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Goddesses of Pop: Understanding God and Christianity in 21st Century Female-Driven Pop Music

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Abstract

Christian imagery pervades the music and culture of western society, and contemporary female artists provide, in their art, both reflections of and inspiration for the culture which surrounds them. 21st Century pop music is globally influential and saturated in a culture of celebrity which is rooted in the instant gratification of the present day. In the analysis of the works of female pop artists of the 21st Century, contorted Christian imagery conveys the artists' interpretations of Christian traditions and beliefs which have become normalised in western culture. The transference of these religious ideals into the realm of the secular allows for artistic licence which produces new, exciting and occasionally controversial art. These artists expect biblical literacy from their audiences and use established Christian narratives, characters and ideas to reveal their own expectations of God. These understandings of what God could or should be highlight the areas in which the God of Christianity fails to address the needs of 21st Century women.

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Introduction

The numerous scholarly studies of Madonna's religiosity in the 1990s paved the way for a further examination of the value of pop culture within academic spheres, but gradually dwindled into boredom as Madonna's once dramatic cultural rebellions faded into mainstream western culture (Hulsether 2005, p.79). Rather than viewing this shift in focus as a sign of such work becoming irrelevant to cultural studies, I argue that the world of pop music in general has great relevance to understanding contemporary western culture's relationship with religion, particularly Christianity. Bal notes that, "Western culture as we know and live it today was built on several interlocking structures, one of which was theological, specifically, Christian. Present-day culture in the West, therefore, cannot be understood without theology" (2005, p.4), and this paper reflects this argument, both as one of the foundational beliefs of this work and as one of its conclusions. In the pop music analysed below, innumerable theological themes are displayed, themes which cannot all be addressed within the scope of this project. Instead, I have chosen a selection of female-driven pop music of the 21st Century to exemplify the ways in which our understanding of the theologies of modern lay women can be informed by their art.

Schüssler Fiorenza notes that, although the experience of each woman is unique, they share in the reality of their oppression within patriarchal societal structures (1994 p.3), a fact which limits the scope of this paper yet further. It is impossible to discuss the experiences and art of every individual woman, but by analysing popular music one can find themes which are deemed important enough to be shared and which find resonance in audiences who consume this artistic content. "Popular music both reflects and shapes the beliefs and attitudes of civil society" (Roberts 2017, p.166), providing a

referent for the scholar interested in widely-accepted concepts within a chosen society. The artists analysed below are products of their time, reflecting their lived experiences as 21st Century women in Christian-influenced western culture, and simultaneously contributing to this culture, informing the worldviews of their audience. The inescapable fact is that "popular music is by definition popular" (Deflem 2017, p.6), meaning that whatever messages are involved in the art of these women reach potentially millions of people worldwide. Successful pop artists, such as those discussed here, influence the lives of countless people, including those who do not *choose* to listen to them. While a preacher may only reach those who have opted to attend a service, pop artists find their music played in public spaces and on radios, removing the option of hearing their message.

Despite the frequency of Christian imagery in contemporary pop music, orthodoxy and easily-recognisable tradition are not always present. Instead, this art provides a method of expression for personal interpretations of Christian narratives, images and characters, and for personal understandings of God. Hulsether admits that one must search to find good examples of pop culture/theology crossover, such as that found by Madonna scholars (2005, pp.77-8), but I believe this search is a lucrative one, revealing to the seeker a world of Christian messages and imagery lying in plain sight, if one only wishes to see it. In the words of Roberts, "theology should not concern itself solely with popular culture that is overtly theological, but explicit theology offers an access point for theologians" (2017, p.170). Once obvious examples of Christian references are found within an artist's discography, one can uncover further evidence of their religious beliefs and opinions within other songs and albums. In Schüssler Fiorenza's experience, biblical scholars are expected to become as detached as possible from their previous relationship to the texts they examine (1994, pp.5-6), but artists are not held to such

expectations. Instead, they are expected to make art rooted in their personal, emotional experiences of external stimuli, including religions and their scriptures. Because of this, no overarching understandings of the entirety of the Bible or Christianity have to be present within each individual work, a reality which results in a labyrinth of interpretations and unending content for analysis. The art of these women reflects not only their surrounding culture in general but also their immediate circumstances, illustrating the changing nature of human relationships with the divine.

Definitions

This work is very limited due to the demands placed upon it, so strict parameters must be laid out in advance. Sanneh writes that, "In one sense, contemporary pop music is hip by definition: pop is what's in style; that's what makes it pop. In another sense, though, popularity and hipness are forever in tension, because you can't possibly keep ahead of the teeming masses by listening to the same music as them" (2021, p.367). For the purposes of this work, pop music will be defined as "music intended to have wide appeal and commercial success" ("pop, n.8 and adj." 2021), in order to avoid a dilemma like Sanneh's. Despite Bal's insistence that "'high' and 'popular' art cannot be isolated from each other" (2005, p.5), this work will deal only with music which fits the above description and which was released from the year 2000 onwards. In doing so, I hope to provide an insight into recent and current trends within pop music, and therefore into the culture in which such music was created. In reference to the world of pop culture and pop music, the term "secular realm" will also be used, referring to areas of contemporary western culture which exist outside of organised religion, which

are not designed for the expression of religious and spiritual thought, although such expressions may take place in these spaces.

Discussing this music's relation to Christianity and Christian images, makes defining such concepts as "Christianity", "orthodoxy" and "tradition" crucial. "Christianity" will be understood to mean the variety of religious groups who hold belief in Jesus of Nazareth and of the Bible as the Christ, the Son of God. "Orthodoxy" will denote those beliefs which have been held and preached throughout history by major Christian groups, and which are shared in biblical texts as well as the Apostles' Creed, a prayer which by its early conception "preserves the origin of all Christian affirmations of faith" (Ashwin-Siejkowski 2009, p.7). In a similar vein, "tradition" will be used to refer to practices which have historically been used by major Christian groups or which find basis in Christian texts. While these definitions are not final and may not be transferable to other discussions of contemporary pop culture and theology, they assist in limiting the scope of this thesis in order to better discuss those issues which it tackles.

Important and even more elusive are definitions of "God" and "blasphemy". The concept of "blasphemy" is hotly debated, and requires much more debate than is possible here. Sherwood opens her work on blasphemy with a discussion of the confusion surrounding its definition, summarising that most dictionaries provide "a general vague sense that blasphemy is somehow about disrespecting, or being outside or against, gods and sacred spaces and holy things" (2021, p.2). She surmises, though, that "blasphemy is about defamation, de-facing, hurting the reputation" of the entity to which the blasphemer refers (2021, p.14). For the sake of simplicity, "blasphemy" will henceforth be understood within this work as, the defamation of God and/or religious or sacred practices and beliefs. The use of the word "God," however,

will vary depending on context. While "the God of the Bible" is intended to refer to the image of God represented by the biblical texts discussed within this work, "YHWH" refers to the God depicted in specifically the Hebrew Bible, and "the God of Christianity" is that idea of God held to be true by major Christian groups, and mainly the idea of God represented in the words of the Apostles' Creed. The very purpose of this work, though, is to develop a concept of the expectations which the artists examined, and therefore their surrounding culture and audience, have of God, the ultimate deity. With that in mind, "God" is intended to refer to the highest power possible, in whatever form God might take. For example, "Lady Gaga's God" refers to the ultimate higher power which Lady Gaga believes or desires to be true. This flexible use of "God" is distinct from the use of "god", "goddess", or "gods", which denote powers greater than humanity but not *ultimate*. While gods may exist in a pantheon of equals, God is the one utmost power in existence.

These definitions are not absolute and are, at times, crude echoes of the wide range of interpretations allowed by the English language, but are unfortunately necessary in order to produce a work which is comprehensible and concise. In placing such rigid boundaries on the meaning of these terms, I hope to more clearly present my argument and its findings.

Artists

The artists chosen for analysis include both industry giants like Beyoncé and Alanis Morissette, and smaller artists such as Nina Nesbitt. They come from a variety of geographical, racial, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds and have varying levels of experience within the music industry. Despite these differences, what these women have in common is that they are products of western societies and Christian influences, and so is their art. This section

provides a brief overview of some of these artists in order to provide the context necessary to appreciate the following research.

“Halsey” is the stage name of Ashley Nicolette Frangipane of New Jersey, an Italian-African-American pop artist (Barlow 2020). This thesis deals with her work released under this stage name and refers to her as such, addressing the persona of Halsey and the publicly available information about her, rather than the life of Ashley Frangipane. Similarly, this work refers to Stefani Germanotta as “Lady Gaga,” Beyoncé Giselle Knowles-Carter as “Beyoncé,” Elizabeth Grant as “Lana Del Rey,” Robyn Rihanna Fenty as “Rihanna” and Cherilyn Sarkisian as “Cher.” These titles reflect the public and artistic lives of these women, identifying the aspects of their lives which their audiences experience and relate to.

In the case of the band Florence + the Machine, frontwoman Florence Welch will be the main focus as the protagonist of much of the band’s art, both audio and visual. However, as with the artists above, she will be referred to henceforth as “Florence,” referring only to the character portrayed in the music and videos of Florence + the Machine. Although the band is a collective, Florence Welch carries the messages of their art into the wider world, giving them a feminine association.

To analyse the intentions or beliefs of every individual responsible for each intricate piece of musical or visual art would be a mammoth task, and one which this work does not claim to attempt. Hulsether argued that, although Madonna’s art is the result of teams of countless creative artists, her name and image are most heavily associated with it, meaning her personal intentions are incredibly relevant to the work’s reception (2005, p.91). Following the same argument, these artists examined here will be held responsible for the images within their art. This thesis works from the assumption that the artist whose

name is associated with a song or video has agreed to support the ideas present, and therefore identifies with the content of the art they promote.

Premise and Structure

Over the next three chapters I will argue that the works of female pop artists of the 21st Century contain detailed descriptions of each artists' own God, or their expectations of God, and that many of these qualities are found within the God of Christianity. However, there are many attributes which these artists wish their God to have which are not found within Christianity, leading these artists to supplement their relationship with God with "god-replacements" (Alanis Morissette 2012 "Havoc"). The God of Christianity is not sufficient for many of these artists, and their art reflects a desire to find a "big God, big enough to fill you up" (Florence + the Machine 2018 "Big God"). Florence + the Machine express a desire for a powerful presence to fill their lives, something which can be relied upon to support and fulfil them. They present an ideal of one deity, but this work explores the many god-like beings, or god-replacements, which the artists discussed use to fill their lives.

The structure of this work mirrors the common Christian acronym JOY; Jesus, others, yourself (Ricken 2013). This acronym reminds believers to prioritise Jesus, then to value others, and finally to care for themselves, reminding them that they are to be selfless in practising their faith. In order to better reflect the intentions of this project, "God" has been substituted for "Jesus," allowing a wide scope of analysis and reflecting the traditional Trinitatian understanding of the God of Christianity (Ashwin-Siejkowski 2010, p.94). The chapters each deal with one category of divine relationships depicted within the art examined. The first, "Love of God", deals with art which directly

acknowledges a God or god and makes explicit commentary on the artists' understanding of higher powers. The second, "Love of Others", addresses pieces in which the role of God is assigned to another human being whom the artist has elevated to a position of influence and power within their life. Finally, "Love of Self" focuses on occasions on which artists deify or worship themselves, attempting to become their own "big God".

Through these three chapters, instances in which the God of Christianity meets or fails to meet the needs of these artists will be identified and studied in order to determine exactly what the artists expect from their God. I will argue that the patriarchal power structures of Christianity fail to tend to the spiritual needs of contemporary women, particularly these artists. In a culture which produces increasingly feminist and post-feminist art, Christianity is unsuccessful in its attempts to reassure or connect with the desires of these women, but continues to inspire them and inform their language in discussions of faith, trust and love.

Method

When approaching the music analysed in this project, I have decided to start on a lyrical basis, with some analysis of the accompanying music videos for each song. Although the music itself is obviously crucial to the overall effect of these pieces, the scope of this project and my own knowledge does not allow for a full investigation of the musical properties of the featured songs. Instead, a lyric- and visual-based approach allows for textual analysis of the aspects of the songs which are most accessible to their audiences, and which overtly carry the artists' messages.

While a number of academic texts are referenced througout this thesis, a few are referenced particularly often. These each lend a different lens to the theological analysis of popular culture. Firstly, Ashwin-Siejkowski's “The Apostles’ Creed: And Its Early Christian Context” (2009) provides a semi-academic breakdown of the Apostles’ Creed and the beliefs it professes. This approach allows for a reading of the Apostles’ Creed which reflects both its theological basis and the emotional and spiritual ramifications of its contents. Through a work less intense in its academic approach, the boundaries of academic theology soften to allow for the poetic license of the art discussed in this work. Contrasting this semi-academia is Schüssler Fiorenza’s iconic “In Memory of Her” (1994), a thoroughly academic work which seeks to place womankind back into the biblical and early Christian narrative. Such work inspires the attempts made in this project to compare the femininity of the artists explored to the patriarchal framework of the Christian texts and beliefs which influence and are influenced by their art. Schüssler Fiorenza’s unfaltering belief that women-led narratives belong in Christianity and her criticism of patriarchal orthodoxy’s tendency to exclude women from Christian spheres are useful to this project in its search for ways in which orthodox Christian traditions disappoint contemporary women. Jeanrond’s “A Theology of Love” (2010) provides a deep, insightful look at the human desire for love and for connection through love. This work lends itself nicely to the overarching structure of this thesis, which interprets love and worship as indicators of God-replacements.

Although these theological texts provide a lot of inside and assistance in approaching this endeavour, Deflem’s “Lady Gaga and the Sociology of Fame: The Rise of a Pop Star in an Age of Celebrity” (2017) provides an example of in-depth analysis of not only pop music, but the motivations and experiences of pop artists and their fans. While this work undoubtedly

informed my analyisis of Lady Gaga, it also contributed greatly to the discussion of celebrity, pop culture and fan relations below. Deflem addresses Gaga's political, religious and ethical influences and influence, opening the door for such conversations about other pop artists. These texts have all been heavily influential on the following material, and are therefore cited regularly as examples of work whose intentions and findings overlap with those of this thesis.

Through the analysis of the lyrics and visuals published under the names of the artists discussed, this work aims to identify at least some of the intention behind the art and to connect it, where relevant, to the cultural influence of Christianity evidenced in the many works regarding Madonna's art (Hulsether 2005), an influence which continues to this day. Assuming some level of biblical literacy and religious awareness, this work uses a method of analysis and discussion similar to that utilised by Edwards (2012), identifying themes and commonalities in cultural representations of Christian and pop-culture-based icons and narratives and addressing the underlying theological issues. Maintaining a focus on the art at hand rather than a specific theology allows for a variety of beliefs and traditions to be analysed as they become relevant, and does not hold the individual artists to any strict doctrine of belief, instead reflecting their own wide range of, at times confused, theological statements, in order to find the "Big God" they each seek.

Love of God: Faith, Worship and Understanding

Introduction

Art which reflects the artist's belief in God is not a new phenomenon. In describing and worshipping God, artists reveal something of their personal expectations of the divine, their understanding of godhood. This chapter explores the ways in which female pop artists of the 21st century bring biblical texts into the present day, and how they relate historical Christian traditions to a modern-day audience. Speaking of Caravaggio's work, Bal wrote: "The emphatic theatricality opens the audience up to the idea that one can play various parts, provisionally participate in - experience from within - an event that took place in the past but that is also being enacted in the present; an event perhaps not otherwise available to each of us" (2005, p.13). This idea is not exclusive to historical high art, but is relevant to the work of contemporary pop music artists. The faith and narratives these artists draw from Christianity is supplemented by unconventional and often unchristian imagery in order to fulfil their needs as they question God's nature, God's relationship with humanity, sin, the afterlife and the role of religion in a life of faith. Biblical literacy and deep-rooted faith pervades contemporary music. Despite America having incredibly low rates of bible-reading and a real lack of knowledge regarding its contents (Beal 2011, pp.31-35), an understanding of Christian theology and biblical narratives is often expected from pop music audiences, as artists attempt to connect on a deeper level and express what they need from their God, and what they actually receive.

"To Sing is to Pray Twice"

This quote, popularly attributed to St. Augustine of Hippo, highlights the deep spirituality which can be accessed through music. Though released in a secular realm, many songs by pop artists petition God for intercession in their lives, or praise God for the gifts they perceive. These prayers range from the explicitly religious, almost worship-music of Whitney Houston, to the more ambiguous single lines in Rihanna's works, but all contain an undeniably Christian theology. Although biblical scholars today refute David's authorship of the Psalms, Pastor Marius Marton preaches that the Psalms were an expression of David's personal faith (2015, p.28), and in their work these artists attempt a similar feat, declaring their personal beliefs and understandings of the divine.

Whitney Houston's "I Look to You" spent six weeks in the Billboard Top 100 in 2009 ("Billboard - Music Charts, News, Photos & Video", 2021), although its lyrics read more like a worship song than a pop hit. Marton discusses how, over time, styles associated with pop and rock music find their way into sacred spaces, as Christian rock and pop have become popularised in recent decades (2015, p.29). He argues that "people, especially young people, are drawn to music that is easy to follow, pleasing to the ear, and catchy," and that such music is therefore an effective tool for evangelisation, particularly within younger demographics (2015, p.59). What is interesting in this case is that, rather than popular styles finding use within explicitly Christian settings, Christian themes have resonated with audiences enough to top the pop music charts. Houston utilised her commercial success to share with a worldwide audience the level of comfort, security and love she experiences from her God. While pop stylings can make Christian music more attractive, palatable and popular itself, Christian themes risk making pop music more divisive and, therefore, less successful. From the mid-twentieth century, popular culture has largely functioned as a rebellion against the traditional values of the Christian West (Deflem 2017, pp.147-8), but Houston's success with this release raises

questions about what exactly her listeners related to and enjoyed about the song.

While Whitney Houston had previously mentioned her faith in various songs, (Houston 2002 “Unashamed”; 2009 “I Didn’t Know My Own Strength”), “I Look to You” deals with nothing but her own faith, giving the listener minimal secular “safe-space” should they become uncomfortable with its earnest tone. The only glimpse of ambiguity in this plea for divine intercession is that Houston never directly names God, speaking only to “you.” This leaves a small opportunity for a secular reading, understanding “you” to be a lover, friend, or other human support system, but this reading does not take into account Houston’s established faith in God, referenced throughout her career. It only works as a conscious decision on the part of the listener, having already heard the lyrics and their religious connotations, to limit the song’s meaning to their own world view. Unless we are to assume the majority of Houston’s audience made this effort to ignore her personal intentions, we must concede that an outright prayer experienced great commercial success, including a feature on cult TV show *Glee* in 2010, as Mercedes (Amber Riley) prays for the recovery of a friend’s father (Murphy and Falchuk 2010). Both Mercedes and Whitney bring an orthodox understanding of God’s mercy into pop culture, echoing the sentiment of widely-accepted hymns, such as “Abide With Me,” still one of Britain’s most popular hymns ("World War One Hymn Is Nation's Favourite" 2019). “In you I can be strong,” Houston sings, reaffirming the beliefs written in Psalm 46:1, that “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble,” (NRSV) and her audience identify with her prayer.

The religious context of the song’s use in other forms of popular culture solidifies its undeniably Christian connotations. Marton compares modern

religious music to that of David, a ministry tool calling others to the faith (2015, p.27); his analysis creates a prophet out of Whitney Houston. However, to many, Houston's life did not appear prophet-like - her issues with drugs and her tumultuous relationship with Bobby Brown are well-documented (Caramanica 2019). Marton's response to this issue is simple: remove the artist from the art. He argues that many great composers listened to by conservative Christians struggled with substance abuse and sin, and that "as long as these artists do not promote unchristian views and practices in their music, it does not have any effect on the listener" who is unaware of their indiscretions (2015, pp.81-82). While it may be less likely for a modern listener to know about Beethoven's lifestyle than about Houston's, Marton adds, "If we were to investigate everyone's private life, I wonder how many artists would be worthy to listen to" (2015, p.82). Theologically, all humans are tarnished with the stain of original sin, and Christians know Jesus to have said, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone" (John 8:7, NRSV). This song is undeniably worship music, popularised by a well-established giant of the pop music scene. Whitney Houston's orthodox faith is expressed throughout, and her personal life does not discount her testimony.

Houston is in no way an anomaly among her contemporaries. Beyoncé's "Pray You Catch Me" (2016) focusses her prayer on divine intervention in her relationship with Jay Z, who she suspects of cheating. She prays that God will help her to find evidence, or help Jay Z to find her searching for it, a sentiment echoed in "Sorry" (2016). Though this specific situation may be viewed as trivial, the intention behind the prayer mirrors Houston's, and throughout the song we hear Beyoncé's desperation and faith expressed as Houston expresses her own. Her belief in God leads her to lean on God as Houston did, although he has not yet provided the respite she longs for. This theme of desperation for divine assistance appears also in Taylor Swift's "Soon You'll Get Better"

(2019), as she sings “desperate people find faith, so now I pray to Jesus, too.” These women find God at their lowest points, when they need help beyond that which other people can provide. In these songs we hear their faith in an all-powerful God, a “Father Almighty,” who will take these women who feel “last” and make them “first” (Matthew 19:30). They communicate a need for a God who will protect them, who will provide strength in their darkest hours.

Beyoncé’s faith has been a running theme throughout her career; in “Dangerously in Love” from her first solo album, she refers to God as “my sunlight” (2003), and later in the same album doubts her worthiness of God’s blessings (2003 “Daddy”). She has always acknowledged God’s presence in her life, though her career has perhaps been more obviously associated with her love/sex life and appearance. Lana Del Rey has similarly capitalised on sex and relationships within her music but, like Beyoncé, has referenced her faith in God’s power from the early days of her public life. One of her first songs published under her now-famous moniker says, “Lord, watch over my love,” “I’ll do anything for you or for him” (2005 “There’s Nothing to be Sorry About”). Early in their artistic processes, these artists brought God into their art, albeit in small portions, often referencing lovers in need of assistance. This theme appears in Del Rey’s “Off to the Races” (2012), Beyoncé’s “Sweet Dreams” (2008) and countless other songs of the era. They expect their God to support their relationships, the things that make them happy on earth, and to care not only for them. These songs can be easily written off as love songs, mentioning God only as a side-note to emphasise the artist’s love, but they are reminiscent of the pleas directed towards Jesus in the New Testament on behalf of loved ones in need. The centurion of Matthew 8:5-13, the friends of the paralysed man of Mark 2:3-12 and countless others brought their loved ones to the one they believed had the power to heal. Matthew 7:7 quotes Jesus saying “Ask and it will be given you,” (NRSV) and

these women do just that. They reach out to the kind of God described in these passages, believing that by their faith, others may be healed.

Del Rey intertwines her pleas for intercession with her political worldview in “God Bless America - And All the Beautiful Women in It” (2017), which makes explicit Del Rey’s opposition to the presidency of Donald Trump, praying for women’s protection from the cultural and political effects of his time in office. Her culturally relevant writing supports Deflem’s view that “it has today become rare to hear of a celebrity who does not advocate some kind of activism or is not somehow outspoken about political, religious, or other controversial topics,” (2017, p.160). Rihanna’s faith similarly expresses her personal morality; “Russian Roulette” (2009) deals with her infamous relationship with Chris Brown, and Rihanna sings “say a prayer to yourself” while describing the fear she experienced as a result of Brown’s abuse. The accompanying video is intense, depicting Rihanna and a man “playing” Russian roulette with a pistol, and the audience feels Rihanna’s fear (Rihanna 2009). She does not shy away from the controversy which surrounds her, and her public plea to God indicates that she feels righteous, in need of and deserving of protection. She condemns not only her own abuser, but through publicising both the song and her experience, all abusers, identifying with all victims and uniting her prayer with theirs. Her prayer does not exist in isolation but in community with other abuse survivors, as an act of solidarity enacting her belief in what is right and who deserves divine intervention. These artists don’t keep their morality to themselves but pray openly about what they deem right or wrong, believing that those who “hunger and thirst for righteousness [...] will be filled” (NRSV Matt 5:6). Like Whitney Houston, their God is both powerful and just, protecting the weak and weary in their hour of need.

Even Lady Gaga's so-called "blasphemous" works (Daily Mail Reporter 2011) contain sincere declarations of orthodox Christian faith. Her 2008 hit "Judas" caused a stir due to its lyrics and her portrayal of Mary Magdalene in the accompanying video (Lady Gaga 2011b), but the song and video act as an allegory for Gaga's own struggle with sin, sexuality and faith. The line "Jesus is my virtue, but Judas is the demon I cling to," (Lady Gaga 2011 "Judas") encapsulates this struggle. While she believes in Jesus' saving grace - a faith instilled in her by her Catholic upbringing (Deflem 2017, p.31) - she "clings to" the sinful pleasures of her life with "Judas," her sexuality. This declaration of faith acts as a prayer for salvation. As she sings "I wanna love you, but something's pulling me away from you," she speaks directly to God, petitioning for help to restore their relationship. In the accompanying video, this line occurs following footage of Gaga in a bath, standing between Judas, her sin, and Jesus, her faith, unsure who to worship. During the following chorus we see her wash the feet of Jesus, identifying with Mary of Bethany (John 12) as she did in the opening verse of the song, while Judas pours beer over her backside to distract her. This imagery makes physical Gaga's prayer, as she shows her audience and God a manifestation of her feelings. She shows her devotion to God/Jesus, highlighting the words of praise throughout the song, while asking forgiveness for the distraction she experiences, almost begging for merciful understanding. Not only does she believe in God's mercy, but she desperately needs it. The degradation she portrays in the video demonstrates the intensity of her inner turmoil, and she lays her soul bare for the judgement of not only God, but her audience. The song humanises Lady Gaga, encapsulating the lived experience of all people of faith as they struggle to stay true to what they believe is right.

Another easily-missed prayer appears in Gaga's 2020 collaboration with Elton John, "Sine from Above." The duo sings about the sacred power of music

within their lives and their understanding of it as a blessing from God. The synth-pop style disguises this prayer of thanks as a club anthem, obscuring its message. Some critics have claimed that Gaga's religious explorations benefit only herself and not her audience (Deflem 2017, p.158), questioning who public art is "for". For those who believe art should serve the public, this motivation is selfish and unhelpful, but if we view art as an outlet for the artist's personal experience, this prayer of thanks expresses Gaga's experience practising music, and the healing and divine power she finds in it. Her music is a medium for exploring her faith and giving God the praise she feels is due, as any composer of hymns or worship music does. Her God is linked to the God of David, and her praise is good in God's eyes; "It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to your name, O Most High" (Psalm 92:1, NRSV). She understands the God of Christianity to have blessed her with a method of praise, emotional expression and comfort.

Alanis Morissette also explores her Catholicism-influenced faith. "Guru" opens with the lines, "I started young, I was enthralled by your agape," (2012) referring to her Catholic upbringing (Weitzman 2015) having taught her of Jesus' unconditional love. Schüssler Fiorenza takes issue with the teaching of "agapeic love", believing it encourages the oppressed to accept their cultural status; God loves their oppressors and expects the same of them, so they must forgive the injustices that they face and accept their current reality (1994 p.78). However, Morissette clearly finds comfort in it, and accepts her own status as submissive to her deity, singing "Guruji, I bow to the divine in you," (2012) obvious praise of God, her "Guru." While Schüssler Fiorenza interprets agapeic teachings as tools for the continuation of power imbalances, Morissette finds humility and acceptance in them. Such a joyful song of praise finds its beginning in the concept of agape, and its climax in the humbling of oneself before God. Schüssler Fiorenza expects that agapeic love will lower

one's defences against other humans with malicious intentions, but Morissette uses it to lower the barriers between her and her God. Despite the worship shown here, Morissette herself is conflicted about calling this "prayer"; "I guess you could call it praying. When I do it, I'm just talking to what some people might call our higher selves: God, myself, my intuition, my heart. Whatever that is, that's where I go" (Weitzman 2015). Her acknowledgement of a higher power allows her audience to make contact with the God of their own understanding through her music. Her Catholic upbringing has led her to expect unconditional love and acceptance from her God, and she shares this faith with others, expressing the importance it has within her life and her reverence before God.

The "mystery of faith" within is that we cannot understand the form or power of God, but can believe nonetheless. Lana Del Rey's "Coachella - Woodstock on My Mind" (2017) deals with this theme, as she sings "I'd give it all away if you give me just one day to ask him one question." Her desire to know and understand God outweighs her desire for material wealth and earthly success, a sentiment echoed in Florence + the Machine's "100 Years" (2018); "Give me arms to pray with, instead of ones that hold too tightly." Neither artist understands the love God gives or expects from them, but both want to. Sincerity is not rare within female-led pop music, but rather is ignored by those who equate popularity with superficiality, who believe all pop culture is "morally bankrupt, flagrantly licentious, and utterly materialistic" (Hulsether 2005, p.78). Here, these artists struggle to accept a God who is beyond the realm of their understanding. The God they desire is more conceivable than the unimaginable "mystery of godliness" (1 Timothy 3:16 NRSVUE) of the Christian God. They search for a deity they may relate to, and pray for this connection.

Female pop artists of the 21st Century are neither inherently apathetic nor disrespectful of Christianity, but express genuine faith and prayer in their music. “The Apostles’ Creed boldly states the distinctiveness of Jesus Christ as God’s Son, while leaving out more complex theology on the nature of the Saviour,” (Ashwin-Siejkowski 2009, p.26) and so do these examined songs, along with many others. While a three-minute pop song may not be the obvious place for extended theological explanations of one’s personal faith, these artists find the time, words and imagery to express their gratitude, their reliance on God’s intercession and their sincere faith in God’s power, all of which come from orthodox Christian theology. For some, the mystifying nature of the God of Christianity is difficult to connect to, but these songs all express a deep faith in and desire for God’s power to meet their needs. The God of Christianity is an attractive concept, and one which these artists desire a relationship with. Catchy tunes and controversial videos may distract some from the theological content, but do not negate it, and the prayers written, performed and published attract young people to the music and to make public one’s private relationship with God.

Creator of Heaven and Earth

The Apostles’ Creed states that God is “creator of heaven and earth,” confirming God’s unchallengeable power, with God as the source of everything (Ashwin-Siejkowski 2009, p.23). This statement of accepted belief continues throughout Christian tradition today, bleeding into non-Christian spheres of life along with the creation stories of Genesis 1-3. Ideas of creation, Eden and divine heritage pervade contemporary pop music, as with other artistic spheres, exemplifying the level of biblical literacy and knowledge of Christianity existing in modern society. Artists expect their audiences to

understand the references they make to the sacred texts, and in their own way educate them about the stories and beliefs at the foundation of the Christian traditions they share. In songs which deal with these themes, the artists express faith in a divine creator, and share their understandings of this being and what they expect from them.

Lady Gaga testifies to such a faith in "Born This Way," saying "He made you perfect, babe," (2011) preaching to her fans that their natural selves are not only acceptable, but divinely planned by an infallible Creator. This claim of Gaga's does not go unopposed, however, by other Christians. Fervr, a website dedicated to Christian content for young people, reviewed the song with the tagline: "Celebrating being unique is good. Celebrating sin is not." (Moroney 2011) The review goes on to argue that "the gospel of Lady Gaga" rejects biblical messages by telling people to never change, and criticises her for not considering the severity of sin. Lady Gaga deliberately styled "Born This Way" to function as a "gay anthem", affirming LGBTQ+ identities within a Christian context, in conjunction with her own belief system (Deflem 2017, p.150), creating contention with those Christians who hold homosexuality and other forms of queer expression to be sinful or heretical. Though Gaga expresses orthodox faith in a Creator God, her further statements surrounding the "love" that she and others were created for received negative attention. The message of creation at the heart of "Born This Way" finds its roots in the Bible and creeds, but her beliefs surrounding LGBTQ+ rights are hotly debated to this day in both Christian and secular spheres. Gaga faces criticism from both sides, with Christians accusing her of following a trend of public religious expression (Deflem 2017, p.185), and some in the LGBTQ+ community accusing her of using them for publicity, deliberately causing a stir around these issues (Deflem 2017, pp.155-6). The singer denies some of these allegations, identifying as bisexual herself and claiming "God is never a trend"

(Deflem 2017, pp.176, 185), but is not immune to criticism of her personal agenda. Her words brim with a bold theology of inclusiveness, but her actions, arguably, do not always follow suit, as her charity, the Born This Way Foundation, has been criticised for how little of its raised funds go to the projects it supports (Deflem 2017, pp.155-6). To defend her theology we must return to Marton's belief in the separation of art and artist, or accept that "God made her perfect, babe." Gaga *needs* to believe in a God who loves queer people and does not demonise their identities and relationships. To some, this is the God of Christianity, but to others, Gaga's beliefs are unwelcome in Christian circles.

Gaga's concept of a blessed creation finds links to Beyoncé's theology in "Bigger," when Beyoncé sings, "not just some words in a Bible verse, you are the living word" (2019). These lines combineJohn's testimony that "the Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:14 NRSV) with Genesis 1:27 to create a theology which declares that, as Jesus took human form and humankind took the form of Jesus/God, our form and physicality is divine. This statement seems to grant humanity divine status, risking equating mankind with God. This unorthodox theology has a warmth to it, but technically contradicts orthodox Christian thought. During the Catholic Mass the congregation says, "Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed" (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales 2011). This statement places humanity below God, not equal to God. Even John the Baptist considered himself unworthy to carry Jesus' sandals (Matt 3:11 NRSV). Despite this, Beyoncé has historically equated her lover's goodness, beauty and influence with that of God (2003 "Dangerously in Love"; 2008 "Halo"; 2008 "Ave Maria"; 2011 "Rather Die Young"), and here she extends this exaltation to the listener, whom she encourages to celebrate their own value within the world (2019

"Bigger"). In this line lies an uplifting message open to a variety of interpretations. The above reading is empowering, but gives too much power to humankind, risking criticism similar to that of Lady Gaga. However, the Very Rev Dr Malcolm Clemens Young stated that, "God is in all the world and… Beyoncé is made in God's image," (McDonald, 2021) a sentiment which applies to all of humanity, and all of Beyoncé's fans. Regardless, like Gaga, Beyoncé expresses what she *expects* from her God, support and affirmation of her own innate goodness. The God of Christianity, so superior to and separate from the human race, may not be what she needs to satisfy her faith.

Sara Bareilles similarly blurs the lines between divine and earthly but with a more pessimistic tone. While Beyoncé raises humans up, Bareilles brings God down to meet us in our sin and suffering. "Eden" (Bareilles 2013) paints a picture of the fabled garden from Genesis, but Bareilles places in it a God and angels who are far from benevolent creators. Although her tone is sceptical of religion, the personification of the cause of her suffering hints at a faith in some higher power. The God of Christianity becomes an identifiable placeholder for this unknown force, as Bareilles assumes her audience has the biblical literacy to appreciate the reference. In this adaptation, Bareilles plays the part of Eve while Adam is absent, as in many post-feminist representations of the Eden tale, allowing us, the audience, to assume his role, watching and becoming complicit in her downfall (Edwards 2012 p.14). Ashwin-Siejkowski understands the Apostles' Creed as describing "the caring Monarch, the ultimate Governor of all reality but also as a very personal protector as a father" (2009, p.25), but Bareilles' God fills the roles of creator, tempter and condemner. Eden functions as a metaphor for a toxic relationship with an extreme power imbalance between Bareilles and her partner, with the moral that nobody with such power can be trusted, but will always betray their

submissive counterpart. Though she does not declare faith in the Christian God, she displays an intense distrust of any higher power, placing at its feet all of her pain from this relationship. This twisting of a traditional Christian tale is quite shocking in its conclusion, as Bareilles calls into question the doctrine of omnibenevolence when her "personal protector" becomes a villain. The idea of an all-powerful being who would not abuse this power is incomprehensible to Bareilles. She needs a deity who is her equal or no deity at all, rejecting the Christian understanding of God in favour of self-preservation.

The Christian creation narrative appears repeatedly throughout Lana Del Rey's work, whose fears lie outside of Eden. For Del Rey, the city of Los Angeles represents humanity's fallen sinfulness, and her short film "Tropico" (2013b) tells the tale of Adam and Eve (portrayed by Del Rey) from the Garden of Eden to their death and ascension into heaven. Adam and Eve are created by John Wayne, who takes the place of God the Father, with assistance from Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley and Jesus Christ. What we witness here is not humanity's creation, but rather the creation of "Lana Del Rey," the persona of Elizabeth Grant. What could be misinterpreted as satire is actually as sincere as any prayer analysed above: Del Rey credits these figures with her success, if not her existence (Crutcher 2019, p,241). The song "Gods & Monsters" (2012) appears during "Tropico," and Del Rey describes herself as "an angel living in the garden of evil." She views LA as a land of sin and herself as a source of goodness, almost godliness. As the film ends she says, "from being created in his likeness, to being banished for wanting to be too much like him, we were cast out, and the garden of Eden transformed into the garden of Evil," making clear that, like Bareilles, Del Rey does not blame humanity for its downfall, but God, who she believes held mankind to an impossible, unknowable standard. Although sin is a product of our fallibility, our fallibility is part of our design, God's design. Crutcher argues that Del Rey holds up "a

mirror to the listener's own understanding of religion, America, love, and beauty," creating discomfort not only with what we hear, but with how we relate to it (2019, p.238). Through this lens, "Tropico" expresses how modern biblical literacy levels leave many uncomfortable with humanity being punished for aspiring to be like their creator (Gen 3:5-6). While one might know the story of the fall from Eden, a developed theology is required to cope with its implications. What Del Rey exposes is undeveloped faith among some, and she accuses herself of this too, of wanting to believe in the Christian God but being deeply uncomfortable with the expectations involved. Like Bareilles, she forces her audience to confront the possibility that their God could create them without persistent love for them, and that Ashwin-Siejkowski's "ultimate Governor" fails to live up to its parental responsibilities. She too needs a creator who expects sin and fallibility in the humans they created, not one who expects godly goodness from ungodly creatures.

Despite her pessimism in some areas, Del Rey affirmed her absolute belief in a benevolent, merciful creator in "God Knows I Tried" (2015). This brief moment of sure, positive faith was short-lived, as in 2020 she released the poem "Paradise is Very Fragile," which speaks of "the curse bestowed upon Eve, that fateful eve, she took that bite of fruit from that fruitful tree." Fewell and Gunn note that, in Genesis 3, "God's rhetoric turns natural consequences into divinely controlled repercussions" (1996, p.29) but like Bareilles, Del Rey understands God's "punishment" to be particularly focussed on womankind, negatively impacting women's lives much more than men's, despite the crime being committed by both genders. She speaks of how her lover brings to mind Eve's dilemma; she finds him both so sweet and so damaging that she feels connected to Eve in her temptation. Notable is the softness of the temptation she experiences, "watercolour images of serpents on orange trees." These

gentle tones reflect her lack of fear; what is dangerous feels comfortable. Edwards speaks of "the subjugation of the male through irresistible female sexuality" found in contemporary images of Genesis 3 (2012, p.20), but Del Rey reverses this situation, finding herself and Eve under male power. She submits to the gentle power of his presence, accurately reflecting what Edwards perceives as the definitive establishment of a patriarchal hierarchy at the end of Genesis 2 (2012, p.22). Though Del Rey places man in the place of the forbidden fruit, she remains true to the overarching themes of the Christian creation stories, understanding Eve's pain and the patriarchal overtones of the texts, and understanding God as judge, jury and executioner, working in favour of patriarchal power structures. Though she acknowledges that this God is unjust towards the women God created, she writes of the Eden narrative as history, expressing faith in its message and the God it depicts.

This return to the pessimistic mind set of "Tropico" illustrates the consistency of Del Rey's struggle with her faith, as she clearly has faith in a Creator God, but is conflicted over the nature of that God and that creation which entails evil and suffering. What is difficult to say is whether this trial of faith is sincerely from the experiences of Elizabeth Grant, or if Lana Del Rey acts as a fantasy for Grant, allowing her to place herself in situations she does not experience. This issue may be interesting, but has little-to-no effect on her audience, as an extension of Marton's earlier examined argument for the separation of art and artist would show. The art made by the character of Lana Del Rey is, by extension, the art of Elizabeth Grant, but reaches the consumer under Lana Del Rey's name, bringing to the mind of the consumer the life of Del Rey, not Grant. Any affect which the artist's life may have on the listener is caused by Del Rey, and her very identity is intertwined with "a mythology full of icons, nostalgia, and ideology, one that often subverts norms and revels in incongruence" (Crutcher 2019, p.242). Del Rey's theology is wrapped in

creativity, pretence and ambiguity, allowing the audience to draw their own conclusions about it. Her faith is buried under layers of stylised metaphors and characterisation, allowing Grant to evade any criticism which Del Rey might encounter. This conundrum affects other artists performing under monikers, such as Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta (Lady Gaga), but also those whose careers are in their legal names, all of whom create personas, fantasies and aesthetics which they take into the public sphere. In their music, we see the faith these artists want to share, and in their silence lies that which is only theirs.

Edwards argues that the Genesis creation story "lends itself to androcentric interpretation" (2012, p.19), but as evidenced, many artists have found multiple interpretations to fit their own worldviews and understandings of God. Despite these different readings, the fundamental orthodox Christian belief of a Creator God pervades each and every artistic representation of the tale. Though Bareilles refrains from identifying her creator as God, and Del Rey creates an amalgamation of her own character and the Christian God, they both maintain that their lives and careers have been brought into being by a higher power. Beyoncé's theology may be more instantly recognisable, but all of the artists discussed include beliefs extending beyond orthodox Christian belief: Gaga's faith in LGBTQ+ identities and their rights; Beyoncé's faith in the divinity of humanity; Bareilles' in an apathetic creator; and Del Rey's confusing double-identity and crisis of faith. These explorations of personal adaptations of Christian theology afford their art uniqueness, but at its core it maintains a biblical basis. What is clear, though, is that not all of these artists are satisfied by the Christian understanding of the Creator, instead needing more from their God than Christianity can provide. Be it security, femininity, humility or even humanity, these artists create images of God not found within orthodox Christianity, images of what they need from a deity.

Sin, Sanctity and Sentencing

The concept of divine judgement is not unique to Christianity, and was in fact adopted from Jewish culture and religion (Ashwin-Siejkowski 2009, p.77). Nevertheless, its appearance in contemporary pop music often accompanies Christian imagery, ranging from strict moral expectations to faith in a merciful God. The links between God's judgement and the one's final destination are also frequently explored by modern artists, indicating Christian understandings of the afterlife, though often adapted to personal worldviews.

Lana Del Rey's "Diet Mountain Dew" (2012) finds her telling her lover to "take Jesus off the dashboard" as they begin their lovemaking, showing her discomfort with her religious and sexual lives converging in this way. She attempts to justify her discomfort with an image of Jesus "watching" her in this moment by saying that he has "got enough on his mind" with people committing greater sins elsewhere. These two short lines tell a lot about her personal theology - while she thinks her sexual misdemeanours do not warrant Jesus' attention, she is embarrassed to have it, feeling shame for her actions. This shame is only related to her faith, and once Jesus is removed from her eyesight, she is sexually liberated, free to enjoy her sexuality in a way her faith does not allow. The sexuality of women has long been demonised in mainstream Christianity with Mary Magdalene long imagined as a reformed sex worker in order to stigmatise the expression of female sexual desire (Edwards 2016). This idea of the sexually sinful woman appears throughout "Tropico" (Del Rey 2013b). Though "Tropico" deals with issues of cyclical sin, as we view Adam and Eve forced into unseemly situations by their socioeconomic status, most of Eve/Del Rey's "sins" are sexual, including her job as a pole dancer. The film paints her profession as being morally dubious

but accessible to her in the subculture she finds herself in. Schüssler Fiorenza comments on how "in a patriarchal society prostitution is the worst form of 'pollution' (sin) for a woman," (1994 p.127) and in "Tropico" we see this stigma extend to other forms of sex work. Though Del Rey's Eve only dances for a living, not engaging in sex, the connotations of male pleasure deriving from a willing female's participation are dark and sinful, reinforced by the apple eaten by Adam at her show, a reminder of the first in this chain of sin they are caught in. Jeanrond writes that "either the erotic realm is judged to stand in contradiction to the transcendent spirit of religion and therefore has to be excluded as sinful from divinely inspired relations; or the erotic realm is considered vital for the relationship between the believer and God and thus becomes an important object for theological reflection" (2010, p.16). Del Rey accepts the first option and believes that Jesus (and therefore God) views her sexuality as sinful, a perversion of their plan for her. She accepts the widely-circulated image of the demonised sexual woman, but cannot resist her own sexual urges. Though she believes in the Christian God, she would find more comfort in a version of God who did not judge her sexuality, and instead celebrated it as part of her created form.

Edwards highlights the role of Mary the mother of Jesus in the cultural damning of sexually bold women (2016). As a counterpart to Mary Magdalene, Mother Mary completes the virgin/whore complex of the New Testament, with the Magdalene representing "the "whores" – those whose presence offends the religious ruling classes whose moral agenda is not being met" (Parker 2019, p.694). Ashwin-Siejkowski discusses Mary's virginity being cemented in the Apostle's Creed, explaining that "the early Christians were obsessed with the idea of 'purity,' 'abstinence,' 'life-long virginity' or 'sexual pollution'" (2009, p.35). With a "pure" role model for women within the Church, those who fail to live up to her example become sinners, likened

to Mary Magdalene. The dichotomy of the virgin and the whore leads to the shaming of women who do not perfectly adhere to societal and religious expectations of chastity and "decency" (Parker 2019, p.694). Del Rey reinforces this divide within "Tropico" as her Mother Mary never enters the earthly realm, but prays for Adam and Eve from afar, remaining untainted by sin, an unachievable goal. Meanwhile, on earth, the humans find themselves caught up in a system that they did not create but now have to compromise their values to survive in. Her characters are, nevertheless, redeemed at the film's end, indicating that Del Rey believes in a merciful God and a positive afterlife. The spoken line, "only the choices made from your free will, will decide your soul's fate" both answers and raises questions regarding Del Rey's worldview. This phrase, combined with Adam and Eve's redemption in the "Tropico" narrative, seems to imply that this cyclical sin was not a "choice", but that their freewill was inhibited by their surroundings, the "garden of evil" that is LA (Lana Del Rey 2012 "Gods & Monsters"). Trying seems to be more important than outcomes in Del Rey's theology, explored in "God Knows I Tried" (2015) as she defends her actions, claiming that God understands her true intentions and will judge her accordingly. This echoes the line "the sun also rises on those who fail the call" from "Money Power Glory" (2014), which uses Ecclesiastes 1:5 to justify her resignation to the inevitability of life's continuation. Del Rey believes that, no matter what she does, she will see the sun again, that only God can judge her and that God will judge her intentions, not their consequences.

This faith in a merciful God and the culpability of her environment is not shared by Florence Welch. In Florence + the Machine's "Lover to Lover" she sings: "There's no salvation for me now"; "I've been setting myself up for the fall" (2011). Although Genesis 2-3 does not place the blame for the Fall at God's feet, only God is responsible for the existence of the tree and the

freewill which allowed the humans to sin. Florence takes all of the responsibility for the precursory events and conditions which led to her own sins and separation from God, bearing a supernatural weight of guilt and shame. Unlike Del Rey, she blames only herself for her actions, sharing no responsibility with her surroundings and views herself as irredeemable. This perspective lacks the hope that Del Rey's faith in God's mercy provides, instead reflecting the tone of Lamentations. Florence speaks of herself almost as Jerusalem in Lamentations 1:8, berating herself for her sins and despising herself. Florence's theology is not without atonement and resolution, however, although this also feels macabre in tone. "Never Let Me Go" (Florence + the Machine 2011) sees Florence drown herself as a means of atonement, referring to the ocean as "the deep cathedral where you cannot breathe," saying there is "no need to pray, no need to speak." She feels her words do not do her situation justice, and that physical punishment is the most apt way to atone for her sins, that removing herself from the world is her only way of repairing and paying for the damage she has done during her life.. In her death, she pays the debt of her sin, echoing the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Florence debases herself, though; Jesus "suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God" (1 Peter 3:18 NRSV), but she feels her transgressions make her so unworthy of this sacrifice that she is exempt. "The crashes are heaven for a sinner like me, but the arms of the ocean delivered me" identifies the ocean as an agent of God, sanctifying Florence in her death. These songs indicate either no faith in the mercy of God, or a belief that she is so despicable that she is beyond divine salvation. She needs to punish herself for her sins, depending not on divine judgement but her own. Not believing God would punish her enough for her crimes, she becomes the God of her own fate. Whether or not she *wants* to believe in the mercy of God

described in Isaiah 30, she cannot, and therefore cannot connect with Jesus-God and his sacrifice.

Gaga's faith in God's mercy contrasts with her lack of faith in human mercy. As previously discussed, "Judas" (Lady Gaga 2011) deals in metaphors, exploring Gaga's self-perceived sins. In the video, Gaga holds a golden gun towards Judas, the perfect opportunity to kill him (and, metaphorically, those who tempt her to sin) before he can betray Jesus, but she chooses not to, instead revealing the gun to be a lipstick, preparing Judas' lips for his infamous kiss (Merkert 2020, p.38). In this moment of compassion, Gaga follows God's example and forgives Judas, allowing God the final judgement. Jesus places his hands on Gaga's face, forgiving her for enabling his downfall, but the crowd is merciless. As the song ends, Gaga is stoned to death in a black and white wedding dress, a symbol of her humanity caught between godliness and sin. Although Jesus forgave her, mankind kills her, as "her unfaithfulness to Jesus is the point of conflict, not Judas' betrayal" (Merkert 2020, p.38). Gaga and her womanhood become a scapegoat for mankind's evil, just as Eve once did. Gaga draws attention to the gendered aspects of her sin as she lists them; "fame hooker, prostitute, wench vomits her mind." This gendered language pits Gaga's existence as a sexually active female performer against her; like Del Rey her very being is sinful. Bal draws attention to the modern desire to separate this physical sensuality from religiosity, saying "this commitment has nothing to do with any theological 'truth'" but rather is "an anachronistic projection from a more recent past" (2005, p.8). Gaga clearly rejects this division, and enforcing it upon her art only detaches her audience from her meaning, causing them to become the crowd stoning her while "forgiving" Caravaggio for the same "sin."

As in the case of Lana Del Rey, characterisation is important here. Although many of Lady Gaga's songs are deeply personal, others are highly performative, reminding us that "Lady Gaga" is the public persona of Stefani Germanotta, not a real person. Although Gaga is often overly sexualised in her presentation, Deflem highlights that only 14 of 57 songs across her first four major albums deal with sex, and that Gaga herself refutes traditionally "sexy" imagery in her art (2017, pp.172-4). What we see in "Judas" is Stefani Germanotta's internalised demonisation of the female form, weaponised by many in order to patrol women's self-expression, but reclaimed by her as a source of power. Lady Gaga's art serves to portray Stefani Germanotta's beliefs about her own internal struggle with sin and the judgement she receives from both God and mankind; she believes in a merciful God, but not in her fellow humans. By publicising and commercialising these struggles, she capitalises on the patriarchal expectations which trouble her, gaining some immediate but impermanent relief from them, rather than the eternal freedom that a "Big God" may offer.

With regard to sin and judgement, several perspectives are available in modern female-lead pop music. While a strong faith in God's mercy influences the music of Lady Gaga and Lana Del Rey, others like Florence + the Machine focus more deeply on God's wrath, finding harsh consequences to be a twisted comfort. Central to these theologies, though, is faith in divine judgement and justice. All of these artists hand sin and atonement over to a God-figure fitting the Christian model, capable of both mercy and powerful anger. Each artist's take on this God-figure reflects their own self-worth and anger at the world. Their faith rationalises their feelings and provides comfort in the knowledge that, one day, all will be made fair.

Life Everlasting

Following God's judgement comes the promise of eternal paradise in heaven or eternal pain in hell, another common theme in contemporary pop, often in response to grief, sin and pain. The existence of heaven and hell are affirmed in the Apostles' Creed and hell is referred to often throughout the Bible in the forms of Sheol and Gehenna (Ps. 88:7; Jer. 19:2; Matt. 5:22; Rev 1:18; etc.). Like with discussion of God's judgement and mercy, each artist's treatment of life after earth tells a lot about their own understanding of their self-worth and the love their God has for them. Faith in God welcoming them into eternal paradise is very consistent with Christian teachings, but doubts often creep in, preventing these women from completely devoting themselves to Christian theology.

Beyoncé's "Heaven" (2013) deals with the death of a loved one and her unshakeable faith that they reside in heaven, which "couldn't wait" for them. The video features Beyoncé praying with rosary beads in a Catholic church and ends with a shortened version of the Lord's Prayer (Beyoncé 2014a). This heavily Catholic imagery indicates that Beyoncé does not hesitate to share her faith with her audience, and is proudly dedicated to her Catholic roots. Her earnestness reflects a raw grieving process, softened only by her faith in a merciful God who accepts her loved one into his heavenly "home." Beyoncé appears in both black mourning clothes and a bright white outfit, representing the lows of the grieving process and the grace which can be found in prayer and happy memories. This well-rounded depiction of mourning in a Catholic environment does not shy away from the pain of bereavement but frames it in the wider context of deep faith in God's goodness. The Apostles' Creed documents Jesus experiencing the pain of hell before the glory of heaven, and in her grief Beyoncé goes through a similar journey. Lady Gaga's 2016 album

"Joanne", named after her deceased aunt (Deflem 2017, p.31), deals with similar themes of love, loss and faith amongst other more sexual, fun-loving tracks. The title track expresses a faith in heaven similar to Beyoncé's. Although Gaga initially protests Joanne's death, singing "heaven's not ready for you," she comes to admit that she understands and trusts God's plan for Joanne; "honestly, I know where you're going, and baby you're just moving on" (Lady Gaga 2016 "Joanne"). Like Beyoncé, Gaga sees death as part of a wider plan and does not worry about Joanne's fate, trusting God to care for her. A merciful, loving and parental God is needed to fulfil these women's expectations.

Beyoncé's faith in heaven is repeated years later in "Spirit" which was released in conjunction with Disney's "The Lion King" (2019). While some may have kept religion out of such a widely-circulated commercial partnership, Beyoncé injects her faith into the project, singing "so go off into that far off land, and be one with the Great I Am." This undeniable reference to YHWH and Exodus 3:14 brings a Christian spirit into both the single and the entire Lion King franchise. Beyoncé's declarations of faith imbue her art with a personal touch. She uses her fame and the power it affords her to share her beliefs with a worldwide audience, to "permeate what is secular with the Gospel" (Marton 2015, p.62) and evangelise through pop music. Although Deflem argues that "the aesthetics of popular music and the ethics of political and religious values inevitably exist in a relationship of tension" (2017, p.159), like Whitney Houston, Beyoncé merges the two realms and experiences great commercial success. Her faith in eternal life with the Christian God has been constant throughout her career and she is eager to share the joy and hope that this faith provides, and her message resonates enough with her audience to provide her with profits and popularity.

Del Rey's theology becomes increasingly complex and doubt-filled as she explores the afterlife. As previously discussed, "Tropico" (Lana Del Rey 2013b) ends with Adam and Eve reaching the afterlife, signified by UFOs raising them up into the unknown, a typical Del Rey twist on traditional spirituality. However, in other places she is less sure of salvation. "Money Power Glory" (Lana Del Rey 2014) expresses doubt that she and her lover will reach heaven "with the way we're living today." While Adam and Eve may be redeemed because of their pure intentions, Del Rey thinks she is less pure. This doubt has persisted since 2007's "Get Drunk" (Lana Del Rey), where she sings, "cigarettes, Robitussin, will I ever get to heaven?" Her dependencies and lifestyle choices make her feel unworthy of salvation, so much so that her entire belief system begins to crumble. This lack of faith in herself and her God does not affect her desire to be good, as in "Body Electric" (Lana Del Rey 2012) she declares that "heaven is my baby," her goal and the product of her actions. This positive desire, though, is countered by the next phrase, "suicide's her father." Del Rey's desperation to know heavenly peace twists itself into suicidal ideation. Her longing to know God is urgent, and her disenchantment with this world is apparent. Streete notes that seemingly arbitrary distinctions have been made throughout Christian history between sinful suicide and noble martyrdom (2018, p.42). The desire to leave the earthly body in order to achieve full connection with God can be read as both pious and disrespectful. While Del Rey's depressive tone may lead her audience to connect her lyrics with suicidal ideation rather than hopes of martyrdom, her declaration of faith in God's mercy and peace is deeply Christian, and expresses a deep love for the God of Christianity despite her struggle with that God's created world.

Unlike Lana Del Rey, heaven is not Florence's primary goal. "All This and Heaven Too" (Florence + the Machine 2011) expresses her desire to

understand and control love on earth. This desire for love outweighs that for heaven, as she would sacrifice “all this and heaven too” to know love now. This distinction between earthly and heavenly love implies that, for Florence, heaven is neither love-filled nor more important than earth. Either Florence’s heaven is not as paradisiacal as Beyoncé’s or Gaga’s, or she is unsure that it exists, and is therefore prepared to risk it in exchange for immediate, tangible improvements to her life. Florence + the Machine’s treatment of the afterlife contains very few firm beliefs. Florence Welch simultaneously says very little about what she believes and a lot about what she considers, allowing her listeners to place their beliefs into her music, and to consider countless possibilities about life after earth. Her shaky belief in heaven reflects a shaky belief in God, suggesting that the God of Christianity and the heaven that God promises cannot fulfil her needs. She needs instant reassurance and security, something eternity cannot provide.

These artists’ beliefs about the afterlife are varied, but all deal with images of returning to a creator and eternal peace and happiness. Ashwin-Siejkowski states that “Christ’s humiliation and glorification are parts of the same process. There is no division between the extreme humiliation of the Saviour in flesh on the Cross, and his exaltation in glory” (2009, p.72). This concept rings true throughout the music examined - the lows of the artists’ earthly suffering lead them to consider the potential highs of the afterlife. For Beyoncé, Lady Gaga and Lana Del Rey, comfort is received from belief in God’s merciful judgement, and an eternity in heaven with God is the ultimate goal. Florence + the Machine’s music raises many questions and appears agnostic, neither professing nor denying faith in God or heaven, but hinting at hope beyond this life, allowing audiences to superimpose their own life over the band’s words. For Florence, God’s heaven may not be worth the wait, and more immediate

comfort is desired. Christianity promises eternal happiness, but not everyone puts their trust in it.

To Believe or Not To Believe

Not all mentions of God in contemporary pop music are as positive as the prayers discussed earlier. As we have seen, Sara Bareilles finds deep faults in certain belief systems, and many artists find themselves tangled in mixed feelings about the divine. While declarations of faith in God are common, so too are rejections of God, disbelief, anger and despair. Examined here are the difficult and uncomfortable approaches to religion, and the ways in which Christianity fails to convince them.

Halsey rarely mentions God within her music, more often referring to herself or others in divine terms and exploring ideas of idolisation, but in “More” (2020) she speaks of her faith experience, “finding God, and lose him too.” Having been diagnosed with endometriosis and experiencing a miscarriage on stage (Carras 2021), Halsey sings about “a couple years of waiting rooms” as she struggled to comprehend and physically recover from her trauma. Understandably, the singer’s faith was shaken, having “found God” in the joy of pregnancy and subsequently lost all faith following her miscarriage. While Job was tested by “the accuser” (Job 1:12 NRSV) and retained his faith in and fear of God as his life fell apart, Halsey cannot live up to such an unattainable standard. The pain of her loss makes belief in a benevolent, self-sacrificing God too difficult. A far cry from the hopeful tones of some previously discussed works, Halsey rejects the concept of God due to her own life experience, and does not sing in prayer. However, this rejection of the divine lacks any malicious or blasphemous tone. In her earnest explanation of her

feelings, Halsey pushes away any notion of God without attacking believers. While she does “promote unchristian views” (Marton 2015, p.82), she does so without disrespectful language. This “anti-Christian” music evokes sympathy, not anger. For Halsey, the consequences of Genesis 3 are simply not justification enough for the tragedy she has suffered. Her God needs to protect her from this level of pain, to help her in *this* life, not keep her waiting for happiness in the next.

Despite her dedication to Christian imagery, Lana Del Rey often expresses negative views of God and Christianity. While “Body Electric” (Lana Del Rey 2012) refers to Jesus as “my best friend”, “Gods & Monsters” (Lana Del Rey 2012) tells a different story. While neither declares any loss of faith, both refer to a deep emotional apathy towards God, indicating times in Del Rey/Grant’s life when she has felt removed from her faith. “Gods & Monsters” tells us that “me and God, we don’t get along,” a statement emphasised by the line, “God’s dead, I said, ‘Baby, that’s alright with me.’” Del Rey reiterates God’s existence, but uses imagery of death and arguments to indicate a break in their relationship. The theme of self-indulgent sin indicates that while lost in her hedonism, Del Rey feels God is unnecessary, that “this is heaven, what I truly want.” Edwards finds the creation narrative “contains within it the seeds of its own ideological deconstruction because Eve exposes the vulnerability of those in power” (2012, p.28). Del Rey’s personal creation narrative may have recognised flaws in her faith, leading her to doubt it as she embodies Eve making her way through a fallen world, challenging the images of God she has consumed from her surrounding culture. It appears that Del Rey has either found contentment within her life, or has lost hope and faith in God. The ever changing tone of Del Rey’s prayers humanises her eccentric character. Her faith ebbs and flows as her life and mental state change, as is true for all believers. Del Rey’s rejection of God’s presence indicates times of struggle

and doubt, but she never rejects God's *existence*, reminding her audience that her faith is an integral part of her, though not always easy. Her God is not the omnipresent God of Christianity, but at times closer to a demiurge who comes and goes as they please.

Even in their rejection, contemporary female pop artists draw on Christian imagery and culture to form their thoughts about God. Those without faith, like Halsey, are still influenced by the cultural impact that specifically Christian theology has left upon Western society (Bal 2005, p.4). These artists struggle with the conflict between their faith in what God *should* be, and their understanding of what God *is* in 21st Century culture. Lana Del Rey shows her two perceptions of God at war with one another, while Halsey outsources the object of their discomfort, claiming not to struggle with internal issues, but rather the pain and suffering present in the external world. These artists deal with the difficult reality of life with and without faith and its emotional impact, allowing their audiences inside their personal relationships with God and religion and giving them space to explore their own in the context of their music.

Gendering God

"Although Jewish (and Christian) theology speaks about God in male language and images, it nevertheless insists that such language and images are not adequate 'pictures' of the divine, and that human language and experience are not capable of beholding or expressing God's reality" - in these words, Schüssler Fiorenza encapsulates the orthodox position on the gender of God, and the ambiguity within it which allows for artistic interpretation (1994, pp.132-3). Female performers have often taken the liberty of imagining God in

feminine terms in order to more easily relate to the deity. Although sometimes surprising, the practice has a rich theological basis dating back to the goddess cults of ancient Hebrew culture, and is no more blasphemous than the use of masculine terms. What this practice does tell us is something of the needs of these women, and often the reasons why androcentric images of God are insufficient for them.

Schüssler Fiorenza states that “patriarchal imagery and androcentric language are the form but not the *content* of the biblical message,” (1994, p.15) acknowledging that the biblical text lends itself to androcentric readings, as indicated by Edwards’ reading of the creation within Genesis (2012, p.14). Despite this masculine bias, examples of the divine feminine are present within the Bible. Ashwin-Siejkowski highlights the feminine associations of the word “spirit” within several Semitic languages (2009, p.42), bringing a feminine presence into the Trinitarian God of Christianity. This female energy is not merely based in linguistics, however, appearing also in the “Sophia-God of Jesus” (Schüssler Fiorenza 1994, p.132) embodied in both Jesus of the New Testament and in Proverbs’ feminine personification of wisdom (8:1-36 NRSVUE). Even in Isaiah, God is frequently described in motherly terms (40-66), taking on feminine roles unusual within God’s biblical depiction. Despite this, Brenner concludes that “the biblical god is not a bi-gender god” but a male one (1996, p.69), and focuses more on the prevalence of goddess cults in ancient Hebrew cultures. Throughout history, female deity worship has existed within YHWH-worshipping communities, and orthodox Christian traditions accept many forms of it (Brenner 1996, p.60-67). In this way, many explorations of feminine divinity actually *follow* orthodox understandings of God’s nature rather than opposing them.

Alanis Morissette's complex relationship with God, faith and religion is interestingly explored in her assignment of different pronouns to her God-figure. In 2008 she expressed her desire to "know God" and "be constantly one with her" in "Incomplete", recognising the comfort of a feminine deity. However, on the same album she sang "If God's taking bets, I pray he wants to lose," (Alanis Morissette 2008 "Not as We) playing with the concept of gender and connecting different aspects of the deity with her own varying attitudes towards God. From this album alone, we can see that for Morissette, God's mercy and love are feminine qualities, providing a comfort that the callous male God in her mind cannot provide. The gambling God of "Not As We" is reminiscent of the God of Job, taking risks with human lives for his own entertainment and/or satisfaction. Alanis aims to defy this masculine God, demonstrating a relationship wildly different to that which she has with her feminine concept of God, whom she embraces as a supportive force. Brenner explores how, among Hebrew women, devotion to goddess cults typically increased in times of trouble as women sought comfort which their Father God could not provide (1996, p.61), a sentiment echoed here in Morissette's work. Whether this female God in her work reflects feminine aspects of YHWH or a different deity is unclear, but either way, she is neither the first nor the last to explore the topic. "Her" (2020) delves deeper into her relationship with this feminine entity, as Morissette states, "she follows me when I run away, and even when I cut her off, she still says that she loves me, come what may." These lines echo the sentiment of the parables of Luke 15, revealing that "she" shares qualities with the God of the Bible, making sense within Morissette's post-Catholic worldview. It appears that Morissette's God is the bi-gender God that Brenner cannot find in the Bible (1996, p.69). She finds the biblical God's masculinity wanting, injecting it with feminine language which allows her to more easily describe and feel comfortable within

their relationship, while still acknowledging the difficulties she has with what views as God's "masculine" side.

Florence + the Machine utilise a similarly gender-fluid understanding of the divine in "Mother" (2015). Though the song obviously focuses on the maternal qualities of God, the term "Lord" is used throughout to address the divine. This gender-queering reflects Schüssler Fiorenza's declaration of God's nature being beyond human linguistic recognition of gender (1994, pp.132-3). Instead of assigning a gender to God, Florence + the Machine express desirable qualities within a deity; lordly grandeur and motherly love. The song acts as recognition of the vastness of God, rather than any attempt to confine God to a fixed definition. The link to the motherhood of God found within Isaiah reflects the fluidity found by Nolan Fewell and Gunn within the Genesis creation narrative, as God struggles to self-identify and indicates that, despite God's own attempts to categorise the world into binaries, there is much which does not fit into that mould (2003, pp.17-18). This gender fluidity is not reserved for only God within Florence + the Machine's music, but extends to many religious figures as they give new life to St Jude, Lot and his wife, Samson and Delilah (2015 "St Jude";2015 "Caught";2015 "Delilah"). Within the world of this music, Florence Welch takes on the persona and gender of whichever person appears to be more closely associated with the divine. The power of Storm Jude leads her to identify with the natural force of the storm, making tangible changes within God's creation (Florence + the Machine 2015 "St Jude), while she embodies the masculinity of both Samson and Lot as she affirms her own righteousness through association with the divine (Florence + the Machine 2015 "Caught";2015 "Delilah"). Like Morissette, Florence + the Machine have no fixed view of God's gender, but rather than choosing a gender for God which fits their own feelings, they use their lyrics to allow

Florence Welch to move through various genders in order to embody the qualities required within each narrative.

Despite her tendency to take artistic licence with matters of faith, Lana Del Rey refers to God solely in masculine terms throughout her music. This is, obviously, somewhat difficult to determine within the world of "Tropico" (Del Rey 2013b) as four characters take the place of the creator, including a woman (Marilyn Monroe). However, even in this fantasy, John Wayne takes the place of the masculine figurehead of the operation, and the others are his subjugated associates. Surprisingly, Monroe plays hardly any part in the rest of the "Tropico" narrative. Instead, Del Rey's depiction of Mother Mary provides a feminine connection to the heavenly realm. Ashwin-Siejkowski explains how Mary provided a feminine presence within Christianity, but is not actually identified as divine within Christian orthodoxy (2009, p.36). As the "creature closest to the divine," Mary becomes a link between human and divine, drawn upon here by Del Rey who depicts her as constantly praying for the wellbeing of humanity, using her unique relationship with God to intercede for us. Again, something within the masculine presence of God requires feminine assistance, associated for a third time with comfort and compassion. Brenner states that, "in stereotypic thinking, this maleness implies both a lack of and need for an F compliment," which is identified by these artists as empathy and maternal love (1996, p.63). Del Rey's God is a masculine force, supported by lesser feminine influences but equalled by none.

The God of the Bible may exist outwith the confines of binary gendered language, but has traditionally been referred to in masculine terms as default. This linguistic issue has translated into an issue of faith as the masculine terms have bred an understanding of a masculine entity, found wanting by many, including the artists discussed. In their pursuit for the qualities these artists

desire in God, they have found comfort in the identification of God with feminine pronouns. These pronouns often accompany a softer, more tender portrayal of God than is found in masculine portrayals, indicating that the association of a male God with tender, maternal care is difficult for these individuals and for the audiences who connect with their music. This recognition of the feminine within the divine (and, conversely, the divine within the feminine) is far from blasphemy or unorthodoxy, but rather takes advantage of the ambiguousness of God to explore personal issues regarding gendered language within religious spaces, indicating a lack of trust in the comfort of masculine figures. While the God of the Bible may fulfil their needs, the masculine God of patriarchal Christian tradition does not.

Gods, Goddesses and Gurus

For some, a change in language is simply not enough to allow one to fully relate to the God of Christianity, and a change in divinity is necessary. Many artists explore relationships with non-Christian deities and powers as well as with the God of Christianity, exploring areas of faith that they feel are inaccessible within a Christian framework. From the Roman pantheon to Hindu goddesses, varying the concept of what (a) God is allows the artists to vary their viewpoint and create more diverse music while retaining a link to the divine and to the wider world.

Both Lana Del Rey and Alanis Morissette find their theological basis in Christianity and utilise its imagery heavily throughout their music, but both have found similar inspiration within Hinduism. Del Rey's 2020 poem "Paradise is Very Fragile" moves from images of Eve in Eden to the line "Kundalini, you breathe me," referring to the "biological mechanism driving

both individual enlightenment and evolution of the species toward higher consciousness", envisioned in feminine terms in Hindu belief (Woollacott, Kason and Park 2020). For Del Rey, it is Kundalini breathing life into her as in Genesis 2:7, not YHWH. This identification of feminine energy being responsible for life-giving once again identifies God with motherhood as explored above. She explores Brenner's suggestion that, given that both male and female human forms were created in God's image within the Genesis creation narrative, God may comprise of both masculine and feminine qualities and exist beyond the gender binary (1996, p.57), as orthodox Christian tradition maintains. However, not content with Christian language, Del Rey has moved outside of the faith to find imagery which fits the deity she believes in, combining the God of Genesis with the feminine energy of Kundalini to create an entity she feels can both physically create and emotionally sustain humanity. A bi-gender or nonbinary reading of YHWH satisfies her needs, but Christian language does not.

Morissette also combines her Christian upbringing and imagery with that of Hinduism. In "Her" (Alanis Morissette 2020), not only is Morissette's God feminine, as discussed above, but she goes on to identify "her" with Kali and Shakti, powerful feminine forces within Hinduism (Doniger 2021; Stefon 2021). This amalgamation of Christian parables and Hindu goddesses implies that the God of Christianity does not fulfil Morissette's expectations of God, and requires feminine supplementation. This is not a new sensation for her; in 2008, Morissette sang "my president is Guanyin," ("Citizen of the Planet") pledging allegiance to the image of mercy in Chinese Buddhism (Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica 2021). As in "Her", she associates the compassion of God with the feminine, one she does not find within Christianity, even in the near-divinity of Mother Mary. Both Del Rey and Morissette seek something more than what the Christian God has to offer - specifically,

femininity and tenderness - and they find it in the deities of other religions. What is clear, though, is that what they find elsewhere is not enough to make them leave behind their Christian roots entirely, resulting in a combination of theologies which fulfils their own needs without attempting to tend to those of others. They reject dogmatic religion in favour of a create-your-own model.

Lady Gaga's ventures into other religious spheres are more stylised than these, with emphasis on the imagery of other faiths rather than their beliefs. Throughout *ARTPOP* (Lady Gaga 2013), Gaga uses the Roman pantheon to represent different facets of her sexual experience. Although Jesus and Judas represented her internal struggle with her sexuality earlier in her career, the Roman gods signify Gaga's attitudes towards sex and her sexual partners. In "G.U.Y", Gaga declares to Himeros, "god of sexual desire, son of Aphrodite", that her music can teach *him* about sexual techniques, indicating her confidence in her own sexual performance and knowledge (Lady Gaga 2013 "G.U.Y."). During her lesson, "Mars' warring spirit rams into the atmosphere" as aggressive masculine power enters the sexual sphere, but Gaga is not intimidated and celebrates its arrival. Conversely, "Venus" sees Gaga ask to be taken to the "leader" of the goddess of love, wanting to learn from and worship them (Lady Gaga 2013). Throughout "Venus", Gaga, her lover and the goddess Venus herself all share the title of "goddess of love" as the power shifts between equal partners. Within the music video for "Applause", Gaga appears in the "seashell bikini" mentioned in "Venus", embodying the goddess and demanding to be worshipped (Lady Gaga 2013). The pantheon allows for Gaga to address different facets of divinity easily, and to play with their personalities in a sexual context. Using the gods of a dead religion attracts less criticism than the use of the God of Christianity, and allows for a wider scope of interpretation and artistic rendition. The Roman gods embody a sexuality and moral ambiguity absent in depictions of the Christian God, allowing for

human emotions and situations to be elevated to godly status without erasing the relatable elements. Additionally, a pantheon allows for power to be shared among participants; sex within a pantheon entails egality which cannot be replicated when using the Christian God as a metaphor. Whether or not she requires it in her life of faith, Gaga needs sexually available divinity to interact with in her art, and mainstream Christianity makes it difficult for Jesus and the God of Christianity to fill this role.

More controversially, “Aura” (Lady Gaga 2013) uses Islamic imagery to convey the performer’s relationship with her body, sex and relationships, playing on the words “aura” and “awrah”, an Islamic term for “intimate parts of the body” (Robinson 2015, p.287). Singing, “do you wanna see me naked, lover? Do you wanna see the girl behind the aura?”, Gaga conjures images of sex and nudity, but the double-entendre gives the song another level. Rather than propositioning the listener, Gaga is offering to reveal her true self, beyond her body and sexuality. While some have charged Gaga with “eroticising” and “hypersexualising” Muslim women who wear hijab as part of their religious practice (Aimen 2013), others defended the move, praising Gaga for framing women as active sexual agents (Francois Cerrah 2013). Regardless, Gaga clearly found hijab to be a uniquely useful metaphor, unparalleled within Christianity. Though some Catholic women wear mantillas in church, in line with 1 Corinthians 11:5-6, this practice must either have been too obscure or too minor for Gaga as she chose the more common, obvious and, at times, extreme practice of hijab, advertising her single by wearing a sheer burqa on the runway (Aimen 2013). By veiling herself in fame and sexuality, Gaga keeps private her sacred self, the most vulnerable part of herself. Once again, she searched outside of Christian tradition for relevant religious imagery, but by implicating a controversial practice in one of the world’s major religions, Gaga placed a target on the back of her burqa.

Even Beyoncé, with her traditional Catholic values, pays homage to non-Christian traditions. Throughout the music video for “Hold Up” (Beyoncé 2016b), the singer takes on the imagery of Oshun/Osun, the Yorùbá goddess “of rivers and fresh water, luxury and pleasure, sexuality and fertility, and beauty and love” (Lee 2017). She reiterated this association in 2019 in “MOOD 4 EVA,” singing, “I am the Nala, sister of Naruba, Oshun, Queen Sheba, I am the mother”, this time also equating herself with her *Lion King* character and the biblical Queen of Sheba (1 Kings 10:1-13), a powerful ruler and the recipient of great wisdom (Ma'at-Ka-Re Monges, 2002). In these African figures, Beyoncé finds power not only in her womanhood, but in her blackness, celebrating her full personal identity. These goddesses and powerful women have traditionally been portrayed in ways more relatable to Beyoncé’s lived experience than the white masculinity of many Western portrayals of Jesus. Again, as in Gaga’s use of the Roman pantheon, Beyoncé does not have to elevate herself above her listeners in order to claim a divine identity, but can share in the power of godhood with anyone and everyone who finds themselves reflected in a traditional deity. Polytheisms create space for a multitude of different and complementary gods and goddesses, excluding nobody from power. The hierarchical structure of Christianity denies artists the scope to create divine relationships, so we see them moving beyond their Christian roots to celebrate humanity.

Brenner notes that biblical writers “often accuse women of turning to non-monotheistic religious practices,” blaming them for YHWH’s jealous rage (1996, p.61). What these writers failed to acknowledge are the conditions within monotheistic YHWH-worship which make polytheism so tempting, particularly to women. We have seen how other religions allow for a wider range of metaphors and provide space for women to feel divine without rejecting their femininity. While Gaga found hijab to be a useful metaphor,

Morissette finds comfort in the divinity of female deities within Hinduism, worshipping God without worshipping maleness. Gaga's use of the Roman pantheon allows for the sexual celebration of several figures at once, as godhood is not restricted to one individual but exists in a power-sharing dynamic, and Beyoncé finds power in black African traditions. A lack of Christianity in these songs tells a lot about what Christianity lacks for these women.

Man-made God

Scepticism of Christianity often presents itself in pop music as scepticism of organised religion as a whole. In criticising the aspects of the Christian faith which they find unappealing, artists call into question the legitimacy of religious leadership and decision-making, as seen in the earlier analysis of Cher's "Sisters of Mercy" (2000). Religion, and therefore God, are regularly viewed as tools of the powerful, keeping the oppressed in line. This line of criticism can easily lead to the rejection of God, but some artists fight for their personal spirituality and attempt to untangle themselves from the constraints of organised religion. Deflem accuses pop culture of ignoring important issues, leading to the labelling of pop-culture-friendly issues as inconsequential (2017, p.146), but the songs and artists below challenge this mode of thinking, confronting important injustices and consequently validating the issues they raise elsewhere.

Despite their personal connections to Christianity, both Beyoncé and Lana Del Rey have openly commented on the hypocrisy of conservative Christianity in the USA. Del Rey singing "got your Bible, got your gun" (2014 "Cruel World") echoes Beyoncé's words about her father; "with his right hand on his

rifle, he swore it on the Bible" (2016 "Daddy Lessons"). In both cases, the sacred imagery of the Bible is juxtaposed with the violent presence of the gun, drawing attention to the dissonance in the symbolism. This representation of what Watts refers to as the "iconic dimension" of scripture is powerful and effective (2015, p.16). Del Rey's protagonist carries both with him for protection, a Bible for the spiritual and a gun for the physical, while Beyoncé invokes the symbolic power of oath-taking on the Bible in American culture, indicating the importance of the Good Book within her family. Alongside the iconic meaning of the Bible, though, is its semantic dimension (Watts 2015, p.16). Jesus reprimanded his followers for their violence (Matt 26:53) and preached in opposition to posturing and hypocrisy (Matt 23:1-12). The carrying of a Bible implies a desire to associate oneself with its message, while the carrying of lethal weaponry displays a misunderstanding, if not a rejection, of Jesus' message. These lyrics are a subtle commentary on the version of Christianity that these characters subscribe to, as Beyoncé and Del Rey draw attention to the conflict of interest at the heart of their lifestyles. While they may identify with Jesus' words, they do not identify with these "Christian" lifestyles.

Gaga takes issues with exclusionary forms of Christianity in "Americano" (Lady Gaga 2011), singing "I won't speak your Jesús Cristo" over a mariachi-inspired track which blends Gaga's message into the very essence of the song. The lyrics here are "a rejection of forms of Christianity that deny same sex marriage, which parallels an opposition to visions of American identity hostile to immigration" (Deflem 2017, p.172). Gaga reinforces her established beliefs in the sanctity of LGBTQ+ identities and relationships, and connects any religious rejection of LGBTQ+ rights with racism and anti-immigration sentiments. She wants to teach her audience that these two forms of exclusion are equally incongruous with the message of Christianity,

and potentially even to shame the churches and/or individual Christians who hold the beliefs she disagrees with. Her rejection of Jesus here is not a rejection of God or the biblical Jesus, but a rejection of the idea of Jesus worshipped by racist or homophobic Christians, which she believes is an untrue representation of Christian values, designed to favour societal oppressors.

As discussed above, Sara Bareilles also feels this way about mainstream Christianity, as "Eden" (2013) and "Armor" (2019) exemplify. In both tracks, Bareilles addresses the use of the Christian creation narratives to oppress women both throughout history and in her own personal life. "Armor" shows an approach to the Bible similar to that of Schüssler Fiorenza, that "patriarchal imagery and androcentric language are the form but not the *content* of the biblical message" (1994, p.15). Bareilles acknowledges the story of the fall from Eden but asks "how the hell did Eve end up with all the damn blame?" before turning the biblical text back on itself to reclaim feminine power. Genesis 2 describes Adam being made from the ground, and Eve then being made from Adam's rib. In her final verse, Bareilles sings, "You don't scare me, I am of the earth" (2019), reclaiming her place, and that of womankind, in God's creation. The music video for the song layers footage of feminist rallies over dancers with exaggerated makeup and flesh-coloured clothes, juxtaposing the political power of women with caricatures of the physical traits they have been desired for (Bareilles 2019). Bareilles charges the gatekeepers of Christian texts with shaping the texts and their interpretation in order to aid the patriarchal oppression of women, blaming them for women's suffering and fighting back with her own reading of the Bible.

This is the second time Bareilles has made such a point, as "Eden" (2013) begins with the words "let me paint a picture for you, then I'll have to teach

you to see it." This bold opening references the Christian leaders throughout history, such as Erasmus, who have attempted to keep biblical interpretation amongst a "scholarly audience," fearing that exposing "the multitude" to the true nature of the sacred texts would be "most hazardous" (Brown 2005, p.16). Bareilles goes on to compare the situation in Eden to a toxic relationship, claiming God "idolized my innocence, stole it from me in the end." This comparison of Eve's ignorance to modern purity culture places her on the negative side of the virgin/whore complex. If Eve cannot be the heroine of the story then she must be the villain, even though, as Fewell and Gunn note, God identifies her as unable to understand morality (1996, p.24). In her life, Bareilles experienced a male figure with God-like power over her removing her sense of purity, and she universalises her experience through the first woman. Bareilles accuses men of inverting the creation narrative, of fashioning a God in their own image who punishes women, in order to justify men's actions. Again, she does not vilify the sacred texts nor faith in them, but rather their use by the powerful to control others in the name of "God". She blames male-lead Christianity for creating their own paradise in which to imprison women, and for corrupting the image of God.

Alanis Morissette presents a similar argument in a gentler tone in "Ablaze" (2020), describing the alienation among humankind and between them and God as "a lie we've been believing since time immemorial." The Genesis creation story frames this disharmony as an inevitable consequence of the transgression in Eden, but Morissette rejects this, arguing that efforts to unite humanity can work without divine intervention, that human efforts can *be* divine intervention in themselves. She tells her children their bond is "unshakeable, even if we all forgot at the same time," echoing the sentiment of Isaiah 49:14-16, that the Lord's love remains even when earthly love forgets. In a similar way to Bareilles, Morissette accepts scripture but rejects Christian

representations of it, emphasising the agency of mankind and the need for change. Having heard tracks like “Her” (2020) and “Guru” (2012), we understand that the *spirit* of faith is more important to Morissette than the letter of religious law, and she challenges rigid forms of religion, preferring a more individualistic approach. Her personal relationship with Christianity, particularly Catholicism, is clearly displayed in the music video for “Reasons I Drink” as we see her become visibly uncomfortable in the presence of a priest (Morissette 2020). Although “Eight Easy Steps” (2004) confirmed a persistent faith in *God*, “Reasons I Drink” reflects back to an earlier release, “Forgiven” (1995), which explored her deep discomfort and trauma resulting from her Catholic upbringing, indicating that those emotional scars have not yet faded. Like the others, Morissette embraces faith without religion, rejecting its rigidity and ritual in favour of a more comforting relationship with God alone.

These artists use their music as a method of sharing not only their faith, but their opinions regarding religious structures. Although they have professed faith in God, their experiences of organised religion are often those of discomfort. The anger and upset they feel is not always directed at God but at humans, usually men, who design and utilise religious structures to serve their own interests at the expense of others. Their negative personal experiences tie into larger issues of sexism and oppression, so their music becomes socially and culturally relevant to not only religious people, but also those harmed by religion. Religion is corruptible (potentially already irreversibly corrupted) and a perversion of God’s message. The artists hold on to their personal relationships with God to stabilise themselves in a world where religion has let them down. Their God does not need restrictive, prescriptive forms of Christianity.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, sincere and traditional Christian beliefs have pervaded contemporary pop music, often juxtaposed with political and sexual content. These artists are not afraid to present their faith in eyebrow-raising fashions, such as Lady Gaga's hyper-sexualised Jesus and Judas or Lana Del Rey's pop-culture-saturated fantasy world. The sincerity of their prayers situates the rest of their religious commentary in an explicitly Christian-influenced mind set as they follow templates of prayers of intercession, praise and penance. The artists all expect their audiences to have the biblical and Christian literacy to recognise images from Genesis and traditional prayer formats, to recognise their God and their worship. "Creator of heaven and earth" is a fitting title for any one of their personal "Gods" but their understanding of this creation varies. Gaga and Beyoncé nearly deify humanity, while traditional imagery of the fall from Eden heavily influences Del Rey's personal theology as she struggles in a world of sin.

Sin and judgement are prevalent throughout the music analysed and highlight the sexist/puritan expectations the women feel from Christian spheres. A sense of hopelessness persists as the artists refuse to suppress their sexual desires but struggle to disconnect their sexuality from sinfulness, instead accepting their status as sinners. Florence + the Machine express feelings of guilt so strong that God's judgement is not enough, and execute their own punishment as a means of atonement, but they hold out hope for the afterlife, like many others, confident in God's mercy and in the existence of heaven. The expressions of this faith range from Beyoncé's straightforward, peaceful imagery to Del Rey's twisted battle with suicidal ideation. Their God is all-powerful, judgemental, wise and merciful, but combining all of these aspects is a battle these artists have not quite won, as they cannot comprehend a God who could

simultaneously love and condemn them, meaning that often only one of these aspects appears at a time.

The Gods of these artists are gender-fluid, not restricted by Christian thinking. As women they need non-masculine, non-hierarchical power which represents them and the people they love. They have no fear of venturing outside of Christianity for beauty and imagery, amalgamating various traditions to satisfactorily express their personal understandings of the divine. Beyond Christianity, images of femininity, mercy and shared power are appealing, implying an understanding of the God of Christianity as masculine/male, vengeful and monopolising. This expression of God is so uncomfortable to them that they become cynical of Christian churches, challenging traditions and dogmas which benefit the (usually male) powerful with Christian hierarchies. Their God breaks down the boundaries of Christianity and tends to their needs on a personal level. Their motivations are both political and personal, and the results are powerful challenges to the status quo.

This chapter has covered a wide range of musical, visual and theological content, all of which informs our understanding of the relationship the artists mentioned have with the God they each believe in. By understanding this relationship, we can begin to understand the needs and expectations they have which are not met by the God of Christianity, or which traditional, patriarchal Christian power structures prevent them from seeing in that God. The following chapters discuss the ways in which these needs are met by other figures, developing a conversation regarding the spiritual needs of female pop artists of the 21st century and of their audiences.

Love of Others: Love, Sex and Sanctity

Introduction

Intense romantic or sexual love can transform a relationship into one of devotion, as one's partner becomes divine in one's eyes. The conflation of romanticism and deification has circulated Christian culture for centuries. Arblaster and Verdeyen comment that in the middle ages, Hadewijch and William both "chose poems about human lovers as the best mode with the best metaphors to give voice to their ineffable spiritual experiences" (2017, p.49). In the pieces analysed below, modern pop artists merge images of earthly love with those of the divine, creating pieces which worship human lovers and their relationships, celebrate the sacramental in the sexual, the "sinful" aspects of their love and the power plays which occur within relationships. This inversion of and development upon the traditions of Hadewijch and William shifts the focus of the art from God to humanity, reminiscent of Rembrandt's understanding of the image of God present in all human beings, turning all art into "supreme religious art" (Gorringe 1995, pp.18-19). The artists below discuss the inherent divinity within their lovers, at times expressing a Johannine theology of creation - a belief that Jesus, as the Word of God, is the root of all life and "the light of all people" (John 1:1-5) - and at others pushing the boundaries between artistic expression, love and blasphemy.

Jeanrond writes that "love seeks the other. Love desires to relate to the other, to get to know the other, to experience the other's life, to spend time with the other" (2010, p.2), and in their music, contemporary female pop artists express their appreciation for the others they share their lives with. Their desire to relate to their partners often becomes a desire to subjugate themselves to their partners, unable to express the love they feel without adjusting the power dynamics at play. These reactions to intense adoration of another both result

from and cause changes in the artists' understanding of God and the relationship between humanity and divinity. Many of these artists require a God with whom they can share the entirety of the human experience, including their physicality, sensuality and sexuality, and this chapter discusses whether such a relationship is possible with the God of Christianity.

Godly Lovers

Dedicating oneself to a lover can often be presented as religious devotion towards them, as the "perfection" one perceives in their loved one appears divine. Equally, dedication to Jesus and/or God can appear almost erotic at times, blurring the lines between earthly and divine love. This can lead either to blasphemous territory or to incredibly personal testimonies of love experienced in a variety of ways. When we understand God to be an entirely perfect, entirely lovable being, then our experience of God is easily comparable to our experiences of love on earth.

In the previously discussed music video for "Judas" (Lady Gaga 2011b), the competition between Jesus and Judas for Lady Gaga's attention becomes sexually charged as the situation intensifies. As Gaga's personal dilemma heightens, she becomes physically closer to both men, drawn towards them by desire. On screen, this creates sexual tension between the characters which some may find uncomfortable, but is not a product of modern secular interference in theological art. Bal highlights the eroticism in Caravaggio's religious works, as "it can only be on and in such bodies that the religious content took hold" (2001, p.8). As human beings, we relate to the world as we encounter it; physically. Gaga's blending of the spiritual and the physical brings religion into *her* sphere, displaying it in ways that she and her audience

can understand. That said, in this corporeal sphere she must encounter Jesus as a physical force, and so the sensuality of their relationship becomes crucial to understanding the emotions behind the piece. Rembrandt too "turns to stories where the humanity of Jesus - not Jesus as God-Man - is in the foreground" (Gorringe 1995, p.17). Jesus came to earth, "Word became flesh" (John 1:14), thus interaction with the flesh shapes our interactions with Jesus and with God. While stories of the divinity of Jesus may inspire prayers of worship, tales of his humanity inspire connection and identification. Jesus allows access to a physical God who can be appreciated in the reality of bodily life, who can help Gaga to express her needs and her struggles in language which reflects her lived experience, which brings the Word into the flesh.

"Sinner's Prayer" (Lady Gaga 2016) echoes the ambiguity of Madonna's "Like a Prayer" (1989) as Gaga sings to an unidentified person, "I don't wanna break the heart of any other man but you." Hulsether notes that the easiest thing to do in pop culture is "simply to reproduce dominant images" (2005, p.88), and that with "Like a Prayer", Madonna used the dominant images of love and sexuality in pop culture in tandem with religious imagery to spark the imaginations of her audience. Neither "Like a Prayer" nor "Sinner's Prayer" identify the object of the singer's desires, and while it would be easy to assume that these singers are deifying their human partners, it is very possible that these are songs of devotion to God. As "Judas" (Lady Gaga 2011b) showed, Gaga's personal faith is far from prudish, and this kind of romantically-charged language fits cleanly into her religious explorations. Both Madonna and Lady Gaga are known to court controversy and these songs - whether read as sexualisation of God, Jesus or a human lover - certainly further this branding. Gaga's God cannot keep her from these metaphors and bodily temptations. She needs a God who can understand and accept these expressions of her humanity and all of its complicated facets.

Images of Jesus are not uncommon in Gaga's music but appear in several love songs. Lady Gaga herself sang, "when you're gone, I'll tell them my religion's you", "when Pontius comes to kill the king upon his throne, I'm ready for their stones" (2011 "Bloody Mary"). Here we see Gaga addressing her lover as if he were Jesus, devoting herself to him as her Messiah. This intense approach to relationships is not unique to "Bloody Mary" as the lyrics to "Yoü and I" (Lady Gaga 2011) show Jesus is no more important to her than her father or her lover. Gaga is clearly not afraid of the jealous God of Exodus 20, or is too potentially overwhelmed by the strength of her human connections to consider the potential ramifications of her divided devotion. She is far from alone, however, as the trend of deifying lovers in Christian terms stretches beyond her discography. Beyoncé's "Ave Maria" (2008) not only samples Schubert's hymn but also refers to her lover as "my last, my first," a title which Revelation reserves for God (21:6; 22:13). This is a step further than "Halo" (Beyoncé 2008) which relies heavily on angelic imagery but stops short of deifying her lover. These self-identified Christian artists use explicitly problematic language in their declarations of love, easily interpreted as trivialisations of the Christian faith. However, as previously discussed regarding Lady Gaga's "Aura" (2013), religious language is a rich source of metaphor. What these artists lack in the secular realm is an appropriate vocabulary to express their personal feelings. The strength of these feelings of love is so great that only words of religious dedication are able to convey the experience. Gorringe writes that Rembrandt's religious art centres around an understanding of "the human form divine" (1995, p.18), an acknowledgement that God's greatness is expressed through each individual person created "in the image of God" (Gen 1:27). Pop artists like Lady Gaga and Beyoncé *also* express "the human form divine," as they worship goodness in their lovers, goodness which their faith tells them originates from God. Their faith informs

their art, as with artists throughout history, and their God is one who can be worshipped through their creation, including humanity.

These female artists also use their art to reflect on how their lovers deify *themselves*, how they claim respect and abuse power which does not belong to them. The video for Beyoncé's "Hold Up" (2016b) contains a long and intense monologue which depicts the many ways in which Beyoncé purified herself for her partner, Jay Z. Her dedication to him is expressed in explicitly religious and ritual terms as she speaks of fasting, abstinence, traditional Catholic sacraments and even self-flagellation in an attempt to be "softer, less awake". The, at times vulgar, monologue, precedes a song of desperation, throughout which Beyoncé praises Jay Z, telling him "there's no other man above you" and begging him to be faithful to her. However, on the same album, she criticises him for this "God complex" (Beyoncé 2016 "Don't Hurt Yourself") before calling him out on his nickname, "Jay-Hova", a play on YHWH. Beyoncé's change in attitude between tracks here highlights the difficulties she experiences within her relationship, with Jay Z's need for constant affirmation and worship in order to keep his attention on his marriage, and the destructive effect that his ego has on Beyoncé and their marriage. While "there's no other man above" Jay Z in Beyoncé's eyes, there is God, presiding over all men. The marriage has begun to reflect the metaphorical marriage between YHWH and YHWH's people, with Beyoncé taking on the role of submissive wife and Jay Z attempting to embody God, demanding worship and punishing her indiscretions (Brenner 1996, p.63). This template for marriage is not one which works within Beyoncé's modern worldview and she rejects it. Her feminisation of God within "Don't Hurt Yourself" (Beyoncé 2016) may be a reaction to her own discomfort with the deification of a male over a female and her need to further subjugate Jay Z, not to the power of just anyone, but specifically to the power of a woman.

Lana Del Rey experiences no such discomfort with elevating her lovers to godhood within her art. Her 2019 poem, “Quiet Waiter Blue Forever,” describes her lover as “my love my laughter my armor my maker”, referencing not only the Apostles’ Creed’s declaration of a creator God, but also Ephesians 6:10-17, which speaks of the “armour of God” (NRSV). Her lover provides her with a feeling of supernatural protection which she does not acknowledge as God, and their impact on her life makes her who she is. This is an increase in reverence from her earlier works, which described her lover as her “religion” (2015 “Religion”) protected by gargoyles (2012 “Bel Air”), but now they are God, the object of her ultimate devotion. Marton preaches that “God may be approached through beauty,” (2015, p.52) and Del Rey finds her God in that which is most beautiful to her. Her God is someone she can interact with, not distant but present and physical, undeniably real. Like Beyoncé and Lady Gaga, the “human form divine” appeals to Del Rey (Gorringe 1995, p.18), a form of divinity immediately accessible to her, more conceivable than a far removed God.

Discomfort with this deifying language arises from the potential for idol worship occurring within relationships, a practice condemned by God in Exodus 20:1-6. Halsey’s difficult relationship with God and penchant for writing about her love/sex life results in some interesting examples of idol-worship in her music, and a remarkable level of self-awareness surrounding the issue. “Coming Down” (Halsey 2015) depicts a relationship tainted by her lover’s substance abuse and the highs and lows which accompany his habit. We are introduced to a moment of bliss as Halsey sings “I found God, I found him in a lover,” echoing Gorringe’s words regarding Rembrandt’s work. However, this acknowledgement of human’s divine creation takes a dark turn as she informs us, “I found a saviour, I don’t think he remembers.” As her lover comes down from his high, he is no longer the

idol she loved and worshipped, and cannot even remember the experience which was so poignant to her. Her salvation is intermittent, but Halsey still chooses to reject the Christian belief in "the very exclusive notion of salvation uniquely through Jesus, as Christ, the sole saviour of all humanity," (Ashwin-Siejkowski 2009, p.8) in favour of a belief system which she already knows cannot fulfil her needs. She attempts to replace God with a fallible human, and although it does not work perfectly, she feels more comfort than with the God of Christianity. Despite the constant disappointment she experiences, she understands this "saviour," and how to conjure his grace, regardless of its brevity. The sporadic bliss she feels is more certain, more tangible than the promises of Christianity, and she puts her faith in what she has evidence of - her lover and his drugs.

She is not alone in submitting herself to a religious icon which cannot sustain her, however. In "What Kind of Man" (Florence + the Machine 2015), Florence Welch sings "with one kiss, you inspired a fire of devotion that lasts for twenty years," as she reflects upon a relationship which hurt her deeply. These women use human love interests as replacements for God because they find no greater comfort in the God of Christianity than in these people who hurt them. Marton writes that "that is why David wrote the Psalms, because those are his testimonies and personal feelings" (2015, p.28). These songs are the testimonies of the artists singing them, declarations that they found more peace and support in a fallible earthly relationship than in one with the divine. While Del Rey finds ultimate comfort in her lover, Halsey and Welch are disappointed by theirs but stay anyway. Any God they have learned of has disappointed them even more than their earthly partners. Having faith in a fallible man's ability to be somewhat good and make them somewhat happy is easier than believing in an infallible deity bringing unconditional love and joy.

Through the medium of pop music, these artists deify and worship their lovers, both metaphorically and literally, elevating them to superhuman status within their lives, and simultaneously subjugating themselves to their partners, which will be addressed later in this chapter. The Christian image of God is less accessible to these women than their human lovers are, and the love they experience on earth is more tangible and evident than that which may come from a supernatural deity. The love and appreciation they have for their lovers is overwhelming to the point of worship, so they replace God with the earthly object of their desire, celebrating the divine in them while recognising their flaws. There is less intimidation in the presence of an equally flawed being, and the women protect themselves from the vulnerability of exposing themselves to a truly higher power. Even when Jesus' image is brought into the sensual realm, he becomes human, more understanding of the human condition and less threatening than the disembodied YHWH. By worshipping the humanity of their lovers, these artists find beauty in their own humanity, involving themselves and their bodies in the world of the divine. They need to feel appreciated by their God, and physical relationships provide tangible evidence of their appreciation.

Heavenly Relationships

Sometimes love itself, the connection between an artist and their lover, is what is deemed holy. 1 John 4:8 states that "God is love" (NRSV), and these artists often invert this statement, making gods out of their earthly love for other humans. Unlike in the songs previously discussed, one person does not bear the title of God, but the relationship between two people is worshipped, with neither individual being holy alone but both being sanctified by their mutual love and shared experiences. However, as in cases of deification of lovers,

these artists sometimes find that their relationships cannot fulfil their needs and they label them “false gods”, a waste of their worship. While the artists respond to the Christian doctrine of 1 John 4:8, they apply the concept to their lived experience of earthly love rather than searching for another love beyond the corporeal world.

Rihanna’s music frequently reflects upon this idea of wasted worship and false idols. In “Say It” (2008), she sings that “we can find heaven if we go look together,” but “Sell Me Candy” from the same album has a more cynical tone as she tells her lover to “sell me heaven, sell me doves” (2008). The naivety of “Say It” is countered by the understanding in “Sell Me Candy” that her lover is doing just that, selling Rihanna on an *idea* rather than providing any real paradise. The heaven she finds with her lover is momentary, an illusion caused by her *desire* for paradise, and in “Sell Me Candy” she begs for it again, content to pay any price that this joy may cost her. She is happy to worship, even if her god-replacement is deficient. Taylor Swift expresses a similar sentiment in “False God” - “even if it’s a false god, we’d still worship this love” (2019). The positive aspects of the artists’ relationships matter more to them than whether the joy is real or the love true. If God is love then these relationships may be driven by lust or desire, but fall short of pure, selfless, agapeic love. Jeanrond writes that “Love desires the good things and happiness. Moreover, love desires these ‘for ever’” (2010, p.15). Within these relationships, women like Swift and Rihanna attempt to manifest love when they are unsure that they are organically experiencing it, desiring goodness and happiness in the moment, not for eternity. The desire for *any* experience of love is more important than waiting for the *right* experience of love. The true nature of absolute love can be overwhelming to humans, who are fallible and can only love fallibly. If God is love, and God is beyond human understanding, then true love is also beyond human understanding, so these

artists settle for something they can comprehend, a safer bet. These women replace an elusive God who embodies love with a relationship which tangibly and immediately provides it, even if only in pieces.

Halsey's self-aware cynicism addresses this issue in "Forever" (2020) as she describes the rise and fall of her past relationships; "Build love, build God, build provinces, build calluses, break promises." She recognises the presence of the divine in the loving sphere she creates with her partner, but also the imperfections in her man-made paradise. Their love is hard work and she is damaged and hardened by the time her commitment to it fails and she breaks the foundational promises of her Eden. Jeanrond describes love as "not principle, but praxis," (2010, p.5) a task rather than an idea, but the effort this love entails takes a visible toll on the participants. The God that they build is only as perfect as its creators and is doomed to fail, but still Halsey repeats the pattern, unable to find anything else to fulfil her need to worship. As previously discussed, Halsey's rejection of God is outright and founded in her painful personal experiences, and here we see her accept a lesser God which inspires less hope and therefore causes less hurt when God disappoints her. There is comfort in the cyclical, predictable pattern of losing her godly relationships, more than can be provided by an unknowable deity. Her expectations of herself and of others' capacity to love her are pathetic, so a weak, mortal "Big God" is enough to fulfil them.

The metaphor of a crumbling Eden is a popular one, as previously discussed in reference to Sara Bareilles' work. In 2018, Dua Lipa declared her relationship to be an idyllic paradise in "Genesis", before admitting its flaws in "Garden," addressing the work involved in maintaining the peace and the lack of faith that both parties had in their Eden. This lack of faith left them in the land of Genesis 4, expelled from their comfort by their doubt. This fits well with the

biblical account of the expulsion from Eden; as Adam and Eve doubted the wisdom of God and broke God's rules, so do Dua Lipa and her lover doubt their love, the creator of their Eden, and fall away. This theme also appears in Nina Nesbitt's early work, with "The Apple Tree" (2014) depicting a fall from Eden caused by her lover's rejection of her in favour of an external "temptation" which draws them to the apple tree, "naive as Adam and Eve." For both artists, the paradisiacal Eden is the result of pure love which creates a realm removed from the pains of earthly life. However, this paradise is fragile and can easily be destroyed by the choices of the Adam and Eve characters in each metaphor. In all of these songs, the sacrifices made to maintain the idyllic relationship are too great a cost, unearthing the undercurrent of dissatisfaction beneath the utopia. The imagery of the Genesis creation and expulsion stories has made a significant cultural imprint, creating a simple and effective metaphor for these and many other artists to express the delicate bliss of their love. There is an expectation for their audiences to understand not only the concept of Eden, but also the relevance of love, trust and temptation to the story, and the consequences of leaving the garden. In all of these songs, though, the Eden created by human love takes work to sustain, a condition of existence only introduced in Genesis 3:17-19 as a consequence of Adam and Eve's disobedience. "Human love can escape the human conditions of time, space and language at the price of death" (Jeanrond 2010, p.7); all human creations, even those deriving from human love, must come to an end, while God's creations may exist outside the realm of death as God does. Eden and its God remain appealing but ultimately unreachable for the artists and their romances.

Beyond death, as discussed, lies "life everlasting" (Felix 1935) and the concept of heaven. For some artists, their love reaches beyond earthly life to the paradise of the afterlife. Jeanrond describes how "particularly blissful

experiences of love have been enjoyed by people who then have claimed that they have entered heaven," referencing those who have survived near-death experiences (2010, p.10), but the theme is found frequently in popular music. Lana Del Rey repeatedly insists that she experiences heaven with her lovers: "Heaven is a place on earth with you" (2012 "Video Games"); "Give it to me, this is Heaven, what I truly want" (2012 "Gods & Monsters"); "Heaven is on earth, I would do anything for you, baby. Blessed is this union" (2014 "Ultraviolence"). Her heaven is impure though, based in lust and hedonism rather than the selfless peace preached by Jesus in the New Testament. Imperfect copies of a perfect creator, removed from grace by the stain of original sin, she and her lover are incapable of creating something any purer than they are as individuals. Beyoncé's heavenly love brings her Christian theology into the mix; "True love brought salvation back into me. With every tear came redemption" ("All Night" video, 2016). Her entry into heaven is dependent on her salvation, which is provided by the love she shares with Jay Z. While the Apostles' Creed acknowledges the significance of the link between suffering and salvation, "only Christ can lift up the whole of humanity to its original place and statue which was lost through the disobedience of Adam and Eve" (Ashwin-Siejkowski 2009, p.29). Christianity maintains that Jesus taking corporeal form constituted "the manifestation of divine love on earth" (Jeanrond 2010, p.11), and Beyoncé compares the blending of physical and spiritual love within her relationship to Jesus himself. As stated previously, human love is limited in a way that Jesus/God's love is not, and only God's love can provide the salvation Beyoncé requires, despite her emotional reliance on Jay Z. Her tears did not bring redemption, Jesus' blood did. It is important to note that these artists believe that love is the key to eternal happiness, a Christian doctrine which has spread into the arguably secular space of sexual and romantic relationships. The artists credit their

relationships with a saving love which is traditionally God’s alone. The connection between them becomes a divine party in its own right, both separated from and connected to the relationship’s participants.

The metaphor of a paradisiacal love is common and easy to understand with minimal theological education, drawing on images of Eden and heaven to reflect the comfort and safety that a relationship can provide. The objectification of the relationship itself as a third party separate from the individual lovers allows for the very idea of love to be worshipped, rather than a person. In these images we see varying levels of appreciation for the nuances of Christian theology, alongside varying degrees of self-awareness and cynicism regarding the relationships. All of the artists seem to agree that love has its own power, but while some (Beyoncé, Lana Del Rey) decide to bask in the positive feelings associated with it, others (Dua Lipa, Nina Nesbitt, Rihanna, Taylor Swift) acknowledge its humanity and fallibility, even if they fall short of ceasing worship altogether. Though the more positive representations seem to equate human love with God’s love, or Godself, the cynicism of the others recognises that only God can create perfect entities and that human efforts take hard work and produce imperfect results. This internalised doctrine of an infallible deity and the fallibility of humanity pervades the music and resonates with audiences, spreading an implicitly Christian doctrine through romantic/sexual music. Some artists retain hope that one day a relationship with the God of Christianity will save them from the heartache of their human relationships, but others require human lust and love to heal from the disappointment they experience as God fails to provide the happiness they desire.

Sacramental Sex

Sexual desires and practices have long been disapproved of throughout the history of Christianity, with beliefs that “even carnal desire between spouses ought to be curbed, and conjugal intercourse vigilantly regulated for the exclusive purpose of procreation” (Frank 2003, p.48) being popular only a few centuries ago. While Genesis’s call to “be fruitful and multiply” (1:28) irrevocably involves sexuality with Christian theology, Paul’s condemnation of “sexually immoral persons” (1 Corinthians 5:9) casts an ambiguous shadow over sexual desire and the morality of various sex acts. Fewell and Gunn note that a double standard is established with regard to sexual sin and shame throughout the Bible, citing both the Genesis creation narrative and that of Amnon and Tamar as evidence of the excessive shaming of women in sexual relationships/situations in comparison to their male counterparts (1996, p,26).The following section analyses the attitudes surrounding sex and religion in contemporary pop music, with sex acts compared to sacraments, ritual worship and prayer against a cultural background of the demonisation of lust and female sexuality.

Jeanrond writes that “all loving relations into which we humans are capable of entering are made possible, but are also limited, by our physical existence,” (2010, p.10). Given that our earthly experiences are undeniably corporeal, the act of sex can be a deeply loving exchange, with the closeness of bodies reflecting the emotional closeness of the participants. Taylor Swift’s “State of Grace” and “Holy Ground” (2012) address this issue, once more equating the power of human love with that of divine love. In both songs, the physical surroundings of the relationship become sanctified by the purity of its love. Florence + the Machine’s “Bedroom Hymns” sexualises this concept by suggesting that the bed where the couple have sex is sanctified by the act, making it an “altar” (2011). Now, the sex taking place on the altar becomes sacramental, both sanctifying and being sanctified, as Florence sings “this is

his body, this is his love," referencing the Eucharist (Matthew 26:26-28) and equating her partner's body with Jesus' sacrifice. Halsey similarly compares her lover and Jesus in "Coming Down" as she sings that her false God has made her "such a fool for sacrifice" (2015). This idea of sex as a sacrifice highlights the power exchange present in the sharing of one's body and the vulnerability which it entails. In exposing themselves to their partners, the participants (in these examples, particularly male participants) offer a part of themselves to their lovers for their pleasure, weakening and debasing themselves in the process. These artists connect male sacrifice in all of its forms with the sacrifice of Jesus, deifying their lovers in even the most human of contexts.

Dua Lipa calls her lover "manna from heaven," ("Hotter Than Hell", 2016), continuing the themes of sanctified food and sex as consumption, but employing a more ancient metaphor. This and other lyrics from her debut album connect her lover and their relationship to the Hebrew Bible and tales which pre-date but exist within Christianity. This pre-Christian imagery lacks the male, human figure of Jesus, removing a third human party from the relationship and focussing rather on the formless YHWH. This God blesses and affects the relationship without placing any barriers between or around the lovers. Here, God facilitates the couple's union and feeds Dua Lipa (or her soul), sustaining her through the act of sex. The sexualisation of the God of the Hebrew Bible is not a new phenomenon, with both Jewish and Christian communities reading the Songs of Solomon as an erotic allegory for God's relationship with humanity (Brenner 1996, p.65). While, traditionally, God takes the male role and Israel the female, Brenner suggests the allegorical reading requires a gender swap, with God taking the active female role and humanity the passive male role, allowing the power dynamic between deity and creation to remain intact. This gender swap results in an image of a

sex-positive, all-powerful woman-God, a far cry from the repressive language found in Romans 8:6-8, condemning "the mind that is set on flesh" (NRSV). A feminine God of the Songs of Solomon appears more likely to grant Dua Lipa her sexual manna than Paul's God of the Jesus movement. The Christian imagery of God works against Dua Lipa's expectations of God, denying the sexual pleasures she believes God would allow humanity.

The Roman Catholic sacrament of reconciliation is another popular theme throughout music dealing with sexual intercourse. Taylor Swift's "False God" (2019) tells her lover to "make confessions and we're begging for forgiveness" as the sexual relationship brings out the couple's vulnerabilities and inspires them to be better. However, this need for forgiveness during sex, like Paul's writings, ties human sexuality to sinfulness, even while celebrating the sexual relationship. Ashwin-Siejkowski writes that the Apostles' Creed's mention of Mary's virginity "suggests that the early Christians were obsessed with the idea of 'purity', 'abstinence', 'life-long virginity' or 'sexual pollution'" (2009, p.35). Lyrics like Swift's suggest that this obsession has continued through time and bled into secular popular culture, though now heavily diluted. Even in the celebration of sexuality there is demonisation. Florence + the Machine's "Bedroom Hymns" (2011), however, counters this position as Florence sings that the act of sex facilitates "sweating out confessions", before stating that she is "not here for absolution." Although she feels lightened and sanctified by the sex, this feeling is merely a side effect, with the sexual pleasure itself being her ultimate goal. The cleansing aspects of sweat and physical exertion serve to provide the phenomenon of spiritual detoxing, but Florence does not rely on an external force to forgive her for any sins she may have committed. This lyric acknowledges the cultural assumption that a woman may desire absolution from sexual sins, but reflects

Florence’s refusal to bow to these expectations. Her God does not hold her sexuality against her, instead celebrating it with her.

Beyoncé and Lana Del Rey stop short of sacramental metaphors but still find aspects of worship in their sex lives, comparing the connections they have with their partners to prayer (Beyoncé 2011 “Schoolin’ Life”; Rihanna 2015 “Religion”). They feel a connection which transcends the physical, as well as providing comfort and relief from the hardships of the day. Jeanrond writes that “Either the erotic realm is judged to stand in contradiction to the transcendent spirit of religion and therefore has to be excluded as sinful from divinely inspired relations; or the erotic realm is considered vital for the relationship between the believer and God and thus becomes an important object for theological reflection” (2010, p.16). Beyoncé and Del Rey choose the latter, using the state of elation and tranquillity they experience during sex as a lens through which they view their relationships with their partner, God and the rest of the world. Although not sacramental, their sex lives sustain them through the rest of their time on earth as a gateway to the divine, be that their partner or a deity.

Despite the often disparaging messages about sexual desires and practices which exist within both traditional Christianity and contemporary Christian-influenced culture, several contemporary female pop artists connect their sexual experiences to religious practices. The metaphors of sacraments, prayer and worship place emphasis on the power, grace and deep connection found in these sexual practices. Not always *replacing* religion with sexual desire, these artists blend the two spheres, integrating their physical body and its abilities and desires with their spirituality to approach their faith from a personal perspective. This merging of religion and sexuality highlights the emotional and spiritual dimensions of the physical process of sex and

reproduction. “In the heterosexual households of Western capitalism the pleasures of the body take on a different socio-economic structure and shift from a means of production to a culture of consumption” (Carrette 2005, p.20); sex is not simply a means to an end, a biological necessity of God’s creation, but also a realm of pleasure and satisfaction, physically, emotionally and spiritually. Sex is just one aspect of a lived bodily experience, an experience which informs and is informed by one’s own relationship with the divine, and these artists and their Gods break away from the constraints of puritanical expectations and sexual repression.

Hellish Lovers

Though the worshipping of lovers is a common theme within female-led pop music, artists are nevertheless wont to demonise those they once praised. Frank discusses how, during the renaissance, “witches were not only Satan’s worshipers but also his sexual slaves”, and how this connection between powerful, sexual women and demonic forces has continued over time within western culture (2003, p.52). This connection between female sexuality and the devil leads to female artists describing lovers who bring out their sexual side as demonic. Images from Milton’s “Paradise Lost” echo throughout contemporary art, rooting the metaphors of the present day in historical Christian understandings of the natural order. The artists discussed use this trope to explore sexual relationships which involve negative behaviours and emotions, exuding the same power as those deemed “heavenly” but with a more dangerous side.

Halsey’s 2015 “Coming Down” describes first how she “found God” in her lover, then how she “found the devil” in the same man. 2 Corinthians 11:14-15

says that “even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is not strange if his ministers also disguise themselves as ministers of righteousness” (NRSV), a sentiment reflected in the evolution of Halsey’s relationship with this man. Although at first he appears to offer the heavenly love discussed above, Halsey soon finds his love to be conditional and impure, with their sexual relationship taking precedence over their emotional connection. Fernie comments on the “restless, urgent, hungry, guilty and fatiguing” sex found in “Paradise Lost” after Adam and Eve betray God’s trust (2012, p.80), an “expressly demonic” sign of their fall from grace. The imagery from Milton’s iconic poem bleeds into other areas of pop culture and is echoed here in Halsey’s understanding of her own relationship as depraved and sin-filled. Within Paradise Lost, “Heaven is not so easily and absolutely distinguishable from Hell, and [...] God isn’t so easily and absolutely distinguishable from Satan” (Fernie 2012, p.74), and here we see Halsey mistake hellish passion for heavenly euphoria. The blending of this boundary between heaven and hell, good and evil, allows for a reading of the text which is sympathetic to Halsey, the devil’s victim. A woman tricked by Satan’s “disguise” is more innocent than a willing accomplice and draws on the compassion of her audience and any deity to ensure the absolution of her sexual sins. What is clear is that Halsey’s God is more than simply powerful, God is good or, as Hart phrases it, “bliss” (2013, p.249). It is in *this* sense that her lover can never become her “Big God”; his power is sufficient but his morality is not.

Beneath Halsey’s performative innocence, however, lies a self-professed attraction to the devil and his works. In “Hold Me Down” (Halsey 2015), she claims to have “sold [her] soul” to a man who allows the devil to “hold [her] down”. This relationship is complex, however, as she sings, “he told me I was holy”, entangling her commitment to the devil with his worship of her. This twisted piece depicts a mutually destructive but addictive relationship, filled

with pain which is *just* insufficient to end it. Frank notes that for the devil to possess a person, traditionally, “a sinful state deriving from lust must open the way to an ever-growing deviancy from and desertions of grace” (2002, p.62). In “selling her soul,” Halsey fears she has opened a gateway to greater forces of evil in her life, which she feels stem from this male figure controlling her, either personally or professionally. This “slippery slope” idea of sin is easily relatable for an audience who live with such concepts of the devil pervading western culture. Christianity traditionally views individuals like Halsey, who enable sin to enter their lives, as easy prey for demonic forces, with only prayer and devotion to God as tools for their salvation. Although Halsey herself does not believe in the Christian God, these Christian ideas of the devil are imprinted into her personal belief system, affecting her perception of her own power and responsibility for the evils in her life. Once more, Halsey falls victim to a powerful man with corrupted morals and her understanding of her own involvement in her fate denies her the power to save herself from it. This diluted cultural dogma of demonic possession dehumanises her, enslaving her to her own sin.

Rihanna’s depiction of her demonic lover ties into Tertullian’s understanding of Satan as a fallen angel, spared by God for humans to be tempted by and reject in favour of God (Ashwin-Siejkowski 2010, p.22). “Even angels have their wicked schemes,” (Rihanna, Eminem 2010 “Love the Way You Lie Part II”); at once she recognises her lover’s capacity for angelic goodness and his “wicked” nature. Rihanna does not reject her lover entirely, though, singing “you’ll always be my hero.” Her dedication to the potential for good within him is a sign of her devotion but, like Halsey, she depicts a toxic and unstable relationship, with Eminem playing the role of the abusive but loyal partner. These depictions of demonic love rarely involve healthy or long-lasting relationships, but rather reflect the self-destructive tendencies of the artists

singing, appealing to the toxic traits of their audience members. Though these songs recognise the illogical and dangerous nature of these relationships, they do not offer a solution, instead wallowing in the humanity of sin-ridden love. According to Frank, “while the devil is the origin of humankind’s limitedness and fallibility, not all sins are committed at his instigation, because [...] all humankind is naturally always disposed to err - particularly with the sexual act” (2003, p.61). Despite this, these artists find comfort in placing the blame on a supernatural source of evil, absolving them of not only their sin but also their salvation. The figure of the devil creates a scapegoat who removes their freewill, preying on their fallibility and giving them no option but to sin. Rather than acknowledging that they may have facilitated the devil’s entrance into their lives, as Halsey does to some extent, some assign the responsibility for their crimes to the devil and to their God who fails to prevent their demise. These women paint themselves as damsels in distress, awaiting a hero to save them from their personal hell while failing to pray for their God’s assistance.

While some female artists find their saviour in their lover, others find that which they need saving from. “The deceiver of the whole world” (Rev.12:9, NRSV) embodies the ultimate villain, full of sexual immorality and enough power to strip the responsibility for salvation away from his prey. This victim complex draws on traditional Christian images of the devil, without inspiring prayer for salvation throughout these songs, leaving the artist and audience to immerse themselves in the helplessness of their humanity, at once aware of and apathetic towards their tendency to sin and cause pain to both themselves and others. A demonic lover is a sign of a dysfunctional relationship reliant upon self-destructive tendencies and a desire to believe in one’s lover’s capacity for goodness despite a lack of evidence. Any God of these artists is expected to intervene without being asked or acknowledged, and is complicit in their demonic encounter having failed to rescue them. Christianity gives

these artists the language and metaphors for their relationship with pain, but not the inspiration to attempt to free themselves from it. It leads them to hell and leaves them in the devil's grasp.

Power Exchanges and Inequalities

Whether good or evil, a supernatural partner always retains one major advantage over their human lover; power. The language of power imbalances in a sexual or romantic context has deep connections to BDSM practices, intensifying the metaphors at play in songs which deal with this issue. "BDSM (Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, Sadism and Masochism) is a recently coined acronym that evolved from the terms SM, S/M, or S&M (Sadism and Masochism)," (Monteiro Pascoal, Cardoso and Henriques 2015, p.1053) and when combined with a religious aspect, BDSM terms and practices emphasise the power imbalances present in both the interpersonal relationship and the artist's relationship with God. As Carrette writes, "religious discourses of suffering permeate into contemporary eroticism" (2005, p.16). The willing submission of one partner to another can be a healthy expression of love and sexual desire or a symptom of toxicity within the relationship, and these artists explore both possibilities.

Discussing the binary gender system established in the Genesis creation narratives, Fewell and Gunn state that, "simple binaries in fact lend themselves to hierarchies" (1996, p.20), in this case leading to patriarchal power structures which pervade Christian, and subsequently western, cultures. Beyoncé, despite deifying herself on several occasions later in her career, submitted to her husband, Jay Z, in "Rather Die Young" (2011) as she sings, "I'm giving you my life, it's in your hands." Both Ephesians 5:21-25 and 1

Corinthians 7:3-4 call for this level of dedication from a woman to her husband, but both call for the same dedication from the husband in return; "Love demands a total and reciprocal abandon" (Arblaster and Verdeyen 2017, p.47). However, as previously discussed, Jay Z's dedication to Beyoncé has been lacking throughout their relationship, and Beyoncé has shared their issues with infidelity on several occasions within her music. This imbalance in their commitment to a monogamous relationship leads to a power imbalance, with Jay Z subjugating Beyoncé and a patriarchal relationship model taking shape. This patriarchal model is, as Fewell and Gunn stated, a common and relatable phenomenon, and Beyoncé's audience will easily relate to her self-degradation for her husband's benefit. The Christian template of androcentric God-language and the gender binary of Genesis lays the foundation for this model as the male partner becomes a God-figure, worshipped by the female partner and maintaining power over the relationship.

Lana Del Rey extends this model outside of the marital sphere, applying it to her casual and extramarital relationships. The music video for "Born to Die" depicts her male partner repeatedly testing her loyalty to him by threatening her life, reminiscent of Abraham's trial in Genesis 22:1-19 (Del Rey 2011). Like the God of the Hebrew Bible, her lover needs to know that Del Rey is willing to give up everything for him, and she does not disappoint him. His self-deification is bolstered by her self-degradation as she provides him with the worship he craves. This is an escalation of the power imbalance found in Beyoncé's marriage, with the stakes raised from infidelity to death. Florence + the Machine similarly escalate the stakes with the threat of violence as Florence sings "The black and the blue, the sweetest submission" ("Bedroom Hymns" 2011). The bruises left on Florence from the couple's sexual activities can be read either as domestic violence or as BDSM, with the infliction of

pain being tied to power plays and sexual arousal. The key to understanding the context of this lyric lies in understanding the foundations of BDSM, mainly that “the significance of consent is central” (Carlström 2019, p.408). In “Bedroom Hymns”, Florence asks her lover to “make me your Maria, I’m already on my knees”, submitting to him as Mary, Jesus’ mother, did to God (Luke 1:38). This voluntary submission indicates a consensual sexual relationship, suggesting that the bruising was indeed BDSM, fulfilling the desires of both sexual partners. Carrette acknowledges the moral grey area of these practices, that “in complex worlds we can at times both simultaneously abuse and liberate in the same action” (2005, p.18). Although these relationships fall into the archetypal Christian, patriarchal model, the danger and pain involved twist the traditional template to fit a more sex-positive, kinky context. Christianity once again paves the way for these expressions of dedication and attraction, although the resulting lyrics and relationships may not immediately appear to be particularly orthodox. Beyoncé, Del Rey and Florence understand a God figure to be someone in complete control, and they consent to their own submissiveness in order to better worship their man-God.

In some situations where the lover is deified, these female artists reclaim their own power with their lyrics. Halsey’s “Strange Love” (2015) references her lover’s fan base as she sings “you walk like you’re a God, they can’t believe I made you weak.” Unlike Beyoncé, Florence or Del Rey, Halsey humanises her lover who is deified by the world outside of their relationship. While his fans view him as god-like, Halsey is the object of his desire, his weakness. Other artists lower themselves to worship their partners, but Halsey uses her power over hers to humble him. She becomes an Eve-like character, at once enriching and endangering her Adam’s lifestyle. Brenner notes that “man creates his god in his father’s image through the statement that god created man in his own divine image,” (1996, p.57) and Halsey’s audience cling to this

male God, more easily rejecting Halsey than considering that she may be more powerful than her idolised partner. Confident in her dominance, however, Halsey continues to display her power over her male lovers, as in "Without Me" (2020) she sings, "I filled your cup till it overflowed," referencing Psalm 23:4-5, deifying herself and assigning her lover the role of David, blessed but inferior. Despite her confidence, her lovers continue to receive greater acclaim and adoration than she does, as she sings "you know I'm the one who put you up there, name in the sky, does it ever get lonely?" (Halsey 2020 "Without Me"). Halsey recognises her own power and godliness, and challenges her lover's image of self-sufficiency. Not only does she attempt to humble him, but she raises a point similar to Fewell and Gunn's reading of Genesis 18: if God has no equal, then God remains alone, a fate which is "not good" (NRSV) (1996, p.21). Despite exalting herself, her demand for recognition actually calls not necessarily for a reversal of the power dynamics, but for gender equality which allows them both to thrive at the top of the cultural hierarchy. Her desire is for appreciation and credit, not subjugation. In "More" (Halsey 2020), Halsey rejected any absolute power, and she seeks equality.

Fewell and Gunn find issue with Genesis 3; "in a story where the man is passive and compliant and the woman active and assertive, for such a man to rule over such a woman's sexuality!" (1996, p.30) However, Lana Del Rey revels in this form of submission to her partner. Carlström found that many in the BDSM community "described their practice as a form of dependency" (2019, p.412), and Del Rey's desire to worship her partner appears to be almost obsessive, aspiring to please him almost exclusively through servility. Her repetitive use of imagery referencing the 1955 novel and subsequent film, "Lolita", places her in a youthful, naive and vulnerable position, and her song of the same name worships her (most likely older) partner, "shining like a God, can't believe I caught you" (Lana Del Rey 2012 "Lolita"). This naive

character finds power in her servile role, however, catching her lover as he plummets to his death, saving his life. Although she views him as infinitely greater than herself, she facilitates his greatness, assuming a crucial role in his life. Jeanrond writes that "love demands mutuality, not symmetry" (2010, p.20), and Del Rey finds herself on mutual ground with her lover when she assists him in living up to his full potential, even if that requires her to act as his subordinate. She understands the toxicity of this dynamic, singing in "Ultraviolence", "I'm your jazz singer and you're my cult leader," as the music video shows her as a bride carrying a bouquet of lilies (2014): this love will be the death of her. Her God is worth her pain.

Del Rey's approach to the power imbalance in her relationship is drastically different to Halsey's, and even to Beyoncé's. While Halsey demands that the balance be restored, Beyoncé and Del Rey encourage the perceived inequality. Beyoncé's humility is almost sacrificial as she forgoes her own happiness in order to facilitate Jay Z's, but Del Rey thrives in her submissive role, finding purpose in aiding her lover. For Florence Welch, submission is sexual, a consensual arrangement involved in BDSM practices, but not necessarily involved in life outside of the bedroom. Schüssler Fiorenza believes that "at the heart of the spiritual feminist quest is the quest for women's power, freedom and independence" (1994, pp.18-19), but the world of BDSM challenges this assumption. There is empowerment in voluntary disempowerment, and these artists explore this concept to varying degrees. The androcentric, hierarchical language of Christianity lays the groundwork for the exploration of female sexual degradation, but the practitioners themselves control the power (im)balances at play. The work of these women reflects a world both dismantling and reinforcing the demonisation of female sexuality. They expect their God to be powerful but to want and need a relationship with them, even if that relationship relies on asymmetry.

Conclusion

Jeanrond writes that “love is neither a Christian invention nor a Christian possession” (2010, p.29), but the artists discussed rely on traditional Christian images of love, sex, relationships and worship as templates for their romantic and sexual affairs. Through the deification and/or demonisation of their lovers, their sex acts and even the relationships themselves, they play with the power dynamics within the partnerships, exploring the effects their connections have on their self-esteem and lives as a whole. While the worship of one’s partner may appear to be an obvious expression of love and devotion, representations of lovers as satanic highlight a desire for something other than perfection, an attraction to danger and sin. While one can place the God of Christianity in an erotic role, as Hadewijch and others are wont to do, this gravitation towards wickedness is incompatible with the worship of a truly pure deity. This void left by the Christian God is filled easily by either a human counterpart who can be both exalted and defamed, or by the devil himself, a powerful but immoral creature capable of satisfying the artists’ lust.

Feminine sexuality has been condemned throughout the history of Christianity, particularly during the Renaissance (Frank 2003, pp.45-78), and associations between sexual women and the devil pervade popular culture to this day, as shown above. The hierarchical, patriarchal model established in the Genesis creation narrative and propagated within Christian cultures encourages the subjugation of women within personal and sexual contexts, but can be explored through the BDSM practices, often leading to a reclamation of one’s own sexuality and power as “the divine presence in acts of erotic exchange transforms them into mysterious encounters with our God-given power and our submission to God’s loving power” (Carrette 2005, p.25). “Respect for the

plurality of expressions must be part of any effort to conceptualize love" (Jeanrond 2010, p.9), and this chapter has tackled a multitude of expressions in an attempt to discover the desires and beliefs of the artists studied. Christianity provides a framework for discussions and understandings of love, but these artists develop their personal relationships and theologies of love beyond the confines of traditional Christian thought. If "the domestic patriarchal sphere is determined by sexual role differences and dependencies" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1994, p.86), then these women determine their own realities, attempting to reclaim their personhood, sexuality and power from a patriarchal framework which aims to deny them these freedoms. These pieces support Gorringe's suggestion of "rejecting all attempts to narrow down understandings of 'religious art'" (1995, p.19), instead appreciating the spirituality and religion present in all art, even that which may at first appear to be blasphemous, understanding that the image of God is present in art, artist and subject.

Love of Self: The Risks and Rewards of Self-Satisfaction

Introduction

A key feature connecting the work of these women is that the artists are just that; women. This chapter explores their personal relationship with themselves, their femininity and their womanhood, and the ways in which they deify, demonise and appease themselves in their lives and their music. Jeanrond reminds us that, throughout history (particularly Christian history), "Women have been understood as less perfect men. The matrix in which this insight was reached was not biology but gender" (2010, p.13). The patriarchal structures which reinforce this historic notion are embedded in western culture, and it is crucial that we keep this in mind when exploring representations of the feminine divine or demon, as these artistic efforts exist in reaction to the culture from which they derive. For no reason other than their personal identification, these women have been treated as inferior to their male counterparts. As Brenner tells us, "Literature is often reflexive of social attitudes, mores and norms," (1996, p.57) and these works mirror at least the immediate surroundings of the artists producing them, if not the wider context of western civilisation. Reclamations of feminine power and divinity echo the goddess cults found in early Jewish communities (Brenner 1996, p.62), while other presentations reinforce the gender hierarchy described by Jeanrond but, on both sides, a Christian theology pervades the imagery used.

Discussing Caravaggio's tourist appeal, Bal points out that "the lust for art not for God, sensual visual appeal not spirituality, brings most viewers into this church, and to these paintings," (2001, p.9) and the same is true of the fans of these artists and their songs. However, as with Caravaggio's work, whether it drew them there or is acknowledged by them or not, the theological content of this art is present and reaches out to its audience from its unconventional

setting. Although not every listener will recognise the theological themes in these pieces, the imagery will stay with them and influence their readings of other artistic works, informing the lens through which they view their own culture. The theology within the work of these artists lives on in the minds of their audience to varying degrees, continuing and moulding the cultural afterlife of various religious texts and traditions. This chapter analyses these theologies against Christian theologies, identifying similarities and differences in order to understand the ways in which these women supplement or replace the Christian God with themselves or substances intended to provide immediate relief from reality, and their reasons for doing so.

The Goddess Within

The most obvious topic for this chapter is the self-worship displayed in much modern female-driven pop music. The deification of the female form is at once empowering and problematic, with Christian imagery often edited to incorporate the artist at work in arguably blasphemous ways. As previously discussed, Schüssler Fiorenza writes that "The Christian religious ingredient is agapeic love which reduces frictions and leads to a 'willing acceptance of given inequalities [...] and structural hierarchies typical of a patriarchal society," (1994, p.78) but these female artists find and place themselves in positions of power within Christian texts and traditions. They see themselves in the key characters of Christian texts, so that their Christian, agapeic love allows them personal humility, rather than practical subjugation. The reclamation of their personal strength and power from the patriarchal systems they find themselves living under requires a gender-bending of the main characters of Christianity, including God. Ashwin-Siejkowski reminds us that, despite the androcentric language of the Bible, God's maleness is a human

fabrication caused by our own linguistic and mental restrictions (2009, p.16). This theology bleeds into the work of these artists, who alongside celebrating and deifying themselves, find and honour the wonder in their fellow women and the femininity within the divine.

As previously discussed, Lady Gaga does not shy away from her own deification, depicting herself as the ultimate creator, "Mother Monster" (Deflem 2017, p.128) in several performances, most notably her "Born This Way" music video (2011). Though the Magdalene themes of her character within the "Judas" music video (2011) are undeniable, she is simultaneously a representation of Jesus Christ, suffering at the hands of those who misunderstand God's desires. This theme is a continuation from the lyrics of "Electric Chapel", the track preceding "Judas" on the "Born This Way" album. These lyrics instruct Gaga's followers as she claims "my body is a sanctuary, my blood is pure" and commands that they "confess to me where you have been", "pray for your sins right under the glass disco ball". This explicit self-deification involves not only her personal attitude towards herself, but draws others into her church, demanding their worship and that they humble themselves before her. Her own self-love and reassurance is inadequate, and she requires the validation of those around her, even if it is inorganic. Deflem reports that "Gaga's presentation of her live shows as a "religious experience" and her call for "people to worship themselves" have likewise been condemned as unchristian" (2017, p.156) while Roberts has criticised her homogenisation of her audience (2017, p.180), but regardless of this criticism, the worship she demands is given to her. Reacting to a culture which has given her a need for external validation, Gaga takes this need to the extreme, and encourages her audience to follow her lead and worship themselves alongside her. The God of the Bible demands exclusive worship in the first of the ten commandments (Exodus 20), setting an example which Gaga modifies,

allowing her followers to praise themselves, as long as she retains her place atop the hierarchy. For Gaga, the monotheistic template of traditional Christianity lacks a nuance which would allow people to fully appreciate themselves and the people they admire, who are themselves God's creation.

Beyoncé's self-deification has involved not only traditionally African tribal deities ("Mood 4 Eva" 2019) but also more general godly terms alongside Marian imagery. While lyrics like "I'll be your sanctuary" ("Bigger" 2019) allude to her godliness in vague terms, the Marian imagery of both the music video for "Mine" (2013) and her 2017 pregnancy announcement post on Instagram (Beyoncé 2017) is undeniably Christian in origin. The use of the pieta pose in the video as Beyoncé sings "I'm not feeling like myself since the baby" draws a connection between Beyoncé, and therefore other mothers, and Mary the mother of Jesus. In the same moment, however, the distinction between them is clear. Mary remained "ever-Virgin" (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales 2011), physically unaffected by the process of childbirth due to her sinlessness (Ashwin-Siejkowski 2009, p.45), thus Beyoncé's experience of physical and mental difficulty during and after childbirth is far removed from the Christian understanding of Mary. Mariological piety places femininity close to the divine, as close as any human can be, but stops short of actual deification of a woman. In a similar way, unlike in "Mood 4 Eva" and "Bigger" (2019), Beyoncé actually stops short of self-deification, instead using the Marian imagery as a way to celebrate her humanity, both in her struggles with motherhood and in her conception of her children through her very human sexuality. Mary becomes a metaphor for the beauty of human life and the glory that can be found in the life of not only the feminine, but also the fallible. Brenner comments that in the goddess cults of ancient Jewish communities, "the unnatural deficiency of the Father God was supplemented by coupling him with a borrowed goddess figure," (1996, p.67)

and in her music, Beyoncé attempts to fill this feminine void without submitting to polytheism, merging her own God-given beauty and talents with the image of Mary, the Mother of Jesus. She sticks to Christian tradition while still addressing the aspects of her lived experience that a male-presenting, Christian God cannot relate to."Tropico" (2013) depicts Lana Del Rey as both Mary and Eve, saint and sinner, feeding into the deeply Christian image of Mary the mother of Jesus as the "new Eve", sent to save humanity from the pain and sin it has caused itself (Ashwin-Siejkowski 2009, p.39). In the same way as Eve *chose* to disobey God's orders in Eden, Mary freely chose to accept God's will and plan for her life (Luke 1:38), thus preparing the way for Jesus' ultimate sacrifice and saving of humanity. In "Tropico" (2013), Del Rey displays this theology in a pop culture setting, preaching a traditional belief in an unorthodox fashion, and bringing this imagery into the consciousness of a different demographic. Her work is an expression of Mariological piety as her twisted universe revolves around two women, one on a path of self-destruction and the other praying fervently for her counterpart's sake. Lizzo similarly takes on Marian form in several music videos ("Fitness" 2018; "Scuse Me" 2016), worshipping again the divine in the human feminine body, elevating humanity and particularly herself to the status of active agent in the salvation of the world. These women use the familiar Christian imagery of the theotokos to revere themselves, at once taking a position of power and humility.

Lizzo's brand of self-worship is soaked in religious imagery, both Christian and otherwise. Several church scenes appear in her music videos ("Scuze Me" 2016, "Cuz I Love You" 2019) but there is very little mention of God. Instead, Lizzo is the object of desire, praising herself and being praised by churches full of men. Even when Jesus is mentioned, she thanks him for creating men to praise her before she worships herself for being the only thing that can complete her ("En Love" 2015). She finds her saviour within herself,

minimising the impact of Jesus on her life. Though she acknowledges him as her creator, she credits “the goddess in me” as her sustainer (“Truth Hurts” 2017). Schüssler Fiorenza writes that Jesus’ “announcement of ‘eschatological reversal’ - many who are first will be last and those last will be first (Mark 10:31; Matt 19:30; 20:16; Luke 13:30) - applies also to women and to their impairment by patriarchal structures,” (1994, p.121) but Lizzo does not wait for life beyond earth to take first place. Although patriarchal structures may not value her as a fat woman of colour, her realised eschatology allows her to value herself, bringing the message of Jesus into her own life and simultaneously taking over part of his role as her saviour.

This concept of self-deification is epitomised in Ariana Grande’s “God is a Woman” (2018). Though the title may sound like the basis for an eschatological reversal of gender roles, the lyrics and music video together make it clear that God is not *any* woman, but specifically Grande herself. Amid sexual innuendos and worship of her own body, Grande sings “boy, if you confess, you might get blessed,” claiming God-like power and referencing the Roman Catholic sacrament of reconciliation. The video is filled with images of Grande radiating light, referencing Jesus’ claim in John 8:12 that “I am the light of the world” (NRSV), and stops abruptly at one point as Grande recites a gender-bent version of Ezekiel 25:17 as she is seen to literally break a glass ceiling with a gavel. This blunt imagery shows her taking the position of ultimate judge within her own life, replacing God as she becomes the authority on morality not only for herself, but for others in her life, including the wider patriarchal society that built the “glass ceiling” she breaks through, becoming a hero of women everywhere, their *female* saviour. Hart writes that “God is not some gentleman or lady out there in the great beyond who happens to have a superlatively good character, but is the very ontological substance of goodness,” (2013, pp.253-4) but Grande appears to disagree. Sure of her own

inherent worth and goodness, she crowns herself as queen of humanity (particularly of men) and of righteousness, leaving little-to-no room for the God of Christianity within her life. Although her personalised Godhood is undeniably heavily influenced by biblical texts, Brenner holds that the God of the Bible "was never a 'woman', was never even fully or largely metaphorized as a woman" (Brenner 1996, p.57). Despite her certainty about this, she acknowledges that in creating both male and female humans "in god's image", God admits to having both masculine and feminine qualities, and that it is in fact the patriarchal guardians of the Jewish (and subsequently, the Christian) faith who ascribe exclusive masculinity to God (Brenner 1996, p.57). Recognising and rejecting the power that this misogynistic system holds over Christian images of God, Grande reclaims those images as her own. She rejects not the theology itself, but its presentation in mainstream male-led Christianity, and uses her platform to worship the female form and subvert patriarchal expectations. She needs what the Christian God offers, but she needs it in the female form.

Florence + the Machine's 2016 film, "The Odyssey", depicts Florence as the eternal narrator of her own story, at one point recovering from death just as Jesus did. Her narrator-self is also seen singing the lyrics "between a crucifix and the Hollywood sign, we decided to get hurt" as the limp body of her living-self is carried into the ocean to be baptised by a group of women. She addresses the dilemma of choosing between the sacrificial life of a Christ-figure and the life of luxury and hedonism epitomised by the phenomena of fame, celebrity and Hollywood. Later in the film she embodies both Samson and Delilah (Judges 16), both protected by God's love and self-sabotaging, attempting to remove her own power and God-given gifts, to cut her own hair ("Delilah" 2015). These confused images of herself express a confused understanding of her own worth and place in the world. She feels

powerful, pure and divine, but simultaneously the temptation to destroy this reality, to punish herself. She feels this desire in others too, as elsewhere she sings “in this pink dress, they’re gonna crucify me” (“Hunger” 2015). Her performed femininity is an embarrassment and a source of anxiety for her, inviting aggression. Ashwin-Siejkowski writes that “it is uniquely through Christ that human beings can recognise their own identity, their purpose of life as renewing its likeness to God and the means to achieve it,” (2009, p.29) but in Christ Florence finds both comfort and terror. As she strives to emulate Christ, she begins to deify herself, inducing shame and the instinct to humble and destroy herself. The complex theologies of Christianity are overwhelming, leaving her to struggle with her relationship with God and with herself, unable to find a version of herself she is comfortable with. She cannot do what Ariana Grande and Lady Gaga have done, and is left on the earthly side of the divine/human divide, her inner Samson and Delilah battling for control.

Attempts at self-deification end in varying degrees of success for these artists. Some, like Lizzo, Gaga and Grande, find comfort that is not provided to them by their understanding of the God of Christianity, while others, like Florence, find themselves wrapped up in an entirely confusing and overwhelming theological dilemma. 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4 warns of “the lawless one”, a destructive creature intent on deceiving humanity into abandoning God’s will, “declaring himself to be God” (NRSV). In their attempts to replace God in not only their own minds, but those of their audience, these artists may be perceived as that “lawless” being, distracting their fans from the God of the Bible. However, Beyoncé’s balance of self-praise without outright self-deification presents a middle way, a path of confidence in herself and in her God. These artists deify themselves to fill roles that they do not understand God to fill, saving themselves from crisis and uplifting themselves with praise. The masculine, all-powerful, infallible and judgemental God peddled by

patriarchal Christian structures fails to empower these women, but inspires them enough that they worship themselves using Christian concepts and images. They attempt to understand themselves as the feminine, powerful, motherly, desirable and self-assured God they wish to see, one that they can identify with.

The Devil Within

Biblical and Christian images can be found throughout every tenet of pop culture, and Edwards comments that “by postfeminist advertising standards, a successful powerful woman must attract both the female and the male gazes: the male through sexual desire and the female through envious desire” (2012). The women in this study have, undoubtedly, catered to the sexual desire of their audience’s male gaze, but in embodying the devil, they tap into the envy of the female gaze and adhering to the postfeminist standards highlighted in Edwards’ work. Frank’s work on the history of women, witchcraft and evil lays out how, for many years, “the dominant image of woman was, therefore, one of a creature ‘governed by her sexual parts’” (2003, p.52), and in their recreation of demonic images, these women reclaim this idea, leaning into the sin, power and fear historically associated with sexual women. While some choose a demonic role for themselves, others make the decision to find empowerment in the negative light they feel they have been cast in by others. What is clear, though, is that there is attraction in playing the “bad girl”, living far from the saving grace of any god and thriving nonetheless.

Though Taylor Swift’s music references very little connection with God in her present life, her adoption of devilish imagery indicates a continued influence of Christianity on her understanding of power dynamics. Her 2014 hit “Blank

Space" hears her sing "I'm a nightmare, dressed like a daydream", and the music video shows her controlling her lover with a red apple which inflicts pain on him as she damages it. This obvious visual reference to Genesis 3 is coupled with lyrics which echo the sentiment of 2 Corinthians 11:14-15, warning of one who will lead believers astray from God's path. Rather than avoiding the road to temptation, Swift takes ownership of it, embracing the power that comes from being the tempter. Baker, Molle and Bader found that belief in "Satan" often means belief in "a supernatural, powerful and evil force that wishes humans harm via temptation and suffering" (2020, p.149), and Swift voluntarily fulfils this role in "Look What You Made Me Do" (2017), swearing revenge on those who have wronged her. The statement, "I don't like your tilted stage, the role you made me play," leads the listener to assume that Swift rejects the villainhood thrust upon her, but instead we see Swift draped in serpents, both alive and ornamental, embracing the devil's influence upon her life and rejecting Eve's victimhood and lifetime of punishment.

In both videos, Swift is not the helpless victim of evil forces, but a force to be reckoned with herself, an intentional temptress. Edwards comments that, in modern visual representations of Eve, temptation becomes "the source of her power" as she both offers and embodies the forbidden fruit (2012). Swift not only controls her lover with the fruit she offers, she then dares her audience to desire her, displaying her dangerous qualities and her power while conforming to patriarchal beauty standards, simultaneously seducing and warning her prey. Some female BDSM practitioners find empowerment in sexual roleplay as it actually detracts focus from the sexualisation of their bodies and concentrates on the character they are portraying (Monteiro Pascoal, Cardoso, Henriques 2015, p.1058), in Swift's case, a demonic Eve. In Genesis 3, Swift finds not a God who will protect and avenge her, but one who criticises the fallible nature he gave her. Her work indicates a move away from attempts to appease the

God who used to “shine on her little brother” (“The Best Day” 2008) and towards her own empowerment. Famously criticised for her dating life (Ryu 2021), Swift takes back control of the narrative and finds power in the negative labels, embracing her apparent talent for seduction and using roleplay to recentre focus on her personhood, even if that person is a persona.

Florence + the Machine’s “Seven Devils” (2011) is an intense exploration of sin, guilt, shame and demonic possession. While Florence herself is not identified as the devil, she wakes to find her lover surrounded by and suffering under seven of them, representative of the seven deadly sins (or seven vices) of Christianity, traditionally attributed to Gregory the Great, said to derive from the sin of pride (Demacopoulos 2015, pp.23-24). Florence declares that “holy water cannot help you now” and that she plans to “burn your kingdom down, and no rivers and no lakes can put the fire out.” This imagery makes clear that Florence’s wrath is powerful beyond the help of divine intervention, that she is strengthened by the demonic forces which are present. The seven devils embolden her to reveal the true power of her rage towards her lover who has brought this evil into her home. In lieu of calling on the power of God to protect her, Florence becomes her own saviour. Despite her apparent confidence, though, she admits that she is on a suicide mission, that “I was dead when I woke up this morning, and I’ll be dead before the day is done.” Like Swift, Florence does not run from the evil in her life but surrenders to it, resigned to her own damnation and the deadliness of her sins. She chooses to find freedom in the certainty of her doom and with nothing to lose, she decides to fight.

These “Seven Devils” are not only representative of her sin but of her potential for salvation. Schüssler Fiorenza identifies that the evidence of Mary Magdalene’s blessedness comes not from a sinless life like Mary the mother of

Jesus, but rather from her transformative experience at the hands of Jesus, who exorcised seven demons from her (Mark 16:9-10; Schüssler Fiorenza 1994, pp.123-4). These seven devils which impact Florence and her lover so awfully are their invitation to salvation, a theme which the song explores in the lines "now all your love will be exorcised, and we will find new saints to be canonised." After dwelling on the evil and pride surrounding her lover and, consequently, herself, Florence asserts her faith in the ability of their love to purify them and discover the "saints" they are when free from their possession. Still, though, she refuses to call on the God of Christianity, or any other god for that matter. She uses the power of the devils against them and her intentions are warped by the evil surrounding her. She declares she will save her lover's heart, only to "take your soul" for herself rather than freeing it, corrupted by the power she now wields. Her acknowledgement of her own corruption comes in the lines "what has been done cannot be undone in the evil heart, in the evil soul." These lyrics reflect the traditional belief that one must in some way invite the devil into one's heart by succumbing to sin (Frank 2003, p.62) - Florence acknowledges that her heart has been wilfully tainted by evil. While she is prepared to exorcise her lover and restore his goodness, she cannot bring herself to surrender her new-found power, despite knowing its origins and consequences. Corrupt satanic power is preferable to the life of a holy fool, and Florence rejects humility, Gregory the Great's antidote to pride (Demacopoulos 2015, p.23), in favour of a life surrounded by devils. Unlike Mary Magdalene, she finds identity in her demonic possession, rejecting any salvation which Jesus or Christianity may offer her. She does not want to be saved.

Jeanrond holds that the popular image of God as "the infinite giver of love who never needs or longs to receive love" has created a problematic culture of forced self-denial (2010, p.20), leaving those who desire love feeling

unworthy of it. This, combined with a masculine God and an impossibly sinless example of a mother-figure (Ashwin-Siejkowski 2009, p.44), demonises the desire for attention or power. While this may be an effective deterrent for some, artists such as Taylor Swift and Florence + the Machine rebel against the desire for godliness, embracing instead the self-worship possible through a life of self-demonisation. Even in mediaeval times, though witches were thought to be slaves to the devil, they were a source of fear and danger to human men (Frank 2003, p.56). The power recognised in sinful women is a rebellion against patriarchal attempts to undermine women's personhood, and so life as a temptress becomes a temptation. These women reject the need for a saviour, especially a male one, by changing their perspective and becoming the danger that others need saved from. In doing so, however, they often find themselves fulfilling the very expectations against which they rebel, becoming wild, sexual, sinful women needing tamed by men. Patriarchal systems are so deeply ingrained into western culture that they become inescapable. Despite the flaws in their feminist agenda, these women express a need to be selfish, a need to be loved, and a need for a God who allows that of them and reflects their needs back to them. The God of Christianity's image of selflessness is alien and insufficient for them.

Doing it for the Fame

"It is impossible to be famous without an audience. But it is possible to be famous without fans" (Deflem 2017 p.121). The very nature of the careers of pop artists requires an audience, and for the women discussed in this thesis, these audiences are, at times, incomprehensibly large. While some may be overwhelmed by the concept of being known the world over, others find not only comfort, but power in the phenomenon. This section examines the

relationship between artist and audience and the ways in which the music of some artists displays an active desire for fame and the admiration which it can produce. Deuteronomy 28:1 states that, “if you will only obey the Lord your God, by diligently observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth,” but these artists find themselves internationally renowned through their own work and publicity, not traditionally religious practices. In cultivating large audiences and fan bases, these women become leaders, deified and worshipped not only by themselves, but by those who follow their careers.

Lady Gaga’s pursuit of fame is part of her own personal lore, playing a large part in her entrance into the public sphere. Her 2008 album, “The Fame,” references “feeling and hoping one is and might be” well known, not any level of tangible fame which she had already achieved at the time of its release (Deflem 2017, pp.41-42). She has spoken negatively of the reality of fame and her performance of “Paparazzi” at the following year’s VMAs was intended to be a cautionary tale of the danger of celebrity, inspired by the death of Princess Diana (Deflem 2017, p.44). Despite this, her desire for “the fame” has resulted in her becoming a worldwide sensation, with over 49 million followers on Instagram (Lady Gaga 2021). Her 2013 hit, “Applause”, is a love letter to attention, identifying her fans’ applause as her emotional sustenance. The very thing Gaga *knows* to be toxic is what she craves, and it is impossible to ignore how this feeds into her own self-deification. Gaga does not simply crave *any* form of attention, but specifically *positive* attention, celebration and validation from people who adore her. Having cultivated a captive fanbase, she commands them to worship her, to love her.

Jeanrond raises the key question though: “Can love be commanded?” (2010, p.22) Gaga’s career seems to indicate that it can be, as she has arguably one of

the most dedicated "fandoms" of any pop artist, but Deflem argues that this is not, in fact, the result of a "command", but rather of a mutually beneficial relationship wherein Gaga provides her fans with music, art and occasional personal interactions, and they respond with their financial and emotional support (2017, p.129). Whatever the reason, just as Christians engage in a two-sided relationship with the God of their understanding while maintaining God's greatness above their own, so too are Gaga's fans not her equals. Despite Deflem's kind reading of the relationship, Stanfill notes that, in any fandom, there are deep-rooted issues and inequalities, meaning some fans get less out of the relationship than others (2018). She argues that "in the Predominantly White Fandom space the fan identity takes precedence, effectively calling on fans of color to be fans first and people of color second," (2018, p.210) commenting on the tendency for pop culture to focus on white narratives, and the toxicity which can arise from aggressive fandoms, like Gaga's. This argument holds ground with regard to other minority groups, as fandoms both provide them with a community which focuses on a common characteristic of its members, and simultaneously re-label them, drawing focus away from their unique struggles. As in Christianity, "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one" (Gal 3:28, NRSV) in Lady Gaga. The "Little Monster" title becomes primary, with Gaga's fans condoning and participating in often problematic behaviour, identifying only with a love for Lady Gaga and no other aspects of themselves or others (Deflem 2017, pp.135-7). The very nature of such a fandom entails Gaga's glorification, and so she cultivates an environment in which she is godly. Her desire for fame has led to a celebrity status which breeds cult-like worship, with Gaga as the charismatic leader. She crowns herself God in her music videos before building upon that image. Although she identifies as Christian, the sensation of being widely adored is

too attractive to pass up, and she becomes a demigod, acknowledging at once a greater power than herself, along with her superiority over others, namely her fans.

Other artists use fame not as a method for deifying themselves, but as a god-replacement in itself. Lana Del Rey admits that "I even think I found God in the flashbulbs of the pretty cameras" ("Without You" 2012), acknowledging that the "pretty" side of fame can bring such joy that it may appear divine, and she acknowledges Marilyn Monroe as an inspiration in "Tropico" (2013), despite her long-standing disapproval of LA and the Hollywood lifestyle. In fame, Del Rey receives praise and attention, with people desperate to see and photograph her, although the aftermath of that footage may not be so godly. The backlash from her performance on *SNL*, intended to promote the very album these lyrics come from, was severe and widespread, criticising not only her performance and talent but her very person (Montgomery 2012). In an interview with Rolling Stone, Del Rey commented that "there's backlash about everything I do," (Scaggs 2012) recognising that fame, her God-replacement, had let her down. Rather than providing comfort and protection, being "the very ontological substance of goodness" (Hart 2013, pp.253-4), fame lured her into a vulnerable position and then caused her pain in a very public way.

This is no surprise to Alanis Morissette, whose 2020 "Reasons I Drink" addresses her issues with alcohol, overeating and motherhood throughout a very public career. The corresponding video depicts different aspects of Morissette's life interacting in a support group setting, and the paparazzi from her fame enter into other spheres of her life. She recounts how she has been working in show business "since I can remember", listing this as one of the reasons for her substance use. In an interview, Morissette said, "if I'm going to

experience this thing called fame, it has to be coupled with some form of service or else it feels hollow to me" (Milzoff 2019). For Morissette, fame is far from a god-replacement, giving her reason to attempt to fill her life in other ways. Unlike Gaga, she does not seek fame in itself, but rather accepts it as a way to do good, by expressing herself and discussing her experiences in the hopes that others will benefit from them.

Florence + the Machine's work documents how they have come to agree with Morissette, having learned the dangers of fame the hard way. From the very beginning of their career, they have used Christ-like imagery, singing "it seems I've made the final sacrifice", "who is the lamb and who is the knife?" ("Rabbit Heart" 2009). John 1:29 describes Jesus as "the Lamb of God" (NRSV), the sacrificial victim who provides protection, and here Florence questions if she has somehow taken on this mantle. These lyrics accompany a Mad-Hatter-style tea party with Florence at the centre, the leader of a deranged cult. Already, having had only a small experience of fame, does Florence feel she has been worshipped too greatly, in a way which demands that she "sacrifice" her personhood to the cult of pop culture. Success comes at the price of privacy. Six years later, "Hunger" (2015) expands on this theme: "I thought love was on the stage, give yourself to strangers, you don't have to be afraid." This time, the imagery is even more Christ-like, with a statue bearing the wounds of Christ sprouting greenery from its hands, feet and side. The realisation of her own self-sacrifice and misguided faith in fame allows Florence's faith in God to bloom, for her to understand and express her love for herself and for others. Acts 4:2 tells us that "the essence of the Christian faith affirmed the very exclusive notion of salvation uniquely through Jesus, as Christ, the sole saviour of all humanity," (Ashwin-Siejkowski 2009 p.8) meaning Florence's previous sacrifices were in vain. "Between a crucifix and the Hollywood sign, we decided to get hurt," she admits ("How Big, How

Blue, How Beautiful" 2015). By giving her life over to the general public and allowing herself to be objectified and idolised she only hurt herself, and in her realisation she can live life anew as neither goddess nor commodity, but as her own person. This personal freedom comes with an opportunity to develop a relationship with God, someone who can take that pressure from her and protect and support her as she lives with the consequences of her fame. Humans were not built for the life of a God.

Halsey has never glamorised the pursuit of fame but, like Florence, criticised its impact on her life early in her career. Her debut single "New Americana" (2015) preaches about Halsey's upbringing and the version of America that she believes her generation will bring to fruition, but the video shows her as an unwilling Christ-figure, worshipped and ultimately sacrificed by her followers for their own sake. "Castle" (2015), from the same album, carries on similar themes, reinforcing that Halsey does not want to be "queen", nor does she want the expectations and judgements that follow fame. Deflem notes that "pop music is influenced by trends and success can be brief" (2017, p.124), but for these artists, the pressure of notoriety is felt almost instantly, no matter how short-lived their time in the spotlight may be. These songs are Halsey's prayer in Gethsemane (Matt 26:39-44), praying to her God, her audience, in an inversion of the fandom relationship. While her fans may idolise her, the power lies in their hands. In contrast to Lady Gaga's experience, this state of being known and worshipped is undesired by many others, creating great discomfort, upset and powerlessness.

Ashwin-Siejkowski describes how the patriarchal image of God created and sustained within Christian circles was a response to the needs of early Christians, who desired a strong father-figure to provide protection and justice (2009, pp.18-9). Similarly, the pop culture icons of today respond to desires

within their fanbase, who view strong, confident women as aspirational, and flock to worship at their stadia and in the charts. This fan identity becomes overwhelming, overtaking other labels which may describe these individuals (Stanfill 2018, p.310) and gaining the power to remove the personhood of the very artists they seek to adore. Fame itself is godly to some and creates gods out of others, giving artists power over their fans and fans power over their inspirations. While many artists acknowledge the toxicity of the power exchanges present in the artist/fan relationship, the cycle repeats for every new artist, with relative newcomers like Halsey and Florence + the Machine sharing life experiences with pop culture veterans like Alanis Morissette. The deification of these women responds to some needs but creates many more, including the need for respite from the pressures of a life in the spotlight. The desire for godhood fails to take into account the reality of such an existence and becomes a source of stress and discontent. In “929”, Halsey sings “I realise that I’m no higher power” (2020). This realisation marks a shift in understanding for these artists; they and their audiences need a God who will not crack under pressure, who is powerful enough to take on their problems, their expectations and their adorations. They need a “higher power,” not a human one.

Alcohol, Addictions and Avoidance

A life in show business is, as shown above, necessarily one of great stress and pressure, as well as great reward. Though many find healthy coping mechanisms for such issues in their lives, the phenomenon of substance addiction is a dark but common alternative, “thought to involve dysregulation of the reward system and stress systems” (Crowley, Dao, Magee, Bourcier and Lowery-Gionta 2019, p.223). Although addiction is an issue for people of all

walks of life, these artists have simultaneously ample stimuli which may cause them to turn to these substances, easy access to such substances and the opportunity to publicly document their relationship with substances through their art. These substances become objects of worship, or methods of self-worship, despite their negative consequences; god replacements which can never quite fulfil the role.

In "Coming Down" (2015), Halsey describes her lover's ability to appear godlike when he is high, and the disappointment and heartbreak she feels when he sobers up. Rather than ending this relationship, however, Halsey begins to encourage his drug-use, viewing it as the gateway to her own personal God. Despite the toxic cycle of his substance abuse, she clings to the good times, convinced that they are worth the pain. Hart comments that "our transcendental ideals, the true, the good, the beautiful, and so on - have the power to move us not only towards objects that are imperfectly desirable in themselves, but even towards objects that we regard as intrinsically undesirable, or even repugnant and terrifying" (2013, p.245), and Halsey desperately seeks "the good, the beautiful" in her lover, even though it may not be true. She experiences a second-hand addiction, not to drugs but to the person her lover becomes when using them. Drugs are not her god, but they become almost sacramental, allowing his grace to enter into her life. Though she doesn't explicitly reveal what her personal "temptation" is, "929" (2020) reveals that she still "feeds" it, indulging in whatever it takes to make her feel special, despite her own acknowledgement that "I'm no higher power". This desire for strength, happiness and significance drives her to dark and unhelpful places which provide a temporary fix. Although these substances do not provide the comfort that Christians testify can be found in their God, Halsey has documented her own discomfort with the god of her understanding ("More" 2020). Halsey cannot access David's experience in Psalm 63, and

while drugs cannot provide her with eternal contentment, they do not attempt to promise that. She accepts the help she can find.

Lady Gaga similarly documents her personal obsession with drug use, chiefly with marijuana. She previously suffered from problems with cocaine use following her first record label dropping her in 2007 (Deflem 2017, p.35), but her marijuana use has continued throughout her career. Both “Dope” and “Mary Jane Holland” (2013) focus on her use of the drug in different ways. While “Mary Jane Holland” describes the comfort and confidence she feels when under the influence, “Dope” is an ode to a lover who Gaga has become dependent on, as she sings “I need you more than dope.” “Mary Jane Holland” is the nickname Gaga gives to herself when high, a version of herself who “won't be a slave to the blonde or the culture of the popular”, who is free from societal expectations. “In individuals with addictions, behaviour is considered to depend increasingly on impulsive/reactive neural systems,” (Brand,Wegmann, Stark, Müller, Wölfing, Robbins and Potenza 2019, p.3) and Gaga’s immediate reaction to emotional discomfort is that “I think that I could be fine if I could be Mary Jane Holland tonight.” The Psalms depict God as man’s help (28:7; 54:4; 118:7), but also accept that God’s help comes in God’s time (69:13), and Gaga cannot wait for God’s time to get the relief she craves. Searching freedom from her inefficient God-replacement, fame, Gaga reaches not for the Christian God of her upbringing but for marijuana, seeking relief from both the reality she created for herself, and the reality God created which surrounds her, as she told NME in 2013 (Stevens). Though her personal relationship with God may be strong, it does not fulfil her immediate needs of freedom and relaxation, and so marijuana becomes a replacement for God’s support in those moments. Her addiction places a roadblock between herself and God in the form of impulsive escapism, preventing Gaga from receiving God’s help.

As previously discussed, Lana Del Rey's "Tropico" (2013) is a scathing commentary on LA and its culture of intense wealth inequality, and the cycle of crime and pain that those in low socioeconomic areas can be caught in. Throughout this piece, drugs are present as a negative side effect of economic inequality and a life of crime and sin, but Del Rey is not exempt from the temptations of substance abuse. She has publicly admitted to having issues with alcoholism at a very young age, though she now lives soberly and participates in support work for those still suffering from addiction (Heaf 2012). The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism believes that roughly 16 million people in the USA suffer from an alcohol use disorder (Crowley, Dao, Magee, Bourcier and Lowery-Gionta 2019, p.222), so Del Rey's struggle is far from unique. Her 2019 single, "Hope is a Dangerous Thing for a Woman Like Me to Have But I Have It", describes her as "servin' up god in a burnt coffee pot for the triad." These lyrics have obvious links to the Holy Trinity, but also to the triangular symbol of Alcoholics Anonymous and the three words present on it; "unity, service, recovery" ("Alcoholics Anonymous Great Britain" 2021). For Del Rey, the process of recovery has come to replace alcohol as her god-replacement. The Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous hold that there is "one ultimate authority - a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience" ("Alcoholics Anonymous Great Britain" 2021), and for many members this authority is the power of the organisation itself. When God cannot provide tangible assistance for an addict, fellowship with other survivors of addiction brings comfort and confidence, taking on a higher power. Del Rey depicts herself providing a service at an AA meeting, serving both coffee and connection, providing access to the higher power of fellowship. From one god-replacement to a more positive one, Del Rey's alcoholism affects her relationship with the God of Christianity, a God she believes in but who cannot provide all of the answers

for her. She also admits in this line that she does not expect other addicts to come to find her god, the John Wayne of "Tropico", but offers them a divine power she believes is more accessible to them.

In 2018, Florence + the Machine acknowledged that "you need a big god, big enough to fill you up" ("Big God"), but "Hunger" (2015) indicates that, for Florence at least, drugs are not up to this task. She sings "I thought that love was in the drugs, but the more I took, the more it took away, and I could never get enough", describing the destructive nature of her drug habit. 1 John 4:8 states that knowing God is the key to knowing love, and as Florence's drug habit removes love and understanding from her life, so too it removes her capacity for a relationship with God. Joshua explains how, "once individuals have become addicted, such destructive behaviour is difficult to change, but they were not addicted to their destructive behaviour during their early stage when they progressively increased their consumption" (2017, p.52). This blunt observation forces addicts to take responsibility for their situation, and Florence's lyrics seem to accurately recount the process of addiction-building, as the positive effects of substances become simultaneously more attractive and more elusive. Searching for a love which will "fill her up" led her down a dark road of drug abuse, where no such love awaited her. Jeanrond writes that "reflecting on love might [...] help us to sharpen our eyes for detecting instances of pseudo-love, distortions of love, or unrealistic expectations of love and resulting disappointments," (2010, p.6) and Florence's rumination on her relationship with love and drugs supports this theory. Only by unpacking her expectations of her substance use is she able to identify that what she sought was actually love, something which mind-altering substances cannot provide, but the God of Christianity can (Romans 8:38-39). Once again, Alanis Morissette is well-versed in the attraction and dangers of substance abuse. She has been honest throughout her career about her relationship with

alcohol, drugs and food, but never so much as in “Reasons I Drink” (2020). While her alcoholism is linked to the mind-altering effects of the drug, her overeating is a different form of compulsion. Morissette quotes her stressful career as the reason for her disordered eating and finds it provides “reprieve” in the same way as alcohol does. Joshua notes that this is a common issue for many people who, triggered by “distressing emotions”, give in to “hedonic hunger”, despite understanding the potential negative outcomes of their actions (2017, pp.50-51). In behavioural addictions like this, “reductions in executive functions” lead those affected into a state of vulnerability, leaving them susceptible to the immediate reward that activities like overeating can provide, although it causes no neurotoxic effects (Brand,Wegmann, Stark, Müller, Wölfing, Robbins and Potenza 2019, p.4). She acknowledges the blurred lines between her faith in God and her faith in her addictions in “Her” (2020) when she describes her higher power as “coming in warm all like Kali, and coursing through my veins like Liquid Mary.” This lyric is a play on words, referencing at once Mary the Mother of Jesus and the popular “Liquid Marijuana” cocktail ("Liquid Marijuana Cocktail" 2021). The links here between the power of drugs, alcohol and faith in her life and their comparable abilities to soothe her concerns indicate that, for Morissette, faith alone is not enough. Her faith is a relationship requiring constant work, but “Liquid Mary” is a method of experiencing the same effects in a more instantaneous way. Hart says that there are “two ways of desiring a thing: as an end in itself or for an end beyond itself” (2013, p.241). In “Her”, Morissette describes a relationship which she values for what it is, “an end in itself”, but in drugs, alcohol and food she finds relationships she values “for an end beyond” themselves; her own happiness. Her relationship with her God *is* happiness, while substances provide only a glimpse of it. Despite this, the temptation to

take the instant fix persists, providing reprieve from the hard work building a relationship with the divine requires.

Marton advises that, "if it helps you connect with God, use it. If it does not help you connect with God, do not use it" (2015, p.77). This advice seems simple enough when applied to music and other artforms, but in the world of substance use and abuse, "help" is a difficult concept. While some of these artists find comfort under the influence of alcohol, drugs or even food, others find the lifestyle overwhelming and distracting from the reality of their lives, a reality which they have to face eventually. Psalm 23:6 claims that, with God in one's life, "goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life" (NRSV) Although substances can provide temporary relief from the pressures of everyday life, constant, eternal contentment cannot be guaranteed by them. These women reach out for the "help" of substances when they feel unable to reach out to God, but often the experience of substance use leaves them in an even more vulnerable position. In "Havoc" (2012), Morissette sings, "I get reduced by my own wilfulness, as I reach for my usual God-replacements." Eight years later, her battle with her attempts to replace God is ongoing, but her understanding of what she needs from that relationship is deeper than ever. Only by reflecting upon their relationships with these substances can these artists help both themselves and their audiences to explore their relationships with coping mechanisms and higher powers, and hope that they find real comfort along the way.

Conclusion

One's relationship with oneself is, unavoidably, a huge influence on one's relationship with others; "love of God, love of neighbour, love of self, and

love of God's creation are intimately related" (Jeanrond 2010, p.29). These artists explore different approaches to themselves and their happiness within their art, examining images of themselves as the divine, the demonic, the great and the dependent. As modern women taking on a divine role in their own lives and the lives of their fans, these women find empowerment alongside objectification as their desire for freedom from patriarchal expectations leads them to embody the very traits which are valued within patriarchal culture; beauty, sexuality, power and wealth. Even in attempts to invert expectations and embody the devil, these same themes rear their heads, conforming to societal expectations even in moments of rebellion. Jeanrond writes that "every form or expression of love is rooted in a specific culture, even when it occurs as a radically transformative force within that culture" (2010, p.9), and in these examples we see that even in their negative reactions to their culture and their attempts to love and praise themselves in ways which oppose societal ideals, these women reflect the very principles they renounce, including several Christian themes. Whether divine or demonic, these women embody biblical and Christian ideas of the creator, the sustainer, the eternal lover, the powerful destroyer, the embodiment of goodness and the relentlessness of temptation.

Of course, these artists live very different lives to those of the general public, faced with the rewards and challenges of the culture of celebrity in which they found their success. The Marian image of the universal mother (Ashwin-Siejkowski 2009, p.45) has significance within the experiences of these women who lead and heavily influence enormous, worldwide fanbases. "There is no art which does not raise the religious question" (Gorringe 1995, p.19), and in addressing their celebrity status, these women reveal something of the need for and expectations of cultural leaders in our time. Though not politicians or religious leaders, these artists undeniably wield power over huge

portions of the world's population, whether they enjoy the experience or not. The self-deification they sing about is realised by their fame, and the pressure of supernatural expectations become ever-present. For many of them, their humanity is recognised only by themselves as they become messianic figures, their personhood sacrificed for the pleasure of their paying audience.

The phenomenon of addiction is a complex and multi-faceted issue which this paper does not attempt to summarise, but for these artists, substances present a quick alternative to a life seeking a relationship with God. "Cue-reactivity and craving evolve from affective and cognitive responses over time as a consequence of conditioning processes" (Brand,Wegmann, Stark, Müller, Wölfing, Robbins and Potenza 2019, p.4), making these substances a constant presence in the minds and lives of their users, providing moments of relief and comfort as well as intense negative consequences. These artists have not found joy promised by the Bible and by Christianity to those who follow God in substance use, but their attraction to this "quick-fix" lifestyle is indicative of a desire for something they also have not yet found with God. The need for respite from reality is a running theme throughout this chapter, as fantastical images of self, the worship of others and the use of addictive substances are sought as methods of envisioning the life and the happiness they ultimately desire, which is currently unavailable to them.

Christianity provides these women with concepts of God and of the devil, models of power and happiness that they seek to emulate. Their reimagining of themselves within these roles often involves others or external substances to realise the fantasy, and rarely leads to their desired outcome. Instead, these women find that themselves, God, Satan, fame or addiction are not enough to constitute their personal "Big God", that none alone can satisfy them, and that further searching is required. They desire a God who reflects their femininity

and humanity while providing infinite strength and comfort. They need to feel important, to feel loved and wanted, and to know how to achieve happiness and relaxation. They need a God in whom they find both identification and aspiration, and while the God of Christianity is certainly aspirational, the male, selfless, patriarchal image widely circulated fails to "fill them up."

Conclusion

On the subject of theological examination of pop music, Roberts writes that "theologians in this field feel they have to justify such engagement in a way that those studying Bach or Messiaen do not" (2017, pp.165-6), but I feel that work in this area justifies itself. Throughout this thesis, internationally influential female artists have been shown to carry the message of Christianity to audiences of millions, although usually with their own unorthodox twists. The impact of celebrities on the shape of the cultural landscape is unavoidable, as Donald Trump's presidency exemplified (Deflem 2017, p.2), and these artists and their work enter into the lives of incredible numbers of people from a variety of cultures. What is clear, though, is that in the western cultures from which these women derive, "Christianity is a cultural structure that informs the cultural imaginary, whether one identifies with it in terms of belief and practice or not" (Bal 2005, p.5). Even those artists, such as Halsey, who declare no faith in the Christian God at all, are complicit in the sharing of Christian imagery and beliefs as their art is saturated with metaphors and narratives which survive in present-day western culture.

The initial focus on obvious expressions of the artists' relationships with God allows the "access point" to the study of this aspect of popular culture, as Roberts said it would (2017, p.170). In this first glimpse into the theologies of these artists, very orthodox images of a Creator, a sustainer and a judge emerged, alongside and occasionally intertwined with non-Christian concepts of deities and ideas of a feminine divine power which struggle to align themselves with traditional Christian worship of "the Father Almighty" (Ashwin-Siejkowski 2010, p.16). Despite the existence of a few biblical references to the "motherhood" of God (Isaiah 42:14; Isaiah 45:10; Isaiah 66:13), the majority of Christian tradition has referred to God using masculine

pronouns, reinforcing the maleness of God. As Brenner writes, “it is difficult to relate to him - a common feminist practice, as ‘s/he’, or as anything more than incorporating some features of femaleness or female symbols or deities” (1996, p.57). Although such a gender swap is attempted by some artists, others turn to feminine deities - either from other religions or from their own desires - to fulfil their need for connection and identification with their God.

A strong belief in and desire for life after death is a recurring theme in the works discussed, but a troubling undercurrent of doubt in God’s mercy persists. This doubt is often connected to issues of sexuality and what the artists perceive as sexual sins, a reflection of the purity culture rooted in the virgin/whore division of the biblical characters of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Mary Magdalene, and the cultural afterlives sustained by patriarchal Christian traditions. While “Mary’s virginity was perceived by early theologians as a way of protecting Christ against the corruption inherited from Adam and Eve” (Ashwin-Siejkowski 2009, p.36), its weaponisation at the hands of those atop the patriarchal hierarchies of Christianity has led to a deep-seated villainisation of sexual women throughout western culture, illustrated in the self-loathing of many of these artists with regard to their sexuality. From Lana Del Rey’s desire to “take Jesus off the dashboard” during intercourse (2012 “Diet Mountain Dew”) to Florence + the Machine’s desperation for atonement through suicide (2011 “Lover to Lover”; 2011 “Never Let Me Go”), these women find the reality of their sexual humanity unsettling. Their music indicates a strong belief in God’s wrath and power, but very little faith in God’s mercy. As with Halsey, these women display low expectations for their god-replacements, reflective of low self-worth. Some desire a softer approach from their God, while others, like Florence, simply desire release from the anxiety of anticipating their doom.

As well as supplementations from other religions, these women involve earthly substances and human people in the development of their “Big God” (Florence + the Machine 2018). These terrestrial substitutes fail to offer the eternal, powerful, love of God, instead repeatedly disappointing these artists. Despite this, these women are drawn to the imperfect pleasure they derive from their lovers, relationships, audiences and substance use. What these alternatives have in common is their fallibility and their immediacy. Regardless of the prayers analysed in the first chapter of this thesis, many of these artists do not want divine intervention in accordance with divine wisdom, preferring instant intervention in accordance with their own wisdom. Drugs, alcohol, food and other humans are able to provide a rapid response and instant relief from the pains of reality. Although these highs do not promise the eternity of bliss that the God of Christianity does, they do not *require* the earthly suffering which is inherently linked to Christian salvation (Ashwin-Siejkowski 2010, p.72).

Earthly suffering may not be a requirement of these coping mechanisms, but it is often a consequence of them. This, too, provides some comfort to these women, however. The certainty of the patterns of disappointment and pain acts as a form of security, more tangible and recognisable than the unknowable power of God. Hart’s analysis of humanity’s unceasing pursuit of “transcendental ideals” leading us “towards objects that are imperfectly desirable” (2013, p.245) is demonstrated in these pieces which describe these self-destructive tendencies as artists attempt to fulfil their needs through flawed methods. In these faulty comforts, these artists find reminders of their own humanity and fallibility, that they are “no higher power” (Halsey 2020 “929”), alleviating some of the pressure of a life of celebrity and of life in the modern world.

Even the worship of themselves, an attempt to glorify their femininity, physicality and humanity, is a double-edged sword, leading to the dangers and dissatisfaction of a life of celebrity. Despite this, some endeavour to enrich other people's lives through their influence. Alanis Morissette only finds meaning in her fame through the service of others (Milzoff 2019) and Lady Gaga created an entire charitable organisation which she supports through her own work (Deflem 2017, pp.151-156). Although Hart believes that "every act for the sake of the good is a subversion of the logic of materialism," (2013, p.255) the very culture of materialism and capitalist consumerism which afforded these women their professional success is exactly what allows them to provide support to their audiences, through practical support or simply the comfort provided by their music. In being worshipped, both by themselves and by their audiences, these artists begin to find opportunities to provide the solace they desire from their own Gods.

A combination of self-deification, worship of lovers and relationships, substance use and reliance on the God of their own understanding goes some way to providing a support system for these artists, but none of these techniques are sufficient on their own. Although the God of Christianity carries connotations of human patriarchal power structures, harsh judgement and purity culture, this God also provides a sense of security, eternity and dependability that earthly forces cannot promise. These women's expectations of God are founded on traditional Christian concepts of a creator, sustainer, lover and judge, but their needs reflect a modern society which seeks to embrace the equality of the sexes and genders, appreciate the beauty in sexual expression and find modes of instant relief and reward. Christianity's promises of eternal life and the unwavering goodness of God do not overcome its failure to alleviate immediate pain or discomfort, or its history of sexism and the demonisation of women, particularly with regard to their sexual desires and

practices. Whether these artists or their audiences could ever come to find complete fulfilment in the God of Christianity is impossible to say, but it is clear that their relationships with both Christianity and their personal Gods are not one hundred percent effective at satisfying their needs and desires.

Roberts argues that “popular music effectively replaces religion as the new opium of the people” (2017, p.165) and the extensive commercial success of pop artists is a testament to the power of strong relationships with their fans and the enormous audiences which modern technology allows access to (Deflem 2010, p.14, p.122). While pop culture may not completely replace religion as Roberts claims, it certainly supplements it with access to countless personal interpretations of God and the meaning and structure of human life. The work of the artists analysed in this thesis is a reflection of the culture which informed their experiences, and feeds back into that culture messages which challenge the status quo. The representation of Christianity within this music is not just personal interpretation of Christian traditions and scriptures but also evidence of echoes of Christian theological concepts echoing through time and secular spaces into every corner of contemporary western culture. The study of female pop artists of the 21st Century provides a window into the theological needs and understandings of modern-day western society, and the ways in which Christianity fulfils and disappoints those who encounter it.

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