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The Devil's Music: Satanism and Christian Rhetoric in the Lyrics of the Swedish Heavy Metal Band Ghost

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Abstract: This paper is an inquiry into a contemporary heavy metal band from Sweden called Ghost. Ghost released its first studio album in 2010 and, while there is some discussion as to what their genre is exactly, they immediately became a rising star in the metal scene. Yet what is of particular interest from a storytelling point of view, especially with regard to theological answers to philosophical questions in popular culture, is that the band presents itself as a satanic version of the Catholic Church through their stage act and lyrics. This made me curious whether they are trying to convey a message and, if yes, what that message might be. For the present paper, I have focused on the latter by performing a non-exhaustive textual analysis of the lyrics in a selection of songs from each of the four studio albums released so far. Ghost turns Christian liturgy on its head by utilizing devout language that is normally reserved for God and Christ to describe Satan and the Antichrist, a strategy I have called the "satanification" of Christian doctrine, and in doing so their songs evoke imagery of a satanic faith community at prayer. The band then uses this radical inversion of traditional Christian themes to criticize certain elements of society, especially those aspects they associate with organized religion.



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1. Introduction

As the first notes echo through the concert hall, the curtains are drawn, revealing the raised marble platforms and steps from where musicians in black are playing their instruments, their identities hidden by horned silver masks. Behind them, tall stained-glass windows depicting a ghostly pope-like figure seem to reach all the way to the ceiling of the venue. Blue light beams across the stage, casting a faint light as from a moonlit sky over both the band and the stained glass. About fifteen minutes into the set, lead singer Cardinal Copia emerges from behind the raised platforms, dressed in black robes and a slightly altered version of the distinct red hats worn by cardinals in the Vatican—one made to look like a bat's wing—as well as carrying a brass thurible. The more subtle blue glow is replaced with a bright red luster, which gives a sense of foreboding. The dark clergyman stands almost motionless behind the microphone for the duration of the song, only swaying the incenser to and fro, spreading its fragrance through the concert hall. The fragment above was taken from a concert I attended in February of 2019 of a metal band from Sweden called Ghost. Founded in 2006 in the city of Linköping, Ghost was first introduced to the world in three videos posted on MySpace in May 2010 and started recording its debut album a few months later (Hartmann 2017; Bennett 2018). Although his identity has since been revealed, frontman Tobias Forge felt he did not look the part of a singer in a satanic metal band and therefore chose to style himself Papa Emeritus by dressing in papal regalia and donning ghostly face paint (Weiderhorn 2013; Bennett 2018). Watching older concerts also revealed that Forge has gone through a number of personae, from three different iterations of this dark Pope to a cardinal in black, who has as of March 2020 been promoted to Papa Emeritus IV. Taking this theatrical use of elements from Catholic liturgy into account and listening to their lyrics more closely, it became apparent Ghost is trying to present itself as a satanic version of the Catholic Church.

While this may sound a little strange to the uninitiated, it is not by any measure a new phenomenon. From the moment metal was given its first impetus, the genre has been characterized by a broader fascination with some of the darker themes found in many of the world's major religions, most notably the end of the world as it is imagined in the Judeo-Christian(-Islamic) tradition. Songs like "War Pigs" by Black Sabbath from 1970 and "The Number of the Beast" by Iron Maiden from 1982 are good examples of this, as they both rely heavily on biblical eschatology (Moberg 2017). Yet what makes Ghost interesting is that they appear to be moving beyond the mere adaptation of religious imagery and rhetoric, and are in fact building an entire mythos of their own.

In the present paper I shall attempt to answer the following research question aimed at the exploration of this mythos:

What message is the Swedish metal band Ghost trying to convey by presenting itself as a satanic version of the Catholic Church?

Given the limitations of the article as a form of writing, it is necessary to focus my efforts on just one aspect of the Ghost mythos, and for the present paper, I have chosen to look at their rhetoric. While the theatrical aspect of the band is equally as important in establishing the satanic image, it serves more as the vessel for the message rather than constituting its contents. With this study, I am going to show that, despite the perceived dichotomy between religion and secularism in the Western world (Juergensmeyer 2017), religion continues to play a role in contemporary popular culture—in this case as it is expressed through music—and that knowledge of religion is, therefore, crucial to understanding how people make use of and engage with it.

In order to answer the main question, I will draw from a multidisciplinary set of scholarly tools. Since the present paper will be focused on the band's lyrics and they seem to borrow heavily from Catholic liturgy, the paper will combine religious studies with some insights from Catholic theology and communication linguistics. The latter is that of the implied reader, an imagined ideal recipient who possesses all the knowledge necessary to see, understand and interpret every reference contained within a text. This text-immanent reader must be separated both from the real reader and from the author, real or implied, as well as the characters that are being used to tell the story (Van Wieringen 2015). Furthermore, the definition of a text is expanded here to include all forms of cultural expression (Kristeva 1980).

The upcoming section will consist of a quick overview of how metal music came to be associated with the satanic, while the theoretical framework will elaborate on the related subjects of religion and popular music, and religion and metal. Next, for the textual-analytical section, the paper will shift to an explanation of the origins of modern Satanism as background information for a non-exhaustive close reading of the lyrics. For this part of the inquiry, I will also be using interviews with the band and reviews of their albums to support my analysis. The paper will end by taking stock of the discussed subjects and presenting some preliminary findings, followed by a conclusion in which an answer to the research question will be provided.

2. Historical Background

For the upcoming section, I have used a number of videos from the "Polyphonic" YouTube channel as one of the main sources, as they provide a good summary of the early history of heavy metal without taking up too much space. Other, more detailed accounts can be found, for example, in *Running with the Devil* by Robert Walser (1993), *Instruments of Desire* by Waksman (1999), and the *Metal Rules the Globe* collection, edited by Harris Berger et al. (2011).

The genre of metal per se is considered by many to have originated with two bands that came to the fore in the early 1970s—Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath—and provided this new music with a thematic direction (Polyphonic 2018a). Being a fan of the Lord of the Rings, singer Robert Plant infused his lyrics with scenes and characters from Tolkien's books (Polyphonic 2018b). But whereas Led Zeppelin made music into epic fantasy in a

triumphant way, Black Sabbath tapped into its darker elements and sang about witchcraft and mankind's greatest antagonist according to the Judeo-Christian(-Islamic) tradition: Satan (Polyphonic 2018a). Moreover, in the song "War Pigs" this darkness is connected to the chaotic nature of war by depicting the devil as the only real winner amid the destruction wrought by armed conflict (Moberg 2017).

This places early heavy metal firmly in the culture of the time. References to war and chaos in rock music during this period in history did not occur in a vacuum, as the rise of the new genre in the early 1970s more or less coincided with mounting opposition against the Vietnam War (Polyphonic 2019a). Because of new media, footage from the frontlines could easily be broadcast to the public, and this exposed people to the true extent of brutality inflicted upon both sides. Most bands at the time sang about the conflict in political terms and criticized the government, like the Rolling Stones with "Gimme Shelter" and Creedence Clearwater Revival with "Fortunate Son", both from 1969. It also turned out electric guitar distortion—a musical technique first discovered by blues musicians in the 1940s—was especially well-suited to emulate the chaotic nature of war, as exemplified by Jimi Hendrix's rendition of the United States national anthem during the Woodstock festival, again in 1969, and the aforementioned "War Pigs" (Polyphonic 2019b).

Over time metal has diversified into a plethora of subgenres, such as thrash metal, doom metal, symphonic metal, black metal, and even Christian, or "white" metal (Weinstein 2011). For a thorough study of the latter, see *Christian Metal* by Moberg (2015). While references to the satanic in early heavy metal were usually figurative, often written by practicing Christians and sometimes framed in terms of ultimate victory over the devil, satanic black metal did the opposite. Some prominent figures in the black metal scene are professed members of the Church of Satan founded by Anton LaVey in 1966, while others claim to be Satanists without any such affiliation. The latter are often atheists or at the very least skeptical of religion. In their music, Satan is seen as a literal entity and associated with terror and destruction, and in extreme cases, they view Christianity as something that must be eradicated. Between 1992 and 1996 this particular strain was the catalyst to a series of arson attacks in which around fifty church buildings in Norway were destroyed (Introvigne 2016).

While these self-styled devil worshippers were a small minority, in contemporary popular culture the connection between Satan and heavy metal is an established trope. In the 2006 cult film *Tenacious D in: The Pick of Destiny* two aspiring rock musicians go on a quest to find the devil's tooth rumored to be a magic guitar pick and, in the finale, defeat Old Nick in a rock-off contest. Similarly, in the video game *Brütal Legend* (2009) the player assumes the role of a roadie who gets transported to an alternate dimension inspired by metal music and then has to help its denizens defeat a devil-like villain. Even television often evokes this association, such as in the popular show *Supernatural* (2005–2020), which tells the story of two brothers that hunt ghosts, monsters, and demons. The eighth episode of season two features the boys taking on a demon that has been tempting aspiring blues musicians to sell their souls in exchange for extraordinary musical prowess.

Still, the association of metal with the devil is far from absolute. There are many metal bands that rarely refer to the satanic in their music like Deep Purple and the Scorpions, and even Black Sabbath has songs in their repertoire that do not mention the devil at all. The late hard rock and heavy metal musician Ronnie James Dio was an interesting figure in this regard, because he rose to prominence as the vocalist of Rainbow singing about epic fantasy, then joined Black Sabbath to replace Ozzy Osbourne after the original singer had left, and eventually started his own band named Dio to make music that included references to the satanic. Finally, there are also examples of metal inspired by war and chaos in more secular historical terms and seemingly separated from biblical eschatology, such as in the music of the power metal band Sabaton and the 1982 song "Run to the Hills" by Iron Maiden.

3. Theoretical Framework

In order to be able to find out what message Ghost is trying to convey by presenting itself as a satanic version of the Catholic Church, a few concepts need clarification. Firstly, it will be necessary to briefly discuss the study of religion and popular music and to take a look at how metal and religion relate to one another. These two concepts taken together are relevant to this inquiry because Ghost relies on religious imagery and rhetoric to present itself as a satanic cult. Finally, this chapter will also include a short survey of the emergence of established Satanism and how it is related to society in general—both as a fully-fledged and institutionalized religion and as a form of political activism—to better contextualize what Ghost is trying to say with their music.

3.1. Religion and Popular Music

In her study of rock music festivals, [Kommers \(2013\)](#) refers to Robin [Sylvan \(2002\)](#), who says that popular music subcultures are fertile soil for the emergence of religion. On the other hand, they are substantially different from religious communities in that they take place mostly within the secular framework of performance and entertainment. However, it is clear that powerful religious experiences arise. A contrasting view comes from [Bruce \(1996\)](#). He argues that religious elements arise in these environments as part of the ongoing process of secularisation. [Koenot \(1996\)](#) provides yet another point of view when he posits that Western society has shifted away from logocentrism through what he has called “musicalization”; where there was historically a kind of resistance to music from the sphere of religion, nowadays complicated anthropological and theological issues are explored through the medium of song.

Following the classic typology put forward by [Forbes \(2000\)](#), there are four approaches to the relationship between religion and popular music. The first is to look at religion in popular culture by finding traces of religious imagery and themes in the music. More or less opposite to this, the popular culture *in* religion approach draws attention to how religious groups adopt elements from popular culture. The third option is to view popular culture *as* religion. Here the underlying assumption is that different forms of popular culture have begun to replace more traditional forms of religion. Viewing the relationship between religion and popular culture in terms of dialogue, finally, focuses on the participation of religious groups in public discussions on the subject of popular culture ([Partridge and Moberg 2017](#)).

Not only are there various ways to describe how religion and popular culture relate to one another, but there are also different methodological approaches. [Lynch \(2005\)](#) distinguishes three: an author-focused, a text-based, and an ethnographic/audience-reception approach. The author-focused perspective takes as its point of departure the idea that music should be interpreted as a reflection of the personal circumstances and intentions of the author or authors. In text-based studies, songs are understood as texts, and the focus is on how music is able to convey a range of different meanings and on its many possible interpretations. Here the intentions of the author are less relevant because the emphasis is put on the culturally determined meaning of language ([Partridge and Moberg 2017](#)).

Because of their aesthetic, Ghost can best be approached either through the lens of religion in popular culture or, following [Sylvan \(2002\)](#) that popular music subcultures are fertile soil for the emergence of religion, that of popular culture *as* religion. Since they are not a religious group, the popular culture *in* religion and dialogue approaches are not suited for this particular inquiry. As mentioned in the introduction, the focus of this paper will be on the band’s lyrics, so I am going to use a combination of author-focused and text-based methods to conduct my research. Furthermore, the songs were chosen based on whether they contained biblical or liturgical language, as this is not the case for the entirety of the Ghost discography.

3.2. Religion and Metal

It was already established in the historical background section that the genre of heavy metal has drawn from religious themes since its conception in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Especially the devil and the end of the world as envisioned by mainly the Judeo-Christian tradition are of particular interest (Moberg 2017). While metal music comes in many different shapes, most of the various subgenres are rooted in the same basic aesthetic and narrative dimension. According to Weinstein (1991), a rough distinction can be made between the Dionysian and the chaotic strands of metal “which are, in some respects, both complementary and contradictory. While the Dionysian category primarily includes themes such as ecstasy, sex, intoxication, youthful vitality, male potency, and power, the category of the ‘chaotic’, by contrast, includes themes such as chaos, war, violence, struggle, alienation, madness, evil and death” (Moberg 2017, p. 225).

Weinstein (1991) also points out that the Bible has provided the genre not only with an aesthetic and narrative dimension, but also with a treasure trove of religious symbolism and terminology to draw from, and many metal bands merge this depository with key elements from the chaotic category. In the case of black metal, these chaotic elements have become an integral part of the subculture’s identity, as the violence inspired by the genre’s early proponents in Norway mentioned earlier continues to play a role for many of its fans (Hagen 2020). Moreover, metal subcultures rely on the generation of controversy; where metal music transgresses certain societal norms, it is experienced as antagonistic, and the corresponding metal scene is shaped by this (Hjelm et al. 2012).

Sylvan (2002) describes metal concerts as “the key ritual form which brings *metalheads* [my italics] together as a community” (p. 163). However, it is not merely about the music; metal culture is a complete system of meaning and presents a full-fledged worldview to its members. In this sense, it is a surrogate for religion, which explains the genre’s vitality. Building on the basic assertion that popular music culture provides religious functions at an unconscious level, Sylvan adds that most members of the subculture are unaware of this. Thus the religious dimension is usually—if ever—not at all consciously present in the minds of metalheads. Nevertheless, he argues that many of them do have these kinds of spiritual experiences and that these experiences are very powerful and can be life-changing.

In his study of black metal and trance music culture, Bossius (2003) places the former in the context of a wider trend seen across the Nordic countries, where the socio-cultural climate is “marked by accelerating processes of de-traditionalization, individualization, and privatization of religious/spiritual life and practice” (Moberg 2012, p. 122). By analyzing multiple sources and making use of both text-based and ethnographic approaches, Bossius (2003) interprets black metal culture as a way to rebel against contemporary society and an attempt to re-enchant everyday life. He argues this is done largely through the radical inversion of many traditional Christian themes but adds that black metal is equally influenced by ancient Norse paganism. The popularity of the genre in the Nordic countries more or less coincided with the rise of anti-cosmic Satanism, which holds that death is the ultimate form of liberation because it allows the individual to be absorbed by an infinite satanic power—a process that is both violent and apocalyptic in nature (Olson 2014).

Going forward, the inquiry ought to be read in light of the distinction between Dionysian and chaotic metal, the notion that the genre is characterized by controversy, the knowledge that metal culture has strong religious and spiritual connotations, and the idea that the genre can be seen as both a form of social rebellion and liberation.

3.3. Satan the Rebel

From the second half of the seventeenth century onwards the figure of Satan became increasingly less prominent in Western philosophy and Christian theology, being relegated instead more to folklore, where he was seen more as foolish rather than dangerous. Especially with the advent of Enlightenment values like reason and individualism the previously dominant view of the devil as the great antagonist began to change. In this

climate, some even took the character out of this traditional narrative and inserted him into their own (Dyrendal et al. 2016). This trend led to the rise of what is now called “literary” or “romantic Satanism” in the nineteenth century. The literary Satanists reinterpreted the devil as a force for good and sometimes even depicted him as the hero (Van Luijk 2016). However, for these individuals Satanism did not carry any religious connotations; it was rather the “strategic use of a symbol and a character as part of artistic and political expression” (Dyrendal et al. 2016, p. 31).

The interpretation of metal culture as a form of social rebellion and its proximity to the satanic is somewhat in line with what Lowney (1995) concluded from her research on a coven of teenage Satanists. In her study, she found that these youngsters use satanic imagery to challenge the dominant culture, but since they lack social power they have to rely on symbolic critique. This also appears to have been the intention of LaVey when he began preaching indulgence, kindness for those who deserve it, and a retributive code of ethics, as opposed to more traditional Christian values like abstinence, unconditional love, and pacifism. According to LaVey, the ideal Satanist should be individualistic and non-conformist in order to escape the herd mentality and scapegoating he associated with mainstream society (Dyrendal 2013). However, it must be added that he never believed in Satan as a literal entity nor encouraged people to worship the devil (Harvey 1995; La Fontaine 1999).

The religious and political activist movement known as The Satanic Temple founded by Lucien Greaves and Malcolm Jarry in 2013 also uses satanic imagery as a rejection of the dominant discourse. However, the Temple goes beyond the symbolic critique and actively participates in public discussion, chiefly in the shape of lobbying and satire, with the separation of church and state as its goal (Bugbee 2013). A much stronger anti-establishment sentiment can be seen in the kind of reactive Satanism that in its most extreme form inspires violence and other criminal behavior. Moreover, while these milieus are strongly dominated by young men, census data from New Zealand suggests a growing number of female Satanists (Dyrendal et al. 2016). This final statistic can be connected to the 19th century, since at that time the devil was often imagined as encouraging women to rebel against the patriarchy, which Per Faxneld re-interprets as a form of liberation (Faxneld 2017).

Ghost is supposedly part of a religious organization, a mysterious cult that is known only as The Clergy (Alderslade 2018), but it seems the band is not trying to insert itself into the cultural landscape mentioned above. In an interview with BANGERTV Forge talked about the conception of his characters and stated that he wanted something similar to the skeletal Eddie used by Iron Maiden in their artwork. However, rather than being just a mascot, his clergymen were going to have to sing as well. Furthermore, he talked about the distinction between the religious Satan and the caricature that is prevalent in pop culture, and that the devil featured in Ghost songs was based more on the latter (BANGERTV—All Metal 2019). Speaking with Revolver Magazine, Forge also said that protestors and sometimes even fans are taking his lyrics too literally (Chapstick 2019). These are strong indications that the satanic shtick needs to be taken with a grain of salt, but this topic deserves its own article.

4. The Word Made Metal

Thematically speaking, Ghost carries on the tradition of satanic black metal; Satan is presented as a literal entity and as a destructive figure. In terms of musical style, however, they have gone in a different direction. The band takes elements from different subgenres of metal and various other musical styles, a kind of mixing and matching that can be found in all echelons of the metal scene. Aesthetically the band appears to fall into a specific category of metal bands that borrow heavily from Christian liturgy. The first building blocks of this trend were put in place in the 1980s by Mercyful Fate vocalist King Diamond. As a professed member of the Church of Satan, his satanic stage act is more than just spectacle, and he is known for using a microphone shaped like a cross, as well

as various patterns of white face paint with black crosses. In more recent years German power metal band Powerwolf rose to fame with something similar; singer Attila Dorn also uses a cross-shaped microphone stand and wears corpse paint under ragged robes, as do the other band members, and there is a strong emphasis on Catholic imagery.

4.1. *Opus Eponymous: The Satanic Advent*

Ghost released its first studio album *Opus Eponymous* in 2010. The word “opus” is Latin for work or labor, while eponymous means “of the same name” and refers to something being named after its creator. This can be interpreted as a nod to early hard rock and heavy metal bands that left their first studio albums untitled, such as *Led Zeppelin* (1969), *Black Sabbath* (1970), and *Iron Maiden* (1980). Although the instrumental opening track “Deus Culpa” is a one-and-a-half minute piece of organ music, it is immediately followed by a more traditional heavy metal song called “Con Clavi Con Dio”, which is Italian rather than Latin and can be loosely translated as “with nails, with God”. Not only does the song appear to be written as a prayer with phrases like “Lucifer; we are here, for your praise” and “Our conjuration sings infernal psalms”, it also contains a reference to Trinitarian theology: “Satanas; we are one/Out of three; Trinity”.

This devout language continues in the track “Ritual” with similar phrases like “Tonight we’re summoned for a divine cause” and “Recite now from the text, pray for all to die”. The bridge is the most interesting part, because it is a satanic version of the Our Father that ends with the word “amen” backward. This “satanification” of Christian doctrine is the most visible in the rough inversion of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed found in the song “Satan Prayer”, and the best way to show this is by putting the lyrics and the original text side-by-side (see Table 1):

Table 1. The lyrics of “Satan Prayer” compared to the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed.

Satan Prayer	Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed
Believe in one god do we, Satan almighty, the uncreator of heaven and soil and of the invisible and the visible	We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.
And in his son, begotten of father;	And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father;
by whom all things will be unmade;	by whom all things were made;
who for man and his damnation incarnated, rise up from hell;	who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost and of the Virgin Mary, and was made man;
from sitteth on the left hand of his father;	he was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered, and was buried, and the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father;
from thence he shall come to judge, out of one substance with Satan;	from thence he shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead;
whose kingdom shall haveth no end.	whose kingdom shall have no end.
Unholy ghost, overlord and taker of life.	And in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceedeth from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified, who spake by the prophets.

Apart from the phrase “out of one substance with Satan” being placed after “from thence he shall come to judge” rather than “begotten of father”, the inversion follows the exact same structure and is down to the level of detail where Christ sitting on the right hand of his Father becomes the Antichrist sitting on the left.

One more song that should be mentioned here is “Prime Mover”, as it is about the mother of the Antichrist: “Clad in cloak, a secretive nun/bearing the old one’s bastard son”. In a way, this is akin to an inversion of the Annunciation (Mt. 1:18–22; Lk. 1:26–38), because the inclusion of the phrase “Prime mover; maternal slave” in the chorus also strongly implies that conception of the Antichrist was not voluntary while Mary actually agreed to have a child. Moreover, the song includes yet another satanification of Christian doctrine that takes the form of an inverted Trinity: “Sathanas, Antichrist, Spiritus Non Sancti”. *Opus* ends with another instrumental track called “Genesis” that is supposed to represent the birth of the Antichrist (Bennett 2013). In terms of musical style, the album seems to harken back to the early days of heavy metal and is rather minimalistic compared to the other three, which supports the devout language of the lyrics: “the band gets their satanic messages across by roping listeners in with accessible arrangements rather than cheap shock tactics” (Begrund 2010, popmatters.com (accessed on 13 January 2021)).

4.2. *Infestissumam: The Arrival of the Antichrist*

Ghost released its second studio album *Infestissumam* in 2013. With it they continued the story where they had left off in the first, with the birth of the Antichrist (Bennett 2013). The name is derived from the Latin word “infestissimus”, which is the superlative of hostile, and it can therefore be translated as “the most hostile one” in reference to the Antichrist. However, the suffix “-am” is feminine, so perhaps the name also implies that Ghost subscribes to the idea that the Antichrist is a woman. The eponymous opening track begins with Gregorian chanting, morphs into polyphonic music, and is then joined by drums and electric guitar riffs before seamlessly transitioning into the next track. The second song is “Per Aspera Ad Inferi”, which is broken Latin—the correct grammatical form would be “inferos”, assuming it is in the plural like the original phrase—for “through hardships, to hell”. This is of course a twist on the still widely used saying “Per aspera ad astra”, meaning “through hardships, to the stars”—and represents futility.

The track “Jigolo Har Megiddo” is perhaps the central piece of this album, as it embodies both of its central themes; sexual desire and the Antichrist. A gigolo is a male prostitute, and Har Megiddo is the Hebrew name for the location of the final battle against Satan (Rev. 16:16). The title of the song can therefore be translated as “man whore of Megiddo”, which effectively rules out a female Antichrist. On the other hand, it is also possible Ghost wants to present an image of the character as gender fluid, as there is evidence that some early Christian artworks depicted Jesus as androgynous as well (Mathews 1999). The main sentiment of this track is summarised in the second verse: “I am the son of one below, the progeny of beast of woe/ And I am the son who comes into the daughters of men/ Destroying all and make them want it again”. This implies that the Antichrist has come to destroy the world by encouraging people to give in to their carnal lust. It is also a reference to the giants born from “the sons of God” who “came in unto the daughters of men” (Gen. 6:4).

The phrase “I offer everything they seek” furthermore suggests that people in fact want to give in, while “However fair and pure, you crave the wand” insinuates that even the most devout cannot withstand his charisma. Moreover, the “I-perspective” of the song makes it seem like the Antichrist is speaking directly to the listener. Related to the satanification of Christian doctrine seen on the first album, the second contains inversions of the life of Jesus. In this particular song, the Antichrist quotes from the Gospel of John with the phrase “I am the way” taken from “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (Jn. 14:6). *Infestissumam* also contains the track “Year Zero”, which is one of the most—if not *the* most—blatantly satanic song in the Ghost discography. It begins with the Gregorian chanting of

names taken from the Old Testament that over the ages have come to be associated with the devil.

The lyrics underscore the futility of human life: “Since dawn of time the fate of man has been that of lice/Equal as parasites and moving without eyes”. Another central thought in this track is the coming kingdom of Satan. The first clue lies in the phrases “Crestfallen kings and queens comforting in their fate” and “As new dawn rises you shall recognise/Now, behold the Lord of Flies”, as they show that the authority of world leaders traditionally sanctioned by God will become void when Satan establishes his kingdom of darkness. This is epitomized in the chorus with “Hail Satan, Archangelo/Hail Satan, welcome Year Zero”. Finally, the song hides two Bible references in the bridge, as “He will tremble the nations, kingdoms to fall one by one” and “He will ascend to the heavens, above the stars of God” are taken from a description of Lucifer the fallen morning star (Is. 14:12–13, 16).

The inversion of the life of Jesus continues in the song “Body and Blood”. The title and its repetition in the chorus refer to the last supper: “His body and blood, sharing in common, his body and blood”. The phrase “So eat Nazarene, and you kiss the obscene anointed feet” comes from the story of the woman who poured expensive perfume on Christ’s feet. Both events are featured in all four canonical gospels, but the latter also shows that Ghost sees it as something unsanitary. This is echoed in the bridge: “Receive, consume/Digest, defecate”. Named after the gilded boxes used in Catholic liturgy to respectfully store the communion wafers, the closing track “Monstrance Clock” may carry a sexual innuendo in the chorus, as the phrase “Come together, together as one/Come together, for Lucifer’s son” could either be referring to coming together as a congregation or be a euphemism for the female orgasm. The song—and the album with it—ends with a combination of church organs and repetitions of the chorus in polyphony. The final “for Lucifer’s son” is, however, replaced with “forever as one”.

As for the sexual innuendo, one of the Nameless Ghouls, as the anonymous musicians are called, has stated that the album is about “how mankind—predominantly men—what they have deemed to be the presence of the Devil, throughout history and even nowadays. And that’s why the record is so fueled [*sic*] with sexual themes and females . . . the Inquisition was basically men accusing women of being the Devil just because they had a hard-on for them” (Nameless Ghoul, as cited in [Stosuy 2013](#), [pitchfork.com](#) (accessed on 13 January 2021)). A similarity with the first album is that the musical style again supports the language of the lyrics. According to Graham Hartmann of Loudwire Magazine the opening track “transports the listener into a black mass, as Ghost, along with a breathtaking [*sic*] choir, begin the Satanic rite with an unnerving beauty”, and the closer “serves as yet another compositional benchmark [. . .] re-introducing the choir during the conclusion of ‘Monstrance Clock’ as the evil mass concludes with the birth of Lucifer’s son” ([Hartmann 2013](#), [loudwire.com](#) (accessed on 13 January 2021)).

4.3. *Meliora: The Kingdom of Satan*

Ghost released its third studio album *Meliora* in 2015. The word “melior” is Latin for better, but according to a Nameless Ghoul it is supposed to be translated as “for the pursuit of something better” or “all things better” and refers to society’s obsession with constantly trying to make small improvements ([Blabbermouth 2019](#)). Although the album as a whole is a little more difficult to interpret than the previous two, it can be assumed that Ghost again picks up the story where they had left off; the establishment of the kingdom of Satan. The band also tried taking the satanic cult out of the classical gothic setting: “The whole album was written and intended to be very futuristic, very metropolitan and urban. Just a post from the classic goth thing [. . .] We were trying to take this thing to a very clean, indoors, 67th floor in a very high building, in a very big city” (Nameless Ghoul, as cited in [Hartmann 2015](#), [loudwire.com](#) (accessed on 15 January 2021)).

The opening track is called “Spirit” and has two possible meanings. In the context of the song itself it likely refers to distilled alcoholic beverages, and specifically absinthe:

“Your green muse; the apparatus for soul mobility”. On the other hand, the chorus can be understood as wordplay, because “Spirit/Absinthe” sounds a lot like “Spirit; absent”. This means the song could also be about the absence of a spiritual being or even the Holy Spirit of God as a result of people having given themselves over to the Antichrist in the previous album. Moreover, it mentions the seven seals and trumpets that will usher in the end of the world (Rev. 6:1–17, 8:1–5). This clearly apocalyptic imagery is continued in the track “He is” with the phrase “We’re standing here by the abyss, and the world is in flames”, while the chorus introduces another theme: “He is; he’s the shining and the light, without whom I cannot see/ And he is; insurrection, he is spite, he’s the force that made me be”. Counterintuitively to the absence of a spirit, this song seems to be about being completely dependent on a higher power, most likely the devil.

The tracks “Mummy Dust” and “Majesty” have a similar atmosphere to them. The former is about how the Antichrist tempts humanity with pleasure and riches to make people submit to him: “I was carried on a wolf’s back to corrupt humanity/I will pummel it with opulence, with corpulence and greed”. The latter of these two songs appears to take place later in time, with Satan now ruling over the earth and mankind corrupted: “A higher power underground, from seraph skies and now to chaos bound/He’s sitting sacred and profound, in midst of sinners looking up to kiss his crown/Pathetic humans in despair; defaced, deflowered, now to death devout/A fallen angel in his lair, in midst of sinners kneeling down before his clout”. While it is clear the devil sees the masses as insignificant, the chorus shows that people are still completely dependent on him: “Old One, Master; all beauty lies within—you”.

The album ends with the track “Deus in Absentia”, which confirms once more that this is the end of the world, and that there is no way out: “The world is on fire and you are here to stay and burn with me”. The song also has a sense of disappointment or disillusionment to it, with the bridge containing the phrase “All of your imaginations are now running down your face”. In the context of the album, this likely refers to a person losing his faith; now that it turns out God has abandoned him, his hope of salvation disappears, and all he can do now is watch with tears in his eyes as the world burns around him. Like the closer on the previous album, the track ends with a choir, but this time the harmony is filled with dread, and the repeated “Deus” is a desperate cry for God to save them. When they finally realize He is not there, their only choice is to admit that they are alone: “Deus in Absentia, in Absentia/Deus in Absentia”.

According to a Nameless Ghoul, this is exactly what the band had in mind from the beginning; while *Opus* and *Infestissumam* were about the arrival of the Antichrist and Satan establishing his kingdom of darkness respectively, the third album “is more about the absent God and how mankind reacts to the absence of a deity. Where in this case, the Church of Ghost is the only holy institution in this world” (Nameless Ghoul, as cited in Hartmann 2015, loudwire.com (accessed on 15 January 2021)). In his review of the album, Andy O’Connor notes that with it Ghost has achieved “their fullest realization of *seductive Satanism* [my italics] so far.” As to the music, however, he is less enthusiastic: “There’s that whole thing about catching more flies with honey than vinegar, but vinegar is a crucial ingredient [. . .] Ghost don’t deserve outright scorn that hellishly opinionated metal fans can dish and dish, and *Meliora* is a step in the right direction, but their pandering can only go so far, and even then, it might be misguided” (O’Connor 2015, pitchfork.com (accessed on 15 January 2021)).

4.4. *Prequelle: The Great Plague*

Ghost released its fourth studio album *Prequelle* in 2018. The name is likely derived from the term “prequel” used in storytelling for something that is made after but takes place before other events. The word “Quelle” on its own, however, is German for “source”, which may signify a return to one’s roots. Although the album marks a shift in the Ghost mythos, the fact that this coincided with the aftermath of the legal battle that forced Forge to rebuild his band is purely coincidental. The choice to interrupt the succession of Papas

with Cardinal Copia was already foreshadowed in the “Square Hammer” video clip, as “there is a red cardinal bird, and that was the idea since a few years back. I wanted to make a plague record, and since the plague record was going to be in some way or form about mortality/survival, it was also going to have a theme of master and apprentice” (Forge, as cited in [Kaufman 2018](#), [consequenceofsound.net](#) (accessed on 15 January 2021)).

As mentioned, the opening track of this plague record is called “Ashes” and features the eerie singing of children. More specifically it is a rendition of “Ring a Ring o’Roses”, which is a nursery rhyme that is said to have originated during the Black Death or shortly thereafter. The second song is the rather catchy “Rats”. This is of course a reference to the rodents that carried the bubonic plague with them, but there is also a figurative meaning, as Ghost likens the disease to faith itself: “Beliefs contagious, spreading disease”. It also appears that the song describes divine punishment after humanity gave itself over to Satan in the previous album: “Into your sanctum, you let them in/Now all your loved ones and all your kin will suffer punishments beneath the wrath of God”. Another possible interpretation is that Ghost used rats as a metaphor for autocratic political leaders ([Bennett 2018](#)).

The songs “Dance Macabre” and “Pro Memoria” deal with the plague through its eventual conclusion, namely death. The former appears to tell the story of someone who knows he or she is going to die and wants to spend the last moments on this earth with their lover: “Something within your eyes said it could be the last time, ‘fore it’s over”. Moreover, although the chorus technically goes “Just wanna be/Wanna bewitch you in the moonlight”, it could be another case of wordplay, as it sounds a lot like “... be with you”. The latter of these two tracks is about death in more direct terms, as the chorus consists of the phrase “Don’t you forget about dying/Don’t you forget about your friend Death/Don’t you forget that you will die”. The song also contains a reference to the Catholic interpretation of the afterlife: “Ain’t that right Swede Saint Peter?”

The next song is called “Witch Image” and juxtaposes the inevitability of death with debauchery, as the phrase “While you sleep in the earthly delight” in the chorus is immediately followed by “Someone’s flesh is rotting tonight”. It also shows that death is always close: “I am riding in the shadows behind you on a pale white horse”. The “pale white horse” is a reference to Death as one of the four horsemen of the apocalypse from the Book of Revelation because it is described as his steed (Rev. 6–8). What these three tracks have in common is that they all seem to favor the idea of “carpe diem” over the “memento mori” that was prevalent in society when the Black Death ravaged Europe. What is also striking about this album is that Satan has taken a backseat. In fact, he is barely mentioned at all; the name Lucifer occurs twice, in the song “Pro Memoria”, and “Witch Image” contains an allusion to the devil with a slightly altered version of the saying “Between the devil and the deep blue sea”.

While the album has a medieval setting, it also relates to modern times. Especially the deaths of several music icons in recent years have had a profound effect on Forge: “This is a record themed with death and the impending end [. . .] and in recent years we have seen the passing of many of our elder idols. Ronnie James Dio was one, but I think that, especially when Lemmy passed away, and Bowie and Prince so close to that, it affected me a lot. It feels like our parents are passing” (Forge, as cited in [Munro 2018](#), [loudersound.com](#) (accessed on 18 January 2021)). Despite the serious nature of the overarching lyrical theme, the music itself is energetic and uplifting. Cody Davis of Metal Injection describes *Prequelle* as “glimmering and somewhat sinister arena rock” and although it “has its misses, there is more good than bad with this album—and those good moments are excellent and damn catchy” ([Davis 2018](#), [metalinjection.net](#) (accessed on 18 January 2021)).

5. Findings

So, despite the dark subject matter, the music is generally accessible compared to some of the other subgenres of contemporary metal, which allows Ghost to preach their satanic gospel to a wider audience. But what are they preaching exactly? *Opus* immediately set

the tone for a truly satanic theatre band, and as a whole, the album evokes imagery of a faith community. This is done mainly through what I have in this paper described as the satanification of Christian doctrine; by replacing God and Jesus with Satan and the Antichrist the band is able to write songs that resemble prayer. However, the imagery used for *Opus* is not to be confused with the real-life Church of Satan because Ghost presents the devil as a subject of worship, while LaVey never did. The so-called satanification of Christian doctrine also fits with the radical inversion of traditional Christian themes described by [Bossius \(2003\)](#) in his study of black metal.

Infestissumam contains a great deal of sexual innuendo, and according to a Nameless Ghoul, this has to do with the fact that women in the past have supposedly often been accused of being the devil because men were lusting after them. This can easily be construed as a critique of historical and contemporary misogynistic attitudes against women, but the potential involuntary conception of the Antichrist described in the first album causes some level of dissonance. Nor is it the case that the critique already started there; it is akin to an inversion of the Annunciation but Mary agreed to it, so it is a moot point. Overall the satanification of Christian doctrine takes the form of a mirror to the life of Jesus. It is also interesting to note that *Infestissumam* contains a large number of Bible references, while *Opus* relies heavily on the post-conciliar doctrine that was established in the centuries after Christ instead. This means that there is a kind of temporal inversion between the two albums as well.

Meliora may be more difficult to interpret than its predecessors, but what is certain is that the album ends on the darkest note imaginable in its critique of organized religion, since at the end of the world its guarantees of salvation prove hollow. As it turns out God is not going to save anyone, not even those who remained faithful, and now there is nothing else left for humanity but to throw itself at the mercy of the devil. More exactly, the only place people can still turn to in this world is Ghost. However, by presenting themselves as the same kind of organized religion they appear to be criticizing, it could be argued the band is also directing this criticism at itself. Sadly it is beyond the scope of the present paper to take a further look at this.

It can even be argued, for a number of reasons, that *Meliora* is the highpoint of the Ghost mythos. First off, the Nameless Ghoul interviewed by Loudwire said as much when he noted the narrative progression leading up to this utter destitution was planned from the beginning. In other words, with *Meliora* comes the fulfillment of the promises made on the previous two albums, i.e., the establishment of the kingdom of Satan on earth. The second reason follows from this, because the total surrender to Ghost as the only remaining holy institution, and by extension to the devil himself, can be seen as the ultimate expression of anti-cosmic Satanism. Finally, when O'Connor described *Meliora* as the fullest realization of "seductive Satanism", he inadvertently classified it as the best at being able to draw people in, meaning the album is both a culmination of the narrative progression in the lyrics and an all-time high for the reach of the band.

Prequelle uses imagery of the plague, death, and destruction to remind people that life is short and encourage them to enjoy it while it lasts. While the album is still apocalyptic, the kind of apocalypse has changed, and the satanic elements have been moved to the background in favor of death itself. Thematically, there has been a shift from the coming of the Antichrist and the kingdom of Satan to death, pestilence, and the wrath of God.

From all this it becomes clear that Ghost has done its homework when it comes to the lyrics, and that the band straddles the line between what [Weinstein \(1991\)](#) called the Dionysian and chaotic strains of metal; while *Opus* and *Meliora* are closest to the chaotic because of their sense of dread and sense of abandonment respectively, the sexually explicit nature of *Infestissumam* and the "carpe diem" of *Prequelle* put these two records in the corner of the Dionysian. Yet even though each of the four studio albums leans more towards one than the other, the division is somewhat fluid, as the song "Spirit" from *Meliora* is about intoxication and thus more Dionysian, and "Rats" from *Prequelle* is about plague-bearing rodents, which makes it more chaotic. Moreover, the possible association with

anti-cosmic Satanism pushes Ghost towards the chaotic side of metal, but their specific brand of seductive Satanism pushes them towards the Dionysian.

From interviews it becomes clear that Ghost has a few things to say with their music as well; not only is there a strong element of storytelling, but it is also intended as a critique of some elements of society that are often associated with organized religion.

6. Conclusions

Thematically speaking, the band continues the tradition of satanic black metal by presenting Satan as a literal entity and as a destructive figure—although their latest album barely mentions the devil at all—but in terms of musical style, they have gone in a different direction, mixing and matching different subgenres of metal and various other musical styles. Ghost also straddles the line between the so-called Dionysian and chaotic strains of metal, and while this division is not rigid, each of the four studio albums released so far leans more towards one than the other. The lyrics are for the most part characterized by what in this paper has been called the satanification of Christian doctrine. Aesthetically the band appears to fall into a specific category of metal music that borrows heavily from Christian liturgy. Moreover, they are trying to tell a story through their music.

The question returns, then, what message is Ghost trying to convey by presenting itself as a satanic version of the Catholic Church? The answer is that the satanification of Christian doctrine in the lyrics is intended as a critique of some elements of society that are often associated with organized religion. Each of the albums tells a story, and it appears that, save for *Opus*, each of them focuses on one specific issue. In the case of *Infestissumam* this critique is directed at historic and contemporary misogynistic attitudes towards women that Ghost blames on religion, on *Meliora* it is aimed at society's obsession with constantly trying to make small improvements and religion's seemingly hollow promise of salvation, and *Prequelle* reminds people that life is short and encourages them to enjoy it while it lasts, as opposed to the focus on the afterlife seen in many religious traditions.

These criticisms are more or less in line with the teachings of the Church of Satan, as LaVey also favored indulgence over abstinence and stated that the ideal Satanist should be individualistic and non-conformist in order to escape the herd mentality and scapegoating he associated with mainstream society. To a lesser degree, they align with the views of the Satanic Temple as well. Yet this critique only becomes apparent retro-actively upon reading interviews with the band and therefore appears to be too subtle for people to notice outright. Still, the question that guided this thesis was not whether the message is conveyed successfully, but what it consisted of, and the answer appears to be that by presenting itself as a satanic version of the Catholic Church, Ghost attempts to convey a critique of both religion and society, with emphasis on the latter. Religion does have a role, but the critique is aimed specifically at those elements of society that are generally associated with organized religion.

While the question of whether Ghost is able to convey its message successfully was beyond the scope of this paper, it is still a relevant one. Wanting to say something through music is all well and good, but it is pointless if nobody notices. Not even all metalheads are aware of the religious dimension of their community, let alone outsiders. It might even be the case that the theatrical qualities of the performance drown out the underlying message rather than support it. To answer this question, further research into the subject is needed. Doing so would also require studying other metal bands that borrow heavily from Catholic liturgy. Such a study could for instance focus on the role that aesthetics might play in telling a story, or, staying with Ghost and their rhetoric, whether they are criticizing themselves as well with *Meliora*.

The phrase seductive Satanism used by one journalist to describe the *Meliora* album could be a sort of diving board for a separate study of the cultural landscape in which satanic organizations operate and where Ghost fits in, as it refers to the band's power to draw people in. Although the band does not appear to be actively taking part in this spiritual ecosystem, they do not exist in a vacuum either, so there is good reason to

investigate this further. A final note here concerns the methodology. The analysis of the lyrics in this paper is based on author-focused and text-based methods, so it leaves out how fans engage with the message. Therefore future research into these types of bands should also include ethnographic/audience-reception approaches.

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