

## **Praising and/or Cursing God Through Music**

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[See table of contents](#)

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# Praising and/or Cursing God Through Music

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As noted by musician and theologian Pierre Charru (2012, 311), the convergences between music and theology represent a little-explored area of research. And yet, much like the tools of theology, music and the singing that accompanies it have often been used to praise God's name. In fact, music has been an integral part of the world's religions for millennia. Through hymns, canticles and other forms, human beings have long used music in their attempts to express and define this relationship between themselves and the divine. We can thus conclude that for as far as religion

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and music have co-existed, *people have engaged in theology through music*.

Clearly, music can have a «theological resonance», to use François Vouga's (1983) phrase, and can be used to communicate the grandeur, omnipotence and splendour of God, as did many of the great baroque and classical composers like Bach, Verdi, Mozart and Beethoven, and as gospel and Christian rock artists still do to this day. But music is supple and malleable. It can also be used to criticize God. To curse God's name. This has been especially true since the first half of the xx<sup>th</sup> century, when artists started using music to present a different way of talking about God. This was a new theology, one that still said God's name, but in a different way: to challenge Him, denounce Him, or even disavow Him. To express a relationship between human beings and God which had changed and transformed. Silence, powerlessness, indifference... God has frequently been accused of all of these things in contemporary music. Yet challenging and questioning God in this way is nothing new. In certain psalms in the Hebrew Bible, music and song are often used to admonish God for His failure to act, His insensitivity, His condescension or His unjustified anger. But the Biblical authors did not reject God, unlike some contemporary musicians and their «followers».

In this volume of *Théologiques*, we present a series of articles that address music's ambivalent and somewhat schizophrenic role: sometimes used to praise God's name, but also to revile it, music wavers between promoting and denouncing God and religion in general. The eleven articles presented here, on topics as varied as classical music, national anthems and horror film soundtracks, as well as Christian rock, extreme metal music and war propaganda, from yesterday to today, show that *music shapes and transforms the relationship between human beings and God*.

This is to say that the acts across the continuum of professing and dispossessing our various Gods have taken their significations from the field of music, whether in its lyrical characterisations, and the lilting singing of praise or its oppositions in the possessed demonic growls, to the sheer enchantment of the blessed nature of religious music and its counterpoints in the cacaphonic embrace of the underground cultural scenes that summon the netherworld as an alternate to the heavens. For as one praises a Creator and gives thanks to the bountiful nature of His many sacrifices, so must one acknowledge the curses that are spat out at the nonchalance that organized religion is accused so often of embodying. This special issue attempts to bring together scholars and thinkers from a multitude of dis-

ciplines ranging from sociology, humanities, consumer culture, sound studies, visual art and, of course, theology, to help break some of the paradigmatic silos that echo hollow praise in favour a pluralistic dialogue along thematic lines that stretch in time, space, and, decidedly, musical genres.

This desire to praise or curse God's name is typically influenced by the historical context, the artists' experiences and beliefs, but also by certain very specific situations — like death, for example. In the opening article in this volume, «Dire un dieu de vie devant la mort. Trois prises de parole: Johannes Brahms, Igor Stravinsky, Frank Martin» (Praising a god of life in the face of death. Three viewpoints), François Vouga analyzes the works of these three great composers. Each in his own way, Brahms, Stravinsky and Martin took the initiative to recreate a musical genre rooted in the Catholic denominational tradition, the Requiem, to reformulate it for a universal audience, and thus to present a form of hope accessible to all of humanity. Based on their own beliefs and personal theological reflections, these composers developed what they hoped would be a universal language to speak of a God of hope in the face of death. According to Vouga, even though it is associated with the history of Western Christianity and its denominational and liturgical traditions, the Requiem is surely the musical genre best adapted to the cultural environment of secularized or lay cultures. Because humanity has no reply when faced with death. It is powerless in the face of death. Vouga concludes that «modern agnostic thought has found few alternatives to the symbolic imagination of medieval times in terms of language to accompany its anxieties, hopes and doubts when faced with death» (57; free translation).

But it must be acknowledged that since 1980, certain music groups with a very different and much more extreme style have indeed found an alternative language to address the subject of death. One example is the group Nuclear Death, the subject of the article by Daniel Butler — himself the singer for the death metal band Vastum, as well as a practicing psychotherapist and psychoanalyst. Formed in 1985, Nuclear Death makes brutal and disturbing music in a style that might be called «deathgrind» (a combination of «death metal» and «grindcore»). The group's singer, Laura («Lori») Bravo, calls herself a «Catholic Satanist» and describes herself as deeply spiritual but drawn to the dark side. Nuclear Death does not attack religion per se. It does not glorify Satan or hold God in contempt. The group depicts a world in which God is absent, and where human beings are just another species that cannot be distinguished from garbage, animals

or insects. The lyrics are dystopian and express an apophatic, or negative, theology. Through His absence, God leaves humanity in a state of distress similar to that of a « half-crushed worm. » The image is disgusting, yet powerful: a part of the worm is dead, while another part is still struggling to survive, but in vain... For God does nothing. He is absent. According to Butler, Nuclear Death's two albums, *Bride of Insect* (1990) and *Carrion for Worm* (1991), invite listeners to adopt a tragicomic attitude to the absurdity of suffering. The psychoanalytic approach he applies to the mystique of the Arizona-based deathgrind group is entirely original. In close concordance with Butler's piece stands Wallin's extraordinarily lucid work on the role of « sound » in seeking to create literal, transliteral and speculative cognitive mechanisms to assume the powerful role of shunning religious authority. While the film examples from his article speak directly to the possessions that uncompromisingly occupy a terrifyingly demonic audial space for the audience, Wallin's analysis presents us with a framework that allows us to seek the evil from within humanity. That is to say that inasmuch as the soundtrack of the possession of Regan in *The Exorcist* and the doom-leaden misgivings voiced by the mysterious demon in *The Evil Dead* seek to elucidate the horrors of society's blind succumbing to organized forms of religious knowing, Wallin highlights the schizophrenic tension that film-based horror reveals in its audiences. For it is through the enactment of such sounds and their resonations within ourselves that we perform the sacrilege of rejecting our own humanity and seeking to reveal the « other » side of the rigidity that neo-liberal societal structures impose on its citizens. One need not look further than recent psychological horror movies such as *Hereditary* (directed by Ari Aster, 2018) which mocks the possessive matriarch and firmly entrenches itself in the sorrow of loss of a child, but manages to seek a feminist resolution to the dispossession of progeny by crowning a seemingly « false » prophet, if only to make the point that postmodern society is doomed to never learn from its failures. In *Hereditary*, perhaps the most sickening sound is reserved for the accidental slaughter of an innocent child due to a reckless and distracted act by this victim's older brother. This ending of the life of an innocent is all too vivid in the silent horror that accompanies the older brother's realisation and immature acquiescence of his role in the killing of his sister. Such a fundamentally humanist analysis is also all too clear in Nelson's piece in this special issue that skilfully balances early postmodern Spanish literature and contemporary filmic structures in discussing the feminist ideals that stake themselves in describing the importance of the Holy Mother herself

and the ultimate sacrifice that she makes in giving birth to Him for the sake of the world, as is seen in his analysis of the film *Mother!* Nelson's modern take on feminism is, in fact, a stellar example of how the study of modern languages, literature and the speculations that arise from therein are central to the propagation of mindsets that do not serve to necessarily betray a staid and solipsistic paradigm, but instead forge a path to engage in pluralism through the means of inductive content analysis of texts, visuals and sounds.

Apophatic theology is addressed in Niall Scott's article, «Black Metal's Apophatic Curse». Scott focuses on black metal, a musical genre known for its aversion to God and religion in general. According to the author, black metal has become an integral part of the apophatic tradition. Drawing on the theory of desire and reconciliation developed by Bruce Milem (2007), Scott offers an analysis of apophatic lyrics from certain songs by black metal groups. In the Christian tradition, apophatic theology seeks to obtain a deeper understanding of God in order to emphasize His transcendence. Apophatic theology thus has nothing negative to say about God. This is not the case in black metal music, which uses negative language or a language of denial. But this is not simply a matter of rejecting God. According to Scott, the attitude here is one that turns away from God in a state of disappointment. In this instance, that which God is not is negative. Quite simply, God is not — a null, if you wish. In this case, apophatic theology is genuinely negative: God is cursed. Scott shows that in addition to cursing God, black metal also turns its back on God — and rejects Him completely.

Unger's essay offers a different perspective. While acknowledging from the start that extreme metal music has a conflicted relationship with religion, Unger emphasizes in his article «Ode à un Dieu agonisant. Dégradation des symboles chrétiens dans le métal extrême» (Ode to a dying God. The degradation of Christian symbols in extreme metal music) that its relationships with God are complex and not limited to ridicule, contempt or derision. In his article, the author examples the relationships — often sincere and sympathetic, though critical — between extreme metal and God, theology and religion. To show how criticism of religion can invert and break down normative metaphysics and theologies, Unger offers a detailed analysis of lyrics from the last album by the popular group Celtic Frost, released in 2006 and titled *Monotheist*. The Swiss group lashes out at organized religion in particular, and highlights the contradictions and grey areas of Biblical monotheism from the perspectives of God,

Jesus or Satan. The author concludes that by inverting the myths of religion and Christian metaphysics in a creative and pessimistic way, extreme metal seeks to erode the predominance of normative accounts of religion, ethics and the body, and to expose the dark side hidden behind a peaceful and happy façade.

Many extreme metal groups attack and denounce God, His followers and the influence of Judeo-Christian religion on Western culture and civilization. But how sincere are these groups, really, in their arguments against God and religions in general? Podoshen's article (« Tracing the Trajectory of Cursing God in Extreme Metal ») provides some important nuances here. Based on a detailed analysis of lyrics by several leading extreme-music groups from the 1980s onward, Podoshen defines three categories or waves. In the first wave of extreme metal, starting in the early 1990s, groups like Venom and Slayer used a profusion of Satanic and anti-Christian imagery (pentagrams and inverted crosses, the « number of the beast » [666], album titles like *Welcome to Hell*, *At War with Satan*, *Hell Awaits*, and so on) with an explicitly stated goal of drawing attention and shocking people, especially conservative Christians. Their Satanism can perhaps be read as insincere. But a movement that was resolutely opposed to Judeo-Christian religion did appear in the mid-1980s and early 1990s with groups like Death, Deicide and Morbid Angel. These groups attack the dominant Christian denominations, as well as televangelists, and make a systematic critique of Christianity the cornerstone of their lyrics, which also include themes of horror and dystopia. A third category, which emerged primarily in Scandinavian countries in the early 1990s, took a far more dramatic turn, and was marked by a series of church fires and even a few murders. Influenced by the Satanic iconography of groups from the 1980s, groups like Mayhem, Burzum and Emperor, to name just a few, encouraged the emergence of a subculture that occasionally resorted to real acts of violence.

Fortunately, discussions about God do not always lead to violent and reprehensible acts. Stéphane Perreault, Marie-Chantal Falardeau and Jeanne Guèvremont take us in a completely different direction with their investigation of the role of religion in national anthems. What can they teach us in theological terms? What perspectives on God do they present? Needless to say, the tone is different from that of extreme metal music, as national anthems are often a vehicle for religious content. In fact, religion is one of the most common themes appearing in national anthems. Perreault, Falardeau and Guèvremont show that nearly half (47 %) of the

national anthems they examined (91/195) refer specifically to a religious entity, and that 19 % of them (38 more out of 195) include religious connotations, while just 34 % (66/195) contain no religious references at all. In cross-referencing this coding with the religion practised in each country, the authors observe that most of the world's nations include mentions of religious entities in their national anthems, and that these religious entities can have multiple « faces » : they are sometimes considered as being above everyone and everything, and sometimes as a collaborator or partner of the country and its citizens. It is worth noting that in all national anthems that mention God (whatever God that may be), the tone is a positive one. But in order for a metaphor involving a religious entity to work, it must be a part of the popular culture. In an increasingly secularized country like Canada, some citizens have questioned whether the word « God » should still be included in the English version of the Canadian national anthem. More generally, it would be interesting to see what role God would play in national anthems if the lyrics could be changed today.

Another point is that positive perspectives on God and/or religion are not limited to classical music and national anthems. Since the 1980s, and especially since the early 2000s, deeply religious individuals — especially in the Christian religion — have begun adopting practices that seem to contradict their religion as generally perceived in the popular imagination. For example, heavy metal music, which is often associated with the Devil, has become the genre of choice for a number of Christian music groups. These artists use a form of music that is generally considered to be fundamentally opposed to Christianity and associated with rebellion against God to deliver a message in favour of God and the Christian religion. Christian heavy metal, which has been growing in popularity worldwide since the early 2000s, is examined by musicologist Éric Smialek. Applying theories of identity formation drawn from Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, Smialek examines three distinct cases : Fratello Metallo (« Brother Metal »), a Capuchin monk who sings in a heavy metal band ; « metal masses » in Finland and Colombia ; and Christian extreme metal groups like Horde, which uses a musical sound and imagery that are generally associated with black metal for the purpose of preaching a religious message. This brings us to Varas-Díaz and Morales' reflections on the unique adaptations and perceptions of the role of religion in shaping post-colonial heavy metal music in Latin American countries. Quite aside from the monumental qualitative research that has been undertaken for the purposes of this research, it is necessary to highlight the leading role that



Varas-Diaz has played and continues to play in seeking to elucidate the contextualized bastardisations of religion and its hypnotic magnetisms in attracting societal and political resistances through artforms propagated in underground cultures. Varas-Diaz stands as one of the few sociological scholars whose deep immersion in communities and whose skilled first-person storytelling and filmmaking devices result in remarkable audio-visual narratives that seek to empower marginalised communities by magnifying these peoples' and their cultures' voices.

Fans of Christian metal, who face opposition both from the international metal community and from the conservative Christian right, attempt to convince one another that Christians can listen to aggressive music with a clear conscience. To do so, they use social media and other platforms to develop strategies to reconcile their religious convictions with their interest for a style of music that was largely created as a form of rebellion against God and religion. However, Christian metal fans are not the only ones who use social media or videos shared publicly on the Internet to communicate a theological message or to promote their religious convictions or ideology. Some groups—not of the musical variety but those advocating armed conflict—use the same media for very different purposes. One such group is Daesh, also known as ISIS or the Islamic State (IS), which promotes its Salafi jihadist ideology in Internet videos that are often accompanied by *a capella* hymns known as *anasheed*. Some of these videos, in which the armed group takes on Iraq's pre-Islamic past, are analyzed by the co-editors of this special issue of *Théologiques*, Vivek Venkatesh and Éric Bellavance. Among other roles, Venkatesh is the co-holder of the UNESCO Chair on the Prevention of Radicalization and Violent Extremism. His teams have worked extensively in analyzing the visual and lyrical content of videos published on the Internet by Daesh, using theories developed in the fields of social psychology, marketing, consumer culture and postmodern philosophy. Bellavance, a historian and specialist on the Hebrew Bible, has worked on the Mesopotamian empires of the first millennium B.C.E. In some of its videos, Daesh shows the pillaging, sacking and destruction of ruins from the Neo-Assyrian Empire, which dominated the Middle East between the x<sup>th</sup> and vii<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.E. Ironically, the Assyrians, whose archaeologically important ruins have been destroyed by Daesh in some cases because they belong to the pre-Islamic past of modern Iraq, were the first to use music in their religious and military propaganda, as analyzed in the first section of the article. In the second part of the article, the authors show how the hyperviolence and the morbid consump-

tion of dystopian imagery in Daesh's videos interact with the concepts of religion, blasphemy and social policy.

Amidst the figurative rubble that Venkatesh and Bellavance have attempted to sift through in their analyses for their own piece as well as in putting together a unique collaborative journal issue, one of the key themes that seems to emerge is the strong social pedagogical role that the arts, humanities and social sciences must play in breaking down the echo chambers that reside in academic circles; in fact, if academia is not pedagogical beyond its commitments to the theoretical Gods and its antithetical Monsters, then it remains insufferably arrogant in the minds of the public. For the social pedagogy in this special issue has fulfilled its obligations to remain communal, inclusive and reflexive. The wide array of contributors and their willingness to bloat the disciplinary boundaries that their training (amongst other factors) constrain them to is all too clear from the quality of the manuscripts. The reflections of the co-editors on their pieces in this liminaire allow a certain speculation beyond theories that these co-editors might be familiar with, and yet, the thread that runs through this special issue is not stamped with the canons of any specific discipline. As co-editors, Bellavance and Venkatesh are, of course, most grateful for the trust and latitude of freedom accorded to them by the editorial committee of *Théologiques*, and appreciate their confidence in reframing the philosophical and importantly, the aural flavours of this important Canadian journal.

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