

3

A Tupacian Theological Gospel

If I were to have read the title of this chapter twenty-five years ago, I would have thrown this book into an open fire with salt to exercise those demons out. Yeah. I was just that fundamental. The world was binary, good and evil. Nothing else. Life was a rhythmic series of church, prayer, casting judgment on the “lose,” and reading my Bible, not to develop knowledge or grow closer to God, but to argue and win against those who would dare say anything contrary to our beliefs. Tupac, of course, was as secular as they came. So, of course, there was nothing he or anyone else like him, in their worldly selves, could teach me. Man, was I arrogant or what? But that’s where a lot of religions folks are right now. Maybe even you, reading this right now, still have doubts about a “secular” person being able to theologize. I get it. It took me finally thinking for myself, asking some difficult questions, and getting married to someone my community considered “outside the faith” to really hit a space that had my theological highway of answers and easy exits finally run out of pavement and had me face the complexity and ambiguous nature of life; that’s when I truly believe my spiritual journey began. It was when I faced hardship and a complete excommunication from what I had assumed was a solid life-long community that

I realized, “hmm, maybe this thing of life is much more complicated than I had ever imagined.” Yup. It is. But that journey was difficult and wrought with doubt, mystery, and shame at certain points. I had to face my true self and see things where I really was. Graduate school helped, a PhD gave me tools, but what was truly the game changer was the painful process of growth, which also involved therapy and dealing with my own demons—that I threw salt on.

Tupac played a role in my own healing process that continues to this day. I am constantly learning from someone who saw God in and from the margins; from the oppressed; from the lynching tree; from the ’hood; from the corners no one looked on; from the beauty of struggle and pain. Tupac has not only aided me in my own theological pursuits, but countless others, especially those willing to push past colonized Christian ecclesiology and desire a journey that locates itself at the intersections of the sacred, secular, and profane. So, this chapter examines that intersection and attempts to look at Tupac as one would some type of European theologian. My hope here is that what we have built up in the previous chapters will now culminate in this one as we look directly at where my own research and engagement with Pac has led me. Let’s get at it.

Situating Tupac in the Post-Soul Context

To begin, we must situate four terms for Tupac and the post-soul context. First, post-soul in the macro sense of an entire culture differs somewhat from micro post-soul as applied to Tupac as a singular individual. Tupac, as this chapter will argue, is a post-soul personification of the rejection of norms, hegemonic authority, and dominant

religious structures that inhibit community building.¹ So, the post-soul is the era that began in the late 1960s and early 1970s and that rejected dominant structures, systems, and meta-narratives which tended to exclude ethnic minorities and particularly the 'hood. The post-soul era rejects linear functional mantras² and embraces communal approaches to life, love, and God. The post-soul context was formed in the cocoon of a social shift that broke open the dam to the questioning of authority, challenging the status quo, asserting one's self identity in the public sphere, and questioning group leaders.³ The post-soul embodies a more urban, ethnic minority, Hip Hop worldview. Therefore, while still recognizing the societal shift that occurred during those years, the post-soul is a more multicultural/ethnic approach to postmodernity and the issues it raises.⁴

1. Alper, "Making Sense Out of Postmodern Music?"; Bauman, "Postmodern Religion?"; Cox, *Religion in the Secular City*; Cupitt, "Post-Christianity."

2. Sequential based reasoning, linear worldviews (first this, then that, lastly this, etc.), and simplistic answers.

3. As discussed in George, *Hiphop America*; Hodge, *Soul of Hip Hop*; Neal, "Sold Out on Soul"; Neal, *What the Music Said*; Neal, *Soul Babies*; Pinn, *Black Church*; Pinn, *Embodiment and the New Shape of Black Theology*.

4. For example, books such as Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Theory*, fall short of mentioning the social, religious, and cultural shift that the civil rights movement brought to the American public sphere. Moreover, Betts, *History of Popular Culture*, does not mention—even briefly—the contributions of Hip Hop and Rap moguls. In the work of Lash, "Postmodernism as Humanism?"; and Lash, *Sociology of Postmodernism*; Gil Scott-Heron, Ray Charles, and even the television show *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* were never mentioned in the literature. While each of these represent major changes and social shifts, they were not engaged. The post-soul, as argued in chapter 1, is therefore a parallel conceptual framework including those excluded voices and creating space for artists like Tupac. Tupac asserted time after time that race played a role in the historical discourse of people,

Second, post-soul theology is the theology of the post-soul context. Its vernacular prioritizes a connection with a God of the oppressed and disenfranchised. Post-soul theology seeks to better understand God in the profane, the blasphemous, and the irreverent. Moreover, it makes God accessible to humans in a multiethnic and inclusive way while still recognizing the atrocities committed in the name of religion.⁵

Third, many renowned evangelical theologians have argued that we live in a "secular" culture. However, within the post-soul context, spirituality makes its reemergence and seeks to discover God in the ordinary. This pathway is foreign to traditional methodologies of salvation. The neo-secular is a mixture of sacred and profane spiritual journeys pursuing God in a space outside traditional forms of worship.

Fourth, neo-sacred is rooted in the post-soul theological context. This sacred space embodies city corners, alleyways, club rooms, cocktail lounges, and spaces/places that are extraneous to many who call themselves "Christian." The neo-sacred is Tupac's message to the pimps, the hookers, the thugs, the niggas, those overlooked by society, missionaries, and many churchgoers. The neo-sacred is concerned with finding God in the post-soul socio-ecological landscape and making God accessible for all.

Tupac was more than just a fad or an "estranged artist." He had a mission and message that few are able to embrace. The cost is high: your life. Tupac saw life and culture beyond the routine and ordinary; he approached life full of passion, rage, anger, love, thoughtfulness, and even carelessness. He was the product of a post-soul society that

and the post-soul aids in filling that void.

5. Hodge, "No Church in the Wild."

had been groomed on the ambiguous consumer culture of the 1980s.⁶ In this consumer culture, Tupac became a type of popular critical pundit for the Hip Hop community, which was established early on in Hip Hop culture in its critique of US social structures—particularly religion and economics. He was a by-product of the post-revolutionary Black spirit alive in the early 1970s.⁷ He was the voice of the ghetto/'hood, marginalized, oppressed, and downtrodden,⁸ connecting God to a people who would never imagine gracing the pristine hallways of a church. He related God, culture, Hip Hop, life, pain, and even “sin” to Jesus, and forced the listener to deal with those issues while offering an accessible pathway and access to a God that was not marred with a blonde-haired, blue-eyed embodiment of perfection. Tupac’s God was the God of the ’hood. As Cheryl Kirk-Duggan so eloquently states of Tupac, “Amid his deep hurt and alienation, he often expressed profound religious sensibilities—a kind of street spirituality that invokes traditional faith categories [and] ranging from irony and sarcasm to humility and sincerity, aware of the life and death issues that people face daily on the street.”⁹

Tupac was also the product of his mother’s, Afeni Shakur’s, upbringing in the Black church

6. Covert, “Consumption and Citizenship.”

7. See also Pinn, *Black Church*, in which he discusses the effects of the civil rights movement, post-soul creations, and post-revolutionary elements for the Black church and Black theology.

8. While this was Tupac’s main audience, there have been numerous suburban, wealthy, White people who connected with Tupac’s message simply because they themselves were marginalized, oppressed, and/or downtrodden by parents and/or other structural forces similar to that of the urban poor.

9. Kirk-Duggan, “Theo-Poetic Theological Ethics,” 214.

framework—which, as previously stated in chapter 1, was connected to protest and praise. Afeni gave Tupac his foundation and provided a theological foundation for his later life. Afeni helped create in Tupac a key theological concept in ethnic cohesion as evidenced in Afrocentric thinking and theologizing. This gave Tupac the context in which to create and think about not just the *Missio Dei* in his own life, but also for the community. Tupac continually emphasized that work needed to be done in order to benefit the community; if it did not, it was not worth the work.

Tupac wove a strand of theological ontology through the intersections of the sacred, secular, and the profane; a place where Tupac resided daily and where he found a lot of meaning pursuing the numinous. It was a space outside the traditional environment of “church” and a space for the “thugs,” the “niggas,” and the “’hood rats.” Tupac was, in a matter of speaking, creating a neo-sacred theology,¹⁰ which he in turn was asserting as a contextualized spirituality of and for the urban post-soul community. Tupac gave the broader American media outlets a view into “the ’hood” and said that there is much to engage with and learn from, theologically speaking, at the intersections of the sacred, profane, and secular and within what seems apparently blasphemous.¹¹

10. This term is used to define the intersection of the profane and the sacred, a space that has elements of both deity and sin while yet pointing to divine edification in the midst of chaos, pain, blasphemy, and irreverence.

11. This takes up the argument begun by Benjamín Valentín in regards to sketching cultural theology and the importance of relevant cultural figures within a theological space. While Valentín argues for a Latino cultural theology, I would argue that Tupac is part of that process even though he was African American. And that many young Latinos in particular saw Tupac as part of their own cultural geography. For instance, Valentín asserts that Latino youth realize

For Tupac, a new type of theological discourse was needed in the face of severe economic, social, and political disparities. For example, in one of his first songs, “Panther Power,” Tupac bellows:

As real as it seems the American Dream
Ain’t nothing but another calculated scheme
To get us locked up shot up back in chains
To deny us of the future rob our names
Kept my history of mystery but now I see
The American Dream wasn’t meant for me
Cause lady liberty is a hypocrite she lied to me.¹²

Tupac calls out the very fabric of the “American Dream” (home ownership, being educated, affordable health care, and day care)¹³ and challenges its apparent mythology for the ghetto poor. Where is God in all of this? Where is justice for those who do not live the commercialized embodiment of “the good life”? Tupac asserts the neo-sacred within this pain and disillusionment in a song titled “Lord Knows”:

I smoke a blunt to take the pain out

that culture matters. There are more ways in which they are being oppressed and which affect Latino lives than simply economic factors: cultural imperialism, racism, sexism. Tupac covered these in his music and felt connected to this type of critical cultural discourse from him. See Valentín, “Tracings,” 39–40.

12. Shakur, “Panther Power,” *The Lost Tapes*.

13. These four “American Dream” taxonomies are what Block et al., “Compassion Gap,” describe as the four main constructs of the “American Dream,” and how the exponential increase in all four of those areas between 1973 and 2003 have almost eliminated the middle class. For Tupac, and many other Black scholars, the poor, the ghetto, and African Americans are at the bottom of this avalanche of misery. These are also building blocks for Western Evangelical Christianity and used as part of Christian exceptionalism.

And if I wasn’t high, I’d probably try to blow
my brains out
I’m hopeless, they shoulda killed me as a baby
And now they got me trapped in the storm, I’m goin
crazy
Forgive me; they wanna see me in my casket
and if I don’t blast I’ll be the victim of them bastards
I’m losin hope, they got me stressin, can the Lord
forgive me
Got the spirit of a thug in me.¹⁴

At the same time, Tupac realizes that this is not the way life was supposed to be. He is fully aware that God has not intended people to behave in an inhumane fashion. He calls out to God in a post-soul style, decrying his lifestyle:

F*** the friendships, I ride alone
Destination Death Row, finally found a home
Plus all my homies wanna die, call it euthanasia
Dear Lord, look how sick this ghetto made us, sincerely
yours I’m a thug, the product of a broken home.¹⁵

In these lyrics, Tupac “does what he has to” in order to survive within these types of injustices, while still asking the poignant theological questions of God in the face of suffering. Tupac presents a voice to engage culture, deal with conflict, create cohesive narrative, generate community, dispel the traditional powers, and call people to a different level of engagement with God. Cheryl Kirk-Duggan would say that “like James Baldwin, Shakur confronted black suffering with a moral ire.”¹⁶ For those who would argue that this type of approach to life is vile, immoral, and “sinful,” Tupac would reply that only God can judge him:

14. Shakur, “Lord Knows,” *Me Against The World*.

15. Shakur, “Letter to the President,” *Still I Rise*.

16. Kirk-Duggan, “Theo-Poetic Theological Ethics,” 219.

Oh my Lord, tell me what I'm livin for
 Everybody's droppin got me knockin on heaven's door
 And all my memories, of seein brothers bleed
 And everybody grieves, but still nobody sees
 Recollect your thoughts don't get caught up in the mix
 Cause the media is full of dirty tricks
 Only God can judge me.¹⁷

Blues music had a similar sense. Contextual, relevant, gritty, and with reflections of Black lives in the White supremacist South, many White conservatives and religious Blacks dismissed the blues as evil, sinful, and altogether vile. Teresa Reed reminds us that "blues singing was associated with the brothel, the juke joint, and the dregs of black-American society."¹⁸ Still, despite the stench of "sin," Reed¹⁹ argues that the "religious commentary is salient in the blues text. . . . These lyrics treat religion in a way that yields two important kinds of information: integration of secular thought with sacred and . . . the postbellum shift in black-American religious consciousness." Tupac's music is merely a continuation of this postbellum shift, now with rap music.²⁰

A great example of part of this shift came in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when a heated debate was brewing that Black theology had no relevance and merely reflected an "angry" and "hateful" message from Blacks.²¹ Black theologian Herbert Edwards, in response to claims from some White theologians that Black theology was not a valid theological approach, argued that Black theology

provided contextualization, a voice, and offered a way for those who had previously been either dismissed by White evangelicals or forcibly assimilated to their tradition. Tupac begins to create such a Black theological space.²²

Tupac argues the inadequacy of the previous and existing theologies for the present crisis: poverty, recidivism rates for young urban males, racism, and classism. Tupac never once questioned, blasphemed, or cursed the name of God or Jesus. What Tupac did do was to call out religious officials, traditionalized churches (churches practicing hyper-traditionalism and adherence to the "letter of the law"), conventional forms of religion, irrelevant theologies, and current methods of evangelism.

Tupac was not a trained theologian, pastor, or evangelist²³ in the way one would recognize from the formal rigor of the seminary. Tupac did not have the eloquence of a T. D. Jakes or the patois of a Baptist preacher. Still, Tupac was able to connect God to the streets and give those who had never heard of God a vision for what their life could be like. For Tupac, and others like him, lacking formal seminary training never disqualified him, or others, from doing "God's work." Still, Tupac never really came to any solid conclusions about a theology of the 'hood. He began

22. Edwards, while discussing Black theology, argues that in order for theologies to have a concrete basis they must prove the inadequacy of the preceding theologies, establish and prove their own adequacy for the present, and must establish continuity with the primordial, normative expressions of the faith. See Edwards, "Black Theology," 46–47.

23. In my 2008 research, nineteen of the twenty interviews stated that Tupac was their "pastor" and had a connection to theology. They told me that Tupac was a prophet because of the way he could interpret theological matters and make it "clear" for them. See Hodge, *Soul of Hip Hop*.

17. Shakur, "Only God Can Judge Me," *All Eyez On Me*, disc 1.

18. Reed, *Holy Profane*, 39.

19. Reed, *Holy Profane*, 39–40.

20. Hodge, *Soul of Hip Hop*.

21. e.g., Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*.

the discussion, but because of his early death, he never finished the mantra of a ghetto Gospel.

We probably in Hell already, our dumb asses not
knowin
Everybody kissin ass to go to heaven ain't goin
Put my soul on it, I'm fightin devil niggaz daily
Plus the media be crucifying brothers severely.²⁴

This aptly-titled song “Blasphemy” was a rejection of a form of Black theology that places the pastor at the center of the church, creates a pious stature for him (and it typically is a him), and discourages honest questions and doubts from emerging within the congregation.²⁵ Tupac not only challenges but shatters the status quo by placing context and reality into his message within this song. He further states:

The preacher want me buried why? Cause I know
he a liar
Have you ever seen a crackhead, that's eternal fire
Why you got these kids minds, thinkin that they evil
while the preacher bein richer you say honor God's
people
Should we cry, when the Pope die, my request
We should cry if they cried when we buried Malcolm X
Mama tell me am I wrong, is God just another cop
waitin to beat my ass if I don't go pop?²⁶

24. Shakur, “Blasphemy,” *The Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory* (1996).

25. Pinn, *Embodiment and the New Shape of Black Theology*.

26. In this verse we can also see Tupac connecting with mainstream theological thought by asking the serious questions of God. In other words, is God just another White, conservative Republican, wanting me to fit in and wear suits and ties like I've been told and have seen? Is there a place for the real nigga and thug in heaven?

Tupac continues shattering the status quo of “nice” theological answers by offering up metaphorical comparisons:

They ask us why we mutilate each other like we do
They wonder why we hold such little worth
for human life
Facing all this drama
To ask us why we turn from bad to worse is to ignore
from which we came
You see, you wouldn't ask why the rose that grew from
the concrete had
damaged petals
On the contrary, we would all celebrate its tenacity
We would all love its will to reach the sun
Well, we are the roses
This is the concrete
And these are my damaged petals
Don't ask me why
Thank God, nigga
Ask me how.²⁷

In one of his greatest theological songs, “So Many Tears,” Tupac pushes past the “milk” theology, described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 3:2, and into a mature theological stance on life:

Now that I'm strugglin in this business, by any means
Label me greedy gettin green, but seldom seen
And fuck the world cause I'm cursed, I'm havin visions
of leavin here in a hearse, God can you feel me?
Take me away from all the pressure, and all the pain
Show me some happiness again, I'm goin blind
I spend my time in this cell, ain't livin well
I know my destiny is Hell, where did I fail?
My life is in denial, and when I die,
baptized in eternal fire I'll shed so many tears

27. Shakur, “Mama Just a Little Girl” *Better Dayz*, disc 1.

BAPTIZED IN DIRTY WATER

Lord, I suffered through the years, and shed so many tears.²⁸

The post-soul context requires one to disembody and deconstruct current theological mantras that continually hold up tradition. Pain, injustice, and racism force the post-soulist to look beyond the “standard” and ask God for more. Simplistic answers are rejected and despised: it gets God off the hook too easily to say “just pray about it,”²⁹ and in times of pain and injustice, everything needs to be on the hook, including God. The procedure is quite simple: have a conversation with God, be real, and do not be afraid to use strong language to describe your pain—a crucial element of a missiology at the intersections of the sacred, profane, and secular:

Was it my fault papa didn't plan it out
Broke out left me to be the man of the house
I couldn't take it, had to make a profit
Down the block, got a glock, and I clock grip
Makin G's was my mission
Movin enough of this shit to get my mama out the
kitchen and
why must I sock a fella, just to live large like
Rockefeller
First you didn't give a f***, but you're learnin now
If you don't respect the town then we'll burn you down
God damn it's a mother**** riot

I see no changes, all I see is racist faces
Misplaced hate makes disgrace to races

28. Shakur, “So Many Tears,” *Me Against the World*.

29. Pinn, *Why Lord?*, describes this type of theological process as nitty gritty hermeneutics, pushing past the basics of theology and into the depths of life to ask God “tougher questions.” Acceptance of pain is put into context and the hermeneutic moves into the “nitty gritty” of life.

A TUPACIAN THEOLOGICAL GOSPEL

We under I wonder what it take to make this
one better place, let's erase the wait state
Take the evil out the people they'll be acting right
Cause both black and white are smokin crack tonight
And only time we deal is when we kill each other
It takes skill to be real, time to heal each other
Pull a trigger kill a nigger he's a hero
Mo' nigga mo' nigga mo' niggaz
I'd rather be dead than a po' nigga
Let the Lord judge the criminals
If I die, I wonder if heaven got a ghetto.³⁰

For Tupac, the goal was to create a manner in which a portion of society who had been forgotten, those living in urban enclaves, could still be human and have meaning. In his song “Searching for Black Jesuz,” Tupac and the Outlawz search for a deity that can relate to them, one who “smokes like we smoke, drink like we drink.”³¹ In the song “Picture Me Rolling” Tupac questions whether or not God can forgive him as he asks, “Will God forgive me for all the dirt a nigga did to feed his kids?”³² In this neo-sacred element, Tupac begins to ask the long-standing theological question: what does forgiveness really look like for sinners?

For the urban post-soulist, this process of searching for God in the mystery, the hurt, the pain, and then finding God in that heinous mixture is a welcome breath of fresh air compared to the avoidance and three-point sermons that so much of evangelical theology has become. It is the heart of dialogue and the very place God is experienced. In fact, almost anyone who has experienced deep loss and pain in which God's hand felt far can relate. For example, “White

30. Lyrics taken from throughout the song “I Wonder If Heaven Got a Ghetto,” *R U Still Down*, disc 1.

31. Tupac and The Outlawz, “Black Jesus,” *Still I Rise*.

32. Tupac interview with *Vibe Magazine*, approximately 1995.

Man's World" combines Tupac's request for heavenly favor and reprisal in a process similar to the Psalms: "God bless me please. . . . Making my enemies bleed."³³ Within those statements much more is at work—a fundamental attempt to make God accessible in a social structure that has been forgotten and left for dead.

More of the neo-sacred and post-soul theology arises in songs such as "Hail Mary." The song suggests a liturgical prayer, beseeching listeners to follow God and to "follow me; eat my flesh."³⁴ While it might appear that Tupac is asking his listeners to see him as "God," in fact Tupac was acting as a type of pastoral go-between. In several interviews from the early 1990s, he made reference to people in the 'hood not always having a clear path to God, and that in that absence of such a path, if he was the only pathway, then he'd gladly take up that mantle.³⁵ Tupac made it clear he was not God or Jesus, but merely a conduit and a beacon to a contextualized Jesus.³⁶

Tupac fills part of the vacancy for those who doubt. In the song "Po Nigga Blues," Tupac poses a question to

33. Shakur, "White Man's World," *Makaveli-Don Killuminati: The 7-Day Theory*.

34. Shakur, "Hail Mary," *Makaveli-Don Killuminati: The 7-Day Theory*.

35. Tupac interview with *Vibe Magazine*, approximately 1995.

36. Note the letter S has been dropped to demonstrate the contextualization of the Christ figure for the ghetto. And the letter Z at the end of Jesus' name was added to give a portrait of a Jesus that could sympathize and connect with a people that were downtrodden and broken. The letter Z is consistent with Hip Hop's vernacular to change words and phrases to fit the context and annunciation of words for a Hip Hop community. The Z also represented a Jesus who was not only "above" in theological discussions, but also "below" in reachable form. The Z gives new dimensions to the portrait of Christ and validates the struggles, life, narrative, and spirituality for many Hip Hoppers. Hodge, *Soul of Hip Hop*, chapter 6.

God that oozes with spiritual doubt: "I wonder if the Lord ever heard of me, huh, I need loot, so I'm doin' what I do."³⁷ In other words, will God really forgive me when I am practicing socially unapproved standards of living? Dyson reminds us that "Tupac's religious ideas were complex and unorthodox, perhaps even contradictory, though that would not make him unique among his believers."³⁸ Part of that vacancy felt in the 'hood also comes with images of heaven: streets of gold, mansions, pearly gates, and a God who is "perfect"—these may be too much for the person living on streets riddled with potholes, in project housing, around broken gates, and with White racist images of God. Paulo Freire boldly states that within situations of oppression, the main goal of the oppressed should be to "liberate themselves from their oppressor."³⁹ Tupac was helping to create that pathway for liberation.⁴⁰

Tupac had a post-soul theological gospel message for his fans, community, and society, embodying both the sacred and the profane. Tupac owned a lot of his own "sins" and shortcomings, which, in post-soul contexts, creates a kind of transparency and authenticity. His listeners

37. Shakur, "Po Nigga Blues," *Loyal to the Game*.

38. Dyson, *Holler If You Hear Me*, 204.

39. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 28.

40. It is interesting to note that within my interviews, a theme of liberation from traditional church arose from the interviewees. "To move away from," "get out from under," and "move out" were all phrases from respondents, when asked, "How has Tupac's music, poetry, and spirituality affected you theologically?" These phrases were part of a larger discussion on how contemporary religion had become corrupted and lost its "edge" in life. Whether or not race was a factor in this response was not analyzed. This would be something for further study, but there is a clear implication here that the interviewees felt they needed to move out from their current theological situation and that Tupac helped them to do just that.

could identify with a marred, scarred, profanity-ridden, and broken ghetto “preacher.” Within that profanity, an attempt to create honest communication between God and humankind is at work. Tupac and E. D. I. contend, in the song “The Uppercut,” that “I’m a product of the pimp, the pusher, and the reverend. . . . We all lost souls trying to find our way to heaven.”⁴¹ What would a missiology look like if it began with that premise? How might we then entreat the BLM movement in the Christian church?

Dyson asserts that “Tupac aimed to enhance awareness of the divine, of spiritual reality, by means of challenging orthodox beliefs and traditional religious practices.”⁴² Tupac’s “gospel,” in essence, was a mature one that sought to better apprehend God in the core of a world gone askew—critical to a theology that pursues decolonizing itself.

Tupac’s “Good News”

Tupac’s “good news,” conversely, about life in a post-soul context is a type of “indecent theology” that Marcella Althaus-Reid discusses in *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender, and Politics*.⁴³ As grand narratives of God have collapsed in mainstream society, creating parallel narratives that are contextual and relatable are crucial and desired by post-soulists. Tupac’s gospel, at its core, seeks to give marginalized urban dwellers (and

41. Tupac, “The Uppercut,” *Loyal to the Game*.

42. Dyson, *Holler If You Hear Me*, 204.

43. See Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, as she discusses an “indecent” approach to theology by questioning the authority figures within that religious structure and allowing new voices to emerge (in her case, a feminist perspective on religion).

disenfranchised Whites for that matter) a voice to God and a place for meaning in unbearable conditions. For Tupac, it is about the tension of grappling with depression, dead friends, racism, and keeping God in focus through all of that. Tupac is an indirect “theologian,” bringing a neo-secular message of God’s love to the people and contextualizing epistemological processes—in other words, constructing a new knowledge set of life for a generation raised in the crack cocaine milieu. Jamal Joseph notes that Tupac had a huge heart for people to understand a better way of living, to know positive role models, and to be critical thinkers.⁴⁴ Tupac is a contradiction within a saintly modality—in other words, while Tupac had saintly attributes, he was also raw, uncut, and indecent in his approach to theology. Yet, he was able to authentically communicate the struggles of his own life, while still invoking the spirit of Jesus in protest. Thus, there are three gospel messages within both their works: The gospel of hold on, the gospel of keeping ya head up, and the gospel of heaven having a ghetto.

First, the gospel of hold on encouraged those who have given up or are about to give up on life or other people.⁴⁵ Tupac encourages his listener to see that there is hope for a brighter tomorrow:

God
When I was alone, and had nothing
I asked for a friend to help me bear the pain
No one came, except God
When I needed a breath to rise, from my sleep
No one could help me . . . except God
When all I saw was sadness, and I needed answers
No one heard me, except God

44. Joseph, *Tupac Shakur*, 16–23.

45. e.g., Iverem, “Politics of ‘Fuck It.’”

So when I'm asked . . . who I give my unconditional
love to?

I look for no other name, except God.⁴⁶

In this poem, entitled "God," Tupac calls out to God and asks for a conduit. He finds it in the midst of hurt. James Cone calls this type of process "revelation" and argues, "For black theology, revelation is not just a past event or a contemporary event in which it is difficult to recognize the activity of God. Revelation is a black event."⁴⁷ In this poem, Tupac takes on the revelation and looks for no one else but God.

In the song "So Many Tears,"⁴⁸ Tupac begs God not to forget a nigga, "Lord I suffered through the years and shed so many tears . . . dear God please let me in."⁴⁹ There is a paradoxical optimism in the midst of extreme pain, hurt, despair, and violence.⁵⁰ Tupac calls the person to seek a better way and higher level of understanding.

The gospel of keeping your head up was a frequent theme in Tupac's discourse. Howard Thurman stated that one of the ingenuities of Black slave culture was the ability

46. Shakur, read by Rev. Run, "God," *The Rose That Grew From Concrete* Vol. 1.

47. Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 30.

48. Shakur, "So Many Tears," *Me Against the World*.

49. This mindset is no different than what slaves had to deal with and their vision that God would eventually help them. Luke Powery asserts that the spirit of lament is combined with celebration and that they go hand in hand. See Powery, *Spirit Speech*.

50. This ideology connects with a concept that Rudolf Otto calls "The Mysterium Tremendum." See Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, 12–24. The mysteriousness of what God did in spite of an appalling situation. For Otto, this meant that "a God comprehended is no God" (25). In other words, holding on does not always mean that it will make sense or will even "feel right." This was an area for Tupac that helped him deal with the bigger picture of sin and the brokenness of humankind.

to not diminish hopes, dreams, or visions to immediate experience. The immediate experience may be hurtful, may be problematic, may be nefarious, may even be abusive but one must foster, encourage, manifest, and manage the future vision that allows one to escape the immediate consequences of despair. Hopelessness occurs when one has the inability to imagine a different future.⁵¹ In this gospel Tupac is essentially making sense of immediate pain and suffering. Tupac would say, "Yes, I'm holding on, but where do I look?"

Tupac wanted his fans to know that the ideology of "keeping ya head up" was not done in vain. In the face of extreme opposition and hurt, there was still a way to move forward. Even when things seemed as though they could not get any better, Tupac would tell his fans that there was a better way. Life did not end on the experience of the immediate event; one's errors and successes were not necessarily their defining moments.⁵²

If I upset you don't stress, never forget
That God isn't finished with me yet
I feel his hand on my brain
When I write rhymes I go blind and let the Lord do his
thang
But am I less holy?
Cause I chose to puff a blunt, and drink a beer with my
homies
Before we find world peace
We gotta find peace and end the war in the streets, my
ghetto gospel.⁵³

51. Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*.

52. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*; Master P, Kane and Abel, "Black Jesus," *The 7 Sins*.

53. Shakur, "Ghetto Gospel," *Loyal to the Game*.

Tupac attempted to bring a pragmatic type of hope for the listener through his music instead of traditional hymns. Tupac replaced them with the thug life mantra and his message of encouragement in hard times.⁵⁴

Regarding the authority of what is from God and what is not, Dyson writes:

Countless sacred narratives are hardly distinguishable from contemporary rap. . . . The prophet Jeremiah belched despair from the belly of his relentless pessimism. And the Psalms are full of midnight and bad cheer. This is not to argue that the contrasting moral frameworks of rap and religion do not color our interpretation of their often-opposing creeds. But we must not forget that unpopular and unacceptable views are sometimes later regarded as prophetic. It is a central moral contention of Christianity that God may be disguised in the clothing—and maybe even the rap—of society's most despised members.⁵⁵

Tupac was part of this long tradition of lament, praise, and life in the secular, or what James Cone calls the “secular spiritual.”⁵⁶

In the song “Hold Ya Head,” Tupac encourages those who are in prison, in pain, and lost to hold on and keep

54. Hodge, *Heaven Has a Ghetto*, 278–84. Also, this was one of the reasons why Tupac was so calm, almost at peace, with the knowledge of his imminent death. Joseph, *Tupac Shakur*. Tupac was fully aware that life did not end here. Even though he did not have it easy and his situation was nefarious, there was a better place in heaven set for him.

55. Dyson, *Holler If You Hear Me*, 208–9.

56. Cone, “The Blues,” 68–97.

that head up in times of trouble. Through weed, alcohol, and even illicit sex, a post-soul theology arises:⁵⁷

The weed got me tweakin in my mind, I'm thinkin
God bless the child that can hold his own
Indeed, enemies bleed when I hold my chrome
Let these words be the last to my unborn seeds
Hope to raise my young nation in this world of greed
Currency means nothin if you still ain't free
Money breeds jealousy, take the game from me
I hope for better days, trouble comes naturally
Running from authorities 'til they capture me
And my aim is to spread mo' smiles than tears
Utilize lessons learned from my childhood years
Maybe Mama had it all right, rest yo' head
Tradin conversation all night, bless the dead
To the homies that I used to have that no longer roll
Catch a brother at the crossroads. . .
Plus nobody knows my soul, watchin time pass
Through the glass of my drop-top Rolls, hold ya
head!⁵⁸

In the song “Still I Rise,” Tupac laments to the Lord that the struggle is almost too much to bear; pain and misery parade his life and the journey seems like it will never end. Yet, in the end, still I rise. “Tupac sounds out that in times of trouble, God is with you, so keep your head up. Even the words in that phrase, “head up” is meant to persuade one to look unto the heavens from which our help comes.”⁵⁹

57. For those who practice moralism, they begin to look outside its confined view of what a Christian looks like. Jesus himself was considered a heretic, a blasphemer, and a profane individual for his views on spiritual matters. c.f., Jack Miles, *Christ*.

58. Shakur, “Hold Ya Head,” *The Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory*.

59. Hodge, *Heaven Has a Ghetto*, 264.

Lastly, the gospel of heaven having a ghetto was a prolific thought in Tupac's worldview, contextualizing heaven and making it accessible for people who do not subscribe to Euro-Western theology. Tupac even calls himself the "ghetto missionary." In an interview on BET, Tupac states:

If I can't be free, if I can't live with the same respect as the next man, then I don't wanna be here. Because God has cursed me to see what life should be like. If God had wanted me to be this person, to be happy here, he wouldn't let me feel so oppressed. He wouldn't let me feel so trampled on; you know what I'm saying? He wouldn't let me think the things I think. So, I feel like I'm doing God's work, you know what I'm saying? Just because I don't have nothing to pass around for people to put in the bucket don't mean I'm not doing God's work; I feel like I'm doing God's work. Because, these ghetto kids ain't God's children? And I don't see no missionaries coming through there. So I'm doing God's work. While Reverend Jackson do his shit up in the middle class and he go to the White House and have dinner and pray over the president, I'm up in the 'hood doing my work with my folks.⁶⁰

Here Tupac expresses not only the divisions of class within Black society, but also within its theological walls.⁶¹ Tupac knows it is his mission to bring a Gospel to those who have been left out and have not been invited to the anticipated heavenly party with its unspoiled clean streets. The thought then is this: if life continues according to plan, heaven will have cops waiting to "beat our ass" the minute

60. Taken from an interview on BET by Ed Gordon in 1994.

61. This is an ongoing debate and issue within Black culture and the Black church. For a further discussion see Dyson, *Is Bill Cosby Right?*; Lincoln and Mamiya, *Black Church*; Pinn, *Black Church*.

we walk through the gates. Therefore, Tupac decided to ask the question, Does heaven have a ghetto? Can I be accepted in this realm that has continually told me I am neither worthy nor acceptable? Can I be taken for my own worth as I am, or do I have to enter through the back so as not to disturb the residents nor mar the fine linen?

The great writer, mystic, and theologian Howard Thurman asks the relevant and almost irreligious question regarding religion and its message to the poor and disheveled: "What does our religion say to them?"⁶² Thurman's challenge says:

I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of times that I have heard a sermon on the meaning of religion, on Christianity, to the man who stands with his back against the wall. It is urgent that my meaning be crystal clear. The masses of men live with their backs constantly against the wall. They are the poor, the disinherited, the dispossessed. What does our religion say to them?⁶³

Tupac took the challenge and made an attempt to create a Gospel message for those poor, disinherited, and dispossessed peoples living in the urban enclaves called the ghetto; Tupac created a transcendental space for the thug, the nigga, and the pimp to find God.⁶⁴

62. Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 13.

63. Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 13.

64. These types of questions create theological conundrums in contemporary evangelical theology, which echo vagueness and ambiguity regarding God's love to marginalized peoples. Therefore, the Hip Hopper, the ghetto person, and Tupac himself pose a new question: if social structures and systems have failed us, wouldn't the church and religion follow suit? Tupac could no longer sit by and accept a traditional view of Jesus or Christianity. Tupac needed a stronger theology than that, a Christ who could accept the thug and the

Tupac's answer to his own question, "Does heaven got a ghetto?" is yes! However, not in the literal sense. Tupac never said that there is poverty, crime, gentrification, and homelessness in God's kingdom. The term is used figuratively, symbolically, as if to ask, "Is the gospel big enough to fit everyone who wants to fit in, and can God handle me if he really created me?" Tupac resoundingly said yes. He encouraged his audience, as a pastor would their flock, to see that there was a different image of heaven outside of a Eurocentric view and that there was room for those who did not fit in a traditional evangelical White theology.⁶⁵

Who's got the heart to stand beside me?
I feel my enemies creepin up in silence
Dark prayer, scream violence—demons all around me
Can't even bend my knees just a lost cloud; Black Jesus
give me a reason to survive, in this earthly hell
Cause I swear, they tryin to break my well
I'm on the edge lookin down at this volatile pit
Will it matter if I cease to exist? Black Jesus.⁶⁶

Toward a Theology of the Post-Soul Prophet

Tupac was not perfect. He was baptized in the dirty waters of marketing, social representations of Blackness,

marginalized person. This was the outcry in songs like "I Wonder If Heaven Got a Ghetto?" and "Black Jesus." These were expressions of a deeper search for God and spirituality. These were also fundamental questions of who God really is—questions that many of us ask ourselves such as are we really "saved?" Hodge, *Heaven Has a Ghetto*, 264–65.

65. This is also something I discuss at length in my chapter on engaging the theology of the profane in Hodge, *Soul Of Hip Hop*, 159–64.

66. Tupac and The Outlawz, "Black Jesus," *Still I Rise*.

stereotypes of the gangsta, the tattooed thug, and the poor Black child. He was not Jesus incarnate, nor was he the "perfect" role model for everyone. Before he left for prison, he told Jada Pinkett Smith that he wanted to quit thuggin' and give up on rap and solely do acting.⁶⁷ However, Tupac ended up embodying the same Black male image he had fought so hard against for so long: the cyclical prison inmate, the nihilistic Black male, the paranoid pessimistic urbanite. This is troublesome and in many ways, he still used women in videos in a misogynist, hypermasculine manner; this was something that in his diaries he struggled with and wasn't sure how to get around it. These are areas that are present in the human species; contradictory values in many regards and a complex recipe of good, bad, and very ugly. Tupac was indeed that which made him so attractive for those living in a post-soul context. He represented both the good and the bad; the two sides of the coin; Tupac also gave you his sins and demanded you deal with them along with your own. Introspection was a key element to Tupac's own development, but because of his unique transparent nature, he created a space in which others were able to do the same.

It is within these conflicts that this paradox between the sacred and the profane arises—a post-soul theology with Tupac in the middle. Tupac embodied both sin and deity; a trait that is a much-needed direction in Christian theology in the twenty-first century. Yet, within this contradiction, there is both good and evil, sin and salvation, dirt and cleanliness all at work and having the ability to create a fuller faith, one that is honest about both the "good" and the "bad." This is the human struggle. Tupac, in this sense, was no different than Paul. While Tupac knew

67. Dyson, *Holler If You Hear Me*, 215–16.

what was right/how to do the right thing, he did not do it because the flesh was weak (Romans 7:7–24). Still, within that weakness, he sought to find space to find God and Jesus. This is a large part of post-soul theology. Tupac gives us this gospel and lets us know that he is not the way; he is only pointing the way to Jesus from a Hip Hop cultural context.⁶⁸

Wilbert Shenk, a Mennonite theologian, puts it this way,

When the church lives in conscious response to the reign of God, its life is governed by only one criterion. Indeed, the power of the church's witness depends on the extent to which God's kingdom defines and shapes that witness. When the church attempts to make its ministry relevant by rendering "respectable" service, it has adopted an alien criterion and it becomes merely mundane.⁶⁹

So, Tupac presents a post-soul theology. Let me break this down into how this is so in five parts:

1. He lived a life transparent and in relation to his own issues/problems. In other words, he is able to truly identify with their own sin, shortcomings, inadequacies, and deficiencies. Both do not run from them nor hide them. As humans, this is our reality. As Christians, this is our reality. Theologically, those who are able to come "as is" will be much more engageable. Tupac insisted that people not reduce their hopes, dreams, and vision to the level of the event.

68. This connects to John the Baptist in John 1:19–32 in the Christian Bible, where John denies that he is the One and that the one who comes after him is Jesus, who gives life eternally.

69. Shenk, *Changing Frontiers of Mission*, 16.

For someone living in the inner city, this meant the vile living conditions you were in at the time. For others, that event might be poverty or a "broken home." Whatever the event, Tupac insisted that people keep their heads up. Hopelessness occurs when one cannot imagine a different future. Tupac encouraged his audience to keep believing for a better day, and that heaven itself might have a "ghetto." Simply put, there is a place that will accept "us" as we are.

2. Tupac seeks after God's face in the midst of tension, ambiguity, and doubt. Tupac's song "So Many Tears" is the perfect example of this. Held in tension is the sin of his past life, the hurt of his current, and the ambiguity of this future—death could be immanent, but begging God to let him into heaven's door, Tupac pleads his case with God, and even in his chaos, he says a "sinner's prayer" throughout the track.⁷⁰ That is a profound sociotheological statement that is in pursuit of a theology that fits the context it originated from.
3. Tupac sees himself as a leader, but as a leader among/amidst, not from on high. Tupac struggled with his position as a leader—he was very young and not the typical older, grayer, adult leader that most expect to see as a leader. Thus, this created a problematic conundrum for Tupac with older adults—he is too young to lead. Right? No. Tupac had a lived theology while still creating that space to learn, grow, and develop with God in the post-soul context. He pushed for better, yet allowed voices to come alongside and help; take the Outlawz as one example.

70. This is isolated in the background of the song and can be heard during the second and third chorus.

4. Both allow doubt, ambiguity, and a mystery of God to exist and just be. For many in a post-soul context, there is no assurance or guarantee of a bright future—especially when we have who we have in the White House at the moment. Moreover, answers and theologies of celebration are unacceptable, invalid, and, in some cases, worthless for a post-soulist. Moving into the twenty-first century, a theological framework that emphasizes doubt, ambiguity, and a mysterious God is key. A God who is solvable, answerable, figurable, and quantifiable is not worth following nor seeking after; it would suggest we have answers and have the power. Why, then, would we need a God?
5. Tupac creates the space needed to question traditional, accepted, normative, and stilted forms of spirituality that have created a crystalized Christian faith in the image of Whiteness. The church must be the beacon of light that opens the door initially and reinvites the people to engage from their space and not from a preimagined space of “salvation.” Tupac, utilizing Hip Hop, had the ability to just allow the questions to stream—often he would instigate the questioning. For too long Christianity has been a symbol of distrust, corruption, lies, sexual misconduct, and misappropriating Christ—Tupac says, let us start there and acknowledge the atrocities, seek forgiveness, and then create a new way, together. A solid missional church opens doors, doesn’t argue for separating undocumented families at the border, cares for life from birth to death, realizes guns don’t create peace, and helps the community they are working with; they do not decide for them or act in the place of God in their lives, but allow them to

think for themselves, critically. To think for oneself, though, means to question. It is time we go there and Tupac can lead the way.

I think, to sum it up succinctly, Tupac is someone to be engaged with much like you would a Howard Thurman or a DuBois. There is a lot there and trust me, as good as this book is, it only scratches the surface of the complexities someone like Tupac presents. But, that’s good, right? We all like being left wanting more and Tupac is just that type of person. Whether you’ve been burned by fundamentalism, scorn by Bible-thumping people for being LGBTQ, or told there are only a few paths to God, Tupacian theology has space and room for all of that. It is a new way forward and provides a framework not for dogmatic procedures, but to grow, develop, and nurture the faith you feel and need to connect with God—that’s post-soul and it’s where we have to go, especially if you consider yourself Christian. We face an apex as the faith develops and matures, Tupac is a good bridge and walkway in this transitory period.