

## Gang Signs and Prayers: 'God Writes Truth in Crude Penmanship'.

The paper would look at how contemporary grime artists, such as Stormzy, are referencing their faith through their music. Michael Omari (Stormzy) has a strong sense of spirituality and faith which is hidden within his music and is expressed through a musical medium which would appear to be diametrically opposed to faith and spirituality. This has not limited or confined him within a marginalised place within society and has allowed him to enter into the mainstream and to grow as an artist. Stormzy's faith and his journey as an artist towards full acceptance and recognition can be viewed as culturally significant for any discourse regarding the place of faith and Christian spirituality in our contemporary society.

This paper will explore the idea that God sometimes writes spiritual truths in crude penmanship. The idea that 'God writes truths in crude penmanship' comes from the film 'Favela Rising' which is the story of Afro Reggae and their attempts to use music and the creative arts to save young people from the dangers of gang life in the favelas of Rio in Brazil. This is an act of faith which liberates the young people from various forms of enslavement. One of the founding members of the band mentions the idea that God speaks the truth through unworthy, flawed and broken vessels. By doing this, a spiritual truth is made complete and accessible to those who would not ordinarily be receptive or open to such a profound spiritual truth. This is in many ways a direct paraphrasing of the idea that is found in Corinthians 9:19-23 when St Paul says 'I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some'. Stormzy talks frequently about saving 'pagan souls' and also acknowledges how he uses a familiar idiom of expression and subverts it, and also offers the chance of saving other people he knows from life on the street. It is also noteworthy that Plan B, another well-known grime artist, during one of his *Ted Talks*, speaks openly about how he uses the language of the disenfranchised and marginalised to reach these people and how he had to do this so that people would listen to his words and would be steered towards a more positive life path through redemption and salvation.

The genre of grime music is associated with a disenfranchised urban experience and it is a musical form of self expression which has emerged from a distinctively British urban experience. Grime music is typically 140 beats per minute and contains sonic beats, reverb and samples which contain rapid and syncopated break-beats. This genre of music has been developed by artists such as Dizzee Rascal, Giggs, Kano, Mike Skinner, JME, Wiley, Devlin and Skepta and is a genuinely British musical innovation. Stormzy, who represents this genre of music, managed to release an album which went straight to number one in the download charts and he is rapidly becoming a household name. He is an artist who is equally at home working with Little Mix and Ed Sheeran, whilst retaining his underground music credentials.

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The cover to 'Gang Signs and Prayers' plays clear and direct homage to Leonardo Da Vinci's famous painting 'The Last Supper' and this is no coincidence. The front cover shows Stormzy standing and a group of young men and one child sat at a table in balaclavas. This mise en scene is a reference to the moment that Jesus shared with his disciples his predictions about his betrayal, rejection and resurrection as part of the passion narrative and here it is clear that Stormzy is preparing himself for all of this with the release of the album itself. This is part of his experience alluded to in 'First Things First' on the album itself'. This is significant and can read be on multiple levels. It is clear, however, that scripture has played a role in the formation of Stormzy's identity and it is showing his depth more clearly whilst resisting the temptation to simply ignore aspects of himself as an artist which would contradict his persona non-gratis as a performer. The title 'Gang Signs and Prayers' also establishes a number of key binary oppositions which are worked through as the album plays culminating in final resolution through Blinded By Your Grace Parts 1 and 2:

'Lord, I've been broken  
Although, I'm not worthy  
You fixed me  
Now I'm blinded by your grace  
You came and saved me' (Stormzy)

It is not without significance that Stormzy opens the first track on 'Gang Signs and Prayers' with 'First Things First', a typical grime track which talks about the darkness that has surrounded Stormzy: the self-doubt, the criticisms, depression and the struggle which has defined his career to date. Omari (Stormzy) makes the point that the darkness has enabled his internal light to shine brighter and can blind those who doubt him. This is an interesting opening track and indicates clearly that this CD will be different, and will make his audience ask questions about his identity. The darkness is present so that the light can be felt more closely to shine. In many ways this is like Christ who hid his identity and his light in order to preserve the secret of who he really was. In this way, in imitation of Christ, Stormzy knows that he needs to be cautious about revealing who he is really is to his audience and could be read as 'know who I am but do not mention who I am to others before I am ready to reveal myself fully'. This resonates with the theological idea of the Messianic secret from the turn of the century as a way of looking at Christ's ministry and how he hid his true purpose and identify even from his closest followers prior to the transfiguration.

In the album Stormzy makes frequent Biblical references and speaks about how his own faith has elevated him and taken him away from a very predictable personal trajectory.

Many of the tracks are raw and contain a litany of invective and yet within these flows there are hidden gems to be uncovered : ‘Be adorned in the secret person of the heart and in the humble spirit which is uncorrupted, an excellent ornament before God’ (1 Peter 3:4). Interestingly enough, the rapper Kendrick Lamar has released a track entitled ‘Humble’ which is also about his own spirituality and Christian beliefs. A lot of ink recently has been expended writing about other rappers who are representing their own spirituality and faith through their lyrics and performances (Premier June 2017). Artists such as Nas, Kanye West, Chance the Rapper, Macklemore, Devlin, Kendrick Lamar, Jay-Z and Frank Ocean have all referenced their faith and have written verses and lyrics about their own beliefs and their own spiritualities. This would appear to signal a significant move towards narrating individual spiritual journeys towards faith and belief creating a sacrament of the everyday and of the mundane in which discourse and discovery can thrive and flourish. This can only be a positive move forward since this change is indicative of a new sense of social and spiritual engagement for Christianity which should be viewed through the lens of popular culture to reach those people who previously would be unable to access any form of spirituality or belief. In the work of the grime rapper, Devlin, it is clear, for example that a lot of his work is very influenced by scripture. He has spoken openly about divine providence in guiding him at key moments in his life and is clearly influenced by his faith and belief. Devlin has also engaged socially with a number of issues related to inequality and by referencing God’s special concern for the poor and marginalised by affirming their exalted place, while the rich and powerful are reprimanded and berated. This is something which could be clearly taken from Luke’s Gospel. Recently, Stormzy has also revealed the socially engaged part of his own spirituality by taking part in the music based response to the Grenfell tower disaster, and again he has shown his willingness to engage with injustice and social deprivation.

One of the most difficult tracks on the album is ‘Mr Skeng’ since the words and lyrics contain unrelenting expletives and yet within these verses there are two references which are made to The Bible, which is significant given the context of the track. Stormzy is talking about the people who have tried to lead him astray from his path and he makes the point that he carries a Bible and not a weapon. He says, ‘Brother, I’m good, I stay with the lord, Bible carrier, that’s my sword’. Stormzy goes on to reference Matthew 12 and John 19 during the course of the song, ‘Matthew 12, so I don’t talk, John 19’s why I never got caught’. The reference to Matthew 12 is a direct link to the words of Jesus who says ‘A tree is known by its fruit. The sign of Jonah will be given’. Also this could well be a reference to the idea that our words reveal our hearts, and how, when we speak it, reveals our sincere intentions and actions. It could also mean that Stormzy is going to remain quiet about his faith and his spirituality. He will cloak it in his music and will reveal it when people are ready to receive the message he wants to share with the public. The second biblical reference that Stormzy makes in the same track is John 19 which deals with Jesus’ trial and his condemnation by the authorities leading to his crucifixion. In this Stormzy is saying he has eluded capture by the authorities because God only has authority and dominion over him and this is real power. Devlin has also written a song

called 'Our Father', in which he imagines God looking down at his creation pondering how things have gone wrong and also speaks about divine providence and the work of God in saving Devlin, and steering him onto the right path. It is quite extraordinary that such artists like Devlin and Stormzy are representing these articles of faith musically and lyrically. It is interesting to reflect upon how the sacred has returned to some extent in the words and the lyrics of these artists and it is what can be called the return of the sacred into mundane and everyday experiences. This is called 're-sacralisation'. Sometimes the experience of the divine can be brutal and raw and like a Caravaggio painting, the lyrical colour palette can be unsettling and disturbing and this is the case in the context of these performers as well. It is no coincidence that Caravaggio had a big influence upon the film director Martin Scorsese in terms of the brutality and the violence he represents in many of his films. You only have to read 'The Golden Legend' by Jacob Varagine, to understand how brutality and divinity can often become entwined and part of the same experience.

In many ways, Stormzy's music is the Socratic Silenus Statue with a brutal exterior and an elegant interior which invites further exploration and reflection from an attitude of faith and belief. Stormzy's music can be quite brutal and ugly in terms of its lyrical content and it is clear that he is trying to reach out to a much broader fan base, yet within this there is also his spiritual mission and enterprise and this is significant. Stormzy has written two songs which talk about God's grace and his power to lift him and to exalt him ('Blinded by Your Grace' parts 1 and 2). This is in direct opposition to the idea that he was expected to carry a weapon and instead he carries a Bible and walks with God. He also quotes references from St Matthew and St John to explain how he made it through to where he is now. This is surprising since the genre of grime would not be where an audience would expect to find these spiritual truths hidden. This is a significant departure and indicates the role that Stormzy is playing as a performer who is guided by his faith and his own moral compass, which sets him aside from his fellow artists on the grime music scene currently. Stormzy is a figure of paradoxes and contradictions since he uses the vocabulary and the language of the street to map out his own spirituality and he is able to use crude penmanship to write about God and his faith.

The ideas contained within this paper are steeped in the conviction that there is cultural capital to be found within popular culture which inhabits and influences our lives today. In a way the connectivity that is represented by many of these aspects of popular culture can make faith and spirituality far more meaningful and much more grounded in the everyday experiences of the audience. In order for Christianity to be meaningful and in touch with our lives and with the lives of others, we must take into account and consideration the cultural influences upon individuals and groups so that we can present ideas and beliefs in a personally meaningful and engaging framework. Grime music and socially engaged hip hop enables us to do this very thing. The renowned hip-hop artist Kanye West significantly composed a track entitled 'Jesus Walks' and this would appear to reference Luke 4:18-24 as a piece of contemporary urban music that links in with liberation theology from South America. This piece manages to communicate an

unexpected message of social reform by affirming a sense of solidarity with and affinity for all of the downtrodden, oppressed and rejected people in the world today.

‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor  
he has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives  
and recovery to the sight to the blind;  
to set free the oppressed  
and announce that their time has come  
when the Lord will save his people’  
(Luke 4:18-24).

The opening part of the song announces that ‘We are at war with terrorism, racism, and most of all we are at war with ourselves’ and in a way this is the announcement that the greatest war is within the human heart to do good over evil. This is an interesting starting point for the whole track and is extremely relevant for us today given the recent events within London. By doing good this can mean the duty to help those people around us and to intervene to assist those people who are struggling or endeavouring to lift themselves out of difficult circumstances to find a better future and a better tomorrow. Kanye outlines and delineates a range of activities that would fall way outside of the confines of religious or spiritual conventions in terms of speaking about the marginalised, the rejected, the outcast and yet in this there is a very strong message of redemption and hope in the dynamics of social change that can be brought about by religious belief and personal conviction. This mirrors the message from the Gospels and is not in any way at variance or at conflict with anything that Jesus spoke about during his brief ministry in Palestine in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century AD. In a way what is more surprising is that we have a contemporary rapper talking about these issues today and the motivation because the lyrics are quite interesting when you consider the fact that Kanye West is a Christian who has openly spoken about his faith and beliefs on numerous occasions. The significance of this piece is that it is the clearest expression of his faith and belief in the redeeming power of forgiveness in a society seemingly besieged by materialism and narrow and very literal interpretations of the Gospels that add very little in terms of exploring meaning and relevance to our lives today. This is a powerful and strong message that is quite difficult to convey to young people however through the music and the video it would be possible to touch upon this message and to get the young people to ask why they think that Kanye West, at the height of his commercial success, has actually released this track that speaks about his faith and his religious convictions. This could be seen to be an unusual step for such a person consumed by the material world and the need for success and recognition.

In a similar way, the rapper Nas has also released a track called ‘Hate Me Now’ which contains images associated with the crucifixion when the rapper himself controversially imitates Christ by experiencing the crucifixion himself whilst rapping about how people ‘hate what they fear: destroy what they cannot conquer’. This creates a poignant and

moving reinterpretation of the passion of Christ in a modern day urban context. This shows how the legacy of Christ still has cultural capital to draw upon when you consider the fact that his life, death and eventual resurrection still have the power to inspire and to influence artists from a whole new generation who seek to frame their responses to issues and to life itself along the lines of his passion and sacrifice. Also it is significant that Nas also talks about the cross as a symbolic burden that we all carry within us and that this is the symbolism of sacrifice and struggle that Christ embodied in his life, death and resurrection. In recent years Nas has also released an album entitled 'God's Son' with the image of himself on the front cover holding a white dove as a symbol of the triumph of the human spirit over adversity, of the holy spirit and also as a symbol of purity and of inspiration that is indebted to higher powers than mere human art. This is significant given the huge influence that Nas has exerted upon artists from the hip-hop world and beyond as a rapper who has used a lot of religious symbolism in his lyrics, poems and words. Inevitably Nas and Kanye have had a profound influence upon Stormzy and has given him the confidence to share his beliefs and his values as a Christian today within an unlikely musical context and this is culturally and socially significant. It is very true that sometimes God does write truths in crude penmanship and the work of Stormzy is a testimony to the power of popular culture to transcend context and to connect with a greater truth in an unexpected way through an unexpected medium.

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