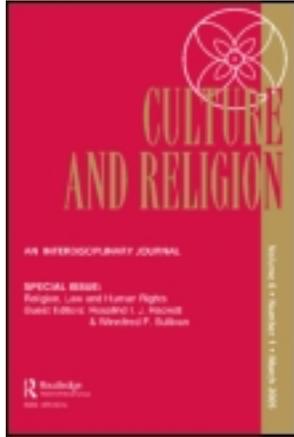


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‘Believe me, this pimp game is very religious’: Toward a religious history of hip hop

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In this essay I argue that by paying attention to the shifting religious references of various rap artists one can map a preliminary history of the religious dimensions of hip hop as it has evolved from the 1980s to the present. Specifically, in KRS-ONE’s biography one is able to discern the same developments that have defined hip hop’s religious history, more generally. While he has consistently attempted to critically situate himself in opposition to mainstream rap music, KRS-ONE’s own religious biography pairs well with the shifting religious sensibilities articulated by several hip hop artists who have been most popular during the span of these same years. In mapping this history, I suggest, first, that religious diversity has more often than not been the rule of rap music, and second, that what appeared to bind these artists together was not a particular religious orthodoxy, be it Christian, Islamic or otherwise. Rather than specific confessional claims, it is the cultural repertoires of the African Diaspora and the experience of white supremacy in the United States, that offers some coherence to these otherwise heterodox spiritual musings.

In his important book, *The black Atlantic: Modernity and double-consciousness*, Gilroy (1993) asserts that black diasporic musics are

facilitated by a common fund of urban experiences, by the effect of similar but by no means identical forms of racial segregation, as well as by the memory of slavery, a legacy of Africanisms, and a stock of religious experiences. (1993, 80)

This stew of cultural and political experiences – a hybrid blend of responses to the experience of white supremacy and inheritances of African cultures – also defines what Hall identifies as the ‘cultural repertoires’ that constitute the ‘black’ in black popular cultures (Wallace 1992). While the subject of religion has not been a top priority in the field of cultural studies, there is indeed much in the realm of popular cultures which has captured the interest of scholars of religion.¹ Thinking more specifically in the direction of a religious history of hip hop, the most obvious ingredient in this stock has been Islam, which in various forms – Sunni, Nation of Islam and Five Percenter – has been ubiquitous in the music and culture since its emergence roughly 30 years ago.²

Too many rappers have expressed allegiance to this multiform tradition to provide a comprehensive list here, but a litany of artists from Rakim to Lupe

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Fiasco could be quickly compiled. Alongside Islam, Christianity was a fixture in hip hop as far back as 1987 when MC Hammer's first record included 'Son of the King', a track that showed up again on his second and more popular album, *Let's Get it Started*.³ While A Tribe Called Quest is most commonly associated with the eclectic Afrocentric spirituality posited by the Native Tongues collective and Afrika Bambaataa's Zulu Nation, the group featured two Muslims (Ali Shaheed Muhammad and Q-tip) and Fife, who on the group's ever popular 1991 album, *The Low End Theory*, cited his own Christian upbringing.⁴ The five-foot tall assassin exclaimed, 'I was raised as a Christian, so to God I give thanks'. Of course, biblical imagery has suffused the lyrics of many artists who did not necessarily self-identify with any particular religious tradition. One thinks of the reference to John 3:16 which appeared on the CD cover of Notorious B.I.G.'s posthumously released *Life After Death* album, Bone Thugs and Harmony's invitation for listeners to meet them at the 'Crossroads', Lauryn Hill's remixing of the church hymn 'Marching to Zion', and Tupac's prophetic ruminations, including the song 'I Wonder if Heaven Got a Ghetto'. While this brief survey provides an oversimplified account of hip hop's religious milieu, it serves my purposes to suggest that religious diversity has more often than not been the rule of rap music.⁵ Additionally, what appeared to bind these artists together was not a particular religious orthodoxy, be it Christian, Islamic or otherwise. Rather than specific confessional claims, by locating these religious significations within the cultural repertoires of the African Diaspora, one is able to offer some analytical coherence to otherwise multifarious musical musings. Specifically, they reflect the particular experiences of primarily black youth living in the United States' post-industrial urban centers. In short, this otherwise heterodox collection of post-soul spiritualities bore witness to the lived (and imagined) realities of black youth reluctant to align themselves with the religious institutions of their elders.⁶

KRS-ONE: Religious significations and cultural repertoires

The famous American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson once argued that all history is in fact biography. By this he meant that the stories humans tell say just as much about a particular author as they do about any actual historical record that an author documents. A quick look at KRS-ONE, the famous MC and hip hop theorist, provides an opportune contemporary case to test out Emerson's claim in the inverse. That is to say, in KRS-ONE's biography one is able to discern the same developments that have defined hip hop's religious history, more generally. By paying attention to the spiritual evolution of KRS-ONE, one can map a preliminary history of the religious dimensions of hip hop as it has evolved from the 1980s to the present. While he has consistently attempted to critically situate himself in opposition to mainstream rap music, KRS-ONE's own religious biography pairs well with the shifting religious sensibilities articulated by several hip hop artists who have been most popular during the span of these same years.

KRS-ONE, real name Lawrence Parker, began rapping in the mid-1980s as part of the group Boogie Down Productions (BDP). As a member of BDP, his recordings included the albums *Criminal Minded* and *By All Means Necessary*, with the latter being a clear reference to Malcolm X. In fact, on the album cover of *By All Means Necessary*, KRS appeared holding an Uzi while gazing out of the window in a manner reminiscent of the classic photograph of Malcolm X, with a shotgun in tow, leaning on the window sill. In more recent years, however, KRS-ONE has released music, most obviously his 2002 *Spiritual Minded* album, which displays an employment of more explicitly Christian lyrics. The songs on *Spiritual Minded* continued KRS-ONE's earlier critique of the American mainstream; but they also specifically addressed such issues as the sacredness of virginity, the importance of cultivating a 'Christ consciousness', and the necessity of being 'born again'.⁷ In the years between these albums, Parker moved from an affiliation with New York's Riverside Church, a bastion of liberal Protestantism, to Barbara L. King's Hillside International Truth Center in Atlanta (a Unity Church grounded in American New Thought traditions), and on to Clarence McClendon's Full Harvest International Church, a multi-cultural congregation in California grounded in the contemporary charismatic Christian movement.⁸ Like KRS-ONE, who moved from drawing on the iconography of Malcolm X to an appropriation of Christian categories (and affiliations with increasingly more evangelical idioms of Christianity), as rap music moved to the centre of mainstream popular culture its most prominent religious sensibilities also shifted from Islam to Christianity. In the case of KRS-ONE, his use of shifting religious rhetorics evinced his commitment to hip hop serving as a consciousness-raising resource, which he calls 'edutainment', as he voices various criticisms of American society.⁹ Through an appeal to Malcolm X, he offered an analysis of white supremacy and in evangelical Christianity KRS-ONE finds a critique of mainstream hip hop's celebration of capitalism and crude displays of sexuality.

KRS-ONE's personal evolution reads as a rich religious narrative on its own terms, and it is surely worthy of further attention. However, his biography also provides an excellent starting point for thinking towards a religious history of hip hop music more broadly. Consider the following narrative. Amidst the public resurgence of black nationalist sensibilities during the late 1980s and 1990s, most visible in events like the Million Man March and Spike Lee's biopic *Malcolm X*, a sort of 'blacker the better' rationale ordered the religious indices of hip hop culture. More specifically, within this framework Islam represented a greater degree of alterity and perceived authenticity, and numerous scholars have documented the appeal of Islam within black popular culture during these years.¹⁰ If you were wise enough to 'know the ledge' you would swagger straight to the store and purchase your X hat and Africa medallion to secure your salvation.¹¹ Hip hop historians will recall the countless rappers – most notably, Guru of the group GangStarr in the video 'I Manifest' in 1989 – who attempted to perform Malcolm X by standing behind podiums with kufis adorning their heads. Of course, such performances speak to the role of the market in mediating

identities, religious, racial or otherwise, clarifying that the commercialisation, commodification and consumption of blackness in popular culture is a quintessentially American phenomenon. Still, reflective of the hegemonic place afforded to Christianity within the United States, Islam played the most overt role in the formation of rap music, and thus helped to shore up early definitions of hip hop as an oppositional discursive practice in relation to the American cultural mainstream (Dyson 1998). However, in the historical development of rap music into hip hop culture, and its subsequent triumph as arguably the most fashionable force in global pop culture, Christianity has emerged as the primary religious sensibility of new millennium MCs, including such disparate figures as West, Cassidy and Elliott.¹²

Making the shift

Significantly, the progression of hip hop's most evident spiritual commitments, from Islam to Christianity, has reflected shifts within black popular culture, as well as reconfigurations in American religion at the end of the twenty-first century.¹³ The religious dimensions of hip hop have evolved from a neo-nationalist, 'black' spirituality associated with the Nation of Islam to an embrace of Christianity. Certainly, this shifting of allegiances from Islam to Christianity allowed for the expression of a range of differences within each of these respective traditions. However, the version of Christianity most frequently visualised is an idiom largely made accessible over the airwaves by televangelists and marketed by megachurch pastors. It often also includes the celebration of a gospel of 'Bling' evidenced in the affinity of many rappers for prosperity preachers. Additionally, in today's scene Islam is no longer perceived to be a necessarily oppositional religious discourse. Talk of black 'gods' has moved from the mouths of black Muslims to the tongues of hip hop moguls like Jay-Z, for whom the 5% lexicon figures as but one religious constellation in a universe of words. In fact, even Lupe Fiasco, hip hop's most recent Muslim MC of choice, nods his head in the direction of Christianity, giving praise to two gospel music stars (Yolanda Adams and Smokie Norful) and an Atlanta-based megachurch pastor (Creflo Dollar) on his most religious song. On the chorus to his underground single, 'Muhammad Walks', a remix of the famous West track that he has released over the internet, Lupe raps, '*I'm not trying to profit off the prophet, so this one's for free*'. While Fiasco does not forego his own religious commitments as a Muslim, he articulates his faith in relationship to Christian figures who have achieved semi-celebrity status in the American religious landscape.

More significantly, references to Creflo Dollar, who is arguably the most popular black prosperity preacher of the day, have become a fixture in hip hop music. They include a cameo appearance in Ludacris and Jermaine Dupri's 'Welcome to Atlanta' video, an acknowledgment in verse by 50 Cent, and a professed affiliation by the rapper-turned-pastor Mason Betha.¹⁴ Within hip hop, Christianity has become as much a signifier of wealth and power as it is evidence of any specific theological vision. Rather, more accurately, many rappers bear

witness to a theology that valorises wealth as divine blessing – a notion that is, to quote Dead Prez, much ‘bigger than hip hop’.¹⁵ Pastor Dollar, for whom wealth is indeed a core spiritual value, seems to embody for many rappers the essence of hip hop’s hustle doused in holy water. Of note, Dollar has his own music video in the works, performed by a group of rappers who belong to his church and record label. Not surprisingly, the song’s refrain is simply, ‘Money, money, coming down!’¹⁶

Kanye West: Walking with Jesus

Hip hop’s rising Christendom culminated in 2003 with the release of Kanye West’s ‘Jesus Walks’, a popular single that was, perhaps, the major exception to the rule of conflating Christianity with capital. On the one hand, the rapper preached a deeply personal piety. West explains:

I ain’t here to argue about his facial features;
or here to convert atheists into believers.
I’m just saying the way school need teachers,
the way Kathy Lee needed Regis,
that’s the way I need Jesus.¹⁷

In this brief verse, West accomplishes at least four specific tasks. First, he offers a critique of Black Theology’s preoccupation with God’s racial identity (‘I ain’t here to argue about his facial features’). Second, West distances himself from the religious impulse to convert unbelievers (‘or to convert atheists into believers’). Third, he draws on mainstream American popular culture (‘the way Kathy Lee needed Regis’). And fourth, West endorses a brand of spirituality popular in contemporary society which caters directly to personal desires (‘that’s the way I need Jesus’).¹⁸ Yet, in the song’s chorus West also proclaims a theology of the oppressed and outcast, as he insists that Jesus walks most closely with murderers, strippers and drug dealers. Surprisingly, West provided a rather nuanced vision of contemporary American Christianity; so much so that he felt the song required three separate music videos.¹⁹ True to the postmodern moment in which he became a celebrity, in the three videos West de-centres any one normative account of African American religion in favour of elevating several religious visions. Yet he simultaneously taps into spiritual sensibilities that remain influential across a significant portion of society. However, despite the complexities captured in each video, West also appeared to bow to prosperity pressures. On the remix to ‘Jesus Walks’, he invited the ex-rapper Minister Mase, a protégé of Creflo Dollar, to offer a prayer in which Mase proclaims, ‘I’m healed, I’m delivered, I’m rich’.²⁰ West had also planned to design a line of diamond-encrusted Jesus-pieces with hip hop’s favourite jeweller, Jacob ‘The Jeweler’ Arabo.²¹ West’s appearance on the 8 February 2006 cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine, adorned with his own crown of thorns, suggested to some that his invocation of Jesus might not be much more than an effort to generate cash-flow by creating controversy. At a minimum, it raised the question of whether West’s

vision of religious complexity was a mere mask for what Lofton (2006, 39) has referred to as 'spiritual capitalism'. But a cynical reading that reduces West's engagement with Jesus to mere market motives must be held at bay in light of a larger tradition of hip hop artists who have featured themselves on the cross. To this I will return soon.

Ja Rule: Religion and power

By contrast with the complexities of American Christianities portrayed by West, the ideal entry-point into the religious aesthetic of rap music, wherein Christianity functions as a form of social, cultural and financial capital, is through the career of Jeffrey Atkins, also known as Ja Rule. Raised as a Jehovah Witness, Ja Rule frequently worked religious references throughout his music when he topped the charts at the turn of the twenty-first century. He did this most obviously when he named his triple-platinum-selling second album *Rule 3:36* – a not so subtle a signification on Christian scripture. The cover of the CD creatively re-imagined the biblical passage (John 3:36) by substituting Ja Rule in Jesus' place: 'He who believes in Ja shall have everlasting life. He who does not shall not see life, but the wrath of my vengeance... Pain is love'.²² A song that Ja Rule recorded with Ashanti in 2002, entitled 'Always On Time', best captures the way Christianity has often functioned in rap music. As the song moved towards its end, Rule's passionate plea is simply this: 'Believe me, this pimp game is very religious'.²³ Throughout the song, Rule's lyrics celebrated his professed sexual powers, but its title and chorus signified the familiar black Christian adage, 'He (God) may not come when you want him, but He's *always on time*' (italics mine). The chorus to Rule's version, sung by Ashanti, went as follows: 'I'm not always there when you call, but I'm always on time...' In utilising the term 'religious', Ja Rule seemed intent on convincing his listeners just how seriously he takes the business of dominating women. While the pimp figure has occupied a prominent place in American popular culture, here Ja Rule elevates pimping to an 'ultimate concern'.²⁴

Before examining the song's overt misogyny and sexism, it is important to address Ja Rule's general pairing of religion and power, which subtly supports the social privileging of Christianity in hip hop music. Probing his use of the term 'pimp' helps to unveil power dynamics that put Christianity in the place of religious authority even when it is not explicitly invoked. And while there has been abundant evidence of black religious diversity – including Judaism, Islam and African-derived religious traditions – across the terrain of hip hop culture, Christianity comes with the most ready-made capital (Verter 2003). To invoke Christianity, whether or not one expresses an exclusive allegiance to its theological tenets, has been to avail oneself of rhetorical, cultural and financial capital. Additionally, with regards to gender, it is equally important to point out at the same time that Ja Rule employs the black Christian vernacular, it is Ashanti's voice that made possible his very profitable 'cross-over' career. More generally, while male rappers have inscribed, performed and consumed their masculinity

via black women's bodies, they have often participated in the presentation of those bodies for public consumption and their own profit. To make this claim does not serve to deprive Ashanti, and the scores of other women in the industry, of agency in hip hop music and culture. Nor does it deny the degree to which such performances of manhood are premised upon the female other (Hill-Collins 2004). Rather, it reveals the way in which Christianity serves as a symbolic resource in support of the very gender and sexual politics that has contributed to hip hop being perceived as irreligious if not profane. Testifying to the power of these norms, Ja Rule's cross-over success quickly faded as he was deemed a 'sell-out' for mainstream acclaim, arguably because he performed one-too-many duets, thus blurring his identity with Ashanti's and crossing the boundaries of hip hop's proscribed gender roles.

'Shesus Khryst': Another approach

Returning now to the controversy surrounding West's appearance on the cover of *Rolling Stone* with a crown of thorns, as a final example of hip hop's religious ethic and aesthetics, one can turn to the tradition of artists who have imagined themselves in the image of Jesus on the cross. Before West, rappers such as Tupac, Diddy (then Puff Daddy) and Nas all experimented with such iconography.²⁵ Additionally, this tradition also provides an opportunity to avoid the trap of painting a picture that re-inscribes male privilege by rendering women MCs invisible. Countless women rappers have critiqued and countered the gendered representations proffered by all too many male MCs.²⁶ The most recent installation in hip hop's stations of the cross introduces the first female rapper, Remy 'Remy Ma' (formerly Remy Martin) Smith, to take up the cross, as well as it provides an image that further complicates the interplay between religion and gender in hip hop.²⁷ In her short video 'Shesus Khryst', also the title of her most recent album, Remy explains her understanding of the cross in relationship to male rappers who have adopted religious names. She raps:

If Jay Z's J-Hova, and Nas is God Son
and I was spitting crack so the people would die, son
And then I came back, like I never left nice
I'm the BX savior, Shesus Khryst!

... See Pun told them, she's so nice
and when it comes to the pen that she was like
some of the greatest of men the way she would write
and now I'm the BX Savior, Shesus Khryst!²⁸

In its earlier incarnations, the image of the crucified rapper was meant to conjure memories of the lynching tree, wherein black men were cast as crucified by the exploitative corporate forces of recording labels. However, in a peculiar synthesis of hip hop's gender politics, Remy usurps masculine power (by citing her endorsement from Big Pun), while her posture on the cross capitalises upon her curvaceous 'feminine' figure. Rapping 'like some of the greatest of men' while

draping her body across the cross, she both seduces male listeners and seizes power typically perceived to belong to male rappers. By the song's end, Remy Ma makes her point abundantly clear. For many hip hop artists, male and female, God-talk (Muslim and Christian) has represented a readily available avenue for articulating one's lyrical authority. In short, hip hop's range of religious sensibilities confirms the genre's preoccupation with power, both spiritual and social.

Concluding thoughts

In this article I have attempted to outline a preliminary history of hip hop's religious dimensions by providing brief encounters with how several of the music's most iconic figures have treated religion in their music. This short litany of artists, from KRS-ONE to Remy Ma, provides fans and scholars alike with a rather rich vision of the multiple ways rappers have engaged (and been shaped by) the American religious landscape. More specifically, in looking for change over time, one is able to discern a pattern in which Christianity gradually supplanted Islam as the most prominent religious tradition in contemporary hip hop music. At the same time, hip hop moved from being understood as an oppositional discourse to the lingua franca of popular culture around the world. Significantly, I have attempted to track this shift by focusing on those figures who have found 'mainstream' success and have received promotion on major radio and television networks. As such, one might argue that this shift in religious sensibilities was abetted by the same corporate entities that kept artists who glamorised violence, unbridled capitalism and no-strings-attached sex on the airwaves. True enough, but to concede this point does not mean one can reduce these spiritual musings to nothing more than rhetorical strategies employed to sign record deals, secure media airtime or improve profit margins. To the contrary, it demonstrates the degree to which rap lyrics are more than simply literary or musical representations, but they reflect (and offer a view of) the historical particularities of American religious culture in time and space. Specifically, this preliminary narrative of hip hop's religious history directs critical attention to the ways in which the market and new technologies mediate religious identities (alongside race and gender) in the twenty-first century.

Hip hop artists, like all human beings, draw on religious language for myriad reasons and to varying degrees of depth. Some of the examples addressed in this essay reveal superficial references (i.e., Jay-Z's use of Five Percenter terminology), others perhaps illumine proof texts used to confirm an artist's modus operandi (i.e., 50 Cent's shout out to Creflo Dollar), and some surely expose religion to be a resource for asserting one's own ambition (i.e., Remy Ma's 'Shesus Khryst'). Yet all of this could also be said of the scores of religious persons who populate everything from Pentecostal revivals to Buddhist pilgrimages. Still, other songs reflect deep, messy and meaningful engagements with religion. For instance, the questions of where KRS-ONE's spiritual

evolution will lead him next, and of which version of Jesus Kanye West claims to walk with, are taller tasks than this essay is able to tackle; but they are important inquiries nonetheless. All of these examples affirm that one's ultimate concerns cannot be divorced from the more mundane, and sometimes seemingly sacrilegious, elements of our cultural worlds. More generally, hip hop confirms religion to be always historically contingent (if not wholly reducible to historical context), and the ways that rappers invoke religion bears witness to what's happening on the ground in black communities, in American society, and around the globe. To be sure, hip hop, and popular culture more generally, presents scholars of religion with a veritable treasure trove of materials, and my hope in this essay was to contribute to efforts to more critically map out this terrain. While I have suggested that religious diversity has been the rule of rap music, highlighting the gradual shift from Islam to Christianity reveals the ways in which black popular culture does not exist in a cultural vacuum or outside of history. Additionally, it also accents the fact that both of these traditions – as well as the very categories of religion and popular culture – are implicated in a broader field of power relations.

While hip hop's early roots drew on the oppositional legacies of 'Black Power' from the 1960s, especially through appeals to Malcolm X and variations of Islam, in its move towards the mainstream Christianity became more central. Moreover, more often than not the images of Christianity invoked in hip hop are not those of the civil rights clerics of the 1960s. Rather, it is the twenty-first century televangelist and megachurch preacher who emerges as exemplary, the very same figure who is providing cues to much of the contemporary American religious landscape. Perhaps, as a dose of postmodern irony, at a moment when multiculturalism and religious diversity are being realised, hip hop reveals that Christianity has maintained its centrality in American popular culture. In fact, many rappers prove the persistent appeal of a version of Christianity that posits a particular set of narrow gender and sexuality norms and celebrates the acquisition of cultural capital, social power and financial prosperity as spiritual virtues. As an important afterthought, it is important to note that it is these same qualities that have more often than not led to hip hop music to be described as certainly not religious, typically secular, and quite often profane.

Notes

1. For two works that explore the efforts of scholars of theology and religion to engage the field of cultural studies see Davaney 1996, and Brown et al. 2001.
2. For a sample of writing on the place of Islam in Hip Hop, see Cheney 2001, Floyd-Thomas 2003, Miyakawa 2005 and Knight 2008.
3. MC Hammer. 'Son of the King', *Feel The Power*. Capitol Records, 1987.
4. A Tribe Called Quest. 'We Got the Jazz', *The Low End Theory*. Jive, 1991.
5. By now the reader would have realised that I am using the terms 'rap' and 'hip hop' interchangeably, and I will continue to do so throughout this essay. While I recognise the different definitions that continue to circulate regarding the purported differences

between rap and hip hop, I am less interested in engaging this normative debate than I am with examining the ways in which religion figures in the music which both of these terms are used to reference. Additionally, that I use these terms interchangeably also reflects that my interests in this essay centre on the lyrics of the song performed by rappers.

6. The term 'post-soul' is generally used to refer to the generation that came of age during the 1970s and 1980s. For a more detail explanation of the term see Neal 2002, and Nelson 2004. Additionally, here I am inverting the argument of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who argues that all religions (cumulative traditions) share a common theological and ethical core (faith). In contrast, I am suggesting that it is the experience of racial subjectivity (not as an essence but a historical reality) that provides shared core of religious sensibilities that suffuse hip hop music. See Smith 1991.
7. KRS-ONE. *Spiritual Minded*. Koch, 2002.
8. I gathered this sketch of KRS-ONE's spiritual biography through an interview I conducted with his former personal assistant, Saideh Browne (3 March 2008).
9. KRS-ONE used the term 'edutainment' to argue that hip hop should both educate and entertain. His fourth album with the group BDP took its title from this philosophy. See Boogie Down Productions 1990.
10. Two of the most significant of these works include Wood (1992) and Dyson (1995).
11. Eric B. and Rakim. 'Know the Ledge', *Don't Sweat the Technique* (MCA, 1992).
12. See West 2003; Cassidy, *Leaning on the Lord*; and Elliott 1999.
13. According to Robert Wuthnow, in the years since World War II American religious culture is more defined by the divide between right and left than it is by doctrinal differences and denominational affiliations. KRS-ONE's evolution from Islam to Christianity, and within Christian from Liberal Protestantism to Charismatic circles, seems to reflect the developments that Wuthnow delineates.
14. Creflo Dollar makes a cameo appearance in a music video: Ludacris and Jermaine Dupri. 'Welcome to Atlanta', So So Def, 2002. In a song recorded with G-Unit, 50 Cent raps, 'I preach the sermon 'bout the paper like Creflo Dollar.' See G-Unit. 'Poppin' Them Thangs', *Beg for Mercy*. G-Unit/Interscope, 2003.
15. For a discussion of the prosperity gospel, and its appeal within African American communities, see Harrison 2005.
16. See 'Money Coming' at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dFyMEnXDG4g> and 'Make it Rain' at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GerKpRw2nkE>. The images in the Dollar's video – of dollar bills flying across the screen – mirror those of *Fat Joe* and Lil' Wayne. Noticeably absent in the Christian version are half-naked black women's bodies.
17. West 2003. West is among many mainstream hip hop artists who have included religious themes throughout their music. While West clearly works within Christian tradition, many other artists have drawn on variations of Islam (Sunni, Nation of Islam and Five Percent Nation of Gods and Earths) and African-based religious traditions. Also, I use the language of 'mainstream hip hop artists' to distinguish such artists from the sub-genre of gospel hip hop.
18. See Wuthnow 1998a, 1998b.
19. West 2005. See 'Jesus Walks' videos. In Video One (the Church Version), West imagined himself inheriting the mantle of the Civil Rights Movement version of black Christianity, as he rapped while jumping around the pulpit, donning a black suit and thin black tie in the image of Martin Luther King, Jr. In Video Two (the Chris Milk Version) West made connections between the history of white supremacy in America and contemporary race politics, featuring images of chain-gangs of shackled black men, the Ku Klux Klan and burning crosses, and desert border

crossings negotiating by white police officers and presumably Latino drug-runners. Meanwhile, dressed in all white slacks and a blazer, West rapped over a backdrop engulfed in flames. Finally, in Video Three (the Street Version), he seemed to poke fun of the Prosperity Gospel, while also performing the personal piety professed in the song's lyrics. Dressed shabbily in dusty jeans and a T-shirt, West is followed around by a stereotypical white Jesus, who puts money in his pockets, food in the refrigerator and provides physical healing for a friend on crutches. Yet this white Jesus is also contrasted with two black Christ figures, each adorned with a crown of thorns: the first an overweight, humorous character with permed hair, who playfully dances on the front lawn with neighbourhood children; the second, a thin and tall man with dreadlocks, who stands on the sidewalk, surrounded by gangsters, and stares with a sober demeanour into the camera. At the end of the video Kanye enters a storefront church, prays quietly in the pews and finally approaches the pulpit, to proclaim his own testimony ('that's the way I need Jesus').

20. Kanye West featuring Mase, 'Jesus Walks: The Remix'. Roc-A-Fella Records, 2004.
21. West and Arabo's jewellery line was temporarily suspended when Arabo was indicted for money laundering. See Nancy Jo Sales. 'Is Hip Hop's Jeweler on the Rocks?' *Vanity Fair*, November 2006. <http://www.vanityfair.com/fame/features/2006/11/jacob200611>.
22. Paul B. Raushenbush. 'Double Crossed By Religion: Ja Rule's new album "Rule 3:36" asks a harder question about "What If God Were One of Us?"' on www.beliefnet.com/story/45/story_4551_1.html.
23. Ja Rule, featuring Ashanti. 'Always On Time', *Pain Is Love*. Def Jam Recordings, 2002.
24. Big Daddy Kane, 'Pimpin' Ain't Easy'. *It's a Big Daddy Thing*. Cold Chillin'/Reprise/WarnerBros. Records, 1989.
25. Nas carried the cross in the video to the song 'Hate Me Now', (Columbia, 1999), which he recorded with Puff Daddy. Tupac appeared on a cross on the cover of his final album, *Makaveli* (Death Row/Interscope/MCA, 1996).
26. For one of the first academic discussions of gender and sexuality in hip hop, see Rose (1994).
27. More recent scholarship has complicated the ways in which women rappers engage questions of gender and sexuality in hip hop. See Perry 2004 and Sharpley 2007.
28. Remy Ma. Video Trailer for 'Shesus Khryst'. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LcNBP4DpR7c>.

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