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Chapter 22
Atheism and popular music

Marcus Moberg and Inka Rantakallio

Popular music has historically been viewed as the 'secular' alternative to 'sacred' music, being at times demonized by more conservative factions of society as providing a path into godlessness, degradation and vulgarity. Thanks in part to such persisting stereotypes, some popular musicians, particularly those representing more musically 'aggressive' and aesthetically provocative styles, have responded by relishing in opportunities to shock listeners with anti-establishment ideas and critiques of institutional religion. Although the articulation of more explicitly atheist sentiment has not constituted a significant feature of Western post-1950s popular music more generally, such positions have nevertheless been repeatedly and publicly expressed by several widely known musicians and bands.

This chapter provides a general and largely exploratory account of the presence and visibility of atheist viewpoints in Western popular music. We open with a brief discussion of the term 'atheism' itself and how it is most usefully approached and understood. This is followed by a general overview of the presence and visibility of atheism and anti-religious sentiment across major Western popular music genres. In the remaining main part of the chapter, we then move to consider the work and views of individual artists. Starting in the early 1970s and then proceeding chronologically, we sketch brief portraits of individual popular musicians, representing different genres and styles, who have been consistently vocal about their anti-religious and atheist views in both their music and statements they have made in interviews. Our brief analysis of the work and views of these individual artists is intended to illustrate the wider spectrum of anti-religious and atheist positions that have been articulated by Western popular musicians during roughly the past fifty years. In this, the chapter more generally also aims to provide an impetus for further research on what remains a highly under-studied field.

What is atheism?

Atheism is a spectrum of thought with no uniform definition. People who self-identify as atheists consequently also make up a highly heterogeneous group. Notwithstanding the existence of several different understandings of atheism, the term is most commonly used to refer to the unequivocal rejection of the existence of all and any deities, god(s) or other agentive supernatural forces. Although atheism constitutes a primarily intellectual position, some atheists also advocate for direct activism *against* religion and religious actors of various sorts. One particularly notable example of this can be found in the so-called 'New Atheism' that rose to prominence in the first

years of the new millennium. Considering the range of different types of atheist positions that have developed over the years, however, it has become increasingly clear that atheism is most adequately understood in the plural (i.e. in terms of multiple atheisms). If only for heuristic purposes, we can also make a general distinction between various atheisms and related 'absence of religion'-type positions such as secularism, agnosticism, indifference towards religion or other forms of 'unbelief' (Bullivant 2013: 13). Having said that, the precise point at which a particular position transitions from a 'non-religious' into an explicitly 'atheist' position is often difficult to ascertain. The vast majority of all more specific forms of atheism nevertheless tend to be defined in some kind of contradistinction to the belief system(s) they *deny* (Hyman 2007: 29), which is to say that all atheisms are dialectically linked to the particular forms of 'religion' that they reject. In Western societal and cultural contexts, atheist viewpoints are consequently most commonly constructed vis-à-vis dominant institutional Christianity and Judeo-Christian monotheistic notions of deity. These are therefore also the types of atheist viewpoints that we are most likely to encounter in the world of Western popular music.

From a historical point of view, active self-identification as atheist is a fairly new phenomenon. For much of the twentieth century, openly ascribing to an atheist worldview was both popularly and widely regarded to be reflective of a person's lack of morals and conscience, which is why only small portions of Western populations (especially in the United States) used to self-identify as atheists in surveys and national census forms. This situation has been slowly changing during the past two to three decades as 'non-religious' positions of various kinds have become both increasingly widespread and accepted (e.g. Lee 2015). Having said that, outright atheism nevertheless still remains a minority self-identification across the Western world (for a more detailed discussion of the historical development of atheism, see for example LeDrew 2015).

Atheism and/in popular music genres

There are considerable differences to be observed both in the ways and degrees to which particular sets of religious ideas and themes have played into the lyrical and aesthetic conventions of different popular music genres (e.g. Partridge 2013; see also the Introduction to this volume). Some genres display evident, even overt, connections to particular types of religion and religious frameworks. Indeed, reggae (Rastafarianism), heavy metal (the Occult, Satanism and neo-paganism) and psytrance (Indian religion and spirituality) all provide apt illustrations of how particular sets of religious themes and imagery can come to constitute part of the defining lyrical, ideational and aesthetic characteristics of entire genres.

The relationship between popular music and religion in the West has historically been strenuous and often openly contentious. But while criticism of religion and religious institutions has been relatively common in post-1950s Western popular music, the expression of explicitly atheist viewpoints has remained rare. As Teemu Taira (2021) notes in a useful (Finnish-language) overview of the presence and visibility of explicitly anti-religious and atheist themes across major Western popular music genres, blues was long considered antagonistic towards established religion and used to be labelled the 'Devil's music'. Yet, outright criticism or rejection of religion has never characterized the genre as a whole. Rather, the blues has always been marked by its

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focus on *this-worldly* strife and suffering. Although rock 'n' roll would eventually assume the mantle of 'Devil's music' in the mid-1950s, genre pioneers such as Elvis Presley, Little Richard and Jerry Lee Lewis only rarely dealt with religion in their music, let alone articulated any explicitly atheist views. The lyrics of country music often revolve around the sinful life of the song's narrator or protagonist. This character, however, is near-unanimously a Christian, albeit imperfect, one. Several illustrative examples of this can be found in the music of Johnny Cash and so-called 'outlaw' country artists such as Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings and Kris Kristofferson (see Chapter 30). Rap and hip hop, in their turn, have been used to articulate a wide variety of religious and worldview-related viewpoints and dispositions, ranging from unconventional interpretations of Islam to indigenous African religion to, indeed, atheism (discussed in more detail below, see Chapter 26). But atheism or criticism of religion by no means constitutes a defining ideational characteristic of either rap or hip hop. As Taira rightly notes, explicitly atheist sentiment has remained uncommon even in heavy metal, which is otherwise known for its often harsh criticism of, and sometimes outright contempt for, Christianity in particular. Heavy metal nevertheless counts among those few popular music genres where one is considerably more likely to come across explicitly atheist sentiment, and especially in so-called extreme metal sub-genres such as thrash metal, death metal and metalcore (see Chapter 25).

As Taira (2021) goes on to point out, there is one major genre of Western popular music that clearly stands out when it comes to the wider visibility of explicitly atheist sentiment: punk. This, though, is not to say that punk would be adequately described as an 'atheist' genre, but only that explicitly atheist sentiment is considerably more common in punk than in any other major genre of Western popular music (see Chapter 27). But, overall, punk as a whole has always been, and remains, most firmly focused on anti-establishment sentiment and issues relating to politics and social injustice. Its relative openness to atheism should therefore be understood against the backdrop of its broader and more fundamental anti-authoritarian and anti-establishmentarian ethos. While early pioneering British bands such as the Sex Pistols and The Clash did indeed deal with religion in some of their songs, neither of them articulated explicitly atheist views, although Sex Pistols frontman Johnny Rotten personally had little positive to say about religion. Highly critical views on religion that either directly express or border on explicit atheist sentiment have generally been more common among US bands and tended to reflect the American experience of massive conservative Christian societal and political influence. US punk's criticism of religion has consequently also tended to centre on the 'unholy trinity' of conservative Christianity, conservative politics and money, the instrumentalization of religion for political mobilization, and the more generally stifling effect that religious dogmatism can have on independent critical thinking. Illustrative examples of the treatment of all of these themes can be found throughout the work of US punk bands such as the Dead Kennedys, The Crucifucks, Bad Religion and NOFX, to name just a few.

Atheist popular musicians

The main conclusion to be drawn from our discussion so far is that, with the exception of punk and the slight exception of heavy metal, explicit atheist sentiment has remained uncommon across all major genres of Western popular music. Rather than characterizing entire genres, atheism is

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therefore a theme that transcends genres and largely tends to be rooted in the personal views of individual musicians. This is why any adequate account of atheism in/and popular music on the whole needs to be artist-focused rather than genre-focused.

Popular musicians' communication of atheist viewpoints tends to occur in two main ways: through song lyrics or statements made by individual musicians in media interviews or through other channels such as biographies and documentaries. There is, however, a notable difference between the two. When atheist views are expressed through song lyrics, they become an integral part of the music and the musical recording itself. When such views are expressed by individual musicians in 'extra-musical' settings such as interviews, however, they instead primarily become connected to individual musicians and their respective personal views about religion. While this difference needs to be acknowledged, it is equally important to recognize that these two main modes of communicating atheist views also can occur alongside one another in a mutually supporting manner. This, to put it simply, happens when popular musicians at least relatively consistently both sing *and* talk about their atheist and anti-religious views. Such cases should be of particular interest to anyone interested in exploring the relationship between atheism and popular music, which is why this will also be our main focus as we now move to consider the work and views of individual artists.

Ex-Beatle John Lennon

John Lennon (1940–80), one of the founding and leading members of the British rock band The Beatles, remains one of the most widely known figures in Western popular music history. The Beatles rose to international fame during the 'long 1960s' (approx. 1955–73) – a time of profound social and cultural transformation in the West. The time period witnessed the confluence of a range of highly influential new ideas and social movements that had a profound impact on people's religious sensibilities (McLeod 2007; Taylor 2007; Brown 2009) and that also become vividly reflected in the popular music of the time (e.g. Partridge 2013; Stahl 2015). This, then, was the broader socio-cultural context in which The Beatles emerged, thrived and ultimately dissolved. Well aware of their (at the time) almost unparalleled success, Lennon caused an uproar among some conservative circles in the United States after having stated in a 1966 interview originally published in the British *Evening Standard* that the band had become 'more popular than Jesus'. As the members of the band became more attuned to countercultural ideas, they also increasingly started to deal with, or at least allude to (primality Indian), religious and 'spiritual' themes in their music. Not insignificantly, in 1967 the band also began cultivating an ever-closer and increasingly public relationship with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, founder and leader of Transcendental Meditation.

After the break-up of the band in 1970, Lennon embarked on a solo career. At this time, he also began to express what could well be regarded as explicitly atheist views in several of his songs. Indeed, he might have been among the first world-famous artists ever to do so. For example, the lyrics to 'God' (1970), written in the first person, declare the narrator's non-belief in a long list of things, including Jesus, Buddha, the Bible and Gita. Similarly, the lyrics to 'I Found Out' (1970) paint a picture of religion and religious belief as something largely delusionary. Lennon's view of religion is nevertheless probably most famously articulated in his widely and enduringly popular

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'Imagine' (1971), which comes very close to articulating an explicitly atheist position, especially in the lyrics to its first and second verses.

Apart from the lyrics to some of his songs, Lennon also made critical remarks about religion in several widely publicized interviews. For example, in a 1971 interview with Tariq Ali and Robin Blackburn, he stated that his previous dabbling with Indian religion was 'directly the result of all that superstar shit – religion was an outlet for my repression' (Ali 2005: 365). In this interview he also related that he actually ultimately abandoned religion as a result of attending therapy, which forced him to confront and come to terms with his own past and upbringing. The therapy, he explained, 'forced me to have done with all the God shit'. As to how the experience had affected his musical work, he went on to state that he did indeed 'try to put some of it over on the album. But for me at any rate it was all part of dissolving the God trip or father-figure trip. Facing up to reality instead of always looking for some kind of heaven' (Ali 2005: 365).

One general conclusion to be drawn from the above is that, when Lennon expressed ideas critical of religion in song lyrics or when he talked about abandoning religion in interviews, he tended to do so with more direct reference to his own personal life. Rather than focusing on, for instance, the political dimensions of religion, his rejection of religion mainly came in the form of first-person accounts of individual thoughts and experiences. His rejection of religion was, in any case, clear and unambiguous enough for him to be considered an atheist artist. Due to his superstar status and wide appeal, his views also reached a vast, international audience.

Experimentalist Frank Zappa

US musician and composer Frank Zappa (1940–93), whose music encompassed and traversed multiple genres and styles, frequently voiced criticism of religion and religious institutions (Bertagnolli 2013: 722). By Zappa's own account, while raised Catholic, he turned away from religion already in his late teens. Most of his criticism of religion centred on two main themes: (1) the ways in which religion works to (and can be used to) suppress and stifle rational, independent thinking, and (2) what he saw as the corrupt alliance between conservative evangelical Christianity, money and politics in the United States. Throughout his career, Zappa dealt with these themes in numerous songs, often in a deliberately humoristic and mocking style. Particularly illustrative examples of this can be found in songs such as 'The Meek Shall Inherit Nothing', 'Mudd Club', 'Heavenly Bank Account' and 'Dumb All Over', all featured on the double album *You Are What You Is* (1980).

Apart from song lyrics, Zappa also frequently brought up religion in interviews. For example, in an oft-quoted interview for the April 1993 issue of *Playboy* he was asked about his Catholic upbringing, to which he replied:

> Well, I think it was possible to do what I've done only because I escaped the bondage of being a devout believer. To be a good member of the congregation, ultimately you have to stop thinking. The essence of Christianity is told to us in the Garden of Eden story. The fruit that was forbidden was on the tree of knowledge. The subtext is, All the suffering you have is because you wanted to find out what was going on. You could still be in the Garden of Eden if you had just kept your fucking mouth shut and hadn't asked any questions.
>
> *(Sheff 1993: 62)*

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Here, Zappa rejects the stifling effect of religion on independent thinking and inquiry while simultaneously emphasizing the intellectually liberating dimension of his own artistic endeavours. Indeed, he sometimes described his music as music for 'those who have outgrown the ordinary'. But, as noted, in addition to the topic of rational, independent thinking, he frequently also criticized the increasingly firm grip that conservative evangelicalism was gaining on the political establishment in the United States in the late 1970s leading up to Ronald Reagan's Religious Right- and Moral Majority-supported electoral victory in 1980 (see also Lowe 2006: 16). For example, he emphatically warned against growing conservative Christian political influence in an interview for Larry King Live in 1985. The following year, while participating in the CNN debate programme Crossfire on the theme of music censorship, he also further argued that the United States was developing into a 'fascist theocracy'.

While Zappa voiced anti-religious and sometimes explicitly atheist views in several interviews, the most detailed summation of his thinking on the topic can be found in the autobiographical *The Real Frank Zappa Book* (Zappa, with Occhiogrosso 1989), which includes a separate chapter on 'Church and State'. In the book, Zappa accounts for how he once even filed documentation for the registration of his own religion C.A.S.H. Church of American Secular Humanism in Montgomery, Alabama (although he eventually withdrew the filing). The documentation filed for C.A.S.H. included a list of 'tenets of belief' which, among others, stated that 'any belief in a deity or adherence to a religious system that is theistic is discouraged (but not forbidden) because of its emphasis on the unseen and transcendent' and 'that man is the center of the universe and all existence, and will act and be treated accordingly, unless evidence to the contrary be discovered through verifiable scientific inquiry' (Zappa, with Occhiogrosso 1989: 170).

In contrast to Lennon, Zappa's rejection and critique of religion were always less private and instead decidedly more focused on the value of independent thinking and especially the dangers he saw in the growing intermingling of religion and politics in the United States. Frequently encouraging people to vote and even to run for public office, it would be fair to say that Zappa's rejection and critique of religion also included an, at least implicit, activist slant. Although Zappa never attained a degree of fame and commercial appeal comparable to that of an artist like Lennon, he nevertheless garnered a substantial and dedicated international following. It is therefore fair to assume that his views on religion had considerable reach as well.

Electronica and ambient pioneer Brian Eno

British musician, composer and record producer Brian Eno (b. 1948) began his musical career in the 1970s as a member of the glam rock band Roxy Music, which he left after two albums to pursue a solo career. Soon thereafter, he delved into experimental, ambient, sound art and generative music. Eno is known for coining the term 'ambient' with his 1978 album *Ambient 1: Music for Airports* and has been highly influential in defining the genre for popular music audiences.

Eno has frequently publicly spoken about self-identifying as an atheist and even engaged in broadcast conversations with celebrity 'new atheist' Richard Dawkins (BBC Oxford 2009). His public atheism notwithstanding, he has also been open about his fondness for gospel music and, among other things, stated that he is often 'moved' by religious music and its ability to induce

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feelings of surrender and removal of the ego in listeners (Evans 2013; Red Bull 2013). His approach might thus be described as one that 'insist[s] on atheism when it comes to beliefs, but accept[s] practices which arise from "religious" and "spiritual" traditions' (Taira 2012: 401). Yet, even though he has become a major representative of a style of music that typically strives to convey a sense of ethereal calmness (Toop 2019: 6), Eno still describes himself as 'anti-mystical' (Evans 2013).

The similarities between ambient and the types of popular music that have become increasingly commonly employed in both institutional and non-institutional Western religious settings have been noted by numerous scholars (e.g. Evans 2013; Partridge 2013). For example, musically and sonically, both are characterized by the frequent employment of sound effects such as delay, reverb and deep bass, which work to evoke 'a sense of timelessness and space' (Partridge 2004: 176; see Chapter 36). During past decades, ambient has become particularly associated with various types of private 'inner' spiritual practices such as meditation, mindfulness and the like (e.g. Partridge 2004: 153, 166, 176). But since ambient is nearly always completely instrumental music, one would be hard pressed to glean any more specific 'religious' or 'spiritual' (or for that matter atheist) content from the music itself. Rather, the 'spiritual' affordances of ambient have emerged as the result of a gradual process whereby ambient has become culturally coded (as well as marketed) as a type of music that goes together with and can aid certain forms of 'spirituality' and 'spiritual' practice.

In light of the above, Eno presents a rather curious case: an avowed atheist who is also a major innovator and representative of a genre that has become ever more firmly culturally coded as 'spiritual' music, or at least as music that frequently goes along with certain types of, mainly private, spirituality and spiritual practice. We might perhaps therefore argue that Eno's music challenges the assumed boundaries between 'secular' and 'sacred' music in its own peculiar way. But here we are nevertheless confronted with a case where the atheist views of a particular artist derive wholly from the public statements and self-identification of that artist himself in ways that lack any evident connection to his music. Individual listeners might, of course, make any number of such connections on their own. And so, to the extent (if any) that the personal worldview of an artist will have an impact on how audiences experience, interpret or afford their music with any 'deeper meaning', Eno's publicly expressed atheist views might certainly have an impact on how some of his audiences interpret and understand his music.

Punk rocker Greg Graffin

The US punk band Bad Religion (1980–present), a staple of the California punk scene, has always been vocally critical of religion. Apart from the band name itself, Bad Religion's logo consists of a black cross inside a red forbidden sign. Criticism of the relationship between religion and money and religion and politics, religious hypocrisy and the incompatibility between religion and rational thinking have all constituted recurring themes in the band's lyrical repertoire ever since its early days. With a career spanning four decades and eighteen studio albums, the number of Bad Religion songs dealing with these types of themes has by now become too numerous to list. They range from more obviously religion-related songs like 'God Song' (1990) and 'Atheist Peace' (2004) to songs like 'Operation Rescue' (1990), which mocks the activities of the Kansas-based anti-abortion organization with the same name.

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Greg Graffin, the lead vocalist and principal lyricist of the band, openly admits that '[m]any Bad Religion songs could serve as a rallying cry for atheists', although he adds that the band has always consciously strived to 'shy away from blunt statements of revolution or cheap one-liners that lack depth or meaning' (Graffin & Olson 2010: 153). Graffin, who holds a PhD in Zoology from Cornell University, has also dealt with questions related to science, religion and worldviews in several scholarly and popular scientific writings. In 2006, an extended email correspondence between Graffin and Preston Jones, professor in history at the Christian John Brown University, was published as the book *Is Belief in God Good, Bad or Irrelevant?: A Professor and a Punk Rocker Discuss Science, Religion, Naturalism & Christianity* (Jones 2006). In 2010, his doctoral dissertation from 2002 was published under the new title *Evolution and Religion: Questioning the Beliefs of the World's Eminent Evolutionists*. The year 2010 also saw the publication of another work co-authored with accomplished popular science writer Steve Olson titled *Anarchy Evolution: Faith, Science, and Bad Religion in a World without God*. These highly suggestive titles aside, in all of these works, Graffin is careful to point out that he ascribes to a 'naturalist' view that extends beyond 'mere' atheism. For example, in *Anarchy Evolution* he states: 'I've never believed in God, which technically makes me an atheist (since the prefix "a" means "not" or "without")' (Graffin & Olson 2010: 127–8). He immediately goes on to point out, however, that he has 'problems with the word "atheism"' because it 'defines what someone is not rather than what someone is / … / Defining yourself as against something says very little about what you are for' (Graffin & Olson 2010: 127–8).

Graffin's focus therefore lies firmly on propagating for a, in his view, much broader science-based naturalist perspective. His reservations towards the label 'atheism' seem largely to derive from what he sees as its inability to provide an adequate foundation on which to 'build socially meaningful relations and institutions' (Graffin & Olson 2010: 127). This makes it possible for him to say 'I don't promote atheism in my songs' but rather a broader naturalist view on life and the world (Graffin & Olson 2010: 150). This, however, seems largely a matter of semantics. For when we view this statement against the broader backdrop of Bad Religion's repeated criticism of religion and prominent position within the US punk scene and the focus of Graffin's own literary production we could certainly argue that the band, irrespective of its or Graffin's own reservations about the term 'atheism', at the very least would *appear* to directly promote an openly atheist position among large sections of its fans and audiences.

Art-pop musician Björk

Icelandic singer Björk (b. 1965) is one of the most well-known turn-of-the-century art pop musicians. Following her solo debut already at the age of eleven, she was a member of a few bands before becoming part of Sugarcubes, a group that grew out of the post-punk band Kukl and Bad Taste arts collective (Fay 2001; Dibben 2009: 7–15). After the group dismantled in 1992 (Dibben 2009: 16), Björk embarked on a successful solo career as a singer-songwriter, producer and actress. The start of her solo career thus coincided with a broader rise of female singer-songwriters, such as Tori Amos and P. J. Harvey, whose singular styles have been described as 'angry' (Gindt 2011: 432). Critical of received ideas about sexuality, gender norms and beliefs, Björk has also been read as feminist and been described as 'taking on the hierarchical structures of male power' (Hawkins 1999: 50; Dibben 2009: 28).

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In addition to the above, Björk is known for expressing views indicating a general 'lack of religious belief' (*The Humanist* 2009). Her Icelandic origin and patriotic identity are often mentioned in scholarly analyses of her music, and especially as it relates to her music's perceived 'northenness' and mystical and pagan influences (Dibben 2009: 31–5; 40). While Björk has often utilized Icelandic musical and literary heritage as source material for her music (Dibben 2009: 35–9), she also appears to connect her worldview to late-modern shifts in the religious sensibilities of the Icelandic population. For example, in an oft-quoted interview, she stated that

> I've got my own religion […] The United Nations asked people from all over the world a series of questions. Iceland stuck out on one thing. When we were asked what do we believe, 90% said, "ourselves". I think I'm in that group. If I get into trouble, there's no God or Allah to sort me out. I have to do it myself.
>
> *(Fay 2001)*

Iceland is often mentioned as hosting one of the highest proportions of irreligious people and convinced atheists in the world (e.g. Beaman & Tomlins 2015), and thus Björk appears to conform to that characteristic as well. At the same time, she has also frequently brought up the centrality of nature for both her music and worldview. This is most clearly articulated in the lyrics to the songs on the album *Volta* (2007). In another interview she also, quite interestingly, stated that '[r]eligion isn't about speaking and it's not about people […] it's a cosmic thing about your place in nature and space' (McNair 2008). This statement can be interpreted as reflecting a scientific naturalist view of life and the universe where 'religion' simply refers to the 'natural' order of things. Alternatively, Björk's rejection of religion should perhaps instead mainly be understood as a rejection of Christianity and organized religion rather than all forms of religion and spiritual belief and practice per se (see McNair 2008; Watt 2021: 712–13). Her public statements and song lyrics have, in any case, been interpreted as atheist and been *used* by atheists in the past (Watt 2021: 712). This, we would argue, warrants the inclusion of Björk in a discussion of popular musicians dealing with atheism. Fact also remains that Björk, in spite of often being somewhat ambiguous when it comes to her views on religion, has both sung and talked about religion in a consistently critical tone.

Rocker Shirley Manson

Shirley Manson (b. 1966), the Scottish singer and frontwoman of the US rock band Garbage, has framed her resignation from organized religion as – to borrow from the late bell hooks – a critique of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Garbage (1994–present) rose to fame in the mid-to-late 1990s with the albums *Garbage* (1995) and *Version 2.0*. (1998). The band's seventh, and as of this writing latest, studio album *No Gods No Masters* from 2021 provides critical commentary on a range of contemporary issues, including religion. It is also worth noting that the album's title borrows a well-known punk slogan that communicates an anti-establishment ideology. Of the title track, Manson says:

> I sing […] "No masters or gods to obey," […] that seemed like the perfect title for the whole record because of what was going on socially at the time. There was just

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> so much dissent and rebellions against governments and the people really rising up, whether it was the Me Too movement, the Black Lives Matter movement – it was a glorious, beautiful thing to see.
>
> *(Apple Music n.d)*

Manson describes the album as a critique of patriarchy, capitalism, racism, sexism and misogyny (Turman 2021). In this, her stance reflects a historically well-established link between feminism and atheism as a form of resistance against patriarchal religious institutions (Overall 2007; Trzebiatowska 2019: 477). The critical tone of the album coupled with frequent references to religious and Christian terminology in many of its songs easily reads as atheist; society's shortcomings are intertwined with those of religion. For example, in 'Waiting for God', the narrator waits for God to show up and God seemingly never does. The song is, according to Manson, about systemic racism and its lethal consequences (Apple Music n.d.).

As illustrated above, Manson has mainly come to connect her rejection of religion to political struggles and resistance against social injustices. Her journey away from religion nonetheless began already at a very early point in her life. She has publicly talked about growing up in a devoutly Presbyterian family with a father who was a Sunday school teacher (Blake 1998: 56) and recounted the 'slow eradication' of her faith during the course of her teenage years (Reilly 2021). When asked if she is a 'religious person' in a 2016 interview for *Classic Rock Magazine*, she replied:

> The logical side of me believes something created everything. What that is I don't know, and I'm certainly not going to worship it. […][O]ur differences [as humans] are so minimal. Religion takes these differences and magnifies them to the point where we can't get along.
>
> *(quoted in Chamberlain 2016)*

Although Manson's views have certainly developed over the years, she has maintained a consistently critical and sometimes openly dismissive stance towards religion. But with the exception of the title of the band's latest album and a few individual songs like the already-mentioned 'Waiting for God' or the early 'As Heaven Is Wide' (1995), atheism and the rejection of religion do not constitute particularly prominent themes in Garbage's music. In Manson, we therefore have a case of a frontwoman who has been consistently critical of religion throughout her musical career even though she only occasionally expresses that criticism through her music. But similar to Eno, considering how consistently vocal Manson has been about her rejection of religion, it is fair to assume that at least some of Garbage's audiences might read the band's music as a reflection of her views.

Rappers Greydon Square and Khid

Numerous US hip hop artists have grown up in the black church and the hip hop genre contains ample examples of religious discourse from openly devout artists like Lauryn Hill and Kanye West to more implicitly religious artists like Nas (see, e.g., Miller et al. 2015; see also Chapter 26). Nevertheless, there are exceptions to the rule.

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In terms of lyrical output, US artist Greydon Square is one of the most explicitly atheist artists in hip hop. Hailing from the Californian city of Compton, Square describes combining his worldview with hip hop in ways similar to many previous Muslim rappers. Many Black Americans who have been critical of the role that Christianity has played in upholding white supremacy have turned to Islam, and Square's anti-racist stance is an atheist one for similar reasons (Rantakallio 2013: 28; Rausch 2016). He is a member of the international secular hip hop activist Anti-Injustice Movement and describes himself as 'a voice for critical thinking and scepticism' (Rausch 2016). In 2013, he also joined forces with Taskrok, Tombstone da Deadman, Syqnys, Johnny Hoax, Gripp and Lady Assassin on their single '2013 Atheist Dreadnought' (2012). In his song 'Molotov' (2007), Square also addresses negative stereotypes of atheists as Satan worshippers, which are still somewhat common in some fundamentalist Christian circles, both in the West and elsewhere (e.g. Herman 1997: 89). By speaking of Christianity as the religion of slave owners, he adds a critical historical argument to his propagation for an atheist position. At times, he has also brought attention to the enduring persistence of negative stereotypes about Black people within the wider atheist community (Rausch 2016).

In comparison to the United States, in secularized Northern Europe, advocating for an atheist position is less controversial. Openly atheist white Finnish rapper-producer Khid (b. 1985), who also performs under the moniker D. J. Kridlokk, provides an illustrative example. He openly states that he has 'never been religious' and also appears to regret having employed language associated with religion and Christianity in the lyrics to some of his older songs (quoted in Rantakallio 2019: 146–7, translated from the Finnish original). Khid expressly takes the view that his music needs to be congruent with his atheistic worldview. While explicitly atheist lyrics in his music are scarce, in his song 'Harha' (Illusion), he raps about his inability to relate to spirituality (Khid 2016). 'Illusion' and 'delusion', it is worth noting, are terms that atheists frequently use when discussing religion. Additionally, Khid connects his worldview to a deliberate resignation from hip hop's authenticity discourse of 'keeping it real', calling it hip hop's 'religion'. According to Khid, being truly authentic as a rapper and artist requires shunning away from established norms and creeds of that sort. Indeed, according to him, blind and unreflective adherence to such norms needs to be regarded as inauthentic 'larping'. In making this statement, Khid is effectively claiming an antagonistic underground rapper identity via his atheist identification (Rantakallio 2019: 294–6).

Whereas Greydon Square's stance towards religion appears to be primarily rooted in his anti-racism efforts, Khid's atheism seems more connected to personal authenticity (see Rantakallio 2019: 314). As such, Square's atheism mainly takes the form of social and anti-establishment critique, whereas Khid's views speak to personal values about music making and artistic integrity. The profiles of these two respective artists therefore provide quite different illustrations of the presence of atheist positions within the world of hip hop.

Concluding remarks

This chapter has aimed to provide a broad-sketch overview of the presence and visibility of atheist viewpoints within Western popular music since the early 1970s to the present day, mainly in light of the views of a group of individual artists representing different styles and genres. As

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our discussion has shown, when artists have expressed such views they have done so in either more explicit or implicit ways. At the more explicit end, we find artists like Lennon, Zappa, Graffin, Square and Khid who have not only dealt with atheist themes in their music but also frequently talked about their rejection of religion in interviews for various types of media, thereby establishing a more direct connection between their personal views and their artistic endeavours. But while Zappa, Graffin and Square provide examples of artists who primarily relate their atheist views to broader social and political issues, Lennon and Khid instead provide examples of artists who primarily relate their rejection of religion to their own personal lives and experiences. On the less explicit end, find artists such as Eno, Björk and Manson whose rejection of religion is frequently brought up in interviews but is less evidently present in their music. These, we need to recognize, constitute cases where the label 'atheism' arguably loses some of its heuristic value in that some of these artists might equally well be described as 'non-religious' rather than atheist per se. For example, the label is clearly more descriptive of an artist like Eno who has (in spite of his stated fondness for religious music) repeatedly self-identified as an atheist when compared to an artist like Björk whose views have always been decidedly more ambiguous in this regard. The case of Manson falls somewhere in-between. While her personal rejection of religion has been both consistent and straightforward, it occupies a less visible position in Garbage's music. But the ways in which Manson directly connects her rejection of religion to the MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements could perhaps nonetheless be viewed as an example of the mainstreaming of atheist or anti-religious viewpoints *via* broader socio-political grassroots movements.

As our discussion in this chapter has also illustrated, atheism remains a problematic and contested term. One main difficulty has to do with the fact that it remains common for people, popular musicians included, to express views that fit hand-in-glove with standard dictionary-type definitions of atheism while simultaneously distancing themselves from the label due to its perceived negative connotations. Overall, the relationship between atheism and popular music has so far received only very limited scholarly attention. In our view, future scholarship could usefully focus on mapping the field further in order to provide more meaningful categorizations to guide future research. In this chapter we have offered three general and provisional observations to that effect: (1) that explicitly atheist viewpoints remain rare across major Western popular music genres; (2) that the theme of atheism largely transcends genres; and (3) that there are often considerable variations to be observed when it comes to the extent to which individual artists who hold atheist views also use their music as a vehicle for the expression of these views.

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