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The unintended consequences of state-enforced religion: 'blasphemous' metal music as secondary deviation in Iran

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ABSTRACT

The concept of blasphemy has been the subject of considerable legal debate and normative analysis. However, we know much less about the lived realities of people living under regimes that not only criminalise blasphemy but also actively monitor and enforce blasphemy laws. This article analyses metal music as a form of religious deviance in Iran, where the production and consumption of most types of metal music have been banned. We examine how Iranian metal musicians negotiate the tension between free artistic expression and religious control and argue that the effect of control is opposite to its intention: The religiously deviant label is carried as a marker of authenticity in the scene instead. In this way, the control itself works to inspire 'blasphemous' acts, just as the theory of secondary deviation suggests.

KEYWORDS

Blasphemy; deviance; Iran; labelling theory; heavy metal music; Islam

Introduction

Blasphemy laws – laws regulating offenses against the divine or sacred – of some sort are in force in 77 jurisdictions around the world (Law Library 2017). Much of contemporary research focuses on Islamic states, Pakistan and Indonesia especially, where blasphemy laws have been analysed in the context of governing religious diversity (e.g., Bielefeldt, Ghanea, and Wiener 2016). However, blasphemy laws are not exclusively a feature of the Muslim world (Nash 2007; Patrick 2011, 189) nor simply an issue concerning religious minorities. They are also tools for controlling dissent in majority populations. As Manea (2016, 118) argues, 'blasphemy laws are often used to silence criticism of religious, social, and political orders that infringe basic human rights'. While there has been much legal debate and normative analysis regarding blasphemy, we know much less about the lived realities of living under regimes, which not only legislate against blasphemy but where citizens are targets of active surveillance and enforcement of such laws. This is the case, for example, in Iran (Afshari 2011).

Blasphemy is, in effect, religious deviance and in Iran, it has been used to justify the control of particular types of music production and consumption. In this article, we ask:

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How does social and religious control influence metal musicians' view of religion in Iran? This is a salient question in a context where there is a significant discrepancy between official (religious) public morality and a growing number of especially young people with 'cosmopolitan' values (Nooshin 2005a) – most recently (September 2022) demonstrated by the protests following the killing of Jina/Mahsa Amini by the authorities for wearing the headscarf inappropriately. In analysing this case, the paper also aims to demonstrate the ongoing relevance of labelling theory and the concept of secondary deviation (Lemert 1951, 1967), which suggests that individuals who are labelled deviant by others tend to adopt that label and start identifying with the externally imposed identity. This theory has been mostly used in the study of 'deviant cults' (e.g., Bainbridge and Stark 1979) but can also be applied more broadly to the study of religion.

We begin by providing some background regarding the role of blasphemy regulation and the music scene in Iran. Then we discuss classical labelling theory and the concept of secondary deviation and introduce the data and method. The empirical contribution consists of analysis of fourteen interviews with Iranian metal musicians, both those living in Iran and those in exile. The analysis itself follows a chronology, where we examine interviewees' views of Islam (and religion in general) before and after the experience of being labelled as deviant. The analysis is divided into three sections: (1) narratives about Islam and religion before the labelling experience, (2) narratives about the incompatibility of Islam and metal music, and (3) narratives about the possible compatibility of Islam and metal music. In conclusion, we argue that while the overall effect of controlling popular music may be that many people avoid the more controversial genres in fear of sanctions – something that is beyond the scope of this article to assess – the effect of control is opposite to its intention among those who join and remain in the metal scene. The religiously deviant label is carried as a marker of authenticity in the scene instead. In this way, the control itself works to inspire 'blasphemous' acts. Through the case of metal music, we offer a micro view of the macrostructural challenges to the religion–state nexus in Iran, arguing that religiously legitimated state control of artistic expression has the unintended consequence of undermining the legitimacy of both religion and the state.

Laws against blasphemy

In international legal terms, blasphemy can be defined as laws that criminalise 'remarks or actions contemptuous of God or the divine' (Knechtle 2017, 195). This is different from religious defamation or religious insult, which Knechtle (2017, 195) defines as 'criticism of religion and hate speech towards members of religious groups'. The latter is far more common in national jurisprudence: 44 per cent of 198 countries in a 2011 Pew Survey had laws against religious defamation, whereas only 16 per cent had laws criminalising blasphemy. Several countries, including European states, continue to criminalise blasphemy or insults to religion. Blasphemy laws vary across countries, with some enacting specific legislation that criminalises insults or offences against religious beliefs or figures. Other countries rely on broader legal frameworks, such as hate speech laws, to address such matters. For instance, in the United Kingdom, blasphemy laws have been largely repealed and replaced with legislation that pertains to incitement to religious hatred (Khan 2023, 9). Finland, instead, has a blasphemy law that dates back to 1922;

'Blasphemer' is defined as a person who publicly blasphemes against God or publicly defames or desecrates what is otherwise held to be sacred by a church or religious community (Nordin and Otterbeck 2023, 76). Furthermore, the discussion on blasphemy law in Europe has become a hot topic. This is due to the actions of anti-Islam activists in Denmark and Sweden who burnt and damaged copies of the Quran in 2023. Consequently, on 7 December 2023, the Danish parliament voted in favour of a bill against 'improper treatment of a text that has significant religious significance for a recognized religious community' ("Nu er koranloven stemt igennem: Et regnbueflag er tilladt, men bacon er ikke" 2023). This is noteworthy as Denmark repealed the blasphemy provision in the Penal Code in 2017 (France-Presse 2017). While we can expect more European countries to rethink such law, for now the proportion of countries with blasphemy laws in the Middle East, in contrast, was 65 per cent in the Pew survey (Knechtle 2017, 195). It would hence seem logical to assume that blasphemy is especially offensive to Muslims. However, this would be a simplification. The key issue is the religion-political power equation, as religious rules are differently implemented in different socio-political contexts (Stensvold 2021). That is, there are differences as to whether freedom of expression is curtailed with reference to blasphemy laws or secular laws. The former tends to offer a broad area of implementation but is also often very harsh. Among the Muslim-majority countries, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Brunei, Mauritania, punish blasphemy with death. Additionally, Pakistan suffers from blasphemy vigilantism, where people often take the law in their own hands to kill people they deem blasphemers (Buneri 2022).

The Iranian legal system does not distinguish between the terms blasphemy and apostasy; authorities often use both terms interchangeably to punish regime opponents or suppress those who violate the constitution (Marshall and Shea 2011). Apostasy and blasphemy in Iran are dealt with in the Penal Code of 2013, the Press Law of 1986, and juristic rulings from the Jafari School. The penal code distinguishes limits, accountability, blood money, and discretionary penalties. The penal code's Book Two deals with *hudud* crimes outlined in the Qur'an, such as drinking alcohol, fornication, slander and insulting the Prophet, though this last crime is not explicitly mentioned in the Qur'an. In addition, articles 513, 514, 206, and 263 address insults against Islam, the founder of the Islamic Republic, and the Prophet. One can further consider insulting God, Prophet Mohammad, or other revered Muslim figures to be proof of abandoning their faith. If blasphemy can be proven, this can result in apostasy charges (Eckerström 2022). The Iranian regime uses accusations of blasphemy and apostasy to punish those who threaten their rule, such as activists, artists, and minorities. Often authorities also add political charges such as 'propaganda against the Islamic Republic of Iran'. Rather than being merely symbolic measures, these laws are being used to persecute political dissidents as well as less political offenses, such as repeated alcohol consumption ("Iran: Man Executed for Drinking Alcohol" 2020).

For instance, directly relevant to our case, the metal band Confess, arrested in Tehran in 2015, was charged with blasphemy and propaganda against the state, among other offences (Eckerström 2022). Similarly, the metal band Arsames fled the country after being sentenced to 15 years in prison for blasphemy (Reilly 2020). Other prominent cases include Faezeh Hashemi, the activist daughter of Iran's late President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was arrested on September 28, 2022, in connection with the

unrest following the killing of Jina/Mahsa Amini mentioned earlier. Hashemi was charged with propaganda activity against the system of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and blasphemy (Zarghami and Esfandiari 2022). Several posts on social media have also led to arrests for blasphemy. One example is Instagram personality Fatemeh Khishvand, known as Sahar Tabar. She was arrested and initially charged with blasphemy based on heavily photoshopped photos and plastic surgery on her face (Wintour 2020). Blasphemy charges can also be imposed on Iranians living abroad. Shahin Najafi, an Iranian singer, released a song in 2012 satirising Ali al-Hadi al-Naqi, the tenth of the 12 Shia Muslim Imams. The singer was forced to relocate to Germany. The Iranian Sharia law allows clerics to issue fatwas calling for Muslims of the world to execute the fatwa. Four fatwas were issued against Najafi, and a \$100,000 reward was offered to anyone who killed him (Sharafedin 2012). Targets of blasphemy accusations are not safe outside the borders of Iran, as the Najafi case and the 12 August 2022 stabbing of Salman Rushdie, author of *The Satanic Verses* and the target of the perhaps most famous fatwa since the Iranian revolution, show.

The Islamic Republic vs. metal music

Ayatollah Khomeini believed that music could divert people's attention from important issues and lead to immoral behaviour (Pierri 2019). His position was clear: music was equivalent to drugs (Youssefzadeh 2000). Thus, since the founding of the Islamic Republic, the regime has imposed strict regulations on music (Nooshin 2005a; Youssefzadeh 2000) resulting in frequent detention of musicians under laws related to offenses against Islamic values or propaganda against the system (Eckerström 2022; Moody 2021). Khomeini's position led to a ban imposed on all concerts, as well as radio and television broadcasts featuring both foreign and Iranian classical and popular music. This ban was also his way of countering the westernising influence of the Pahlavi regime (Nooshin 2005b; Youssefzadeh 2005). In the 1970s, Iranian radio and television broadcast almost exclusively popular music, and imitations of Western pop performed by Iranian singers, such as Googoosh, a superstar in the Iranian pop music industry who left the country after the revolution (Youssefzadeh 2000, 36). State control of music did not lead to its disappearance, as simplistic accounts sometimes seem to imply, but rather that it went underground, where it often flourished, enabling a national conversation to take place outside the parameters set by the authorities (Siamdoust 2017, 2). People formed bands and gave music classes in secret, especially in Tehran. Perhaps as a tacit acknowledgement of the thriving underground scene, Ayatollah Khomeini's position expedited the establishment of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (Ershad) in 1988. The Ministry is responsible for granting publishing permission to all writers, musicians, filmmakers, artists, and scholars (Maghazei 2014, 5; Siamdoust 2017, 24).

The severe censorship did not stop music fans from finding innovative ways to obtain and trade VHSs, cassettes, and band t-shirts. The anti-establishment tunes by bands such as Black Sabbath, Metallica and Judas Priest inspired the Iranian metal scene already in the 1980s. While smuggling cassettes and VHSs helped establish the scene, the crucial moment for the growth of heavy metal in Iran was in the 1990s when people started accessing satellite television (Eckerström 2022; Otterbeck 2008). As one of our

participants, Bijan, explains, ‘People used analogue satellites and receivers. They were smuggled from Turkey and were illegal at the time since the government did not know what they were’. Metal fans could see with their own eyes that the artists they adored were simply musicians, not deranged Satanists, as suggested by Iranian authorities (Crowcroft 2017, 68). At the same time, the government grew concerned when this enemy from the sky was able to show Iranians a different lifestyle. The ‘cultural thaw’ (Nooshin 2005a, 469) following the election of President Khatami in May 1997 enabled a re-emergence of a grassroots popular music scene, including metal music. Since then, however, popular music has become a proxy battlefield between reformists and conservatives. With the latter in ascendance since Khatami’s period, the metal scene has increasingly relocated to the internet. Metal musicians have created significant communities on Instagram and Telegram to support musicians and fans, using VPNs to circumvent blocks.

Today, Iranian musicians and fans face constant governmental propaganda against metal music (LeVine 2008, 176–177). A key governmental actor is the Basij militia, the Iranian ‘morality police’ who, as Golkar (2015, 81) notes, asserts moral control over society following their interpretation of the Qur’anic principle *Amre be Maruf va Nahy az Monkar* (commanding the right and forbidding the wrong). This norm is also part of the constitution (Article 8). The *wrong*, in this context, is understood as immoral acts, such as consuming alcohol or playing loud music. The Basij Cyberspace Headquarters – called ‘cyber police’ by Bunt (2018) – created in 2014, conducts online surveillance of political activists, women who violate the dress code, and artists, including metal musicians. Human rights organisations have expressed concern about increasingly draconian laws and censorship with the ascendance of hardliner Ebrahim Raisi to the presidency in 2021 (e.g., ‘Iran: Raisi’s Presidency Will Embed the Human Rights Crisis in Iran 2021’; Ward 2021).

Despite frequent arrests, the scene has flourished, with a few bands becoming known also in the West. According to the participants in this study, it is not a coincidence that the most popular metal genre in Iran is extreme metal (black, thrash and death metal). The severe censorship and limits imposed by the government inspire metal musicians to play the most extreme genres of music to vent the frustration against a system that aims to prevent their self-actualisation (see also LeVine 2008, 9–10). The extreme genres, the participants argue, mirror their lives under a deviant label, with threat of censorship and punishment always looming on the horizon. This sets the Iranian scene apart from the scene in Turkey, for example, where metal music is controversial, but where metal bands avoid desecrating Islamic symbols (Hecker 2016, 138–139; Otterbeck, Mattsson, and Pastene 2018). In contrast, the blasphemy expressed by Iranian extreme metal bands is explicit and intentional (Eckerström 2022).

Secondary deviation as subjective narrative

The sociology of deviance has been pronounced dead several times in the last couple of decades (see Goode 2004). Partly this has been the outcome of the recognition that any reference to moral norms shared by entire societies has become untenable in a time of increasing diversity. To recognise something as ‘deviant’ requires a shared sense of what is ‘normal’ or ‘conventional’. While this may still broadly apply to things like the

injunction not to kill other people, the scope of issues that divide different social groups seems to be ever-expanding. Hence the shift in sociological thinking, where deviance is not considered an objective fact, but rather an outcome of social definitions (Blumer 1971, 302; Spector and Kitsuse [1977] 2001).

This approach to deviance and social problems (see Hjelm 2014, 37–56) is obviously relevant to our current endeavour. Metal music may be considered offensive in the Western context, but aside from the occasional moral panic, it is not illegal, it is not widely considered a social problem, nor are metal music fans usually subjected to social ostracism, except in conservative religious communities (e.g., Moberg 2013). However, in many other countries, such as Iran, the metal scene is not only considered morally offensive, but is being occasionally criminalised as blasphemous. The discrepancy between these two positions is a textbook demonstration of the constructedness of ‘deviance’: Deviance is not a property of things or behaviours themselves, but a label affixed to things and behaviours in particular social contexts.

Now, ‘labelling theory’, especially the work of Howard Becker, makes essentially two claims. The first part of Becker’s paradigm-challenging argument in his 1963 classic *Outsiders* (Becker [1963] 1991) outlines the labelling process:

[S]ocial groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance, and by applying those rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders. From this point of view, deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an ‘offender’. (Becker [1963] 1991, 9. Emphases in the original)

In other words, deviance only exists as an outcome of naming particular actions as deviant. As the example of metal music shows, its ‘deviance’ is not an inherent quality, but an outcome of the social contexts of its production and consumption. However, Becker goes further: He suggests that ‘treating a person as though he [*sic*] were [...] deviant produces a self-fulfilling prophecy. It sets in motion several mechanisms which conspire to shape the person in the image people have of him’ (Becker [1963] 1991, 34). What Becker is saying here, then, is that people internalise the labels given to them from the outside and start to act according to role expectations. Here Becker was inspired by Edwin Lemert (1951, 1967), who called this process *secondary deviation*. The labels given to perceived deviants ‘become central facts of existence for those experiencing them, altering psychic structure, [and] producing specialized organization of social roles and self-regarding attitudes’ (Lemert 1967, 40–41). The classic example of this is the prison. Although the putative function of incarceration is to make criminal offenders into law-abiding citizens, the actual effect is often that they appropriate the label of ‘delinquent’ or ‘criminal’ and get even more deeply socialised into a criminal subculture (e.g., Cid 2009).

Although labelling theory was influential especially in the 1960s and 1970s, it was soon subjected to rather fierce criticism. First, according to critics, labelling theory accorded little agency to those labelled deviant. Once you were labelled, the deviance more or less automatically followed. The issue is more complicated, as our data also shows. Labels can be resisted, and actions do not automatically follow even from self-identification. Second, ‘the label does not create the behaviour in the first place’ (Akers 2000, 126). People commit norm-breaking actions without ever having been labelled as

deviant by outsiders. In other words, secondary deviation fails to explain ‘primary deviation’. Finally, there is also a logical problem with labelling: Many criminals – embezzling bankers and company executives come to mind first – are never labelled as such. Logically, according to labelling theory, they should not then develop a criminal career. This does not fit empirical reality, however. Indeed, in the case of embezzlement, the opposite is true: The longer you avoid detection and outside labelling, the more likely you are to continue. Thus, while touching on a previously untapped nerve, labelling theory in its original iterations was also problematic (Akers 2000, 126–128). Becker himself responded, rather defensively, that his ambitions were much more modest than critics had thought: The point was not to supersede all previous theories, but to point to a lacuna in them concerning the labelling process and its effects (Becker [1963] 1991, 177–208).

Our point is not to engage in the decades-long debate, but to apply what we find useful in labelling theory and mould it for our purposes. Hence, in this article, we want to ‘flip’ the meaning of ‘secondary deviation’ the same way the original labelling theorists did with ‘deviance’. As we have seen, treating social control, and labelling as a strict *cause* of deviant behaviour is one-sided and problematic. We could not possibly ascertain state suppression as the original or only cause for identification with the metal music scene in Iran – not with our data, and probably not with any data. However, what we can do is examine *how social control affects identification*. Subjective narratives tell us how our participants construct their deviant identity. There are other underlying causes for identifying with a deviant-labelled scene – looking at objective measures such as class, education, and religious socialisation would likely show significant differences in susceptibility to participation in the metal scene – but the narratives demonstrate how people appropriate the deviant label. In this sense, our approach comes close to later developments in discourse theory (see Hjelm 2014). By doing so, by focusing on self-identification rather than behaviour, our use of ‘secondary deviation’ is more consistently faithful to the constructionist aspects of labelling and social problems theory than the original formulations of Becker, Lemert, and others.

Data and method

For this study, the first author interviewed fourteen extreme heavy metal musicians from Iran. While six participants now live abroad as political refugees, or with working visas, eight still live in Iran. The participants include twelve men and two women. Those with asylum obtained it on the grounds of religious persecution related to their music. The few with a working visa felt that they could not perform their music in their own country because of the risks they would face or the threats they had already received. We recruited participants by contacting some well-known Iranian metal musicians on social media and initiating a snowball sample. This method allows the study of ‘hidden’ communities (Atkinson and Flint 2001) and populations who are marginalised, who violate social norms, or are otherwise hesitant to participate (Baltar and Brunet 2012; Waters 2015). We found no discernible patterns regarding identification based on the interviewees’ place of residence or immigration status – with the exception of the participants who thought metal and Islam are reconcilable, who all lived in Iran at the time of the interviews.

The interviews were conducted remotely in English. All the participants spoke fluent English. We conducted multiple interviews with each participant. The average duration of each interview was one hour. Our choice of data and method was circumscribed by the underground nature of the scene, but in many ways fits it well since much of the interaction within the Iranian metal community happens online. Scholarship from the early days of Internet research (Fetterman 1998; Garrison 2003) also supports the validity of online interviewing. This is particularly fitting in this context, as Iranians are much more comfortable in responding to questions anonymously over the internet. Further, we were able to circumvent some of the often-mentioned limitations, such as lack of sensory cues (e.g., facial expressions), by conducting video calls.

The interviews were narrative in nature. That is, the first author engaged in long conversations with the respondents, instead of limiting the interviews to a strictly structured question regime. This relinquishing of control and the conversational style has been found to facilitate unexpected narratives (Riessman 1993, 56). Considering that the topic is controversial in the participants' home country, a single participant was sometimes interviewed multiple times to establish trust and understand the interviewee's circumstances and rationale (Boeije 2009; Seidman 2019). The interviews were conducted between January 2020 and August 2021. Some of the interviewees – mostly those already well known in the scene (and to Iranian authorities) – preferred that we used their own names, for others we have used pseudonyms. We have not altered ungrammatical quotations unless necessary for understanding the content.

After a preliminary reading, we coded the interview material according to a chronological logic into narratives regarding life before labelling, secondary deviation, and mixed responses. Our focus was, hence on the *content* of the narratives (instead of structure or performance). What was interesting for us, per the theoretical framework explained above, was not the accuracy of depictions of events, but rather the evaluative function of the narratives, that is, what the described events *meant* for the interviewees (Elliott 2005, 38).

Pre-metal piety

The extreme metal musicians participating in this study are from the first post-revolution generation. This is significant because their parents lived in a very different reality. In the time of the Shah, there was an active musical culture with famous local artists and regular concerts (Ghazizadeh 2011). Western music was ideologically preferred, as part of the modernisation drive of the Pahlavi regime (Nooshin 2005a, 469). While in the West metal music is often portrayed as teenage rebellion against conservative parents (e.g., Arnett 1996; Gaines 1998), most of the interviewees were raised in progressive families for whom all kinds of Western music, even the extreme type, reminded them of the foregone days. However, this does not mean that they were born or raised without religion. In fact, a sense of a conforming, even a pious Muslim identity came up recurrently in the conversations. For example, Shayan, the lead singer of black metal band Trivax, described himself as a devoted Muslim before discovering heavy metal:

I was very religious. Even when I was nine years old I remember before going to bed I told God I know he was real, and ask him to move chair. The chair did not move but I was like:

‘ok I still believe you’ to me, it says a lot about me being religious since I was kid. When I was thirteen, I became practicing Islam firmly. I was praying all the time and encouraging others to do the same. Because of my religion, I even went fourteen months with semen retention as I thought I was doing something bad.

Similarly, death metal guitarist Bijan was always very interested in religion, and as a young adult, he devoted his time to reading about it. However, the results of this intense study led to scepticism rather than strengthening of the religious identity.

Since you are a child in Iran, there is a constant propaganda to follow religion. I wanted to know what that was all about. I read the Qur’an and all the other major religions books. I was praying a lot. After one or two years I understood this is bullshit and inhumane. I researched my way out of religion.

Although in Bijan’s narrative the road from Islam to irreligion happened through independent study, he realised early on that to perform music, he would have to adjust his outward ideological appearance. He says that to obtain permission to perform from the authorities, they played in front of them and changed the lyrics of some Metallica songs. Their lyrics were filled with hate against the West, not because this was their ideology but to please the authorities.

This experience of religion as a factor limiting free expression was important in the narratives of our participants. Hence, metal music was not necessarily sought to oppose state Islam, but rather became the vehicle towards indifference or, more dramatically, an anti-religious ideology. Akhtar, an extreme metal singer, and guitarist Morad defined themselves as Muslim before realising that in Iran religion is a tool to limit people. Akhtar stated: ‘I was a Muslim before [I started playing extreme heavy metal]. I believe now humanity is always in search of power and religion is a form of power’. For Morad, who was raised in a conservative environment, the issue was not Islam as such, but its political use: ‘Islam was forced on me but I thought it was a good thing, actually I liked it and I thought it was going to rescue people. So, it was something that I liked and now I am telling you that limitations made me hate it’.

This attitude was especially visible in musicians who have been persecuted because of the music they played. Arash, member of the band Confess, arrested in 2015 for blasphemy and propaganda against the system, changed his stance towards religion when as a teenager he understood he was labelled as deviant simply for enjoying music: ‘Even if you are a religious person, a pure one, you lose your religion because you are under oppression. So this [renouncing Islam] happened also to me as a teenager’.

Standing out among our participants were Magus and Charuk Revan. The former is a black metal artist who identifies as ‘pagan’ and was accused of Apostasy in 2005. Magus’s family was Zoroastrian: ‘my father was Zarathustrian from Iran, and my mother was Israeli and Pagan’. His parents were killed in the Iran-Iraq war, leaving him an orphan. He consequently lived in different cities with relatives, most of whom were Zoroastrians. Magus developed a strong interest in researching the ancient culture of Iran, including Mithraism, Zurvanism, and local Buddhist traditions: ‘I became flexible in grasping the paganism elements in each environment and developed the ability to find the common ground that connects them to my primal roots dating back thousands of

years'. Magus' band mate, black metal musician Charuk Revan, said that she was raised pagan, believing in the sanctity of nature:

My parents believed in the power of nature. My father always said nature's my God. My family believed that nature has the power to take you wherever you want and can affect your life. And you can affect the nature and they (.) It can affect your life.

Based on our interviews, it looks like that the direction of influence between metal music and becoming a religious deviant in the context of high level of social and religious control is not simply that atheists find metal music as an outlet for their religious rebellion. While that is sometimes also the case, in other cases participating in the metal scene inspires genuinely religious people to re-evaluate state-enforced Islam and, consequently, their personal relationship with religion (see Nieuwkerk 2018).

Labelling, secondary deviance, apostasy

Whatever the direction of influence, one message that stood out in the interviews was that the role of Islam in controlling musical expression – and life more broadly – functioned as a red flag. Shayan, who called himself 'very religious' above, started doubting Islam because of his desire to learn more about it. His curiosity was sparked when he learned about the concept of *murtad* (apostate) at school. Shayan asked his teacher why the authorities or a citizen are allowed to kill a person who leaves Islam. 'I was challenging him, but he told me I was asking too many questions, and that doubt is the root of sins. That planted the seed for me.' He found the opposite attitude in metal: 'It is music that makes you feel empowered. Little by little music took the place of religion'. Naturally, this was not an easy path. Shayan was scared of not being able to connect with religion any longer.

Looking back, it was a sign of intelligence. I developed a resentment for the God they created. You want me not to be empowered but to follow you out of fear in exchange for nothing? Maybe I am not afraid of death, and I denounced it completely. It took months of questioning and, at the same time listening to music that made me feel empowered.

Shayan explains that he felt metal music led to an awakening. He felt free and empowered by the music that authorities in his country denounced. To him, it was not only about music but also about the ideology of extreme forms of music, as he states:

The ideology within heavy metal crept up and slowly replaced religion. I felt so empowered by metal, like the peak of what the human experience could be. And at the same time, Islam gave little choices. In Islam, you do as Islam says. The scepticism towards music went away, and when it came to my music, I became braver. I took more of an honest approach to what I wanted to write. To me, rebelling means freedom to break free from the limits I had.

Like many other musicians, once Shayan decided to listen to and play black metal, he felt like an outcast. However, he did not suffer from it – quite the opposite:

I felt a lot of pride in being an outcast. To them, I was an outcast for things I believed in, having different interests that would not comply with norms. It felt like having the weight of the world on my shoulders: me against everyone else. But I never questioned my identity because the music felt very genuine to me. I never questioned my experience because it seemed I discovered something no one was aware of.

This narrative conforms to the observation made by Kahn-Harris (2007) and others that extreme metal valorises transgression and a sense of outsidership, or a countercultural identity (Hjelm, Kahn-Harris, and LeVine 2013). In that sense ‘the ideology of heavy metal’, as Shayan put it, can be considered a particular pull factor for those alienated by the state’s religiously legitimated control apparatus. Considering that all the participants are metal artists themselves, foregrounding the transgressiveness of metal in Iran is also a way to build a transgressive identity within the broader metal scene. However, Shayan struggled with not being able to share his experience with others. The illegality of his passion meant that looking for others would put him at risk of being persecuted. Yet, as he states, ‘It [being outcast] made me a stronger person and more appreciative of the principle of freedom’. When eventually Shayan became a musician, he implemented his newfound ideology in his music. He turned one of the main strengths of religion upside down ‘while religion feasts from fear of death, I aim to the acceptance of it. My lyrics explore the path of finding my highest potential.’

Bijan, who, as Shayan, was very passionate about religion, experienced a similar process. Because of the music he liked and his research about religion, he became an atheist. Similarly, Morad renounced Islam because of censorship imposed by religious limits:

We talk about living in a religion that bans music, and that is why we hate it. My father dared me to not buy a guitar because of religion and because the Qur’an says music leads you to have sex. He told me I was not allowed to get a guitar, and I thought, why? I am not going to be a criminal. It was challenging, but this was something I had to do.

Morad’s choice of a metal lifestyle caused daily stress: ‘Basij and police can stop your car to search for illegal material, and this includes cassettes, CDs etc. If a person refuses to let the agent search, they get arrested’. Moreover, Morad could not show his guitar skills because concerts were illegal. This eventually fortified his aversion to Islam: ‘I wanted to introduce myself [by performing], but there was fear in showing yourself up. These limitations made you hate religion’.

For those raised and self-identifying as Muslim, the effect of the deviant label has of course been most dramatic. Others described themselves as indifferent. Nevertheless, in their telling, the religiously legitimated social control drove them towards positions that are more radical. The control over self-expression led another extreme heavy metal musician, Javad, to anti-religiosity and self-identification as deviant.

I was about thirteen years old, and I was out with my friend. The police stopped me and cut my hair. That’s when I decided, ok, I am different, I am not accepted. That’s when I had a rage in my soul. I am a musician, I am a music lover, it is not just about me, but all the guys that listen to this music or doing this job, we choose not to be traditional guys, we choose to think. But it has a price. I have never been a religious guy, but I was not offensive towards my religion. After that, I was very vocal about my hate towards religion. I openly speak about it. If somebody starts talking to me about religion, I will explain my ideas very firmly. Religion was not part of my life, but I became vocal against it after.

As explained before, illegal satellites have played a big part in the life of our participants. Akhtar remembered one particular music video that initiated his process of leaving Islam: ‘I remember after I watched Dimmu Borgir, and in the video, there is a scene where a scholar breaks [a] cross necklace, and it was inspiring for me. It was a moment that transformed me into something different from before’.

Magus and Charuk had a similar path, although they were not raised Muslim. Black metal helped them to explore their deviant attitudes and express their message against organised religion. However, their narrative is coloured by an ideological understanding where criticism of religion and society is an individual achievement, not a result of social pressure. As Magus states 'I choose black metal as an individual path leading to *Übermensch* to destroy borders of stupid established religion and politics made for nihilistic, naive, and desperate mankind'. To Charuk,

performing art and black metal took me on a path of inner destruction and challenging everything I have ever built. I put myself to any position that I was afraid of confronting; in this way, I was practicing my bravery in expression in any form even if that ends up destroying my reputation, losing family, country and even my way of life. Being a defiant, a rebel is not something that society or religion gives me or linear path that directs me to specific genre but a multilayer, complex spiral that is dynamic consciously going through chaos to create the order and black metal is one of my tools which serves this sacred intention and not the society, my fans, labels or anyone else.

Despite the hyper-individualistic retroactive narrative, it was the encounter with Iran's strict version of Islamic law, which drove Magus further towards anti-religion. Incorporating pre-Islamic themes in his music, he says, resulted in being arrested for blasphemy and tortured multiple times: 'I'm talking about old mysteries of kings, and [the topic of] kings in Islam, is forbidden, because you should talk about imam, not the kings. Islam represent all the kings as a corruption'. He now lives as a political refugee in Germany and continues to be very outspoken against religious authoritarianism.

Complex identifications

According to the interviewees, it is not Islam *per se* that is seen as problematic, but the implementation of religion as a form of social control. As mentioned above, Shayan believed the Islamic way was a good path to a just life. He believed that this genre of music and his beliefs could coexist, when his guitar teacher introduced him to the black metal band Dimmu Borgir: 'He told me that they were Satanist and I remember I thought it was a shame but the music is very good'. Bijan voiced similar thoughts. This, of course, was before they realised that their system saw their musical journey as blasphemous.

Perhaps because the participants who renounced religion were driven to this position by the social control they experienced as suffocating, they were adamant about not giving into state regulations. State approval for musical performance and releasing music is a linchpin issue, which divides the metal scene in Iran. To those labelled deviant, artistic expression is an issue of freedom and compromise unacceptable. As Shayan stated, 'art should never ask for permission, in Iran or elsewhere. We do what we do to express ourselves and our freedom. If we touch a like-minded person, that is great. However, we do it to achieve our highest freedom'. Similarly, Akhtar has never asked permission. He believed that 'if you do, the whole identity of the band would be destroyed'. Akhtar underlined that while some extreme heavy metal musicians are in denial, the truth is that this form of art is banned in Iran: 'Maybe sometimes you have to pay the price and face the consequences, because what you play is illegal and everyone knows. *Society pushes you away*' (emphasis

added). Javad thinks asking for permission or identifying as both metalhead and Muslim contradicts the ideology of extreme heavy metal:

If you comply with the rules and ask permission, for example, you remove lyrics [and play only instrumental], it's bullshit. This music is not only about heavy distortion. This music has a language, and the language is lyrics. I am a guitarist. I should defend my instrument above everything, but the core of heavy metal is in the lyrics. If you don't listen to the message, go fuck yourself, you are on the wrong path. Lyrics is the only way to find out what this music says. I don't understand people that are religious and listen to Mayhem [a Norwegian satanic black metal band]. It does not make sense. It's such a wrong combination.

However, not everyone agrees. Drummer Azadeh identified as a Muslim. She has a band and they have performed occasionally. She thought it was fine to apply for permission and compromise with the state. For instance, she wears a scarf on her head and dresses modestly on stage. The band is always careful to avoid gestures, which could be problematic, such as headbanging.

Metal is a form of music. It should not be considered political as it is right now. I decided to show girls that I exist, that you can do this. I know I am not the image of that heavy metal idol because I do not headbang, as it is forbidden, I am not dressed sexy, I need to cover up. Some people see that there is only one way. Because they want to do it as Black Sabbath, they believe so much in the heavy metal culture and authenticity. But this is music that does not belong to our culture.

Similarly, guitarist Hassan, who identified as spiritual but not Muslim, has tried to obtain permission in the past. This required modifying his music by, for instance, playing only instrumental compositions.

I don't understand why people don't ask permission. They think that metal music is always against everything. I try to make it public. I had a metal concert two years ago without singing, only instrumental. Heavy metal is not only music, but it is also a culture, and we make it in our way. Meaning we have our lifestyle in Iran, and we adapt it. That's how people will accept this music and change their idea.

Interestingly, both interviewees who see compromise as an option use a variation of the 'cultural relativism' argument analysed by Afshari (2011): Because we have our own (Islamic) culture, we cannot presume to do things the same way as others. Metal music's history as a transgressive genre in West (Eckerström 2022; Kahn-Harris 2007) fits the Euro-American cultural context. In Iran, the argument goes, metal music should fit the parameters set by – in this case – the state. The choice is being a public metal musician or an underground deviant. What is clear is that retaining a Muslim identity is unlikely in the latter case.

Blasphemous metal music as secondary deviance

All governments exercise social control over their citizens. What makes theocratic governments – such as that of Iran – special is that they legitimate the control with divine authority. This means that, unlike in most secular Western countries, blasphemy laws remain a key tool for suppressing freedom of expression. Where blasphemy laws still exist in Western countries, they are (nowadays) used for a narrow selection of

offenses, such as attacks on religious buildings (e.g., Äystö 2017). In other words, even though they are blasphemy laws by international criteria, they are used (when they are used in the first place) to prosecute actions targeted against a religious group rather than actions targeted at God or the sacred. In contrast, in Iran, any transgression of religiously defined boundaries of propriety can be prosecuted as blasphemy. Significantly, despite their supposedly divine and eternal nature, these boundaries are ever-shifting: ‘fierce political battles among factions in power required constant revisions of the “sacred” principles already set as the dictums of the “divine law”’ (Kazemipur and Rezaei 2003, 357). Kazemipur and Rezaei (2003) suggest that the top-down ‘de-secularisation’ of public life after the revolution has led, paradoxically, to a situation where an increasing number of Iranians think that they will be less religious in the future and that religion should be a private matter. There is, in other words, a legitimisation crisis (Habermas 1988) in Iranian society, when a growing number of (especially young people) see the religious legitimisation of state power as illegitimate. As Hashemi (2018, 187–188) notes the 1979 Revolution was a rejection of secular nationalism of the Pahlavi regime and its authoritarian, modernising, pro-Western policies. Secularism has returned to Iran, but with a twist. Until 1979, secularism was imposed from above by the state, alienating members of the society; today secularism is pushed by civil society, supported by intellectual and moral arguments grounded in Iranian culture. Furthermore, approximately 50 per cent of the Iranian population is under 30 years old (“50% of the Country’s Population is under 30 Years Old” 2016), which is an important point when it comes to the legitimacy of political power justified with religious edict. In 2023, Godazgar and Mirzaei (2023) conducted a study to examine the impact of the Iranian revolution on the religious beliefs of 365 students from the University of Tabriz, Iran. The study found that there is a trend towards individualisation of religion, spirituality, and secularisation, rather than collectivism, Sharia-orientation, and the portrayal of Islam as a political ideology or Islamism. It is however worth noting that Iranians under 30 are not alone in their criticism. Studies have shown that even among the elderly population in Iran, there exists a significant proportion of individuals who hold critical views towards Islam, (see Loeffler 2022). Furthermore, the images of the Woman, Life, Freedom movement depict people of all ages expressing their criticisms.

The narratives of the metal musicians we have analysed in this paper can be treated as a microcosm of the abovementioned macro patterns. Controlling metal music by labelling it and metal musicians as deviant has the consequence of ‘pushing people away’, as Javad put it above, and thus reinforcing their commitment to transgress the religiously legitimated boundaries of public expression. In the title of this paper we suggested, in classic Weberian vein (see Turner 2019), that this is an unintended consequence of state-enforced religion. Culling blasphemous music has the effect of inspiring it. We certainly agree with Nooshin (2017) that there is a danger of fetishising music singularly as resistance in the Iranian context, but at the same time resistance is the story metal scene participants choose to tell when talking about their ‘deviant’ careers.

However, the labelling theory of deviance – especially the concept of ‘secondary deviation’ – suggests that assuming a deviant identity may be unintended but at the same time an *anticipated* consequence of labelling. The narratives our participants shared strongly support the secondary deviation thesis – not as a strictly causal explanation of action, but as a process where the labelling provides building blocks for identity. There is a push–pull

dynamic at work here: On the one hand, the religiously legitimated social control pushes people away from Islam and into a deviant identity. On the other hand, extreme metal valorises transgression, thus making it an appropriate vehicle for deviant identification. We do not suggest that this is a universal process – indeed, our interviews show that the outcomes of labelling are more complex than that – nor can we discuss the prevalence of the phenomenon. Nevertheless, our research points to the issues and dynamics that are relevant in a social context where, on the one hand, the legitimacy of the theocratic regime is increasingly in question and where, on the other hand, the rhetoric of the supreme leader Khamenei ‘capitalizes on the existence of an insider-outsider divide to promote ideas about an imagined “we” of the regime [which] is portrayed as an Islamic we, fully committed to his rule’ (Selvik 2018). Metal music in Iran is a proxy through which a broader struggle regarding freedom of expression, but also the role of religion in public life, is waged.

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