study national-socialist black metal (and its esoteric and pagan dimension) as a specific trend of the region and the dynamics of metal music within state socialism and post-socialist transformations. Besides the strictly academic part, the conference also hosted a presentation of the Ossuarium project (documenting ossuaries across Europe) with a social anthropological commentary by its founders Yves



Müller and Anna-Katharina Hoepflinger. In addition, an online discussion was organized with Bartłomiej Krysiuk from the black metal band *Batushka* (moderated by Karolina Karbownik, SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Warsaw), and even an evening social event with a concert given by the death metal band *Slaves of Passion* took place. These events provided not only a further glimpse into scenic imagery, but also helped to deepen the healthy transparent relationship between academia and the studied scene.

In conclusion, the conference “Metal and Religion” succeeded in creating a (rather brief) platform for the academic discussion of the multidimensional intersections between the fields of religion and metal music, a rare opportunity in the history of their study. As one of its consequences, the need for interdisciplinarity became evident from the wide diversity of the papers presented. Academics involved in Czech Metal Studies (and other researchers from central-eastern Europe active at the conference) thereby demonstrated their readiness for greater integration in international metal studies, still dominated by Western academia. With this important milestone behind us, let us wish Czech Metal Studies further impetus to explore new dimensions of the dynamics of religion in popular culture and to design wholly new research projects pertaining to one of the most long-standing scenes of popular music.