

# METALLICA, MARX AND NIETZSCHE

By Peter S. Fosl, Professor of Philosophy at Transylvania University



There are those who think that “philosophical rock” is somehow an oxymoron, that neither rock musicians nor the music they produce can have real philosophical meaning. This view is nonsense. Rock musicians, like their fans, are at least as smart as anyone else. Moreover, the ideas produced by great philosophers permeate culture and often speak through people, whether they’re aware of it or not. This, too, is true of rock musicians as much as it’s true of other people, perhaps even truer of them.

Metallica is, of course, to those who’ve actually paid attention to their music, a decidedly philosophical rock band. While, granted, the band members have had no formal philosophical training, the lyrics of their songs and various qualities of their music do exhibit real philosophical meaning. James Hetfield (1963-), in particular, the band’s lead singer and principal composer, presents insightful criticisms of religion, morality, and society. His philosophical commentary, in fact, is strikingly similar to some of the lines of criticism that have been developed by philosophers Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) and Karl Marx (1818-83). I have argued as much elsewhere.

What is it that I think similar between Metallica and Nietzsche and Marx? Well, the principal thing is that like Nietzsche and Marx, Metallica advances a moral criticism of religion, in particular Christianity. Over the course of western philosophical history, philosophers have criticized religion in a number of ways. Perhaps the best known is what I’d call the “epistemological” critique perfected by philosophers of the European and American Enlightenment. This line of criticism argues that the kinds of things that religions claim to know just can’t be known—for example, whether God exists, whether there’s one God or many, whether God is a trinity or not, whether God thinks, whether God is loving, whether God issues any moral prescriptions for us, etc. The religious often pretend to know such things, but of course they really don’t.

Philosophers have also developed what I would like to call a “metaphysical critique” of religion, arguing that the sorts of things that the religious claim exist actually don’t exist, and perhaps can’t exist. So, for example, those who argue this sort of line might maintain that there can be no such thing as an immaterial, omnipresent, mind, that an eternal being is impossible, or that the existence of a good God is inconsistent with so much evil in the world.

Other philosophers have argued that the very concepts and ideas the compose religion make no sense. It makes no sense, for example, to speak of a being that is utterly transcendent, that’s beyond all human experience. It’s simply incoherent to maintain the universe was created out of nothing. The idea of Jesus being both God and human is internally incoherent. The theory of the Trinity (one being but three persons) isn’t a mystery but a muddle.

While they are, no doubt, more popular, these three aren’t the only lines of

criticism that philosophers have advanced against religion. A fourth kind of critique has argued that religion is objectionable on strictly moral grounds. Let’s call it the “moral critique.” Criticizing religion on moral grounds may seem a rather odd thing to do because so many people actually define what’s morally good and bad according to what religion says is morally good and bad. But many of the western tradition’s most important philosophers have deployed just such a form of criticism against religion—among them I’d count Xenophanes, Socrates, Lucretius, Voltaire, Hume, and of course Nietzsche and Marx. Metallica’s philosophical thought positions the band in this philosophical stream, as well. How so? Well, start with this: Nietzsche argues that Christianity is a “slave morality.” It weakens people and collects them into a docile herd that can be managed and manipulated by the more powerful. Similarly, Marx and Engels maintain that religion is what they have famously called the “opiate of the masses.” It’s a sedative to which those who’ve suffered the ravages of exploitation turn in order to find comfort and hope. It’s a narcotic keeps the masses stupefied, looking for a better life in the next world rather than pursuing revolutionary struggle in this one.

Those who know Metallica will know that James Hetfield suffered through the rigors of being raised in a Christian Scientist family. His lyrics in “Leper Messiah” (a figure that calls to mind both David Bowie’s “Ziggy Stardust” and the mythology of ancient Judaism, Isaiah 53) stem from this twisted family background in their description of religion alternatively as a “disease,” an addictive drug, a form of mind control, and an instrument of power.

One of my favorite among Metallica’s songs, “Leper Messiah” drips with both Nietzschean and Marxian sentiments.

*Marvel at his tricks, need your Sunday fix.*

*Blind devotion came, rotting your brain.*

*Chain, chain*

*Join the endless chain.*

*Fame, Fame*

*Infection is the game, stinking drunk with power.*

*We see.*

...

*Witchery, weakening*

*Sees the sheep are gathering*

*Set the trap, hypnotize*

*Now you follow.*

*[Chorus]*

*Lie.*

“Holier than Thou” trumpets a kind of solidarity with the working class and threatens the ruling class with revolutionary judgment in response to the way things that present themselves as “sacred” and “just” instead cloak privilege and exploitation.

*It's not who you are, it's who you know  
Others lives are the basis of your own  
Burn your bridges build them back with wealth  
Judge not lest ye be judged yourself.*

“And Justice for All” tells it like it is in its account of the way those with economic power often control our world:

*Halls of justice painted green  
Money talking  
Power wolves beset your door  
Hear them stalking  
Soon you'll please their appetite  
They devour  
Hammer of justice crushes you  
Overpower.*

But there is also something worrisome about Metallica’s songs in terms of the Marxian and Nietzschean critiques. While in Metallica’s songs we find a lot of complaints about how bad things are, there’s much less of a call to rise up and prevail over them; and there’s not much of an alternative to religion presented. The clearest example of this tendency in their songs is probably the piteous “One.” Left blind, deaf, mute, and limbless by a landmine, the song bemoans how people are used up and cast aside by their exploitive rulers: “Nothing is real but pain now.” Pleading for death, the former soldier beseeches God for release, even the release of annihilation. But just as God failed to bring consolation to James Hetfield at age thirteen when his father fled his family or at age sixteen when his devout Christian Scientist mother was consumed by cancer, God brings no consolation to the abandoned veteran. As it is in “The God that Failed,” the oppressive forces of society in “One” seem to have won.

Broken is the promise, betrayal  
The healing hand held back by the deepened nail.

This dimension of Metallica’s songs seems to me to exhibit the kind of defeatism that has afflicted the left in the wake of the failure of a Marxist revolution to improve things. It also, I think, is symptomatic of what Nietzsche calls “incomplete nihilism”—the failure of even critics of Christianity to have fully escaped Christianity’s debilitating grip. Too often, I think, Metallica’s art is well described by Nietzsche’s diagnosis. Too often the band hasn’t fully free itself from the Christian worldview but instead simply whines about God not living up to his followers’ expectations. I confess to feeling on occasion that Metallica should cut the whining and just get over it. Once or twice I’ve actually turned off their music (or forwarded to the next song) in disgust.

The clearest example, I think, of Metallica’s nihilistic tendency is “To Live is to Die” (Hetfield’s spoken word performance of a poem by Cliff Burton).

*When a man lies he murders  
Some part of the world.  
These are the pale deaths which  
Men miscall their lives.  
All this I cannot bear  
To witness any longer.  
Cannot the kingdom of salvation  
Take me home?*

No, James, it can’t, and you’re mistaken even to wish it would. Nietzsche explains how even minds as independent as Metallica’s remain within Christianity’s grip—why in a sense Metallica is still at times a Christian rock band. Now we discover needs implanted by centuries of moral interpretation—needs that now appear to us as needs for untruth; on the other hand, the value for which we endure life seems to hinge on these needs. This antagonism—not to esteem what we know, and not to be allowed any longer to esteem the lies we would like to tell ourselves—results in a process of dissolution. (Will to Power, Book I §5, 10)

The problem Metallica faces is one that afflicts many of us: while we’ve recognized the falsehood and immorality of religion, it’s still difficult for us to understand how we can lead meaningful lives without it. Metallica, however, isn’t all failure. I think that the band has shown important signs of “getting over it” and beginning to see how a meaningful life can be led beyond Chris-

tianity. I think, in fact, that it’s in part because of the band’s alternative vision, and not simply because of its complaints, that Metallica has drawn so many young people to its music. Part of that alternative vision is, of course, the music itself. Metallica’s driving guitars and thunderous drums speak to us of strength and defiance and power, not dissolution and pessimism. Hetfield’s growling, muscular voice inspires us with its awesome tone and texture, no matter what the lyrics say. But, indeed, there are lyrics suggesting an alternative vision, too. Perhaps the best are those of “Escape.”

*No one cares, but I'm so much stronger.  
I'll fight until the end  
To escape from the true false world.  
Undamaged destiny.  
Can't get caught in the endless circle  
Ring of stupidity.*



And then I think there’s something else, something perhaps even more important. A crucial indication that Metallica has more completely transcended Christianity is the suggestion in the film *Some Kind of Monster* (2004) and in *St. Anger* (2003) that Hetfield no longer obsesses about the way religion has victimized him. Paradoxically, to be free from religion is not to be consumed by anger towards it—even a negative relationship is still a relationship. To be free of religion is to understand its dangers but to put oneself beyond their reach; perhaps it’s also even to accept that for some people, for example those struggling with alcoholism, something like religion may even serve a salubrious function.

Metallica, then possesses a complicated relationship to Marx’s and Nietzsche’s critiques of religion. Metallica shares with these philosophers an acute sense of religion as an immoral institution. Metallica also, however, in its revolutionary pessimism and in its incomplete nihilism, exhibits a failure to realize the promise Marx and Nietzsche offer of a life beyond religion. But in Metallica there are also increasingly important elements that suggest that the band is well on its way to recovering from religion. I look forward to seeing just how far they can get in their escape.

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Peter S. Fosl has co-authored and/or co-edited the following books: *The Philosopher’s Toolkit: A Compendium of Philosophical Concepts and Methods*, *The Ethics Toolkit*, *British Philosophers 1800-2000* and *British Philosophers 1500-1799*. He is also a contributing editor to *The Philosophers’ Magazine*.