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presents



*World Religions and
the Search for Meaning*

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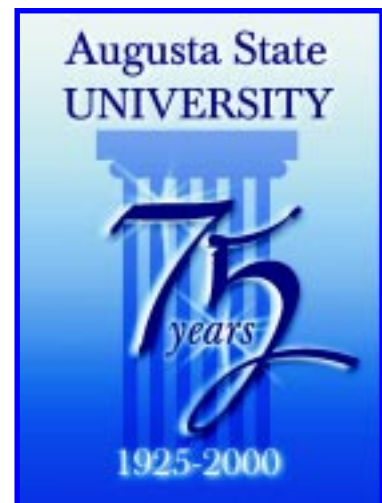


Table of Contents

The Purpose of Life: A Comparison of Hinayana Buddhist and Christian Perspectives	Jonathan E. Leightner
Memory and the Sabbath in Jewish Living	Susan Sherer
Fishin' 4 Religion	Ralph C. Watkins

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The Purpose of Life: A Comparison of Hinayana Buddhist and Christian Perspectives

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The codes of morality in Buddhism and Christianity are extremely similar. Christianity teaches that people should not covet (Exodus 20:13-17 and Matthew 5:17-32)¹. Buddhism teaches that people should not desire things (Sainyutta-Nikaya 22.35, Warren 161)². Coveting or desiring is often the first step towards many other sins like lying, stealing, murdering, and committing adultery.

Although the moral codes of Christianity and Buddhism are similar, these religions challenge us to become more than just moral. In other words, both of these religions view moral behavior as an important step; however, in and of itself, morality can not produce salvation or Nirvana. In Christianity, a person must believe, or have faith, in Jesus Christ in order to be saved (John 3: 16). In Buddhism, a person must stop their desires and have correct knowledge in order to reach Nirvana (Visuddhi-Magga 17 & 27, Warren 171, 180-182). In Buddhism, correct knowledge includes knowing the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism and that there is nothing permanent. In Christianity, men have souls which can live forever; in Buddhism, men do not have souls and misery will last forever if ignorance is not dispelled and desires stopped. Christianity claims there is a God who loves and cares; in contrast, Buddhism claims that Buddha was a man who no longer exists as an individual. Perhaps most importantly, the goal of a Buddhist is to end his own suffering. In Christianity, we are called to be like God who willingly suffered for others (Phillipians 2:5-8). An answer to suffering is key to both of these religions, but the answers they offer are very different.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section II briefly describes the lives of Jesus and Buddha. Section III presents how Christianity and Buddhism address the problem of suffering. Section IV contrasts the purpose of life as portrayed by Buddhism and Christianity. Section V concludes.

II. Short Synopses of the lives of Jesus and Buddha

According to the Bible, Jesus is God and has never had a beginning or an end (John 1: 1-14, Revelations 1:8-18). As God, he created the world and everything on it (Genesis 1, John 1:3). In contrast, Buddha was a man (Jataka I.65, Warren p. 68). The Buddhist believe in reincarnation. Before he was born as The Buddha, Buddha lived thousands of lives, during which he accumulated merit (Jataka I.3-I.44, Warren p. 5-33). After his enlightenment and after he made many disciples, Buddha entered Nirvana (Maha-Parinibbana-Sutta 49-62, Warren, p. 95-110). Nirvana is not heaven; it is a state of non-being. In Nirvana, a person does not exist as an individual. In Nirvana, there is no perception and no sensation, there is no suffering, and there is no pleasure. When a person reaches Nirvana, they stop existing as a separate being. Once a person achieves Nirvana, they are never re-born. Thus, Nirvana breaks the endless cycle of reincarnation.

Having reached Nirvana, the person named Buddha no longer exists. Buddha is not a god who can hear your prayers or help you. Buddha is gone. When Buddhists pray to Buddha, they are actually praying to his teachings, which continue to live. Although Buddha was a man, he was not an ordinary man. He was implanted in his mother's womb without an act of intercourse (Introduction to the Jataka 50, Warren, p. 43). By comparison, Jesus was born to a virgin (Matthew 1: 18-25). Buddha picked his own mother and he picked a virtuous woman of the most respected caste who was married to a powerful and wealthy king (Introduction to the Jataka 49, Warren, p. 41). In contrast, Jesus was born to a very poor (Luke 2: 21-24, together with Leviticus 12: 2-8) mother who gave birth to him in a stable (Luke 2:1-7).

Immediately after his birth, Buddha surveyed the world, strode seven paces, and shouted in a noble voice, "The chief am I in all the world" (Introduction to the Jataka 53, Warren p. 47). From his conception until his death, all heavenly beings (gods and angels) and most men gave Buddha their total reverence and adoration. Buddha had only one major opponent — Mara, who is the ruler of the sixth and highest heaven of sensual pleasure (Introduction to the Jataka 71-76, Warren p. 76-83.)

Although Jesus's birth was announced by a star and by angles, which resulted in wise men from the East (Matthew 2) and local shepherds (Luke 2: 8-17) coming to worship him after he was born, most of Jesus's contemporaries rejected him (John 1: 11, Isaiah 53: 3). Jesus's family had to flee to Egypt to keep King Herod from killing Jesus. The Jewish religious leaders plotted against Jesus, and their plotting came to fruition when the Romans nailed him to a

cross. After dying on that cross, Jesus laid in a tomb for 3 days and then came back to life. After being seen by many of his disciples, he ascended into heaven and will one day come back to earth to bring a new era of justice.

Before Buddha's birth it was prophesied that he would either become an universal monarch or the greatest religious leader. Buddha's father, preferring that Buddha become a universal monarch, decided to keep all instances of pain and suffering from his son. Buddha's father reasoned that the experience of suffering causes people to become religious. Thus, Buddha's father would send out an army to clear the roads of all people who were sick, old, or dead, before Buddha's chariot would travel on those roads (Introduction to the Jataka 55-56, Warren p. 51-53). Buddha married a beautiful woman. The day his first child, a son, was born, the gods arranged for Buddha to see a sick man, an old man, a dead man, and an ascetic. These four sights were the first time Buddha had ever seen suffering and he was so affected that neither music nor beautiful, dancing women could calm him. He took one look at his new born son, and left to become a wandering ascetic (Introduction to the Jataka 58-62, Warren p. 56-62).

He spent six years forsaking the wealth and power to which he was born trying several religious traditions, and starving himself almost to death. At one point he existed on one sesame seed a day and if he tried to touch his stomach, he actually got his backbone. Realizing that starvation would not work, he began eating again (Introduction to the Jataka 66-67, Warren p. 69-71). In the fullness of time, he sat under a tree. All the gods had gathered around to see Buddha's enlightenment, when Mara (the ruler of the sixth and highest heaven of sensual pleasure) attacked. All the gods fled from Mara, but Buddha stood firm. All of the weapons, mountains, and fire that Mara threw at Buddha changed into flowers. Buddha achieved enlightenment solely on his own efforts (Introduction to the Jataka 71-76, Warren p. 76-83). Although under no moral or religious obligation to do so, Buddha chose to teach others what he had learned (Noss p. 124-125). Many years later, as an old man, Buddha laid down under twin sal-trees, said farewell to his disciples, and died (Maha-Parinibbana-Sutta 49-62, Warren, p. 95-110).

III. The Problem of Suffering:

The biggest philosophical challenge to Christianity is the problem of suffering. One simple statement of this problems is, (1) if God is all good, he would not want the innocent to suffer, (2) if God is all powerful, he could stop the innocent from suffering, (3) the innocent often suffer in our world, (4) therefore God is either not all good or not all powerful. Buddhism and other religions that teach reincarnation have less problem with suffering. In reincarnation religions people suffer because of sins committed in this or former lives (Milindapanha 46-48, 71; Visuddhi-Magga, xvii; Anguttara-Nikaya 197; Warren p. 228-231 & 234-241).

Said the king, “Bhante Nagasena, what is the reason that men are not all alike, but some long-lived and some short-lived, some healthy and some sickly, some handsome and some ugly, some powerful and some weak, some rich and some poor, some of high degree and some of low degree, some wise and some foolish”

Said the elder, “Your majesty, why are not all trees all alike, but some sour, some salt, some bitter, some pungent, some astringent, some sweet?”

“I suppose, bhante, because of a difference in the seed.”

“In exactly the same way, your majesty, it is through a difference in their karma that men are not all alike ... (Milindapanha 65; Warren p. 214-215).

It should not be assumed that a belief in reincarnation entails a belief that men have souls. Desires and deeds accumulated in one life time can be passed on to another life just as the flame of a candle can be passed on to another candle. Just as no substance moved from one candle to the next, no soul moved from one life to the next (Milindapanha 71, Warren 234).

There is no entity, no living principle; no elements of being transmigrated from the last existence into the present one; nor, on the other hand, do they appear in the present existence without causes in that one (Visuddhi-Magga, xvii; Warren 238).

The relationship between the original life and the new life are similar to the relationship between the original noise and the echo it causes, the relationship between an object and its reflection, the relationship between an acorn and an oak (Visuddhi-Magga xvii, xix; Warren p. 239-240, 249-250).

In Buddhism, men do not have souls. Although a baby grows into an adult who grows old and dies, the baby, the adult, and the dying man are not the same being (Milindapanha 40; Warren 148-150). In Buddhism, nothing is permanent, everything is subject to change. Thus, Buddha refused to answer the question, “Does a person who reaches

Nirvana exists or does not exist after reaching Nirvana?” Buddha refused to answer this question for the same reason you would refuse to answer the question, “How often do you beat your spouse?” The “spouse beating” question assumes that you beat your spouse; the “Nirvana question” assumes that people have souls. Buddhism denies that men have souls (Milindapanha 25 & 40; Maha-Nidana-Sutta 256; Visuddhi-Magga xxi, Maha-Vagga I.6; Warren 129-150).

Since Buddhism rejects the notion that men have souls, how can it explain the fact that people who appear to be relatively innocent often suffer more than those who are less innocent?

“Bhante, if it is not this same name and form that is born into the next existence, is one not freed from one’s evil deeds?”...

“Your majesty, it is as if a man were to take away another man’s mangoes, and the owner of the mangoes were to seize him, and show him to the king, and say, ‘Sire, this man hath taken away my mangoes,’ and the other were to say ‘Sire, I did not take away this man’s mangoes. The mangoes which this man planted were different mangoes from those which I took away. I am not liable to punishment.’ Pray, your majesty, would the man be liable to punishment?”

“Assuredly, bhante, would he be liable to punishment.”

“For what reason?”

“Because, in spite of what he might say, he would be liable to punishment for the reason that the last mangoes derived from the first mangoes.”

“In exactly the same way, your majesty, with this name and form one does a deed — it may be good, or it may be wicked — and by reason of this deed another name and form is born into existence. Therefore is one not freed from one’s evil deeds.” (Milindapanha 46, Warren p. 235).

In contrast to Buddhism, Christianity teaches that men have souls (Matthew 16: 26-27). Furthermore, Christianity rejects the notion of reincarnation (Hebrews 9:27). Therefore, Christianity has a bigger problem with relatively innocent people suffering than Buddhism because Christianity can not trace the cause of that suffering back to deeds committed in a previous life.

The Holy Scripture of Christianity does not ignore this problem of suffering. The book of Job is about an innocent man suffering. At the beginning of Job, God proclaims that Job is “a perfect and upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil” (Job 1:8, see also Job 2:3). Yet, God lets Satan take away all of Job’s possessions and inflict him with every disease imaginable. Job’s friends tell him that he must have sinned. Yet, Job maintains his innocence throughout the entire book. At the end of the book, God declares that Job’s friends have not spoken the truth, but that Job has (Job 42:7). Jesus admitted that pain and suffering are not correlated with sin.

There were present at that season some that told him [Jesus] of the Galilaeans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answering said unto them, Suppose ye that these Galilaeans were sinners

above all the Galilaeans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, Nay: but except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish. Or those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay: but except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish (Luke 13: 1-5).

As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"
"Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus ...(John 9:1-3).

Although addressed elsewhere, Christianity's ultimate answer to the problem of suffering is given in the story of Jesus. The Christian God was up in heaven, without any suffering or pain, until one day He decides to make man, who then breaks God's heart. Does God respond to this hurt by destroying mankind and staying in heaven? No, instead, he decides to leave the joy of heaven to come to earth in order to be chased by murderous Herod, rejected by his creatures, betrayed by his friends, and painfully crucified on a cross (Philippians 2: 5-8).

Christianity is the only religion that contains an incarnate God who willingly suffers. When I began my undergraduate college days, I believed that there were many concepts that were unique to Christianity. I thought that only Christianity had a concept of grace or God becoming incarnate. Then I took a world religions course under Dr. Breckenridge of Baylor University in Waco, Texas. Dr. Breckenridge taught us about the absolute grace of Amida Buddhism and the many incarnations of the Hindu god Vishnu. Disturbed, I went to Dr. Breckenridge one day and asked, "Is there any thing that is truly unique to just Christianity?" He said, "Yes, Christianity is the only religion in the world where God willingly chooses to actually suffer. The Hindu God Vishnu may 'appear' to suffer in some of his incarnations, but that suffering is just an illusion. Only in Christianity does God actually, willingly, suffer."

Dr. Carlton, formerly of Southeastern Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, tells about the death of two of his friends in high school. These two friends were strong Christians who were also star players on their outstanding football team. One day, while returning from a victory in their high school football playoffs, these two friends were hit by a drunk driver and killed instantly. The preacher at one funeral talked about how God had to weave the dark threads in with the light threads to create a beautiful pattern that we would some day recognize. He also said that God knows what is best and that these two boys dying was in their best interest. The future seminary teacher left that funeral very dissatisfied. At the other funeral, the preacher said that these deaths were a tragedy. He talked about the difference that two intelligent, athletic, strong Christians could make in this world. He said that these deaths were tragedies, but that

the first person who cried over these tragedies was God. The answer that Christianity offers for the problem of suffering is that we have a God who willingly suffers for us and with us.

IV. The Purpose of Life:

The most important doctrine of Buddhism is the Four Noble Truths which were explained by Buddha in his first sermon after his enlightenment. These Noble Truths are (1) life is suffering, (2) the cause of suffering is desire, (3) to end suffering, you must end desires, (4) the way to end desires is to follow the eight fold path. The eight fold path is (1) right belief, (2) right aspiration, (3) right speech, (4) right conduct, (5) right means of livelihood, (6) right endeavor, (7) right mindfulness, and (8) right meditation (Noss, p. 132). The goal of life for a Buddhist is to escape suffering.

In contrast, the goal of life for a Christian is to be like God who willingly suffered for others (Phillipians 2:5-8). Jesus commands us to love one another and even our enemies (John 15:17 and Luke 6:27-36). Furthermore, this type of love is so deep that it is willing to die for others (John 15:12-13). Our pattern here is Jesus who gave up heaven and came down to earth to die for us. Indeed, this love drove at least two Jewish and Christian leaders to offer their own place in heaven for others. When God threatens to destroy all of Israel, Moses replies, “Oh, these people have sinned a great sin, and have made them gods of gold. Yet now, if you wilt forgive their sin—; and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of your book which you have written” (Exodus 32:31-32). Then Paul writes, “I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart. For I could wish that myself were accursed [damned] from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh” (Romans 9:2-3). Moses and Paul were following the pattern of Jesus. Jesus commands us to feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, shelter to the stranger, clothing to the naked, nursing to the sick, and friendship to those in prison (Matthew 25:31-46). Doing these things involves entering into the suffering of others.

The goal of life for a Buddhist is to escape suffering; the goal of life for a Christian is to meaningfully enter into the sufferings of others in order to bring salvation to them. These are the goals of Hinayana Buddhism and Christianity as expressed by their most Holy Scriptures. Having said the above, it is important to admit that not all Buddhist and Christians live up to these goals. Indeed there are some sects of Mahayana Buddhism which strongly encourage those who achieve enlightenment to follow the example of Buddha by becoming a teacher of others, even though teaching others is painful (Bishop, p. 126). There are also sects of Christianity which emphasize doing things on

earth in order to receive blessings on earth and in heaven or in order to escape the unending suffering of hell.

V: Conclusion

The moral codes of Christianity and Buddhism are extremely similar. However, both of these religions view morality, in and of itself, as insufficient. To find the goal of Buddhism, Nirvana, people must acquire correct knowledge and stop all their desires. To obtain the goal of Christianity, people must be like their God who willingly suffered for others.

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross? (Philippians 2:5-8, KJV)

Furthermore, Nirvana for the Buddhist is achieved by personal effort. In contrast, salvation for the Christian depends of God (Romans 5). Buddhism teaches that people do not have souls; Christianity teaches that men do have souls. The goal of a Buddhist is to end one's own suffering; the goal of a Christian is to willingly enter into the sufferings of others in order to help.

In order to live in a free society, we must be tolerant of those who do not believe as we do. However, religious toleration does not entail a belief that all religions are the same. The moral codes of most religions are extremely similar; their central teachings are not.

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Endnotes

¹All references to Christian scripture will be to the Holy Bible and will give book, chapter, and verse. Unless otherwise noted the translation used will be the King James Version.

²Determining what is holy scripture for Buddhism is more difficult than it is for Christianity because:

Buddhism is divided into numerous traditional schools, each with its own set of Scriptures. The bulk of authoritative Buddhist writings is truly enormous, and covers tens and hundreds of thousands of pages. The Pali Canon, which is restricted to one single sect, fills 45 huge volumes in the complete Siamese edition, exclusive of commentaries. The Chinese and Tibetan Canons, on the other hand, include the work of all those schools which left their mark on China or Tibet. In its most recent Japanese edition the Chinese Scriptures consisted of 100 volumes of 1,000 closely printed pages each, while the Tibetan extend to 325 volumes. (Conze, 1959, p. 11)

However, Buddhism has divided into two major groups: Hinayana and Mahayana. The Hinayana only accept the teachings of Buddha and his direct disciples; whereas, the Mahayana also accept the teachings of later bodhisattvas. Which teachers were recognized as later bodhisattvas determined what additional writings were added to a given Mahayana sect's scripture. The Mahayana sects tend to recognize the scripture of the Hinayana Buddhist, but the Hinayana Buddhist do not recognize the additions that the Mahayanists make to the Hinayana scriptures. I will focus my analysis on the Hinayana scriptures which are widely regarded as the most important. All references to Buddhist scripture will give book, chapter, and the English translation with the page number.

Memory and the Sabbath in Jewish Living

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We are a people in whom the past endures, in whom the present is inconceivable without moments gone by. The Exodus lasted a moment, a moment enduring forever. What happened once upon a time happens all the time— Abraham Joshua Heschel

I remember when I was a child we had a kitten who died when she was only a few weeks old. I was extremely sad, and felt a deep and genuine love for my kitten. And I understood the irrevocability of the loss. In order to console me, my mother said that this kitten would live on in my memory. In the aftermath of all the deaths of family members during my childhood, adolescence, and even adulthood, my mother has said the same thing, that the loved one would live on in my memory, which is essentially saying that it is memory that preserves life. She never asserted the immortality of the soul or told me stories of heaven. It is only in the past several years that I have come to realize that, in asserting the centrality of memory as the force that counteracts death and nihilism, my mother was handing over to me a deeply Judaic response to death. In her ceaseless refusal to hand over a vision of the soul's afterlife, a saccharine picture of a heavenly city as the desideratum of life, she was also protecting me from sentimentalities that could never serve me in a world of cruelty, violence and prejudice.

Although I now believe in an afterlife, one wholly consistent with Jewish thought, my mother's wisdom about memory is, perhaps ironically, precisely what has led me to this new faith. It's been and remains a complicated journey, but one whose seeds were planted almost three decades ago when a grieving child buried a kitten in her sewing box, but retained its memory in the pattern of her life.

I

My mother's belief in the role of memory as that which has the strange power of defying the extinction of death echoes everywhere in the great Jewish thinkers, even if they themselves were at war with their Judaism. Consider Freud, for whom the repressed memory when lifted to expression brought the analysis and a kind of life-altering relief. In fact I often teach my students that the modern quest to the underworld that the traditional epic hero—Odysseus, Dante, and even Christ—enacts is, in our post-Freudian time, taken on by each of us as we journey to the dark continent of our own underworlds and survive the death of having confronted the repressed demons of memory. The terrifying land of repressed memories, in our time, has replaced the underworld, the Hades or the Dantean Hell, of the traditional epic hero. The Freudian process hinges on the concept of memory unearthed as the means of salvation, of redemption, and redemption *within life*. And what is redemption in the present, *within life*, but therapeutic success, relief from pain, the arrest of neurotic repetition. Freud's vision of personal salvation requires conscious remembering.

Consider also Karl Marx, who reintroduced the modern world to the historical consciousness, that mind molded and inspired by memory, a mind that has internalized a landscape of past events through which we presently move, a mind designed by the awareness of a past that informs the present and so protects that present moment from repetition. And Marx's writings resemble the Semitic theological conception of time in still yet another sense: events in history lead toward a final goal. Although that goal may not appear at first religious in Marx, George Steiner reminds us that Marx was reading Isaiah while composing his 1844 papers—papers which recall the ecstatic rage of the prophets, renouncing the desires of the self, calling for a purging of the corrupt city and rebuilding in its place a cleansed garden—that Eden retained by memory, but occluded by our collective selfishness (Steiner 44-45). Something of the Jewish religiosity resounds from the center of Marx's deep bellow for a better place, a fairer place, a place where justice resides.

Marcel Proust, a twentieth-century Jewish novelist, in his *Overture to Swann's Way* recalls an instance of what he refers to as "involuntary memory." He remembers a particular experience when, as a young boy, his mother fed him tea and madeleines:

No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory—this

new sensation having had on me the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me, it *was* me. I had ceased now to feel mediocre, contingent, mortal. Whence could it have come to me, this all-powerful joy? I sensed that it was connected with the taste of the tea and the cake, but that it infinitely transcended these savours, could not, indeed, be of the same nature....It is plain that truth I am seeking lies not in the cup but in myself...What an abyss of uncertainty, whenever the mind feels overtaken by itself; when it, the seeker, is at the same time the dark region through which it must go seeking....Seek? More than that: create. It is face to face with something which does not yet exist, to which it alone can give reality and substance, which it alone can bring into the light of day...And I begin to ask myself what could it have been, this unremembered state which brought with it no logical proof...Undoubtedly what is thus palpitating in the depths of my being must be the image, the visual memory which, being linked to the taste, is trying to follow it into my conscious mind...And suddenly the memory revealed itself. The taste was that of the little piece of madeleine which on Sunday mornings at Combray, when I went to say good morning to her in her bedroom.....

The feeling of tranquility that overwhelms the young Marcel is associated, through the strange power of sense memory, back through the rivulets of the stream of his consciousness, with a moment of cherished contact with his aloof mother. It is memory alone that can reinvigorate the pleasure, the transcendent peace, of reunion with the mother. Sense memory, it should be noted, is also an acting technique originated by Stanislavski and imported to America by Lee Strassberg, a Jewish artist and theorist.

We have seen how concepts of memory figure greatly into the thinking of some of the finest Jewish writers, artists and thinkers of the past two centuries. In order to understand the very particular nature of Hebrew memory, we must first examine the Semitic concept of time, which will ultimately deliver us to the subject of the Sabbath, the most holy day of our week.

II

In his book *The Gift of The Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels*, Thomas Cahill discusses the Hebrew invention of the historical consciousness by contrasting it with the Greek experience of time:

For the ancients, nothing new ever did happen, except for the occasional monstrosity. Life on earth followed the course of the stars; and what had been would, in due course, come around again. What was peculiar or unique, like Oedipus' union with his mother, was of necessity monstrous. Surprise was to be eschewed...One came to inner peace by coming to terms with the Wheel... In the two great narratives of the first two books of the Bible, Israel invents not only history but the New as a positive value....The past is no longer important just because it can be mined for exemplars but because it has brought us to the present; it is the first part of our journey, the journey of our ancestors. So, in retelling their stories we have a serious obligation to get their

stories straight. We are not merely creating literature: we are retelling a personal story that really happened and that has helped us make us the people that we are (Cahill 128-9).

What the Hebrews accomplished was the breaking of the Wheel and the invention of the line of history, the landscape of time. The individual stands in a present moment with the past behind and the future before him; thus, he experiences time as fractured, as marked by difference, surprise, the New.

We see this new sense of time as early as the creation accounts in Genesis. Much has been written on the distinction between the two creation narratives, usually referred to as P (Priestly) and the J (Jehovah), recounted in Genesis. Indeed the Priestly (P) account presents an almighty distant God, a God of heavenly triumph commanding the universe into an order whose exquisite perfection both soothes and confounds us. In the Jehovah (J) account however the Divine force, the victorious voice of P has become an intimate God who can “breathe life” into Adam’s nostrils, who can participate within, rather than direct from afar, the creation of life. And here life is sentient, subjective, and God knows it. With a compassion somehow foreign to the God of P’s stunning creation, J’s God creates the animals and then Eve so Adam will not experience loneliness. This God allows Adam to name the animals, to join the creative project. One cannot help but feel that this is a God who acts and creates and feels from the standpoint of knowing alienation himself. Such loving intimacy, such vicarious desire can only be the offspring of subjectivity which itself implies separateness. This is a God of longing, not of power.

Yet, despite the radical difference in demeanors in P’s and J’s representations of God, despite the conspicuous modulation of tone between Genesis 2:4 and 2:5 (the dividing point in the Jewish Bible), the creation in both narratives share a crucial feature: division, generation by separating, turning one thing into two, successive fracturings of space. These dividings of space, we shall see, create the line of time, the breaking of the Wheel that Cahill discusses. In the Priestly account, God creates the universe through a series of awesome Sunderings: “God said, ‘Let there be an expanse in the midst of the water, that it may separate water from water.’ God made the expanse, and it separated the water which was below the expanse from the water which was above the expanse. And it was so. God called the expanse Sky” (Genesis 1:6-8). It is unnecessary to recount each of the separations which God enacts, but what is crucial to recognize is that each of these splittings of space is punctuated by an acknowledgement of a splitting of time, of the distinction between evening and morning: “And there was evening and there was morning, a second day” (Genesis, 1:8). Time moves ahead, not cyclically.

In J's creation narrative, we see a similar trajectory of spatial separation followed by a recognition of linear time. The very creation of Eve out of Adam's rib replicates the severings we see in P's creation account. With Eve's creation comes the fall, which in turn, immediately harks time's forward march: God's footsteps are heard "at the breezy time of day" (Genesis 3:8). The day is now characterized by change.

With this linear time comes memory, in the form of punishment for sin, accountability for the past. What is especially interesting is that God's punishments of Adam, Eve and the Serpent are articulated in the form of lists. And what are lists but a gathering of fragments? Lists then imply division. Notice how God's punishments for the fallen are not only enumerations, lists, but are also written, not in the usual prose paragraphs we have come to expect, but in indented list style. Here God addresses the Serpent:

“Because you did this,
More cursed shall you be
Than all cattle
And all the wild beasts:
On your belly you shall crawl
And dirt shall you eat
All the days of your life.
I will put enmity
Between you and the woman,
They shall strike at your head,
And you shall strike at their heel” (Genesis 3: 14-15).

Here God foreshadows the creation of law at Sinai, which will come in the form of the Decalogue, ten commandments, a list. The list that is law reflects the fracturing of the lost unity of the Garden, where there was only one law: Do not eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. It is of further relevance that the first tablets are literally broken, fractured, when Moses witnesses a kind of second fall: the Israelites are dancing around and worshipping the golden calf.

Further, Judaic law is case law, precedent, which later gets codified into prohibitions. The Talmud is a list, in random order, of cases interpreted and then made into precedent, which is law as the observance of what has been decided before, law as memory raised to established authority. It makes sense that law and memory are intimately connected for the Jewish God continually defines himself as a God in history, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and one who remembers his covenant with his people. In fact God begins the Decalogue with a reminder of what he has so far done for the Israelites: “I the Lord am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage” (Exodus 20:2).

III

We have seen how the severing of space gives way to linear time, which, in turn creates memory. Conversely, memory is proof of linear time and the New in individual and collective history, for memory presupposes a distinction between then and now. Nowhere is the differentiation between the past and the present so clear in Jewish life than in the observance of the Sabbath. The stream of prohibitions against work on the Sabbath, the absolute command to rest, to read Torah, to reflect on the week that has preceded the seventh day, to pray, and the scurry to prepare for the Sabbath as if she were a holy guest, to clean the home, to prepare the tablecloths and candles, to complete all preparations before Friday at sundown – all of this testifies to a radical demarcation in the week of Jewish life. Heschel rightly refers to the Sabbath as “A Palace in Time.” As many scholars have noticed, God looks upon the world of space that he creates in the first six days and continually calls it good, but the Seventh day he declares holy. What then is the difference?

The visual universe may have been created in six days, but the Bible is explicit in telling us that, “On the seventh day God finished the work that He had been doing” (Genesis 2:2). What happened on seventh day that was so necessary that not until then could the task of creation be declared completed? On the seventh day, God created the Sabbath. The Sabbath then is also a creation, an act of God: “And He ceased on the seventh day from all the work that He had done. And God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy, because on it ceased from all the work of creation that He had done. Such is the story of heaven and earth when they were created” (Genesis: 2: 2-4). God’s rest is so crucial to the completion of creation that the Priestly narrator twice tells us how God refrained from work.

Moreover, notice how the Priestly narrator has punctuated this repetition with a summation of the creation of heaven and earth, as if to say the Sabbath is a time for summary, reflection, memory, as if to rehearse to duty of the Sabbath day just as he creates it. Biblical man, unlike the ancient Greeks, experiences the day of rest not as refreshment, regeneration for another six days of labor, but just the opposite. As Heschel writes, “Man is not a beast of burden, and the Sabbath is not for the purpose of enhancing the efficiency of his work. Last in creation, first in intention, the Sabbath is the end of the creation of heaven and earth...It is not an interlude but a climax of living” (14). If the Sabbath were an “interlude” we would be living according to cyclical time. As a “climax,” the Sabbath situates us firmly upon the landscape of linear time, where memory is born. Significantly, the fourth commandment, which

comprises one third of the Decalogue, orders us to “*Remember* the Sabbath and keep it holy” (Exodus 20: 8). Furthermore, the fourth commandment concludes with a summary of the creation similar to what we saw when God made the Sabbath on the seventh day: “For in six days the Lord made heaven, earth and sea, and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it” Exodus 20:11). The mere mention of the Sabbath beckons retrospection, the recollection of the six days of .creating the physical universe.

But what is so glorious about memory and study that we should take a whole day out of our week to bathe in it? The answer can be found in the model for living that God creates for man in the first seven days. God establishes the seventh day as a day of reflection, but he also concludes his spatial creations during the first six days by looking at them and declaring them good: “And God saw that this was good” (Genesis 1:18). It is as if God detaches at the end of almost each creation (for seeing implies distance) and reflects in order to deem it good, finished. We have a kind of miniature Sabbath, rest, at the end of each day of labor. It is as though God were erecting a model of living in which creation, doing, means little without reflection on what we’ve done. Nothing is finished without reflection, during which we may approve or disapprove of what we’ve done, declare it good or bad. If we do not reflect, we are human doings, not human beings. Reflection lifts existence into being.

On the Sabbath, like God, we cease from creating in the physical world and we reflect on what we’ve done, on what we’ve created. Thus, we internalize the external world we have made in the preceding six days. We live more in study, prayer and memory, in the realm of time, which is holy, rather than the realm of space, which is merely good. The internalization of the external world, the visual world, the world of all the senses, is memory’s grand accomplishment. Memory houses the past in the human psyche. It erects a monument to what has fled. It retains the wholeness of time, while saving it from the repetition of cyclical time. Memory is eternity’s altar ego.

On the Sabbath, we experience time, which is holy and hence eternal. In this holy experience, our inner worlds expand as we internalize what we have created in the physical world. The Hebrew scriptures consistently privilege the internal over the external, time over space, what is holy over what is good, by resisting the description of what the physical world looks like. As many scholars have noticed, in place of telling us what something or someone looked like, the Jewish Bible describes how it was made (Boman 76, Scarry 212). Eve, Noah’s ark, the Ark of the Covenant, Aaron’s vestments—none of these are described for us as finished products, but rather we are given a detailed account of how they were made, and out of what ingredients, a rib, certain kinds of wood, crimson and purple cloths. The effect

of this refusal to describe the created thing is that it trains the reader to reject the visual world, the world of space. It also places more demands on the imagination and so pushes us to our interiors, to the realm of thought and reflection, the realm of the Sabbath. The goal is, “to know what we see rather than see what we know” (*The Prophets*, xi).

IV

In the Post-Holocaust age, I would be remiss, as a Jew examining the role of memory in my religion, to make no mention of the crimes of the Third Reich. We have all heard the cry, “Never forget,” and I ache at the thought that some of us may have become numb to this plea. Six million Jews- one of the largest mass murders in history- annihilated. No burials, no prayers at their graves, tortured, slaughtered in camps that destroyed human lives with the horrifying efficiency of factory productivity. That I can enjoy the Sabbath as a glimpse into the eternal, that I can sometimes experience God as benevolent, situates me among the elect, among those Jews born after the War. But I know what happened, and although I cannot remember from personal experience, I must read and listen to narratives that bear witness to a time when many of my people asked and continue to ask, “Where was God when there was Auschwitz?” I shake my head in wonder at all those who did not respond, who did not help, and I must admit that my bewilderment, my grief at the collective ignoring that occurred (and still occurs) outflanks my gratitude to those who did respond to the “still, small voice” of conscience and performed heroic deeds. It seems to me that remembering the ill deeds of the tormentors lifts us closer to civility than celebrating the heroic deeds of the sympathizers. Why? Because those who heard the voice of conscience were able to respond to its beckoning call precisely because they saw the cruelty, and heard the rumors, and remembered them, held them in their minds. It was the bearing of the unbearable news that compelled them to help. Remembering makes us moral, not hateful. So to recall the horror is not to bury oneself in a plot of hostility and vengeance, but rather to cross the threshold into just action. No writer articulates the redemptive value of memory better than Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel:

We remember Auschwitz and all that it symbolizes because we believe that in spite of the past and its horrors, the world is worthy of salvation; and salvation, like redemption, can be found only in memory....But you may ask: Isn't there a danger that memory may perpetuate hatred? No, there is no danger. Memory and hatred are incompatible. The reverse is true: memory may serve as a powerful remedy against hatred (Wiesel 200-1).

When we welcome the Sabbath into our homes, we reflect on the world we have been creating; we recreate the uniqueness of the seventh day, that holy day on which nothing was divided. That was when God “finished his work,” when the world required no more repair. And it is memory that creates a civilized world, a world of unity and peace, a garden where only one law, rather than a list of laws, was necessary: Do not eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Let us not forget the original sin is represented as a desire for destroying the unity of a perfect whole, as a hunger to bite into a piece of fruit.

It is pertinent that the fall of man, the original sin, is associated with inaccurate remembering. For Eve tells the Serpent that she is forbidden not only to eat the fruit, but also to touch it. The Bible does not tell us if she has heard the prohibition from God or indirectly from Adam. Does Eve misremember God’s or Adam’s warning or does Adam fumble as he communicates the prohibition to her, does he add the prohibition against touch? In either case, a lapse in memory accompanies the fall.

Many rabbinical scholars have asserted that Adam and Eve are punished, not because they disobeyed God’s original proscription, but because they did not take responsibility for their transgression. Adam hid from God, they hid from one another and, most disturbingly, they hid their sin under a veil of excuses. They attempted to repress the memory of the actual occurrence. And are there any among us more dangerous, more likely to repeat our sins, than those who fail to remember those sins, who have repressed their memory? Can anyone deny that the unthinkable must get expressed, must be remembered, if it is to cease repeating itself? Was this not Freud’s contribution to individual salvation? And what counts for the individual counts even more for collective humanity. Remembering the sins of the past then, our own and others, is what keeps us civilized. It is our only hope against repeating the Holocaust or slavery or any of the many other atrocities of history. As unbearable as remembering may be, it is our only threshold to world peace, to unity, to a day, like the seventh, when the world is no longer divided.

To set apart one day a week for freedom, a day on which we would not use the instruments which have been so easily turned into weapons of destruction, a day for being with ourselves, a day of detachment from the vulgar, of independence of external obligations, a day on which we stop worshipping the idols of technical civilization, a day on which we use no money, a day of armistice in the economic struggle with our fellow men and the forces of nature – is there any institution that holds out a greater hope for man’s progress than the Sabbath (Heschel 28)?

When we view the Sabbath in this light, it is no surprise that what Elie Wiesel, witness to mass murder by means of technological prowess and efficiency, longs for most are the Sabbaths of his youth.

Like most survivors, I would give everything I own to awaken and see that we are in 1938-1939; that I had only dreamed the future. I would give much to be able to relive a Sabbath in my small town. The whiteness of the tablecloths, the flickering candlelight, the beaming faces around me, the melodious voice of my grandfather, the Hasid of Wishnitz, inviting the angels of the Sabbath to accompany him to our home. I ache when I think of these things. That is what I miss most: a certain peace, a certain melancholy that the Sabbath, at Sighet, offered its celebrants, big and small, young and old, rich and poor. It is this Sabbath that I miss. Its absence recalls to me all else that is gone. It reminds me that things have changed in the world, that the world itself has changed. And I have, too (Wiesel 144-45).

The Sabbath is the time when the eternal can be felt. Jewish tradition has metaphorized the Sabbath as a bride, whose union with the home she enters symbolizes the final union of Israel and God. That divine union is prophesied in Ezekiel (37) in the story of the valley of the dry bones, where the dead Israelite tribes are resurrected and gathered together in Israel.

Thus said the Lord God: I am going to take the Israelite people from among the nations they have gone to, and gather them from every quarter, and bring them to their own land. I will make them a single nation in the land, on the hills of Israel, and one king shall be king of them all. Never again shall they be two nations, and never again shall they be divided into two kingdoms. . . . My servant David shall be king over them; there shall be one shepherd for all of them. . . . My Presence shall rest over them; I will be their God and they shall be my people” (Ezekiel 37:20-27).

The Sabbath gives us a taste of this eternal peace, when God’s work will be finished once again.

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Fishin' 4 Religion

Shadows of a Religious Movement

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Goodie Mob means, 'The Good Die Mostly Over Bullshit'
You take away one 'O' and it will let you know
'God is Every Man of Blackness'
The Lord has spoken thru me and the G-Mo-B. Goodie Mob

One of the major influences of the Black theology of the 'hood is the theology rooted in what I have come to refer to as GOD conscious rap music. As Goodie Mob claims, "The Lord has spoken thru me and the G-Mo-B." Rappers claim to have a word from GOD much like the preachers and prophets of old. These claims in the rhymes of today's hip hop socio-theologians serve as a foundation for the emergence of what promises to be a new type of religious movement in the 'hood. This movement will be like none we have seen before. It will not have the traditional or typical signs of religious movements for it will develop in the streets. Meeting halls and buildings will not be built to support this movement. The movement will not have a sacred text in the usual form but rather a sacred text in the lyrics and orthodoxy they live in the context of a religious world view is practiced in the streets. Many theologians and sociologists will miss this movement for they will look in the wrong places in attempt to locate a religious movement with the lenses that worked in times past.

In this era of religious development in an age of virtual space and virtual realities, religious movements will take place outside the confines of former paradigms. Former paradigms will provide hints about how these movements are similar to those that came before, but the religious movements of this age will be distinctly different. The religious movement that is beginning to emerging in rap music is described in this chapter. Some would characterize what has been located in the 'hood in the form of rap music and described in this chapter as merely a religious consciousness or expressions of a theo-religious contour. It is more than that. What we actually see is the early stages of a new and different type of religious movement. The socio-theologians of the 'hood and rap music are looking for a new religion.

Prominent rappers, in an effort to make sense of their world from a socio-theological perspective, have put together a corpus of religious principles that should be seen as theological constructs. While rappers may not be intentionally developing a theology, the end result is a theological dialogue serving as a primary religious source of theological development for inner city youth. Many of these rappers have reinterpreted orthodox tenets of Christianity and Islam. Their work, when viewed as whole, shows evidence of a developing theology, with its own orthodoxy.

Rappers clearly proclaim that they are looking for a new religion, in one form or another. They are not simply sharing religious urges that reaches back to established religious orders, but they are looking for and forming a new strand in the religious landscape among the African American community. One of this genre's most vocal and clear articulations of a call for a new religion is found on the group Arrested Development's cut *Fishin' 4 Religion* on its compact disc, *Unplugged*. On this cut not only does the group critique the institutional church, its theology and eschatology, but calls for a ***new religion***. Arrested Development claims it is "fishin' 4 religion" because the church has failed them. Arrested Development contends that the church has failed to be a true agent of liberation for the Black community. The following sample from the cut *Fishin' 4 Religion* makes clear the claim they are Fishin' 4 Religion. "The reason I'm fishin'" for a new religion is my church makes me fall asleep; They're praising a God that watches you weep and doesn't do a damn thing about it."¹ Church is seen as irrelevant and not sufficiently addressing the needs of the Black community.

A key factor fueling the development of the theological fusion in the 'hood is the irrelevance of the Black church. Those who are in the church are quick to point to all the things the church has done and is doing to serve the larger community but the misery index in the 'hood continues to go up. This tension between what the church proclaims it does and the larger community's perception of those works as tangible is evident in socio-rap theology. As the rap socio-theologians wrestle with the issues of theodicy they call the churches to task. In the process they have discerned a need to practice and define their religion outside the bounds of the institutional church. They are not held hostage by the need to appeal to the dogma of Christianity. This is a radical shift from what Mitchell and Cooper-Lewter found in *Soul Theology*.² In that work they found that the theology of the 'hood was one that had a pattern that followed the doctrines of the Christianity. This is not the case in the Black theology of the 'hood and the theology that is found in GOD conscious rap today. There has been a drastic shift.

Shadows of a Religious Movement in Social Context

Within rap music a new religious movement or sect is emerging amongst many inner city African American youth. Most of these young people don't attend formal institutionalized religious services. William J. Wilson found in his research that fewer than 29% of persons who live in the inner city or ghetto claim to have a tangential relationship with formal religion.³ The lack of a relationship with formal institutionalized religion has not stopped the yearning for a religious encounter and response. The 'hood's youth, like most people, ask the ultimate questions; they want to make sense of their existence and discover their purpose in life. As I spoke to and interviewed inner city youth, I found that most of all they are trying to understand what kind of GOD would sentence them to life in the ghetto. The hardest thing for them to believe was that GOD loved them. This love concept was difficult to grasp because their lives are difficult and the despair and death in their communities doesn't make any sense. They didn't see their family members who had been victimized by the slow death nail of inner city living as bad people. In essence they were primarily focused on questions that revolve around theodicy.⁴ How can a just GOD who loves us allow such injustices and oppression to continue?

Inner city residents and especially inner city youth are searching for answers, answers that were not being satisfactorily answered by institutionalized religion. Many inner city residents felt the Church had turned their back on them. One fourteen year old teenager remarked, "They all fake, all of them churches fake, they don't care about us, they don't even live here." There is a void in their lives and they are looking for answers. The answer to this void is being filled by segments of rap music. Rap music, along with its theology and rap theologians has captured and canonized a religious discourse that has provided a vehicle for religious expression among many African American youth who find themselves living in decaying inner cities. The birth of this emerging religious movement is true to the historical birth process of other religious sects or movements. It is a movement, that is underground, and being birthed by the outcast as they interpret and apply the theology of rap music lyrics to their lives.

Richard Niebuhr wrote in 1929 that "... the sect has ever been the child of an outcast minority, taking rise in the religious revolts of the poor, of those who were without effective representation in church or state and who formed their conventicles of dissent in the only way open to them, on the democratic, associational pattern."⁵ Rap music was born as the music of the outcast. Though later consumed by popular culture, it remained the music genre of choice for

inner city African Americans. As the genre of rap music scaled the charts and became the fourth top seller among all other music genres, it actually began to serve a symbolic prescriptive role for inner city African Americans.⁶ By symbolic prescriptive role we mean that rap music became more of an influence on inner city human behavior than a reflection of inner city behavior. It began to shape the way inner city youth saw their lives and interpreted their surroundings. In a conversation with a young African American male, he emphasized this issue, “Rappers keep it real, they know what it’s like to live where we live. They keeping it real.” He felt that rappers understood and, in essence, he then understood rap music as both a reflector and true indicator of what life was like in the ghetto. He never questioned that the major rap artists that we often talked about had moved out of the ‘hood and millionaires living in mansions and not housing projects.

The power of rap as an art form born in the ‘hood continued to serve as a foundation for the legitimacy of rap in the hearts and minds of its new listeners. Rap, which appeared on the pop culture scene in the late 1970s and early 1980s, has since been consumed by a record industry that controlled its content and distribution. Nevertheless, young rap fans still accepted rap as a reflector of their community. The removal of rap music from the ‘hood as an indigenously produced art form denies its claim of being simply a reflector of the inner city and elevates it to being a social constructor of the inner city social world. This point must be tempered for it is difficult to measure but it must be considered in this discussion. The point must also be made that rap and hip hop, even though they have become commodified and removed from the ‘hood, still remained connected, in a unique way, to the inner city. George Nelson said it best:

Hip hop didn’t become commodified in a simple, connect- the-dots manner. It morphed, like an alien in a sci-fi flick, to serve its different masters. Yet, like so many other underground cultural expressions, hip hop managed to remain vital, abrasive, and edgy for two decades. The culture’s connection to the African-American working and underclass, people usually without a media voice, enables it to communicate dreams and emotions that make outsiders uncomfortable...hip hop survives even the crassest commercialism...⁷

Rap music, though removed from the ‘hood as an indigenous art form, still maintained a hold on its inner city audience. The bond of loyalty and resonance was established. The fans of rap love hard and are not about to divorce themselves from the one love that, in the words of one young man, “is about us, this is the shit we deal with everyday, this is our shit.” This art form is the star of the ghetto. Sports stars leave the ‘hood and are always labeled as the ones who got out, and therefore represent a connection broken. Rap and its stars always claim the ‘hood as home. They feature the ‘hood

as the star in their music videos and they claim to put the real life of the 'hood to rhyme. This semiotic connection between rap and its inner city fans is a unique love affair. It is a love affair shaped by the artists and their fans. They are locked in a web of reflection and reflector. The evolution of rap music into a popular icon has not hurt this relationship but it has made it stronger as the fans adore and worship their ghetto superstars. While the relationship between artist and fan has grown remotely intimate there has been a different effect between the function and role of the art form. The art form has taken a more complicated role.

The transformation of rap / hip hop as it became an industry money maker removed it from the 'hood as an indigenously produced art form and its socially significant role was transformed. A reflexive-recursive social prescriptive role developed for rap music. This social prescriptive role that rap music assumed begins to provide an answer to the call and response of the inner city by offering a cathartic religious symbol for the pain of the ghetto. The socio-physic power inherent in this response in turn shapes the social world of the ghetto as its listeners interpret the lyrics, along with raps's signs and symbols. One of the major identifiable components of this message was rap music's artists' claim that they had a word and sign from "GOD". Rap music, along with the rap gurus, began to espouse a theology, supported by signs, symbols, images and complementary interpretations that began to emerge into a type of religious movement. As this movement began to emerge there developed common theological themes in the genre. These theological themes provide the socio-theo-rap-ological foundation for what we will refer to as rap religion. The term socio-theo-rap-ology refers to the culture, theology, and constructive power of rap music as a shapper of religiosity in the African American community through its expressions, motivations, intentions, behaviors, styles, rhythms and the lived experience it professes and supports. It is socio-theo-rap-ology as found in GOD conscious rap music that serves as the ethical, moral and religious foundation of the emerging religious movement in rap.

Moving Toward a Definition of Rap Religion

Several themes in this genre of rap religion distinct religious/theological stand out. The first major theo-theme is the definition of a deity. In rap religion there appears to be an assent to a GOD but this GOD is distinctly different than described in orthodox Christianity or Islam. There has also been the establishment of forms of rituals, prayer(s), methods for worship, an explanation and definition of what truth is and how one attains this truth. These broad categories have been accentuated by rap religion answering the question that most religions tend to answer, is there life after death. This emerging religious movement has also tackled the questions related to ultimate orientation, the place and power of the divine, while also assisting inner city African Americans to make sense of their existence in a cruel and oppressive environment. These broad categories of religious themes will be explored as various rap artist lyrics are lifted up as archetypes of this genre of rap music that serves as the theological and ideological foundation of the rap religion movement. Many other rap works could have been cited but for the sake of developing a concise and coherent, readable argument we will highlight archetypes of the genres whose work serves as models. These models display both the level of sophistication and broad theological trends in GOD-conscious rap. GOD-conscious rap is the theological source for this new type of religious movement, rap religion.

Definition of Religion

We use Charles Long's definition of religion to guide this discussion. His definition stands for the breadth and depth necessary to glean the nuances and richness of religion as a lived experience. Long's definition frees religion from the constraints of religion as being defined simply in term of a theology (*theos*=deity and *logos*=discourse / word) Long allows us to see religion and the ascent to the sacred as broader and holistic. Long's definition of religion is rooted in orientation: "...orientation in the ultimate sense, that is, how one comes to terms with the ultimate significance of one's place in the world."⁸ In essence, this definition points to a process by which one, or a group of people, seeks to make sense of the world. Theologians asks the big question in an attempt to become oriented in the spaces and places of lived experience while at the same time weaving in explanation of the past and the present while looking to the future.

If we hope to understand the diversity and breadth of religion in the Black experience we must move beyond the limited boundaries that constrict our definition of religion. Moreover we must remove any seeming separation between the sacred and the secular. Many persons can't hear or see the religious movement in rap music because of their inability to see the sacred as emerging out of the things that have been labeled secular. There is also an inability by many to hear and interpret the religious value in rap because of their unwillingness to take rap and its socio-theo-rap-ology seriously. The cultural and religious significance of rap is demeaned by both black and white communities. The marginalized definition of religion and paradigm constraints of religious movements theory has resulted in many scholars missing the religio-creative powers of rap music. Long is helpful here for his scholarship constantly pushes us to expand our definition of religion. Long argues that the Christian experience has never been an adequate frame to fully understand the religious experience of Africans. In order to understand the religious journey of Africans or African Americans, Long contends one must look to "...extrachurch orientations (which) have great critical and creative power." GOD-conscious rap is such an extrachurch orientation with critical and creative powers.⁹ To understand the quest for orientation in this world via religiosity Long contends we must look at the folklore, music, style of life and so on. In Long's words:

The religion of a people is more than a structure of thought; it is experience, expression, motivations, intentions, behaviors, styles, and rhythms. Its first and fundamental expression is not on the level of thought. It gives rise to thought, but a form of thought that embodies the precision and nuances of its source. This is especially true of Afro-American religion. Americans of African descent have been forced to deal with several heritages - those of Africa, and those of the New World in the form of the cultural and political situation of the United States, and the heritage of a distinctive culture created in this country from this amalgam. And they have had to deal with these realities always under a situation of oppression and duress.¹⁰

When Long's definition is taken seriously it points us in the right direction when looking at rap music as the foundation for a religious movement. When the experience, expressions, motivations, intentions, behaviors, styles and rhythms become the identifiable birth canal for religious consciousness, then rap, along with its cultural expressions, becomes a perfect candidate for study. When one reviews the religious movement emerging in the inner city being fueled by the socio-theo-rap-ology one can recognize the interplay of an oppressed minority trying to make sense of its place in this world via the cultural birth canal or GOD conscious rap and its complementary culture. These icons or religious markers that are developed in GOD conscious rap that is lived and expressed through the behaviors, styles and rhythms inherent in the genre of rap music. It is in the world of the inner city that African Americans are attempting to

survive and make sense of a world, outside the institutionalized church, by constructing some hybrid culture linked to the religiosity of GOD conscious rap music.

Inner city African Americans, like their forefathers and foremothers are struggling to define self while between caught between several heritages. This is even more so for inner city residents who are not only cast as aliens by the dominant American culture, but are in many ways separated from their ethnic brothers and sisters along class lines. GOD-conscious rap music is yet another cultural layer present in the lives of inner city African American youth as they ask big questions and try to make sense of their lives through a religious expression, as espoused in rap music. This music and religious expression further alienates them from the dominant minority religious culture and further alienates the adherents of rap religion. Religious expression for inner city African Americans is a struggle on multiple levels, for they are seen as outcast by the dominant culture. They are frowned upon by their middle class ethnic brothers and sisters, and also they are among a religious minority in relationship to Christianity and the Nation of Islam, the dominant religions of African Americans.

It is only as we look at rap religion as religious expression with the breadth that Charles Long calls for will we be able to recognize its power and critical creative spirit. The beauty and breadth of this religious movement is couched in the experience, expression, motivations, intentions, behaviors, styles and rhythms of theo-rap or GOD-conscious rap as lived and interpreted by inner city residents who listen these to sacred rhymes everyday.

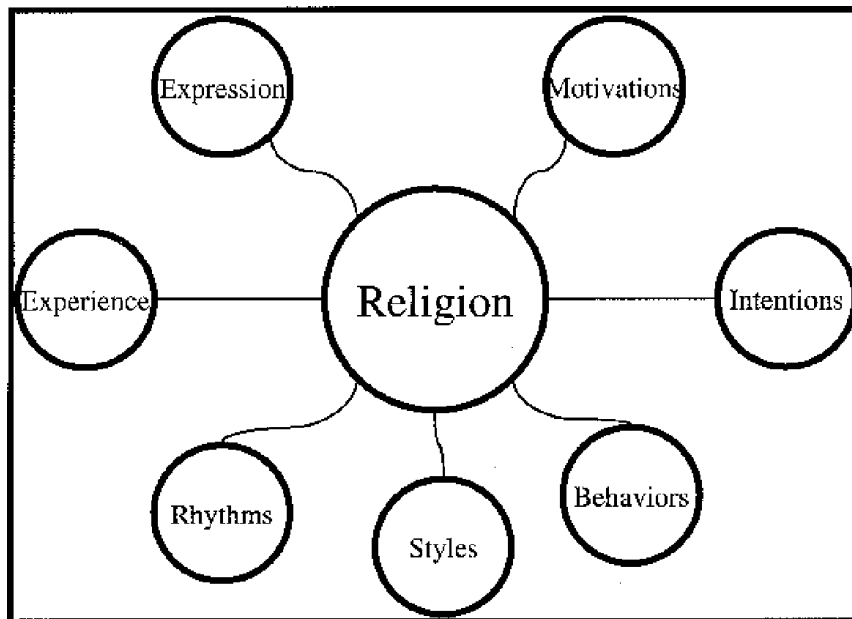


Figure 1: Seven Lenses for Understanding Religion

This socio-theo-rap-ology of GOD-conscious rap has caught the ear of inner city African Americans and has birthed an alternative religious life and dogma. The expression of religion in the rap movement is seen not only through the lyrics but also in the signs, symbols and images of this genre of GOD-conscious rap. The undergirding foundation that has spurred this movement is the socio-theology inherent in the lyrics. The lyrics as constructed in connection with the inner city socio-cultural context gives rise to socio-theological-thought that embodies the nuances and precision of a religion that situated in a specific sacred space called the 'hood.

The seven lenses of religion as defined by Long serve as operative tools for religious expression in rap music. One can easily chart the experience, expressions, motivations, intention, behaviors, styles and rhythms of rap music as it has emerged as a new type of religious movement within the inner city. The lyrics or rhymes of this genre serve as the foundation for the socio-theological discourse. This discourse has moved from mere religious overtones into a type of religious sect dialogue. The early years of this theology embraced a relative religious orthodoxy, in relation to Christianity and Islam. As the genre developed, along with the amount of theological content, the meanings and interpretations of the theological concepts changed. Rappers took familiar religious symbols like Jesus Christ, suffering, martyrdom, the blood images of sacrifice and made them palatable to their audience. Inner city African Americans found a resonance and relationship with the theological concepts, definition of GOD, and the application of popular religious icons with their own suffering. When homies who were shot down in drive-bys were likened to Jesus Christ, saints or martyrs of the 'hood, it provided a healing and a sufficient religious response for inner city African Americans. GOD conscious rap music was answering a call that most Christian churches and mosque had failed to answer.

Whereas institutionalized religion condemned the violence of the streets, rap music glorified the violence. Rap music justified retaliation and developed a defensible theological argument that those who died at the hand of the streets were actually going to "ghetto heaven". When GOD-conscious rap began to dedicate complete cuts on compact discs that gave clear theo-rhyme answers to life's major questions, it was a clear sign in the development of this genre. It was moving from being a genre with lyrics laced with religious overtones to the development of systematic theological-rhyme arguments. In this stage of development that a segment of rap music had effectively birthed a new type of religious movement. At this point in the movement we find an experience or way of life seeking understanding, answering ultimate questions about existence and returning answers that are wrapped in the rhythms, behaviors and styles of the people who live in the inner city. The late 1980s and early 1990s are markers for this emerging transition.

By the late 1990s the transition from lyrics laced with religious overtones had developed into lyrics completely dedicated to the definition of GOD and other religious themes. Rap had effectively woven together, via the medium of rap and the theo-rappers, a systematic WORD about the ultimate. This religious orientation, as it evolved into a more sophisticated dogma, was in essence becoming religion as lived by inner city residents who listen to rap music, interpret its rhymes as truth resonating with experience, and then live their lives informed by a theology according to rap.

The Theoretical Lenses for the Analysis of Socio-theo-rap-ology

The theoretical undergirding for this analysis is rooted in what we have termed, “socio-theological-semiotics.” Socio-theological-semiotics contends that theological constructs are products of the social settings in which they are framed. These theological constructs have social constructive properties in the form of socio-theo signs and symbols. Socio-theological constructs serve as symbols that stand for and lead to larger socio-contextual interpretation of these signs and symbols that have theo-appropriations attached to them. In the case of theology in rap music, socio-theological-semiotics contends that it is in the social frame of the inner city that these theological tenets are re-formed and re-framed by the followers of GOD-conscious rap and then apply semiotic meanings to the symbols constructed through the medium of rap music. In the ‘hood, the lyrics of rap artist / theologians are imparted a theological impetus that informs the religious world view of inner city listeners who interpret these lyrics in their social context. The lyric’s intent, along with their imparted meanings, are interpreted in a social context where social actors are attempting to order and make sense of their world. Socio-theology, as contained in rap music lyrics, offers an interpretation of inner city residents social world with the claim of “divine” sensitivities to the struggles they face. This genre of music then proceeds to offer a socio-theological interpretation of the inner city world, while attempting to make sense of the seeming chaos by answering the questions that have historically been given privilege in the circles of organized/ institutionalized religion. In essence, rap theology is offering a religious dogma for the listeners of rap music. These rappers can be referred to as theo-rappers, rappers whose lyrics/rhymes have substantial theological content.

The Theological and Ethical Foundation of the Rap-Religious Movement

When GOD-conscious rap is constructed as a corpus, much like the Bible was constructed (a bunch of little books put together in one big book), one can locate answers to the major questions that religions claim to answer and effectively define a socio-theo-*rap*-ology that informs a unique brand of religious dogma. In this genre of we have labeled GOD conscious rap music that answers these questions in the form of religion as lived through the seven lenses we spoke of earlier (see Figure 1). One of the major questions that religion answers is what happens after death. Socio-theo-*rap*-ology attempts to makes sense of both the moment and method of death as well as answering the questions that pertain to the after life. In essence they move the adherents beyond mortality. An illustration of this finding is neatly situated in the events, interpretations, and reaction to the death of Tupac Shakur by many of the street theologians I encountered in inner city Pittsburgh in 1996.

The religious system that is constructed through the medium of socio-theo-*rap*-ology is a lived religion that has everyday implications and interpretations. I remember very vividly the Sunday morning message I preached at Trinity African Methodist Episcopal Church, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on September 15, 1996, just two days after the untimely death of Tupac Shakur. The sermon was titled, *A Tribute to a Soldier*. The young African Americans who I shared with before and after the message were clear on the purpose of Tupac's life and they knew that he had gone to a place called heaven. His life and work had an enormous impact on them, much like civil rights leaders had an impact on the lives of many in my generation. The legacy, life, work and death of Martin King lingered years after his death in the minds of my generation and it appeared in the processing of the death of Tupac by my fellow street theologians that his legacy would have a lasting effect in their lives.

On this particular Sunday, in the context of our conversation, Tupac was likened to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.. As we discussed Tupac's music video, *I Ain't Mad At Cha*, the young Brothers and Sisters concluded that Tupac had prophesied his death. As we talked our conversation circled back to Martin King's "I Have Been To the Mountain Top" speech in Memphis in April of 1968, just prior to his death where portions of the speech's content appeared as if King predicted or prophesied his death. When we came to this juncture in the conversation, as I inserted this irony, the kids immediately likened Tupac to Martin King. They continued by saying, "Tupac understood us, he knew what it was like, he knew what was going down, he knew what was coming, he knew they was go kill him" in essence they were saying

that he knew what their lives were like and he had some type of divine foresight in reference to his own death. Tupac was in the eyes of many African American inner city youth a spokesperson for their struggles as much as he spoke to their struggle. In understanding and making sense of the life struggle of inner city youth many rappers gain credibility with inner city listeners. In essence, Tupac was for many a prophet in his own time.

The socio-theo-rap-ological voice of rappers is given credence for it resonates with the listeners as it makes sense of the struggle of living in the 'hood and then points to the future as it answers questions that revolve around ultimate life orientation. Tupac Shakur's video, *I Ain't Mad At Cha*, shows him being shot to death in a drive by shooting. He then proceeds to heaven and meets many other rhythm and blues stars, such as Marvin Gaye, Redd Foxx, Nat King Cole, Donnie Hathaway, and many others. The video proceeds to tell a story of Tupac and his friend, who Tupac returns as a type of angel to help. The friend in-turn goes to build a relationship with Tupac's former girlfriend. This video asks and answers the question, what happens after death. Moreover this GOD conscious- rap video answers what happens when one is shot in a senseless shooting. The answers are caught up in the experiences, motivations, intentions, behaviors, life styles of the shooter and the one who is shot. This, like other GOD-conscious rap, makes this plain in the rhythms, rhymes, signs and symbols of rap. The song contends that if one doesn't do all that is right on this side of life then one can work their way into heaven by going back to the natural world and doing good deeds. It also asserts that one does not have to be connected to a formal institutionalized religion to get into heaven. In essence, Tupac is asserting in this GOD conscious-rap video that one can deal with religious matters after life as well as during ones lived experience on earth. If one is killed by a senseless drive by, then it isn't over. There is definitely life after death and this eternal life is one that enables the slain to be active in the natural world in a tangible way. One can connect with the present, intervene in actions and these actions have everlasting benefits that can get a person into heaven.

GOD conscious-rap is extended by many rappers to include Tupac Shakur. Bone Thugs ~n~ Harmony in their cut *At The Crossroads* contend that we will meet at this place called the crossroads. This is a place where life meets death and the issue of the after life is brought to bear. It is in this cut and the highlighted cut by Tupac Shakur that we see socio-theo-rap-ology addressing both the life one lives in the 'hood and the issue of untimely, seemingly senseless death. Bone Thugs ~n~ Harmony calls the roll of those who have fallen to untimely deaths and they proclaim, we will all meet at the crossroads, a place that resembles the throne of judgement of Christianity. Bone Thugs ~n~ Harmony

claims that an angel comes and takes the dead to heaven and offers comfort in the moment of grief to loved ones left behind. The dead are taken to a place of peace as they journey to the top a mountain and an angel, a Black male with wings, takes the dead to a place in the sky.

GOD consciousness of rap is highlighted through the power of music videos. Rappers are not only providing theo-lyrics but also providing the signs, symbols and images to support the theology they are espousing. When a video depicts a drive by, a funeral and then the dead person being carried by a Black angel, the very appropriation of these religious symbols lends itself to religious interpretation and then implies an inherent theological message. GOD-conscious raps appropriates a plethora of commonly recognizable religious symbols in their videos and compact disc art that appears on both the cover and inside of the disc case. This appropriation of religious symbols is extended to the rappers claim that they speak on behalf of a divine being. They appropriate both symbols and the office of religious voice as they convey their socio-theo-rap-lyrics to their followers.

Many rappers claim to have divine right to speak. They claim they have been sent by GOD to speak the masses in the 'hood. A perfect example of this element in GOD-conscious rap is the rhymes of DMX (Dark Man X - X representing the unknown, a reach back to the Nation of Islam and Malcolm X). In some cases this privilege is conferred by the voice the socio-theo-rappers choose or assumes and in other cases it is stated outright by the socio-theo-rapper that GOD has sent them to share this message. In the case of DMX he claims that GOD has sent him to speak a word to the people. On the cut "Prayer" he puts it this way:

Let Us Pray, Lord Jesus it is you, who wakes me us everyday
You let me touch so many people, and it's all for the good
I influenced so many children, I never though that I would.....
I don't deserve what you have given me, but you never took it from me
because I am grateful, and I use it, and I do not, worship money
If what you want from me is to bring your children to you
My regret is only having one life to do it, instead of two
Amen¹¹

DMX makes it clear in the prayer that what he has GOD gave it to him and this includes the privilege of being a voice for GOD. This privilege also includes his being empowered to influence the lives of so many people/children. DMX has included such a prayer on all of his hit compact disc. In each prayer he implies that he has a relationship with GOD and implies that GOD has favored or chosen him to bring a message to the masses. These are prayers that he writes himself. He has recently begun to include the words of his prayers on the inside cover of his compact disc. DMX is not

alone in this practice. He, like other GOD-conscious rappers, are intentionally sending theological messages to their followers.

A Pause for the Cause: A Word on the Process of the Construction of Religion

So what is going on here? How is religion being constructed through the appropriation of religious symbols, sign and language? When we think of GOD-conscious rap we must realize that it is not developed in a vacuum. A key to understanding GOD-conscious rap and recognizing it as a new religious movement is seeing it as a process of semiosis. “By semiosis I mean an action, an influence, which is, or involves, a cooperation of three subjects, such as a sign, its object and its interpretant....” In the case of religion in the context of GOD-conscious rap there is a circular relationship in the semiotic process. This process of sign, object and interpretation has a circular rather than a linear relationship. In this semiotic convention there is ¹GOD-conscious rap music, ²the appropriation of religious symbols and signs, and ³the interpretant, follower’s of GOD-conscious rap trying to make sense of their life in their social context. The listeners or followers are the ones who interpret and then apply meanings to the lyrics in the context of their social context (see Figure 2).

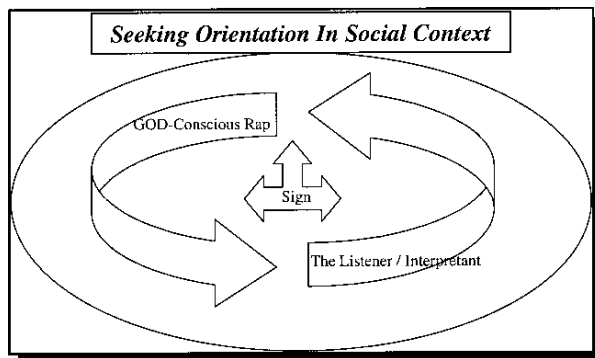


Figure 2: Semiotic Process of Sign, Object and Interpretation

This semiotic process is a process of religious-evolutionary construction. The process is a constant interaction of the three, sign, symbol and interpreter. As these three properties interact, the construction of a socio-theo-rap-ology and religion is occurring. When this semiotic process is monitored in GOD-conscious rap and the process understood of how it is informing a religious movement, it becomes clear where the movement is going. In this process we see the movements toward a constructive socio-theo-rap that informs rap religion. This process births socio-theo-rap-ology in the context of the ‘hood. These rappers and their followers may not have petitioned to be recognized as a religious sect, they have no 501-C3 tax status, but they are definitely constructing a religious system outside of institutionalized religion with the same results as other religious sects of the past.

Dogmatics of Rap Religion

GOD-conscious rap has developed a complex theological system of deities, doctrines and dogma. There appears to be relative principles syncretism operative in GOD-conscious rap. The music borrows and merges theological ideas and concepts from major religions that are then reinterpreted and re-framed with the inclusion of socio-theo-ology to form a dogmatic core of beliefs for the religion. This socio-theo-ology is then represented and interpreted through the socio-theo-semiotic process, which is a form of syncretism. One such example of the principle of syncretism that is operative in GOD-conscious rap is their reference to Jesus. There is clear reference to a type of Jesus but it is not the same Jesus of Christianity or Islam. Tupac Shakur refers to the Jesus of rap religion as Black Jesuz. The first and obvious reinterpretation of Jesus is the intentional spelling of the name with a “z” at the end of the name instead of an “s”. In the cut *Searching for Black Jesuz* Tupac begins to describe the GOD of rap religion, Searching for Black Jesuz, We believe in you we pray to Black Jesuz, he is like a saint we can trust to help carry us through ... He is like a saint we pray to in the ghetto. We need somebody, that understand our pain, somebody who hurt like we hurt, that think like we think, somebody that drink like we drink, somebody that understand where we coming from and shit, thats who we pray to, we got a new religion, we went to church, don't understand it, they under handed.”¹³ The definition of Black Jesuz makes it clear that the GOD they are talking about is a GOD who can relate to their pain, isn't perfect, and isn't without sin. The doctrine appears to be one that implies that he is a saint like character who intervenes and assist persons in the 'hood live out their struggle. This isn't a GOD who is worshiped in a building but rather one worshiped through lived, everyday experiences. This is a theistic figure in a very intimate way for the GOD actually lives with them and can be accessed in everyday life. It is in many ways like the gods of voodoo, a GOD of everyday life not a GOD of an institution.

GOD-conscious rap is insistent that the religion it speaks of is not a religion of the institutionalized church. Rappers oppose and critique the church as having turned on the community and therefore they see the church as no friend of African Americans suffering from oppression in the inner city/African American community. This includes a rejection of the God of the institutionalized church and its interpretation of the Bible. An example of this socio-theo-ology is evident in the rhymes of Killah Priest. On Killah Priest's compact disc entitled, *Heavy Mental*, there is a cut titled, *B.I.B.L.E.*, sub-titled, *Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth*. Killah Priest exhibits how rap

religion condemns the institutionalized church as irrelevant and duplicitous:

I searched for the truth since my youth
And went to church, since birth, but it wasn't worth the loot
that I was paying, plus the praying
I didn't like staying cuz of busy-bodies and dizzy hotties
That the preacher had souped up with lies
Had me cooped up lookin at loot, butt, and thighs
Durin the service, he swallowed up the poor
And after they heard this, they wallowed on the floor
But I ignored, and explored my history that was untold...
See look in the eyes brethren that's the lies of a Reverend¹⁴

Killah Priest raps of his break from the church and contends that it is only after this break that he was able to discover TRUTH. This is a consistent theme in rap religion that breaking from institutionalized religion and then searching for the truth, is the way in which one finds the ultimate truth and is made free. Killah Priest and others go on to assert that Africans are the chosen race and he implies in other cuts on the same compact disc that those who are chosen must go through struggles as a sign of their being chosen. He affirms the struggle and reassures his followers that they are blessed. His rhymes are clear, "It goes: life, difficult time, and mad crime, some pay the price, while others refine. Blessed are those who struggle— God love you and wisdom is the principle thing for Kings and Queens."¹⁵ It is once again that GOD-conscious rap connects GOD as one who understands the struggle of African American youth and also that this GOD loves them. It is a reassuring promise that even though it may appear that God and religious institutions have abandoned the 'hood, don't worry, because the GOD of rap religion has not abandoned the 'hood but rather this GOD loves and cares. Killah Priest goes on to say, "Blessed are those who struggle, from day to day, we all hustle; Comin home with sore muscles, and scarred faces ... there's no escapin, the clutches of Satan; Spendin years in state pens, awaitn patient dreams of a scholarship, ended up by a hollowtip, politics and number slip."¹⁶ Killah Priest, like other GOD-conscious rappers, is able to relate to the working poor, affirming their struggle and letting them know that GOD relates to this struggle as well. GOD knows about the broken promises of America and the dried up dreams of ghetto kids. This type of reassuring theological musings serves to comfort and court the followers of rap religion.

The GOD of rap religion has only hints of transcendence; the GOD of rap religion is a GOD who is immanent. The rapper Common goes as far as to claim that, "Hip hop is my God."¹⁷ The concept and definition GOD is caught in the lyrics and their interpretation via the semiotic process. The GOD of rap religion is unique and is being

constructed as socio-theo-rap-ology constructs this GOD along with its followers. As adherents of this new religion begin to structure rituals around the music, styles, rhythms and behaviors of this religious system an ethos begins to emerge that expands the religiosity of this genre. The power inherent in ritual is evident as followers describe and participate in socially conscious religious rituals with rap music serving as the foundation for the construction and practice of these rituals.

Rap religion is a lived religion of the 'hood that has a GOD of its own and a ritual that complements its belief system. This religion that is lived outside the confines of the four walls of institutionalized church, a religion with no formal requirements for membership, and therefore complimentary rituals have to fit this pattern of religious expression. This is a religion that focuses on an internal consciousness of GOD. Common has a cut on his compact disc entitled, *G.O.D.* (Gaining One's Definition). On this cut Common defines GOD as coming into a sense of self awareness. As one seeks to find oneself, that one finds the way or GOD, much like what we find in Buddhism. Common goes on to rhyme, "As a child, given religion with no answer to why; just told believe in Jesus cuz for me he did die, curiosity killed the catechism; understanding and wisdom became the rhythm that I played to; And became a slave to master self."¹⁸ Common is making it clear, like other GOD-conscious rappers, that the finding of GOD is outside the Church and it is about finding oneself, being a master of self and that this is a process that occurs in the spirit and psychic of a person. There is an emphasis in rap religion that to know GOD is a highly individual thing. You don't need anyone to assist you in finding GOD and there is no call for corporate worship or common rituals. The ritual and process of worship is as personal as the quest itself.

The rapper Witchdoctor actually claims that rituals in rap religion are to be individual events. Ritual is not something a person has to be led in by some clergy-person or shaman but rather one can discover and develop her/his own rituals that she/him in touch with GOD. Witchdoctor defines ritual on his compact disc *A.S.W.A.T. Healin Ritual*.

The rhyme begins with a female's voice that ask the question, "What is a ritual?" The Witchdoctor answers:

A ritual is something every man do around his house or anytime of the day, every man got his own ritual that he does to keep him alive. Music is my ritual.

(female voice) The language you speak is that part of your ritual?

(Witchdoctor answers) What's that?

(female voice) The language you speak, is that part of the ritual?

(Witchdoctor answers) That is my ritual.¹⁹

Ritual is located in the music and language of socio-theo-rap according to the Witchdoctor. Ritual and worship in rap

religion has been indiginized to the extent that there is no need to access a place for worship because the land on which one lives in holy ground. The power to create and engage in ritual is intimately intertwined with the language of rap and the follower or rap religion. As Witchdoctor claims, “language is the ritual”. Therefore to repeat or engage in the words of socio-theo-rap is to create and engage in religious ritual. This empowers the follower in rap religion to create ritual in his or her home-place, which also empowers him / her to transform the space in which they live into a sacred space.

In rap-religion, the ‘hood becomes holy ground. The Witchdoctor makes this point clear. His cut *Holy Ground* claims that there is inherent sacredness in the space, called the ‘hood, as the adherents to the religious system recognize and name it as such. Ritual then takes place in this sacred space, that is transformed as sacred, as the worshiper engages in ritual. It is in this system, as one defines and practices ritual, that GOD inhabits that particular space. The inherent sacredness of ones social location is an empowering motif in rap religion. The streets of the ‘hood which have been demonized by the media, the police and others is transformed into sacred space, where ritual and worship take place.

The practitioner or follower of rap religion is empowered as an equal amongst equals. There is no local hierarchy in rap religion. The adherent is able to believe in GOD and define their faith as they see fit. One has the power to define the path they take, and to develop a personal relationship with GOD. Rap religion is still in its formative stages. It is not like other religious sects. It will not take the normal path of other sects. It is a religion that operates out of the paradigms of the strict definitions many have given religious systems. It is not a system that some of its adherents would label a movement. Matter of fact many of its followers probably wouldn’t distinguish the theological tenets of socio-theo-rap as being in contradiction to the major religions of African Americans. They unknowingly, being devoid of an historical connection with these major religions, tend to see rap religion as orthodox. One could also posit that in many cases the emerging religious belief system of rap religion’s followers is being constructed on a sub-conscious versus a conscious level. This makes the case of arguing that the movement exist a bit tricky. It is tricky because it is commonly argued that to define a religious movement requires formative intentionality on the part of the socio-theo-actors, but in this case it is different. Whereas the socio-theo-rappers are operating at an intentional and active level of construction I would contend that the listeners, interpreters / adherents of socio-theo-rap are operating at a more passive and sub-conscious level of religious construction. The fact that these two levels of operation exist does not deny the social fact that a new type of religious movement exist in rap music.

How Will Rap Religion Be Institutionalized: An Exercise in Futuring

Rap Religion will not be institutionalized like most other religious movements. It will not follow the track that most other minority religious sects have taken. Rap religion will become an accepted and legitimate alternative form of religiosity for inner city African Americans. This religious system will serve as the primary religious formation for many inner city youth who will be raised outside a connection with the institutionalized church. The religious understanding and world view of inner city residents will be informed and sustained by the prophetic voice of socio-theo-rappers. The voice of other religious leaders will be marginalized within the sphere of their socio-theo-constructive influence in the religious construction of inner city residents. Hardcore inner city residents will listen more to rappers than to the so called religious leaders of major African American religions. One of the keys in this phenomena rests on the success, or lack thereof, of Black Christian, Islamic or other institutionalized religious traditions to attract hardcore inner city residents to their ranks. The lack of success these major religions are having with inner city residents tends to suggest that inner city residents will turn to GOD-conscious rap before they go to the traditional Black church.

The vast majority of large inner city churches are supported and filled by bloummuters (black commuters from the suburbs). These bloummuters travel into the inner city, do their service, and leave. They are the financial foundation for these congregations and the back bone of the service core. These churches are not filled with members from the very community they claim. The neighbors to many of these churches are no more than a foreign mission field for the bloummuters who fill the pews of these affluent, middle class, African American congregations. Inner city residents find these churches foreign ground and are therefore turning more and more to rap religion. As the adherents of rap religion embrace its socio-theo-conscious-dogma they will find themselves further alienated from the institutionalized church while simultaneously institutionalizing rap religion.

The institutionalized nature of rap religion will be an acceptance of its tenets and practices as normative religious life for inner city adherents. It will not be a big deal to inner city residents if one isn't a member of or involved in a local church. It will become normal practice to pray at home or along with a rapper on a compact disc. It will become normative for one to quote a rapper over an "ordained clergy-person". The likes of Tupac Shakur and The Notorious B.I.G. will assume the prophetic martyr status of a Dr. Martin L. King Jr. and Malcolm X. Rappers will continue to have a bond with its hardcore inner city followers. There will be a much different relationship established

with white suburban listeners (a topic for another paper).

There will continue to be a distancing from institutionalized religion in final rites as well as other typical religious rites. The blessing of babies, infant baptism and other religious rites will take on new forms. They will be reformed and done away from religious institutions, if done at all. Final rites such as funerals will continue to take place more in funeral homes or other settings rather than the “church”. Two of the greatest religious icons of this movement both were funeralized away from the church. Tupac Shakur was cremated and The Notorious B.I.G.’s final rites were held at Frank E. Campbell Funeral Chapel in Manhattan. The program did not include any well known clergy persons, there wasn’t a eulogy and no church choirs were present. A scripture was read by Voletta Wallace, several songs were sung, and reflections were given by Sean “Puffy” Combs.

There will be greater syncretism and a merging of orthodox tenets to construct a new orthodoxy within rap religion. As the emerging socio-theo-rap-ology emerges it will establish a core belief system that will be built upon by other socio-theo-rappers. This movement will continue to mature as the inner city becomes further isolated from the larger society and the major African American religions. This is a new type of religious movement that demands the attention of both theologians and sociologists. Stay tuned, do not touch your radio dial.

Notes

¹Arrested Development, *Unplugged*, (Hollywood, CA: EMI Records, 1993), compact disc.

²Copper-Lewter, Nicholas and Henry H. Mitchell. *Soul Theology: The Heart of American Black Culture*. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986).

³Wilson, William J. ed. *The Ghetto Underclass*. William J. Wilson and Loic D. Wacquant *The Cost or Racial Exclusion* (Newbury Park, California: Sage Publications, 1993), 41.

⁴Theodicy is derived from two Greek words meaning 'deity' and 'justice' and refers to the attempt to justify the goodness of God in the face of the evil that is present in the world.

⁵Niebuhr, Richard H.. *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*. (NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1929), 19.

⁶Recording Industry 1997 Consumer Profile; available from <http://riaa.com/stats/press/conpro97.htm>.

⁷Nelson, George. *Hip Hop America*. (NY: Viking Press, 1998), 155.

⁸Long, Charles. *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*. (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1986), 7.

⁹*Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 7.

¹¹Earl Simmons (a.k.a. DMX), *And Then There Was X*, (NY: The Island Def Jam Music Group, 1999), compact disc.

¹²Eco, Umberto. *A Theory of Semiotics*. (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1979), 15.

¹³Tupac Shakur, *2Pac + Outlawz* (Los Angeles, CA: Interscope Records, 1999), compact disc.

¹⁴Killah Priest, *Heavy Mental* (Los Angeles, CA: Getten Records, 1998), compact disc.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, .

¹⁶*Ibid.*, .

¹⁷Common *One Day It'll Make Sense* (NY: Relativity Records, 1997), compact disc.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, .

¹⁹Witchdoctor A.S.W.A.T. *Healin' Ritual* (Los Angeles, CA: Interscope Records, 1998), compact disc.