

Goths and God: Theological Reflections on Subculture

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What is Goth?

Goth subculture is generally characterised by its musical and visual styles, but many Goths would argue that these are simply the expressions of an underlying aesthetic or world view which dwells on a fascination with the dark, the uncanny and the mysterious. For Goth writer Nancy Kilpatrick:

goth is a state of mind [...] a way of being that embraces what the normal world shuns, a lean toward and an obsession with all subjects dark and grim, a view of life that incorporates the world of night as well as the world of day. The gothically inclined make room for the *noir* in a global culture that favours white and prefers its darkness sanitized.¹

Musically and aesthetically, Goth emerged from the bleak and disillusioned post-punk era of Britain in the early eighties.² Whilst both Punk and Goth responded to what they saw as the fracture and failure of society, their disillusionment found expression in different moods. Musicologist Tony Fonseca suggests that Goth differs from Punk in being “less political, less satiric, and, usually, less overtly optimistic [...] more concerned with the personal, especially with each individual’s darker side”.³ Introspection, and a heightened awareness of dissonance in the emotional, psychological or spiritual dynamics of the inner life, are a mainstay of Goth as expressed in its music, art and literature.

Initially labelled ‘positive punk’, bands such as Joy Division, The Cure and Bauhaus laid a foundation of visual style, musical sound, and thematic focus.⁴ Early Goth rock bands were characterised by their dark or black clothing, pale make-up and heavy dark eyeliner and lipstick (for men and women); thin, reverberating guitars and eerily atmospheric synthesizers, with bass heavy in the mix alongside deep, angst-ridden male vocals; and melancholic reflections on loneliness, disillusionment, mortality and loss, often flavoured with motifs drawn from gothic horror, religion or mythology. A focal point for the nascent Goth subculture in the early eighties was the London club The Batcave, whose décor set the tone for the classic Goth aesthetic by incorporating bats, cages and instruments of torture in a deliberate harking back to the Hollywood horror films of the thirties and forties. By the mid-eighties Goth had become sufficiently well established for its leading artists to be signed to major record labels. Bands such as The Mission, The Cult, The Sisters of Mercy, Fields of the Nephilim and All About Eve were able to gain sufficient airplay and promotional

¹ Kilpatrick, 2005, p.1

² One of the most frequently cited accounts of Goth’s origins is Baddeley, 2006, but see also Baddeley, 2010; Scharf, 2011.

³ Fonseca, 2002, p.60

⁴ Bauhaus’ 1979 single “Bela Lugosi’s Dead” is cited by many commentators as the archetypal Goth track, and referencing it seems to have become *de rigeur* in academic articles (see e.g.: Carpenter, 2012; Fonseca, 2002; Young, 1999).

support to attract new fans not only in Britain but overseas.⁵ After this period of success Goth faded from mainstream view by the mid-nineties, but sustained itself in the British context as an underground scene, underpinned by independent record labels and promoters, local club venues and a network of fanzines, supplemented later by an active online community.⁶ Overseas, and especially in Europe, Goth has gained a large following and expanded beyond the underground: in Germany, festivals such as Wave-Gotik-Treffen and M'era Luna attract crowds of 15,000-20,000 people and magazines devoted to Goth culture, music and style are generally available on newsstands.⁷

Goth music has also diversified from its guitar-driven, post-punk roots. Tony Fonseca suggests that Goth music is best defined by its atmosphere and thematic concerns, characterising it as:

the music of surrealism and decadence. It pushes musical boundaries to test what is acceptable in melody, instrument choice, chord progressions, and subject matter. To this end, the music revels in the power of raw experience, and often in the dark side of human nature, which sometimes finds its expression in the monstrous or grotesque.⁸

Goth music has consistently sought new musical forms for the exploration of gothic aesthetics and themes, often by incorporating styles from other subcultures such as Rave or Metal. Each new hybrid has generated its own variant of visual and dance style and its own particular designation within the wider subculture, so that Goth is now less a single entity than, in the words of sociologist Dunja Brill, “a conglomerate of overlapping subgroups”.⁹ The coherence of the scene, however, centres upon its core dystopian aesthetic, so that as sociologist Paul Hodkinson observes, there are few bands associated with the goth scene which have no connection at all with “the themes of gloom and darkness”.¹⁰

Goth Visual Style

More than its distinctive musical styles and themes, it is perhaps Goth's striking visual style which best identifies it as distinct from the mainstream culture. Sociological studies have indicated that self-identification as Goth, expressed in a commitment to the visual style which extends beyond purely leisure time and activity, is a primary component of many Goths' sense of self.¹¹ Dunja Brill observes that whilst the more extreme and complex Goth styles are mostly to be observed only in Goth clubs or at festivals, many Goths will wear a

⁵ Significantly, a number of influential artists on the Goth scene actively resist or disown the “Goth” label. Examples would include Siouxsie Sioux of Siouxsie and the Banshees, and Andrew Eldritch of The Sisters of Mercy, who reportedly once threw a support band off a tour for being “too Gothic” (Baddeley, 2006, p.251).

⁶ Hodkinson, 2002, p.37. The importance of the internet to the sustaining and growth of Goth has been noted by commentators, and some have suggested that net.Goths in fact constitute a distinct group within the subculture (see e.g.: Hodkinson, 2002, pp.175-94; Whittaker, 2007; Van Elferen, 2009).

⁷ Brill, 2008, pp.4-6; Scharf, 2011

⁸ Fonseca, 2002, p.60

⁹ Brill, 2008, p.4. Some of these sub-groupings include Romantigoths, Deathrockers, Rivetheads, Cybergoths, Perkygoths, Metalheads and Vampyres (see e.g.: Voltaire, 2004, pp.4-9; Kilpatrick, 2005, pp.18-26).

¹⁰ Hodkinson, 2002, p.47

¹¹ Hodkinson, 2002, pp.71-73

toned-down version of the style “as far as social pressures permit” in their everyday life, and books and websites for Goths often contain advice on the adoption of context-appropriate looks.¹² The level of commitment required to construct and maintain their own version of Goth style is an indication of the importance of their subcultural identity to many Goths, and the growing numbers of mature or Eldergoths in the scene supports the notion that for many, Goth is a foundational component of their identity rather than, as often characterized, an adolescent phase.¹³

Goth visual style is frequently eclectic, spectacular and transgressive. Classic Goth looks combine elements as diverse as fetish wear and nineteenth-century mourning costume with pallid make-up (often referred to as ‘corpse paint’) to create a striking and startling juxtaposition of elements. According to dance scholar Tricia Henry Young:

Drawing on such disparate sources as Punk, horror movies, Gothic novels, comic books, and Christian imagery Goths juxtapose familiar items in unconventional ways, changing meaning by shifting context. At once elegant and ghastly, earnest and parodic, this conflation embodies the paradoxical and dichotomous nature of the Goth mindset. Black clothing, hair, lipstick, nail polish and blackened eyes and whitened faces are both visually compelling and repulsive. While Goth fashion is striking and often very beautiful, it intentionally rejects and parodies mainstream ideals of beauty and good taste.¹⁴

Fashion historian Catherine Spooner, similarly, identifies fashion elements which foreground the taboos of sex and death as integral to Goth’s “internal iconography”, and argues that this is a crucial component in Goth’s positioning of itself as a subculture over-against “a cultural hegemony of the bland”.¹⁵

Goth fashion has evolved a number of *tropes* to express this transgressive emphasis, including the ‘Undead bride’ (in torn or bloodstained dress with deathly make-up), the seductive vampire (most frequently drawing on classic 1920s ‘vamps’ such as Theda Bara, characters from Anne Rice’s *Vampire Chronicles* or Francis Ford Coppola’s 1996 film version of *Dracula*), or the dark cybergoth look of *The Matrix* (1999) or concept art of H. R. Geiger.¹⁶ Another common element of the Goth look is the adoption of androgynous styles which blur gender boundaries. Male Goths frequently conform to an aesthetic which favours slender, fine bodies and faces and a minimum of body hair, and sometimes include elements of female clothing in their look, thus expressing what Dunja Brill has called an “ideology of genderlessness”.¹⁷

Goth’s eclectic plundering of a rich mixture of visual and musical styles is indicative of the social constituency upon which it draws. In contrast to the working-class roots of many

¹² Brill, 2008; Venters, 2009; Venters,

¹³ Brill, 2008, p.72; Hodkinson, 2011

¹⁴ Young, 1999, p.78

¹⁵ Spooner, 2004, p.166

¹⁶ Catherine Spooner argues that Goth is a “monstrous hybrid” of fan culture and popular subculture (Spooner, 2004, p.166).

¹⁷ Brill, 2008, p.38

other subcultures, the majority of Goths are white middle-class, and as such the subculture has been described as “unusually educated and literate”, including a broader range of ages than many other subcultures, and an unusually high number of professionals.¹⁸ Goths tend to be intelligent, thoughtful, articulate and literate, able to appropriate discerningly not only from contemporary popular culture but from the historic gothic tradition, whether that be the medieval gothic or its nineteenth-century and subsequent revivals. Gavin Baddeley traces Goth’s cultural roots to the concept of the sublime, Romanticism and the Decadents, whilst Tricia Henry Young identifies a number of connections with the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothic movement, such as “a preoccupation with death and dying, transgressive sex, the spectral figure, the eerie and supernatural, the estrangement of everyday life, and an ambivalence toward technology”.¹⁹ Catherine Spooner has suggested that Goth’s ability to continually appropriate new styles from the historic Gothic tradition and mainstream culture and blend them into its repertoire accounts for its longevity and richness, whilst Baddeley praises the scene as “the only youth cult with a literary and artistic tradition all of its own – outliving the trappings of youthful self-indulgence to become a viable lifestyle and aesthetic”.²⁰

Goth Values

A topic of debate among commentators is whether the musical and visual articulations of Goth subculture can be interpreted as expressions of a coherent system of beliefs or values, which is a significant question insofar as it impacts the approach or viability of a distinctively *theological* response. Paul Hodkinson, in his ethnographic study, resists the temptation to seek to explain Goth’s characteristic themes of death, horror, and gender ambiguity on the grounds that this would entail “a process far more characterised by construction than by revelation”.²¹ Hodkinson’s research leads him to conclude that there is no stable and coherent meaning, philosophy or political purpose to Goth style, concluding from his research that “style was held to be significant in and of itself as a set of enthusiastic preferences located within, and not beyond, the sphere of the aesthetic”.²² To illustrate his point, Hodkinson points out that whilst fetish clothing is a common Goth fashion component, actual participation in fetish practice is no more prevalent among Goths than among the general population. Fetish clothing in many Goth contexts is stripped of its overtly sexual connotations in favour of its generic shock value or the aesthetic qualities of its materials, in much the same way that some Punks in the 1970s appropriated the swastika as a means of provoking strong reactions from the mainstream rather than as a signifier of any particular political affiliation.²³ Catherine Spooner, similarly, observes the tendency in Gothic scholars to idealise and over-write their own meanings onto their objects of study,

¹⁸ Brill, 2008, p.9. Catherine Spooner has suggested that Goth’s middle-class demographic has caused a lack of interest from academics who tend (for ideological reasons) to favour working-class subculture as a subject for study, and led to accusations that Goth is an affectation or posture rather than an “authentic” lifestyle or world view (Spooner, 2004, pp.167-72). Paul Hodkinson’s survey of Goths at the Whitby Goth Festival indicated that 41% were over 25, 39% were students and 35% identified themselves as managers, administrators or professionals (Hodkinson, 2002, p.70-71).

¹⁹ Baddeley, 2006, pp.12-15; Young, 1999, p.88

²⁰ Spooner, 2012, p.351; Baddeley, 2006, p.284

²¹ Hodkinson, 2002, p.61

²² Hodkinson, 2002, p.62

²³ Hodkinson, 2007, p.266; Hodkinson, 2002, pp.51, 134; Hebdige, 1979, p.117

“privileging it as a site for whatever transgressive purposes the critic particularly subscribes to”.²⁴ She goes on to warn against taking much of the symbolism of Goth subculture at face value, pointing out that “To enjoy a culture of transgression [...] is not necessarily the same thing as being transgressive”.²⁵

Many Goth writers and commentators affirm this, pointing out that the Goth subculture is laced with a heavy dose of irony and self-parody. Many Goths actively discourage others from playing to common stereotypes or taking the symbolism and attitudes too seriously. The classic posture of the “mopey Goth”, constantly depressed and excessively grumpy, is rather frowned upon by many in the scene as propagating the stereotype that Goths are, as Goth musician and writer Voltaire puts it, “a bunch of humourless, suicidal mope-meisters”.²⁶ Similarly, many Goths would want to disassociate themselves from the subgroup known as Vampyres, who play out vampiric identities in a sustained way, even to the extent in some groups of blood-exchange practices.²⁷ Participants in Paul Hodkinson’s research into the Goth scene felt that taking the symbolism of the Vampire so seriously that one attempted to realise it indicated someone who was over-obsessed and had “completely missed the point” of a subculture which leavened its fascination with dark themes with heavy doses of subtlety and humour.²⁸

Accepting these caveats means we should be wary of reading stable or consistent meanings into particular elements of Goth subculture or taking them at face value, not least because the highly individualistic ethos of the scene means that meanings are often particular to the individual. That said, commentators tend to agree that Goth exhibits a strong sense of commitment and community which coheres around certain core values and a shared outlook. According to one Goth quoted by Hodkinson:

It gives you a central focus, a meeting point [...] where you can affirm your own identity. You go there, and it’s all shared. It’s like going to church really, you know it’s a shared belief that you’ve got – a shared way of thinking.²⁹

Accounts of Goth subculture tend to identify three particular *foci* of value. The first is a characteristically strong and postmodern commitment to individualism and freedom of expression, standing over against social pressure to conform to the expectations of the mainstream. Goths tend to characterise mainstream culture as mindless, bland and shallow, sometimes using derogatory terms such as “trendies”, “townies” or “mundanes” to refer to non-Goths. As opposed to the fickle and superficial mass trends they see in the wider culture, Goths place value on discrimination, taste and self-construction in personal style which conveys a strong sense of individual identity.³⁰ This style functions both as a marker

²⁴ Spooner, 2004, p.162

²⁵ Spooner, 2004, p.163

²⁶ Voltaire, 2004, p.15; Hodkinson, 2002, p.48; Venters, 2009, pp.35, 104-06.

²⁷ See discussion in Baddeley, 2006, pp.232-41; also Powell, 2007, pp.364-65.

²⁸ Hodkinson, 2002, p.46. Jillian Venters summarizes the distinction between the two groups by remarking wryly: “Most Goths think the vampyre types need to get a life and stop playing pretend, while the vampire types tend to think that the Goths need to get over themselves” (Venters, 2009, p.35).

²⁹ Hodkinson, 2002, p.92

³⁰ Miklas and Arnold, 1999

of shared affiliation with other Goths and a distinguishing mark which emphasizes the individual's separation from mainstream culture.

For some Goths, this often intentionally disturbing and startling style is a means of keeping the mainstream at bay, as one Goth interviewed by Brill observes:

For me, it's as much about repelling trendies – no I don't want to discuss what happened on Pop Idol, Eastenders or Blind Date – so f**k off!³¹

Visual style also serves to mark out distinctive Goth space: Goth clubs and pub nights tend to operate dress codes which exclude those who do not make some effort to look the part, and 'outsiders' will be quickly noted and usually ignored until they go away.³² Outside specifically Goth events and spaces, the adoption of a startling look by Goths can serve as a form of test, to see whether others will accept them for who they feel themselves to be.³³ Rejection or strong negative reactions by non-Goths confirm the Goth's sense of alienation from the mainstream and reinforce their sense of affiliation to the subculture, whilst acceptance or approval will indicate that the person concerned is either 'Goth-friendly' or actually a Goth themselves.

This latter point suggests that as well as marking them out as individuals distinct from the cultural mainstream, the disturbing aspects of Goth style function as a litmus test of a second value of Goth: tolerance. Many Goths gravitate towards the subculture because of a feeling of alienation or marginalisation from the mainstream, and find within the Goth community a commonality of understanding, as one Goth quoted by Hodkinson comments:

I've found a lot of friends through it. A lot of people accepted me, which is something I've never had before [...] it gave me a lot of confidence, which is something I'd probably never lose.³⁴

The solidarity among Goths often arises from shared experiences of rejection, abuse or personal trauma: again, as one Goth remarks, "every goth is very open-minded because they've been taken the piss out of and they know what it feels like".³⁵ A shared sympathy for those outside the mainstream extends to a heightened tolerance for a range of alternative lifestyles. Various studies suggest that whilst homosexual or bisexual relationships and practices are not necessarily more common among Goths than in wider culture, the Goth scene is more tolerant of displays of same-sex affection, and thus becomes a 'safe space' for gay members.³⁶

Dunja Brill also discerns an ideological motivation behind the androgynous style adopted by some male Goths. Noting the finding of German sociologists Schmidt and Neumann-Braun that Goths share an ideal of "demonstrating strength through weakness, through tolerance,

³¹ Brill, 2008, p.47

³² Hodkinson, 2002, p.90

³³ Montenegro, 2001

³⁴ Hodkinson, 2002, p.94

³⁵ Hodkinson, 2002, p.77. See also Voltaire, 2004, p.15.

³⁶ Hodkinson, 2002, pp.55-56; Brill, 2008, p.10

endurance and suffering”, Brill observes that androgynous male Goths attract approval and admiration within the scene as their visual style lays them open to often homophobic verbal (and sometimes physical) abuse.³⁷ This, she suggests, can be seen as voluntary embracing of the marginal status of women and gay men within the wider culture, and whereas in the mainstream culture androgyny often entails a loss of social status, within the Goth scene “[t]his deliberate act of stigmatising oneself vis-à-vis general society is seen as courageous and admirable”.³⁸

It should be noted that the emphasis on their exclusion or marginalisation by Goths can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. An initial identification with the marginalised, expressed through a visual style which marks Goths out as distinct within the culture, will tend to be reinforced by negative reactions to the style. Hodkinson and Brill both report Goths’ frequent experience of abuse, which reinforces their sense of rejection by “trendies”.³⁹ The alienation provoked by these responses is reinforced by the high levels of commitment expected by the subculture, so that as Goths become more drawn into relationships with other Goths, their connections outside the subculture tend to become attenuated.⁴⁰

Some Goths accept the possibility or even likelihood of rejection or abuse as an integral and inevitable consequence of the lifestyle, as Nancy Kilpatrick articulates:

Most goths are goth because of a refined sensitivity to life, and an ability to view and tolerate the shadowy elements that much of society is busy ignoring, like death. [...] When anyone takes on the grim business of shouldering the shadow for those who refuse to bear their own portion of the darker part of life, it’s no wonder the pain of such an endeavour can feel unbearable at times. Personifying the elements that much of the mainstream is trying to avoid means rejection.⁴¹

Put in these terms, being Goth sounds more of a vocation than a lifestyle choice, performing a vital function *for* the mainstream at the same time as being distinct from it, and the characteristically dark character of Goth subculture reflects its third and perhaps most important value.⁴² In his wry and witty introduction to the Goth scene, *What is Goth?* (2004), Voltaire offers one of the most sustained and articulate explanations of Goth’s fascination with the dark and the morbid:

The underlying philosophy of Goth is that our society is predominantly hypocritical. Goths hold that the ‘normal’, ‘upstanding’ members of our society who pretend to be ‘good’ all the time are in fact quite capable of doing evil. [...] Moreover, in

³⁷ Brill, 2008, p.10

³⁸ Brill, 2008, p.54. It should be noted that whilst Brill identifies and affirms this aspect of Goth subculture, she also makes the point that female Goths tend to be constrained within a more conventional set of expectations, which raises questions about the extent to which the rhetoric of equality and inclusion is manifested in practice. Similar points have been made by other students of the scene (see e.g.: Spooner, 2004, pp.175-81; Wilkins, 2009, esp. pp.363-64).

³⁹ Hodkinson, 2002, pp.74-75; Brill, 2008, pp.50-51. Examples of insults include “tarts”, “vampire bitches”, “Satan”, “corpse” or simply “slut”.

⁴⁰ Hodkinson, 2002, pp.94-96

⁴¹ Kilpatrick, 2005, pp.7-8

⁴² Miklas and Arnold, 1999, p.569

mainstream culture, so much of what makes us human is denied. We are expected to be persistently happy and are discouraged from expressing any discontent or loneliness. [...] Goths know that no one can be happy all of the time; hence, they fight against this two-dimensional attitude by delving into other aspects of the human condition.⁴³

For many Goths, an emphasis on the dark and the macabre is therefore an exploration of the full potential of human experience, and represents the core value of the subculture. For Dunja Brill, Goth involves deliberate and sustained engagement with topics otherwise considered taboo within the mainstream, such as death, perversion, or psychological extremes, conducted through “critical reflection on philosophical and transcendental questions and the search for alternative perspectives on life”.⁴⁴ As one Goth quoted by Nancy Kilpatrick explains it, the representation of taboos in visual style, music, literature and art is a means of reducing the fear of these things by making them aesthetic, so that thereby “perhaps one can accept these unacceptable things”.⁴⁵

Kilpatrick goes on to argue that meditation on the reality of death enhances one’s sense of the value of a fully-lived life, and increases a sense of empathy with others:

The fragility of humans is that we are, apparently, the only species that knows it will one day die. And while we may not be the only life-forms to feel death as it is occurring, the knowledge of our mortality throughout a lifetime – if it is not denied out of sheer terror – can only make us more generous and more accepting of human foibles while we’re still here. That knowledge allows us to live, and to die well.⁴⁶

The argument that an exploration of the dark, macabre and dissonant is not a celebration of those things but an integral step on the journey to a full and healthy appreciation of life is a common one among Goths. The highly creative and symbolic ethos of the subculture allows for a re-mystifying and intensification of experience, as opposed to the bland, packaged and over-familiar consumerism of the mainstream, so that participation in the subculture performs what Frances Henry Young describes as “a regenerative function”.⁴⁷ One of her interviewees argues that Goths:

[...] find beauty in the darker side of life, they believe that there is nothing wrong with a little misery and drama. ‘Depressed’ has often been used to describe the Gothic people, but this is not quite right. Because revelling in dismay is not the norm in society, does not mean that they are ultimately sad, just that they are fascinated by the feelings and action that it can bring.⁴⁸

For Voltaire, Goths are those willing to confront the inner darkness which all humans share, but which the mainstream seeks consistently to repress or deny. In their visual styles Goths

⁴³ Voltaire, 2004, p.15

⁴⁴ Brill, 2008, p.10

⁴⁵ Azazelle, quoted in Kilpatrick, 2005, p.8

⁴⁶ Kilpatrick, 2005, p.268

⁴⁷ Young, 1999, p.92

⁴⁸ Young, 1999, p.78

confront the mainstream with its own repressed desires, which explains the often extreme and hostile reactions from those he describes as “mundanes”:

[...] many mundanes fear these feelings and spend most of their time trying to keep them hidden from the rest of the world; daily, they fight an internal battle to deny the existence of these less-than-pure thoughts. Hence, when a Goth appears before them, that Goth becomes the incarnation of their fears, a manifestation of their own insecurities, a symbol of the frightening unknown. They lash out violently – verbally and/or physically – as though by attacking the dark creature before them they are somehow wrangling the inner demons against which they are so helpless. The ongoing war within spills out onto an external battlefield; here, the enemy is no longer themselves but a scapegoat dressed in the colours of their darkest inner strife.⁴⁹

Goth Spirituality

Put in these terms, to the theological observer Goth may begin to appear more like a spirituality than simply a leisure or lifestyle choice, and a number of commentators have picked up on the spiritual aspects of Goth subculture. There is general agreement that Goths share no one religious affiliation, although an interest in Wicca or Paganism is perhaps more common than in the mainstream, and whilst blasphemous or overtly satanic imagery is widely used in Goth style and music, practicing Satanists or occultists are rare.⁵⁰ More common is a characteristically postmodern spiritual individualism, often resulting in an “occult-religious-philosophical *bricolage*” of the kind common to alternative or new age subcultures.⁵¹

Some scholars have suggested that, whilst not in itself a cult or religion, Goth nevertheless performs a spiritual or parareligious function for its participants. Sharon Miklas and Stephen J. Arnold suggest that in patterns of consumption and identity construction through style, Goths create an “extraordinary self”:

The extraordinary self is an aspirational or ideal self-image, reflecting the influence of superstition, magic, fantasy, and ritual. An individual’s attempt to create, experience, and sustain the extraordinary self, involves the suspension of what is conventionally perceived as the ‘reality’ of that individual’s experience, in favour of a fantastic narrative bricolage which transcends mundane experience.⁵²

Hence, as we have noted, Goth serves to transcend the platitudinous reality of mainstream culture, enhancing participants’ experiential awareness through intense emotion and heightened sensibility.

⁴⁹ Voltaire, 2004, p.77

⁵⁰ Brill, 2008, p.9; Powell, 2007, pp.365-71

⁵¹ Brill, 2008, p.9; Powell, 2007, pp.367-68; Bruce, 1995, pp.103-24

⁵² Miklas and Arnold, 1999, p.575

Sociologist Anna Powell, similarly, notes that for some Goths otherwise secular practices and places such as dancing in nightclubs may function as the “nonreligious sacred”, in the sense of being spaces and practices set apart from the mainstream and exclusively appropriated to some special purpose. She draws on the work of Laurence Coupe to suggest that Goth exemplifies an example of “ludic imagining”, whereby in a post-religious context the sacred is not abandoned, but absorbed into the secularized imagination so as to offer numinous or spiritual experience.⁵³

One example of this is the prevalence in Goth style and music of religious imagery, of which Christian symbolism in general and Catholic symbolism in particular are most common. Both Powell and Young note the ironic, subversive and parodic use of this imagery through its appropriation in sexual contexts:

Crucifixes, rosaries, crosses, angels and images of Christ are juxtaposed with gargoyles, demons, vampires and satanic images to high affect. Likewise nun’s habits and monk’s robes may be worn with fishnets and garters, dog collars, chains, and heavy leathers. Blasphemy is used as a symbol of rebellion [...]. As forbidden, culturally maligned images they serve to shock, to identify the wearer with dangerous, powerful forces, and as a kind of cultural mirror – as if to say that what society fears and despises most is in fact the essence of itself.⁵⁴

It should be noted that the target of this blasphemous parody tends to be institutional religion rather than the person of Christ himself, who tends to be viewed more sympathetically. The iconography of Christ’s passion and crucifixion is a recurring theme of many Goth songs, in which the intense personal pain of emotional distress, alienation and trauma are evoked by more or less sustained identifications with the sufferings of Christ.⁵⁵

Whilst a sustained examination and reflection upon the use of Christian imagery by Goths would be interesting and possibly highly illuminating from a theological point of view, the caveats already noted make this a complex undertaking beyond the scope of this paper. Anna Powell stresses that although Goth subculture is laden with religious iconography, there are “no established norms for the interpretation of such signifiers”.⁵⁶ Christian imagery is used for a variety of purposes including simple shock factor, institutional satire, evocation of intense or heightened emotion, or genuine spiritual reference.

Instead, I wish to conclude by suggesting a theological model by means of which to draw out what I believe to be the genuine theological significance of Goth both for the wider culture and for the Church. I propose that Goth is best understood as a post-Christian, parareligious manifestation of the prophetic, in the echoes of Christendom which we find throughout Goth style, music, art and literature.

⁵³ Powell, 2007, pp.358-59

⁵⁴ Young, 1999, p.79

⁵⁵ Examples of this include the songs “The Grip of Disease” by founding Goth band The Mission, from their album *Grains of Sand* (1990); and “The Cross” by dutch goth metal band Within Temptation, from the album *The Heart of Everything* (2007).

⁵⁶ Powell, 2007, p.363

Goth and the Prophetic

In *The Prophetic Imagination* (1973), Walter Brueggemann identifies the prophetic as the necessary counterpoint to what he calls the “royal consciousness”, a mainstream ideology characterised by:

*An economics of affluence in which we are so well off that pain is not noticed and we can eat our way around it. [...] a politics of oppression in which the cries of the marginal are not heard or are dismissed as the noises of kooks and traitors; [...] a religion of immanence and accessibility, in which God is so present to us that his abrasiveness, his absence, his banishment are not noticed, and the problem is reduced to psychology.*⁵⁷

In contrast to this, Brueggemann stresses the importance of a poetic and prophetic imagination, by which alternative realities and futures to that proposed by the royal consciousness may be conjured, and which is committed to the “possibility of passion”, “the capacity to care, to suffer, to die, and to feel”.⁵⁸ Crucially, he argues:

*The royal consciousness leads people to numbness, especially to numbness about death. It is the task of prophetic ministry and imagination to bring people to engage their experiences of suffering to death.*⁵⁹

In pursuing this ministry, the prophetic imagination faces three tasks, which parallel the emphases of the royal consciousness:

To *offer symbols* that are adequate to the horror and massiveness of the experience which evokes numbness and requires denial. [...] To *bring to public expression those very fears and terrors* that have been denied so long and suppressed so deeply that we do not know they are there. [...] To *speak metaphorically but concretely about the real deathliness that hovers over us and gnaws within us*, and to speak neither in rage nor in cheap grace, but with the candour born of anguish and passion.⁶⁰

The pre-exilic prophets challenge the royal consciousness in passionate, poetic oracles which push, and sometimes transgress, the boundaries of genre and good taste. Isaiah seduces his audience into a romantic rural idyll in his song of the vineyard, then subverts it by transitioning abruptly and jarringly to the language of judicial accusation (Isaiah 5:1-7), ramming the point home with pointed satiric puns.⁶¹ In Isaiah 3, Jeremiah 2, Hosea 2 and Ezekiel 16 and 23, Israel’s spiritual adultery is described in terms which veer into the pornographic, and God’s retribution is meted out in terms which have scandalized modern feminist critics no less than they must have startled the predominantly male target audience

⁵⁷ Brueggemann, 1978, p.41

⁵⁸ Brueggemann, 1978, p.41

⁵⁹ Brueggemann, 1978, p.46 (author’s italics)

⁶⁰ Brueggemann, 1978, p.50

⁶¹ “He expected justice (*mishpat*), but saw bloodshed (*mishpah*); righteousness (*sedaqa*), but heard a cry (*se’aqah*)” (Isaiah 5:7).

of the prophets' own day.⁶² More than this, the prophets make their metaphors concrete through striking prophetic acts which similarly transgress the bounds of acceptable behaviour, punching through the mainstream consensus which seeks to deny the spiritual realities to which they point: Isaiah goes naked for three years to represent the captivity of Cush and Egypt (Isaiah 20:1-4); Ezekiel cooks his food upon dung to represent the defilement of Jerusalem and its people in exile, and divides his shaved hair into three portions to symbolize their fate (Ezekiel 4:9-5:4); Hosea marries a prostitute, playing out in his own domestic life the broken relationship between God and his people (Hosea 1-3). Western Protestantism, with its historic emphasis more upon the propositional and doctrinal interpretation of the divine Word mediated through biblical texts, has perhaps undervalued the poetic and the visual aspects of the prophets' ministries which Brueggemann highlights, and underplayed the role of hearing and seeing in their communication.

In the light of Brueggemann's account of the prophetic calling, it seems clear that the Goth subculture functions in a comparable mode in relation to the contemporary mainstream culture. Goths confront the mainstream's attempts to deny the reality of pain, to ignore the marginalised and to co-opt the divine in a self-satisfied and complacent spirituality. They construct and fashion themselves as incarnate symbols of the deathliness and fear which the mainstream seeks to suppress, and re-mystify the sacred through their use of religious and occult symbolism. Goths hold up a critical mirror to the mainstream, which seeks to disarm the critique through ridicule, demonisation or, in extreme cases such as the murder of Sophie Lancaster in 2007, brutal violence. In their commitment to confrontation of the darker aspects of human existence so as to enhance an appreciation of life in all its breadth; in their desire to embrace and identify with the marginalised; and in their striking modes of signification, there is much in Goth practice which resonates with the Christian gospel.

Recognizing this does not mean that a theological appraisal should affirm uncritically all aspects of the scene. Like any other expression of human culture, Goth demonstrates both the virtues and the failings of its participants. The exclusivity of much Goth culture belies its ideal of tolerance and inclusion, and the 'ideology of genderlessness' applies more to male Goths than females. Some aspects of the subculture are morally suspect, such as some of the excesses of the Vampyre subculture or the decadent tendencies of some fetishists, and some analyses have identified a higher than normal incidence of self-harm among teenage Goths.⁶³

At the same time, however, the Church needs to be open to the possibility that where gospel dynamics and patterns are discerned in the world beyond itself, it is possible that the Holy Spirit is at work, prompting the Church not only to join in, but to reinterpret and re-assess its understanding and its practice relative to the wider culture. As Francis Watson asserts in his *Text, Church and World* (1994):

Movements within the world beyond the ecclesial community continually pose a question to the community. [...] This process of questioning from outside is one of

⁶² See e.g.: Exum, 1996, pp.101-28

⁶³ Fitz, 2006; Montenegro, 2001; Rutledge et al., 2008; Young et al., 2006

the ways in which the Spirit leads the community out of distorted and inadequate positions into all the truth (cf. John 16:13) [...].⁶⁴

Perhaps, somewhere in the shocking, challenging, and even blasphemous carnival of the post-Christian prophetic Goth subculture there is something for the Church to learn, as it journeys out of the mainstream and onto the margins of our culture, about how to rediscover the poetic, concrete, radical prophetic voice that our society increasingly needs, and how to express it.

⁶⁴ Watson, 1994, p.240

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