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Joey Rubino

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INFLUENCES OF RELIGION IN RAP MUSIC

Joey Rubino



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SANTA CLARA UNIVERSITY
Jrubino@scu.edu

Joey Rubino

Professor Hendricks

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Religion In Rap Music

Rap music. What is it? While researching I was shocked to find that there was a common recurring definition which stated it is, “A type of popular music of US black origin in which words are recited rapidly and rhythmically over a prerecorded, typically electronic instrumental backing.” This definition stuck out to me because it is so broad. Music is beautiful, creates harmony and is a great way for people to express emotions. This genre of music always tells a story and if you listen intently you can learn a lot about an artist or rapper through their music. It is often combined with religion and personal beliefs from the artists. Kanye West speaks about his religion when he says, “Keep your nose out the sky, keep your heart to god, and keep your face to the raising sun”(Brainy Quotes). Just from reading this one line quote it is obvious to see that Kanye has a relationship with God in his life. In fact not just Kanye, but many rappers seem to have a similar connection like this. It then leads to religion and rap intersecting and creating beautiful yet fascinating music that millions of people have enjoyed since the release.

Religion and its influences it has on rap music plays a huge role in our culture today. Rappers incorporate their beliefs into their music making something unique and special to their listeners. Many modern artists of this time have at least one or more songs that heavily involves religion. Some artists use religion to bolster their music and make it relatable to peoples experiences. Others may make references or claims as if they are God and make truly unexpected and surprising claims. When you evaluate the lyrics rather than just listening to the song and

mindlessly nodding your head to a good beat. You will notice there is much more to the song. This is their career. What they make a living off of. Rappers are not going to waste their time putting together an album just to have their listeners and fans nod along and not look into their lyrics. They want their listeners to find deeper meanings and the truth behind what they are saying. Popular rappers that use religion frequently in their music relate more to their audience and are extremely successful because of their radical claims, influential lyrics and their truthfulness and relevance to the current situations in society. This is significant because the common theme of religious influences in rap music correlates to the success of modern day rappers.

It's important to understand the history of black music in America before analyzing the connection between rap and religion. The involvement of religion is displayed through various rappers new and old. This is something that took time to come about. Rap started to become introduced to the world in the 1970's but even then it took time for it to become popular. With the introduction of rappers like 2Pac Jay-Z and Ice Cube people began listening. As the popularity grew new rappers started emerging and now we are here today. Rap music is fairly new still and it has evolved from various genres but mostly Jazz and Blues genres. These were familiar genres used in churches as gospel music as well. Today there are subtle hints in modern rap music where a choir might be used in the background or the use of an organ, which are both commonly associated with church music. However, now rap has made a big impact in my generation and I think it is safe to say it has surpassed its predecessors in popularity. Even some churches have begun using it to attract more followers to the church. They create their own versions of gospel rap and build an excitement for going to church. Rappers mention religion a

lot in their songs. Some compare themselves to God, others reference it here and there and some even make the claim that they are God.

The intersection of rap with religion is an ironic mix because usually rap music is associated with crime and bad influences. As a stereotype rap music is full of violence and drug use references. However, religion is just the opposite associated with doing the right thing all the time, treating people the way you want to be treated and respecting yourself as well as others. It is so often taught to treat your body as a temple and to treat everyone with the utmost respect. It is weird to think that these two things would go together. It makes no sense. However, I kept thinking about it and I came up with that religion is not always good. The obvious examples include crusaders, wars for conversion and forced coercion. But one thing that happens every day is confession. When people go to confession they tell the priest or father what they have done wrong and to be forgiven. This is a common practice in the Christian Religions and on a daily basis. The Priest or person of authority there, will tell the person who is partaking the act of confession to repent for their sins by either praying or doing some kind of act of kindness in the future. Rap could easily be used as a confession of some kind. But it is the true meaning of songs and the closeness of the songs that make them personal to people. People relate to these songs and they love what they hear. Then these rappers become extremely successful and open up more to tell more of their story and people keep wanting to hear more. One artist I think fits this speculation is A\$AP Rocky. His music is brutally honest and eye opening. The references of God and religion in rap music is constant. The artists that I see making these references over and over again are the ones that are at the top of the business. This includes, Kanye West, Chance The Rapper, Kendrick Lamar, 2Pac and as I mentioned before, A\$AP Rocky. They occur in popular songs too that people listen to everyday which in turn shape and form our young culture

every time a new song, album and rapper comes out. These references must be done on purpose to spark political conversations or what not, because I find it extremely interesting every time I hear a song that is so relevant to what is going on in the world around me.

The base of religious influence in black culture is strong since rappers to this day feel the need to include it in their songs. It all comes from God's conventional promises to give material abundance to his believers. Those with a strong faith and in good standing with God would receive his grace. The black culture rise of religion migrated from urban areas stricken by the post-industrial effects of poverty and violence. This is told in essay titled "Towards an African-American Genealogy of Market and Religion in Rap Music" by Khan K. Who talks about the intersections of religion and rap music. The essay also talks about when the modern black prosperity gospel and hip hop culture first were combined. The essay says, "Black megachurches produced a form of black religion that reflected their congregations' economic status" (Bowler 102-03). In what we recognize today as the modern black prosperity gospel, poverty itself thus became a symptom of unbelief, rather than systemic inequality which in turn required a spiritual solution. So then the inclusion of rap music and religion was born.

2Pac becomes one of the first rappers to merge the music of rap and religion. The belief that being a good person and doing right is the ultimate message from 2Pac. This allows his listeners, through his lyrics, to not only feel what Tupac is going through, but also to bear through the same types of situations and seek religion as guidance. One of his well-known songs called "Hail Mary" he sings, "And God said he should send his one begotten son / (What do we have here now Do you wanna ride or die) / To lead the wild into the ways of the man / Follow me! (La la-da-la la la la la) / Eat my flesh, flesh of my flesh!" Tupac is making a direct parallel to himself in Jesus in these opening first lines of the song. He takes some things right out of the

bible and incorporates them into his song as well. First 2Pac wants to lead the wild into the ways of man. In other words he is hoping to raise man above and beyond their basic instincts. He wants man to become better than just having fear, anger or addiction for example. When he says “follow me” “eat my flesh” this is something that Jesus said and it means eternal life or to live. To follow him is to follow Jesus and he is doing his part in what Jesus’ is asking of each of us. Throughout the song more and more references are made towards the bible. It becomes a bit overwhelming. Obviously 2Pac had a great understanding of the bible. To close out the song his final four lines are, “Yes, we free/ like the bird in the tree / We runnin’ from the penitentiary / This is the time for we liberty / Hail Mary, hail Mary!” Digging deeper into these lyrics a reference between life and death is mentioned here. When 2pac dies he will be as free as a bird. The comparison of life and prison and death and freedom is truly powerful. However, this is just scratching the surface of rap songs with religious references and influences.

Through listening to one extremely popular and successful artist, Kanye West, in his songs he clearly mentions “God” and “Religion”. I remember listening to his music when I was young and I had no idea as to what the meaning behind the song was. I ended up doing a project on his album “The College Dropout” a little after its release. Now I’m traveling back in time and I get to re-evaluate a song I have loved for so long “Jesus Walks”. This song is a good example of a song that he references religion and God in rap music. Kanye holds strong beliefs in a Christian God – with heavy emphasis on God’s assistance through life’s many struggles. We see countless references in some of his biggest records, where there is often intense meaning. This message especially revolves around power and what our life on this earth really means

Being one of the best takes time and effort. Kanye West obviously put hours of work into what he loves to get where he is today. Big hits like “Jesus Walks” from his album The College

Dropout helped guide him towards this success. Conveniently, this song also mentions religion often and is a staple of the intersection of religion and rap music. In an essay titled, "Religion, music and the question of social justice in selected African American singers" by K Pyon this article explains the theme of religion in the lyrics of Kanye West's *Jesus Walks*. It goes on to say how African Americans have expanded the genre of what was known as Negro spirituals. The author argues the reasoning of why Black musicians and artists have made songs with religious undertones in a racial context. The figures of God, Muhammad and Jesus are used as narrative tropes leading through a quest for freedom is just one reason. The essay goes into detail on "Jesus Walks" saying it, "provides a cultural template that uses images of Jesus, God and African Americans as symbols of 'soldiers' who are all being invited to participate in the struggle for a better form of life for African Americans" (Pyon). This is asked of us from the beginning of the song when Kanye says, "We at war/ We at war with terrorism, racism/But most of all we at war with ourselves"(Kanye West). This is spot on and follows the meaning of the song. The representation of African Americans fighting for a better life is displayed throughout the song every time the chorus is reached. This is a man that made it big and he wants to see everyone else make it big too. Unfortunately, it is a cruel world and not everyone can be as lucky. However, there is always religion and God to turn too in desperation and times of need. As I dig deeper through the song I find more and more meaning from each and every line. *Jesus walks* was praised as one of the best songs of the year when it was released and it shows. The clever word choice and rhythmic beat make it such an enjoyable song. One clever line for example is, "Top floor of the view alone will leave you breathless / Try to catch it, it's kinda hard" (Kanye West). This line has a double meaning. Kanye could be talking about a view from a skyscraper with a view of Chicago, or he could be talking about the view from heaven. Both

interpretations will ultimately leave you breathless. The view from heaven is a reference to the 40 days and nights Jesus spent in the desert during the exodus. Jesus was brought to place where all the cities and kingdoms were visible to him. This view is sure to leave you breathless.

Religion and rap music make it extremely interesting as if a rapper such as Kanye could in fact lead the world in the right direction like he is a messenger from God. Kanye is looking at the world and seeing what he can do to make it better. In the chorus Kanye states, “The only thing that I pray is that my feet don’t fail me now” (Kanye West). In the gospel of Matthew Jesus walks on water while his disciples watched. Peter was the only disciple to walk for a brief moment. However, once he doubted his faith he sunk in the water. Kanye makes this reference in hopes that his faith keeps him afloat in this tough and bitter world. If his faith is strong enough he can overcome the evils in the world. Kanye must stay afloat because he is the leader in this scenario leading people to freedom, just as like Jesus was the leader for his disciples. Kanye is comparing himself to Jesus Christ. Statements like these are what grab people’s attention and create conversation about whatever topic the music is covering. However, as a leader and with such influence Kanye is relying on the help of God to guide his decisions. Standing on such a large and high platform above someone else he feels as if he has the power like God to help and support those below him.

“Jesus Walks” is not the only song that Kanye makes references to religion. One other that I found to be really interesting was “I wonder” from his Graduation album. Throughout this song Kanye steadily flows and does not mention God very much if at all. In fact he only mentions God in one line in the entire song. That is towards the end of the song when he says, “Heaven’ll watch, God calling from the hotlines / Why he keep giving me hotlines?” (Kanye West) This line implies that Kanye has direct communication with God. He is making the claim

that God is guiding him in the creation process of the great music that has been so successful. This is like God is telling him what to say. Like Kanye is a messenger from God. Helping those in need by rapping and getting them through the tough times that life throws at them. This line also shows how close Kanye is with his religion and that it means so much to him that it is impacting his entire career. If it was not for God Kanye would not be the superstar he is today. This is just one line in one song. However, it has so much meaning and power it is truly amazing and is what makes Kanye a lyrical genius.

A journal by Laura Beth Daws, looks at how music has always had a profound influence on culture and cultural movements over the past several decades. The journal is titled, "The College Dropout: A Narrative Critique of the Music of Kanye West." It focuses on culture today and how hip hop and rap music are clearly at the forefront of today's culture. Ultimately it ends up talking about how Kanye's album relates to pop culture and how he creates success for himself at the same time. This is important because his success is so dependent on the things going on in the world around him. So if he is not up to date on what is going on in society his music will likely lack popularity ultimately making it very difficult to succeed in his rap career. Making it big in the music industry is already hard enough. But being at the top of the charts and being regarded as one of the best if not the best has to make you feel like God in a way. It must make you feel like you are on this earth for a reason. When looking at the success of Kanye's career Daws says, "Perhaps what sets *Dropout* apart from other traditional rap albums is the way West communicates the positive influence of Christ in his life. West harmonizes on the gospel hymn "I'll Fly Away," presenting an unexpected genre-crossing of songs to the first-time listener" (Daws 94). This is the crossing of gospel music and rap music that got his career off to

a hot start. Religion was not very common in rap music and did not make sense to combine the two. However, Kanye pioneered a way for his music and future rappers.

A “Chance” of Success: The Influence of Subcultural Capital on the Commercial Success of Chance The Rapper by multiple authors shows how Chance the Rapper’s career has led him to where he is today. This case study describes Chance the Rapper’s path to success. The findings show that his accusation of subculture within the areas of Christian and Hip-Hop cultures. Also his use of economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital helped build a large following which in turn led to great success. Chance had a good following in all the right markets and it bolstered his popularity to stardom. Having a positive following and good relationships created a lot of upside for his career. Timing is of course another factor to add in when it comes to his success but he also made it because of his talent. The way he incorporated religion was amazing. Instead of making religious references constantly he uses beats and instruments that you would often hear in church music. So for example an organ and an live choir would create a beautiful background music for chance to rap over. By doing this people are thinking of religion not from his lyrics but from the sound within his songs. This is different from the other rappers because most rap songs have their own distinct sound and beats. Nothing sounded quite like this and it was new and different and people always get excited about something new.

Kanye opened the door for so many rappers to get involved with religion and rap music. One rapper to walk through that door would have to be Chance the Rapper. Chance loves to reference religion and God in his music. From listening to his music you can immediately tell he has a connection with religion because of the background beats and the choir voices he has in some of his songs. Christina Zanfagna mentions this in her book, “Hip Hop Church L.A.: Shifting Grounds in Inglewood” In the chapter *Holy Hip Hop in the City of Angels* Inglewood is

mentioned quite a bit. Chance the Rapper also has a song titled 65th and Ingleside. This song is more so a story of Chance's life in a brief four and a half minutes. Inglewood was a predominately African American Christian community in LA, it was, "a place to explore these dynamics as it was once hailed as a model city of black uplift—a symbol of racial pride and possibility" (Zanfagna 57). Chance references this place because it is where his career started. However this song, "65th and Ingleside" was not released until Chance was well established in his career. Could this be a message from God so that the song could reach more people? It is interesting to think about and something I think some rappers consider when they are making songs before or if they get famous. Ingleside was where he was living with his girl during the dark times of his career. He needed a place away from his parents place and this was it. A space where he could work but have the freedom to do what he wanted. Chances faith was shaky through his career. He was faithful in his younger years. Then he started faltering during the hard times. Then, finally the birth of his daughter sparked a strong Christian faith once again. This is heavily present in his "Coloring Book" album. In his first song of the album "All We Got" you can see the religious references in the music overflowing in the song. He has choir singers in the background making the music sound so beautiful. This is then doubled with the clever lyrics, "Ayy, ayy, I got my word from the sermon / I do not talk to the serpent / That's the holistic discernment" (Chance the Rapper). This line directly references the story of Adam and Eve. It references good and evil when they break the only rule God had for them and they banished from the garden of Eden. So here chance is trying to avoid temptation which is the serpent and trying to "discern" right from wrong in his everyday choices. This is indeed a difficult task literally for everyone in the world. Decisions people make every day it is always difficult for some people to

make the right or “good” choice. Chance recognizes that these decisions are made all the time and tells us that he makes the “holistic discernment.”

Another song that Chance fuses with religion and rap music is “How Great” from the same album. In this song the first three minutes is a choir singing “How great is our God?” and other religious lines leading up to the third minute. This is when Chance finally enters the song. Leading up to it the choir and background music is so pleasant and gospel like. Basically sounding like church gospel music. The religious influence in Chance the Rappers music is so evident. The fact that this man is so popular leads me to believe that the religious influence in pop culture is well and alive. This song makes so many references it would be hard to cover them all in just a fifteen page paper. However, one line in particular that really stands out is when he says, “The type of worship make Jesus come back a day early” (Chance the Rapper). The book of Revelations in the bible eludes to the fact that Jesus will come back one day. This line means that Chances faith and worship would make Jesus return a day earlier. I found this particularly interesting because Chance is describing his faith as a key to bring Jesus back to the world.

The line after states “With the faith of a pumpkin seed sized mustard seed” (Chance the Rapper). Once again making a reference to the bible, specifically the gospel of Mathew. This is when Jesus tells his disciples that faith as small as a mustard seed is enough to move mountains. Now a pumpkin seed is much larger. Chance is staying humble with his faith but eluding to the fact that he has a strong faith and could do much more than move mountains with God on his side. Since the release of his album “Coloring Book” Chance has labeled himself as a Christian rapper and believes that God is to thank for his successful career. This is inspirational and

interesting to see given his other albums like “Acid Rap” and “10 Day” which are nowhere near as religious as his album “Coloring Book.”

A\$AP Rocky a very popular modern rapper uses religion in his songs but he tends to use darker themes. His music is not the same when compared to that of Tupac, Kanye or Chance. His religious references are scarce and displayed in a different light. In his song “Angels” he says, “Niggas claim they the God of black / well your name is purple I’m the God of that / Gave you my back nigga pardon that” (A\$AP Rocky). In the first line A\$AP is referencing someone as the devil “God of black” or darkness. And then he makes the reference of being the God of purple. This is a reference to marijuana. This is an ironic line from a religion and rap perspective because here you have to contradictory references. One of God and another of what some may call the “Devil’s lettuce.” A\$AP’s music is different with religious references as they clearly show darker themes and in a way stand up to religion. Another couple of references in his song, “Long Live A\$AP” identify more of these ironic claims. The irony is present in the lines “A bunch of hypocritic Christians” followed up by, “The land of no Religion” (A\$AP Rocky). The possibilities of who A\$AP is referencing could go on and on. Religious figures? Politicians? Or other people A\$AP may have encountered? Whoever it is obviously make the claims that they are religious but they do not seem to follow through with their actions. They might talk the talk but they do not walk the walk. When A\$AP says, “the land of no Religion” he undoubtedly is referencing the greed in the world. There is one goal that drives everyone in America. That goal is money. He sees that money breaks relationships and pits people against each other. This short excerpt from the song has such powerful and strong meaning. Great thought and effort was put into his music and it shows. A\$AP Rocky has song that use a title “Hell” which definitely has

something to do with religion in some sense. One way or another I feel like if you dig deep enough into a rap song you can spot a religious reference whether it be obvious or not.

Kendrick Lamar, another well-known and highly respected rapper in the world of rap references religion in his music as well. He is considered as one of the most skillful and successful rappers of his generation. Kendrick is a devout Christian. He converted immediately following the death of a friend. He believes that God has given him this voice with a purpose. He plans on doing whatever must be done with his gift from God. Kendrick Lamar Duckworth has written and produced many songs. When it comes to religion and rap music he is yet another musical genius in this department. One recent song in particular “GOD.” From his album “DAMN.” displays lyrical expertise and cleverness to make a song successful yet relatable while all the while incorporating his religious beliefs into the mix. The opening two lines of the song starts off with, “This what God feel like, huh, he-yeah / Laughin’ to the bank like ‘A-ha!’, huh, he-yeah” (Kendrick Lamar). God has the ability to give whoever whenever an abundance of wealth and prosperity. Kendrick is making the statement that he feels as if he is like God in this scenario. This reference is also in Bible in 2 Chronicles. Where God gives King Solomon “possessions and honor, such as no king who was before you ever had and none after you will ever have.” Kendrick is laughing to the bank because he is overjoyed with his success. He laughs in the face of his haters and in doubters. This could also be interpreted as the devils temptations and risks that could lead Kendrick Lamar off his steady path of success. Later on in the song Kendrick Lamar makes another religious reference saying, “Everything I say is from an angel” (Kendrick Lamar). An Angel is a messenger from God. This makes sense and is yet another religious reference. What makes this line even more impactful is that Kendrick spoke about this line in an interview and said, “I always felt that God used me as a vessel, to share my stories, to

share his message” (Kendrick Lamar). God gave him his voice to share whatever message it is that he is supposed to share. He is making these claims and people are listening to him like Jesus’ disciples listened to Jesus. However, Kendrick is simply stating he is a messenger with a gift. And he plans to use this gift to better our society as a whole. This one song from Kendrick Lamar mixes religion in and shows how successful rappers really cling to religion and the mysteries of faith to bolster their overall standing in the music charts.

It is important to that these songs are much more than a beat. They have very important messages and themes that relate to us right now. It’s as if every song that gets released is a political statement or speech from a politician. References to religion were made since the beginning of the creation of not just rap but since black culture was making music with Jazz and Blues music. It has easily navigated its way into rap and it is really interesting to evaluate the modern rap music to see how history is in fact repeating itself. This music is being used as both political messages here and there but also the music’s themes and how these rappers either rap about themselves as an angel crusader doing God’s work or rapping about how they are the equivalent of God himself. As new music comes out it is really interesting to listen to the lyrics intently and discover new things about the thoughts and feelings of rappers and the world around us.

Digging deeper into religion and rap music you immediately find different meanings and unexpected personal thoughts from great rappers. It allows you to tap into their brain and see just how genius the lyrics are when they are put together. The rappers I mentioned are just a few that use religion frequently in their music to relate more to their audience and are extremely successful because of their radical claims, influential lyrics and their truthfulness and relevance to the current situation in society. Music is a powerful tool and these popular rappers have an

opportunity like no one else. What they say or sing about can have millions of different outcomes for how each separate person interprets or acts after listening to their music. Are the claims of some rappers claiming to be “God” too far and push people away from their music? I don’t think so. I think people want to hear that more than ever because they want someone to follow that aligns with their same beliefs. These rappers were able to tap into that by using music. Some rappers just simply have a better story and that is why some rappers become way more successful than others. As I mentioned above “65th and Ingleside” by Chance the Rapper and “Jesus Walks” is just two songs that do this exceptionally well. At first glance on a topic with religious reference and rap music you would think there is not much information. However, there is a plethora of information and music at my fingertips. I was only able to cover the most obvious and well known scenarios. There is more not so well known rappers making similar claims I just have not come across their music and nor has the world. Finding the root to their success is what all “SoundCloud” rappers hope to find one day so they can make it just as big as these famous rappers. Is it as simple as just making the music relatable and catchy?

Unfortunately, that is only half the battle. The music needs to have an impact on people, and the lyrics need to inspire and move people. That is one thing each of these rappers all have in common. They were able to catch people off guard and surprise them with beautiful music that has so much meaning and power behind it. The references of religion and rap music look like sure fire ways to get a discussion going on music and really make people think. Now rap is taking over just as Jazz and Blues music was the standard of gospel music. Rap is tapping into that category now becoming the new standard of gospel music.

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