

Christianity Ain't What it used to be

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

When I was growing up in the 1960s and 70s, most of those professing to be born-again Christians knew they had to represent the faith in a positive way. That is to say, they had to try their best to live righteously. They knew there were certain kinds of behavior in which they simply could not indulge – fornication, illicit drug use, drunkenness, and so on. They understood that if they did not at least seriously strive to live moral lives, they could not enter the Kingdom of God according to their faith. Indeed, I was a born-again Christian, and people were never surprised to learn that I was so serious about the faith. I truly practiced what I preached.

Times have changed. Now many deeply pious Christians go to church regularly, yet curse, smoke cigarettes, engage in premarital and extramarital sex, use drugs, get drunk, and so on. They believe that faith and grace will get them into Heaven – not good works. In reality, these people might as well be worshipping the devil! In a round-about way, many of them are essentially worshipping Mammon.

This mindset is nowhere more obvious than among the so-called hip-hop generation. For example, many young Christians today embrace marijuana use as do Rastafarians, as though it is integral to their spirituality.

In the book *Beats, Rhymes and Life: What We Love and Hate about Hip-Hop*, co-editor Ytasha Womack has a chapter titled “A Christmas Story.” She discusses how hard-core rappers make music about hoes, bitches, the glorification of drug use, violence, murder, and so on. Yet at awards shows, they routinely thank God for their success! This clearly absurd phenomenon caused actress Jada Pinkett Smith to joke “that artists shouldn’t thank God if they can’t perform their songs in church.” (p. 134)

What sounds like an amusing and insightful remark rubbed Womack the wrong way. She believes that the joke could be regarded as classist, implying that poor people and people that identify with the streets cannot be blessed by God. However, this is not about class or a generation gap. This is about basic morality and Christianity.

Even *Christmas* ain't what it used to be. I never thought I would ever be around to hear a *Christmas song* glorifying the world of pimps, "hoes, hoochies," street-corner "niggas," drunkenness, marijuana, pistols, and gratuitous sex. But it's all there in the 1993 hit "Player's Ball" by OutKast.

That's not all. Womack writes:

In OutKast's "B.O.B." video, the duo gives credence to Atlanta's stripper culture and Baptist church scene with equal reverence, intercutting gyrating strippers with well-dressed parishioners who just seconds ago were the same strippers. (p. 139)

However, for hard-core religiously inspired misogyny, it's hard to beat Snoop Dogg. Womack informs us that in the rapper's "Mac Bible Chapter 211 Verse 20-21," God says he will send "a G with street ethics" and a set of "Gangsta Ten Commandments" including "Thou shalt kill a snitch" and "Thou shalt check a bitch." (p. 141)

On the same page, Womack writes that the rapper Nas uses Christ's age to create "a metaphor on the rounds of bullets fired at an enemy." (Call me crazy, but I just don't think that's what the "Prince of Peace" had in mind.)

One of the more bizarre incidents in the history of religiously inspired hip-hop occurred when Nas made a version of a video with the rapper

...Diddy nailed on a cross beside him. (Diddy allegedly consulted with his pastor and decided he didn't like the depiction, and when the video was released anyway, he allegedly attacked a music executive with champagne bottles.) (p. 145)

And so it goes. However, this is not to say that only young Christians are prone to go astray. On the contrary, many middle-aged and elderly pious Christians embrace lives of gross immorality. Nor is the acceptance of Christianity unique among young thugs of today. Many White mobsters have always embraced the Christian faith, as have KKK members, Nazis and other thugs. In any case, it is amazing that so many people do not seem to see the strong connection that is supposed to exist between morality and spirituality.

Sadly, many Christians do not seem to know how to recognize bad behavior, because it has become so endemic in the popular culture. They make statements such as “he’s not a bad person, he just needs some guidance,” when they are talking about a brutal murderer. People like to say “I’m not religious, but I’m spiritual.” Many of them could just as easily say, “I’m not moral, but I’m spiritual.”

Some Christians have honest internal struggles between temptation and spirituality. Others seem to want to avoid (richly deserved) cognitive dissonance by any means necessary. Thus, they accept a form of spirituality without morality and even glorify “sinful” behavior. This might make the individual feel great, but it is terrible for society. Many people do seem to use spirituality as a feel-good drug. However, one of good religion’s most important uses has always been to improve individuals and societies. Once religion abandons that role, or even worse, promotes “sin,” it becomes a serious liability to society.

I never thought I would say this, but I would rather have some of that old time religion than this newfangled stuff, any day of the week.