

Feature Article: JAG060

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO GOTH

by Marcia Montenegro

This article first appeared in the *Christian Research Journal*, volume 29, number 1 (2006). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: <http://www.equip.org>

SYNOPSIS

Goth (or gothic) culture has been around for about 25 years, yet those who belong to it remain misunderstood. Goths wear dark clothing, which, together with their sometimes unusual appearance, often causes people to fear them. Goths tend to be nonviolent people who are not involved in Satanism, although many Christians mistakenly assume that they are. They do not subscribe to particular goth beliefs (another misperception); in reality, goth culture is not a belief system, but a subculture that arose from England's angry, rebellious punk movement in the late 1970s. Goth sensibilities were prominent first in brooding music, but since then, goths have adopted different types of music with no clear agreement on what goth music is. Goths express themselves creatively not only in music, but also in poetry, art, fashion, and their unique brand of dark, ironic humor. Goths flourish by being outside the mainstream and resisting labels and popular cultural trends. Goth culture is not monolithic but rather diverse, with many types, musical styles, and varied spiritual beliefs. Consequently, there are goth pagans, goth Wiccans, and even goth Christians, as well as the darker offspring of goth, the vampire subculture, which some goths disavow as part of gothdom. The original goths often dismiss the present generation's claims to gothdom, and there is continuing debate on what goth is and what it is not. This ongoing dialogue and disparity may be what keeps goth alive; it suggests that goth is not stagnant or rigid but adapting to changes by successive generations. Christians have a responsibility to acknowledge the goth culture and to be willing to respond to individuals who are involved in these lifestyles with the love and truth of Christ.

"It was a dark and stormy night" would be a fitting way to start an article on goth. There are probably few subculture movements in society today that result in as many misconceptions and fears as does gothic, or goth, culture. When people hear the word goth, some immediately envision black clothes, pale faces, and tattoos, while others connect it to something more menacing, such as vampires. Some equate goth with the modern witchcraft religion of Wicca; others equate it with Satanism. Goth is a cultural phenomenon rather than a religious one, though many beliefs are found among goths, ranging from agnostic to Wiccan to Christian beliefs.

Goths (also called gothics) resist labels, and have no authority figures or leaders, but they do have some characteristics in common, such as appreciating the arts, being creative, being introspective (not necessarily introverted), being antitrend, and rejecting the status quo and the artificial. Goths embrace the darker side of culture. Think cemeteries. Think melancholy. Think of the 1994 movie, "The Crow."

In contrast to "Have a nice day," the statement "Life is dark, life is sad, all is not well, and most people you meet will try to hurt you" resonates more with goths.¹ One goth put it this way: "Goth stands in direct opposition to the hippie 'free love,' 'be happy' attitude."²

WHENCE COMETH GOTH?

The word *Goth*, historically, is linked to the barbaric tribes that invaded the Roman Empire from the north, initiating the so-called Dark Ages; thus, *goth* became associated with something dark and outside civilization.³ Modern goths have little in common with these early nomadic raiders, yet they situate themselves outside the mainstream culture, as did the warrior Goths of old. One present-day goth writer points out, "Goths are often feared and shunned, usually viewed as sinister, unwholesome...crude by the polished plastic standards of the status quo."⁴ Like the original Goths, today's goths "dwell in their own realm...apart from the rest of the world."⁵

Goth's more recent roots rose from an identification with Victorian gothic novels and sentiments found in the writings of Edgar Allan Poe, Mary Shelley, John Keats, Lord Byron, and others who lamented the pains of lost love and the inner wounds inflicted by a cruel society. The modern gothic movement's clearest connection, however, is the *punk* scene of late 1970s England. The original punk movement was famously outside the mainstream and was derisive of commercial music, trendy hair and fashion, and the mores and morals of culture. It expressed itself primarily through what seemed to be chaotic music, spiked and brightly dyed hair, multiple body piercings, and anarchic politics.

Goth was first visible as a post-punk movement launched mainly through the musical group, Bauhaus, who played in a London club called Batcave.⁶ Other musical groups contributing to the goth scene were Siouxsie and the Banshees, Sisters of Mercy, and the Cure. The word *goth*, used for fans of gothic rock, was not in vogue until about 1983.⁷ Gothdom blossomed in the 1980s, displayed in black clothing, body piercings, fetish fashion, and goth clubs, such as the Bank in New York City, where goths gathered to hear goth music and meet with others of like mind. The punks had been anarchic and attacked the culture; the goths were brooding and withdrew from the culture.

Goths are outsiders who cherish their outcast status and fashion their own world from what society has rejected. As one goth told me, "For the most part, goths just want to be left alone."⁸ Another said, "I tend more to blend in to a crowd, which gains me the isolation I need to do what we do best—watch."⁹ Wearing black renders one less visible—black is the noncolor, or the anticolor, a supreme symbol of gothic outlook. Goths do not seek approval from society; in fact, they consider such approval to be the kiss of death.

GETTING GOTHIC: IS BLACK NAIL POLISH NECESSARY?

Many imagine that being goth means merely wearing black clothing and black nail polish, but gothic culture goes deeper. It is more of an "aesthetic, a viewpoint, even a lifestyle, its tradition a legacy of subversion and shadow."¹⁰ It is further described as "sophisticated barbarism" that "uses darkness to illuminate" and is "the unholy, the uncanny, the unnatural."¹¹ Goths see beauty in what the social order considers ugly or unsettling, whether it be dark clothes, taboos in behavior, that which is eerie or in shadows, and even death. One Web site states that "one of Goth's defining characteristics is the need to take the underlying darkness that is in all of us and bring it into the light in such a way as we can recognize it as what it is—an integral part of all of us, for better or for worse."¹²

This love affair with darkness can become mawkish and goths are well aware of this. They often display a strong sense of camp and comic irony about themselves. This is easy to see in one goth writer who peppers his book with statements such as, "Read this while I pretend to kill myself," and with section titles such as, "Dude looks like the matrix!" and "Gothic makeover."¹³

Yet another goth writer defines goth as a "state of mind" that "embraces what the normal world shuns."¹⁴ This is probably as good a succinct definition of goth culture as any.

There are many stereotypes and misconstructions of what goth is. After the Columbine shootings, the media reported that the shooters, who had dressed in long, black trenchcoats, had been goths. I, along with others, did not believe that the Columbine killers were goth at all.¹⁵ Goths lean toward the artistic and peaceful, not the violent or vengeful; goths reject culture, but are not in active rebellion against it. The Columbine killers were angry loners with a cache of weapons. Their dark clothing and fondness for heavy industrial music gave many the misleading impression that they were goths, but it takes more than

black clothing and certain musical preferences to be goth. As goth writer Voltaire says, goths are more likely to commit suicide than homicide, though he admits (with characteristic goth humor) that instead of suicide, goths would “rather contemplate suicide and then just write a really bad poem about it.”¹⁶

Goths might wear black clothing, black boots, black nail polish and lipstick, dye their hair raven black streaked with purple, red, or green, and wear unusual jewelry or accessories such as spiked dog collars, or they might not wear any of this. A symbol commonly seen in goth culture is the *ankh*, an Egyptian symbol made from a cross topped by a loop, representing the Egyptian concept of immortality.¹⁷ Some identify with the Victorian Romantic period and dress accordingly in nineteenth-century clothing. Many goths are into the music and club scene, some dressing in extreme outfits. Others simply express their goth nature through poetry and artistic endeavors. In fact, an Internet search for goth will turn up numerous sites heavily centered on goth poetry.

Goths vary in their style and enjoy defying stereotypes, even of themselves. It would be a mistake to envision goths as a monolithic group who like the same music, or dress and think the same way. Although black clothes and certain styles of hair or accessories are common among goths, each goth is unique and has his or her own way of expressing “gothness.” Some identify more with the outward appearance while others immerse themselves deeply into goth culture.

The variety of goths make it difficult to define what goth is, but the starting point is inward, not outward. It is the sense of disconnection from mainstream culture, and an embrace of what is considered taboo or rejected by society. One teen goth said, “I think all humans are fascinated by evil, and the forbidden. That’s why people stare at me in the street; they want to ask me questions so badly. I wish they would, I’d love to answer them. I’d love to let people know that the Goth lifestyle is not only beautiful, but also wise and culturally valuable. And that small-minded people are killing it.”¹⁸

POETRY AND COFFINS: FROM ROMANTIC TO VAMPIRIC

Music was seminal for the goth scene at the beginning, and after the initial poignant and melancholy style of goth music, goth tastes ran to New Wave, industrial music, or even rave. Goth culture varies in musical tastes from the haunting Darkwave to more industrial groups like Skinny Puppy or Nine Inch Nails. Goth music has given birth to a progeny of styles such as EtherGoth, ElectroGoth, Orchestral Gothic Metal, GothPop, PerkyGoth, GlamGoth, Zombie Rock, and others.¹⁹ It is now increasingly tricky to identify what goth music is, or to link one kind of musical style to goth.²⁰

Goth has been around long enough for some devotees to consider the original goth movement—the old school—as the true goth period and themselves as the only true goths. Subsequent claims to gothdom by a younger generation are rejected as fake or at least inferior by the older generation. Those who may look goth but fall short of the real thing are called *poseurs*. Author Kilpatrick notes that being goth is not a phase: “For most goths, a goth is a goth for life.”²¹

One area where the split over what constitutes goth is seen is with rocker Marilyn Manson. Many teen goths identify Manson as goth, but many adult (or original) goths tend to dismiss him as a mere shock rocker.²² Some goths reject Manson, they say, because he is too commercial, his music is not truly gothic, and he achieved fame and popularity. Popularity is antithetical to goth.²³ With his black clothes and bizarre trappings, industrial-type music, avowed rejection of society’s mores, ties to the Church of Satan, and outcast persona, however, Manson continues to draw teen fans who consider themselves goth (although many of his fans increasingly are not goth).

Manson fans say they like him for being an intelligent individual who does not try to please society.²⁴ They say that he reveals the hypocrisy and artificial veneer of our culture. Manson once said that he gets the kids America throws away, and this resonated with a lot of teens. One fan wrote, “I love the music, it tells the truth. You just have to be smart enough to know how to interpret the songs.”²⁵ Another admirer said, “One of his main messages is to not follow the calls and boundaries of others, but to make up one’s own mind.”²⁶ And yet another explained what Manson is all about: “He builds himself up like a symbol of all bad, corrupt and fake things in America, and sings lyrics with ironical themes but with true

meanings. When the Christian American mothers say they hate him, he just replies: 'Well, then you hate yourself, because I am an imitation of you'...(pretty smart I think)."²⁷

Goth musician and writer Voltaire humorously designates several types of goths with names such as Romantigoth, Cybergoth, Candygoth, Deathrocker, and Vampyre.²⁸ Another goth writer categorizes goths into groups such as blood drinker, Diva, industrial, fetish, graver, elder goth, kindergoth, punky goth, cemetery goth, corporate goth, Ubergoth, Christian goth, Pagan/Wicca goth, and several others.²⁹

Goths often take a special goth name; for example, transforming from Laura into "Raven" or from Jeremy into "Dark Angel." They might borrow names from vampire or Gothic novels, or from biographical figures such as the mad Russian monk Rasputin.³⁰ The purpose is to have a name to suit their gothic persona, and ideally, the name should be "dark, mysterious, sexy, and romantic," with extra points if it evokes "an air of nobility."³¹

Spiritual beliefs vary widely, with agnosticism seeming to predominate. There are, however, goth pagans,³² goth Wiccans, atheists, goths involved in Eastern beliefs, a very small number of Satanists, and Christian goths. Goth pagans and goth Wiccans are becoming more common. The category of Christian goth might surprise Christians, but in many cases Christian goths became goths before they became Christians and find that they still relate to the goth style and outlook.³³

There can be a dark(er) side to goth—vampirism. Vampyres³⁴ are a subset of the goth scene, though many goths reject vampyres as such and dislike being associated with them, finding it embarrassing. Vampyres may dress in capes, play a live action role-playing game such as "Vampire: The Masquerade,"³⁵ wear artificial fangs,³⁶ and may or may not drink blood from a voluntary donor. There are vampyre games that incorporate their own mythology and belief system. There is disagreement among vampyres as to what a real vampyre is. Some merely play the part in clubs or in games, or are into fetish scenes. Some belong to groups, called clans.³⁷ There are those who claim vampyrism as a medical condition that causes them to shun the sun or to crave blood. Others believe that a true vampyre is initiated by another vampyre, often through a blood-drinking ritual. Still others believe that one is born a vampyre. Some vampyres do not drink blood and reject this as a part of vampyrism, while others claim that it is essential.³⁸ Then there are the psychic vampyres who allege that they gather their "life force" from psychically feeding off people's life energy. The psychic vampyres often e-mail me to insist that they are the true vampyres, while the blood-drinking vampyres do the same.³⁹

Some vampyres believe that they are not human, and that they have reached a state of immortality. This nonhuman status is possibly an ironic reaction to, or comment on, the dehumanization of our fast-paced and increasingly impersonal society, where shifts in relationships are casual and constant. The vampyre seems to say, if society treats us as nonhuman, then nonhuman we will become. Sometimes the vampyre guise is a way to reject others before others reject them, or a way to hide pain under a seemingly forbidding persona. The vampyre underground, although it is an extreme form of goth counterculture, does exist, despite the fact that it is not commonly known, and despite the fact that society may not want to believe it exists.

GOTHS TODAY: IS GOTH STILL UNDEAD?

Though the heyday of gothdom seems to have subsided, goth culture lives on. Some believe it has become mainly a fashion trend with no substance, but many still identify themselves as goth, goth Web sites proliferate, and books have come out in recent years delineating the goth way of life. These books examine gothic history, music, dress, movies, literature, icons, and more. According to one expert, goths are found in the United States, Canada, most of Europe, the Far East, and South America.⁴⁰ A special hot spot for goths was New Orleans. New Orleans was the home of Anne Rice, author of *Interview with a Vampire* and other books, and is also the setting for many of her novels and for the movie, "Interview with a Vampire."⁴¹ One New Orleans tour guide notes that Anne Rice fans "sporting vampire garb with pale makeup and black lipstick are just part of the scenery here."⁴²

Aside from Rice's novels, goths are drawn to the horror works of Poe and H. P. Lovecraft; to dark movies such as "Edward Scissorhands," "Beetlejuice," and "The Matrix"; to vampire movies such as "The Hunger"; and to various role-playing games. These books, movies, and games feature characters who are

misfits, outcasts, vampires, or otherwise outside mainstream society. Rice perhaps can be credited with crafting the contemporary vampire figure into the ultimate antihero, a figure of power who inspires terror yet who also suffers a doomed status, and is beset by inner turmoil, conflicting desires, and the eventual pain of being forever shunned by society. The price for immortality is high.

Tensions exist between the original goths of the early days and those today who claim gothdom. A goth Web site observes that the Internet is tying together the "Olde" school of goth and the new, although it also acts as a "battleground between them." The site states that the new school has "an increased drive towards the creativity and self-expression that the Olde School goths hold in such high esteem," and adds that the new school goths, "or Goffs as many of them have begun to call themselves, have become more like the originals than either side of the schism seems to wish to admit. Hopefully this trend will continue...bringing fresh blood and a new outlook to...the dark undercurrents of our society's imagination."⁴³

Despite the popular perception that goth is simply a matter of style, there remains a sense that it goes deeper than appearance, even among teens. An 18-year-old Manson fan told me that even though she dresses in goth style and most people would consider her goth, she herself does not think she qualifies. She said, "Goth, like most cultures can go pretty deep, past music and appearance, I have not gone past that myself. So depending on how you want to define goth...I would still say I'm not."⁴⁴ A Manson fan, wanting to be goth but disliking labels, says, "I wanted to consider myself goth, because I thought Manson was goth. But now I think the word 'gothic' is more of a label on people than a religion, or belief."⁴⁵ On one hand, we have a careful use of the term *goth*, whereas on the other, there is the equally strong dislike of the goth label.

It may be that this ongoing disagreement and debate among goths of different generations is what keeps the goth culture thriving. The fact that a younger generation is making its own claims on goth shows that it continues to have appeal, rather than being unable to adapt. It is not seen, at least by younger goths, as just something for 25 years ago, but remains relevant to how they want to express themselves today.⁴⁶ Goth writer Voltaire believes that goth culture will have a moment in the sun and then slip back into the underground from whence it came.⁴⁷

Attempts to define or pigeonhole goth go against the goth grain. The goth culture is resistant to examination. An example of this resistance to the spotlight is goth clubs; as soon as they become well identified or popular, the real goths flee for lesser-known hangouts. Goth is antitrend. To a certain extent, when goth is dissected, it is no longer goth, and goths would have it no other way. As the author of *The Goth Bible* says, "Goth is one of the premier artistic movements of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and true artists are, by nature, unique and unpredictable."⁴⁸

RESPONDING TO GOTHS

The first thing you as a Christian should do in responding to goths is to set aside stereotypes, especially any misconceptions that goths are Satanists or violent. Goths are usually gentle people.

Second, you should not be unsettled by how the goth person appears. The dark clothing often belies a friendly spirit. The more extreme goth styles may be off-putting to some, but it is important to see the goth as a person first. Showing distaste for their appearance only confirms to goths their suspicions that Christians dislike or fear them. Like anyone else, goths want to be treated respectfully.

The third thing to be careful to do is to see each goth as an individual. As pointed out earlier, goths may look alike in the way they dress, but it is important to bear in mind that each one is a unique person created in the image of God. Approaching a goth as an individual is much more respectful and productive than viewing him or her as just part of a subculture.

It would also be an error to think that the goth person is someone who feels rejected by society. Many goths do not feel rejected at all; rather, they feel they merely do not fit into the mainstream mold, or they find it shallow.

It is best to talk to goths in the context of relationships. Find out their interests; goths typically enjoy discussing books, music, movies, or their own creative pursuits. A useful question to ask is why the

person became goth. Ask what they think goth is and what they like about goth. Each of these questions opens doors to understanding their views and what it is that they seem to have found in being goth.

Goths are usually very interesting to talk to, and hearing their perspectives on society and life can be both challenging and stimulating. The goth culture can be commended for its acknowledgement of the “dark” side of life—the unpleasant and ugly realities that society often ignores or denies—and of death. These two issues can be good starting points for dialogue. A true goth, for example, will have reflected on the significance of death. From a biblical perspective this involves the fact that death is our enemy—an enemy that Jesus Christ has utterly defeated through His own death and resurrection. Perhaps a goth might be especially suited to appreciate what Jesus Christ has accomplished in this regard.

Goths often are willing to discuss spiritual topics. Listen respectfully and share your own experiences and beliefs as part of the conversation. Keep in mind that many goths have Christian backgrounds, though these might be only nominally Christian or possibly legalistic forms of Christianity. If their background is Christian, discover what turned them away from Christianity. Find out what their understanding of Christianity is. Be sensitive to bad experiences they may have had with Christians or misunderstandings of the Christian faith.

Goths will listen to reasons for your faith if you show them respect and demonstrate sincere interest in them. It is a mistake to focus on clothing or worry about their looks if you invite them to your church. They should be welcomed into your church regardless of their appearance.

Due to the fact that there are a variety of spiritual views among goths, it is impractical to address how to respond to those differing beliefs here. Ask questions about their beliefs and see where that leads. Whether the goth holds agnostic, Wiccan, or other beliefs, remember that we as Christians are representatives of Christ and that others should see Christ in us.

If Jesus were doing ministry today, would He be reaching out to goths and engaging in dialogue with them? I believe He most definitely would be.

NOTES

1. Voltaire, *What Is Goth?* (Boston, MA: Weiser Books, 2004), x.
2. RedNight, e-mail message to author, November 2, 2002.
3. Voltaire, 11.
4. Nancy Kilpatrick, *The Goth Bible* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2004), 13.
5. Ibid.
6. Wikipedia, s.v. “Goth,” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goth>. Bauhaus’s famous goth song was “Bela Lugosi’s Dead,” released in 1979; for lyrics, see Alicia Porter Smith, “Origin of Gothic,” *A Study of Gothic Subculture*, <http://www.darkwaver.com/subculture/origin.php>.
7. Ibid.
8. RedNight, e-mail message to author, November 2, 2002.
9. The Marquis de Omni, e-mail message to author, October 3, 2001. This e-mailer identified himself as goth and as a vampire.
10. Gavin Baddeley, *Goth Chic: A Connoisseur’s Guide to Dark Culture* (London: Plexus Publishing Limited, 2002), 10.
11. Ibid., 19.
12. Azhrarn, “Defining Goth: Origins of Modern Gothic Culture,” *blood-dance*, <http://blood-dance.net/goth/origins.html>.
13. Voltaire, viii, 22, 58.
14. Kilpatrick, 1.
15. See relevant articles on the Columbine shootings at “Gothic from the Christian Perspective,” *ChristianGoth.com*, <http://www.christiangoth.com/trenchcoat.html>.
16. Voltaire, 86.
17. This symbol is even more common in the gothic vampire subculture.
18. Name confidential, e-mail message to author, December 2, 2001.
19. Voltaire, 92.
20. Ibid., 2.
21. Kilpatrick, 24.
22. I base this conclusion on numerous conversations with teen and adult goths, both in person and by e-mail.
23. Voltaire, 90–91; Kilpatrick, 89.
24. I base this conclusion on numerous conversations with Manson fans, both in person and by e-mail.
25. Wendell, e-mail message to author, January 19, 2002.
26. James, e-mail message to author, January 5, 2002.
27. Julian, e-mail message to author, February 1, 2002.

28. Voltaire, 4–9.
29. Kilpatrick, 18–26.
30. Voltaire, 37.
31. Ibid.
32. For more on goth paganism, see Elizabeth Barrette, “Gothic Paganism,” An Exploration of Dark Paganism, <http://www.waningmoon.com/darkpagan/lib/lib0022.shtml>
33. It is beyond the scope and purpose of this article to describe Christian goth. For extensive information on this topic, see ChristianGoth.com, <http://www.christiangoth.com/>.
34. Many in this subculture prefer the spelling “vampyre” to distinguish themselves from the fictional and stereotypical views of vampires; however, there are those who consider “vampyre” to be pretentious and prefer the original spelling.
35. There are players of this game who take on the vampyre persona only for purposes of the game.
36. A few actually take the step of having their incisors sharpened to look like fangs.
37. Vampire role-playing games often designate several types of clans, each with its own special attributes and talents. The term *kindred* is used in some games to identify the players.
38. Evidence and testimonies from this group indicate that blood is provided by voluntary donors only.
39. For further information, see Marcia Montenegro, “The Vampyre Underground,” CANA, http://cana.userworld.com/cana_vampyre1.html; Katherine Ramsland, *Piercing the Darkness: Undercover with Vampires in America Today* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998); Jeff Guinn with Andy Grieser, *Something in the Blood: The Underground World of Today’s Vampires* (Arlington, TX: The Summit Publishing Group, 1996); and Rosemary Ellen Guiley, *Vampires among Us* (New York: Pocket Books/Simon and Schuster, 1991).
40. Kilpatrick, 3.
41. Wikipedia notes that Anne Rice’s novels have been “a major influence on the Goth youth subculture,” s.v., “Anne Rice,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anne_Rice.
42. “Anne Rice’s New Orleans,” Fodor’s, http://www.fodors.com/miniguides/mgresults.cfm?destination=new_orleans@110&cur_section=fea&feature=30007.
43. Azhrarn.
44. Kathy, e-mail message to author, June 12, 2005.
45. Anonymous, e-mail message to author, June 21, 2005.
46. When young people e-mail me about a goth topic, I ask if they are goth, or if they think Manson is goth. They answer easily, and have no problem accepting and identifying goth as something they can recognize.
47. Voltaire, 93.
48. Kilpatrick, 3.