Hip Hop and Religion: Gangsta Rap's Christian Rhetoric

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Abstract: *This article analyzes gangsta rap discourse through the lens of rhetorical studies to reveal central features of its Christian religious ethos. The religious rhetorical output of many gangsta rappers, both textual and visual, reveals a religious ethos containing a form of religious phronesis (practical wisdom). This ethos has three central telling characteristics: solidarity with Jesus formed through the common theme of suffering; a mistrust of organized religion; and the presence of a psycho-social battle between good and evil, analyzed here through the examples of DMX and Mase.*

Keywords: *Rap*, *hip hop*, *religion*, *Christianity*, *music*, *rhetoric*, *gangsta*, *suffering*, *struggle*, *inner city*, *phronesis*, *black*, *African American*

> Indeed, gangsta rap's in-your-face style may do more to force our nation to confront crucial social problems than countless sermons or political speeches.
>
> —Michael Eric Dyson (2008, 181)

Religiosity[1] is an important part of individual and social identity. The pervasiveness of religious thought, rhetoric, and symbolism is seen in its deep-rooted connections to historical, social, political, and popular discourse and action. In hip hop culture, important and telling connections exist between that culture's discourse and religious thinking and symbolism. This resource of social agency, in this case rap, can both be revealing and formative. Hip hop music and culture are telling sources of religious identity and can teach us much about the religious ethos of those who produce and closely identify with them.

More specifically and intriguingly, a subgenre of rap music, gangsta rap, known mainly for its crude and violent rhetoric, also contains a vast amount of religious discourse and imagery. Religious discourse and gangsta rap may be seen as an incompatible paradox to some, but rhetorical analysis reveals a complicated and layered connection in which the producers of gangsta rap, and those who strongly identify with its message, attempt to reconcile personal and social marginalization with aspects of religious thought. This paradox of religious discourse and gangsta discourse is played out under the umbrella of a community—the gangsta hip hop community—that struggles within a socially and economically marginalized realm while being connected to communities that stress hope through religion.

It is important to first establish a working definition of the term "gangsta rap." Here, it will be defined as the subgenre (and subculture) of hip hop that is dominated by rebellion and an outlaw mentality, and has the common elements of violence, drugs and drug dealing, sex and misogyny, and an unrelenting fight for physical and linguistic respect. Furthermore, gangsta rappers, and those who closely identify with their message, most often come from

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poor, inner-city neighbourhoods and are usually African American or Latino/Latina. In fact, the very few Caucasian gangsta rappers who have been successful and *accepted* within hip hop culture have had their gangsta ethos legitimized by the fact that they came from poor, minority neighbourhoods.[2] Central to the discussion here is that gangsta rappers, coming from African American and Latino/Latina communities, are brought up in environments where many use religion (mainly Christianity) as a means of understanding and getting through life and social ordeals. This is not to say that gangsta rappers are very religious, in the sense that they are connected to organized religious activities, but there is ample evidence in textual and visual form to show that religion does indeed play a role in their worldviews.

It is in this religious rhetorical output of gangsta rap where a religious ethos is revealed—an ethos containing three main characteristics. One characteristic is a strong solidarity with Jesus Christ and an embracing of Him as a symbol of suffering and marginalization. On a basic level, gangsta rappers predominantly embrace the life of Jesus because, simply put, Christianity is the predominant religion of African American and Latino/Latina communities in the United States. On a more profound level, Jesus and His life story are embraced because they point to suffering caused by a seemingly unjust society and because they represent meaning in suffering and hope beyond suffering. A second dominant characteristic of gangsta rap's religious ethos is that while it glorifies the life and suffering of Jesus, it simultaneously expresses a deep mistrust of organized religion. For the gangsta rapper and his/her followers, religion gets in the way of God and the message of Jesus, and can be part of the social order that has marginalized many poor, often minority, individuals and communities. Finally, gangsta rap seems to fully embrace the notion that good and evil exist simultaneously within individuals and society.

These characteristics are displayed by vast amounts of textual and visual rhetoric, some of which will be discussed here, and in the lived experiences of many gangsta rappers. Some of these rappers include Tupac, Notorious B.I.G., Nas, South Park Mexican, DMX, and Mase. Importantly, these gangsta rappers are not insignificant figures in the rap industry, but artists who have sold millions of albums and discursively connected with thousands of inner-city individuals, particularly African Americans and Latinos/Latinas. As Charles W. Mills states, they are "philosophers . . . pondering the truths of inner-city life" (Darby and Shelby 2005, xi) and often use religious rhetoric to do so. This rhetoric is an important piece of the rhetorical landscape and the terrain of religious scholarship, and one that should not be trivialized or ignored. Importantly, this article is not aimed at making sweeping generalizations that connect gangsta rap to all poor, urban minorities—or even to all that listen to gangsta rap music—but to display central characteristics of the Christian religious ethos of gangsta rappers and their rhetoric. Future scholarship may, and should, address the complex connections between gangsta rap's religious ethos and larger segments of society.

Gangsta Rap and Christian Rhetoric: Between Religion and the Jesus Trope

> The stone which the builders rejected, The same was made head of the corner;
>
> This was from the Lord, And it is marvelous in our eyes?
>
> —Matt. 21:42
> (*American Standard Bible*, 2009)

On the surface, gangsta rap's connection to religion may seem superficial—large diamond, gold, and silver crucifix necklaces around the necks of many rappers and references to being a god of rap. Lil Wayne stating "ask ya reverend 'bout me, I'm the young god" in the song "Aint That a Bitch," and Jay-Z regularly referring to himself as Jay-Hova or Hova[3] are but two examples. Yet a deeper study of religious rhetoric and imagery in gangsta rap music reveals a complex connection between the identity of those who produce and strongly identify with the musical genre and the religious figure of Jesus Christ. This connection is forged mainly through two themes that are central to both—struggle and marginalization.

As Cornel West (2002) points out, one of hip hop music's aims is to "forge new ways of escaping social misery" (xi), so it is not surprising that gangsta rap's rhetoric would connect to a figure whose life was surrounded by, and ended in, social misery and suffering. It is because of Jesus's suffering that He is predominantly who gangsta rappers most identify with in the religious realm. It is not surprising that a musical genre born from a marginalized community and a subgenre (gangsta rap) that often focuses on the "struggle in the streets" often highlight the image and life of the suffering servant of Yahweh.

This emphasis on Jesus may be seen by some as a simple extension or reuse of the Jesus trope in pop culture and entertainment. Others may see it as a sign that gangsta rappers are truly religious figures and "pastors of the street." I argue that the use of religious rhetoric by gangsta rappers places them somewhere in the middle of these poles. On the one hand, gangsta rappers seem to not merely identify with Jesus for fictional entertainment value, as is the case with recent uses of the Jesus trope in movies such as *The Matrix*; *The Lion King*; *Braveheart*; *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*; and *Harry Potter*, just to name a few. Gangsta rappers are, in fact, *real people* born of *real situations* telling *real stories* about their life experiences, and they consciously choose to connect their identity with the suffering in Jesus's life. On the other hand, gangsta rappers are not known to be religious in the sense of living lives centred on religious practices and creeds. This is discursively displayed in the fact that gangsta rap is still predominantly materialistic, violent, and misogynistic—all characteristics that run counter to the message and practices preached by Christianity. Gangsta rap, in fact, looks upon organized religion with strong suspicion, a point that will be discussed later. Importantly, this dichotomy of sacred and profane has never been a simple one in popular culture or within Christianity itself. Christian texts, including the Bible, Christian churches, and Christian figures throughout history regularly make us question a simple and static notion of holy and profane discourse and actions.

For gangsta rappers, identifying with Jesus is not trivial, or simply a storytelling trope; it, in fact, seems to be an important piece of many of their identities. This identification, though, seems to stop at the doors of the church. It is one that is simultaneously bound up in the image of Jesus as sufferer *and* with a strong indifference and/or mistrust of organized religion. Their focus on Jesus is more biographical than religious. Like Christianity itself, and many of its followers, rappers struggle with important questions of holiness, goodness, righteousness, justice, and the lived reality of a complex world. And while it can be argued that in some cases rappers may use religious tropes for entertainment or marketing purposes, gangsta rappers, especially in the examples provided here, seem to truly identity with Jesus the sufferer because of their life experiences.

Identifying with Jesus the Sufferer

Theologian Luis G. Pedraja (1999) reminds us how many marginalized groups experience God: "It is an embodied and empirical experience that acknowledges . . . particular

experiences" (49) and is connected to important contexts. These contexts include struggle and marginalization and are the contexts from which most gangsta rap is produced. Themes of struggle and marginalization are not surprising, considering that a vast majority of this music, and consequently the gangsta rap ethos, are created mostly by poor racial minorities, especially African Americans and Latinos.[4] These individuals are members of groups who have been socially and economically marginalized by a historical process of racialization. This process is connected to a complex of developments (Hall 2002) and is constituted by racial projects that work within the web of cultural hegemony (Omi and Winant 2002). These complicated circumstances have led to the creation of a genre and culture of music with a textual and visual rhetorical output that both understands and perpetuates the experience of marginalization. And because of this marginalization, and its thematic connection to the life and death of Jesus, those individuals accept the notion that God deeply understands their historical context. This notion is born from an understanding that "Jesus came from a place at the margin of society and [that] he identifies with those who were rejected and marginalized by society," and empowers marginalized individuals and communities to claim Jesus as their own (Pedraja 1999, 50). Gangsta rappers, and those who connect with their music's religious ethos, display an understanding that in some ways Jesus is one of them.

This connection is best illustrated in the ultimate image of Jesus's suffering, the crucifix, which has a prominent place in gangsta raps' symbology. This visual rhetoric is often displayed by rappers on large necklaces and has adorned the necks of some of gangsta rap's most popular and influential artists: Tupac, Notorious B.I.G., DMX, Jay-Z, Lil Wayne, 50 Cent, and Rick Ross, just to name a few. The notion that Jesus understands the suffering of these individuals and the community they look to represent—poor minorities—is the main reason that the crucifix plays such an important role in many gangsta rappers' telling of their life experiences. And while it cannot be ignored that gangsta rap includes numerous references to drug use, misplaced violence, and misogyny—which tends to be the only focus of many social pundits—much of the focus of gangsta rap music is actually on the social circumstances and lived realities of poor inner-city minorities in the United States. As Anthony B. Pinn (2003) asks, "is it not possible that rappers are modern griots . . . who are continuing a tradition of social critique using an 'organic' vocabulary?" (1). These rappers use one of their most powerful discursive mediums—the organic language of hip hop—to express the experience of economic and social marginalization and suffering, which often highlights the suffering Jesus Christ.

Beyond the crucifix being displayed on jewellery, "Jesus pieces" as they are known, some gangsta rappers have directly integrated the image of the crucified Jesus with their own image on album covers and in music videos. Some of the most popular of these images include Tupac's image of himself as Jesus on the cross on the cover of his album *Makaveli*, rapper Nas being crucified in the video *Hate Me Now*, and Mase standing with a crown of thorns and bloody neck garb on the cover of his mixtape[5] *10 Years of Hate*. Two other notable examples are the February 2006 cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine, where Kanye West appears with a crown of thorns, and the cover of The Game's 2012 album titled *Jesus Piece*, where a black Jesus is displayed in a stained glass window with a teardrop tattoo and red bandana covering the lower half of his face. As these images show, these rappers not only feel solidarity with the suffering Jesus, but actually see themselves as Jesus figures in that they encounter suffering, injustice, and persecution by an unjust society. While the merits of this connection can be argued at length, and may be found by many to be inaccurate or blasphemous, the fact that gangsta rap embraces and perpetuates this suffering identity in lyrical stories and images, and the fact that this identity is born out of real-life social and historical circumstances, is undeniable.

The visual rhetoric of rappers as Jesus figures is powerful and telling, and because it represents real people and their real-life struggles, it moves rappers beyond any simplified view of the use of the Jesus trope for storytelling purposes. J. Anthony Blair (2004), in "The Rhetoric of Visual Arguments," states that "the narratives we formulate for ourselves from visual images can easily shape our attitudes" (43). Not only are narratives formulated and followed and attitudes shaped from the religious images espoused by gangsta rappers, but these images are formed also from specific social circumstances. A recursive cycle of image formation and image influence is at work. Gangsta rappers incorporate images of the crucified Christ in their ethos because of their life experiences, and these images in turn can affect the attitudes and psyches of those who connect to the visual and textual message of gangsta rap's religiosity. Ultimately, these images are *didactic narratives* (Blair 2004, 52); they teach us something about the psychological makeup of these gangsta rappers, predominantly urban minorities, who see suffering and marginalization as central characteristics of their personhood—a personhood connected to their community.

Beyond visual imagery, gangsta rappers' religious ethos is espoused textually/verbally through their narrative and stories—namely song lyrics. As Jeffrey D. Jones (2007) states about the power of stories to convey and form religious identity:

> Faith stories aren't just about success. They are about people seeking to find faithful ways of being and doing in the world. Sometimes they struggle; sometimes they succeed; sometimes they just hang on. Often they do this in an environment that is hostile. Often they are uncertain about what God is up to. (7)

Gangsta rappers seem to be looking at their particular social context, understanding that struggle is a big part of that context, and embracing a figure they feel understands their situation and provides meaning. Interestingly, they simultaneously see themselves as suffering figures *and* triumphant figures. This too connects with Jesus because, after all, in Scripture, "Jesus is to be found in those places where people suffer and die" (Pedraja 1999, 50), characteristics common in poor inner-city neighbourhoods, but He is also ultimately seen as a triumphant martyr who rises from the dead and ushers in a new religion and new age. This understanding leads to textual and visual rhetoric that finds solidarity with the figure of Christ. This *story* of suffering, solidarity, and occasional triumph is conveyed visually in the wearing of crucifixes and in the images of rappers as Jesus figures, and textually or verbally in numerous song lyrics and interviews. These gangsta rappers connect their stories to the "grander story that is God's" (Jones 2007, 8). But these *stories*, once again, are not stories about characters in a novel or film; they are the all-too-common narratives of poor inner-city peoples who feel that Jesus understands their specific social situation and suffering.

In the song "Lord Give Me a Sign," rapper DMX writes:

> I know you're here with us now
> Jesus
> I know you're still with us now
> Keep it real with us now
> I wanna feel, show me how
> Let me take your hand, guide me
> I'll walk slow, but stay right beside me
> Devil's trying to find me
> Hide me—hold up, I take that back
> Protect me and give me the strength to fight back

The rapper is expressing the common sentiment in gangsta rap that Jesus understands the plight of those struggling and does not abandon those in need ("I know you're still with us now"). He also states, "Keep it real with us now," which is a way of asking Jesus to not be fake in His claims of solidarity with the downtrodden and to allow the truth of His message to connect directly with the real-life situations faced by the rapper and the community he wishes to represent. And finally, DMX changes his request of Jesus from one of fear of evil ("hide me") to a more forceful request—"give me the strength to fight back." This final request is reminiscent of the hip hop and gangsta rap ethos, which emphasizes strength in the face of adversity and highlights the fact that while gangsta rappers see themselves as victims of oppressive and violent social circumstances they, and their religious identity, are not to be labelled weak or neutered. Physical strength and spiritual strength, in the form of a mental and emotional solidarity with Christ, carry them through life.

This sense of solidarity is also seen in a song titled "My Life" by The Game and Lil Wayne, in which the rappers express their feelings about life *on the streets* and offer up a sort of prayer to God. The most telling lines are delivered in the first section of the song:

> I'm from . . .
> From a block close to where Biggie was crucified
> That was Brooklyn's Jesus
> Shot for no fuckin' reason
> And you wonder why Kanye wears Jesus pieces?
> 'cause that Jesus people
> And The Game, he's the equal

First, the references to "Biggie" (Notorious B.I.G.), "Kanye" (rapper Kanye West), and "The Game" (the one rapping) are ones who would be easily recognizable to those familiar with rap music and show a very direct and *kairotic* connection between the stories being told by gangsta rappers and real, everyday life. In *keeping it real*, these rappers do not look to reference mythic and historical literature, figures, and texts, but instead want to tell the stories of struggle, injustice, and survival in terms of their particular social circumstances. As Robin Sylvan (2001) puts it, the religious worldview of rappers "refuses to take refuge in the hope of other worldly salvation but, rather, tells the truth about the harsh reality . . . of oppression" (281). The focus on Jesus as sufferer is meaningful and practical.

When The Game states that he is from the same area where "Biggie was crucified," there is the layered understanding of who Biggie is and the circumstances of his death. Notorious B.I.G. is a pillar of rap music and was a native of Brooklyn, New York, who was gunned down in 1997. What is especially interesting, and very telling in regards to the social and religious identity of many poor black and Latino/Latina communities, is how the death of Biggie is perceived. For privileged non-minorities, the death of a rapper who often rapped about sex, drugs, and violence was nothing important and happened simply because he chose to live a life and follow a career path that was surrounded by the very things he often rapped about. But, for many disadvantaged minorities, especially blacks and Latinos/Latinas, Biggie has been and is seen as "Brooklyn's Jesus"—a Christ figure in that he suffered in life and died at the hands of senseless evil and injustice ("shot for no fuckin' reason"). Some may argue that Jesus, on the other hand, was not killed for *no reason* but, in fact, for the salvation of humanity. But that would be a misreading of the sentiment of Biggie's message. Biggie, and Jesus, being killed *for no reason* stresses the senselessness of the killing and the fact that, like

Jesus, society did not *have to* kill, but did. And for those who strongly identify with DMX's message, if Biggie rapped about sex, drugs, and violence, it was because those were central characteristics of the life that was handed him and were characteristics born from the same society that might eventually kill those who identify so strongly with the message. As Michael Eric Dyson (2008) puts it in "Gangsta Rap and American Culture," while misogyny, violence, and materialism are common characteristics of gangsta rap, they are not its exclusive domain—"at its best [gangsta rap] draws attention to complex dimensions of ghetto life ignored by many Americans" (179). This includes the use of religious rhetoric to "aggressively narrate the pains and possibilities, the fantasies and fears" of urban youth (179). While not every disadvantaged minority would rush to label Biggie a Jesus figure, there is an understanding among disadvantaged urban communities, especially among those who strongly connect to gangsta rap, of how a gunned-down rapper could be equated to the suffering Christ. Conversely, this occurrence would, at best, be labelled as misguided by many in the dominant culture, and at worst, as disrespectful and sacrilegious.

Furthermore, in the song lyrics, The Game adds, "and you wonder why Kanye wears Jesus pieces?/'cause that Jesus people/and The Game, he's the equal." Here, the rapper stresses the fact that rappers—like Kanye West and himself—wear crucifix necklaces (Jesus pieces) because they are members of Jesus's community and connected to the suffering that Jesus experienced in life and in death. Once again, solidarity with Christ is created and displayed through the discourse of gangsta rap and highlights a religious identity that focuses on the martyrdom of Christ. This same sense of struggle, marginalization, and meaning in suffering can be seen in numerous lyrics by gangsta rappers:

> Jesus loves me, he told me so/that's why when it gets ugly, he hugs me/'cause he knows me, yo.
>
> DMX in "Jesus Loves Me"

> The other day I spoke to the reverend/to see if he said that Mexicans could go to heaven/[in heaven] . . . is minimum wage all they offer my people?/does my uncle gotta marry someone just to be legal?/will he get dirty looks 'cause he can't speak English?
>
> South Park Mexican in "Mexican Heaven"

> With me it's not just bars and music/I walk with God/I got the scar to prove it.
>
> Mase in "Jesus Walks"

> Man, I gotta get my soul right/I gotta get these devils outta my life.
>
> Jay-Z in "Lucifer"

> I'm the boss, and I don't follow no person. I follow Jesus.
>
> Snoop Dogg in "Gangsta Ride"

> God is who we praise/even though the devil's all up in my face.
>
> Bone Thugs-N-Harmony in "Tha Crossroads"

> Come from the land that Jesus walked through/sacrifice my life . . .
>
> Lil Wayne in "Intro: This Is Why I'm Hot"

> God's the seamstress who tailor-fitted my pain/I got scriptures in my brain.
>
> 50 Cent in "Patiently Waiting"

> God love us hood niggaz/'cause he be with us in the prisons and he take time to listen/God love us hood niggaz/'cause next to Jesus on the cross was the crook niggaz/but he forgive us.
>
> Nas in "God Love Us"

In these lyrics we see the complex mixture of suffering, calls for help, solidarity, and the presence of specific realities. The rappers pull God in to their situations and theology from the realm of theory into the space of their lives. And because this space is often filled with suffering and marginalization, minority urban youth do not simply "cling on" to Jesus, but raise Him as a symbol of their very identity and find meaning in their lives and a will to persevere in the face of social, ideological, historical, and economic marginalization. So, it is not only in their death—as in the case of Biggie's martyrdom—but also in their lives that suffering is present.

As theologian Karl Barth (1959) stresses in *Dogmatics in Outline*, Jesus's crucifixion was merely one part of His suffering. Barth writes, "I should think that there is involved in the *whole* of Jesus' life the thing that takes its beginning in the article 'He suffered'" (101)—a statement that runs in opposition to much religious exegesis, from Calvin to the Apostles to many contemporary religious leaders, which emphasizes Jesus's suffering only in the Passion. For Barth, and seemingly for many gangsta rappers, "the whole life of Jesus comes under the heading 'suffered'" (102). It is no simple coincidence that a marginalized community would discursively and visually connect to the life of Jesus—a life that included being born in a stable, becoming a stranger among one's family and nation, and a stranger in the realms of government, church, and civilization, a life lived full of loneliness and temptation, which involved betrayal by one's closest followers; and a life that ended by being sent to be crucified by a judge and vengeful community. It was an entire life lived in the shadow of the cross (103).

Thus, when gangsta rappers invoke the life and name of Jesus, when they wear the crucifix, or when they display themselves as crucified Jesus figures, they are expressing a deep connection between the totality of their lives and the totality of Jesus's life. This is made apparent in an interview with Tupac Shakur, one of gangsta rap's most prominent voices. Tupac often used religious imagery in his music and was displayed as a crucified figure on the cover of his album *Makaveli*—his final album release before he was gunned down in 1996. In an interview with *Vibe* magazine, the rapper states, "We get crucified. The Bible's telling us . . . all these people suffered so much. That's what makes them special people. I got shot five times" (2007, 128). He then proceeds to equate his five gunshot wounds with the stigmata of Christ by outstretching his arms and legs and continues with:

> I got crucified to the media, and I walked through with the thorns on and I had shit thrown on me and . . . I'm not saying I'm Jesus be we go through that type of thing everyday. We don't part the Red Sea but we walk through the 'hood without getting shot. We don't turn water in to wine but we turn dope fiends into productive citizens of society. We turn words into money. What greater gift can there be? So I believe God blessed us. I believe God blesses those who hustle and

> those who use their mind and who, overall, are righteous . . . God put us in the ghetto because He's testing us even more. That makes sense. (2007, 129)

This religious discourse by a central gangsta rap figure points to the complicated religious identity embraced and espoused by many who see gangsta rap as the soundtrack to their lives. They see the miracle of Jesus manifested in the miracle of surviving harsh social conditions and violence. They see blessings mixed in with suffering, and they see themselves walking in the footsteps of Christ. It is for them both natural and theologically sound to equate their suffering to Christ's suffering and to understand that suffering in a social context. Tupac and many other gangsta rappers often see their suffering in connection to the evil present in society. Poverty, an unjust legal system, racism, decrepit social conditions, the media, and political pundits are just a few of the reasons, according to rappers, why individuals and communities are marginalized.

Theologically, rappers are rhetorically expressing the fact that, like Jesus, they feel that they and their communities are bearing the sin of the whole human race, a sentiment that once again moves their identification with Jesus beyond a simple artistic trope. They suffer mostly not out of individual choices or decisions, but because the world is structured in a way that marginalizes poor racial minorities. The link between economic poverty and racial marginalization is made by Stuart Hall (2002), who writes that modern capitalist production has produced a classed and racialized work force—one that has perpetuated black labouring classes and a class system that is structured in race (61–3). This system is very much alive in contemporary times and not only negatively affects the black community but also the Latino/Latina community. Thus, the realities of economics and race form communities that understandably produce discourse—in this case gangsta rap—that carries a message of suffering at the hands of an unjust social order. This parallels Jesus who suffered because of a lost and sinful society—"from Bethlehem to the Cross He was abandoned by the world that surrounded Him, repudiated, persecuted, finally accused, condemned and crucified" (Barth 1959, 104). From individuals who forsake them, to an unforgiving society they are born into, to an unjust legal system[6] and death at the hands of society, there are parallels made and romanticized by gangsta rappers who use Jesus and His suffering to find meaning and forge a religious identity.

Not surprisingly, Tupac, in the same interview, expresses notions of heaven and hell in very down-to-earth terms. This is not surprising, considering gangsta rappers produce religious discourse that sees suffering in the context of real-life situations. For Tupac, heaven and hell are *kairotic* matters—in the here and now of social circumstances. They are not floating somewhere in the ether but connected to the realities of life on the streets:

> Heaven and hell are here [on earth]. What do you got there that we don't have here? What? Are you gonna, [in hell], walk around aimlessly, zombied? Nigga, that's here! Have you been on the streets lately? Heaven is now, here. Look (gesturing to the expensive room he is sitting in). We sittin' up here with big screens. This is heaven, for the moment. I mean, hell is jail. I've seen that one. (2007, 127)

This notion is directly connected to the common gangsta rap theme of materialism. While critics of gangsta rap see the ultra-materialism of the genre as fickle, short-sighted, and selfish, a more complex look at the situation points to the fact that money, cars, jewellery, and fame are small pieces of "heaven" for individuals who many times grow up in poverty-stricken areas. If hell can be here on earth in the form of poverty, violence, crime, and marginalization, then heaven can be here as well. So for many gangsta rappers, and for those who closely relate to its rhetoric, there is a seeming dichotomy in the way they view heaven and redemption.

In a sense, the meek shall inherit the earth in two possible ways. Heaven and redemption may come in the form of material wealth for those who are either lucky or "hustle" their way out of marginalization, or it may come at the end of time when God rightfully judges those who have not lived up to the calling of Matthew 25[7] and "helped thy neighbour" and who have created social conditions that have led to the "crucifixion" of poor minorities. For many gangsta rappers, there is hope that in some way "the stone which the builders rejected, the same [will be] made the head of the corner" (Matt. 21:42a). That is, discarded individuals/communities, which many gangsta rappers feel they represent, may become the centre of God's heavenly kingdom. All this may upset and baffle privileged people and leave them asking, "And is it marvelous in our eyes?" (Matt. 21:42b)—a question that can reflect confusion and anger at the fact that the world's marginalized may, in God's eyes, actually be the cornerstone of heaven. Then, in fact, rappers are not simply using the Jesus trope for simplified entertainment or storytelling purposes, but identify themselves and their communities with Jesus the sufferer and with those who will find some sort of justice and redemption.

Embracing Jesus, but Not Organized Religion

An interesting aspect of gangsta rap's religious rhetoric is that while it embraces the life of Jesus and aspects central to religious thought such as heaven, hell, justice, redemption, and meaning in suffering, there is a strong mistrust of organized and established religion. Gangsta rap's theology, therefore, is centred on the person of Christ, specifically on His suffering, but not religion centred. That is to say, while many gangsta rappers embrace the life and suffering of Jesus—and often display this attitude through visual and textual rhetoric—they do not embrace the entity of organized religion nor live what most would recognize as religious lives.

This dynamic is partially laid out by rapper South Park Mexican when he states in "The System," "without peace there can be no happiness/I wear a cross around my neck like the Catholics/I'm not sure exactly what my religion is/I just know I thank God for my little kids." The rapper displays the attitude that while God is an important part of his life and psychology, religion itself causes an attitude of indifference. This attitude reaches the ears of many and can shape the religious attitudes of those who connect to the message. As one fan of South Park Mexican stated on an online message board directed at the rapper, "Like it said in da story, Ur not da most Christian in da world. Me neither, but I do believe in God and his Son Jesus. I'm glad U have Christian beliefs now and more importantly that U speak about it freely" (Martinez 2009).

Most gangsta rappers who mention religion go beyond South Park Mexican's indifference and openly attack organized religion. Talib Kweli[8] writes in "Beautiful Struggle," "You go to church to find you some religion/and all you hear is connivin' and gossip and contradiction." For Kweli, religion is full of hypocrisy and ungodly things. So while God and particularly the life of Jesus are good and useful presences in history and the world, the entities that purport to carry Their message is extremely flawed in the eyes of these individuals and many of those who strongly connect with gangsta rap.

This mistrust of religion is layered and complex, considering the fact that religion plays a large role in the lives of many racial minorities. Looking specifically at the African American and Latino/Latina communities in the United States, two communities that have a large following in gangsta rap, Protestantism and Catholicism often play central roles in the families and communities of these groups. Yet, in gangsta rap, there is the overwhelming notion of mistrust of religion. This—a point that needs to be re-emphasized—is within a rhetoric that

reveres the life of the suffering Christ. Thus, the theology of gangsta rap unknowingly points to the complex history of biblical interpretation and racialization. While the ancient authors of biblical texts were aware of colour, this awareness "was by no means a political or ideological basis for enslaving, oppressing, on in any way demeaning other people" (Felder 1991 127). Centrally, an awareness of colour, as a physiological characteristic, was not to say that these authors were racializing society—for the social construct of "race" did not come about until the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries through the writing of natural historians (West 2002). It has been the long history of biblical exegesis that has racialized many biblical events and led, in many cases, to the diminution of racial minorities.

Cain Hope Felder (1991), in "Race, Racism, and the Biblical Narratives," shows some ways in which biblical interpretation has subjugated "colored" people—specifically those of African descent. One instance is in the interpretation of the biblical story usually referred to as the Curse of Ham or Curse of Canaan (actually the land of Canaan; Gen. 9:18–27). Ham was a son of Noah, and he was cursed by Noah for disrespecting his father by not doing the proper thing and covering up his father's nakedness. Though there is much ambiguity in the connection between Ham/Canaan and Africans, the fact that there is some seeming connection between Ham/Canaan and the peoples of Africa/Egypt that has led some "Bible interpreters to justify *their* particular history, culture, and race by developing self-serving theological constructs. In one instance the Canaanites 'deserve' subjugation; in another instance, the Hamites 'deserve' to be hewers of wood and drawers of water" (Felder 1991, 132)—two lower occupations.

Furthermore, Felder (1991) points out that racism is present in the Midrashim (the teachings on or of the Bible and biblical exegesis):

> In the fifth-century Midrash (C.E.) [it states that] Noah says to Ham: "You have prevented me from doing something in the dark (cohabitation), therefore your seed will be ugly and dark-skinned."
>
> The Babylonian Talmud (sixth century C.E.) states that "the descendants of Ham are cursed by being Black and are sinful with a degenerate progeny."
>
> Into the seventeenth century the idea persisted that the blackness of Africans was due to a curse, and that idea reinforced and sanctioned the enslavement of blacks. (132)

There was a clear link made and perpetuated, through religious discourse, between blackness and unpleasing aesthetics, blackness and sinfulness, and blackness and evil. It is a link that has had a powerful historical influence, and that can be connected to the "genealogy of modern racism" (West 2002). It is a genealogy that includes in its ideological ancestry scientists, artists, and philosophers and traces the history of racism in the West, a racism that is alive and well in the minds and experiences of many inner-city minorities. This connection between blackness and evil, prevalent in early biblical hermeneutics, lives on today in religious circles in more subtle ways:

> Even today in such versions of Holy Scripture as *Dake's Annotated Reference Bible* one finds a so-called great racial prophecy with following racist hermeneutic: " . . . after the flood. All men were white up to this point, for there was only one family line—that of Noah who was white and in the line of Christ . . . and his son Shem would be a chosen race and have a peculiar relationship with God . . . His descendants constitute the leading nations of civilization." (Felder 1991, 132)
>
> Today, there are also those who tend to "exclude black people from any role in the Christian origins . . . [as when] Luke's editorializing results in the circumstantial de-emphasis of a Nubian

> (African) in favor of an Italian (European) and enable Europeans thereby to claim that the text of Acts demonstrates some divine preference for Europeans." (Felder 1991, 142–3)

Though gangsta rappers are presumably not scholars of historical racial biblical exegesis, they point to an understandable mistrust by some racial minorities of biblical interpretation and the largest purveyor of that exegesis—religion. This mistrust permeates the discourse of gangsta rappers and is usually expressed in a way that displays the notion that the church is out of touch with the marginalized. As rapper Tupac once opined,

> If the church would give half of what they're making and give it back to the community, we would be all right. Have you seen some of these god damn churches lately? There are ones that take up the whole block. Trust me, all this religion stuff is to control you.

So while the life of Jesus, and particularly his suffering, is a central theme in gangsta rap, there is also the deep mistrust of organized religion, especially by young, poor racial minorities—the most common producers of gangsta rap discourse.

This mistrust, when looked upon from a historical perspective, is fascinating and also didactic in that it teaches us about important connections between religion, economics, race, ideology, and popular discourse such as rap music. All these connections emphasize the notion that music's presence "is clearly political, in every sense the political can be conceived" (DeNora 2000, 163) and that, as one genre of music, gangsta rap—including its religious discourse—can serve as a powerful medium of social understanding and social critique.

Living Out the Paradox: The Conflicted Spirituality of DMX and Mase

> From its very inception, the human race has been condemned to exist within the eternal division [of good and evil], always moving between those two opposing poles.
>
> —Paulo Coelho (2000, 129)

The connection of religion and gangsta rap is vividly portrayed in the discourse and lives of rappers DMX (Earl Simmons) and Mase (Mason Betha). Both rappers reached the height of their popularity and commercial success in the 1990s and are important figures in the history of rap music and culture. What makes these two rappers unique, and pertinent to the discussion in this essay, is the fact that both have openly and discursively embodied a struggle between a "gangsta" lifestyle and a life of spirituality. They have often dealt with this struggle rhetorically and have lived lives that make this struggle clear. DMX and Mase embody the paradox of gangsta discourse and religious discourse within the life of one person and display a struggle between using the life and message of Jesus in a seemingly haphazard manner and actually taking up the mantle of serving Christ through the avenue of organized religion.

It is important to establish that DMX and Mase fall into the realm of gangsta rap. Much of their lyrical discourse focuses on themes common in this genre: sex, materialism, misogyny, violence, drugs, respect, struggle, and marginalization. DMX and Mase are by no means gospel/Christian rappers—a separate genre—but are rappers who followed the path toward gangsta rap, a path surrounded by those common themes of gangsta rap. These rappers, like many inner-city minorities, are influenced by this musical genre that was born from a marginalized social environment. The following lyrics provide examples that place these two rappers squarely in the realm of gangsta rap.

DMX

> I resort to violence, my niggaz move in silence/like you don't know what our style is/New York niggaz the wildest/my niggaz is wit it/you want it? Come and get it
>
> "Ruff Ryders Anthem"

> I'm Evil, like Knievel, faggot I'll leave you/like I shoulda did your peoples before they could conceive you
>
> "Don't You Ever"

Mase

> Make all my guns shoot/you let your gun loose, none o' them niggas gun proof/watch them niggas drop, when I pop one in they sunroof/and we be lead bustin', leavin' niggas heads gushin'
>
> "Take What's Yours"

> And they send the trauma unit to come repair you/Now there you are, nigga, in the fuckin' reservoir/ . . . we don't give a fuck . . . who you are
>
> "You Aint Smart"

These lyrics, along with many others produced and performed by the two rappers, may seem ultra-crude to some but represent the norm for much gangsta rap rhetoric and highlight pieces of the gangsta rappers' identity. What is most intriguing about DMX and Mase is not that they follow the mould of gangsta rap but that, while having such violent and crude lyrics, they also have discourse and life experiences that reflect a struggle with good and evil. They also, fitting the mould of gangsta rap religiosity, continually look to God/Jesus for answers. While many gangsta rappers reflect this struggle, DMX and Mase do so most often and most poignantly.

DMX, a platinum-selling artist, in his six best-selling albums, includes a track that is a spoken-word prayer. These prayers almost always come at the end of each album—albums containing lyrics like the ones presented above—and are examples of Socratic *parphesia*: bold, frank, and plain speech in the face of conventional morality and entrenched power (West 2002, xi). In his first prayer, DMX reflects the solidarity that he perceives God/Jesus to have with His suffering and connects his life to the life of Christ through meaning in suffering:

> I come to you hungry and tired/ . . . I come to you weak/you give me strength and that's deep/you called me a sheep.
>
> Lord, why is it that, that I go through so much pain?/all I saw was black and all I felt was rain/I come to you because it's you that knows.
>
> But it's all good, 'cause I didn't expect to live long/so if it takes for me to suffer for my brother to see the light/give me pain till I die, but please Lord, treat him right.

These lines reflect the notion that the Lord understands DMX's pain and suffering and is there as a respite and saviour. They also reflect the meaning-in-suffering theme discussed earlier—a theme that many gangsta rappers connect with. In DMX's second prayer, "Ready to Meet Him" (West 2002), he presents a conversation between himself and God and continues to emphasize the evil of the world around him ("Snakes still coming at me"); the fact

that God is there for help ("My child, I'm here, as I've always been"; "My doors are not locked/ . . . all you gotta do is knock"); and that he (DMX) has been moved by the negativity of the world and the good of God to follow Him ("After what I just saw, I'm ridin' with the Lord"). Once again, the spirituality presented is always very *kairotic* in that it comes from real-life experiences and the fact that God helps people persevere in their worldly struggle. DMX is not speaking of an ideological struggle between good and evil but a struggle that permeates the very streets he was raised in and walks in.

In "Prayer III" (West 2002), DMX continues by labelling the Lord Jesus as his *crutch* and describes himself as a "weakened version of Your reflection." The former statement reflects the functional use of God/Jesus in the lives of the marginalized; it literally helps them get through life. The latter statement shows the direct connection these individuals feel they have with Jesus. Like Tupac comparing his five bullet wounds to the stigmata of Christ, DMX believes that in his life and suffering he is, or is trying to be, a reflection of Christ. "Prayer IV" (West 2002) emphasizes similar notions of spirituality but adds to why the rapper has become a follower of Jesus: "You gave me a love most of my life I didn't know was there." This short line is reminiscent of much gangsta rap that emphasizes a lack of love and an abundance of hate, anger, or violence in the lives of marginalized inner-city individuals. This may come from absent fathers, overworked mothers, dying friends and relatives, lack of material comforts, crime, an unforgiving legal system, racism, classism, and cultural hegemony.

But DMX's religious rhetoric also stresses victory and redemption and connects to the biblical notion that the hungry, hurting, and meek shall inherit the earth (Matt. 5:3–12). DMX, in "Prayer V," states, "Because of God's favor my enemies cannot triumph over me/ . . . I declare restoration of everything/that the devil has stolen from me," and in "Prayer VI" asks that Jesus uplift the suffering and allow their spirits to be born. DMX also references John 2:15, where Jesus angrily drove the moneychangers from the temple—the rapper's way of showing that the world he lives in is full of those who are concerned with ungodly activities and thus ignore those who need help in society. The reprimanding of moneychangers may represent, in today's terms, the reprimanding of those who create an unjust social order that in turn marginalizes many in society—including the community that DMX represents.

Beyond lyrics, DMX, while expressing the more common themes of gangsta rap (the prayers constitute only about 10% of his music), has over time espoused more and more religious rhetoric and contemplated a religious life. He has more consistently spoken about God and religion even while he has been involved in criminal behaviour, including drug possession, assault, and animal cruelty. Since 2003 he has been interested in pursuing a career as a preacher and, while working on a set of gangsta rap albums and completing a stint in prison in 2009, stated he would soon release a gospel rap album as well. His life is a symbol of the dichotomy between good and evil expressed by numerous gangsta rappers. While many people experience personal battles between good and evil, in gangsta rap there is often a message of meaning in suffering and a connection is seen and made between evil and specific social circumstances. There is also a reaching out toward God or Jesus for hope and solidarity. DMX is one rapper who highlights these notions, and Mase is another.

When DMX thought of leaving the music business to pursue religious preaching, he went to seek the advice of Mase (Mason Betha). He told Mase, "I'm fed up with this rap shit. I know the Lord. I know my true calling is to preach the Word. Where do I go from here?" Mase answered, "As long as the Lord give you the talent to do what you do, do it. He'll call you when he's ready" (quoted in Reid 2005/2009). The question and answer, and the fact that the conversation even took place, are quite remarkable considering the fact that both of these rappers have released a plethora of gangsta rap material—material usually seen as polar

opposite to any religious message. Their rhetorical output is seemingly conflicted between a pursuit of righteous behaviour and a glorification of negative and criminal behaviour in pursuit of profit.

Mase, in a span of ten years, went from releasing gangsta rap music under the name of Murda Mase to retiring from the music industry twice to serve as a Christian pastor. His second return to rapping included discourse that glorified killing and womanizing, and ended soon after with a return to pastoral duties. In 2013, Mase was still contemplating another return to rap while continuing his religious work. This wavering and indecision illustrate the personal and ideological struggle between the world that gangsta rap espouses or creates and the world of spiritual righteousness. The rapper has simultaneously become a Christian preacher, worked with inner-city youth, *and* released the gangsta mixtape albums *Mase Crucified for the Hood* and *10 Years of Hate* (the album whose cover displays Mase as a Jesus figure). He has stated that his rapping career is incompatible with his religious beliefs *and* returned to his rapping career at least twice—not only his rapping career, but his gangsta rapping career. Also, from this rapper we hear in the song "Gotta Survive," "You don't even know success until you know him and him is Jesus," and in "300 Shots," "put guns in niggaz mouth like 'who you dissin?'/ . . . I [shoot] niggaz in the chest, they never breathe again." Finally, in Mase's explanation of his moment of conversion is a sincere belief that he felt his music career was "leading millions of people to hell,"[9] yet he felt it necessary, just a few years later, to return to his early persona of Murda Mase—espousing aggressive gangsta lyrics. Part of this return could be for financial reasons, but if economics was the only reason, Mase would not have left the music business in the first place. His reasoning, backed by the fact that he had, in fact, become a pastor, seemed based on a true mental and spiritual struggle and was not simply about economic issues.

The life and rhetorical output of Mase is revealing in that it displays a conflicted religious and spiritual ideology that is symbolic of the religious message common in gangsta rap, which in turn may be representative of the religiosity of many inner-city minorities who strongly connect with the message of the genre. This ideology is one that *simultaneously* struggles with good and evil and closely connects life on earth to the Christly characteristics of marginalization caused by an unjust society and meaning in suffering. When Mase expresses that he has been crucified for his religious beliefs and actions, the crucifixion is not taking place at the hands of inner-city minorities who connect to the gangsta rap ethos; those individuals are, in fact, the ones who seemingly understand his message clearly. They understand how a deep desire for material wealth, possibly an aspect of Mase's returns to rapping, a lived reality surrounded by poverty, violence, and suffering, and a belief and hope that the poor and meek shall inherit the earth (Matt. 5), can be intertwined within one individual's psyche and message.

Conclusion

The religious rhetorical output of many gangsta rappers, both textual and visual, points to the Christian religious ethos that they seem to embrace. This rhetoric contains a form of religious *phronesis* (practical wisdom) in that it is born out of the rappers' specific social situations and espouses religious interpretations of understanding and dealing with the world. This output focuses on the telling characteristics of solidarity with Jesus, formed through the common theme of suffering, a mistrust of organized religion, and a psycho-social battle between good and evil. These characteristics are on display in the rhetoric of rappers like Tupac, South Park Mexican, Notorious B.I.G., Jay-Z, Nas, 50 Cent, and numerous others. They are also acutely

represented in the lives of DMX and Mase—two gangsta rappers who have had a considerable impact on the formation and perpetuation of the gangsta rap religious ethos.

Future scholarship must work at unpacking the complex ways in which these characteristics are connected to the milieu of larger sections of inner-city minorities and to the long and complex history of religiosity in the African American and Latino American communities, as well as the United States as a whole and Christianity in general. Furthermore, future work in this area must continue the work of unpacking how the religious ideology of gangsta rap is directly influenced and created by a social and capitalistic system that has historically marginalized certain groups and individuals. This unpacking will lead to the further understanding, as Derrick Darby (2005) writes, that "[t]hese poor righteous teachers and lyrically gifted MCs [give] their congregations a street-side perspective on biding philosophical questions concerning the nature and existence of God [and] the problem of evil" (4). In studying gangsta rap, we also continue to reveal that "music is . . . implicated in the formulation of life; . . . it is something that is a formative, albeit often unrecognized, resource of social agency" (DeNora 2000, 152–153). Understanding central characteristics of gangsta rap's religious ethos is an important foundation from which to build understanding and action.

Notes

1. *Religiosity* is used in this article as a general term to represent religious beliefs, actions, and/or discourse. Within this article, it is emphasized that organized religion itself is not a central characteristic of gangsta rap's culture.
2. This includes rappers such as Eminem, Paul Wall, Shamrock, and Yelawolf.
3. Jay-Hova and Hova refer to *Jehova* (JHVH), which was the term used to refer to God in the Old Testament/Hebrew Scriptures.
4. The term Latino is specifically used here because the majority of these rappers are male.
5. Mixtapes are "underground" albums that are not commercially released but that, in many instances, accomplish large distribution, especially among those who are more serious listeners of hip hop.
6. Another common theme in gangsta rap is the vilification of the US legal system (police, laws, judges). Future work could make deeper connections between this occurrence and the fact that "Jesus dies the penal death of Roman justice" (Barth, 104).
7. Matthew 25 tells of those whom God will choose to inherit the earth—those who fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, visited the stranger, clothed the unclothed, and visited those who were sick or in prison.
8. Talib Kweli is not a gangsta rapper, but many of his raps contain sentiments often found in gangsta rap—and in hip hop in general.
9. From a UK interview with Mase at http://realtalkny.uproxx.com.

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