

CHAPTER 7

METALLICA, NIETZSCHE, AND MARX

The Immorality of Morality

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Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities.

Voltaire

In songs like “Leper Messiah” and “The God that Failed,” Metallica charges religion with moral failure and in this way connects itself with a tradition in philosophy stretching back through thinkers like Voltaire, Hume, Lucretius, Socrates, and Xenophanes. According to these philosophers, what religions prescribe as morally “good” is actually morally bad or wrong. What religions claim to be “righteous” is instead corrupt. What they portray as “pious” is in fact perverse. What they present as “truth” is in reality deceit. Since religion has had such a wide effect on common ideas about morality in our society, what passes for sound morality across society generally is more often a putrid tangle of immorality.¹

¹ Thus Metallica and their philosophical predecessors offer a moral critique of religion. Other philosophical critiques of religion are rooted in epistemology, metaphysics, and the philosophy of language. Epistemological critiques leverage their criticisms on an examination of the possibilities of acquiring knowledge about religious matters, typically arguing that one can’t really “know” the sorts of things that the faithful claim to know. Metaphysical critiques hinge on ideas about what’s “real” and might possibly be real, often maintaining that religious claims about divine reality are somehow flawed—that entities of the sort described by religion don’t exist or can’t exist. Critiques drawing on ideas from the philosophy of language address what it’s possible and not possible to speak of meaningfully. They argue that religious language is literally meaningless, or at least not meaningful in the way the faithful think.

Morality and Power

One of the most important critiques of Christian morality was developed by German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900). In books like *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), *The Genealogy of Morals* (1887), and *Twilight of the Idols* (1888), Nietzsche describes the way Christian morality presents a pathological doctrine, one that ultimately weakens people, tearing down their minds, bodies, and cultures.

In a manner not terribly different from the way Metallica's James Hetfield describes it, Nietzsche depicts Christianity as a "slave morality." Originating among the members of a relatively insignificant ethnic group living under the heel of Roman rule, Christian morality found its origins in a sentiment both puny and dishonorable—"resentment" (*ressentiment*). Resenting Roman power, members of the Jesus movement argued that it's really the meek that are blessed. Resenting Roman wealth, they praised poverty and simplicity. In the face of Roman pride, Christians promoted humility. Against Roman military might, they deployed peacemaking. Since the Romans ruled this world, Christians concocted a better, truer kingdom in another world, a transcendent world beyond this one, beyond Rome.

But it wasn't enough for early Christians simply to defy Roman rule. They also produced their own distinctive way of ruling, of exerting power over others. Perhaps the most effective way Christians exerted power was by collecting the faithful into a docile "herd" through the idea that we all carry an internal debt called "sin."² Having convinced people of this, Christian priests proclaimed that they alone could forgive the debt, that only through the authority of their religion could human beings find consolation and salvation (John 14:6, 10:9). It was a wildly successful technique.

Aside from Nietzsche's, perhaps the most influential critique of religion was articulated by Karl Marx (1818–83). While it would be wrong to characterize Metallica as a Marxist band, there are elements of Metallica's critique that overlap with Marx's. Writing in

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals* in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 1968), §20.

the year of Nietzsche's birth, Marx famously described religion as the "opium of the people."³ This opium, says Marx, deadens people, submerging them in a stupor that renders them unable to think clearly or resist effectively the exploitation to which they're subjected. Metallica is certainly no stranger to this insight.

Hetfield's lyrics in, for example, "Leper Messiah" describe religion alternatively as a "disease," an addictive drug, a form of mind control, and an instrument of power.⁴ In an especially rich and compressed lyric, Metallica weaves together Nietzschean and Marxian themes into an evocative bundle: "Marvel at his tricks, need your Sunday fix. / Blind devotion came, rotting your brain. / Chain, chain / Join the endless chain, taken by his glamour / Fame, Fame / Infection is the game, stinking drunk with power. / We see." The song also depicts the way Christianity weakens people and gathers them into an obedient herd: "Witchery, weakening / Sees the sheep are gathering / Set the trap, hypnotize / Now you follow. / [Chorus] / Lie." "Holier than Thou" announces a kind of solidarity with the working class and threatens (religious? revolutionary?) judgment in response to the way things posing as "sacred" and "just" commonly 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" expresses a more impotent and defeated sentiment, but nevertheless an understanding of how things really work: "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."

For all its apparent defeatism, however, there is perhaps a kind of ambiguity in that last line, "overpower"—a call to the oppressed to rise up and overpower the forces that are crushing them. But, if revolutionary inspiration's what you're after, these few half-submerged suggestions offer a pretty thin reed to cling to.

³ Karl Marx, *Contributions to a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* [1844] in *The Portable Karl Marx*, ed. by Eugene Kamenka (London: Penguin, 1983).

⁴ The figure of the "leper messiah" reaches back into ancient Hebrew mythology, perhaps rooted in Isaiah 53. David Bowie draws upon the image in "Ziggy Stardust" and, of course, Bowie's song "Fame" resonates here, as well.

Indeed, on balance Metallica does seem more pessimistic than Nietzsche or Marx. Their songs often seem preoccupied with the failure of religion and the failure of attempts to resist it. Perhaps this is because Metallica writes more than a century after its German predecessors, at a time when the hopes and expectations of a revolution against the religious, economic, and political institutions that dominate our contemporary world have been largely discredited or forgotten. Since both religion and revolution seem to have failed, Metallica finds itself, like so many others today, awash in despair.

The pitiful figure depicted in “One,” for example, can find no comfort in religion. Left blind, deaf, mute, and without limbs through the effects of a landmine, the disconsolate veteran speaks to us now after having been used up and cast aside by his exploitive rulers. “Nothing is real but pain now,” he declares. Pleading for death, he beseeches God for release, even the release of annihilation. But God brings no consolation to the abandoned soldier—just as God failed to bring consolation to James Hetfield at age thirteen when his father left the family and at age sixteen when his devout Christian Scientist mother died of cancer. This disposable hero’s only reward is isolation, “hell.” The oppressive forces of society (represented in “God that Failed” by the Romans who successfully nailed God to the cross and killed him) seem to have won. “Broken is the promise, betrayal / The healing hand held back by the deepened nail.”

Metallica and Rebellion

But, perhaps, if we just dig a bit deeper through the provocative layers of meaning in Metallica’s songs, something more than defeatism and despair can be unearthed. “The Four Horsemen” is a good place to dig. From a Christian point of view, the four horsemen of the Apocalypse (Revelation 6:1–17) are instruments of God’s justice: “So gather round young warriors now / And saddle up your steeds / Killing scores with demon swords / Now is the death of doers of wrong / Swing the judgment hammer down / Safely inside armor, blood, guts, and sweat.” These lyrics on their surface seem to affirm the Christian point of view, calling young men (like so much of

Metallica's work, it is male-centered) to join in striking down the wrongdoers whom God has come to judge and punish.

But, looking deeper, one finds a more subversive suggestion here. Who are the true "doers of wrong," anyway? The lyrics give us a clue in describing the horsemen as those who threaten wives and children. A more telling implication surfaces when we consider why the young warriors wield "demon swords." Mustn't they be fighting with the demons? Perhaps they are the demons?

If the horsemen are the real enemy, there can be no hope, of course, in opposing them. Ultimately, the horsemen must win. And so it seems as though defeatism permeates even the deeper layers of the song, the same sort of defeatism we find in "Phantom Lord": "Victims falling under chains / You hear them crying dying pains / The fists of terrors breaking through / Now there's nothing you can do."

But whether or not the resistance must ultimately succumb, it's important to acknowledge that "The Four Horsemen" does call for resistance. For many rebels, there's dignity in resistance, even if it offers only temporary freedom. In the phrase attributed to Mexican revolutionary Emilio Zapata: "It's better to die on your feet than live on your knees."

In fact, "The Four Horsemen" deploys a number of common heavy metal tropes to advance a message of defiant freedom. The inversion of standard ideas of good and evil, the use of demonic perspectives, and blasphemy as a form of rebellion all serve as devices to loosen the grip of Christian authority. In short, in order to subvert it, metal bands confront Christian power with its own worst nightmare.

Demonic tropes announce a defiant freedom from Christianity's control. They proclaim the successful establishment of a life beyond its reach, the achievement of a space where people don't fear Christianity—its terrifying threats of damnation, its cruel judgment, or its retribution for disobedience. Striking back at the Christian regime with dark, offensive imagery makes freedom incarnate. But how deep does this line of resistance really run in Metallica?

Metallica's inversion of good and evil in "The Four Horsemen" presents an example of what Nietzsche called a "transvaluation of all values," dismantling Christian anti-life traditions and replacing them with something life-affirming. But to what extent has Metallica really achieved a Nietzschean transvaluation? Does Metallica suffer what Nietzsche called "incomplete nihilism" (the attempt to escape

Christianity without fully transvaluing its values)?⁵ Is Metallica, at the end of the day, just a Christian rock band?

Metallica, Nihilism, and Nostalgia

Nihilism, which derives from the Latin word *nihil*, for “nothing,” may be defined as a cultural condition where people can’t value anything, where nothing seems really right or wrong, good or bad, beautiful or ugly—where neither life nor death, neither action nor inaction seems to matter. Christianity, according to Nietzsche, actually produces nihilism. Here’s how.

First, Christianity devalues the world in which we actually live by arguing that the general features characterizing our existence are bad. It’s bad, according to the Christian tradition, to have a body and to experience physical desires. It’s bad that everything changes, that nothing lasts forever, and that we die. It’s bad that we must labor and struggle and exert ourselves in contests of power. It’s bad that we don’t know everything and that people hold different opinions and values. In place of this inferior world, the Christian-Platonic tradition promises a better, transcendent world beyond it.

The transcendent world Christianity promises is decorated with perfections and absolutes. Its truths and its beauties are singular, clear, fixed, permanent, and unambiguous. Its realities are unchanging, crystalline forms of being, clearly superior to our messy world of flux—or so they say.⁶ The heavenly world is one of harmony, ease, tranquility, pleasure, love, and immortality. And thank God that He and His heavenly reality exist, because without them our earthly existence would be pointless and our world would be worthless. The only thing that ultimately justifies us and makes our existence worth a damn, say the Christians, is that we mean something to some heavenly Father.

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), Book I, §28, 19.

⁶ Plato’s theory describing an eternal world of “forms” (*eide*), of which our world is a mere imperfect image, is perhaps the *locus classicus* of this view.

The next step in the nihilistic process takes place when the Christian model of truth and reality collapses and it becomes impossible to believe in God, god-like truth, or the heavenly reality any more. Ironically, the Christian-Platonic tradition's excessive demand for a pure, singular truth becomes self-subverting. According to Nietzsche, after carefully scrutinizing things, people finally come to acknowledge that the sort of pure, singular, universal, absolute "truth" Christianity requires can't be acquired and perhaps even makes no sense at all. Similarly, the kind of reality Christian metaphysics describes comes to look like a fantasy, and perhaps an incoherent one at that. People realize at long last, in Nietzsche's (in)famous phrase, that "God is dead."⁷

But the trouble is, says Nietzsche, that having lived for centuries under the Christian-Platonic regime people have internalized its way of seeing the world. Yes, people do come to understand that the Christian way of thinking and valuing is untenable, but they can't conceive of an alternative. (Offering such an alternative, one where people don't need to look beyond the world for something to give it meaning, is of course just the task that Nietzsche undertook.)

Christian systems of thought, despite having devalued our world, had nevertheless infused it with a derivative kind of purpose, meaning, and value. Christianity had given the world a source of value—from their perspective, its only source. With that source of value gone people find themselves at a loss, without a source of truth or meaning, unable to find value elsewhere or to give the world value themselves. Like addicts in withdrawal, people still long for a Christian-Platonic fix, but they know that no such fix is coming. About this condition, Nietzsche writes:

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)

⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. by Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), §108.

Having reached this point, it's a short step (even a predictable step) to move from not valuing anything to valuing nothingness—that is, to valuing intoxication and escapism and even, in the most extreme cases, to valuing death and destruction, including self-destruction. That's why so many today have turned to drugs, to new age mysticism, to video games and television, and endless consumer consumption. That's also why it's no surprise we're plagued with murderous Islamic *jihadis* who would incinerate this world for the sake of a phony transcendent kingdom. Hardly monstrous aberrations, these are the predictable, natural offspring of the nihilistic religious traditions that have spawned them.

The popularity of films like *The Passion of the Christ* (2003) and the militarism of Christian conservatives are explicable on this model, as well. There's good reason why Mel Gibson's execrable snuff film pays scant attention to the resurrection, to the healing, to the feeding, and forgiving parts of the Jesus story. It's because, despite their protestations to the contrary, religious conservatives (Christian and Islamic, alike) really value death. Unable to find value in life any longer, their fascination turns to suffering, to explosions, to missiles and guns, to war, to suicide bombing, to blood and sacrifice, to crowns of thorns and crucifixion.

Is Metallica part of this nihilistic culture? In many ways it is (as any of us living today are likely to be). Metallica is keenly aware that our society is pervaded by lies, injustice, exploitation, and suffering. But its criticisms of this state of affairs often appear to be not thoroughgoing rejections of Christian truth and value, but rather disappointments with their absence from the world. Rather than rejecting God, often Metallica seems simply to lament God's failure and wish that God wouldn't fail—as if the band were wishing that the father and mother who left Hetfield on his own would return as the dependable parents they were supposed to be.

This lamenting disappointment and this wish are perhaps most clearly evident in “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?”

Sick with the world and its lies, without the strength to bear it any longer, this song abandons life and, like the soldier in “One,” longs for

death. The pain the voice expresses is not simply the pain of destruction, exploitation, and deceit, but also the pain of abandonment—the betrayal of promises for consolation, sustenance, fairness, and truth. Metallica’s response to this pain in “To Live is to Die,” however, isn’t revolt, resistance, or imagining new forms of truth and health. It’s instead exhaustion, resignation, and death-wish (*thanatos*).

The perverse longing for death as the path to one’s true home, as the route to the absent father, is classic Christian nihilism and a sign of what Marx would call alienation. The promise of such a home may be a false one, and Metallica like the rest of us may full-well know it. But the longing remains, and this longing compounds the pain—as it does in so many of Metallica’s songs, as it does so often for abandoned children, exploited workers, and recovering Christians in our nihilistic culture today. Despite their recognizing the pervasiveness of this betrayal, songs like “To Live is to Die” still long nostalgically for the things that had been promised. They seem still to wish Christianity were true.

Just as we saw, however, in the case of Metallica’s capacity for rebellion, there’s more to the band than this. The voice of “Master of Puppets,” for example, exhibits the heightened but lonely nihilistic resignation I’ve described (“Hell is worth all that / natural habitat / just a rhyme without a reason”). But living now a life that’s “out of season” also signals what the beginning of the song heralds—that the illusory passion play of religion is over.⁸

Another clue that Metallica moves beyond nihilism is available simply by stepping back from the lyrics and listening. The angry tone, the driving guitars, the pounding drums show us muscle, testosterone, strength, and defiance. Metallica’s voice is hardly the whimpering tremolo characteristic of so much of the music scene today. This band is no puddle of dissolution. Its art has drawn together and sustained a culture of fans and admirers, as well as a few philosophers, over more than two decades. It has influenced the direction and content of culture across the globe. Nietzsche would, I think, find power in this creativity.

⁸ Metallica’s characterization of its voice here as “out of season” calls to my mind Nietzsche’s description of his own thought as “untimely.” Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, ed. by Daniel Breazeale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

There are other indications, too, that Metallica is not thoroughly nihilistic, but that it also works towards what Nietzsche would call “overcoming” Christianity. We already saw in the ambiguities of “And Justice for All” and “The Four Horsemen” a sort of call to arms against Christian oppression. Metallica’s anthem “Escape” takes a step farther in that direction, marking perhaps the most Nietzschean moment in Metallica’s corpus.

From its opening chords the voice of “Escape” declares its defiance and its independence from the manipulating and dangerous lies our culture presents. More importantly, however, it does so from a position of strength, without any nostalgia for things Christian: “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.”

Nietzsche observed that the end of the Christian-Platonic idea of truth would also make it possible to neutralize the Christian-Platonic poison of thinking about our world as something derivative, inferior, and merely apparent: “With the true world we have also abolished the apparent one.”⁹ For those with strength enough for it, the collapse of Christian-Platonic ways of thinking (the “true/false world”) opens a path of escape, of escape from the debilitating and oppressive effects of those regimes entirely. The voice of “Escape” has begun boldly striding down that path.

Confirmation of this interpretation may be found a few lines later when the song affirms the same self-creative power that Nietzsche extols when he portrays life as a work of art through which people may authentically express themselves: “Rape my mind and destroy my feelings. / Don’t tell me what to do. / I don’t care now, ’cause I’m on my side / And I can see through you. / Feed my brain with your so called standards / Who says that I ain’t right? / Break away from your common fashion / See through your blurry sight. / [Chorus:] / See them try to bring the hammer down. / No damn chains can hold me to the ground. / Life’s for my own to live my own way.” Here we see then not simply the critical complaints about what’s wrong with the world that may lead one to interpret Metallica as a critic of

⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Penguin, 1982), pp. 95–6.

Christianity that hasn't fully escaped its nihilistic clutches. "Escape" shows us that Metallica is also on the path to freeing itself from Christianity and achieving a life beyond it. It's a path through which Metallica offers listeners not only outrage, disappointment, and defiance, but promise, as well.

In fact, the confidence the lost little boy of "Dyers Eve" seems to have ultimately found in the angry young man of "Escape" may have ironically laid the foundation for acquiring a sense of peace with his parents and perhaps with their religion, too.¹⁰ Hetfield's eleven-month stay in rehab while the band was producing *St. Anger* (2003) seems to have tempered his regard for the positive ways in which belief in a "higher power" may function in some people's lives. The maturity and self-possession he achieved there (evident, I think, in the film *Some Kind of Monster*, 2004) corresponds to his overcoming another sort of disease afflicting his life—alcohol abuse. Insofar as the wish to escape the world through intoxication might itself be read as symptomatic of nihilism, perhaps Hetfield's new physical health offers us the outward sign of a kind of philosophical health, too—the overcoming of Christian nihilism and the achieving of a kind of freedom from obsessing over the pain it had caused him.

The case of Metallica, then, is a complicated one. The band's work echoes with the critical theories of both Marx and Nietzsche in arguing that religion is rife with crippling deceptions. In this, Metallica advances a critique of Christianity based on moral rather than epistemological or metaphysical considerations. The band nevertheless at times itself succumbs to the sort of nihilism Nietzsche predicted would flow from the degeneration of Christian-Platonic culture. But a closer look also reveals in the band's powerful music and multi-layered lyrics efforts to overcome this nihilism and free itself (and ourselves) from Christianity's pathological grip. Ironically, this overcoming of religion's pathologies may have made possible not only a healthier life outside of religion, but also an awareness of the possibility that religion may serve salutary functions, as well.¹¹

¹⁰ Here I'm speaking of the maturity of the narrators of the songs, recognizing that Hetfield himself was actually older when he wrote the lyrics to "Dyers Eve."

¹¹ I am grateful to Isaac Fosl-van Wyke, Bill Irwin, Joanna Corwin, and Eileen Sweeney for their comments, corrections, and suggestions in the writing of this chapter.