

IN DEFENSE OF CHRISTIAN HEAVY METAL

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Abstract

Genre heavy metal seringkali diasosiasikan dengan hal-hal yang negatif seperti kekerasan, anarkisme, perilaku seksual yang di luar batas, bahkan satanisme. Artikel ini mengupas tentang genre tersebut, untuk mencari tahu apakah genre ini dimungkinkan untuk dipakai di dalam ibadah kristiani. Bagian pertama dari artikel ini berisi kritik terhadap pendapat negatif tentang heavy metal yang sebagian besar tidak berdasar. Bagian kedua menyoroti beberapa sisi positif dari genre ini yang dapat dimanfaatkan ibadah kristiani. Bagian terakhir memuat beberapa saran dalam pemakaian genre ini di dalam ibadah serta beberapa hal praktis yang mungkin masih menjadi kendala.

Kata kunci : *Worship, Christian, Heavy Metal*

Introduction

This paper analyzes the heavy metal genre, in effort to discern and discuss its appropriateness as “Christian heavy metal music” (henceforth CHM), as an alternative style of Christian worship. There has not been much scholarly research on this topic, either in support or against the idea of CHM as a form of worship. This is unfortunate because questions relating to the eligibility of heavy metal music in the Christian church have lingered for some time among the members of congregations, especially among the younger generation. Moreover, there are actually many Christian heavy metal bands that are quite popular, such as Stryper, Extol, Norma Jean, and Demon Hunter. Surely it is important for the church to take a stance concerning these bands and to respond to the metal subculture.

Heavy metal music might, at first glance, seem incompatible with Christian worship, probably because of its strong association with dirty words, violence, anarchism, sexual vulgarity, and even satanism. In a sense, this genre may be the most obvious example of so-called contemporary secular music. But perhaps its association with things that are contrary to Christian purity is not a conclusive argument to utterly ban the use of its style from the Christian community. As a matter of fact, association, after all, is just association. There is not necessarily a connection between heavy metal music and profanity. Hence, if my examination of CHM indeed shows that it is not only innocuous to Christian faith but also as an actual legitimate form of Christian worship, it would not be too difficult to defend the use of other genres of contemporary music when used in worship.

My examination considers which features of music are essential for Christian faith, and which ones are merely preferable. There are two major parts to this paper. First, I will attempt to reconstruct and analyze arguments against CHM as a form of worship based on available scholarly literatures that either directly opposes CHM or contemporary worship music in general. This first part of the paper will be somewhat “negative” because it aims to refute the opponents of CHM. Needless to say; merely defeating the opponents of CHM is not enough to get CHM accepted as a legitimate part of Christian worship. Hence the second major part of my paper will contain a “positive” account of why CHM is admissible in Christian worship. I do not intend to make strong claims that we all *must* utilize CHM immediately in the church. For it is possible that

even though CHM is not problematic theologically, its immediate use in some Christian churches might still be practically unwise. In general, the conclusion of my paper will be a modest contribution to the discourse on CHM. A secondary purpose to this paper is to provide helpful information to guide the selection of spiritually edifying and theologically sound worship music for the glory of God. In order to better understand heavy metal and CHM, let us now look at a brief history of heavy metal and CHM.

A Brief Story of Heavy Metal and CHM

The History of Heavy Metal

Heavy metal is a progeny of hard rock.¹ The term “heavy metal” perhaps is derived from the lyric ‘heavy metal thunder’ from the single ‘Born To Be Wild,’ released by a late 60’s rock band Steppenwolf.² Its weighty sound character, which separates this genre from other rock music, was initially developed from the use of a heavier drum beat and bass thumping, along with distorted guitar tone colour by Jimi Hendrix and British hard rock bands during 1960s.³

Heavy metal music is believed to be born out of the dissatisfaction of the socio-economical situation in the 60’s.⁴ The generation born in that period (also called the post-baby-boom generation or Generation X), was not pleased with their terrible condition. They had been filled with the hope of being prosperous when a dreadful recession came into the scene. This grim situation was exacerbated by class and race warfare, divorce, and child abuse. All of these things made many young people angry, desperate, fearful, frustrated, hopeless, hurt, and alienated. In addition to television’s daily violent actions, brutal and painful home life contributed to the gestation of a violent young generation. These difficulties drew them to an ear-splitting, aggressive, rebellious, furious music called heavy metal. While the heavy metal fans unleashed their aggressiveness and pain on the performance floor, it was as if they were welcomed into a new family which accepted them as they were. The themes of some heavy metal subgenres are closely related to notions which are not consistent with, and even oppose, Christian faith.

The story of CHM

The heavy metal’s incongruity with Christianity invited some Christian heavy metal musicians to try and restore this genre for God’s sake, using CHM as their means of evangelism. CHM was born in late 1970’s. The first CHM bands members were heavy metal musicians who became Christians.⁵ These band members used lyrics while retaining the heavy metal style. The reason of the forming of CHM bands was to reach out the people in heavy metal genre and to share about Jesus Christ.⁶ The members of CHM bands do not promote Christian values only with their performances, with themes consistent with Christianity, but also with their lives as Christians. These musicians

¹ *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Vol. 11, s.v. “Heavy Metal,” by Stanley Sadie.

² Colin Larkin, “Heavy Metal,” *The Encyclopedia of Popular Music* vol. 3 (New York, MUZE UK Ltd., 1998), p. 2467.

³ *The New Grove Dictionary*, s.v. “Heavy Metal.”

⁴ David Szatmary, *A Time to Rock: A Social History of Rock ‘n’ Roll* (New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan, 1996), pp. 315-325.

⁵ Trent Salter, “Where are They Now?” *Premiere Guitar* April/May 2002 [home page on-line]; available from <http://www.premierguitar.com/archive/interviews/ozfox.htm>; Internet; accessed 12 November 2008.

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believe that the Bible is the word of God and have the desire to share it with their listeners.⁷

Differences between heavy metal and CHM

CHM differs from other heavy metal subgenres in its themes. The themes of CHM lyrics uphold Christian values, although sometimes utilizing terms which are different from hymns or other Christian music.

Initially CHM used the same style which was employed by Jon Bon Jovi, which is called *soft metal* or *glam metal*. There was a moment when CHM kept a distance from other darker heavy metal subgenres, such as death metal or black metal. The terms for the two subgenres are usually used interchangeably. The reason for initial CHM avoidance from black metal was perhaps that the themes of the subgenre, among others, Satanism, extreme violence such as mutilation and torture, and occultism, which are considered to be contrary to Christianity.⁸ Later, however, some CHM bands have used this dark subgenre as their musical style. Perhaps those bands have attempted to win a genre that once had been claimed as a satanic genre. Some Christian black metal bands like Horde obviously incorporated lyrics which explicitly assaulted Satanism.⁹ The point is clear: CHM is different with other heavy metal subgenres. After briefly summarizing heavy metal and CHM, let us now examine features from the music that is most influential in moulding Christian belief.

Features of Music that are Relevant to Christian Faith

Lyrics

I argue that the lyrics are the element of music which has the biggest influence to the human belief system. There are two reasons for my argument. First, human belief systems are formulated largely by written or spoken language. Although there are other factors that shape human belief system, such as unarticulated experience, it is with language we formulate our explicit belief system that is primarily cognitive. Because lyrics are a cognitive expression of language, they connect directly with human belief systems, sending consistent or inconsistent messages. Secondly, the meaning of a song will be changed if other lyrics are used. Asymmetrically, however, we still get roughly the same message from a song regardless of the music style. For example, one can listen to the Star-Spangled Banner in the classical music style, and compare it to the presentation of it in the gospel R&B style. It is possible that two presentations of the same national anthem but may evoke different feelings or moods. Due to the cognitive characteristic of human belief system, the main message of songs, which can shape Christian faith, is primarily contained in the lyrics.

Music

The role of music in shaping Christian faith is analogous to the non-semantic features of our communication. For example, when we say "I love you," we can say it in

⁷ Tom Beaujour, "Underoath, As I Lay Dying, Norma Jean, and Demon Hunter," *Revolver* [home page on-line]; available from <http://www.revolvermag.com/content/underoath-1>; Internet; accessed on 12 November 2008.

⁸ Natalie J. Purcell, *Death Metal Music: The Passion and Politics of a Subculture* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003), p. 39.

⁹ The interview with Horde can be found on <http://unblack.d1351r43.de/hordeint/hordeinterview.html> (accessed November 13, 2008).

a variety of ways. We either can say it in a lovingly romantic way or in a gloomy manner like what Peter probably did when he was asked whether he loved Jesus. We can state the message in a thunderous voice or in a mellifluous whisper. While the manners with which we say it are different, the cognitive locution stays the same. This once again indicates that lyrics have a predominant role in forming Christian faith. However, it is not to say that music has no influence whatsoever in shaping Christian faith. Music helps in articulating the message and has an indirect influence to Christian beliefs, for example, by giving more emphases to certain points in the lyrics or providing an emotional ambience for the lyrics. It is not surprising that music can greatly help or hinder the reception of the lyrics, just as non-verbal communication such as gestures, are decisive in a live exchange. My point here is that the lyrics are the most determining factor in formulating our faith because of their cognitive characteristics. This position is not inconsistent with the cognitive theory of emotion, in which emotion is seen as a form of low-level beliefs that are seldom articulated clearly.

Arguments against CHM

Lyrical Associations

Since its emergence, CHM has been severely criticized by many Christian scholars and leaders, mainly because of its use of the heavy metal style. There are many people who associate heavy metal with Satanism, violence, drug abuse, and sexual connotations. For example, at the U.S. Senate Hearing Before the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation in 1985, Stuessy argued that heavy metal music is different from popular music in its content of hateful element. Heavy metal main themes, he claimed, are "extreme violence, extreme rebellion, substance abuse, sexual promiscuity and perversion and Satanism."¹⁰ I maintain that his statement is perhaps applicable to *some* heavy metal subgenres, but CHM is dissimilar to the other subgenres. It is possible that Stuessy's vitriolic accusation was dismissive of the complex reality of CHM in that it fell into an unintended generalisation. In the ensuing discussion, I will examine three of the negative associations: sexual promiscuity, suicide, and satanic associations. The three associations will be representative of other associations similar in nature. Let us examine the sexual promiscuity association.

Sexual Promiscuity

Although it is true that the lyrics and perhaps the stage acts of some heavy metal bands are closely related to sexual promiscuity, one cannot say that all of heavy metal bands support the same theme. Even more, one cannot say that the sexually loaded lyrics can only be found in the heavy metal music. One can also find sexual connotations in the lyrics of other musical genres from nearly every period. Bullough mentions the existence of "erotic lyrics from the Greco-Roman period," the bawdiness and overt sexual references in the verses of the wandering singers in the High Middle Ages, and "the singing of 'sodomitical songs'" in the fourteenth century.¹¹ Moreover, he exposes the presence of sexual enticement in the themes of operas, including W.A. Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* (1786), Richard Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*, and

¹⁰ Amy Binder, "Constructing Racial Rhetoric: Media Depictions of Harm in Heavy Metal and Rap Music," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 58, No. 6 (Dec., 1993): 758. The complete hearing text can be read on <http://www.joesapt.net/superlink/shrg99-529/p117.html> (accessed on October 25, 2008)

¹¹ Vern L. Bullough, and Bonnie Bullough, *Human Sexuality: An Encyclopedia* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1994), p. 413.

Richard Strauss' *Don Juan* and *Salome*.¹² He also observes that sometimes opera themes are about homosexuality, such as in some of Benjamin Britten's and Alban Berg's operas.¹³

Although there are sexual connotations in musical lyrics in some musical genres, one cannot infer that *all* music in that genre has the same connotations. For example, even though Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* contains a sexually alluring theme, one should not say that all of his operas and his music have such subjects. Furthermore, one cannot say that because Mozart makes use of a sexual attraction theme in one of his works, all of his contemporaries utilize the same theme in their works. Likewise, one might not want to deduce that because *some* heavy metal music incorporates lyrics which are associated with sexual promiscuity, *all* heavy metal music lyrics, including CHM lyrics necessarily carry the same theme.

Suicide

Heavy metal music has been closely associated to suicide invitations. Again, while it is suspected to be true for some heavy metal music, CHM lyrics do not invite people to kill themselves. In contrast, CHM provokes metal fans to re-evaluate their viewpoints about life, to enjoy God's gift of life rather than hate it, yet also to stay aware of the still ongoing spiritual warfare. For example, one of Whitecross' songs "Lookin' for a Reason" invites its audience to have hope instead of despair, because Jesus cares and will be there.¹⁴

It is reported that there have been some cases of people committing suicide right after they had listened to heavy metal music.¹⁵ This might indicate that some heavy metal music might have had such a strong influence on listeners in an unstable state of mind or mentality that they were persuaded to commit suicide. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that a person would kill himself just because of listening to heavy metal music. Some researchers have found that there is no straightforward cause and effect that linked exposure to heavy metal music and suicide.¹⁶ Litman and Farberow, however, found that heavy metal music might become a problem for teenagers who are wrestling with estrangement emotions beforehand.¹⁷

Moreover, when listening to heavy metal and other genres, it is possible that the listener and the composer would have different interpretations of the lyrics. This is normal because it is unlikely that the listener and the composer have precisely the same interpretative context for the lyrics. Moreover, heavy metal lyrics are full of symbols and metaphors. In one suicide case, the victim's parents accused Ozzy Osbourne's song, *Suicidal Solution*, as a trigger of suicide because their son heard the lyrics as an invitation to kill himself. However, according to Osbourne, the song was dedicated to Bon Scott, the lead singer of AC/DC, who died because of alcohol abuse at a party.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Its lyrics and some other CHM lyrics can be read at <http://www.metalforjesus.org/lyrics.htm>

¹⁵ One of the case can be read on

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?sec=health&res=9C0CE0D71E30F934A25754C0A966958260>

¹⁶ Steven Stack, James Gundlach, and Jimmie L. Reeves, "The Heavy Metal Subculture and Suicide," *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* 24 (1994), pp. 21-22.

¹⁷ Robert E. Litman and Norman L. Farberow, "Pop-rock Music As Precipitating Cause in Youth Suicide," *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 39 (1994), pp. 497-498.

Osbourne claimed that the lyrics were a warning against alcohol abuse and in fact an anti-suicidal song.¹⁸

In addition, there are some other genres whose themes are directly or indirectly related to suicide. These other genres are very rarely suspected as the cause of suicide. For example, Stack and Gundlach found that country tunes contain a number of themes that can promote suicide, including social seclusion, economic pressure, marital conflict or divorce, alcohol abuse, or being exploited at work.¹⁹ Another example is if we enter "suicide" as the keyword at the Mudcat Cafe²⁰ database of traditional songs, we will discover more than 30 songs with that keyword, with some, even depicting murder. As many as 77 completed suicides, as observed by Harewood (1976), are found in 306 opera plots.²¹

Even more, there was once a young man who committed suicide after singing a hymn!²² Surely one does not want to infer that the hymn was the cause of the suicide. One would say instead that he was already facing an overwhelming trouble when he committed suicide and that his suicide was most likely not related to the singing of the hymn. In addition, being a hymn writer does not guarantee that a suicide attempt will not occur. William Cowper a hymn writer and well-known English poet of the eighteenth century, tried to kill himself because of his psychotic depression.²³

Although heavy metal music is often accused of being the cause of some suicides, surprisingly, for some, it has a protective function against suicide. For example, Arnett shows that more than half of the male heavy metal fans from his research samples, state that by listening to heavy metal music, they are better able to let go of their anger.²⁴ Furthermore, Wass claims that in some instances, rock lyrics, even those considered to encourage detrimental actions, might offer a channel to sort out issues of death and how to cope with the uneasiness evoked by the issues.²⁵ This cathartic function of heavy metal music is definitely therapeutic and not unlike what one may experience in counselling sessions where a therapist tells her client to let go all bitterness and anger off her chest.

Satanism

Some black metal bands such as Venom and Mayhem incorporate lyrics and stage acts which are associated with Satanism. Another example is Gorgoroth, which exhibits satanic symbols, crucified nude women, and bloody animal limbs in their

¹⁸ Robert Wright, "'I'd Sell You Suicide': Pop Music and Moral Panic in the Age of Marilyn Manson," *Popular Music* Vol. 19/3 (London, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 370-371.

¹⁹ Steven Stack and James Gundlach, "The Effect of Country Music on Suicide," *Social Forces* 71 (1992), p. 212.

²⁰ <http://www.mudcat.org>

²¹ Graeme Feggetter, "Suicide in Opera," *British Journal of Psychiatry* 136 (1980), p. 552.

²² The news can be found on

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=950CE7DA103EE033A2575AC1A9669D946697D6CF>

²³ Andrew Sims, "Mysterious ways: Spirituality and British Psychiatry in the 20th Century,"

<http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/pdf/Andrew%20Sims%201.11.03%20Mysterious%20Ways%20-%20Spirituality%20and%20British%20Psychiatry%20in%20the%2020th%20Century.pdf> (accessed October 19, 2008), p. 2.

²⁴ Jeffrey J. Arnett, "Adolescent and Heavy Metal Music: From the Mouths of Metalheads," *Youth & Society* 23 (1991), pp. 83, 95.

²⁵ Hannelore Wass, M. David Miller, and Carol A. Redditt, "Adolescent and Destructive Themes in Rock Music: A Follow-up," *Omega* 23 (1991), p. 204.

performances.²⁶ Both the lyrics and the stage acts are possibly a sign of the band member's conviction in Satanism. Some of black metal band members, such as the players of Gorgoroth and Mayhem, admit that they are Satanists.²⁷ However, not all heavy metal lyrics are satanic or anti-Christian. CHM band's lyrics, for example, promote God's word and Christian values. While some heavy metal bands displays satanic symbols in their stage acts, some CHM bands incorporate Christian symbols. For instance, Stryper incorporated a big cross in their 1986 concert and always uses stripes on their guitars, clothes, and decoration. The stripes, from which their band's name comes, are derived from King James Version of Isaiah 53:5: "But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed." Furthermore, it is highly probable that at least some CHM band members are devout Christians.

Nevertheless, heavy metal is not the only genre that is associated with Satanism. If one looked hard in the Classical genre, which to some Christians is the most perfect genre for praising God, one could also find a relationship to Satanism. Barton, in her history of the church of Satan, mentions eighteen classical music composers and pieces with satanic associations, such as J.S. Bach's *Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor*, W.A. Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, Franz Liszt's *Mephisto Waltz* and *Faust Symphony*, and F. Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.²⁸ Barton, who was a high priestess of the church of Satan, must know deeply her church's values and the types of music that is considered suitable to those values. What then can we say? Will we forbid the music of Bach, Mozart, and other classical composers in Christian worship just because one of the leaders of the church of Satan claimed that *some* classical music is associated with satanic values? Despite the claim, we surely will not give up classical music only because there is a possibility that some pieces and even composers of a genre are associated with Satanism. Likewise, we should not surrender the heavy metal genre just because some songs and band members of the genre are associated with satanic values. Moreover, CHM does not only lack satanic values, it counters them and promotes Christ and His teachings.

Musical Associations

Some scholars suggest that music is in some ways independent of the lyrics. Therefore, music can have its own effect, which is indifferent from its lyrics. For example, Roberts, Christenson, and Gentile argue that "the main effects of music may be carried by the emotional 'sound' of the music rather than by the lyrics."²⁹ This idea, I

²⁶ Blabbermouth.net, "

<http://www.roadrunnerrecords.com/blabbermouth.net/news.aspx?mode=Article&newsitemID=46365>; Internet;

²⁷ An interview with the founder of Gorgoroth band can be read on http://www.live-metal.net/features_interviews_infermus_gorgoroth.html; and an interview with one of Mayhem band members can be read on <http://www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~jasen01/warsongs/euronymous2.htm>

²⁸ (Herbert?), "Church of Satan commonly asked questions," *Newsgroup alt.satanism* (March 23, 2004), under "7.2. Other Music of Satanic Value," [home page on-line]; available from <http://www.faqs.org/faqs/religions/satanism/cos/>; Internet; accessed 24 October 2008. Cf. "Church of Satan (book)," *Wikipedia*, under "Satanic Music,"

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Church_of_Satan_\(book\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Church_of_Satan_(book)) (accessed October 24, 2008).

²⁹ Douglas A. Gentile, *Media Violence and Children: A Complete Guide for Parents and Professionals* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), p. 166.

think, can be explained linguistically: not only the “semantics” of the music can have an influence on the listeners, but also the “syntax.” Furthermore, the aforementioned authors also state that the lyrics have a relatively minimum effect on human emotions “because [lyrical] content may be difficult to understand, [and] may be interpreted differently by different people.”³⁰

Even if the above argument were true, one’s musical associations perhaps tend to be very subjective and contextual, not universal. For instance, when some Indonesians born in the 1970s or 1980s, hear the Pink Panther Theme by Henry Mancini, it is likely that they would not associate the melody with the Pink Panther movie, but rather with an Indonesian comedian group who also used the same theme in their movies. Another example is when one looks at a painting, one’s subjective and contextual association will have a role in interpreting the picture. The painting of a beautiful beach may be associated with beauty, joy, and excitement to some people. However, for Acehnese people who only recently experienced a tsunami, the same painting might evoke a tattering anguish.

Some scholars like Slade observe that in its musical aspect, classical music can have sexual connotations.³¹ McClary claims that the tonality of classical concert music is underlined by a sort of erotic imagery. She argues that:

*“The principal innovation of seventeenth century tonality is its ability to instill in the listeners an intense longing for a given event: the cadence . . . After the need is established . . . tonal procedures strive to postpone gratification of that need until delivering the payoff in what is technically called the ‘climax’, which is quite clearly to be experienced as metaphorical ejaculation.”*³²

The same remark can possibly be attached to Gregorian chants. A typical chant consists of an intonation, which is always started with a lower note that raises to a higher note; a recitation, which is a held tone; a mediant, which is a cadence in the centre of each verse that usually contains the highest note or the climax; another recitation, and is closed by a termination, which is the release of the climax.³³

But why is music associated with sex? One possible answer is because sex is a sublimation of a spiritual need.³⁴ In other words, what humans need most is a kind of mystical union with Christ.³⁵ Unfortunately, that kind of union is difficult to be comprehended and achieved by humans. That is why eventually humans fall into sublimation, which is a sort of substitution with its imperfect satisfaction. Nevertheless, sexual imagery in spirituality has been used since the Middle Ages by monks and nuns. For example, St. Bernard of Clairvaux is well-known for his interpretation of the Canticle of the Canticles, which is mystically perceived as a relationship between Jesus

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Joseph W. Slade, *Pornography and Sexual Representation: A Reference Guide* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2001), p. 716.

³² Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 125.

³³ J. Peter Burkholder, Donald J. Grout, and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006), p. 58.

³⁴ Mortimer Jerome Adler and Max Weismann, *How to Think about the Great Ideas: From the Great Books of Western Civilization* (Chicago, IL: Open Court Publishing, 2000), pp. 131-132.

³⁵ Jean Calvin, Donald K. McKim, and Ford Lewis Battles, *Calvin's Institutes: Abridged Edition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), p. 94.

and His church.³⁶ Likewise, St. Teresa of Avila is portrayed by Gian Lorenzo Bernini in an ecstatic orgasm when she entered into a spiritual communion experience with God.³⁷

I have explained that some musical genres, not just heavy metal, have sexual connotations. It is possible that all musical genres have some negative associations. Should one, then, expel music from the church like what Zwingli did? Perhaps we should retain music because despite of its sensual nature, music also helps people to better worship God.

The Use of the Elements of Secular Music in Sacred Music

Another objection to CHM is that it includes the elements of secular music. The Rev. Benzmiller, for instance, tries to make a distinction between sacred and secular music.³⁸ He argues that the two cannot and should not meddle with each other. The purpose of sacred music, as Benzmiller quoted from Saint Pius X, “is the glory of God and the sanctification of the faithful.” Further, he states that a document regarding the instruction of music in liturgy (*Musica Sacram*) declares that sacred music is “created for the celebration of divine worship,” and because of that, it “is endowed with a certain holy sincerity of form.” Furthermore, he states that *Musica Sacram* gives some examples of sacred music: “Gregorian chant, sacred polyphony in its various forms both ancient and modern, sacred music for the organ and other approved instruments, and sacred popular music, be it liturgical or simply religious.” Secular music, on the other hand, is music which is evocative of theatrical pieces and has a secular form. Then, Benzmiller mentions some examples of secular form: Broadway-style tunes, jazz, and polka. He further explains that according to another document called *Tra le sollecitudini*, music which is provided a certain holy sincerity of form must be proper for the liturgical rites, in particular because it expresses “holiness and beauty, from which its other characteristic, universality, will follow spontaneously.” The document claims that because of its holiness, sacred music should preclude “everything that is secular, both in itself and in the way it is performed.” Benzmiller sums up that “what is secular is neither holy nor beautiful.”

The segregation between sacred and secular music is perhaps useful to remind Christians of our status as God’s people. Christians have been redeemed by Christ’s blood and called to live a new holy life. However, while some people are called to abandon their previous vocations to do full-time service for God, the majority of people are called to stay in their occupations and to live a godly life in their environment. By doing so, they become the light and salt of the world in their field. They live according to God’s word in their “secular” environment. While living in their environment or workplace, they can utilize “secular” things to glorify God. For example, those who work as a web developer can offer their “secular” skill of programming and “secular” tools of software and computer to exalt God by making a Christian website. As we remember, at the very start of their emergence, the computer and internet were

³⁶ David William Kling, *The Bible in History: How the Texts Have Shaped the Times* (New York: Oxford University Press US, 2004), p. 86.

³⁷ Simon Blackburn, *Lust: The Seven Deadly Sins* (New York: Oxford University Press US, 2004), 25. The picture can be seen on http://www.wilsonsalmanac.com/images2/teresa_avila_bernini.jpg

³⁸ The Rev. James T. Benzmiller, “What so Sacred about Sacred Music?” *Adoremus Bulletin Online Edition* – Vol IX, no.4 (June 2003) [home page on-line]; available from <http://www.adoremus.org/0603SacredMusic.html>; Internet; accessed 30 October 2008.

considered as anti-Christ tools by some fundamentalists. Nevertheless, we can glorify God and bless the faithful by these “secular” means. Likewise, although some musical genres are closely related to secular realm, it does not mean that we cannot use them to worship God.

I disagree with Benzmilller’s statement regarding the separation of sacred and secular matters, including music. He gives the example that Gregorian chants would not fit in the secular world and secular musical styles would not be suitable in the church service. But the word “secular” (Latin: *saeculum*) does not have to be understood as antagonistic to Christianity. What is secular is simply what is here and now (*hic et nun*), something that pertains to one’s own age, generation, and context. Understood that way, we *are* one hundred percent secular because we are currently living in the world, though we are not of the world. Granted, our world is sinful. Yet God who is holy came to this world to save it through His Son. While Jesus was on earth, He was also being secular in that he embraced the world and time where he lived. His commitment to what is secular was conspicuous from the fact that He dealt with what was in front of his very eyes, and with sinful people like the Samaritans and the tax collectors. He drank from their wells, ate with them, blessed by them using their secular materials (e.g., a woman’s perfume in Matthew 26:7). By letting humans use secular materials to serve Him, Jesus implicitly reclaimed and redeemed this world. In the same way, I believe that Christian may use the elements of secular music to worship God.

Benzmilller believes that secular does not include that which is holy or beautiful. Yet again, the word “secular” has a broader definition in terms of what pertains to our present human condition. I agree that we should worship God in holiness because He is holy. But the only way to do that is to be immersed in our own situation, which is a situation where God has put us and set us aside to be His vessels. It is most likely a mistake to think that certain means of worship have the intrinsic property of *being holy*. In fact, we and all the means we use in worship, will never achieve the standard of God’s holiness. One’s prayer alone cannot make something holy. We need God to purify and sanctify us and our worship.

Furthermore, the concept of beauty is to some degree subjective and contextual. To some, Gregorian chants are very beautiful and edifying. Yet to others, the chants sound like murmuring and seem boring. Not everyone has the opportunity to study and learn how to appreciate Gregorian chants. In the same manner, to some persons, CHM sounds abstract and full of anger. Yet, as often is the case, after one has the opportunity to learn about the historical formation, style elements, text creation or has a personal experience with CHM, the one’s opinion is often changed. Beauty is closely related to the ability to appreciate and the ability to appreciate is cultivated in education. Furthermore, the concept of beauty is very sensual. One considers something as beautiful by one’s own sights, tastes, ears, or feelings. There is the danger that beauty might entertain the worshippers more than exist as an offering to God. Additionally, the concept of beauty is dynamic rather than static. It changes as time goes by. Unfortunately, some ruling powers sometimes dictate the concept of beauty to their minions.

I contend that using the elements of “secular” music for worship is not wrong, as long as it is consistent with biblical truths and edifying for the congregation. Distinguishing sacred and secular music is like drawing a line on the sand. Probably our defective humane judgement is the one which created that false dichotomy in the first place.

Musical Aesthetics

Some church leaders prohibit the use of the heavy metal style in worship because they opine that the heavy metal style is not beautiful. Their reasoning stems from the idea of worshippers offering only their best for God, and the best offerings we can give are beautiful ones. However, I argue that the best offering is not always beautiful. There are three reasons for this. Firstly, our Lord Jesus Christ offered Himself as a sacrifice by being not beautiful. Isaiah 53:2 states that “He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him.” Nevertheless, by being not beautiful, He became the best offering. Secondly, if one offers something that is beautiful according to oneself, it can possibly mean that one entertains oneself more than pleasing God, since one’s notion of beauty is not necessarily same as God’s. Thirdly, although if one continues insisting that one must offer beautiful offerings to God, one cannot always measure the beauty of one musical genre with aesthetical values of another musical genre.

Angry-Sounding Techniques

Another trait of some heavy metal subgenres is its use of screaming and growling in singing. Some people may be distracted by this and consider that heavy metal music is an angry musical genre. However, I argue that screaming and growling possibly reflects three things: Firstly, a reprimand for an unseemly situation. For example, CHM sometimes rebukes hypocrisy in Christianity. In this sense, CHM seems angry to hypocritical Christians. The question is, are Christians allowed to be angry? Yes, as long as it is done with a good objective and in a controlled way. Being angry through music could even be more effective in some ways than inciting a revolution. Secondly, we scream to someone who is far away or pretending to be deaf. So, the screaming and growling also implicitly say that the hegemony system is unreachable or pretending to be deaf, or truly deaf. The first and the second reflections are for the songs which are directed for humans. On the other hand, the third is directed to God: it is possible that screaming and growling reflect an honest heart, which extremely desperate for God’s reaching hand.

The other reason for rejecting the incorporation of heavy metal into worship is that the words are not clearly sung. I cannot deny this fact. However, with the advance of projection screen technology, the words can be projected, so that the congregation would be able to follow what is sung. Furthermore, I argue that it is not only the heavy metal singing technique that makes the words seem blurred. The Italian *bel canto* technique has the same effect in blurring the message as well.

In the above discussion, I have attempted to canvas the objections to CHM and to respond to those objections. If my responses are satisfactory, then there is no good reason for rejecting CHM as an alternative worship style. It is time now to examine whether we can give a positive account for why we need to welcome CHM into our worship lexicon.

Arguments for CHM

Inclusiveness of CHM Lyrics

Some CHM lyrics use Christian terms that can be found in other Christian music genres. However, some CHM lyrics are similar to secular song’s lyrics. In fact, they also contain messages that are consistent with the biblical teachings. Despite employing

“Christian idioms,” they draw on the “vernacular” in their attempt to be inclusive, in order to embrace both the most devout and the most atheistic.³⁹ I argue that the same approach was exercised by our Lord Jesus. In most of His teachings, He used parables (Mark 4:33-34). Parables use vernacular language in many ways. Parables use colloquial terms, which are already known well by most of the listeners. In utilizing parables, Jesus attempted to be inclusive. The gospel is not only for “sacred” people who speak in “sacred idioms,” but rather for everyone, including the sinners, who speak in “secular idioms.” The door to repentance should be open to all. Christians should try to reach people with idioms that are easy to understand. It is not to say that we may use any secular language without any selectivity. The composition of lyrics should be done through a thoughtful process, and should be faithful to biblical truth.

CHM has a strategic position in covering themes which are unsuitable for other genres. For example, the theme of God’s rebuke in Psalm 52 will perhaps be more properly conveyed by CHM than by a sweet hymn-like tune. Other themes such as protests against exclusivity, hypocrisy, abortion, suicide, promiscuity, avocation and consolation for rape or violence victims and protests against other “dark” themes are more suitable if communicated in the heavy metal genre. In fact, those kinds of themes can hardly be found in any hymn books. Could it be that hymns are only associated with clean and sweet ideas, and do not meddle with “dirty” realities?

CHM is Able Convey Scriptural Messages in a More Intense Way

Powerful trait

Heavy metal music is powerful. It has the ability to penetrate human hearts and plant its message deeply. Heavy metal is powerful because of its music and lyrical features. According to Weinstein, there are three key elements that make heavy metal musically powerful: its sound, timbre, and volume. The use of amplified distorted guitars adds more heaviness to the sound and timbre. Furthermore, she states that the great volume or loudness is necessary to pull its listener into the music and induce “youthful vitality.”⁴⁰ I would like to add that the intense heavy metal drumming perhaps has a significant role in making the music more powerful. The continuous bass drum, which is usually much faster than a human heart beat, and its clashing cymbals make the listeners enter a condition of higher awareness. Furthermore, the tempo of the heavy metal genre, which is relatively fast, is by some degree also responsible for its powerful nature. Likewise, the vocal strength of the singers, which is sometimes intensified by growls or screams, has an essential contribution to the overall force of heavy metal music. In addition, the sound of the heavy bass guitar augments heavy metal musical energy. The musical force has been exploited by some heavy metal bands to sow harmful messages into the hearts and minds of many young people. The same means has also been utilized by CHM in the opposite direction, to introduce Christian teachings and values while countering the destructive effect of the other band’s lyrics.⁴¹

There are many heavy metal bands which have taken the advantages of this feature to persuade young people to do and think unconstructively. The CHM bands grab the chance to use the same features to win the young people back. The same

³⁹ Jim Bessman, “Bridging Christian Music, Heavy Metal: Singer/Songwriter Is Comfortable Working in Both Genres,” *Billboard - The International Newsweekly of Music, Video and Home Entertainment* 113:10 (10 March 2001), p. 51.

⁴⁰ Deena Weinstein, *Heavy Metal: The Music and Its Culture* (New York:Da Capo Press, 2000), p. 23.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

vehicle can be employed to achieve an end beneficial to Christian faith. For example, CHM bands *Gardian* and *Stryken* wear full body armour that symbolizes defensiveness and readiness for spiritual warfare as depicted in Ephesians 6:10-17.⁴² Of course, the metaphors and theatrical elements are to be moderated under biblical truth.

Theatrical trait

Another feature of heavy metal music is its theatrical quality.⁴³ The player's costumes and make-up symbolize certain notions. In the same manner, their stage actions also emphasize the message that they intend to convey. In one piece of educational research, it has been found that people learn more by visual rather than auditory exposure. Glodo argues that while modernist rationality is losing its command in public discourse, in the post-modern era "image has become preferred."⁴⁴

Metaphorical trait

Furthermore, Glodo also states that the Bible contains many metaphors, which are utilized to construct reality. He also claims that "God's speech is determinative and true, even when He uses metaphors."⁴⁵ Babin maintains that the audiovisual way moulds the message of religion, so the gospel should be delivered both through image and word synergistically, which he designates as a "stereophonic" way of communicating the gospel.⁴⁶

Cultural Reformation/Redemption

John Calvin made in his Psalter a unique style of *musica sacra* because he believed that music for God should be different from other music.⁴⁷ On the one hand, it may very well be suitable to decide to form an awareness of a specific kind of style which is needed to enhance the worship experience of the congregation at the moment. However, on the other hand, confining sacred music to a certain style can also mean giving up the possibility to utilize other musical styles creatively. CHM bands in the 1980s and early 1990s attempted to bring the word of God to the heavy metal world by using their own "language," i.e., musical style and themes. Of course, these bands directed the lyrics to serve God's purpose. By doing so, they brought about a "cultural reformation" or even "redeemed" the genre.⁴⁸ This was a valuable effort because to some people, musical preference is a personal matter that cannot easily be changed. For example, most Indonesian low class workers love *dangdut* and *campursari*. If we intend to use music to proclaim the gospel to this target audience, classical or jazz music will not be as effective as *dangdut* and *campursari*. One is most likely to be touched by musical genres for which one already has an affinity.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 108.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Michael J. Glodo, "The Bible in Stereo: New Opportunities for Biblical Interpretation in an A-Rational Age," in *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, ed. David S. Dockery (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1995), p. 152.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 155-158.

⁴⁷ Charles Garside, *The Origins of Calvin's Theology of Music, 1536-1543* (Philadelphia, PA: American Philosophical Society, 1979), p. 28.

⁴⁸ Luhr, p. 105.

Niebuhr exhibits the presence of the conflicting relations between Christianity and culture. He concludes that Christ, who is risen from the dead, is “the redeemer of the world”, including “the world of culture”, which is “man’s achievement” so that the culture will be able to partake of grace in God’s Kingdom.⁴⁹ On the other hand, White states that “It should not be culture changing our Christianity, but Christ changing our culture. God did not come to redeem our culture. He came to redeem the person.”⁵⁰ While I agree that God came to redeem persons who believe in Him, I argue that Christ did not come to oppose and reject culture entirely. Jesus appreciates human culture, redeems it, and works in it and through it for His purpose. That was exactly what He did to the Jewish culture when He came. He did not annul the Jewish culture completely. For example, He did not modify the way of dressing. Moreover, He used the Semitic language (perhaps Aramaic) to proclaim God’s word, and He even participated in Jewish rituals, such as fasting and the Passover. He worked in and through the existing culture, gave new interpretations to it, and thus redeemed it. McLaren rephrases this argument: “Jesus came not to drive the culture from the people but the sin from the culture. He came not to condemn our culture but to redeem it.”⁵¹ Having shown that heavy metal music is eligible to be used in Christian worship and even preferable for some purposes, let us examine some practical issues that hinder that realization.

Eligibility of CHM in Christian Worship

Having shown the positive traits of CHM and that most of the negative accusations of CHM are off the mark, I conclude that CHM is eligible to be used in the Christian worship. This is not to say that we should use CHM in the church just for the sake of using it. There are many considerations to make before we use CHM in our churches. For example, we should find out whether the congregation is ready to appreciate CHM. If they have not yet had a positive reception towards CHM, we surely do not want to insist on using it immediately. We should educate the congregation on ways to appreciate CHM before inviting them to use it in their worship. The emotions which are evoked by CHM songs should also be taken into consideration. Certain feelings are perhaps more easily realized if expressed through CHM. Perhaps we need to be honest to God and express our true feelings. While retaining its flow, an example of a good practice would be to have a liturgy which utilizes tension and release, like a cadence. This kind of cadence can be realized by combining CHM with other “sweeter” styles. Here, the point is CHM is indeed a possibility as a worship option, but the inclusion of CHM should be carefully done, taking into consideration the congregation’s stance towards CHM and its liturgical function.

What is even more important to consider is the congruence between CHM and the lifestyle of a particular congregation. CHM might be best used in subculture churches, like churches for Christian Goths. We need not and should not force the use of CHM, for example, in a congregation of Reformed Dutch members. The careful consideration of congruence or incongruence is necessary when helping the congregation worship God in the best possible way given their background and aspirations.

⁴⁹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Incorporated, 1956), p. 256.

⁵⁰ Velma D. White, *Redeeming Culture* (La Vergne, TN: Lightning Source Inc., 2008), p. 61.

⁵¹ Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley_Default, 2001), p. 75.

Conclusion

I have shown that CHM was born because of the intention to win back the heavy metal genre for the glory of God. I have argued that while music has an indirect influence on our faith, it is the lyrics that have a predominantly effect on Christian faith. Furthermore, I also have argued that the negative lyrical associations, which are attributed to CHM, are somewhat off the mark. In fact, CHM intensely promotes Christian values and faith. In addition, I have confirmed that musical connotation tend to be subjective and contextual. Against the notion of avoiding the use of secular elements in sacred music, I have argued that we need to redefine what is secular in terms of what is relevant to our life here and now. Even more, I have suggested that in order to value heavy metal aesthetically, we must not judge it using another genre's measurement.

In the second part of my paper, I have shown some of the positive traits of CHM, i.e. the inclusiveness of its lyrics, its rhetorical power in conveying biblical messages in a strong way, and the need to reclaim the heavy metal genre for God. I have argued that the use of CHM in Christian worship is possible, as long as the congregation is prepared to appreciate it. One would do well to use CHM while taking into consideration its liturgical function and the lifestyle of the congregation. We should consider CHM as an alternative style for Christian worship as beneficial, for reaching out to the younger generations without being afraid of violating Christian faith or dumbing down the quality of Christian worship.

Lastly, we should offer our best for our God. However, I deem that in our quest to find out what is the best offering, we should not thoughtlessly discard anything we do not like, but try our best to make use of God's gifts as far as we can, to the glory of the Creator. *In omnibus glorificetur Deus!*

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