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Throwin' Faith in Rap: Christianity's Compatibility with Hip Hop?

Recording artist Andy Mineo's love of hip hop sprang from a Christmas gift from his brother when he was ten years old—a Jay-Z album. That love of hip hop grew into what is now Mineo's vocation—professional rapper. He has experienced a great deal of acclaim—his latest album *Uncomfortable* was the No. 1 independent album in the US—and he has scored high places on Billboard's Hip Hop and Top 200 album charts ("Andy Mineo"). Yet Corrie Mitchell of Narrative.Ly writes that "Mineo is too clean for the mainstream." His music definitely is unique as far as hip hop is concerned. But that is not necessarily a bad thing. This paper attempts to answer the question "How does Mineo's unique music offer a pursuit of fulfilment that is superior to that embodied by mainstream hip hop?" The answer lies in examining the themes in Mineo's lyrics and what makes them unique, how hip hop culture dictates these "clean" themes, and why this message transcends that of mainstream hip hop.

Mineo's message is not unique in the sense that it is a new one. His works share several similarities to the works of Victorian author Charles Dickens, whose works are famous for their criticism of the ills of Victorian society. Mineo uses his pen to address social issues as well.

Mineo crafts an interesting track on his second studio album, *Uncomfortable*, dealing with several socio-political issues. In passing, "Vendetta" criticizes materialism, the corruption of politics, and American eating habits. But Mineo does not "deal" with these issues by providing a solution. Instead, he offers an insight into the source of these problems. He laments,

“We point fingers at people who sin different, skin different, but the same color we bleed” (“Vendetta” Lines 65-66). Humans are adept at finding the source of problems in others, but Mineo tells his listeners to point their fingers in a different direction: “the real problem in America... always has been and always will be, me” (Lines 67-68). Mineo does not mean himself specifically. His point is that before anyone can “judge” others, he or she must first acknowledge his own error.

This theme of self-error recognition is present in Dickens’ writing as well—particularly in the character of Sydney Carton, in *A Tale of Two Cities*. Carton is the hero of the story—a surprising hero, because he is not introduced as a heroic character at all. When Carton’s friend Stryver compares his successes to Carton’s lack of achievement, Carton responds “before Shrewsbury [school]...and ever since...you were always somewhere, and I was always—nowhere” (93-94). He acknowledges and accepts as fact—or even destiny—his own lack of achievement. Indeed, after Carton leaves his conversation with Stryver, Dickens describes the hero as “incapable of [the] directed exercise [of his abilities and emotions] ...sensible of the blight on him, and resigning to let it eat him away” (96). A sad fate indeed. While Dickens does not explicitly promote this characteristic of Carton, he wanted his readers to clearly take notice of it—he bestows it not on one of the many, colorful supporting characters, but on the man who ultimately becomes the hero of the novel. In his own way, Dickens is communicating the importance of an individual realizing their own imperfection—just as Mineo does, in his direct way.

Both artists criticize materialism in their works, as well. Mineo paints it as a dangerous distraction from more important things. In “Uncomfortable,” Mineo describes the materialism of hip-hop culture: “In this game, in this biz, want the fame, want [to] get rich, comfort, everybody

wantin' it" (Lines 25-27). Who does not want comfort, or money, or some level of ease? The drive for comfort and recognition is universal. Mineo points out, however, that he can get "lost" in this pursuit, and always want more—regardless of how much he already has (Lines 28, 31). Getting lost in this pursuit of comfort blinds him to the needs of others. "I got excess, others got need... I got a hundred pairs [of shoes], but only two feet" ("Vendetta" Lines 61, 63). He laments in "Uncomfortable" the legalization of marijuana in Colorado "that'll keep us high" here in America, while around the world suffering is high (Lines 52-53). Mineo wants his audience to take note, and think of others instead of their own comfort.

As he was a critic of Victorian England, it is no surprise that Dickens puts materialism in a similar negative light. *Little Dorrit* is a good example of this. The protagonist, Little Dorrit, is born into a family living in the Marshalsea debtors' prison (62). Her mother dies when she is eight years old (64), and she grows up filling the motherly, caretaker role for her father, brother, and sister. Until the Dorrits are released from the Marshalsea, Little Dorrit thinks little of herself, devoting her efforts to the needs of others. Dickens puts this devotion on par with the inspiration of a poet or a priest, clearly valuing the "heart impelled by love...to the lowliest work in the lowliest way of life" (71). This selfless devotion is contrasted with the materialism of her family. Even after her family is released from the Marshalsea blessed with remarkable fortune, Dorrit finds the life of the wealthy foreign and difficult, while her family is thanklessly absorbed in it. Dorrit's father calls his daughter to let her know that he is not pleased with her, that she embarrasses him, and that she must "dutifully do what becomes [her]...station" (477). So focused on living the comfortable life, the father is blind to the merit of his daughter's honest efforts to please him—however failing and contrary to her nature they are. Dorrit has spent her life serving her family in their poverty, and now that such hard work is not needed, she is not

thanked, but required do an even harder task. This unwitting cruelty is in harsh contrast to the protagonist's selflessness, and shows the negative way that Dickens viewed materialism. Thus Mineo and Dickens are connected by their criticism of the love of comfort in their society.

The most powerful value that they both portray, however, is a positive kind of love—sacrificial love for others. This is a central theme to the album *Uncomfortable*. “Ghost” describes the pain of broken friendships, which are all based on love to varying degrees—love that must be given at the risk of being lost. “Love” is a track devoted to defining love itself. Mineo's words reveal that he sees love as deeper than an emotion—addressing it in a personal way, he says, “you're more than just a feelin', you're more like a action [*sic*], more like a decision” (Lines 33-35). Mineo believes that true love is choosing to sacrifice for another regardless of how one feels about it. In “Ghost,” he describes his fear of his wife leaving him—of that friendship being broken—because “the closer you are, the deeper the cuts, longer the healin'” (Lines 38, 32). Mineo's love is vulnerable; it is taking a risk. Thus he believes “to truly love a person [is] the bravest act of the soul” (Line 44). Mineo's love is uncomfortable, and requires bravery—bravery that is possible because of another's bravery and love. He mentions how his “Creator bankrupt the heaven” so that he could “be there with him” (“Vendetta” Line 74). He is referring to the payment Jesus made for eternal life in the Bible, and his faith in this act of sacrificial love is what empowers his own—he is “livin’ by the motto ‘if I die tonight...I’m ready for tomorrow’” (“Desperadoes” Lines 70-71). He is “ready for tomorrow” because he believes Jesus has secured eternal life for him, and he lives today with the courage to love sacrificially likewise. His view of true love is selfless, sacrificial love—and that view is inspired by a greater example.

Dickens displays this theme of sacrificial love, empowered by example, as well. He does this most notably with his unlikely hero in *A Tale of Two Cities*. Sydney Carton's humble resign

to his fate discussed above is not the end of his story. In the penultimate point of the story, Dickens shows a change in Carton's character. Just before the climax of the story, Carton wanders the streets of Paris with "the settled manner of a...man who had wandered...and got lost, *but who at length* struck to his road and saw its end" (331 emphasis added). What was his road—his end? Not a life of mediocrity devoid of any good. Carton, inspired by love for his friend Lucie Manette, takes the place of her husband at the guillotine (395-396). This is the ultimate display of sacrificial love. But it is not just sacrificial love—it is an act inspired by the sacrifice of another. As he wanders the streets of Paris, and even as he lays his head down at the guillotine, he remembers a few words spoken at a childhood funeral: "I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live" (332, 395). Carton found the courage to give his life for his friend in the hope secured by the sacrifice of another—the same sacrifice that Mineo finds hope in. Dickens clearly valued this kind of love—it is the central point of his story.

Mineo and Dickens display values of selfless discomfort in their works. Both portray the significance of one humbly acknowledging his or her own imperfection. Both speak out against the distraction of material comfort. And both artists show the value of one sacrificing his or her own comfort for the good of another. The message that Mineo raps is not a new one in art as a whole.

Mineo's music stands out because it uses the medium of hip hop to communicate the Christian themes discussed above. This message is not common in the world of hip hop. LakeiaBrown with HipHopDX remarks "once rappers find God they must make their way to the nearest fluorescent exit sign." This is because hip hop often "promotes...quick money, arrogance, promiscuity, and dishonesty," while Christianity promotes the opposite

(LakeiaBrown). Indeed, Corrie Mitchell of Narrative.Ly writes, "To many, the pounding beats and fast lyrics [of Mineo's music] still signal that the music can not be good...because rap is about money, sex, and drugs...And yet, Mineo is too clean for the mainstream." He stands out as an artist because he sits between two apparently incompatible spheres, and combines them.

Mineo does this because hip hop is the art form he is most familiar with. He "fell in love" with hip hop as a preteen when he received one of Jay Z's albums for Christmas from his brother ("I AM UNYC – Andy Mineo"). He and his friend, Ryan, would spend hours listening and breakdancing to hip hop singles they would buy. Eventually, they began recording themselves—but this was only the beginning. In high school he built his own recording studio and made money by selling studio time (Mitchell). While pursuing a music degree at The City College of New York, Mineo used his school projects as opportunities to determine his own style ("Bio – Andy Mineo"). From that first CD to his success as an emcee with Reach Records, Mineo has developed a love for hip hop.

Mineo's message of Christian values and hope also comes straight from childhood influences. His mother talked about faith when he was young, but he did not connect with it until his sister brought him to a Christian summer camp at age 12. Here, he found new life.

He struggled with this new faith when he returned to high school, where none of his friends shared his beliefs. But it became easier at college. Here he connected with a Christian hip hop group called T.R.U.C.E. Mineo made friends there who shared his faith and mentored him. It was then that Christianity was anchored in his life, becoming the integral part of his life and music that it is today (Mitchell).

Mineo combines these two loves because of two key themes of hip hop culture. The first is the mainstream's materialism. One does not need to be a scholar to see this—the pursuit of

wealth and fame is unashamedly promoted. This pursuit is often for the purpose of increasing status. Chandler & Smith write that the “bling-bling” materialism of hip hop is a form of “conspicuous consumption”—the practice of storing up material wealth to enhance social status (qtd. in Suddreth 44). Though some rappers outside of the mainstream have criticized this materialistic focus, it remains a characteristic of popular hip hop culture (Suddreth 45-46). Anyone who listens to mainstream hip hop must be impacted in some way by the materialism that permeates it—either to embrace the mindset, or reject it.

As an artist who grew up loving hip hop, it is no surprise that Mineo is influenced by this materialism in his own music. The theme pops up in many of his songs. “Fool’s Gold” is an outright disapproval of material focus. “You need something real, baby that ain’t never gon last. That’s just fool’s gold” (Lines 1-2). In another song, “Uncomfortable,” Mineo describes the materialistic mindset: “In this game, in this biz, want the fame, want [to] get rich, comfort, everybody wantin’ it” (Lines 25-27). Materialism is a theme in Mineo’s music due to hip hop’s influence. But it is not quite a direct result—Mineo does not display a materialistic mindset. He raps against it. He sees the prevalence of this mindset in his art form, and finding it harmful, opposes it.

This is not simply the case of an outsider looking in and criticizing a mindset from afar. Mineo was directly influenced by hip hop’s materialism before reacting against it. His lyrics reveal that he has tried this mindset, and found it lacking. He raps, “I bought the lie hip hop sold me, man I want a refund” (“Death of Me” Line 32). The “lie” is that of materialism: “I’m sitting here...rememberin what them rappers showed me, ugh, how to bag a honey, stack the money” (Lines 23-25). He bought the lie—he believed it. But what was once a positive influence towards a focus on wealth, power, and status now pushes him away from it. He seeks to promote

something of greater worth in his music. “My new goal is to be close to the one who made my soul” (“Never Land” Line 39). More than being anti-materialism, Mineo is pro-Christianity, and this is the central theme of his message.

Authenticity is the second key hip hop value that influences Mineo’s music. Williams describes hip hop as “preoccupied” with the notion of authenticity, saying the two have been linked since the beginning of the art (2). What is this “authenticity”? According to Furia, “representing honestly one’s own experience and identity is the most powerful source of authenticity” (28). Honest self-expression is the authenticity valued in hip hop. Its importance is not lost on Mineo. He said in an interview with Dominique Zonyee of TheBoomBox.com that “hip hop has always been about...being authentically you. That is what I try to do in my music.” This desire to “be himself” is evident in his music as well. In response to those who would have his message or style change, he raps, “I’m doin’ me, I’m doin’ me like I’m ‘posed to” (“Desperadoes” Line 11). Mineo recognizes the importance of being true to one’s mission.

For Mineo, this mission is living out his faith. He considers it as central to who he is. While many hip hop artists seem to find their identity in material things, Mineo finds his identity in his relationship with God. He says “My relationship with Jesus is in me, and it informs everything that I do...When I speak as a Christian...I can speak about any topic ... and [the] perspective that I hold is going to come through in it” (qtd. in Daniels). For Mineo, faith in God is more than a ticket to heaven. It is bigger than a tool on his belt—it is who he is. Thus, for Mineo to be authentic as a hip hop artist, he cannot help expressing a faith message in his music. He would be hiding something, limiting the expression of his own experience and identity. His faith and his hip hop inevitably flow together, and that makes him unique.

But uniqueness in art, on its own, does not necessarily constitute a better alternative. The

art in question must be unique in an uplifting way—this makes the art notably refreshing. Consider two different unique feelings that a person might feel while walking into a bakery. Before entering, the individual smells only the normal scent of air—essentially nothing. Upon walking into the bakery, he or she will likely smell “something,” a unique scent that breaks the monotony. This could be the smell of fresh cookies—a scent that is unique in a good way—or the smell of burning bread—a scent that is unique in a bad way. Step back out of the bakery, and consider that this applies in the same way to art: A work can strike an observer as unique—different from other art generally experienced—in a negative way, or in a positive way.

Mineo’s unique combination of faith and rap stands out from the common message of materialism in mainstream hip hop in a positive way. He offers a fresh perspective that both acknowledges the mainstream message and offers greater fulfillment. By analytically comparing the lyrics of mainstream rapper Jay-Z to Mineo’s, a greater understanding of the differences between mainstream hip hop and Mineo’s can be gained—differences in message and potential for fulfillment.

In the intro of “Run This Town” (performed by Jay-Z, Rihanna, and Kanye West), Rihanna sings, “got a problem, tell me now, only thing that’s on my mind is who’s gonna run this town tonight” (Lines 6-8). The attitude of the artists here is one of carelessness to the equally vague danger and problems of someone else. The only thing that matters to the artists is who will “run this town”—and Jay-Z raps in the first verse “we are, yeah I said it, we are” (Lines 11-13). The song is about the artists’ status—a materialistic status that raises them above others.

This is fleshed out in the verses in several places. In the second verse, Jay-Z raps that “the other side” is jealous of him and his friends (Line 65). “We got a banquet full the broads, they got a table full of fellas,” he raps (Lines 66-67). In other words, Jay-Z’s group has the

idealized female attention of mainstream hip hop, while the “other side” does not. Jay-Z and his friends are so successful that their opponents “should throw they hand in ‘cause they ain’t got no spades” (Lines 69-70). This is a reference to card game of spades, in which a spade card is always the trump card. Jay-Z’s point is that his opponents do not have a chance at achieving his status, so they might as well give up—and this is all evidenced by the female attention that he and his friends have, compared to their opponents.

The celebration of material status is present in the third verse, performed by Kanye West. He raps, “this is the life everybody ask for, this is a fast life, we are on a crash course” (Lines 92-94). He says “this” life to emphasize that the life everyone asks for is the life he is leading. Not everyone gets this life, but he sure has. This life is the life of fame and riches. He raps that he bought his whole family cars, “no Volvos” (Line 88). In other word, he he did not buy them average cars—these are expensive cars, because he is rich enough to afford them. Finally, he asks a rhetorical question, revealing the purpose he lives for: “What you think I rap for, to push a...Rav 4?” (Lines 95-96). This is yet another reference to an everyday car—and the answer is “of course not.” He raps for this material wealth.

This same celebration of materialism is present in “Jay-Z’s Dirt Off Your Shoulder.” The song opens by proclaiming, “You are now tuned into the...greatest. Turn the music up in the headphones” (Lines 1-2). The point here is not obscured by metaphors: Jay-Z believes he is the greatest rapper, and wants the listener to celebrate that by turning the beat up. He gives the listener several examples of how he is the greatest. In the first verse, he raps, “all the ladies they love me, from the bleachers they screaming...all the rappers be hating, off the track that I’m making” (Lines 13, 15). Again, the importance of attention is present here: Jay-Z has the coveted female attention because he is the greatest rapper (so he says), and the other rappers give him

envious attention because of it. In verse two, Jay-Z shows an expensive taste in fashion. “I paid a grip for the jeans...no chrome on the wheels, I’m a grown-up for real” (Lines 35-36). “A grip” is a slang term for a thousand dollars. This is an expensive pair of jeans. Jay-Z shows off his wealth by investing in things like designer jeans, instead of less “mature” upgrades like chrome wheels that others invest in. This shows not only a materialistic focus, but a self-centered one. This fits right in with the overall theme of the song: “You’re now tuned into the...greatest, best rapper alive” (Lines 49-50).

Jay-Z’s music celebrates self-centered materialism. This stands in great contrast to the mood through which Mineo approaches the subject. The overall theme of his “Death of Me” is one of lament—lament over time he has spent pursuing the materialism he now finds empty.

Andy Mineo acknowledges the attention and material success he has received as a successful rapper in “Death of Me.” He raps “still can’t believe I get paid for this, as a kid all I did was pray for this” (Lines 12-13). Mineo is not as popular as Jay-Z, but he is a successful rapper, making a living by living out his childhood dream. He says that he learned from other rappers how to “bag a honey, stack the money” (Line 25). In other words, he has learned from mainstream hip hop the importance of female attention and wealth. The emphasis mainstream hip hop places on these female attention is no obscure fact. Ladel Lewis, writing for Western Michigan University, informs that many rap videos portray women as “passive, sexually aggressive, and willing to be utilized at will (5). “Bagging a honey” means not just gaining female attention, but gaining the woman herself for sexual gratification.

The emphasis that mainstream hip hop places on wealth is no secret, either. Courtney Suddreth, in her English thesis at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, writes that hip hop music videos became increasingly inclusive of “materialistic symbols of success” in the

1990s. This materialistic focused has continued to increase throughout the 2000s (Suddreth 46). This is what Mineo is referencing when he says that other rappers taught him how to “stack the money.”

Mineo learned the ideals of female attention and money from other rappers, likely through the time he spent listening to their CDs growing up, but his lyrics do not reflect that in the way one might expect. He definitely talks about women and wealth, but not in a celebratory fashion. He expresses amazement that he is living out his childhood dream, but at the same time he raps “who cares if I ever get a Grammy nom if my soul takes L’s” (“Death of Me” Lines 10-11). Mineo expresses here a greater focus on his soul’s well-being than on his fame—he would rather lose a Grammy nomination than suffer losses (L’s) spiritually. But this emphasis is not what he learned from those “other rappers.” What has caused this change in focus? Mineo raps that he has been “changed up” (“Death of Me” Line 28). He says, “I bought the lie hip hop sold me, man I want a refund” (“Death of Me” Line 32). He learned the materialistic value placed on attention and wealth from hip hop, tried it, and found it empty. Now he focuses his efforts on what he values as more important: spirituality. This is his own spirituality—he raps “opportunities come and they go, but none of them is worth my soul” (Lines 82-83). This is also the spirituality of his fans. He describes the purpose of his music as “trying to give life” (Line 117)—the same life that he has found in his Christian faith. “I’ve found hope in my life, and I want other people to be able to find hope through my music” (qtd. in Mitchell).

Thus, in contrast to Jay-Z’s unashamed promotion of materialistic pursuits, Mineo’s message laments the “lie” of materialism. And where Jay-Z celebrates his own materialistic success—and flaunts it in the face of rappers less successful than he is—Mineo focuses on the spiritual well-being of both his audience and himself.

It is this focus that makes Mineo's music refreshingly unique. Thomas Gilovich, a psychology professor at Cornell University, has performed research showing that experiences are more likely to make people happy because "they are less likely to measure the value of their experiences by comparing them to those of others" (paraphrased in Hamblin). Comparison is exactly what Jay-Z does in his lyrics discussed above—he compares his material position to that of the less successful, and boasts about it. But Mineo's message throughout his music is not one of material comparison, but one of spiritual inclusion. Inclusion in both spiritual judgment—the "imperfection awareness" discussed earlier—and spiritual benefit—the salvation from that judgment.

Another way that individuals find greater happiness in experience is through memory and anticipation. Hamblin, commenting on research performed by Harvard psychologist Matthew Killingsworth, says that "minds tend to wander to dark...places...unless [they have] something exciting to anticipate or sweet to remember." Mineo's message has both of these assets. Mineo remembers the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ displayed in his death for sinners in "Vendetta"—an awful thing that Jesus experienced, but a "sweet" thing to remember because of what it means for Mineo and all who share his faith. "Our creator bankrupt the heaven so that we could all be there with him" ("Vendetta" Line 74). His faith is non-material, it includes others, and it offers meaning. Hamblin claims that "maximal...personal happiness comes from pursuing not happiness but meaning." Jay-Z promotes finding fulfillment and meaning in his lyrics through material pursuits that exclude others. Mineo promotes finding fulfillment and meaning through his Christian faith, that includes others—thus transcending exclusive material pursuits.

Mineo's music is unique because it brings Christianity into the world of hip hop. His art is not any less "hip hop" because of that fact—the very ideals of the genre pushed Mineo to

combine the two unlikely friends. Mineo's unique music offers a superior pursuit of fulfillment than that embodied by mainstream hip hop. His lyrics deliver a message of hope for all people that surpasses wealth, and offers fulfillment beyond the material—fulfillment more based in experience. While Jay-Z is one of the most successful mainstream rappers (he claims that he is *the* greatest)—and his message may well be what most hip hop fans appreciate, for those who find the pursuit of material wealth empty, or its goals impossible to reach, Mineo's lyrics offer something more—satisfaction in the pursuit of God rather than wealth.

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