

Marcus Moberg

# **FASTER FOR THE MASTER!**

Exploring Issues of Religious Expression and  
Alternative Christian Identity within the Finnish  
Christian Metal Music Scene





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# 1. Introduction

During recent decades, scholars of religion have increasingly started to draw attention to the role being played by *popular culture* within the overall context of religious change and transformation in the West. Popular culture, it is argued, not only reflects these changes but, in turn, also provides important sources of inspiration for the construction of religious identities and the transformation of religious and spiritual practices for increasing numbers of people today (e.g. Partridge 2004, 2005; Lynch 2005; Forbes & Mahan 2005; Possamai 2005). The need for many Christian groups to compete on the contemporary “spiritual marketplace” (Roof 2001) can thus be said to entail some form of engagement with popular culture. This study aims to highlight the ever more important role being played by popular culture in the transformation of religious identities within traditional institutional Christianity. Christian group’s use and appropriation of popular cultural forms is, of course, nothing new. However, in varyingly secularized late modern societies and cultures, for many Christians, popular culture is increasingly seen as a *natural* and *self evident* resource for the construction of alternative forms of Christian expression. In some cases very intimate relationships between Christianity and particular forms of popular culture have developed.

*Christian metal*, that is, metal music which conveys a Christian message, produced *by* and principally *for* Christians, is an exceptionally good example of this. In addition to the music, it has adopted most other aspects of its secular counterpart, such as its uncompromising attitude, rhetoric, style, and aesthetics. It has evolved into a transnational Christian popular music culture and developed its own and highly independent infrastructure of record labels, distribution channels, magazines, fanzines (amateur magazines), web sites, and festivals. It has developed into a space in which Christians from a number of countries, with a range of different religious backgrounds and affiliations, and a passion for metal music, can meet. It can be seen as an example of a space in which Christianity and a distinct form of popular music and its culture have met and merged. It is important to note that this particular Christian popular music culture essentially sustains itself. It is thus characterized by a large degree of *independence*. It is not sponsored or directly controlled by any Christian institution or group and advocates no particular denominational creed, which is not to say that it does not have closer ties with certain denominations than with others. Even though it has developed into a transnational, independent, and recognizable Christian music culture since the early 1990s, it has received very little scholarly attention.

This study explores the case of Christian metal within the particular

religious, social, and cultural context of Finland through an examination of the vibrant and growing Finnish Christian metal scene. In Finland, cases of Christianity and *particular* popular music cultures merging are highly rare. So far, Christian metal is the only such case to have developed on a larger scale. It could be described as having developed into a popular music-based alternative Christian community. In this context, “popular music-based alternative Christian community” is used to denote cases in which faith and music have become intertwined to such a degree as to having merged with or become virtually inseparable from one another. Today, around five hundred to a thousand people are more actively involved with the scene. Even though there are other small distinct Christian music scenes in Finland, none of them is nearly as large, developed, and visible as the Christian metal scene. Hence, when examining the relationship between Christianity (religion) and popular music (popular culture) in Finland today, one would be hard pressed to find a better place to start.

## 1. 1 Aim and purpose of the study

The aim of this study is threefold. My aim is to provide a general, yet detailed, account of Christian metal music and culture through focusing on three interrelated questions. This account aims to be general in the sense of attempting to provide an overall picture of the world of Christian metal music and culture. At the same time, my aim is also to present a more detailed account through my examination of what basic *meanings* and *functions* Christian metal culture is *ascribed* by its members within the particular social, cultural, and religious context of Finland.

First, I present a general description of the *defining characteristics* of Christian metal. In doing this, I focus on Christian metal as situated and understood within the musical, stylistic, and aesthetic context of the popular music culture of metal more generally. Christian metal will thus be understood in relation to a wider musical and cultural context. This also entails a more detailed examination of the particular characteristics and distinctive features of Christian metal within this wider context. These issues are explored in relation to questions such as the following. How do the musical aspects of Christian metal relate to those of metal music more generally? What are the main lyrical themes of Christian metal and how do these relate to lyrical conventions and uses of rhetoric and imagery within metal music overall? What does Christian metal look like? What are the stylistic and aesthetic characteristics of Christian metal, and how do these traits relate to metal style and aesthetics in a wider sense? Drawing on a variety of different types of material gathered for this study, these questions

will be examined in relation to the historical development of Christian metal as a distinct Christian popular music culture from the late 1970s to the present day. The emergence of a Finnish Christian metal scene in the early 1990s will then be explored in greater detail and situated within the wider transnational Christian metal scene of today. However, what distinguishes Christian metal from its secular counterpart the most are not its musical and stylistic aspects but, rather, the essentially religious attitudes which underpin it.

This brings us to the second and central aim of this study: to explore what the Christian metal scene is 'about', what *meanings* and *functions* it is *ascribed* by its core members as represented by a larger group of Finnish Christian metal musicians interviewed for this study. As will be discussed in more detail below, musicians constitute the core group of the scene as a whole. The ascribed functions, meanings, and purpose of Christian metal is approached through another set of questions, i.e.; what does it all mean to these musicians who are all consciously and actively involved in developing and maintaining the Finnish Christian metal scene? Is Christian metal represented and understood as having some kind of particular function and purpose? What is the position and function of Christian metal in the everyday lives of its adherents? What role does Christian metal play in their religious lives?

In attempting to provide answers to these two clusters of questions, I concentrate on the ways in which the meaning and function of Christian metal is constructed *discursively* within both the wider transnational and Finnish national scene. The ways in which musicians and other core scene members *express* and *present* what they regard to be the basic meaning and function of Christian metal to themselves and others through talk and written text thus becomes a question of central concern. In exploring the first cluster of questions in relation to what Christian metal sounds and looks like (what it 'is'), I thus direct particular attention to how these questions are approached by members of the Christian metal scene themselves, that is, the ways in which they express what Christian metal is *supposed* to sound and look like. Regarding the second cluster of questions relating to what Christian metal is 'about', I endeavor to direct particular focus onto the ways in which scene members themselves discursively invest their involvement with Christian metal music and culture with particular, both cultural and religious, *functions* and *meanings*.

Third, in light of these issues, I proceed to show how the discursive construction of the Christian metal scene provides its members with *resources* for the construction of an *alternative form of religious expression* and an *alternative Christian identity*. As Christian metal combines religion with a particular form of popular music and its culture, including its rhetoric, style, and aesthetics, it not only expresses Christian faith in a particular popular

cultural form but also in a particular popular cultural *way*. This can be seen as having entailed the shaping of a consciously and pronounced alternative way of expressing, viewing, and engaging in faith and religious life. The main question then becomes: in which ways does the Christian metal scene provide its members with an alternative and non-traditional way of 'doing' religion and an alternative and non-traditional, or less institutionally bound, way of 'being' a Christian? Importantly, the aim of this study is *not* to claim or automatically assume that this necessarily must be so. The task is, instead, to highlight the ways in which the scene can be seen as providing its members with *resources* for alternative Christian expression and identification and *then*, by way of qualitative research among Finnish Christian metal musicians, explore in which sense or to which extent this may, or may not, indeed be the case.

The discursive construction of the scene needs to be understood in the context of the scene as a distinct space that is popular cultural in form but religious in outlook. Importantly, as already noted, this space is neither directly sponsored nor controlled by any particular Christian institution. It is through the interaction of scene members within this space that the scene is discursively constructed and invested with certain functions and meanings. The ways in which the meaning and function of Christian metal is expressed and presented thus needs to be understood in relation to the scene as a distinct Christian space. An important task thus becomes to map and account for the workings of this space using the theoretical framework of *scene*, which will be explained in more detail below.

Christian metal has developed on a transnational level. Thus, the discursive construction of its meaning and function also takes place within a wider transnational context. Christian metal's transnational character makes it highly likely for scenes in different parts of the world to be mutually influenced by each other. However, key discourses pertaining to its meaning and purpose are invested with particular meanings in the lived lives of Christian metal scene members in different parts of the world with different social, cultural, and religious environs. In this study, the ways in which the discursive construction of Christian metal provides its members with resources for the forming of an alternative way of 'doing' religion and an alternative Christian identity will be examined within the particular context of the Finnish Christian metal scene and situated within the particular social, cultural, and religious context of Finland. However, the ways in which it can be seen to be inspired and influenced as part of a transnational phenomenon will also be addressed.

Lastly, this study also has some more general aims. One of these is to raise the issue of what the Christian metal scene might imply *more broadly* about young adult Christian's views on Christian life in Finland today. Regarding this issue, this study aims to point out that the Christian metal



scene is best understood, not in terms of being in conflict with, but as presenting an *alternative* or *complement* to traditional modes of Christian expression and practice. Nevertheless, it can still be seen as constituting an active and multidimensional *engagement* with traditional modes of Christian expression and practice. This raises the question of whether the Christian metal scene might reflect a more widespread need for new, complementary and alternative forms of religious expression among young Christians in Finland today. However, in this case, it is of crucial importance to note that the Finnish Christian metal scene consists of a particular group of predominantly *male* young adults. As with metal music and culture more generally, the large majority of Christian metal scene members in different parts of the world are male. The gender imbalance of the scene thus needs to be openly acknowledged. The number of female scene members has indeed risen steadily for some time now with women having become an increasingly visible part of the scene as whole. Even so, women are still all but absent among the core of the musicians. For example, among all Christian metal bands active in Finland during the course of this study only two had female members. In all, there were three female musicians, of which two were members of the same band. Hence, I can only claim to raise the question of what the Christian metal scene might imply more broadly about young adult *male* Christians views on issues of religious expression and practice in Finland today. The Christian metal scene provides a more specific sample regarding this issue and can thus not be viewed as being particularly representative for wider sections of young Finnish Christians. However, by concentrating on the views and attitudes expressed by members of this distinct group, special attention can be directed at both these attitudes in themselves as well as the particular *ways* in which they are expressed and articulated. In order to confidently say something about more widespread attitudes, this sample would surely need to be compared with other case studies. This study does, however, aim to provide one such point of comparison for future research on the issue of young Christian's attitudes towards traditional modes of Christian expression as well as to future research on the relationship between religion and popular culture in Finland today.

By examining Christian metal in Finland using the theoretical framework of *scene*, thus far principally developed within popular music culture studies, I aim to further highlight the usefulness of interdisciplinary approaches to the study of today's increasingly close relationship between religion and popular culture. In order to move beyond a mere description of its main characteristics and discursive construction, the Christian metal scene also needs to be studied as both a contemporary religious *and* popular cultural phenomenon. As such, it also needs to be situated within wider debates on the changing face of religion in the West and today's increasingly



close relationship between religion and popular culture. Importantly, as I will be arguing throughout this study, Christian metal is not purely a case of Christian 'appropriation' of a popular cultural form. Although religiously motivated to a considerable degree, Christian metal should also be viewed as a popular cultural form in its own right. Therefore, it not only can, but should be, studied as both. Having said that, such an approach is not totally unproblematic. Might it, for instance, lead to a foregrounding of Christian metal's popular cultural aspects at the expense of its religious aspects or vice versa? One must constantly aim to attend to the delicate balance that exists between the two. In the following pages, I aim to show that such an approach is necessary for an adequate understanding of the phenomenon that is Christian metal. Finally, I also hope to present an account of the Finnish Christian metal scene that is recognizable to its members. Certain scene members might perhaps disagree with some of the conclusions I make in this study. However, on the whole, I hope my account will be satisfactory to all people involved with the scene.

The main aims of this study can thus be summarized as follows: First, to provide a broad and general account of the *defining characteristics* of Christian metal and to account for Christian metal as a *distinct Christian musical space* on a transnational level. Second, and most importantly, to explore what basic *meanings* and *functions* it is ascribed by core members of the scene as these meanings and functions are constructed *discursively* on a both transnational and Finnish national level. In relation to this, particular focus will be directed at the discursive construction of Christian metal among musicians within the Finnish scene. This allows us to understand the phenomenon of Christian metal, and the particular meanings ascribed to it by people actively involved with it, within a more specific cultural and religious context. In this way, the discursive construction of Christian metal within the Finnish scene is also viewed in relation to the discursive construction of Christian metal on a transnational level. This allows us to account for the peculiarities of the Finnish scene while simultaneously viewing it as part of a wider transnational Christian popular cultural phenomenon. Following from this the Christian metal scene will then also be *situated* within a broader context of religious change in the West and Finland in particular. The ways in which the Christian metal scene provides its members with resources for the shaping of an alternative Christian identity and way of 'doing' religion will then be explored in light of this particular social, cultural, and religious context. The primary focus of this study therefore lies in the basic meaning and function that scene members themselves *ascribe* to Christian metal through participating in its *discursive construction*. However, as outlined above, one central aim is also to move beyond issues of discursive construction specifically and offer some reflections on what wider functions the Christian metal scene as a particular

religious-musical space has in the lives of its core members, what significance it has for their construction of their religious identities, and what this might imply more broadly about the views of young adult Christians on Christian life in Finland today.

## 1. 2 Composition of the study

Having explained the purpose of the study and laid out its main theoretical and methodological perspectives in the present chapter, chapter 2 moves on to explore the wider religious context in which the Christian metal scene needs to be understood. Chapter 2, begins with a general overview of current debates on religious change and transformation in the West, and Western Europe in particular. These issues are then explored with specific reference to the contemporary Finnish context.

Chapter 3 is dedicated to a detailed exploration of the present-day relationship between religion and popular culture. The issues raised here build on the more general debates on secularization and religious change discussed in the previous chapter. The chapter is also meant to deepen our examination of the changing face of religion in contemporary Western society and culture through highlighting the many ways in which popular culture has become an increasingly important medium for the dissemination of religious/spiritual ideas and an increasingly important resource for the shaping of alternative religious/spiritual identities, activities, and practices. The main aim of the chapter is to show how popular culture has influenced and even changed the ways in which increasing numbers of people ‘do’ religion irrespective of whether the religiosity in question is of an alternative or more traditional kind. This chapter also discusses Christian or evangelical popular culture in detail, which brings us to issues which are directly related to the principal focus of this study, namely, the Christian metal scene.

Chapter 4 offers a general overview of metal music and culture with particular attention directed at its characteristic and often controversial use of themes and imagery inspired by the world of religion. In a sense, this chapter can also be seen to explore today’s relationship between religion and popular culture in the particular context of the world of metal music. The principal aim of this chapter, however, is to offer an account of the particular *popular cultural* context in which Christian metal necessarily needs to be understood. Importantly, Christian metal continues to develop in a delicate relationship to its secular counterpart. Today, it constitutes an in many ways integral, albeit frequently contested, part of the wider world of metal music. Therefore, a general account of metal music and culture is needed in order to situate Christian metal on the popular cultural map.

In Chapter 5, we move on to directly exploring Christian metal music and culture. This chapter begins with a general overview of the history and later development and diversification of Christian metal, its definition, and its main verbal, visual, and other aesthetic characteristics. Today's world of Christian metal is then explored in light of its main components using the theoretical framework of *scene*. The main purpose of this chapter is to map the wider transnational space of which the Finnish Christian metal scene constitutes a part.

In chapter 6, the study moves into the first stage of analysis. Here, the aim is to explore the discursive construction of Christian metal. Having touched on questions regarding the discursive construction of what Christian is supposed to sound and look like in the previous chapter, the analysis now moves on to examining the discursive construction of what Christian metal is supposed to be 'about'. Comparisons are also made between the Finnish scene and the wider transnational scene in order to examine more closely possible discursive similarities or differences at these different but interrelated levels. Here, the discursive construction of Christian metal is also directly examined in light of the key meanings and functions it is represented as holding by core members of the Finnish scene in relation their own real life experiences. This chapter will thus also explore the discursive construction of the Christian metal scene in the light of the particular social, cultural, and religious context of Finland.

Finally, chapter 7 explores what possible religious functions Finnish Christian metal musicians ascribe to their own musical activities as well as to their participation in the Finnish Christian metal scene as a whole. How does it feature in their everyday lives? What part does it play in their religious lives? This chapter thus moves beyond issues of discursive construction per se, as it concentrates on what broader functions the Christian metal scene holds for core members of the Finnish scene in particular. Here the ways are also explored by which the scene serves to provide musicians interviewed for this study with resources for the shaping of an alternative form of religious expression, an alternative way of 'doing' religion, and an alternative Christian identity. Lastly, we shall inquire into what this may imply more broadly about young Christian's attitudes towards traditional forms of religious expression and practice in a social and cultural climate marked by religious change. This chapter thus returns, and attempts to provide some answers, to the main questions outlined when presenting the main aims and purpose of this study.

### 1. 3 Material and sources

This study draws on a fairly wide range of different types of qualitative materials and sources. The main material for this study consists of a larger number of *interviews* with Finnish Christian metal musicians, and a smaller number of additional interviews carried out by means of email correspondence with administrators of different forms of Internet-based Christian metal media in other countries. It also includes material gathered by means of *participant observation* at a large number of Christian metal concerts and festivals in Finland during the course of 2004-2008.

This study also draws on a variety of other types of materials and sources. An important part of this material consists of the content of different forms of *Christian metal media*: magazines, fanzines (amateur magazines), different forms of Christian metal Internet-sites such as general information sites, webzines (online fanzines), discussion forums, and the official homepages of bands. These include such forms of media produced in both Finland as well as in a number of other countries. Moreover, Christian metal *lyrics* also constitute an important material for this study since it is principally through lyrical content that Christian metal distinguishes itself from its secular counterpart. Finally, the *visual aesthetics* of Christian metal will also be explored as they appear on album covers, in music videos, during concert performances, in the context of magazines, fanzines or Internet sites, clothing, or other forms of stylistic practices.

#### 1. 3. 1 The interviews

The core material of this study consists of recorded semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with nineteen Finnish Christian metal musicians from all over the country during the course of 2007-2008. All the musicians interviewed for this study were, at the time of the interview, members of one or several Christian metal bands that had released one or several albums. Many of the musicians interviewed thus represent many bands simultaneously. While a few had only fairly recently started their musical activities others are well known veterans of the scene; therefore, over half of all Finnish Christian metal bands active during this time are in some way represented in this study. I consciously endeavored to include both more established as well as upcoming bands from different parts of the country that represented as many different metal styles as possible. I did not, therefore, attempt to include *every single* Christian band active during this time. Instead, I chose to conduct a fairly limited number of interviews so that an equal amount of attention could be given to each. All the musicians

interviewed were male, and aged between 20-34 at the time of the interview.

All participants were initially contacted by email through the official web pages of their respective bands. At this initial stage, I offered a brief explanation of my project and inquired whether there was interest in this undertaking, and if anyone was willing to participate by doing an interview. All initial emails were virtually identical. If I got a positive response, I then sent another email in which I provided further details about my project and answered any specific questions raised by my initial email. At this stage, I also provided the basic practical details of how the interview would be conducted, explained that it was going to be used as material for academic research, that it would be used for this purpose only, and that eventually the interviews would be archived at my university department. I offered everyone the opportunity to participate anonymously, in which case I explained that anonymity was guaranteed. Having received initial informed consent from each person to these terms, a time and place for the interview was then agreed upon by telephone.

It should be noted here that three of the Finnish bands contacted did not respond in any way to my inquiries about an interview. I also started initial correspondence with members of three other bands with whom a suitable time for an interview could never be agreed. One additional in-depth interview was also conducted with a female church musician. However, due to structural changes during the course of this study it has had to be omitted.

In endeavoring to conduct the in-depth interviews in as comfortable surroundings as possible for the participants, the times and places were completely at their request. Two interviews were conducted with two participants at the same time, one with three, and one with an entire band of six. The remainder were all conducted with a single person. The interviews lasted from one and a half to three hours. They were based on a set of main themes or topics for discussion rather than a certain set of clearly formulated questions. In each case, these main themes were discussed following a certain broad pattern. I started every interview by explaining my project and then repeating the practical details of the interview. Having received informed consent to these terms and answering any other questions raised, I then began by asking participants to freely provide some basic background information about themselves. This was followed by general questions about their religious backgrounds, their current religious lives and religious views. After this, we discussed their musical background and musical preferences in general. During the remaining main part of the interview, we moved on to discuss Christian metal music and culture in particular.

During the course of 2005-2009, three additional interviews were also conducted with people involved in different forms of Internet-based Christian metal media in different countries around the world. One was the creator and administrator of numerous types of Sweden-based Internet-

based Christian metal media, who was also involved in a range of other projects. One was the creator and administrator of what was until recently the largest US-based Christian metal online discussion forum (the forum was suspended in 2009), and one was the creator and administrator of a smaller New Zealand-based Christian metal webzine, which is also presently non-operational. These interviews were all conducted electronically by means of email correspondence. These participants were also approached by email. Having described the project, anonymity, practical details, answered possible questions, and received informed consent, we commenced correspondence. These interviews were also based on a set of themes rather than on a set of pre-formulated questions. They were all conducted without a timeframe. The correspondence usually spanned several months. There was a considerable variation in the length of the correspondents replies, as some of these participants chose to provide more elaborate answers than others.

Three other Christian metal Internet-site administrators contacted in other countries did not respond to my inquiries regarding an interview. Three interviews conducted by means of email correspondence also had to be left unfinished and have consequently not been used as material for this study. One additional email interview was also conducted with the editor of a Swedish Christian music magazine but, due to structural changes, has not been included as material for this study.

Among the wide range of ways in which people may be involved with the scene, the interviews conducted for this study were limited to nineteen Finnish Christian metal musicians and three additional people involved with the production and administration of Internet-based transnational Christian metal media based in other countries. Hence, people involved in musical production, distribution, promotion, and the organization of festivals and events, were not interviewed in that capacity as such. This study does indeed explore a range of issues pertaining to the practical maintenance of the Christian metal scene, but its primary focus lies on the *discursive* construction of its basic meanings and functions. However, a large portion of all the people involved with the practical maintenance of the scene are themselves also musicians. Therefore, issues regarding practical maintenance thus also surface in my interviews with them. Fans were also not interviewed in their specific capacity as fans. By this I am by no means suggesting that the perspectives of fans are unimportant or that fans do not play an important role in the maintenance and reproduction of the scene. Indeed, as fans buy Christian metal albums, follow scenic media, and attend concerts and events, they constitute a central and indispensable component of the scene as a whole. However, although they *may* well do so, fans are not directly *expected* or indeed *obliged* to participate in the discursive construction of the scene to the same extent as musicians and administrators

of Christian metal media. As with issues regarding practical maintenance, since most of the interviewees were long-standing fans of Christian metal, a wide range of fan-perspectives also surface in my interviews with them. Limiting the interviews to musicians and people involved in the administration of transnational Christian metal media was motivated by the aim of this study to focus on the views of people who can clearly be viewed as being *actively* and *consciously* engaged in the *discursive construction* of the scene.

A total of twenty-two people were interviewed for this study (excluding the two omitted interviews mentioned above). Of all interviews, two were conducted in Swedish and two in English. The remaining were all conducted in Finnish. Issues regarding translation and transcription will be discussed in more detail below.

## **Methodological considerations**

Usually, interview situations require the participants to do most of the talking in answer to the questions asked by the interviewer. Importantly, the questions asked will always influence, in a number of ways, the answers, and the types of answers given. As the participants for this study were provided with a relatively large amount of information about the project beforehand, I naturally assumed that they brought certain expectations to the interview, such as an idea of what kinds of questions would be asked and what the interview situation would be like. At the same time, I also assumed that they had no previous experience of participating in an interview of this kind. I was relieved and delighted to find that many participants related to my study with great interest, curiosity, and enthusiasm. This made it possible to encourage free discussion and for all the interviews to be conducted in a relaxed atmosphere.

Of course, an in-depth interview is very different from that of an ordinary everyday interaction. One must keep in mind that participants interviewed in relation to a certain topic may never have had to express their thoughts, views, or personal engagement with the topic in a similar situation before. Nevertheless, participants will presumably expect to be asked certain questions for which they also may have prepared themselves. However, the questions asked in an interview may also raise any number of unexpected topics for discussion. The interviewer will also steer the interview in fundamental ways, encouraging certain topics as important and suitable while simultaneously discouraging other topics as being unsuitable or of lesser importance. The interviewer needs to be aware of how these factors as well as the general manner and setting of the interview may influence the answers, and the types of answers given. It should also be noted that the



number of people participating in an interview simultaneously also will affect the interview-situation in important ways, including the answers and types of answers received. For example, in an interview situation that involves more than two people particular participants may do more of the talking than others. But everyone will still have the opportunity to complement and elaborate on what is said by the others. In such a situation, then, participants will quite naturally formulate their own answers in relation to the answers provided by the others. In all interviews conducted for this study involving more than one participant at a time, everyone was given the opportunity to answer each and every question asked. These issues are equally important to keep in mind at the stage of analysis. Lastly, one also needs to openly acknowledge the power relations that always inevitably exist between researcher and participant. As Stephanie Taylor (2001b, 20) points out, researcher and participant do not meet as equals in an interview situation. Unlike the participant, the researcher will have complete information about the project and design the interview accordingly. (Taylor 2001b, 18-20)

The interviews conducted by means of email correspondence raise some additional issues that also need to be discussed briefly. As an email correspondence is done in writing, it will inevitably take the format of more or less clearly formulated questions followed by more or less clearly formulated answers. This type of interview is very different from one conducted face to face. Factors of importance in face to face interviews, such as ways of speaking and intoning, are absent. Both interviewer and participant also remain more personally detached from the process as a whole. On the other hand, email correspondence allows participants to take as much time as they wish to think about and formulate their answers. Keeping in mind how questions formulated in a certain way will influence the answers received becomes even more important in this context.

None of the participants interviewed for this study chose to remain anonymous. In the case of the face to face interviews, this issue was always finally agreed upon at the end of each interview. In the interviews conducted by means of email correspondence this issue was instead always agreed upon before the interview started. The people interviewed for this study, and the musicians in particular, are all well known figures within the Finnish Christian metal scene. Some are also well known within the wider transnational scene. As such, they have also adopted certain public personas. It is thus important to note here that all of these participants publicly and openly identify with the thoughts and views expressed in these interviews. In addition, in various ways, they are all connected to a small and relatively easily identifiable group of people. As Taylor (2001b, 21) points out, cases such as this raise particular problems regarding issues of confidentiality. However, since none of the participants in this study chose to remain



anonymous, it was not necessary to consider such problems. Although the participants are rarely referred to by their full names, I have not taken any steps to conceal their real identities.

This study makes use of so-called “member checking” (e.g. Taylor 2001a, 321-322). This means that every person interviewed for this study was given the opportunity to comment and give feedback on the entire final text (not the interview transcripts), particularly those parts that referred to or contained an excerpt from their interview.

### **1. 3. 2 Additional material and sources**

Additional material has also been collected through participant observation at a larger number of Christian metal concerts and festivals in Finland during the course of 2004-2008. These events have been documented through written text, and a large number of pictures and the recording of a few video sequences. Participant observation was also conducted at a number of Christian events not explicitly directed at a Christian metal audience. In addition, I also attended a few concerts by Christian metal bands in purely secular settings. The Finnish Christian metal scene is relatively small with only limited resources for arranging activities. Larger concerts and festivals are relatively rare. Opportunity for participant observation is thus limited. However, the few regularly organized Christian metal concerts and festivals that do exist, and which I have also regularly attended during the course of 2004-2008, are all important scenic events.

This study also draws on material found in different forms of Christian metal media. This includes analysis of printed media such as magazines and fanzines. It also includes analysis of different types of Christian metal Internet-sites such as general information-sites, webzines, discussion forums, and the web pages of bands. Important clues to an understanding of Christian metal can also be found in song lyrics. This study analyzes the lyrical conventions of Christian metal in the light of examples from bands from all over the world. Finally, the visual and aesthetic aspects of Christian metal are analyzed as they appear during concerts, on album covers, in music videos, ways of dress, in the layout of magazines, fanzines, and different types of Internet-sites. This study does not venture into pure musical analysis. However, musical characteristics will be discussed briefly in relation to a general account of metal music and culture in chapter 4. These additional types of material provide the backdrop against which the main interview-material needs to be understood. Whereas the interview-material essentially pertains to the question of what Christian metal is represented as being ‘about’, this additional material provides us with ways of describing Christian metal as a distinct popular music culture more

generally, that is, what it sounds and looks like, what forms and types on media it makes use of and how. Drawing on this material is thus meant to complement the main discursive analysis of the scene. These various types of material should thus not be regarded as being separate from each other but, rather, as contributing to creating an integral whole that becomes something more than merely the sum of its parts.

## 1. 4 Theoretical perspectives

Christian metal music and culture could be studied in a number of different ways. The choice of theoretical and methodological approaches not only depends on the nature of the study itself. It will also form, inform, and direct that study in fundamental ways. This study focuses on the *discursive construction* of Christian metal's meaning and function within a Finnish social, cultural, and religious context. As such, particular attention is directed at how meaning is constructed and maintained through different forms of *social interaction*. Among the many possible alternatives, I believe a *social constructionist* approach to be the most fruitful for the task at hand. Social constructionism is a particular type of approach to the broader notion of 'social construction'. Other main approaches include *radical constructivism*, *constructivism*, *social constructivism* and *sociological constructivism* (for more on these approaches see for example Gergen 1999, 48-49). Above all, social constructionism directs particular focus at how our understandings of our individual selves and our conceptions of reality are formed in *relational* contexts, as something constructed and given meaning through social interaction and communication through *language* and *discourse* (e.g. Gergen 1999; Burr 2003). As such, a social constructionist approach also provides a framework for an understanding of *identity construction* as something fundamentally relational. In line with this approach, the discursive construction of Christian metal will be analyzed through *discourse analysis*. Moreover, Christian metal also needs to be understood as a distinct popular music culture in its own right. Here, the ways in which Christian metal music and culture constitutes a distinct musical and religious space is examined in light of the concept of *scene* (Kahn-Harris 2007). This theoretical framework is particularly well suited for highlighting the various interrelationships that exist between different elements of particular popular music cultures. As such, it also allows us to focus on how these elements are essentially upheld through various forms of communication and interaction. In the case of Christian metal, it allows for special attention to be directed at the combination of religious, musical, stylistic, and aesthetic aspects which characterizes this space.

However, 'social constructionism', 'discourse', and 'identity' are all fluid concepts that are implicated in a wide range of ongoing scholarly debates. As such, these concepts take on multiple and changing definitions and meanings depending on the context in which they are used. In a holistic spirit, this study aims to combine these, in many ways closely related, theoretical concepts. They should primarily be understood as lenses that can provide fruitful inroads to an understanding of the discursive construction of Christian metal music and culture. Since they underpin and inform this study in fundamental ways, I shall, in the following, account for my understanding of each of them in more detail. It is, however, through the overarching framework of social constructionism that these concepts are woven together. I shall therefore begin by discussing the key tenets that underpin a social constructionist approach and outline how this approach is understood and used in this study.

#### **1. 4. 1 Social constructionism**

As a theoretical orientation, social constructionism is essentially concerned with the epistemological question of our possibilities to gain knowledge about the relationship between ourselves, as individuals, and the world that surrounds us. It centers on the idea that we, as individuals and groups, in various ways continually contribute to constructing and reconstructing our understandings of ourselves and our conceptions of reality. During recent decades, social constructionist approaches have emerged as part of a wider move towards alternative ways of studying people as social beings. These alternative approaches (some of which can be traced back to debates originating in the late 1960s) have developed under a number of headings such as deconstruction, post-structuralism, discursive psychology, and discourse analysis. Vivien Burr (2003, 1) describes social constructionism as the "theoretical orientation" that, to a greater or lesser extent, provides the basis for all of these alternative approaches. Social constructionist approaches have mostly developed within or in close relationship to the fields of psychology and social psychology. However, it has also been adopted within a range of fields within the social sciences and assumed a highly multidisciplinary character. As Burr points out, although the term "social constructionism" has, so far, mostly been used by psychologists, "many of its basic assumptions are actually fundamental to one of its disciplinary cousins, sociology" (Burr 2003, 2). However, social constructionism lacks a single description and definition. Instead, as many different understandings and forms of social constructionism have emerged, it should rather be described in terms of a theoretical *approach* or *orientation*. (Burr 2003, 1-2; see also Wetherell 2001b, 4-6)

This is also how social constructionism is understood in the present study, that is, as a *general approach* or *orientation* rather than a rigid and clearly demarcated theoretical framework.

According to Kenneth Gergen (1999), at the most basic level, social constructionism can be viewed as a particular way of addressing the problematic relationship between the 'in here' (the individual mind) and the 'out there' (the world). When subjecting our understanding of the world to closer examination, a number of problematic questions abound. In which sense, we must ask, can we speak about the existence of a world 'as it is' separately from our experiences of it? If we presume that there indeed exists a world independent of our experiences of it, then how can we know that our experiences of that world actually reflect that world 'as it is'? If, on the other hand, we presume that all of our understandings of the world are produced solely within our individual minds, then how are we to relate our experiences of the world to those of other people? These are but a few of the many important questions evoked when examining our conditions and possibilities for gaining knowledge about our selves and our relationship to the world. It is of importance to note that, no matter how we attempt to answer questions such as these, the implications for our understanding of such things as 'human agency', 'society', 'culture', 'morality', 'truth', 'knowledge', and 'science', will be profound. (Gergen 1999, 8-18) At a basic level, social constructionism can thus be said to be characterized by meta-theoretical concerns.

### **Key assumptions of social constructionism**

It is important to make clear that social constructionism should not be viewed as an attempt to provide us with ready answers to the questions outlined above, but rather be viewed as a means of suggesting new ways of *approaching* them or new lenses through which to view them. As social constructionism maintains that it is primarily through *language* that we gain, describe, and share our experiences of the world, as well as our thoughts, feelings and desires, with others, the question of how we *use* language, how language *works* in contexts of human relationship, becomes of primary concern. (Gergen 1999, 19-20) Although many forms of social constructionist inquiry have developed, Gergen argues that four sets of interrelated key assumptions shared by most social constructionists can be outlined:

First: "The terms by which we understand our world and our self are neither required nor demanded by 'what there is'" (Gergen 1999, 47). That is, when we express our perception of the world through language and communication, we do not provide an objective description of an ultimate reality or the world 'as it is'. Importantly, this assumption applies to all

forms of representation, not only language as spoken or written. Moreover, the various ways through which we shape our understandings of the world are only possibilities among many; “for any state of affairs a potentially unlimited number of descriptions and explanations is possible” (Gergen 1999, 47). This means that we cannot take anything we have learned about ourselves and the world for granted. We must *suppose* that our understandings of ourselves and the world *could have* been formed otherwise. As Gergen points out, such a supposition may seem deeply unsettling and threatening since it essentially posits that there exists no solid foundation for anything. On the other hand, it also opens up new possibilities for inquiry into the ways in which our existing and traditional categories of understanding fundamentally shape our personal, social, and cultural lives. (Gergen 1999, 47-48)

Second: “Our modes of description, explanation and/or representation are derived from relationship” (Gergen 1999, 48). All forms of representation gain their meaning through their use within human relationships. We do not produce our understandings of ourselves and the world within our individual minds, but rather, through our interactions with others. As Gergen explains: “Meanings are born of co-ordinations among persons – agreements, negotiations, affirmations /.../ relationships stand prior to all that is intelligible” (Gergen 1999, 48). Hence, according to this view, we must presume that, under certain circumstances and “conditions of relationship” (Gergen 1999, 48), it is possible for our understandings of words and phrases to be reduced to pure nonsense. Social relationships are key to all understandings of reality since, in order for them to be plausible and meaningful, they have to be verified and reinforced through social relationships. Hence, our understanding of the world is always intimately bound to specific historical, social, and cultural settings. (Gergen 1999, 48)

Third: “As we describe, explain or otherwise represent, so do we fashion our future” (Gergen 1999, 48). As our language and other forms of representation are bound to relationships, these relationships are, in turn, embedded within broader contexts such as traditions and social institutions. As a basic form of social action, communication through language is essential to our construction of a meaningful and shared conception of reality. Through our communication with others, we continually construct, reconstruct, and transform social relationships and social institutions. Hence, social relationships and institutions become interlocked with their continual construction through communication and language: “In a broad sense, language is a major ingredient of our worlds of action; it constitutes social life itself” (Gergen 1999, 49). Our ability to sustain such things as traditions, rituals, conceptions of morality, justice, and ‘the good’, depend on “a continuous process of generating meaning together” (Gergen 1999, 49). This has far-reaching implications for how we understand meaning systems

such as religion. As Gergen points out, Christianity has had to be continually reconstructed in order to remain sensible and vital in contemporary society and culture – an issue we shall return to at many points in this study (see also Beckford 2003, 134). Subsequently, we continually form new ways of understanding ourselves and the world by creating new forms of representation and language use. That is, we continually shape “generative discourses /.../ that simultaneously challenge existing traditions of understanding, and offer new possibilities of action” (Gergen 1999, 49). Meaning-making should therefore be understood as a constantly ongoing process. (Gergen 1999, 48-49)

Fourth: “Reflection on our forms of understanding is vital to our future wellbeing” (Gergen 1999, 49). It is important that we pay attention to the intimately related processes of sustaining our traditions on the one hand, and creating new alternatives on the other. At the most basic level, tradition shuns the new – the new destroys tradition. As we come to realize that we live in a world where no universal claims to truth, reality, or the good can be sustained, so do we come to realize that we live “in a world of *multiple and competing* constructions” (Gergen 1999, 49, my italics). At the same time, it is important to recognize that every creation of new meaning must necessarily be grounded within already established traditions and constructions. One must continually consider alternative ways of understanding self and reality and attempt to question taken-for-granted assumptions and that which seems ‘obvious’. This does not necessarily mean that our most revered traditions have to be altogether rejected but, rather, “simply to recognize them *as* traditions – historically and culturally situated /.../ to recognize the legitimacy of other traditions *within their own terms*” (Gergen 1999, 50, my italics). Thus, our constructions of reality are characterized by *reflexivity*. The issue of reflexivity is of particular significance for social constructionist inquiry in itself. Social constructionist scholars thus need to recognize their own boundedness to various traditions of understanding (an issue that we shall explore in more detail below). In this way, social constructionism can be viewed as an invitation to dialogue between different ways of understanding the world. (Gergen 1996, 49-50; see also Beckford 2003, 22-23)

Drawing on the work of Gergen, Burr (2003) provides a very similar account of the basic tenets of a social constructionist approach. First, she points out that social constructionism is based on a “critical stance toward taken-for-granted knowledge”. Hence, “It invites us to be critical of the idea that our observations of the world unproblematically yield its nature to us, to challenge the view that conventional knowledge is based upon objective, unbiased observation of the world” (Burr 2003, 3). Second, social constructionism draws attention to “historical and cultural specificity”, that all ways of understanding are bound to specific historical and cultural contexts and “dependent upon the particular social and economic



arrangements prevailing in that culture at that time" (Burr 2003, 4). Third, "knowledge is sustained by social processes" (Burr 2003, 4). We construct our understandings of ourselves and the world together through our everyday social interactions, in which our use of language plays a central role. Fourth, "knowledge and social action go together". As possible constructions of the world are multiple, they also invite or make possible different forms of social action, that is, "they have implications for what it is permissible for different people to do, and for how they may treat others" (Burr 2003, 5). (Burr 2003, 2-9; see also Shotter 1993, 179-183)

The basic assumptions of social constructionism outlined above raise a number of profound questions for our understanding of ourselves and the world we inhabit. Here, I wish to point out that the aim of this study is not to provide answers to any of these questions. Indeed, viewed from the perspective of social constructionism, all such attempts must be regarded as ultimately futile. In this context, the *anti-essentialist* character of social constructionism also becomes of crucial importance. As we ourselves, and the social world we inhabit are seen as "the product of social processes", it follows that any notion of there being a "determined nature to the world or people" must be rejected (Burr 2003, 5). A social constructionist approach thus entails a *questioning of realism*, that is, the notion that we can determine the existence of an ultimate reality and establish such things as objective facts. Instead, all knowledge is viewed as situated, partial and contingent, stemming from the particular perspectives and lenses through which we gaze at the world. Social constructionism thus offers a very different understanding of the very nature of social scientific research from that of positivist or post-positivist traditions. It should be noted that the social constructionist view of all knowledge as historically and culturally specific equally applies to social constructionist claims themselves. (Burr 2003, 5-7; Taylor 2001b, 11-13)

The social constructionist view on reality has been a much debated issue. Social constructionism has at times been interpreted as adopting a radical relativist position that denies the existence of a material reality outside language. However, most social constructionists do not deny the existence of a material reality. They do, however, question our possibilities and abilities to gain any form of 'objective' knowledge about such a material reality. Most importantly, they question all notions that our language and other ways of representing are somehow able to mirror or reflect such a reality in clear and unproblematic ways. (Burr 2003, 102; Shotter 1993, 1-5).

Social constructionism, then, is essentially about keeping an open mind to different possibilities of scholarly inquiry and questioning our taken-for-granted ways of understanding ourselves and the world. For example, a social constructionist approach can help us question and avoid the pitfalls of taken-for-granted ways of approaching alternative and marginal religious

phenomena (Beckford 2003, 1-4). As stated above, this study makes use of a social constructionist approach by understanding it as a theoretical *orientation*. Therefore, the type of approach employed here is not a radical one but, on the contrary, one that strives to invite to dialogue. Its principal value for this study can be summarized in the following way:

First, it provides a way of describing the manner and style in which this study was conducted. The basic theoretical and methodological assumptions of social constructionism are also fundamental within a range of other disciplines within the humanities and social sciences. The emphasis on reflexivity, in particular, has become a central element of qualitative research within many academic disciplines. When working from a social constructionist perspective, the intimate and multifaceted relationship that exists between researcher and 'researched' is openly acknowledged and particularly *pronounced* (for a broader discussion on these and related issues see for example Droogers 2008).

Second, a social constructionist approach provides this study with an overarching framework for understanding people's use of language, including religious language, as a principal means of creating meaning. Nearly all types of discourse analysis, including the type used in this study, are essentially underpinned by a social constructionist understanding of language.

Third, focusing on issues of language use and representation may provide us with valuable insights about the changing face and nature of religious activity and practice within contemporary Western society and culture. As James A. Beckford (2003, 16) has argued, a social constructionist approach allows us "to analyse the various situations in which religious meaning or significance is constructed, attributed or challenged". This involves looking at the social processes underlying what "counts as religion" across particular social settings and groups of people. As he goes on to point out, "what is needed is sensitivity to the various forms of religious expression and the skill to relate them to features of the social and cultural contexts in which they occur" (Beckford 2003, 23). The virtues of such approaches have also been recognized within the growing study of religion in everyday life during recent years (e.g. Ammerman 2007; McGuire 2008). Importantly, as argued by Beckford (2003, 195), "the social construction of religion is not only a theoretical topic but also an inescapable feature of everyday social interaction". The starting point of a social constructionist approach to religion, then, must be to regard religion and religious meaning as something socially constructed and as being dependent on the particular historical, social, and cultural context in which this takes place (Beckford 2003, 22-23; 193-195; see also McGuire 2007, 188). This essentially entails employing and developing an understanding of religion as discourse, communication, and representation. As pointed out by Kocku von Stuckrad



(2003, 263-264, my italics), “many scholars have long concerned themselves with ‘spiritual beings’ or the ‘belief’ in them and have disregarded the fact that it is only the *communication* of these beliefs that academic scrutiny can analyse”. As von Stuckrad continues to argue in relation to the anti-essentialist character of social constructionist approaches to religion, or what he refers to as a “polyfocal approach” or a “discursive study of religion”: “There is no way of escaping the relativistic stance that leads to methodological dilemmas. But discursive study of religion provides an instrument for *coping* with it” (von Stuckrad 2003, 268; see also Horsfield 2008, 118-119 on discursive approaches within religion and media studies).

As illustrated by Beckford’s and von Stuckrad’s arguments, in order to gain a fuller understanding of a phenomenon such as Christian metal, one needs to allow academic understandings of the processes whereby religious meanings are constructed to enter into a dialogue with the processes whereby religious meanings are constructed within the Christian metal scene itself. This entails looking at how these meanings and constructions are expressed, communicated, and represented through language and *discourse*. Important connections can also be drawn here to an understanding of religion as *mediation* (e.g. Meyer & Verrips 2008; Stolorow 2008, 195-195; Horsfield 2008, 118-119) – an issue we shall return to in more detail in the final chapter.

## **The constructive/constitutive function of language**

The social constructionist understanding of language can be traced back to debates emerging in the 1960s on the character and function of language within the fields of semiotics and literary theory. These debates have usually been coupled together under the heading of “post-structuralism” or “postmodern critique”. Focusing on the nature of words and language, postmodernist scholars developed a radical questioning of modernist constructions of knowledge that became instrumental in generating what is often referred to as a “legitimation crisis” within the social sciences. (Gergen 1999, 24-26; Burr 2003, 11-15) Postmodern theorists rejected the earlier claims of such structuralist social theory as well as other “metanarratives” or “grand theories”, such as Marxism and Freudian psychoanalysis, which typically strove to understand all social and psychological phenomena in the light of one single and all-encompassing principle or logic. As postmodernist theory both coincided with and fuelled what is often referred to as a broader “cultural turn” within the social sciences, its main ideas also greatly influenced many other disciplines, including the study of religion. (e.g. von Stuckrad 2003; Shotter 1993, 6-10; Stone 2007).

The further development and refinement of *deconstruction theory* initially

developed by French theorist Jacques Derrida (1967) and *genealogical* (or *arhaeological*) analysis initially developed by French theorist Michel Foucault (e.g. 1972) have been particularly influential in this regard. Deconstruction has often been concerned with identifying how our ways of representing ideas or states of affairs through language and other forms of representation serve to mediate, validate, or strengthen various forms of power relations, knowledge, and ideologies within the wider society and culture. From this perspective, it is through 'deconstructing', that is, taking apart and analyzing our ways of representing through language, that we come to understand how our language use and other ways of representing fundamentally shape our understandings of the world. Foucault used the term "discourse" to refer to such representations and the term *genealogy* to refer to his particular methodological approach of tracing the *historical developments* of such representations in order to reveal their continuing effects on modern social phenomena and states of affairs (Carabine 2001, 277). Hence, this type of deconstructionist analysis is often referred to as *Foucauldian discourse analysis* or *critical discourse analysis*. (Burr 2003, 18)

Focusing on the specific historically and socially embedded constitutive and constructive function of language, postmodern theory also entailed a questioning of the traditional Western "picture metaphor" view of language, or the view that words are able to communicate pictures of the world 'as it is'. Importantly, the idea that language does not reflect – and indeed cannot reflect – the world 'as it is' had already become a recurrent theme in social theory during the first two decades of the 20th century, particularly as a result of the hugely influential work of French linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (e.g. Elliott 2009, 55-60). Alternative understandings of the basic character of language to that of the "picture metaphor" view had thus been sought for in social theory for quite some time. Much inspiration was also found in the thoughts on language presented by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein in his influential work *Philosophical Investigations* (2001/1953). Wittgenstein abandoned the picture metaphor view of language in favour of that of the "game" as he argued that words and language gain their meaning and intelligibility through their use within human interaction, or as he put it, through their use within different "language games". Wittgenstein illustrated his point through making a simile with the game of chess. The game of chess contains many different pieces, all of which can be moved in certain ways, at certain times, in accordance with a certain set of rules, with each single piece deriving its meaning from the game as a whole. Wittgenstein suggested that words and language become meaningful in similar ways. Language use seems to be governed by a "game-like" set of implicit rules by which words and phrases gain their intelligibility and meaning. Wittgenstein thus argued that words gain particular meanings through their use in a myriad of interrelated language games. However, as

the pieces of the game of chess gain their meaning within the context of the game as a whole, so language games must be understood within broader contexts of human interaction, which Wittgenstein termed “forms of life”. (Gergen 1999, 33-35)

Significantly, the “game metaphor” view of language puts *human relationships* at the very center of inquiry (Gergen 1999, 35-38). This shifts our attention away from words and texts in themselves to the ways in which they function in the particular relational contexts of different communities and groups of people. As explained by Taylor, from this perspective, language is not understood as being merely “transparent” or “reflective” but also as being *constitutive* (and constructive). This means that language does not simply function as “a neutral information-carrying vehicle” but, rather, that it also “creates what it refers to” (Taylor 2001b, 8; see also Shotter 1993, 2). However, our use of language is always intimately bound up with the historical, cultural, and social world we inhabit and, hence, our language use is always determined by these wider contexts in which we find ourselves. Moreover, language should not be understood as something stable and static. Instead, it is always fluid and open to change, modifications, and mutations. (Burr 2003, 47-53) According to this view, then, it is essentially through our acquisition of and use of language that we make sense of ourselves and the world. (Burr 2003, 54)

## Micro- and macro approaches

The social constructionist understanding of language can be approached at two main levels. One is primarily concerned with analyzing language use on a “micro” level, while the other concentrates on language use on a “macro” level. Within micro social constructionism particular focus is directed at the constitutive and *situated* use of language within *particular* social interactions. This type of approach is often associated with *conversation analysis* which focuses on language use in itself and directs less attention to wider situations or contexts (Taylor 2001a, 312). It is also associated with the broader concerns of *discursive psychology* which primarily concentrates on the ways in which individuals actively engage in interaction through language with particular goals and purposes (Burr 2003, 60). Although they essentially share the same view of language, macro social constructionist approaches (such as deconstruction theory and Foucauldian/critical discourse analysis) direct particular focus instead at how language is related to material, social, and institutional structures and practices within wider society and culture (e.g. Fairclough 2001, 229). The notion of *discourse* is central to both of these approaches (Burr 2003, 20-23).

This study focuses on the discursive construction of the meaning and

function of Christian metal music and culture and the ways in which it can be seen as providing people actively involved with it with resources for the shaping of an alternative form of religious expression and an alternative religious identity. As such, this study is essentially concerned with how the discursive construction of Christian metal relates to larger social and cultural developments such as religious change and the present-day relationship between religion and popular culture. Moreover, as this study draws on material in three different languages – Finnish, English, and Swedish – focusing on the situated use of language within particular interactions would become highly problematic. The understanding of discourse employed here is thus that of a macro approach.

#### **1. 4. 2 Discourse analysis**

The concept of discourse has come to be widely used within a range of different academic fields. As Margaret Wetherell (2001b, 3) states, the “turn to discourse” within the social sciences “concerns the changing nature of social life and some recent radical transitions in the flow of information across societies” (see also Shotter 1993). Contemporary social life – in which different forms of communication and representation occupy an increasingly important role – has to a large extent become organized and mediated through discourse. Discourse analysis focuses on how language and discourse *works* as a central element of human meaning-making. It can therefore also be said to be concerned with enhancing our understanding of human agency and social life at both more specific as well as general levels (Wetherell 2001b, 22). However, as different discourse analytic traditions have developed, the term discourse has itself come to be understood and defined in different ways (e.g. Burr 2003, 62; Taylor 2001b, 5). In this study, discourse will be defined broadly and based on the basic tenets of the social constructionist view of language outlined above. In this perspective, discourses are more or less coherent meaning-systems, i.e. ways of constructing and representing reality in particular ways, as expressed through language or other forms of communication and representation. Burr presents the following description of the concept of discourse:

A discourse refers to a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events. It refers to a particular picture that is painted of an event, person or class of persons, a particular way of representing it in a certain light. (Burr 2003, 64)

Burr goes on to explain that, as social constructionism holds that there always exists a multitude of possible ways in which to construct a person, event, or state of affairs, then, there may also be any number of different discourses simultaneously surrounding any one particular person, event, or state of affairs. As with language in general, discourses are constitutive and constructive: they “serve to construct the phenomena of our world for us” (Burr 2003, 65; see also Wetherell 2001b, 15-16). However, they do so in different ways, each highlighting certain aspects at the expense of others, each presenting particular accounts of any given phenomena, each claiming to present and articulate the truth about that phenomena. As such, different discourses also present us with different possibilities for action, different pictures of what we can or ought to do.

Discourses, then, do not originate from within our individual minds but from the wider social, cultural, and discursive contexts that we inhabit (Burr 2003, 64-66; see also Taylor 2001b, 9-10). As Jean Carabine (2001, 269) points out, in this way, discourses also “‘hook’ into normative ideas and common-sense notions”, producing “shortcut paths” into dominant notions about good and bad, right and wrong, normal and abnormal etc. Although discourses are constructed through words and sentences, these do not in themselves constitute or belong to any particular discourse. Instead words and sentences gain their meaning within the “general conceptual framework” (Burr 2003, 66), that is, the *discursive context* in which they are used. A discourse, argues Burr (2003, 66), “can be thought of as a kind of frame of reference, a conceptual backcloth against which our utterances can be interpreted”. This means that there exists a reciprocal “two-way relationship” between discourses and the things that people say and write: “discourses show up in the things that people say and write, and the things we say and write, in their turn, are dependent for their meaning upon the discursive context in which they appear” (Burr 2003, 66; see also Wetherell 2001b, 23-25). However, discourses do not only appear in spoken or written text but in all forms of representation that can be read for meaning. In addition to speech (including the *ways* in which we talk), newspaper articles, films, television shows, official documents and so on, discourses also appear in such things as symbols and ways of dress. (Burr 2003, 66-67) The important point to note is that, in this view, we enter “the realm of discourse” as soon as we begin to speak, write, or represent in any other way (Burr 2003, 91).

In light of a macro-perspective on discourse, it is important to note here that discourses often transcend language borders, and to varying degrees cultural borders as well. We might for example consider the flow of discourses within the more or less globalized realm of popular music. Approaching how particular meanings are attached to particular kinds of popular music by particular groups of people through focusing on how such

meanings are constructed discursively can prove very fruitful. As pointed out by Robert Walser (1993, 27) with specific reference to metal music and culture, the texts produced within music genres “are developed, sustained, and reformed by people, who bring a variety of histories and interests to their encounters with generic texts”. Being produced by people in particular historical, social, and cultural contexts, these generic texts “come to reflect the multiplicities of social existence” (1993, 27). From this viewpoint, music in itself has no intrinsic meaning. Instead, its particular meanings are informed by the particular *discourses* that surround it, or as Walser (1993, 29) writes, “Musical meanings are always grounded socially and historically, and they operate on an ideological field of conflicting interests, institutions, and memories”. Simon Frith (1996) makes a largely similar point when he argues that, in various ways, we often use music to express *who we are*. We also often assume, or indeed presuppose, that other people’s tastes in music will tell us something about *who they are* and what they are like. This, argues Frith, is most clearly illustrated by the ways in which we tend to *talk* about popular music through making *value judgments* about it. However, the value judgments we make in such situations “are not about likes and dislikes as such, but about ways of listening, about ways of hearing, about *ways of being*” (Frith 1996, 8, my italics). In order to understand and make sense of the cultural value judgments people make, we need to pay closer attention to the wider social, cultural, and discursive contexts in which they are embedded. Hence, we need to examine the particular discourses or sets of discourses through which music is invested with certain meanings. Everyday disagreements or disputes about music are rarely about music in itself but, as Frith (1996, 26) expresses it, “*about something with music*”. (Frith 1996, 22-27)

Discourses, then, are not only ways of representing and conveying particular *accounts* of different phenomena and states of affairs but also resources of meaning-making, that is, resources for constructing different phenomena and states of affairs as meaningful in particular ways. Macro social constructionist approaches typically employ these types of broad understandings of discourse. From this perspective, we may also consider the ways in which discourses may form and limit our ways of both constructing our understandings of ourselves and the world as well as determining our possibilities for action. In this view, therefore, the constitutive and constructive function of discourse is understood as reaching far beyond the situated use of language in itself. (Burr 2003, 63-65)

As Taylor (2001b, 7-8) points out, working with a macro perspective on discourse means expanding one’s focus from particular interactions to the “extra-discursive” realm. This type of study does not focus on the analysis of language in itself but, as Taylor (2001b, 15) points out, instead concentrates on “using the language as a resource for studying something else”. Macro



perspectives on discourse are therefore typically interdisciplinary in character and often integrated as *a part* of larger studies that also employ additional theoretical perspectives (Taylor 2001b, 26; Fairclough 2001, 230).

This is also the case within the study at hand, in which the approach of social constructionism is utilized as a broadly understood theoretical orientation and the analysis of the discursive construction of Christian metal music and culture is situated within a wider context of religious change. Thus, in this study, central discourses pertaining to the meaning and function of Christian metal are understood broadly as ways of *talking about* and *representing* Christian metal music and culture in certain ways and in a certain light, thereby investing it with certain *meanings*. This study is not concerned with the situated use of these discourses in particular interactions, although that aspect is far from unimportant, but rather, with how this discursive construction relates to broader contemporary developments and transformations of religious life and practice throughout much of the Western world and Finland in particular. However, the ways in which discourses function within particular *formats* of interaction remains an important issue for this study as it draws on a wide range of different materials and sources. The key meaning-conveying complexes of Christian metal identified in this study surface both in written text in different forms of Christian metal media as well as in in-depth interviews with Finnish Christian metal musicians.

## Doing discourse analysis

There exists no one 'right' or 'correct' way of conducting discourse analysis. Certain approaches suit certain types of studies better than others (e.g. Gee 2005, 5). The general purpose of a study, the academic discipline it stems from, and the theoretical underpinning it employs, will always inform the choice of particular discourse analytic perspectives as well as the ways in which discourse analysis is performed (Taylor 2001b, 28-29; Wetherell 2001a, 380).

Discourse analysis is basically concerned with identifying *patterns* and *recurring* elements and themes in a body of material which appear to be of particular importance for the ways in which particular meanings are produced (e.g. Taylor 2001b, 6). As noted above, when approaching Christian metal, we must begin by attempting to describe what it looks and sounds like. What kind of cultural form is it? Having established that, we may then proceed by asking its adherents what it is supposed to look and sound like, and more importantly, what it is *about*, which *meanings* and *functions* it holds for them. In striving to find answers to these questions we might start by approaching Christian metal through reading magazines and

fanzines or visiting Christian metal Internet-sites and discussion forums to get an idea of the ways in which it is presented and talked about there. We then start to look for patterns and recurring ways of talking about and representing Christian metal in this material. We might then extend our inquiries by interviewing Christian metal scene members themselves to learn more about what it all means to them and what functions it has in their everyday lives. In analyzing the interviews, we again look for recurring ways of representing and talking about Christian metal that appear to be important for how it is invested with certain meanings. Having done *both* in order to get a more nuanced and complete picture that is sensitive to the lived experiences of Christian metal musicians and fans themselves, we may then combine and compare these bodies of material and look for resemblances between them. This is essentially the process through which Christian metal has been approached in this study. Looking at how recurring elements and themes surface in the material for this study from a macro-perspective also entails relating them to wider discursive or inter-textual contexts. How do Christian metal discourses relate to other similar and connected discourses within the wider context of Finnish institutional Christianity? For example, how do key discourses pertaining to the meaning and function of Christian metal as an alternative form of religious expression relate to wider contemporary Christian discourses on such topics? How is Christian metal represented and interpreted within secular metal culture? How is Christian metal represented in wider Christian denominational contexts? Might we discern similar or different ways of representing Christian metal in these various contexts, different ways of interpreting what it is all about? However, although issues such as these will be touched upon at many points in following chapters, they also extend beyond the main focus of this study. Even so, it is important to note that the discourses produced within the Christian metal scene itself – and which are the primary focus of this study – are always embedded within this wider discursive realm.

However, there exist no clear rules as to exactly how one should go about identifying recurring elements and patterns in a given body of material. As Taylor (2001b, 39) points out, discourse analysis is primarily distinguished by its particular theoretical underpinning (which often employs a social constructionist understanding of the character of language) and not by a particular form of “sorting process”. Importantly, since the key elements identified will steer the study and inform its conclusions in fundamental ways, the researcher must proceed reflexively, essentially relying on the interpretations of him/herself. This entails the researcher striving to be constantly aware of the ways in which he/she plays an active role in the very production of the research material. In doing so, it is important that the researcher sufficiently accounts for *how* a set of key



elements are identified. Depending on both the interests of the individual researcher as well as the general topic of the study, certain recurring elements and themes found in the material will be focused upon at the expense of others (Taylor 2001b, 39). This study concentrates on a certain set of interrelated discourses that I have identified as being of particular importance for the study at hand, that is, for how the meaning and function of Christian metal is constructed within the Christian metal scene itself. That is not to say that a different kind of study could not identify a different set of central discourses.

Moreover, when undertaking discourse analysis one also needs to keep in mind that discourses do not simply mirror the “true inner states” (Taylor 2001b, 19) of discourse users in unproblematic ways. Rather, the analysis should focus on the discourse in itself as the means through which meaning is created (e.g. Wetherell 2001b 16; Potter & Wetherell 2001, 200). In relation to this, an important methodological point needs to be made. We should note here once again that, as this study repeatedly talks about the discursive construction of the “basic meaning and function” of Christian metal, what is intended thereby is the basic meaning and function that scene members themselves *discursively ascribe* and *attach* to the Christian metal scene and their own personal involvement with it. To put it another way, the discourse analytic element of this study should therefore not be viewed as being able to highlight *in itself* or *on its own* what other possible types of functions the Christian metal scene may or may not hold for its members. As explained above, one aim of this study is to move beyond issues of discursive construction specifically and highlight some other important, and not merely discursive, functions that the scene provides for its core members. Although the reflections I make and the conclusions I arrive at regarding these issues cannot be separated from my analysis of the discursive construction of the scene, at this level, the analysis nevertheless moves beyond what meanings and functions Christian metal is ascribed by its adherents in scenic discourse alone.

Within discourse analytic research the role that the individual researcher plays within the construction and analysis of the material also needs to be openly acknowledged. As Taylor (2001b, 24) points out, when doing discourse analytic research, “What count as data will depend on the researcher’s theoretical assumptions, about discourse and also about the broad topic of the research”. The researcher constantly needs to remain “self-aware” of the many ways in which he/she features in and influences the research process as a whole. A researcher, especially one who works alone, needs to keep in mind that it was he/she who chose the research-topic in the first place and then set up interviews around it to gather data. (Taylor 2001b, 16-17; see also Wetherell 2001b, 3-4). Reflexivity also plays an important part in the analysis of the material. Finally, it will also play a role

in the presentation and transcription of the material.

Lastly, it should be acknowledged that, like all methodological approaches, discourse analysis has its limitations. Its primary strength lies in that it allows for the identification and analysis of key ways (discourses) through which certain people and groups of people make certain phenomena and practices meaningful in certain ways, particularly as these meanings are constructed through communication and interaction through language. However, when studying a popular music scene one can also single out some particular additional factors of importance that discourse analysis is less well equipped for analyzing. Within the present study, issues regarding *embodied practices* and the *auditory* or *musical* dimension of the Christian metal scene more generally are both examples of this. Although the focus of this study lies on the discursive construction of the scene, these issues will not be ignored. Therefore, where appropriate and when called for, issues of embodied practice and auditory/musical factors will be briefly reflected upon throughout the text, particularly in relation to more recent debates on religion as *mediation* (e.g. Meyer 2008; Meyer & verrips 2008; Stolow 2008). The additional material gathered for this study by means of participant observation is of particular importance in this regard.

### **1. 4. 3 Notes on translation and transcription**

The core material for this study consists of interviews conducted in three languages: Finnish, Swedish, and English. In addition, this study also makes use of secondary sources, such as Christian metal magazines, fanzines, and song lyrics in all of these languages with the addition of one or two in German. Throughout this study, all quotations from material in any of these languages have been translated into English with the original language version appearing at the bottom of the page (in the case of song lyrics and one excerpt in German translations appear in parentheses after the original language version). A few important points regarding translation need to be noted. The Swedish language can usually be relatively directly and unproblematically translated into English; including the order of words and the structure of sentences. The Finnish language, however, does not allow for this.

Any intelligible translation from Finnish into English will *necessarily* involve changing the structure of sentences and the order of words to a considerable degree. It will also involve adding some words and replacing a range of non-directly translatable Finnish words, concepts, and expressions with English alternatives that may not *exactly* match their original meaning in Finnish. For example, it is not unusual for the same word in Finnish to translate differently into English depending on the context in which it is

used. Indeed, in this case, such changes necessarily need to be made in order for the translation to be valid and correct. It should be noted, though, that this also means that it is quite possible for slightly different translations of the same sentences to be equally valid, not least if they are only based on a transcription of an interview. Finnish-speaking readers will no doubt notice that a range of these types of changes have been made in the translated excerpts that appear in this study. I wish to stress, however, that I have endeavored to translate all quoted excerpts as directly as possible in *direct relation* to how sentences appear in their spoken form on record. Translations are thus based on context and attention to such factors as tone, pronunciation, and intonation. Having said this, I still wish to openly acknowledge that certain parts of the excerpts quoted could have been translated in slightly different ways. These problematic issues are essentially of a technical nature, which unfortunately cannot be overcome in this case. I am aware of the criticisms that my choices may be open to in this regard. However, I wish to repeat here that, as all participants interviewed for this study were given the opportunity to comment on the final version of the text, they were all also informed of the changes made to the quoted excerpts. Nonetheless, I am, of course, fully accountable for my own translations.

A few issues regarding transcription also need to be noted. Translation from Finnish into English is further complicated by the fact that there are considerable differences between how the Finnish language is written and how it is spoken. For example, in colloquial Finnish words of all kinds are often pronounced in slightly more simplified and shortened ways. Pronunciation also varies between different local dialects. This, however, is not how the language is correctly and formally written or read aloud. With the exception of slang words and metaphorical expressions, *all* words pronounced in colloquial forms on record appear in their full correct and formal form in all the quoted excerpts. These changes have been made for the sake of clarity and readability.

Different forms of discourse analytic research use a relatively more or less detailed form of transcription depending on the purpose and the particular type of theoretical underpinning of the study in question. As Taylor (2001b, 36) points out, transcription constitutes part of the analysis in itself and should thus not be regarded in terms of a “separate stage”. Focusing on discourse in a wider social and cultural context, this study uses only a minimum of transcription detail. This is because the focus of this study lies on the meanings produced through language and not on language use in itself. In Taylor’s (2001b, 35) words, this form of study focuses on “the meaning which resides in those features which talk shares with writing”. Indeed, the constructed character of a transcription in itself means that it will never reflect recorded talk in direct and straightforward ways. (Taylor 2001b, 35-38) Hence, the simple or “broad” (Gee 2005, 106) form of

transcription used here has been chosen for the sake of readability and clarity. The form of transcription used here will present the recorded talk of the interviews in a form that retains many features of talk. However, unnecessary repetitions of the same words in a row and the repetition of some filling-in words typical of talk such as “like” and “sort of” have been omitted. For the sake of clarity and readability some sections have also been slightly restructured and punctuated in a way that more closely resembles written text. For largely these same reasons, many excerpts quoted in the following pages have been abbreviated. This is indicated by /.../. Only six additional transcription symbols are used, all of which regularly appear in normal writing. A period (.) is used when the speaker makes a stop as to complete a sentence or as to having finished a point. A comma (,) is used when the speaker in some way or other diverges from the main sentence being spoken in order to make a related point or simply breaks the sentence to start over in a different way without making a stop. As mentioned above, in some cases, periods and commas have been added in order to structure sentences more clearly for the sake of readability. A triple-dot punctuation mark (...) is used whenever there is a longer pause in speech. Simple quotation marks (") will be used when what is said is intended as a quote or in a metaphorical or sarcastic sense. Capital letters will be used to indicate if something is shouted or being spoken in a clearly raised voice. Lastly, parentheses are used to mark laughter (laughs).

#### **1. 4. 4 The concept of identity**

Similar to the concept of discourse, the concept of ‘identity’ has been widely used within a range of academic fields. The concept of identity has also frequently been used by social constructionist scholars since it avoids the “essentialist connotations” of concepts such as ‘personality’ (Burr 2003, 106). As Paul du Gay, Jessica Evans and Peter Redman (2000, 1-2) point out, “the term identity takes on different connotations depending upon the context within which it is deployed /.../ the term ‘identity’ often provides only simple cover for a plethora of very particular and perhaps non-transferable debates” (see also Joseph 2004, 9-10). Moreover, as pointed out by Kath Woodward (2002, 2), in much research on the topic, terms such as ‘self’, ‘subject’, and ‘identity’ are often used interchangeably. Essentially, different approaches to the issue of identity take different views on human agency, that is, our abilities and possibilities to actively participate in forming our identities (Woodward 2002, 2-4; for a detailed account of key approaches see du Gay & Evans & Redman 2000).

In Western social and cultural contexts we tend to understand, and *talk* about, ‘identity’ as an individual’s way of making sense of and

comprehending him/herself as a unique, distinct being who has a set of “inner mental states” (Shotter 1993, 5). Another way of expressing this would be to say that an identity is commonly viewed as stemming from a set of individual characteristics, or a ‘personality’, through which an individual defines him/herself in relation to others, and in extension, is then defined *by* others. (e.g. du Gay & Evans & Redman 2000, 2; Weedon 2004, 8-9; Shotter 1993, 4) As Chris Weedon explains:

In commonsense discourse, people tend to assume that they are ‘knowing subjects’, that is sovereign individuals, whose lives are governed by free will, reason, knowledge, experience and, to a lesser extent, emotion /.../ As sovereign, knowing subjects, they use *language* to express meaning. They acquire the knowledge that they convey in language from their socialization, education and experience of life. (Weedon 2004, 8, my italics)

Identity is formed in *social relations* with others, both in terms of association and non-association, that is, individuals form their identities not only in relation to their notions of ‘who’ or ‘what’ they are, but equally, in relation to ‘who’ or ‘what’ they are *not*. As Weedon (2004, 19) writes: “Like the structure of meaning in language, identity is relational. It is defined in a relation of difference to what it is not”. As such, identities are always bound to specific historical, social, and cultural contexts. (Weedon 19-21; Woodward 2002, vii) As we have seen, discourse is widely regarded as being central to all constructions of identity since, “in the process of using language – whether as thought or speech – /.../ we take up positions as speaking and thinking subjects and the identities that go with them” (Weedon 2004, 18). As discussed above, language not only functions as a means for us to express our understanding of who we are to ourselves and others – our use of language also *forms* and *structures* our understandings in fundamental ways. As Weedon goes on to argue:

One of the key ideological roles of identity is to curtail the plural possibilities of subjectivity inherent in the wider discursive field and to give individuals a singular sense of who they are and where they belong. This process involves recruiting subjects to the specific meanings and values constituted within a particular discourse and encouraging identification. (Weedon 2004, 19)

The intimate relationship that exists between our use of language and our construction of our identities also implies there being a constant element of negotiation, resistance, and struggle to this process (see also Joseph 2004, 2-3). Through the course of our daily lives, we find ourselves in different circumstances and situations that each both offer and encourage us to take on a multitude of possible and particular identities depending on the particular contexts in which we find ourselves. Identity can also be viewed

in particular relation to numerous other aspects of social and cultural life and understood in such terms as, for example, ethnic-, cultural-, political-, social-, class-, national-, gender-, or *religious identity*. In practice, these are all intimately intertwined. Thus, as we participate in the discourses through which these categories are constructed and maintained, we take on *multiple* identities. As Weedon (2004, 7) points out, the particular identities bound to, for example, ethnic or religious groups, often rely on “active processes of identification”. Moreover, they may also “involve a conscious counter-identification against institutionally and socially assigned identities, and the meanings and values that they are seen to represent” (Weedon 2004, 7). These questions also bring different *visual* aspects of identity to the fore. As already noted, language is not the only means by which we express who we are to ourselves and others. We also employ a wide range of other forms of representation such as cultural signs, symbols, codes, and practices. For example, certain cultural and religious identities are often expressed and marked by certain forms of dress. (Weedon 2004, 6-7) As Burr argues:

For each of us, then, a multitude of discourses is constantly at work constructing and producing our identity. Our identity therefore originates not from inside the person, but from the social realm, a realm where people swim in a sea of language and other signs, a sea that is invisible to us because it is the very medium of our existence as social beings. However, to say that identities are socially constructed through discourse does not mean to say that those identities are accidental. (Burr 2003, 109)

Essentially, this brings us back to the social constructionist emphasis on community and social interaction. It also highlights the ways in which our understandings of our identities are also built around a sense of *continuity*. As we commonly think of ourselves as unique personalities, we also understand ourselves as having a history and a future. This can be illustrated by the ways in which we tend to construct our understandings of ourselves in *narrative* terms. That is, we commonly tend to think of ourselves and others as characters in a story, and we often construct that story in relation to some kind of general theme (Woodward, 2002, 24-25; Burr 2003, 143). This idea has been widely explored in relation to social and cultural change by social theorists such as Charles Taylor (1989), Anthony Giddens (1991), and Scott Lash (1995). In different ways they all argue that, in late modernity, our sense of self and identity has become increasingly fluid and reflexive as we have become increasingly free to choose our own identities or who we want to be. Giddens (1991) has famously described identity in late modernity in terms of a “reflexive project of the self”. He argues that we essentially shape our understandings of ourselves through telling stories about ourselves. We reflexively construct and constantly revise our “personal biographies” by which we try to make sense of who we are, how



we got to where we are at present, and where we are heading. Notably, as Steven Miles (2000, 27-28) points out, Giddens (1991) also draws attention to the growing role that *consumption* plays in giving “material form to a particular form of self-identity”. The developments of these lines of thought can be traced back to the earlier work by pragmatist scholars such as George Herbert Mead (1934), Erving Goffman (1959), and Harold Garfinkel (1967). A version of this idea also appears in Peter L. Berger’s and Thomas Luckmann’s (1991/1966) influential work on the sociology of knowledge. Importantly, these accounts of identity construction all afford individuals a large degree of agency in their constructions of their identities. From this point of view, then, even though our construction of identity is something we construct in relation to others within a wider cultural and social context, we are still, as Burr (2003, 147) points out, “the authors of our own stories”.

The narrative construction of identity can be seen as being central to many forms of social constructionist inquiry. Some writers (e.g. Gergen 1999) have suggested that we also may construct our stories in connection with a set of narrative structures that are available and familiar to us in our respective cultural contexts, e.g. in terms of “tragedies” or “success stories”. These structures may then have important implications for how we understand and interpret our past, present, and future. For example, and as will be discussed in later chapters, a narrative of conversion typically constitutes a central element in the construction of evangelical Christian identities. However, the ways through which we construct stories of ourselves should not necessarily be regarded as a fully conscious process (Burr 2003, 143). This raises a range of issues concerning the ways in which we construct our narratives of ourselves in relation to the narratives of others, that is, in *relational* contexts. We are thus dependent on other people in our constructions of our stories about ourselves. As Burr (2003, 145) writes, “We are dependent for our identity upon the willingness of others to support us in our version of events. Narratives are subject to social sanctioning and negotiation” (see also Crossley 2002; Gergen 2001).

How then, are we to understand *collective* forms of identity, such as ‘cultural’ and ‘religious’ identity? The concept of cultural identity has been widely debated within the field of cultural studies and social theory. A cultural identity can be seen to having to do with a person’s understanding of him/herself in relation to other cultural beings within a broader cultural context. Thus, under consideration are also the various ways in which individual identities might be said to be influenced through activity in groups. In a broader sense, the concept of cultural identity can be illustrated in relation to popular music. Andy Bennett (2001, 1) argues that “popular music is a primary, if not *the* primary, leisure resource in late modern society”. To a greater extent than many other forms of popular culture, popular music is characterized by its *collective* quality; “people forge new

friendships and associations based around common tastes in music, fashion and lifestyle" (Bennett 2001, 1). However, popular music encompasses much more than just music in itself. Particular ideologies, values, and styles are bound up with particular forms and genres of popular music, creating *popular music cultures* which foster a sense of cultural belonging among their followers and, for many, also become important markers of personal and cultural identity.

## Religious identity

Although the concept of 'religious identity' is commonly used within a range of different both academic and non-academic contexts, its meaning is often simply assumed. Having said that, it is not an easy concept to define.

What would be particularly characteristic of religious identity as opposed to, or perhaps rather in relation to, other forms of identity within late modern society and culture? In the most general sense, we might say that religious identity has to do with how a set of beliefs and practices that are invested with some kind of ultimate meaning or 'spiritual', 'transcendent', or 'otherworldly' significance become a central part of a person's understanding of who he/she is and his/her place in the world. These beliefs and practices might be inspired by or linked to sets of belief systems, rituals, traditions, scriptures, mythologies, and modes of experience found in various religions traditions or institutions. Alternatively, they may also be inspired by other types of beliefs or practices that an individual invests with some form of deeper 'existential' significance. Thus, an important and distinctive characteristic of religious identity would be that it relates a person's understanding of him/herself to a wider or overarching context of ultimate meaning or significance that is often expressed as being of an *otherworldly* kind (cf. Lövheim 2004, 22; 40). This may have far-reaching consequences for how a person understands him/herself in a range of other social and cultural contexts. For example, to be a devout Christian may entail a view of oneself as inherently sinful which, in turn, may have far-reaching consequences for other aspects of self-understanding. As John E. Joseph (2004, 172) writes, religious identities "supply the plot for the stories of our lives, singly and collectively, and are bound up with our deepest beliefs about life, the universe and everything".

However, religious identities are not constructed in a social and cultural vacuum. Importantly, when explicitly religious, spiritual, or other existential elements become integrated with a person's understanding of him/herself, it does so within a particular historical, social, cultural, and most importantly, *relational* context. The construction of religious identities may therefore be seen as being intimately tied to particular groups that are characterized by



an emphasis on otherworldly concerns, of which institutional religions are clear examples. However, this is not to say that all religious identities necessarily need to be constructed and upheld in *direct* relation to some form of religious/spiritual group. It is to *propose*, however, that individual religious identities are always constructed in *some* form of, either positive or negative, relation to any number of other ways of conceptualizing otherworldly significance in a given culture and society at a particular point in history. But religious identities, like religions themselves, are by no means static. As William H. Swatos Jr. (2003, 43) reminds us: "As ideational systems, religions (or values more generally) are always in interaction with material culture, social structure, other cultural systems, and actor's personalities". It is therefore important to recognize that people's religious beliefs and religious identities may change over time (Swatos 2003, 42-43; 51-52).

Discussing collective identity in relation to contemporary social movements, Gordon Lynch (2007b) points out that it typically involves people identifying with each other "as a 'we'". It also involves people experiencing "themselves as part of a meaningful movement or network with a particular ethos or concerns" as well as "a shared consciousness in which people share an overlapping cluster of ideas, beliefs, values and ways of interpreting their particular social and cultural situation" (Lynch 2007b, 87). These are all central characteristics of most forms of institutional religion. Similar to all forms of identity, a religious identity is also always formed in relation to what it is *not*. As David Chidester (2005, viii) points out, "religion entails discourses and practices for creating sacred space, as a zone of inclusion but also as a boundary for excluding others".

A discussion of the myriad of different possible ways of constructing religious identities that may exist across different religious traditions is something that lies far beyond the scope of this study. Here, the issue of religious identity will be discussed with specific reference to institutional Protestant Christianity. In relation to the particular concerns of this study, I would suggest a working definition of such a *Christian* identity as involving the following closely connected dimensions: a person's understanding of him/herself and the world in relation to a certain set of Christian *beliefs*; a person's understanding of his/her *relationship* to the Christian institutions and practices in which these beliefs are embedded; a person's way of *expressing and representing* his/her understanding of him/herself and the world in light of these beliefs and the institutions and practices they are embedded in; and a person's views of how these understandings and the ways of expressing and representing them *relate to* and *function* within his/her everyday life.

Christian identities are always constructed in relation to particular Christian traditions, and different Christian churches and denominations

represent different understandings of Christian faith and the meaning of a Christian life. Such understandings should be viewed as being constantly negotiated, sustained, and transformed, in relation to the concerns of particular churches and denominations in particular historical, cultural, and social contexts. It is important to note that similar to all forms of identity, religious identity must also be negotiated through social interaction and communication and *enacted* through rituals, practices, and codes of behaviour (cf. Lövheim 2004, 40; Ammerman 2003, 213). As such, there is also a sense in which certain Christian identities, or certain aspects or elements of them, may be understood in terms of being ascribed or imposed. This study focuses on the issue of Christian identity in a Finnish social and cultural context. Although Finland has not remained untouched by wider trends of religious change and transformation, the religious landscape is still dominated by the increasingly liberal Evangelical Lutheran Church. A minority of the Protestant Christian population also belong to different forms of Protestant groups or so-called *free churches* (e.g. the Evangelical Free Church, Pentecostals, Methodists, Baptists, Adventists). Only a relatively small proportion of the population is engaged with various forms of alternative spirituality. The issues of *Christian* identity explored in this study thus needs to be understood in relation to the particular Christian identities that these churches and denominations can be seen to espouse and encourage, and which together provide the most common forms of Christian identification in a Finnish context.

However, these Christian identities can also be explored with direct reference to the idea of the increasingly fluid and unstable character of identity in late modernity. Commenting on Giddens' idea of identity as a "reflexive project of the self", Stewart M. Hoover points out that "As the self *is* the project, the spirituality of the self becomes an important dimension of that project" (Hoover 2006, 52, my italics). As is further argued by Wade Clarke Roof in relation to more recent transformations of religious life in the USA: "With a more fluid, adaptable, and insatiable self, religious identity becomes less ascribed, and more of a voluntary, subjective, and achieved phenomenon" (Roof 1992, cited in Hoover 2006, 53). However, as will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter, these developments have arguably become a defining feature of Western society and culture as a whole.

In which ways may a religious and cultural climate characterized by increasing fluidity, adaptability, and individual choice affect the construction and maintenance of more institutionally and traditionally grounded Christian identities? As argued by numerous scholars (e.g. Bruce 2002, 22), in such an environment, the maintenance of traditional Christian identities may become an increasingly difficult task. On the other hand, it may also involve the shaping of *alternative* Christian identities. An

alternative Christian identity may involve people developing the following: different or new understandings of themselves and their place in the world in relation to a set of Christian beliefs and practices; different or new ways of expressing these beliefs; different or new ways of understanding their relationships to the Christian institutions and practices in which these beliefs are embedded; different or new ways of expressing and representing their understandings of themselves and the world; and different or new ways of viewing these understandings and ways of expressing and representing them in relation to their everyday lives. Defining an alternative Christian identity as involving *new ways* of approaching the main dimensions of more 'fixed' or 'traditional' Christian identities allows us to direct particular focus at the *relational* and *interactional* processes at play in this context. That is, it allows us to focus on what the construction of a *particular* alternative Christian identity, and the processes and negotiations that go in to it, may look like in the particular case of the Finnish Christian metal scene. As such, it also allows us to explore the construction of such an alternative and particular Christian identity in close relation to a particular social, cultural, and religious environment. However, alternative Christian identities need not involve all of these dimensions to the same extent. Moreover, they need not be viewed as standing in some form of conflict with or direct opposition to more traditional or institutionally bound Christian identities, although that may also be the case. Instead, they may be understood as offering alternative, innovative, and complementary ways of 'doing' religion. One way of exploring these issues is through focusing on how such new ways of doing religion are represented and expressed through language. Alternative ways of 'doing' religion will entail the creation of alternative ways of speaking about and representing it. Importantly, alternative Christian identities also need to be shaped and sustained through human interaction and relationships. An alternative Christian identity is not something a person constructs entirely by him/herself. This, however, should not lead us to think of alternative Christian identities in terms of a wholly new phenomenon. Commenting on the historical role of popular music in the construction of religious identities, Lynch reminds us:

From the heretical songs of Arius, to Wesleyan hymns, and the spiritual songs of African Americans, music has served a number of functions, such as reinforcing religious identities, establishing a sense of collectivity within religious groups, acting as a means of theological expression, celebration, protest, and lament, providing a subcultural resource and practice against dominant religious identities and orthodoxies, and serving as a focus and stimulus of religious experience and sentiment. (Lynch 2006, 482)

Religious identities always need to be understood in relation to the wider historical, social, and cultural context in which they are shaped and

embedded. In this study, issues of alternative Christian identity will be explored with specific reference to the contemporary relationship between religion and popular culture. As I will argue throughout this study, people engaged in shaping alternative Christian identities are increasingly drawing on popular cultural resources, creating new ways of religious expression, experience, and practice. The account of Christian metal offered in this study should be seen as one particular, but simultaneously highly illustrative, example of this.

#### **1. 4. 5 The concept of *scene***

The concept of scene is an increasingly used theoretical framework within contemporary popular music culture studies and particularly suitable for recognizing different spatial and temporal relations and circumstances at play in the production, consumption, and experience of different forms of popular music (Kahn-Harris 2007, 19). The term “scene” itself can be understood in various different ways. As Keith Kahn-Harris points out, within the context of theater, it denotes a space of performance. As such, it is an example of a long-standing and widespread use of theatrical metaphors in Western thought. In modern everyday life it is also often used as “connoting vague notions of lifestyle”, for example when people distance themselves from something, usually a situation, by saying “this is not my scene” (Kahn-Harris 2007, 15). Such uses of the word scene are, of course, mainly, but not exclusively, limited to the English language. Furthermore, the term scene is also commonly used for describing certain phenomena bound to certain different locations, such as in “the religious scene in Finland”. However, as Kahn-Harris (2007, 15) writes, “It can also mean something much more definite and located that connotes something ‘subcultural’”. Understood in this way, the concept of scene has also developed as a theoretical construct that has been used in various, more or less theorized, ways and typically been highlighted as having more analytical value than that of “subculture” (Bennett & Kahn-Harris 2004; Kahn Harris 2007, 16-21). A short discussion of the concepts of subculture and post-subcultural theory is thus called for prior to an outlining of the concept of scene.

#### **Subcultural theory**

In the sense in which it is usually understood today, the concept of subculture was first developed in the 1950s and 1960s as a theoretical and conceptual framework within the so-called “Chicago School” of urban

sociology. In this view, subcultures were essentially understood in terms of distinct groups existing “on the margins of ‘acceptable’ society” (Kahn-Harris 2007, 15), formed by people who, in particular ways, chose to *deviate* from the norms and values of dominant society and culture by behaving differently as well as sharing a somewhat different frame of reference, set of values, and ideals. Essentially, it was their relative smallness, non-conformist nature, and modest social status that made them ‘sub’-cultures. However, subcultural ‘deviance’ was chiefly interpreted as offering an alternative means of attaining more “commonly-targeted social goals” (Bennett & Kahn-Harris 2004, 4).

Building on the work of the Chicago School, a differently theorized version of the concept of subculture was developed in the mid 1970s by researchers associated with the *Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies* (CCCS). One of its principal aims was to offer a systematic model for the understanding of subcultures. Influenced by the work of socialist philosophers such as Louise Pierre Althusser (1971) and Antonio Gramsci (1971), the contributors to the seminal anthology *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain* (Hall & Jefferson 1976) as well as later “post-centre” theorists (e.g. Hebdige 1979; Willis 1978) developed an understanding of subcultures as “sites of counter-hegemonic resistance to dominant ideology” (Kahn-Harris 2007, 16). Subcultural resistance to cultural hegemony was seen as being most clearly expressed through a range of “counter-hegemonic ‘rituals’” and the creation of particular and spectacular *styles* (Kahn-Harris 2007, 16). Understood as a reflection of a wider class struggle within 1970s British society, subcultural resistance was interpreted as being ultimately *symbolic* and essentially elicited by a need to find solutions to problems of a purely material nature. In short, the CCCS-theorists viewed modern societies driven by the logic of capitalism as offering only very limited possibilities for resisting dominant and hegemonic culture. (Bennett & Kahn-Harris 2004, 4-6; Kahn-Harris 2007, 16)

The subcultural theory of the CCCS has been subjected to repeated criticism since the early 1980s on a number of both general and more specific points. Here, we shall briefly account for those which are of more significance for the study at hand.

Firstly, the theory of the CCCS was developed for the study of British youth culture at a particular point in history. Hence, its analytical value within other geographical, historical, cultural and social, as well as academic, contexts is limited (e.g. Fornäs 1995). Another particularly important point of criticism concerns the ways in which the CCCS’ objects of study can be seen as having been largely predetermined by its theoretical assumptions. For example, metal music was not considered to display the forms of ‘counter-hegemonic resistance’ needed in order for it to be studied under the heading of ‘subculture’ (Brown 2003). Consequently, along with

many other popular music cultures, it was ignored. As Kahn-Harris (2007, 17) points out, in focusing on “those who were ‘other’ to capitalism”, the CCCS-theorists “also *produced* that otherness through a rigid conceptual framework that read members’ activities as implacably resistant”. As a consequence, the subcultural theory of the CCCS failed to consider the *varying degrees* and *different ways* in which people may choose to engage with particular subcultures. Nor did it seriously attend to the possibility of people engaging with several subcultures simultaneously, switching between them, or only engaging with them sporadically (see for example Muggleton 2000). Moreover, as membership of a subculture was understood as being marked by a high degree of seriousness, the CCCS-theory never really addressed the possibility of people engaging with subcultures just for fun. Finally, the theory has also been criticized for “its failure to consider local variations in youth’s responses to music and style” (Bennett & Kahn-Harris 2004, 8).

Nowadays, this *particular* theoretical understanding of subcultures has been largely abandoned altogether. It has, however, been enormously influential and often, both despite as well as because of its shortcomings, been regarded as an important step within the overall development of the field of youth culture studies. As a term, “subculture” has become part of everyday language and, hence, increasingly difficult to define. In spite of this, it is still widely, and often vaguely, used across a wide range both academic and non-academic contexts. Commenting on its use within wider academic contexts today, Bennett and Kahn-Harris (2004, 1) contend that it “has arguably become little more than a convenient ‘catch-all’ term for any aspect of social life in which young people, style and music intersect”. But it is still important to note that, despite many researchers arguing for the concept to be abandoned altogether, it has nevertheless proven continually useful in modified forms, particularly when used *in combination* with other theoretical perspectives. The concept of “subcultural capital” developed by Sarah Thornton (1995), building on the notion of “cultural capital” as developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1984), is one good example of this. Another good example would be the updated form of subculture used by Paul Hodkinson (2002) in his study of goths. Although this study does not utilize the concept of subculture it should be acknowledged that modified and updated versions of the concept may still prove fruitful for certain types of studies.

## **Post-subcultural theory**

Since the beginning of the 1990s, a number of alternative theoretical concepts to that of subculture have emerged. Usually combined under the heading of “post-subcultural theory” (e.g. Muggleton & Weinzierl 2003) they all stem



form the observation that the overall character of youth culture has developed towards increasing fragmentation and fluidity since the 1980s (Bennett & Kahn-Harris 2004; Muggleton & Weinzierl 2003; Miles 2000).<sup>1</sup>

The concept of subculture as a theoretical framework has increasingly come to be seen as having lost its usefulness within a context in which “subcultural divisions have broken down as the relationship between style, musical taste and identity has become progressively weaker and articulated more fluidly” (Bennett & Kahn-Harris 2004, 11). Kahn-Harris provides a useful summary of the wider context of contemporary youth culture and post-subcultural studies:

Contemporary ‘postmodern’ society is characterized by such phenomena as: less commitment to membership of social groups; greater heterogeneity in society as a whole; increased possibilities for multiple social affiliations; the fragmentation of ‘grand narratives’; increased globalization; growing job insecurity; greater choice of popular cultures; the multiplications of centres of power and surveillance; the blurring of the line between ‘popular’ and ‘unpopular’ cultures; and the blurring of the line between ‘conservative’ and ‘resistant’ cultures. Such changes make it hard to maintain any notion of subculture as a social formation with coherence, a firm class basis or a clear notion of resistance. (Kahn-Harris 2007, 18)

The need for contemporary youth culture to be understood in relation to a wide range of social and cultural changes and circumstances also highlights the need for the study of it to employ interdisciplinary approaches. Even though it may seem obvious, it is important to stress that no single theoretical approach is in itself sufficient for an understanding of contemporary youth culture as a whole. Instead, it is vital that youth culture is approached in an interdisciplinary spirit, which seeks to combine and compare rather than exclude. Thus, in my view, the different approaches developed within post-subcultural theory should be viewed as offering different plausible, rather than mutually exclusive, alternatives. This, of course, does not mean that some approaches should not be considered better suited for certain types of studies than others.

Michel Maffesoli’s (1996) concept of “neo-tribe”, essentially aimed at describing the increasingly fluid, unstable, and temporal character of contemporary social relations, has been used as one alternative approach to the study of youth cultures, particularly dance-music cultures (e.g. Bennett

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<sup>1</sup> This study does not engage in theoretical debates on the concept of “youth” – the meaning of which has become difficult to pin down as “youth” increasingly has come to reflect an *attitude* to life rather than a certain stage of it (see for example Miles 2000, 11). In the context of “youth culture” the term “youth” is usually simply meant to designate popular cultural forms that are primarily consumed by people when they are ‘young’. When used, this is also how the concept of “youth culture” is understood in this study.

1999; Malbon 1999). When viewing popular music cultures as neo-tribes, particular attention is directed at the ways in which they draw people together *temporarily* in a 'tribal-type' fashion at events such as popular music festivals. Neo-tribes are thus characterized by fluid, temporal, and loose affiliation, not shared commitment to particular ideologies or values. They are based, as Kahn-Harris (2007, 18) writes, "on shared affect and shared experiences of the body as occurs".

Another alternative approach is that of "lifestyle" (Miles 2000; Chaney 1996; Johansson & Miegel 1992). Focusing on *individual consumer creativity* and reflexivity, this approach highlights the role of *consumer goods* in the formation of cultural identities, particularly among youth. As explained by Miles (2000, 28): "Lifestyles can effectively be described as the material expression of an individual's identity". According to this approach, the increasingly wide variety of popular cultural forms and types of leisure activity offered in contemporary society has led to increasingly heterogeneous varieties of youth lifestyles. (Miles 2000, 33-34)

Although they both emphasize the increasingly fluid character of contemporary youth culture, the concepts of neo-tribe and lifestyle do so in different ways. However, besides having been criticized for not being sufficiently empirically grounded, the concept of neo-tribe has often been considered simply too broad to be of any greater analytical value (e.g. Kahn-Harris 2007, 18-19). It takes the notion of increased fluidity and temporality within contemporary social and cultural relations to the extreme and fails to adequately acknowledge the persistence of a variety of more fixed and non-fluid cultural forms. The concept of lifestyle is equally broad, encompassing a wide variety of possible ways and forms in which (primarily young) people may construct their individual and cultural identities.

In addition to these, a number of other related theoretical frameworks have also been developed over time. Among the more influential ones one could mention the concept of "artworld" developed by Howard S. Becker (1982), and "taste public" developed by Herbert Gans (1974). However, although in many ways closely related to the other theoretical concepts discussed above, these two concepts were not explicitly developed for the study of "youth" cultures.

## Scene

Today, most popular music genres can be found in most countries throughout the world. The continuing and accelerating development of new forms of media such as the Internet and the MP3 format, as well as media-technologies such as the iPod and file-sharing networks, has made music more easily accessible, transportable, and reproducible than ever before



(Clark 2006, 475). The resulting rapid flow of information has come to ensure that new musical trends and sounds spread throughout the world, especially its so-called 'developed' parts, almost as soon as they are conceived. Nevertheless, popular music is still produced, consumed, and experienced in different local, national, and regional cultural settings. New sounds spring from one place and are simultaneously appropriated, developed and mutated, interpreted and reinterpreted, defined and redefined, in a number of others. (cf. Moberg 2008a, 82)

Considering these broader developments, the concept of scene allows us to concentrate on the very issues for which the CCCS theory of subculture was poorly equipped "through a flexible and anti-essentialist quality that allows it to encompass an exceptionally wide range of cultural practices" (Bennett & Kahn-Harris 2004, 14). The concept encourages a *holistic* approach and form of analysis that does not exclude the combination of different theoretical approaches and perspectives. It highlights the interconnectedness of all central elements of popular music cultures (e.g. artists, fans, production, and consumption) without, as Kahn-Harris (2007, 22) points out, *predetermining* their interrelationships. It also highlights the varying ways and degrees to which people may engage with or participate in particular forms of popular music cultures and focuses on relationships and variations in practices of production and consumption in different local and national, as well as social and cultural, settings. By itself, the framework of scene has only limited analytical value. This is because, in itself, the concept is not aimed at providing any particular way of interpreting the meanings and functions that people attach to their participation and involvement with various music cultures. It is thus a highly malleable concept. In this study, it will be combined with a social constructionist approach and discourse analysis. Greater attention will thus be drawn to those aspects of the framework of scene that pertain more directly to issues of discursive construction. (cf. Moberg 2008a, 83)

It is important to note that a popular music scene comprises of much more than merely a particular form of music, even though it is a fundamental component. Essentially, a scene is formed when a number of people in a certain place (or certain geographically connected places), with a shared passion for a particular kind of music come together and develop a wide range of other practices, discourses, aesthetics, and styles in connection to that particular form of music. Hence, the term scene is also frequently used by people *within* popular music cultures, most often as a means of conceptualizing being part of a community of shared musical passions, cultural interests, and sensibilities. The Finnish language version of the term, "skene", is also commonly used by members of the Finnish Christian metal scene. With regard to this, I am particularly interested in two important issues raised when using the concept of scene. Firstly, I wish to draw

attention to the ways in which the concept can be used to make the relationship and interconnectedness between the local, national, and transnational dimensions of Christian metal easier to describe. Secondly, I wish to highlight the ways in which the world of Christian metal, understood as a scene, aids and facilitates modes of interaction and communication among its members. My aim is not to engage in any deeper theoretical discussion on the definition and use of scene as a theoretical framework as such, although I do wish to highlight how it can be of value in the study of religion and popular music more generally. (cf. Moberg 2008a, 83)

In this study, when considering Christian metal, I will be using the concept of scene as developed by Kahn-Harris (2007) in relation to his study of the global extreme metal music scene. Kahn-Harris (2007, 101) describes his understanding of scenes in the following way:

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

Scenes are built on different forms of scenic *structure*. First, and perhaps most important, are the different forms and degrees of “infrastructure” within scenes, such as record labels, distribution-, production-, and promotion channels, scenic media, and gatherings and festivals. Some scenes develop more independent *institutions* and thereby also higher degrees of autonomy while others remain “more weakly institutionalized” (Kahn-Harris 2007, 100). As we shall see, the Christian metal scene has developed its own highly independent scenic infrastructure. Second, there is the question of “stability” and how scenes manage to survive and maintain their distinctiveness without disappearing or being assimilated into other scenes. Scenes may also come to share particular institutions with other scenes. Long-lasting scenes generally develop stronger scenic institutions and forms of infrastructure. The Christian scene is an exceptionally good example of this since its expressed emphasis on religion makes it highly unlikely that it would become assimilated into other metal scenes or indeed other non-Christian scenes more generally. It has also developed long-standing scenic institutions. Third, scenes also vary in their “relation to other scenes”. Scenes with similar musical aesthetics are more likely to develop closer relationships and become mutually inspired and influenced by each other. Some may even “cross-fertilize considerably” (Kahn Harris 2007, 101). In

some places, Christian metal scenes may indeed develop closer connections with secular metal scenes. However, “cross-fertilizing” most commonly occurs between different *Christian* music scenes, e.g. between Christian metal and Christian hardcore punk. Fourth, drawing on the work of Bourdieu and Thornton, Kahn-Harris also underlines that member’s possession of non-scenic “capital” may be more common within some scenes than within others. The notion of “cultural capital” has been developed in many different forms. When talking about cultural capital in relation to music scenes the concept is essentially meant to describe the different forms of merit, respect, and notoriety that members may accumulate or be ascribed within the context and logic of certain music scenes. Indeed, as Kahn-Harris argues, scenes often create their “own forms of ‘cultural capital’” (Kahn-Harris 2007, 101). In a sense, famous Christian metal musicians, often regarded as metal “missionaries” or “ministers” within the Christian scene, can be interpreted as accumulating and being ascribed a form of cultural capital that could be termed “religious” or “evangelistic” capital which often extends beyond the scene in itself. Fifth, scenes differ in “production and consumption”. Vibrant and highly productive scenes do not necessarily constitute the largest markets for the music they produce. For instance, the Christian metal scenes in the Nordic countries are highly productive and produce a lot of bands and records in spite of the relatively small numbers of people involved in them. (Kahn-Harris 2007, 100-101; cf. Moberg 2008a, 84)

Different forms of scenic *construction* also constitute crucial elements of all music scenes. Kahn-Harris outlines three main forms of scenic construction through which “scenes are discursively and aesthetically constructed through talk and a range of other practices”. First, “internal discursive construction” refers to the degree to which scene members “discursively construct that scene as a distinctive space”, making it “visible” and “recognizable” to other members and participants of the scene. Second, “external discursive construction” refers to the ways in which scenes may be discursively constructed from the outside, e.g. by mainstream media or other music scenes. The third main form by which scenes are constructed is that of “aesthetic construction”; scenes develop “particular aesthetics, musical and otherwise, that become both internally and externally visible”. (Kahn-Harris 2007, 100; cf. Moberg 2008a, 84) Within this study, the first two of these forms of scenic construction become of central concern. Issues of aesthetic construction will be discussed in relation to metal music and aesthetics more generally.

In addition, scenes are also reproduced on place-based scales: locally, nationally, transnationally, regionally (in both a more specific as well as wider sense), and globally. Local scenes form national scenes. Through contact and shared scenic structure and construction transnational scenes may develop. Sometimes, as in the case of extreme metal, a global scene is

developed. One can also speak of regional scenes in a wider sense as in “the Nordic Christian metal scene”, or in a more specific sense, as in “the Orange County Christian metal scene”. Kahn-Harris points out that even though this may resemble a neat series of Russian dolls, the relationships between these different levels are considerably more complex. For example, scenes not only overlap, they also differ discursively and institutionally. This is complicated further by scenes also generally being reproduced along a genre-based scale. Different scene members and scenic institutions may direct themselves at particular sub-genres and their particular discourses and aesthetics. Within metal then, sub-genres such as death- and black metal can be viewed as partly separate and to some extent independent generic scenes. In this sense, viewed as part of the wider world of metal music, the Christian scene can also be viewed as such a generic scene. Scene members are thus never confined to any one particular scene at any one particular level. Instead, members usually interact “within a complexity of overlapping scenes within scenes”. (Kahn-Harris 2007, 99; *cf.* Moberg 2008a, 85)

There are a number of noteworthy differences between extreme metal and Christian metal, the most obvious being the role assigned to and played by Christianity and Christian values. Even though the account of scenes outlined by Kahn-Harris on some points only refers to extreme metal more directly, it can also readily be applied to Christian metal. This is because Christian metal has developed the same types of scenic structure and construction discussed previously, and is similarly reproduced along place-based scales. Moreover, as it constitutes a metal music scene in itself, the Christian scene has quite naturally become largely modelled on the existing structures of various secular metal scenes. (*cf.* Moberg 2008a, 85)

## **1. 5 Ethical considerations and self-positioning**

As discussed above, the social constructionist approach employed in this study can be seen as essentially being about keeping an open mind to the multitude of possible ways in which we may construct meaningful understandings of ourselves and our world. As also noted, the basic assumptions underlying this approach also inform this study in fundamental ways. They have important implications for the very understanding of the nature of scholarly research which this study takes as its starting point. They also inform the ways in which I view central concepts such as ‘religion’, ‘secularization’, and ‘identity’, that is, as socially constructed concepts which gain particular meanings through processes of human communication and interaction (see also Beckford 2003, 194). Through emphasizing the ways in which we construct meaning *together*

through language, these basic assumptions also have important implications for how I view and analyze my material. The form of discourse analysis used in this study must also be understood in light of its social constructionist theoretical underpinning.

From a social constructionist perspective, as Burr points out (2003, 151), “the ‘objectivity-talk’ of scientists becomes just part of the discourse of science through which a particular version, and vision, of human life is constructed”. According to the view employed here, there exists no such thing as an ‘objective’ or unbiased study. When conducting discourse analytic research, engaging reflexively with one’s material involves viewing researcher and ‘researched’ (the participants or ‘subjects’ under study) as having equal status in the construction of the discourse that is subjected to analysis. The many accounts that I have collected from people within the Christian metal scene concerning what they consider to be the basic meaning and function of Christian metal music should thus not be regarded as something that I have simply collected and then analyzed. I have myself played an important role in the construction of these accounts. Although it is I who choose the ways in which these accounts feature within the context of this study, it is important to keep in mind that these accounts have emerged out of my own interactions with different people within the scene (see section 1. 3. 1 on the interviews above). In important ways, the ascribed essential meaning and function of Christian metal presented here can be viewed as something that we have constructed together. The implications of a social constructionist approach for social constructionism itself also needs to be openly acknowledged. Perhaps most importantly, the particular social and cultural circumstances, background, values, and perspectives informing the work of the individual researcher need to be brought out into the open. (e.g. Burr 2003, 156-158; Gergen 1999, 49-50) This may entail examining one’s own purposes for making one’s choice of study. Scholars of popular culture often tend to choose to study something in which they have a personal interest and investment. Of course, this is not surprising, and nor should it be. I am no different myself. Unfortunately, in doing so, there is a risk of being regarded as an ‘un-serious’ scholar within the wider academic community, that is, to be regarded as someone who really should be concentrating on something more ‘worthwhile’ of ‘serious’ study. Indeed, my interest in Christian metal is greatly motivated by my own interest in metal music, which dates back to my childhood years. Metal music is still very much a part of my everyday life, although my taste in music has diversified considerably over the years. Nonetheless, even today, approximately one third of my (quite considerable) record collection could be classified as metal.

These issues have been discussed in detail by fandom-theorist Matt Hills (2002) who makes a distinction between what he calls “scholar-fans” and

"fan-scholars". A scholar-fan is an academic who studies a cultural form of which he/she is him/herself a fan. The advantages and problems that such a position may entail have been thoroughly debated within the ongoing discussion about self-reflexivity in social and cultural research. Fan-scholars, on the other hand, are fans that make use of various types of academic theorizing and terminology in writing about and explaining their own respective fandoms and fan cultures (Hills 2002, 7). According to Hills, this phenomenon, which is typical of many writers on metal, has unfortunately so far largely been ignored. Fan-scholars function as critics within their own fan-cultures. Some have even embarked on academic careers. For example, within metal culture, much importance is attached to having detailed overall knowledge of the music and its culture, such as its history, sub-genres, and individual artists. For Hills, the central question becomes where to draw the line between 'academic' and 'fan'. Can academics (i.e. scholar-fans) really be expected to approach their own favorite music in a purely 'rational' way? For instance, can an academic who is also a metal fan pretend *not* to have any personal opinion whatsoever about, for example, the world famous metal group Iron Maiden in the name of 'objectivity'? Drawing a clear line ultimately becomes impossible. Hills views the notion of the "rational academic" as an "imagined subjectivity" that refuses to die even though it is commonly regarded as impossible to live up to. Neither should fandom be regarded as something fundamentally irrational, that is, fans should not be regarded as mere passive consumers of particular products of popular culture. Instead, it is argued (2002, 10) that fandom should be understood primarily on its own terms and fandom theories be grounded on "a primary allegiance to the role of 'fan' and a secondary allegiance to 'academia'". Importantly, the theorizing that occurs *within* fan-cultures should also be taken into account. (Hills 2002, 3-10; 18-21) This argument is also fully in line with the social constructionist approach of this study.

My personal taste in metal may thus influence my studies of it in a range of ways. For example, I like certain forms of metal more than others. Some I almost despise. Having a detailed personal knowledge of this kind of music has its positive sides, though. For instance, similar to all fans of metal, in most cases I am readily able to identify a certain form of metal when I hear it, explain its musical characteristics, its history and so on. However, Christian metal continues to be sharply criticized and ridiculed within the wider secular metal community and I can in no way claim to have remained impervious to this. When I decided to study Christian metal, I knew before commencing that I was going to have to face my own prejudices in this regard. Nonetheless, my interest in Christian metal is also significantly motivated by my scholarly interest in the relationship between religion and popular culture. I grew up in a normal middle class family and although I occasionally visited church with my parents as a child, I did not receive a

particularly religious upbringing. I was confirmed by the Evangelical Lutheran Church at the age of fifteen, mostly because that was what one was expected to do. I remain a member of this church to this day, but I cannot really explain why. Although I developed an interest in religion already as a child, I have never considered myself to be a particularly religious person. On the other hand, I have always kept an open mind about religion. This means that, although I share the same taste in music as the participants in this study, I do not share their religious beliefs. In this respect, I approach the Christian metal scene as an outsider. Although I would not describe myself as a Christian, I have no personal problems at all with Christianity. However, I have gained most of my knowledge of it, not through personal experience, but through studying it in a scholarly sense. This may have influenced the ways in which I have interacted with my participants. For example, as a few of them told me that they had experienced the presence of the Holy Spirit during their concerts, this is something that I cannot fully relate to personally. Of course, I have read much about this and even seen people being 'filled' by the Holy Spirit, but I have never experienced it myself. Such issues as these may, in crucial ways, have affected the construction of Christian metal that I have created together with my respondents.

By way of summary, this study combines four theoretical concepts: social constructionism, discourse analysis, identity, and scene. The first three are all intimately related and can thus be seen to constitute integral components of the overarching theoretical concept of social constructionism. The concept of scene, on the other hand, is a theoretical construct so far mainly used and developed within popular music culture studies. However, the emphasis it lays on approaching popular music cultures holistically makes it fully compatible with the overarching social constructionist approach of this study. In this way, these theoretical approaches are integrated with social constructionism, which is understood as a general theoretical approach or orientation.



## 2. Religion in the contemporary West

Today's pluralistic Western societies are characterized by a myriad of different religions and worldviews, all co-existing, and often competing, in the same social and cultural arena. Throughout much of the Western world, widespread reduction of interest in traditional and institutional forms of religion have in many respects gone hand in hand with increased interest in alternative and highly individual forms of spirituality. Christopher Partridge (2004, 2005) has argued that contemporary Western society and culture is experiencing a more profound process of "re-enchantment", while Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2005) have contended that the West may be seen to be experiencing the beginning of a "spiritual revolution" as a result of the overall individualization or "massive subjective turn" of Western culture and society. However, as these scholars point out, the contemporary religious landscape of the West may still need to be studied and understood within, and in close relation to, an overarching framework of *secularization*. This process, situation, or state of affairs, has long been interpreted as posing great challenges to traditional and institutional Christianity for which the overall picture has long been one of slow but steady decline. (cf. Moberg 2008a, 87-88)

Finland has not been unaffected by these general trends although, arguably, secularization has not been as thoroughgoing as in many other European countries (Kääriäinen & Niemelä & Ketola 2005). The religious landscape of Finland is still dominated by the Evangelical Lutheran Church, of which approximately 80.3 percent of the population were members as of 31 December 2008. Church membership may be exceptionally high in European comparison, but attendance is low. In relation to Grace Davie's (1994) often cited description of Britons as "believing without belonging", Finns have instead been described as "belonging *without* believing" (Martin 2005, 86) or, indeed, as "believing *in* belonging" (Kääriäinen & Niemelä & Ketola 2005, 85). What follows is a general overview of recent scholarly debates on the changing face of religion in the West. We shall begin with a discussion of the notion of *secularization* as a key element of these debates.

### 2. 1 Secularization and religious change

The notion of secularization has occupied a central position in debates on the state of religion in the West for decades and mainly concentrated on the broad overarching impact of *modernization* on *institutional Christianity* in the context of Western Europe and the USA (e.g. Martin 2003, 30). Viewed as part of a broader narrative of modernization, theories of secularization have



traditionally offered a rather dismal account of the state of religion in the West, and Western Europe in particular, in terms of a single “running narrative”, usually one of slow but steady decline (Martin 2005, 8). Thus, theories of secularization also characteristically contain an element of *prediction* (Woodhead & Heelas & Davie 2003, 1-3). More recently, though, traditional narratives of secularization have become increasingly contested and questioned. However, at the same time as many different theories of secularization have emerged, this has led to a great deal of confusion as to what exactly is meant by the term. As noted, secularization is commonly understood in relation to the overall framework of modernization, of which Steve Bruce offers the following account:

Modernization is itself a multifaceted notion, which encompasses the industrialization of work; the shift from villages to towns and cities; the replacement of the small community by the society; the rise of individualism; the rise of egalitarianism; and the rationalization both of thought and of social organization. (Bruce 2002, 2)

Within debates on secularization, these developments are taken to have led to a number of specific structural changes in society and culture that, taken together, have reduced the significance of institutional religion within both individual life (on a micro level) as well as within society and culture on the whole (on a macro level) (Beckford 2003, 49-50). Some commentators afford more weight to some of these developments than others. According to some (e.g. Bruce 2002; Beckford 2003), rather than a theory, secularization should primarily be understood in terms of a *paradigm* consisting of a set of different more or less closely interrelated elements or “clusters of descriptions” (Bruce 2002, 2). In the following, we shall discuss some of the most common of these, mainly through letting the ‘orthodox’ view as represented by Bruce (2002) engage in dialogue with other alternative approaches.

Many sociologists of religion understand processes of *differentiation* as having been of particular importance for the diminishing role of religion in modern Western societies (e.g. Bruce 2002; Martin 2005; Casanova 1994; Dobbelaere 2002). Kimmo Kääriäinen, Kati Niemelä, and Kimmo Ketola (2005, 18) explain that “Differentiation refers to the process whereby separate areas of life gradually acquire their own institutional structures”. For example, the social domains of health care, economy, politics, education, and law were all considered to fall within, or at least significantly overlap with, the domain of the institutional church in pre-modern times. Through the effects of modernization, however, they all gradually became embedded in their own separate and specialized institutions (Kääriäinen & Niemelä & Ketola 2005, 18). The result is often interpreted as having led to a clearer separation between religious and secular areas of social life which, it is

typically argued, gradually also led to a decline in the overall *social significance* of religion (e.g. Bruce 2002, 8). These processes of *structural* differentiation were connected with additional processes of *social* differentiation. As Bruce argues, the economic growth brought about by modernization led to the emergence of a wider “range of occupation and life situation” (Bruce 2002, 9), new social classes and roles, and growing social mobility. Such circumstances made the preserving of a “single moral universe” (Bruce 2002, 9) considerably more difficult. Religion thus became increasingly defined along the lines of social roles and positions (Bruce 2002, 9-10; see also Dobbelaere 2002, 24). However, degrees of structural and social differentiation vary across modern societies. Close bonds between church and state may also persist in highly differentiated societies such as Finland where the Evangelical Lutheran Church has managed to retain its role as national church (Kääriäinen & Niemelä & Ketola 2005, 19). Significantly, as argued by many scholars of religion in modern times, modernity is itself marked by a range of both differentiating as well as *dedifferentiating* tendencies (e.g. Heelas 1998). As Beckford (2003, 46), among many others, has pointed out, it is within different ideas about the effects of differentiation on institutional religion “that the roots of much agreement and disagreement about secularization are located”.

Another closely related process is that of *societalization*. According to Bruce, this refers to the ways in which the “locus” of people’s everyday lives increasingly shifts from local communities to that of wider “society” (see also Wilson 1976). Combined with the processes of structural and social differentiation, societalization further contributed to a climate in which “the plausibility of any single overarching moral and religious system declined” (Bruce 2002, 13). Religion thus changed from being a matter of necessity to one of *preference*, eventually leading to the emergence of the religiously neutral state. (Bruce 2002, 13-15; see also Wilson 1976, 265-273)

Modernization also gave rise to *social and cultural diversity* or *pluralism* (e.g. Berger 1969). The increasing movement of populations brought new religions, languages, and customs to new environs. Moreover, modernization itself also aided the emergence of cultural pluralism through the creation of new social classes and social roles which, in turn, led to weakened ties between religion and community. As a consequence, states became increasingly religiously neutral, resulting in a reduction of the social power, significance, and *relevance* of institutional religion. (Bruce 2002, 16-18) Again, such developments may vary considerably between different countries. As David Martin (2005) points out, the rise of pluralism always needs to be understood within particular historical contexts. For example, one has to consider the historical significance of religious monopolies. As Martin (2005, 59) writes, “you cannot separate the nature of the religious culture from that of the political culture or that of the intellectual culture”.

Additionally, he goes on to argue that “All the Scandinavian countries illustrate how uniform is the modern mirror-image of an established religious monopoly in the more recent political monopoly of Social Democracy” (Martin 2005, 61).

According to Bruce (2002, 19), the response to differentiation, societalization, and pluralism on the level of the individual can be viewed in relation to additional processes involving an increasing *compartmentalization* and *privatization* of religious life. Aided by increasing pluralism, these processes again brought with them heightened awareness of the existence of a multitude of religious systems and ways of believing within society (as also argued by Berger 1967), resulting in religious beliefs and practices becoming confined to specific “compartments” of life. Bruce (2002, 22) argues that such a situation leads to a weakening of people’s religious commitments “by removing the social support for any one religion”. This, in turn, leads to an increasing *privatization* of religion that encourages *relativism*, leading to the proliferation of a multitude of competing plausibility structures within society. In a social and cultural environment in which individuals are aware of and able to choose from a seemingly endless variety of ways to understand the world, it becomes harder to insist upon one’s own worldview as the only one universally true. Thus, in modern societies and cultures, individuals are always, to some degree, aware of that their worldview is *chosen* rather than given. However, some commentators (perhaps most notably Jose’ Casanova 1994) have also argued that there are signs of religion in the modern world becoming more “de-privatized” as contemporary modern social and cultural arrangements also can be taken to offer institutional religion new ways of figuring as independent actors in the public sphere. (Bruce 2002, 20; 29; Luckmann 1967, 99; Berger 1967, 151)

This brings us to the closely related issue of the rise of *individualism* in modern Western society and culture. Bruce points out how the Protestant Reformation introduced a new belief system that “removed the institution of the church as a source of authority between God and man” (2002, 10), freeing people from the old “all embracing hierarchy” (2002, 12) of the church through the notion of the priesthood of all believers. (Bruce 2002, 10-12; 20-23; see also Martin 2003, 32) Moreover, as Berger (1967, 123-124) argued, the Lutheran idea of the two kingdoms, i.e. of God and of man, actually provided the “autonomy of the secular ‘world’” with a “*theological* legitimation”. The Reformation thus also changed the very understanding and definition of religion (McGuire 2003, 128-130; see also Beyer 2003, 164). The emergence of *schism* and *sects* also greatly aided the emergence of the *voluntary association* as an alternative to the traditional organic community. (Bruce 2002, 15; see also Martin 2003, 32; Dobbelaere 2002, 173-176; Hervieu-Léger 2000, 157-162). Many commentators argue, although in different ways, that privatization, individualism, and relativism also lead to increased

religious apathy and indifference. It is argued, as Bryan Wilson (2003, 69) does, that even though people may continue to view religion “as a legitimate pursuit”, they increasingly also view it as something that one *may* do. In addition, people also increasingly view religion as something that ‘others’ do (e.g. Lynch 2007b, 5). For many, religion becomes a matter that is left for the traditional churches to handle, for example, as providers of resources and support in times of crisis and need. Davie (2000) uses the term “vicarious religion” to refer to such increasingly widespread contemporary European attitudes towards traditional institutional religion (see also Davie 2007, 23). However, as many commentators have pointed out, decline of public individual involvement with religion, religious activities and practices, should not simply be equated with a decline in individual *religiosity*. For example, Casanova (2006, 65) points out that, although participation in traditional and institutional religious practices clearly have declined among European populations, many have nevertheless “maintained relatively high levels of private individual religious beliefs”. There is thus a sense in which European religious sensitivities can be said to have experienced a process of “unchurching” and “religious individualization” rather than secularization (Casanova 2006, 65).

Some commentators also argue that increasing *rationalization* caused by developments in science and technology had a negative bearing on religion, individual religiosity, and religiously based views of the world. According to Bruce, the “zero-sum view of knowledge” (2002, 26) based on rational thinking brought about by the Enlightenment eventually led to a “gradual accumulation of scientific knowledge [that] gave people insight into, and mastery over, an area that had once been a mystery; [and hence] the need and opportunity for recourse to the religious gradually declined” (Bruce 2002, 27; see also Wilson 2003, 68). The proliferation of science and technology also greatly reduces the ability of organized religion “to dominate all fields of intellectual endeavour” (Bruce 2002, 27). However, the effects of scientific and technological development on religion should not be overstated. Their impact may also be understood in terms of a *disenchantment* of life gradually brought about by more “naturalistic ways of thinking about the world” (Bruce 2002, 28; see also Beckford 2003, 48-49).

### **2. 1. 1 Interpreting secularization**

There is much agreement among commentators on secularization that the processes initiated by modernization, discussed in the previous section, had an overall negative impact on, or at least fundamentally altered the social position of, institutional Christianity throughout much of the West. However, commentators differ hugely in how they interpret the

consequences of these processes for the vitality of *religiosity* as such. There is no agreement as to whether secularization should be regarded as an irreversible process or not (e.g. Martin 2005, 3-12). The issue of “European exceptionalism”, that is, whether secularization should be understood in terms of a distinctively European experience or not, has also been the subject of much debate (e.g. Davie 2002; Casanova 2003, 17-23). Although a much disputed issue, the population of the USA is generally regarded as displaying much higher degrees of religiosity than those of Europe. According to Martin (2005, 65-67) this also has to do with the “decentralized religio-political voluntary end entrepreneurial culture of the USA” as well as with the ways in which the churches of the USA are often so “aligned with the American ethos” (2005, 65). Furthermore, unlike Europe, the USA does not have a history of a union between centralized power and religious monopoly (Martin 2005, 117).

There is also widespread disagreement on how secularization and an often supposedly corresponding decline of individual religiosity is to be *measured*. Accounts of secularization typically draw on statistical data on such things as church attendance and belief in God and religious doctrine among various Western populations. There is much debate on how, and on which grounds, such data should be interpreted (e.g. Beckford 2003, 46-47). For example, the *notion* or *definition* of religion one operates with will greatly influence any such interpretations (e.g. Casanova 1994, 25-35; Dobbelaere 2002, 45). Lastly, as a general rule, the ways in which narratives of secularization have reflected, and continue to reflect, wider notions prevalent in academic discourse at any particular time also need to be openly acknowledged (e.g. Martin 2005, 127; 2003; Beckford 2003, 41-42; McGuire 2003). It is, above all, in relation to this particular issue that social constructionist perspectives might provide fruitful ways of moving forward. Commenting on these broader debates on secularization and religious change, Beckford (2003, 68) expresses it as follows: “Awareness that the category of religion is itself a product of continuing social construction and disagreement is low”. In order to illustrate these disagreements, we might consider the argument in favor of the secularization paradigm offered by Bruce (2002). His main point is that the declining *social* significance of religion has led to, and will continue to lead to, increasing individual *indifference* towards religion as such. Basing his argument on an understanding of secularization as a “cluster of testable explanations” (2002, 39), Bruce views it in terms of a *cyclical* but essentially irreversible process. He illustrates his argument through the metaphor of a given point on a wheel “running down a gentle slope” (2002, 176). The point rises and falls as the wheel turns. However, at each turn the point will be lower than it was on the previous turn (Bruce 2002, 176):

(a) the influence of religious institutions is less at the end of every cycle; (b) the numbers involved at every stage are smaller than at the previous one; (c) the total stock of shared religious beliefs (and the word 'shared' is central to the argument), and hence the amount of 'ambient religion', are markedly less. (Bruce 2002, 177)

Bruce's argument can, and has been, criticized on a number of points. For instance, it is clear that it operates with a narrow substantive notion of religion that essentially equates religion with Western institutional Christianity. In this view, secularization inevitably leads to a decrease in the social significance of religion, which, in turn, inevitably leads to a decrease in individual religiosity. For present purposes, it is enough to note this as *one* of many ways of interpreting the effects of secularization.

An alternative to this model of irreversible cyclical decline is offered by Martin (2005, 3) who argues that "instead of regarding secularization as a once-for-all unilateral process", it may instead be thought of "in terms of successive Christianizations followed or accompanied by recoils". According to Martin (2005, 5), evangelical Christianity and Pentecostalism constitute the latest such forms of Christianization, running "alongside modernity in a mutually supportive manner". (Martin 2005, 3-5) In Martin's (2005, 41) view, evangelical Christianity and its Pentecostal variant can be viewed as "a manifestation of modernity" in the sense of being a "voluntary association" that transcends national borders and easily adapts to new conditions. The issue becomes whether to treat such religious resurgences and enterprises in terms of "creative restatements" or, more pessimistically, as "responses to secularization" (2005, 137). (Martin 2005, 135-137) Martin thus argues for a more cautious approach that concentrates on comparing secularizing *tendencies* across different historical and cultural contexts. In his view, "Christianity embodies a dialectic of the religious and the secular which more easily generates secular mutations of faith than straightforward replacements and displacements" (2005, 78). Religion, he argues, should be regarded as an intimately embedded "distinctive current" (2005, 78) within wider society and culture which, from time to time, flows either with or against the general flow of that wider society and culture. Christianity, then, is open to a range of secular mutations. According to Martin (2005, 80), such secular mutations are clearly at evidence in the ways in which the inclusiveness of Lutheranism in the Nordic countries has become fused with the "inclusiveness of Social Democracy and the welfare state". (Martin 2005, 78-80).

As illustrated by these two different perspectives on secularization, there is relatively much agreement among commentators on the *causes* of secularization but less agreement on their *effects*. Indeed, while most commentators agree on the overall decline of the social position of



institutional Christianity throughout most of Western Europe, different perspectives may still differ considerably from one another. As we have seen, some (e.g. Bruce 2002) interpret secularization in terms of what Partridge (2004) calls the “de-intensification theory”. In this view, although religion will remain in society, it will eventually do so “only in a de-intensified, weak and insubstantial form” (2004, 8). Others (e.g. Martin 2005) instead opt for the “co-existence theory”, focusing on variations in secularizing and de-secularizing trends across different geographical, historical, social, and cultural contexts. (Partridge 2004, 8, for more on main approaches to secularization see for example Woodhead & Heelas 2000, 307-308)

## **2. 1. 2 Alternative spiritualities and religious change**

An important part of the secularization debate concerns the emergence and proliferation of *alternative*, non-traditional forms of religion, spirituality, and worldviews in the West. Scholars concentrating on these developments tend, in various ways, to interpret the contemporary Western religious landscape in terms of the co-existence or dialectical relationship between secularization and *sacralization/re-sacralization* (e.g. Woodhead & Heelas 2000; Heelas & Woodhead 2005; Partridge 2004, 2005). These scholars seldom refute the overall effects of secularization on institutional religion. They do, however, question the validity of claims that secularization somehow automatically and irreversibly has led, and will continue to lead, to an overall decline in religious vitality and individual religiosity, or a “secularization of the mind” (Kääriäinen & Niemelä & Ketola 2005, 23). Hence, they point to the ways in which religious belief and practice has changed and transformed in contemporary society and culture, appearing in new forms and sometimes unexpected places.

Recent decades have seen the dissemination of as well as growing interest in a wide range of alternative religions, spiritualities, and worldviews 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, in a broader sense, “the alternative spiritual milieu” (e.g. Partridge 2004). The broad category of “alternative spirituality” encompasses a much wider range of beliefs and practices than those traditionally assembled under the heading of “New Age”. Generally speaking, alternative spiritualities stress the importance of *individual choice* regarding spiritual matters, that is, they emphasize the individual as his/her own ultimate spiritual authority or, as Heelas and Woodhead (2005, 6) write, they are characterized by their focus on the “cultivation or sacralization of unique subjective lives”. Spiritual truth and authenticity is not to be derived



from or be made dependent on external religious authorities but, rather, emanate from 'within' oneself. Within this milieu, individuals are encouraged to seek inspiration in whichever religious and spiritual traditions, teachings, beliefs, and practices that best suit their particular individual needs and life situation at any particular time (Partridge 2004, 72–73; Woodhead & Heelas 2000, 111–112). Although the alternative spiritual milieu encompasses a myriad of different and disparate beliefs and practices, and is characterized by an emphasis on the authority of the individual and an abandonment of overarching authoritarian belief systems characteristic of traditional institutional religion, a set of key themes have nevertheless come to be so widely shared that they can be described as having developed into what Partridge (2005, 11) terms “soft orthodoxies” (*cf.* Aupers & Houtman 2008). One example would be the widely shared general sense within the alternative spiritual milieu of the West becoming increasingly attuned to ‘the spiritual’, of everything being holistically ‘connected’, often in terms of an all-permeating or all-encompassing ‘universal energy’ or ‘life force’. The sacralization of *nature* is another commonly recurring feature of various forms of alternative spirituality. In close connection to this, there is also widespread suspicion towards “modern invasive technologies” (Partridge 2005, 18), particularly when connected to irresponsible industrial exploitation of natural resources and large-scale environmental pollution. Moreover, as Partridge (2004, 77) points out, alternative spiritualities also typically emphasize “the resurgence of ancient traditions” and continuity with an often “mythical past” as being key “to vibrant, authentic contemporary spirituality”. This is also connected to a more widespread distrust, suspicion – and sometimes outright hostility – towards traditional institutional Christianity within many sections of the alternative spiritual milieu. (Partridge 2004: 77–81)

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), Partridge provides an extensive and stimulating account of overall religious change and transformation in the West. Essentially, Partridge argues that the proliferation of a large number of alternative religions, spiritualities, and worldviews in the West, especially since the 1960s, gradually has led to the formation of a broad bank of religious, spiritual, and existential resources, which he terms *occulture*. It is important to point out that this considerable expansion and broadening of the term “occult” should not be understood as denoting a form of religion or worldview 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” (Partridge 2005, 2), is sourced by a wide array of disparate spiritual and existential ideas and themes

informing such phenomena as a more general and widespread belief in the “paranormal”, “wellbeing culture”, “eco-enchantment”, “sacralization of psychedelics”, various forms of “cyber-spirituality”, “sacralization of the extraterrestrial”, “Western demonology”, and “eschatological re-enchantment” (Partridge 2005). There is also growing interest in different, and often strongly dualist, forms of “dark occulture” sourced by different strands of modern Satanism, Esotericism, Paganism, beliefs about the Devil, vampires, malevolent extraterrestrials, and theories of mass conspiracy (Partridge 2005, 207-278). Hence, occulture should be understood in the broad sense of providing the “unpredictable raw materials” (Partridge 2004, 85) for the construction of alternative spiritual identities.

Partridge places particular stress on the ways in which the proliferation of this vast plethora of spiritual and existential ideas in a supposedly secularized society and culture points to the emergence of a new “spiritual atmosphere” (Partridge 2005, 2); an ongoing process of *re-enchantment* or “dialectical process of the re-enchantment of the secular and the secularization of the sacred” (Partridge 2004, 44; see also Heelas & Woodhead 2005, 125-128). According to Partridge, these significant changes in the spiritual landscape of the West have important, and indeed profound, implications for the study and understanding of religion itself: “just as we are witnessing a revolution in the way twenty-first century religion/spirituality is lived, so there will need to be a revolution in the way it is studied and understood” (Partridge 2004, 59). Importantly, it is argued that particular attention should be directed at the increasingly central role that *popular culture* has played, and continues to play, in this context. We shall return to this issue in the following chapter. (Partridge 2004, 84-85) It should be added here that *Christian* ideas, themes, and symbols are not exempt from this “occultural milieu”. For the moment, the most important point to note regarding Partridge’s argument is that the wide range of religious/spiritual themes and ideas that ‘float’ around in today’s broader cultural and popular cultural environment might well also affect, inspire, and influence people involved in more traditional and institutional forms of religion such as Christianity.

Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2005) have also attempted to make sense of these “apparently contradictory trends” (2005, 77) of secularization and sacralization by understanding them in relation to what they call the “subjectivization thesis”. They base their argument on the idea that the “massive subjective turn of modern culture” (2005, 2) has had profound effects on the very nature of religion and religious practice throughout the West. In this climate, “The subjectivities of each individual become a, if not the, unique source of significance, meaning and authority” (2005, 3-4). This, they argue, has led to a development of “self-understanding and socio-cultural arrangements /.../ in a ‘person-centred’ or ‘subjectivity-centred’

direction" (2005, 5). According to Heelas and Woodhead, these developments may be understood in terms of a burgeoning "spiritual revolution" as people become ever more concerned with cultivating their subjective lives regarding all matters spiritual and existential as well. They thus argue that there is relatively strong evidence of an overall trend towards "subjective-life spirituality" in the West centered on the "cultivation or sacralization of unique subjective lives" (2005, 6). Heelas and Woodhead contrast their notion of "subjective-life spirituality" with "life-as" forms of religion, such as Christianity, that are characterized by an emphasis on such things as external authority, hierarchical forms of organization, obedience, tradition, metaphysical dualism, absolute truth claims, and moralism (Heelas & Woodhead 2005, 14-16; see also Barker 2008, 190). This is also the context in which the widespread use of the term "spirituality" within the alternative spiritual milieu needs to be understood, that is, as a way of contrasting the ideals of subjective-life spirituality from those of life-as religion (Heelas & Woodhead 2005, 5-6; see also Barker 2008, 189, 196; Partridge 2005, 9; Hunt 2003, 160-163). However, as Kate Hunt (2003) has argued, even though more and more people have less and less contact with traditional and institutional Christianity, its legacy lives on as the predominant form of religious language available in Western society and culture. (Hunt 2003, 162-168; see also Martin 2005, 76). However, Heelas and Woodhead apply the subjectivization thesis to institutional Christianity as well, distinguishing between four main types of life-as Christianity: (1) "congregations of difference", (2) "congregations of humanity", (3) "congregations of experiential difference", and (4) "congregations of experiential humanity". This interpretive framework has also been presented by Woodhead and Heelas in much broader form in *Religion in Modern Times: An Interpretive Anthology* (2000).

(1) "Congregations of difference" emphasize the fundamental difference between God and humankind. While such congregations "make an explicit offer of subjective reconstruction and satisfaction" (2005, 23) they also insist upon the subordination of subjectivity to a higher authority. This category would include conservative Catholicism and conservative Protestant evangelical and fundamentalist groups. (2) "Congregations of humanity", on the other hand, put particular emphasis on self-sacrificial service of God through helping one's fellow humans in need. Thus, "the imperative of self-sacrifice overrides any impetus towards self-cultivation" (2005, 22). This category includes mostly mainline and more liberal Catholic and Protestant churches. (3) "Congregations of experiential difference" stress the fundamental difference between divine and human but also entertain the possibility of direct personal experience of the divine through the medium of the Holy Spirit. Stronger emphasis is thus put on the cultivation of individual subjective experience. This category chiefly includes various

Charismatic and Charismatic-evangelical churches. Lastly, (4) “congregations of experiential humanity” remain concentrated on the notion of self-sacrifice while incorporating certain experiential elements catering to personal subjective life. This category would include groups such as the Quakers and other revivalist or parachurch-type Protestant groups. Lastly, it is important to note that these categories often may overlap or combine. (Heelas & Woodhead 2005, 17-23; 154-156) It is also fair to assume that there would be some degree of variation regarding which congregations would fall into which categories across different broader social and cultural contexts. Even so, this typology of different forms of “life-as” Christianity provide useful ways of conceptualizing the fate of different forms of Christian congregations and their corresponding attitudes to Christian life today across a range of different Western social and cultural contexts. We shall thus return to this typology at many points below. Drawing on the findings of their research of the holistic milieu and congregational domain of the British town of Kendal, Heelas and Woodhead thus offer the following account on the state of different types of religiosity and religious activities in a society and culture marked by the overall “massive subjective turn”:

- 1 Holistic milieu, subjective-life spirituality – which pays *most* attention to the cultivation of unique subjectivities – tends to be faring *best*.
- 2 Religions of experiential humanity and experiential difference – which address unique life subjectivities whilst placing them within a life-as frame of reference – tend to be faring *relatively well*.
- 3 Religions of difference – which pay some attention to unique subjectivities whilst emphasizing the life-as ‘oughts’ – tend to be faring *relatively badly*.
- 4 Religions of humanity – which pay *least* attention to unique subjectivities – tend to be faring *worst*. (Heelas & Woodhead 2005, 75)

As Heelas and Woodhead point out, the explanatory strength of the subjectivization thesis depends on evidence of the “subjective turn” being in place. Although these arguments are made on the basis of empirical research carried out in Britain, the purpose is nevertheless to offer a general interpretive framework for understanding religious change and contemporary religiosity and religious practice across the Western world. Moreover, as pointed out by Woodhead, Heelas and Davie:

The observation that ‘soft’ or subjectivized forms of religion and spirituality, both Christian and non-Christian or post-Christian, are doing relatively well in the West and can be expected to continue to do well, begins to undermine the very distinction between Christian and alternative forms of religion (and spirituality). Just as the simple dichotomy between religion and secularity may artificially constrain and distort our vision of the future, so too may that between Christian and alternative. (Woodhead & Heelas & Davie 2003, 8)

As argued here, contemporary transformations of religious belief, life, and practice in the West should not necessarily be understood in terms of 'new' and 'alternative' spiritualities springing up and increasingly sidelining traditional and institutional religion simply by virtue of their 'alternativeness'. To argue that "subjectivized" forms of religion, be they Christian or alternative, are beginning "to undermine the very distinction between Christian and alternative" in this regard is certainly a valid point to make. We shall return to this issue below when discussing the transformation of Evangelicalism during recent decades. In the following, we shall continue discussing issues such as these in a particular context when considering the impact of secularization and religious change on Finnish religiosity in light of these wider debates on the changing face of religion in the West.

## **2. 2 Secularization and religious change in Finland**

In which ways, then, have the general developments discussed above affected the religious climate of Finland? Before considering this question directly, we shall first begin with a short historical overview of religion in Finland since the advent of modernity.

As Finland constituted an integral part of the Swedish kingdom, Lutheranism was established in Finland as it was adopted as the sole confessional state church of Sweden at the Synod of Uppsala in 1593 (prohibition of any other religious observance was introduced throughout the realm in 1617). The 17th century was marked by a strong "emphasis on uniformity" (Kääriäinen & Niemelä & Ketola 2005, 39) and the building of centralized power structures. This period is usually referred to as the Period of Orthodoxy. As Kääriäinen, Niemelä, and Ketola point out, during this period, the Church strove to adapt and consolidate its activity and practice with the realities of the local village community, which was the form of life for the great majority of Finns at the time. In this way, the Church aimed to extend its influence to cover every aspect of social and cultural life. Moreover, during this period, "religious uniformity was regarded as a cohesive force in the whole realm" (Kääriäinen & Niemelä & Ketola 2005, 40). The Lutheran doctrine of the three estates and the resulting three-level division of society served to strengthen and consolidate the relationship between church and state, divine and secular authority, into a single whole. As Kääriäinen, Niemelä, and Ketola (2005, 41) express it, "In the eyes of the people the secular and spiritual authorities were one and the same". However, in spite of the rigid and non-tolerant climate of this period, some old popular religious beliefs and practices still managed to persist.

(Kääriäinen & Niemelä & Ketola 2005, 39-46)

German Pietism arrived in Finland during the last decades of the 17th century and also became a concern for the Church. However, although the Pietist movement put greater emphasis on the Protestant notion of the priesthood of all believers and the medium of the Holy Spirit, it also fully ascribed to Lutheran doctrine. Radical Pietism never gained a strong position in Finland. Notably, the Pietist movement, for the most part, constituted “a certain religious movement within the Church” (Kääriäinen & Niemelä & Ketola 2005, 48) since it appears to have been primarily aimed at bringing certain increasingly secularized portions of the population, such as the middle class, back into conformity with Church beliefs and practices. (Kääriäinen & Niemelä & Ketola 2005, 47-48) Although Finland was annexed by the Russian Empire in 1809, the Lutheran Church retained its position as state church of the now Grand Duchy.

## Later developments

In European comparison, the industrialization of Finland began at a rather late stage. Commencing proper in the 1830s and 1840s, industrialization increased pace in the 1860s and 1870s, and also coincided with a range of other profound social and cultural processes involving a shift from local to civil society. This climate of social and cultural change gave rise to a number of popular movements, including a number of revivalist movements, such as the Supplicationist movement, the Awakened, the Evangelical Revival, and Leastadianism, which originated from the ministry of Lars Levi Leostadius (1800-1861) (for a detailed account of revival movements in Finland during this time see for example Murtorinne 1992; 1995). These revival movements typically emphasized the importance of individual conversion and an eschatological understanding of history. Similar to Pietism, they mainly constituted “popular lay movements” *within* the Lutheran Church (Kääriäinen & Niemelä & Ketola 2005, 52). However, they gradually gained a stronger foothold within the Church, which in itself had gradually become increasingly liberal, as it no longer viewed it necessary to police doctrinal purity among all of its members. In addition to these domestic and essentially Lutheran movements, a number of other movements from abroad, such as the Seventh Day Adventists, the Methodist Church, the Pentecostal movement, the Salvation Army, the Free Church, and the Baptist Union also reached Finland during this time, eventually forming independent denominations of their own, or so-called “free churches”. The term “free churches” (“vapaat suunnat”) essentially denotes a wide array of different independent Protestant communities and groups (many of which are also Lutheran-based) which all lack direct links to the Finnish state.



Reflecting concerns typical of evangelical Protestantism more generally, these free churches are generally characterized by an emphasis on active personal engagement with faith, voluntarism and lay-leadership, evangelistic activity, and the notion of the priesthood of all believers. Many of them are also part of both national as well as wider transnational and international umbrella networks and organizations. (Kääriäinen & Niemelä & Ketola 2005, 49-55; <http://www.uskonnot.fi/uskonnot/view?religionId=20>; Martikainen 2004, 160-161)

The Church was greatly affected by the social turmoil of the early 20th century: the General Strike, a fundamental restructuring of the parliamentary system, and the effects of and resistance to the policy of “russification”, all contributed to widespread social instability. The Russian Revolution of 1917 resulted in Finnish independence later that same year and the establishment of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and the much smaller Orthodox Church as official state churches. Finnish independence was shortly followed by the bitter Finnish Civil War of 1918, during which the dominant Evangelical Lutheran Church aligned itself with the right-wing side or the “whites”. After right-wing victory in May of 1918, the Church was assigned an ever more central role as a uniting force in the country. The Act of Religious Freedom in 1922 also greatly affected the legal position of the Church. During the period leading up to the Second World War, Finnish society also became increasingly differentiated as many social functions previously administered and overseen by the Church gradually became overtaken by secular government and municipalities. As Kääriäinen, Niemelä, and Ketola point out, such developments were characteristic for the Nordic countries more generally and key to the subsequent development of the Nordic Welfare State-model. (Kääriäinen & Niemelä & Ketola 2005, 56-58)

During the latter part of the 19th and first part of the 20th century, a number of other Christianity-based religious organizations also arrived in Finland. These included The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which was first established in the city of Vasa in 1876 and eventually registered as a religious community in 1948, and Jehova’s Witnesses who started their activity in Finland in 1910 and were registered as a religious community in 1945. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Jehova’s Witnesses (now the third-largest religious community in the country) have both become relatively familiar to Finns through the increased visibility generated by their missionary work (e.g. Martikainen 2004, 163-165). Small Muslim and Jewish congregations had already gained a foothold in Finland in the beginning of the 20th century. A number of esoteric groups also became established during the first half of the 20th century, including The Finnish Theosophical Society (Teosofinen seura ry) founded in 1907 (and re-founded in 1933), The Finnish Rosicrucian Society (Ruusu-Risti ry)



founded in 1920, The Anthroposophical Society of Finland (Suomen antroposofinen seura) founded in 1923, and The Spiritualist Association of Finland (Suomen spiritualistinen seura ry) founded in 1946 (Sohlberg 2008, 205-210; Kääriäinen & Niemelä & Ketola 2005, 63-67; Martikainen 2004, 163-171) The abbreviation “ry” stands for “rekisteröitynyt yhdistys” which means *registered voluntary association*. As established by the Finnish Associations Act, religious groups may also be registered as *registered religious communities* (rekisteröitynyt uskonnollinen yhdyskunta). As ‘national’ churches, the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church and The Finnish Orthodox Church have their own legislation (see for example <http://www.uskonnot.fi/english/>). Although these Churches no longer hold the status of state churches, in the full sense of the word, many fundamental structural and legal connections still exist between them and the state. In 2003, the old Religious Freedom Act of 1922 was replaced by a new and expanded one.

The post-war decades brought additional profound changes in the structure of Finnish society. At this time, although still primarily an agrarian society, Finland experienced rapid industrial and service-industrial development and fast-increasing urbanization, resulting in unprecedented economic growth and fundamental changes in the social and cultural life of the large majority of Finns (in the beginning of the 1990s less than 20 % of Finns lived in rural areas). As Kääräinen, Niemelä, and Ketola (2005, 59) point out, through these rapid developments, Finnish society shifted almost directly from an agrarian to a service society. During this period, the Church also strengthened its position as national or ‘folk’ Church, particularly through emphasizing its role as the main proponent of social solidarity. As Kääräinen, Niemelä, and Ketola (2005, 60) write, “The spirit of common responsibility also contributed to directing the Church’s attention more towards social action. Instead of personal piety there was a new emphasis on mutual social responsibility”. The Church also responded to the new social and cultural challenges brought by late modernity, such as the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s, by concentrating on developing new forms of Church work. However, this new, and increasingly liberal, general direction also met with considerable resistance from conservative sections within the Church itself. The rising influence of conservative views resulted in the so-called “fifth revival” and also in increasing political engagement through the Finnish Christian League (formed in 1958). Eventually, following fierce debate, the ordination of women was established at the General Synod of 1986, further deepening the divisions between moderate and conservative sections within the Church. (Kääräinen & Niemelä & Ketola 2005, 60-61)

The debate concerning women pastors have surfaced anew in recent years as some conservative male pastors have united in their refusal to

conduct services with their female colleagues. Coupled with issues regarding the Church's stance on homosexuality, these debates have dominated much of mainstream media coverage of Church affairs during recent years and also affected wider attitudes towards the Church, especially among the young (Mikkola & Niemelä & Petterson 2007, 69).

Finnish society became increasingly religiously pluralistic during the post-war period, partly as a result of increasing immigration, and later, through the arrival of refugees. The wider countercultural trends of the 1960s and 1970s resulted in steadily increased interest in various forms of new religious movements and alternative spirituality. Hinduist religious teachings have become represented by new religious movements such as ISKCON, Transcendental Meditation, as well as a number of Yoga groups. A number of Buddhist groups also started their activities in the beginning of the 1980s. (Martikainen 2004, 168-171; Kääriäinen & Niemelä & Ketola 2005, 63) More recent rising interest in alternative spiritualities is most clearly evidenced by a steady growth in the number of alternative spirituality bookstores and magazines such as *Minä olen* (I Am), *Voi hyvin* (Be Well), and *Ultra* as well as by the enduring popularity of alternative spirituality fairs such as the annual "Spirit and Knowledge Fair" (Hengen ja Tiedon messut) organized by the Association for the Borderline Science (Rajatiedon yhteistyöryhmä) (Sohlberg 2008, 214). More recently established groups include various Neo-Pagan umbrella groups such as Lehto - The Association of Nature Religions (Lehto -Luonnonuskontojen yhdistys ry, founded and registered in 1998) and The Finnish Pagan Network (Pakanaverkko ry, founded and registered in 1999). Most Finnish Neo-Pagans identify themselves with different Wiccan traditions. In addition, a number of esoteric and magical groups have also been established during the last decade. Generally speaking, however, although there is evidence of a rise of interest in alternative spiritual teachings, membership of alternative spiritual groups has so far remained low. (Sohlberg 2008, 211-215)

As of 31 December 2008, 58 registered religious communities were listed by The Population Register Centre. However, the large majority of these represent Christian free churches and Islamic groups. At the time of writing, *The Religions in Finland Project* (<http://www.uskonnot.fi/>) online database lists 825 groups with religious/spiritual concerns (broadly defined) registered as either voluntary associations or religious communities. Some of the groups listed also operate as unregistered associations or commercial enterprises. It is important to note, once again, that overall membership in non-Christian religious communities or voluntary associations has remained low. The country's Muslim population is also divided into a larger number of smaller groups. At the time of writing, the total number of Muslims in Finland is approximately a little above 40,000 (for more on Islam in Finland see Martikainen & Sakaranaho & Juntunen 2008). As of 31 December 2008,

approximately 80.3 percent of all Finns were still members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. With the exception of the Finnish Orthodox Church and the much smaller Catholic Church in Finland, almost all other registered religious communities and voluntary associations with higher membership rates are either Christian Protestant (free churches) or Christianity-based (e.g. Jehova's Witnesses). It is important to point out that the long-standing dominant social position of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, its special legal relationship to the state, as well as its position as *the* Church in public discourse, means that people affiliated with other Christian churches and denominations, and indeed other religions, can scarcely ignore the dealings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church altogether. There is thus a sense in which religious 'diversity' has so far remained limited in Finland (*cf.* Beckford 2003, 76-77).

During recent decades, the Finnish religious landscape has experienced a gradual shift towards increasing individualization and privatization of religious beliefs and practices. Reflecting global trends, Charismatic Christianity and Pentecostalism has grown steadily in Finland since the 1970s. A number of new activities and movements stressing the experiential side of faith have also developed within the Evangelical Lutheran Church itself, for example, in the form of silent retreats, renewed interest in the pilgrimage cult, or the creation of the so-called St. Thomas Mass, which is an ecumenical evening service characterized by its simplicity and down-to-earth approach. The Charismatic Movement has also played an important role in these developments. As is often pointed out, the Nordic welfare-state model essentially builds on Christian ideas of neighborly solidarity (e.g. Kääriäinen & Niemelä & Ketola 2005, 58). Indeed, the Nordic churches have always emphasized the importance of their social work, particularly among the poor and less fortunate (e.g. Yeung 2008). Viewed in the light of Heelas' and Woodhead's typology of different types of Christian congregations outlined above, the Nordic Lutheran churches all constitute typical "congregations of humanity", and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland is certainly no exception in this regard. We should recall here that, according to Heelas and Woodhead, these were the types of congregations that tended to be faring *worst* in a social and cultural climate, such as Finland, that is increasingly marked by a broader "subjective turn". The situation for the larger number of smaller Finnish free churches is slightly different. Of course, the majority of these churches fall within the categories of "congregations of experiential humanity" and "congregations of experiential difference". The smaller membership rates of these churches, usually stretching from a few hundred to a few thousand members, have in many cases remained relatively stable over longer periods of time. In line with Heelas' and Woodhead's thesis, in some cases, there has even been evidence of a slight increase of interest in recent years, particularly in

Charismatic Christianity and Pentecostalism.<sup>2</sup> As reported on the Religions in Finland Project website, when including the family circles of baptized members in 2003, the total number of people somehow involved with Pentecostal communities in Finland was estimated to reaching over a hundred thousand. (<http://www.uskonnot.fi/uskonnot/view?religionId=28>)

## **The current state of traditional institutional Christianity in Finland**

The current state of religion and its social role in Finland has received much attention from Finnish scholars of religion in recent years. In their exploration and overview of recent trends in Finnish religiosity, *Religion in Finland. Decline, Change and Transformation of Finnish Religiosity*, Kääriäinen, Niemelä, and Ketola (2005) direct particular attention at the issue of whether Finland has “gone secular”. They approach this question in the light of the traditional and most commonly used ways of quantitatively measuring the social and cultural significance of religion, as well as the degrees of individual religiosity, in connection to theories of secularization and religious change: commitment to religious denominations, degrees of individual religious belief, degrees of religious practice, comparisons between different groups of the population, and the relationship between religion and morality.

Kääriäinen, Niemelä, and Ketola (2005) offer the following general observations on the state of traditional institutional religion in contemporary Finland, most of which concern the Evangelical Lutheran Church in particular: There has been a steady, but by no means radical, decline of membership (about 10 percent) in the Evangelical Lutheran Church during the last five decades. The significance that Finns attach to the doctrines and religious message of the Church has also declined. Participation in all forms of Church activities, particularly activities that require regular participation and long-term commitment, has also declined sharply, especially among younger age groups in urban areas and the Helsinki metropolitan area in particular. The relationship between Church teachings and the morality of Finns has likewise weakened considerably. However, as Kääriäinen, Niemelä, and Ketola (2005, 168) point out, the portion of the population still belonging to the Church is high in comparison to most other Western European countries. Significantly, Church member’s attitudes to their own membership as such has so far largely remained unchanged, that is, the majority of Church members still view membership of the Church as something natural and taken-for-granted. Above all, it is argued, when

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<sup>2</sup> For statistical data see:

Population Register Centre: [http://www.vaestorekisterikeskus.fi/vrk/home.nsf/pages/index\\_eng](http://www.vaestorekisterikeskus.fi/vrk/home.nsf/pages/index_eng)

looking at individual beliefs and practices, Finnish religiosity has become increasingly *privatized*. For although participation in all forms of Church activity has seen overall decline, there appears to have been only slight changes in the degrees of private religious belief and practice among Finns. For example, the proportion of people who state that they believe in the existence of God (although not necessarily as taught by Christianity) has not changed significantly during the past two decades and the proportion of people reporting that they pray on a regular basis has also remained stable during this time. Thus, in a wider European comparison, Finnish private religious practice has remained high. This leads Kääriäinen, Niemelä, and Ketola (2005, 168) to contend that “Only a small part of Finns can be described as ‘irreligious’” (That, of course, depends on one’s understanding of what counts as a ‘religious’ person). It should be noted, though, that they also point out that, in wider European comparison, the number of active churchgoers is exceptionally *low*. As they go on to argue (2005, 122): “Thus in Finland the connection between private and public religious observance is in European comparison very weak”. At the same time, as the Church has become ever more concerned and engaged with wider social issues it has also increasingly come to be more generally expected to serve not only its own members but also “the public at large” (2005, 170). This can be interpreted as having somewhat strengthened the Church’s societal position in recent times. (Kääriäinen & Niemelä & Ketola 2005, 166-171; see also Mikkola & Niemelä & Petterson 2007, 47; 55)

The issue of young adult’s religious sensibilities deserves special attention in this context. As argued by Teija Mikkola, Kati Niemelä, and Juha Petterson (2007), exploring young adult’s attitudes towards religion may be seen to provide particularly valuable insights into possible future developments and changes in the religious attitudes of Finns. Moreover, viewed in light of the traditional ways of quantitatively measuring religiosity as mentioned above, the religiosity of young adults appears to have declined on all fronts, particularly in the Helsinki metropolitan area. Generally speaking, taken together and viewed as a group, young adults today seem markedly less interested in religion than they were only a few decades ago (for statistical data see Mikkola & Niemelä & Petterson 2007, 64; 81; 117). This, of course, also has to do with a more widespread process of detraditionalization and a weakening of religious socialization, particularly as received in the home (Niemelä & Koivula 2006, 176; Mikkola & Niemelä & Petterson 2007, 101-106). The numbers of young people being confirmed by the Evangelical Lutheran Church each year has, however, remained high. Much in line with general transformations of religious attitudes in the West, young adult Finns have become more inclined to emphasize individual and subjective values. Indeed, Mikkola, Niemelä, and Petterson (2007, 58-59; 77-80) explicitly discuss young adult’s attitudes towards religion in relation to a

Western society and culture marked by a widespread “subjective turn”. They also highlight the important role played by media and popular culture in the formation of young adult’s views on religion today. Parallels can be drawn here to Partridge’s (2004) notion of “occulture” and the increasingly important role being played by popular culture as a resource of religious/spiritual inspiration. (Mikkola & Niemelä & Petterson 2007, 44-49; 82; 101)

But what can be said with regard to these issues about the *religiously active minority* within the Church? Generally speaking, religiously active young members of the Church have become increasingly frustrated by entrenched and drawn-out debates within the Church on topics such as resistance to women pastors and homosexuality. As Mikkola, Niemelä, and Petterson (2007, 69) phrase the matter, “in the opinion of the religiously active minority, the Church is not sufficiently bold in taking a stand”. Indeed, as they go on to argue, the Church’s increasingly ambivalent stance on many moral issues may indeed “activate those active in the Church to drift away from it” (2007, 69). However, the “religiously active” should not be viewed as constituting a homogeneous group. Among the religiously active some identify with the “Church mainstream” and tend to regard religion as a mainly private matter while others instead identify more with revivalist views. It is from within this latter group in particular that the Church has come to be criticized for “its lack of backbone and for not being faithful enough to the Bible” (2007, 76). People within this group tend to participate less in ordinary conventional Church activity, favoring instead a deeper participation in the activities of different types of revivalist groups within the Church or some other free churches. As argued by Helen Cameron (2003, 117), today’s modern churches often include “affinity groups within particular denominations and cross-denominational groups meeting to explore particular spiritualities”. Moreover, as “These groups build trust on the basis of shared experience /.../ It seems possible that affiliation to these groups may strengthen at the expense of participation in the local church” (Cameron 2003, 117). Today, a wide range of such groups can be found within the broader Finnish Christian environment. As we shall explore in more detail below, in many respects, the Christian metal scene could also be viewed as an example of such a cross-denominational affinity group based on shared experience. As noted, research on the religious attitudes and sensibilities of young adults in Finland also clearly indicates that the *private* and *experiential* aspects of religious activity have become increasingly important over time (Niemelä 2006, 65). Finally, there are also those within the religiously active minority whose understandings of faith involves “a marked societal component” (2007, 76) and who would like to see a stronger emphasis on tolerance, openness, and equality within the Church. It is worth noting here that young people belonging to the



religiously active minority usually have been socialized into the Church at an early stage in the lives. (Mikkola & Niemelä & Petterson 2007, 75-76; 127)

The Church has also experimented with as well as introduced a number of strategies and nation-wide projects aimed at bringing young people back into its fold. The general idea behind most such initiatives has been to try to approach young people in their own environment and on their own terms. Quite much attention has also been directed towards the issue of *music* in Church settings. The Church has increasingly come to recognize that traditional church music simply no longer appeals to younger age groups. Hence, the Church has started experimenting with alternative contemporary forms of music. The *Metal Mass*, first arranged in the summer of 2006, is a recent and good example of this (discussed in more detail in Chapter 5). The Church has also addressed the issue of *language* in Church settings as it has begun to acknowledge the fact that the language used in Church services has become increasingly alien if not altogether unintelligible to younger sections of the population. (Mikkola & Niemelä & Petterson 2007, 128-136) These are all important observations as they concern all of the participants in this study, many of whom belong to the religiously active minority of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, and all of whom belong to what could be called the broader 'active Christian minority' of the country. As argued above, because of the Evangelical Lutheran Church's dominant position within the Finnish Christian milieu, and indeed religious milieu more generally, its dealings and fortunes are commonly viewed as functioning like something of a barometer of overall Finnish religiosity. This may not reflect reality in unproblematic ways, but it is still quite fair to assume that it affects views on the current state of Christianity in Finland among people affiliated with free churches as well. Indeed, as is discussed below, Finnish Christian metal musicians interviewed for this study who were not affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church still had much to say about its current position and dealings.

What, then, should be said by way of conclusion? Kääriäinen, Niemelä, and Ketola summarize their (admittedly rather optimistic) conclusions about the current state of religion in Finland in five main points. First, the Evangelical Lutheran Church has so far continued playing a central social and cultural role as a component of Finnish national identity or "Finnish way of life" (2005, 172), particularly through offering people rites of passage such as Church baptisms and weddings. Second, "Institutional religion has changed from state-oriented to society-oriented" (2005, 172). Secularization, it is argued, has been "slowed down" (2005, 173) through the "more rapid redefinition of relations between Church and state" (2005, 173). Third, as already noted, the *social role* or "social conscience" (2005, 173) of the Church has remained widely appreciated by the majority of Finns regardless of their individual religious commitments. The church has also increasingly taken



on functions not directly connected to religious or faith-related issues as such. In various ways, the Church has made accommodations to late modern Finnish society and culture as it has become increasingly concerned with having “more interface with the concerns which people find important” (2005, 173). Fourth, “Institutional religion has begun to offer frameworks for private religiosity” (2005, 174). A range of new activities directed at cultivating the experiential aspects of religiosity have been introduced. Fifth, “Institutional religion in itself has changed in a direction of popular religiosity” (2005, 174). Institutional religiosity has become somewhat more individualized. The Church has further relaxed its requirements on doctrinal purity in favor of a more debate-emphasizing approach that also lends some room to a “searching and rethinking of traditional conceptions” (2005, 174). Clearly, many general developments in Finnish religiosity appear to support the idea that a considerable degree of secularization has indeed taken place. Few Finnish scholars of religion would dispute this. However, the evidence also suggests that *transformation* would be a more appropriate description of contemporary changes in Finnish religiosity than secularization proper (when understood as involving not only a decline in the overall social significance of religion but also a “secularization of the mind”). (Kääriäinen & Niemelä & Ketola 2005, 172-175)

As pointed out here, the contemporary Finnish religious climate may seem to be marked by some contradictory trends. On the one hand, religious belief and practice has become increasingly privatized with increasingly fewer people, particularly young adults in urban areas, feeling that traditional institutional religion has much to offer them. However, on the other hand, although the general trend has been one of slow decline, the vast majority of Finns have nevertheless so far remained members of the dominant Evangelical Lutheran Church. The notion of “vicarious religion” (Davie 2000) thus *partly* appears to apply to the Finnish situation. However, it is clear that Finns should not be described in terms of “believing without belonging” but, rather, in the case of the Evangelical Lutheran Church at least, primarily in terms of “believing in belonging” (Kääriäinen & Niemelä & Ketola 2005, 85) and “belonging without believing” (Martin 2005, 86). However, as noted above, increasing numbers of young people in particular no longer seem to feel such a need for ‘belonging’ (Mikkola & Niemelä & Petterson 2007, 68; Mikkola 2006). At the same time, the Evangelical Lutheran Church has so far managed to retain its role as ‘folk’ church, albeit with increasing difficulty. It should also be noted here that, as a typical “congregation of humanity”, it has so far also managed to fare surprisingly well. Indeed, its role as a ‘guardian’ of social solidarity has largely been an advantageous one. Of course, some other Christian congregations emphasizing the experiential aspects of religious life have indeed grown in

Finland in recent times. It is, in any case, still important to note the resilience and enduring prominence of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in a social and cultural climate that is clearly marked by a general “subjective turn”. In the main, even though Finns have become increasingly estranged from Church teachings and practices, the appreciation of the Church as social actor has remained high (Mikkola & Niemelä & Petterson 2007, 80-83; 94-95). The current Finnish situation can thus be viewed as an example of how traditional institutional religion may continue, in many ways, to occupy a prominent position throughout society in spite of clear evidence of a more general shift towards “self-understanding and socio-cultural arrangements /.../ in a ‘person-centred’ or ‘subjectivity-centred’ direction” (Heelas & Woodhead 2005, 5). Due to these partly contradictory factors and trends, the time does not yet seem ripe for more confident predictions about the future of Finnish religiosity.

The main conclusion we need to draw from this chapter is that religion and religious life has undergone many deep and fundamental changes in late modernity. Traditional institutional Christianity has long been on the decline throughout much of the Western world. In some parts however, and most notably in the USA, Christianity appears to remain in as strong a social and cultural position as ever. At the same time, as argued by many scholars of religion (e.g. Partridge 2004, 2005; Heelas & Woodhead 2005) there are also signs of a resurgence of individual religiosity as evidenced by a more widespread increasing interest in alternative religions and spiritualities, which, above all, cater to the subjective and individual side of religious/spiritual life. However, all of these observations remain the subject of much debate. In particular, we also need to note that Finland has not remained unaffected by these wider developments. As argued above, secularization, which is often taken to involve a corresponding rise of interest in alternative religions/spiritualities to some degree, seems not have been as thoroughgoing as in many other Western countries *so far*. But, importantly, this should not be taken to indicate that the many challenges that traditional institutional Christianity faces today would not be highly relevant for the Finnish context as well. As seen above, the Finnish Christian landscape is, slowly but surely, experiencing these types of changes. This is the broader religious environment in which the Finnish Christian metal scene is to be understood. Lastly, as argued by many commentators on contemporary religious change, for increasing numbers of people today, popular culture has become an ever more important, and in many ways unpredictable, resource for religious/spiritual inspiration and identity construction. It is this issue which is addressed in the following chapter.

### **3. The encounter between religion and popular culture**

The study of the relationship between religion and popular culture has grown exponentially during the last two decades (e.g. Lynch 2007c, 1) and increasingly started to attract the attention of scholars from a range of different academic fields within the humanities and social sciences, including religious studies, theology, cultural studies, media and communication studies, anthropology, literature, and sociology. The field is highly interdisciplinary in character, encompassing a wide range of particular interests and theoretical and methodological approaches. To date, no unified study of religion and popular culture has developed. As Bruce D. Forbes (2005, 9) observes, "it is a field in need of definition, articulated methodologies, and fuller awareness of the diverse contributions already made". Indeed, many scholars have sought to bring together commonly used perspectives and approaches in attempting to provide something of an overview of this fragmented field of study (e.g. Forbes & Mahan 2001/2005; Mazur & McCarthy 2001; Stout & Buddenbaum 2001; Lynch 2007a). In addition, a number of detailed studies aiming to develop starting points for more unified and integrated approaches have also been produced in recent years (e.g. Partridge 2004, 2005; Lynch 2005; Possamai 2005; Chidester 2005). A few notable contributions to the study of religion and popular culture have also been made in the Nordic countries during recent years (e.g. Häger 2001; Bossius 2003; Sjö 2007; Axelson 2008). Before moving to discussing key approaches within the field, we must first begin by reflecting on the concepts of 'popular culture' and 'religion' within the study of religion and popular culture. However, as Lynch (2005, 27) points out, within this broad and still emerging field of study, these categories are best viewed "as conceptual tools rather than neatly defined entities".

#### **3. 1 The concept of 'popular culture'**

As many researchers of popular culture have observed, those who claim to study "popular culture" do not always agree upon the meaning of the concept (Lynch 2005, 2). The many ways in which the concept has been used thus calls for some clarification. Lynch distinguishes between three main ways of defining popular culture "in relation to a cultural 'other' or 'others'":

- 1 Popular culture as an opposing cultural form to *high culture* or *the avant-garde*;
- 2 popular culture as a category that is defined in relation to both *high culture* and *folk culture*, or which is seen as replacing *folk culture*;
- 3 popular culture as a form of social cultural resistance against *dominant culture* or *mass culture*. (Lynch 2005, 3)

Definitions of popular culture as an opposing form of culture to that of “high culture” or the “avant-garde” usually afford popular culture an inferior status to that of the ‘true art’ of “high culture” or the “avant-garde” (Lynch 2005, 4). This view has also become known as the “culture and civilization” tradition (Clark 2007d, 12). As discussed in detail by John Storey (2003), this way of understanding popular culture has its origins in the notion of a distinction between “entertainment” and “art” that emerged among sections of the British and North American social elites in the late 19th century. This distinction was essentially based on the idea that the “lower” and “vulgar” forms of culture (i.e. entertainment) of the lower classes had to be separated from those of the “higher” and ‘nobler’ forms of culture (i.e. art) of the higher classes. Thus, this separation also constituted a form of social distinction advocating an institutionalization of a connection between culture and class. (Storey 2003, 33-45; Lynch 2005, 4-8)

Elaborating on these issues, Lynch points out that we also need to recognize how the idea of a distinction between “high” and “low” forms of culture “fails to acknowledge the complexity of the cultural life of the majority of the population” (2005, 7). Moreover, he goes on to argue that the legacy of this distinction also continues to influence the scepticism directed towards popular culture as a ‘serious’ or ‘worthwhile’ object of study within certain sections of the academic community. (Lynch 2005, 7-8). Although this view of popular culture has been repeatedly contested, it continues to influence ‘common-sense’ notions of popular culture within wider society.

Definitions of popular culture in relation to both “high culture” and “folk culture”, or as replacing folk culture, can be formulated both positively and negatively. When formulated positively (e.g. Forbes 2005, 2-3), popular culture is viewed more as a *type* of culture existing alongside those of “high” and “folk” culture. In this view, these are all different but equally valid forms of culture. In its more negative form this way of defining popular culture centers around the idea that a commercialized popular culture “focused around mass production and consumption” has “displaced more authentic, traditional folk cultures” (Lynch 2005, 9). These accounts, then, are typically based around some form of “narrative of a ‘cultural fall’” resulting in a shift from a culture *of* the people to one *for* the people (Lynch 2005, 11). However, as Lynch points out, one can certainly bring into question the meaningfulness of trying to sustain a distinction between “popular” and “folk” culture within the broader multifaceted Western

cultural climate of today. (Lynch 2005, 8-11)

Lastly, when popular culture is defined as a form of social cultural resistance against “dominant” culture or “mass” culture, particular focus is directed at how popular cultural forms may provide *resources* of cultural resistance to the dominant culture of a particular society at a particular time. Following Lynch (2005, 13) we might add that contemporary Western societies are characterized by multiple forms of “social and cultural domination, and more than one kind of dominating group” (see also Hoover 2006, 45). As David Morgan (2007a, 24) points out, it is important to note that distinctions drawn between different forms of culture “tend to be either arbitrary or ideologically enforced”. Lynch instead favours a broader definition of popular culture “as the shared environment, practices, and resources of everyday life in a given society” (2005, 14), or put in another way, “as a ‘way of life’ for particular people in particular contexts” (2005, 15). Approaching popular culture in this way “involves looking at the wider structures, relationships, patterns, and meanings of everyday life within which popular cultural texts are produced and ‘consumed’” (2005 15-16). Popular culture, then, should not be viewed as “a straightforward object” (2005, 19) that simply ‘exists’ independently of people’s various forms of engagements with it. But we should not let such a broad definition lead us to view popular cultural audiences as a “homogeneous population” who all engage, or have the opportunity to engage, with popular culture in the same ways (Lynch 2005, 14-21; for an alternative but similar discussion of the defining features of popular culture see Clark 2007d, 8-9)

Focusing on popular culture in relation to everyday life becomes of particular importance when studying the various relationships that exist between *religion* and popular culture in a cultural climate marked by religious change. As Forbes (2005, 5) writes, “Because popular culture surrounds us, it seems reasonable to assume that its messages and subtle themes influence us as well as reflect us”. These thoughts are echoed by Partridge (2004, 123) who argues that “popular culture is both an expression of the cultural milieu from which it emerges and formative of that culture, in that it contributes to the formation of worldviews and, in so doing, influences what people accept as plausible”. In this way, popular culture plays an important role in our daily interactions by providing us with resources for expressing our identities or who we are to others (e.g. Clark 2007c, 11-20; Morgan 2007a, 21). However, as Jeffrey H. Mahan (2007, 48) points out, “Religion and culture have always been overlapping categories and religion’s interactions with the cultural and economic systems of its day have always troubled and intrigued observers”. Moreover, popular culture itself provides an arena in which the very meaning and understanding of ‘religion’ is constantly negotiated (Mahan 2007, 51; see also Chidester 2005, 9; Schultze 2001, 46; Clark 2007c, 72).

The role of *communications media* (nowadays electronic media in particular) and *consumption* continue to constitute important elements in debates about popular culture. Issues relating to communication and consumption have also received much attention within wider debates on religion in late modern times (see for example Lyon 2000). Lynch argues that a fuller understanding of the role of popular culture within contemporary everyday life needs to take these intimately connected dimensions into account as they both can be viewed as being of great significance “in relation to specifically theological and religious concerns such as the construction of communities, identities, values, and beliefs” (Lynch 2005, 43). For present purposes, it is particularly important to note how electronic media have changed the very ways in which we interact and, as Lynch (2005, 55) expresses it, have come to “play a growing role in shaping people’s personal identities and understanding of the wider world”. (Lynch 2005, 48-56)

From a slightly different perspective, these issues have also been widely debated within the study of the relationship between religion and media. As Hoover (2006, 284) argues, “On a more pervasive level /.../ the ‘common culture’ represented by the media has today become determinative of the contexts, extents, limits, languages, and symbols available to religious and spiritual discourse”. As he goes on to point out, these developments have also made it increasingly important to account for the ways in which people’s actual religious and spiritual beliefs are reflected in various forms of media (and popular culture) as they are used by individuals and specific religious or spiritual groups and, moreover, to explore the different ways and degrees to which media may become *formative* and *determinative* of those individuals and groups (Hoover 2006, 290; similar arguments are also made by Chidester 2005, 32; Lyon 2000, 56-64; and Stout 2001b, 69-70). These observations are highly significant for any study of Christian metal. Not only does this group express its Christian faith through a popular cultural form, but that popular cultural form is itself highly formative and determinative of that group. As we shall see in following chapters, an adequate understanding of the phenomenon of Christian metal necessarily needs to take account of how the particular musical, rhetorical, and aesthetic characteristics of metal music as such also constitute central, and indeed integral, components of this phenomenon.

A related and much debated issue has centered around what Partridge (2004, 122) terms the “dilution thesis”, that is, the idea that popular culture serves to “dilute”, “erode”, or “trivialize” traditional ‘serious’ religious beliefs and worldviews. As Partridge (2004, 122) argues, in many ways, traditional religious beliefs and worldviews appear in popular culture in *restated* form, or as he (2004, 122) formulates it, “trivialized or superficial spirituality can, over time, become serious religion” (Partridge 2004, 121-123; see also Chidester 2005, 9; Possamai 2005, 132). Importantly, no matter how



we choose to approach the issue of “dilution”, it will have far-reaching consequences for our understanding of the people themselves who engage in popular culturally-infused forms of religion and spirituality. It is important not to *pre-suppose* the nature of the multitude of different possible ways in which people may engage with popular culture in a religiously or spiritually significant manner. This holds equally for both alternative *and* more traditional forms of religiosity.

The issue of *consumption*, on the other hand, might be seen as relating more directly to people’s construction of social and cultural identities. As discussed above, some social theorists (e.g. Giddens 1991) have suggested that people increasingly express their identities through the consumer choices they make. That said, one should not automatically assume that people construct their identities in predictable and straightforward ways. The relationship between popular culture and consumption has long been the subject of much scholarly debate. As such, it also continues to influence understandings of the relationship between religion and popular culture. For example, already in the 1950s and 1960s, hugely influential social theorists such as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse identified increasing consumption in the Western world, and the USA in particular, as playing a central role in the forming of culture as a whole into a “dehumanizing system” (Lynch 2005, 70) centered on standardization and commercial profit. We shall return to issues of religion and consumption at many points below (for more on critical views on popular culture and consumption see Lynch 2005, 60-73; Elliott 2009, 20-21; 36-40).

### **3. 2 Defining ‘religion’ within the study of religion and popular culture**

Examining religion in relation to popular culture and everyday life raises important questions of definition. How religion is interpreted as featuring within the context of popular culture will depend on how it is defined. Within the study of religion and popular culture these debates have mainly concentrated on the respective virtues and weaknesses of *substantive* and *functionalist* approaches. According to Lynch (2007c, 128-129), an intermediary *phenomenological* approach may also be added. These debates, then, should be viewed as part of wider debates on the definition of religion within contemporary religious studies, and the sociology of religion in particular.

*Substantive* definitions of religion are essentially concerned with what religion ‘is’. As Lynch points out, such a definition is usually based on the identification of a set of “externally observable” (2007c, 128) core or



‘substantive’ elements that need to be present in order for a “socio-cultural” (2007c, 127) system to be termed a religion. Such core elements would include belief in supernatural beings, sacred texts, sacred spaces, rites and rituals, religious institutions, and various forms of religious personnel. Different substantive definitions may afford different core elements different degrees of importance. These types of definitions have functioned as the basis on which religious systems traditionally identified as “world religions” (e.g. Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism) have been understood. Substantive definitions are also implicit in much research on religion and popular culture. (Lynch 2007c, 126-127)

The virtues of substantive definitions lie in their ability to delineate a more clearly marked area or field of study. However, they raise a number of problematic issues as well. For example, it is not clear *how* one is to determine which elements constitute the core elements of religion. It is also unclear as to how useful such a definition might be for analyzing the increasingly fluid character of religious life and practice within contemporary Western society and culture. That being said, substantive or “generic” understandings of religion have exerted considerable influence on both academic as well as everyday ‘lay’ understandings of what religion ‘is’ (Beckford 2003, 16-17; see also Ammerman 2007, 7-8). Moreover, the historical genealogies of such definitions also need to be taken into account. Substantive definitions may blind us to the complexities of religious life and risk imposing Western ideas about religion on other non-Western religious traditions. (Lynch 2005, 27-28; 2007c, 126-130; Beyer 2003, 164-165)

A *phenomenological* approach, on the other hand, concentrates on identifying universal ‘features’ of religion that appear to be recurring across religious traditions and historical periods. This approach thus directs particular attention at people’s “lived experience” of religion and the sacred, concentrating on “culturally universal phenomena” such as myths and rituals (Lynch 2007c, 128). Thus, while displaying many similarities with substantive definitions, phenomenological approaches extend their inquiry beyond the traditional canon of institutional world religions. However, phenomenological definitions, which also build on a generic understanding of supposedly universal features of religion as a whole, also risk imposing ideologically grounded Western perceptions and notions of myth, ritual, and ‘the numinous’ on non-Western social and cultural contexts.

Finally, religion can be defined in *functionalist* terms, concentrating on what religion ‘does’. Such an approach would seem to be particularly suited for studying the increasingly fluid and individual-centered character of much contemporary Western religiosity. As Lynch (2007c, 129) observes, this approach can be illustrated with reference to the thoughts of Emile Durkheim (1995, first published 1912) who viewed religion as the “socio-cultural system which binds people into a particular set of social

identifications, values, and beliefs". From this standpoint, religion essentially has to do with the "sacred", that is, ideas and practices that are set apart from the ordinary or the "profane". In Durkheim's view shared notions of the sacred serve to uphold social cohesion by binding people together within a single moral universe (Chidester 2005, 16). A similar view can also be found in the work of Clifford Geertz (1973). Following Lynch, in this way, functional definitions emphasize the *social* function of religion as a force that binds people together through offering structures for everyday life. Functionalist approaches may also highlight the "existential" or "hermeneutical" function of religion, that is, the ways in which it provides people with resources for the shaping of identities and a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives. In addition, particular attention can also be directed at the "transcendent" function of religion, focusing on how it provides people with ways of experiencing the sacred or the transcendent. The importance attached to each of these dimensions varies among different functionalist definitions. Functionalist approaches can prove particularly useful when looking at new and alternative forms of religious and spiritual practice and the many ways in which they may interact with traditional religious institutions. (Lynch 2005, 28-30)

However, functionalist definitions are by no means unproblematic. As Lynch (2007c, 129) observes: "Functionalist approaches open up the possibility that any socio-cultural system which serves these basic 'religious' needs for community, identity, and meaning could be defined as religious, even though it may fall far outside the conventional canon of religions". This means that, in practice, functionalist definitions seem to give academics the authority to determine that certain cultural practices are 'really about' religion or spirituality regardless of the views of people actually involved in them. Hence, it can be argued that functionalist definitions are in fact much less attentive to the "lived meanings" of people involved in different religious and cultural communities and practices (Lynch 2007c, 131). As this approach essentially makes it possible for anything to be labeled as 'religious', it may serve to obscure more than it clarifies by blurring all distinctions between religion and other cultural practices. (Lynch 2007c, 129-134; see also Dobbelaere 2002, 49-52; McLoud 2003, 199; Swatos 2003, 43-44). Therefore, as Peter Beyer (2003, 165) has pointed out regarding the problem of defining religion more generally, it could be argued that functionalist definitions "do not so much solve the problem [of definition] as evade it".

These different approaches to the definition of religion each have their explanatory strengths and weaknesses. As this study is mainly situated within the realm of institutional Christianity, it may seem most suitable to employ a substantive approach. However, there is no reason why a substantive approach should not also take into account how religion functions, what it 'does', within people's lived experiences. Drawing

absolute lines between substantive, phenomenological, and functionalist approaches to religion inevitably leads to a theoretically based *exclusion* of important dimensions of religious belief and practice. Approaching religion from a social constructionist perspective involves directing particular attention at how religion and religious meaning is constructed and embedded in the context of human interaction. It is quite fair to assume that many people, including many of the participants in this study, hold understandings of religion that include *all* of the defining elements – substantive, phenomenological, and functionalist – singled out by the main approaches to the definition of religion discussed above. It is also important to note that, in their respective ways, these three approaches all postulate some objective ‘reality’ or generic qualities to that which may count as religion. Again, this is not to say that these approaches would not each contribute to a deeper overall understanding of the phenomenon we call religion. The social constructionist approach employed here thus involves paying serious attention to the construction of religious meaning and significance within the lived experiences of a particular group of people, that is, the Finnish Christian metal scene, and allowing this construction to enter into dialogue with various theoretical understandings of religion such as those discussed above (see Ammerman 2007, 5-6; Swatos 50-52; Beckford 2003, 195).

### **3. 3 Key approaches in the study of religion and popular culture**

A more comprehensive understanding of the complex relationships between religion and popular culture, as well as the different ways in which that relationship can be studied, requires us to consider the various forms this relationship might take. Working from a European perspective, it should be noted that until now much work within the field has primarily concentrated on a North American context, which is reflected in a large number of studies concentrating on the relationship between religion and different forms of media in the USA. Forbes (2005) provides a useful, although not totally unproblematic, way of conceptualizing this diverse field of study through distinguishing between four main areas of inquiry, concentrating on four main types of relationship between religion and popular culture. These are “religion in popular culture”, “popular culture in religion”, “popular culture as religion”, and “popular culture and religion in dialogue” (for an alternative but similar typology of key approaches see Lynch 2005, 21). As these categories overlap in many ways, they should not be regarded as exclusive in any sense but, rather, understood in relation to one another. In

many respects, they also represent different forms of scholarly approaches to the field. However, all highlight the increasingly important role played by popular culture within the social, cultural, and religious climate of the contemporary West.

As noted, it should be acknowledged that this typology has its limitations, particularly since it may be taken to suggest that 'religion' and 'culture/popular culture' in some sense can be viewed as constituting separate spheres or domains and, as such, that they somehow could be set apart and studied and analyzed separately from one another as well. In line with the social constructionist approach of this study, what students of religion and popular culture (and indeed students of religion in general as argued by von Stuckrad 2003) can only really and reasonably claim to study and analyze is religious propositions as *expressed, communicated, or represented* (von Stuckrad 2003, 263). Therefore, according to the view adopted here, 'religion' and 'popular culture' are not viewed as constituting separable spheres, since popular culture itself is understood as constituting one among many arenas (itself encompassing a myriad of different forms of representation) through which religious propositions are made and religiosity and religious sentiment is expressed, communicated, and lived out in the first place (see also Horsfield 2008, 113-114).

Furthermore, as Jeremy Stolow (2008) observes, we might also usefully question any distinctions being made between religion and *technology*. As Stolow suggests, "we are more amply rewarded by examining the myriad ways in which religious experiences are materialized, rendered tangible and palpable, communicated publicly, recorded, and reproduced, – in short, *mediated* – in and through its given range of technological manifestations and techniques" (Stolow 2008, 195). Very similar arguments have also been presented by Birgit Meyer (2008) and Meyer and Jojada Verrips (2008) who, focusing on the relationship between religion and aesthetics and religion as mediated, have called into question understandings of religion and media in general as constituting somehow separate spheres. As Meyer and Verrips (2008, 25) state, "The very assumption of a divide between religion and media stems from a dematerialized and disembodied understanding of religion". As they go on to argue, "Pondering the nexus of religion and media has yielded an understanding of religion as a practice of mediation /.../ to which media are intrinsic" (Meyer & Verrips 2008, 25). As pointed out by Meyer and Verrips (2008), an understanding of religion as mediated does not foreground either the individual mind or "social forms" (2008, 26) as "the generis" (2008, 27) of religious experience and subjectivity, instead emphasizing the ways in which "the personal and the social are inextricably bound up with each other" (2008, 27). As such, an understanding of religion as mediated does not only reflect concerns central for a social constructionist approach to religion, but it can usefully complement and enrich it as well

(compare for example Horsfield 2008, 119).

Keeping these issues in mind, we shall nevertheless approach the field in light of Forbes' typology since that will help us illuminate more generally some key debates and areas of focus within the study of the relationship between religion and popular culture. The category of "popular culture in religion" is particularly significant for present purposes and will thus be discussed lastly in more detail. A brief discussion of how Christian metal illuminates some of the limitations of this typology will also be included at the end of the chapter.

### **3. 3. 1 Religion in popular culture**

Most existing research within the field falls within the broad category of "religion in popular culture". This is the study of the both explicit and implicit appearance of religious ideas, themes, symbols, and language in different forms of popular culture such as film, television-series, literature, popular music, computer games etc. Film has arguably received most attention in this regard although popular music has been the subject of increasing interest in recent years (e.g. St. John 2004, Gilmour 2005, Bossius 2003). Forbes argues that, when studying the relationship between religion and popular culture in this way, more can be learned through attempting to discern broader patterns, "asking what the patterns reveal about the creative forces behind the images and the audiences who respond", than through concentrating on isolated examples. (Forbes 2005, 10)

The study of religion in popular culture has also been popular among Christian theologians searching for implicit Christian religious themes in various forms of popular culture, especially in film (Forbes 2005, 10-12). Some of these theologically grounded studies tend to be somewhat sensationalist in that they often purport to 'reveal' or 'expose' traces of religion, and Christian belief in particular, in a supposedly deeply secularized society and culture (e.g. Detweiler & Taylor 2003; Mattingly 2005). Nevertheless, besides contributing to the field by offering new insights, these studies also provide researchers of religion and popular culture with an interesting additional body of material.

A more challenging task is identifying ways in which the long-standing relationship between religion and popular culture might have changed in late modern secularized society and culture. For one thing, a considerable portion of the various religious themes that appear in contemporary popular culture are not Christian at all. When an increasingly wide range of different religious and spiritual themes, ideas, beliefs, and symbols start to appear ever more frequently in popular culture, what does that say about its audiences which it is taken to both 'reflect' and 'form'? As mentioned briefly

above, some scholars have directed particular attention at precisely such general patterns and trends.

In this context, as Andreas Häger (2008, 113) reminds us, we should also pay attention to the ways in which various forms of religious artefacts, imagery, iconography, symbols etc. also may be put to essentially 'popular cultural' uses and, for example, function as material for home decoration. Häger relates the study of the relationship between religion and popular culture to broader debates on religious change within the sociology of religion today, particularly regarding the increasing individualization and privatization of religion. As he writes, "It is evident how the religious 'supply' is increasing through the connections to popular culture, both when institutionalized religion creates a greater variety of alternatives of how to practice religion, and when further alternatives are present within mainstream popular culture" (Häger 2008, 114-115). This, he goes on to argue, also contributes to greater religious pluralism as "This pluralism contributes to the possibility to use popular culture religion as a source for creating one's own, more or less, individual religious mix" (Häger 2008, 115).

This same notion is also explored in great detail by Partridge who 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). The important point to note is that regardless of how, or to which degrees, we choose to engage with this vast range of beliefs and ideas, we are nevertheless increasingly aware of their existence. As popular culture is all around us, argues Partridge, so are the spiritual ideas it conveys and disseminates. This is evident in the ways in which popular culture has become an increasingly important and natural source of inspiration for many people's construction of religious and spiritual identities. Importantly, all of this equally concerns Christians as well and that is why Partridge's argument also is of greater significance for this study. The relationship between religion and popular culture is thus best understood in terms of two-way reciprocity (Partridge 2004, 126). Through circulating a wide range of religious and spiritual beliefs and ideas, popular culture not only functions as an important source of inspiration for the formation of spiritual identities but also significantly contributes to increasing people's knowledge of and interest in these different beliefs and ideas. (Partridge 2004, 54; 121; see also Hoover 2006; Heelas & Seel 2003, 236). Perhaps more than in any other form of popular culture, religious and spiritual themes have been particularly common in different forms of *popular music*. For example, today, eastern religious themes have become a particularly visible component of



many forms of dance music culture (e.g. St. John 2004, Bossius 2003). Among numerous other examples one could mention the close affinity between reggae and Rastafarianism, as well as that between metal and different forms of Satanist, pagan, occult, and esoteric beliefs.

Popular culture has long been an important site for the dissemination of alternative religious and spiritual ideas that challenge the traditional Judeo-Christian worldview. This, argues Partridge, is further reflected in the ways in which different forms of religion and spirituality are presented in different ways within popular culture itself. As he points out, within this context Christianity is often presented as exclusivist, authoritative, hierarchical, and patriarchal – all highly undesirable qualities within not only the alternative spiritual milieu, but increasingly also within the general Western religious/spiritual climate of today (Partridge 2004, 136). However, a notable exception is found in popular culture's long-standing 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 Biblical apocalypse. Moreover, these types of themes have long constituted important sources of inspiration within the world of popular music; "popular musicians and their fans have found dark occulture particularly alluring" (Partridge 2005, 252). As shall be explored in more detail below, *metal*, and especially some of its more extreme sub-genres, is no doubt one of the clearest contemporary examples of this. As pointed out by Partridge (2005, 248) – who does not fail to note the significance of metal in this regard – "the subversive values provided by Western demonology are actually enormously attractive to those wanting to construct countercultural identities". (Partridge 2005, 207-278; 2004, 185)

Partridge's argument is of a very broad and general character. Its broadness also arguably makes it difficult to apply to more specific contexts. However, we need not fully accept all aspects of it in order to still appreciate the need for situating the increasingly close relationship between religion and popular culture within a broader context of religious change and transformation in the West. Moreover, the argument is also significant in that it puts greater emphasis on the many *connections* that exist between different forms of religious and spiritual themes within popular culture. Thus, it further highlights the need for different approaches to religion and popular culture to be viewed in close relation to one another.

### 3. 3. 2 Popular culture as religion

Similar to the category discussed above, studies of "popular culture *as* religion" emphasize the ways in which popular culture both forms, shapes, and reflects us. However, they also go a step further by suggesting that, for



many, the implications of today's increasingly close relationship between religion and popular culture may have been much more far-reaching. In different ways, studies within this category suggest that popular culture has taken on many of the functions previously held by institutional religion. (Forbes 2005, 14-15) A wide range of popular cultural forms have been studied in this way, including popular music (e.g. Sylvan 2002), sport (e.g. Price 2001), film (e.g. Lyden 2003), television-series fandom (e.g. Jindra 2005), and popular cultural icon fandom (e.g. Reece 2006).

Whereas other ways of studying religion and popular culture differ in focus, this category mainly differs in *approach*. Studies within this category are underpinned by functionalist definitions and approaches to religion. There are, however, different ways of studying "popular culture as religion". One can, for example, examine the game of football and focus on how it may be said to offer its fans a sense of community and set of public rituals; the ways in which existential or religious themes appearing in television series such as the *X-Files* or film series such as *Star Wars* may provide fans with resources for the shaping of worldviews and private rites; what it means when fans of Elvis travel to his grave at Graceland in a pilgrimage-type fashion; or the ways in which popular music cultures such as trance may provide its members with 'transcendent' experiences. One way of approaching questions such as these is by highlighting *parallels* between the presumed basic functions of religion and certain popular cultural forms. The game of football, for example, can be viewed as offering its fans a sense of community, a set of public rituals, myths and icons, resembling those found in traditional institutional religion. However, some studies within this category go further still by asserting that certain forms of popular culture have come to function or serve *as* religion for an increasingly large number of people. As Forbes points out: "Whether the emphasis is upon essential religious beliefs, religious forms, or religious functions, each avenue of discussion makes it possible to *claim* that aspects of popular culture /.../ constitute a religion for their most devoted followers" (Forbes 2005, 15, my italics). Within this category, the definition of religion quite obviously becomes of central importance. (Forbes 2005, 14-15).

As discussed above, functionalist approaches may reveal much about the fluid and person-centered religious climate of today by concentrating on religious practices outside the boundaries of traditional institutional religion. On the other hand, it also risks obscuring differences between religious and other cultural practices. One might ask, for instance, how a devout Christian who is also a highly dedicated fan of his local football club should be understood in light of such an approach. In which respects and under which circumstances would it be *reasonable* to assume and then argue that, in spite of this person's Christian commitments, the game of football serves additional religious functions for this person as well? The main point

to note here is that studies arguing for the religious functions of popular culture – and most of all studies arguing for the *replacement* or *substitution* of religion by popular cultural forms – tend to raise these types of problematic issues.

However, as these approaches makes it possible for virtually anything to be labelled as serving essentially religious functions, or as constituting a form of religion in itself, this can also be taken to undermine their explanatory value as it may lead to a blurring of all distinctions between religion and other cultural practices. While this approach may have its virtues, its problematic aspects need to be openly acknowledged.

### **3. 3. 3 Religion and popular culture in dialogue**

This category designates an area of study focused on the ways in which religious groups relate to and engage in debates on popular culture within wider society and culture. Such debates may not focus on religion as such but instead “be ethical arenas to which religious values pertain” (Forbes 2005, 16). Such ‘dialogue’ may take many forms. It mostly revolves around religious groups “listening to the voices of popular culture” (Forbes 2005, 16) in an either open-minded or confrontational spirit. In addition, it may also involve religious groups comparing their own values with those perceived to be represented by and within popular culture, for example through criticizing popular culture’s perceived negative impact on morality. As argued by Chidester (2005, 17, see also Häger 2001), such criticism may also entail religious groups defining popular cultural forms as “religious” in order to “raise the stakes in the cultural contest”. This point is further elaborated upon by Hoover:

The so-called “popular media” of television, film, and popular music are implicated in important debates about cultural norms and social relations, having come to represent – for some – the very definition of the kind of culture and cultural values that must be confronted and contested in any project that is interested in normative values, as religion is. (Hoover 2006, 28)

This point is further illustrated by how religious groups also may engage with popular culture by criticizing the ways in which their religion (and sometimes themselves) is represented within certain popular cultural forms. For example, Hollywood action films have been criticized by some Muslim groups for disseminating and upholding negative stereotypes about Muslims by repeatedly portraying them as terrorists and religious fanatics (Chidester 2005, 14); the Catholic church has criticized a number of films representing Catholic clergy as sadistic child abusers; and new religious

movements have at times reacted to how popular culture typically represents them as dangerous “brainwashing” cults (Beckford 2003, 181; 185-186). However, dialogue may also take the form of religious groups viewing popular culture as an “ally” and an arena that can be used to promote certain campaigns or causes (Forbes 2005, 16). Religious groups may also engage in dialogue with the aim of transforming popular culture in accordance with their own beliefs. Lynch (2005, 33) terms such form of dialogue “missiological engagements” (this form of engagement will be discussed in the following section). (Forbes 2005, 15-16)

We should also keep in mind here that religious-cultural dialogue has a long history. For present purposes, this can be illustrated by H. Richard Niebuhr’s (2001/1951) typology of five historical ways in which Christian groups have engaged with the wider culture in his much debated book *Christ and Culture*. This classic typology has also been both much discussed and utilized within the study of the relationship between religion and popular culture on the whole. Essentially, in different ways, Niebuhr’s categories all pertain to the basic Christian idea of being ‘in’ but not ‘of’ the world. First, there is the category of “Christ against culture”. In this view, Christianity is understood as standing in fundamental opposition to the wider culture, no matter what the circumstances. In absolute terms, one has to choose between either God and that which is good or the world and that which is evil. No room is left for intermediary positions or compromises. Second, at the other end of the spectrum, we have the category of “Christ of culture”. From this standpoint, Christianity is in full agreement with the wider culture. Not all aspects of culture need to be religiously motivated. However, a culture inspired and informed by Christian beliefs and ethics can become ‘better’ or ‘redeemed’ in terms of soundness and morality. Third, the category of “Christ above culture” places itself somewhere between the two former. Christians should neither wholeheartedly embrace nor totally eschew the wider culture. They should, however, strive to maintain a Christian ‘distinctiveness’ in their everyday lives and dealings with the wider culture. Fourth, the category of “Christ and culture in paradox” is of a strongly dualist character. Christians are called to live a sanctified and perfect life. However, it is recognized that this ideal is impossible to realize. Hence, life is lived in sin and the hope of the continued grace of God. Christian’s relationship to the wider culture is thus divided and somewhat unclear. Fifth, the final category of “Christ as transformer of culture” takes a view of culture as being neither evil nor sinful in itself but, rather, as having *fallen* into sin. Hence, it is possible to *restore* it in accordance with the initial will of God. (Howard & Streck 1999, 42-43; Lynch 2005, 99-101)

As highlighted by Niebuhr’s typology of Christian religious-cultural dialogue, Christian engagements with popular culture may take many

forms. But if Forbes' (2005) typology of different relationships between religion and popular culture may be taken to suggest that 'religion' and 'culture' constitute somehow separable spheres, that is even more the case with Niebuhr's. However, as this study does not utilize Niebuhr's typology, for present purposes, it is enough to note that much can be learned about the present day religious environment through exploring how religious groups respond to wider contemporary cultural trends (e.g. Mahan 2007, 61).

### 3. 3. 4 Popular culture in religion

Research within this category differs from the other three discussed so far in that it concentrates on the appropriation and use of popular cultural forms by religious institutions and groups themselves. The since long fairly common, both direct as well as indirect, appropriation of popular musical styles, film, advertising, or marketing strategies by Christian groups are all examples of this. Indeed, most research on "popular culture in religion" explicitly focuses on various *Christian* groups' use of popular cultural forms such as music and television. However, this category has been afforded the least academic attention within the study of religion and popular culture as a whole (Forbes 2005, 13; Stout 2001a, 7). Studies within this area (e.g. Jorstad 1993; McDannell 1995; Howard & Streck 1999; Hendershot 2004; Luhr 2009) have mostly concentrated on a North American context and typically focused on some aspect of the *evangelical* Christian popular culture industry of the USA, to which there exists no directly comparable equivalent in any other country (e.g. McDannell 1995, 268). Christian popular cultural products have, however, become increasingly available outside the USA as well (Hendershot 2004, 88).

Terms such as "Christian popular culture industry", "evangelical popular culture", "Christian media", or some variation thereof, are often used interchangeably to denote a wide array of Christian "appropriations" of popular cultural forms that are bound to certain industrial and organizational structures, produced and chiefly consumed by "evangelical" or "born again" Christians in North America, and especially in the USA. Henceforth, the term "evangelical popular culture" will be used. As scholars within this particular area of study often point out, it is frequently difficult to draw clear lines between "Christian" and "secular" popular culture in this regard. As this research has tended to focus on Christian "appropriation" of popular cultural forms, the attitudes and motivations that underlie such appropriation has developed into one of its primary concerns. The case of evangelical popular culture provides a useful and multifaceted example of this. Importantly, this is also the wider religious-popular cultural context in which Christian metal essentially needs to be understood. While

acknowledging that popular cultural forms have become embraced and integrated into the practices of a range of different religious institutions and groups (see for example the contributions to Clark 2007b), for present purposes, the following discussion will focus on evangelical popular culture in particular.

The term “evangelical” lacks clear definition. The diverse group of people it serves to signify is also a little difficult to pin down. As a particular form of Protestantism, Evangelicalism can be traced back all the way to the Reformation (Lynch 2002, 34). As a particular Christian Protestant movement it is usually traced back to mid 18th century Britain. In the context of “evangelical popular culture”, the term serves to designate a broad group of Protestant Christians with varying degrees of institutional affiliation who share some particular understandings of Christian faith and life. Understood in terms of a religious movement in a broad sense, Evangelicalism constitutes an important element of the North American religious landscape in particular. However, it is by no means confined to North America. As noted, Evangelicalism has traditionally also occupied a visible position within the Protestant milieu of Western European countries such as Britain. It also occupies a somewhat visible position in the contemporary Protestant milieu of Finland. For evangelicals, denominational affiliation usually comes secondary to an understanding of faith as a matter of *personal salvation*. Hence, particular emphasis is put on the importance of a personal and unique relationship with God. Such a relationship starts with a personal choice to accept Christ as ones personal savior and become “born again” in him. (Hendershot 2004, 97; 112; 124; Hoover 2006, 78; Lynch 2002, 34-35) Evangelicals also stress the importance of spreading the Christian message to others, often through *testimonies* of their own conversion experiences highlighting the wonderfulness of their new lives in Christ as opposed to their earlier sinful and unhappy lives as unbelievers (Herndershot 2004, 124). As Heather Hendershot points out, in evangelical contexts, the telling of conversion stories (or giving testimonies) serves to “maintain a sense of community, of shared experience” (Hendershot 2004, 97; 124). The importance attached to the giving of testimonies is also reflected in many forms of evangelical popular culture. As we shall see in later chapters, this is also the case within Christian metal, in which testimonies also typically highlight the role of metal music in itself.

The Bible occupies a central position in evangelical theology as the revealed word of God. It is also understood to predict the end of the world and the Second Coming of Christ (e.g. Hendershot 2004 10; 101). Hence, evangelicals usually view the Bible as the literally true and infallible word of God and also tend to interpret biblical prophecy *literally*. In North America in particular, evangelical understandings of Biblical prophecy and eschatology have been greatly influenced by so-called *dispensationalist*

teachings in which notions about the “end times” and The Second Coming of Christ occupy a central position. For example, the central dispensationalist notion of the *rapture* is a particularly recurring theme in much evangelical popular culture. Although there are many versions, this is essentially the belief that all true or ‘saved’ Christians will be removed (‘raptured’) from the earth and lifted up to heaven either before, sometime during, or soon following a seven year period of *tribulation* prior to the Second Coming of Christ during which the Antichrist emerges and establishes his rule on earth (e.g. Hendershot 2004, 101). This teaching is central to evangelical novels such as Jerry Jenkins’ and Tim LaHaye’s hugely successful *Left Behind*-series, films such as *A Thief in the Night* (1972) and *The Omega Code* (1999), as well as the lyrics of much Contemporary Christian Music. A strong interest in *apocalyptic* themes and other topics dealing with the perceived “reality of evil in the world” (Clark 2005, 37) is thus a main characteristic of evangelical popular culture and, arguably, typical of much contemporary American popular culture more generally (Hendershot 2004, 177-180; Lynch 2002, 34-35; Hoover 2006, 106). Indeed, as argued by Lynn Schofield Clark (2005, 25-27: 30-37), North American Evangelicalism and the evangelical popular culture industry’s production of a wide range of popular cultural products dealing with these types of issues (e.g. the reasons for the existence of evil in the world, biblical prophecy, the rapture, and the end times), has also contributed significantly to the frequency or even pervasiveness of such themes in contemporary popular culture more generally. As discussed above, Partridge (2005) has also argued that there is much evidence of growing interest in “dark occulture” in which precisely these types of Christian themes (e.g. biblical prophecy, the reality of evil, and apocalypticism) play an important role.

Evangelical popular culture is often interpreted, and indeed often presented, as a “counter-media” that offers “Christianized” or more “sound” versions of various popular cultural forms (e.g. Hendershot 2004; Howard & Streck 1999). Today, it encompasses almost every thinkable form of popular culture. As noted above, the notion of “appropriation” and “borrowing” has thus become central to much research within this area. As Forbes writes:

Does such borrowing influence the religion, sometimes in ways it may not recognize? For example, what does it mean when the supposedly distinctive music of an evangelical Christian youth subculture is expressed in hard rock, heavy metal, alternative, or meditative (“new age”) musical styles? (Forbes 2005, 13)

Many studies within this area have explored the ways in which evangelical Christianity may be said to have been influenced, transformed, or indeed trivialized or diluted, by being expressed through popular cultural forms



(e.g. Hendershot 2004; Romanowski 2005). However, according to Daniel A. Stout, such research tends to foreground the issue of popular culture influencing institutional religion, while not always paying sufficient attention to the ways in which institutional religion also plays a major role in creating and forming popular culture generally. Indeed, as the case of evangelical “counter-media” illustrates, popular culture may even be viewed as a primary means of expressing faith. (Stout 2001a, 7-10; see also Hoover 2006, 205). When studying “popular culture in religion”, it is therefore important to keep in mind that the relationship between Christianity, culture, and media stretches back over a considerable amount of time. Throughout history, Christian groups have always been early adopters of new forms of communications media (e.g. Schultze 2001, 39-41). As the evangelical movement is particularly characterized by a typically Protestant openness to culture and different forms of media, in this context, attention should also be paid to the many ways in which different forms of media may have influenced, changed, and transformed evangelical religious practice in itself (Hoover 2006, 78; 150; 2001; 70-72; see also Romanowski 2005, 111). In relation to this it is of particular importance to note that Evangelicalism in general has been experiencing profound changes during recent decades – changes that the phenomenon of evangelical popular culture needs to be understood as *part* of rather than the sole example of.

The increasing flexibility and diversity of Evangelicalism in general, and particularly in North America, has been thoroughly explored in the work of scholars such as James Davison Hunter, Donald E. Miller, and Eileen Luhr. In *Evangelicalism. The Coming Generation* (1987) Hunter directs particular attention at the increasingly strong emphasis among evangelicals on the self as well as the ever more widespread searching for “new experiences” (1987, 66) within evangelical circles. He argues that “absorbed in it rather than being (spiritually) repelled by it, modern Evangelicals have accorded the self a level of attention and legitimacy unknown in previous generations” (1987, 71). Evangelicalism has thus not only become increasingly diverse, flexible, and subjectivity-oriented regarding such things as organizational structure, and forms of religious expression and practice, but the very idea of diversity has also become embraced and celebrated to such a degree as to having developed into something of central characteristic of modern Evangelicalism more generally.

These lines of thought are also central to Miller’s *Reinventing American Protestantism. Christianity in the New Millennium* (1997). Concentrating on the so-called “new paradigm” churches in the USA, Miller directs particular attention at how an ever stronger emphasis on personal and embodied experience (e.g. a personal relationship with Jesus or God) increasingly has come to eclipse issues regarding theology and doctrinal purity, essentially rendering such issues secondary to subjective experience (which also



involves a democratization of faith). As he goes on to argue, this movement “is challenging not doctrine but the *medium* through which the message of Christianity is articulated (1997, 11, my italics). A recurrent theme in Miller’s book is that such a “postmodern” attitude has led to the emergence of a “new style” of “postdenominational” Protestant Christianity in the USA that is “restructuring the organizational character of institutional religion” (Miller 1997, 1). Miller (1997, 11) even goes so far as to suggest that these developments could be interpreted in terms of a “second reformation”. Moreover, like Hunter, Miller also views these developments in close relation to the cultural changes brought by the 1960s. Very similar observations, especially regarding the cultural influence that the counterculture of the 1960s and today’s consumer-oriented marketplace has had on the ways in which Evangelicalism has changed during recent decades, have also recently been presented by Eileen Luhr in *Witnessing Suburbia. Conservatives and Christian Youth Culture* (2009). As she writes with reference to the evangelical Harvest Crusade event (essentially an evangelical popular musical festival) in California: “The event and its organizers claimed to offer a *counternarrative* – not a reaction – to the decade” (2009, 177, my italics; see also for example Clark 2007a, 24-28; Pike 2008, 167-170).<sup>3</sup>

All of these scholars, and perhaps Luhr in particular, highlight the increasingly important role being played by *new media*, *consumption*, *marketing*, and *branding* within these wider developments (see also Clark 2007a; Borden 2007). Indeed, a growing literature has emerged that focuses on these issues specifically (e.g. Moore 2001; Clark 2007b; Twitchell 2007). As Clark (2007a, 5-7) reminds us, the US religious environment in particular has a long-standing relationship with the marketplace and consumer culture. It is important, therefore, to note more generally how the development of the consumption-driven neo-liberal marketplace and culture of Western societies (and increasingly non-Western societies as well) has affected practices of religious mediation (e.g. Meyer 2008, 721) and made various forms of ‘religious goods’ and commodities not only increasingly marketable and brandable, but increasingly *profitable* as well. Today, the marketing and branding of all kinds of religious goods – what Clark (2007a, 23) refers to as “religious lifestyle branding” – have increasingly also come to affect people’s construction of religious identities and religious lifestyle-choices. In this context, it is also important to point out that these developments by no means have been confined to the North American

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that these scholars, even though they often write about of the same groups and events, use different terms to describe this broader Protestant Christian milieu. For example, while Hunter uses the term “evangelicals”, Miller (1997) instead favors the term “new paradigm churches”, and Luhr (2009) uses both “evangelicals” and “conservative Christians”.

evangelical scene. From a global perspective, evangelical Christianity (the meaning of the term evangelical is expanded here to include its Charismatic and Pentecostal variants), characterized as it is by its openness to the use of different forms of media, and its close relationship to the expanding consumer marketplaces of today, has also spread and become increasingly globally diverse. This is also evidenced by its rapid growth in recent decades throughout Latin America, Asia, and Africa (Vasquez 2003; see also for example Roy 2007, xi). As Manuel A. Vasquez (2003, 172) points out in his review of some important scholarly works on global Evangelicalism, considering the spread and diversity of the phenomenon as a whole, any future study will benefit from the gathering of empirical material from different parts of the world and the combination of “multiple levels of analysis” employing interdisciplinary approaches.

These observations highlight the changing face of Evangelicalism and Protestant Christianity (particularly in the USA) and as such provide a broader backdrop against which evangelical popular culture essentially needs to be understood. Most importantly for present purposes, these studies all draw particular attention to the ways in which Evangelicalism has become increasingly occupied with the self and subjective experience, moved away from traditional and institutional organizational structures, and embraced a wide range of new media and cultural (and popular cultural) practices in order to develop new forms of religious expression and practice.

Indeed, returning now to evangelical popular culture specifically, as Hendershot (2004, 6) points out, “if today’s thriving Christian cultural products industry illustrates anything, it is that evangelicals continue to spread their messages using the ‘newest thing’, be it film, video, or the Web”. However, Hendershot goes on to highlight that “contemporary Christian media are incredibly uneven in the degree to which they overtly proclaim their faith” (Hendershot 2004, 7). Christian popular cultural products should not be understood purely as tools of evangelism. Instead, they are mostly, but not exclusively, directed at an already ‘saved’ evangelical audience. The aim of evangelical popular culture is therefore not just to “poach” on secular popular culture but to *transform* it by means of a Christian direction from within; “if evangelical media producers and consumers constitute a ‘subculture’, it is one that aspires to lose its ‘sub’ status” (Hendershot 2004, 13; Luhr 2009, 73). Hence, evangelical popular culture is primarily concerned, not with popular cultural forms as such, but with their *content*. However, as evangelical popular culture mirrors secular popular culture in outlook, organization, and management style, and when a considerable portion of its products only hint at religious beliefs and values, distinguishing between ‘Christian’ and ‘secular’ popular culture often becomes a difficult task. Hendershot views evangelical popular culture

within the larger context of religious change in the contemporary West and argues that “evangelicals have survived by being flexible and making accommodations to modernity” (2004, 5). However, she also argues that evangelical popular culture has not necessarily become more “secular” because of this, but rather, “more ambiguous”, displaying varying “levels of evangelical intensity” (2004, 7). Thus, Christian products with the lowest levels of “evangelical intensity” can be seen as having managed to cross over into the secular marketplace precisely because their messages are “ambiguous, diluted, or absent” (2004, 8; cf. Luhr 2009, 192-193). An equally important reason for this lies in the fact that Christian products are increasingly distributed by large secular companies (e.g. Romanowski 2005, 105; Häger 2003). However, Hendershot still argues that there is little evidence to suggest that evangelical appropriation of popular culture has led to a shallowing or dilution of evangelical faith as such:

In their appropriation of secular forms such as science fiction, heavy metal, or hip-hop, evangelicals seem to say that these forms are not inherently secular but, rather, neutral forms that can be used to meet evangelical needs. Such appropriation elides the historical specificity of popular forms /.../ Evangelical media producers often take styles and genres that nonevangelical youth might use to articulate “resistant identities”, (themselves heavily commodified) and respin that resistance in previously unimagined ways. (Hendershot 2004, 28)

According to Hendershot, nowhere is this, and the ways in which evangelical popular cultural products vary in “spiritual intensity” (2004, 12), more evident than in Contemporary Christian Music (hereafter termed CCM). Fuelled by the overall growth of Evangelicalism in the USA, it is the fastest growing and arguably most visible part of evangelical popular culture today (Hendershot 2004, 36; 52-53; see also Romanowski 2005, 108-109; Stiles 2005; Luhr 2009, 193). As such, it has also spread far beyond the evangelical environment of the USA, including Finland as well. In Finland, the annual *Maata Näkyvissä festarit* (Land in sight-festival) – the largest Christian youth festival in the Nordic countries – is a good example of this. Every year it attracts over ten thousand participants from all over the country. It usually features a number of internationally known Christian popular music artists and groups as main attractions (in 2007 the festival was headlined by world famous Christian heavy metal band Stryper). Within the festival area one always finds a number of Christian music retailers offering all kinds of Christian popular music. The Internet has also greatly increased the availability of Christian popular cultural products all over the world. For example, the Finnish Christian popular culture products retailer *Kristillinen kirjakauppa kotisatama* (Christian Bookstore Home Harbor) with outlets in Helsinki and Tampere, offers a wide range of Christian products online at [www.kotisatama.net](http://www.kotisatama.net). The site contains an extensive

catalogue of all kinds of Christian popular cultural products, including music, films, and a variety of Christian books in Finnish translations. Notably, a large portion of all products available at Kotisataman kauppa are imported from the USA. The import of American evangelical popular cultural products also aids the dissemination of religious ideas more typical of American Evangelicalism, such as dispensationalist teachings and an occupation with the “end times”, which have so far remained marginal within evangelical groups in the Nordic countries.

The case of CCM has been explored in detail by sociologists Jay R. Howard and John M. Streck (1999). CCM initially emerged in the USA in close connection to the evangelical *Jesus Movement* of the late 1960s. Primarily still concentrated in North America and the USA in particular, it has come to comprise all popular music genres and should thus not be regarded as a genre in itself (this, of course, depends on how the concept of “genre” is understood. A more detailed account of how the concept is understood within this study will follow below). Instead, argues Howard and Streck (1999: 8-13), three non-musical distinctive features – (1) lyrics, (2) artists, and (3) organization – function as its primary underlying principles. The music in itself, be it blues, rap, or rock, is generally regarded as neutral. The (1) lyrics, however, should deal with Christian themes such as evangelism, praise, or moral and social issues from a Christian perspective. However, as noted above, lyrics often vary in “evangelical intensity”. It is also of crucial importance that (2) the artists that create the music themselves are Christians and lead – and are *seen* to lead – Christian lives (e.g. Stiles 2005; Luhr 2009, 61-62). Lastly, (3) the music should be produced on Christian record labels guided by Christian principles and an evangelist agenda, and sold and distributed through Christian networks such as Christian bookstores or Internet-sites. However, these ‘requirements’, which constitute typical characteristics of evangelical popular culture more generally (e.g. Haley & White & Cunningham 2001), are highly debated and frequently contested issues within the world of CCM. For example, issues regarding the relationship between evangelism and commercial profit continue to be the subject of much debate. This particular relationship between religion and commercial enterprise is also illustrative of the broader ‘commodification’ of religion in modern times. (Howard & Streck 1999, 5-13; see also Romanowski 2005, 113; Hendershot 2004, 58-63; Häger 2003, 38-39; 2008, 114; Clark 2007b)

It is important to stress that the genres represented within CCM usually do not differ from their secular equivalents with regard to the music itself or even the way it is performed. Generally speaking, Christian rock both sounds and looks just like secular rock. Having said that, there are still some exceptions to this. Christian rock concerts are usually marked as such, that is, as Christian, in a number of ways and they are also principally attended

by Christian people (Häger 2003, 41-42). A Christian band may, for instance, read passages from the Bible or lead the crowd in prayer as part of their concert, something guaranteed to seize the attention of anyone thinking they are attending an 'ordinary' rock-show. Moreover, it is equally important to note that CCM, while serving as a means for worship and religious expression, also serves as *entertainment* (Howard & Streck 1999, 3; cf. Moberg 2008a, 89). Howard and Streck direct special focus at the discursive construction of the 'requirements' of CCM outlined above. As they argue: "Contemporary Christian music is an artistic product that emerges from a nexus of continually negotiated relationships binding certain artists, certain corporations, certain audiences, and certain ideas to one another" (Howard & Streck 1999, 14). This, they go on to argue, can be illustrated in relation to the historical five main types of Christian relationship to culture identified by Niebuhr as discussed above. The different views on the relationship between Christianity and the wider culture that these categories represent all surface within the world of CCM, making it a "splintered artworld" that encompasses a range of competing discourses and ideas (Howard & Streck 1999, 43-44).

As we have seen above, there is a tendency within much of the research on "popular culture in religion" to raise the question of whether evangelical Christianity itself can be said to have been influenced, transformed, or even trivialized and diluted, by being expressed through popular cultural forms underpinned by organizational structures designed to generate commercial profit. As discussed in relation to Forbes' and Niebuhr's typologies of religious-popular cultural relationships above, this also reflects a long-standing tendency within research on these issues to view religion and popular culture as constituting somehow separable spheres or entities of analysis – a view that many important objections can be raised against. However, these issues are nevertheless worth raising and exploring in detail, not least for the sake of conceptual clarity. For example, the particular case of Christian metal in its turn raises some important questions about precisely how such "trivialization" and "dilution" should be interpreted and understood. Generally speaking, even if we do not view religion and popular culture as constituting separable spheres, in which sense are we to speak of Christian "appropriations", "accommodations", or "borrowings" of popular cultural forms in the first place? Moreover, if we do, do we not also need to be clear about what exactly it is that we mean by these terms? We need to be clear about how the use of such terms may risk reinforcing understandings of Christian groups as being mere "appropriators" and "borrowers" of popular cultural forms for their own religious purposes instead of being *participants* in today's wider popular cultural milieu and consumer marketplace (e.g. Clark 2007a; Pike 2008, 168-170).

As the case of evangelical popular culture illustrates more generally,

clear lines are not always that easily drawn. Moreover, although the notion of “Christianized” popular culture sometimes may be quite rightly associated with the evangelical popular culture industry, and although there is much talk of direct “appropriation” within *certain* sections of the world of evangelical popular culture itself, that should not lead us to automatically view the phenomenon as a whole as being merely directed at the “appropriation” or “borrowing” of popular cultural forms for purely evangelistic purposes. Indeed, to varying degrees, many of the studies of evangelical popular culture drawn upon above (e.g. Hendershot 2004; Romanowski 2005; Luhr 2009) explicitly warn against automatically making such assumptions. This is because, today, there are numerous examples of cases of evangelical popular culture in which the issue of “appropriation” and “borrowing” is much less pronounced in both discourse and practice as Evangelicalism in general has become increasingly communicated, expressed, and *lived* both in close connection to as well as *through* various popular cultural forms. The Christian metal scene can clearly be seen as an example of such a case. Furthermore, even though certain sections of today’s transnational scene continue to develop under the auspices of the evangelical popular culture industry, the scene as a whole has still managed to escape such confines and achieve a high degree of independence from both direct industrial as well as particular denominational influence and control. This can, in turn, be viewed in relation to more general transformations of Evangelicalism during recent decades.

Instead of automatically and readily viewing Christian group’s uses of popular cultural forms merely, or even primarily, in terms of “appropriation”, “accommodation”, or “borrowing”, we might instead opt for a more nuanced approach that takes account of the many ways in which today’s broader popular cultural environment has come to constitute an ever more self-evident and natural resource for the shaping of cultural *and* religious/spiritual identities for increasing numbers of people regardless of their particular religious backgrounds or affiliations. Such an approach would also be in line with an attempt to consciously move beyond understandings of ‘religion’ and ‘culture/popular culture’ as constituting somehow separate domains or spheres of inquiry and analysis. This is not to say that issues of “accommodation” or “borrowing”, and perhaps least of all issues of “trivialization” or “dilution”, should be ignored, for they constitute important elements of the social construction of what counts as ‘genuine’ religion across a range of different contexts. But it is to call for closer examination of the grounds on which claims about these issues are made in the first place, especially when such claims figure in academic research.

When looking more closely at these issues, there is also a sense in which Christian metal could be viewed as an example of “religion in popular culture”, for instance, as one among many examples of the “sacralization” of



popular music. Furthermore, although it would seem oxymoronic to view it in terms of “popular culture as religion”, arguments of that kind could still perhaps be made, particularly when pondering what functions it serves for its musicians and fans. Furthermore, there is also a sense in which Christian metal could be viewed as an example of “religion and popular culture in dialogue”, especially when considering how it typically is represented as constituting an active engagement with its secular counterpart. The possibility of viewing Christian metal as an example of all of these particular relationships between religion and popular culture is illustrative of the problems associated with such typologizations and categorizations. And, although Christian metal clearly could be seen to defy such neat typologizations, viewing it in such terms in the first place does not take us beyond understandings of ‘religion’ and ‘culture/popular culture’ as constituting somehow separable spheres. As we shall explore in more detail below, rather than being interpreted merely in terms of the “appropriation” or “borrowing” of metal music and aesthetics for religious purposes, Christian metal is more appropriately described in terms of Christians “combining” or “merging” their passion for metal with their religious beliefs and sensibilities (usually of an evangelical kind); thereby making metal music and culture a central avenue for the expression and practice of these beliefs and sensibilities. Having explored the structure and construction of the Christian metal scene in chapter 5 and 6 in more detail, some further reflections will also be offered on these issues in the conclusion in chapter 7.

Lastly, when looking at the ways in which popular cultural forms have come to play an increasingly important role in the practices of Christian groups in a Finnish context it should be pointed out that Finland is a post-industrial and highly technologically developed country with a typically Western, and to a large extent ‘Americanized’, general popular cultural climate. Popular cultural forms, products, and trends of all kinds, including Christian ones, are thus both generally familiar and readily available to Finns, especially among the younger portion of the population. The discussion above, of the increasingly important role played by popular culture in the transformation of religious beliefs, practices, and identities, is therefore of clear significance for the contemporary Finnish cultural context as well. From different perspectives, these and related issues have also been explored in a Nordic context by a number of Nordic scholars of religion during recent years (e.g. Häger 2001; Bossius 2003; Lövheim 2004; Sjöborg 2006; Axelson 2008).



## 4. Metal music and culture

*Metal* is one of the most aggressive, extreme, controversial, and debated forms of popular music of our time. Its history 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 different directions. These days, the term “metal” is commonly used as a general term, coupling together a large amount of closely related sub-genres and styles that have developed throughout the years and that all share some distinctive musical and aesthetic traits (some commentators also use the term “heavy metal” itself as a general term). (cf. Moberg 2008a, 85-86)

With a history spanning nearly four decades, metal has also proven exceptionally enduring and long-lived in the context of a global, rapidly changing, and increasingly fluid world of popular musical production and consumption. As such, it has exerted considerable influence on the development of many other forms of popular music (e.g. Walser 1993, 28). Together with the tribal-type popular music culture that has constituted an inseparable ingredient of it since its early days, metal has also spread on a global scale far beyond what is usually seen as the Western cultural sphere. Vibrant scenes can nowadays be found from Latin America to South East Asia. In addition, smaller scenes have also appeared in the Middle East and Northern Africa. Metal gained an exceptionally strong foothold in Finland at an early stage. Today, it is one, if not *the*, most popular form of music in the country with metal bands constantly topping the charts. The extreme character of the music, and its corresponding use of provocative and often radical lyrical themes and aesthetics, have also sparked a great deal of controversy and debate and made metal a highly polarizing form of music that is as dearly loved, appreciated, and defended among its fans as it is detested and reviled among its detractors (e.g. Weinstein 2000, 237; cf. Moberg 2008a, 86).

This chapter aims to provide a brief and general account of the history of metal music and culture. It will discuss its most characteristic musical, visual, and verbal dimensions in dialogue with earlier research on the topic. However, because of the huge range and scope of the subject, this account should in no way be regarded as comprehensive or exhaustive. Instead, it is of a very general nature, giving only limited attention to detail. In the spirit of the saying “writing about music is like dancing about architecture”, any attempt to describe the sound of metal in words is ultimately futile. I therefore encourage interested readers to listen for themselves. In the following, special focus will instead be directed at the *verbal dimension* of metal, particularly the inspiration it finds in different forms of *religious* themes, since that is of particular significance for an understanding of

Christian metal.

## 4. 1 Studying metal music and culture

Compared to the interest directed at most other major and long-lived popular music genres, scholarly work on metal used to be scarce. As mentioned above, this may partly be explained by metal not being considered to fulfil the necessary requirements in order to be studied under the heading of “subculture” in the 1970s and 1980s (Brown 2003). However, recent years have witnessed something of an upsurge in academic interest in metal. Today, one can find a large number of thorough and detailed article-length analyses of a range of different aspects of metal music and culture from a variety of different perspectives. Among many others, these include Stan Denski and David Sholle (1992) on metal and gender issues, Jeffrey Arnett (1993) on metal and adolescent alienation, Steve Waksman (2001) on metal and “guitar heroes”, Kahn-Harris (2004) on extreme metal, reflexivity, and politics, Heli Perkkio (2003) on metal and masculinity, and Ulf Lindberg (2002) on metal, fantasy, and the fantastic. The recently published anthology *Heavy Metal Music in Britain* (Bayer 2009) which, as the title suggests, contains articles mainly concentrating on the British context, also attests to the growing interest in metal music and culture across different academic disciplines during recent years. A number of BA and MA theses focusing on metal culture in the Nordic countries have also been produced in recent years (e.g. Sarelin 2002; Knapskog 2006; Rana 2008). In addition, the first ever global academic conference on metal, organized by UK-based *Interdisciplinary.net*, was held in Salzburg, Austria in November of 2008. The conference, titled *Heavy Fundamentalisms. Music, Metal & Politics*, featured presentations from thirty-four scholars from nine different countries.

Over the years, a large number of popular books on the history of metal or analyses of its particular subgenres have also appeared (e.g. Bashe 1986; Baddeley 1999; Nikula 2002; Purcell 2003; Moynihan & Söderlind 2003/1998; Christe 2004; Mudrian 2004). Indeed, Hills’ (2000) notion of “fan-scholarship” is clearly in evidence within metal culture. This chapter also draws on some popular sources on overall metal history and the development of particular sub-genres. It is important, however, to note at the outset that metal has been approached and studied from a number of different perspectives. As Kahn-Harris (2007, 9) points out, “there is no unanimity as to terminology in such writing”. For instance, it is not uncommon for different commentators to regard certain known groups as representing different sub-genres. The term *genre* thus requires some clarification.

In her seminal academic work on heavy metal music and culture, *Heavy Metal. A Cultural Sociology* (1991), Deena Weinstein argues that popular music genres develop through a certain pattern of stages (drawing on the work of Ronald Byrnside, 1975). During an initial stage of “formation” the differences between a new form of music and the existing ones from which it develops is unclear. This is followed by a period of “crystallization” in which a new form of music starts to be recognized, and starts to recognize itself, as a distinct style or form of music. This stage is characterized by numerous small shifts and changes, the setting of boundaries to other genres, and the development of distinct general musical and aesthetic traits. This stage may either include or be followed by one of “fragmentation” in which the genre is divided into different sub-genres. Finally, a popular music genre may enter a stage of “decay” in which it becomes too predictable for audiences to maintain interest. Thus far, metal has shown no signs of decay. Popular music genres also consist of three interrelated main dimensions, a *sound/musical* dimension, a *visual* dimension, and a *verbal* dimension. It is primarily in relation to these dimensions that particular meanings are attached to particular genres. In some genres, one dimension may dominate and be regarded as more important than others, but all three play a part in the construction of a genre and the meanings that are attached to it. In relation to these dimensions, a genre develops a certain “code” that encapsulates its most distinct and characteristic musical, visual, and verbal traits. Genre-codes are not systematic or absolute. However, they are normally sufficiently coherent to enable a largely objective identification of a certain core of music as belonging to a certain genre. As we will see, metal has developed a highly distinctive code that allows people to relatively easily and clearly identify certain songs, bands, and visual aspects as unmistakably belonging to the genre. (Weinstein 1991, 6-8)

### **Academic research on metal music and culture**

As already mentioned, although academic interest in metal has risen sharply in recent years, such scholarship remains fragmented and mainly limited to article-length explorations each focusing on some particular aspects of metal music and culture. However, over the years, a number of book-length analyses aiming to provide more general and systematic accounts have also been produced. Deena Weinstein’s *Heavy Metal. A Cultural Sociology* (1991) and its updated version *Heavy Metal. The Music and Its Culture* (2000) are among the most influential and best-known general works on the subject. Through primarily concentrating on the various forms of relationships that exist between heavy metal artists, fans, and specialized media, Weinstein aims to offer a broad yet comprehensive account of all central aspects of

metal music and culture by understanding them as forming a *cultural bricolage*. Particular focus is put on the various ways in which heavy metal music and culture serves to *empower* its supposedly disenfranchised fans and audiences. Kahn-Harris (2007, 10) identifies this focus on empowerment as “a key theme in studies of metal”. However, since Weinstein’s analysis mainly concentrates on the “classic” heavy metal of the 1980s, its value for an understanding of the later developments of other forms of metal is limited. Even so, it is important to note that the fragmentation of heavy metal in the 1980s and the development of more extreme sub-genres such as *thrash metal* are explored by Weinstein in some detail. As part of understanding the music and its culture in a wider social and cultural context, Weinstein also offers a detailed analysis of the various forms of criticism and resistance that heavy metal was subjected to in the 1980s.

Robert Walser’s study *Running with the Devil. Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (1993) offers a similar understanding of heavy metal culture as providing disenfranchised youth with a vehicle to, as Kahn-Harris (2007, 10) puts it, “escape the oppressive confines of deindustrialized capitalism”. Walser combines his account of heavy metal’s history with a musicological analysis of its musical qualities and characteristics but, like Weinstein, concentrates almost exclusively on the heavy metal of the 1980s. Nevertheless, Weinstein’s and Walser’s pioneering work has been hugely influential within the study of metal by setting the stage and providing subsequent research with much to build on. Combined, they offer a comprehensive and valuable account of heavy metal music and culture, particularly that of the 1980s. The interpretation of metal as empowering its audience by providing a sense of meaning and community first developed and elaborated in these studies has been of particular importance since it highlights the need for metal to be understood within broader social and cultural contexts, particularly those of late modern post-industrial societies (e.g. Walser 1993, xvii). Only a few studies of metal have directed particular focus at purely musicological aspects. In addition to Walser’s study, a detailed musicological analysis can also be found in Harris M. Berger’s *Metal, Rock and Jazz: Perception and the Phenomenology of Musical Experience* (1999).

However, some scholars of metal have explored the issue of empowerment in a rather different light. In *Metalheads: Heavy Metal Music and Adolescent Alienation* (1996), focusing on metal in the USA, Jeffrey Arnett argues that the popularity of metal is best explained by American society’s incapability or failure to ‘properly’ socialize its youth and adolescents (see also Kahn-Harris 2007, 10). A rather different understanding is provided in Thomas Bossius’ (2003) study of issues of religion and worldview in the Swedish black metal scene. According to Bossius, black metal can be seen as a reflection of the increased social uncertainty inherent in late modern post-

industrialized and secularized societies, a state of affairs that has particular implications for working class youth. In this context, he argues, black metal can be seen as providing means for creating meaning, hope, and strength in what many of its adherents view as a hopeless situation (Bossius 2003, 190). He is, however, careful not to equate involvement with black metal with the practice of religion or spirituality as such. Bossius' work is important for this study since it explicitly highlights the issue of *religion* within metal music and culture in a Nordic context. The preoccupation with anti-Christian sentiments and pre-Christian Norse religion and culture within the extreme black metal sub-genre is interpreted as mirroring a more widespread need for a *re-enchantment* of society and everyday life. It should be added that Bossius also discusses black metal in terms of one particular *attempt* at the re-enchantment of *culture*. This, of course, is fully in line with the idea of popular culture offering important means for the re-enchantment of everyday life discussed above. Indeed, metal is also shortly discussed by Partridge (2005) in relation to his discussion of growing interest in different forms of "dark occulture".

Another very different account of the relationship between metal and religion is offered by Robin Sylvan (2002) in his book *Traces of the Spirit. The Religious Dimensions of Popular Music*. Working with a functional definition of religion, Sylvan argues that metal culture serves many essentially religious functions for its fans through providing them with such things as a sense of community, shared rituals, and a certain world view. However, he virtually ignores developments in metal since the late 1980s. Consequently, in spite of this being relatively recently conducted research, the notion of metal culture Sylvan uses as a reference point in making these arguments is for the most part outdated. One can only conclude that, had Sylvan paid more attention to the later development of extreme forms of metal, such as death- and black metal (discussed in more detail below), he would certainly have found a far more explicit and sustained engagement with religious and spiritual themes and ideas.

The studies of metal mentioned so far all share the widespread notion of metal fans being young, "predominantly white, male, heterosexual and working class" (Kahn-Harris 2007, 11). Kahn Harris (2007, 11) points out that this notion "has been taken as fact by many researchers and applied indiscriminately to all metal genres" although there exists only "very limited data" to support it. That said, there are *some* merits to *some* components of this commonly held notion. Metal fans are still predominantly male although the number of female fans has risen sharply through the years. In Western countries at least, metal fans are also still predominantly white and, given the prejudice against homosexuality within metal culture generally, presumably also predominantly heterosexual. However, as metal has spread globally it has also become considerably more ethnically diverse. The issue

of age and class has, arguably, never been all that clear. The central point made by Kahn-Harris is simply that one should be cautious in taking these demographics as fact.

Kahn-Harris' own study *Extreme Metal. Music and Culture on the Edge* (2007) is of particular importance for the study at hand. Concentrating on the significant but often ignored so-called *extreme metal* sub-genres, Kahn-Harris introduces a new approach to understanding metal culture based on the theoretical framework of scene. Particular attention is directed at the various forms of *interrelationships* that exist between different elements of the global extreme metal scene. Drawing on and developing Thornton's (1996) notion of "subcultural capital", the global extreme metal scene is interpreted as being sustained through a balance between its "transgressive" and "mundane" elements, reflected in scene member's accumulation of transgressive and mundane subcultural capital. In addition to offering a detailed examination of extreme metal music and culture, Kahn-Harris' differently theorized study also offers an alternative approach to metal as such that is more sensitive to the peculiarities of the wider global metal culture of today.

In 2008, American Middle Eastern studies scholar Mark LeVine also published a popular-academic book titled *Heavy Metal Islam: Rock, Resistance, and the Struggle for the Soul of Islam*. Although LeVine's book mostly deals with contemporary youth culture throughout the Islamic world more generally, it does contain some valuable information on the role of metal in youth cultural struggles in strongly tradition-bound and often oppressive social and cultural environments.

Most researchers of metal music and culture view it in a positive light. Indeed, most of the researchers discussed above are themselves professed metal fans. This is worth noting when studying a popular music culture such as metal which itself has a long-standing tradition of "fan-scholarship". In aiming to present an as adequate and nuanced account of metal music and culture as possible, both academic and fan-work needs to be combined. Naturally, researchers of metal commonly draw on a wide range of sources produced within metal culture itself. However, when subjected to rigorous academic theorizing, methodology, and terminology, the picture inevitably becomes quite different from that of fan-scholarly accounts. Hence, researchers and fans may disagree on specific points and interpret them in different ways. These questions are all the more important to keep in mind when studying Christian metal. Although it has developed its own forms of fan-scholarship, academic interest has been very modest indeed. Nevertheless, in most studies of metal, Christian metal is mentioned in passing as a curiosity. In addition to being briefly discussed by Weinstein (1991) and Bossius (2003), it has also been explored in a few scholarly articles, including a few by myself (Glanzer 2003; Brown 2005; Luhr 2005;



Moberg 2007a; 2007b; 2008a; 2008b). However, this is partly explained by the fact that Christian metal is such a small phenomenon compared to secular metal and its global scope, with Christian metal fans being counted in the thousands and secular metal fans in the millions. In the following, we shall approach metal music and culture through focusing on its key musical, visual, and verbal elements. This account will proceed from a general account of the historical developments of metal and a description of its distinct sub-genres and styles.

## 4. 2 Formation and early development

*Heavy metal* music first emerged in the late 1960s through the fusion of blues-based hard rock and elements of psychedelic rock. At this time, the counterculture of the 1960s, characterized by its ethos of peace, love, and tolerance – most commonly expressed through a widespread belief in the possibility of changing the world through social and political activism – was beginning to fragment and break down. At the turn of the decade, the previously widespread countercultural notion of youth-cultural unity was replaced with a fragmentation into distinct and separate youth cultures. According to Weinstein (1991), the development of heavy metal should be understood in the light of this particular historical, social, and cultural context. Although heavy metal never was countercultural in the sense usually understood by that term, it nevertheless did emerge in close enough connection to that environment so as to become considerably influenced by it, especially during its initial stage of development. Weinstein argues that heavy metal did indeed adopt some characteristics typical of the “Woodstock generation”. Much in line with the countercultural ideology of this time, early heavy metal also came to reflect a deep distrust for social, cultural, and political authorities, a view of popular music as a serious form of artistic expression, and an emphasis on musical authenticity. Within heavy metal, however, these elements were also transformed in important ways. The most important stylistic element adopted was long hair for men, which soon became, and has since then remained, perhaps *the* primary stylistic characteristic of heavy metal culture. Apart from the hair, heavy metal developed its own distinctive style of dress in the form of denim, leather, and chains. Only marginally interested in social and political activism, heavy metal eschewed such typical countercultural concerns. Instead, in heavy metal lyrics and imagery, key elements of the countercultural ethos such as tolerance, peace, and love were often replaced with their opposites, evil, death, and destruction. (Weinstein 1991, 12-18; cf. Moberg 2009, 137-139)



Heavy metal went through its stage of formation in the 1970s. The initial development towards more specific musical, visual, and verbal characteristics, or a heavy metal “code”, was at first expressed in particular songs, then by particular groups such as British Led Zeppelin and Deep Purple who further developed 1960s hard rock in a new, more heavy and aggressive direction. (Weinstein 1991, 11-21) These groups produced a great deal of material containing almost all of the musical elements, which were later to become typical of heavy metal. However, the British group Black Sabbath is most commonly regarded as having been the first to fully employ the musical, visual, and verbal dimensions that later would become the hallmark of heavy metal and is thus widely regarded as the first full-fledged heavy metal group. It is, however, important to note that this has been a constantly debated issue within metal culture since its early days. Irrespective of whether one chooses to regard groups like Led Zeppelin and Deep Purple as heavy metal in the full sense of the term or not, their influence on the genre can hardly be overstated. Nonetheless, many would argue that even the most casual observer would notice the decidedly heavier and gloomier quality inherent in the music of Black Sabbath, for example in songs like “Black Sabbath” (*Black Sabbath* 1970), “War Pigs” (*Paranoid* 1970), or “Iron Man” (*Paranoid* 1970). Black Sabbath not only developed the musical elements in a more heavy and aggressive direction but also, from the very start, set the standard for the types of lyrical themes that subsequently were to become a distinctive feature of heavy metal on the whole, such as the battle between good and evil, war, religion, and the occult. The initial development of heavy metal was thus essentially a British phenomenon.

Heavy metal began to “crystallize” as a distinct genre in the late 1970s through continuing musical, visual, and verbal development by Black Sabbath as well as a number of new groups, particularly Judas Priest from Britain, which is still active at the time of writing (e.g. Christie 2004, 22). The 1970s also witnessed a number of groups on the borderline between hard rock and heavy metal, such as KISS and AC/DC, achieving worldwide success. According to Weinstein, the boundaries of the genre became increasingly clear and fixed at this stage as heavy metal developed into “full being” (1991, 14), and developed a code that “demarcated a core of music that could be called, indisputably, heavy metal” (1991, 22). It also began to develop its own view on rock music “as a sensual vitalizing power that only heavy metal brings to its highest pitch, its perfection” (Weinstein 1991, 12). The heavy metal of the 1970s is often regarded as constituting a form of “proto-metal” and principal source for all subsequently developed sub-genres. Indeed, even though the more encompassing term “metal” is nowadays most commonly used as a general term for all forms of metal, all sub-genres and styles can ultimately be traced back to the heavy metal of the 1970s. (Weinstein 1991, 6-8, 14-21; Christie 2004, 23)

## The musical dimension

During much of the 1970s, heavy metal's *musical dimension* was, as mentioned above, particularly influenced by earlier and contemporary blues-based hard rock groups such as The Yardbirds, Cream, and The Jimi Hendrix Experience and, arguably, to a lesser extent also by 1960s psychedelic rock groups such as The Grateful Dead and Jefferson Airplane. The distinction between the two was always fluid, with artists like Jimi Hendrix freely incorporating elements from both. Influences from both blues-based hard rock and psychedelic rock are clearly at evidence in the early production of pioneering heavy metal groups such as Black Sabbath and Judas Priest. In addition, as discussed in detail by Walser (1993, 63-107), elements of *classical music*, particularly inspired by more 'heavier' composers such as Bach and Wagner or virtuoso player-composers such as Paganini, also became common within the genre at an early stage.

The sound of heavy metal is essentially created through considerable amplification of the overdriven *distorted electric guitar*, loud *bass*, *drums*, and intense *vocals*. Synthetisizers and keyboards were at first added only occasionally but they later became important instruments for many groups. In heavy metal, no single instrument is assigned a clearly dominating role. Instead, all instruments, including the vocals, collaborate in creating a single whole. Thus, rather than subduing any one instrument, all are instead simultaneously brought to the fore, creating what Weinstein (1991, 23) calls a powerful, energetic and intense "onslaught of sound". (Weinstein 1991, 21-30)

Usually created by a four- or five-piece group, heavy metal is generally more complex and technically demanding than most other forms of rock. Considerable technical ability is thus required on all instruments. This is further expressed in a common stress on musical *virtuosity*, particularly on the guitar. The most recognizable feature of heavy metal guitar is the extensive use of the *power chord*; an interval of a perfect fourth or fifth played on a heavily distorted electric guitar enhanced by feedback, overtones, and resultant tones (Walser 1993, 2). Typically arranged in repeated sequences of "riffs", they are often played in staccato-style, using so-called "palm-muting" techniques. When played on heavily distorted electric guitars, this style produces a thick and crunching sound. A contrast is provided through the use of complex scales and harmonies in solos. Heavy metal is also characterized by its powerful and intense rhythm section. Heavy metal bass lines tend to be more complex than in many other forms of rock. A particularly intense and fierce style of drumming, found almost exclusively in metal, also developed at an early stage. Drummers typically make extensive use of the whole set of drums and often expand the traditional drum set into a whole complex of drums and cymbals. Lastly, the vocal style

of heavy metal emphasizes intensity and emotion. Usually, although not always, sung in a clear and high pitched voice carrying long notes at the time, it strives to express feelings consistent with the heavy metal code such as pain, defiance, anger, or arousal. (Walser 1993; 41-51; Weinstein 1991, 21-28; Waksman 2001)

In the late 1970s, a number of new British groups emerged with a faster and more aggressive style of heavy metal. This movement became known as the “New Wave of British Heavy Metal” (NWOBHM). Finding much inspiration in the directness, anger, and attitude of punk rock, groups like Iron Maiden, Saxon, and Def Leppard left the blues roots of earlier heavy metal behind, “took their primary inspiration from metal itself” (Kahn-Harris 2007, 2), and put greater emphasis on aggressiveness, speed, musicianship, musical complexity, and melody. NWOBHM revitalized and upgraded heavy metal but also steered it in a more aggressive direction. At this stage, the genre had fully developed a set of highly distinctive musical, visual, and verbal characteristics. The full “crystallization” of heavy metal during this period was also greatly aided by the emergence of specialized metal-media, particularly magazines such as *Kerrang!* in 1981, *Metal Forces* in 1983, *Metal Hammer* in 1984, and *Aardschok America* in 1985 (Weinstein 2000, 174).

## The visual dimension

Heavy metal's *visual dimension* is expressed in a number of different ways: in group logos and group photos, on album covers, clothing merchandise, in concert outfits, in the use of visual effects in live performances and music videos etc. Generally speaking, the visual dimension of heavy metal elevates the fantastic, exaggerated, and shocking. Groups typically develop own identifiable band logos to express an association with a certain attitude or image. These are used on album covers and all forms of group-merchandise such as t-shirts, caps, and pins. Album and merchandise artwork commonly display menacing, threatening, and grotesque motifs inspired by horror films- and literature, heroic fantasy, science fiction, mythology, and religion. Heavy metal also adopted biker-culture style at an early stage. In the 1970s and early 1980s, a distinctive heavy metal style had developed, mostly consisting of jeans, leather, studded belts, chains, jewelry, band t-shirts, and tattoos. However, the most identifiable way for heavy metal fans to express their affiliation with heavy metal culture was, and largely remains, to grow their hair long. These basic stylistic characteristics have changed very little over time although some sub-genres have developed some more distinctive stylistic elements of their own. The main point is that these basic stylistic elements have given rise to a highly recognizable, and since long globally

spread, “metal uniform” through which metal audiences distinguish themselves as members of metal culture and the basic attitudes that go with it. (e.g. Weinstein 1991, 28-34; 121-129) The heavy metal audience, most commonly referred to as “metalheads”, “metallars”, or “headbangers”, has always been characterized by its high degree of commitment and sense of community. Heavy metal audiences are not casual but highly active consumers of their music, commonly displaying an exclusivist rather than eclectic taste (Weinstein 1991, 93-98).

The visual elements are most clearly at play in the huge “sensory overload” spectacle of the heavy metal concert, described colorfully by Weinstein (1991, 194) as an event at which “audience and artist encounter one another directly in a ritual-experience, /.../ itself the peak experience, the summum bonum, the fullest realization of the subculture”. (Weinstein 1991, 213-217) Weinstein even goes so far as to compare resemblances between the ecstatic mood produced during heavy metal concerts with that of religious ceremonies and religious ecstatic experience: “Ideal metal concerts can be described as hierophanies in which something sacred is revealed” (Weinstein 1991, 231-233). She does not, however, argue that heavy metal should be regarded *as* a religion, although she clearly suggests that it may serve some religious functions. As already mentioned, this point is explicitly made by Sylvan (2002, 175) who also singles out the metal concert as “the key ritual form which brings metalheads together as a community”. He goes on to argue that “It is not only the music, however, but an entire meaning system and way of looking at the world, a surrogate of religiosity if you will, that explains the enduring power of heavy metal” (Sylvan 2002, 163). The problematic aspects inherent in highly functionalist approaches of this kind have already been discussed above.

## **The verbal dimension**

Heavy metal’s musical and visual dimensions are in many ways informed by its *verbal dimension*. Heavy metal lyrics are not dominated by any specific theme. However, following Weinstein (1991, 35), one can still discern a “significant core of thematic complexes”. Weinstein groups heavy metal’s verbal dimension into the two, and in many ways contradictory, main categories of “dionysian” and “chaotic”. Within the dionysian category, we find themes such as ecstasy, arousal, sex, intoxication, youthful vitality and power, potency, and masculinity (often expressed through consciously exaggerated “machismo”). A key dionysian theme is also the celebration of metal music and culture itself, vividly expressed in songs such as Judas Priest’s “Take on the World” (*Killing Machine* 1980), Quiet Riot’s “Metal Health” (*Metal Health* 1983), or Manowar’s “Die for Metal” (*Gods of War*

2007). Although perhaps most colourfully expressed in heavy metal, these types of themes are also common in many other forms of rock. Indeed, as Weinstein points out, they can be understood in relation to the maxim “sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll”. However, heavy metal has become particularly known for its use of themes falling within the category of the “chaotic”, such as chaos, disorder, catastrophes, war, struggle, evil, and death – typically employing the figure of Satan or the Devil as the most common symbol of chaos. Heavy metal’s fascination with the Devil can ultimately be traced back to its roots in the blues. However, regarding explicit references to Satan or the Devil in heavy metal, Walser (1993, 151) argues that, “as with other transgressive icons, the Devil is used to signify and evoke in particular social contexts; he is not simply conjured up to be worshipped”. As noted above, such themes may be interpreted as constituting an inversion of the central themes of 1960s counterculture, and “an act of metaphysical rebellion against the pieties and platitudes of normal society” (Weinstein 1991, 39)

From the very outset, heavy metal adopted *religion*, particularly the dark and evil forces of the Judeo-Christian tradition in the form of Satan, demons, and the fires of hell, as a central source of lyrical and aesthetic inspiration. The *Bible*, and the apocalyptic themes of the Book of Revelation in particular, not only provided early bands with a whole set of stark themes to draw upon but also with a broad arsenal of religious *symbols*, *motifs*, and a rich religious *terminology* (Weinstein 1991, 36-41). Much inspiration was also provided by themes and ideas found within different strands of Occultism, Esotericism, Paganism, and Satanism as well as in ancient legends and myths, primarily as found in Germanic, Norse, and Celtic mythology. These days, religious/spiritual and mythological themes of these various kinds commonly surface at nearly all levels of metal culture; most evidently in the content of song lyrics and the use of imagery and aesthetics in album artwork, specialized media, music videos, as well as during live performances. The use of various forms of *pagan* themes is particularly common within so-called *folk metal* that appeared in the early 1990s. Folk metal bands tend to incorporate elements from the folk music traditions of their own native cultures, often adding instruments such as fiddles, flutes, and accordions to an otherwise traditional metal sound of guitar, bass, and drums (*cf.* Moberg 2009, 141). Finnish groups such as Amorphis, Finntroll, Moonsorrow, and Korpiklaani have been important contributors to this particular sub-genre. An interest in myth and legend is also evident in the inspiration drawn from authors such as J.R.R. Tolkien, H.P. Lovecraft, and E.A. Poe.

In the following, special attention will be directed at how these themes have developed in relation to the overall development and fragmentation of metal over time and illustrated by some examples from lyrics by known heavy metal bands. Religious themes and imagery are often incorporated

into treatments of other key heavy metal themes such as war, struggle, and evil. One can find many examples of this in the production of heavy metal pioneers Black Sabbath, as in this excerpt from the anti-Vietnam War song “War Pigs” (*Paranoid* 1970):

Now in darkness world stops turning  
As you hear the bodies burning  
No more war pigs have the power  
And as God has struck the hour  
Day of judgement God is calling  
On their knees the war pigs crawling  
Begging mercies for their sins  
Satan laughing spreads his wings  
Oh Lord yeah

Importantly, although many groups contributed considerably to the development of metal’s “chaotic” verbal dimension in the 1970s and early 1980s, they nevertheless dealt with explicitly religious themes in different ways. It is equally important to note that most of these early groups used religious themes *symbolically*, with Satan and hell often being treated as symbols of an undefined evil. Of course, these types of themes are also deeply embedded in the Western cultural mindset and an integral part of a widely shared Western cultural frame of reference. However, while many early groups, such as Judas Priest, used religious themes only occasionally, others, such as Black Sabbath, used them repeatedly. As illustrated above, the lyrics of Black Sabbath commonly deal with religiously infused themes, typically portraying Satan and evil as something to be feared and shunned rather than embraced. Indeed, some of their lyrics (see for example “After Forever” from their third album *Master of Reality* from 1971) even appear to portray religious and Christian sentiment in a directly positive light. Other influential groups such as Iron Maiden essentially treat religious themes neutrally. For example, their much-debated song “The Number of the Beast” from their 1982 album with the same name does not easily lend itself to be interpreted as a celebration of Satan or the Antichrist although it has received much criticism for doing precisely that. Rather, as Walser (1993, 152) argues, it is more about “exploring tensions between reality and dream, evil and power”. On later albums such as *Seventh Son of a Seventh Son* (1988), every single song touches upon religious, spiritual, or existential questions in one way or another. One example can be found in “Infinite Dreams” dealing with the question of reincarnation:

There’s got to be more to it than this  
Or tell me, why do we exist?  
I’d like to think that when I die  
I’d get a chance, another time



And to return and live again  
Reincarnate, play the game  
Again and again and again

As demonstrated through these examples, religious themes and terminology were not only employed to spice up lyrics. On the contrary, hugely influential groups such as Black Sabbath and Iron Maiden often treated issues of a religious nature in an apparently serious manner, thereby adding greater existential depth and mystique to their already powerful music. The basic musical, visual, and verbal dimensions of heavy metal have also developed and diversified over time as new sub-genres and fusions of sub-genres have emerged and developed. A detailed account of these developments would fill an entire book in itself. However, all subsequently developed metal sub-genres and styles share a basic connection to the main characteristics outlined above.

#### 4.3 Fragmentation and diversification

In the beginning on the 1980s, the general character of heavy metal changed as the genre began to fragment, initially splitting into the two opposing sub-genres of *glam-* and *thrash metal*. Glam metal, appearing in close connection with the Los Angeles hard rock scene, combined classic heavy metal with a considerable degree of pop sensibility, “MTV glitz”, an outrageous style of cross-dressing, heavy make up, and long teased hair reminiscent of that of 1970s “glam rock” artists such as David Bowie and Marc Bolan (Christe 2004, 159). Initially developed through the more aggressive early work of groups such as Mötley Crüe, Twisted Sister, and W.A.S.P., it took a softer turn in the mid 1980s, making it the single most commercially successful popular music genre of the decade, with groups such as Poison and Bon Jovi selling millions of records. As part of this movement, Christian glam metal group Stryper also rose to worldwide fame.

This shift towards softer metal sounds was countered by the simultaneous development of the largely underground *thrash metal* movement. Inspired by the development of punk in the early 1980s, pioneering groups such as Metallica, Slayer, and Venom introduced the most aggressive form of metal to date, “characterized by speed, aggression and an austere seriousness”, paving the way for the subsequent development of so-called *extreme metal* styles (Kahn-Harris 2007, 3). The thrash metal movement also reflected a change of attitude in the experience and production of metal as it moved away from the earlier emphasis on the fantastic and exaggerated in favor of a more down-to-earth “back to the basics” type of approach. As various forms of “chaotic” themes had been



downplayed within glam, they were instead embraced and developed further within thrash. Often concentrating on more worldly topics such as alienation, abuse of power, and war (particularly nuclear war), thrash metal developed an aggressive and uncompromising lyrical style. This is further illustrated by the names of other pioneering groups such as Anthrax, Megadeth, and Nuclear Assault. (Weinstein 1991, 43-52) The apocalyptic themes of the Bible also provided an important source of inspiration. British group Venom also introduced more explicit and provocative occult and satanic imagery through their releases *Welcome to Hell* (1981) and *Black Metal* (1982). Although Venom clearly employed these types of themes in a spirit of playfulness and humor, the group became hugely important for the subsequent development of the 'satanic' *black metal* sub-genre (discussed below). However, stark and austere biblical themes continued to function as particularly important sources of inspiration for many pioneering thrash metal groups. One such example can be found in Metallica's "Fight Fire with Fire" (*Ride the Lightning* 1984):

We shall all die  
Time is like a fuse, short and burning fast  
Armageddon's here, like said in the past

Further examples of biblical themes functioning as direct sources of inspiration can also be found in the lyrics of Megadeth's "Ashes in your Mouth" (*Countdown to Extinction* 1992):

Melting down all metals, turning plows and shears to swords  
Shun words of the Bible, we need implements of war  
Chalklines and red puddles of those who have been slain  
Destiny, that crooked schemer, says the dead shall rise again

The lyrics cited above are both examples of religious themes essentially being treated neutrally. However, some groups, such as Slayer from the USA, adopted a much more critical approach. At the time of writing still active and widely popular, Slayer has become known for demonstrating a particularly critical view of religion in general, and Christianity in particular. This is reflected in albums titles such as *Haunting the Chapel* (1984), *Hell Awaits* (1985), and *God Hates Us All* (2001) as well as in the lyrics of numerous songs. A particularly illustrative example of their critical stance towards religion, most commonly expressed through direct criticism of Christianity, can be found in their song "Circle of Beliefs" (*Divine Intervention* 1994):

Can't explain the reason why  
Someone would rather live than die

If dying is the only way  
To end a life of mental stains  
All your life he's been the cause  
A man impaled upon a cross

Pure religious holocaust  
If religion dies it's not my loss  
/.../  
Blinded by the holy light  
That constantly consumes your mind  
/.../  
You're following a fake  
Everyone awake!!!

These types of themes were to be explored a great deal further within a number of even more extreme and radical metal sub-genres, such as *death-* and *black metal* in particular, which started developing in the early and mid 1980s. It is at this point, if not earlier, that the more encompassing term "metal" becomes more useful for describing metal music and culture in general. Together with thrash metal, these sub-genres are usually combined under the heading *extreme metal*. As Kahn-Harris (2007, 5) writes, extreme metal sub-genres "all share a musical radicalism that marks them out as different from other forms of heavy metal". Indeed, within metal as a whole, the very idea of development and innovation has always been intimately connected to new groups striving to develop their music in ever more extreme directions than that of their predecessors.

The creation of death metal by groups such as Death, Possessed, and Morbid Angel in the mid 1980s is a good example of this. Death metal once again changed the way metal was made and experienced, by taking the already powerful music to its outermost extremes with raging tempos, extensive use of extremely fast so-called "blast-beat" drumming, unconventional song-structures, innovative guitar riffing, and guttural or growled vocals – making it sound like little more than unorganized noise, hardly music at all, to many of its detractors. Usually held at smaller venues, the intensity and aggressiveness of death metal is also reflected in the concert experience. Death metal combines typical metal themes such as death, violence, and war with extensive use of various types of satanic and occult themes. Some groups, such as Deicide, Acheron, and Akercocke, have become particularly known for dealing with satanic and anti-Christian themes almost exclusively. In addition, "the destruction of the body", typically expressed through explicit and graphic descriptions of rotting, mutilated corpses, torture, and murder, also became an important source of lyrical and aesthetic inspiration (Kahn-Harris 2007, 35; see also Mudrian 2004).

In the beginning of the 1990s, inspired by the earlier work of explicitly

'satanic' groups such as Venom and Bathory, black metal was developed into a distinctive sub-genre by Norwegian groups such as Mayhem, Emperor, and Darkthrone. Favoring a raw and unsophisticated sound, black metal was principally created through very fast tempos, bright and heavily distorted guitars, and high-pitched, screaming or shrieking vocals. (Kahn-Harris 2007, 34-37; Bennett 2001, 42-56) This particularly raw sound was characteristic of earlier releases by Norwegian bands such as Darkthrone's *Under a Funeral Moon* (1993), Mayhem's *De Mysteriis Dom Sathanas* (1994), or Emperor's *In the Nightside Eclipse* (1994). Some groups, such as Dimmu Borgir and Cradle of Filth, later developed a more melodic variant of black metal characterized by much higher production values. Above all, this sub-genre has become particularly known for its radical lyrical themes. Black metal, writes Kahn-Harris (2007, 5), "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 was essentially based on a loosely defined 'black metal ideology' which advocated a revitalization of Norse pagan heritage and a return to a pre-Christian culture and society untarnished by the perceived hypocrisy and herd mentality both engendered and ingrained by a historically imposed Christianity (cf. Moberg 2009, 139). As argued by Bossius (2003), this can be interpreted as an attempt to re-enchant culture and everyday life. Some bands also started incorporating national socialist themes and discourses into their lyrics and imagery. This eventually led to the development of a separate and highly marginal sub-genre called National Socialist Black Metal or NSBM. Kahn Harris argues that by distancing themselves "in a self-conscious attempt to explore the radical potential of metal", extreme metal sub-genres have become increasingly occupied with different forms of "sonic transgression" (2007, 30). In addition, as noted above, the extreme metal scene is also characterized by its emphasis on different forms of "discursive transgression" (2007, 34-43) which, among other things, is evident in a "far more sustained engagement with occult ideas" (2007, 38). Elaborating further on extreme metal discourse, Kahn-Harris writes:

Extreme metal discourse represents a departure from heavy metal discourse in that the fantasies it explores are less obviously 'fantastic'. Heavy metal discourses are generally lurid, theatrical, baroque, and often satirical. Extreme metal discourses are detailed, repetitive and apparently serious. (Kahn-Harris 2007, 43)

Apart from the development of extreme metal styles, metal diversified further in the 1990s through the mixing and fusing of metal with elements

from other popular music genres. The mid 1990s saw the development of so-called *nu-metal* by groups such as Korn, Limp Bizkit, and P.O.D. from the USA. Nu-metal groups incorporated elements from hardcore punk, funk, and hip-hop music, thereby creating a new form of metal that in many ways constituted a break with many of its traditional musical and stylistic conventions, particularly through extensive use of funk beats and rapping vocals. Nu metal lyrics rarely concentrate on religious topics, instead focusing on topics such as alienation and social injustice. Nu-metal brought metal-sounds to new audiences but was largely rejected within more traditional circles of metal culture.

Overall, metal has become increasingly musically diverse since the late 1980s with new sub-genres and styles, and hybrids of sub-genres and styles, constantly being developed. In addition to those already discussed above, a few that could be mentioned include doom metal, grindcore, metalcore, alternative metal, progressive metal, funk metal, industrial metal, gothic metal, sludge metal, stoner metal, and symphonic metal. In addition, it is not unusual for bands to experiment with and move between styles. Hence, much contemporary metal defies neat and clear classification. As Weinstein (2000, 286) reminds us, “Style categories are not watertight containers – they leak, bleed into others, and mix with elements from anywhere”. However, even though metal continues to diversify in a number of directions, the fascination for religious themes has remained a central and defining lyrical and aesthetic characteristic of metal as a whole.

#### **4. 4 Controversy and resistance**

Throughout the years, metal has engendered a great deal of controversy, perhaps more than any other contemporary genre of popular music. The fascination and customary use of the types of themes mentioned above, such as Satanism/the satanic and anti-Christian sentiments, is the main reason why metal also continues to run into resistance from conservative Christian groups. Since its conception, metal has been accused of the glorification of violence, the promotion of suicide and self-destructive behavior, extreme rebellion, drug- and alcohol abuse, sexual perversion and, last but not least, *Satanism* and outright Devil worship (e.g. Weinstein 2000, 245-262). Occasionally, metal has also been implicated in various concentrated campaigns against pornography, youth violence, and teen suicide by secular lobbying groups in the USA promoting “family values” and “morality in media”, such as the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) and the National Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) in the mid 1980s (see for example Weinstein 2000, 265-270). Robert Wright (2000, 370) has pointed out

how, by accusing metal of fostering suicidal tendencies among its fans, campaigns in the mid 1980s by US groups such as the PMRC and the PTA supported by the Christian Right ultimately managed to push this “sensational allegation” all the way “into the public imagination” (Wright 2000, 370). For a more detailed account of resistance to metal during the 1980s see Weinstein 1991; Walser 1993). Even though these groups nearly always operate within the USA, the repercussions of their actions extend much further in today’s global popular music market. These critiques have reached the Nordic countries as well, but they have generally remained confined within the limited reach of conservative Christian discourse (see Häger 2001).

Criticism and rejection of dominant social and cultural authorities constitutes a central component of many popular music cultures, and metal is no exception in this regard. However, metal has often been interpreted as presenting a critique of a society and culture that is viewed as false and hollow by consciously and deliberately transgressing the boundaries of the socially and culturally acceptable (Kahn-Harris 2007, 141-156; Weinstein 1991, 42-43; 53-57). One way of doing this is through extensive and deliberately provocative use of radical anti-Christian or otherwise strongly misanthropic lyrical themes and imagery. The criticism leveled at Christianity within certain forms of metal is most commonly expressed through provocative mockery of central Christian beliefs and symbols, particularly those with a more direct reference to the crucifixion and person of Christ. In addition, criticism of both past and present institutional Christianity is also fairly common. As noted above, the apparent seriousness and sincerity of extreme metal discourse and aesthetics is greatly fuelled by the use of various types of ‘dark’ religious/spiritual themes and imagery. This is especially the case when deliberately provocative, blatantly satanic, and anti-Christian imagery such as the inverted cross or the Sigil of Baphomet are employed. However, the apparent seriousness of extreme metal discourse, themes, and imagery, especially when it relates to religion, is complicated by metal generally having remained 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 (e.g. Kahn-Harris 2007, 42; 129). Even so, although this broadly defined individualist ethos can be seen to function 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, particularly within extreme sub-genres such as black metal. (*cf.* Moberg 2009, 139-140)

In the beginning of the 1990s, black metal attracted much attention from mainstream media in the Nordic countries, and in Norway in particular, as a few members of the Norwegian black metal scene were linked to, and later

also convicted of, a large number of both successful and attempted church arsons, a few notable instances of extreme violence, and even some cases of murder. The arson of the medieval Fantoft stave church in Bergen is perhaps the most widely known of these cases. These extraordinary events have been documented by Michael Moynihan and Didrik Söderlind in their book *Lords of Chaos: The Bloody Rise of the Satanic Metal Underground* (2003, first published 1998) which contains rich interview material with many scene members who were implicated in these events. These events also came to afford the Norwegian black metal scene with much notoriety within metal culture on a global scale. Although it has lost most of its earlier violent aspects, the radical anti-Christian sentiments held by some members of the infamous early 1990s scene have been carried on by several contemporary acts. It is, however, important to keep in mind that these types of radical ideas are marginal within metal culture in general. Therefore, although many black metal bands continue to promote anti-Christian sentiment, such sentiments have only rarely translated into direct action, with the exception of the isolated and unmatched events in Norway during the early 1990s. Nonetheless, reinforced by these events, the widespread, and nowadays often humorous, notion of metal as Satanist 'Devil's music' continues to appear in Christian criticisms of metal music and culture (e.g. Håger 2001). However, conservative Christian resistance to metal should come as no surprise considering that anti-Christian themes explicitly expressed in extreme sub-genres such as black metal actually have led to direct action in the form of church arsons in the past. Even though open confrontation is rare, the notion of metal as an evil and destructive form of music persists. (cf. Moberg 2008a, 86-87)

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 some cases, we also find such themes and imagery being vehemently, consistently, and actively *promoted* in a way that makes it difficult to dismiss as mere shock-theatrics (cf. Moberg 2009, 140-141). A critical stance toward religion, especially Christianity, is a common feature of metal culture on a general level, but it is a feature that also needs to be understood in light of its broadly defined ethos of individualism. This also has to do with metal's character as a particular kind of apolitical and anti-authoritarian music culture. However, the issue of whether the transgressive themes commonly used in many forms of metal should be interpreted as reflecting the views of artists and fans themselves is quite another matter since there are also lyrical genre-rules at play. That is, metal lyrics and imagery, particularly within extreme metal sub-genres, are more often than not *supposed* to be extreme, the worse the better, often coming across as pure (and deliberately distasteful) humor. Above all, they raise the shock-value of the music. Thus, it could also be argued that these types of radical themes



and imagery make important contributions to metal's entertainment value. (cf. Moberg 2009, 130-131) Generally speaking, although some extreme sub-genres are marked by a higher degree of apparent seriousness, metal has also always been characterized by a high degree of playfulness, humor, self-irony, a fondness for exaggeration, spectacle, and over the top theatrics. The apparent seriousness of these types of extreme themes and imagery has long been a much-debated issue among researchers of metal music and culture. As 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". Some studies of metal may indeed have downplayed its "Satanic element". At the same time, however, one should also be wary of exaggerating or overstating this element. 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". Moreover, one should also keep in mind that, with the exception of its "Satanic element", metal's "religious element" as such has so far only received relatively little attention within research on metal generally. As I have argued elsewhere, when exploring the dissemination of 'dark' alternative spiritual ideas within metal music and culture on a general level, speculating about whether particular bands are 'really' serious or not regarding the messages they convey should perhaps not be a question of primary concern. It could also be argued that metal's tendency for "spoof adherence and theatrics" applies equally to all cases in which religious/spiritual themes and imagery are used in an apparently serious manner. Again, as with any major form of popular music, we also need to recognize the *commercial* and *entertainment* aspects at play here. (cf. Moberg 2009, 145)

Although metal has been associated with satanic themes and imagery since its early days, many metal bands show no great or consistent interest in such things. Nevertheless, the world of religion and myth in general has remained a particularly important source of inspiration for many metal bands to this day. For example, bands interested in exploring religious/spiritual topics may also turn to various pagan, occult, or esoteric themes and ideas. Various forms of pagan themes and imagery in particular have long ago become such a recurring feature of many forms of metal that, if one is to speak of its "Satanic element", one could certainly speak of its "Pagan element" as well. While satanic themes and imagery sometimes seem to be used in a very serious manner indeed, pagan and esoteric themes tend not to be explored in an equally confrontational spirit. In some cases, satanic and pagan themes may overlap. In other cases, however, some particular pagan or esoteric tradition functions instead as the primary source of lyrical and aesthetic inspiration. (cf. Moberg 2009, 141-144) It is self-evident that exploration of such themes should not automatically be equated



with Satanist or anti-Christian sentiment, although that is sometimes the case with conservative Christian criticism of metal (e.g. Dyrendal 2000, 144-145). Darker forms of alternative spiritualities such as various strands of Paganism, Occultism, Esotericism, and modern Satanism do, however, tend to be antagonistic and sometimes openly hostile towards traditional institutional Christianity (cf. Moberg 2009, 134-135). This is a particularly characteristic feature of various forms of Satanism, which usually adopt an explicitly *elitist* stance towards the question of self-development and the realization of one's true potential. As Partridge (2005, 222) points out, in many respects, 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, some forms of contemporary Satanism, such as that of Anton LaVey and the *Church of Satan*, essentially base their teachings on an atheistic worldview. Such a brand of Satanism may also be understood as a "positive self-religion that encourages egocentricity and personal development" (Partridge 2005, 223) while typically rejecting all kinds of herd mentality which, in these contexts, often becomes associated with traditional and institutional belief systems like Christianity. Therefore, within some forms of Satanism, self-development may be understood more in terms of an existential or individual developmental process rather than an expressly religious or spiritual one. However, other contemporary Satanist groups sometimes express their understanding of the force of Satan in more spiritual or theistic terms. (Partridge 2005: 221-230; cf. Moberg 2009, 135) Generally speaking, the exceptional pervasiveness of Satanist/satanic themes in metal needs to be understood in relation to the general character of metal as an oppositional, confrontational, and individual-centered popular music culture.

Lastly, it is important to note that metal's often-controversial exploration of religious themes has had a profound effect on the very self understanding of Christian metal as a whole. It might not be possible, or even desirable, to attempt to explain what the hugely diverse world of metal music is 'really' about. Suffice to say that it continues to appeal to and bring together people with different cultural backgrounds in nearly all corners of the world. However, as we turn to explore Christian metal in following chapters, we shall see how metal music and culture may indeed become 'about' some rather specific issues when used by particular groups as a central means or vehicle for the expression of particular identities and worldviews. For despite Christian metal's marginal and controversial status within the broader global metal community, it also clearly attests to the *malleability* of metal music and culture as a vehicle for the expression and articulation of a wide range of disparate worldviews, ideologies, and identities.

## 5. Christian metal music and culture

The following chapter proceeds with the direct exploration of Christian metal music and culture. I shall begin with offering a general account of Christian metal's historical development and its main lyrical and visual characteristics. This account should be understood in relation to the previous discussion on secular metal music and culture since that forms the backdrop against which Christian metal necessarily needs to be understood. Christian metal is, whatever else the case may be, also a form of metal music. The distinction between Christian and secular metal is primarily of a discursive nature. Hence, we shall begin by looking more closely at how Christian metal can be defined. In addition, as it is primarily through the content of song *lyrics* that Christian metal distinguishes itself from its secular counterpart, in the next part of this chapter, particular focus will be directed at Christian metal's verbal dimension. The lyrics in particular also provide very important clues to a broader understanding of the discursive construction of Christian metal as a distinct Christian space. Additionally, Christian metal's visual dimension will be discussed in some detail.

In this chapter, Christian metal is also explored as an independent popular music scene. This involves charting the particular space that makes up the scene and looking at how this space is structured and constructed on a transnational level. Secondly, it involves situating the contemporary Finnish scene within this wider transnational religious and musical space, and directing particular attention at its specific forms of structure and construction. As with secular metal above, this account does not aim to be all-comprehensive. New Christian metal bands, stores, fanzines, magazines, Internet-sites, and promotion- and distribution channels are constantly created while others are laid to rest. Moreover, it is not unusual for bands, magazines or fanzines to resurface after having been defunct for many years. Attempting to keep constant track of all such developments would surely prove an impossible task. The information contained in this chapter is thus likely to change over time.

### Researching the Christian metal scene

Second hand sources on Christian metal are somewhat hard to acquire. Apart from a small number of academic articles (Brown 1994; 1995; 1996; 2005; Glanzer 2003; Luhr 2005; Moberg 2007a; 2007b; 2008a; 2008b), Christian metal has received very little scholarly attention so far. In some articles and unpublished conference papers Charles M. Brown has focused on issues of apocalypticism, alienation, and rebellion in Christian thrash metal in the

USA. Similarly, Luhr has focused on Christian metal in the context of the US “culture wars” of the mid 1980s to the mid 1990s. Perry L. Glanzer has discussed the activities of the US-based *Sanctuary* “metal church” (discussed in more detail below) in relation to Niebuhr’s typology of different Christian responses to the wider culture, which was also briefly discussed above. Importantly, in various ways, all of these articles have also attempted to provide some answers to the question of what Christian metal is *about* from the perspective of its musicians and fans. We shall return to this issue a little later.

More general explorations of evangelical popular culture sometimes mention Christian metal in passing (e.g. Howard & Streck 1999; Hendershot 2004; Forbes 2005), but they rarely discuss it in any detail, let alone treat it as a distinct Christian music culture in its own right. Luhr’s already mentioned *Witnessing Suburbia: Conservatives and Christian Youth Culture* (2009), which traces the development of evangelical popular culture from the late 1960s to the present day, is a notable exception as it contains an entire chapter dedicated to an exploration of Christian metal in the context of the US “culture wars” of the mid 1980s to the mid 1990s. Much like Luhr’s analysis, however, academic explorations of Christian metal have so far almost exclusively focused on mid 1980s and early 1990s Christian metal in the USA. In my own writings (e.g. Moberg 2007a; 2007b; 2008a; 2008b) I have instead aimed to draw attention to the transnational dimensions of contemporary Christian metal. As I have also argued elsewhere and will continue to argue here, I believe it is important to keep in mind that, despite of its religious outlook, regarding most practical aspects, the Christian metal scene functions much like any other popular music scene (Moberg 2008a, 97). In order to gain a fuller, and indeed adequate, understanding of Christian metal one needs to move beyond lyrical and aesthetic analysis (although that is important too) and also explore Christian metal as a Christian *popular music culture* in a wider sense. One could even go so far as to argue that some of Christian metal’s lyrical and aesthetic dimensions start to make sense only when they are viewed in relation to the workings of Christian metal as a wider Christian musical space.

Similar to secular metal, Christian metal has also developed its own tradition of “fan-scholarship” (Hills 2002). However, due to the small scale and limited resources of Christian scenes, fan-scholarship on such things as the history and basic tenets of Christian metal have so far largely remained confined to the Internet. Christian musician John J. Thompson’s *Raised by Wolves: The Story of Christian Rock ‘n’ Roll* (2000) does, however, contain a more lengthy section on the history and development of Christian metal in North America. Additional information on various Christian metal bands can also be found in Mark Allan Powell’s *Encyclopaedia of Contemporary Christian Music* (2002). Perhaps rather surprisingly, the Finnish-language

twenty-eight page Wikipedia-article “Kristillinen metallimusiikki” (“Christian metal music”) is the single most comprehensive general overview of Christian metal’s main characteristics and historical development on a transnational level that I have been able to find. There is also a shorter but largely identical English language version titled “Christian metal”. Wikipedia also contains a small number of separate articles on the various stages of Christian metal’s development and its many styles. Taken together, these Wikipedia articles constitute the most comprehensive account of Christian metal that has been produced to date. This chapter draws upon all of them. However they are all, of course, fan-scholarly accounts and consequently, all need to be approached critically. Their fan-scholarly character is, among other things, evidenced by the fact that some of them contain sections that highlight the use by certain secular band of various Christian themes, which is a typical feature of Christian accounts of Christian rock (see for example Thompson 2000; Detweiler & Taylor 2003; Mattingly 2005). One also finds additional sources on many large Christian metal Internet-sites such as *The Metal for Jesus Page*, *JesusMetal*, *Angelic Warlord.com*, or in magazines such as *Heaven’s Metal* or *Devotion HardMusic Magazine* (all of which are discussed in more detail below). Finally, the rather different and novel *The Spiritual Significance of Music*-project can also be treated as such a source. This project, which is available entirely online, essentially consists of a large collection of portfolios in which people involved in different aspects of music from all over the world share their views on the relationship between music and spirituality. So far, the project has been divided into four main “editions”, including a metal edition and a Christian edition. The latter contains many portfolios of known Christian metal bands. In short, any exploration of Christian metal needs to rely on both fan-scholarly accounts as well as a range of additional sources to a considerable degree. However, it is important to approach all such sources critically.

In the following, I will not only draw on fan-scholarly accounts but also on the first hand interview material gathered for this study. Through combining these two different types of sources, I intend to highlight the many *connections* that exist between how the basic characteristics of Christian metal are presented in most Christian metal fan-scholarship and specialized media, on the one hand, and how they are presented by core scene members interviewed for this study on the other. In other words, by combining these different types of sources I aim to illustrate the ways in which the wider transnational Christian metal scene facilitates interaction and the forming of shared understandings among its members in different countries around the world. As stated earlier on, the Finnish scene must be understood in relation to the wider transnational scene from which it constantly receives influences and ideas. In addition to the neighboring

Swedish and Norwegian scenes, the US scene also remains particularly significant in this regard.

## 5. 1 Historical development

Christian metal, or *white metal* as it was also called during its earlier phase, appeared in the USA in the late 1970s, little under a decade after the emergence of secular metal. The foundations for Christian metal had already been laid in the mid 1970s by Christian hard rock bands such as Agape, Resurrection Band, and Petra from the USA, Jerusalem from Sweden, and Daniel Band from Canada. In the beginning of the 1980s, Christian bands such as Saint, Messiah Prophet, and Stryper from the USA, as well as Leviticus from Sweden, appeared with a full-fledged metal sound and look and an expressed goal of spreading the Christian message in the secular metal community. Glam metal act Stryper in particular managed to achieve considerable wider crossover success. The band, which toured extensively with successful secular metal acts, became widely known for its practice of throwing bibles into the audience. However, touring with secular bands and releasing their music on the secular label *Enigma Records/Capitol* also engendered some controversy in evangelical circles in the USA (Thompson 2000, 152). Eventually, largely as a consequence of Stryper's success, Christian metal started to be noticed by both secular metal media such as *Kerrang!*, and mainstream popular music media such as MTV. Still active, Stryper has remained the single most successful Christian metal band to this day. Their record sales exceed five million and their 1986 release *To Hell with the Devil* even received a Grammy Award nomination. As Thompson (2000, 153) states, "They certainly put Christian rock on the map". Christian metal continued to develop and diversify in the late 1980s, mainly through the efforts of US Christian heavy- and glam metal bands such as Whitecross, Sacred Warrior, Holy Soldier, Bride, Barren Cross, Bloodgood, Recon, and Rage of Angels – all of which have remained Christian metal classics to this day. Indeed, many of the musicians interviewed for this study had initially come to know Christian metal through bands such as these. (Thompson 2000, 152-162; Weinstein 2000, 53-54)

### The Sanctuary movement

There is one particular factor that played a crucial role in the initial development of Christian metal in the USA. In 1984, a California-based evangelical movement called *Sanctuary* (or "The Rock and Roll Refuge") was established as a temporary alternative 'metal style' church for born again

Christians involved in various rock scenes as well as for evangelistic outreach in various secular music scenes; particularly the secular metal community. Sanctuary was thus the first 'metal church' ever to emerge. Head pastor Bob Beeman (or "Pastor Bob" as he is also called) himself led the way by fully embracing the metal style and look, appearing with long hair, metal-style clothing, and tattoos. Indeed, issues regarding style and look constituted an important part of Sanctuary's main aims and aspirations. Sanctuary expressly welcomed anyone into their church regardless of their appearance. The basic idea was to attract people who felt uncomfortable, unwelcome, or even rejected, in more traditional evangelical settings. Indeed, metal style was certainly far from generally accepted in wider evangelical circles during this time (Luhr 2009, 115). In this way, as Glanzer (2003 [19]) writes, one could say that "Sanctuary members understood the dressing practices and values of the evangelical church [broadly understood] as fallen because of the preoccupation with external appearance". Indeed, Sanctuary explicitly encouraged its members to fully opt for the metal style or, as Glanzer (2003 [15]) writes, "The importance of accommodating the heavy metal look became almost a sacred norm at Sanctuary". In addition to using metal music during its services and encouraging its members to adopt the metal-look, Sanctuary also created its own metal-inspired logo, which it also printed on t-shirts and stickers. However, there was also some degree of confusion within Sanctuary regarding the adoption of certain elements of the metal style and look. One such issue was that of female metal fashion. During the 1980s and 1990s, female metal-style essentially took two main forms. While some female metalheads dressed much like the men in t-shirts, jeans, and leather, others opted for what Weinstein (1991, 134) calls the "male fantasy"- look of deep cleavage, short skirts, and high heels. Sanctuary leaders nevertheless trusted that, as female members fully embraced the Christian faith, this would eventually lead them to dress less revealingly. (Glanzer 2003 [13-19])

By forming an alternative evangelical space, the Sanctuary movement can also be seen to have offered its members resources for the shaping of an alternative form of religious expression, and more importantly, a space to live out an alternative Christian identity. In this way, Sanctuary was in many ways directed *against* traditional evangelical notions about 'appropriate' forms of Christian worship and evangelism. Although popular music styles had already become an integral part of church activity in many Protestant congregations and denominations, some forms of music were still deemed too extreme within more conservative evangelical circles. Discussing how different forms of music have been viewed in different religious settings, Jeremy Begbie makes the following comments:



Why assume, as many seem to, that spiritual music has to be slow? Why assume that being close to God necessarily entails suppressing change and movement? Why assume that simplicity is necessarily more spiritual than complexity? Why assume that true spirituality is marked by the evasion of conflict? (Begbie 2003, 95)

Whether one agrees or not, these questions could just as well have been posed by a member of the Sanctuary church, or indeed any Christian metal musician or fan. For one thing, metal is complex music and often very fast indeed. Christian metal can also be interpreted as advocating change through its struggle for acceptance within the wider evangelical community. It seems reasonable to assume that a certain form of music in itself will affect the content of its lyrics, at least to some degree. Lyrics and singing are often, as Begbie underlines, “valued more for their sound than for their obvious verbal reference”, more “part of a total sound mix of which music is a determinative element, and that sound mix is itself part of a composite multi-media experience” (Begbie 2003, 99). However, while this is certainly true for secular metal, it is only partly so for Christian metal. In Christian metal, lyrical content becomes of crucial importance (Glanzer 2003 [22]). Even so, when Christian lyrics are set to metal, the style in which they are sung is very much in line with a metal-“sound mix” and, especially in live performances, they also become part of a metal-“multi-media experience”. Presenting and expressing Christian faith in an alternative form, giving Christians the opportunity to be part of a metal-“multi-media experience” that was neither ‘satanic’ nor ‘morally depraved’ can be said to have been one of Sanctuary’s main aims. Indeed, the church actually encouraged concert-like behavior during its services. It also supported Christian bands playing at secular venues and invited known Christian metal bands to come and play for the congregation. (Glanzer 2003, [32-34]). Ultimately, however, as Glanzer (2003, [40]) points out, “Although Sanctuary sought to transform the heavy metal subculture, the subculture also influenced and transformed Sanctuary”.

In typical evangelical fashion, the leaders of Sanctuary sought to base their rationale for adopting some of metal culture’s central elements on certain passages of the Bible. For example, as Glanzer (2003, [22]) writes, regarding the music in itself, Sanctuary members looked to “what the Bible says, or does not say, about the powerful practice of creating music”. The Sanctuary church came to hold the view that no particular form of music could be rejected on the basis of the Bible. Instead, *any* form of music could be “redeemed” and used as a means of religious expression and evangelistic outreach, provided that the lyrics were ‘sound’, that is, clearly based on a “Christian” view of the world. Regarding the metal style and look, members instead looked to biblical passages that emphasized purity of heart over



appearance. Yet another example can be found in Sanctuary's open attitude to typical metal concert practices such as "moshing". At metal concerts, particularly by bands that play more extreme styles, a so-called "mosh pit" sometimes appears close to or in front of the stage. The audience creates a circle in which they dance and slam into each other in a seemingly, but not actually, violent manner. In a somewhat transformed sense, Sanctuary embraced this practice as well. As Glanzer (2003, [38]) goes on to argue about Sanctuary's attitudes to metal sounds, styles, and practices more generally: "If members did not see adequate Scriptural grounds for rejecting it, they accommodated it". (Glanzer 2003, [14-22]) Sanctuary's emphasis on evangelistic outreach also meant that it offered its members the opportunity to preach the Christian message by playing their own favorite music. However, they rejected what they viewed as metal's "idolatrous aspects" (Glanzer 2003, [24]), that is, the 'metal god' image that surrounded many successful secular metal musicians. They did, however, emphasize the role of Christian metal musicians as "ministers" or "missionaries". Generally speaking, evangelism took precedence over musical creativity. Through its many efforts, Sanctuary eventually managed to lend Christian metal some degree of credibility within broader evangelical circles in the USA. It also functioned as a breeding ground for future Christian metal acts (Brown 2005, 124-125) as well as an important source of inspiration for bands in other countries. As Brown (2005, 125) points out, "The [Sanctuary] churches also became centers of socialization by providing a place where other potential band members could meet each other and receive training in reaching the lost youth with their particular brand of /.../ metal". At its peak in the early 1990s, Sanctuary had as much as thirty-six congregations across the USA. In time, as the movement became more known, it also started attracting some degree of outside interest as a curiosity and even tourist attraction. By the end of the 1990s, however, more accepting attitudes towards alternative musical styles had begun to spread within wider evangelical circles. Sanctuary therefore decided it had fulfilled its role. With the exception of their San Diego congregation, the movement chose to end its congregational activities and instead transform itself into an international ministry under the name of *Sanctuary International*. Today, Sanctuary International focuses on working with Christian metal scene members within already existing churches all over the world. It has also established its own Internet-radio channel *Intense Radio*, which has become widely known within today's wider transnational scene. (Glanzer 2003, [42-44]; see also interview with Bob Beeman in the Finnish Christian metal fanzine *Ristillinen* 3/2002, 22-29)

## Later development and diversification

Apart from a few bands from other countries such as Sweden and Canada, the development of Christian metal in the early and mid 1980s was mainly, although not exclusively, confined to the USA. It is also important to note that the Christian metal scene in the USA, to a large degree, developed outside the more clearly demarcated borders of the world of CCM and the evangelical popular culture industry. Much like its secular counterpart, however, it quickly became a highly controversial form of Christian rock (Brown 2005, 118). The 1980s also saw the establishment of specialized small Christian metal record labels such as *Pure Metal Records*, *Intense Records*, and *R.E.X. Records*. Some Christian metal bands also managed to obtain contracts with larger secular labels such as *Enigma Records/Capitol* and *Metal Blade Records*. The first Christian metal fanzine *Heaven's Metal* was established in the USA in 1985 by journalist Doug Van Pelt. In 1995, *Heaven's Metal* changed its name to *HM: The Hard Music Magazine*. In 2004, however, *Heaven's Metal* was resurrected by Van Pelt and is now released side by side with *HM*. Other fanzines active during the late 1980s and early 1990s include *Gospel Metal* and *White Throne* (Luhr 2009, 84). In the 1980s, Christian metal was mainly distributed through Christian bookstores or small mail order services. During this time, the term "white metal" also gradually started being replaced by the slightly broader and more inclusive term "Christian metal". This shift partly had to do with "white metal" mostly having been used as a counter-term to the 'satanic' black metal of the early 1980s as represented by bands such as Venom and Mercyful Fate. The term "white metal" had itself reportedly been invented by the secular metal label *Metal Blade Records* for precisely this purpose. Another reason for the shift also had to do with the word "white's" possible racist connotations. These days, the term "white metal" is mostly used within the Latin American Christian metal scenes of Brazil and Mexico while bands in the USA and Europe instead tend to prefer the term "Christian metal". (Thompson 2000, 161; 164; [http://fi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kristillinen\\_metallimusiikki](http://fi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kristillinen_metallimusiikki))

In the second half of the 1980s, Christian metal bands playing more extreme metal styles also started to appear. During this time, Christian thrash metal developed through the efforts of US bands such as Vengeance Rising (initially Vengeance), Deliverance, Believer, and Tourniquet. Vengeance Rising's 1988 album *Human Sacrifice* is commonly regarded as an important benchmark in the development of Christian thrash. Tourniquet in particular would go on to achieve considerable success and long-time popularity within the Christian market. In line with the more extreme musical character of thrash, lyrics also took a darker, more solemn and uncompromising turn. Christian thrash metal songs tended to focus on eschatological and apocalyptic themes, the battle between good and evil,

“spiritual warfare”, and Christian rebellion against sin (e.g. Brown 2005, 124). These would all later become standard themes within the subsequent development of extreme Christian metal styles. (Thompson 2000, 162; Weinstein 2000, 54; [http://fi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kristillinen\\_metallimusiikki](http://fi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kristillinen_metallimusiikki))

At the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, Christian death metal started to develop, mainly through the work of Australian bands Mortification and Vomitorial Corpulence. Mortification’s 1992 release *Scrolls of the Megilloth* is widely regarded as having been particularly influential in this regard. The band also managed to achieve wider success in the secular metal community and gain a contract with the major secular metal label *Nuclear Blast Records*. However, the Brazilian band Incubus (later Opprobrium) had already experimented with death metal sounds in the late 1980. Other Christian death metal bands appearing during this time include Crimson Thorn and Living Sacrifice (disbanded) from the USA and Sympathy from Canada. Later influential mid and late 1990s Christian death metal bands include Extol from Norway, Pantokrator from Sweden, Deuteronomium and Immortal Souls from Finland, and Aletheian from the USA ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian\\_metal#Death\\_metal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_metal#Death_metal); Thompson 2000, 163-164) The emergence of Christian black metal, or “unblack” as it is also called, in the early 1990s further heightened Christian metal’s already highly disputed position within the wider metal community. Unblack took off through the release of the Australian one man band Horde’s first and only release *Hellig Usvart* (“Holy Unblack”) in 1994. Other influential unblack bands appearing during this time include Antestor from Norway and Admonish from Sweden. These early unblack bands tended to fashion their lyrics and activity as a counterweight to the pervasive satanic ideology of much of the secular black metal of the time. Later, lyrics started taking a more philosophical turn as more unblack bands started to appear. Some of the most influential include Crimson Moonlight and Sanctifica from Sweden, and Vaakevandring, Drottnar, and Frosthadr from Norway. Unblack has become one of the most popular Christian metal styles during recent years. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian\\_metal#Unblack\\_metal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_metal#Unblack_metal))

In the late 1990s, updated forms of power metal and progressive metal started gaining popularity anew within the wider metal community. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Christian power metal had been represented by bands such as Seventh Avenue from Germany and Narnia from Sweden. Later power metal bands include Theocracy from the USA and Harmony, Divinefire, and Heartcry from Sweden. Progressive bands include Balance of Power from Britain and Jacobs Dream from the USA. Christian doom metal, which also emerged in the 1990, was represented by bands such as Veni Domine from Sweden, Paramaecium from Australia, and Ashen Mortality from Britain. During the same time, Christian gothic metal also appeared through the work of bands such as Saviour Machine from the USA,

Kohlhapse from Australia, and Undish from Poland. Around the turn of the century, Christian nu metal bands such as P.O.D. (Payable On Death) and Pillar appeared in the USA. P.O.D., which managed to achieve wider crossover success at an early stage, has probably become the most commercially successful Christian metal band after Stryper. Several other bands playing nu metal-related styles also emerged during this time. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian\\_metal#Unblack\\_metal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_metal#Unblack_metal))

As we have seen, Christian metal has developed and diversified considerably since the early 1990s, following closely in the footsteps of the overall development of secular metal. Today, Christian metal comprises all metal sub-genres and styles. However, in line with contemporary general developments in metal, many Christian bands of today frequently experiment with and mix and move between styles and thus defy clear and neat classification into particular sub-genres. However, in order to distinguish themselves from their secular counterparts, Christian metalheads have also produced some consciously humorous metal-inspired labels of their own. For example, in addition to Christian black metal being referred to as “unblack”, Christian metalcore/hardcore is sometimes referred to as “Christcore” or “Godcore” and Christian death/grindcore as “Goreship” (a play with the word “worship”). Moreover, Christian metal has also produced some of its own slogans such as “Faster for the Master!”, “Turn or burn!”, and “Support the war against Satan!”. As the rhetoric of these slogans illustrate, although in a much-transformed sense, Christian metalheads have also created their own ways of expressing the uncompromising attitude that metal has been associated with since its early days.

## **5.2 Main themes and characteristics**

When talking about Christian metal’s main themes and characteristics, it is important to note at the very outset that Christian metal wholeheartedly embraced metal’s defining musical, aesthetic, and stylistic elements from the very beginning. Moreover, in a somewhat transformed sense, it embraced metal’s characteristic uncompromising rhetoric, attitude, and lifestyle as well. As such, Christian metal constitutes an exceptionally good example of the merging of religion with a particular form of popular culture. Again, metal music and culture in general constitutes the musical and aesthetic backdrop against which Christian metal necessarily needs to be understood. Hence, although Christian metal constitutes a largely separate and independent metal scene, it cannot readily be regarded as a separate metal sub-genre in the sense usually meant by that term. As noted, the differences

between Christian and secular metal are primarily of a discursive kind, with the similarities far outweighing the differences. Nevertheless, Christian metal musicians did not initially, and have not since, set out to create a separate metal style as such. Rather, their intention was and still remains to express and spread their Christian faith through already existing metal styles. However, as Christian metal has developed and spread to different countries around the world with different social and cultural environments, not all Christian metal musicians would necessarily accept such a narrow description of their musical aspirations and endeavors. This is because, for many Christian metal musicians and fans today, Christian metal is about much more than merely “appropriating” or “borrowing” metal music and style for purposes of evangelistic outreach or the transformation of metal music in a more ‘moral’ or ‘sound’ direction from within. Many Christian metal musicians and fans of today consider themselves ordinary metalheads who are Christian and who choose to express their faith in close connection to their cultural sensibilities, i.e. through Christian metal understood as an alternative and fully legitimate Christian way of ‘doing’ religion or, indeed, as a fully legitimate popular culturally inspired Christian lifestyle.

Apart from sharing all basic musical and aesthetic tenets, the similarities between Christian and secular metal also extend to a considerable degree of interest in similar types of lyrical themes such as the apocalypse, war, and the battle between good and evil (e.g. Glanzer 2003 [21]). Christian metal is also particularly characterized by its interest in biblical eschatological themes such as the creation of the world and the fall from grace. Moreover, lyrics often deal with other central Christian themes such as the suffering and sacrificial atoning death of Christ, the particular implications thereof, and the importance of accepting Jesus as one’s personal savior before the last judgment and the end of the world. In addition, lyrics may also deal with more ‘earthly’ issues such as social injustice and personal everyday struggles from a Christian perspective. Importantly, apart from the content of song lyrics, it is virtually impossible to distinguish between Christian and secular metal. The musical dimension of Christian metal is identical to that of secular metal and will thus not be explored any further here. There are, however, some differences in the use of visuals and aesthetics. These will be discussed in more detail below. In the following, we shall first explore Christian metal’s verbal dimension. We shall begin by looking at issues pertaining to the *definition* of Christian metal.

### **5. 2. 1 Defining Christian metal**

Any exploration of Christian metal’s main characteristics needs to start with a discussion of how Christian metal is commonly defined and understood as

a distinct form of metal within the Christian metal scene itself. Looking more closely at how Christian metal is defined also reveals the processes of constant negotiation that combining Christianity with an aggressive and controversial popular cultural form entails. We might begin by noting that, generally speaking, the basic 'requirements' of Contemporary Christian Music discussed in chapter 3 largely apply to Christian metal as well. It should also be noted here that the discursive construction of the basic *meaning* and *function* of Christian metal (explored in more detail below) also bears many resemblances to the discursive construction of CCM more generally. One can therefore single out three main elements that recurrently surface in accounts of what it is that makes Christian metal *Christian* from the perspective of its musicians and fans.

First, Christian metal is typically defined as metal that somehow conveys some form of Christian *content* or *message*. This means that, in some way or other, lyrics should either deal with clearly Christian themes or be based on a Christian worldview. Lyrics may thus deal with explicitly religious topics such as eschatology, apocalypticism, or spiritual warfare. In addition, they may also deal with a wide range of other social or everyday issues from a broadly defined 'Christian perspective' or 'Christian point of view' (cf. Luhr 2009, 114-115). Second, Christian metal is also commonly defined as metal that is made and produced *by* people who are themselves professed Christians and lead Christian lives. Sometimes, Christian metal may also be defined as being principally produced *for* Christians as well. This view stems from the notion that, in order to produce music in a 'truly' Christian spirit with a 'truly' Christian content, it necessarily needs to be grounded in the *personal* Christian faith of its creators. According to this view, then, a person who is not a Christian can never make truly *Christian* music. In other words, a non-Christian person may well make music that speaks to or resonates with Christian listeners, but that does not make the music truly *Christian* in the full sense of the word. As discussed above, this notion also constitutes a central component of the world of evangelical popular culture more generally (see for example Howard & Streck 1999; Hendershot 2004). Third, and arguably of lesser importance nowadays, Christian metal is defined as metal that is produced and distributed through various Christian networks guided by 'Christian principles' and an evangelistic agenda. When this element appears in definitions of Christian metal, it usually stems from notions regarding the 'gatekeeping' functions of Christian labels, producers, and distributors. These business actors are seen to be in a position in which they, to a certain extent, are able to guarantee that the albums released, produced, or distributed convey some form of Christian content and are made by professed Christians who lead Christian lives. Most contemporary Christian metal bands do indeed release their records on Christian labels and mainly rely on various Christian channels for promotion and



distribution. These days, however, releasing on secular labels has become increasingly acceptable and desirable, as long as bands which do so do not deviate too much from the other two 'requirements' outlined above. Releasing on a secular label has increasingly begun to be seen as a sign of wider success since it usually entails at least some degree of wider promotion, distribution, and much-desired attention within the secular market. As noted above, many successful Christian metal bands (e.g. Stryper, Mortification, P.O.D) have released their music on secular labels.

It is important to note that these 'requirements' also constitute part of the discursive construction of the scene. As such, they are characterized by constant contestation and negotiation. Nevertheless, even though they are constantly debated, the overwhelming majority of Christian metal musicians and fans appear to hold the view that, in order to be considered truly *Christian*, a band would have to meet the second requirement, and at least to some degree the first as well. This view was also in some way expressed by all Finnish Christian metal musicians interviewed for this study (e.g. IF mgt 2007/69; IF mgt 2008/56; IF mgt 2008/59). However, as already noted, there are a number of bands today who are widely considered Christian although they hardly ever make any clear references to religion in their lyrics. There is thus a sense in which certain bands also may be defined as Christian based solely on the professed Christian faith of their members and what is *not* contained in their lyrics. That said, bands are generally required to convey a Christian message in some form or other. These are much debated issues which surface at all levels of today's transnational scene. For example, David, creator and administrator of the formerly largest, now defunct, US-based Christian metal discussion forum *Firestream.net*, expressed the following views on this issue:

MM: What, in your view, are the most important differences between Christian and "secular" metal/hard rock?

David: In my view, the biggest difference is that the band can and will express their belief in Jesus Christ. I don't think that all songs have to be written in a purely praise fashion, but I think that if a band wants to call themselves Christian, they need to reflect the core Christian values in their song writing and in their day to day lives.

MM: Are discussions on this topic, what makes Christian music Christian, in your view important within the Christian metal community?

David: Yes, I believe there is an importance. I think there are too many bands that label themselves Christian, but do not show it in their music or in their lives. If that is the case, they are really no different than any other band out there. The discussion of this topic allows people to really see which bands shine for Christ and which bands simply want to be labeled as "Christian". (IF 2006/9)



As seen here, David can be interpreted as saying that, in order to be considered *Christian* in the full sense of the word, bands should strive to convey some form of Christian content in a sufficiently clear and straightforward way. However, there exists no agreement within the scene as to what exactly constitutes or may count as a 'Christian content'. Indeed, in this context, a Christian content is usually defined very broadly. For example, in the above excerpt David speaks of bands needing to reflect "core Christian values". Other common ways of defining a Christian content include defining it as somehow containing or conveying a Christian *message*, as approaching things from a Christian *perspective* or *point of view*, or as reflecting a Christian *worldview*. These ways of defining a Christian content all constitute important ingredients of the discursive construction of Christian metal as a distinct form of metal. Indeed, as David points out, they have an important role to play in scenic discourse. However, notions about a Christian content also need to be understood in relation to the other basic requirements of Christian metal outlined above, particularly the notion that Christian metal is metal that is made by Christian people. For example, in the "Frequently asked questions" section of Sweden-based *The Metal for Jesus Page*, which is one of the oldest, most comprehensive, and best known general Christian metal Internet-sites, one can read the following:

1) What is Christian Metal?

Well, Christian Metal is Metal made by Christians with a Christian message. 2) What is the difference between Christian Metal and Secular Metal?

Christian Metal is just as brutal and heavy as the Secular when it comes to the music. What differs is the lyrics. Instead of having bad, destructive or meaningless lyrics (I'm not saying that all secular bands have lyrics in this vein but many have) the lyrics in Christian Metal are positive. They are bold but positive. They tell the good news about Jesus Christ and have positive lyrics from a Christian point of view where they try to uplift their fans and bring them closer to Christ. Instead of dragging people down they are showing them that they can find the meaning of life, have a living relationship with God and go to Heaven too, by just believing that Jesus died for them on the Cross in their place. So the music is "the same" but the lyrics are very different. The lyrics also talk about the hate we Christians have for Satan and all the bad things he does. They also deal with things that are totally wrong in the society. Some lyrics are also about ordinary things that we face every day. But the main focus in the lyrics is about Jesus Christ, why He came, what He did, and what He can do in people's life when they choose to follow Him.

(<http://www.metalforjesus.org/faq.html>)

This excerpt starts out by emphasizing that Christian metal is metal made by people who are themselves Christians. The importance of lyrics having a

clearly Christian content is also stressed at some length. Indeed, here too, lyrical content is singled out as the most important way in which Christian metal is, and should be, distinguished from its secular equivalent. The “Frequently asked questions” section makes no mention of Christian metal necessarily having to be produced and distributed through Christian labels and networks, although it does contain some recommendations for Christian distributors and stores (which are not cited above). As noted, these and related questions are also frequently debated at Christian metal online discussion forums. They also appear at the forum *Kristillinen metalliunioni* (Christian Metal Union) where Finnish scene members can discuss these issues in their own language. Clearly, as Christian metal has developed, diversified, and spread to different countries around the world, so have various understandings of its definition, main purposes, and aims. Today, it is not unusual for bands to differ widely regarding the degrees to which they explicitly and deliberately proclaim their Christian standpoint. Indeed, the very meanings attached to concepts such as “Christian standpoint” or “Christian perspective” in this context have broadened significantly over time and sparked an ongoing debate within today’s transnational scene. For one thing, not all Christian metal bands share the same degree of evangelistic fervor. Many who strive to gain wider acceptance within the broader metal community clearly consciously choose to downplay or ‘cloak’ their Christian approach in order not to put off secular audiences and thereby better their chances of wider success. As we saw in chapter 3, for these same reasons, many contemporary US evangelical bands in particular choose to cut down on their use of obviously Christian references or imagery. Many of these issues are touched upon by musician Pekka from the Finnish Christian death/metalcore band Sotahuuto (Warcry) who expressed the following views on the definition of Christian metal:

MM: In your view /.../ What is Christian metal? What makes Christian metal... how does it differ from ordinary, non-Christian metal?

Pekka: The difference between Christian and secular metal is maybe that Christian metal has that Christian message, and like, it is, it is a bit differently expressed with different bands so that some say it directly or in the face while others perhaps a bit, maybe say it more metaphorically, but that is probably like the difference. In principle I have always thought that music is music and as such all neutral and then you can splash on it any kinds of lyrics you want but of course they will not always work if the contrast is huge /.../ In my opinion you like cannot just splash the kinds of ‘Jesus loves you, period’ style of thing to death metal, even though some do that /.../ One is allowed to do that but it is sort of a bit of a stylebreak, like lyrics should be written according to musical

style. Things can be said in many different ways.\* (IF mgt 2007/69)

As seen here, Christian metal is defined as containing a broadly defined Christian message. This is also the principal way in which it is distinguished from its secular equivalent. However, as pointed out by Pekka in this excerpt, such a broadly defined Christian message can be expressed in many different ways. It is up to individual bands to choose for themselves how explicit they want their lyrics to be in this regard. This issue is also related to the manner and style in which lyrics are written. As with many other Christian metal musicians, Pekka takes the view that lyrics should be written in accordance with metal's genre-conventions, that is, written in a way that suits the character of the music. That, in turn, may also affect the choice of lyrical topics to some extent. As he went on to explain, this is because an important part of making metal has to do with "maximizing heaviness"\* (IF mgt 2007/69). These views were in one way or another expressed by every musician interviewed for this study. However, many also emphasized the importance of Christian metal being made by Christian people in particular. For example, such views were expressed by Markus from the Finnish Christian death metal band Megiddon:

Well, the starting point is that, in my view, that at least the person who makes the music is a believer and through that... surely that those values of life are mediated through that. And many do not think of themselves as Christian or at least do not want to label themselves as such, but if one's personal, if one has like a Christian faith then it will surely also influence the lyrics. In my view, you do not necessarily have to devote that much attention to the term as such, like is this a Christian band or not, but to who the person is who is making the music /.../ faith should be lived out in everything one does and of course it will also show in those values that are transmitted through a band.\* (IF mgt 2007/71)

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\* MM: Sinun mielestä /.../ Mitä kristillinen metalli on, mikä tekee kristillisestä metallista... miten se eroaa tavallisesta ei-kristillisestä metallista?

Pekka: Kristillisen metallin ja sen sekulaarimetallin ero on ehkä se että kristillisessä metallissa on se kristillinen sanoma, ja tuota, se on, se on eri bändeillä vähän eri tavalla sitten puettuna, että jotkut sanoo sen suoraan tai namaan jotkut siinä sitten vähän sanoo vertauskuvannollisemmin ehkä, mutta tuota se on varmaan se ero että. Se on periaatteessa minä itse olen aina ajatellut että musiikki on musiikkia ja sinänsähän ihan niin kuin neutraalia ja siihen sitten voi läiskäistä päälle minkälaisia sanoituksia haluaa mutta tietysti ne ei aina sitten toimi jos se kontrasti on valtava niin /.../ Ei niin kuin minun mielestä tuommoiseen death metalliinkaan niin voi läiskäistä vaan semmoista 'Jeesus rakastaa piste' tyylistä juttua että tuota, vaikka kyllä sitä jotkut tekee /.../ Saa sillai tehdä mutta se on vähän semmoinen tyylikiriko että, että musiikkityylin mukaan pitäisi tehdä niitä sanoituksia. Asioita voi sanoa monella eri tavalla.

\* maksimoida rankkuutta.

\* No, lähtökohtahan on se että, näkisin että ainakin se joka musiikin tekee niin tuota on itse niin kuin uskossa ja sitä kautta niin... kyllä se että ne elämän arvot sitä kautta välittyy. Ja monethan sitä itseään niin kuin ei kristillisenä tai ei halua leimaantua ainakaan sellaiseksi niin mutta jos henkilökohtainen, jos omaa niin kuin kristillisen vakaamuksen niin kyllä se niin kuin vaikuttaa myös niissä sanoituksissa. Eikä minun mielestä niin kuin välttämättä siihen niin kuin itse termiin tarvitse niin kuin

As illustrated by this excerpt, when attempting to define Christian metal, one should take the Christian faith of its creators as a “starting point”. Markus thus expresses the view that music created by Christian people in some way or other will reflect Christian “values of life”. Whether a band chooses to label themselves as Christian or not becomes of secondary importance in this context. In a way, Markus also seems to suggest that the label “Christian metal” as such could, and perhaps should, be abandoned altogether. The label is considered having become too restricting and limiting even for a band such as Megiddon, which very explicitly proclaims its Christian standpoint and as such would be a rather typical example of a band, for which the label would clearly be suitable.

The basic point that Christian metal musicians usually want to make through avoiding using the label “Christian” metal is that conveying or reflecting a Christian message or worldview does not make a band any less authentic as a *metal* band. However, considering the rather deeply ingrained verbal conventions, individualistic ethos, and broadly defined oppositional ideology of secular metal, this argument has so far not had much impact within the wider secular metal community. This argument can thus also be taken to reflect a certain degree of naivety and refusal on the part of the Christian scene to continue being defined on secular metal’s terms. Speaking of these issues in relation to his own musical activities, Wille from the Finnish (Christian) melodic black metal band From Ashes expressed the following views:

MM: What would you say that... that is the core of Christian metal, or what I mean by that is that, in your view what, what should it be like to make it precisely Christian metal? How does it differ from other forms, if one can say secular or profane metal?

Wille: Well, I maybe sort of oppose this kind of sharp distinction because like we do not promote, not any more at least, ourselves as a Christian band so we are like dark metal or this gothic extreme and then that is, our conviction comes forth in the music itself and in the lyrics and... but of course that is not the only way to do it /.../ other bands are very like directly proclaiming but that is not natural for me and I am turned off by that a bit because it can be like, if one makes this kind of proclaiming music, it can also drive people away and very clear fences are then also often put up in like we are Christians and you are not, and I do not want to raise these kinds of fences. Like in the same way that I can identify with like the thoughts of some satanist to some degree, in the same way I also imagine that some satanist can identify with my thoughts which I bring forth in my music, still like, even if you would not buy the whole ideology you can still find something that hits you and in my view that is what music is all

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niin kiinnittää huomiotakaan, että onko tämä kristillinen bändi vai ei mutta että se että kuka että kuka sen tekee sen musiikin niin /.../ tulee elää sitä uskoa todeksi joka asiassa mitä tekee niin totta kai se niin kuin näkyy myös niissä arvoissa mitä välittää sen bändin kautta.

about, expressing the kinds of feelings that like, that resonate with the listener.\*  
(IF mgt 2007/70)

In this excerpt, Wille takes up another point commonly made by musicians wanting to avoid attaching the label “Christian” to their music, namely, that proclaiming a Christian message in explicit terms might turn people away from it. The label, he suggests, easily risks becoming counter-productive as using it may hamper any chances of getting across any type of message at all. In addition, it may also lead to the raising of “fences” that serve to separate that which is deemed ‘truly’ Christian music from that which is not. This may also put people off or push them away. Instead of such an approach, Wille is more in favor of promoting dialogue through his music. As is also quite clearly expressed in the two previously quoted excerpts above, this kind of resistance has more to do with the label “Christian” in itself, than it has to do with what is actually usually intended by that label. For example, even though Wille no longer labels his band a Christian band, this does not mean that he does not strive to convey and express his Christian conviction through his lyrics. During our interview, Wille explained that From Ashes continues to play Christian festivals and also that the Christian metal scene constitutes one of the band’s most important markets. It should also be noted here that From Ashes is widely considered a Christian band within the Finnish scene. This serves to illustrate how bands that reach a certain degree of success within a particular music scene often, in the process, also lose full control over how they wish to portray themselves. At many points, Wille also stressed that his style of writing lyrics in a more metaphorical way is but one style among many others. Other styles might be more suitable for other purposes. As he continued:

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\* MM: Mitä sinä sanoisit että... että on kristillisen metallin ydin, eli mitä minä tarkoitan sillä on se että sinun mielestä mitä, mitä se kuuluu olla niin kuin tehdäkseen siitä just kristillisen metallin? Miten se erottuu muista, jos voi sanoa sekulaari tai maallisesta metallista?

Wille: No, minä ehkä niin kuin vastustan tällaista niin kuin jyrkkää distinktiota siinä että niin kuin me ei mainosteta ainakaan enää niin kuin itseämme kristillisenä bändinä että me ollaan niin kuin, me ollaan dark metal tai tämä gothic extreme ja se on sitten, se tulee siinä musiikissa itsessään ja niissä niin kuin sanoituksissa se vakaumus esille ja... mutta että tietysti se ei ole ainoa tapa tehdä sitä että sitten on, toiset bändit ovat nyt hyvinkin niin kuin suoraan julistavia mutta se ei ole minulle luonteva ja minua vähän karseuttaa sitä koska se voi olla sellaista että jos niin kuin tehdään tällaista julistavaa musiikkia niin se voi myös karkoittaa ihmisiä pois ja siinä tehdään usein hirveän niin kuin selvä raja-aita sitten että niin kuin me ollaan kristittyjä ja te ette ole, ja tällaisia niin kuin raja-aitoja minä en haluasi pystyttää. Että samalla tavalla kuin minä pystyn niin kuin jossain määrin samaistumaan niin kuin jonkun satanistin ajatuksiin niin samalla tavalla minä kuvittelen että joku satanisti voi niin kuin samaistua minun ajatuksiin mitä minä tuon niin kuin musiikissani ilmi, kuitenkin niin kuin, vaikka ei sitä niin kuin koko ideologiaa ostasi niin voi lyötää jotain sellaista mikä kolahtaa ja siitä minun mielestä musiikissa on kysymys että niin kuin ilmaistaan sellaisia tunteita mitkä niin kuin, mitkä löytää vastakaikua kuuntelijassa.

But for people who are like seekers, who is a seeker, then the kind of music that is outspoken can be like the best kind of music. Like necessarily, for example my songs for a person who has a very strong like need to know about issues of faith, they would not be the best songs because they are not very informative but more expressions of emotions. In spite of me being doctrinally oriented it does not come forth much in my music, at least I do not bring it forth.\* (IF mgt 2007/70)

As noted above, bands may differ considerably in their approach regarding these issues. As illustrated by the above excerpt, in most cases, they also tend to accept approaches that differ from their own. That, of course, does not mean that every musician views different approaches as being equally effective or appropriate. For example, although he accepts other approaches, Anders O, the lyricist of the Finnish Christian melodic death metal band Hilasterion explained that:

Of course, this definition has been much struggled over during many years, like I have followed these circles for almost ten years so /.../ I have also seen many bands who gladly would like to avoid this, shall we say 'tag', to call themselves a Christian metal band because it would somehow scare away listeners. I am a bit against that because if one wants to be Christian, if one wants to go out with a message, then one should not hide behind facades /.../ I am of the view that a Christian band shall have Christian lyrics, and it shall in any case be clear from the lyrics that the band is Christian /.../ Of course, there is a price to pay having a band that has straightforward lyrics. But my vision when we started the band a few years back was perhaps not to sell a million records but, if possible, win one person to maybe get some hope back into life. And we are of course aware of that the lyrics may slow down record sales, if it can help one person to regain hope in life then, that is the price we want to pay, at least I want to\*. (IFmgt 2008/55/1-2)

In this excerpt, Anders O seems to say that straightforward lyrics will serve Christian metal's evangelistic aims better than lyrics written in a more

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\* Mutta sellaiselle ihmiselle joka tuota etsii, on etsijä, niin sellainen musiikki joka on suorapuheista niin voi olla sitä niin kuin parasta musiikia. Että välttämättä niin kuin, esimerkiksi minun biisit sellaiselle ihmiselle jolla olisi hirveän suuri niin kuin tarve tietää uskon asioista niin ei, ei olisi niitä parhaita biisejä koska ne ei ole kovin informatiivisia ne minun biisit vaan ne on enemmän sellaisia tunnekuvauksia. Siitä houlimatta että olen tällä tavalla opillisesti orientoitunut niin se ei musiikissani hirveästi, en ainakaan niin kuin tuo sitä esille.

\* Det är klart, den här definitionen har man brottats med många år, att jag har ändå följt med med kretsarna i tio år snart att /.../ För jag har sett många band också som vill gärna undvika den här skall vi säga 'tagen' att kalla sig ett kristet metalband för att de på något sätt skall skrämja bort lyssnarna, jag är lite mot det för vill man vara kristna, vill man gå ut med ett budskap så skall man inte gömma sig bakom fasader /.../ Jag är av den åsikten att ett kristet band skall ha kristna texter och det skall i alla fall komma fram ur texterna att bandet är kristet /.../ Klart att det är ett pris att betala så att ha ett band som har raka texter. Men min vision när vi startade bandet några år tillbaka var inte kanske att sälja en miljon skivor utan om möjligt vinna en människa att få ett kanske ett hopp tillbaka i sitt liv, och det är klart vi är medvetna om att texterna kan bromsa upp skivförsäljningarna, om det kan hjälpa en människa att få hoppet tillbaka till livet så, det är priset vi vill betala, i alla fall vill jag göra det.

metaphorical or implicit style. This view was also partly expressed by Wille above. In addition to functioning as a means of evangelism, however, part of the Christian metal ethos is also about supporting, edifying, and inspiring audiences that are already Christian. To illustrate this point we might consider an example of a strongly expressed argument in favor of bands needing to convey their Christian message as clearly as possible. In an interview for *Heaven's Metal* in 2006, Steve Rowe of Mortification, no doubt one of the most respected personas within the wider transnational Christian metal scene, expressed the following views:

We have always been accepted in the secular market /.../ We always play with secular bands in Australia. We have sold more than any other metal act from this country. Men who stand for Jesus in their lyrics are the meat of what is going on. Any band that does not have a strong Christian message should not be sold in Christian bookstores or play at Christian Festivals. The world needs Jesus and the Christian fans need encouragement in their faith and walk with Christ. It is too easy to say you're a Christian and get easy sales in the Christian market /.../ If you don't have the message you should do the honorable thing and take the hard road like all secular acts do. Don't scam Christians who think they are buying Christian music and get no food. What has happened to The US "Christian" Rock scene is a disease. (*Heaven's Metal* 62/2006, 10)

In this excerpt, Rowe clearly states that, in order for Christian metal to be *Christian* in the full sense of the word, it first of all needs to offer Christians "encouragement in their faith". He also appears to state that Christian metal should be produced, not only *by* Christians, but principally *for* Christians as well. In addition, he goes on to emphasize the right of Christians listeners to expect that Christian bands deliver spiritual "food" in the form of a clear Christian content. Moreover, Christian bands also need to evangelize and cater to the world's 'need for Jesus'. However, even though evangelism is represented as constituting an important part of the activities of bands, Rowe nevertheless appears to regard Christian metal's evangelistic element as secondary to its function as being edifying and providing inspiration. Rowe can thus also be seen to represent Christian metal in terms of a distinct Christian musical culture. He does, however, take a rather exceptionally strong stance in favor of bands needing to convey their message as clearly as possible.

While some bands indeed choose to express their Christian faith in as unambiguous and explicit terms as possible, there are also others who instead opt for a much more implicit and metaphorical approach. Most bands, however, write lyrics in both of these veins. One could well argue that, generally speaking, the very idea or notion of conveying a Christian message *in some form or other* becomes of primary importance in this context. In part, this has to be understood in relation to most bands having broader



evangelistic aims. However, it also needs to be understood in relation to bands wanting to provide Christian audiences with music that has a positive, inspiring, and uplifting content. Debates concerning different, either more explicit or implicit, ways of conveying a Christian message become important in both of these respects. This is because this question constitutes a central component of how Christian metal is understood and made meaningful within the Christian metal scene in the first place. Stated bluntly, debates on these issues can also be seen to be about constructing some form of guidelines which would make it possible to somehow objectively determine when a Christian band is Christian enough. It is important to note, however, that debates such as these constitute important components of the internal discourse of practically all music scenes. Moreover, as noted above, musicians within the world of CCM (and within evangelical popular culture more generally) have always struggled with this particular issue and the Christian metal scene is no exception in this regard.

With this discussion in mind, the Christian metal scene can also be viewed as being rather distinctive from many other Christian or evangelical popular music scenes, in that its internal scenic debates on this issue are so closely bound up with genre-specific notions of authenticity and the closely related predominantly negative and dismissive view of Christian metal found within the broader secular metal community. As seen above, when debating this issue, Christian metalheads are not only concerned with what may count as a Christian content, but also with how such a Christian content should or could be expressed through *metal* specifically (musically, rhetorically, and aesthetically). As also noted, there is a tendency within many contemporary evangelical music scenes to downplay the religious element in order to increase the overall chances of crossover success. Although these tendencies also can be found within Christian metal (as when bands avoid using the label “Christian”) there is also another important factor at play here, namely, the issue of *acceptance*. That is, compared to many other evangelical music scenes, the Christian metal scene seems exceptionally occupied with striving to become, not only tolerated, but fully *accepted* within the wider secular metal community. It should be noted, however, that not all Christian metalheads are as concerned with this issue. Moreover, as hinted at in the excerpts quoted previously and as will be explored further below, an important element of internal scenic discourse centers around *distinguishing* Christian metal from secular metal regarding the *messages* that are conveyed through the music. Even so, generally speaking, the struggle for acceptance within the wider secular metal community on purely *musical* terms remains a characteristic of the Christian metal scene.

What makes these issues (determining what counts as a Christian content and gaining acceptance within the secular metal community) particularly

interesting in the case of Christian metal, therefore, is that they are highly revealing of the ongoing processes of negotiation that go into combining Christian faith with a *particular*, and highly controversial, popular cultural form. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, they are also highly illustrative of the processes of negotiating and re-negotiating that constitute part of legitimating and securing a place for Christian metal within a broader, non-evangelical popular cultural context without making too many compromises regarding its Christian distinctiveness along the way. We shall continue to discuss these issues in more detail in chapter 6 as we explore the internal discursive construction of today's transnational and Finnish scene. In the following, we shall first look at how these issues surface in Christian metal lyrics – the central element through which it distinguishes itself from its secular counterpart.

### 5. 2. 2 The verbal dimension

Generally speaking, the main lyrical themes of Christian metal can roughly be divided into six main categories, which partly overlap and intertwine (for a less detailed somewhat similar categorization see Brown 2005, 130-133). However, they should by no means be regarded as exhaustive. In the following, we shall explore these categories in light of some examples, including lyrics from many Finnish bands. Many Finnish and Swedish bands write lyrics in their own native languages. Here, all such lyrics have been translated as directly as possible. Again, not all Christian metal bands write lyrics on all of the topics included in these main categories, although most do. Some have even dedicated entire albums to particular themes such as spiritual warfare, the end times, or the last judgment. More recent examples include the Norwegian unblack metal band Drottnar's *Spiritual Battle* (2000) and the Swedish unblack band Admonish's *Den yttersta tiden* (*The End Times*, 2005). Although Christian metal bands tend to write lyrics on serious and austere topics, using strong language and rhetoric, they usually also emphasize the 'good news' of the gospel in various ways. For example, the Swedish Christian heavy metal band Divinefire's 2005 release *Glory Thy Name* includes songs like "From Death to Life" and "Out of the Darkness", and the Finnish Christian melodic death metal band Hilasterion titled their 2007 debut release *Taken from Darkness*. Moreover, Christian metal bands tend to choose names that somehow reveal their Christian approach, for example by using biblical references in band names or album titles. Early examples include the US bands already mentioned such as Whitecross, Sacred Warrior, and Barren Cross. Later examples include Tourniquet (USA), Saviour Machine (USA), Demon Hunter (USA), Holy Blood (Ukraine), Extol (Norway, disbanded), Pantokrator (Sweden), and Sanctifica

(Sweden, disbanded). Bands with similar types of names can also be found within the contemporary Finnish scene. Examples include Deuteronomium, Immortal Souls, Megiddon, Luotettava Todistus (Reliable Witness), Renascent, and Sacrecy.

## **Biblical, eschatological, and apocalyptic themes**

The first main category of themes include lyrics dealing with biblical, mostly eschatological and apocalyptic themes such as the creation of the world, the fall from grace, or the last judgment. Indeed, most of the lyrics within this category are directly inspired by biblical texts, particularly the Books of Moses and the Book of Revelation. A classic example of this can be found in the Christian thrash metal band Deliverance's "No Time" (*Deliverance* 1989):

At last before the Lord I came  
I stood with downcast eyes  
He held a book in His hands

It was the Book of Life  
He opened up the book and said,  
"Your name I cannot find. I once was going to write it down. I couldn't find the time"

These lyrics, directly inspired by the Book of Revelation, contain a clear warning of the consequences of not accepting Jesus before the final judgment and the end of time. As time is short, this choice should be made as soon as possible. First person accounts of the final judgment such as this have remained fairly common in Christian metal lyrics. Lyrics on this topic may also be written in a more story-like fashion. One more recent example of this can be found in the Swedish unblack band Admonish's "Den yttersta tiden" ("The End Times", *Den yttersta tiden* 2005):

Hans änglar skall sändas till himlens alla gränser (His angels will be sent to all borders of the heavens)

De heliga skall samlas inför hans tron (The holy shall gather before his throne)

Men änglarna skall rensa ogräset från vetet (But the angels shall separate the weeds from the wheat)

som getter ifrån får skiljs de onda ifrån de heliga (like goats from sheep are the evil separated from the holy)

Tillsammans med Satan och hans demoner (Together with Satan and his demons)

Slängs de i eldsjön för evig död (They are thrown in the lake of fire for eternal death)

(Author's translation)

These lyrics retell parts of the prophecy of the last judgment as depicted in

the Book of Revelation. Lyrics on these topics may also be expressed in less explicitly biblical terms. For example, the song "Taivas" ("Heaven", <http://www.luotettava.net/index.php?q=6&s=7>) by the Finnish Christian thrash metal band Luotettava Todistus begins with the following lines:

Yläpuolella ihmisymmärryksen (Above human understanding)  
tehtiin suunnitelma ikuinen (An eternal plan was made)  
Jeesus Kristus maailmaan lähetettiin (Jesus Christ was sent to earth)  
kuolemaan vuoksi syntisi (To die for your sins)

(Author's translation)

Lyrics of this type may also deal with the turbulent times prior to the Second Coming of Christ during which the Antichrist is believed to establish a reign of terror on earth. As we saw above in chapter 3, such themes also continue to occupy a prominent position in much of evangelical popular culture more generally. However, not all biblically inspired lyrics deal with eschatological and apocalyptic themes per se. A range of other particular themes and stories from the Old Testament, again mostly inspired by the Books of Moses, are also fairly common. For example, the song "Veren merkki" ("The Sign of the Blood", *Veren merkki*, 2003) by the Finnish band Lumina Polaris deals with the establishment of the Pentecost, and the events preceding the exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt as told in Exodus 12, and the song "Blod ropar från jorden" ("Blood Screams from the Earth", *Blod* 2003) by Swedish Pantokrator retells the story of Cain's murder of his brother Abel as told in Genesis 4: 8-16. Even the most casual observer would probably notice the direct and explicit style in which such lyrics are usually written. Biblical themes and stories, such as in the first example above, are often basically just retold in slightly different, simplified, or more poetical ways. Additionally, as already noted, it is not uncommon for biblical themes to surface in secular metal lyrics as well. Christian bands, however, tend to use these types of stark and austere biblical stories to illuminate or explain a Christian understanding of history and the human condition (see also Brown 2005, 125 on Christian thrash). Indeed, many bands include Bible-references in the liner-notes of their record sleeves. The Bible also provides Christian metal bands with a rich resource of stark and austere themes that suit the aggressiveness of the music. Indeed, musicians often point out that lyrics and music should go together, that is, that metal music is supposed to have powerful lyrics (e.g. IF mgt 2007/69; IF mgt 2007/70; IF mgt 2007/71).

## The crucifixion, suffering, and atoning sacrificial death of Christ

A second main category includes lyrics dealing with the suffering, crucifixion, and atoning sacrifice of Christ as well as the cosmic and human implications of this event. Such lyrics often make use of central Christian symbolism such as the *blood* of Christ and Christ as the sacrificial *Lamb of God*. Lyrics falling within this category are also typically biblically inspired, but they still tend to be more detached from particular biblical texts as such. One example of lyrics dealing with this topic can be found in the Finnish unblack band Parakletos' "Se Guds lamm" ("Behold the Lamb of God", *Offerlammets makt*, 2004):

Behold the lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world  
But the power and the strength of heaven he doesn't have  
God became human  
Word became flesh  
Everything that is dead shall come to life  
In the water of the river the Messiah will be baptized

(Band's translation from the Swedish original,  
<http://www.victoryzine.com/parakletos/>)

Another example can be found in the Finnish Christian death/metalcore band Sotahuuto's "Veri" ("Blood", *Sotahuuto* 2005):

Vain Jeesus sun veres riittää meidät puhtaaksi pesemään (Jesus, only your blood is enough to wash us clean)  
Pois pyyhkii kaikki syntitahrat, ne antaa anteeksi (To wipe off all stains of sin and forgive them)  
Rakkaudessa orjan vapautat (With your love, a slave you free)  
Maksoit kalliin hinnan (You paid a high price)  
Oman Henkes olit Sä (Your own life you were prepared)  
Edestämme valmis antamaan (To give for us)  
Jeesus anna veresi pestä pois syntini (Jesus, let your blood wash away my sins)

(Author's translation)

The lyrics reproduced here constitute typical examples of how the crucifixion of Christ is usually treated in a more basic and explanatory way. These lyrics often also aim to extol and explain the cosmic implications of Christ's sacrificial death. There is thus something of an educational aspect to much of these lyrics. For Christian audiences, these types of lyrics mainly serve edificational and inspirational purposes. But they also offer an alternative way of expressing these central Christian beliefs. For non-Christian audiences these lyrics are instead mostly aimed at highlighting the importance of accepting Jesus as personal savior and establishing a personal

relationship with God (e.g. Brown 2005, 126). In this context, the spreading of the Christian message becomes of primary concern. Thus, there is often some overlap with lyrics emphasizing that particular theme.

## Evangelism

Although the evangelistic element of Christian metal has to some extent become more toned down during recent years, the idea of spreading the Christian message has continued to constitute a central element of Christian metal lyrics. This third main category includes lyrics dealing with the importance of spreading the Christian message to all corners of culture and society, including the inhospitable or even hostile crowds found within the secular metal community. Taking the Christian message to the unsaved also involves fighting and standing up for the Christian faith. As noted earlier, Christian metal musicians are often regarded, and often regard themselves, as ministers or missionaries (e.g. Brown 2005, 126). Some bands opt for a consciously confrontational and uncompromising approach to this issue, which can be seen to be directed at both critical voices within their own Christian churches as well as against detractors within secular metal culture. One can find many examples of such lyrics in the earlier more metal-inspired production of the Finnish band Dust Eater Dogs (disbanded). For example, some of the lyrics for “Trampling on Snakes and Scorpions” (*Thunderleg EP*, 1997) read as follows:

We rant in Jesus name  
Any place we roar the same  
We don't care if you don't like our din  
/.../  
Got problems with our faith?  
Hah, your loss. We preach, you pay  
We don't care if you don't like our din  
Trampling on snakes and scorpions  
We don't look glory of our own

This is our ministry  
with all authority  
We declare this place to the Lord!

These lyrics highlight a multitude of issues pertaining to Christian metal as an alternative form of “rock ‘n’ roll” evangelism. The band depicts itself as holding a consciously confrontational and provocative understanding of their evangelistic activity. It is also emphasized that the band does not seek glory for itself, spreading the Christian message being the all-important issue. They also declare “all authority” for their evangelism, proclaiming

that this type of ministry is “theirs”. As noted above, these lyrics can be interpreted as being directed both at detractors within the secular metal community as well as critical voices within particular Christian circles opposed to metal music and style. However, there are many different ways in which Christian metal’s evangelistic element surfaces in lyrics. It is not always expressed as explicitly as in the above example. It may also be integrated as an undercurrent into lyrics dealing with other related topics. Evangelistic lyrics may also be written more or less metaphorically without making explicit references to biblical texts. Even so, they still tend to be more or less *indirectly* biblically grounded. One example of this can be found in the Finnish band Renascent’s “Wisdom Calls” (*Through Darkness*, 2005):

Seek me while you can  
Or it will be too late  
Then you will call to me  
But I will not answer  
Since you rejected me when I called  
Since you ignored all my advice  
And would not accept my rebuke  
I in turn will laugh at your disaster  
How long will you simple ones  
love your simple ways?  
How long will mockers boast  
and fools hate knowledge?  
I would have poured out my heart to you  
And made my thoughts known to you  
Seek me while you can!

These lyrics also include warnings of the disastrous consequences that follow for those who refuse to accept the call to faith. Indeed, it is not unusual for Christian metal lyrics on evangelism to be expressed in plain and uncompromising terms. However, not all evangelistic lyrics contain such warnings or threats. Some instead take the form of personal testimonies or conversion stories highlighting the positive effects of a Christian life. But, as noted, such stories often also contrast the new Christian life with a prior life of sin and meaninglessness (see also Luhr 2009, 132).

## **Spiritual warfare**

Christian metal lyrics often portray the *spiritual battle* being fought on a daily basis against the sinfulness of society and the destructive work of Satan and the forces of evil. The term “spiritual warfare”, which has long been used within many Christian evangelical, Charismatic, and Pentecostal traditions, is commonly used as a metaphor for this constantly ongoing struggle. These



types of lyrics, or what Luhr (2009, 117) refers to as a “warrior rhetoric”, has constituted a central component of Christian metal’s verbal dimension since the very beginning and have remained common to this day. Christian metal bands have found much inspiration for the notion of spiritual warfare in some *particular* texts of the Bible. That is, although Christian metal lyrics commonly draw on a wide range of biblical texts, there are also a few particular passages that bands tend to draw upon more often than others when dealing with issues of spiritual warfare. These passages are found in 2 Timothy and Ephesians. For example, 2 Timothy 2: 3-4 provides “true believers” with the following encouragement: “Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs – he wants to please his commanding officer”. Much inspiration has also been found in Ephesians 6: 11-17, which reads:

Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. (Bible, New International Version)

The particular set of war and battle metaphors used in this passage, such as the “full armor of God”, “the breastplate of righteousness”, “the shield of faith”, “helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit”, have provided important sources of inspiration for Christian metal lyrics. The notion of spiritual warfare also surfaces in Christian metal album titles such as Stryper’s *Soldiers under Command* (1985), Deliverance’s *Weapons of our Warfare* (1990), and Drottnar’s *Spiritual Battle* (2000). To take a classic example of spiritual warfare lyrics, Stryper’s “Soldiers under Command” (*Soldiers under Command*, 1985) contains the following lines:

We are the soldiers under God’s command  
We hold His two-edged sword within our hands  
We’re not ashamed to stand up for what’s right  
We win without sin, it’s not by our might

As noted, these types of lyrics often employ various forms of militaristic and martial rhetoric and terminology. As these lyrics emphasize, spiritual warfare is not about actual fighting and violence in the physical world;

instead, this is a war waged on a spiritual level through prayer, evangelism, and rebellion against the sinfulness of humanity and “the powers of this dark world” (Eph 6:2). Another classic example of this can be found in the US band Recon’s “Behind Enemy Lines” (*Behind Enemy Lines*, 1990):

Recon, an elite force  
Highly trained for war  
Armed and dangerous  
The enemy is no match  
For a warrior of God  
Come and join the soldiers of the light  
Be prepared to tread dangerous ground and to fight  
Behind enemy lines

Here, in a fashion resembling a military-style call to arms, a direct connection is made between spiritual warfare and evangelism. Taking the Christian message to the unsaved and un-churched, to “dangerous ground”, involves stealth tactics, which demand persistence, determination, and courage. The nature of this struggle, and the toughness needed in order to prevail, is clearly spelled out in Deliverance’s “Flesh and Blood” (*Weapons of our Warfare*, 1990):

Jesus’ blood has made us free  
but the battle still remains  
we contend not with flesh and blood  
but with spiritual darkness  
For this we wage war  
but not against man  
this war is with darkness  
and not against flesh and blood

The Holy Book makes it clear as to how we ought to fight  
put on the armour of God  
not by your might  
pray always with all supplication  
in the spirit  
to the pulling down of strongholds and crushing of Satan’s plan  
/.../  
This war is not for wimps  
the emaciated or the weak  
it’s for those who bear their cross and believe the power of Jesus’ name  
Christianity, a reality  
It’s a fight to let you know  
about a man who gave his flesh and blood to save your hellbound soul

These lyrics clearly draw on the passages of 2 Timothy 2: 3-4 and Ephesians 6: 11-17 outlined above. They also serve to illuminate the pervasiveness of

the eschatological view of history that permeates much of Christian metal lyrics. Most of all, these lyrics emphasize the spiritual strength and determination that characterizes the 'true believer'. After all, spiritual warfare "is not for wimps, the emaciated or the weak". The militaristic and sometimes aggressive and violent rhetoric often used in Christian metal have indeed sparked some degree of debate in Christian circles. In some cases, such debates have also found their way into Christian metal lyrics themselves, such as in the song "Violence and Bloodshed" (*The Mechanics of Perilous Times*, 2000) by the US Christian thrash metal band Ultimatum:

Who says you can't mix aggression with a message of faith  
Music is an expression, with that there's no debate  
Why not sing of my faith, for it what I live.  
If you want message of violence,  
I've got a one to give.  
To those who try to mock us for that for which we do,  
We will never back down for we know our message is true.  
Screaming the ultimate music with real brutal truth  
And if you want aggression and violence  
I've got a message for you

These lyrics can be seen to be directed at both liberal forms of Christianity as well as Christian critics of metal. They are obviously not meant to incite violence but to point out the radical qualities of the Christian message itself. They emphasize metal as an "ultimate" way of expressing the Christian faith and urge Christian metal fans not to compromise with their music and style. But importantly, these lyrics also need to be understood in relation to the general style in which metal lyrics are supposed to be written, that is, in a style that emphasizes directness and confrontation rather than compromise.

## **Rebellion against sin**

Much of the lyrics dealing with spiritual warfare also point out that being 'warriors of God' and engaging in spiritual warfare against evil and sin entails resisting and rebelling against the sinfulness of mankind and human society. Such concerns are clearly reflected in the following excerpt from Dust Eater Dogs' "Amateurs Built Titanic" (*Thunderleg EP*, 1997):

Faith is rebellion against wrong tolerance  
Faith is rebellion against religious violence  
Faith is rebellion against laws of immorality  
Faith is rebellion against norms of society

These lyrics clearly express the central Christian struggle of being 'in' but not 'of' the world. For example, faith is portrayed as "rebellion against *wrong* tolerance" and the "norms of society". These lyrics clearly suggest that contemporary society is fallen and in need of redemption. Similar ideas about Christians feeling a need to revolt against sin can be found in Sotahuuto's "Kapinaan" ("To Revolt", *Sotahuuto*, 2007)

Tahdon nousta kapinaan! (I want to revolt!)  
Tahdon nousta taistelemään! (I want to stand up and fight!)  
Syntiä vastaan! (Against sin!)  
Joka päivä taistelen, Jumalaani rukoilen (Everyday I fight, praying to my God)  
Yksin en voi voittaa, pelastusta saavuttaa (Alone I can not win, achieve salvation)  
Periksi en anna, tahdon mennä loppuun saakka (Give in, I will not, I want to go on to the end)  
Vaikka sorrun, nousen uudestaan, en jää tuleen makaamaan (Even if I break, I rise again, I do not stay laying in the fire)

(Author's translation)

Lyrics such as these do not merely express the notion of rebellion against sin, however. They are also designed to aid, support, and inspire Christian listeners in their own everyday struggles of living as Christians in a sinful world. Discussing the widespread use of apocalyptic themes in Christian thrash, Brown (2005, 129) argues that "The fascination with apocalyptic imagery can be viewed as a direct rebellion and defiance toward society /.../ The world is perceived as hostile and repressive in nature". Comparing secular and Christian thrash metal, Brown has also argued that both forms can be seen as "expressions of direct rebellion against mainstream societal norms" (Brown 1995, 447) and also that both can be seen as ways of expressing personal *alienation* toward a society dominated by such norms. All this, however, very much depends on how the notion of "rebellion" is understood. Christian thrash metal's use of radical lyrical themes, he argues, "extends beyond the surface observations of the music itself to the underlying social and cultural views of those who participate in this musical style" (Brown 2005, 135).

Luhr (2005, 107) offers a rather similar account, arguing that the evangelistic efforts of Christian metal bands in the USA from the mid 1980s to the mid 1990s "confirmed the fluidity of oppositional cultural themes such as 'rebellion' and 'alienation'". Indeed, as Luhr (2005, 124) points out, these observations need to be understood in the context of the broader cultural struggles or "culture wars" that raged throughout US society and culture during this time. She argues that, in Christian metal, as well as in American evangelical youth culture more generally, the issue of rebellion has more to do with conservative and evangelical Christian's opposition to

the perceived sinfulness and immorality of a late modern society and culture in which traditional “family values”, decency, and morality have been eroded. This is seen to have taken place through such things as the legalization and increasing acceptability of abortion and pornography, and the rise of gay rights and feminist movements. As noted, the issue of alienation has more to do with the fundamental Christian struggle of being ‘in’ but not ‘of’ the world. Luhr discusses in detail how influential US evangelical Christian metal bands of the mid 1980s and mid 1990s strived to “redefine ‘rebellion’ as resistance to sin and obedience to parental, church, and divine authority” (Luhr 2005, 118; cf. Luhr 2009, 141). Turning the ‘conventional’ understanding of rebellion on its head, Christian bands such as Bloodgood and Barren Cross consciously and directly engaged in wider youth cultural debates through proclaiming that, in late modern Western society and culture, it was in fact Christian faith and morals that constituted the true and ultimate form of ‘rebellion’; “obedience was the true transgression, and personal morality became the basis for reform” (Luhr 2005, 199). This may also be taken to reflect wider attempts within the evangelical community, and perhaps within the evangelical popular culture industry in particular, to construct an alternative to ‘conventional’ forms of rebellion in the form of a ‘rebellion against rebellion’ during this time.

However, a more multifaceted picture inevitably emerges when looking at the later development of Christian metal in Europe. For instance, the North American strand of Evangelicalism has so far remained relatively marginal, although not nonexistent, within the Christian milieu of countries such as Norway, Sweden, and Finland whose religious climates are all still dominated by the increasingly liberal Lutheran former state churches (in Norway the Lutheran church retains full status of state church). As already noted, in such relatively homogeneous and (at least seemingly) increasingly secularized social and cultural environments Christian metal has become characterized by somewhat different aspirations and concerns. In contrast to the Christian metal in the USA in the 1980s and early 1990s, today’s Nordic scenes seem much less concerned with engaging in debates regarding “family values” and morality. Of course, those kinds of debates have not been nearly as visible in the Nordic countries as they have in the USA. Nor do members of the Nordic scenes appear to be particularly concerned with whether the music primarily should be used as a means of evangelistic outreach or if it also can be adopted as a particular kind of Christian lifestyle. Regarding this issue, members of the Nordic scenes seem to have chosen the latter alternative. That, however, has not changed the content or style of lyrics to any significant degree. Lyrics are usually written in accordance with Christian metal’s own conventions. It should be pointed out, though, that Christian metal musicians come from various Christian backgrounds in which issues such as rebellion against sin may be

interpreted in different ways. Even so, the theme of rebellion against sin has remained highly pervasive in the lyrics of Christian metal bands from different parts of the world. In its most basic form, the issue of rebellion against sin is fully compatible with the teachings of most Protestant traditions. However, as we shall explore in more detail below, within the Christian metal scene, denominational affiliation is of secondary importance anyway. Moreover, the issue of resistance to sin may also surface at many other levels of a band's activities and extend beyond the messages of lyrics. For example, the official online community of the US band Demon Hunter is called "The Blessed Resistance" (<http://www.demonhunter.net>). Another example can be found on the official web pages of the US band Ultimatum, which include a separate statement by the band on the issue of sin. Under the heading of "the ultimatum", visitors can read the following:

Although God, the Almighty, is the Creator and upholder of the universe He is also our loving Father and He wants to have a personal relationship with all of us. God is hopelessly in love with YOU! However, there is one thing that stands in the way of this relationship... SIN! ... Since God is holy and perfect, he cannot and will not have fellowship with sin. Yes, God is a loving God, but he is also a JUST God and sin must be dealt with and we are all sinners! (<http://www.ultimatum.net/mainframe.html>)

In short, the issue of rebellion against sin surfaces at many levels of Christian metal culture. This particular theme is also indirectly drawn upon in lyrics dealing with a range of other topics. It is perhaps the most pervasive of all of Christian metal's recurring lyrical themes.

### **Everyday social and personal struggles**

A sixth and final main category of lyrics focus on everyday social and personal struggles from a Christian perspective. Social injustice and social commentary have long constituted central themes of popular music lyrics more generally. In Christian metal such issues are, again, typically approached from a broadly defined "Christian perspective". For example, social problems and social injustice is often treated in light of notions of humanity and society as inherently sinful or at least in need of deeper spiritual guidance. Following Luhr (2009, 136), a significant subcategory of song lyrics dealing with these types of topics could be called "issue-based", such as anti-abortion, anti-pornography, or anti-gay rights. Reflecting conservative Christian's broader cultural and political engagements and campaigns in the USA, these types of issue-based song lyrics have been particularly common among US bands. Similar to their secular counterparts, Christian metal bands tend not to shun potentially

controversial and disturbing topics. Admittedly, a person largely unfamiliar with metal music and culture might view some of the topics commonly treated under the heading of “everyday” struggles as actually being quite far removed from *everyday* life. Violence, rape, and murder are surely not a part of the *everyday* lives of most Christian metal musicians. The term “everyday” should be understood in a broader sense in this context. For example, it is customary for Christian metal bands who write lyrics on these kinds of topics to explain that they only write about things that undeniably happen “every day”. Focusing on the most gruesome acts of violence and injustice is also fully in line with metal’s lyrical conventions more generally. In addition, as noted above, dealing with such strong topics also serves to highlight societal ills from a Christian perspective. Moreover, lyrics on such topics are often written in a blunt and direct style. One example can be found in Finnish Hilasterion’s “Sick and Rotten World” (*Taken from Darkness*, 2007):

Reading the paper about a young girl being raped  
It says she tried to convince them that she is a virgin girl  
But they’re deaf because of their perverted desires  
Blinded by their lust they destroy all that she’d become  
/.../  
But in all this utter darkness I felt  
A friend of mine came by and saw my pain  
He told me about the greatest One  
He who was and is and forever will be

IT’S A SICK AND ROTTEN WORLD  
IT SEEMS SO DEAD TO ME  
FILLED WITH HATE, GREED AND PAIN  
BUT I KNOW I CAN CHANGE THE WORLD  
BECAUSE THE ONE IN ME  
IS BIGGER THAN HE WHO IS IN THE WORLD

Essentially, these lyrics deal with the everyday frustrations Christians experience living in a “sick and rotten world” full “of hate, greed and pain”. We should also note that such features of society are presented as part of everyday life. Indeed, one is confronted by them just by reading the papers. However, they also clearly suggest that this inherently sinful world and society perhaps could be redeemed or at least changed for the better if people only put their trust in “the greatest One” and led more moral lives. In this way, these lyrics also relate the sinfulness of the world to everyday personal struggles with faith, doubt, depression, and sorrow. An example of lyrics dealing more directly with such topics can be found in the Finnish band From Ashes’ “Blackened” (*As the Leaves Fall*, 2007):



this morning I felt that the daylight was waning  
 this morning I felt that my lust for life was fading  
 Lost in thousand thoughts of darkness  
 my soul wanders through this blackened dawn  
 Give me life give me hope  
 give me joy  
 Too heavy is this burden  
 to bear alone  
 HERE I GO  
 And so did the morning rise after all  
 through all sorrow  
 through all the darkness  
 And so did the morning rise after all...  
 "Time after time you lift me up and time after time I fall again"  
 You are the light of my day  
 You saved my soul once again  
 You are my home in times of grief  
 Where else could I ever go?

These lyrics express the solace and strength found in faith when confronted with feelings of sorrow or other "dark thoughts". Of course, Christian metal musicians may well use lyrical styles such as these to express and deal with their own personal struggles. In addition, however, musicians often stress that these types of lyrics are also intended to inspire and edify Christian listeners. Arguably, when lyrics are written in a first person narrative form, they are also designed to convey a higher degree of directness and authenticity as they invite listeners to relate to them on a personal level (see also Luhr 2009, 135). As was argued by Steve Rowe of Mortification above, Christian listeners have the right to expect bands that call themselves "Christian" to offer them spiritual "food", that is, to have inspirational and edifying lyrics. Although lyrics dealing with social and personal issues rarely make direct references to the Bible or use much Christian terminology, the Christian approach of a band is still usually brought to the fore in some way or other. For example, the lyrics of "Sick and Rotten World" by Hilastherion cited above make explicit references to "the greatest One" and in "Blackened" From Ashes' narrator sings about a "you" who is "the light of my day", who "saved my soul once again", and who is "my home in times of grief".

Reminiscent of its secular counterpart, Christian metal's use of strong and uncompromising rhetoric goes hand in hand with the extreme character of the music. Of course, militaristic rhetoric and battle metaphors have long constituted a central part of Charismatic and Pentecostal Christianity in particular (e.g. Percy 2003, 96). Battle and struggle metaphors have also long been used within the song traditions of the Nordic free churches (Selander 1980). But not all Christian metal band

members are Charismatic or Pentecostal Christians. The small majority of Finnish band members interviewed for this study were members of the dominant Evangelical Lutheran Church, which has no particular tradition of overly militaristic rhetoric. However, according to Martyn Percy (2003, 97), “Charismatic Christianity is, for many people, also becoming a *less* intense form of religion, a resource ‘pool’ to dip in to /.../ rather than a river that carries one in a particular direction”. Indeed, as will be explored in more detail below, most of the Christian metal musicians interviewed for this study expressed some degree of discontent with the increasingly liberal and inclusive stance of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in particular (e.g. IF mgt 2008/57; IF mgt 2007/70). Some of those interviewed, while remaining members of the Church, also explained that they had become increasingly involved in the activities of free churches or revivalist groups and in such settings the experiential side of faith is usually brought to the fore in various ways (IF mgt 2007/69; IF mgt 2007/71).

In spite of differences in the interpretation of notions such as rebellion against sin or the relative absence of notions such as spiritual warfare within the respective Christian churches of individual Christian metalheads, militaristic rhetoric and war metaphors continue to be widely used in Christian metal lyrics and imagery. The main lyrical categories discussed above are also highly indicative of the ways in which the lyrical conventions of Christian metal also may reflect some widely shared understandings among musicians and fans about the basic realities of a Christian life. Tentatively, one could therefore pose the question of whether the strong and sometimes radical topics of Christian metal lyrics could be taken to reflect more uncompromising understandings of Christian life among Christian metal musicians and fans themselves. Indeed, if based on the style and rhetoric of lyrics alone, such a conclusion seems entirely plausible. Lyrics do indeed reflect the views of musicians and fans to some degree but, when approaching Christian metal as an alternative form of religious expression, these issues become slightly more complex. One factor that has repeatedly been stated is that musical style matters. Metal music, musicians often argue, needs to contain lyrics that are in line with its confrontational character (see also Thompson 2000, 164). Indeed, musicians often openly acknowledge the sometimes radical character of their own lyrics. However, they also tend to emphasize that, ‘in fact’, they are only expressing the ‘real truth’ about the world and the Christian message. There are, of course, different ways of doing this. As noted, some bands choose to express their message metaphorically while others opt for what one musician interviewed for this study referred to as a “turn or burn” approach (IF mgt 2008/59).

In Christian metal, lyrics and music strengthen each other, especially during live performances, which also feature a wide array of visual elements

that serve to heighten the experiential dimension of the music. For example, unblack bands sometimes use typical black metal 'accessories' such as swords, axes, or medieval-style armor during concerts. The Norwegian band Drottnar has also become known for performing in more modern military-style uniforms. In this context a range of other visual characteristics also need to be taken into account and it is to these that we now turn.

### 5. 2. 3 The visual dimension

As has already been pointed out numerous times, Christian and secular metal are largely identical when it comes to basic musical, visual, aesthetic, and stylistic traits. For example, the appearance of most Christian metalheads is in full accordance with metal styles or variations of the classic "metal uniform". Many male Christian metalheads have long hair; most prefer to dress in dark colors, band t-shirts, jeans and leather; they wear chains, band pins, patches, and metal-inspired jewelry; some have tattoos etc. Any informed observer would readily identify most of these individuals as metalheads. Generally speaking, Christian metal band t-shirts, pins, patches, and album cover artwork also conforms to the metal aesthetic. As was explored in the previous chapter, secular metal often employs a wide range of imagery inspired by the world of religion and myth. Indeed, as I argued there, religious imagery of various sorts have in many ways developed into an integrated part of a broadly defined metal aesthetic. Moreover, as was also discussed briefly, certain more extreme forms of metal commonly employ various types of satanic and anti-Christian imagery.

In all basic respects, Christian metal's visual dimension also conforms to a broadly defined metal aesthetic. It includes typical gloomy metal imagery such as skulls, fire, weapons such as swords and axes, motives of violent battles and death, apocalyptic images of hell and the destruction of worlds and so on. With the exception of overtly anti-Christian motifs, the *type* of imagery used is largely identical with that of secular metal. Christian bands representing particular metal styles also tend to conform to the particular variations of the general metal aesthetic developed by these particular styles. For example, while Christian thrash metal bands tend to favor the colorful but raw aesthetics of thrash, unblack bands instead tend to adopt typical black metal aesthetics such as Viking-age motifs and mountain and dark forest landscapes. But importantly, Christian metal also makes use of a range of motifs that one would generally not find in secular metal. The *ways* in which these motifs are presented is fully governed, however, by either the general metal aesthetic or some particular variation thereof.

As might be expected, Christian metal aesthetics often make relatively

pronounced references to Christianity. One classic example would be the album cover of the Christian thrash metal band Vengeance Rising's 1988 debut release *Human Sacrifice*. The album cover depicts a bloody hand roped and nailed to a piece of wood. This, of course, is an obvious reference to the crucifixion of Christ (as is the album title itself). A more recent and less explicit example would be the cover of the Finnish band Hilastherion's 2007 release *Taken from Darkness*. This cover depicts an old stone entrance, possibly to a church or crypt, leading to a stone chamber in which a figure is kneeling as if in prayer.

Bands may also use a whole range of other types of imagery, iconography, and motifs to make either direct or indirect references to Christianity. These include motifs of crucifixes and crosses, depictions of Jesus himself, angel-like figures, figures appearing in various poses of prayer, praise or worship, churches, altars, stained-glass windows, Bibles and scrolls, grave monuments, beams of light, doves, and wine and bread (see also Häger 2005, 258-260). Häger has analyzed in detail how these types of motives also commonly appear in Christian rock music videos more generally. Of course, these are all considered central and centuries old Christian motifs and symbols that are easily recognizable to most people living in largely Christian cultures. However, not all Christian bands use all of these types of motifs as frequently and some make no use of them at all. When Christian metal bands do use central Christian motifs and symbols such as these, they usually tend to espouse the more powerful ones or more powerful ways of depicting them. Some examples would be grim or bloody motifs of crucifixes or the crucified Christ himself, altars, powerful angel-like figures, or gloomy grave monuments. As Häger points out, when used by Christian bands, the context in which such motifs and symbols appear also becomes a largely Christian one. The motifs themselves thereby serve to afford the music a stronger "institutional anchoring" (Häger 2005, 254). For example, it may also be noted that Christian metal has also come up with its own variant of the originally biblical symbol "666" or "number of the beast" commonly used in secular metal aesthetics. In Christian metal aesthetics, the numbers instead read "777".

References to Christianity are also sometimes included in the design of the official web pages of bands. For example, the site of the Finnish band Luotettava Todistus prominently displays a cross, which is also included in the logo of the band. Christian metal media, both printed and Internet-based, also tend to include Christian references of various sorts, usually in the form of crosses. All of the central motifs mentioned above may also appear in music videos in which they are usually interspersed with concert-type footage of the band. However, videos by Christian bands need not necessarily employ any such motifs. Videos are usually only made by more widely successful bands. Smaller bands may instead release self-produced

live footage or live DVDs.

As with Christian popular music generally, differences may also surface regarding the *ways* in which bands perform. The *type of event* in question also becomes of importance in this context. At Christian events with a largely, and often exclusively, Christian audience it is not unusual for bands to interrupt their set for a short prayer, an edifying speech, or the reading of a few Bible passages. However, in the case of Christian metal concerts in Finland at least, it would be mistaken to interpret this practice in terms of 'preaching to the choir' or the 'already saved' (for more about this issue regarding evangelical popular culture more generally see for example Hendershot 2004, 3). Instead, such practices are primarily aimed at edifying, supporting, and inspiring Christian audiences in their faith. In addition, such practices also further serve to highlight an event as a "Christian" one (see also Häger 2003). Some Christian metal bands have also taken this practice to secular audiences, preaching the Christian message from stage to secular metal crowds in secular venues. Such evangelistic outreach was particularly common during the 1980s and early 1990s. These days, however, many bands choose to downplay their religious messages and references when playing for non-Christian crowds. That said, there are still plenty of bands left today who refuse to make compromises in this regard. Because of this, some of these bands have also experienced considerable difficulties in finding secular venues that are willing to let them play. Indeed, it is largely because of the untiring evangelistic efforts of some early bands that Christian metal became so widely known throughout the wider secular metal community at an early stage. This awareness was also greatly fuelled by the media attention engendered by the success of some early bands such as Stryper during the glam metal heyday of the mid and late 1980s. But this is not to say that Christian metal ever gained any wider acceptance among secular metal audiences, quite the contrary. Even so, most contemporary Christian bands rarely play secular events; this also being the case among Finnish bands. There are those who express a strong willingness to do so (e.g. IF mgt 2008/55/1-2; IF mgt 2008/57) but others instead choose to play for Christian audiences exclusively. Importantly, it is at Christian events that the scene comes 'alive'. As will be discussed in more detail below, Christian metalheads have also created their own festivals and events exclusively dedicated to Christian metal.

A typical Christian metal festival usually features something between two and six bands per night. Again, on the surface, such events do not differ from secular events to any significant degree. Both the performances in themselves as well as the ways in which audiences typically respond are done in a distinctive metal fashion. Bands try to execute their set as powerfully and intensively as possible and audiences respond in an equally intense way, for example by headbanging or moshing. Generally speaking,

Christian metal concerts exude the same intense atmosphere as their secular equivalents. The only more directly noticeable difference regarding the general atmosphere of Christian metal concerts has to do with the near total absence of alcohol and drugs. Indeed, as a general rule, alcohol is usually prohibited at Christian metal festivals and concerts held in Christian venues (drugs, of course, are illegal).

Apart from the occasional prayer, short edifying speech, or Bible-reading, discerning other differences requires attention to detail. Let us consider some examples. Secular metalheads have long used the so-called “Il Cornuto” hand sign as a main form of greeting and symbol of metal affiliation. The sign is made through the extension of the index and little fingers from an otherwise clenched fist. This sign is also known as the “satanic salute” and in some traditions it has also figured as a sign of protection from the “evil eye”. Throughout the years, the sign has also become widely used as a general symbol for everything having to do with ‘metal’ and increasingly also for everything having to do with ‘rock’ more generally. While most Christian metalheads view this sign purely as a symbol and form of metal greeting, some indeed abstain from using it. The sign is, nonetheless, commonplace at Christian metal concerts.

([http://fi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kristillinen\\_metallimusiikki#Kristillinen\\_metallialakulttuuri](http://fi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kristillinen_metallimusiikki#Kristillinen_metallialakulttuuri))

Christian rock has also created a hand sign of its own called “One way” (first developed within the 1960s Jesus Movement) which is also commonly used at Christian metal concerts. This sign is made by extending only the index finger from an otherwise clenched fist and raising the arm upwards towards the sky (Luhr 2009, 80). The sign is meant to symbolize Jesus as the (only) way (e.g. Häger 2005, 259). As in secular metal, it also is not unusual for Christian audiences to simply thrust their clenched fists in the air in sync to the beat. Sometimes members of the audience react to the music by assuming a typical so-called “praise pose”. Such a pose is made by standing relatively still in one place while keeping one’s face, usually eyes closed, and one or both arms extended straight upwards or slightly forwards-upwards (e.g. Häger 2005, 259; 2003, 49-51). Such poses are sometimes also taken by band members themselves. Occasionally, band members also take crucifixion poses. It should also be noted that all such poses are very common in more traditional free church, Charismatic, or Pentecostal worship settings.

The common appearance of these signs and poses at Christian metal concerts further illustrates the many ways in which these events are marked as “Christian” events. Although the main format of the event is that of the metal concert, it is also combined with various elements more typical of “church-like” behavior such as collective prayer and praise poses (Häger 2003, 49-51). Indeed, Christian metal concerts are sometimes held in



churches or some other facilities of a particular parish or congregation. Band members, leading the crowd in prayer, reading from the Bible, speaking about faith or even preaching to the crowd, with people in the audience doing the “one way” sign and taking praise poses – all of this in the midst of intense headbanging and moshing – attests to how Christian metal concerts simultaneously function as both intense musical and religious experiences. Indeed, for some participants, Christian metal concerts come to constitute an alternative form of worship. This is also often the case for band members themselves since the concert situation allows them to fully assume and live out the role of “metal ministers”. Moreover, band members may also invest their own performance with religious dimensions. Performing at Christian events may thus inspire and edify musicians as well. For example, some Finnish musicians interviewed for this study related that playing live clearly had a religious dimension to it (IF mgt 2008/56; IF mgt 2008/57). This is not to say that all band and audience members react to the music in such openly religious ways. Even so, Christian metal concerts nevertheless provide scene members with apt opportunities for such religious expression.

Häger (2003) has discussed how Christian rock concerts are usually characterized by the combination of two “repertoires” (or, alternatively, discourses), – a “Christian” and a “rock” repertoire – on which both artists and audiences typically draw simultaneously. Basically, in relation to Christian metal, typical metal concert behavior such as headbanging and moshing would fall within the “rock” or “metal” repertoire while praise poses and prayers during concerts would fall instead within the “Christian” repertoire. The point to note is that the combination of these two repertoires serves to illustrate how CCM generally receives much of “its meaning from being recognizably similar to one particular discourse – secular rock – but still not the same as this” (Häger 2003, 42). This is equally true for Christian metal since the combination of what could be called “metal” and “Christian” repertoires that characterize Christian metal concerts also clearly serve to mark out these events as *particular types* of “Christian” events. It is important, therefore, to note on a general level that the particular type of *musical* situation in question also matters. That is, we also need to pay attention to how the musical/auditory elements and concert practices typical of metal music play an important role in this context. We need to note that, as Christian metal concerts function as an alternative form of worship and religious expression, this is a very *particular* form of alternative worship and religious expression, which is particularly directed at encouraging intense responses and active *embodied* participation. Christian popular music concerts take on a different character depending on the form of music in question (compare for example Sai-Chun Lau 2006 on Christian club culture). We shall briefly return to these issues in chapter 7.

In the following, having discussed Christian metal’s verbal and visual



elements we now turn to exploring today's Christian metal culture as a distinct religious and musical space. In the light of the concept of scene outlined above, we shall begin with a general overview of the transnational dimensions of contemporary Christian metal culture.



Picture 1. "One way". Sotahuuto live at *Maata näkyvissä festarit* in 2005. Photo: Tove Forssell.



Picture 2. "One way". Audience at *Immortal Metal Fest* in 2008. Photo: Marcus Moberg.



Picture 3. "Praise pose". Recidivus live at *Maata näkyvissä festarit* in 2005. Photo: Tove Forssell.



Picture 4. "Praise pose". Audience at *Immortal Metal Fest* in 2007. Photo: Marcus Moberg.



Picture 5. Member of Sacrecy reading from the Bible during a live performance at *Immortal Metal Fest* in 2007. Photo: Tove Forssell.



Picture 6. Member of Desyre speaking to the crowd at *Immortal Metal Fest* in 2008. Photo: Tove Forssell.



Picture 7. Frontman of From Ashes saying a prayer as part of a song during a live performance at *Immortal Metal Fest* in 2008. Photo: Marcus Moberg.



Picture 8. Wooden cross beside the stage at *Immortal Metal Fest* in 2007. The festival featured a *Metal Mass*. Photo: Tove Forssell.



Picture 9. Stand of *Maanalainen levykauppa*/The Underground Recordstore at *Maata Näkyvissä festarit* in 2005. Photo: Tove Forssell.



Picture 10. Audience at *Maata näkyvissä festarit* in 2005. Photo: Tove Forssell.

### 5.3 Contemporary national and regional scenes

During the late 1980s, Christian metal gradually started gaining a stronger foothold in a number of countries outside of the USA. In the early 1990s, small Christian metal scenes started developing in the Northern European countries of Sweden, Norway, Finland, and to some degree in Germany, The Netherlands, and Belgium. A few years later, small scenes also started developing throughout Latin America, particularly in Brazil and Mexico. Australia has produced some of Christian metal's most influential bands and a small scene appears to have developed there as well. It is worth noting that these are all countries with long-standing and significant secular metal scenes. Christian metal has remained firmly rooted in evangelical Protestantism (broadly defined) and hence more rare, but not nonexistent, in predominantly Catholic countries. Today, predominantly Catholic countries such as Brazil and Mexico have significant Protestant minorities that have partly emerged as a result of the rapid growth of Evangelicalism, Charismatic, and Pentecostal Christianity throughout Latin America during recent decades. In addition, other traditionally Catholic countries such as Italy and Poland have also produced some known Christian metal bands. So, although there is clearly an affinity between Christian metal and evangelical Protestantism, it is also characterized by an open stance towards other forms of Christianity. Whereas secular metal has gained considerable popularity in many Islamic countries such as Indonesia and Morocco (Kahn-Harris 2007, 118; LeVine 2008), Christian metal has so far mostly remained confined to North America, (mainly Northern) Europe, Latin American countries such as Brazil and Mexico and, arguably, Australia.

Today's *transnational* scene is mainly confined to these core regions, although there are some known Christian bands coming from outside these regions as well. For example, the Indonesian Christian extreme metal band Kekal is well known at a transnational level. However, more vibrant and significant national scenes have so far only developed in a smaller number of countries. The more significant national scenes mentioned above produce the majority of bands today, and also control and maintain most of today's transnational scenic infrastructure of record labels, distribution channels, and specialized media. The Christian scene has so far not spread on a global scale. This is the main reason for referring to it in terms of a *transnational* scene. In the following, I shall offer a brief general overview of some of today's most important regional and national scenes.



### 5. 3. 1 The transnational scene

As mentioned above, today's transnational scene consists of a smaller web of national scenes. The Christian metal scene of the USA – the birthplace of Christian metal – has remained significant to this day. However, because of the geographical size of the country, it has always been fragmented to some degree. A significant portion of US Christian metal bands have come from the so-called “Sunbelt states” of California (and Southern California in particular), Florida, and Texas – all core areas of evangelical youth cultural activity (Luhr 2009, 84). In the case of the USA, we could therefore also speak of national-regional or local Christian metal scenes, for example, the “Orange County”-, “Los Angeles”-, or “Florida”-scene. The Canadian scene seems to have become largely integrated with the much larger US scene. From a transnational perspective, these scenes can be said to constitute a regional “North American” scene.

Another increasingly significant regional scene is formed by the contemporary national scenes of the Nordic countries Sweden, Norway, and Finland. Sweden in particular has a long-standing and highly vibrant national scene that continues to produce many successful bands. Some of the most important Christian metal record labels and distribution channels are also based there. Sweden also hosts the *Endtime Festival*, which was established to replace the earlier *Bobfest*-festival, named after Sanctuary's head pastor Bob Beeman. An alternative “metal parish movement” or “metal ministry”, as they are also called in Christian metal terms, has also recently been established in Sweden under the name of *Metal Sanctuary*. The smaller Norwegian scene largely developed in connection with the developments of early and mid 1990s Norwegian black metal. Indeed, the Norwegian scene has become particularly associated with unblack metal. Norway also hosts the Christian metal festival *Nordic Fest*. The Swedish and Norwegian scenes have developed close ties. Both of these scenes also have closer ties to the Finnish scene. However, because of the language barrier, overall closer cooperation has remained somewhat limited. The Finnish scene has grown steadily since the beginning of the 1990s, and developed into one of the most vibrant national Christian metal scenes of today. Its development will be discussed separately in more detail below.

In the 1990s, small scenes also appear to have developed in Germany, The Netherlands, and Belgium. It is, however, difficult to assess their scale. Information regarding the numbers of people involved always has to be derived from scarce, second hand sources such as occasional reports from festivals in various forms of Christian metal media. Of course, membership of music scenes is not something that one generally finds statistical data on. A sober and highly tentative estimate would put the number of people involved in these scenes at something around a thousand or less. However,

these countries have nevertheless produced a number of bands, some of which have become very successful within the wider transnational scene. There are many signs of scenic activity though; for example, there is also a metal ministry operating in Germany under the name of *Headbanger's Rest*. The web forum *Unblack.com* (in German) is also based in Germany. The Christian metal record label *Fear Dark* is based in The Netherlands. *Fear Dark* also organizes Christian metal events in The Netherlands, Germany, and Switzerland under the heading of *Fear Dark Festivals*. Currently the largest Christian metal festival in Europe, *Elements of Rock* is held in Switzerland, and the widely known Christian metal Internet-site *JesusMetal* is based in Belgium. Christian metal has clearly gained a foothold in these countries but it is unclear as to whether they have actually developed distinct national scenes of their own. Instead, they might be seen to form a Northern European continental regional scene. Such scenic structure differs from that of the larger scenes of the USA, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Brazil, and Mexico, which have all developed distinctively national scenic structures. In addition, as noted, there are also some contemporary Christian metal bands coming from Italy and Poland. For example, the Christian metal webzine *Holy Steel* is based in Italy and the webzine *Uzvarit Zine* in Poland.

In Latin America, the Brazilian scene appears to have grown significantly during recent years with new bands, magazines, and webzines constantly emerging. A larger scene also appears to have emerged in Mexico. Both of these scenes are marked by a high degree of commitment and preoccupation with evangelistic outreach. For example, scene members in Brazil and Mexico have also created their own Christian "metal parish-movements" or "metal ministries". Brazil has at least two such movements. One based in the city of Recife is known as *Comunidade Zadoque* and the other based in Florianópolis goes by the name of *Crash Church*. As observed above with the US-based Sanctuary movement and the metal ministries in Sweden and Germany, Christian metal musicians and fans in different parts of the world have decided to create their own parish-movements in order to be able to worship in an alternative metal-inspired way and attract people who feel alienated from more traditional church activities. Brazil also has a number of groups dedicated to supporting and maintaining the country's national scene. These include *Christian Metal Force Brasilia* and the Christian metal portal *Metal Blessing*. The scene has also developed its own Portuguese-language webzines and online stores and distribution channels. Considering the larger populations (and sheer numbers of metal fans) of these countries, one would assume that the number of people involved in these scenes would be higher than those in Europe. But, again, any assessment of the total number of people more actively involved must remain tentative at best.

In Mexico City, members of the successful band Exousia have reportedly started a movement known as the *Underground Outreach (Extreme Brutal*

*Death* 2005/1, 16). Another related, although in many respects also different, contemporary example of this can be found in Finland in the form of the already mentioned *Metal Masses* organized by the Evangelical Lutheran Church since the summer of 2006 (discussed in more detail below). The creation of separate “metal parishes” or “metal services” also attests to the unusually strong ability of metal music and culture to function as a resource for the forming of alternative countercultural identities in a number of different contexts. In the particular context of alternative “metal parish-movements”, the music also functions as a central resource in the construction of an alternative form of religious expression and worship. There is also some evidence of the existence of Christian metal in other Latin American countries. For example, there is a metal ministry called *Theocracy Ministry* in Paraguay and a Christian metal Internet-site called *Insacris* based in Colombia. While it has become easier to obtain basic information about the larger scenes of Brazil and Mexico, assessing the spread of Christian metal in other Latin American countries on the basis of the scarce information that does exist, remains very difficult indeed.

It is important to note here that all of these scenes are connected through the complex web of shared infrastructure and channels of communication and interaction that make up the overarching transnational scene. As we have seen, today’s transnational scene is clearly reproduced along place-based scales at regional and national levels. However, as will be explored in more detail below, through the development of a largely Internet-based scenic infrastructure and different forms of scenic media, the transnational scene also facilitates interaction between different regional and national scenes. This also makes it possible for people living in countries with only small scenes or no scene at all to participate in scenic activity on a transnational level.

### **5. 3. 2 The Finnish scene**

Bands playing heavier forms of Christian rock started to appear in Finland in the late 1980s – rather late in comparison with the US and neighboring Sweden. Among the first to appear, the Christian hard rock band *Terapia*, formed in 1987, is commonly regarded as having been particularly influential for the subsequent development of Finnish Christian metal. Another influential Christian hard rock band, *The Rain*, also formed in 1987, has remained active and widely popular among Christian audiences to the present day. In the beginning of the 1990, a few full-fledged Christian metal bands playing extreme metal styles started to appear. Among these, the band *DBM* (*Destroyer of Black Metal*, later *Cathacomb*) formed in 1990 is usually regarded as the first Finnish Christian metal band. Having released a

few demos such as *Death of a Soul* (1990) the band separated after a few years. However, former members of DBM, Manu Lehtinen and Aki Särkioja, went on to form some of Finland's most revered and influential Christian metal bands, both of whom have remained active to this day and also gained considerable transnational success. In 1991, Särkioja formed the Christian death metal band Immortal Souls while Manu Lehtinen went on to form another influential Christian death metal group, Deuteronomium, in 1993. Deuteronomium's debut EP *Tribal Eagle* (1997) became a great success in the burgeoning Finnish scene. The band separated in 2001, but re-formed in 2006. Other bands that subsequently separated but were active during this time include Sanctify, Mordecai, Alttari, Manifestum, Tinnitus, Anchor, Alpha Omega, Blind in Faith, Dei Gloriam, The Children of Light, Demetrius, and Cruciferae.  
([http://fi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kristillinen\\_metallimusiikki#Kristillinen\\_metalli\\_Suomessa](http://fi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kristillinen_metallimusiikki#Kristillinen_metalli_Suomessa)).

By the mid 1990s, a modest but tight-knit scene had emerged and towards the end of the decade a few national scenic institutions were established as well. In 1998, Deuteronomium members Manu Lehtinen and Miika Partala established the company *Little Rose Productions*, which simultaneously functioned as a Christian metal importer, distributor, and record label – the first of its kind in Finland. During its time, *Little Rose Productions* released some influential records by Finnish bands. These include Deuteronomium's first full-length release *Street Corner Queen* in 1998, Immortal Soul's *Divine Wintertime* EP in 1998 (which was a split CD with Mordecai's *Through the Woods, towards the Dawn* EP), *The Cleansing* EP in 2000, and their first full-length release *Under the Northern Sky* in 2001. *Little Rose Productions* also released two collection CDs with Finnish bands called *From Kaamos to Midnight Sun* in 1998, and *The Metal Rose Collection* in 2001. After the first separation of Deuteronomium in 2001, the record distro/store wing of *Little Rose Productions* was sold to Lasse Niskala and Päivi Niemi who established *Maanalainen Levykauppa/The Underground Recordstore*, which has become one of the largest Christian music retailers in the country. In recent years, it has also expanded its activities and started to release records by Finnish bands as an independent label. Two Finnish-language Christian metal fanzines, *The Christian Underground Zine* and *Ristillinen Metal Magazine* were also established in the late 1990s. The latter has remained active to this day. At the time of writing, seven issues have so far appeared. The Finnish scene has also created its own Finnish-language Christian metal online discussion forum, *Kristillinen metalliunioni* (Christian Metal Union), which has developed into the scene's main channel for communication and information.  
([http://fi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kristillinen\\_metallimusiikki](http://fi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kristillinen_metallimusiikki); *Ristillinen* 2007/7, 7-29).

Compared with other Northern European countries Finland also has an

unusually large number of annual festivals featuring Christian metal. Among these, the *Immortal Metal Fest*-festival established in 2001 is dedicated to Christian metal exclusively. It is held each spring (usually in May) in the small town of Nokia in the south-west of the country. The festival has grown steadily from year to year and developed into one of the largest annual festivals of the Nordic countries. As such, it has also developed into a particularly important institution for the Finnish national scene. The festival has usually featured at least one band from abroad. Indeed, many transnationally known and successful bands have played at the festival. Currently, it attracts an annual audience, mainly from Finland, of around five hundred. The festival was initially held in the premises of the local Evangelical Lutheran parish. In 2007, it moved to Nokian Palloiluhalli (Nokia Sports Hall) in order to be able to accommodate a larger audience. (see also [http://fi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kristillinen\\_metallimusiikki](http://fi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kristillinen_metallimusiikki))

In addition, the large annual Christian youth festival *Maata näkyvissä festarit* (Land in Sight-Festival), which was briefly discussed above in chapter 3, always features the immensely popular so-called “Alternatiivi pommisuoja” (“The alternative bunker”) Christian metal concert. This concert, which usually features shorter sets by three or four bands, has developed into an important showcase for Finnish bands. It is held in a space that accommodates up to a thousand people and it is nearly always sold out in advance. This particular event, as well as the festival generally, affords Christian metal bands much exposure to a wider, and predominantly young, Finnish Christian audience. In addition, in 2005 a midsummer festival called *OHM-Fest* (Organized Hard Music Group-festival) mainly featuring Christian metal bands, was established in the town of Keuruu. In 2008, it was organized by *Maanalainen Levykauppa/The Underground Recordstore* under the name of *Maanalainen juhannus* (Underground midsummer). A smaller do-it-yourself-type of annual event called *True Attitude* has also been held in the town of Heinola since 2005. A few onetime festivals have also been organized during recent years, including the larger two-day festivals *Underground Festival* held in Helsinki in the summer of 2005 and *Metal Fest of the Creator of Night* held in the city of Joensuu later that same year. Lastly, Christian metal bands have also played the annual Christian rock festival *Ristirock* (Cross Rock) held in the city of Tampere. (see also [http://fi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kristillinen\\_metallimusiikki](http://fi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kristillinen_metallimusiikki))

In addition to these larger events, separate concerts are also held relatively regularly in certain venues throughout the country, especially in the Helsinki metropolitan area. Such concerts and events are usually held in the premises or youth cafés of particular denominations, in most cases those of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. One example is the *Hard Gospel Cafe* youth café in eastern Helsinki in which “Gospel Nights” featuring Christian bands have been held regularly since 2000. Many Christian metal bands

have also played at these events. As indicated here, compared to many other countries, the Finnish scene has established an unusually large number of its own events. In addition to these, some bands also play secular venues. Playing secular venues differs from playing Christian events and venues in many important ways. We shall return to this issue when later discussing Finnish Christian metal musician's thoughts on Christian metal as a means of evangelism.

The Finnish scene has grown steadily since the latter half of the 1990s. These days it contains around twenty-five to thirty bands, some of which are more active than others, and many of which have become successful within the wider transnational scene. The bands active within today's scene also cover a large spectrum of different metal styles. To name a few, more classic as well as progressive variants of heavy metal are represented by bands such as Lumina Polaris, Sacrecy, VIP, and Oratorio; glam metal by Desyre; thrash metal by Luotettava Todistus; death metal by bands such as Deuteronomium, Immortal souls, Megiddon, and Hilasterion; metalcore by Sotahuuto; and black metal by bands such as Parakletos and From Ashes. As in most other music scenes, new bands are constantly being formed while others disband. Some bands may only be active for a shorter period of time while others continue to play and record for many years. It is also not uncommon for bands to reform after not having played for many years. However, as with the other national Christian metal scenes briefly discussed above, the number of people actively involved is difficult to assess. As mentioned above, the larger annual *Immortal Metal Fest* attracts around five hundred participants each year. This number would also come close to a sober assessment of the number of people actively involved in the scene as a whole (e.g. IF mgt 2007/69). However, when including people who only engage with the scene sporadically, irregularly, or periodically, one could well presume the number might rise to something slightly over a thousand. That, however, is a tentative estimate which I have arrived at based on my participant observation at Christian metal festivals and concerts in Finland during the course of 2004-2008, as well as my interviews and discussions with core members of the scene. It is important to note that not all scene members participate in the same types of scenic activities in the same ways or to the same extent. We might define an "actively involved" scene member as a person who regularly buys new Christian metal records, follows various forms of scenic media, participates in scenic discourse through interacting with other scene members (for example, through online discussion forums), and regularly attends concerts and events. But again, the number of people who only engage with the scene in one of these ways is impossible to assess.

The clear majority of active scene members are young adult males. However, female scene members do constitute a clearly visible group within the scene. Although this study does not engage with the concept of "youth"



(in a theoretical sense), it should be noted that most scene members are young adults between sixteen and thirty years old. Based on my interviews with Finnish musicians, most become more actively involved in the scene in their mid- or late teens. The scene brings together people with a range of different denominational affiliations. Most are members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church but many are also affiliated with other free churches. However, the lines between denominational affiliations become fluid in this context. As noted above, people belonging to the religiously active minority of the Evangelical Lutheran Church often tend to participate in the activities of various free churches as well. It is also worth noting here that, apart from the Evangelical Lutheran Church, affiliation with Pentecostal congregations is particularly common among the core of musicians. I want to stress here, though, that these are conclusions which I have arrived at on the basis of my interviews with musicians and discussions with other scene members during the course of this study. The majority of scene members also express themselves as metalheads in style and look. As noted in our discussion of secular metal music and culture above, metal in general has traditionally been interpreted as attracting (male) working class youth in particular. What can be said regarding the issue of class within the Christian metal scene is that most musicians interviewed for this study either already held or were at the time of the interview studying for a higher education or university degree. Musicians, at least, can thus hardly be described as being working class. Overall, social class does not appear to play any significant role within the scene. It should be noted, though, that this study has not directed any specific focus at this particular issue.

Scenic activity has become more concentrated in certain regional areas than others. This is simply to say that more bands tend to come from these areas and that concerts and events tend to be more frequently organized there. The Helsinki metropolitan area and surrounding towns is the most vibrant. This is also what one would expect considering the capital's dominant position as the cultural and economic center of the country. In addition, there is also more lively scenic activity in areas around the larger city of Tampere in the south-west of the country, in areas around the larger city of Jyväskylä in the middle of the country, and throughout the region of Ostrobothnia on the north-west coast – traditionally a particularly religiously vibrant region. This, however, does not mean that the scene has become divided into different local scenes. Because of its small scale and the relatively small numbers of people involved, the scene has very much remained a national one. For example, larger events such as the annual *Immortal Metal Fest* attract scene members from all over the country. The Finnish scene could also well be described as close-knit. Most core scene members have known each other for several years. For example, bands and people involved in maintaining scenic institutions often cooperate in various



ways, for example by advertising one another's Internet-sites, media, distros, or organizing events together. Other actively involved scene members, such as dedicated fans, also tend to know each other and be very knowledgeable about the scene as a whole. The unusually large number of festivals and events also provides scene members with regular opportunities to meet and for the scene as a whole to come 'alive'. Through these events in particular, the scene has also become a recognizable space within wider Finnish Christian circles. Indeed, as mentioned above, many of these concerts and events are directly or partly church-sponsored. However, as we have already noted and will continue to explore in more detail below, particular denominational affiliation is of no actual importance within the scene. The scene as a whole has also become more visible in recent years. This is largely due to the success of the already mentioned special 'metal-service' called the *Metal Mass* organized by the Evangelical Lutheran Church (discussed in more detail below).

## 5. 4 Scenic structure

One of the most important ways in which music scenes are sustained is through their various forms of scenic structure. First, examining the structure of the Christian metal scene involves looking at the development of its own infrastructure of record labels, promotion- and distribution channels (so called "distros"), specialized media, and festivals. Significantly, this scenic infrastructure is not shared with any other scene (see Kahn-Harris 2007, 100). Examining its structure also involves looking at the ways in which the scene is sustained and kept stable through its degree of institutionalization. As Kahn-Harris (2007, 100) points out, "Institutional 'thickness' is correlated with the degree of autonomy that scenes have". In this context, the role played by the Internet in the overall structure of today's transnational scene will be discussed in light of the views of three Christian metal site-administrators from different parts of the world. Second, we shall also consider the Christian metal scene's relation to other scenes, both Christian and secular. Its relation to the secular metal scene naturally becomes of particular importance in this regard. Finally, we shall also look at some of the ways in which the scene produces its own forms of cultural and religious "capital" and discuss how variations in social and cultural circumstances between national scenes affect their activities and positions within the wider transnational scene. In each of these sections, the structure of the wider transnational scene will be related to the structure of the Finnish scene.

### 5. 4. 1 Infrastructure and scenic institutions

Today's transnational scene has developed its own highly independent, and largely Internet-based, scenic infrastructure of record labels, promotion- and distribution channels, magazines, fanzines, webzines, online communities and discussion forums, and festivals. These different forms of scenic infrastructure are referred to as *scenic institutions*. Different national scenes have also developed their own smaller scenic institutions concentrating on bands and events in their own respective countries. It is important to note that some national scenes are more vibrant than others, with more bands, fans, and events. All scenic institutions have to start on a local or national level. The Internet has had a decisive impact on the construction and structure of most popular music scenes and, indeed, become of crucial importance to many. By being initially established or by relocating to the Internet, an increasing part of Christian metal's scenic infrastructure has become transnational in scope. The following account does not aim to include every scenic institution. It is intended as a general overview of the most significant scenic institutions of today's transnational scene.

#### Record labels

As mentioned above, the 1980s saw the establishment of small, specialized Christian metal record labels in the USA, such as *Pure Metal Records*, *Intense Records*, and *R.E.X. Records*. Subsequently established US labels releasing Christian metal bands include *Open Grave Records/Sullen Records*, *Facedown Records*, *Solid State Records*, *Bombworks Records*, *Retroactive Records*, *Bloodbough Records*, and *E.E.E. Recordings*.

As Christian metal has spread to other countries, a number of new labels mostly catering to national or regional scenes have also emerged. Most of these labels release Christian bands only, although there are a few that release bands on the borderline between Christian and secular as well. Record labels thus also serve important gatekeeping functions. There is a strong sense in which Christian metalheads rely on these labels to guarantee that the albums they release more or less conform to the basic 'requirements' of Christian metal outlined above. There are, however, some labels which choose not to call themselves "Christian" even though, in practice, they only release Christian bands. Such labels could be called "Christian by association"<sup>4</sup>. There are also many labels that openly express their Christian approach, for example, the official web pages of Sweden-based label *CM Sweden/Rivel Records* contain the following information:

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<sup>4</sup> A term suggested to me by Justin Davisson.

CM SWEDEN / RIVEL RECORDS was formed in 1999 by Christian Liljegen. The focus with the recordlabel is to release good hardrock and metal with a good message that lifts up people.

(<http://www.rivelrecords.com/main.php>)

*CM Sweden/Rivel Records* is one of the most significant Nordic Christian metal labels of today. It has been of particular significance for the Nordic scenes and released records by a large number of known bands. These include Divinefire, Pantokrator, and Crimson Moonlight from Sweden, and Immortal Souls, Oratorio, and Parakletos from Finland. The label has also developed a broader transnational scope. Another significant Sweden-based label *Endtime Productions* mostly concentrates on extreme metal styles. It has released records by many well-known Norwegian unblack bands such as Antestor, Drottnar, and Extol. *Endtime Productions* has also established another label called *Momentum Scandinavia* in cooperation with the Norway-based online Christian metal distro *Nordic Mission*. As mentioned above, in recent years, the large Finland-based Christian popular music retailer *Maanalainen levykauppa/The Underground Recordstore* has also expanded its activities and started releasing records by Finnish bands. The label *Fear Dark* is another significant European label based in The Netherlands. These labels all constitute important institutions of the Nordic and Northern European regional scenes. Although most Christian metal labels are based in either North America or Northern Europe, some have also been established elsewhere. These include the long-established and well-known Australia-based label *Rowe Productions* founded by Mortification's front man Steve Rowe. The label has released many important bands, including the Australian unblack band Horde and the Christian thrash metal band Ultimatum from the USA. There is also a larger label called *Extreme Records* based in Brazil.

The establishment of record labels such as these has meant that it has become relatively easy for Christian metal bands to release records at early stages of their musical careers. Indeed, it is not uncommon for bands to release their first record after having played only a few concerts. On the other hand, most Christian labels operate with fairly or very limited resources. A few of the larger ones have distribution deals with larger secular or general Christian labels. All of the labels mentioned above primarily cater to the regional scenes in which they are based. Swedish labels such as *CM Sweden/Rivel Records* and *Endtime Productions* thus primarily release Nordic bands. However, largely because of the rapid development and accessibility of the Internet, labels of all sizes have become increasingly transnational in scope. Lastly, it should be noted that some bands choose to release their music themselves.

With the exception of *Little Rose Productions*, which simultaneously functioned as a retailer, distributor, and record label, no Christian metal record label per se has been established in Finland thus far. Nevertheless, Finnish bands do not seem to have much difficulty in getting their albums released. Many Finnish bands have released records on the European labels mentioned above. As referred to earlier, the Finnish *Maanalainen Levykauppa/Underground Recordstore* has also started releasing records and thus become an increasingly important institution of the Finnish scene during recent years. With regard to releasing records, many Finnish bands still turn to labels based abroad.

### **Promotion and distribution channels**

Developing means of promotion and distribution becomes of crucial importance for every music scene existing on the fringes of wider mainstream secular markets. Marginal underground scenes have always found innovative ways of promoting and distributing their music to their members. For example, in the 1980s and early 1990s, secular extreme metal culture developed its own institution of tape-trading and letter writing that eventually spread all over the globe. Two or three decades ago, promoting and distributing both old and new music often involved considerable voluntary grassroots organization and networking on a non-profit basis. The development and increasing availability of the Internet throughout the world has brought fundamental changes to such earlier means of promotion and distribution. Today, nearly all Christian metal promotion and distribution channels are Internet-based, that is, promoting and offering their products solely online. The establishment of specialized Christian metal record labels has been of particular importance in this regard. Primarily, they offer Christian bands channels through which to release their music in the first place. But record labels not only produce records, they promote and distribute them as well. For example, labels such as *CM Sweden/Rivel Records* and *Fear Dark* both run online distribution through their web pages. Moreover, some not only distribute records but also various forms of band merchandise such as t-shirts, patches, posters, and stickers.

A number of Internet-based channels dedicated solely to distribution have also developed. Distros based in the Nordic countries include *Nordic Mission* based in Norway, *Metal Community* based in Sweden, and *Maanalainen levykauppa/The Underground Recordstore* based in Finland. Larger US-based distros include *Christian Metal Superstore*, *Crossing Music* and its filial *Shaver Audio and Video*, *Rugged Cross Music*, *Divine Metal Distro*, and *Ultimatum Metal Distribution*. Christian metal records can also be ordered through general online Christian music stores such as *Rad Rockers.com*. A

number of Christian metal distros have been established in other regions as well. These include *Soundmass.com*, *unDark Webstore*, and *Iron Guardian Industries* based in Australia, *Metal Mission* and *Forca Eterna Records* based in Brazil, *Lament Distributions* based in Mexico, and *Tarantula Promotions* based in the UK. Most of these distros have a transnational scope, but some are more concentrated on distributing bands within their own national or regional scenes. For example, the web site of Sweden-based *Metal Community* is in Swedish only and the sites of Brazilian *Metal Mission* and *Forca Eterna Records* are both in Portuguese. Much like Christian metal record labels, distros also serve important gatekeeping functions. Their catalogues typically contain only Christian bands. Some distros also openly acknowledge this function. For example, the “about us” section of Norway-based *Nordic Mission* contains the following information:

So what is NORDIC MISSION?

We were established in late 1997 wanting to be the new Christian underground metal distribution and mailorder company. At that time, there weren't hardly any stuff to get hold of, at least in Norway, and the bigger labels were not interested in hardly any Christian stuff. At that time we had alot of demo tapes and underground releases.

Things have changed quite a bit, both for us and for the whole scene. We now try to bring you most releases within the Christian metal and hard music scene, everything from hard rock/heavy metal to the more extreme death/black metal and quite a bit of punk and hardcore. But we still think it is important to represent and get hold of band demos and upcoming unknown bands that need to be recognized. So, if you play in a band or run a label, feel free to send your demos or promos for a possible distribution deal.

(<http://www.nordicmission.net/>)

As illustrated here, *Nordic Mission* clearly states the distribution of Christian metal specifically as being its main objective. It is also important to note how *Nordic mission* also aims to support the scene by encouraging new and upcoming bands to send in samples of their music to be reviewed. The above excerpt also highlights the importance of the establishment of independent Christian metal distros, especially since the larger secular labels tend not to be interested in “Christian stuff”. To take another example, the “about us” section of the Australian distro *Soundmass.com* states similar objectives:

**Our Vision:** To make hard to get Christian music available to anyone anywhere. The aim of Soundmass.com is to provide you with access to reasonably priced Christian and faith-inspired music.

([http://www.soundmass.com/show\\_info.php?item=aboutus](http://www.soundmass.com/show_info.php?item=aboutus))

As is hinted at here, it has been necessary for Christian metal scene members to establish their own distribution channels since secular labels and distros usually have not been interested in working with Christian bands. However, not all distros include such information about their main aims and objectives on their web sites. All of the distros mentioned above are nevertheless widely known as “Christian” throughout the scene, and they often cooperate with each other in various ways as well. Today’s network of distros has made it possible for scene members to get hold of virtually any Christian metal recording, old or new. Distros thus play an important role in aiding bands to reach their core Christian audiences throughout the world. Moreover, they also give new and upcoming bands much needed exposure and visibility. Much like labels, distros thus simultaneously function as both promoters and distributors.

As mentioned above, regarding distribution, the Finnish scene is largely catered for by *Maanalainen Levykauppa/The Underground Recordstore*. In addition, many Finnish bands are also distributed through the online store of the Christian popular culture retailer *Kristillinen kirjakauppa kotisatama* (Christian Bookstore Home Harbor). Domestic distribution could thus well be described as being good. Individual scene members may thus choose to order most of their records from either one of these suppliers. Hence, distros abroad may not be so important for individual Finnish Christian metalheads, but they are still very important for the wider exposure of Finnish bands. Indeed, successful Finnish bands tend to be distributed by many of the distros mentioned above.

## Scenic media

Specialized media constitutes another crucial component of all music scenes. As we saw above, the establishment of specialized secular metal media in the first half of the 1980s played an important role in the overall development of a distinct metal culture in the West and later throughout the globe. Secular metal also embraced the Internet at an early stage and is now arguably one of the most visible popular music genres online. Because of the small scale of the Christian scene and its limited resources, an increasingly large portion of scenic media has become entirely Internet-based. Despite this, Christian metal media can still be roughly divided into two main categories: printed and online.

First, we have printed magazines and fanzines, which offer reports, interviews, and reviews. These days, the distinction between magazines and fanzines has become somewhat unclear. Generally speaking, magazines tend to display higher production values, contain more pages, be published regularly, be printed in color on smooth or glossy paper, and sometimes

distributed to regular stores selling books and magazines. Only a few magazines exist that are dedicated to Christian metal and hard rock, of which the US-based *HM: The Hard Music Magazine* is probably the most widely known. In Sweden there is also a Swedish-language magazine mainly concentrating on Christian metal and hard rock called *Noizegate Music* (earlier *Noizegate*). Fanzines, on the other hand, are generally characterized by lower production values. Essentially, a fanzine is an amateur-magazine, usually produced entirely by only one person or a few people and published irregularly according to time and resources. Fanzines are usually distributed through their own web pages or Christian metal distros. They tend to be photo-copied on rough paper, usually in black and white. They also usually contain fewer pages than magazines. However, some fanzines display much higher production values and sometimes also call themselves magazines. Presently, most Christian metal fanzines are entirely Internet-based and hence referred to as *webzines*. However, a few printed fanzines still exist, including the well-known *Heaven's Metal* based in the USA, *Devotion HardMusic Magazine* based in Sweden, and *Extreme Brutal Death* based in Brazil. As mentioned, the Finnish scene also has its own Finnish-language fanzine called *Ristillinen*. Some of these fanzines are transnational in scope, reporting, interviewing, and reviewing bands from all over the world. *Heaven's metal* in particular has enjoyed enduring popularity within the wider transnational scene.

Second, we also have a whole range of various forms of online Christian metal media. Importantly, online media does not require many resources in order to operate. The Internet also enables webzines and other types of sites to store a large amount of reports, reviews, and interviews. Christian metal webzines proper include *The Whipping Post* and *Eternal Reign* based in the USA, *Victory Zine* based in Finland, and *Holy Steel* (partly in Italian) based in Italy. Currently non-operational webzines include New Zealand-based *The Buries Scrolls Webzine* and US-based Christian metal/punk zine *Screams of Abel*. Much of the earlier content of the latter can be accessed though the Swedish site *Välsigna landet* (Bless the land). Other webzines concentrated on national or regional scenes include *Metal Land* (in Portuguese) based in Brazil, *Immortal Zine* (in Spanish) based in Ecuador, and *Usvart Zine* (mostly in Polish) based in Poland. These magazines, fanzines, and webzines essentially all work with the expressed goal of promoting Christian metal. Some also express their aims in "mission statements". For example, the webzine *Eternal Reign* contains the following statement:

There are only two reasons that I started the 'zine and this website in the first place.

1) To give some REALLY good bands the little bit of exposure that I can offer.  
There are some great bands out there that you will never, EVER here of



otherwise... I'm trying to bring them to you.

and more importantly 2) To share the truth of Jesus Christ, the son of God who suffered and died on the cross for the sins of the world and rose again. Through His blood and resurrection salvation and forgiveness are received. The Bible says that if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead you WILL be saved.

([http://www.geocities.com/eternal\\_reign\\_magazine/MAINframe.html](http://www.geocities.com/eternal_reign_magazine/MAINframe.html))

This statement emphasizes the difficulties Christian bands often experience in acquiring the attention and exposure they are seen to deserve; hence the need for Christian metal webzines. More importantly, the statement also relates such exposure to evangelistic outreach. Mission statements of this kind also appear in printed fanzines. For example, a note from the editor in issue 3 of *Devotion HardMusic Magazine* states the following:

Devotion hardmusic magazine started with a pupose to show that there is a living music culture with a positive message /.../ its exiting to see that more and more christian bands entering the secular market /.../ Its important that christian bands are in the secular market ,,to be a light in the darkness and let jesus be known...Jesus is the main reason why we do this and try to reach those who is lost... (*Devotion HardMusic Magazine* 3/2001, 27)

In addition to underlining the evangelistic purpose of Christian metal, this statement also emphasizes the importance of Christian bands reaching beyond the confines of both the Christian scene and the world of Christian music more generally. By describing Christian bands in terms of a "light in the darkness", this statement also aims to highlight Christian metal's active engagement with its secular counterpart. In a similar fashion, the editorial of issue 3 of *Ristillinen* states the following future aspirations for the fanzine:

True, we will be breaking boundaries for our Lord Jesus! We will clear a way for Christian rock to go out there beyond the congregations where the gospel is really needed.\* (*Ristillinen* 3/ 2002)

Although these types of mission statements tend to be very similar to one another, they sometimes adopt a much stronger tone, as in this example from the editorial to the first English-language issue of the Brazilian fanzine *Extreme Brutal Death*:

EXTREME has the objective of disclosing the bands of Christian extreme metal, and mainly the Word of God. Our wish is to bear fruits, souls in the presence of

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\* Toden totta tulemme rikkomaan raja-aitoja Herramme Jeesuksen tähden! Raivaamme tien kristillisen rockin kulkea tuonne seurakuntien ulkopuolelle jossa ilosanomaa todella tarvitaan.

God. The Portuguese version of this magazine provoked a huge damage in the satanic black metal scene in South America. We want to enlarge this damage and to increase the revolt of Hell everywhere. Therefore, dear reader, we'll need prayer and support. (*Extreme Brutal Death* 2005/1, 4)

These excerpts are all illustrative of the ways in which Christian metal's evangelistic element not only surfaces in the lyrics and activities of bands but in the goals and aims of various forms of scenic infrastructure as well. The latter excerpt also highlights the transformed sense in which Christian metal has embraced the uncompromising metal attitude and rhetoric. Principally, it clearly expresses the commonly held notion of Christians needing to have the courage to take the Christian message to inhospitable environments in the spirit of spiritual warfare. Christian metal media are thus essentially characterized by a twofold purpose: to support the scene through promoting Christian bands and, in relation to this, to support the spreading of the Christian message beyond the scene itself.

In addition to printed magazines, fanzines, and online webzines, there also exists a large number of general Christian metal information or resource sites on the Internet, many of which also contain album reviews and interviews with bands. Among these, *The Metal For Jesus Page* based in Sweden is one of the oldest and best known. The site contains detailed information on the history and purpose of Christian metal, testimonies from Christian metalheads, monthly sermons, detailed Christian and secular metal comparison charts (comparisons between Christian and secular sound-alikes), and a very substantial collection of links to bands and all kinds of other sites somehow related to Christian metal. Moreover, it also contains a lengthy section dedicated to a detailed defense of Christian metal. This practice is commonly referred to as "Christian metal apologetics". Creator and administrator Johannes is a central figure in the vibrant Swedish scene. On the Internet, he also runs the Christian metal prayer chain *Prayer Warriors*, the previously mentioned Christian metal distro *Metal Community*, and the Christian metal online radio channel *Metal Countdown*. In addition to this, Johannes functions as head coordinator for the *Metal Bible*-project, the first ever special 'metal-edition' of the New Testament containing testimonies from popular Christian metal musicians from all over the world (discussed in more detail below). Johannes states the main objectives of *The Metal For Jesus Page* in the following way:

1. To lead metalheads to faith in Christ.
2. To help Christians grow in their faith and go on with Christ.
3. Show how much good Christian metal there is out there so that people will not miss all the good music that exists within this

As seen here, Johannes endeavors to engage with many central issues regarding the main purposes and functions of Christian metal through his site. Other large and well-known sites include *JesusMetal* based in Belgium, which also contains a substantial bank of interviews and reviews. It also cooperates with a similar site called the *Christian Metal Fellowship*. In addition, it also contains an online forum. The US-based site *Christian Xtreme* similarly contains much general information and a large number of interviews and reviews. Another fairly recently (2006) established US-based Christian metal resource site is called *Angelic Warlord.com*. This site offers a particularly substantial collection of interviews, reviews, and articles from a wide range of both past and present Christian metal magazines, fanzines, and webzines. General Christian metal sites come in a range of different forms. Larger information and resource sites such those mentioned above all operate on a more 'professional-type' basis. For example, they may contain sound-files and advertisement banners for other Christian metal sites, online stores, and distributors. In addition to these sites, there are also various forms of more personal sites mostly dedicated to the particular interests of their administrators. Examples include *Blimo's Heavy Metal Sanctuary*, *Snokis Christian metal reviews*, and the blog *Sanctified Steel*.

Sites designed to aid *communication* and *interaction* between scene members constitute a final significant category of online Christian metal media. Such sites are typically designed in the format of the discussion forum or online community. Indeed, such modes of more direct communication and interaction have come to constitute important components of many contemporary music scenes. This is because discussion forums or online communities greatly aid fast interaction between individual scene members in different parts of the world and thus contribute to fostering a sense of being part of a larger transnational community of people with shared interests and concerns. A number of forums and communities have developed throughout the years. Until recently, the largest one of these used to be US-based *Firestream.net* with members from all over the world (IF 2006/9:3. On 1 December 2008, *Firestream.net* had a total of 4,229 members, 21,277 threads, and 516,043 posts). On *Firestream.net* both artists and fans could come together and discuss a wide array of topics ranging from musical styles and lyrics to Satanism and details of Christian theology. David, its creator and administrator, explained that the main purpose for his site was to "be an open, growing community of Christian

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\* 1. Leda metalheads till tro på Kristus. 2. Hjälp kristna att växa i tron och gå vidare med Kristus. 3. Visa hur mycket bra kristen metal det finns så folk inte missar all bra musik som finns inom denna genre. 4. Ge svar på tal till alla kristna kritiker till kristen rock.

metal listeners that can come together in discussion and glorify the name of Jesus Christ" (IF 2006/9). This forum also had many registered members from Finland.

Other similar larger online discussion forums include *The Christian Metal Realm* and *Blabber Jesus*, which is the forum of the *JesusMetal* site mentioned above. The label *Endtime Productions* and distro *Nordic Mission* also run their own forum. As noted above, the Finnish scene has developed its own Finnish-language forum *Kristillinen metalliunioni* (Christian Metal Union). Larger transnationally aimed forums such as those mentioned above have all developed into important transnational scenic institutions, while *Kristillinen metalliunioni* constitutes an important institution of the Finnish national scene.

In addition to these various forms of online media, the official web pages of bands themselves also need to be mentioned, some of which are more elaborate than others. The more simple ones only offer some basic information about the band, its members, releases, and concert dates. Others may contain such things as substantial biographies of the band and its individual members, detailed information about its releases and lyrics, large galleries of promotion and live pictures, video sequences from concerts, and sample MP3s. Band-web pages may also contain smaller mini-forums through which fans can interact directly with the band. It is also not unusual for bands to offer their albums and merchandise for purchase directly through their own web pages. During recent years, the *Myspace*-site has also become an increasingly important additional online avenue for bands to communicate their music to larger audiences.

Finally, a number of Christian metal online radio channels have also been established. These include *Intense Radio* run by Sanctuary International, *Reign Radio*, *Heaven's Metal* (not the fanzine), *Metal Countdown*, *Full Armor of God*, 91.7 fm *The Underground Church*, *The Refinery Rock Radio*, *Almighty Metal Radio*, *Classic Christian Rock Radio*, and *The Cross Stream*. Some of these online radio channels also contain mission statements similar to those that have been quoted above. For example, Sweden-based *Metal Countdown* contains the following:

#### WHAT'S THE PURPOSE BEHIND METAL COUNTDOWN?

Our purpose is first of all to spread the good news about Jesus thru Christian Metal so more metalheads come to know Christ, so they can be saved for eternity. That has always been and will always be the mainreason behind our programs. We totally respect though if you don't share our belief, and since we stick to real Hardrock/Metal music only I'm sure any metalhead will enjoy our programs, no matter what you believe.

Then we also want to spread the news about all the awesome Christian Metal bands that are out there, so more people come to know them and start to listen to them.

(<http://listen.to/metalcountdown>)

As illustrated by this excerpt, Christian metal online radio channels also typically aim to guarantee that all the music they broadcast is Christian, that is, metal that conforms to the basic 'requirements' of Christian metal discussed above. In addition, they often have an expressed aim of promoting Christian bands. For example, *Metal Countdown* also airs demos and unreleased music by new and upcoming bands. Among these online radio channels, *Intense Radio* and *Reign Radio* have developed into particularly significant transnational scenic institutions.

Transnational Christian metal media play an important part within the Finnish scene as well. As mentioned, the Finnish scene has developed some scenic media of its own, but bands also rely on transnational scenic media for wider exposure abroad. Obviously, individual scene members use transnational scenic media to follow news and general developments within the scene, read interviews with their favorite bands, read and hear about new bands, interact with other scene members from other countries and so forth. Although some scenic media mainly concentrate on the respective national scenes of the countries in which they are based, there is also a sense in which transnational scenic media, and Internet-based media in particular, are never, in practice, bound to any particular place or geographical location. Nearly every musician interviewed for this study both knew about and regularly followed many forms of transnational scenic media. It is important to note that, with the absence of such scenic media, Christian metal might not receive much media attention at all. Scenic media can thus be said to play a particularly important role within the overall infrastructure of the scene. This is because they constitute virtually the only channels through which scene members can receive news about Christian metal developments in countries other than their own.

## **The significance of the Internet**

As noted many times above, the Internet has become an indispensable part of scenic communication and infrastructure as well as one of the primary means by which individual scene members themselves take part in scenic activity. On a transnational level, the scene as a whole has become Internet-based to a considerable degree. Today's transnational scene is both largely structured and sustained through the Internet. Much research has been done

on the peculiarities of the Internet as a means of communication and interaction. This research has often echoed Marshall McLuhan's (1994, first published in 1964) influential work on media theory, particularly the idea that different forms of media affect the social context in which they are used, primarily by their nature rather than their content, and moreover, that different forms of media will inspire different forms and degrees of involvement with it. The Internet, unlike many other forms of media, enables individuals to choose from and move between many different forms and degrees of involvement and participation. As Anastasia Karaflogka (2003, 191) points out, "the Internet depends entirely upon its users not only for content contribution, but also for playing an active and communal part in its distribution". Moreover, as she goes on to argue (2003, 193), the Internet also provides "an environment which supports and nurtures" changing modes of religious language, experience, and practice. (Karaflogka 2003, 193-196) Indeed, as we have seen, the Internet has played an important role in the formation of what can be viewed as a transnational Christian metal discursive community with a set of common ideals and goals as it also offers a range of opportunities for communication and interaction among its members. However, in doing so it has not only affected the nature of Christian metal discourse by making it more fixed and concentrated but, arguably, also entailed the formation of certain requirements on participation, such as the acquisition and understanding of a specific use of language (cf. Moberg 2008a, 97). In this section, we shall explore the significance of the Internet from the perspective of three Christian metal site creators and administrators from different parts of the world.

Johannes, creator and administrator of Sweden-based *The Metal for Jesus Page* saw the Internet as having had a great importance for the development of a transnational scene:

The Internet is enormously important! Without the Internet it would never have been possible to get contact with Christian metal bands all over the world, and the Internet has also made it much easier to shape new contacts within the Christian metal scene /.../ It is to a very large degree clearly Internet-based /.../ this has meant much and made it enormously much easier for the shaping of the Christian metal scene.\* (IF 2005/5: 1-7)

Here, Johannes clearly states that today's transnational scene would not have developed into its present form if it were not Internet-based to a large degree. It is also implied that Christian metal scene members have embraced

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\* Internet är enormt viktigt! Utan internet skulle det aldrig gått att få kontakt med kristna metalband över hela världen och internet har också gjort det mycket lättare att knyta nya kontakter inom den kristna metalscenen. /.../ Till mycket stor grad är den helt klart internetbaserad /.../ detta har betytt och underlättat enormt mycket för framväxten av den kristna metalscenen.

the Internet as a primary means of communication (cf. Moberg 2008a, 94). These thoughts were echoed by David, creator and administrator of US-based *Firestream.net*. He expressed the following views:

In my view, Christian metal bands are some of the most active groups on the Internet. I have seen more metal band members take an active role online than any other genre of music. On Firestream.net /.../ you are likely to run into members of quite a few bands all over the world /.../ I do think the Internet has become important to the Christian metal scene though. Many bands have come to rely on their Internet website as the main source of sales and promotion /.../ I think the Christian metal scene is getting larger each day and wants to be taken more seriously /.../ The Christian metalheads that come to Firestream are very dedicated to the music they love and they show it in their posts and their overall knowledge of the scene as a whole. (IF 2006/9)

In this excerpt, David underlines the significance of the Internet and Christian metal's active role online. As discussed above, webzines are a form of scenic media that mainly concentrate on reporting news, writing album reviews, and conducting interviews with musicians. Trevor, creator and administrator of the (at the time of writing non-operational) New Zealand-based webzine *The Buried Scrolls*, mainly confines himself within these boundaries. Even so, Trevor's views on Christian metal's use of the Internet are very similar to those of the other administrators cited above:

I believe the Christian metal culture is very deeply entrenched in its reliance on the internet. Look at the way information can be transmitted through the internet /.../ Without these [Internet search engines with Christian metal listings, forums, fan-sites, and webzines], the Christian metal scene would be more disintegrated than it is /.../ If there was no internet to help with the Christian metal culture, it would be very localized /.../ Reliance on other media forms would exist, such as magazines like HM or Heavens Metal. Any news would be slow /.../ Many Christian bands have come to rely on the internet for their own survival and recognition. Getting their name out there and acknowledging in who they are is still not easy but they have the opportunity to reach a global scene than ever before /.../ But they get some recognition by being sold on the 5-10 Christian metal distros [stores, distributors] that exist online. Then with exposure by interviews on webzines, or magazines, invites to trans-national concerts they can expose themselves to a broader base of people. (IF 2006/9: 2)

Similar to David above, Trevor also underlines the importance of the Internet for the production and distribution of Christian metal beyond local and regional levels. More importantly, he also points out how the Internet has made possible the development of a largely autonomous and independent scenic infrastructure, how Christian metal has become chiefly promoted, sold, bought, and discussed online. Trevor, like Johannes, also



speaks of contact and cooperation between administrators in different countries. He also went on to explain how the Internet can be the only way to obtain information about Christian metal for people living in countries with only a small or no Christian metal scene. He is himself an example of this. Through the Internet, it is not particularly difficult for Trevor to run a central form of scenic media from New Zealand, where virtually no scene exists (cf. Moberg 2008a, 95).

As illustrated by the views of these Christian metal site administrators, the Internet has greatly enhanced the speed of communication between the larger Northern European and American scenes as well as made Christian metal more easily accessible to people outside of these areas. Importantly, the use of the Internet as a primary means of communication has aided the spreading of central discourses on the meaning and function of Christian metal on a transnational level, as local and national scenes have come together. The spreading of these discourses has enabled artists and fans with different religious affiliations, living in countries with different cultural and religious environments, to shape very similar understandings of what Christian metal is supposed to be all 'about' (cf. Moberg 2008a, 96). We shall return to this issue in greater detail when exploring the discursive construction of Christian metal in chapter 6.

## Festivals and events

Different national scenes have established their own festivals dedicated exclusively to Christian metal. At these events, the scene comes 'alive' as members meet in the flesh. Some of these events attract bands and visitors from different countries around the world. However, like most music festivals, they are mostly attended by scene members from the countries in which they are held. In 1999, the first *Bobfest*-festival was held in Stockholm, Sweden. Over the years, the festival has featured a large number of well-known bands and attracted visitors from all over the world. As mentioned above, the festival was named after head pastor Bob Beeman of Sanctuary International and also featured him each year as a speaker, until the festival was suspended in 2005. *Bobfest* was the only larger annual Christian metal festival in the Nordic countries for many years. In 2007, a new festival called *Endtime Festival* held in the town of Halmstad was established in its place. *Endtime Festival* has continued the transnational scope of *Bobfest* and quickly developed into one of the largest festivals of Northern Europe, attracting bands and participants from many different countries. In 2002, the Norwegian distro *Nordic Mission* established *Nordic Fest*, which is held in Oslo each year. Denmark's first ever Christian metal festival *Green Light District Festival* was held in 2007 in cooperation with Sanctuary International

and held again in 2008. As mentioned above, the label *Fear Dark* based in The Netherlands organizes small festivals under the name of *Fear Dark Festival* in different locations throughout Northern European countries such as The Netherlands, Germany, and Switzerland. *Elements of Rock*, held annually in the town of Uster in Switzerland was established in 2003. It is the currently largest Christian metal festival in Europe and always features many transnationally recognized bands. In the USA, the first ever onetime Christian metal festival *The Metal Mardi Gras* was organized by the Sanctuary movement in Los Angeles already in 1987. US Christian metal bands have also played at large US Christian music festivals such as *Creation Festival* and *Cornerstone Festival*. In cooperation with Sanctuary International, the UK also hosts a smaller annual festival called *Destruction Fest* held in London. There is also a Christian metal/ hardcore festival in the Ukraine called *Total Armageddon Fest*. Lastly, there is much evidence of festivals being organized in Brazil and Mexico as well, but they are rarely advertised in transnational Christian metal media.

It should be pointed out that festivals and smaller events dedicated exclusively to Christian metal tend to operate with very limited resources. In some cases, they may also be partly sponsored by some particular church, parish, or congregation. They are usually organized by only a small number of people on a voluntary and non-profit basis. Because of this, festivals sometimes have to be cancelled. On the other hand, from time to time, onetime festivals are also organized. This makes it difficult to keep track of all Christian metal festivals and larger gatherings on a transnational scale.

Finally, it is worth noting that scenes also may be connected to certain *places*, such as certain venues or pubs. Such places may not have any relevance to the scene as a whole beyond a local level. There are a few places that could be seen to be invested with such scenic relevance for the Finnish Christian metal scene. Although there are many bars across the country, which have become significant for the secular scene, this is not the case for the Christian scene since scene members usually do not convene in bars. Arguably, Nokian palloiluhalli (Nokia Sports Hall) in which the annual *Immortal Metal Fest* is held could be said to be invested with some degree of such scenic significance. Another place more clearly invested with scenic significance is the club-localities of the Evangelical Lutheran Church's Töölö-parish in Helsinki. Scene members, mostly from the Helsinki metropolitan area and surrounding towns, regularly gather there for loosely organized so-called "cell meetings" in order to discuss scenic activities, other pressing issues, pray, and just spend time together.

## Institutionalization beyond the scene

Scenes may also institutionalize themselves further through engaging in activities that extend beyond the scene itself. The establishment of alternative “metal parish movements” in Sweden, Germany, Brazil, and Mexico are clear examples of this. In some rare cases, the notion of metal as being particularly suited for expressing and spreading the Christian message has also been adopted by traditional and institutional Christian churches. One contemporary example from Finland can be found in the already mentioned *Metal Mass* nowadays regularly organized all over the country by the Evangelical Lutheran Church. These are traditional Lutheran services (the term “mass” refers to the Eucharist being included) held in full accordance with traditional liturgy and service sequence. The *Metal Mass* only differs from conventional services in that all the featured music, accompanying both liturgy and collectively sung hymns, is provided by a live metal band. The *Metal Mass* has so far managed to attract substantially larger crowds than conventional church services and arguably started evolving into an institution in itself. However, largely because of its format, on its web pages, the creators of the *Metal Mass* are careful to point out that it is a church service and not a concert. It should also be added that the metal bands featured at these services are largely comprised of members of the Christian metal scene. There is thus also a sense in which the *Metal Mass* can be seen as having developed into an institution of the Finnish Christian metal scene as well. Its success has no doubt afforded the scene some increased visibility during recent years.

Another way in which the transnational scene has institutionalized itself in a way that extends beyond the scene in itself, is through the already mentioned *Metal Bible*-project. The *Metal Bible* is a pocket-size special edition of the New Testament published by *Bible for the Nations* in Sweden, and contains testimonies from Christian metal musicians and fans from all over the world. It also has a metal-inspired layout. The cover displays the contours of an electric guitar against the backdrop of a nighttime church with the title “Metal Bible” printed in metallic gothic letters. Many concert pictures have also been included of the testimony-writers. At the time of writing, the *Metal Bible* is available in Swedish (Metal Bibeln) and Dutch (Metal Bijbel), but work is underway for translations in English, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Finnish, Danish, and Slovak. As reported on the *Metal Bible* website (9.6. 2009), the first four Swedish editions (44,000 copies) have already been distributed.

The *Metal Bible* clearly has evangelistic aims. The main purpose behind the included testimonies is to encourage metalheads to reflect on their life situation and the Christian message. In addition, the coordinators also state

broader aims. The *Metal Bible* website contains the following purpose-statement:

The purpose of this special Bible is to break down prejudices and misconceptions that many metalheads have about the Bible and help people to realize that the Bible is not a boring book but an interesting and living book that has a lot to tell us today. Hopefully many will through this special bible edition see that the Bible and its message is something for them too.

(<http://www.metalbible.nu/enginfo.htm>)

The coordinators thus also want to change widespread misconceptions of Christianity as something stale and boring. The included testimonies are also clearly aimed at highlighting how Christian faith can be expressed in many different forms. Most are written in a typical evangelical testimonial style. Writers contrast their earlier unhappy and sinful lives with their new happy lives as believers. Indeed, conversion is often described in terms of having been 'born again'. They also typically stress the importance of establishing a personal relationship with God. Importantly, nearly all of these writers also explicitly relate their conversion stories to having come into contact with Christian metal.

These testimonies can roughly be divided into four main categories. A first category includes shorter testimonies by well-known musicians on what general meanings God, Jesus, and the Bible have for them in their everyday lives. A second category includes the conversion-stories proper. Testimonies in this category relate personal experiences and often highlight the important role played by Christian metal in the conversion process itself. Indeed, some writers explicitly state that they found faith through listening to Christian metal. A third category includes writers who focus on faith having rescued them from earlier self-destructive lives of drug- and alcohol abuse, suicidal thoughts, and Satanism. Most of these testimonies are not written by musicians and music is hardly discussed at all. They are, however, written in a deeply personal way. One would surely not be entirely mistaken to argue that they have, at least partly, been included in order to associate secular metal with self-destructive behavior, Satanism, and the occult. Indeed, interest in Satanism and the occult – which secular metal is taken to inspire to – is directly related to depression and suicidal thoughts in each of these testimonies. Because of this, they also stand out from the others with titles such as "Free from a life as a witch", "Teenage Satanist", and "Liberation from Satanism"\*. A final category includes testimonies that explicitly focus on Christian metal as a means of evangelism

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\* Translated from the Swedish *Metal Bibeln*: "Fri från ett liv som häxa", "Tonårssatanist", "Befrielse från satanism".

and alternative form of Christian expression. Many of these writers focus on how Christian metal has enabled them to form an alternative Christian identity and point out that Christian faith can also be expressed in a form that “relates” more to metalheads. For example, many emphasize that people need not change their taste in music and appearance just because they are or become Christians. In this way, the testimonies of the *Metal Bible* also take the form of a collective testimony that serves to express a sense of a shared Christian identity. Indeed, as noted, this shared Christian identity is often expressly represented as an *alternative* Christian identity as it is also intimately tied to the particular popular cultural form of metal.

#### **5. 4. 2 Relation to other scenes**

As already noted, the most significant Christian metal scenes of today have all developed in countries with long-standing secular metal scenes. Whether Christian metal can be said to have gained any real foothold within the secular metal communities of these countries is, however, an altogether different matter. Generally speaking, by forming its own separate and independent scene, Christian metal has so far remained confined to the very margins of the wider metal community. Even so, as noted, because of the highly visible evangelistic efforts of some early bands, it has become widely known throughout global metal culture in spite of this.

In some countries, the Christian scene has developed closer ties with the wider secular scene. In others, however, it remains completely segregated. The situation in Finland is best described as something in between. Christian metal bands sometimes have difficulties finding secular venues in which to play. For example, grassroots secular metal concert organizers are not usually interested in featuring Christian bands at their events because of the affect it might have on ticket sales and the possibility that problems and trouble may ensue during the concert itself. As already noted, some Christian bands do not play secular venues at all. On the other hand, some bands such as Immortal Souls and (the less obviously “Christian”) Callisto have also played the annual *Tuska Open Air Metal Festival* festival in Helsinki, which is the largest secular metal festival of the Nordic countries. In 2007, the leading Finnish secular metal magazine *Inferno* (2007/52) also published a largely impartial and even slightly sympathetic report on Christian metal. The Christian scene has clearly gained more visibility within the wider secular scene during recent years. At the same time, there is also a sense in which the Christian scene also deliberately has excluded itself from the wider secular scene. Even though it is uncommon, secular events may feature Christian bands, whilst the reverse is extremely rare. Christian metal events in Finland are nearly always kept totally ‘Christian’

in this regard. Its exclusion from the secular scene is thus partly self-imposed. However, the Finnish secular metal scene covers all corners of the country and can thus be divided into separate local and generic scenes. Relationships with the Christian scene may thus vary across different local areas. On the whole, however, the Christian scene can hardly be said to have established any significant relationships with the wider national secular scene. On the other hand, individual scene members may still interact with and participate in the secular scene in various ways. Indeed, the majority of all musicians interviewed for this study also actively participate in secular scenic activity. For example, many of them regularly follow secular scenic media and often attended secular metal concerts.

This seems to be the case in most other countries as well. However, the Latin American scenes appear to be particularly concerned with engaging with the secular scene in a more expressly evangelistic way. As noted above, the scenes of Brazil and Mexico are, generally speaking, characterized by a more confrontational stance towards secular metal and a higher degree of evangelistic fervor and intensity. For example, as we saw above, the Brazilian fanzine *Extreme Brutal Death* proclaimed to have caused “a huge damage” in the country’s secular “satanic” scene. In countries with other larger Christian music scenes, such as the USA and Canada in particular, the Christian metal scene has usually formed closer relationships with other musically related Christian scenes such as Christian hardcore punk, hard rock, or goth scenes. In Finland, the Christian metal scene is the only larger Christian music scene to have developed until now. Because of this, it does not have, in practice, any other Christian scenes with which to develop closer ties. However, in Finland, Christian metal festivals sometimes feature some of the few Christian hardcore punk-type bands that exist in the country. Finally, we also need to note here that there seems to exist some degree of suspicion towards other forms of Christian rock in general within certain sections of today’s transnational scene. For example, when discussing the definition of Christian metal above, it can be noticed that some central scenic figures explicitly lamented the increasing lyrical ambiguity of North American CCM in particular. The Christian metal scene does indeed largely keep to itself, but this also has very much to do with the extreme and distinctive character of the music.

### **5. 4. 3 Scenic ‘capital’, production, and consumption**

Most global and transnational music scenes create their own forms of scenic or cultural capital. As discussed in chapter 1, in the case of the Christian metal scene, the term “cultural capital” or “scenic capital” basically refers to the different forms of merit and respect that individual members may



accumulate or be ascribed within the context and logic of this particular scene. In the main, scenic capital is gained by people who are seen to represent or embody the scene's main ideals or who are involved in maintaining scenic structures. There are two main forms of scenic capital within the Christian metal scene. The first type has to do with musical creativity. Such capital is gained by musically creative bands and individual band members who pioneer new sounds and thereby further the overall musical developments of the scene. For example, Christian bands such as Mortification have been afforded much such capital for pioneering Christian death metal. Because of the musical creativity of the band, Mortification has also gained quite a degree of respect in the secular metal community. Similar examples include Tourniquet, which has developed its own highly technical signature sound of Christian thrash, and Australian musician Jayson Sherlock (also a former member of Mortification) who pioneered the unblack metal style through his one man band Horde.

A related form of scenic capital that is more characteristic of the Christian metal scene has to do with furthering the scene's evangelistic aims and goals. Such capital is gained by Christian bands that have over a long period relentlessly aimed to spread the Christian message through their music. The Christian scene has seen many such bands, including Stryper, Deliverance, and Mortification. Members of such bands gain what could be called "religious" or "evangelistic" capital and become widely known and respected throughout the scene as "metal ministers" or "metal missionaries". Examples of individual persons invested with particularly high degrees of such capital include Michael Sweet of Stryper, Steve Rowe of Mortification, and Bob Beeman of Sanctuary International. However, every national scene has a number of particularly respected core members. Indeed, all band members are generally afforded at least some degree of religious or evangelistic capital just for being in a Christian band. People in gatekeeping roles who are known for their long-time involvement with the maintenance of both national and transnational scenic infrastructure and institutions may also gain much such capital. Significantly, this type of religious or evangelistic capital also extends beyond the scene itself into the respective Christian communities of the respected scene members themselves.

National scenes differ in the degrees to which they contribute to the wider transnational scene regarding the production and consumption of such things as Christian metal albums and media. As observed above, most transnational infrastructure is maintained by the North American and Nordic scenes in particular. For example, even though the Nordic scenes are much smaller than the US scene, a considerable portion of overall record production is still based there. These countries also produce many successful bands. This means that a substantial portion of all Christian metal is produced in the USA and the Nordic countries Sweden, Norway, and



Finland. Christian record labels based in these countries also tend to produce a significant number of records by bands from other regions. Although there are no statistics, it is also fair to assume that these more affluent countries also constitute the most important markets for Christian metal. The number of people involved in the Nordic scenes is relatively small, but records are easily affordable to the majority of them. The wider Northern European continental regional scene also constitutes an important market. Even though Christian records are also produced in Latin America, a considerable portion of all records are still imported from the USA and Northern Europe. Generally speaking, one would assume that the resources of the Latin American scenes are slightly more limited because of the relatively lesser economic affluence of countries such as Brazil and Mexico. For example, records may not be as easily affordable for many Latin American scene members as they are for scene members in the Nordic countries. This affects the activities of bands as well. Establishing a band requires instruments and various forms of technical equipment, all of which are quite expensive. However, although it may be more difficult, people involved in music scenes in less affluent countries still tend to find ways of acquiring records and equipment. The point to note is that national and regional scenes are always affected by the general socio-economic conditions of the countries in which they are embedded. However, such differences or inequalities between regional scenes in different parts of the world should not be exaggerated; although they do need to be noted.

The same goes for the commercial aspect of Christian metal in a more broad sense. Christian metal does indeed offer its musicians and fans an alternative form of religious expression and a form of entertainment that is in line with Christian values. However, this should not make us lose sight of the fact that Christian metal also is a form of Christian expression and entertainment that is promoted and marketed in order to *sell*, and preferably sell well. Of course, such a commercial aspect constitutes an integral and indispensable part of every music scene. Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine how a Christian metal scene would be possible to sustain without such a commercial aspect. These issues fall beyond the scope of this study, but they do need to be noted nonetheless.

### **The significance of transnational scenic infrastructure and institutions**

As seen above, the Christian scene has developed a highly independent scenic infrastructure. Many of its record labels, promotion- and distribution channels, media, and festivals have developed into long-standing and important transnational scenic institutions. At this stage the most important

respects in which the scene should be described as being “highly independent” have been clarified. First, as already noted in our discussion of evangelical popular culture above, the Christian metal scene can be said to exist on the fringes of established institutional Christianity. As such, overall, it has remained highly independent from particular denominational influence and control. Second, the development of its own scenic infrastructure and institutions has also afforded it a large degree of independence from the wider, and increasingly global, evangelical popular culture industry. Although Christian metal in the USA partly, depending from case to case, remains more closely connected to the large US evangelical popular culture industry, the situation throughout other core regions of today’s transnational scene, such as Northern Europe and Latin America, is very different. Third, through the development of its own scenic infrastructure, the Christian metal scene has also been able to achieve a high degree of independence from the infrastructures and institutions of the world of secular metal, many of which have traditionally not been particularly accepting of the very idea of Christian metal in the first place. It is important to note therefore that, in the specific case of the Christian metal scene, the development of such a comprehensive and highly independent scenic infrastructure has been of crucial importance for the establishment of a transnational scene in the first place.

Without its own specialized record labels, promotion- and distribution channels, and different forms of media, a transnational scene would become nearly impossible to sustain. It would dissolve into separate and largely isolated national scenes. The scene’s high degree of institutionalization has also ensured its development and stability over time. As has been remarked on earlier, there is also much cooperation between people involved in the maintenance of scenic infrastructure and institutions throughout the core-regions of the transnational scene. Such cooperation further ensures that the scene is kept stable and intact. Christian metal’s particular religious outlook also makes it highly unlikely for it to be assimilated into other scenes. Finally, because of its relatively small scale, scene members in different parts of the world tend to be very knowledgeable about transnational scenic infrastructure and institutions. Today’s scenic infrastructure is present and implicated at most basic levels of scenic activity.

We have also seen how the Christian metal scene can be described in terms of being highly independent regarding its relationships with other scenes. While Christian metal scenes may have developed closer ties to secular metal scenes in certain countries, in most cases, including the scene in Finland, the two remain clearly separated.

The concept of “cultural capital” was also briefly discussed. As argued in the discussion, the Christian scene can be seen to have developed its own characteristic brand of cultural capital, which can be described as “religious”

or, alternatively, “evangelistic” capital. The most important thing to note regarding such religious capital is that it often transcends the scene in itself. Finally, different national scenes differ regarding issues of musical production and consumption, the US and Nordic scenes having so far remained the most prominent in this respect. Perhaps most importantly, this chapter has explored today’s transnational scene *as a particular type of Christian space*. It is equally important to note here that, regarding scenic structure, this space is very similar to almost any other secular music scene. In relation to this, we have also seen how this space as a whole is underpinned by some particular notions of its main purpose and function, or what it is all ‘about’. In the following, we shall turn our attention to these notions as we explore the discursive construction of the scene.

## 6. The discursive construction of the Christian metal scene

In this chapter, we move to explore the discursive construction of the Christian metal scene directly. Importantly, through focusing on Christian metal's discursive construction we mainly approach it from *within*, that is, from the perspective of its musicians, fans, and other people involved in maintaining Christian metal scenes at different national as well as a transnational level. What do Christian metal musicians and fans get out of their involvement with the scene culturally, religiously, identity-wise etc.? What meanings and functions does Christian metal music and culture have for the people who make, play, and listen to it, who create and administer Christian metal Internet-sites, produce and distribute magazines and fanzines, organize concerts and festivals and so on? In this chapter we shall thus concentrate on the ways in which today's transnational scene constitutes a particular type of *discursive* space.

As outlined by Kahn-Harris (2007, 100) above, scenes are generally marked by three main forms of scenic construction through which they "are discursively and aesthetically constructed through talk and a range of other practices". First, "internal discursive construction" refers to the degree to which scene members "discursively construct that scene as a distinctive space", making it "visible" and "recognizable" to other members of the scene (Kahn-Harris 2007, 100). Importantly, it is through such discursive construction, communication, and interaction among its members that scenes become invested with certain meanings. Exploring the internal discursive construction of the Christian metal scene involves looking at different ways of representing it that appear to be both stable and recurring as well as central to the ways in which certain meanings are produced. What we need to ask is this: how do core members of the Christian metal scene *represent* and *talk* about the scene as a whole and their involvement with it? What basic meanings does it have for them? Essentially, this means approaching the scene from within and asking what Christian metal is *about* from the perspective of Christian metalheads themselves. In other words, in the following, primary focus lies on the ways in which core scene members *themselves* describe and present the meaning and function of Christian metal as a whole as well as their own personal involvement with it. It has been my argument throughout this study that, in order to gain an adequate understanding of the phenomenon that is Christian metal, such an approach is necessary. This is why the first part (6. 1) of this section will be dedicated to exploring these issues. In the second part (6. 2), we will also briefly be exploring the "external discursive construction" of the Christian metal scene, that is, the ways in which it is discursively constructed and identified as a

distinct space from outside of itself. Particular focus will be directed at the discursive construction of Christian metal in the wider secular metal community. In addition, we shall also look at some of the ways in which the scene is viewed within a wider Finnish Christian context. These issues will only be discussed on a more general level since a more detailed exploration would surely require a study in itself. They partly also extend beyond the main purpose of this study, which is to examine the discursive construction of the scene by core scene members themselves. However, external discursive construction can never be totally separated from the internal discursive construction of the scene. Issues pertaining to its external discursive construction will therefore also surface in our exploration of its internal discursive construction. Finally, having explored both of these forms of discursive construction, in the final part of this chapter (6. 3) we move on to explore the discursive construction of Christian metal within the Finnish scene specifically. This also involves directing particular focus at how the discursive construction of Christian metal on a transnational level relates to its discursive construction on a Finnish national level.

## **6. 1 Internal discursive construction**

Today's transnational Christian metal scene has developed into a space that greatly aids the forming of some basic shared understandings of what Christian metal is, or is supposed to be, all 'about'. Before we move on to exploring the internal discursive construction of the scene, we might consider more closely what we have learned about Christian metal so far. In full accordance with metal's uncompromising attitude and general lyrical and aesthetic conventions, Christian metal song lyrics often deal with strong and sometimes radical themes supported by equally strong imagery and aesthetics. Earlier on, I posed the tentative question of whether Christian metal's use of such uncompromising themes, imagery, and aesthetics perhaps could be seen to reflect more uncompromising religious views among its musicians and fans. Indeed, Christian metal musicians often point out the 'radical' character of the Christian message itself. Some also expressly describe themselves as religiously radical (e.g. *Extreme Brutal Death* 2005/1, 16), although no Finnish musicians interviewed for this study described themselves in that way.

On closer inspection, however, the rhetoric and imagery used in Christian metal should perhaps not be interpreted as being all that 'radical' after all. It all depends on how that concept is understood. It is important to note that, most of the time, the ideas that Christian metal bands express through their lyrics and imagery do not deviate, to any significant degree,

from the teachings of most Protestant traditions. The *way* and *style* in which they are expressed and used, however, clearly does. Calls to spiritual warfare and rebellion against sin do not constitute a particularly visible part of the rhetoric of mainline Protestant traditions such as Lutheranism, but they do appear all the more frequently in evangelical, Charismatic, and Pentecostal contexts. This also needs to be understood in relation to these latter traditions being more concerned with cultivating the experiential and subjective side of faith (e.g. Heelas & Woodhead 2005, 17-23). Their respective worship styles also emphasize participation, feeling, and emotion rather than simply listening, receiving, and interpreting. Even so, none of the worship practices found within any of these traditions can be directly compared with the intensity and aggressiveness of the metal experience. Because of this, Christian metal scenes also provide their members with a space in which they can express their Christian faith in strong and radical terms in close connection to the intense musical experience that metal provides. Importantly, Christian metalheads may not find many, if any, opportunities for such forms of religious expression within the more traditional worship settings of their own churches.

As a whole, the Christian metal scene can be described as being rather conservative regarding doctrine and beliefs but progressive and innovative regarding expression and practice. Such attitudes regarding issues of religious expression and practice could also clearly be viewed in direct relation to the changing face and increasing diversity of Evangelicalism more generally, as discussed briefly in chapter 3. This is perhaps particularly so in the case of the larger North- and Latin American scenes, which are all embedded in broader social and cultural climates of which Evangelicalism (also in its Charismatic and Pentecostal variant) constitutes a major religious current. As we shall see later on in this chapter, much in line with these more general developments, Christian metal is typically represented as a *complement* and *alternative* to other more traditional modes of religious expression. This, however, should not be taken to mean that Christian metalheads *reject* traditional modes of Christian expression and worship. Generally speaking, the relationships between Christian metalheads and their own churches are overwhelmingly positive. For example, although many Finnish musicians have become increasingly critical and alienated from the ever more liberal stance of the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church, this does not mean that they disapprove of the Church as a whole. As noted above in chapter 2, the Church is very inclusive with the much of the religiously active minority of the Church being divided into a range of revivalist, conservative, and other types of “affinity groups” (e.g. Cameron 2003; Mikkola & Niemelä & Petterson 2007, 76). I would argue that the Christian metal scene constitutes precisely such an “affinity group”. For example, among many pastors and youth workers, Christian metalheads are

often recognized as a distinct and active cross-denominational group. Indeed, although many are affiliated with various free churches, some known Finnish Christian metal musicians are themselves priests or youth workers of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Again, this particular form of affinity group is itself intimately connected to the particular popular cultural form of metal as well as the particular scenic structure through which it is reproduced and sustained. This is primarily where the “affinity” lies.

Christian metal scene members from around the world do indeed appear to hold some shared understandings regarding what they view as constituting the “basics” of Christian faith and life, and lyrics may indeed reflect these shared understandings to some degree. However, some of the countries in which Christian metal has thrived differ considerably in religious mood and milieu. Even though these differences do surface in scenic discourse, they are usually represented as being secondary to a wider and more encompassing notion of Christian metal as an alternative community of believers. Again, its ‘alternativeness’ is rarely directed against scene member’s own churches in a confrontational sense. Rather, this alternativeness mostly has to do with innovation and renewal, not rejection and open criticism. This is not to say that scene members never meet resistance from conservative voices within their own churches. As we saw earlier on, such resistance was still commonplace two or more decades ago, especially in conservative Christian circles (including evangelical ones) in the USA. Although it is rare nowadays, musicians may still mention such resistance in interviews for scenic media. In general, however, open confrontation is neither common nor sought after (see also Luhr 2009, 144). Indeed, many Christian metal bands have the expressed support of their churches. Even so, Christian metalheads from around the world nevertheless still share the experience of being part of a particular form of affinity group that extends beyond their own respective churches. More importantly, through the development of a transnational Christian metal scene, they are also aware of the fact that similar affinity groups that share their concerns exist across a range of different churches and denominations in a number of other countries as well. They thus also share a notion of being part of what could be described as a wider transnational movement, i.e. a wider transnational Christian metal scene.

The development of a transnational scene has greatly aided the forming of such shared notions as it brings together people with different Christian affiliations and shared passions for metal music from different parts of the world. Again, the ‘metal part’ of this equation is every bit as important as the religious/Christian one. As different national scenes have developed, Christian metal has also become increasingly integrated into the everyday lived lives of scene members. As I will continue to argue later on, there is clearly a sense in which Christian metal scenes may be seen to provide their



members with an alternative Christian lifestyle, a non-traditional way of 'being' a Christian, and an alternative way of 'doing' religion.

It is worth repeating here that the overwhelming majority of Christian metalheads worldwide are Protestant. This is not surprising considering Christian metal's roots in North American Evangelicalism. Particular national scenes need to be understood in their respective social, cultural, and religious contexts, but as Christian metal has spread on a transnational level, the transnational scene *as a whole* has also become increasingly detached from the cultural and religious peculiarities of particular countries or regions. As already noted, today's transnational scene is not controlled by any particular Christian group or institution and advocates no particular denominational creed. It can be described in terms of a small cross-denominational, both religious *and* musical, transnational movement. Partly as a consequence of this, Christian metal is in practice not reproduced along genre-based scales, that is, different Christian metal scenes have in practice not emerged around particular Christian metal styles. Instead, since all Christian metal styles are characterized by largely the same concerns, they all come together within one single scene. One could, of course, argue that the transnational scene is reproduced along 'ideological' or 'religious' scales (using the term "ideology" to denote different denominational views on particular religious issues). However, the high degree of uniformity between scenes regarding the ascribed basic meaning and function of Christian metal has ensured that they are largely reproduced along one general and widely shared ideological and religious scale. Debates and disagreements on religious topics constitute an important part of internal scenic discourse but become secondary to the notion of the scene as a particular type of Christian musical space. For example, David from *Firestream.net* points out the fact that the scene is a space where a number of people with different Christian affiliations meet. Discussing the "Theology forum" on *Firestream.net*, he gives the following take on debates on religious issues within the scene:

Since there are so many denominations and that people come from different backgrounds, disagreements are bound to happen. In the Christian metal culture disagreements happen with lyrical interpretation a lot. Disagreements also pop up since there are so many genre's of Christian metal. Some people disagree and debate on which metal style a band belongs too, or which metal style sounds best, etc. (IF 2006/9)

According to David, it is not unusual for Christian metalheads to disagree on interpretation of lyrics. This further attests to the importance attached to the content of lyrics in Christian metal more generally. A large portion of disagreements also revolve around musical styles and tastes. This, in turn, again attests to the central part that metal music itself plays in this context.

Indeed, these same types of disagreements may surface just as well within any music scene. However, these types of disagreements and disagreements on the basic meaning of the scene in itself are different things. For example, when asked whether religious disagreements ever cause problems within the scene, Johannes from *The Metal for Jesus Page* (among others) replied:

Practically, no. We all share the same basic Christian faith, so there is no problem /.../ The important thing is the core of the Christian message which all Christian metal bands share /.../ It is simply not an important subject to raise when it is the core of the Christian message, the gospel, that is the important and central message the bands wish to spread and not specific 'denominational teachings'.\* (IF 2005/5: 1-7)

According to Johannes, various teachings and differing views on more specific religious issues become secondary to "a basic Christian faith" within the scene. Thus, even though discussions on religious topics may constitute an important part of internal scenic discourse, disagreements are not allowed to eclipse the notion of unity and solidarity within the scene.

How does such unity come about? How have such shared notions about the basic meaning and function of Christian metal developed and come to be so widely shared on a transnational level? The method used in this study searches for answers to these questions through examining the ways in which the scene is constructed discursively, that is, the ways in which it is recurrently represented and talked about among scene members themselves. Obviously, a range of different discourses can be seen to circulate within the scene. At closer inspection, however, scene members tend to represent what they regard to be *the basic meaning and function* of Christian metal through four main and often overlapping discourses. I have chosen to call them the "Christian metal is an alternative form of religious expression"-discourse, the "Christian metal is an alternative means of evangelism"-discourse, the "Christian metal is a legitimate form of religious expression and evangelism"-discourse, and the "Christian metal is an alternative to secular metal"-discourse. In spite of a range of other discourses circulating within the scene, these four closely related and often overlapping discourses play a central role in expressing and encapsulating the essence of what Christian metal is all 'about' from the perspective of its musicians and fans. They can thus be seen to constitute the basic *building blocks* for the wider discursive construction of Christian metal on a transnational level.

I have chosen to focus on these four discourses for three main reasons: 1)

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\* I praktiken inte, vi delar alla samma grundläggande kristna tro, så det är inget problem /.../ det viktiga är kärnan i det kristna budskapet och den delar alla kristna metalband /.../ Det är helt enkelt inget viktigt ämne att ta upp då det är kärnan i det kristna budskapet, evangeliet som är det centrala budskapet banden vill sprida och inte specifika 'samfundsläror'.

they are stable and recurring on a transnational level, 2) they surface at every level of scenic activity, and 3) they appear to be central to the ways in which particular meanings are produced. This means that these four discourses have featured throughout today's transnational scene for a long time; that they surface in many different contexts, such as in scenic media, in song lyrics, or in speeches during concerts; and that they appear to be particularly important for ascribing the Christian metal with certain main meanings and functions on a transnational level. As already mentioned, these four discourses often overlap. They support and uphold each other. As such, they make up what Kennet Granholm (2005, 290) refers to as a "web of discourses". This is to say that the ascribed basic meaning and function of Christian metal is never expressed through any of these discourses alone. Instead, it is through their convergence and coexistence that such meanings are produced. Much of the wider discursive construction of the scene can hence be viewed in terms of threads spun from the ground- or 'mother'-web formed by these four discourses. Taken together, these discourses thus serve to express the basics of a meaningful whole that becomes something more than the sum of its parts. It is important to note here that variations of these discourses, and particularly the notion of music being an effective medium for spreading the Christian message, also circulate within the wider world of CCM as well as within numerous other distinct evangelical popular music scenes (see for example Sai-Chun Lau 2006 on evangelical club culture). For example, as discussed above, CCM has represented itself as a fully legitimate 'wholesome' or 'sound' alternative to secular popular music ever since its emergence in the late 1960s. The long-standing discourses that underpin the idea of CCM thus constitute a wider discursive context in relation to which the discursive construction of Christian metal also needs to be understood. However, in the following, these four discourses are explored in direct relation to the *particular* ways in which they are formulated and the *particular* meanings they produce within the *particular* context of the Christian metal scene.

Importantly, discourses – ways of representing certain phenomena in a certain light – do not always come in pure forms. Instead, they are always embedded in the particular broader discursive contexts in which they appear. These key internal discourses are also highly revealing of the ongoing processes of meaning-making that underpin this, in many ways peculiar, combination of Christianity and a particular form of popular music and its culture. Moreover, although these discourses are both stable and recurring this does not mean that they are static. Instead, within certain bounds, they are constantly contested, debated, and modified depending on the particular contexts in which they appear. We shall begin by exploring how these discourses appear on a transnational level. Because of this, most examples will be taken from various forms of transnational Christian metal

media<sup>5</sup>. Examples that illustrate variations in the ways in which these discourses may appear will also be included.

### **“Christian metal is an alternative form of religious expression”**

This discourse essentially represents Christian metal as a non-traditional and non-conventional but equally sincere way of expressing Christian faith. However, compared to the other three main discourses, this general and broad discourse rarely appears in ‘purer’ form. That is to say, when examining the Christian metal scene, one rarely comes across statements which explicitly state that “Christian metal is an alternative form of religious expression”. In many ways, this broad discourse serves to underpin the other three. For instance, it is clearly at play in the following excerpt from the “Frequently asked questions” section of Sweden-based *The Metal for Jesus Page*:

Why the need of Christian metal?

First of all because many Christians love metal music, and since we are Christians it's only natural to combine it with our faith. Just because you are Christian that doesn't mean that you have to listen to gospel or pop music! God is much bigger than the regular church music. Great music also deserves a great message, so why not combine them and take the best from both worlds. The reason that we want to spread the message of Jesus is because we care for people and don't want anyone to burn in hell, but instead find a living relationship with God (cause that's what the real Christian life is all about, it's a living relationship with God and not a boring religion!). Christian metal is also needed to encourage and help believers that love metal to grow in faith and come closer to Christ through the lyrics.

(<http://www.metalforjesus.org/faq.html>)

This excerpt highlights an entire range of issues pertaining to how the basic meaning and function of Christian metal is represented by Christian metalheads, and particularly by core scene members such as musicians and people involved in maintaining important scenic institutions. Indeed, this excerpt is primarily intended as *information* for outsiders on what Christian metal is all about. That is the broader discursive context in which this excerpt needs to be understood. It represents Christian metal as an alternative form of religious expression through stating that it is “only natural” for Christians to combine their taste in music with their faith. It is also stated that “God is much bigger than the regular church music” and,

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<sup>5</sup> Grammar has been left unchanged in all quoted excerpts.

moreover, that “Christian metal is /.../ needed to encourage and help believers that love metal to grow in faith and come closer to Christ”. First of all, this statement points out that Christian faith can be expressed in many musical forms besides “the regular Church music”. Second, it goes on to suggest that Christian metal plays an important role in the personal religious lives of individual Christian metalheads. This excerpt is also illustrative of how the four main discourses of Christian metal often overlap. For example, it clearly draws on the “Christian metal is an alternative means of evangelism”-discourse as well. Another example of this can be found in an article in *Heaven’s Metal* (2006/62) by Steve Rowe of Mortification:

There is a sick and dying world out there on its way to hell. I am so happy to be part of an extreme Christian music culture that still holds fast to the truth of salvation through Jesus, when the majority of “Christian” rock acts have sold out to little or no Jesus message. Let all who play Christian Metal stand strong together as people who present powerful music with the most powerful message of salvation. (Rowe 2006, 21)

This excerpt is taken from a short article in which Rowe discusses the combination of evangelism with the extreme musical form of death metal. As in the previous excerpt cited above, Rowe also highlights Christian metal’s evangelistic aims. We should note here that spreading the Christian message through metal is also represented as constituting an alternative form of religious *expression*. For musicians, Christian metal is not merely about using metal to express their own religiosity to themselves and their fans, although it does serve that function too. As an alternative form of Christian expression, Christian metal is also directed outward as a means of evangelistic outreach. In addition, Rowe also argues that it is the duty of Christian musicians to convey a clear Christian message through their music. He expresses joy in being “part of an extreme Christian music culture” that still holds true to that ideal. Discussing the main objectives of today’s transnational scene, scenic media administrator Johannes further elaborates on these issues:

Christian metal is a complement to other ways of spreading the Christian message. Through this music it is possible to reach out to many who would never take the message to themselves if they got it served in a more traditional way /.../ There is quite much contact with like-minded people in other countries and more and more all the time. We are like a big team working together since we have the same faith and like the same music. It is important and it means a lot to meet like-minded people and exchange experiences and have fun together\*. (JF 2005/5: 1-7)

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\* Kristen metal är ett komplement till andra sätt att sprida det kristna budskapet. Genom denna musik kan man nå ut till många som aldrig skulle ta till sig budskapet om de fick det serverat på ett mer

In this excerpt, Johannes clearly emphasizes contact between different scenes, describing the transnational scene as a “big team” of “like-minded people” working towards a shared goal. Moreover, as Johannes points out, scene members not only “have the same faith”, they also “like the same music”. The common notion of the music functioning as a tool for “reaching out” with the Christian message in an alternative form is likewise stressed. It is also important to note here that the scene is also about having fun. A final example is taken from the official web pages of Sanctuary International, where one finds the following introductory statement:

Sanctuary International continues to promote Christian Music “On The Edge” as we celebrate our faith in Jesus Christ. Pastor Bob travels around the globe teaching the basics of the Christian Faith without the legalism of traditional religion. Our message remains powerful and life-changing.

(<http://www.sanctuaryinternational.com/>)

Here, the promotion of “Christian Music ‘On The Edge’” (i.e. metal) is related to a “powerful and life-changing” message that avoids the “legalism of traditional religion”. For one thing, this statement appears to express the general cross-denominational aims of Sanctuary International. In addition, though, the promotion of music “On The Edge” is also contrasted with the practices of “legalist” and “traditional religion”. This statement can thus also be interpreted as representing the Christian metal scene in terms of a “big team” of “like-minded people” that share the “basics of the Christian faith” (IF 2005/5: 1-7). Seen in the light of this statement, the alternativeness of Christian metal also has to do with abandoning “specific denominational teachings” (IF 2005/5: 1-7) in favor of broader cross-denominational concerns.

These examples all illustrate how the “Christian metal is an alternative form of religious expression”-discourse can be seen to underlie the other three main discourses. Again, as seen here, the alternativeness of Christian metal is not directed against traditional modes of religious expression in a confrontational spirit. More accurately, in the above examples, Christian metal is represented rather as something which is “only natural” to “combine /.../ with faith” (<http://www.metalforjesus.org/faq.html>); as “an extreme Christian music *culture*” that has remained true to faith (Rowe, 2006, 21, my italics); as “a *complement* to other ways of spreading the Christian message” (IF 2005/5: 1-7, my italics); and as characterized by non-legalistic

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traditionellt sätt /.../ Det är ganska mycket kontakt med likasinnade i andra länder och blir mer och mer. Vi är som ett stort team som jobbar tillsammans eftersom vi har samma tro och gillar samma musik. Det är viktigt och betyder mycket att träffa likasinnade och utbyta erfarenheter och ha skoj tillsammans.

cross-denominational concerns (<http://www.sanctuaryinternational.com/>). All of the examples cited above also draw attention to Christian metal as a means of evangelistic outreach.

### **“Christian metal is an alternative means of evangelism”**

The pervasiveness of the evangelistic element in Christian metal culture has already been pointed out many times. We saw it surfacing in lyrics as well as in the main objectives of many scenic institutions such as record labels, distros, and media. As already noted, although Christian metalheads nowadays rarely view the music purely as an evangelistic tool, the general notion of a “metal ministry”, of representing a Christian voice in the metal-world, has remained important. This discourse thus continues to be drawn upon by bands as well as other core members of the scene. Indeed, Christian metal is often represented as an *effective* means of evangelism. As seen above, Christian metal is represented as making “it possible to reach out to many who would never take the message to themselves if they got it served in a more traditional way” (IF 2005/5: 1-7). Christian metal sometimes even comes close to being represented as the *only* means to reach certain people. In this way the scene as a whole is also invested with a clear and important evangelistic *mandate*. Although this discourse may appear in many guises, it is often also expressed quite explicitly. The “Christian metal is a powerful tool!”-section of *The Metal for Jesus Page* is a particularly good example of this and thus worth quoting at length:

Christian metal is a very powerful tool to spread the Gospel. The best with this tool is that thru this wonderful tool we can reach people that never will be reached otherways. Thru Christian Metal we can talk the metalheads language and have their attention. When we have got their attention they will also be open to the great message of salvation in a way that they relate and understands. So Heavenly Metal is a great way to communicate the gospel to people that wouldn't be reached in other ways.

Christian Metal is a powerful tool and now is time that we start to use it!

#### **Don'T BE SELFISH!**

Don't just listen to your Christian Metal Cds by yourself but let non-Christians around you borrow them. Don't be so selfish! Buy Christian Metal Cds for your non-Christian friends. Let them know that there is a good and positive alternative to all the crap that many of the secular bands are offering!

/.../

#### **USE YOUR CHRISTIAN METAL MAGS!**

Also use your Christian metal mag's. Lend them to your friends. And why don't you give a subscription to them so they can check out the bands and the message for themselves.



### **WE WILL BE ACCOUNTABLE TO GOD**

Christian Metal is a very powerful tool. So let's use it to bring metalheads to Christ. Jesus will soon return and we will be accountable for how we have used these great tools He has given us. Thru this powerful music you can help your non-Christian friends to come to know the wonderful love of Jesus, and escape Hell too. Don't just hold your records for yourself but use them to let more people know about Jesus. That's what it's all about.

Of course God has also created Christian Metal for our enjoyment and to help us to grow in faith. But the mainreason Christian Metal exist is because God wants people to get to know Christ so they can have a living relationship with Him and in the end go to Heaven instead of Hell.

(<http://www.metalforjesus.org/greatool.html>)

In this excerpt, Christian metal's role as an effective evangelistic tool is emphasized repeatedly. Indeed, all activities related to Christian metal are represented as being guided by evangelistic purposes. This also includes the entire scene in itself, which is represented as a God-given evangelistic tool (cf. Luhr 2009, 144-145). The 'effectiveness' of Christian metal as an evangelistic tool is represented as lying in its ability to reach people who "never will be reached otherways" through approaching them in their own language and thereby getting their attention. Christian metal media are also represented as offering non-Christians opportunities to "get to know Christ". Spreading the Christian message, it is stated, is "what it's all about". Although Christian metal serves additional religious functions for Christian metalheads as well, evangelistic outreach is presented as "the mainreason" for its very existence in the first place. However, as noted, this discourse comes in many different forms. The 'effectiveness' of Christian metal as an evangelistic tool may be emphasized to varying degrees. In its many forms, this discourse also appears on the official web pages of many bands. We shall consider some examples. This first excerpt is taken from the official web pages of the Swedish band Sons of Thunder:

The purpose of the band is:

\* To exalt Jesus

\* Preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the lost e.g. in prisons, among bikers and to young people. We believe that we can bring the gospel to these people through our kind of music. It is often said that Rock 'n' roll is the devil's music and maybe it's has been that for a while but now we're taking it back for good. God is the creator of all things and thus He is also the creator of all kinds of music, that is why we want to use the "Thunder Metal" to praise Him and to bring salvation to the lost. This is what Sons of Thunder is all about, that is why we can say: Jesus Christ is the only rockstar in this band!

(<http://home9.swipnet.se/~w-91764/Thunder/thunder.html>)

Here, the band clearly states that evangelism constitutes one of their main objectives. The notion of musical style itself being a neutral tool in this regard is also stressed. In addition, Christian metal is represented as an *effective* tool of evangelism through which “salvation” can be brought to “the lost”. As such, it is also represented as an *alternative* form of evangelism that is different from more traditional ways spreading the Christian message. Similar thoughts surface in the following statement, which one can find on the web pages of another Swedish band, Majestic Vanguard:

The day of tomorrow and what it will bring to us, will we never know. However for those who have chosen to live there life with Jesus Christ, there will always be a great future. Majestic Vanguards future lies in the hand of our bringer of the day. Nothing can ever chance that fact. The only thing we can do is to serve the one who once served us. The purpose with Majestic Vanguard is to present Jesus Christ to a fallen mankind. Too many voices in our time speak the fall prophet's words. It will all end up in misery. Jesus is the only way to God and through him we can all go free. Majestic Vanguard accepts that fact, and we are Gods respectfully servants!

(<http://www.majesticvanguard.net/site.php?page=biography.php>)

In this excerpt, the band focuses on representing themselves as servants of God whose main purpose is “to present Jesus Christ to a fallen mankind”. Their evangelistic aims are clearly connected to their musical activity. It is important to note, as is also hinted at in this excerpt, that spreading the word may also take the form of musicians being seen as examples and functioning as living proof of the advantages and “great futures” of people (who are also metalheads) who have embraced faith.

Bands are also frequently asked about these issues in interviews for scenic media. For example, when asked about the main purpose and goals of the band in an interview for *Devotion HardMusic Magazine* (5/2003), the Finnish unblack band Bleakwail simply stated: “1. To preach the gospel for metal people. 2. To play good music to the same people”. However, not all bands represent their understandings of themselves and their activities in such unambiguous terms. For example, the following statement from the web pages of the Finnish band Oratorio is much less straightforward in this regard:

The form of Oratorio's music has changed a lot during the past nine years. But the contents have remained the same: The forward-pushing force of the band has always been the gospel of Jesus Christ. The band's lyrics don't want to hit you on the head with the bible, but talk about life as a christian. As people, we all are weak and we have many struggles in our lives. Life as a christian is not always easy, but we believe that God is able to carry us when we are weak. In our weakness, the Christ's redeeming power is glorified. With Jesus Christ we

have everything and without him we have nothing.

(<http://www.oratoriometal.com/biography.html>)

The form of evangelism advocated here seems more concerned with encouraging discussion and debate. The band does not wish to turn people away from the Christian message by advocating an uncompromising and aggressive form of evangelism. Instead, they want to “talk about life as a Christian” from their own personal perspectives. This excerpt illustrates how the “Christian metal is an alternative means of evangelism”-discourse also may be drawn upon more indirectly. For example, there is a sense in which this discourse functions more as an undercurrent for how the band understands the purpose of their musical activity. Finally, we shall consider a statement found on the web pages of the German band Ancient Prophecy. Even though this statement is in German, it is also very similar to the two previously quoted unambiguous statements above. It thus also attests to how the main internal discourses of the transnational scene have spread to different countries and transcended language barriers:

- Wir machen Musik, Gott zur Ehre (We make music in praise of God)
- Er soll im Mittelpunkt stehen, nicht wir (He should stand center stage, not us)
- in unseren Texten geht es um mehr, als um oberflächliche Liebe, großartige Heldentaten oder einfach nur cool zu sein (Our lyrics are about more than superficial love, heroic deeds, or just about being cool)
- Uns ist es wichtig unsere von Gott geschenkten Gaben (Talente), also die Fähigkeit zusammen Musik zu machen für Ihn einzusetzen, wir wollen Ihn groß machen und seine wunderbare Botschaft an die Menschen weitergeben (It is important for us that we use the gifts given to us by God (talents), that is, our ability to make music for Him, to praise Him and spread His wonderful message to the people)
- Er ist der Schöpfer und wir seine Werkzeuge (He is the creator and we are His tools)

(<http://www.ancientprophecy.de/home.htm>)

This excerpt is another example of musicians representing themselves as servants or “tools” of God. Indeed, the band’s musical abilities are themselves represented as God-given gifts. They also state that God occupies “center stage” in their activity as a band and, moreover, that spreading God’s “wonderful message” is their principal aim.

It is important to note that, although it can be formulated in different ways, this way of representing one of the principal aims and purposes of Christian metal has proven enduring. This particular discourse has thus remained relatively stable over time. When appearing in written form in Christian metal media or in the mission statements of bands, this discourse

tends to appear in largely similar and more explicit forms. Moreover, the music as such is typically represented as a God-given tool that is neutral in itself. Musicians also repeatedly represent themselves as servants of a higher evangelistic cause and their musical activities, on the whole, are also typically represented as being primarily directed at this cause rather than personal gain and fortune. Moreover, Christian metal is also often represented as an alternative, and frequently also as an *effective*, means of evangelism that is particularly suited for reaching certain groups of people such as secular metalheads. This is essentially what makes it “alternative” in this context. However, as will be discussed further in following sections, when this discourse is explored in relation to the actual lived experiences of musicians themselves, its meaning becomes more multifaceted. Even so, in various ways, all of the examples cited above express the notion of a “metal ministry” that is able to reach places which more traditional modes of evangelism cannot. Many of these examples also simultaneously highlight Christian metal’s edifying and inspirational functions for Christian metalheads themselves. As such, this discourse also connects with the broader “Christian metal is an alternative form of religious expression”-discourse examined above.

### **“Christian metal is a legitimate form of religious expression and evangelism”**

As has been noted many times, the seemingly radical ideas, aesthetics, and imagery used within Christian metal have not always been accepted within more conservative Christian circles. Indeed, *some* Christian metalheads may even feel rejected within more traditional church settings. This was one of the main reasons for the establishment of the Sanctuary Movement in 1984 as well as the forming of alternative “metal parish-movements” in Sweden, Germany, Brazil, and Mexico. We should also note how the “Christian metal is an alternative means of evangelism”-discourse surfaces within this context. Although attitudes have become increasingly accepting, Christian metal is still repeatedly defended against detractors and represented as a fully *legitimate* means of religious expression and evangelism. This discourse also underlies the already mentioned practice of writing so-called “Christian metal apologetics”, that is, detailed defenses of Christian metal that are primarily directed towards Christian critics of Christian metal. Essentially, this discourse represents Christian metal as a *fully viable* contemporary means of religious expression and evangelism that does not shun the new and innovative. Christian metalhead’s choice of music and look is defended in a number of ways, one of the most common being the already mentioned argument that a musical style as such cannot be regarded as either good or

bad/evil, the lyrics and how one uses the music being the all-important question. All this, however, depends much on the general religious mood and milieu of the social and cultural contexts in which Christian metalheads find themselves.

As noted, in Finland where metal enjoys the status of mainstream music, it has even been adopted by the dominant Evangelical Lutheran Church. Some musicians interviewed for this study did recall some initial resistance to their activities from conservative circles within their own churches (e.g. IF mgt 2008/59; IF mgt 2008/57; see also *Ristillinen* 6/2005/2006, 31-32) but in each case these difficulties had been resolved and overcome. Many musicians interviewed also told me they had received the direct support of their own churches right from the start, for example, through their respective parishes providing them with such things as rehearsal spaces and some technical equipment (e.g. IF mgt 2008/56; IF mgt 2008/57; IF mgt 2007/70). In one case (IF mgt 2008/54) the local parish had even contributed with some financial assistance for the covering of production expenses for a promotional CD as well as a full-length album.

In spite of this, the “Christian metal is a legitimate form of religious expression and evangelism”-discourse continues to constitute a central element of the internal discursive construction of today’s transnational scene. This discourse has also lurked in the background in many of the examples discussed above. Importantly, there is also a sense in which it functions as a way for the scene as a whole to legitimate *itself for itself*. The well-known *The Metal for Jesus Page*, which has been quoted many times above, contains a particularly detailed defense of Christian metal. The section “Christian rock – friend or foe?” outlines “7 Reasons Why It’s OK To ROCK FOR JESUS!”. The first part (roughly points 1-3) primarily focuses on defending Christian metal as an alternative means of evangelism:

**1. You can’t limit God to only work thru worship and gospel music.** GOD IS much BIGGER THAN YOUR MUSICTASTE and He can use anyone and anything to spread his Word.

/.../

Cause there is no limitations to God. He works thru any musicstyle and anyone that are submitted to Him.<Luke 1:37, Jer 32:27> And who are you that try to take God’s place and say that He doesn’t like this or that musicstyle just because you don’t?? Do you really know???

/.../

**2. /.../** You know music is like languages, and you can’t win people in China for Christ if you speak swahili to them. They need to get the message in a language they can relate to. It’s the same thing with music, if we speak the wrong language to wrong people they won’t listen to the music and then they won’t grab the message either. Therefore there have to be Christian Metal bands that play Heavy Metal so the metalheads can relate to it and get the message and come to know Jesus.

/.../

3. /.../ And you know what, God doesn't care about our outer look but HE LOOKS AT OUR HEARTS! <1 Samuel 16:7> That's what important to God not if you look Heavy Metal or wear a three-piece-suit. But as you know Jesus went to those who the religious people didn't care for. And that's exactly what I and other Metal Missionaries do. We go to these people that most Christians just look down upon and tell them the message of Jesus.

(<http://www.metalforjesus.org/friorfoe.html>)

Here, Christian metal is defended on the basis of constituting an effective means of reaching out to people who would never be interested in receiving the Christian message served in a more traditional way. In addition, it is also suggested that Christian "metal missionaries" consciously choose to evangelize to groups that tend to fall outside the grasp of the evangelistic outreach of most other Christian churches and groups. Christian metal is distinguished from these other forms of evangelism through consciously approaching possible converts "in a language they can relate to". This is the primary argument most commonly used to establish Christian metal's *legitimacy* as an alternative, fully viable, and indeed effective, means of evangelism. As seen here, this discourse may also become intimately connected with the other two main discourses outlined above. The argument for Christian metal's legitimacy is also made on biblical grounds (*cf.* Luhr 2009, 145). For example, biblical passages are drawn upon in order to emphasize the neutral status of particular musical forms and the importance of purity of heart over appearance. The second main part of this defense (roughly points 4-7) moves to arguing for Christian metal as a legitimate form of religious expression:

5. **The BIBLE SUPPORTS HEAVY MUSIC!** Yeah, I'm not joking, read for yourselves in <Psalms 150> and you will see. In this Psalm we are told to praise God with cymbals(in our days that would be drums) and harps(in our days that would be guitars). And that's exactly what we do when we worship the Lord thru Heavy Metal!! So here we see that God supports Heavy Metal!

/.../

6. **The Bible also tells us to worship God with LOUD cymbals!** <Psalms 150:5> Another verse also tells us to make a joyful noise unto God <Psalms 66:1> Since Metal music uses loud cymbals and also is one of the loudest and most "noisy" forms of music that exist, it's definately biblical

/.../

As you can see God supports Heavy Metal to bring the message out. And the Bible tells us that **if you are going against something God supports you are actually going against God!!** <Book of Acts 5:38-39> So if you are condemning christian rock/metal you really need to think about what you are doing. I can't understand why some christians condemn christian rock. Christian rockers are a part of the body of Christ just like them. Christian Rock is a friend to the church and not its foe. Then why on earth are these rock critics wasting their

time and energy to go against something God supports? Why are they fighting against their own christian brothers instead of using their time and energy to fight against our Enemy, the Devil?? They surely need to repent!

**7. Christian Rock/Metal bears good fruit.** The Bible tells us that we should judge the tree by it's fruit. <Luke 6:43-44> On my page I have a section where you can [READ TESTMONIES](#) from people that have come to know Christ thru the ministry God is doing thru Christian Metal. So you see, Christian Metal ministry bears fruit, good fruit and God supports it. What more can you ask for?

(<http://www.metalforjesus.org/friorfoe.html>)

As seen here, particular emphasis is put on the biblical grounds for using metal as a means of religious expression. Worshipping the Lord through metal is represented as an updated version of a style of worship that is encouraged by the Bible in the first place. This makes it possible for the author to proclaim that the Bible actually "supports heavy music", the louder the better. This excerpt makes no secret of that these arguments are primarily directed at Christian critics of Christian rock or metal. The author expresses some astonishment and frustration about the fact that such criticism exists at all. It is argued that if all Christians realized that Christian metal is "a friend to the church" the door could be closed on such debates once and for all. However, since the author also seems to suggest that it is unlikely for that to happen any time soon, a continued aggressive defense of Christian metal's legitimacy is necessary. However, this discourse is not always drawn upon in such detailed ways. For example, when musicians touch upon these issues in interviews for scenic media, they usually only use some of the arguments outlined in the above excerpt or just allude to some of them in passing. Nevertheless, scenic media dealing with these issues do provide scene members with clearly articulated and detailed versions of this discourse. Let us consider parts of a different type of Christian metal defense called "Christian metal: A Defence" found on a New Zealand-based site dedicated to extreme Christian metal styles called *Unblack Noise*:

It has been said that metal stands for power and rebellion against the prevailing culture, values and structures in which it finds itself. This is considered incompatible with the assumed "submission" that Christians uphold /.../ A Christian is the most rebellious type, as they will rebel against a society that allows permissive or zero morality to run rampant.

As for being "counter-cultural", metal and Christians share something in common, though maybe only in part and not in the way expected. While census' here show that about 70% of people are "Christian", let's cut the crap. If that were true, then Sunday would be a hell busy day for most churches /.../ Being a Bible-believing Christian, (and I am not referring to the so-called Liberal



Christian crap), is about as counter-cultural as one can get while remaining within the law. Metal has nothing uncommon with Christians on that score /.../ The bottom line is that it is just music, connected absolutely to no particular lifestyle or value system and, like any other art form, open to reinterpretation. Christians will always be in it.

(<http://unblacknoise.wordpress.com/2008/10/08/christian-metal-a-defence/>)

This defense provides a rather different approach to the issue of Christian metal's legitimacy than the previous excerpts quoted above. For one thing, the author chooses to approach widespread notions about the meaning of secular metal in a more straightforward way. However, exactly *who* the author wishes to address with these arguments is less clear. When Christians are talked about as "the most rebellious type", this could be interpreted as being directed against detractors within the secular metal community who accuse Christian metal of not being sufficiently "rebellious". However, it may just as well be directed at Christian detractors who accuse Christian metalheads of having accommodated metal music and style to such a degree as to having lost their identity as Christians. In addition, it also clearly alludes to the notion of the 'true believer's' rebellion and resistance against a fallen society and culture. Significantly, towards the end, the author also expresses the commonly held notion of all musical forms being neutral in themselves and "open to reinterpretation". Christian metal is thus legitimated in a somewhat reversed manner. It is not represented as something that is supported by biblical texts or as a particularly effective way for reaching certain groups of people. Instead, it is legitimated on the grounds that "it is just music" and, hence, that Christians may well "be in it". This last example serves to illustrate the many forms in which the "Christian metal is a legitimate form of religious expression and evangelism"-discourse may appear, sometimes more explicitly, sometimes more vaguely. The important point to note, though, is that it continues to appear in spite of Christian metal having achieved wider acceptance in Christian circles during the past decade. As noted above, representing Christian metal as a legitimate form of religious expression and evangelism also functions as a way for the scene as a whole to legitimate its own existence. In this sense, this particular discourse also serves to remind scene members of what Christian metal is supposed to be 'about', and why it is needed.

### **"Christian metal is an alternative to secular metal"**

This discourse principally deals with distinguishing Christian metal's 'positive' message from the perceived potentially destructive messages

presented by many secular metal bands. As with CCM more generally, this discourse thus also underlies the rationale for the existence of a separate Christian metal scene, that is, a scene that is at least partly separated from other secular metal scenes by the virtue of being comprised by Christian people, and having an expressed aim of making metal that strives to convey and spread a “basic” Christian message (IF 2005/5: 1-7). For example, as noted above, some Christian metal Internet-sites contain detailed comparison charts designed to aid Christians in finding ‘positive’ Christian sound-a-likes of popular secular bands. In this way, although the most obvious difference between Christian and secular metal lies in the content of the lyrics, this discourse is also directed at distinguishing Christian metal *culture* from secular metal culture more generally. Christian metal is thus contrasted with secular metal culture and represented as a more positive and meaningful alternative. As with the other key discourses examined above, this discourse also comes in many shapes and forms. For example, it surfaced in many of the mission statements of scenic institutions quoted above. A more typical example of this discourse at play can be found in the following excerpt from the Christian metal Internet site *JesusMetal*:

Here at JesusMetal we will introduce you to the Extreme Side of Christianity, or the safe side of Metal, it's both really. Here you'll find all about positive metal, with sometimes christian lyrics, sometimes a band just has a christian background. We try to keep the site 100% christian, but it might happen that accidentally a secular band is added, because it was promoted by a christian company. If you find any band on here that is not christian, please e-mail. We will dig deeper into a band and decide whether or not we'll delete the band from our archives.

(<http://home.wanadoo.nl/kemman/homer.htm>)

As mentioned above, scenic institutions are often seen as serving important gatekeeping functions and this excerpt clearly illustrates how the administrators of *JesusMetal* have assumed this role. They stress that they aim to keep their site “100% christian”. Again, this is fully in line with the basic ‘requirements’ of both Christian metal as well as CCM more generally. The administrators can be said to draw on the “Christian metal is an alternative to secular metal”-discourse through stating that *JesusMetal* “will introduce you to the Extreme Side of Christianity, or the safe side of Metal”. In this way, Christian metal is distinguished from secular metal by the virtue of being “safe”. However, by also stating that *JesusMetal* “will introduce you to the Extreme Side of Christianity”, the administrators also draw on the “Christian metal is an alternative form of religious expression”- as well as the “Christian metal is a legitimate form of religious expression and evangelism”-discourse. The administrator of another site, *Christian Xtreme*,

provides a very similar description of his main purposes and aspirations:

Our Mission at Christian Xtreme is to help lead people to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ through music with positive Christ centered lyrics. I strive to keep this website Christian based so if you find any content on this site objectional please feel free to contact me /.../ Also feel free to give me any suggestions to make this site more christian based to suit my visitors needs.

(<http://65.61.12.97/mission.html>)

Both of these quoted excerpts convey the idea that Christian metal should not only be clearly distinguished from secular metal but thoroughly *separated* from it as well. As already noted, this is a much-contested approach within the wider transnational scene. Indeed, bands who seek acceptance within the wider metal community may regard separation as hampering their opportunities to represent a Christian voice in the metal-world. Most Christian metalheads seem to favor a delicate balance between separation and integration. However, such a balance may be extremely difficult to uphold since notions about absolute separation on the one hand and full integration on the other seem incompatible. Bands who favor integration typically choose to downplay the directness of their Christian message. Because of this, they are sometimes seen as yielding to the demands of both the secular metal community as well as the wider secular popular culture. The question of lyrical content thus lies at the very core of these debates. That, however, has not changed the general notion of Christian metal as constituting a *positive* alternative to secular metal. Christian metal bands who make compromises with their message in exchange for the possibility of wider success in the secular market may still continue to emphasize that they make 'positive' metal. In such cases, what kind of a message a band actually conveys through its lyrics becomes secondary to what kinds of messages it consciously *leaves out*. The "Christian metal is an alternative to secular metal"-discourse may therefore also simply be used to represent Christian metal as lacking the perceived potentially destructive messages of much secular metal. On the other hand, it may also be used to emphasize the 'meaningfulness' (i.e. the Christian content of the lyrics) of Christian metal as opposed to the 'meaninglessness' of much of secular metal. This discourse thus also has bearings for understandings of the Christian scene as an alternative *metal* scene.

Even though Christian metal is commonly distinguished, and sometimes directly separated, from secular metal in various ways, as we shall see, not all Christian metalheads are as concerned with actually *replacing* their favorite secular bands with Christian alternatives. Many Christian metalheads are avid fans of secular metal as well, which is not to say that they always approve of the messages they find in it. While some Christian

metalheads consciously and deliberately eschew all secular metal, others opt for a less unconditional stance and only avoid listening to bands with the most overt satanic and anti-Christian lyrics. Some just simply ignore the whole issue altogether. All of these attitudes were represented among the musicians interviewed for this study and we shall explore these issues in more detail in the following sections. However, the overwhelming majority of Finnish Christian metal musicians interviewed listen to both Christian and secular metal. Most seem reluctant to opt for either separation or full integration. Instead, this choice is usually left to individual bands or band members themselves. As we have seen, bands are rarely judged *solely* on the basis of how clearly or explicitly they convey a Christian message anyway. Purely musical merits play an important role as well. In other words, a band that conveys an explicitly Christian message also needs to be musically creative in order to achieve wider success within the Christian scene. In any case, this discourse is still the most commonly used way for Christian metalheads to distinguish Christian from secular metal.

## 6. 2 External discursive construction

The Christian scene is also discursively constructed from ‘outside’ of itself in various ways. When approaching the external discursive construction of the scene, we might begin by looking more closely at Christian metal’s position within broader Protestant denominational contexts. As we have seen above, in addition to the extreme music, Christian metal has also fully embraced the metal rhetoric and aesthetic and no other contemporary form of popular music has been as consistently criticized and condemned by conservative Christian groups as metal has (e.g. Weinstein 2000, 245-263; Luhr 2009, 131). Indeed, there are still many conservative Christian groups (for example US-based *Dial the Truth Ministries*) who vehemently oppose all forms of rock music and everything related to it, including Christian rock. Such groups tend to represent metal as an utterly unredeemable ‘satanic’ style of music. The notion of “Christian” metal is therefore viewed as oxymoronic (*cf.* Luhr 2009, 143). Many others who accept some forms of popular music being used for religious purposes also tend to be particularly suspicious towards metal. In such cases, metal is simply not regarded as a suitable form of music through which to express the Christian faith. Hence, again, Christian metal may become slightly problematic. As noted above, there is also the question of the metal style and look. Long hair for men, black clothes, leather jackets, spikes, and chains may not be deemed as suitable ways for Christians to appear within certain conservative Christian circles (*cf.* Luhr 2009, 44; 115; Andreasson 2007). In the next section, we shall also see how the issue of

style and look surfaces in accounts of Finnish Christian metal musicians.

It is also worth noting that, if approached separately from the overall internal discursive construction of the scene, the “Christian metal is a legitimate form of religious expression and evangelism”-discourse examined above might lead us to think that Christian metal continues to encounter much resistance within wider Christian circles. However, as pointed out above, viewing it separately from the other three key internal scenic discourses would be highly misleading. As noted, this is because this discourse has also come to function as a way for the Christian metal scene to legitimate itself for itself. On the basis of this study, there are no sufficient grounds for arguing that Christian metal is commonly criticized by Christian groups in Finland nowadays, quite the contrary. As will be discussed in more detail below, among all nineteen musicians interviewed for this study, only two had experienced stronger and prolonged resistance from within their own churches. It is important to note here that both of these musicians are older veterans of the scene who both became involved with Christian metal in the 1990s, when it had only just started to arrive in Finland and the scene was in its infancy. In addition, both were at the time also affiliated with conservative free churches. It is thus fair to say that Christian metal initially did indeed encounter quite a degree of resistance within some conservative Christian circles in Finland. However, as Christian metal has become more visible through the development of a lively national scene, this earlier wave of initial resistance seems to have largely ebbed away. That is not to say that such resistance may not still exist; only that it is no longer commonplace. This also largely appears to be the case in the other Nordic countries. I wish to point out, however, that these are general conclusions that I have arrived at based on my many discussions and interviews with core members of the Finnish scene. The situation in much more religiously diverse countries such as the USA, however, is impossible to assess. Considering the exceptionally wide range of different types of Christian churches in the USA, it is fair to assume that attitudes towards Christian metal range across the whole spectrum from total acceptance to fierce opposition. This *may* be one reason for the continuing need to legitimate and defend Christian metal in transnational scenic discourse.

These days, however, most Christian groups appear to accept Christian metal. This, at least, is the picture that emerges from the accounts provided by Christian metal musicians interviewed for this study among whom many different denominational affiliations are represented. Indeed, as reported by musicians, some parishes even directly support Christian metal and view it as a form of activity that takes place on the sidelines of ordinary church activity. It is clear, though, that *concentrated* Christian criticism of Christian metal is highly rare in Finland nowadays. As mentioned above, Christian metalheads are often identified by representatives of Finnish Christian

churches as constituting a distinct Christian youth group in itself. The activities of Christian metal bands may not be interpreted in terms of extensions of the activities of their respective churches, but they are generally viewed in a decidedly positive light. It should also be noted here that individual members of the same band may well be affiliated with different churches. For example, it is not unusual for bands to have both Lutheran and Pentecostal members. Generally speaking, Christian metal does not seem to have become discursively constructed in any particular way within wider Finnish Christian circles. It appears that the issue hardly ever comes up at all. When it does come up, it is usually represented as an activity that it is only “natural” for Christian youth to be involved with. Even so, there may still be isolated cases where Christian metal becomes implicated in Christian criticisms of metal more generally. Musicians may, of course, also still encounter criticism from *individual* members of their own churches, that is, from individual persons who for some reason or other dislike the music and its style as such, or who view it as being somehow unsuitable for Christians to be involved with. However, on the basis of my interviews with musicians, representatives of churches generally view the musical activities of their fellow members who are into metal positively. It should also be noted here that discourses pertaining to Christian metal within different Christian churches are not that far removed from similar discourses within the scene itself. There is thus a sense in which such discourse is only partly ‘external’. To varying degrees, depending from case to case, the key internal discourses of the scene outlined above are all affected by the external discursive construction of the scene. A more thorough examination might of course bring some particular forms of external Christian discursive construction to light, but such an inquiry would extend beyond the scope of this study. Since relationships between the Finnish Christian metal musicians interviewed and their own churches are overwhelmingly positive, the issue can be left at this point.

Another form of external discursive construction that more directly also influences the internal discursive construction of the scene is that of the wider secular metal community. This particular form of discursive construction has so far presented a rather different picture of what Christian metal is all ‘about’. Although they may not approve of it (and many certainly do not), the existence of Christian metal is still widely known among secular metal audiences. As noted above, because of its religious outlook and more or less pronounced evangelistic agenda, Christian metal has never gained wider acceptance within the secular metal community. Instead, it has often been ridiculed, discriminated against, and at times been vehemently opposed within certain sections of secular metal culture. As noted above, metal has often been interpreted as constituting a form of rebellion against the stifling confines of post-industrial late modern society



and culture in a spirit of “Fuck you, I won’t do what you tell me!” (“Killing in the Name”, *Rage Against the Machine*, 1992), as the successful band Rage Against the Machine so famously expressed it. Because of this, Christian metal is often viewed as completely antithetical to what metal is ‘supposed’ to be about. To take a notorious example, one secular black metal fan became so provoked by the very existence of the Swedish unblack band Admonish that he started his own anti-Admonish Internet-site in the mid 1990s. Moreover, due to external pressure and protest from secular metal fans, the major secular label *Nuclear Blast Records* reportedly eventually halted all distribution of the unblack band Horde’s controversial release *Hellig Usvart* (1994).

([http://fi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unblack\\_metal](http://fi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unblack_metal))

From the vantage point of many secular metalheads, Christian metal is typically viewed as oxymoronic, that is, a complete contradiction in terms. The lyrics of Christian metal have also been widely ridiculed within secular metal culture. For example, it is not unusual for secular metal commentators, such as album-reviewers, who happen to like the music of a Christian band to dismiss its lyrics, and thereby the band as such, as complete garbage. Christian metal is thus typically represented as an appropriation of metal music and style for purely evangelistic purposes and, therefore, as being ‘treason’ to metal. Often, Christian metal is simply dismissed as a bad joke. In addition, Christian metal bands are also often accused of being musically poor. As seen above, earlier bands emphasized evangelistic outreach over musical creativity and technical ability. These days, this way of approaching music-making is often criticized within the Christian scene itself. However, although they are likely to disapprove of the lyrics, secular audiences tend to accept Christian bands that are particularly musically creative. For example, bands such as Australian Mortification, Norwegian Extol, Swedish Crimson Moonlight, and Finnish Immortal Souls have managed to gain some degree of wider respect in the secular metal community in spite of being widely known as Christian bands. The main criterion seems to be that, if the music is truly creative and innovative, then it is possible to simply ignore the content of the lyrics. But, unless it is viewed as a laughing matter, direct evangelistic activity is rarely accepted by secular audiences. This also has to do with the pervasive and deeply engrained individualistic ethos of secular metal culture. This is perhaps where the problem that secular audiences tend to have with Christian metal essentially lies. The basic issue, it seems, does not so much have to do with lyrics, as with the ideology behind the music. In other words, secular metal audiences tend to have a hard time accepting the very *idea* of “Christian” metal.

As we have seen, such external discursive construction also affects the internal discursive construction of the Christian scene to some degree. However, as already noted and further illustrated by the key internal



discourses explored above, today's Christian metal scene seems primarily concerned with constructing an understanding of itself as an alternative way of 'doing' religion, and this includes evangelism as well. As such, it could be argued that the Christian metal scene's engagement with the broader secular metal community so far has largely remained outweighed by its engagement with itself. Nevertheless, one may still find negative representations of Christian metal on virtually any secular metal online discussion forum. Christian scene members who also participate in secular metal scenes thus regularly encounter such resistance and criticism and that could be seen to be a main reason as to why the secular metal community's external discursive construction of Christian metal continues to influence the internal discursive construction of the Christian scene.

In the following first stage of the final analysis of this study, we shall focus on the ways in which Finnish Christian metal musicians are influenced by the internal discursive construction of the wider transnational scene. More precisely, we shall ask what bearings the internal discursive construction of the transnational scene might have for the understanding of Finnish Christian metal musicians concerning the basic meaning and function of Christian metal. Where called for, issues of external discursive construction will also be taken into account.

### **6. 3 Discursive construction within the context of the Finnish Christian metal scene**

We now move on to explore how the discursive construction of the basic meaning and function of Christian metal relates to the views expressed by Finnish Christian metal musicians interviewed for this study. The views they express regarding issues of alternative religious expression, evangelism, legitimation, and the relationship to secular metal illustrates the ways in which the discursive construction of Christian metal relates and translates to actual real life practices and experiences. Moreover, when we explore how these key discourses relate to and find expression within real life settings, we also need to take account of the wider social and cultural context in which this occurs. The following exploration of the relationship between the discursive construction of Christian metal and the real life practices and experiences of musicians will therefore be situated within the particular cultural and religious context of Finland.

As we have seen, in transnational internal scenic discourse, Christian metal is often represented as an alternative form of *religious expression*. We now need to examine if and how this way of representing Christian metal surfaces in the accounts of Finnish Christian metal musicians. What we need

to ask is the following: in which ways does Christian metal function as an alternative form of religious expression for Finnish Christian metal musicians? In which sense is it represented as *alternative* when compared to other Christian practices available to musicians within the wider Christian milieu of Finland today? In scenic discourse, Christian metal is also typically represented as an alternative, and frequently also as an effective, means of *evangelism*. Looking closely at the views of Christian metal musicians themselves, we now need to ask what this actually means in practice. Which forms does such evangelism take in real life settings and what experiences do Finnish musicians have of such evangelistic practice? As we have seen, Christian metal is also represented as a fully *legitimate* form of religious expression and evangelism. Now we must inquire about the actual experiences that musicians have regarding issues of legitimation. We need to ask in which ways such issues of legitimation surface in the actual religious environments in which musicians find themselves. This issue also relates to the external discursive construction of the scene. Lastly, in internal scenic discourse, Christian metal is often represented as a positive *alternative to* secular metal. We now need to focus on what actual views musicians express regarding secular metal. We should recall here that Finland is one of the very few countries in the world where metal enjoys the status of mainstream music. As discussed above, metal has even been embraced by the dominant Evangelical Lutheran Church. The views of Finnish Christian metal musicians on secular metal thus need to be understood in the context of a broader Finnish popular cultural environment in which metal music and culture occupies a very prominent and highly visible position.

We should also recall here that the key discourses on the basic meaning and function of Christian metal often overlap as they complement and support each other. Consequently, when musicians relate these discourses to their own actual experiences in real life, they may often highlight many of them simultaneously. Indeed, as these discourses become intimately connected with how Christian metal is understood in real life settings, we might expect musicians to draw on all of them when expressing their views on what Christian metal means to them. However, it is crucial to note here that these discourses are much easier to grasp when they appear in written form. When they are related to actual lived experiences as expressed by musicians themselves, they become considerably more multidimensional. For example, as we shall see, most interviewed musicians clearly draw on the “Christian metal is an alternative form of religious expression”-discourse in their accounts. However, although they clearly can be said to understand their own musical activities as constituting a form of alternative religious expression, it is equally clear that they do so in different ways. The same applies to the discourse representing Christian metal as an alternative means of evangelism. This is because, in reality, representing Christian metal as an

alternative means of evangelism and actually going out and evangelizing in this alternative way are two very different things. But, importantly, the picture that emerges through relating and comparing the discursive construction of the basic meaning and functions of Christian metal with the real life views, practices, and lived experiences of Christian metal musicians themselves is also precisely what this study aims to bring to the fore. Indeed, the aim of highlighting how issues of discursive construction relate to and find expression in real life settings in particular social contexts, lies at the very core of the type of macro approach to discourse employed in this study. Nonetheless, the relationship between discourse and real life practice is always a complex one. The account that follows should thus not be understood as one that simply identifies the key internal scenic discourses of Christian metal being drawn upon by musicians in clear and straightforward ways. Instead, it should be understood in close relation to the broader cultural and religious context in which these musicians find themselves; the aim is to highlight the many important *connections* that exist between these key discourses and the real life experiences and practices of musicians themselves.

I also wish to stress an important methodological point here. When interviewed, musicians were not asked about these issues *explicitly*. They were thus not asked questions such as: “Is Christian metal an alternative form of religious expression?”; “Is Christian metal an alternative means of evangelism?”; “Is Christian metal a legitimate form of religious expression and evangelism?”; or “Is Christian metal an alternative to secular metal?”. Instead, questions were formulated much more broadly. Thus, musicians were asked whether Christian metal plays a role in their everyday and religious lives, and whether it has some relationship to other more traditional forms of religious expression and church practice. They were also asked if they thought that Christian metal has some particular purpose or if they had some particular purposes or goals with their own musical activities; how their musical activities have been received by people within their own churches and parishes at large; and what their thoughts were on other, non-Christian forms of metal. The questions were thus consciously formulated in ways that would make it possible to see whether musicians would draw on the key discourses on the basic meaning and function of Christian metal without being explicitly or directly invited to do so.

### **6. 3. 1 Issues of alternative religious expression**

As seen above, one of the key internal scenic discourses on the basic meaning and function of Christian metal represents it as an alternative vehicle for the expression of Christian faith. As also noted above, this

discourse rarely appears in a pure form. However, regardless of the form in which it appears, it functions as a way of making Christian metal meaningful in a particular way. The word “alternative” takes on particular importance in this regard as Christian metal is represented as being an alternative form of religious expression in at least two closely related important respects. First, it is represented as constituting a merging of Christian faith with the particular popular music culture of metal. It is never either or but always both. Second, as such, it is represented as constituting a way of expressing faith that is very different from more traditional ways of doing the same. However, it is worth repeating here that this alternativeness is rarely directed against more traditional forms of religious expression but instead presented more in terms of a complement to them. This discourse would thus suggest that, for Christian metalheads in real life, faith and music become intimately connected. Hence, one would assume that, since they are both creators and performers of Christian metal, this should hold true for musicians in particular. As we shall see, the views expressed by the majority of musicians interviewed for this study do indeed clearly support this notion. Let us consider some examples. When asked if his Christian faith has some particular relationship to his music, Wille from From Ashes explained:

In a way, for oneself, it has like been a natural form of expression, precisely this kind of gloomy, like gloomy music, so to express the kinds of like gloomy feelings that are also part of a Christian's, and at least my life, and in my lyrics there is very much this kind of prayer that like in a way you talk to God in the second person. And it is a form of expression and like rhetorical device that maybe others may imagine that Christian bands cannot use /.../ But in some way for oneself it is a prayer and in relation to that maybe this kind of, that we have those like, the vocals are like sort of shouting and roaring and I think it fits well with if you say... 'lift the stone heart from my chest' like LIFT THAT STONE FROM MY CHEST! (laughs) or in that way, like it is a very powerful way of expression and I feel that it suits our music /.../ At least making songs and somehow like writing lyrics is quite like a religious experience... And sometimes parts which one sings oneself, like also at rehearsal when you play it can happen that you like pray as such at the same time as you sing those things so there is also this kind of like... I do not know the correct term for it but this kind of, well this kind of ritual side to the music, and it is like a kind of personal way of practicing faith to some degree but, well it is difficult to say whether it is principally music or principally practicing religion like it is both, sometimes more the one and sometimes more the other so.\* (IF mgt 2007/70)

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\* Jotenkin itselle se on niin kuin ollut luonnollinen ilmaisukanava, nimenomaan tällainen niin kuin synkkä, synkkä niin kuin musiikki, niin ilmaista sellaisia niin kuin synkkiä tunteita mitkä niin kuin kuluu niin kuin myös kristityn ja ainakin meikäläisen niin kuin elämään ja hirveän paljon niin kuin minun lyriikoissa on semmoista rukousta että niin kuin puhutaan niin kuin toisessa persoonassa niin kuin Jumalalle. Ja se on sellainen niin kuin ilmaisumuoto ja niin kuin retorinen keino jota ei ehkä niin kuin muut kuvittelisi että kristilliset bändit voi käyttää /.../ Mutta jotenkin itselle se rukous ja siihen

As seen here, for Wille, the practice of making and playing music has developed into an important aspect of his personal religious life. For him, it constitutes a form of prayer and self-therapeutic “personal way of practicing faith to some degree”. In addition, there is also a “ritual side” to it. Importantly, Wille also relates this particular way of expressing faith to the particular style of *metal* music that he makes and plays. He describes the strong and aggressive music as being well suited for the expression of gloomy feelings, not least since it allows for such feelings to be expressed in a powerful and direct way. The practice of writing lyrics is represented as being “quite like a religious experience”. Indeed, practicing religion and making and playing music are understood as two sides of the same coin. As Wille states, “it is difficult to say whether it is principally music or principally practicing religion like it is both”. Wille thus clearly both presents and views his musical activities as an alternative form of religious expression although he does not state it using those exact words. However, many of the words and expressions he *does* use to describe the relationship that exists between his faith and his music also appear in the other examples of the “Christian metal is an alternative form of religious expression”-discourse cited above. For example, he describes his way of expressing faith through metal music as having been a “*natural* form of expression” for him. He also states that this is a form of expression “that maybe others may imagine that Christian bands cannot use”. He could thus also be interpreted as saying that one does not easily find modes of religious expression within more traditional church settings that are comparable to the powerful form of expression that metal provides.

This, however, should not be taken to mean that Wille has come to eschew more traditional church practices in favor of expressing his faith through metal alone. Instead, considering that he was actively involved in the activities of his local parish and was also studying to be a Lutheran pastor at the time of the interview, using his music as a means of religious practice should clearly be understood in terms of an alternative or complement to more traditional forms of religious expression and practice. This again serves to illustrate how the alternativeness of Christian metal

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liittyvä ehkä tämä sellainen, se että meillä on nuo niin kuin, vokaalit on niin kuin sellaista huutoa ja niin kuin karjumista niin se niin kuin istuu siihen minun mielestä hyvin että jos sanotaan että...‘lift the stone heart from my chest’ niin kuin että OTA SE KIVI MINUN SYDÄMMESTÄ! (naurua) tai tällä tavalla niin kuin sellaista että se on hyvin voimakasta ilmaisua niin minä koen että se sopii meidän musiikkiin /.../ Toi biisien tekeminen ja jotenkin niin kuin sanoittaminen on aika niin kuin uskonnollinen kokemus... Ja joskus niin sellaisia osia mitä itse laulaa niin treeneissäkin kun vetää niin saatta olla että niin kuin itse niin kuin rukoilee sinänsä samalla kun laulaa niitä asioita että siinä on myös tällainen niin kuin... en tiedä oikeata termiä asialle mutta tällainen niin kuin, no tällainen rituaalinen puoli siinä musiikissa, ja että se on niin kuin sellaista omakohtaista uskonnonharjoitusta myös jossain määrin mutta, no sitä nyt on vaikeata sanoa että onko se ensisijaisesti musiikkia vai ensisijaisesti uskonnonharjoittamista että se on kumpaakin, välillä enemmän toista ja välillä enemmän toista että.

should not be exaggerated in this regard. It is clear, though, that Wille draws on the “Christian metal is an alternative form of religious expression”-discourse in a number of ways.

Similar views were also expressed by Markus from Megiddon. Speaking of issues of religious expression in relation to issues of evangelism, he expressed the following views:

As I see it, it simply relates to the Great Commission so that wherever we might be we would sort of be the light of Christ in the world. It is primarily about what you want to do, because one wants to bring this message forward, so I sort of do not separate it from church practice in any way, because that is also such a broad concept, what Christian activity can be, it does not need to be there inside the walls of the church and neither should it be.\* (IF mgt 2007/71)

The thoughts expressed here primarily highlight the second important respect in which Christian metal constitutes an alternative form of religious expression, namely, that it differs considerably from more traditional forms of religious expression. On the one hand, Markus states that “Christian activity” can take many different forms. As he affirms, Christian activity neither needs to nor should be confined inside “the walls of the church”. However, on the other hand, he also maintains that he really does not make any distinction between church practices and his own musical activities per se. Markus thus seems to say that his musical activities essentially serve the same basic functions as do other forms of church practice. However, it is clear that they do so in different ways. It should be noted, therefore, that when Markus talks about Christian activity outside the walls of the church and the many different forms that such activity may take, he is clearly primarily referring to his own musical activities as well as that of other bands. He can thus be interpreted as saying that the activities of his band constitute an alternative or complement to other more traditional forms of expressing and spreading the Christian faith. Even so, the basic aims remain the same regardless of form. It seems that the main point he wishes to make is that Christian activities that occur inside the walls of the church will, very likely, also take the *forms* that are characteristic of that context. Those forms would, in most cases, be of a more or less traditional kind, at least when compared to Christian metal. This is where Christian metal comes in as an alternative and complementary form of Christian activity that primarily takes place *beyond* the walls of the church. Markus can thus also be seen to

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\* Minä näen että se liittyy ihan perus niin kuin lähetyskäskyyn ja että niin kuin missä tahansa me ollaankin niin tuota oltaisimme tavallaan niin kuin kristuksen valona maailmassa. Että niin kuin se on lähinnä semmoinen mitä haluaa tehdä että, koska haluaa viedä tätä asiaa eteenpäin, että se niin kuin en minä tavallaan erota sitä miteenkään niin kuin kirkollisesta toiminnaista että, koska sekin on niin kuin niin laaja käsite että mitä se kristillinen toiminta voi olla että ei sen tarvitse missään siellä kirkkojen seinien sisällä olla eikä saisi olla.



draw on the “Christian metal is an alternative form of religious expression”-discourse in a number of ways. In addition, he also makes some remarks about the role of metal in relation to practices that occur *inside* church walls. He singles out the *Metal Mass* as an apt example of how traditional church practices can enter into a direct and fruitful dialogue with the wider popular cultural milieu. Himself one of the originators of the *Metal Mass*, he expressed the following views about its significance:

Regarding the *Metal Mass*, well it is surely going in the direction that I have at least hoped, that this would become a new way of sort of bringing forward the Christian message and a new way of conducting services, so that it no longer necessarily would need to be accompanied by just organs.\* (IF mgt 2007/71)

In this excerpt, Markus specifically presents metal in terms of an alternative “new way” of expressing and spreading the Christian faith. He also clearly takes the view that there is a more widespread need for renewal of traditional worship practices within the Evangelical Lutheran Church and that the *Metal Mass* has been an important step in that direction. However, in the previous excerpt Markus also spoke of Christian activity not having to be confined inside church walls. We should recall here that Markus made these comments in relation to the issue of evangelism. When viewed in relation to his comments on the significance of the *Metal Mass* he can be taken to say that, although it usually takes place inside the walls of the church, it may also play an important evangelizing role in attempting to attract people who have become disinterested in or alienated from more traditional church practices. The *Metal Mass* can thus be seen as an attempt to, so to speak, somewhat lower “the walls” (or the threshold) of the church. In this context, *musical form* appears to take center stage. As discussed above, the *Metal Mass* is actually much more traditional than it might at first appear. It uses a traditional sequence of service and traditional formal liturgy. The music is actually the only alternative aspect to it. However, it seems that it is precisely that aspect which becomes the most important one in this context. We should also note here that the *Metal Mass* was originally initiated in close collaboration with core members the Christian metal scene.

As mentioned in our discussion of religious change in Finland in chapter 2, the Evangelical Lutheran Church has indeed acknowledged the issue of musical form to some degree and also initiated some projects aimed at experimenting with contemporary forms of music. The *Metal Mass* is no doubt the clearest example of this so far. Generally speaking,

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\* Metallimessun suhteen, no se on varmaan pitkälti menossakin siihen suuntaan mitä olen ainakin toivonutkin että tästä tulisi uusi tapa viedä jotenkin kristillistä sanomaa ja uusi tapa pitää sitä niin kuin jumalanpalveluksia, että sen ei tarvitse välttämättä olla enää semmoinen niin kuin pelkästään urkujen säestyksellä toteutettua.



experimentations with alternative forms of music largely appear to depend on the particular attitudes and interests of people employed by particular parishes. Indeed, some parishes have begun to organize their own versions of the *Metal Mass*. For example, due to the initiative of some of its members, pastors, and youth workers, the Swedish speaking Evangelical Lutheran parish in the city of Turku (Åbo svenska församling) organized its first own Swedish language version of the *Metal Mass* in November of 2008. Other musicians interviewed for this study also spoke about certain people employed by their local parish, usually youth pastors and youth workers, showing a great interest in experimenting with alternative musical forms. For example, Panu from the Finnish Christian progressive heavy metal band Sacrecy explained that many people employed by his local parish actively encourage the use of alternative musical forms in parish activity and also directly support the activities of bands (IF mgt 2008/54). To take another example, Wille from From Ashes mentioned that the youth worker of his local parish has organized collective minibuses from Helsinki for parish members wanting to attend the annual Christian metal festival *Immortal Metal Fest* in Nokia (IF mgt 2007/70). However, in spite of this, some musicians still felt that more could be done. Speaking of these issues with particular reference to the practices of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, Sami from the Finnish Christian thrash metal band Luotettava Todistus expressed the following views:

I think that we are, we are also living in a kind of transition period here, like in the churches hymns are still played and arranged to organs even though no one listens to hymns in their free time anymore /.../ We speak of a folk church and although hymns maybe used to be folk music in the sixteenth century we can still think that these days metal, well if we think about, say, the elimination competitions for the Eurovision song contest which have been organized there are a lot of metal bands there, but the church has still not in any way like noticed this, that the young are not interested in hymns, or the way to perform those hymns on organs, so we are precisely searching for like new forms. The content stays the same, song lyrics can be very much hymn-like, but that the way of presenting them is changed to drums, guitars, and basses, then we get it closer to that 'people-like' music.\* (IF mgt 2007/73)

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\* Minun mielestä tässä, tässä eletään tietynlaista kanssa niin kun siirtymäaikaan että niin, että kirkossa edelleen soitetaan ja säestetään virret uruilla vaikka virsiä kukaan ei enää kuuntele omana vapaa-aikansa /.../ Puhutaan kansan kirkosta ja ehkä virret on joskus tuhat viisisataa luvulla ollut sitä kansanmusiikkia niin kuitenkin voisi ajatella että nykypäivänä metallia... niin kuin jos ajattelee nyt vaikka Euroviisu karsintoja mitä nyt on järjestetty niin siellä on paljon metallibändejä mutta kuitenkin kirkko ei millään tavalla ole niin kuin huomionnut tätä että niin että nuoria ei kiinnosta virret... tai se tapa esittää uruilla niitä virsiä että nimenomaan tässä haetaan niin kuin uusia muotoja, että sisältö pysyy samana, laulujen sanat voi olla hyvinkin virsimäisiä mutta se että se esitystapa muutetaan rummuille ja kitaroille ja bassoille niin, sitten saadaan siitä niin kuin lähemmäs sitä 'ihmisten näköistä' musiikkia.

In this excerpt, Sami criticizes the Evangelical Lutheran church for not having paid enough attention to the signs of the times regarding the issue of music in Church settings. In spite of the Church's initiatives on musical issues, Sami, who is himself employed by the Church and also very aware of these initiatives, still clearly suggests that more could be done in a more general sense. This is because, although alternative forms of music have increasingly begun to be used in Church settings, it is still the exception rather than the rule. Expressed simply, traditional church music, it is argued, no longer reflects the cultural sensibilities of most people today and of young people in particular.

This is where Christian metal comes into the picture – as a way of searching for “new forms” in this period of “transition”. As Sami states, such exploration of new forms is not about making changes to the content or message of the music. However, he is clearly suggesting that complementing or even replacing traditional and largely outdated forms of musical religious expression with alternative forms that people actually can relate to might have bearings on how people relate to the content or message of the music as well. Christian metal could thus have a role to play in this context, especially with regard to younger age groups. These thoughts are also echoed by Anders O from Hilastherion:

The problem is a bit, as I have seen it, I remember when I was new in faith myself as an eighteen year old that in my free church circles it was not so much like ‘Yes! You listen to metal!’, for example Christian extreme metal like black and death metal, that was totally, in the end of the nineties at least, an impossible equation /.../ It is a bit like the church does not really keep up with this, with this development, our modern society, that the church looks a lot more at these traditional forms ‘it has to be like this’, while society changes. We, if we buy a computer today, well, we do not buy a VIC-20 [one of the first ever personal computers] /.../ one buys the newest thing and the church should also think a bit like that and not look at the exterior of these forms and think that we must keep to the old hymns that one should get going with the old pump organ but also take in these modern influences /.../ What I mean is that it is not the way and how we do it which makes it bad or good but it is really where it comes from, from our hearts, what the creator wants to convey with his message, not the way in which it is conveyed.\* (IF mgt 2008/55/1-2)

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\* Det är lite det som är problemet som jag har sett det, jag minns när jag själv var ny i tron som aderton åring att inte var det i mina frikyrkokretsar så jätte så där ‘yes! att du hör på hårdrock’, till exempel kristen extrem metal som black och death metal det var ju helt, i alla fall i slutet av nittiotalet, en omöjlig ekvation /.../ Det är lite så att kyrkan inte riktigt hänger med i den här, den här utvecklingen, vårt moderna samhälle, att kyrkan ser ju mycket mera på de här traditionella formerna, ‘det måste vara så här’, medan samhället förändras. Vi, om vi köper en dator idag inte köper vi ju en VIC-20 inte /.../ man köper ju nyaste som gäller och lite det så borde kyrkan också tänka att man inte ser på de här yttre formerna och tänker att vi måste hålla oss tillbaka till de gamla psalmerna som man skall trampa igång med gamla pumporgeln utan man kan också ta in de här moderna influenserna /.../ Vad jag menar är att det är ju inte sättet som det är och hur vi gör det som gör det ont eller gott utan

In this citation, Anders O recalls his experiences of being a Christian metalhead in a conservative free church setting in the 1990s. When he speaks about “the church” seeming to have difficulties in keeping up with broader cultural developments, he could thus also be taken to be speaking of the Finnish Christian churches in a more general sense. Even so, his remarks can still be interpreted as implicating the dominant Evangelical Lutheran Church in particular. Similar to Sami above, he speaks of the churches needing to be more open to “modern influences”. According to Anders O, churches should not focus so much on the “the exterior” of alternative forms of Christian musical expression but instead look more to what is actually conveyed through these forms. In this way, he also emphasizes the neutrality of different forms of musical expression as such, and what they are used for being the important question. At the same time, he also seems to say that, as society and culture changes, there will always be a need for new alternative forms of religious expression within traditional and institutional Christian settings as well. Christian churches should thus take account of contemporary alternative and complementary forms such as Christian metal. Of course, Anders O is not saying that churches should incorporate Christian extreme metal into their practices wholeheartedly, but only that they should try to recognize it as a valid, albeit different, form of religious expression.

The main conclusion we can draw from the views expressed here is that musicians clearly view Christian metal as an alternative form of religious expression. However, as illustrated by the above examples, when asked if Christian metal plays some kind of role in their religious lives and if it has some relationship to other more traditional forms of religious expression and church practice, they tend to mostly focus on issues regarding *forms* of religious *expression*. It is primarily in this context that Christian metal is represented in terms of being *alternative* and *complementary*. There is one quite obvious reason for this. If Christian metal is to be represented as being alternative or complementary, it has to constitute an alternative or complement *to* something. Musicians might, as Wille from From Ashes does, mainly approach this issue in relation to their personal religious lives. But, as seen here, they usually tend to, as did Markus from Megiddon, Sami from Luotettava Todistus, and Anders O from Hilastherion, view the issue of alternative religious expression more in direct connection to a broader Finnish denominational context and the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church in particular.

The “Christian metal is an alternative form of religious expression”-discourse becomes fully comprehensible only when viewed in relation to actual real life experiences and practices in particular cultural and religious

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det är egentligen varifrån det kommer, från vårt hjärta, vad skaparen vill få fram med sitt budskap, inte sättet som det kommer fram.

contexts. It is thus important to note here that, when this particular discourse surfaces in the accounts of Finnish Christian metal musicians, it does so in a particular *Finnish* cultural and religious context. For example, Wille spoke about his musical activities in terms of a personal way of practicing faith. However, as a self-described “doctrinally oriented”<sup>\*</sup> (IF mgt 2007/70) Finnish Lutheran, one might well presume that he primarily understands his music to constitute a personal way of expressing *Lutheran* faith. Additionally, when Markus spoke about Christian activity not having to be confined inside “the walls of the church”, by this he clearly specifically intended the Evangelical Lutheran Church. His views should thus be understood in a particular Finnish denominational context in which Christian activity arguably does indeed mostly occur within the walls of churches. When Sami spoke of a growing need for alternative forms of music in church settings, and metal in particular, he made these remarks with explicit reference to the “folk church”, that is, the Evangelical Lutheran Church. His remarks, then, should primarily be understood in relation to the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church’s attitudes and policies on musical issues. The same is true for Anders O who also argued that Finnish Christian churches (and perhaps the Evangelical Lutheran Church in particular) should open up to new and alternative forms of musical religious expression. Of course, as long as such new forms of religious expression are not fully, or at least more clearly, recognized within wider church contexts, they will remain alternative.

Although musicians clearly would like Christian metal and its perceived potential to attract more people to Christianity to become more clearly *recognized* in this regard, this does not necessarily mean that they would like it to become more *integrated* with church practices as such in any wider sense than it already has in the form of the *Metal Mass*. Obviously, the *Metal Mass* and Christian metal are not the same things at all. The *Metal Mass* has simply embraced metal as a form of music. Christian metal, by contrast, also constitutes an independent and transnational *music scene* which is also very much concerned with making and playing music and having fun. Indeed, in their respective ways, musicians do present Christian metal in terms of an alternative religious expression that can, and in most cases should, be understood quite independently from church practice per se. For example, when Markus from Megiddon stated that he really does not see any difference between his musical activities and church practice as such, by this he did not mean to say that he views them as being equivalent in every respect. What he most probably *did* mean to say is that they share the same basic aims. After all, he also talked about his musical activities in terms of Christian activity that goes on beyond the walls of the church.

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<sup>\*</sup> opillisesti orientoitunut

The discourse of Christian metal as an alternative form of religious expression thus always takes on a range of more particular meanings depending on the wider cultural and religious context in which it appears. The different ways in which this discourse may find expression in real life settings also has much to do with its broad character. Even so, as illustrated here, this broad and transnational scenic discourse constitutes one of the most important and principal ways of representing Christian metal within the Finnish scene as well. As illustrated by the quoted excerpts above, Christian metal is represented as “a personal way of practicing faith” that is viewed as “natural” (IF mgt 2007/70), and an example of the many forms that “Christian activity” that goes on beyond “the walls of the church” can take (IF mgt 2007/71). It is also viewed as representing a search for “new forms” of Christian musical expression that are more in line with people’s actual musical tastes and cultural sensibilities (IF mgt 2007/73; and also IF mgt 2008/55/1-2)

### **6. 3. 2 Issues of evangelism**

The discourse representing Christian metal as an alternative means of evangelism also clearly surfaces in the interviews with Finnish musicians. As seen above, this discourse presents Christian metal as an alternative form of evangelistic outreach that is particularly suitable for reaching certain kinds of people (mostly secular metalheads and other people who like harder forms of rock) who would perhaps not be interested in receiving the Christian message served in a more traditional way. In this context, Christian metal is often also frequently presented as an *effective* means of evangelism. This notion of reaching people who would not otherwise be interested in hearing the Christian message also clearly emerges in the interviews with Finnish musicians. As with the “Christian metal is an alternative form of religious expression”-discourse above, the discourse of Christian metal as an alternative means of evangelism takes on a much more multidimensional character when it surfaces in musician’s accounts of their own experiences of actually going out and spreading the Christian message to secular audiences in secular venues. Indeed, many musicians expressly stated that evangelistic outreach constitutes a principal aim of their musical activity. For example, when asked if Christian metal has some particular purpose for them, Sami and Arvi from Luotettava Todistus responded as follows:

Sami: Yes, like for myself, for myself it is a nice hobby, but then again it is like, through the music you feel like through it you can bring forth a certain kind of message and, just fill that void that, that for Christians /.../ Youth have a need for Christian music so...

/.../

Arvi: Well, yes we are transmitting a certain message here, we try to convey a message so, that would be its purpose, like if you think about it like that with Christian metal specifically. We are not a Christian band just for fun but that we are transmitting something.\* (IF mgt 2007/73)

As stated here, spreading or transmitting a Christian message constitutes an integral part of what the band is all about. However, as discussed above, in addition to bands having evangelistic aims, they often also aspire to cater to an already Christian audience. Therefore, when Sami speaks of filling a “void” and youth having a “need for Christian music” in the above excerpt, he is primarily speaking of aiming to fill a void in Christian music and cater to the needs of Christian youth. Arvi then goes on to emphasize the band’s evangelistic aims more broadly. Furthermore, they clearly represent evangelistic outreach as constituting an integral and important part of their own musical activities. As Sami also explained during the interview, the main target audience of the band is “just ordinary people”\* (IF mgt 2007/73). Because of this, like many other Finnish Christian metal bands, Luotettava Todistus has not opted for an aggressive style of evangelism. As Arvi went on to point out: “Our band does not harass with Jesus”\* (IF mgt 2007/73). Similar views were also expressed by Roope from the Finnish Christian heavy metal band VIP:

There is this feeling that we are not doing this work in vain, that we, maybe kind of that we, a kind of feeling that, if one would say like directly that the Devil does not like at all what we are doing so there is this kind of invisible warfare and this is visible in everything that we do with VIP.\* (IFmgt 2008/57)

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\* Sami : Kyllähän se niinkuin itselle, itselle se on mukava harrastus, mutta sitten taas just niin se että, tavallaan se että musiikin kautta niin kokee että sitä kautta pystyy viemään tietynlaista viestiä eteenpäin ja, just täyttää sitä tyhjiötä mitä, mitä sitä kristilliselle /.../ Nuorilla on tilausta kristillisille musiikille niin...

/.../

Arvi: No kyllähän tässä tietynlaista sanomaa viedään eteenpäin viestiä yritetään välittää että, eiköhän se olisi sen tarkoitus, niin kuin jos sitä noin ajatellaan että kristillisellä metallilla juurikin että, ei me olla kristillinen bändi ihan huvin vuoksi vaan se että me viedään jotakin juttua eteenpäin.

\* ihan tavallisia ihmisiä.

\* Orkesterimme ei ahdistele Jeesuksella.

\* Semmoinen tunne vaan että kyllä tässä, ei me turhaan tätä työtä tehdään että niin kyllä me, ehkä semmoinen että, semmoinen olo että niin kuin, jos sanoo näin suoraan että pahalainen ei tykkää siitä olleenkaan mitä me tehdään ja niin siinä on semmoista näkymätöntä sodankäyntiä ja kyllähän se näkyy kaikissa meidän VIPin tekemisissä.

As expressed once more here, conveying a Christian message or doing evangelistic “work” is represented as a central aim and integral part of the activity of the band as such. Indeed, it constitutes a form of “invisible warfare” that is “visible in everything” that the band does. Talking of issues of evangelism, William from Hilastherion also expressed the aims of his band in very similar ways:

Well, that is the point with a Christian [band], otherwise we could just play anything at all if we did not care about the lyrics or in that way. As a matter of fact we really want to come out with something, that is why we do this.\* (IFmgt 2008/55/1-2)

As with Sami and Arvi above, William clearly states that evangelistic outreach constitutes a principal aim of the band and the main reason why they play *Christian* metal in the first place. William also took the view that an aggressive form of evangelism may not always be that well suited for every occasion. For example, talking about playing secular venues, he went on to explain:

But if you like think of those kinds of general, people are drunk and it is perhaps not the best occasion to like... maybe rather that they buy the record, like that ‘this was a good band’, the next morning the wake up and start browsing through [the lyric sheet] and see that ‘ah, this is what it was about’.\* (IFmgt 2008/55/1-2)

According to William then, instead of preaching to people in situations in which they most likely would not be in a particularly receptive mood, just making Christian metal available to secular audiences and giving them the opportunity to choose for themselves may in the end prove to be a more effective way of getting a message across. William also emphasizes the importance of lyrics being able to clearly convey a Christian message or what a band is all ‘about’. The basic idea seems to be that the lyrics may serve to invite secular audiences to reflection about issues of faith once in a more receptive mood. Similar issues were also raised by Pekka from Sotahuuto who also pointed out that the evangelistic activity of a band always depends on situation and context. As he also stressed, the issue of evangelism does not surface to the same degree in all situations. For example, playing for Christian audiences does not really raise the issue of evangelism at all. That

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\* Det är ju det som är vitsen med ett kristet, annars skulle vi kunna spela precis vad som helst att om vi inte skulle bry oss i texterna eller som på det viset. Vi vill ju faktiskt komma ut med någonting, det är ju därför vi gör det här.

\* Men alltså om du tänker att på sådana där allmänna, folk är i fyllan och det är kanske inte alltid rätta tillfället att som... kanske istället att de köper skivan där att ‘det här var bra band’, nästa morgon de vaknar och så börjar de bläddra och se att ‘ja att det var det här som det handlade om’.



has more to do with inspiring audiences and addressing more specific faith related issues such as doubt and the importance of forgiving and living morally responsible lives. As pointed out above, this should not be interpreted in terms of 'preaching to the choir' or the 'already saved', although it may often seem that way to outsider observers. Elaborating further on the difference between playing for Christian and secular audiences, Pekka explained:

Those bar gigs and others they maybe demand a little initiative and we have not had all that much of that, but we have oriented ourselves towards that side now because we feel that our music works better there and we maybe have sort of like two target audiences with our band /.../ If we play for religious people, it is a bit like sort of in an encouraging, in an encouraging spirit or something like that, and then again on the other hand we would also like to play for non-religious people /.../ Maybe not necessarily to covert them forcibly but sort of... to break down prejudices so that we could go and play in a bar and be like 'we are religious and we play here and good vibe', so like not all religious people sit in church with their hair tightly in a bun, although there is nothing wrong with that either, but non-religious people seem to have quite much prejudice against religious people so those could be broken down and then at the same time of course our songs still proclaim the gospel to some degree so to bring it there and maybe those who want to listen would then listen and those who do not want to listen would not listen.\* (IF mgt 2007/69)

As further illustrated here, some bands consciously strive to be more careful when playing for non-Christian audiences. As Pekka emphasizes, the band does not aim to convert people forcibly. In the interview, he also stated that a person who feels called by God to evangelize should do so while a person who feels no such call should not. He is thus also saying that a Christian band should not engage in evangelistic activity unless its members somehow feel called to do so. However, Pekka went on to argue that it is quite possible for a band to evangelize and *entertain* at the same time. He thus advocates a softer form of evangelism, which takes the braking down of prejudices against Christianity as its starting point. On the one hand, this needs to be understood in relation to the broader contemporary religious environment of

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\*Tommoiset baarikeikat ja muut niin ne vaatii vähän ehkä omaa-aloitteisuutta ja meillä ei ole sitä ollut kauheasti, mutta me ollaan nyt suuntauduttu sinne puolelle koska meistä tuntuu että se meidän musa toimii siellä paremmin ja meillä on ehkä tavallaan niin kuin kaksi kohdeyleisöä meidän bändillä /.../ Jos me soitetaan uskovaisille niin me, se on vähän semmoista niin kuin rohkaisu, rohkaisu meininkiä tai semmoista, ja sitten taas toisaalta me haluaisimme soittaa myös ei uskoville ihmisille /.../ Ei ehkä nyt välttämättä väkisin käännättää mutta semmoista... ennakkoluulojen murtamista että me voitasi mennä baariin soittamaan ja olla niin kuin että 'me ollaan uskovaisia ja me soitetaan täällä ja hyvä meininki' että tuota että ei kaikki uskovaiset ole nuttura päässä kirkossa istumassa ja, vaikka ei siinäkään mitään vikaa ole, mutta siis että semmoista kuin ei uskovilla tuntuu olevan aika paljon ennakkoluuloja uskovaisia kohtaan niin että voisi niitä murtaa ja sitten samalla tietysti kyllähän ne meidän biisit jonkun verran kuitenkin julistaa sitä evankeliumia niin tuota tuoda sitä sinne ja ehkä ketkä sitten haluaa sitä kuulla niin kuntelee ja ketkä ei halua kuunnella niin ei kuunntele.

Finland in which church membership and attendance is on the decline and increasing numbers of people no longer identify with many central Christian traditions and beliefs. On the other hand, it also needs to be understood in relation to the more widespread prejudices against Christianity within the wider Finnish secular metal community.

The alternativeness of this type of evangelism is also emphasized in a number of ways. For example, it entails braking down prejudices by having the courage to play secular venues on their own terms as an openly Christian band. It also entails attempting the difficult task of presenting a Christian message through music in a way that speaks to people who want to listen to that message while not at the same time turning away people who are not interested in hearing it. This type of evangelism also centers on the person of the Christian metal musician himself (and it is nearly always a he). When playing secular venues, the Christian metal musician functions as living example of how not all Christians “sit in church with their hair tightly in a bun”. In this regard, Pekka also touches upon the “Christian metal is an alternative form of religious expression”-discourse; in this context style and look also become important. We should remind ourselves here that, when understood as an alternative form of Christian expression, Christian metal is about much more than just music. As has been stated at many points above, expressing Christian faith through metal also entails expressing it in a particular *way* in accordance with a certain set of verbal, rhetorical, aesthetic, and stylistic conventions that are characteristic of the particular popular musical form of metal. What Pekka hopes to show by going out and playing to secular audiences as an openly Christian band is that there exists no contradiction between Christianity and metal. Anders O from Hilastherion also related this issue to the practice of writing lyrics:

Personally, I can say that when I wrote these lyrics that, say ninety percent of the lyrics are based on personal experiences which I have had myself during my journey as a believer, and I guess that quite many who listen to and read the lyrics also can find themselves in them, for example, the struggle of loneliness and bitterness and... disappointments and so on. Like what I have tried to do when I wrote these lyrics is to... is to not paint a shiny picture of like, ‘to be a believer that is hip hip hurray’ but to really paint a picture of this dark side which we all still take part in at some point, but in this darkness still find that light which is God.\* (IF mgt 2008/55/1-2)

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\* Jag kan säga personligen att när jag skrev de här texterna att, säg nittio procent av texterna är från personliga erfarenheter som jag själv har upplevt under min vandring som troende, och det jag gissar är att ganska många som lyssnar och läser texterna också kan finna sig själv i dem, till exempel kampen av ensamhet och bitterhet och... besvikelser och så vidare. Att det jag har försökt göra när jag skapade de här texterna det är att... det är att inte heller måla upp en glansbild att, ‘att vara troende det är hip hip hurra’ utan verkligen att måla upp den här mörka sidan som vi alla ändå tar del av någon gång, men i det här mörka ändå finna det där ljuset som ändå är Gud.

As pointed out by Anders O here, when aiming to spread the Christian message, it is also important to write lyrics that non-Christian audiences can relate to on a personal level. Moreover, through emphasizing the importance of writing lyrics that are based on personal experiences, he also points out the role that Christian metal musicians themselves have to play in this context as living examples of believers who are 'into' metal. This notion of Christian metal musicians needing to function as living examples of how Christian faith and values can be integrated with the culture of metal surfaces in many accounts by musicians. For example, it was also clearly expressed by Markus from Megiddon:

Every band has to sort of think out their own style regarding the issue of spreading the gospel, and maybe every band learns along the way that perhaps this was not necessarily a good style to hit people on the head with the Bible, so one needs to stay responsible towards the listener. So that if someone is interested well then you can for instance say that, by the way, it is fine to come and chat with us after the show if you are interested. \*(IF mgt 2007/71)

Markus also seems to advocate a softer form of evangelism similar to that expressed by Pekka and Wiliam above. A band should not necessarily aim to convert people in an uncompromising manner by "hitting them on the head with the Bible". For some bands, a better alternative might be to tread more carefully by just aiming to encourage audiences to reflection. As he elaborated further during the interview, this is essentially what he intends to say when stating that a band has a responsibility towards its audience. In the interview, Markus also pointed out that an aggressive and uncompromising form of evangelism easily risks becoming counter-productive, particularly if attempted in secular venues where the majority of the audience (which, most probably, also would have consumed larger amounts of alcohol) most likely would neither expect nor condone such activity. Generally speaking, Finnish audiences simply do not expect to become the subject of evangelistic outreach outside of clearly Christian settings, and least of all in venues and bars oriented towards metal and hard rock (see also Luhr 2009, 122-123). Christian metal musicians show a very strong awareness of the fact that audiences easily may become irritated and regard such activity in terms of undesired and misplaced religious 'infringement' or 'interference'. Manu from Deuteronomium who has considerable experience of playing at all kinds of secular venues with known secular bands both in Finland and

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\* Jokainen bändi joutuu niin kuin vähän niin kuin itse niin kuin miettimään mikä se on se oma tyyli niin kuin sen evankeliumin levittämiseen suhteen ja tuota ehkä siinäkin jokainen bändi oppii matkan varrella no että ei tämä ole välttämättä ihan hyvä tyyli että tuota paukuttaa raamatulla päähän että jotenkin semmoinen tietynlainen kuuntelijan vastuu säilyttää siinä. Että jos on itse kiinnostunut asioista niin tuota silloin voi vaikka sanoa että niin että meidän kanssa saa muuten tulla rupattelemaan keikan jälkeen jos kiinnostaa.

abroad explained it in this way:

In that sense it is much easier to play in a Christian joint so, like there we know that our gang of fans will be there, well mostly, like there one has sort of like a home field advantage. So then when you go to some type of rock club, then there is much more of a challenge to it and we have to like, as a starting point people will have preconceptions and they, we have to like try to win them over.\* (IFmgt 2008/59)

As expressed here, because of the general atmosphere of secular environments, bands need to tread carefully. However, Manu also explains that Deuteronomium has abandoned its earlier more aggressive style of evangelism in favor of letting the songs “speak for themselves”\* (IF mgt 2008/59). As was also pointed out by Pekka and Markus above, staying responsible to the listener also entails Christian metal musicians actively striving to engage in dialogue with non-Christian audiences. In other words, when playing secular venues, Christian metal musicians should actively aim to engage in discussions with interested people about issues of faith. We should also note that when Markus spoke of every band having to develop their own approach to the issue of evangelism for themselves, the idea that Christian bands should be involved in *some* form of evangelistic outreach is more or less assumed and taken as a basic starting point. Nonetheless, the notion of evangelism is clearly defined very broadly in this context. For example, Markus states that his band Megiddon strives to convey a certain “positiveness”\*. In similar ways, Timo from the Finnish Christian heavy metal band Lumina Polaris also explained that, in addition to evolving musically as a band, “We also have like Christian or spiritual reasons, we would sort of like to, sort of bring a certain kind of hope to youth”\* (IF mgt 2008/56). We should also note that the notion of Christian metal as an *effective* means of reaching secular metal audiences in particular also constitutes an undercurrent in many of these accounts.

Clearly, when exploring the issue of evangelism in light of the views of musicians themselves, the “Christian metal is an alternative means of evangelism”-discourse takes on a range of slightly different meanings since, in practice, such evangelism may take many different, either more or less

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\* Kristillisessä mestassa on siinä mielessä paljon helpompi soittaa että, että siellä niin kuin tietää että siellä on sitten meidän faniporukkaa, enimmäkseen, että siellä niin kuin on vähän niin kuin kotikenttä etu. Että sitten kun mennään johonkin tuommoiseen rokkiklubiin niin siellä on niin kuin sitten on haastetta paljon enemmän että meidän täytyy niin kuin, että lähtökohtaisesti jengillä on ennakkoluuloja ja ne, meidän pitää niin kuin yrittää voittaa ne.

\* puhua omasta puolestaan.

\* positiivisuus.

\* On meillä niin kuin kristillisiä tai hengellisiäkin syitä, haluttasimme olla niin kuin, tavallan tuoda semmoista toivoa nuorisolle.

direct forms. Thus, although the musicians cited above clearly draw on this discourse in their accounts, it is equally clear that they do so in slightly different ways in close connection to their own real life experiences. Even so, in some way or other, *every* musician interviewed for this study stated that they considered spreading the Christian message an important part of their musical activities as such. Christian metal's function as an *alternative* form of evangelism is also brought to the fore in a range of ways. For example, as seen above, musicians typically emphasize the ways in which their evangelistic aims are intimately connected with their activities as members of Christian *metal* bands. As already pointed out, in transnational scenic discourse, Christian metal is often represented in terms of a "metal ministry", as a way of spreading the Christian message using the particular musical expression of *metal*. This also allows musicians to take on the role of "metal ministers". This notion also surfaces in the above accounts, which stress the importance of Christian metal musicians being present among secular audiences and actively encouraging dialogue and reflection regarding issues of faith. How successful bands actually are in this regard is, of course, an altogether different question but it is an issue that is not relevant here.

In connection to this idea, musicians also talk of their musical activities primarily being directed at reaching certain groups of people in particular. Christian metal bands are, of course, very aware of the fact that playing secular venues essentially means playing for secular metal audiences and other people who like harder forms of rock. Because of this, Christian bands wanting to play for secular audiences will most of the time end up playing at venues that are more or less specifically metal and hard rock oriented and thus mainly attract metal and hard rock audiences. As seen above, Christian metal musicians quite naturally regard such environments as being the most fitting for their music. After all, they play metal. At the same time, however, they can also be the most threatening. In such environments, a Christian band always risks getting a very cold reception indeed (*cf.* Luhr 2009, 123). Such issues also surface in some interviews within musicians. For example, one musician interviewed had witnessed direct threats of violence having been made against another Christian metal band from abroad during a concert at a secular venue (IF mgt 2008/57). At one occasion when playing a secular venue abroad, another interviewed musician had also repeatedly received violent threats to himself and his friends in the band. Indeed, at this particular occasion, one person in the audience had even threatened to kill him. He also related that his band had received hate mail from a secular satanic band threatening to burn down their rehearsal space (IF mgt 2008/59).

In spite of this, this is precisely the type of environment that many Christian metal musicians state that they want to place themselves in. This is

because they regard such environments as providing them with apt opportunities to brake down prejudices by functioning as living examples of the compatibility of Christian faith and metal culture. In so doing, they hope to be able to get across some form of Christian message or at least 'plant a seed'. For example, Manu from Deuteronomium recalls the following experience of playing a secular venue in Germany at a time when the band was still proclaiming its Christian standpoint during concerts in much more explicit ways:

Up to the year two thousand it did not matter where we played, so precisely in that place where half were bikers and the other half Satanists, well like there I would make a speech and it was like, before that, the crowd was all with it but then when it came, then precisely that other half of the crowd just started shouting and so on after that. And then after the show there were quite an interesting couple of hours /.../ or let us say that the first hour went like, like those guys were blustering a lot and /.../ then when that hour had passed /.../ after that they started like discussing with us, many of us had many really interesting discussions there with like individual people so.\* (IFmgt 2008/59)

Indeed, as expressed here and also hinted at by some of the other musicians quoted above, there is a sense in which merely being present in such environments as openly Christian metalheads can be understood as constituting a form of evangelistic activity in itself. In this context, then, the concepts "Christian" and "metal" become equally important elements of the same equation. This is also where Christian metal's *alternativeness* as a means of evangelism essentially lies.

As illustrated by the excerpts quoted above, making and playing Christian metal is represented as entailing "transmitting a certain message" (IF mgt 2007/73), as striving to break down prejudices against Christianity by going out and being among secular metal audiences and trying to engage in dialogue with those who wish to listen (IF mgt 2007/69), and as conveying a certain "positiveness" (IF mgt 2007/71) and "hope to youth" (IF mgt 2008/56). In this way, Christian metal is also clearly represented as a particularly suitable way of spreading the Christian message to certain groups of people, and especially secular metalheads, who would not be interested should this message be served in a more traditional way. Hence,

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\* Silloin sinne kaksituhatta vuoteen asti niin se oli ihan sama missä me oltiin keikalla, että just siinä paikassa missä oli puolet bikereitä ja puolet satanisteja, niin siellä niin kuin pidin spiikin ja siinä oli silleen että sitä ennen niin kuin jengi oli aivan täysin mukana mutta sitten kun se tuli niin sitten se just se toinen puolisko jengistä sen jälkeen vaan niin kuin huuteli siellä ja muuta. Ja sitten keikan jälkeen oli aika mielenkiintoinen pari tuntinen että siellä, siellä niin kuin oli mielenkiintoista, tai sanotaan näin että ensimmäinen tunti meni silleen että, että ne vaan ne tyypit uhosi kauheasti ja /.../ sitten kun se oli se tunti mennyt /.../ sen jälkeen niin kuin sitten ne rupesi niin kuin keskustelemaan meidän kanssa, oli niin kuin ihan mielenkiintoisia pitkiä keskusteluja käytiin niin kuin useampikin meistä niin kuin porukasta siellä niin kuin yksittäisten ihmisten kanssa että.

an *alternative* form is called for.

### 6. 3. 3 Issues of legitimization

In the past, Christian metal musicians and fans have often had to legitimate their choice of music within their own churches and respective parishes. Because of this, Christian metal has also come to be represented as a *legitimate* form of religious expression and evangelism. It should be noted at the outset that this issue needs to be viewed in close connection to the various Christian, as well as particular social and cultural settings, in which musicians find themselves. As noted above regarding the external discursive construction of the scene, within Finnish Christian circles, the activities of Christian metal musicians are usually viewed positively. Although the music surely is not to everyone's taste, nowadays, other parish members still tend not to be overly concerned about the activities of their fellow members who play and listen to Christian metal.

Some musicians interviewed for this study reported having experienced some degree of initial resistance and criticism from individual members of their respective parishes (e.g. IF mgt 2008/59; IF mgt 2008/57; IF mgt 2007/73). However, these disagreements had typically concerned musical *form*. In each of these cases, musicians had been able to resolve these situations by explaining the Christian basis of their music. Some musicians also reported their own parents having expressed some initial concerns about their choice of music when they were younger (e.g. IF mgt 2007/71; IF mgt 2008/59; IF mgt 2008/55/1-2). In time, these issues had also been resolved when it became apparent that their musical activities were firmly based on a Christian worldview. As seen in our discussion of issues of religious expression and evangelism above, musicians clearly view Christian metal as a fully legitimate form of expressing and spreading the Christian faith. However, most of them have never had to actually defend or legitimate their musical activities in real life, at least not repeatedly and over longer periods of time. Nor does this issue constitute a visible part of wider Finnish scenic discourse. For example, although it is sometimes hinted at (e.g. *Ristillinen* 6/2006, 31-32), this issue only rarely surfaces in Finnish Christian metal media.

As noted above, among all musicians interviewed for this study only two had experienced stronger resistance, which had forced them to directly and repeatedly defend and legitimate their choice of music in a number of ways over a longer period of time. As both of these musicians are veterans of the scene, their comments should be understood in light of the situation in the 1990s, when Christian metal bands had only just started to appear in Finland. Anders O from Hilastherion provided the following account of his



experiences of being a Christian metalhead in his conservative free church circles in the late 1990s:

I was really very questioned the first three or four years and the only one in my circles who listened to metal, I was the only one to provocatively continue doing it even though many spoke against me and it was of course the Devil, at least seven different variations of him that featured in my music and... I remember that I wrote a provocative article in a Christian youth magazine /.../ I wrote about Christian black metal which also created a lot of fuss. I wrote in ninety-nine, and then one was going to be excluded from everything and preferably become a Mormon or something (laughs) /.../ The first three or four years it was really very, one was really not understood by anyone, not in Vasa at least. I had some acquaintances, I knew, or I know the members of the former legendary [Christian] death metal band from Jakobstad, Tinnitus, and there, via them I then got support and encouragement to hold fast to that which I still believed and was convinced to be right, but it was not always easy.\* (IF mgt 2008/55/1-2)

Anders O tells of having had to repeatedly defend and legitimate his choice of music within his free church circles for many years. Indeed, he tells of being accused of listening to and defending what the majority of his fellow parish members regarded as a satanic form of music. This also led to him feeling excluded and isolated. The valuable support that he received from other Christian metal musicians helped him stay his ground and continue listening to Christian metal. However, Anders O also seems to say that things eventually changed for the better. We might also note here that the Christian youth magazine, for which he wrote the article on Christian black metal, has since then changed its name and is now called *Activate*. Nowadays, the magazine (of which Anders O is presently one of the editors) regularly includes articles on Christian popular music and youth culture in general. For example, issue 2 of 2007 included a report on the Christian metal festival *Endtime Festival* in Sweden, which was clearly aimed at advertising and highlighting the Christian character of that event. More generally, this also illustrates how attitudes towards metal as a form of music and religious expression have become more accepting over the years.

The second account of stronger resistance is provided by Manu from

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\* Jag var ju väldigt ifrågasatt första tre fyra åren och enda i mina kretsar som hörde på hårdrock. Jag var enda som provokativt fortsatte och göra det fast många talade mot mig och det var ju djävulen, minst sju olika varianter av honom som förekom i min musik och... Jag minns jag skrev en provokativ artikel i en kristen ungdomstidning /.../ Jag skrev om kristen black metal som också skapade stora rabalder. Jag skrev nittionio, och då skulle man nu bli utesluten ur allting och helst bli mormon eller någonting (skratt) /.../ Första tre fyra åren var det nog väldigt, ingen förstod ju sig på en, inte i Vasa i alla fall, jag hade vissa bekanskap, kände ju, eller känner bandmedlemmarna i det forna legendariska death metal bandet från Jakobstad Tinnitus och där, via dem då fick man ju då sitt stöd och uppmuntran att hålla fast vid det som jag då ändå trodde och var övertygad om att var rätt, men inte var det alltid lätt inte.

Deuteronomium who related his experiences of having received a lot of criticism from both conservative free church circles and the secular metal scene during the band's formative years in the 1990s. When asked about his experiences of Christian criticism and resistance to his musical activities, he made the following comments:

We did get that [criticism] like, as I mentioned before we lost our rehearsal space back in ninety ninety four and it was, well it was a rehearsal space of a Pentecostal parish where we rehearsed where there were also other gospel bands, Christian bands. And well, well it became like, one time at rehearsal a kind of delegation of senior parish members came to talk to us (laughs) and then one time we heard that, a friend told us that 'during the Sunday day-meeting the parish prayed for your band', [and I thought] 'well that is a great thing' like, [and then the friend said] 'well, but they did not, they like rather prayed for you to find faith for real and stop playing Satan's music' (laughs). And then it did not take very long until we were kicked out from that rehearsal space, like 'that kind of music will not be played here'.\* (IF mgt 2008/59)

Similar to Anders O above, Manu also speaks of having been accused of having played a "satanic" form of music that was deemed totally unacceptable and incompatible with Christian life within his conservative Pentecostal circles during that time. This is aptly illustrated by parish members having prayed for the band to "find faith for real". Indeed, as he goes on to tell, parish elders eventually took concrete action against the band.

These two accounts serve to highlight the ways in which metal music as such, Christian or not, still was viewed within many conservative parishes during the 1990s. Such views may still be found in some circles today. These types of criticisms are particularly frustrating for Christian metalheads since they are received from what they consider to be their own camp. It is important to note once again that, most of the time, Christian metal musicians do not desire or seek out these types of conflicts but instead consciously strive to avoid them (*cf.* Moberg 2008a, 85). Nowadays, however, attitudes have become increasingly accepting or at least less openly condemning. Manu also went on to explain that the parish elders eventually revised their standpoint. It should be noted, though, that these types of

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\* Sitä tuli kyllä sillai että, se kun mainistin tuossa että meiltä meni silloin ysi-neljä vuonna treenikämpä alta niin se oli, oli tuota niin yhden helluntaiseurakunnan treenikämpällä kun treenattiin missä oli muitakin gospelbändejä, kristillisiä bändejä. Ja tuota, no se meni semmoiseksi että sillai, yhden kerran tuli meidän treeneihin semmoinen lähetystö vanhempia seurakuntalaisia niin kuin vähän puhuttelevaan meitä ja (naurua) sitten kerran kuultiin niin kuin juttua että, kaveri kertoi että 'Sunnuntai päiväkokouksessa niin seurakunnassa rukoiltiin teidän bändin puolesta' sitten 'sehän on tosi hieno homma' että, 'niin muuta kuin ei ne, ne niin kuin rukoili lähinnä sitä että tulisitte oikeasti uskoon ja lopettaisitte saatanan musiikin soittamisen' (naurua). Ja sitten siitä ei mennyt enää kovin kauan kun saatiin kenkää sitten siltä treenikämpältä että 'täällä ei toummoista musiikkia soiteta että'.

accounts of older Christian metal musicians standing their ground and defending their choice of music serve as encouragement for younger musicians regardless of whether they themselves have had to defend their music or not. However, importantly, as Anders O went on to comment, Christian metal musicians are not interested in imposing their music on those who do not wish to hear it:

Nor should we go and say that something is wrong or that something is more right, but it is what people want and want to hear that, well that has to be offered to them, so if they want to listen to gospel or hymns and things like that then they must be allowed to have that. But that should not limit our right to play the music we want to present, but the target audiences are maybe not, not many seventy or eighty year olds (laughs)... One has to direct ordinary marketing too, one has to direct oneself at the group where one potentially could find listeners. But we do not have anything against that [more traditional church practices], there have been many fine Christmas services and church services during my years, I even stumbled into some gospel weekend last year, so we are not so narrow-minded that we are 'only metal' and then we demonstrate against everything else [inaudible] that there is". (IF mgt 2008/55/1-2)

In this excerpt, Anders O takes up a range of closely related important issues. Everyone should be allowed to express their faith in a way that suits them, he states. He also clearly expresses the view generally shared by Christian metal musicians that their musical activities should not be understood in terms of a rejection of more traditional forms of church practice and modes of religious expression. However, that should not "limit" the right of Christian metalheads to express their faith in the particular way that suits them best. In this way, Anders O also highlights Christian metal as a *complement* to other musical practices within particular churches. However, as he points out, they do not wish to impose their music on anyone. Apart from the experiences of the two musicians quoted here, the issue of legitimation only seldom appears in the accounts of other interviewed musicians. Hence, on the whole, the "Christian metal is a legitimate form of evangelism and religious expression"-discourse seems not to hold all that much importance for the majority of Finnish musicians interviewed for this study. This is because, for most of them, this particular

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\* Inte skall vi heller gå och säga att någonting är fel eller att någonting är mer rätt utan det är ju vad folk vill ha och vill höra som, det måste ju erbjudas åt dem, att vill de höra på gospel eller psalmer och sådant så måste de ju få ha det. Men det får ju inte heller begränsa vår rätt heller att spela den musik som vi vill framföra, men målgrupperna är ju inte kanske, rentav så många sjuttio och åttioåringar (skratt)... Man måste ju rikta liksom vanlig marknadsföring också, man måste ju rikta in sig på den gruppen där man potentiellt kan hitta åhörare. Men vi har ju ingenting mot att, det har varit många fina julmässor och gudstjänster under mina år, att jag till och med vinglade in på någon gospelhelg förra året, så inte är vi så trångsynta heller att vi 'bara metal' och så demonstrerar vi mot allt [ohörbart] som förekommer.

way of representing Christian metal appears rather remote from their real life experiences.

### 6. 3. 4 The relationship to secular metal music

Among the key discourses on the basic meaning and function of Christian metal one also finds the “Christian metal is an alternative to secular metal”-discourse. This discourse mainly concentrates on the different *values* that Christian and secular metal are seen to convey or represent. Through this discourse, Christian metal is typically represented as containing a *positive* message and thereby as offering an alternative to the perceived potentially destructive messages conveyed in much secular metal. Indeed, as we saw in our discussion of issues of evangelism above, many musicians state that they wish to convey a sense of “positiveness” (IF mgt 2007/71) and “hope” (IF mgt 2008/56) through their music (also for example IF mgt 2007/73; IF mgt 2007/70; IF mgt 2008/57; IF mgt 2008/58).

Apart from some notable exceptions, most Finnish Christian metal musicians interviewed for this study expressed largely similar views on secular metal. Nearly all of them regularly listened to secular metal. Most had also initially become interested in metal through well-known secular bands (e.g. IF mgt 2007/69; IF mgt 2007/70; IF mgt 2007/71). Some also explicitly pointed out that they actually listened more to secular than Christian metal (IF mgt 2007/70; IF mgt 2008/54). There are many obvious reasons for this; one being that there are an infinitely larger number of secular metal bands available. Generally speaking, the radical lyrical content that one can sometimes find in the production of some secular metal bands did not constitute a very important issue for most musicians interviewed. Most stated that they only disliked and also to some degree avoided bands who write lyrics that directly and explicitly attack their Christian faith (e.g. IF mgt 2007/69; IF mgt 2007/70; IF mgt 2007/71).

For example, Timo from Lumina Polaris explained that he disliked such things as the portrayal of “indiscriminate violence”, the “idealization of intoxicants”, and the “idealization of war”<sup>\*</sup> that one sometimes finds in secular metal. However, regarding such radical and extreme themes he also made the following comments:

Well like, I myself, what I have followed, I understand that many do it sort of more in terms of art or something, so that although there may be very provocative lyrics indeed and other things, that does not necessarily, if you can say that they are not like really serious then, when they put, use powerful

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<sup>\*</sup> silmitön väkivalta, päihteen käytön ihannoiminen, sodan ihannoiminen.

Timo takes the view that, for many secular bands, writing lyrics on extreme and radical topics has more to do with making art than anything else. Consequently, although he may not like all such topics, generally speaking, he does not necessarily regard them as reflections of musician's actual attitudes and views. When asked about his thoughts on explicitly anti-Christian lyrics he replied: "Well, in no way does it feel good, and I do not, myself I do not like really listen if it is like clearly..."\* (IF mgt 2008/56). Timo thus only avoids listening to lyrics that directly attack his Christian faith. Overall, however, he takes this issue lightly. There were also some musicians who stated that they just could not take seriously overtly extreme lyrics, or that they just ignored them if the music was otherwise good. For example, Anders B from Hilastherion commented as follows:

I really listen to nearly everything, if it sounds good to me, the band, then it is OK with me. In some extreme cases where they sing like totally negatively [inaudible] then I do close my ears again, and in comparison with Christian metal, if I listen to that then it is much more emotional /.../ it is not the same thing.\* (IF mgt 2008/55/1-2)

In this excerpt, Anders B states that he really listens to any kind of metal as long as the music is good and that he only ignores lyrics that are overly negative. At the same time, he also seems to suggest that one needs to keep one's guard up when listening to some secular bands. He also clearly takes the view that there still is some kind of difference between Christian and secular metal. He describes listening to Christian metal as being more "emotional" compared with listening to secular metal. A few musicians also explained that they were much more selective regarding secular metal (IF mgt 2008/55/1-2; IF mgt 2008/58). For example, Anders O from Hilastherion expressed the following views:

Personally, I do think that one can listen to that which is important, but I have always distanced myself from everything that, from all lyrics that go against my

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\* Kyllä minä niin kuin itse, mitä olen seurannut, minä niin kuin ymmärrän että monet tekee sitä tavallan ehkä enemmän niin kuin taiteena tai semmoisena niin kuin että välttämättä vaikka saatta olla hyvinkin provosoivia sanoituksia ja tuommoista niin välttämättä jos voi sanoa että he eivät ole niin kuin tosissaan tavallaan sitten ja laitetaan vähän niin kuin, käytetään voimakkaita ilmaisuja ja kielikuvia.

\* No ei se mitenkään sillai hyvältä tunnu että, ja en minä, itse en sillai niin kuin oikeastaan kuuntele jos ihan niin kuin selvästi...

\* Jag lyssnar nog på det mesta och, bara det låter bra i mina öron, bandet så, är det OK för mig. Vissa extremfall där de sjunger helt liksom negativt [ohörbart] där stänger jag nog öronen åter och i jämförelse då med kristen metal, om jag hör på det så är det mycket mera känslomässigt /.../ det är inte samma sak där.

faith. It has, for example, when I became a Christian I threw away two hundred CDs, just, well I felt that, or that I take a distance from it and maybe for a year afterwards I did not really listen all that much to other music [than Christian] just to stabilize myself in faith. But as the years have passed I have still felt that, in that way, it has not influenced me in the same way.\* (IF mgt 2008/55/1-2)

Compared to the other views cited above, Anders O takes a much stronger stance. Indeed, he states that he consciously avoids all lyrics that go against his faith. He does also say, however, that one can listen to “that which is important”. By this he means listening to secular bands that are particularly musically innovative or that pioneer new styles. He also alludes to his conversion to Christianity as he tells about having thrown away his secular CD collection in order to distance himself from the influences of secular music on his life. However, he then goes on to explain that his views on this issue have changed somewhat over the years. When he speaks about “it” not having influenced him in the same way anymore, he is speaking of no longer being as influenced by secular metal as he perhaps used to be in the past. He thus no longer strives to avoid secular metal as strongly as he did before. That, however, has not changed the fact that he still avoids listening to lyrics that go against his faith.

Although they expressed different views on the issue, every musician interviewed still had *something* to say about the relationship between Christian and secular metal. Most musicians opposed making sharp distinctions between the two. As might be expected, this view was particularly common among musicians who also originally questioned the usefulness of the label “Christian metal”. Musicians thus typically related this issue to debates concerning the definition of Christian metal. For example, let us consider the following excerpt from the interview with Panu from Sacrecy:

Panu: I have never really liked dividing up music like into secular and Christian in that way, in my view it is sort of a bit of a shame that they are so clearly separated from each other as they are today. In my view it is like... Well, both sides are like still music, but it is more on the secular side where there is this sort of craze to try to like separate them as much as possible in a way that they would not be, that like they sort of would not belong to the same group.

MM: Why do you think that... Or what do you think would be the reasons for that?

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\* Jag själv personligen anser nog att man kan lyssna på det viktiga, men jag har alltid tagit avstånd till allting som, alla texter som går emot min tro. Det har nog, till exempel när jag blev kristen så slängde jag bort tvåhundra CD skivor, bara, alltså jag kände det, eller jag tar ett avstånd mot det och kanske ett år efter lyssnade jag egentligen inte så mycket på annan musik bara för att stabilisera sig i tron. Men när åren kom så har man känt ändå att det inte på det sättet har påverkat en på samma sätt.

Panu: Well, on the secular side there is this, this quite common perception that Christian music cannot be good and there is also this notion that a Christian message that for example metal bands may have reduces the credibility of a band. Or for example record reviews which I have read, well it means a lot to like a secular or like an Atheist reviewer if the songs have a Christian message, and if the record is OK otherwise, if there is a Christian message, then it might like reduce the points straight away.\* (IF mgt 2008/54)

In this excerpt, Panu laments the fact that there is so much prejudice against Christian metal within the wider secular metal community. This is a view that is shared by all musicians interviewed for this study in some way or other. As illustrated by Panu's remarks, when musicians were asked about their thoughts on secular metal, in various ways, they typically related this issue to the unfortunate separation of Christian metal from other forms of metal. This is clearly not fully in line with representing Christian metal as an alternative to secular metal since that would also involve a more obvious willingness to separate the two from the Christian side. As Panu continued to explain:

I believe that, on the Christian side, there is also this desire to separate this like Christian music from secular music but personally I do not like that all that much because.... Well for example because I have myself tried to form contacts and aimed at being able to get gigs on the secular side and so on just because the message does not like need to be spread to like religious people, so these Christian bands are sort of more needed on the secular front in my opinion.\*

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\* Panu: Minä en ole koskaan oikein tykännyt sillai jakaa tuota musiikkia just niin kuin maalliseen ja kristilliseen, että minun mielestä se on aika harmi tavallaan että ne silleen niin kuin erotellaan toisistaan niin selvästi kuin nykyään tehdään. Minun mielestä silleen niin kuin... No siis musiikkia nämä kummatkin niin kuin puolet tavallaan on, mutta niin kuin se on enemmän tuolla maallisella puolella semmoinen villitys tavallaan että niin kuin koitetaan silleen niin kuin erotella mahdollisemman paljon niitä että niin kuin että se ei olisi, että ei kuuluisi silleen niin kuin samaan ryhmään.

MM: Miksi sinä luulet että se... Tai miten sinä ajattelet että mistäköhän se niin kuin voisi johtua?

Panu: No maallisella puolella on semmoinen, semmoinen käsitys aika yleinen että kristillinen musiikki ei voi olla hyvä ja muutenkin se että niin kuin aika usein ajatellaan että tämä kristillinen sanoma mitä esimerkiksi heviväändeillä on niin se tavallaan on, on tavallaan pois bändin uskottavuudesta. Tai esimerkiksi tuota mitä näitä levyarvosteluja niin kuin sillee on lukenut niin se merkitsee tosi paljon niin kuin sillee varsinkin maalliselle tai tämmöiselle ateisti tai tämmöiselle arvostelijalle että onko biisissä kristillistä sanomaa jos niin kuin levy on noin muuten ihan jees niin jos siinä on kristillistä sanomaa niin sattaa sitten niin kuin alentaa saman tien niin kuin heti pisteitä.

\* Kyllä minä uskon että kristillisellä puolella halutaan silleen niin kuin myöskin erottaa tämä niin kuin kristillinen musiikki tuosta maallisesta musiikista mutta minä en itse siitä henkilökohtaisesti hirveästi taas tykkää koska niin kuin... No esimerkiksi silleen minäkin olen koittanut ihan niin kuin maallisellekin puolelle niin kuin luoda kontakteja ja pyrin siihen että maallisellekin puolelle voitaisiin saada keikka ja jne ihan vaan sen takia koska eihän niin kuin tuota sanomaa tarvitse levittää enää niin



As seen here, Christian metal is presented as being different from secular metal because of its Christian content and evangelistic aims. However, it is only very vaguely represented in terms of being an *alternative to* secular metal. As seen in the above excerpts, Panu clearly regards such separation as being unfortunate and unhelpful. He therefore represents Christian metal more as a particular form of metal that exists side by side with secular metal. Although a few musicians clearly draw on the “Christian metal is an alternative to secular metal”-discourse when talking about their views on secular metal, most only hint at it in indirect and much more ambiguous ways.

As many Finnish Christian metal musicians have grown up with secular metal this has undoubtedly influenced their views on this issue as well. However, it is important to note that their views on this issue also need to be understood in relation to the wider Christian environments in which they have grown up. For example, parishes quite frequently, regardless of denomination, buy in Christian music, including Christian metal, in order to make it available to their young members. Although many musicians reported having been recommended Christian bands in this way, they did not report having been directly encouraged to actually *replace* their favorite secular bands with Christian alternatives. In Finland, Christian groups, which expect their members to avoid contact with the wider secular culture altogether are exceptionally rare. This is not to say that such ideas may not indeed to some degree surface within *some* groups. As we saw in our discussion of issues of legitimation above, two musicians interviewed who had grown up in and remained affiliated with more conservative free churches (in these cases Charismatic and Pentecostal churches) had some experiences of such attitudes. However, apart from these notably exceptional cases, the occasional small disagreements and conflicts musicians reported having experienced had primarily concerned *musical form* as such. Furthermore, as we saw in our discussion of the external discursive construction of the scene, within broader Finnish Christian contexts, when discussed at all, the activities of Christian metal musicians are generally viewed in a clearly positive light.

When looking more closely at what musicians had to say regarding Christian metal being represented as an alternative to secular metal it is clear that they are very aware of Christian metal often being represented in this way. However, most are reluctant to represent it in that way themselves. We thus need to draw the conclusion that the notion of

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kuin silleen uskovaisille ihmisille että enemmän tämmöisiä kristillisiä bändejä tarvitaan tuonne maalliselle niin kuin rintamalle minun mielestä.

Christian metal as an alternative to secular metal seems not to have influenced Finnish musicians to any larger degree.

## Conclusion

What, then, can be said by way of conclusion? We can begin by noting that musicians reported taking part in transnational and national scenic discourse both in different ways as well as to different degrees. Many reported that they regularly followed transnational Christian metal media and online discussion forums in particular. One could thus expect these musicians to be very aware of the ways in which Christian metal is usually represented within wider transnational scenic discourse and transnational scenic media in particular. However, a few musicians reported only following scenic discourse sporadically or not much at all. Even so, it is interesting to note that these musicians also represented and talked about their musical activities and Christian metal in general in largely the same ways as did those who participated in scenic discourse more actively.

Generally speaking, when expressing their thoughts on what Christian metal essentially was about to them, Finnish Christian metal musicians often drew on the key discourses on the basic meaning and function of Christian metal which also circulate within the wider transnational scene. As their views were primarily based on their own real life experiences in the particular cultural and religious context of Finland, these discourses also assumed some more specific meanings as they became embedded in that particular wider context.

However, we also saw that Finnish Christian metal musicians did not draw on all of these key discourses to the same extent. In other words, they did not seem to be particularly concerned with representing and understanding their own musical activities, as well as the phenomenon of Christian metal more generally, in all of the central ways in which it is recurrently represented and understood within transnational internal scenic discourse. Although it is clear that Finnish musicians view Christian metal as a fully legitimate form of religious expression and evangelism, when talking about these issues, they rarely drew on the “Christian metal is a *legitimate* form of religious expression and evangelism”-discourse explicitly. This is because, apart from a few notable exceptions, most of them had never actually had to defend and legitimate their musical activities in real life. When this particular way of representing Christian metal did surface in their accounts, it primarily did so in relation to musicians expressing a desire for metal *music*, and its enduring and growing appeal for young people in particular, to become more clearly recognized in wider church contexts. In this sense, this discourse can also be said to having made itself

felt when musicians called for a renewal of musical forms in church settings. It can thus be seen to have lurked beneath the surface in many of these accounts. However, only two musicians raised the issue of Christian metal's legitimacy in more explicit terms.

Nor were musicians particularly concerned with representing Christian metal as an *alternative* to secular metal. Whilst a few musicians did indeed draw on the "Christian metal is an alternative to secular metal"-discourse in passing, many instead clearly rejected making distinctions between Christian and secular metal in that regard. One reason for this no doubt has to do with metal's prominent position within the wider Finnish popular cultural milieu. It also has to do with the relatively liberal Christian environments in which most interviewed musicians have grown up. This further serves to illustrate how the meanings that musicians attach to their musical activities as well as Christian metal in general come to depend on the wider cultural and religious context in which they find themselves.

By contrast, musicians clearly drew on both the "Christian metal is an alternative form of religious expression"- and "Christian metal is an alternative means of evangelism"-discourses in a number of ways. For example, for one musician making and playing music constituted "a personal way of practicing faith to some degree" (IF mgt 2007/70). Another understood his musical activities in light the Great Commission, and viewed it as an alternative form of "Christian activity" that goes on beyond "the walls of the church" (IF mgt 2007/71). Yet another described the activities of his band in terms of a searching for "new forms" (IF mgt 2007/73) of musical religious expression that are more in tune with the cultural sensibilities of increasing numbers of people today.

Many musicians also explicitly emphasized evangelistic outreach as constituting a fundamental component of their musical activities (e.g. IF mgt 2007/73; IF mgt 2008/55/1-2; IF mgt 2008/59). The notion of Christian metal as an *alternative* means of evangelism was likewise brought to the fore in many of these accounts. In various ways, many musicians also represented Christian metal as a particularly *suitable* way of reaching certain kinds of people, and secular metal audiences in particular. For many, such evangelism essentially took the form of trying to brake down prejudices against Christianity by going out among secular audiences and striving to encourage them to reflection on issues of faith. One musician aptly described this in terms of aiming to convince secular audiences that Christian life can take many forms and that not all Christians "sit in church with their hair tightly in a bun" (IF mgt 2007/69).

As seen in this chapter, on a transnational level, the main meanings and functions ascribed to Christian metal are typically represented through four closely related and frequently overlapping key discourses. Through these discourses, Christian metal is first of all represented as an *alternative form of*

*religious expression* that is different from more traditional or more institutionally bound forms of religious expression. As such, it is also represented as a particular *popular culturally* inspired form of religious expression that is more in line with the cultural sensibilities of its musicians and fans. Second, in close connection to this discourse, Christian metal is also typically represented as an *alternative means of evangelism*, that is, as an alternative, and usually also effective, way of reaching certain groups of people, and secular metalheads in particular. Through this discourse, the Christian metal scene also invests its own activities with an *evangelistic mandate*. Third, Christian metal is also represented as being fully *legitimate* in both of these two respects. As argued above, this way of representing Christian metal also functions as a means by which the Christian metal scene as a whole can legitimate *itself to itself*. Fourth, Christian metal is often represented as constituting a *positive alternative* to the perceived potentially destructive and ‘meaningless’ lyrical content conveyed in much secular metal. Through this discourse, the Christian metal scene as a whole is also *distinguished* as a particular alternative and ‘positive’ type of metal community. Notably, these four key ways of representing Christian metal recurrently appear at all levels of today’s transnational scene. However, Christian metal scene members still draw upon them in different ways depending on the particular social, cultural, and religious contexts in which they find themselves. As just noted above, when these four key discourses were explored in relation to the views and real life experiences of Finnish Christian metal musicians, they all became considerably more multidimensional. Finnish musicians were clearly not as concerned with representing Christian metal in all of these main ways. Instead, they mainly chose to represent Christian metal and their own musical activities as an alternative form of religious expression and evangelism.

## **7. Christian metal, everyday religious life, and alternative Christian identity**

As has been explored in detail in the previous chapter, when Finnish Christian metal musicians talk about what Christian metal and their own musical activities mean to them, they typically represent it as constituting an alternative form of religious expression and evangelism. Because of this one would assume that their musical activities, as well as Christian metal in general and the Christian metal scene of which they are core members, would play an important role in their everyday religious lives. Moreover, one would also assume that their understandings of their own musical activities would have bearings on their identities as Christians.

In this final part of the study we shall explore this issue in more detail. In doing this we also move beyond issues of discursive construction specifically, focusing more on what broader and more general functions the Christian metal scene serves for its core members. Having done this, we shall also discuss what this might imply more broadly about young (male) Christian's views on religious life in Finland today. Finally, we shall summarize the main findings of this study and discuss some of its implications for possible future research on today's relationship between religion and popular culture. In relation to this I shall also present some suggestions on further research on related issues within the study of religious change in Finland today.

### **7.1 The Christian metal scene and everyday religious life**

Considering the meanings and functions that Finnish Christian metal musicians attach to their musical activities we now need to ask how these meanings and functions relate to their everyday religious lives. We might begin by looking at what musicians had to say more generally about Christianity's position within the present broader Finnish social and cultural environment. During the interviews, all the musicians were asked about their thoughts on the position of Christianity and Christian faith in contemporary Finnish society and culture. Significantly, with the exception of one musician who stated that he never really had given these issues much thought, every other musician expressed some degree of dismay about the current state of Christianity in today's Finnish society and culture. Let us consider some examples. The following views were expressed by Wille from From Ashes:

Through my work with confirmation class I have noticed that religion and the Lutheran Church still has a very notable position in Finnish culture, and I believe that if like the Church had more pastors who are dedicated to their work, then there could be very much people in church. Like that we have something in the range of ninety percent of the age-group [people around the age of fifteen] attending confirmation class, which is a larger portion than all young people belonging to the church, that shows that the church still has a strong position but it is, I am of the view that the Church is like on a knife-edge so that it could lose its position.\* (IFmgt 2007/70)

Speaking of his own experiences of working within the Evangelical Lutheran Church, Wille takes the view that it still occupies a strong position within Finnish society and culture. However, he also fears that it may be on the brink of losing that position. Moreover, Wille also states that he would like to see a higher degree of dedication among those who work within and represent the Church. In the interview, he also spoke about having come to identify with the “neo orthodox” movement within the Church that is concentrated on “caring for the faith”\* (IF mgt 2007/70). Generally speaking, however, as an active and dedicated member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, Wille can clearly be said to express concern about more recent developments. Very similar views were also expressed by Markus from Megiddon:

Markus: In my view, in a certain way, its position has weakened primarily because of, like because of the Lutheran Church or because of its own fault. In a way concessions have started to be made on such issues which are very strongly like doctrinal issues and many issues that have been fundamental have been given up just because one should be tolerant and somehow modern and with the spirit of the times. It is sort of, many non-religious people have also said that the Church like does itself damage by making concessions on issues that have been fundamental and doctrinal for thousands of years. It is regrettable.

MM: How would you, would you for example have some propositions or thoughts on how that could be reversed like in a positive direction?

Markus: Well, for example many free denominations precisely do not make those concessions on doctrinal issues and somehow the Lutheran Church could have much to learn from them in that regard. As it is today I am not sure that it will change or at least not to what it has been sometime before but then maybe

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\* Rippikoulutyön kautta olen huomannut sen että uskonnolla ja luterilaisella uskolla on edelleen hyvin merkittävä asema suomalaisessa kulttuurissa ja minä uskon että jos niin kuin kirkolla olisi enemmän sellaisia niin kuin paimenia jotka on omistautunut sille työlleen ja uskoisi sen niin kuin perinteiseen evankeliumiin niin kirkossa voisi olla, niin kuin kirkossa voisi olla hyvinkin paljon ihmisiä. Että se että meillä käy niin kuin tuommoisen jotain yhdeksänkymmenen prosentin luokkaa niin kuin ikäluokasta rippikoulua joka on siis suurempi määrä kuin mitä kirkkoon kuluu nuoria niin se osoittaa sitä että kirkolla on vielä, vielä vahva asema mutta se on, minä olen sitä mieltä että kirkko on niin kuin veitsenterällä että se voi menettää sen asemansa.

\* Uusortodoksia, opin vaaliminen.

everyone should have a little look in the mirror and particularly in the Bible to see how these things really have been thought out.” (IF mgt 2007/71)

In this excerpt, Markus expresses concern about the Evangelical Lutheran Church having made too many “concessions” on a range of fundamental doctrinal issues in its endeavor to adjust to wider social and cultural developments. According to Markus, through liberalizing its position on central Christian teachings the church does itself a serious disservice. As noted in our discussion of the current state of institutional Christianity in Finland in chapter 2, this is a commonly held view among the religiously active minority of the Church who tend to lament the church’s increasingly lukewarm approach to both its own teachings as well as other important faith-related issues within wider society and culture. As Markus contends, both the Church and its individual members should perhaps take a closer “look in the mirror and particularly in the Bible”. Importantly, Markus takes the view that the Evangelical Lutheran Church could have much to learn from the much more steadfast attitude towards doctrinal issues that one finds in free church settings. In the interview, Markus also talked about being active in some free church activities. However, he also explains that, although denominational affiliation is of no real importance to him, he remains a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. In any case, his assessment of the current state of the Church can hardly be viewed as positive as he does not think that the foreseeable future will bring any significant changes in this regard. He would thus like to see the Church rethink its role in today’s Finnish society and culture. Indeed, these types of views were in some way or other expressed by every musician interviewed who was affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church.

We might also look more closely at the views of other musicians who are not members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church but instead affiliated with

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\* Markus: Minun mielestä se asema on tietyllä tavalla heikentynyt pitkälti niin, niin kuin luterilaisen kirkon takia tai heidän niin kuin omasta syystään että, että tavallaan on niin kuin alettu tekemään myönnytyksiä semmoisista asioista mitkä on hyvin vahvasti niin kuin opillisia kysymyksiä että on tuota luovuttu monista semmoisista asioista mitkä on ollut perustavanlaatuisia kysymyksiä ihan sen varjolla että pitää olla suvaitsevainen ja pitää jotenkin niin kuin olla nykyaikainen ja ajan hengen mukana. Se on tavallaan, monet ei-uskovaiset on möys sanoneet että niin kuin kirkko tekee itselleen hallaa sillä että tekee myönnytyksiä semmoisissa asioissa mitkä on perustavanlaatua olevia niin kuin opillisia kysymyksiä ollut vuosituhansia. Se on valitettavaa.

MM: Miten sinä, olisiko sinulla esimerkiksi joku ehdotus tai ajatus miten tuo saisi käännettyä niin kuin positiiviseen suuntaan?

Markus: No, monet vapaat suunnat esimerkiksi tekee just sitä että ne ei anna niitä myönnytyksiä opillisista kysymyksistä ja jotenkin heiltä olisi varmasti luterilaisella kirkolla paljon opittavaa siinä suhteessa. Minä en välttämättä usko että nykyisillään se enää tulee muuttumaan ainakaan siihen mitä se on ollut joskus aiemmin mutta tuota ehkä siinä pitäisi sitten jokaisen katsoa vähän peiliin ja nimenomaan sinne raamattuun että mitenkä nämä asiat nyt olikaan ajateltu.



free churches which, in relation to Heelas' and Woodhead's (2005) typology of different types of Christian congregations outlined above, would fall within the categories of "congregations of experiential difference" or "congregations of experiential humanity". It is important to note here that these types of churches have largely managed or at least made strong efforts to resist making concessions on doctrinal and ethical issues. It should also be noted that, generally speaking, when issues concerning the types of concessions and accommodation intended here are debated within such settings, *resistance* may often be taken as the starting point rather than the other way around. Jere from the Finnish Christian heavy metal band Venia, who is a member of a Pentecostal parish, expressed the following views on these issues:

It looks like its position in a sense is like weakening somewhat in the West when these pluralistic values are predominant now and, well, it is a bit like a sort of a mishmash so that anything goes but then again nothing goes or like that. So it is like a bit like people would not want to believe in absolute values anymore, so that everything can be a bit whatever, and then still Christianity is about absolute truths so I think that this world of values in the West is moving away from Christianity even though it is still quite visible on the surface but the churches too /.../ You cannot say that the Lutheran Church this and that by itself /.../ or some other church, but the churches too have maybe like become more secular. But then there are of course also those groups which still firmly hold fast to those, the original idea, biblical values. I do not want to take a stand on whether the Church is a bad thing, or if the Lutheran Church or that they would be completely off track, but there would be reason to be careful regarding these issues in Christian circles now and think about whether we are giving in to the wrong things or whether we should stay on the 'rock of Christ' to use a figure of speech, that is, with the values given by the Bible or whether we should draw up some line of our own in accordance with the world and whatever whim at any one time.\* (IF mgt 2008/58)

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\* Näyttäisi että sen asema on hieman heikentymässä niin kuin länsimaissa tietyllä tavalla kun täällä on nyt vallalla semmoinen moniarvoisuus että tuota se on vähän niin kuin sitten semmoista mössöä että kaikki käy mutta sitten mikään ei käy tai saillai. Että tämä on vähän tällaista että kuitenkin ei kuin enää haluttaisi uskoa absoluuttisiin arvoihin niin paljon, että kaikki saa olla vähän mitä on, ja on sitten kuitenkin kristinuskossa kyse absoluuttisista totuuksista niin minä vaan näkisin että tämä arvomaailma länsimaissa niin on menossa pois päin kristillisiltä vaikka se niin kuin vielä päällisin puolin on aika paljon näkyvissä mutta myös kirkotkin /.../ Ei voi sanoa että luterilainen kirkko sitä ja sitä yksin /.../ tai joku muu kirkko, mutta kirkotkin ehkä hiukan on niin kuin tähän maallistumaan päin ollut. Mutta sitten tietysti niissä on myös niitä porukoita jotka edelleen tiukasti pitää kiinni niistä, alkuperäisestä ideasta, raamatullisista arvoista. En nyt halua ottaa kantaa että kirkko olisi paha asia, tai luterilainen kirkko tai että ne olisi täysin hunningolla, mutta näissä asioissa kristillisissäkin piirreissä olisi syytä olla nytten tarkkana että miettiä että annetaanko periksi väärissä asioissa että vai pysytäänkö me siinä "kristus kalliolla" näin kielikuvaa käyttäen eli raamatun antamissa arvoissa vai lähdetäänkö me vetämään semmoista oma linjaa vähän maailman mukaan ja milloin minkäkin tuulahduksen mukaan.

In this excerpt, Jere takes up largely similar issues as Wille and Markus above, as he laments the increasing relativism and groundlessness of moral values within Western contemporary society and culture. Significantly, like Wille and Markus above, he also draws attention to how increasing secularization and moral and ethical relativism has affected Christian churches as well and made them increasingly prone to making accommodations to the wider “whims” of the broader social and cultural climate. Although he points out that no single church is to blame for this development, Jere would still like to see the churches becoming more careful and mindful regarding the ways in which they engage with these broader social and cultural changes. Moreover, similar to the other musicians quoted above, he is also clearly aware of the problems that Christian churches face in contemporary times. Discussing this same topic, Timo from Lumina Polaris, who is also an active member of a Pentecostal parish, expressed these views:

Timo: Well, maybe it is, just yesterday I heard on the radio that something like a hundred thousand people has left the church so in that way maybe it could be seen to superficially be sort of about to lose its position but, or at least like the folk state church [inaudible]. But of course then we have these like smaller, smaller communities where there is a very lively, lively Christianity, but maybe it has at least declined in like mainstream culture.

MM: How do you feel about that?

Timo: Well, it is sort of not in any way a surprise to me but... I can not say if it is a positive or negative thing but... Somehow I see it sort of like a predictable development in Finnish society.\*

(IFmgt 2008/56)

Looking at this excerpt, one immediately notices a clear difference in tone. Timo no doubt takes the view here that Christianity in general, as represented by the Evangelical Lutheran Church, has indeed lost some of its earlier position within the wider Finnish cultural mainstream. This comes as

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\* Timo: No, on se ehkä, just eilen kuuntelin radiosta kun jotain satatuhatta on eronnut kirkosta niin tuolla lailla niin ehkä sen niin kuin näkee niin kuin pintapuolisesti että se on vähän niin kuin tavallaan menettämässä mutta että, tai ainakin tuolla lailla niin kuin kansan valtion kirkko [ei kuultavissa]. Mutta tietenkin sitten meillä on tuommoisia niin kuin pienempiä, pienempiä yhteisöjä jossa on hyvinkin elävää, elävää kristillisyyttä, mutta ehkä niin kuin valtakulttuurissa ainakin taantunut se.

MM: Miten sinä koet sen?

Timo: No, tavallaan se ei ole mitenkään yllätys minulle sillai mutta... En osa sanoa että onko se positiivinen vai negatiivinen asia mutta tuota... Jotenkin näen sen tavallaan semmoisena niin kuin ennalta arvattavana kehityksenä Suomalaisessa yhteiskunnassa.

no surprise to him as he sees it as a “predictable development in Finnish society”. However, he seems only mildly concerned about it, and not able to say if it is a “positive or negative thing”. This is because, as he points out, there are also a lot of smaller Christian communities out there in which Christianity is “lively” and flourishing. In similar ways, Anders O from Hilastherion, who is an active member of a Charismatic church, expressed the following views on the subject:

I would say that, for me Christianity is not so much about if you belong to the church here and there, that there is much writing and debate about people leaving the church. In a way for me it makes no difference if people belong to the church or not, like why should they belong to the church if they do not believe in what is said in church anyway. Like for me Christianity is mostly about what there is in each person’s heart, that which one believes in, and that which one wants to believe in, that is what one should do. Of course, it is with sorrow one looks at the development in Finland when more and more people choose to give up the Christian faith for their own lives, but one can only hope that one can contribute with one’s own life to, if possible, try to get that curve to point upwards again.\* (IFmgt 2008/55/1-2)

As stated by Anders O here, he does not attach much importance to denominational affiliation. He does, however, look “with sorrow” at the fact that the role of Christianity has diminished in contemporary society and that increasing numbers of people no longer seem interested in what the churches have to offer. However, similar to Timo above, he does not seem all that concerned about these developments although he thinks that one should, “if possible”, try to contribute to reversing that trend.

Although the musicians quoted here do not seem equally concerned about the current state of Christianity in Finland, they are nevertheless all clearly of the opinion that things have developed, and most likely will continue to develop, in an regrettable direction. They are thus all highly aware of representing a minority within a wider social and cultural climate increasingly marked by secularization (although not necessarily understood as involving a “secularization of the mind”) and religious change. Furthermore, in many ways, and regardless of their denominational affiliations, musicians also tend to emphasize that there exists a need for new, alternative, and complementary ways of religious expression among

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\* Jag skulle då säga att, för mig handlar ju kristendom inte så jätte mycket om man hör till kyrkan hit och dit att, att det är ju mycket skriverier och debatter om att folk som går ut ur kyrkan. På ett sätt för mig så kvittar det om folk är med i kyrkan eller inte, att varför skall de vara med i kyrkan om de ändå inte tror på det som sägs i kyrkan. Att för mig handlar kristendom mycket om vad som finns i var och ens hjärta, att det som man tror på, och det man vill tro på, det är det man skall göra. Att klart är det med sorg man ser på utvecklingen i Finland när mer och mer folk så väljer att lämna bort den kristna tron för sitt liv, men man får ju hoppas att man kan själv bidra med sitt eget liv till att om möjligt då försöka få den där kurvan att vända uppåt igen.

younger generations across the denominational spectrum. This is most clearly expressed through musicians pointing out their own need to express their faith in an alternative and complementary way that is more in line with their particular cultural sensibilities. They seem to suggest that any comparable forms of religious expression cannot be found within any denomination. Considering the perceived diminishing role and position of Christian churches throughout Finnish society at large, there is also a growing need for alternative ways of spreading the Christian message. The argument here is that the more traditional ways of going about trying to attract more people to churches have clearly not been able to meet the challenges of today.

As seen above, in connection to this argument, Christian metal musicians also invest their activities as well as the scene as a whole with an evangelistic mandate. However, as many musicians state that as they do not attach any particular importance to denominational affiliation anyway, there is really no reason for them to aim to attract people to particular churches. Instead, musicians seem more concerned with attracting people to Christianity more generally. Indeed, as stated many times above, as the Christian metal scene draws together people with a range of different denominational affiliations, it remains a highly independent and cross-denominational community that advocates no particular denominational creed. This is why the activities of the Christian metal scene and individual scene members should not be directly equated with the practices or aims of particular churches. For although the musicians interviewed here represent different denominations and remain active members of their respective parishes and churches they also actively participate in the promotion, maintenance, and reproduction of a distinct Christian music scene in which denominational affiliation is often explicitly talked about as being of no real significance. In this context, different denominational teachings and practices become secondary to what one Christian metal Internet-site administrator referred to earlier as “a basic Christian faith” (IF 2005/5: 1-7).

It is important to note that this also has important bearings on the *religious* meanings and functions that many musicians attach to their own everyday musical activities as well as to participating in the scene itself. Making and playing music provides musicians with an additional avenue through which to engage with faith and work out personal everyday struggles. As we already saw above, Wille from From Ashes spoke of his musical activities in terms of a “personal way of practicing faith to some degree” and a way of dealing with dark emotions and “gloomy feelings” (IF mgt 2007/70). Similarly, Markus from Megiddon explained that:

The message is like a uniting thing and then there is also the same type of music and then for me it also makes possible the expression of like my own feelings

when I make music, and also when I listen to music, it puts my thoughts and feelings into words and as such it has a very strong position in my life.” (IFmgt 2007/71)

As exemplified by Markus here, many musicians state that making, playing, and listening to Christian metal helps them express and deal with their feelings and emotions. Many also explained that it has helped them to deal with their own struggles regarding issues of faith. For example, as Anders O from Hilasterion explained: “I /.../ became a believer when I was eighteen and came into contact with Christian metal when I was nineteen and it is really much thanks to that that one has gone on and kept the faith through the years”<sup>\*</sup> (IF mgt 2008/55/1-2). His younger band mate Niclas also talked about how coming into contact with Christian metal had a strong impact on his religious life:

Then at some time I had gone along /.../ to Sweden, well there were these very good Christian metal festivals where you sort of felt ‘but hey!’, I feel that I am at home here sort of, like with those kinds of people. For example, there was one that was called Bobfest /.../ Endtime Festival, very like, I got a very strong experience of being there, and like, also got to know other Christian metal bands.” (IFmgt 2008/55/1-2)

Here, Niclas talks of coming into contact with a wider scenic environment which had a strong influence on him. He speaks of having experienced a feeling of being “at home” within such an environment. To take another related example, speaking about which kinds of parish activities he is active in, Pekka from Sotahuuto explained that “Sotahuuto is also one such parish that I go to /.../ a spiritual community too”<sup>\*</sup> (IF mgt 2007/69). For some, the music primarily functions as a way of contemplating issues of faith. For example, when asked if his musical activities played some role in his religious life, Timo from Lumina Polaris commented: “Well yes, when you play in a band yourself you think about those things quite a lot... through

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<sup>\*</sup> Se on semmoinen yhdistävä asia tuo sanoma ja sitten vielä saman tyyppinen musiikki ja tuota sitten myöskin niin se mahdollistaa minulle niin kuin minun omien tunteiden ilmaisua kun tuota minä teen musiikkia niin myös sillä tavalla että minä kuuntelen musiikkia niin se sanottaa minun ajatuksia ja tunteita että sillä se on hyvin vahvassa roolissa minun elämässäni.

<sup>\*</sup> Jag /.../ blev troende som, när jag var aderton år och kom i kontakt med kristen metal när jag var nitton och egentligen mycket tack vare det också som man har hållit sig vidare fast vid tron under åren.

<sup>\*</sup> Sedan i något skede hade ju följat med /.../ till Sverige, det fanns ju väldigt bra sådana här kristna metal festivaler där man liksom kände ‘men hej!’, här känner jag att här hör jag hemma liksom men sådana här människor. Till exempel det finns ju en som hette Bobfest /.../ Endtime Festival, väldigt alltså, jag fick väldigt stark upplevelse att vara där, det där, bli bekant med andra kristna metal band också.

<sup>\*</sup> Sotahuuto on yksi sellainen seurakunta missä minä käyn /.../ semmoinen hengellinen yhteisö kanssa.

that, and like, well, it sort of does have a quite large role”\* (IF mgt 2008/56). In the interview, Timo also explained that he strongly feels there being a religious aspect to playing live as well. This issue also surfaced in the interview with Jussi and Roope from VIP who expressed the following views:

Jussi: Yes, at least many have come and told us after a gig that they have experienced like a kind of, kind of had experienced the Holy Spirit so, and I have also myself during gigs...

/.../

Roope: Well, really nearly always when you step up on stage you get this sort of, sort of like when you start playing you get this, you get goosebumps and a kind of strange, a strange force that sort of lifts you up in that moment /.../ so, yes, it is some kind of, some /.../ invisible force.\*

(IFmgt 2008/57)

As expressed by Jussi and Roope here, playing live also involves a religious element in the form of the presence of the Holy Spirit or some “strange /.../ invisible force”. Being part of and participating in the Christian metal scene is also invested with religious functions by many musicians. For its core members it constitutes a distinct both Christian *and* popular cultural space in which they can share their passion for metal and the particular cultural identity that goes with it with likeminded people, who also share their Christian beliefs. Many musicians describe the scene in terms of an open religious community in which denominational affiliations become of no real importance. Pekka from Sotahuuto expressed the following thoughts about today’s Finnish scene:

It is, it is like sort of a community, it is a bit like... on the one hand it is tight and on the other scattered, maybe like that. There are, however, people with different backgrounds and people who think very differently and every once in a while there are some conflicts on sort of personal levels, but there is still quite much pulling in the same direction and supporting one another and kind of a healthy competition and encouraging one another onward and... It is, it is like a kind of community yes and it feels like it is maybe sort of becoming tighter all the time

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\* Kyllä sillä, tulee niin kuin itse soittaa bändissä niin tulee mietitty niitä juttuja aika paljon... sitä kautta, ja tuota, no siis, kyllä sillä aika suuri rooli sillai tuota.

\* Jussi: Kyllä ainakin monet on tullut sanomaan keikan jälkeen että ne on kokenut niin kuin semmoista pyhän hengen niin kuin kokeemista siinä että, ja itsekin on joskus tuota keikoilla...

/.../

Roope: No, oikeastaan aina melkein kun nousee lavalle niin tulee semmoinen, semmoinen niin kuin aloitetaan soittaa niin tulee semmoinen iho menee kananlihalle ja semmoinen outo, outo voima joka tavallaan niin kuin nostaa siinä hetkessä /.../ että kyllä se on semmoinen joka, joku /.../ näkymätön voima.

/.../ You get to know new people from all around Finland all the time.\* (IF mgt 2007/69)

In this excerpt Pekka talks of the scene bringing together people with different backgrounds and ways of thinking. However, although that may sometimes lead to conflicts on personal levels, generally speaking, the scene is characterized by mutual support and “pulling in the same direction”. He also speaks about it in terms of a community that is becoming tighter all the time. By this he is clearly referring to its significant growth during recent years. Juhani and Jere from Venia also expressed very similar thoughts:

Juhani: Well, it feels like in metal circles there still maybe is this kind of relatively healthy, that is, in Christian metal circles, a kind of healthy Christianity that is dominant so there are not many extreme cases or like, on the whole, we are at least not on any extremes.

Jere: We are not too liberal but not too conservative either.\*

(IF mgt 2008/58)

As seen here, the scene is represented as an open, neither too liberal nor too conservative particular space, that is generally characterized by a “healthy” Christianity. These thoughts are also echoed by Timo from Lumina Polaris:

I feel it is sort of like pretty open or tolerant, like inside this Christian metal culture there are really like many different opinions, or if you compare like Lutheran, Pentecostal, like I think that that does not really matter all that much and there can even be people from different denominations in the same band.\* (IF mgt 2008/56)

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\* Se on, on semmoinen eräänlainen yhteisö että se on vähän... se on toisaalta tiivis ja toisaalta hajannainen, ehkä sillai. Siellä on tosi kuitenkin eri taustoista porukkaa ja tosi eri tavalla ajattelevaa porukkaa ja aina tulee välillä vähän konflikteja sitten jotenkin henkilökohtaisella tasolla, mutta tuota on kuitenkin aika paljon semmoista yhteen hiileen puhaltamista ja semmoista että porukka ymmärtää kuitenkin että ollaan samalla asialla ja semmoista toistensa tukemista ja semmoista tervettä kilpailua että semmoista tsemppaamista niin kuin eteenpäin ja... On, on se niin kuin semmoinen yhteisö kyllä ja tuntuu että se on ehkä niin kuin silleen tiivistymässä koko ajan /.../ kyllä sitä koko ajan oppii tuntemaan enemmän porukkaa ympäri suomea...

\* Juhani: Niin, tuntuu että metallipiireissä on kuitenkin ehkä kohtuullisen semmoinen terve, siis kristillisissä metallipiireissä, kohtuullisen semmoinen terve kristillisyyys yleensä vallassa että ei ole niin kuin ääripäitä kauheasti tai siis niin kuin ainakaan niin kuin kokonaisuutena ei olla ainakaan missään äärimmäisyyksissä

Jere: Ei olla liian liberaaleja mutta ei liian vanhoillisiakaan.

\* Minusta tuntuu että tavallaan se on niin kuin aika semmoinen avoin tai suvaitsevainen, tällaisen niin kuin kristillisen metallikulttuurin sisällä, loppujen lopuksi eri niin kuin näkemyksiä, tai jos vertaa niin kuin just luterilainen, helluntai, että niin kuin sillä ei hirveästi minusta ole väliä ja saattaa olla samassa bändissäkin eri kirkkokunnista.



Similarly to Pekka above, Timo also speaks of the scene in terms of a space in which people with a range of different denominational affiliations meet. However, that is an issue that “does not really matter all that much”. Timo also speaks of people with different denominational affiliations playing in the same bands. Indeed, this is not at all unusual within the Finnish scene and it also further illustrates both the Finnish as well as the wider transnational scene’s aims of being a cross-denominational space aimed at expressing and spreading a broadly defined “basic” Christian faith. When asked if the scene can be understood in terms of a community, Timo went on to say that:

Yes, I do feel quite strongly that it is, because still in the end although there is, there have come many new bands now and, there is still this sort of underground vibe to it in a sense /.../ So like it is just that, that there is this quite strong sense of community.\* (IF mgt 2008/56)

Similar thoughts were also expressed by Markus from Megiddon who likewise described the scene as a tight-knit distinct community of people:

In my view it is still quite a sort of lively group. Now it is quite large and there is the Christian metal union on the net and then we have, we always gather about once a month there in Helsinki for this metal cell /.../ If someone is a Christian and a metalhead then I can say that I know this person. Particularly if this person is from the south of Finland, well then especially, many times like more up in the north it can be that I do not have the same kind of contact.\* (IFmgt 2007/71)

In this excerpt, Markus also points out some particular factors that have served to make the scene even more tight-knit than before. He mentions the online forum *Kristillinen metalliunioni* (Christian Metal Union) as well as the Christian metal “cell-meetings” which are regularly held in the basement of the Lutheran Töölö parish in Helsinki, which were mentioned above. The establishment of *Kristillinen metalliunioni* has provided the Finnish scene as a whole with a shared main channel for information, interaction, and discussion. Today, it serves as the single most important channel through which scene members communicate and interact on a daily basis. The majority of all musicians interviewed also reported visiting and posting on the forum regularly. The Christian metal cell meetings have no doubt also

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\* Kyllä minä koen että se aika voimakkaasti on koska kuitenkin niin kuin loppujen lopuksi vaikka onkin, nyt on tullut paljon uusia bändejä ja, kuitenkin on semmoista tavallaan underground tuota meininkiä kuitenkin tietyllä tasolla /.../ että tuota niin siinä on sitten just se että on niin kuin semmoinen yhteisöllisyys aika voimakas.

\* Minun mielestä se on kuitenkin aika semmoinen elävä porukka. Nyt se on aika isoa kokoa ja on tuo kristillinen metalliunioni netissä ja tuota sitten meillä on, kokoontuu aina noin kerran kuussa tuolla Helsingissä että semmoinen metallisolu /.../ Jos joku on kristitty ja metallisti niin kyllä minä voin sanoa että minä tunnen sen. Varsinkin jos on etelä Suomesta niin sitten etenkin että, monesti tuolla että jos on vähän niin kuin pohjoisempaa niin sitten voi olla että ei ole ihan samanlaista yhteyttä.

served to strengthen the sense of community or fellowship among musicians and other scene members living in the Helsinki metropolitan area and nearby towns. Musicians and other scene members from other parts of the country also regularly hear of these meetings as they are announced through *Kristillinen metalliunioni*.

As seen here, many musicians invest their own musical activities as well as the scene as a whole with many functions that have direct bearings on their everyday religious lives. Many explain that making, playing, and listening to Christian metal helps them express their emotions and deal with personal issues and struggles with faith. The music provides their feelings and emotions with a soundtrack and also helps musicians to put these emotions and feelings into words. Others instead emphasise the ways in which the music functions as a way of contemplating faith on a daily basis. Again, when the music comes to fill these functions, it does so in a particular popular cultural *way* that is very different from more traditional and conventional modes of expressing and practicing faith. This also further serves to illustrate the ways in which musicians view Christian metal as an alternative form of religious expression and an alternative way of 'doing' religion. As such, the music also provides musicians with an avenue for the expression of a more *subjective* and *experiential* side of faith.

In making the above observations, we have moved beyond the discursive construction of the scene specifically, focusing instead more directly on a range of other types of important functions that the scene holds and provides for its members (functions that must nevertheless be viewed in close relation to the discursive construction of the scene). Therefore, although the discursive construction of the scene has been the main focus of this study, we need to acknowledge that a range of other factors, such as particular embodied, sensory, and musical/auditory elements also play an important role in investing the scene with certain functions and meanings. Indeed, as stated above, for some musicians, playing in a band serves to strengthen a sense of religious fellowship with co-musicians. This sense of religious fellowship is further reinforced through the sense of being part of a larger community of Christian metalheads who not only share some basic aims and concerns but also a common aesthetic and style. The scene is socially constructed as an open Christian space in which people with different denominational affiliations can meet, exchange ideas and, equally importantly, share their appreciation for metal with likeminded people. The scene should thus primarily be understood to function as a space in which Christians who are into metal can express their faith in an alternative and complementary way that is fully in line with their cultural sensibilities. It might thus be possible to describe it in terms of a cross-denominational religious community with a set of shared aims and concerns. Indeed, musicians, who are themselves all core members of the scene, also describe it

in such terms. Nonetheless, it is of importance to note that it is not only their religious views but to an equal degree also their shared passion for metal and the cultural identity that goes with it that draws them together. People interested in alternative ways of expressing Christian faith who do not like metal music would probably not become involved in the Christian metal scene.

A deeper understanding of these dimensions and functions of the scene can also be gained by briefly engaging with some more recent thinking on the notion of religion as *mediation*. Meyer's (2008) notion of "sensational forms" (see also Meyer & Verrips 2008) provides a particularly interesting avenue for further reflection on these issues. Religion, according to Meyer, is "a *practice of mediation* that organizes the relationship between experiencing subjects and the transcendental via particular sensational forms" (Meyer 2006, cited in Klassen 2008, 144). Meyer and Verrips (2008, 27; cf. Meyer 2008, 707) explain the notion of sensational forms "as relatively fixed, authorized modes of invoking and organizing access to the transcendental, thereby creating and sustaining links between believers in the context of particular religious regimes". Sensational forms have three key dimensions; they "organize the encounters with an invisible beyond" (2008, 27); they "address and form people's bodies and senses in distinct ways" (2008, 28); and, through strengthening aesthetic and stylistic affinities within groups of believers, contribute to "forming religious subjects" and to "underpin a collective religious identity" (see also Meyer 2008, 707). The term "sensational forms" thus essentially denotes various ways of organizing and "inducing experiences of the transcendental" (Meyer 2008, 707), such as collective rituals, religious objects, images, or music, which in different ways involve, implicate, and activate the body and the senses, inducing particular emotions and feelings. Let us consider the way in which the Christian metal scene has been described previously as a particular type of Christian space in relation to what Meyer and Verrips write about sensational forms:

Including as well as expressing shared moods, a shared religious style – materializing in, for example, collective prayer, a shared corpus of songs, images, and modes of looking, symbols and rituals, but also a similar clothing style and material culture – makes people feel at home. Sharing a common aesthetic style via a common religious affiliation generates not only feelings of togetherness but speaks to and mirrors particular moods and sentiments. (Meyer & Verrips 2008, 28).

It immediately becomes clear that these observations are all highly relevant for any understanding of the embodied, aesthetic, and stylistic practices of the Christian metal scene on the whole. As discussed above in chapter 5, Christian metal concerts activate the senses and the body to a considerable degree, and they also do so in particular and highly distinctive ways. Indeed,

the embodied practices of Christian metal concerts – of moshing, headbanging, assuming praise poses, and making the one-way sign – all constitute integral parts of the Christian metal experience in itself. As such, the scene may also be seen to provide its adherents with particular forms of religious embodiment that are quite distinctive to this particular scene and also very different from the types of religious embodiment prevalent within more traditional and conventional church settings. The musical/auditory element also becomes important in this regard. As noted in our discussion of metal music and culture in chapter 4, generally speaking, metal is a highly aggressive form of popular music that encourages intense and emotional *embodied* modes of both performance and reception. This also applies to Christian metal's aesthetic and stylistic practices, which function as important markers of cultural identity beyond the concert setting as well. These practices (a shared aesthetic and style) clearly serve to foster a sense of togetherness among participants as Christian *metalheads*. Finally, if viewed as a type of sensational form, or a particular combination of certain sensational forms, Christian metal also clearly “speaks to and mirrors particular moods and sentiments” (Meyer & Verrips 2008, 28; cf. Meyer 2008, 718) as it allows scene members to express their religious beliefs, feelings, and emotions in a consciously intense and often (at least seemingly) aggressive manner. As Meyer and Verrips argue, taken together, these elements can all be seen to contribute to a sense of shared religious identity, an issue we shall return to in the following section.

A particularly important point to note here is that the Christian metal experience in many ways is very different from the more “fixed, authorized modes” (Meyer & Verrips 2008, 27) of sensational forms most commonly employed within more conventional church settings. As seen above in chapter 5, some practices typical of ‘church behavior’, and of Charismatic and Pentecostal churches in particular, have indeed been incorporated into Christian metal concert practices. But, if Christian metal is taken to induce experiences of the transcendental, the way of achieving this is still quite distinctive. As also discussed briefly in chapter 5, Christian metal concerts are *multi-media* events that activate many senses simultaneously. Christian metal concerts are *heard* and *listened to*. The music is often very loud indeed (earplugs are usually needed). They are also *seen*. For example, apart from the generally highly intense performance of bands themselves (who may don costumes, wear makeup, or use various forms of metal paraphernalia such as spiked armbands or even weapons such as swords and axes) concerts feature elaborate lighting and special effects such as smoke machines. In addition, concerts are *physically felt*, especially in the mosh-pit or when headbanging, in which case they are also *physically demanding*. Lastly, they could even be said to be experienced as a distinctive sense of *smell*, as concert halls become hot and filled with the smell of sweat and machine smoke. The scene could

thus perhaps be seen to provide its members with particular *alternative* sensational forms, thereby further strengthening a sense of community and shared religious identity among its members (see also for example Schulz 2008, 187-186).

However, although the Christian metal scene clearly serves to foster a sense of togetherness among its members, it is a little unclear as to whether the scene really should be viewed as a religious community in the full sense of the word. Its peculiar character as an expressly Christian metal *music* scene seems to put it somewhere on the borderline between a popular music culture and a religious community. It is also important to note, however, that particular national, regional, and local scenes have developed institutions and practices that are clearly designed to further deepen a sense of community among their members. On a transnational level, the *Metal Bible* project can be seen as an example of this. Other examples include the larger alternative “metal parish-movements” or “metal ministries” that have been established in Sweden, Germany, Brazil, and Mexico. Within the Finnish scene, a clear example of this can also be found in the regularly held Christian “metal cell” meetings in Helsinki.

As has been explored in detail above, the transnational Christian metal scene has spread and grown significantly during recent years. The development of the Internet has also greatly aided interaction and accelerated communication between national and regional scenes in different parts of the world. On a transnational level, the Christian metal scene could thus also be understood in terms of a broader *movement* principally aimed at cultivating a particular alternative and complementary form of religious expression and evangelism. It is important to stress here that, when the scene is described as a movement, this should not be understood in terms of a movement that is aimed at cultivating any specific Christian teachings. Instead, the scene is expressly constructed as a distinct space aimed at cultivating a particular way of *expressing* a broadly defined “basic” (Protestant) Christian faith. In this context, a “basic” Christian faith essentially denotes an *attitude* to faith that emphasizes all the things that different Christian denominations share and have in common rather than clinging to the points and details on which they differ. Of course, as such it also leaves room for individual scene members to express their faith in more direct relation to the particular teachings of some specific denomination should they wish to do so. Although, in the main, open engagement with particular denominational teachings is not generally encouraged within the scene.

By way of conclusion, it therefore becomes clear that whether one regards the scene in terms of a religious community or not, it clearly plays an important role in the religious lives of many musicians interviewed for this study. As has been noted many times already, most musicians are active

members of their own parishes and many are also involved in the activities of other Christian groups. In addition to their participation in the Christian metal scene, musicians are thus also involved in a range of other particular religious communities, or perhaps rather, other *types of* communities. Even though the scene clearly does fill religious functions for many of its members, it might still be argued that, when compared to participating in the activities of their own respective churches, parishes, or other Christian groups, scene members may not necessarily view their participation in the Christian metal scene as a type of activity that is as obviously or exclusively oriented towards the religious per se. As seen above, participation in the scene is also about making and listening to music and having fun.

## **7. 2 The Christian metal scene and alternative Christian identity**

Through exploring the internal discursive construction of the scene, we have seen how particular meanings have become attached to the scene through the ways in which it is recurrently represented and talked about among its members. When exploring the internal discursive construction of the scene we focused on four main and intimately intertwined discourses pertaining to the basic meaning and function of Christian metal on a transnational level. We saw that Christian metal was typically represented as an alternative form of *religious expression*, as an alternative *means of evangelism*, as a *legitimate* form of religious expression and evangelism, and as an *alternative to* secular metal. To be concise, we saw that Christian metal is represented as a non-traditional but equally sincere way of expressing Christian faith; as an alternative, and often effective, means of spreading the Christian faith to certain groups; as a legitimate and much needed way of doing both of these things; and as a “positive” alternative to secular metal music and culture. Significantly, Finnish Christian metal musicians interviewed for this study also represented Christian metal in much the same ways when they talked about their own musical activities in relation to their own real life experiences. They were particularly concerned with representing Christian metal in terms of an alternative form of religious expression and evangelism. Many of them also stated that participating in the Finnish and wider transnational scene plays an important role in their everyday religious lives.

What, then, can be said about the Christian metal scene providing its members with resources for the forming of an alternative Christian identity? As discussed in chapter 1, the notion of ‘religious identity’ is typically used in a range of different contexts without being clearly defined. As discussed



there, attempting to provide some form of clearer definition, a religious identity can be taken as having to do with a set of beliefs and practices invested with some kind of transcendent or otherworldly significance becoming an integrated part of a person's understanding of who he/she is and his/her place in the world. These beliefs and practices might then be linked to or embedded in some particular religious traditions or institutions, such as Christian churches, in which they become shared with others. It is also worth repeating that identities are always formed in social contexts in relationships with others. We also saw that our *language use* is intimately connected to our identities, as it is primarily through language that we express who we are to others in relational contexts. Our identities become intimately connected to the wider discursive context in which we find ourselves. As argued by Weedon (2004, 7) in chapter 1, particular types of identities, such as religious identities, often involve "active processes of identification". However, as Weedon (2004, 7) went on to point out, they may also involve a "conscious counter-identification against institutionally and socially assigned identities, and the meanings and values that they are seen to represent". As was also underscored earlier on, any form of identity, and not least religious identities, are typically constructed in contrast to what they are *not*.

In chapter 1 we also noted that, as argued by many influential social theorists (e.g. Taylor 1989; Giddens 1991; Lash 1995), in contemporary late modern society and culture, identities have generally become characterized by increasing rootlessness, fluidity, and reflexivity. In particular, identities have become consciously *chosen* rather than given, ascribed, or imposed. As reflected in a more widespread increasing individualization and privatization of religious/spiritual belief and practice, this holds equally true for religious identities. As people increasingly, so to say, have no choice but to choose who they are or want to be, this has also often been interpreted as having led to people feeling ever more anxious and uncertain about who they are, who they want to be, or should be. This also has important implications for issues pertaining to the study of religion and religious life in late modern Western societies. As discussed in chapter 2, the contemporary Western religious landscape has become increasingly marked by an emphasis on individuals choosing, or choosing not to choose, their religious or spiritual beliefs and identities for themselves. At the same time, as identities are formed in relational contexts, people are also dependent on others in their constructions of their own identities. This is particularly important to keep in mind when exploring religious identities that are tied to institutional religions since such religious identities typically include a strong collective element.

As pointed out by Lynch (2007b, 87) earlier on, collective identities are generally characterized by the development of "a shared consciousness in



which people share an overlapping cluster of ideas, beliefs, values and ways of interpreting their particular social and cultural situation". In this way, they also typically involve people identifying with each other "as a 'we'" and experiencing "themselves as part of a meaningful movement or network with a particular ethos or concerns" (Lynch 2007b, 87). As was also pointed out above, institutional religions also typically display these characteristics.

In chapter 1, I suggested that a working definition of a *Christian identity* might include the following four closely related dimensions. First, it would involve a person constructing his/her understanding of him/herself and his/her place in the world in relation to a certain set of Christian beliefs. Second, it would also involve a person developing a certain understanding of his/hers own relationship to the institutions and practices in which these beliefs are embedded. Third, it would entail a person developing ways of expressing and representing his/her understanding of him/herself in light of these beliefs and the institutions and practices in which they are embedded. Fourth, it would also have to do with how a person understands his/her Christian beliefs, his/her relationship to the institutions and practices they are embedded in, and his/her way of expressing and representing them to relate to and feature in his/her everyday life.

As the musicians interviewed for this study are all self-described Christians and active members of Protestant Christian churches, a more particular set of Christian beliefs and practices invested with ultimate meaning and a transcendent or otherworldly significance can clearly be said to constitute an integral part of their understandings of themselves and their place in the world. They can thus all clearly be said to have *Christian identities*.

As has been illustrated through the accounts provided by Finnish Christian metal musicians interviewed for this study, they have clearly constructed understandings of themselves and their place in the world in relation to certain sets of Christian Protestant beliefs. Having said that, they typically also express a desire to spread a much more broadly defined "basic" Christian faith (a desire that also can be viewed as being fully in line with the Protestant notion of the priesthood of all believers). However, their understandings of their own relationship to the institutions and practices in which these beliefs are embedded seem more complex. Since musicians present their own musical activities as well as Christian metal in general in terms of an alternative or complement to other more traditional modes of religious expression and practice, that would seem to suggest that their relationships to the institutions and practices in which their beliefs are embedded, that is, their own churches, appear to be somewhat divided. However, although musicians may be critical of certain aspects of traditional church practice, particularly regarding musical issues, it is clear that they do not hold directly dismissive attitudes towards traditional and conventional

modes of religious expression and practice in general. They do, however, actively *choose to* express their religiosity in an alternative and complementary way. The manner and style in which scene members choose to express their faith and thereby their understanding of themselves in relation to their own churches is also fundamentally influenced by the particular popular musical form of metal and thus very different from more institutionally bound and traditional modes of religious expression and practice. It can therefore, I would argue, be described as a different way of 'doing' religion. A more multifaceted picture of Christian metal's ability to function as an alternative way of 'doing' religion also emerges when issues of embodiment, aesthetics, and style are taken into account. This was discussed above in relation to the concept of "sensational forms" (Meyer 2008; Meyer & Verrips 2008). One would also expect all this to have bearings on Christian metalhead's understandings of how their faith relates to and functions within their everyday lives. Importantly, as illustrated by their accounts above, Christian metalhead's religious identities are intimately intertwined with their cultural identities as metalheads.

As I suggested earlier on in chapter 1, an *alternative* Christian identity may involve people developing different or new understandings of themselves and their place in the world in relation to a set of Christian beliefs and practices; different or new ways of expressing these beliefs; different or new ways of understanding their relationships to the Christian institutions and practices in which these beliefs are embedded; different or new ways of expressing and representing their understandings of themselves and the world; and different or new ways of viewing these understandings and ways of expressing and representing them in relation to their everyday lives. As also noted in chapter 1, an alternative Christian identity need not involve all of these dimensions to the same extent. Indeed, in the case of the Finnish Christian metal scene, some of these dimensions clearly assume greater significance than others.

There is not much ground for arguing that Finnish Christian metal musicians have developed different or new understandings of themselves and the world in relation to certain sets of Christian beliefs. Regarding beliefs, most musicians interviewed for this study rather lean towards revivalist, traditionalist, and conservative-type views. Moreover, musicians also explicitly represent the Christian metal scene as a cross-denominational community directed at cultivating a particular popular cultural way of expressing and spreading a broadly defined "basic" Christian faith. In this context, denominational affiliation and particular teachings become represented as being of no real importance. This, however, is not to say that the issue of beliefs plays no role within the scene. As seen above, when expressing their views on the current state of Christianity in Finland, many musicians typically lamented what they viewed as an increasing

secularization of Christian churches themselves (IF mgt 2007/71; IF mgt 2008/58; IF mgt 2008/56; IF mgt 2008/55/1-2). Taken as a symbol of 'mainstream' Christianity in Finland, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in particular was represented by many as having made too many concessions on "basic" and "fundamental" Christian beliefs and values. Nevertheless, as noted, musicians can hardly be interpreted as expressing some kind of desire to revise or develop new understandings of Christian beliefs as such.

By contrast, musicians are obviously concerned with developing different or new ways of *expressing* and *representing* their beliefs, and this includes the *form* in which it is expressed as well. Much of the discursive construction of the basic meaning and function of Christian metal explicitly and repeatedly represent it as constituting an alternative and complementary way of expressing and spreading the Christian faith. As has been shown above, Finnish Christian metal musicians also clearly invest their own musical activities with these particular meanings. Again, this also entails expressing and representing their faith in close relation to a certain type of popular cultural expression that is connected with a certain aesthetic, style, and rhetoric.

Moreover, musicians are also clearly concerned with developing different or new ways of understanding their relationships to the Christian institutions and practices in which their beliefs are embedded. As we have seen, musicians explicitly present their musical activities as something that takes place both on the sidelines of traditional church activity as well as on the borderline between religion and popular culture. Within the context of their own churches, regarding issues of religious expression and engagement with today's broader cultural environment, musicians represent innovation and renewal. This is because, through the Finnish and wider transnational scene, Christian metal musicians independently choose to take their way of expressing and spreading their Christian faith in an expressly unconventional way *outside* the traditional domain of their churches. As noted, this also entails developing different or new ways of viewing these understandings and ways of expressing and representing them in relation to their everyday lives. For instance, Christian metal musicians do not cease being metalheads as soon as they leave the stage or their rehearsal studios. On the contrary, their identities as Christian *metalheads*, or indeed as "metal missionaries", are constantly reproduced on an everyday basis and thus become integrated as important parts of their day to day lives. In other words, being a Christian metalhead also involves embracing the Christian metal version of the metal lifestyle. As this also involves embracing different forms of embodied and stylistic practices it can again usefully be viewed in relation to the concept of "sensational forms" (Meyer 2008; Meyer & Verrips 2008) and, more generally, also in relation to Clark's (2007a) notion of "religious lifestyle branding" as briefly discussed in chapter 3.

The development of a Finnish national Christian metal scene has been crucially significant in this regard. It is important to point out here that it is within this particular space that the understanding of Christian metal as an alternative form of religious expression and evangelism is embedded. In addition, and as discussed above, the scene provides its members with a space in which this understanding can be *realized* in real life and thereby be *lived out* with likeminded people who share these same aspirations and concerns. The scene can thus clearly be described in terms of a space that is characterized by a “shared consciousness” as its members no doubt have come to “share an overlapping cluster of ideas, beliefs, values and ways of interpreting their particular social and cultural situation” (Lynch 2007b, 87). However, this should not be overstated in this context. As argued above, the Christian metal scene constitutes both a religious as well as a popular cultural space. As such, it is neither one nor the other but always both – no more weight is clearly given to either one of these aspects. It would be a mistake to argue that the musicians interviewed for this study participate in the scene for purely religious reasons. Nevertheless, one can clearly say that they do so since it provides them with a way and space in which they can *express* their religious beliefs in a way that is fully in line with their cultural tastes and sensibilities. The “overlapping cluster of ideas, beliefs, values and ways of interpreting their particular social and cultural situation” that scene members share also find their expression in the key discourses on the basic meaning and function of Christian metal explored in this study. These discourses can in themselves be seen to provide scene members with malleable resources for alternative religious identification within the particular religious and cultural environment in which they find themselves – in this case, Finland.

In this way, the scene can clearly be seen to provide its members with resources for constructing an alternative way of ‘being’ a Christian and an alternative way of ‘doing’ religion. Furthermore, as it constitutes part of a wider transnational scene it also provides its members with a sense of being part of a wider and growing transnational community or movement. Moreover, we also need to note that different national scenes are never isolated from transnational influences and flows of ideas. The alternative *way* of being a Christian and of doing religion that the scene provides its members with thus also becomes largely *detached* from any particular Christian institution and instead embedded in a broader transnational religious-popular cultural space. As noted above, the Christian metal scene has developed, and will most likely continue to develop, largely independently from institutional influence or control. Considering its cross-denominational character, the scene as a whole can thus also be seen to take on functions as an alternative or complement to any range of other Christian institutions. In this way, the scene may be described as a space that is

characterized by a “conscious counter-identification against institutionally and socially assigned identities, and the meanings and values that they are seen to represent” (Weedon 2004, 7). The Finnish scene no doubt provides its members with such resources for “counter-identification against institutionally and socially assigned identities” within their own churches and the wider Finnish Christian milieu. Although again, in this case, such “counter-identification” mainly concerns issues of *religious expression* and only to a much lesser extent issues regarding meanings and values. That, of course, depends on what precisely we take “meanings” and “values” to mean in this context.

The main conclusion we need to draw from this is that, in both transnational as well as Finnish scenic discourse and practice, Christian metal is not about revising or developing new understandings of Christian beliefs and values. Instead, it is all about cultivating a particular alternative way of *expressing* “basic” traditional (Protestant) Christian beliefs and values, and creating a distinct space in which this can be done together with likeminded people who all share the same cultural sensibilities. Based on my exploration of the internal discursive construction of the scene on a transnational level, and the views expressed by Finnish Christian metal musicians interviewed for this study, my argument is, therefore, that the Christian metal scene does indeed provide its members with a range of resources for the shaping of an alternative Christian identity as well as an alternative way of ‘doing’ religion. It should also be pointed out here that this alternative religious identity is a very consciously *chosen* one. As such, it also points to how religious identities have become increasingly chosen rather than ascribed within more traditional and institutional religious contexts. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, it further illustrates the increasingly important role played by popular culture as a resource for the shaping of religious identities within more traditional and institutional religious settings as well. However, in making these observations, we also need to note that different social, cultural, and religious contexts also affect the ways in which this occurs.

### **7.3 Broader implications?**

In this final part of the study, we shall consider what the Christian metal scene might imply more broadly about changing religious sensibilities and practices in the West, as well as how the phenomenon of Christian metal as such relates to contemporary scholarly debates on these issues. In the latter part of this section, I shall also offer some observations on what the scene might imply more broadly about the religious attitudes and sensibilities of

young (male) Christians in Finland today and make some suggestions on avenues for further research in this area.

In a broader perspective, all present-day cases of groups of Christians embracing new media and popular cultural forms need to be understood in relation to wider processes of religious change, and perhaps particularly in connection to accelerating processes of detraditionalization and a corresponding increasingly widespread individualization and privatization of religious life and practice. Viewed in this light, Häger (2003, 39) has argued that it is possible to partly view evangelical engagements with popular culture on the whole in terms of a “‘parachurch’ type phenomenon /.../ loosely organized in non-congregational forms”. However, as he (2008, 114) also points out, such cases can also be viewed as examples of “detraditionalization in the sense that the religious establishment loses control over the practice and expression of religion”. In the case of evangelical popular culture, he writes, “the loss of control is due to the fact that the use of popular culture often is most prolific in the fringes of institutionalized religion; it is also controlled by commercial enterprises /.../ or by parachurch type organizations rather than by the leaders of the established denominations” (Häger 2008, 114). However, although this argument is intended to be understood in a broad sense, it is still important to add that it applies differently in different wider social, cultural, and religious contexts. For example, it clearly applies to a Finnish Christian congregational context in which detraditionalization has indeed been taking place at an accelerating pace for some time. It fares differently, however, when applied to a wider North American Protestant Christian congregational context of which these developments (e.g. increasing detraditionalization and individualization) already have become an integral and openly recognized component (e.g. Miller 1997).

As Woodhead and Heelas (2000, 342) formulate it, detraditionalization entails a change “from an authoritative realm which exists over and above the individual or whatever the individual might aspire to, to the authority of the first hand spirituality-informed experience of the self”. On a general level, as Woodhead and Heelas (2000, 431, *my italics*) write, “The *location* of religion, it appears, has changed, from church and chapel to the culture at large”. However, as they also make clear, this very general observation should by no means be taken to denote that strongly traditionalist religious communities do not still persist today. Detraditionalization also occurs *within* particular religious traditions, and it does so to certain *degrees* as well (Woodhead & Heelas 2000, 344; see also Heelas 1996). Generally speaking, though, it seems clear that popular cultural forms and new media have come to play an ever more central role in relocating the expression and practice of religion of an increasing number of people and religious groups from more traditional spaces into the much more unpredictable and essentially non-



regulated realm of the wider culture. However, looking at detraditionalization in direct connection to Christian popular cultures or scenes nevertheless requires that sufficient attention is paid to the peculiarities of particular social, cultural, and religious contexts. Depending on the context, one would, for instance, need to make some form of distinction between thoroughgoing detraditionalization on the one hand, and particular detraditionalizing *tendencies* on the other. In other words, in certain contexts, one would primarily need to focus on, not how “the location of religion *has* changed”, but rather on how the *locations* of religion are *changing* (religion as such is, of course, never static), diversifying, and multiplying. It also seems reasonable to presume that the “locations” of religion may have changed, diversified, and multiplied more in some particular contexts than they have in others. This, I would argue, applies more generally to Christian/evangelical popular cultural groups in different parts of the world as they are embedded in different religious climates. Christian metal is no exception in this regard. Any exploration of the meanings and functions that Christian metal is ascribed by its musicians and fans needs to take account of the particular social, cultural, and religious environments in which these musicians and fans find themselves. As noted above, the core areas of today’s transnational scene do not only differ considerably with regard to general religious mood and milieu, but also with regard to the degrees and scale on which detraditionalization can be said to have occurred.

Considering the general evangelical orientation of the Christian metal scene, these observations could also be viewed in relation to the changing face and increasing diversity of transnational Evangelicalism in the main, as discussed in chapter 3. As argued by many scholars (e.g. Hunter 1987; Miller 1997; Vasquez 2003; Luhr 2009), Evangelicalism (broadly understood) in general has increasingly moved away from traditional institutional organizational structures and hierarchical forms of oversight. It has become ever more occupied with the self and subjective experiences, and embraced a wide range of new media and cultural practices in the creation of new forms of religious expression and styles of worship. As with many other Christian popular music scenes (see for example Sai-Chun Lau 2006), the transnational Christian metal scene could clearly be viewed in relation to such more widespread trends. As seen above, the scene no doubt displays many of these general characteristics. For example, it is expressly constructed as being a particular non-traditional, non-institutional, non-hierarchical, open, and cross-denominational, both religious *and* popular cultural community or movement that is upheld and maintained through its own independent scenic infrastructure. In the previous chapter we saw how Christian metal is represented as being aimed at expressing and spreading “the basics of the Christian Faith without the legalism of traditional religion”



(<http://www.sanctuaryinternational.com/>), as a form of “Christian activity” that goes on outside and beyond “the walls of the church” (IF mgt 2007/71), and as an “extreme Christian music culture” in its own right (Rowe, 2006, 21). The scene is also clearly characterized by an emphasis on subjective religious experience and the experiential side of faith. For example, as discussed above, Christian metal is represented as espousing a view of Christianity as a “living relationship with God and not a boring religion” (<http://www.metalforjesus.org/faq.html>). Moreover, the scene is expressly (and thus also very consciously) aimed at cultivating a *particular* and heavily popular culturally-influenced alternative and complementary form of religious *expression* and way of ‘doing’ religion. As such, Christian metal is represented as constituting a search for “new forms” (e.g. IF mgt 2007/73; IF mgt 2008/55/1-2) of Christian musical expression that are more in line with the actual musical tastes and cultural sensibilities of most people today. A broader understanding of these issues can also be gained by moving beyond issues of discursive construction per se and engaging with the concept of “sensational forms” (Meyer 2008; Meyer & Verrips 2008) since that also brings into focus the different types of embodied practices that the development of such “new forms” entails.

### **Broader implications within the Finnish context**

Generally speaking, the Finnish national scene is also clearly characterized by the same broad aspirations and concerns as the wider transnational scene. Through constituting a part of a wider transnational scene, it also provides its members with a sense of participating in the development of a larger transnational community or movement. However, although they were very aware of developments within the wider transnational scene, for most musicians interviewed for this study, scenic activity was firmly concentrated within the Finnish national scene. One can thus make the argument that, in a Finnish context at least, the scene is primarily directed at transforming traditional modes of religious expression within a *Finnish* Christian congregational realm. Because of its high degree of independence from denominational control – or its existence on the “fringes” of the established Finnish Christian institutions – the scene may also be understood in terms of a detraditionalizing force that challenges denominational “control over the practice and expression of religion” (Häger 2008, 114). However, as noted, the relationships between musicians and their respective churches are overwhelmingly positive as the scene is not directed against the practices of any particular Christian group or institution but instead represented as offering an alternative or complement to them. We also need to note here that not all Finnish Christian churches are as concerned with policing and

maintaining full “control over the practice and expression of religion”.

As pointed out at many points above, today’s transnational scene greatly aids interaction between people in different parts of the world and also serves to foster some shared understandings among its members regarding what Christian metal is, or is supposed to be, all ‘about’. Moreover, different national scenes also become mutually influenced by each other through their shared wider scenic infrastructure and discursive construction. However, having said that, it is of crucial importance to note once again that different national and regional scenes nevertheless remain embedded in particular religious, social, and cultural contexts. Although the transnational scene as a whole is clearly characterized by concerns more typical of transnational Evangelicalism as a whole with regard to general religious attitudes and sensibilities (e.g. the cultivation of a popular cultural alternative and complementary form of religious expression, the emphasis on the experiential, the downplaying of denominational boundaries and differences), the character and visibility of Evangelicalism (also in its Charismatic and Pentecostal variants) nevertheless varies considerably across the core areas of today’s transnational scene (compare for example Vasquez 2003, 172; Luhr 2009). For example, to be a Christian metalhead in North America means living in a broader religious environment of which an increasingly diverse evangelical movement constitutes a major and highly visible component. It thus also means living in a broader Christian congregational environment, which is increasingly characterized by a more widespread searching for new forms of religious expression, an increasing emphasis on the self, and an increasing disillusionment with traditional denominational and congregational organizational structures (e.g. Miller 1997; Clark 2007a). To be a Christian metalhead in Finland, by contrast, means living in a religious climate still dominated by the traditional and institutional Evangelical Lutheran former state church, which still retains many important connections to the Finnish state. Hence, it also means living in a broader Christian congregational environment which, compared to North America, is not (yet, at least) generally characterized by a directly corresponding and *equally* widespread move towards new forms of religious expression, an increasing emphasis on the self, or an abandonment of traditional organizational structures. This is not intended to mean that the Finnish Christian landscape has not been experiencing such changes or that contemporary wider trends in transnational Evangelicalism (also in its Charismatic and Pentecostal variants) have not yet reached Finland. It is only intended to mean that the Finnish context needs to be understood *on its own terms*.

The main point to note, therefore, is that although they are mutually influenced by each other through their shared scenic infrastructure and discursive construction, one would be rather seriously mistaken to argue

that different national and regional Christian metal scenes do not differ with regard to general evangelical orientation and character. The discursive construction of today's transnational scene clearly also provides Finnish scene members with resources for shaping and expressing their understandings of what Christian metal as well as their own involvement with it essentially is all 'about'. As such, it also clearly serves to foster a sense of being part of a wider movement characterized by a set of main aims and concerns. However, we also need to pay sufficient attention to the ways in which these understandings, aims, and concerns translate somewhat differently depending on the particular religious contexts in which Christian metalheads find themselves. Therefore, although the scene as a whole is clearly characterized by many typical evangelical concerns, there is also quite a degree of diversity within the transnational scene itself in this regard. One should also keep in mind that, even though the Christian metal scene is clearly characterized by a set of main aims and concerns, it has no written or clearly articulated 'official' agenda. Moreover, although these main aims and concerns are expressed through the key transnational internal scenic discourses explored in this study, they gain full meaning only when expressed in connection to the real life experiences of Christian metalheads in particular cultural, social, and religious contexts.

What, then, can the Christian metal scene be said to imply, more broadly, about young adult (male) Finnish Christian's attitudes towards Christian life in Finland today? One point clearly indicated by the musicians interviewed for this study was the view that the position and influence of Christianity has declined in Finnish society and culture. Many musicians also partly blame this on the increasingly liberal stance of the dominant Evangelical Lutheran Church. For example, when Christian metal musicians interviewed for this study who were *not* members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church expressed their views about the current state of Christianity in Finland, they often did so through making direct references to the "state church" or the "folk church" (e.g. IF mgt 2008/56; IF mgt 2008/55/1-2; IF mgt 2008/58). In relation to these issues, musicians express views that are typical of the religiously active minority of not only the Evangelical Lutheran Church, but of members of other Christian churches as well. In this regard, therefore, musicians express the kinds of views that one might expect them to although they also state some more specific concerns. In particular, they appeal for renewal and a greater openness to alternative musical forms within Christian churches in general; such appeals having already been made for quite some time. However, for Christian metal musicians this becomes an issue of great importance. Their views can thus be taken to reflect a more widespread and growing need among young adult Christians to be able to express their faith in ways that are more in line with their cultural sensibilities together with likeminded people. It must be stated

again, however, that the spreading of such attitudes and ideas has been known to both Finnish students of religion as well as most Christian churches themselves for quite some time. For example, as discussed in chapter 2, the Evangelical Lutheran Church has indeed introduced alternative music styles in worship settings. However, the Christian metal scene also serves to illustrate one particular point that has so far not been particularly visible within more recent thinking on these issues.

If the Christian metal scene illustrates any specific point, it is that there also may be a more widespread need among young adult Christians in Finland today to express and practice their faith in ways that are more intimately connected or integrated with their *popular cultural* tastes and the respective *cultural identities* that go with them. We should recall here that, in contemporary late modern Western societies in particular, for increasing numbers of people, *popular music* has come to constitute an ever more important resource for the shaping of personal and cultural identities (Bennett 2001, 1). This is also true of popular culture more generally as it has come to play an ever more important role in the dissemination of all kinds of religious/spiritual ideas. Indeed, as illustrated by the Christian metal scene, particular popular cultural forms may even become formative and determinative of people's religious and spiritual lives (e.g. Hoover 2006, 290; Clark 2007a). The Christian metal scene may thus also reflect a more widespread need among young adult Christians across the denominational and congregational spectrum to be able to express their faith in alternative *environments* that are more directly connected to the broader popular cultural milieu in which they participate in their everyday lives. As such, it may also be seen to reflect a more widespread searching for new types of Christian identities. In this regard, the scene also constitutes a highly rare example for a Finnish context of a particular group of people actually forming an alternative space of their own in which such needs can be met. However, as has been repeatedly stated above, this is not a community that is directed *against* more traditional and conventional forms of church practice but one that is expressly represented as offering an alternative or complement to them. One could thus perhaps also interpret the scene to reflect a more widespread need and desire among young adult Christians to express and practice their faith in a form and environment *of their own choosing*. However, it is also quite possible to question each of these presumptions since the Christian metal scene is the only distinct popular music-based alternative Christian community to have developed on any larger scale in Finland thus far. However, as such, it could perhaps be seen to hint at possible future developments in this regard.

As we have seen, the issue of alternative religious *expression* takes on particular significance in this context. This is because, when viewed in relation to Heelas' and Woodhead's (2005, 17-23) typology of different types

of “life-as” religion (in this case Christianity) discussed above, the Finnish Christian milieu, dominated as it is by the Evangelical Lutheran Church, is generally characterized by attitudes and practices that clearly fall within the category of “congregations of humanity”. We should recall here that Heelas and Woodhead identified these types of congregations as being only very marginally concentrated on cultivating the subjective and experiential aspects of religious life and practice. Generally speaking, they might thus be viewed as being less concerned with issues pertaining to *forms* of religious expression as well. We should remind ourselves once again, though, that the Evangelical Lutheran Church has taken some steps towards developing more experientially oriented practices during recent years. However, when considering the strong emphasis on the experiential within the Christian metal scene, its members would seem more directed towards the attitudes and practices characteristic of “congregations of experiential difference” and “congregations of experiential humanity”, both of which are considerably more directed towards the cultivation of individual/subjective religious experience and expression, and neither of which are particularly representative of (although not necessarily incompatible with) the attitudes and practices most commonly found within the broader Finnish ‘Christian mainstream’. Generally speaking, though, one should not expect members of the Christian metal scene to represent the ‘Christian mainstream’ as it mainly attracts people belonging to the religiously active minority of the Evangelical Lutheran Church as well as other Charismatic and Pentecostal free churches.

We also need to recall here that the Christian metal scene is additionally about embracing a particular kind of style and look, and in a certain sense, about adopting a certain kind of lifestyle as well. As such, it can be described as a space, which provides resources for, allows for, and indeed encourages Christians to express their *individuality* and to ‘be themselves’. Importantly, this includes *embodied* practices as well. In this way, the scene can also be viewed in relation to the increasing emphasis on the individual or subjective in modern Western society and culture more generally. As noted in our discussion of general contemporary transformations of religious belief and practice in the West in chapter 2, within such an environment, increasing numbers of people have come to choose to engage with religion in ways that cultivate their “unique subjective lives” (Heelas & Woodhead 2005. 6). The Christian metal scene can thus also be taken to reflect a growing need among young Christians to engage with faith in ways that suit their personal tastes and individual needs.

In relation to Heelas’ & Woodhead’s (2005) typology of different types of Christian congregations, referred to at many points above, it is thus possible to view the Christian metal scene as an example of how the more experience- and subjectivity-oriented *practices* characteristic of

“congregations of experiential difference” and “congregations of experiential humanity” are increasingly also being introduced into “congregations of humanity”-settings. This would also partly be in line with the increasing *privatization* of Finnish religiosity (e.g. Kääriäinen & Niemelä & Ketola 2005, 166-171). In addition to this, considering the general evangelical ethos of the wider transnational scene and its often rather uncompromising rhetoric, and considering the relatively rather strong views expressed by many Finnish musicians interviewed for this study, it would also seem that Finnish Christian metalhead’s religious *attitudes* correspond more closely with the attitudes and practices most characteristic of “congregations of experiential difference” in particular. The Christian metal scene does indeed display some particular characteristics, which makes it possible to raise the question of whether it also could be taken as an example of if and how the more uncompromising *approaches* to faith that are more characteristic of “congregations of experiential difference” also may be making their way into “congregations of humanity”-settings (in this case represented by the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church).

As discussed in relation to the radical and uncompromising themes and ideas often conveyed through Christian metal lyrics above, it would not seem entirely far-fetched to make such an argument, at least in a suggestive sense. When discussing these issues above, the tentative question was raised whether the strong and often radical topics of Christian metal lyrics could be taken to reflect more uncompromising understandings of Christian faith and life among Christian metal musicians themselves. In light of the views expressed by Finnish musicians above, we might now formulate this question in a slightly different way. If the music helps musicians to express their faith and put their emotions into words, would those words be of the same strong type commonly found in Christian metal lyrics and could that be taken to reflect or influence musician’s understandings of Christian faith and life? It would fall outside of the scope of this study to attempt to provide any form of conclusive answer to that question. Nevertheless, we do need to note that, when viewed within the context of the broader and relatively liberal Christian milieu of Finland as discussed in chapter 2, such lyrics may easily appear more radical than they actually are. Of course, not all bands write those types of lyrics. Moreover, in the interviews musicians repeatedly stated that lyrics should be written in accordance with musical style, i.e. in a way that is suitable for metal. Writing strong and uncompromising lyrics, then, has just as much, if not more, to do with the style of music that they make and play. Because of this, one should be careful not to automatically interpret the lyrical content of Christian metal as reflecting the actual views and attitudes of musicians themselves in straightforward ways. In any case, it is clear that sufficient grounds for making such an argument have *not* been provided by this study. Instead, based on our exploration here, the



relationship between Christian metal lyrics and the actual religious views of Finnish Christian metal musicians themselves is best described as arbitrary or even somewhat elusive. When viewed in light of the views and attitudes of Finnish Christian metal musicians and understood against the backdrop of metal music and culture more generally, this relationship should perhaps not, after all, be taken to be of any special significance.

It is also important to note here that, although they typically downplay denominational differences, many Finnish Christian metal musicians are indeed affiliated with churches best described as “congregations of experiential difference”. These musicians could also be described as being more ‘obviously evangelical’ (broadly understood). Even so, there is no escaping the fact that many remain members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church – a typical “congregation of humanity” (a few are even employed by the Church). As argued by Mikkola, Niemelä, and Petterson (2007, 69) in chapter 2, the perceived increasingly liberal and often ambivalent stance of the Evangelical Lutheran Church on many social, ethical, and cultural issues may indeed “activate those active in the Church to drift away from it”. As they went on to point out, people belonging to the religiously active minority of the Church tend to be less interested in participating in ordinary Church activity and instead favor deeper engagement in the activities of (often cross-denominational) revivalist, parachurch, or other types of affinity groups either within or outside the Church (Mikkola & Niemelä & Petterson 2007, 75-76; 127). As seen above, many Christian metal musicians affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church interviewed for this study also reported participating in the activities of such groups (e.g. IF mgt 2007/69; IF mgt 2007/71; IF mgt 2008/58). Understood as constituting such a cross-denominational affinity group in itself, the Christian metal scene may thus perhaps be taken as an example of how practices oriented towards the experiential sides of religious life and practice are making their way into dominant “congregations of humanity”-settings, largely *through the activities of groups such as these*, which often exist on the fringes of the Church establishment, and in this case, also on the borderline between religion and popular culture. This tendency towards the experiential could, then, perhaps be taken to involve a move towards more uncompromising *approaches* to faith among Lutheran scene members as well. However, this should not *automatically* be taken to mean that *all* musicians who remain members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church would like to see it revise or move away from its emphasis on humanity and social solidarity per se and adopt a *markedly more* uncompromising stance more typical of “congregations of experiential difference”. However, as they clearly would like to see the Church *halt* and *rethink* its strategy and approach to broader social and cultural changes, this nevertheless remains an issue worth raising and exploring further.

In relation to this, we might also want to revisit the question whether



Christian metal, viewed as a particular type of “sensational form” (Meyer 2008; Meyer & Verrips 2008) in itself, can be said to incite or encourage the expression of certain forms of religious *feeling* and *emotion* in particular. As seen above, many musicians spoke of Christian metal in terms of a medium that makes possible the expression of certain religious feelings and emotions in particular. For example, one interviewed musician spoke of the music as “a very powerful way of expression” that enables him to express dark emotions and “gloomy feelings” (IF mgt 2007/70). Another spoke of the music as a way of engaging with the “dark side” of Christian life, such as “the struggle of loneliness and bitterness and... disappointments” (IF mgt 2008/55/1-2). When looking at transnational scenic media, we also found examples of Christian metal being represented as a “brutal” form of Christian expression which, among other things, “talk[s] about the hate we Christians have for Satan” (<http://www.metalforjesus.org/faq.html>). Here, Christian metal was also described as expressing and representing “the extreme side of Christianity” (<http://home.wanadoo.nl/kemman/homer.htm>) and the scene as constituting an “extreme Christian music culture” (Rowe, 2006, 21).

Considering metal’s emphasis on power and (consciously exaggerated) ‘machismo’ (e.g. Weinstein 2000), and the male-dominated (and presumably predominantly heterosexual) nature of the scene, one could perhaps also raise the question of whether Christian metal can be seen to support the construction and expression of traditional masculinities (for a detailed historical exploration of the complex ways in which Christianity can be interpreted as supporting the expression of traditional notions about masculinity through images see Morgan 2007b, 199-213). As noted above, among US bands in particular, there is a long-standing tradition of writing “issue-based” (Luhr 2009, 136) songs, which in addition to other things, typically lament the perceived erosion of traditional family values, gender roles, and the increasing acceptability of feminist and gay-rights ideas. Such themes might surely be taken to reflect a more conservative and traditional understanding of gender roles and masculinity, but we also need to recall that this particular subject matter is much less common among bands in other parts of the world, such as Finland for example. In addition, as seen when discussing lyrical themes emphasizing struggle and spiritual battle in chapter 5, Christian metal clearly has an affinity with the notion of the strong male ‘warrior of Christ’. However, one could still argue that the macho image in Christian metal also differs from that of secular metal in at least one very important respect. This would be that, whilst macho images are generally closely related to celebrations of self-elevating male vitality, potency, and power in secular metal, they are clearly more directly connected with the notion of being ‘servants of Christ’ or a ‘higher cause’ in Christian metal. This also has to do with the metal style and look. For

example, many Christian glam metal bands of the 1980s and early 1990s in particular, came under attack from conservative Christian circles for adopting the effeminate and deliberately outrageous gender-bending style of many successful secular glam metal bands of that time (Luhr 2009, 146-148). However, these days, most Christian metal bands play extreme metal styles, which are characterized by a much more 'masculine' style and look. That style and look (e.g. long hair for men) might not, however, be recognized as being particularly 'masculine' by outsiders and uninformed observers.

Christian metal could indeed be seen to support the expression of traditional masculinities to some degree, especially when looking at the topics of issue-based songs and the masculinity- and male-vitality emphasizing embodied practices of metal music and culture more generally. It could be argued, for example, that the rhetorical style and embodied practices of Christian metal are less attractive for women in general. However, on the other hand, many of Christian metal's stylistic practices (e.g. long hair for men, the use of costumes and makeup at concerts) might equally well be viewed as constituting a direct *challenge* to traditional gender norms. We also need to note once again that, although the scene remains predominantly male-oriented, an increasing number of women are becoming involved in it all the time.

These are but a few of the many questions that could be raised when thinking about what the Christian metal scene might imply more broadly about young adult Christian's attitudes towards Christian life in Finland today. Many of these questions also extend beyond the scope of this study. However, it must be reiterated that, on the basis of this study, these broader observations remain largely tentative. In order to be able to say with more confidence something about these broader issues, the results of this study would need to be complemented by further empirical research on similar and related cases in which particular popular cultural forms have become determinative and formative of particular Christian groups in a Finnish context.

### **Avenues for further research**

As noted many times above, considering today's increasingly close relationship between religion and popular culture, it has become all the more important for the study of contemporary religion to account for the role popular culture plays within people's everyday lives across different social and cultural contexts. In close relation to this, as popular culture undoubtedly has come to function as an ever more important resource for the shaping of religious identities for increasing numbers of people (e.g.

Partridge 2005; Lynch 2005; Hoover 2006), this has made it all the more important for the study of contemporary transformations of religious life and practice to account for the ways in which popular culture also may become formative and indeed determinative of people's religious/spiritual attitudes, views, and practices. As Hoover (2006, 290) summarizes his discussion of the need to examine the role of different forms of media and popular culture in the religious lives of people today: "The ways they are determinative, and for whom, under what circumstances, and with what consequences, remain to be shown".

Further *empirical* research, focusing on these issues in different social and cultural contexts, is also needed for the *development and refinement of theoretical and methodological approaches* within this area of inquiry (see also Beck & Lynch 2009). As stated when outlining the main aims and purposes of this study, what I have aimed to do here is provide future research on related topics in a Finnish context with a point of reference and comparison. Focusing on the *particular* case of the Christian metal scene, this study has aimed to highlight some *particular* ways in which a *particular* popular cultural form has become formative and determinative of the ways in which a certain group of young adult Christians have developed an *alternative* and *complementary* way of expressing and practicing their religion. In order to reach a broader understanding of the role that popular culture plays within contemporary Finnish Christian contexts, much could surely be gained through comparing the results of this study with other future studies of similar and related cases, both within and beyond the borders of Finland. Further empirical research into related cases in particular social, cultural, and religious contexts would also contribute to the refinement of broader, more *macro-level theoretical frameworks*. One example would be Heelas' and Woodhead's (2005) typology of different types of Christian congregations that has been utilized in this study. Empirical research into the ways in which the practices characteristic of "congregations of experiential difference" and "congregations of experiential humanity" increasingly may be making their way into "congregations of humanity"-settings could contribute significantly to the refinement of this typology as a whole, for example, by making it more sensitive to *particular* social, cultural, and religious contexts.

Current thinking on religious *identity construction* is another theoretical field for which further empirical research would be of much value. Theoretical reflection on the role being played by popular culture in people's constructions of religious identities is in constant need of various types of empirical explorations of the ways in which this actually occurs in real life settings. As explained above, a social constructionist understanding of religion and religious identity construction demands that theoretical reflection and empirical material are allowed to be informed by each other.

Although it has not been an expressed aim of this study, a case has nevertheless been made here for social constructionist approaches to religion (e.g. Beckford 2003; von Stuckrad 2003), which seriously engage with the *lived experiences and practices* of the subjects under study. Future research might well consider utilizing and developing such approaches further; particularly when based on first hand empirical material. As noted many times, conducting research from a social constructionist perspective involves paying serious attention to the intimate relationship that exists between the researcher and those being researched (i.e. the participants or 'subjects' under study). Paying sufficient attention to this relationship is also of great importance, not only in the gathering of the material, but in the analysis and presentation of it as well. This type of approach involves researchers engaging in open dialogue with the topic of the study, aiming at offering an as informed interpretation of it as possible, and taking responsibility for their interpretations. Further research on these issues would also surely gain from engaging more directly with broader debates in media, religion, and culture studies, and perhaps particularly with theories of religion as *mediated* (e.g. Meyer 2008; Meyer & Verrips 2008; Stolorow 2008).

Another closely related topic for further research would be the relationship between religion and the contemporary consumer marketplace in a Finnish context (and more generally as well). For example, as seen above, market forces and commercial interests have a part to play within the context of the Christian metal scene too. For although the scene clearly is not particularly bent on generating maximum commercial profit at all times, active participation in it nevertheless always involves, and indeed requires, some degree of consumption. Christian metal records, DVDs, band merchandise, and magazines all constitute examples of religious goods or commodities, which are necessary for keeping the scene at least somewhat economically stable and viable. Although this study has not focused on issues of consumption per se, these are certainly worth noting and exploring further. Economic arrangements have always constituted a hugely important, although maybe not always a sufficiently acknowledged, factor in how religions have operated in different social and cultural contexts at different points in history. Today, however, nearly *all* religious groups, both long-established and more recently established, are obliged to engage with the contemporary consumer, or perhaps rather *consumerist*, marketplace in one way or another (e.g. Miller 1997, 28). As illustrated by much scholarly work on these issues during recent years (see for example the contributions to Clark 2007b), as today's consumerist culture and marketplace has come to permeate most areas of everyday life, this has had far-reaching implications for much contemporary religious life and practice in general as well.

Finally, as I have argued throughout this study, the Christian metal scene is expressly constructed as a particular Christian space directed towards the

cultivation of an alternative and complementary form of religious *expression*. Moreover, as it draws together people with a range of different denominational affiliations, and if it indeed reflects a more widespread or growing need for developing alternative and complementary forms of religious expression and ways of 'doing' religion, then this need can also be found in some form or other across the denominational spectrum. In relation to this, further research on how popular culture figures in Christian congregational contexts in Finland today is thus particularly called for.

## 8. Summary

This study has attempted to make sense of a, in many respects peculiar, combination between Christianity and a particular and controversial form of popular music and its culture. Having presented the social constructionist and discourse analytic approach employed in this study in chapter 1, we moved on to account for broader changes in the religious landscape of the contemporary West in chapter 2. We saw that, although interest in institutional Christianity has long been on the decline in many regions throughout the West, there is also much evidence of a resurgence of religion in general as illustrated by a growing interest in alternative and individual-centered forms of religiosity and spirituality. Relating these broader developments to the contemporary situation in Finland, we found that, thus far, secularization does not appear to have been as thoroughgoing as it has in many other Western European countries. Membership of the traditional and dominant Evangelical Lutheran Church in particular has indeed been declining steadily over a long period of time. Increasing numbers of people no longer identify with many central Christian beliefs and many no longer feel that institutional Christianity has much to offer them. These attitudes are particularly common among younger age groups living in urban areas. However, in spite of constituting a typical example of what Heelas and Woodhead (2005) refer to as a “congregation of humanity” that is not particularly concerned with cultivating “unique subjectivities”, the Evangelical Lutheran Church has so far managed to retain widespread support as a guarantor of social solidarity. The main conclusion that arose from our discussion on these issues was that religion in Finland has become increasingly privatized and that changes in the Finnish religious milieu perhaps would be better described in terms of religious change and transformation rather than secularization proper (at least when interpreted as also involving a “secularization of the mind”).

In chapter 3, we then moved on to explore contemporary transformations of religion in relation to today’s increasingly close relationship between religion and popular culture. We saw that, as argued by numerous scholars, popular culture has come to play an ever more important role in the dissemination of a wide range of religious and spiritual beliefs and ideas. As such, it has also become an increasingly important resource for more and more people’s construction of religious identities. We saw that the relationship between religion and popular culture can take many different forms. Considering evangelical popular culture as an example of “popular culture in religion”, we saw that popular cultural resources have become increasingly used within more traditional religious contexts as well, particularly within different forms of contemporary evangelical Christianity.

It was argued that Christian metal is largely characterized by this particular relationship between religion and popular culture. However, the many problematic aspects inherent in such typologizations, i.e. the ways in which they seem to suggest that religion and culture/popular culture somehow could be viewed as separable spheres, were also discussed at some length. We saw that Christian metal in many ways defies being classified as having merely “appropriated” metal music and culture for purely religious purposes. In line with the social constructionist approach of this study, I argued against automatically making such interpretations without basing them on the actual views on Christian metalheads themselves.

We then proceeded by exploring the world of metal music and culture more generally in chapter 4. It was argued that, in order to make sense of Christian metal, it was necessary for it to be understood in relation to this broader popular music cultural context. Metal has been a highly polarizing and controversial form of music ever since its emergence in the late 1960s and early 1970s. However, in addition to being perhaps *the most* controversial form of popular music of our time, it has also proven to be one of the most enduringly appealing and long-lived. Over the years, metal has developed into a major and truly global popular music culture. However, it remains as fiercely debated as ever. Often deemed a dangerous and ‘satanic’ form of music, metal continues to meet resistance from conservative Christian groups. Considering the marginal but highly visible radical ideas that can be found within some sections of metal culture, this should hardly come as a surprise. Metal is by no means totally undeserving of its reputation. We saw that much of contemporary metal culture is generally characterized by an antagonism towards Christianity in particular. At the same time, a range of alternative religious and spiritual ideas also circulate within it. Metal’s love-hate relationship with religion has had hugely important implications for the development of Christian metal. It has led to Christian metal having received much criticism within both Christian circles as well as the wider secular metal culture.

In chapter 5, we moved on to exploring Christian metal in detail. We discussed its definition, historical development, and main verbal, visual, and aesthetic characteristics. We saw that, apart from the content of song lyrics, some particular visual and aesthetic elements, and some particular embodied practices, Christian metal is virtually indistinguishable from secular metal. We then went on to trace the development of Christian metal on a transnational level using the concept of scene. We saw that Christian metal has developed into a transnational, highly independent, and largely Internet-based, Christian music culture with its own infrastructure of record labels, promotion and distribution channels, specialized media, and festivals. We also saw that the scene has institutionalized itself in ways that extend beyond ‘conventional’ scenic activity through producing its own



*Metal Bible* and through the establishment of alternative “metal parish-movements” in Sweden, Brazil, Mexico, and Germany. The main purpose of this chapter was to provide a general yet sufficiently detailed account of the Christian metal scene as a particular Christian musical space.

Chapter 6 explored what Christian metal is ‘about’, what basic functions and meanings it is ascribed by its musicians and fans. This question was approached in light of how the basic meaning and function of Christian metal is constructed discursively within today’s wider transnational scene. The ascribed basic meaning and function of Christian metal was approached through four interrelated key discourses that recurrently surface at all levels of the scene, and as such appear to be particularly important for making Christian metal meaningful in particular ways. These discourses represented Christian metal as an alternative form of *religious expression*, as an alternative, and frequently effective, *means of evangelism*, as a fully *legitimate* form of religious expression and evangelism, and as a positive *alternative* to secular metal. It was argued that these four key discourses encapsulate the essence of what Christian metal is all about from the perspective of its musicians and fans. I also argued that, in order to gain an adequate understanding of this peculiar combination of Christianity and metal music, it necessarily needs to be approached through the particular meanings attached to by its musicians and fans. It is important to note that such an approach need neither be overly sympathetic nor insufficiently critical. Reflecting the social constructionist theoretical underpinning of this study, this approach was adopted in order to be able to provide an account of Christian metal that is fair and recognizable to its musicians and fans. In addition, we also explored the external discursive construction of the scene. We saw that, within the wider secular metal community, Christian metal is typically represented as an appropriation of metal music for purely religious purposes and, as such, usually viewed negatively. We also saw that, within some conservative Christian circles, Christian metal is sometimes represented as an oxymoronic attempt to combine Christian faith with an utterly unredeemable ‘satanic’ form of music. However, in a Finnish context Christian metal is usually represented in a positive or neutral way when discussed in wider Christian circles.

We then moved on to investigate how the discursive construction of the basic meaning and function of Christian metal relates to the real life experiences and practices of Finnish Christian metal musicians interviewed for this study. This made it possible to see how the discursive construction of Christian metal translates to real life settings in a particular cultural and religious context. However, we also saw that, when embedded in real life settings, Christian metal’s key internal discourses become more malleable and multidimensional. Indeed, as was argued, it is only when viewed in relation to real life settings that these ways of representing Christian metal

become meaningful for Christian metal musicians and fans in the full sense of the word. We saw that, when talking about what Christian metal and their own musical activities meant to them, musicians drew on the key discourses that circulate within the wider transnational scene. However, they did not draw on all of them to the same extent. Finnish musicians were particularly concerned with representing Christian metal and their own musical activities as constituting an alternative form of religious expression and evangelism. Musicians clearly expressed a desire for their musical activities, and its potential to spread the Christian message to secular metal audiences in particular, to be more openly recognized within the wider Finnish Christian milieu. However, they were less concerned with representing Christian metal as a fully legitimate form of religious expression and evangelism or representing Christian metal as an alternative to secular metal. This is because most of them have never had to repeatedly defend their choice of music in real life. This should be understood in relation to the generally accepting attitudes of their own churches. Indeed, some had the direct and concrete support of their own churches. Those musicians who had experienced stronger resistance in the 1990s, also made it clear that attitudes have changed since then. Finnish Christian metal musician's generally accepting views of secular metal need to be understood in relation to a wider Finnish cultural context in which metal music enjoys the status of mainstream music.

In the final analysis of this study in chapter 7, we explored the ways in which Finnish Christian metal musician's own musical activities and participation in the Finnish and wider transnational scene featured within their everyday religious lives. Nearly every musician interviewed expressed some concern about the current state of Christianity in Finland. The dominant Evangelical Lutheran Church in particular was seen by many as being on the verge of losing its still notably strong position. This is because, in practice, the Evangelical Lutheran Church represents the Finnish 'Christian mainstream'. Some musicians who were members of the Church explicitly regarded its ever more liberal stance on doctrinal issues as being a step in the wrong direction. Musicians can thus be said to be highly aware of being part of a religiously active minority in a culture increasingly marked by a more widespread disinterest in traditional Christian traditions and beliefs. Regarding the music itself, many described it as a vehicle through which they can express their emotions and deal with everyday faith-related struggles. Many also described the scene as a whole in terms of a tight-knit, cross-denominational both musical and religious community. It was argued that the scene as a whole could be understood in terms of a community of likeminded people with different Christian affiliations who are all drawn together by their desire to express and spread their Christian faith in a particular alternative and complementary way that is fully in line with their

cultural tastes and sensibilities. This issue, as well as the significance of embodied, aesthetic, and stylistic practices, was also briefly related to the study of religion as mediation. In light of this, the scene was interpreted as providing its members with an alternative way of 'being' a Christian and an alternative and complementary way of 'doing' religion. It was thus further argued that, because of this, the scene also provides its members with a range of resources for the shaping of an alternative Christian identity. The issue of alternative religious expression becomes of particular importance in this context, as the scene is not concerned with beliefs as such but all the more with cultivating an alternative and complementary way of expressing those beliefs.

Lastly, we discussed what the Christian metal scene might imply more broadly about processes of religious change and particularly about young adult Christian's views on Christian life in Finland today. It was suggested that it might reflect a growing need within this group to express faith in alternative ways that are more in line with its member's cultural tastes and popular cultural tastes in particular. Following from this, it might also point to a growing need to express and 'do' religion in alternative environments. As such, it could also be seen to reflect a wider move towards the experiential within wider Finnish Christian congregational contexts. Finally, offering some suggestions for future research within this area, we briefly discussed some other questions that could be raised when exploring the case of the Christian metal scene.

As I stated in chapter 1, what I set out to do when I began this study was to offer an account and interpretation of the Christian metal scene that builds on the expressed views and lived experiences of scene members themselves. Such as it is, I hope to have succeeded in offering an account of the scene that is fair and recognizable to its members. Popular culture as a whole clearly appears to have come to play an increasingly important role within the religious and spiritual lives of Finns as well. If the Christian metal scene implies anything, it is that Christians are as much a part of these developments as anyone else.

## Svensk sammanfattning

Dagens västerländska samhällen präglas av en mångfald, ofta sinsemellan konkurrerande, religioner, andlighetsformer och livsåsksådnings. Denna pluralistiska situation har medfört en mängd utmaningar för de traditionella och institutionella kristna kyrkorna som förlorat sitt tolkningsföreträde på de stora livsfrågorna och istället blivit ett alternativ bland många. I ett västeuropeiskt sammanhang sammanhör detta även med en tilltagande avtraditionalisering och förändring av det religiösa fältet som återspeglas i ett stadigt minskande intresse för traditionell institutionell kristendom.

I samband med denna mer genomgripande religiösa förändring bör man dock även uppmärksamma hur moderna kristna kyrkor och grupper på många sätt även strävat till att anpassa sin verksamhet och praxis till dagens bredare kulturella klimat. Inom senare religionssociologiska strömningar har man alltmer börjat fästa uppmärksamhet vid den centrala roll som *populärkulturen* kommit att spela inom denna utveckling. Populärkulturen har i dagens läge kommit att utgöra en allt mer viktig och central inspirationskälla för allt fler människors konstruktion av den egna religiösa identiteten även inom traditionella och institutionella kristna sammanhang. Därtill har populärkulturen även starkt påverkat de *former* och *sätt* på vilka allt fler människor utövar och praktiserar sin religion inom ramen för sina vardagliga liv. Denna avhandling belyser denna utveckling i ljuset av den finländska kristna *metalmusik-kulturen* – en sällsynt stark sammanblanding av protestantisk kristendom och en utpräglad och kontroversiell populärmusikform och dess kultur.

Denna studie tar sin utgångspunkt i *socialkonstruktionistisk* teori. Ett socialkonstruktionistiskt perspektiv på religion fäster särskild vikt vid hur religion och religiösa samfund både formar och formas av den bredare samhälleliga och kulturella kontext inom vilken de figurerar. Detta teoretiska närmandessätt uppmärksammar även de sätt på vilka människors skapande av en meningsfull verklighet, även vad gäller det religiösa livet, alltid sker i specifika relationella, kontextuella och kommunikativa sammanhang. I enlighet med detta teoretiska närmandessätt tillämpas i denna studie *diskursanalytisk* metod. Fokus riktas därmed framför allt på hur den kristna metalmusik-kulturen blir meningsfull för sina medlemmar genom de sätt på vilka den konstrueras diskursivt, dvs. genom de sätt på vilka den representeras och talas om bland sina egna anhängare. Den diskursiva konstruktionen av den kristna metalmusik-kulturen utforskas på ett såväl bredare trans-nationellt som ett finländskt nationellt plan. Utforskandet av den finländska kontexten baserar sig även på en större mängd empiriskt material, framför allt djupintervjuer med finländska kristna metalmusiker samt ett större antal deltagande observationer vid

olika tillställningar och evenemang. Studien redogör även för den kristna metalmusiken- och kulturens huvudsakliga verbala, visuella och estetiska kännetecken. Uppbyggnaden och spridningen av dagens trans-nationella kristna metalmusik-kultur undersöks även i ljuset av det teoretiska konceptet *scene*.

I ljuset av sina medlemmars diskursiva konstruktion av vad som utgör den kristna metalmusiken- och kulturens grundläggande mening och funktion utforskas sedan även de sätt på vilka den figurerar i finländska kristna metalmusikers vardagliga religiösa liv. Studiens centrala slutsats är att den kristna metalmusik-kulturen erbjuder sina medlemmar en mängd resurser för skapandet av ett alternativt religiöst uttrycksätt, en alternativ religionsutövningsform och en alternativ kristen identitet. Studien visar att den kristna metalmusikkulturen inte kännetecknas av några strävanden till en revidering eller omvärdering av traditionella kristna föreställningar eller värderingar utan istället mer av att utvecklandet av ett specifikt alternativt och komplementärt populärkulturellt influerat religiöst uttrycksätt.

Dessa frågor diskuteras slutligen i direkt relation till det nutida och alltmer privatiserade finländska religiösa klimatet. Genom denna fallstudie av den kristna metalmusik-kulturen belyses ett av de många sätt på vilka individcentrerade och upplevelseinriktade religionsutövningsformer i dagens läge blivit alltmer synliga också inom mer traditionella och institutionella kristna sammanhang i Finland.

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During recent decades, popular culture has developed into an increasingly important source of inspiration for the construction of alternative forms of religious expression and practice. This study concentrates on the phenomenon of Christian metal music in a contemporary Finnish context as an example of a case in which Christianity and a distinct form of popular music and its culture have met and merged. It accounts for the historical development and defining characteristics of Christian metal music on a transnational level and explores the structure and discursive construction of today's transnational Christian metal music scene. The ways in which Christian metal music is constructed discursively and invested with certain, both cultural and religious, functions and meanings are explored with particular reference to the contemporary Finnish national scene. In relation to current debates on religious change and transformation in the West, it is argued that the Christian metal music scene provides its core members with important resources for the shaping of an alternative and complementary form of religious expression and practice and an alternative Christian identity.

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