

Religion, Culture and Gender Guides



The purpose of the Guides is to showcase the work of Manchester students on the theme of Religion, Culture and Gender in Britain, and provide creative, informative and critically informed resources on this theme.

The Sexualised use of Catholic Imagery in Popular Music

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For many years there has been a growing trend with music artists, popular in the UK, to use Catholic Imagery in their music videos. Examples of this can be seen in Madonna's music video for 'Like a Prayer', Lady Gaga's 'Alejandro' and Nirvana's 'Heart Shaped Box'¹. Madonna and Lady Gaga have both continued this imagery into their live performances, and more recently Nicki Minaj's 2013 Grammy Performance used aspects of Catholicism, including a 'mock exorcism.'² While both male and female artists use this imagery in their music, in general the imagery used by female artists is much more overtly sexual- for example Lady Gaga's latex nun's habit and Madonna making love to a saint. This has resulted in the Vatican and Catholic League condemning the female pop stars to a much greater extent than the males.³

Religious and Cultural Context

The Catholic Church in the Media Age

While Christianity is a declining religion in the United Kingdom, there are still almost five million Catholics living in the country. This does not make it a major religion when compared to Protestantism, which claimed twenty-six million members in 2010, however it does mean that around one in twelve British people follow the Catholic religion. This means that the influence of the Catholic Church and its beliefs continue to be relevant in the UK today.⁴ As such the Catholic Church and Catholic imagery are regularly portrayed in popular culture.

Beaudoin argues that songwriters, film directors, and music video producers routinely 'draw upon the theological' and use religious imagery in their work⁵. Therefore Catholic Imagery being used in popular music is not an uncommon occurrence. Religious imagery can be found

¹ Author Unknown. "Religious iconography in Music: The most famous moments" *Swide*, October 2013, accessed December 20, 2013

<http://www.swide.com/art-culture/most-iconic-use-of-religious-imagery-in-music-videos-and-pop-music/2013/10/15>

²"Is Nicki Minaj Possessed" last modified March 2012,

<http://www.catholicleague.org/is-minaj-possessed/>

³ Author Unknown. "Religious iconography in Music."

⁴ Author Unknown, "How Many Catholics are there in Britain," *BBC News*, September 15, 2010, accessed January 5, 2014,

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/11297461>

⁵ Pete Ward, *Gods Behaving Badly: Media, Religion, and Celebrity Culture*. (London: SCM Press, 2011) p.80.

in many different forms of media including film, for example the spiritual and theological connotations in Star Wars, and fashion, such as Miranda Kerr's fashion shoot in the European magazine *Numero*, where she posed embracing a woman dressed as a nun.⁶

Sexualisation of Women in the Music Industry

In today's modern culture, women in pop music are said to be either ignored completely or referred to mainly by their 'appearance and sexuality.' Helen Davies produced numerous examples of this in her chapter on the representation of women in the British music press including Alanis Morissette being accused of sexual hysteria in 1997 and Kylie Minogue being asked in great detail about her sex life in 1991⁷. This trend has continued to modern times, Charlotte Church has recently claimed that women are often 'coerced into sexually demonstrative behaviour' in order to continue with their careers and be taken seriously in the music business. However this is dismissed by Chris Wright, a leading record company executive who claims that female artists who attack the music industry in this way are merely 'making their own failures "someone else's fault".'⁸

As well as being portrayed provocatively by the media, females in the popular music industry often accompany their songs with sexually suggestive music videos and performances. BBC News highlighted this issue in November 2013 using Miley Cyrus' sexually suggestive music videos as an example and claiming that women in these videos were making themselves too 'sexually available.'⁹ Another music video which provoked anger in Britain in the past year was Robin Thicke's 'Blurred Lines' video in which Thicke is fully clothed and surrounded by topless women, this video was 'branded misogynistic and banned from YouTube.'¹⁰ From these examples it can be seen that women are often sexualised in the music industry- whether

⁶ Hollie McKay, "Lady Gaga is Latest Celeb to Abuse Catholic Imagery in Hollywood's 'War on Religion'" *Fox News*, June 11, 2010, accessed January 12, 2014.
<http://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/2010/06/11/hollywoods-war-religion-lady-gaga-latest-celeb-sexualize-abuse-catholic-symbols/>

⁷ Cynthia Carter and Linda Steiner. *Critical Readings: Media and Gender*. (Berkshire: Open University Press, 2004) pp.163-165.

⁸ Author Unknown, "How Many Catholics are there in Britain," *BBC News*, September 15, 2010, accessed January 5, 2014,
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/11297461>

⁹ Author Unknown, "Parents fear 'sexualised culture' of music videos," *BBC News*, November 7, 2013, accessed December 29, 2013,
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-24836571>

¹⁰ Author Unknown, "Robin Thicke advert rules 'too sexual' for early showing," *BBC News*, October 9, 2013, accessed January 11, 2014,
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-24442268>

it is their own choice as Miley Cyrus has claimed¹¹, or pressure from the industry as is Charlotte Church's view. Using Catholic imagery as a tool for this sexualisation then, can perhaps be seen as another extension of this trend of sexualisation.

While many people agree that the sexualised use of Catholic Imagery is a controversial issue there are contrasting views on who is being most damaged by it. The Catholic Church argue that the sexualisation is most damaging to the religion and those involved in it, while others may argue that it is more damaging for the artists who are sexualised or the public who watch and are influenced by these videos.

Academic Theory

Feminist Theory

Bell Hooks states that 'Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression.'¹² With this in mind the using Catholic imagery for sexualisation could be seen as an issue in feminism, as it is primarily women who are sexualised by this kind of imagery. While I have provided examples of males using Catholic imagery in their music videos this is usually done to shock or make a point, while with women it is almost purely used in a sexual manner. This could be viewed as 'sexist exploitation' as religion becomes yet another tool used to sexualise and degrade women while not being used in the same way with men.

Women as Symbols and Agents

Susan Starr Sered suggested that females in religious systems can either be defined as 'Woman' a symbolic construct of 'men's psychological projections' or as 'women' people with their own agency and right to choose freely and make their own decisions¹³. The media often portrays women as 'Woman' contrasting 'good' girls with 'evil' girls who are 'assertive, sexual, stubborn and selfish.'¹⁴ The way the women are portrayed in these music videos is confusing as they are on one hand being seen as sexual characters, and therefore fall into the evil section, however this is subverted by the religious imagery- piety being a major

¹¹ Amelia Butterfly, "Miley Cyrus says she's 'one of the biggest feminists'," *BBC News*, November 12, 2013, accessed January 11, 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/24911610>

¹² Bell Hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. (London: Pluto Press, 2000) p.viii

¹³ Susan Starr Sered, "'Woman' as Symbol and Women as Agents: Gendered Religious Discourses and Practices." In *Revisioning Gender*, ed. Myra Marx Ferree et al. (London: Sage Publications, 1999) p.194

¹⁴ Carter and Steiner, *Critical Readings: Media and Gender*, p.12

part of the 'good' woman from a religious perspective. Therefore the women in these videos could actually be viewed to embody the role of the agent, taking religious ideology and imagery and using it in the way that they wish, to portray their own meanings and messages.

However this can only be the case if the women themselves are happy with the way they are sexualised in their music. If, as Charlotte Church argued, the women are being pressurised into creating erotic music videos by the music industry, their agency is taken away and they return to the role of symbol.

Explanation of the Use of Catholic Imagery

The Theologian Tom Beaudoin provides an explanation as to why female pop stars are using this Catholic Imagery in their music videos which is explored in Pete Ward's 'God's Behaving Badly.' He uses Madonna as his prime example, analysing her videos for both 'Like a Virgin' and 'Like a Prayer.' In 'Like a Virgin' Madonna is shown wearing a rosary with a crucifix attached to it, which Beaudoin claims is one of the first instances in popular culture of a crucifix being worn as a fashion statement. Beaudoin believes that this use of rosaries in popular culture highlights a 'deep suspicion of religion' amongst younger generations in modern times. He then goes on to explain the links between Catholic imagery and sexuality in 'Like a Prayer' as a representation of the way modern generations explore religious experience through irreverent expressions.¹⁵

Different Approaches

Catholic Response

Unsurprisingly the Catholic Church has responded negatively to this sexualisation of catholic imagery. The Catholic League in America has been particularly vocal with its disapproval of the females who use Catholic imagery in a sexual way. In 2010 they condemned Lady Gaga for her video for 'Alejandro', their president Bill Donohue berated Lady Gaga for 'abusing Catholic symbols' and 'Catholic bashing.'¹⁶ More recently the Catholic League posed the question as to whether Nicki Minaj was possessed for her sexual exorcism representation at the Grammy's and dismissed her performance as 'vulgar' while stating that such an attack on

¹⁵ Ward, *Gods Behaving Badly*, pp.78-79

¹⁶ "Lady Gaga Mimics Madonna" last modified March 2012, <http://www.catholicleague.org/lady-gaga-mimics-madonna/>

Catholicism would only ‘embolden Catholics’¹⁷.’ The Vatican itself has also been brought into these debates, condemning Madonna’s ‘Like a Prayer’ video and stage performance on her ‘Confessions’ tour where she wore a crown of thorns and portrayed herself being crucified.¹⁸

The Catholic view of this issue, then, seems to be that it is an attack on Catholicism, however not one of great consequence. They assume that the female artists are the ones to blame for the defamation of Catholic imagery and that while it is offensive it isn’t an attack that will have a long-standing effect on the religion.

Non-Religious Responses

Not all concerns about this sexualisation of Catholic Imagery are focussed upon the damage to the Catholic Church. Particularly parents have expressed the idea that these ‘very sexual pop acts’ could be damaging to both their sons and daughters. Affirming to their daughters that they would be ‘judged on their looks’ and making young boys believe that women are ‘too sexually available.’¹⁹

However some non-religious responses are much more accepting of the use of Catholic imagery in music videos, denoting it as a form of expression. An example of this is Adrian-Mario Gellel’s examination of Lady Gaga and her use of Catholic and religious symbols. While Gellel accepts the idea that sometimes Lady Gaga’s use of Catholic imagery is intended to shock and even anger, he also points out the fact that her followers, instead of being damaged by her ‘seemingly transgressive and shocking behaviour,’ connect with her message and identify it as a display of being true to yourself. According to Gellel Lady Gaga employs these religious and Catholic symbols strategically as part of her overall message to her fans, and in his view this message is one which is, in fact the opposite of damaging. Instead he argues that her message is one of ‘self, love of self, uniqueness/originality, creativity and... potential.’²⁰

Industry Approach

¹⁷ “Is Nicki Minaj Possessed.”

¹⁸ Author Unknown. “Religious iconography in Music.”

¹⁹ Author Unknown, “Parents fear ‘sexualised culture’ of music videos,”

²⁰ Adrian-Mario Gellel, “Traces of spirituality in the Lady Gaga phenomenon,” *International Journal of Children’s Spirituality* 18 (2013): 214-226, accessed January 11, 2014. Doi:10.1080/1364436X.2013.796309

The artists and directors involved in these videos and performances also deny that the religious imagery was meant to offend, arguing that it, instead, had other purposes. The director of Lady Gaga's video 'Alejandro' argued that the religious symbolism in the video was meant to 'represent the character's battle between the dark forces of this world and the spiritual salvation of the soul', he goes on to insist that the image of Lady Gaga swallowing the rosary beads portrayed a 'desire to take in the holy'²¹.

However not everyone in the popular music industry was as accepting of the music videos as the artists who performed them. Katy Perry, for example, dismissed Gaga's Alejandro video as blasphemous and cheap over Twitter.²²

²¹ Robert Rheubottom, "Lady Gaga defends new video against denunciation by Catholic group" *Examiner*, June 10, 2010, accessed January 13, 2014.

<http://www.examiner.com/article/lady-gaga-defends-new-video-against-denunciation-by-catholic-group>

²² McKay, "Lady Gaga is Latest Celeb to Abuse Catholic Imagery in Hollywood's 'War on Religion'"

Glossary

Exorcism: the ceremony performed with the intent of expelling an evil presence or spirit from a person or being.

Theology: the study of the nature of God and other divine beings

Misogyny: an irrational hatred of women based purely upon the fact that they are female

Irreverent: a lack of respect for something which is generally respected in wider society

Catholic League: America's largest Catholic civil rights organization. It was founded in 1973 and defends the rights of Catholics in America.

Transgressive: a violation of accepted moral and social boundaries.

Bibliography

Author Unknown. "Religious iconography in Music: The most famous moments" *Swide*, October 2013. <http://www.swide.com/art-culture/most-iconic-use-of-religious-imagery-in-music-videos-and-pop-music/2013/10/15>

This was the article which I used for my case study. I felt that it was a particularly enlightening article on the use of Catholic Imagery in music videos as it provided a description of the religious iconography used and listed the reaction which it caused from the public. I wanted a contemporary article to use for my case study and this one was written in 2013, highlighting the fact that my issue is still an extremely relevant one. Swide is an online magazine which fits in with my target audience of young adults.

BBC. Various News Articles. Accessed between December 29, 2013 and January 11, 2014 www.bbc.co.uk/news

I used various BBC News articles to provide contemporary information about the media in Britain and to gain the viewpoints of individuals working within the industry as this was something that I found difficult to find in academic publications.

Carter, Cynthia and Linda Steiner. *Critical Readings: Media and Gender*. Berkshire: Open University Press, 2004.

I used two chapters in the writing of my Guide- 'Mapping the Contested Terrain of Media and Gender Research' by the editors of the book and 'The Great Rock and Roll Swindle' by Helen Davies. The book was compiled with the intention of bringing together a number of different issues within media and gender and to examine the way, despite much progress in this area, there are still many inequalities in popular culture. This book was particularly useful to me in exploring the wider cultural context to my case study as, although there was little mention of religion, the book provided invaluable information about the way women are treated in the music industry- particularly in Helen Davies' chapter.

Catholic League. Accessed January 7, 2014 <http://www.catholicleague.org>

The Catholic League is an American association who provided me with a Catholic viewpoint of some of the female pop stars and their performances mentioned in the guide. The website comments upon recent occurrences in the media and the effect which they may have upon Catholics and religion in general. They were particularly vocal about their disapproval of Lady Gaga and Nicki Minaj. There was a clear religious bias in the two articles which I used for my guide- 'Is Minaj Possessed?' and 'Lady Gaga Mimics Madonna', however this was beneficial as it provided me with an explicitly religious viewpoint. One downside of the website is that it was an American not a British organisation, however I struggled to find a British equivalent of the organisation and the Catholic Leagues viewpoints were quoted in English news publications such as the Daily Mail, so I found it a relevant organisation despite this.

Furness, Hannah and York Membery. "Female pop stars complain about sexualisation as 'convenient scapegoat,'" *Telegraph*, November 22, 2013.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/music-news/10466649/Female-pop-stars-complain-about-sexualisation-as-convenient-scapegoat.html>

Gellel, Adrian-Mario. "Traces of spirituality in the Lady Gaga phenomenon," *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 18 (2013): 214-226. Accessed January 11, 2014. Doi: 10.1080/1364436X.2013.796309

This article addresses both the way in which Lady Gaga uses religion in her music and message to her fans and the way in which her fans adoration of her borders upon spirituality. I found this to be an invaluable article as it provided one of the only

academic opinions I could find which addressed Lady Gaga and her use of religious symbols. It was also very useful to me as it was one of the only resources I came across defending Lady Gaga's work.

Hooks, Bell. *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. London: Pluto Press, 2000.

Bell Hooks' book was written with the intent of spreading the message of feminism and proving that it is a discipline that everybody can relate to and support. I found the introduction of this book most useful as it provided me with a definition of what feminism was and allowed me to relate my case study to feminist theory.

McKay, Hollie. "Lady Gaga is Latest Celeb to Abuse Catholic Imagery in Hollywood's 'War on Religion'" *Fox News*, June 11, 2010.

<http://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/2010/06/11/hollywoods-war-religion-lady-gaga-latest-celeb-sexualize-abuse-catholic-symbols/>

Rheubottom, Robert. "Lady Gaga defends new video against denunciation by Catholic group" *Examiner*, June 10, 2010. <http://www.examiner.com/article/lady-gaga-defends-new-video-against-denunciation-by-catholic-group>

Sered, Susan Starr. "'Woman' as Symbol and Women as Agents: Gendered Religious Discourses and Practices." In *Revisioning Gender*, ed. Myra Marx Ferree, Judith Lorber and Beth B. Hess, 193-221. London: Sage Publications, 1999.

This chapter examines the way women can be viewed as either symbols or agents within religion, based upon whether they fit into the gender stereotypical roles prescribed to them or whether they make their own decisions and decide upon their own actions with agency. I found this chapter to be useful as it provided an academic theory that I could relate to my case study. I found it interesting to explore whether the women in the music videos I discussed would be seen as symbols or agents, however while it was an interesting theory to explore it was inconclusive as the conclusion as to whether they would be symbols or agents depends upon who's decision it was to use this imagery in a sexual way and this is a point which is highly contested.

Ward, Pete. *Gods Behaving Badly: Media, Religion, and Celebrity Culture*. London: SCM Press, 2011.

Pete Ward's book addresses the connection between celebrity culture and religion. He highlights both the ways in which celebrity worship can be comparable to religion and the way that religion is addressed within popular culture. This book was particularly useful to me in providing a scholarly perspective on the issue which was not informed by feminism. It allowed me to explore an academic theory which shed light on the reasons why Catholic imagery may be used in popular culture without automatically assuming that the videos were damaging to either women or religion. Pete Ward is a Professor of Theology and Ministry at Kings College London and therefore his work is reliable and current. I also found this book particularly useful as it was written in 2011 and therefore the issues he discussed were extremely modern and relevant.