

CRITIQUE

Rap's Humanism

by Rich "Frosted" Shusterman



Rap music is often attacked not only for its violence but for its vileness; for the way it demeans the human image by appealing to our harsh and lower instincts. Rap, complain the critics, offends the moderation of reason and the gentility of culture with its hard beats, blasting sound, and brutal expression of sex, violence, and political anger. The idea is that rap is too hard to be humane and humanistic. So, the critics continue, even if rap is great for dancing, we'd be better off not taking the words too seriously. These dogmas need to be exposed as falsehoods, and one way to do so is by studying the hard humanism of BDP's KRS-One as expressed in "The Real Holy Place."

This "song" is the concluding, climactic track of the Sex and Violence album, and I put "song" in quotes because it has no melody and its rhymes are not at all chanted or standardly rapped to a dancable beat. Instead "The Real Holy Place" is delivered in the powerful speech-like rhythms of a solemn sermon or a dramatic poetic monologue. Though KRS-One's forceful delivery of the text is occasionally enhanced by some noisy, eery sound effects, the track is not really aiming at music at all; and its lack of music is clearly meant to highlight its role as poetry and philosophical teaching. So much for the false idea that rap is simply dance music. But what about rap as philosophical humanism?

Philosophy should be expected from KRS-One, since he has long described himself as a

philosopher (since "My Philosophy"), and since this recent album, like the earlier Ghetto Music, is signed "KRS-One Metaphysician." As a philosophy professor myself, I admire his teaching and share the hard pragmatist humanism expressed in "The Real Holy Place." Let me demonstrate this philosophy (and my admiration) by giving you some of the text of "The Real Holy Place" and elaborating it in my own philosophical terms. It begins:

*Why are metaphysical teachings forbidden?
[said 3 times]*

The only way to talk to God is in Church.

Ha, ha, ha. You must be kiddin'.

For years they kept God hidden.

Look for God in self, not in what's written.

Turn this up and listen.

*If your slave master wasn't a Christian, you
wouldn't be*

a Christian [said 3 times]

Your whole culture is missin'.

*It was the Africans and they originated
Judaism.*

The belief in one god is monotheism.

Metaphysics is defined as "the branch of philosophy that treats of first principles or the ultimate nature of existence, reality, and experience." But Christian religion has also claimed to answer these issues, with God as the ultimate first principle and His Bible and Church as the final arbiters of truth. Philosopher maintains that the way to attain truth is by applying human intelligence, by exercising our senses and our reason, by learning from experience and history. Christianity instead advocates faith in God's Bible and Church-authorities as the better source of truth, for it argues that man's senses and reason are too fallible, too corrupted by our worldly human existence, to be trusted. It offers a God whose existence and truth lie beyond human reason and history.

Since humanism is a philosophy where "human interests, values, and dignity are taken to be of primary importance," it opposes religion's depreciation of the human and monopolization of the divine. It finds godliness in humanity and sees nothing superior to human reason as a force continually refining and improving itself as it learns from its own mistakes. KRS-One is clearly defending this philosophical humanism against religion, urging that we use our minds to "look for God in self" not in the "written" dogma of Church doctrine. "The real holy place," he will argue, is human reason as physically embodied in human history. And to make this humanistic argument he has to be heard on religious sensibilities.

Reason and history are also the weapons of his critique. Christianity is discredited for its history of repressing the free exercise of reason, for having "forbidden" rival "metaphysical teachings" and persecuted secular science as it did most infamously in the Inquisition. Christianity, KRS-One reminds us, is not a faith that came naturally and freely to the black people. Imparted by the "slave master," it forms part of the history of slavery and its absolute, transcendental authority should be undermined by exposing its real, earthly history, including its often ignored genealogical debt (via Judaism) to African monotheism. KRS-One therefore urges his listeners:

*"You gotta know your history
Or they'll tell you that God is a mystery
And that when you're born, you're born in
sin.
They're only sayin' you can't win,
You can't succeed, you can't advance.
Don't ask about God, just sit there and
believe.
Well I ain't hearin' that lesson.
'Cause one thing I know [said three times]
Is that the truth can always be questioned.
Yeah, that's how I'm livin'.
Ask and you shall be given."*

Exposing the history of religion's domination means uncovering its major strategies against the humanist faith in man — the doctrine of original sin and the related idea of the narrowly fixed limits of human reason for comprehending the divine order of things. The connection between the doctrines goes back to Adam's sin

of eating from the forbidden tree of knowledge instead of relying exclusively on the word of God. We inherit, through birth, this original sin; our corrupt worldly reason is unequal to penetrate the "mystery" of God, and we should therefore not try to "ask about God" or probe his creation through metaphysical reasoning but instead simply accept religious dogma: "just sit there and believe." For humanists like KRS-One, "That's bullshit" designed to make us lose faith in our human perfectibility and intelligence, so that we abandon the hard task of perpetual study and self-improvement ("you can't succeed, you can't advance") and instead lazily rely on faith in God's grace for our salvation.

Refusing to "hear that lesson" of blind faith in religious authority, KRS-One advocates the philosophical virtues of critical reason and inquiry. Like Socrates, he realizes that the one thing he must surely know is that alleged "truth can always be questioned." Like John Dewey and the pragmatists, he holds that there is no final truth, that knowledge can always be revised and improved, and that continuing inquiry, not blind faith, is what will provide for us: "Ask and you shall be given," an ironic echo of the biblical dictum advocating that we simply trust in God to answer our needs. With rap's hard humanism, man not God must provide the answers; and this means not only the difficult labor of historical research but the thorny road of revolutionary thinking against society's norms. This doctrine of revolutionary emancipation is Christianity's hard core of valid truth hidden beneath its false mythology and emotional ritual, a truth recognized only through critical biblical history.

*When you're lyin', ha ha, you got no
answers.
You got hand-clappers and a whole lot of
dancers
In the church or sanctuary.
They all forgot Jesus was a revolutionary.
[said 3 times]
That hung out with criminals.
I would say read the Bible but it's not the
original.
So it's really misleading.*

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"If you don't know the history of the author, you don't know what you're reading."

If the Bible taught by the Church is not the original, then its allegedly eternal word is in fact subject to the forces of history and can be overcome by them. There is the still more radical suggestion that the Bible never was the revelatory word of a divine author outside of history, but was instead a historical product of historical authorship, whose meaning can't be understood without knowing "the history of the author." This humanism sees the Bible (and all religion) as a human product for human use. The holiness we find in religion derives from the sanctity of humankind. God's meaning in the Bible is what the god in us human interpreters finds there. Having outlived its original emancipatory message, the Bible's historical role is over. For purposes of human liberation, it's a dead book and an obstacle to further progress.

*Keep that Bible on your shelf.
God helps those that help themselves.
Stop readin' from a dead book.
Stop readin' from a dead book for a live God.
You know how stupid you are.
God reads the Bible with you.
You both read the language of the dead
that's dissin' you.*

The message here, formulated through Ben Franklin's famous proverb of self-help, is that we should trust in human efforts rather than rely on God. For God is only alive and available as the God within us, as the intelligence with which we read and reason.

KRS-One concludes by cautioning us against misunderstanding his message as simply negative, as merely an anti-Christian, anti-religious protest. It is rather a hard humanist argument for the superiority of critical historical reason to faith in religion's transcendental authority. Its aim is to show that the divine resides in human intelligence, that "the real holy place is mental," a message underlined by being repeatedly shouted.

*You revolutionaries, check this.
I'm not synthetic.
I'm not anti-Christian, anti-Muslim,
anti-Buddhist or anti-semitic.
But I will set it off in the Temple.
'Cause the real holy place is mental.
[shouted 6 times]
Mental, physical: metaphysical.*

We also find in these lines a shrewd linking of KRS-One's religious protest with the revolutionary tradition of Jesus, whose protests also "set it off in the Temple." Jesus won a victory for human emancipation, but now his teachings have been distorted to enslave the mind. Rap's hard humanism presents the contemporary revolutionary equivalent.

Moreover, the final lines cleverly cautions against misinterpreting the sanctification of the mental as a withdrawal from real-world struggles through an escape into the divine realm of mind. The idea that the mind is its own holy place is dangerous because it offers a separate ideal realm, a heaven on earth, to which we can retreat when we are weary and disgusted with the oppressive brutalities of material existence. And this retreat allows us to ignore and tolerate those evils in the material world, instead of changing them. Revolutionary thinkers like Marx, Marcus, and KRS-One want revolution in the material world, not merely in the mind; just as they recognize that the mental is shaped by physical conditions and in turn can reshape them.

If "the real holy place is mental," we must add that for rap's embodied humanism the mental implies the physical. Our physical embodiment is part of our humanity and forms an inalienable dimension of our mental make-up and cognitive functioning. The poem's ultimate truth is the ultimate line: "Mental, physical: metaphysical." Truth demands the mental effort of human reason as expressed in the physical world of human history for the purpose of progressive human liberation. This is rap's hard pragmatist humanism. Get down with it and start to think and question.