

Kanye West: Disciple or Deceitful

WHO IS KANYE WEST? Ye, Father, son, friend, RAPPER, Yeezy, designer, potential presidential candidate, CHRISTIAN, Nazi...sympathizer?

Kanye West exemplifies the confusing, almost impossible intersection between religiosity and secularity. His songs explore his relationship with religion, love, and self. However, his affiliation with Donald Trump and Marilyn Manson and anti-semitic comments may suggest conflicting ideas of hatred. His rise to fame is marked by his debut album, *The College Dropout*, with themes of autonomy and separation from society. However, the song "Jesus Walks" alludes to biblical passages of Jesus walking on water and with followers - a "bombshell within the musical community" which "endorses[ed] Christianity," genius.com claims. It was revolutionary in the rap community - rapping about sensitive topics with little recognition in the media was unconventional and controversial. West was early to the game. Alongside Chance the Rapper and Kendrick Lamar, West helped spearhead the incorporation of religiosity into rap music in the early 2000s. However, his conveyed ideas are more than old-fashioned. Kanye West represents the ambiguity and resurrection of religion in a new generation. Many of his songs and public beliefs are accurate to the Bible, but some of his actions seemingly contradict Christian beliefs. He simultaneously breaks the old tradition of being a 'slave' to the church by almost picking and choosing what Christian beliefs to follow while redefining religion as a way of life, not just rules and laws.

Kanye West's usage of God for personal reasons results in the representation of religiosity as ambiguous. In "God Breathed" and "I am a God," West seemingly only mentions God regarding his success. He raps, "God will solve it all for me," in the former; he accurately implores listeners to trust God. However, he inaccurately suggests that God will fix everything for His followers. Following God does not mean having a guardian angel; it means following and obeying His will. In "I am a God," West raps, "I am a God, Even though I'm a man of God, My whole life in the hand of God, So y'all better quit playing with God." Genius.com describes this verse as "playing with the sacred dichotomy between God and man." He alludes to Christians believing in God, saying humans should become 'gods' and believe in themselves. West implores listeners to believe in themselves, as he is the same as us, and we can become 'gods' as he has become a 'god.' Exodus 20:7 states, "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain." Believers can imply that in "I am a God," West uses the Lord's name in vain. His comparison of himself to Jesus can be seen as offensive to Christianity; this may convey the idea of religion as something that is ambiguous to new followers - West follows some biblical teaching but ignores others. West continues to praise himself while seemingly praising God in an interview with Joel Osteen. One statement West makes is alarmingly arrogant: "Now the greatest artist that God has ever created is working for him." Authentic fakes are described as "involv[ing] artificial or fraudulent religious claims about transcendence, the sacred, or ultimate human concerns (Chidester, 1)", and this definition may be attributed to the kind of 'Kanye West religion' promoted in popular culture. Kanye West seemingly glorifies himself in comments like the above to Joel Osteen. Christianity has long been established as the religion that strictly follows the Bible, but West holds a looser interpretation which some admire as him not being a "slave" to the church. West does religious work by "forging a community, focusing [on] desire, and facilitating exchange in ways that look just like religion (Chidester, 2)", but is what he is doing legitimately 'Christian work' or is he building a religion based on himself?

Kanye West's conflicting actions further result in the representation of religion as ambiguous. Many of the comments he has made and actions he has taken do not represent Christian beliefs. In one interview with Alex Jones, West states, "I see good things about Hitler" and "I love Jewish people. But I also love Nazis". Christians are taught to love everybody, even those who sin, but West's outrageous comments paint this Christian moral negatively.

Loving your neighbors does not include justifying or excusing cruel actions. Again, this represents one of the many confusing principles of Christianity. The Bible tells us to love everybody, but how far does this extend to seemingly evil people? Kanye West's seemingly anti-semitic comments further complicate confusion over this principle, allowing believers to interpret the Bible uniquely, just as West has.

Kanye West has used religiosity for personal reasons, but these actions have also beneficially amplified Christianity. *Jesus Is King* received 264,000 first-week album sales, while West's other albums, *Donda*, *Yeezus*, and *Watch the Throne*, received significantly more, according to beats-rhymes-lists.com. These statistics refute claims that West is outwardly religious for economic benefits. However, many think his Sunday church gatherings are not God-centered. These church gatherings are invite-only, creating exclusivity. Furthermore, many of the participants and performers rep Yeezy merch and clothing at some of these church gatherings. Jia Tolentino, a newspaper writer, states, "With Kanye, it's always been this very complicated dance between whether he is worshiping God or subsuming God to his own ends." However, does it matter what West's true intentions are if, in the end, his actions bring recognition to Christianity? Regardless of how people interpret West's actions, there is no denying that his declaration as a Christian has brought recognition to Christianity through the usage of his songs and lyrics. Previously seen as outdated and rigid, religion is being redefined as accessible and open to everybody due to a vast and respected celebrity.

Kanye West accurately depicts Christian morals in a way that allows a broader audience to connect with religion. West helps push the understanding of religion as more than a traditional, rigid institution. "Closed on Sunday" and "Selah" exemplify how West does this. "Closed on Sunday" reiterates the biblical concept that Sunday is a rest day, where West raps, "Follow Jesus, listen and obey. No more livin' for the culture, we nobody's slave". He incorporates biblical beliefs that followers should follow Jesus, giving their life to Him, while rapping about Chick-Fil-A. The ridiculousness of rapping about a fast-food restaurant catches people's attention, then the beat, production, and lyrics hook people in. Furthermore, the ridiculousness also dispels some controversies over Christians devoting one day of the week to Jesus and, subsequently, Chick-Fil-A closing on Sundays. Many public opinions about Chick-Fil-A were negative, with some claiming homophobia. However, West's breakdown of Sabbath Sunday conveys the biblical truth (day of rest for Christians) and the added relatability of just spending time with family.

"Selah" is related to Ornate Coleman's belief that "music is totally created for an emotional experience (Bivins, 7)" that then allows people to be "put...in touch with the source of creation (Bivins, 7)". Zachary Schwartz writes that he "scoffed" when West announced a Christian album due to prior beliefs of Christianity as a "derivative religion that used heaven and hell to control the masses." This false narrative of religion is not uncommon. People believe religion is oppressive due to many outspoken religious figures, like the Westboro Baptist Church, that sometimes promote the wrong messages, which makes it difficult for non-religious people to connect with religiosity. The Westboro Baptist Church justified the picketing of funerals of LGBTQ+ funerals by their interpretation of the Bible condemning homosexuality. Schwartz writes that he gave *Jesus Is King* a listen because it "deserved at least one listen," and immediately upon listening to "Selah," "chills shot through [his] spine" as he relates the lyrics to "an incantation with an imprint in ancestral memory." This transcendence can be described as "different cultures and spiritualities merging for a time through sound (Bivins, 7)". Although Schwartz does not share the same religious ideas as West, West's music allows Schwartz to experience a similar transcendence to one evoked by religion. Schwartz writes, "I could learn the same messages by studying holy texts, but these are Kanye beats – they're delicious and digestible." Kanye West has an established reputation in the music industry that he utilizes to persuade the younger generation, who may rebel against typical societal institutions like religion, to give it a try. Kanye gives way to the revitalization of religion in the younger generations.

Kanye West redefines religion as a 'way of life' that cannot be separated from other spheres of living. There is a belief that separation from religion and politics should exist; however, West represents religion as

something integrated into every aspect of living. In 2009 West told Vibe, “I don’t believe in religion and giving it all up to Jesus and stuff like that. I don’t believe in that. I just believe in God. I would never say that it’s in Jesus’ hands.” Previously, West practiced being a ‘lukewarm Christian’ - believing in Jesus but still partaking in things of the world. However, in a recent Lowe’s Beats 1 show interview, West says, “I just had to give it up to God. The more I am in service to God, I just clear my head and just wake up more empty every day and let God do the driving and just use me as he may.” This character development showcases how West views religion. It is no longer a hobby or side addition to his life but a lifestyle. His pro-life stance further exemplifies this switch. In an interview on Thursday’s *Tucker Carlson Tonight*, West says in terms of his pro-life stance, “I don’t really care about people’s response to that. I perform for an audience of one and that is God.” Regardless of the numerous interpretations of the Bible, it is clear that a pro-life stance is a common interpretation of many verses, such as Jeremiah 1:5, which states, “Before I formed you in your mother’s body I chose you. Before you were born I set you apart to serve me. I appointed you to be a prophet to the nations.” West represents religiosity as a way of life by sticking to his pro-life values and not shying away from it in interviews. Numerous Christians hold this stance, yet many are reluctant to speak out against pro-choice campaigns and advocates due to fear of backlash and hatred. Another example of West’s almost complete integration of Christianity into his life is his commitment to not cussing. In an interview with Zane Lowe, West announced that he intended to release versions of his older tracks “free of all traces of naughty language” because he is in “service to Christ.” This may be an infinitesimal detail; however, it exemplifies how West fully committed himself to God. Again, he spearheads another movement for the resurrection of religiosity as something that must be followed every day of life, not just on Sunday.

It is important to note that believers must not support or condone all of Kanye West’s actions and beliefs. Alongside many other Christians, I believe West and countless other religious celebrities use religiosity to combat and defend racist, homophobic, misogynistic, and hateful comments and actions. Furthermore, although Kanye West’s music is not similar to the jazz and improvised music discussed in terms of religiosity and music, both share similar qualities. Wagner discusses the ability of the intersection between media and religiosity in allowing “freedom to do otherwise unacceptable things”, such as blowing up a church in a virtual reality. West’s persistence to his listeners to follow Jesus, gives off a similar message that some actions, such as making anti-semitic comments, is okay because it follows Jesus. Wagner makes the argument that religion and media are both about mediation and communication – how the audience receives important information and how this transmission, or mode of communication, affects reception. Likewise, how West conveys Christianity to fresh minds, void of any knowledge of religion, will greatly affect how they see it. It is important that he also practices the morals he preaches in his songs, in real life.

There is no doubt about Kanye West’s influence on rap and Christian communities. By championing the generation of rappers who produce songs about religion, he significantly impacts how religion is viewed in the generations who listen to him. In conclusion, Kanye West represents the ambiguity of religion in modern times. While his music may reflect a strong affinity for Christianity, his actions often contradict his beliefs, creating confusion over what constitutes true faith. West’s usage of God for personal reasons further perpetuates this ambiguity, such as in “I am a God,” where he compares himself to Jesus. Comments made in public further add to the confusion, allowing believers to interpret the Bible uniquely, just as West has. While some argue that West’s religiosity has positively amplified Christianity, his exclusivity and seemingly self-promoting Sunday church gatherings question the sincerity of his faith. Furthermore, he represents religion as not one sector of somebody’s life but as covering all aspects. Overall, West represents religion’s complex interaction and role in contemporary culture.

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