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### Recommended Citation

Lief, J. (2013). Some Kind of Monstrosity: What Youth Ministry Can Learn from Heavy Metal. *Journal of Youth and Theology*, 12 (2), 7. <https://doi.org/10.1163/24055093-90000066>

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## Some Kind of Monstrosity: What Youth Ministry Can Learn from Heavy Metal

### Abstract

This article brings Slavoj Žižek's articulation of Pauline Christianity into conversation with Norwegian Black Metal (Gorgoroth) in order to demonstrate the subversive role of popular culture as it challenges the panoptic ideological power of the status quo. Through dialogue with elements of popular culture, like Black Metal, youth ministry is reminded of its prophetic function to challenge the powers of this age as it proclaims the monstrosity of the crucified and resurrected Christ.

### Keywords

heavy metal, youth ministry, Slavoj Žižek, Norwegian Black Metal, popular culture

### Disciplines

American Popular Culture | Christianity

### Comments

This is the author's post-print version. The official version of record is at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/24055093-90000066>

Lief, Jason. "Some Kind of Monstrosity: What Youth Ministry Can Learn from Heavy Metal." *Journal of Youth and Theology*. 12.2 (2013): 7-22. DOI: 10.1163/24055093-90000066

# SOME KIND OF MONSTROSITY: WHAT YOUTH MINISTRY CAN LEARN FROM HEAVY METAL

BY: JASON LIEF

**Abstract:** This article brings Slovoj Zizek's articulation of Pauline Christianity into conversation with Norwegian Black Metal (Gorgoroth) in order to demonstrate the subversive role of popular culture as it challenges the panoptic ideological power of the status quo. Through dialogue with elements of popular culture, like Black Metal, youth ministry is reminded of its prophetic function to challenge the powers of this age as it proclaims the monstrosity of the crucified and resurrected Christ.

## INTRODUCTION

When one examines the current literature in the field of youth ministry it is evident that the Christian community faces a crisis - young people are leaving the church. This assessment is based upon studies that suggest there are significant problems with the way the Christian faith is being transmitted to the younger generations. Recent books by Christian Smith, David Kinnaman, Kenda Creasy Dean, as well as the *Sticky Faith* phenomenon, offer different, yet complementary, interpretations of the data.<sup>1</sup> What they share in common is the belief that there is a problem, and that the solution involves the church doing something better - whether that is moral formation, becoming more culturally relevant, or providing better teaching and/or formation into an orthodox version of Christianity.

There is, however, something missing from these interpretations. What if a proper response to this issue is not just more or better moral and doctrinal formation; what if a proper response is to "let go?" By "let go" I do not mean to abandon young people; what I mean is for the Christian community to resist the temptation to

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<sup>1</sup> Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching : The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); David Kinnaman and Aly Hawkins, *You Lost Me : Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church-- and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: BakerBooks, 2011); Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian : What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Kara Eckmann Powell and Chap Clark, *Sticky Faith : Everyday Ideas to Build Lasting Faith in Your Kids* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2011).

desperately hold on more tightly. Rather than “strengthen” its theology, insisting upon some metaphysical guarantee for its theological and moral claims, maybe the proper response is to “weaken” our theology.<sup>2</sup> The problem with a “strong” theology is that it insists upon the adherence to specific truths as the basis for the existence of the community. The tendency of this form of “strong theology” is to become imperialistic as it seeks to draw young people into the beliefs and practices of the community. The problem with this approach is that, while giving lip service to the importance of diversity, it inevitably collapses all difference into uniformity – specifically as the process of differentiating theology and morality from its cultural packaging proves difficult. “Weak” theology, on the other hand, focuses upon the loosening and undermining of all metaphysical guarantees. A community grounded in the weak theology of the Pauline interpretation of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ assumes a posture of charity (love) - making space for difference while challenging every form of dehumanization that stems from oppressive control, manipulation, and strategic power of the status quo.

It is precisely here that the Christian community, and youth ministry in particular, can learn from certain manifestations of popular culture. In his book *Youth in a Suspect Society: Democracy or Disposability* Henry Giroux addresses the impact of the forms of social control that have been unleashed upon young people in the west.<sup>3</sup> He speaks to the increasingly institutionalized forces of global capitalism that frame possibility and normality for young people with regard to the construction of meaning

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<sup>2</sup> “Weak” and “strong” refer to a metaphysical approach to truth. “Strong” theology refers to a form of religious thought that focuses upon power and objectivity. “Weak” theology refers to a form of theological thought grounded in a poetic hermeneutics. For further discussion see John D. Caputo, Gianni Vattimo, and Jeffrey W. Robbins, *After the Death of God, Insurrections* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Henry A. Giroux, *Youth in a Suspect Society: Democracy or Disposability?*, 1st ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

and identity. Interestingly, it is within various expressions of popular culture that young people are able to cultivate subversive forms of praxis. One subculture in particular – the genre of popular music known as “Heavy Metal” – serves as an important example of how certain manifestations of popular culture work to rupture the dominant ideology of the status quo – forcing open the cultural space for new forms of meaning and identity. In this way, the heavy metal subculture offers a dialogue partner for the Christian community as it reflects upon what it means to cultivate a subversive Christian praxis grounded in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – a praxis that attempts to rupture the cultural space so young people might experience freedom, justice, and love.

The purpose of this article is to explore the possible relationship between the subculture of heavy metal and the subversive nature of Christian praxis grounded in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. I will argue that it is through the poetic manifestation of the “monstrous” or the “grotesque” that heavy metal ruptures the status quo, challenging the hegemonic paradigm of global capitalism, making space for young people to construct meaning and identity. While on the surface it seems much of symbolism of heavy metal opposes the Christian narrative, a closer examination reveals it to be significantly dependent upon the Christian narrative. More specifically this article will argue that heavy metal’s appeal to the “monstrous” provides a paradigm for youth ministry as the cultivation of subversive tactics over and against the dominant cultural paradigm. What will emerge from this conversation is a philosophical and theological articulation of “monstrosity” that provides the basis for a “weak” theology, and a subversive form of Christian praxis as the foundation for youth ministry.

## STRATEGIES AND TACTICS: SUBVERTING THE CAPITALIST PARADIGM

The later half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has seen an increased awareness to various forms of institutional and cultural oppression. Within the fields of practical theology and pastoral care there has been deliberate attention paid to the forms of cultural bias that have led to the oppression of various communities based upon race, gender, and sexuality.<sup>4</sup> An important part of this has been the development of liberation and political theologies that address institutional forms of violence and oppression.<sup>5</sup> One group whose cultural and institutional situation needs more attention is the cultural experience of young people.

One possible reason for this omission is that the discourses that undergird the institutional life of young people have become the status quo even for the Christian community. The social scientific discourses of developmental psychology and institutionalized education provide the empirical and biological justification for the powerful educational institutions that govern the lives of young people from the time they are toddlers to their mid 20's and beyond. There is no better example of Foucault's "disciplined" panoptic society than that of the North American compulsory education system in which young people are subjected to a cultural pedagogy that prepares them for a productive participation within the world of global capitalism. Rather than offer a counter narrative to this paradigm, many of the programs developed to provide pastoral care for young people within the Christian community simply take this form of

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<sup>4</sup> See Rebecca S. Chopp, *The Praxis of Suffering : An Interpretation of Liberation and Political Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986).

<sup>5</sup> See Stephen Pattison, *Pastoral Care and Liberation Theology*, Cambridge Studies in Ideology and Religion ; [5] (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

institutional life for granted, with the structure and practices of youth programs continually being formed by the standards of institutionalized education.

The work of Catholic sociologist Michel de Certeau acknowledges the existence of Foucault's disciplinary society and the homogenizing institutional power of global capitalism, while holding open the possibility for communities to subvert the status quo through what he calls the "art of using."<sup>6</sup> De Certeau writes, "If it is true that the grid of "discipline" is everywhere becoming clearer and more extensive, it is all the more urgent to discover how an entire society resists being reduced to it, what popular procedures... manipulate the mechanisms of discipline and conform to them only in order to evade them..."<sup>7</sup>

An important part of De Certeau's work is his differentiation between "tactics" and "strategies." The "strategic" refers to the means by which the panoptic disciplinary society establishes control through the organization of space.<sup>8</sup> A "tactic" is the response of the marginalized to the "strategies" of hegemonic power in which the products of the imposed order are turned against itself. Thus, through the act of consumption, communities are able to create fissures that subvert the status quo from within – what he refers to as "everyday practices (talking, reading, moving about, shopping, cooking, etc.)" that become tactical "ways of operating" that function as "clever tricks, knowing how to get away with things..."<sup>9</sup>

For De Certeau these tactics are fundamentally an artistic endeavor that cultivate new ways of speaking (language), poetic ways of knowing (tales and legends), and "arts of practice" that divert time, thus making subversive space within the context of the

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<sup>6</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xv.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., xiv.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., xix.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

homogenized space of global capitalism.<sup>10</sup> Through these “tactics” individuals and communities are able to use the products given by global capitalism against itself, what De Certeau calls the process of “ ‘putting one over’ on the established order...”<sup>11</sup> This, for de Certeau, is precisely the significance of “popular practice.” He writes,

The actual order of things is precisely what “popular” tactics turn to their own ends, without any illusion that it will change any time soon. Though elsewhere it is exploited by a dominant power or simply denied by an ideological discourse, here order is tricked by an art. Into the institution to be served are thus insinuated styles of social exchange, technical invention, and moral resistance, that is, an economy of the “gift” (generosities for which one expects a return), an esthetics of “tricks” (artists’ operations) and an ethics of tenacity (countless ways of refusing to accord the established order the status of law, a meaning, or a fatality). “Popular” culture is precisely that...<sup>12</sup>

While de Certeau accepts that the contemporary situation is one in which space has been homogenized by the panoptic disciplinary power of modern capitalists institutions, he also leaves space for individuals and communities to subversively respond to this situation through the tactical practices of every day living. Furthermore, de Certeau’s work provides an interpretation of popular culture as something more than the capitalist duping of the masses. While popular culture is a contested area, as global capitalism seeks to constantly re-appropriate what is produced through the practices of everyday living, there remains a vital place within the realm of popular culture for human agency and responsibility - providing an aesthetic hermeneutic for the interpretation of human identity in the context of postmodern global capitalism.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.



## HEAVY METAL: THE MEDIATION OF MONSTROSITY

De Certeau's work provides a significant interpretive lens in which the message and symbolism of the heavy metal subculture are understood to be the manifestation of subversive tactics that rupture the ideology of the status quo. One musician described heavy metal as the "negation of the world as it is handed to you...Fuck you, I won't do what you tell me."<sup>13</sup> At its core, heavy metal utilizes poetic narrative and symbolism as a way to re-narrate the world - providing an alternate paradigm by which young people might form meaning and identity as they experience the world. The symbols most often used are taken from the dark or satanic side of life - tapping into such themes as power, chaos, death, and the grotesque. Two of the primary themes underlying the metal experience are what Dianne Weintstein refers to as the Dionysian and the Chaotic as it "challenges the order and hegemony of everyday life" through "monsters, the underworld and hell, the grotesque and horrifying, disasters, mayhem, carnage, injustice, death, and rebellion."<sup>14</sup>

Such themes are particularly prevalent in the subcategory of heavy metal known as "death" or "black" metal. While there are various representations throughout the world, one of the primary manifestations of this type of music is found in Norway. In the book *Lords of Chaos: The Bloody Rise of the Satanic Metal Underground*, authors Michael Moynihan and Didrik Soderlind provide insight into the history of Norwegian Black Metal, as well as an examination of the controversies surrounding the movement - particularly the church burnings that occurred in the mid 1990's.<sup>15</sup> Without glorifying

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<sup>13</sup> Sam Dunn, *Metal: A Headbanger's Journey* (Warner Home Video, 2005). This comment was made by Rage Against the Machine guitarist Tom Morello.

<sup>14</sup> Deena Weinstein, *Heavy Metal : The Music and Its Culture*, Rev. ed. (New York: Da Capo Press, 2000), 35.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Moynihan and Didrik Soderlind, *Lords of Chaos : The Bloody Rise of the Satanic Metal Underground*, New ed. (Port Townsend, WA: Feral House, 2003).

the deplorable violence associated with the movement, the authors provide a fascinating examination of the philosophical presuppositions behind the tactics by which Black Metal attempts to mediate the world. Through the satanic imagery, the obsession with death and violence, the explicit rejection and hatred of Christianity, as well as the nostalgic re-appropriation of Norse mythology, the purveyors of Norwegian Black metal offer young people a counter-narrative to the secularized culture of Norwegian society.

While the imagery of Black metal is specifically directed against Christianity – demonstrated by the church burnings – the interviews contained in *Lord's of Chaos* suggest that the primary target of Norwegian black metal is actually the secularization of Norwegian society, of which protestant Christianity is seen to be a complicit participant. In an interview with theology professor Jacob Jervell, Jervell responds to a question about the church burnings by saying, “[The church burnings are] a reaction to [the church] becoming more secular. As a result, if you want to “find yourself,” you don’t go to church. Incitement to thinking doesn’t come from the Church anymore; not even the incitement to behave morally. We are not able to expose modern society for what it is.”<sup>16</sup> Norwegian journalist Pal Mathiesen argues that the “Satanism” of Black metal is primarily an opposition to “civilization” – specifically the type of secular society that has developed in Norway. He responds to a question about what draws young people to Black metal by saying:

I think there is a culture in Norway around the collective dream of society...This is something that’s important – individualism in Norway has been held down. That has happened. If you are different in school or very good for example, or very intelligent, that becomes a problem for you. We don’t accept people with exceptional gifts or anything like that...Everything is supposed to fit in, in a classroom of twenty-five or thirty people. If you are too weak or too healthy, or

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 78.

if you're too good, you're supposed to shut up. It's mediocrity. Satanism, for these people, starts as purpose against this pattern...They've been oppressed because they have special gifts, and that's true...That's one important aspect in Norwegian society, and because of that when it boils over it becomes very extreme because the hatred toward the mediocrity is so strong that when it breaks free then the results are that much more extreme.<sup>17</sup>

In a documentary that specifically focuses upon the genre of Black Metal, Thomas Erikssen, a Professor from the University of Oslo, explains his view on why Black metal took root in Norway.<sup>18</sup> He states, "There is a vital power here, there's a kind of I'll say "sheepishness" – conformism, following the stream of general morality, and not fashioning your own morality... That's why I'm also saying perhaps Black metal is a sort of the ultimate moral form of anarchism because it says you have to have faith in yourself." Per Solvang, a professor at the University of Bergen, adds, "The metal scene in Norway is challenging the social – democratic ideology... because the metal scene is representing a very individualistic ideology."<sup>19</sup> Gaahl, The controversial lead singer of the Black Metal band Gorgoroth sees Norwegian black metal as fundamentally opposed to any form of ideology – Christian or otherwise – that seeks to impose any type of control upon the individual. He states, "We don't stand for socialism, we don't stand for democracy, we stand for the individual and the strongest survival."<sup>20</sup> Norwegian pastor, Per Anders Nordengen, recognizes in Black metal the attempt to weave a counter-narrative to the cultural forces that dominate the lives of Norwegian young people – including the church. He states, "A lot of young people today, they want to

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 245.

<sup>18</sup> Dunn, *Metal: A Headbanger's Journey*, 2005. This specific documentary on Black Metal is a supplement found on the DVD version of *Metal: A Headbanger's Journey*. It was added because of criticism concerning the way some perceived Dunn's representation of Black Metal in Norway.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

oppose...to the [societal] authority, and maybe the church has been linked too much to the authority, and that has maybe been the reason for the opposition to the church.”<sup>21</sup>

This opposition to societal and cultural norms, and the traditional association of the church with the establishment of the dominant secular culture, explains why Black Metal appropriates satanic symbolism. According to Gaahl, “Black metal is Satanism. There is no other answer...My only goal is to procreate Satan.”<sup>22</sup> But the documentary makes clear that “Satanism” in this context is not the belief in, or worship of, a literal Satan – rather, Satan, is a symbol of rebellion and non-conformity. One Norwegian pastor interviewed referred to it as the attempt to attempt to tap into a “life force, an energy, of a rather dark kind.”<sup>23</sup> Solvang emphasizes that the Satanism of Black metal, which he believes remains dependent upon the symbolism and narrative of Christianity, is essentially a form of rebellion. He argues that young people have become Satanists in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries because “it was the only form of opposition left – the vacant slot. Because their parents had been against the Vietnam war, they had been pacifists – so what was left for them? Well... nothing, except Satanism because that had not been taken.”<sup>24</sup> In this context, one Black metal musician referred to the Satanism of black metal as “part of a philosophical path towards something else...” essentially discovering and embracing the dark, shadow, side of existence.<sup>25</sup>

It is in this context of non-conformity, life energy and power, and even the shadow side of existence that Norwegian Black metal attempts to ground itself in Norse

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

Mythology.<sup>26</sup> Sam Dunn, the director of the documentary, talks about how unlike many other forms of music, the culture and the place of Norway is incorporated into the ethos of Black Metal. From the exotic climate and terrain of the country, to the extreme weather conditions – Black metal represents a type of romantic re-appropriation of both the place and mythical culture of Norway. Norse mythology taps into a desire for a Dionysian interpretation of life and strength through such gods as Odin and Thor. Erikssen states, “The gods in Norse Mythology are just so much more interesting than the Christian God because they embody both good and evil – they’re unpredictable in a way that certainly the God of the New Testament is not – so they are easier to identify with.”<sup>27</sup>

The secularization of Norwegian culture, which is connected with the Christianization of Norwegian culture, has in many ways, according to those interviewed in the documentary, become devoid of spirituality. In this way, the life, power, and freedom represented by the gods of Norse mythology is understood to be an antidote to the mediocrity of secular society. Erikssen states, “I think the emotional and physical power represented in the Norse gods is attractive – it can perhaps be more personal because it has not yet been appropriated by the establishment of society. Which Christianity has for a 1,000 years in this country.”<sup>28</sup>

What we find in the genre of heavy metal music – specifically Norwegian Black metal – is one manifestation of a popular tactic by which young people push back against modern secular society. By tapping into the mythical power of satanic symbols,

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<sup>26</sup> Interestingly, those involved in Black Metal refer to the ideas of Jung regarding the “shadow” side of reality, as well as his emphasis upon archetypes. Moynihan and Söderlind, *Lords of Chaos : The Bloody Rise of the Satanic Metal Underground*. Specifically see chapter 9 “Resurgent Atavism”. Also see C. G. Jung and Marie Luise von Franz, *Aion* (Zürich: Rascher, 1951).

<sup>27</sup> Dunn, *Metal: A Headbanger’s Journey*.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

and by reclaiming the nostalgia of Norse mythology, heavy metal works to rupture the dominant social narrative of global capitalism in order to assert a sense of freedom and agency on behalf of young people who see themselves as domesticated and institutionalized. In this way, heavy metal uses the mythical and the poetic as a means of mediating reality. To use Lacanian terminology, the symbolism and poetic of heavy metal disrupts the symbolic order (secularism and global capitalism) through “monstrosity” – what Slavoj Žižek might call “irruptions of the Real.” Thus, heavy metal, particularly black metal, offers a social imaginary that mediates the possibility of alternative articulations and experiences of the world. The means by which they do this is through the assertion of “monstrosity.”

#### MEDIATED BY MONSTROSITY: CHRISTIANITY AND HEAVY METAL

For philosopher Slavoj Žižek “monstrosity” refers to the intrusion of that for which we have no prior categories - resulting in the disruption or rupture of the symbolic order of the status quo. To use Lacanian terminology, “monstrosity” represents the irruption of the “Real” that fractures both the “imaginary” and the “symbolic” orders – something that evades conceptualization by the dominant powers of the status quo. For Žižek, this irruption is understood to be the result of an inherent tension between “truth” and “ideology,” as “ideology” tries to concretize, or capture, “truth” in the form of a particular. It is here that philosophers like Žižek and John Caputo speak of “truth” as an “event” – as that which cannot be reduced to metaphysics, or a particular way of being in the world.<sup>29</sup> The tension that exists

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<sup>29</sup> See John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God : A Theology of the Event*, Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

between this “event” and the ideology of the status quo results in the rupture of the symbolic order – the clearing of space for the possibility of something new.

Zizek argues that the symbolic order develops as a way to “gentrify” the monstrous excess of humanity – what he refers to as the human “excess” (what differentiates us from the biological or “natural” world) that becomes the basis for subjectivity, desire, and history.<sup>30</sup> This becomes the basis for the rise of ideology – for the pervasive domination and control of the status quo that seeks to contain and control “truth.” This, for Zizek, is the proper paradigm for interpreting global capitalism – as an ideology that seeks to control and domesticate this human excess by keeping humanity enslaved to a continuous cycle of desire and consumption. It is only “truth” as “event,” or “truth” as the universal that cannot be fully contained within particular, that obliterates all metaphysical conceptualization – breaking into the symbolic order of the status quo, rupturing the cycle of desire, in order to free humanity for the possibility of subjectivity, agency, and political action.

For Zizek, as well as Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, it is the Pauline understanding of Christian faith that provides the ultimate metaphor for speaking of “truth” as “event” as the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ becomes the “monstrosity,” the rupture that opens up the possibility for agency and identity in the face of totalizing systems and institutions. It is faithfulness to the “event” of Christ’s death and resurrection that represents adherence to “truth” that is beyond the empirical and the metaphysical – opening space within the symbolic order for subjectivity, freedom, and political action.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Slavoj Zizek, *The Fragile Absolute, or, Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?*, Wo Es War (London ; New York: Verso, 2000), 83.

<sup>31</sup> See Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul : The Foundation of Universalism*, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003). Also see Slavoj Zizek, *The Ticklish Subject : The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, Wo Es War (London ; New York: Verso, 1999).

More specifically for Žižek, the cross becomes the revelation of the “monstrosity of Christ.” He writes, “Monstrosity...the appearance of God in the finite flesh of a human individual: ‘This is the monstrous...whose necessity we have seen.’ The finite fragile human individual is ‘inappropriate’ to stand for God... The very attempt at reconciliation, in its first move, produces a monster, a grotesque “inappropriateness as such.”<sup>32</sup> This monstrous revelation of the divine found in the suffering human Jesus Christ works to rupture the ideological foundation of radically transcendent theism. Žižek addresses this through a quote from Chesterton’s work on the book of Job in which Chesterton writes:

God is here no longer the miraculous exception that guarantees the normality of the universe, the unexplainable X who enables us to explain everything else; he is, on the contrary, himself overwhelmed by the overflowing miracle of his Creation. Upon a closer look, there is nothing normal in our universe – everything, every small thing that is, is a miraculous exception; viewed from a proper perspective, every normal thing is a monstrosity.<sup>33</sup>

All of this supports an interpretation of Black metal as a “symptom,” or surplus, that cannot be appropriated by the symbolic order of secularist ideology and global capitalism. It is the poetic and symbolic rupture that awakens us to the impossibility of the desire cultivated by the secularist / global capitalist fantasy. If one looks at it directly (meaning the grotesque and violent imagery), they are sucked into the “nothingness,” seeing only death, chaos, and void. Yet, if one gains what Žižek refers to as a “parallax view” – meaning the engagement of the poetic and symbolic slant – one discovers an affirmation of life itself.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Slavoj Žižek, John Milbank, and Creston Davis, *The Monstrosity of Christ : Paradox or Dialectic?*, Short Circuits (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009), 74.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>34</sup> See Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* ibid. (2006).



Evidence for this interpretation can be found in an interview with the lead singer of Gorogroth, Gaahl, in a European documentary focusing upon Black Metal. Stripped of the makeup, costume, and performance – the documentary offers a glimpse of Gaahl’s home – a rustic family farm nestled in an isolated Norwegian valley. At the beginning of the interview Gaahl talks about being able to focus upon the only god as he states, “the god within yourself. Of course that’s the only true god – the god within everything. That is the only thing, for me, that is worth calling “god”. The highest spirit of everything and not this control freak...God is within man, god is within nature, and nature will always grow. That’s the force of all life –is to grow.”<sup>35</sup> This statement reveals Gaahl’s philosophical and theological perspective is similar to Nietzsche’s opposition to metaphysical and moral manifestations of truth found in the dominant form of theistic Christianity. While Gaahl does not make this connection, there is a relationship between the type of Christianity advocated by Zizek, Caputo, Badiou, and Vattimo, and the “satanic” message of Gorogroth’s music.<sup>36</sup> In the statements made by Gaahl we see that his atheism is not simply the rejection of “God” – it is, instead, an opposition to, and rejection of, a particular form of metaphysical theism (albeit a historically influential form) that, it can be argued, is the basis of secularism.

From this connection it can be argued that the Black Metal represented by Gorogroth and Gaahl in many ways remains firmly a part of the “Christian” horizon. After all, Black Norwegian metal appropriates Christian symbols – especially the cross – using them in such a way to negate a certain manifestation of Christian theism. This is done by celebrating what Jung might call the “shadow” side of Christianity. However,

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<sup>35</sup> Peter Beste, Rob Semmer, Ivar Berglin, Mike Washlesky, *True Norwegian Black Metal* (VBS TV, 2007). This is a five part documentary focusing upon Gaahl, the lead singer of Gorgoroth.

<sup>36</sup> See Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, Italian Academy Lectures (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

in affirming Lucifer, in celebrating death, pain, and sexuality, and by giving meaning to the cross as a symbol of negation, they end up affirming human subjectivity and freedom. In doing so the proponents of Black metal have not ventured outside of Christian faith, but represent the latent dark corners of Christian belief that often remain unexplored. In this way, far from undermining Christianity, they actually point to the “monstrous” aspects of Christian “truth”, which are only explored (if at all) with great trepidation and discomfort. Such an exploration can be found in Carl Jung and G.K. Chesterton’s treatment of the book of Job, which Zizek picks up in the *Monstrosity of Christ*. Zizek quotes Chesterton where he writes that the “great surprise” of the book of Job is that it “makes Job suddenly satisfied with the mere presentation of something impenetrable. Verbally speaking the enigmas of Jehovah seem darker and more desolate than the enigmas of Job; yet Job was comfortless before the speech of Jehovah and is comforted after it. He has been told nothing, but he feels the terrible and tingling atmosphere of something which is too good to be told...The riddles of God are more satisfying than the solutions of man.”<sup>37</sup>

Whether intentional or not the propensity of black metal to accentuate the “shadow” side of Christianity places them directly within the scope of the type of Christianity advocated by Zizek, Caputo, and Vattimo. Thus, in their attempt to negate the metaphysical theism of Christianity, Black metal inadvertently finds itself affirming the post-metaphysical interpretation of Christianity put forth by contemporary philosophers and theologians.

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<sup>37</sup> Zizek, Milbank, and Davis, *The Monstrosity of Christ : Paradox or Dialectic?*, 52-53.

## CONCLUSION: THE CLEARING OF CULTURAL SPACE

All of this leads to the question: What does this interpretation of heavy metal mean for the Christian community, and youth ministry more specifically? Institutional churches in the west are obsessed with establishing programmatic forms of youth ministry to address the engagement of cultural issues. As the church attempts to respond to the various issues facing young people in the context of popular culture – the tendency is to take for granted the institutional structures that dominate the lives of young people, along with the discourses that undergird them. Thus, reflecting the influence of global capitalism and the consumer society, the programmatic forms of youth ministry work to domesticate the cultural engagement of young people – bringing the various forms of cultural expression under the watchful panoptic eye of the church. This can be seen in the various attempts to manage the cultural engagement of young people – whether it be by advocating specifically Christian forms of popular culture (CCM), or by integrating secular forms of pop culture into the youth program (in both positive and negative critique) – the result is that young people are brought under the watchful, often moralistic, eye of the institutional church through the youth ministry program.

In this context youth ministry is co-opted by the status quo as it attempts to domesticate the culture of young people. It does this by cultivating a moralistic understanding of Christianity in which the gospel is brought into the service of the dominant forces of global capitalism and liberal democracy. Here there is a tendency to indoctrinate young people into a metaphysical form of Christianity, one that often leads to the formation of various social hierarchies (gender, sexuality, race, economic class, etc.) as well as the spiritualization of the Christian message which leads to the de-

politicization of young people, and a resignation to the way things are as a part of a greater Divine will. Within this type of youth ministry the human “excess” – the cultivation of subjectivity and agency – is domesticated, grafted in to the capitalist cycle of desire under the guise of Christian spirituality.

A critical dialogue with popular culture provides an opportunity for youth ministry to begin a process of deconstruction. In recognizing the political nature of the Christian community, and the radical “truth” event that is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Christian community can begin to break free from the metaphysical trappings that attempts to consume and control – thus loosing its grip upon the lives of young people. Crucial to this process is an affirmation of the various modes of cultural expression that are the result of young people pushing back against the panoptic institutional culture forced upon them. Rather than attempt to either domesticate or oppose the various movements in film, music, and media – the Christian community can begin to see these expressions as potential subversive forces that make space within the homogenous culture of global capitalism. Such a perspective can be interpreted to be the fulfillment of the reformational vision that began with Luther and Calvin, creatively restated in Bonhoeffer and Moltmann, to “allow the world to be the world,” empowering members of the Christian community to engage the processes of the world through the Holy Spirit.<sup>38</sup> Through this process of cultural engagement, the community empties itself – loses itself – both in and for the world, “enabling people to criticize and

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<sup>38</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Eberhard Bethge, *Ethics*, 1st Touchstone ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 227. Bonhoeffer writes, “Action which is in accordance with Christ is in accordance with reality because it allows the world to be the world; it reckons with the world as the world; and yet it never forgets that in Jesus Christ the world is loved, condemned and reconciled by God.”

stand back from the partial historical realities and movements which they have idolized and made absolute.”<sup>39</sup>

Ultimately, the Christian community must come to recognize the subversive aesthetic and metaphorical power that resides in the various forms of popular culture. Through the poetic imagination of heavy metal, for example, young people are able to create space for different forms of community that provide an alternative interpretation of the world than that given by the status quo. Thus, the Christian community might want to leave heavy metal, and other forms of popular culture, to do what they do well - artistically stick its finger in the eye of the panoptic culture by providing space for young people to re-narrate reality.

Furthermore, through this dialogue with popular culture it is clear that the Christian community must aesthetically reinvent itself. This begins by recognizing that the power of the gospel does not consist of domesticating or controlling all aspects of culture. The power of the gospel is in the disruptive – the subversive – power of the cross and the resurrection. This means that the “truth” of Christianity is not found in metaphysics, or institutional power, but it is found in the “weak” power of the cross that subverts the status quo, and re-narrates the world through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Only through the rupture of the cross and the event of resurrection can humanity be free from the idolatry of global capitalism – breaking us out of the cycle of desire, and freeing us to re-describe the world through the de-centering power of love and charity.

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<sup>39</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God : The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1974), 17.

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