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Jesus and Metal Music Don't Mix?

The Controversy over the 'Metal Mass' in Finland

Anna Saurama & Titus Hjelm

Abstract:

In 2006, a Metal Mass—a regular Lutheran mass with accompanying metal music—was celebrated in Helsinki and created a controversy on several online forums. On the one hand, the focus was the appropriateness of metal music in the context of a Christian mass. On the other hand, the issue at stake was the appropriateness of Christianity in the context of metal music and culture. In this article, we concentrate on how the controversy over the boundaries of 'good' religion is constructed in discourse about the appropriateness of metal music in the context of a national church and its services. We argue that the controversy over the Metal Mass is a case of broader negotiation between the function and performance of religious actors in contemporary Finland, yet when it happens within a secularized context, the temporarily full pews turn out to be an anomaly rather than a sign of revival.

Keywords: Christianity; controversy; discourse; Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland; Finland; metal music

1. Introduction

As in the other Nordic countries, pews in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF) are overwhelmingly empty on an average Sunday.¹ While 82 percent of the population were members of the ELCF during the period of 2004–2007 that is of interest for us in this article,

¹ Inger Furseth et al, "Changing Religious Landscapes in the Nordic Countries," in: Inger Furseth (ed.), *Religious Complexity in the Public Sphere: Comparing Nordic Countries* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan: 2017), 31–80.

only 1.9 percent of the members attended mass once a week—although special services, such as Christmas, still attracted significant numbers. However, about one fourth of ELCF members had not attended any services (including marriages, baptisms, and funerals) in recent years.² The decline of overall membership has accelerated in the last decade (71 percent at the end of 2017), although attendance at weekly mass has remained more or less the same.³

On Wednesday, 26 June 2006, however, the pews of Temppeliaukio church in Helsinki were packed. This was the date of the controversial “Metal Mass” (*Metallimessu*), a regular Lutheran mass but accompanied by a heavy metal band and hymns arranged in metal-music style. The mass was also advertised as a “pre-club” for the Tuska Open Air metal festival held the following weekend in the center of Helsinki, and three hundred people were left queuing outside because the church had filled to capacity in minutes.⁴ Not only was the full attendance peculiar for a Lutheran mass, so was the audience: clad in black, more often than not sporting a T-shirt of a favorite metal band, and singing their hearts out from the official hymnal.

But why is it referred to as ‘controversial’? Although subsequently celebrated over one hundred times in Lutheran churches around the country, and garnering even international interest, in the run up to the first Metal Mass in Helsinki, several online forums were filled with heated discussions—a controversy, if you will—about the appropriateness of the event.⁵ These

² Figures are from 2007. Kääriäinen et al, *Monikasvoinen kirkko: Suomen Evankelisluterilainen kirkko vuosina 2004–2007* (Tampere: Kirkon Tutkimuskeskus, 2008), 77–79.

³ Church of Finland, “Kirkkoon kuuluu 71 prosenttia väestöstä,” <https://evl.fi/uutishuone/tiedotarkisto/-/items/item/17504/Kirkkoon+kuuluu+71+prosenttia+vaestosta> (accessed 4 February 2019); Ketola et al, *Suomen*, 73–74.

⁴ <http://metallimessu.com/info/metallimessun-alkutekijat/>

⁵ <http://metallimessu.com/info/metallimessun-alkutekijat/>; Regarding international interest, see e.g., BBC Outlook, “The Finnish pastor and his heavy metal hymns,” <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p06yw3s3> (Accessed 4 February 2019).

debates are the focus of this article. Two main issues emerged in the online discourse. On the one hand, the focus of the debate was the appropriateness of metal music in the context of a Christian mass. On the other hand, the issue at stake was the appropriateness of religion, or, more specifically, Christianity, in the context of metal music and culture, with metal often being described as “the Devil’s music” in the debates. In this article, we concentrate on the former issue, that is, how the boundaries of ‘good’ religion are constructed in discourse of this controversy about the appropriateness of metal music in the context of a national church and its services.

We ask three questions. First, how did the Metal Mass become controversial in the first place? Metal music and religion have had a relationship fraught with tension since the early days of forerunners, like Black Sabbath. In this sense, the Metal Mass controversy is part of a broader pattern.⁶ However, we are not interested in abstract debates about the real or assumed anti-Christian message of metal music, but rather in the effects of the embedding—or displacement, as some of the discussants would claim—of metal music in an institutional religious setting in a particular historical context. Therefore, we ask, secondly, what do the discourses used in the controversy tell us about the boundaries of religion (in particular, the ELCF) and popular culture in modern Finland? Looking at a controversy from 2006 is justified in this case, as this was the origin of the Metal Mass phenomenon and paved the way for the

⁶ For a historical view, see Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), 137–171; Deena Weinstein, *Heavy Metal: The Music and Its Culture*, revised ed. (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2000), 237–275; Ian Christe, *Sound of the Beast: The Complete Headbanging History of Heavy Metal* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), 117–125, 290–303. On Finland, see Titus Hjelm, *Saatananpalvonta, media ja suomalainen yhteiskunta* (Helsinki: Yliopistopaino, 2005), 22–29, 117–130. See also Keith Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge* (Oxford: Berg, 2007); Marcus Moberg, *Christian Metal: History, Ideology, Scene* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

later mainstreaming of metal music in the ELCF. Finally, we discuss our third question of what impact broader, if controversial, visibility has for the ELCF. We argue that the controversy over the Metal Mass is a case of a broader negotiation between the function and performance of religious actors in contemporary Finland, yet when it happens within a largely secularized context, the temporarily full pews turn out to be an anomaly rather than a sign of revival.

2. Controversies as Social Movements

‘Controversy’ and ‘controversial’ are part of everyday parlance. In the sociology of religion, they have been applied especially to the study of controversial new religious movements in the 1970s and 1980s.⁷ Following that tradition, but clarifying and expanding it—interestingly enough, ‘controversy,’ as such, has been rarely social scientifically conceptualized—we proceed to formulate a definition that draws from the constructionist approach to the study of social problems.⁸ This tradition contends that “no social condition, however deplorable or

⁷ James A. Beckford, *Cult Controversies: The Societal Response to the New Religious Movements* (London: Tavistock, 1985).

⁸ One the social scientific conceptualization of ‘controversy,’ see Lewis A. Coser & Otto N. Larsen, “Introduction,” in: Lewis A. Coser & Otto N. Larsen (eds.), *The Uses of Controversy in Sociology* (New York: The Free Press, 1976), xv–xvi, at xv; Judith Roads, “The Language of Historical Religious Controversies: The Case of George Keith and the Quaker Movement in England,” *Journal of Religion in Europe* 11/1 (2018), 46–78. This section draws from Titus Hjelm, Keith Kahn-Harris, & Mark LeVine, “Introduction: Heavy Metal as Controversy and Counterculture,” in: Titus Hjelm, Keith Kahn-Harris, & Mark LeVine (eds.), *Heavy Metal: Controversies and Countercultures* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2013), 1–14. See also Joseph W. Schneider, “Social Problems Theory: The Constructionist Perspective,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 11 (1985), 209–229.

intolerable it may seem to social scientists or social critics, is inherently problematic.”⁹ Conditions become problematic only inasmuch as people define them as such. Therefore, it is not the properties of a condition, but the public reaction to a perceived condition that should be the focus of scholarly attention. However, these definitions need a critical mass of people and publicity to make the wider society recognize the condition as a problem. Put differently, “since [...] a social problem is dependent on a social movement for its very existence and is, practically speaking, coterminous with it, we might say that a *social problem is simply a kind of social movement*.”¹⁰

With the above as a guideline, but substituting ‘social problem’ with ‘controversy,’ we follow Titus Hjelm, Keith Kahn-Harris, and Mark LeVine and define ‘controversies’ as the *activities of individuals or groups making public claims about conditions that are perceived as a threat to certain cherished values and/or material and status interests*.¹¹ Two things stand out here for the purposes of our analysis. First, “controversies are *subjective* in the sense that [...] perceptions of inappropriateness, deviance, and threat can be independent of the actual conditions, but they can also be influenced by particular ‘trigger moments’ which create concern.”¹² Second, controversies are slightly different from ‘claims-making,’ the central analytical concept in the sociology of social problems. Whereas claims-making is often seen as one-sided—i.e., focusing on the discourse of the people and groups claiming that a condition is problematic—controversy presupposes two contrasting viewpoints that vie for hegemony in the debate. As Lewis Coser and Otto N. Larsen put it: “Not all controversies, alas, provide enlightenment; when the contenders argue from mutually exclusive positions and have no

⁹ Armand Mauss, *Social Problems as Social Movements* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1975), xvi.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* Emphasis original.

¹¹ Hjelm, Kahn-Harris, & LeVine, “Introduction,” 2. Emphasis original.

¹² *Ibid.*, 3. Emphasis original.

common ground to share, the result is usually, as the French say, a dialogue of the deaf.”¹³ In other words, metal music would not be controversial if *everyone* agreed that it was harmful. It is controversial because people disagree about the issue of harmfulness and make claims from opposite ends of a moral spectrum regarding metal music. As our case demonstrates, there might be disagreement on what exactly the problem is: Is it metal music corrupting Christianity or vice versa? Here we focus on the framings of the former idea.

3. The Discursive Analysis of Controversy and a Note on Sources

As Hjelm, Kahn-Harris, and LeVine argue, a central feature of controversies is that they are discursive-symbolic.¹⁴ Claims are discursive acts with an aim to draw attention to and change a condition considered deplorable. Hence, the ‘natural’ choice for a method is a form of discourse analysis. Discourse analysis focuses on the “action orientation” of language use, that is, *what is being done* with discourse.¹⁵ As Hjelm has argued, “*every discourse analytical study needs to be designed individually.*”¹⁶ Since our focus is on the discursive ways in which the (a) facticity and (b) morality of positions is constructed, we employ several tools of analysis,

¹³ Coser & Larsen, “Introduction,” xv.

¹⁴ Hjelm, Kahn-Harris, & LeVine, “Introduction,” 3.

¹⁵ Derek Edwards & Jonathan Potter, *Discursive Psychology* (London: Sage, 1992), 2.

¹⁶ Titus Hjelm, “Discourse Analysis,” in: Michael Stausberg & Steven Engler (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2011), 134–150, at 142. Emphasis original.

developed in different traditions of discourse analysis.¹⁷ These include the analysis of lexis, category entitlements, and footing.

Word choice, or *lexis*, contextualizes events and actors. Naming someone an ‘insurgent’ as opposed to ‘freedom fighter’ is the classic example of how the description of people affects our interpretation of them. Similarly, an event acquires meaning through the words used. Boundary maintenance in communities is often done by calling competing communities or deviant individuals ‘evil.’¹⁸ The lexical connections—that is, the things, issues, and moral qualities that discussants associate with the Metal Mass in word usage—matter.

While words contextualize what the topic under discussion is, *category entitlement* contextualizes the speakers. It is “the idea that certain categories of people, in certain contexts, are treated as knowledgeable.”¹⁹ On an anonymous online forum, however, the entitlement needs to be earned through explication, rather than through titles or visible signs of rank, for example. Hence, participants sometimes engaged in legitimating their right to talk about either faith or metal by flaunting their credentials in either community. This is interesting, because it tells us who has the right to draw the boundaries between metal music and religion—or at least it tells us how these people legitimate their right to such boundary-making.

Finally, *footing* refers “to the range of relationships that speakers and writers have to the descriptions they report.”²⁰ Jonathan Potter gives the example of two sentences with the

¹⁷ Jonathan Potter, *Representing Reality: Discourse, Rhetoric, and Social Construction* (London: Sage, 1996); John E. Richardson, *Analysing Newspapers: An Approach from Critical Discourse Analysis* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007); Titus Hjelm, “Religion, Discourse and Power: A Contribution Towards a Critical Sociology of Religion,” *Critical Sociology* 40/6 (2014), 855–872.

¹⁸ Kai T. Erikson, *The Wayward Puritans: A Study in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1966), 64.

¹⁹ Potter, *Representing Reality*, 133.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 122.

same content: “Karen can’t come down to the pub because she’s revising” and “Karen said that she can’t come down to the pub because she’s revising.”²¹ The first one is a factual statement, whereas in the second one the speaker distances herself from the explanation for Karen’s non-appearance. In other words, footing refers to the accountability of speakers, how invested they are in the claims they are making.²² Linguistically, footing is often indicated by modality, or the use of modal verbs (e.g., may, could, should), their negations (e.g., couldn’t, shouldn’t), adverbs (e.g., certainly), and categorical language (e.g., will, must, certainly).²³

In addition to the above linguistic and meaning-related foci of this analysis, two things characterize the process of our inquiry. First, we do not consider discourses as free-floating phenomena, independent of the social context of discourse use. Hence, we will interpret the discourse in light of the different forums we analyze and—if the information is available—in reference to the position of the ‘speaker.’ Anonymity has often been given as the defining feature of online communication.²⁴ Judging from the messages themselves, however, many of the authors clearly knew each other already, although whether from online or offline contexts we cannot say. Interestingly—although perhaps not surprisingly—many of the posts engaged in active personal identity construction in addition to partaking in the topic of controversy. True to our premise that context matters, we will discuss the actors whenever their self-constructions are crucial to the interpretation of the controversy. Furthermore, although online forum discussions lend themselves perfectly to a type of analysis that focuses on sequential interaction or the responsiveness and dialogicality of discourse, we concentrate on the instances in which

²¹ *Ibid.*, 147.

²² Richardson, *Analysing Newspapers*, 59.

²³ *Ibid.*, 59–60.

²⁴ E.g., Andrew Wood & Matthew Smith, *Online Communication: Linking Technology, Identity and Culture*, 2nd ed. (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2005).

the facticity and morality of claims are constructed, referring to responses only when relevant to the original claim.²⁵

Finally, a brief note on data. We gathered data from three distinct online forums: (1) *Imperiumi*, the largest Finnish-language forum for metal fans (abbreviated as ‘I’ in the footnotes); (2) *Metalliunioni*, a forum for Christian metal fans (MU); and (3) the guestbook of the Metal Mass home page (MM). The period of analyzed discussions ran from 2 October 2005 to 31 July 2006. The discussion around the first Metal Mass is captured within this frame, with new threads established when plans for a second mass (and subsequent ones) were publicized. The threads on *Imperiumi* and *Metalliunioni* can still be accessed, but the Metal Mass guestbook has been discontinued since 2015.²⁶ Even after a preliminary screening where “off-topic” messages were dropped from the data, the corpus is large: 499 individual messages on *Imperiumi* alone and 277 and 193 on *Metalliunioni* and the Metal Mass guestbook, respectively. After an initial reading and screening, we organized the messages into different subject positions (see below). It is clear that with a corpus this large, a full-scale discourse analysis on the linguistic level was impossible. Hence, in the second instance, we further divided the positions into different discourses according to the contextualizations of church and metal made by authors and, finally, in the third stage, engaged in a more detailed analysis of representative instances of individual messages.

²⁵ See David Silverman, *A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book about Qualitative Research* (London: Sage, 2007), 63–64.

²⁶ <http://lauta.imperiumi.net/>; <http://www.metalliunioni.com/forum/> (accessed 4 February 2019). The posts from the Metal Mass guestbook (<http://www.freebok.net/books/metalmes/view.html>) are archived in print form by the first author.

4. Mapping the Subject Positions in the Metal Mass Controversy

In the initial mapping of the data, we divided the material into four subject positions. By ‘subject position,’ we refer to the ways in which the participants in the controversy discursively position themselves. From the empirical material, logically enough, a classic sociological fourfold table emerges, where the positions are determined by the participants’ take on Christianity, on the one hand, and metal music, on the other.

	Christianity +	Christianity -
Metal +	A	B
Metal -	C	D

Table 1: Subject Positions in the Metal Mass Controversy

Position A sees the combination of Christianity and metal music as uncontroversial. However, since much of this discourse is produced in response to the positions in which one or the other is seen as problematic, this position warrants closer analysis. This is also the case when the discourse is not directly responding to other discourses but preempts responses in what is called ‘horizontal intertextuality’ or the dialogicality of texts.²⁷ This means that discourse is often produced with *potential* responses in mind.

Position B and C are the foci of analysis in this article. In them, the controversy over the role of metal music in the context of institutional Christianity is debated. It should be emphasized here that, in the table, attitudes towards Christianity are not the same as attitudes towards the ELCF. As we discuss below, some of those who identified positively with

²⁷ Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), 103.

Christianity and negatively with metal thought that the church had lost its way. Finally, again logically enough, few accounts fell into position D—after all, what is the point of taking part in a conversation if you are not interested in either of the topics?

Subject positions, conceived this way, do not, however, tell us *how* these positions are achieved. Therefore, below, we have added the discourses—the ways of talking—that justify positions A, B, and C factually and morally. These are analyzed in detail in the sections below. We will begin with discourses within subject positions B and C, both of which we named “A Secularized Church”—these are, after all, the positions claiming that the combination of metal and Christianity is controversial—and then move on to the discourses in position A, which we named “A Modern Church” and “Christian Metal.”

	Christianity +	Christianity -
Metal +	A Modern Church Christian Metal	A Secularised Church
Metal -	A Secularised Church	N/A

Table 2: The Discourses on Metal Music and Christianity in the Metal Mass Controversy

The sources each had different emphases. On the *Imperiumi* forum, the focus was, unsurprisingly, on metal music. Much of the discussion there focused on position B, but in this subject position, we have analyzed only the discourses about the appropriateness of metal in the context of a Lutheran mass in particular, whereas many of the comments concentrated on the authenticity of metal as “anti-Christian” music. *Metalliunioni* and the Metal Mass guestbook, in turn, focused on the church and faith part of the controversy, which means that

although numerically *Imperiumi* had the most posts on the topic, the majority of the posts singled out for closer analysis come from the other two sources.

5. A Secularized Church: The Outsider View

Much of the debate on the Metal Mass revolved around the question of metal being ‘anti-Christian’ on a rather abstract level. Speaking from outside Christianity in general, commenters saw the combination of metal music with church services as fundamentally antithetical to the spirit of metal music. Their focus was, in other words, on why the Metal Mass is controversial from a metal fan’s perspective. In between more general commentary, however, a discourse emerged that directly tackled the role of the ELCF in the controversy. In the first instance, commenters saw the Metal Mass as another sign of the church having lost its way and effectively becoming secularized:

The best thing about this is that it is easy to see how the church’s principles change and loosen. I don’t know if it has been previously possible to follow the secularization of the church in real time like this.²⁸

If you would at least stay true to your religion [*Pysyisitte sitten edes uskonnollenne uskollisina*].²⁹

The church makes concessions all the time and frankly, the whole thing feels like brown-nosing [*pyllykän nuoleskelulta*].³⁰

²⁸ I: HFP, 30 April 2006. All of the translations are the authors’. In addition to regular translation challenges, we have tried to retain the informal tone of the posts, which inevitably means ungrammatical sentences. In ambiguous cases, we have included the original word or phrase in Finnish.

²⁹ MM: E., 10 May 2006.

³⁰ I: tellie, 30 April 2006.

In these cases, the central argument is on the church failing its basic function. What is interesting is that based on the tone of the comment—the ‘best thing’ in the first comment is a sarcastic comment—or the commenters’ explicit identification and previous posts we grouped these commenters under position B (metal positive, Christianity negative). Few self-identifying Christians took part in the *Imperiumi* forum, where the first and third quotes above are from. The second is from the Metal Mass guestbook, but the commenter’s choice of “*your church*” positions her or him outside the church. Nevertheless, the tone is almost theological, with all of the commenters having apparently a clear sense of what the function of the church *should* be. The church’s *principles* and the *religion* itself have been sacrificed for *concessions*—that is, the church has been explicitly secularized.

A variation of the secularization of the church discourse presents the Metal Mass as a disingenuous attempt by the ELCF to make itself relevant in the modern world, specifically in the face of increasing loss of membership.

Then there’s the desperate church that tries to capitulate just a little bit so that the prodigal sons can be ostensibly kept in the crew. It is really nice to notice how badly the church is doing.³¹

It is doubtful that a [regular] mass [*pelkkä jumalanpalvelus*] would make anyone attend [*saisi liikkeelle*], but when it’s performed in metal form then idiots [*pösilöitä*] appear who want to take part.³²

In addition, you mention on your pages that “metal music is more popular than ever.” This alone makes one suspect the motives behind your whole Metal Mass [...] I’m afraid that metal won’t help the church survive the loss of people.³³

³¹ I: PETO, 3 May 2006.

³² I: Roni 30 April 2006.

³³ MM: Riike, 28 April 2006.

The last comment engages in some wordplay: the Finnish idiom “*ei hevillä selvitä*” can mean “metal [*hevi*] is not the answer to the problem” (more literally, as we have done above, the church will not *survive* the loss), or it can mean “it will not be easy [*hevillä*] to survive.” Although posted on the Metal Mass guestbook, the author distances her/himself from the event, explicitly calling it ‘*your* Metal Mass.’

Some commenters paint a picture of a greedy and desperate ELCF by connecting membership loss with loss of revenue:

So, it’s the market economy and money speaking—churchmen have already been worried about the growing number of people who have left the church, and about “how they could be brought back.”³⁴

Even an idiot understands that this is about making money, because an organization that big needs to survive somehow. Only a very small portion pays the church tax, as compared to for example five years ago.³⁵

The following early post on *Imperiumi* also combines the themes of membership loss and loss of revenue and the Metal Mass as a desperate attempt to remedy the situation of the ELCF. It became ‘viral’ in a limited way when people copied it into their own posts. It also found its way to the Metal Mass guestbook.

The popularity of the church wanes -> Membership goes down -> Revenue falls -> More income is needed (earthly mammon) [*maallista mammonaa*] -> Popularity needs to be increased -> “What is trendy at the moment?” -> Metallimessu.com.³⁶

³⁴ I: metalglory, 30 April 2006.

³⁵ I: PahiZ, 22 May 2006.

³⁶ I: HFP, 30 April 2006.

Similar posts appear in the run-up to the Metal Mass, especially on the *Imperiumi* forum.³⁷ The church that the discourse constructs is desperate and not a little cynical in its adoption of metal music for the purposes of a church service.

6. A Secularized Church: The Insider View

Our analysis shows how discourse and subject positions are different analytical ideas, because discourse can be similar (or the same) even when the subject positions are polar opposites. This is the case with the subject positions B and C. Both focus on the ‘internal’ secularization of the ELCF, but whereas for position B (metal positive, Christianity negative) this is a cause for celebration, position C (metal negative, Christianity positive) sees the Metal Mass as a cause for lament.³⁸

Considering the historically tense relationship between Christianity and metal music—mapped by earlier research and referred to by commenters in our data—it is interesting that there were only two examples of this type of discourse in our material, both posted by the same person. Perhaps a survey of attitudes among active Christians or an analysis of mainstream media discourse around the Metal Mass might reveal something about the extent of the

³⁷ e.g. I: PahiZ, 27 May 2006.

³⁸ Regarding ‘internal’ secularization, see Karel Dobbelaere, “Secularization: A Trend Report,” *Current Sociology* 29/2 (1981), 3–153, at 12. In this, the discourse follows a common theme, which Andreas Häger calls ‘defense’ of religious institutions from the potentially corrupting forces of popular culture, prevalent in Evangelical and charismatic Christianity in particular. Idem, “Jerusalem in Uppsala: Some Accounts of the Relationship Between a Christian Rock Group and its Congregation,” in: Thomas Bossius, Andreas Häger, & Keith Kahn-Harris (eds.) *Religion and Popular Music in Europe: New Expressions of Sacred and Secular Identity* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 11–30.

controversiality of the event, but, clearly, the self-identifying Christians who found faith and metal music incompatible did not find their way to the forums we have analyzed. Both comments were posted on the Metal Mass guestbook.

To have lived to witness the day, if the pure preaching of Christ's Atonement does not attract young people then one has to woo them with some Metal Mass.³⁹

The purpose of the church's youth work is not to organize a masquerade but to preach Christ's atonement and guide young people on the road to heaven [*taivasmatkalle*]. Unfortunately, the line seems to be substance abuse education and hobby guidance, not the upholding of the Gospel, Bible study, and the preaching of grace.⁴⁰

The commenter's choice of words and Christian terminology makes it clear from the outset that she or he is speaking from an insider position. Furthermore, she or he, who posted both comments, has signed onto the Metal Mass guestbook under the moniker "Church youth worker." This is another example of category entitlement, where the speaker's rather absolute certainty about what church youth work should be is legitimated by his or her title: he/she speaks as a professional, not as any random commenter. Obviously the comment did not go unchallenged, and in some ways the category entitlement can work against the speaker. For those participants who wrote about the Metal Mass as welcome progress in a church that is seen as lagging behind the times, being a church youth worker is not automatically a positive attribute, such as when the message is interpreted as old-fashioned. The commenter's personal interest in upholding a narrow, conservative definition of church youth work and forms of church services turns against him or her. As Potter puts it: "it is the sort of thing that people with that background, those interests, this set of attitudes *would* say, and it formulates this

³⁹ MM: Kirkon Nuorisotyönohjaaja, 24 May 2006.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

predictability as shared knowledge: they would say that, *wouldn't they*. That is, it does not have to specify or elaborate on the nature of the interests.”⁴¹

7. A Modern Church

We identified two different discourses in subject position A, which sees both Christianity and metal as positive. The first one, which we call “A Modern Church,” is often a response to actual and anticipated critical discourses of the church as secularized in positions B and C. The discursive focus here is on the legitimacy of the Metal Mass as an official part of the majority church in Finland. In this sense, it is different enough from the more general discourse regarding the compatibility of Christianity and metal music, which we have named “Christian metal” (see below).

The outsider view of the ELCF as secularized (subject position B) saw the Metal Mass as a somewhat desperate marketing attempt by an obsolete institution, while the insider view (subject position C) saw in the Metal Mass a church gone astray. In contrast, the discourse on the modern church sees the Metal Mass as an integral aspect of the function of the church, that is, preaching the word of God—just like any other ecclesiastical service. This is explicit in some of the comments:

Right on [*asiaa*]. Christ exhorts you to go into all the world. That is also “metal’s” world.⁴²

⁴¹ Potter, *Representing Reality*, 125.

⁴² MM: Jyri Niskanen, 16 May 2006.

The church has to go where it is needed and not get stuck with prejudices about “satanic” metal music.⁴³

The first commenter paraphrases what is referred to as Jesus’s Great Commission that appears in different forms in the Gospels of Mark, Luke, and Matthew and the Acts. Metal music is one of these ‘worlds’ Jesus’s disciples should go into, as metalheads are equally worthy of the word, as the second comment agrees.

The metaphor of language comes up in sources in connection with the function of the church. The message of salvation is the same; just the ‘language’ has been updated:

In my opinion people should be told [*tulee puhua*] about Jesus exactly in the language that they [*se*] understand. The dudes [*heput*] who followed Jesus were taught to do so on the first Pentecost; check it out. The story can be found in the Bible, in the beginning of the Acts.⁴⁴

It was great to see that the Finnish state church is finally able to speak to young people in the language of young people and is genuinely glad about the thing that it represents. The event was not only for young people, but metal brought together the people unbelievably well.⁴⁵

For the latter commenter, “the thing that it represents” refers to the word of God and the promise of salvation—and in a possibly implicit quip he also comments that this time the church can also be “genuinely” glad about fulfilling its function.

Implicit critique is present also in the comments where the focus is less on the basic function of the church in the modern world, but rather about how the church has changed. In direct contrast to the discourse in the insider view, which sees the church as secularized (position C), here the change is definitely for the better.

⁴³ MM: Petri Kauppi, 29 April 2006.

⁴⁴ MM: Mummo, 11 June 2006.

⁴⁵ MM: Tomi, 29 June 2006.

It is really great that you organized something that was this much different from normal church stuff [*kirkkomeininki*].⁴⁶

More of these so the Lutheran church will keep up with the times!⁴⁷

The church should keep up with the times and not stick to old formulae, as far as I know the Bible does not encourage conservatism nor narrow-mindedness.⁴⁸

The threshold for attending mass would be lowered significantly, as well as the number of young people leaving the church, if these “modern” [*nykyaikaisia*] masses were organized. I am sure that there’s a verse in Bible where it says everyone who wants to hear the Lord’s word has to be given the opportunity to hear it. :) That not everyone fitted in shows that there are willing people. It is doubtful that regular masses require checking whether one fits into the church.⁴⁹

The “normal church stuff” or “regular” masses comes off as rather unflattering in comparison to what three of these people had experienced at the Metal Mass and what one was anticipating in early May. The two latter comments are more theological, making the case that the dryness of the regular mass is not something that is required by or even theologically supported by the Bible. Both commenters hedge their text with qualifiers, the first with “as far as I know” and the second with “I am sure that”—which signals ‘although I don’t know the exact quote, I am sure that there is one.’ Both nevertheless engage in category entitlement by referring to sacred scripture, which is the basis of all the practices of the church, hence displaying their qualifications for commenting on the issue. While the comments could be construed as general enough for any anonymous person to post, it is likely that they were posted sincerely, since the Metal Mass guestbook clearly attracted more people with an active relationship with the church and its services. To these people the Metal Mass was a sign of an

⁴⁶ MM: Tolstoi, 30 June 2006.

⁴⁷ MM: Henna, 1 July 2006.

⁴⁸ MM: wellu, 1 May 2006.

⁴⁹ MM: Ninni, 30 June 2006.

institution keeping up with the times and being modern, even suggesting that the dire developments in the number of participants in regular mass and the overall decline in church membership might be reversed if only the ELCF embraced these modern ways of worship.

8. Christian Metal

We called the second discourse in subject position A “Christian Metal,” because it represents metal and faith as compatible on a more abstract level, regardless of the institutional context.⁵⁰ The argument and rhetoric is therefore almost theological, rather than focusing on the politics of the ELCF is particular. Two comments from the Metal Mass guestbook illustrate the tone of this discourse:

You can praise God with metal music as well. It’s a good option for those who cannot listen to anything else but metal but still want to hear the Lord’s word.⁵¹

As a metal fan [my] attention is certainly not diverted from God with these hymn arrangements but rejoices about God.⁵²

⁵⁰ We chose ‘Christian Metal’ despite the potential confusion in terminology: Strictly speaking, playing regular hymns in metal style is not ‘Christian metal’ as such. The point is the compatibility of metal and Christianity, obviously also represented by the Christian metal genre. See Moberg, *Christian Metal*; Marcus Moberg, “Christian Metal in Finland,” in: Thomas Bossius, Andreas Häger, & Keith Kahn-Harris (eds.), *Religion and Popular Music in Europe: New Expressions of Sacred and Secular Identity* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 31–50.

⁵¹ MM: metalli riippuvainen, 1 May 2006.

⁵² MM: Kynarios, 30 June 2006.

Much, if not most, of the discussion in *Metalliunioni* also concerns the compatibility of Christian faith and metal on a broad scale—the forum does, after all, characterize itself as “the meeting point for the Christian metal scene.”⁵³ The participants are in conversation with like-minded people, who consider themselves both Christian and metal fans. The discussion draws (interdiscursively) from the well-established discourse on Christianity and metal music—particularly the American-influenced Evangelical debate regarding faith and contemporary popular culture—and there is little need to justify or legitimate the compatibility of Christianity and metal music as such. However, the primacy of the message, or ‘the word,’ is a theme that comes up recurrently. The below sequential interchange between three participants on *Metalliunioni* is revealing:

No basic babble about how we are Christian metal men, that we rock for Jesus, yeah. Instead it should be the kind of preaching that makes people change their lives more to God’s will [*mieli*].⁵⁴

The kind that makes people stop listening to metal? Or at least consider it? ;) ⁵⁵

If required you have to be ready for that, if it is God’s will.⁵⁶

The second commenter injects some humor into the thread, appending the comment with a winking smiley. However, the seriousness of the discussion is apparent in the reply: Indeed, if the Christian message at a Metal Mass makes you give up metal music, then that is God’s will.

On the Metal Mass guestbook, the same discourse—although here in conversation with less positive positions on Christianity—is summarized by one of the organizers:

⁵³ <http://www.metalliunioni.com/forum/index.php> (accessed 4 February 2019).

⁵⁴ MU: juhani, 3 October 2005.

⁵⁵ MU: Whitewashed, 3 October 2005.

⁵⁶ MU: Vily, 3 October 2005.

It would be unfortunate if people became interested in Jesus just because of metal. The guy himself needs to be in the lead role.⁵⁷

Indeed, some of the comments were explicit about the primacy of faith, no matter the form of worship:

Christ is being preached one way or another always however so that the aim is the salvation of souls through belief in Lord Jesus and the confession of sins and repentance.⁵⁸

The position of the above commentator vis-à-vis metal music is implicit. She (assuming the online name is genuine) does not support metal explicitly but does not condemn it either. She is, modally speaking, not committing herself to the Christian metal position, but neither is she against it, thus arguably implicitly legitimating the Christian metal discourse. The legitimation is supported by universalization through passive voice (“Christ is being preached”). There are no actors in the sentence; this is how things are done—one way or another, and metal just might be one of those ways—but always with faith as the prime incentive.

9. Conclusion: The Metal Mass as Controversy over the Function and Performance of the Church

⁵⁷ MM: Moderator’s reply to message: “hmmm...,” 28 April 2006.

⁵⁸ MM: niina hauhonsalo, 29 June 2006.

In this article, we mapped the subject positions and discourses in the controversy around the first major ‘Metal Mass’ in Finland, which took place in the summer of 2006. The subject positions show the different attitudes towards Christianity, on the one hand, and metal music, on the other. Within these positions, we identified four different discourses, which show how the positions are constructed and legitimated. What is at stake in these constructions is, first, what the Metal Mass is about (the ‘facts’ of the event) and, second, whether it is a good or bad thing. As the analysis shows, the online debates fulfill our definition of controversy, because for some the combination of a church service and metal music was unacceptable, which others responded by defending the event.

Put in theoretical terms, the controversy was about the *function* and *performance* of the ELCF. Drawing from Niklas Luhmann’s work on social systems, Peter Beyer defines the two in the following way:

[F]unction refers to ‘pure’ religious communication, variously called the aspect of devotion and worship, the cure of souls, the search for enlightenment or salvation [...]. Religious performance, by contrast, occurs when religion is ‘applied’ to problems generated in other systems but not solved there, or simply not addressed elsewhere. Examples of such problems are economic poverty, political oppression, familial estrangement, environmental degradation, or personal identity.⁵⁹

For the participants falling into subject positions B and C—where one of the binary pair of Christianity and metal music was seen as problematic—the controversiality was about the ELCF not fulfilling its function by including metal music as part of its performance. Interestingly, the secular metal fan community was more eager to constrain the social space that the ELCF could legitimately inhabit. For them, the role of the ELCF was limited to a narrow and conservative view of the church and Christianity in general. This is, of course,

⁵⁹ Peter Beyer, *Religion and Globalization* (London: Sage, 1997), 80.

partly explained by the fact that the more Christian communities oppose metal music, the more metal fans gain cultural capital within the metal community. The rebellion is diluted if an institution like the ELCF adopts metal music as its own.

More surprising was the dearth of Christian critical voices. Previous research on metal music and religion has a rather unanimous image of the two as opposing forces—that is why ‘Christian metal’ is such a controversial topic.⁶⁰ The lack of this perspective in our material is likely a function of the medium: older, more conservative church-goers are not people to post on specialist metal music forums or even the Metal Mass guestbook. But neither was there much of an outcry in Christian or mainstream media.

In hindsight, it looks like time dissipates controversies. As mentioned in the introduction, the Metal Mass has been celebrated over one hundred times around Finland since 2006. It remains an anomaly in terms of attracting full houses, in contrast to the empty pews on a regular Sunday. Although discussion continues on the forums we have analyzed in this article, the initial oppositional positions have been overtaken by silence and indifference.

Despite finding new relevance among estranged members, especially young people, popular events employing popular music have not stemmed the tide of membership loss in the ELCF. Nor has average participation in church services increased in the last decade. As Steve Bruce has noted for Britain, popular new forms of worship might have local relevance, but cannot be demonstrated to have an impact on the broader patterns of secularization.⁶¹ The type of experiential religion that the Metal Mass offers is popular in Finland and elsewhere in Europe, but its individualism makes it a weak contender for turning the tide of membership

⁶⁰ Marcus Moberg, “The ‘Double Controversy’ of Christian Metal,” in: Titus Hjelm, Keith Kahn-Harris, & Mark LeVine (eds.), *Heavy Metal: Controversies and Countercultures* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2013), 83–97.

⁶¹ Steve Bruce, “Secularization and Church Growth in the United Kingdom,” *Journal of Religion in Europe* 6/3 (2013), 273–296.

loss and decreasing vitality in national and mainstream churches.⁶² The controversy also shows how visibility does not equal vitality: The church and its services might be talked about more and in new contexts (such as the *Imperiumi* metal fan forum), but that does not translate directly into attendance numbers and certainly not an increase in membership. In a way, the Metal Mass controversy, with its construction of boundaries for ‘appropriate’ religious practice, can be seen as a microcosm of the secularization process. It is not the anti-Christian metal fans who make Finnish society more secular by opposing the combination of religion and popular music in the ELCF. Instead, it is the mass of people that are indifferent to the controversy in the first place.

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⁶² Regarding Finland, see Kimmo Ketola, “Uusi kansanomainen uskonnollisuus,” in: Kimmo Kääriäinen, Kati Niemelä & Kimmo Ketola, *Moderni kirkkokansa: Suomalaisten uskonnollisuus uudella vuosituuhannella* (Tampere: Kirkon tutkimuskeskus, 2003), 53–86, at 72.

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