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Metalheads in the classroom: encountering the stranger as a
hermeneutical and spiritual exercise in learning diversity

Abstract
This paper explores the world view, social position and psychological make-up of people who listen to metal music (metalheads) and the cultural reactions to this musical genre in order to prepare for an encounter with metalheads in the classroom. Only when teachers can connect with the world view of students can they fulfill their hermeneutical-didactical task of fostering religious identity. Using the spiritual model of Steggink and Waaijman (1985), the concept of ‘meeting a stranger’ is introduced as a spiritual exercise for teachers to open themselves up to the questions of life that these students are contemplating. Religious motives regarding hospitality to strangers foster an open attitude for a fruitful dialogue, enabling the religious educator to put his role as a moderator into practice, handling diversity professionally.

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In the classroom, metalheads may well be perceived as strangers. Their dark clothing, tattoos and sometimes extreme piercings, together with the brutal music they adore, often containing lyrics that are blatantly rude, provide teachers with a challenge in connecting to this world, their world. Religious education is a thorough hermeneutical enterprise involving three approaches (Schweitzer 2004): the teacher must be able to use a hermeneutical method in explaining historical sources like sacred texts; the ability to interpret students’ experiences in their contemporary societal, religious and cultural context is a requisite; and students’ religious development can be seen as hermeneutics of an active subject. The religious educator is a hermeneutic juggler, balancing these threefold hermeneutics in his didactics in order to foster the students’ search for meaning and to support their personal construction of a religious identity. When students try to answer, however provisional their answers may be, their questions of life in engaging in religious sources and practices and in debating them in dialogue in the classroom with the teacher and other students, the outcome of this process is often an individual one. The hermeneutical paradigm presupposes an openness for religious diversity. Opening up to the ‘otherness’ of the other can be contemplated as hosting a stranger, which is not only a hermeneutical but also a spiritual exercise.
Encountering metalheads as strangers: a spiritual exercise

Why do I call the deliberate and open-minded attempt to connect to metalheads not only a hermeneutical, but also a spiritual exercise? In the model of Steggink and Waaijman (1985), practice is one of the aspects of dialogical spirituality. Theologically speaking, they describe spirituality as the experiential aspect of faith in which transformation as a mystical process constitutes the core. This process evolves in an interplay of Zeitgeist (spirit of the age), self, core inspiration (core values) and practice. The authors find their working hypothesis suitable for different religious and non-religious world views. Later on, Waaijman (2002) defines spirituality as a divine-human relational, multi-layered transformation process. Following Steggink and Waaijman’s model, I describe spirituality as a dynamic interplay of five aspects: self, core inspiration, practicing, Zeitgeist and transformation. The human self (soul, animus), the unique person, the I, interiorizes core inspiration through practice, in the context of the Zeitgeist which enables a spiritual transformation.

![Figure 1: Spiritual Transformation](image)

The Zeitgeist is the cultural atmosphere, the climate of an era, the very air we breathe. There are common symbols, roles, behavioral patterns, which become visible on the micro-, meso- and macro-levels of society. Core inspiration indicates the depth structures in our society: the fundamental motivations (Leitmotivs) and orientation underlying roles, groups, and institutions. They become visible in personal ideals, group ideals and macro-social values. Practice is the behavioral expression of the connection between self and core inspiration, influenced by the context. This connection takes shape through physical exercise (yoga), encounter, religious acts like prayer or contemplation, or through social action. Practice can be aimed at self-development, dialogue, societal transformation, or for example at protecting nature and the environment. The outcome and heart of the spiritual process of practice is spiritual transformation of the self. Christians might use terms like re-creation, or growing in conformity to the image of Christ. The five aspects are interconnected: the ways of practicing in time and in place are clothed in the current Zeitgeist. The language in which ideals are formulated is historically and culturally situated. The perspectives on the self and on transformation change over time and are bound to location.

I see initiating and experiencing a genuine encounter with metalheads in the classroom as spiritual practice, as interiorizing core inspiration. The core inspiration involved here is the value of hospitality. Kearney and Taylor (2011, 1) underline that hospitality is an important value in religious traditions: “Judaism tells of Abraham welcoming the three wanderers in the desert. Christianity speaks of the Annunciation as a moment of receptivity to a Word becoming flesh, Islam teaches hospitality to the stranger as a core principle of the Koran, Hinduism recognizes the guest as manifestation of the divine – Atithi Devo Bhava (God is not manifested through the guest; rather the guest by being a guest manifests God), while Buddhism cherishes a radical hospitality of “interbeing” as a way of overcoming illusory antagonisms between friend and enemy.”
In the Christian tradition, with which I am most familiar, the virtue of hospitality is an important theme in Scripture and in practice.\(^1\) Two core motives can be discerned: first, we are strangers ourselves (as were the Jewish people), and we are never completely at home with ourselves; second, God reveals himself in the stranger. These motives demand a hermeneutical openness to be interrupted by unfamiliar thoughts and practices, as an act of theological hospitality (Moyaert 2011).

Offering hospitality to strangers belongs to the core inspiration of Christianity. It is a challenging and difficult task, but also a task that holds a promise of the opportunity to experience something that transcends the normal, something of God. Practicing this core inspiration to the metalheads as strangers in the classroom will not only offer an opportunity to grow spiritually as a religious educator, but will also provide the hermeneutical foundation for a genuine dialogue with them in the classroom.

**Encountering metalheads as strangers: a hermeneutical exercise**

The religious educator as a hermeneutical juggler wants to understand the students’ views, needs, emotions and behavior. Understanding requires the educator to be open to the ‘otherness’ of the other, and to step outside the context of popular cultural or religious frames that influence his attitude. Welcoming a stranger in his or her alterity also requires an active attitude and a curiosity about students’ personal stories. Additionally, a professional educator has access to scientific information about metalheads’ world view, cultural and societal positions, and behavior. I will first shed some light on metalheads form literature, and then present results from my own analysis of metal lyrics.

**Literature on metalheads**

What then are metalheads? A single, definitive metalhead does not exist, although a common denominator is that a metalhead is a fan of heavy metal music, which is a bricolage consisting of sonic, visual and verbal aspects (Weinstein 2000). Sonically, heavy metal is powerful music, performed (and played) at high volume, dominated by complex guitar work and fierce drumming, sustained by the sounds of a bass guitar. The vocals are important, since they include intense displays of emotion, sometimes expressed in yelling, growling or grunting. Visually, the bands in the genre use black as the basic color; artwork on album covers, patches, logos, and T-shirts opt for bold, angular typefaces and incorporate threatening motives from horror movies, heroic Gothic tales, or science fiction stories. Verbally, we see band using a prevalence of names that refer to mayhem, death and evil.

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\(^1\) I recall the following Biblical motifs: A stranger deserves protection from oppression, and must indeed be seen and loved as one of our own people “for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Leviticus 19:33-34). A stranger must be allowed to eat the leftovers from the harvest; farmers must leave some gleanings behind for the orphan, the widow and the stranger (Deuteronomy 24:19-21). A stranger shares in the benefits of living by the law of God, and may not be treated differently, for example: a stranger does not have to work on Sabbath (Exodus 23:12) or on religious feasts such as the day of atonement (Leviticus 16) and has to be judged within the same judicial system (Leviticus 24:22). It is God who feeds and clothes strangers impartially, and therefore we have to love them likewise (Deuteronomy 10:18). In the face of God, all people are equally strangers on earth (Psalms 119:19). Man is not created alone but in a plural: man and women for ‘it is no good that the man shall be alone’ (Genesis 2:18). This social character of being demands an openness to each other; Jesus identifies himself strongly with strangers in his narrative on the judgment at the coming of the Son of Man in Matthew 25:31-46: ‘I was a stranger and you took me in’. Anyone who provides hospitality to a stranger extends that hospitality to Jesus and will receive the Kingdom. This sacramentality wherein the sacred appears in the profane act of hospitality – see also Abraham receiving three men presenting God – leads to the instruction in Hebrews 13:2: ‘Be not forgetful to entertain strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares’.
researchers concur that heavy metal promotes use of substances (Mulder and Bodner 2016). Suicidal behavior or perversion, violence or drug use (Walser 2014, 139; cf. Arnett 1996, 46). Content research shows that heavy metal lyrics pay relatively little attention to sexual instance lyrics based on superficial reading. A lot of songs provided or not convincing, and forward do not hold suicide, violence, sexual perversion by parents, teachers, senators, psychologists and church representatives in response to this music, we would have to consider the fans of these loud sounds and dark lyrics as regrettable. The history of heavy metal shows a strong cultural dislike of this subcultural musical genre, especially in the 1980s. Weinstein (2000) makes a distinction between progressive criticism, condemning this rock genre as apolitical, and conservative criticism, which draws the biggest attention because of lawsuits, banning of concerts and bands from various venues, lyric censorship, record-burnings and public hearings by the Parents Music Resource Centre. Conservative criticism targeted suicide, violence, sexual perversion, substance abuse and Satanism. Not only are these themes addressed in heavy metal lyrics, but these early objections alleged that listening to heavy metal would lead to unwanted behavior related to these themes. Generally, the arguments put forward do not hold weight scientifically. Moreover, empirical evidence was either not provided or not convincing, and the criticism often relied on a gross misinterpretation of lyrics based on superficial reading. A lot of songs containing references to violence, for instance, were read literally, whereas a symbolic interpretation would be more appropriate. Content research shows that heavy metal lyrics pay relatively little attention to sexual perversion, violence or drug use (Walser 2014, 139; cf. Arnett 1996, 46). Additionally, empirical research has not found causal relationships between listening to heavy metal and suicidal behavior or self-harm (Lacourse, Claes and Villeneuve 2001; Baker and Brown 2016). On the contrary: for some fans, listening to this music has a prophylactic and cathartic effect. Furthermore, research has shown that the intensity of positive emotions increases while listening to heavy metal (Bodner and Bensimon 2015) and there is no evidence that this music contributes to adolescent turmoil (Took and Weiss 1994) or to juvenile delinquency (Epstein and Pratto 1990). The musical preference for heavy metal does not contribute to heightened use of substances (Mulder et al. 2009). Finally, although there have been accusations that heavy metal promotes Satanism, there is no evidence that corroborates these claims. With the possible exception of some Scandinavian black metal fans and a few extreme metal bands, all researchers concur that neither musicians nor fans actually venerate the devil. Songs about
Satan must be read symbolically as indicating chaos or powers of the unknown. The Devil is associated with the dark side and horrors of the modern capitalist state (cf. Walser 2014, 137-72).

All these critiques must be read as a form of stereotyping and framing, in which the metalhead is estranged from a dominant culture with normative behavioral patterns and esthetics. There are feelings of estrangement, as is clear when we analyze interviews with metalheads. This observation brought Arnett (1996) to his thesis of ‘alienation’. Alienation is “a sense of estrangement from one’s culture, a deep loneliness arising from a lack of gratifying emotional connections to others, and cynicism about the ideals and possibilities for life offered by one’s culture” (Arnett 1996, 17). This sense leads to anger and anxiety. The metal scene provides a subculture and to some extent an alternative community, and the listeners derive a sense of significance from the music. Not only do many fans state that the music is cathartic and has a purgative effect, releasing anger, they also affirm that metal lyrics address issues that matter to them. As metalhead Brian puts it: “But I also listen to the lyrics, because that’s the thing about heavy metal. It exposes a lot of problems. It tells the truth about what’s really going on in the world, not just a bunch of bull.” (Arnett 1996, 59). The concept of alienation can imply a normative point of reference: there is a culture which you are alienated from, but that alienation is not the better alternative. Therefore, I would like to follow Walser (2014, xxvii) in a more neutral interpretation of heavy metal culture as “an attempt to create an alternative identity that is grounded in a vision or the actual experience of an alternative community. Heavy metal’s fascination with the dark side of life gives evidence of both dissatisfaction with dominant identities and institutions and an intense yearning for reconciliation with something more credible.” Metal music expresses experiences of disillusion, corruption, confusion and isolation which resonate in the lives of adolescents in post-industrial society, facing all kinds of difficulties in their lives (Bennett 2001, 52).

Content analysis of metal lyrics

What are the contents of these metal lyrics that combine with music, imagery, dress codes and rituals to create an identity powerful enough to survive the darkness in society? As an example, I chose to analyze all 81 songs from the eight albums by thrash/groove metal band Machine Head from Oakland, California. The band started underground in 1992, but managed to grow and has sold now over three million records, selling out tours worldwide in moderate and bigger venues. I coded the songs based on themes and emotions in each song and did some overall analysis on keyword frequencies and co-occurrence of keywords using Wordstat 7.1.3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Distribution of subjects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Societal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Band</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Almost two-thirds of the songs (Table 1) address personal subjects like coping with fear, depression, betrayal, abuse and hate; like the feeling of being wronged, unloved by parents, rejected and criticized by society, or experiencing life as a struggle. Many songs are about strength, the power to resist or rise from a fall (dealing with your mistakes), and the encouragement to walk your own path. There is a hopeful tendency in the songs, stressing the inner power of men that enables one to survive, stand tall, resist, and not to give in to addiction or unjust relationships. The songs about societal subjects address themes like legitimacy of war in the light of casualties (women, children) and of the financial costs. Quite
a few songs are about the political system, addressing abuses of power, lying politicians and the resulting societal impacts of the loss of hope, racism and killings. The excessive use of violence by police officers is also condemned. The general societal morality connected to the American Dream and the ideal of becoming rich as a supreme goal in life is viewed as generating corruption and greed. Kids grow up and are infected by this ‘impurity’, a word also used to refer to television churches grabbing viewers’ money, degrading religion to a moneymaking machine. Listeners are invited to resist the system by speaking out. In the end, society cannot break you. Some songs explore band-specific subjects like ventilating feelings of anger when a member leaves the band, or reacting to critique when new musical pathways are explored (daring to fail). There are also songs about the community established between band and fans, the electrifying relationship depicted as a brotherhood, fighting against the wolves (symbolizing all kinds of threats).

I was particularly struck by the results of a keyword analysis (see Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>KEYWORD</th>
<th>FREQUENCY</th>
<th>% SHOWN</th>
<th>NO. CASES</th>
<th>% CASES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SEE</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>17.09%</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>40.74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAIN</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>12.75%</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>54.32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EYES</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>11.48%</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>39.51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INSIDE</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>11.20%</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>38.27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIFE</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>10.08%</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>38.27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TIME</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>8.54%</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>25.93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEEL</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>7.56%</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>28.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HATE</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>7.56%</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>23.46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FALL</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>7.00%</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>22.22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RISE</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>6.72%</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>17.28%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 shows that the lyrics underline the serious subject matter covered in the lyrics of metal songs. What we see here is not songs advocating sex, drugs or rock and roll, but rather songs about encountering problems in the world and surviving them. The noun most often used is /pain/, which is present in 54.32% of the cases. This also holds true for the subset of songs about personal issues (13.98% of all key words in 29 cases). Therefore, I will conclude with a short summary on the meaning of pain in songs from Machine Head about personal subjects, the songs with which metal fans identify most strongly.

The deepest root of anger, hate, self-hate and depression – all of which are dominant themes – is pain. Pain could be caused by betrayal, a friend lying to you, dishonesty, a sense of not being respected by people, government, parents – abuse is specifically mentioned – or society. Pain causes inner tension that can be perceived as a big void inside, which leads to fear.

The response to pain should be to look it in the eye and come to terms with it. Rather than walking away from what is inside, pain must be faced. Framed in this context, facing the pain head-on provides inner strength, as an alternative to exacting revenge or inflicting physical harm.

Tears that made me
Ashamed to be me
But that gave me
Strength to see me
Made a spark that
Lit the dark and
Let me shine
Time to see
Believe this in me
This pain that I feel deep inside
- Machine Head, *From This Day*

The lyrics do not advocate falling in the pit of self-reproach or self-accusation as a result of feeling inner pain. While acknowledging that it is indeed possible to be haunted by negative thoughts, these songs argue that it is necessary to face your deepest self, that it is possible break down the walls that keep you imprisoned in these feelings.

A second response to pain is to seek refuge in music:

Salvation is found alone
Haunted by its melody
Music it will set you free
Let it set you free
We build cathedrals to our pain
Establish monuments to attain
Freedom from all of the scars and the sins
Lest we drown in the darkness within
- Machine Head, *Darkness Within*

Lyrics in Machine Head’s songs that are about hurting people, e.g. “smash face to concrete” from *In the Presence of My Enemies*, operate as a safe space in which feelings can be expressed without unleashing actual violence. Maintaining an internal sense of integrity provides a different perspective on adversaries, supposed friends and external oppressors: head held high, the listeners can be proud to be who they are and refuse to let critique, abuse and dishonesty hurt them anymore. Self-torture or drug abuse is not the appropriate response to pain: it is possible to fight the pain with patience, using willpower to regain control of life.

Other lyrics convey the message that it is possible to live in love:

I will go on
Patience, belief
Love will ascend
Just listen to it
Voice so true inside calling
To pick you up and march you on
Keep from falling
Let go your sorrow
Sun will shine, this I promise
Rising tomorrow
Rising
- Machine Head, *Imperium*

Being part of the metal community provides a beneficial effect for the people in it: although society at large might despise and reject them, metalheads have a fairly strong online community based on shared contexts. These virtual connections are supplemented by a real,
physical community that emerges at concerts and festivals, providing a feeling that these people are not isolated in their pain:

The damned are we
Abused and beat,
We're left for dead
We raise our head
For we are strong
And they are wrong
So scream with me
"I do believe!"
I need your help
For I have knelt
Held fist at skies
And cried out: "Why?"
Your shoulder strength
It gives me length
We lift ourselves
Together meld
So take my hand
And don't look back
And sing with me
“Let new life be
Old life goodbye”
- Machine Head, Now We Die

As a group, metalheads may be perceived as separate from or shunned by society, but within the community that has formed from a shared appreciation of metal music, they find a sense of strength and purpose.

**The hermeneutical juggler welcoming proud pariahs**

In Machine Head’s song *Old*, Jesus descends from heaven again. He sees hate, corruption and racism and a failing church; he weeps and is murdered again. This song is performed by Machine Head at almost every concert. At the crucial point in the song, the metalheads present scream their hearts out, singing along with the words: “Jesus wept.” In the depths of their pain, they feel they are in good company. As a protest song, *Old* reflects a core inspiration that a religious educator may recognize. Machine Head is not a Christian metal band, but that does not mean that their themes are completely alien to the Christian core inspiration. Metalheads find stories, emotions and a hopeful perspective they can relate to in their lyrics.

Digging deeper into the world view of metalheads provides opportunities to establish a connection between the educator’s own core values and theirs. Opening up to a keener awareness of the meaning of pain in the lives of metalheads may bring the religious educator in touch with his own pain and anger and with his core values, putting them into perspective. Feeling like pariahs in our societies, metalheads are able to develop an attitude of being “proud pariahs” – a term proposed by Weinstein (2000) – assisted by metal music. Learning more about metalheads’ culture and world view is a hermeneutical obligation. Welcoming these students in the classroom and in life as a religious educator can be a spiritual exercise which provides a transformation, not only in relationships with metalheads, but also in the educator’s own spirituality. The religious educator juggles various sources from different traditions and from the lives of his students for the benefit of all present in the classroom.
REFERENCES


