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REVIEWS, REPORTS, INTERVIEWS

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## **Report on the *Metal and Religion*: an International Academic Conference on the Religious Aspects of Metal, 7–8 September 2022, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic**

For the first time in its history, Czech Metal Studies (CMS) succeeded in organizing a global international conference. The event was held in hybrid form in Brno between 7–8 September 2022 at the Department for the Study of Religions (Masaryk University) and indisputably confirmed the position of Metal Studies in Central/Eastern Europe (MSCEE) – the official network of researchers established by CMS members last year – in the global field of international metal music studies. Following last year’s MSCEE online workshop, Miroslav Vrzal, the head of CMS, managed to organize an event that took local metal studies to yet another level in terms of international networking and through the wide range of research perspectives applied on metal by respective speakers. To discuss the topic of *Metal and Religion*, conference participants came personally or connected online from various parts of the world (including North and South America, and different parts of Europe) and presented multiple ways through which religion and spirituality interact with metal music and culture.

### **Day I. Black Metal, Spirituality, and the Problem of “Religion” (7<sup>th</sup> September)**

#### **Morning panel**

The conference was officially opened in the early morning by Miroslav Vrzal. He warmly welcomed all participants and briefly introduced the establishment of CMS with the recent development of the international MSCEE format, that CMS members initiated to join the forces with Polish and Magyar colleagues. By explaining that religion and spirituality are central to metal, Vrzal opened the floor for the first key speaker – Marcus Moberg, Professor in the Study of Religions at Åbo Akademi University in Turku, whose metal-related work inspired many of the CMS members.

Moberg began his talk *Metal and “Religion”: A View from the Discipline of the Study of Religion* by explaining that, more than being a metal music scholar, he is

sociologically interested in interactions between religion, mass media, and popular music (where metal belongs due to its large music industry). By understanding religion as a discursive formation, Moberg thinks we should pay much more attention to the only empirical data we have access to – texts, performances, and other ways by which religion in metal is communicated. In this sense, metal possesses a vast religious repertoire, mainly related to “darker” religious topics like biblical apocalypticism, left-hand path, esotericism, Satanism, Paganism, etc. Moberg argued that we should study religion and metal in connection to larger phenomena such as occulture and (dark) alternative spirituality and avoid detailed case studies and essentializing religion. By saying that, Moberg stressed the importance of critical awareness about problems related to the “religion” category and welcomed non-western and non-Christian contexts to the debate.

After a short coffee break, Reinhard Kopanski from the University of Siegen introduced us to his online talk *“Psalm of an Unborn” – Conservatism in Christian Metal*, to his ongoing project “Music, Religion and Politics”, focusing on how conservative Evangelical Christian values are negotiated via metal music. Using discursive analysis and close reading of available sources, he so far analyzed 60 bands that exist in somewhat dual tension: they are rejected by the metal scene for being openly Christian and by the evangelical community for playing the “devil’s music”. Christian metal bands try to overcome this tension by following metal conventions while embracing religious conservatism via their lyrics, often with an evangelizing “seed-planting” strategy. Since Kopanski’s project is only beginning, we look forward to further developments.

In the following talk, conference organizer Miroslav Vrzal switched from Christianity to *Czech black metal and Satanism in the late 80s and early 90s: Törr, Root and Master’s Hammer*, three iconic Czech black metal bands. In his analysis, Vrzal showed that western discourses on extreme metal and Satanism influenced Czech metal underground in the last two decades of the former century. However, even though the inspiration from the first wave of black metal (with a related interest in Satanism and Paganism) was strong, each band then developed their own ways of understanding Satanism. This was probably most visibly promoted by Root, whose frontman Jiří Big Boss Valter established The Czechoslovakian Church of Satan in 1991.

Anna-Katharina Hoepflinger from Ludwig Maximilian University closed the panel by dealing with the question *“Do They Really Mean It?”. Five Functions of the Reception of Religious Symbols in Black Metal*. Based on her ethnographic research inside the Swiss Black metal scene (where she even participated as a band player), Hoepflinger observed that such normative divisions between “seriousness” and “mere playfulness” are too rigid to be applied to black metal. Religion in black metal is not based on scriptures and dogmas but rather on performance, interaction with the audience, and – together with the re-usage of symbols from various religions – is constructing something new and serious: a “black metal reality”. After her talk, all participants went together for lunch, engaging in lively discussion.

## Afternoon panel and social gathering

In the online contribution *Folk-metal Band "Shadow of the Sun": Music, Outlook, Action*, Oksana Smozhevska from the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv focused on how the subcultural discourse of the Ukrainian Neo-pagan community Native Faith is communicated via the production and artistic expression of Shadow of the Sun's music and related activities. The band members believe that language is a central component of Ukrainian identity and actively engage in the ongoing war with Russia by educating the army, organizing concerts for soldiers, and even through the active personal defense of the country. Unfortunately, the quality of her talk was affected by technical problems with broadcasting and sound.

The following contribution, *Hellenic Polytheism & Heavy Metal: From Classical Reception to Contemporary Ritual*, was given in a hybrid form by Jeremy Swist from Brandeis University and Aneirin Pendragon from the University of St Andrews (online). In the first part of their talk, Swist introduced how widely various metal bands use the Hellenic pantheon, ranging from lyrics and artworks to ideas. Metal bands often use polytheism to criticize Christianity or syncretize Hellenic mythological topics with motives from other religions (e.g., the figure of Prometheus with Satan). In the second part, Pendragon (being Hellenic polytheists themselves) joined us online. They introduced the current Hellenic revivalism and argued that metal – with its performative ritualistic aspect – can be seen as a religion. They further tracked the similarities between contemporary Hellenic worship and particular elements of lived metal culture.

Shamma Boyarin from the University of Victoria, in his contribution *Wordless Ecstasy: The Jewish Drone/Doom Mysticism of Dveyekus*, explored how Jewish (music) mysticism is expressed in the work of the doom/drone band Dveyekus. The band's name is derived from a Yiddish word that, in a mystical context, refers to a kind of religious ecstasy achievable through music. The similar idea is, according to Boyarin, embedded in Dveyekus' album *Pillar Without Mercy*. The band combines the traditional Hassidic wordless tunes *niggunim* with the mystical potential of drone metal, which he further explored through the example of musical, textual, and visual elements from their album.

After the coffee break, participants gathered for the last two papers of the afternoon panel. Both contributions dealt with the problematics of black metal, following the stable interest of researchers in studying this extreme metal subgenre. The first (online) paper, *"Burning the bridges": the pursuit of authenticity in Norwegian black metal*, was delivered by Stoyan Sgourev, visiting scholar at the New Bulgarian University and Ca' Foscari University in Venice. He explored the social dynamics of polarization and radicalization in the context of the second wave of black metal. Members of the early 1990s Norwegian scene become (in)famous for their criminal activities like church burnings or murder. Therefore, in his talk, Sgourev explored what motivated them to challenge social norms and "burn the bridges" to social acceptance and why it helped them achieve wider recognition than following the socially acceptable compromise.

Next, a member of CMS/MSCEE Matouš Mokry (Masaryk University), with a long-standing interest in connections between black metal and (dark) esoteric spirituality, presented the paper *Unholy Alliances: Preliminary Remarks on the Esoteric Interaction with Black Metal*. Using the example of three case studies from the cultural context of radical right-wing esotericism, he tried to demonstrate “evidence for ongoing esoteric reflection of black metal by non-metal occult actors and their active involvement with the scene for the sake of their esoteric interests”. Among these authors, he mentioned Slovak Sebastián Jahič describing black metal as the clearest embodiment of negative transcendence. Mokry’s enriching insight was nicely complemented by diagrams, punchy quotes, and graphic excerpts from old-school metal zines.

The conference program then continued by meeting an online host Bartłomiej Krysiuk, a musician from the Polish black metal band Batushka. Bartłomiej was interviewed by a member of MSCEE, Karolina Karbownik, discussing the band’s return on stage in the post-Covid period, their relationship to Orthodox religion, and Batushka’s specific stage performances. Funny moments appeared when Krysiuk called himself a “boomer” or during a misunderstanding of the word “pop”, which he did not mean as a music genre but as the Polish equivalent of the word “priest”. Krysiuk also mentioned that black metal in its current form often lacks the aspects he expects to be there, and that is why he prefers 90s music – Darkthrone, early Mayhem or Venom.

The first day ended with a short presentation of the *Ossarium project* by Yves Müller and Anna-Katharina Hoepflinger, mapping ossuaries across Europe with Müller’s compelling photographs capturing the bones and the dead. Many participants then gathered to enjoy casual fun and a concert by the young local band *Slaves of Passion* during the afterparty at the M13 Rock Hell club.

## Day II. Controversies and Bones (8<sup>th</sup> September)

### Morning panel

Niall Scott, a Reader in Philosophy and Popular Culture at the University of Central Lancashire and the principal editor of *Metal Music Studies* journal, opened the second conference day with his keynote lecture, *Apophatic transgressions and hymns to the void*. His talk was structured as a discussion partly moderated by CMS/MSCEE member Ondřej Daniel. In general, Scott addressed the problematic relationship between Christianity and metal. Christianity has negative publicity inside metal culture, ranging from existential hatred to the perception of Christian metal bands as somewhat peculiar. However, Scott argues that extreme metal owes a lot to Christian theology because (especially the negative theology) significantly influences its lyric content and the aesthetic of sound. Thus, the extreme metal tendency to make apophatic claims leads to a transgression of both metal and religion, where the negations of the divine can be either negative or positive.

Dawid Kaszuba, from Jagiellonian University, opened the morning panel by examining the *Embodied voice of the oppressed. The feminist exorcisms of Lingua Ignota*. Kaszuba explained that the feminist musician, who expands the boundaries of noise

and metal, describes her work as self-exorcism stemming from her experience with domestic violence and uses Christian and Biblical symbolism to create feminist “survivor’s anthems”. By examining her inspiration, ranging from the Christian mystic Hildegard of Bingen to “feminist” serial killer Aileen Wuornos, Kaszuba analyzed the feminist use of Christian rhetoric in Lingua Ignota’s lyrics and the use of her voice and body as a tool for the articulation of traumatic experience during transgressive performances “designed as explicit, cathartic rituals”.

The next speaker, Márk Nemes from the University of Szeged, presented a paper on *“The ones who called Satan” – an examination of a written manifestation of Christian moral panics regarding heavy metal*. He analyzed techniques used by Christian authors to spread moral panic around the metal subculture. On the primary example of Corradi Balducci’s book *Satanism and Rock* (published in 1991), he explained how informative books and pamphlets for “potentially concerned families of young metalheads” helped create the notion of amoral and dangerous metal, sometimes valid to this day. It was amusing to see how poorly understood or intentionally twisted metal terms and band names were presented as evidence of metal musicians’ hidden satanic or amoral intentions.

Finally, Jakub Jahl from Charles University closed the morning panel with a paper on *Marilyn Manson and the Antichrist of Modern Age*. He examined the concept of “antichrist” in the work of Marilyn Manson, its gradual changes during the past few decades, and how changes in the conceptualization of the antichrist reflected the shifts in a postmodern global society. According to Jahl, Marilyn Manson’s antichrist figure was influenced by the media picture he created about himself, which gradually pushed him to commit further extremities. Since Jahl’s presentation was full of appealing visuals containing explicit content, some online participants felt offended that he did not warn them about the explicit pictures’ presentation. It is surely a good incentive for conference organizers to prevent similar tensions next year.

### **Afternoon panel and closing MSCEE roundtable**

Following the Ossarium project presentation from the previous day, participants, after lunch, visited the Brno ossuary in the city center under Saint Jacob’s Church. The afternoon panel was then opened by Marek Vodička from Charles University, bringing out the philosophical-aesthetic topic *Metal and the Sublime*, where the sublime is “an aesthetic experience described most famously by Burke and Kant as a mixture of awe, fear, and beauty”. According to Vodička, metal is not beautiful – frequently, it can even be ugly, but still, it somehow brings aesthetic pleasure. To find out how, Vodička identified the main philosophical concepts of sublime and then analyzed their presence in (mostly progressive and technical) metal – from romanticism-inspired album covers to musical experience of “heavenness”, that, according to him, might resemble or even imitate religious experience.

The standpoint of philosophy was once again discussed by the next speaker and a member of CMS/MSCEE, Vojtěch Volák (also from Charles University). In his talk *Immanent Lobster God: Creating the New within Metal Subgenres*, Volák used the concept of the Lobster God, which through a process of double articulation, layers

the intensities of individual subgenres of metal music into assemblages. Subgenres, through this view, have a constant tendency to stasis and to change simultaneously. In doing so, he has shown how subgenres can be viewed as temporal signifiers of these layered intensities, which gain meaning through the layers from which they emerge and give meaning to the other layer genres that emerge from them.

Because the first (online) speaker of the following panel, Anna Lénárd from the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts, unfortunately, could not join with their contribution *The visibility of religious Indonesian heavy metal bands in Europe*, the coffee break was unexpectedly prolonged. Pasqualina Eckerström from the University of Helsinki then (online) opened the panel with a somewhat sensitive topic: *The unintended consequences of state-enforced orthodoxy: "Blasphemous" metal music as secondary deviation in Iran*. She conducted a narrative analysis of 16 metal musicians' interviews from religiously conservative Iran, where metal is officially banned. Metal enthusiasts are thus forced to secretly keep and bring metal music and related items via smuggling, VPN changes, etc. According to Eckerström, there are two groups of metalheads (both coming mainly from the male middle-upper class and non-conservative families): the first is trying to find a compromise with a state oppressing metal for religious reasons and understanding it as deviant; and the second, more radical group, is strictly going against the authorities without asking for permission, where the religiously "deviant" attitude is taken as a sign of authenticity.

The last (online) conference speaker, Sergio Miranda-Bonilla from the University of Guanajuato, delivered a paper on *Theological language, postreligious paradigm, demythologisation and metal music cultures*. In his PhD thesis, Miranda-Bonilla started to use theological language as an instrumental metaphor for metal-related dogmas, mythologies, and morality. By using a view of culture as a palimpsest (a layer that is repeatedly overwritten by new meanings) and metal (and rock) fans as tribes, he argued that the horizon of meaning in metal overcomes the individual identities and forms "spiritualities". According to Miranda-Bonilla, metal creates a transcendental aesthetic experience: he believes that we can use the theological language to describe its effect on personal dimensions and life-meaning possibilities while studying metal as a sort of "belief system".

### **New Perspectives, Fruitful Ideas, and the Future of MSCEE and International Metal Studies**

Before the conference ended, all participants gathered for an open round table discussion on *Metal Studies in Central and Eastern Europe: status, vision, perspectives*. Miroslav Vrzal reminded the audience of last year's online workshop, where the idea to connect metal studies from (in a way peripheralized) central and eastern Europe enabled the establishment of the MSCEE network. Vrzal stressed that central-eastern parts of Europe might enrich global metal studies with topics related to metal oppression by the communist regime or the current war's influence on Ukraine and Russian metal scenes. In the following discussion, participants proposed to study the cultural import of metal from East to West (so far rather overlooked), Slavic influences on metal subgenres and local eastern metal scenes or the general problematics

of nationalistic tendencies in central-eastern black metal. Importantly, Niall Scott took an online word to thank all conference contributors for the high quality of their papers and offered the possibility of publishing them in the *Metal Music Studies* journal. He also proposed a direct involvement of MSCEE in future conferences of The International Society for Metal Music Studies. MSCEE thus definitely made a further step in terms of international networking and possible cooperation. We are looking forward to its future international development!

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