



## The 2006 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture

“For Such a Time as This” Esther 4:14

### Introduction

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The Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture are designed to foster original scholarship pertaining to youth and the contemporary church. The lectures are delivered as a series at the Princeton Forums on Youth Ministry and are published annually. Lecturers include scholars who are not directly involved in the practice or study of youth ministry but who can bring the fruits of their respective disciplines to bear on ministry with the young.

The theme for the 2006 lectures is “For Such a Time as This.” Esther was a Jewish teenager in the Persian kingdom who was chosen from a harem to become queen. She soon found herself called to a difficult and dangerous task, one that would save her people. Her cousin Mordecai entreats her, “For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father’s family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this” (Esther 4:14). Esther accepts the call, albeit reluctantly, and implores her faith community to fast and pray in solidarity with her.

Esther’s is a story of tenacious courage, a willingness to follow God’s call, and a firm trust that the community of faith will survive by the grace of God. Her story provides a rich theme for the 2006 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture, for we live in a time when courage is often called for in ministry and when many challenges face the church and its young people. These lectures address a range of topics within this theme, including the future of the church, the nature of time, the practice of lament, and the call for youth to speak out.

May these lectures feed your mind and renew your ministry.

Amy Scott Vaughn  
Director of Leadership Development  
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Princeton Theological Seminary

## 2006 Lectures

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Douglas John Hall

Where in the World Are We?  
Finding Our Way into the Future

Barbara A. Holmes

For Such a Time as This: Lament as a Herald of Joy  
Joy Unspeakable in an Unspeakably Joyless World

Patrick D. Miller

A Time for Every Matter  
For Such a Time as This

Harold J. Recinos

Loud Shouts Count  
Youth Ministry in a Harder Country



## Loud Shouts Count • *Harold J. Recinos*

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**A**t the age of twelve, I became very aware that the vocabulary field of established culture maintains, shapes, and arrests social relationships by its power to define who belongs in the social body and who deserves rejection. I grew up in the South Bronx. It was a tough place, a crucified place at the edges of society, whose young people get represented in the official language of dominant social and educational institutions in the kind of pathological terms that mobilize government indifference and rejection from religious communities.

Before I hit my teens, I was living on the streets in abandoned tenements, twenty-four-hour movie houses, city parks, and parked Greyhound buses, responding to the pitiful conditions of life around me by becoming a junkie. During the four years I was on the street, the language of representation used by public intellectuals and religious leaders alike demonized street kids and silenced their cries for the quality education and resources needed to participate in the wider society.

At first, shooting heroin, dope, chiva, horse, junk, and smack was not about taking the alluring drug described by William Burroughs in *Junky* (1953), nor was it the so-called genius-making drug idealized by jazz greats like Billie Holiday, Charlie Parker, Chet Baker, or John Coltrane, among others. Dope enabled me to go through restaurant garbage dumpsters with other homeless outcasts in search of food to eat. It made it easier to drop out of junior high school. Junkiedom empowered me to beg others for money; to wear the same clothing for months at a time, never noticing the stench; and to sleep in the filth of condemned Bronx tenements. Often, on cold winter nights alone on the rooftops I wondered why in the barrio, where a crucified people

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lives, so many churches deserted the mission that “complete[s] what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions” (Colossians 1:24).

One bitter night in a windowless, abandoned building, I read these words from a pocket Bible: “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine (Isaiah 43:1).” As I lay awake that night—a junior-high-school dropout, abandoned, criminalized by society’s politics of representation—I knew God was leading me out of death into a world where my identity was not simply a social problem, a world where individual despair would be examined in light of the massive inequalities of a social order that denied youth a future. As I wrestled with the abysmal conditions of my life, I discovered that claiming a Christian voice required engagement in the real-life struggles of those persons who have a special place in God’s vision of a new humanity—the sad, the oppressed, the poor, the crucified, the rejected, the strangers, and the outcasts.

On the streets my life was consumed with learning how to stay alive each day. I did not want to end up with a knife in my heart like my friend, Pee Wee. I was lucky to have survived one stabbing, a sign to me that childhood had come to an abrupt end. I never surrendered the dream of going back to school. I met a Presbyterian minister who had discovered the God of the oppressed while active in civil rights marches in the 1960s. His interpretation of what it meant to follow Jesus directed him to the barrio to engage in street ministry with junkies. Most of the junkies on Home Street were suspicious of him. I thought he was truly insane for coming to the South Bronx. I was a seasoned junkie by then who felt the language of “salvation” was a joke—good news for the comfortable and better-off, but a waste of time for the poor and nearly dead! All I wanted from him was a new set of clothes, a good meal on occasion, and money to get a fix. I did not want to be bothered about a “radically new possibility” for life in Christ! But he welcomed me into his family, got me off drugs, got me back in school, and showed me how to be in relationship with God.

I have been involved in theological education for about twenty years now, engaging in anthropological investigation of popular religion in Central American society and teaching students to use the social sciences to articulate their leadership for the sake of the church in a changing world. But I must confess to you that it was the streets of the South Bronx—the birthplace of hip-hop culture—that taught me to confess a God who offers salvation by giving life to people who live in life-denying conditions. I can tell you that

young people at the edges of society who are systematically disadvantaged by poverty, lack of education, and discrimination are not uniquely lawless, reckless, and threatening. These young people and the popular cultural forms that have come out of their so-called worthless neighborhoods have a great deal to say about their crucifying world.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz notes that one of the most significant aspects of the human condition is that “we all begin with the natural equipment to live a thousand kinds of life but end in having lived only one.”<sup>1</sup> As I think about this very basic anthropological insight, I cannot help but wonder what it is that shapes the lives of young people and causes them to choose certain paths in life over others. I am concerned today that we know too little about what it means for youth to develop their lives in a society that sees basic freedoms abridged, social problems criminalized, the helping functions of society declining, and a government imagined as a protector from crazed terrorists and expanding policing functions.<sup>2</sup> I am also troubled by the many ways that youth are denied a hearing within the larger culture of the United States, and by the ways their voices of dissent against militarism, racism, and economic exploitation are shut down.

How might youth feelings of agency and alienation from the wider cultural meaning system result in new ways to think about the meaning of community and thinking that produces a culture of questioning? I will explore answers to this question by first discussing the cultural terrain within which youth acquire their system of meaning for ordering experience and generating behavior in society. I will situate youth in our wider youth-marginalizing culture, highlighting certain negative societal functions that affect the activism and identity of youth. Second, I will discuss a way to find God in the details of youth popular culture, which I understand to be a public site of learning that provides a voice and an alternative sense of cultural agency to young people. Let me begin by discussing the social context of young lives and saying something about the external forces shaping them.

## **Contextual Aspects of Youth Culture**

We have good reason to worry about how young people are growing up in American society. They are growing up with guns and drugs in schools, entertained by violence and crime on television and film, increasingly aware of the lies they inherit from society, impatient with the political duplicity and corruption of elected officials, misdirected by our capitalist culture of con-

sumption, dying of AIDS, manipulated to support an unnecessary war, and misunderstood by adults who exclude them from conversations about the responsibilities youth have for the future of society. Henry Giroux observes, "If not represented as a symbol of fashion or hailed as a hot niche, youth are often portrayed as a problem, a danger to adult society or, even worse, irrelevant to the future."<sup>3</sup> This so-called "generation of suspects" should not be silenced, discounted, or prevented from negotiating the uncomfortable truths of their world.

I am not talking about youth as a biological or psychological stage of human development on the way to adulthood. "Youth" is a cultural idea that suggests the need to seriously consider the social and cultural practices young people use to act on the world. I remind you that the 1960s racial justice and the anti-war movement showed young people actively renewing the moral outlook of adult society. Youth challenged social values and practices at home and abroad in the name of justice and a vision of shared social responsibility. Today, youth are also finding ways to tell adult society that life together should not be constructed from a vision of shared fear, but in light of a questioning culture of justice. To begin, let's briefly chart the cultural terrain of ultimate meaning forming the background to the life experience and cultural agency of youth in American society.

The religious environment of the world young people live in is changing in ways that challenge the assumption that modernization and scientific rationality will replace religious worldviews.<sup>4</sup> Religious beliefs and practices have not been driven out of modern life or out of the mind of individuals; rather, they have increased and established new and various realignments between religion and culture. This cultural fact has given rise to a revised secularist view in which religious sociologists are busy arguing not only that religious decline varies across Western societies, but also that religion matters.<sup>5</sup> In the United States, religious beliefs and practices over the last fifty years have changed, as reflected by individual concern to reevaluate the meaning of the sacred.<sup>6</sup>

The church has lost its spiritual monopoly over believers and over individuals who have grown restless with the inability of congregations to meet their spiritual needs and who are seeking to deepen their religious experience by visiting New Age bookshops, inventing new languages of faith, or picking up clues about spirituality in films, television, and the Internet.<sup>7</sup> In other words, young people are not only growing up in a society where religion matters, but

their spiritual sensibilities are not limited to any one place or religious tradition. Religion has never been more important in American society than now, but the details of the new religious awakening show that God is found in various places in popular culture. Young people are growing up in a society where individuals are increasingly open to the way the sacred becomes visible in the complex variety of human experiences. Nonetheless, openness and tolerance of the plurality of religious experience do not necessarily mean youth unfold a deeper knowledge of human difference and theological identity.<sup>8</sup>

If the new religious climate of society changes the way young people appropriate religious meaning, what about the economic and political context of growing up in the United States? Youth are growing up at a time in American society when political leadership celebrates the triumphs of the marketplace, while the economic prospects of most young people grow dim. From the time the teenager was socially invented in the first half of the twentieth century until the baby-boom generation, Americans expected that each new generation would do better; but the free market fundamentalism of the present is now producing hard economic conditions. What is going on? Among industrialized countries, the United States is ranked first in the number of millionaires and billionaires, yet the poverty rate for children is higher than that of any industrialized nation. Although the United States is one of the richest democratic nations in the world, it ranks seventeenth among industrialized nations in efforts to lift children and youth out of poverty.<sup>9</sup>

The government policies that allow a relative handful of private interests to control most of social life are behind the growing social and economic inequalities youth experience. For instance, political policies such as lowering taxes on the wealthiest one percent of the population, deregulating environmental protections, transferring public funds to the defense industry, and divesting public education help maximize the personal profits of a small wealthy class. Researchers at the Children's Defense Fund, studying the social conditions of children and youth created by current political policies, note,

The Bush administration's budget choices before and after September 11 leave millions of children behind; favor powerful corporate interests and the wealthiest taxpayers over children's urgent needs; widen the gap between rich and poor—already at its largest recorded point in over thirty years; and repeatedly break promises and fails to seize opportunities to Leave No Child Behind.

While thousands of children, parents, and grandparents stand in unemployment and soup kitchen and homeless shelter lines waiting for food and a stable place to live all across America....<sup>10</sup>

Subsequently, young people who experience economic hard times pull back on hope and question leaders who say the market will eventually spread the spoils of the good life.

Market fundamentalism places a premium on buying and selling and on producing citizen consumers, as well as devaluing the democratic culture championed by schools, civic organizations, family life, churches, neighborhood associations, and voluntary associations of various kinds. Not surprisingly, youth then are growing up in a society driven by market relations *uber alles*; indeed, the organized political activism that upheld the deepest values of our democratic tradition and expanded the right to vote, women's rights, civil rights, labor rights, and the rights of racial minorities appears only to appeal to the indignation of the opulent elite of U.S. society. Sadly, the political authoritarianism of the current presidential administration teaches young people that citizenship and community "demand not courage, dialogue, and responsibility, but silence and complicity."<sup>11</sup> It appears that too many adults and political leaders discourage youth from taking seriously the political idea of the public good, which seeks to expand people's claim on the politics of life together.

In short, the political, economic, and spiritual culture framing the experience of young people in U.S. society is in need of a theological leadership willing to address aggressive nationalism, finance capitalism, authoritarian government, and seeker spirituality. I want to suggest that in the details of youth popular culture theological leaders will find resources for ministry. In particular, I think rap music as a form of popular youth culture has the potential to offer a new cultural, political, and religious language of questioning that helps us think about the world in a way that is critical of political arrogance, religious hypocrisy, and economic injustice. Among the messages carried in this popular cultural form, one finds a strong opposition to the suffering of the oppressed and to economic exploitation, and a more internationally encompassing vision of freedom, community, and human rights. Let's now more closely examine rap music as a resource of youth social and theological identity.

## **Shaping a Culture of Questioning**

The margins of society manifest a unique variety of popular youth culture that promotes crosscultural interactive dynamics, which help youth unfold a deeper understanding of difference and lofty notions of human community. The hip-hop culture that originated with youth of color in post-industrial New York City, for instance, has become a powerful form of youth understanding and social identity. As a cultural style enjoying international popularity, hip-hop is a cultural meaning system brimming with youth agency and a creative questioning of the commonly held value system of U.S. culture and religious tradition.<sup>12</sup> If baby boomer parents today lament the death of Abbie Hoffman, Allen Ginsberg, Jerry Garcia, Jerry Rubin, William Burroughs, Timothy Leary, John Lennon, and Jimmy Hendricks, they should celebrate the new counterculture in the making that is more multiracial and gender inclusive.

You may wonder why I want to hold up rap music as a form of youth theological and political discourse, especially since it has been subjected to fierce criticism from many parts of society, argued about in U.S. Senate hearings, and blamed for “allegedly fueling violence, drug abuse, and a general devolution of character.”<sup>13</sup> Critics like Bill O’Reilly, William Bennett, and C. Delores Tucker who think rap is morally bankrupt ignore the fact that rap music is not monolithic. Instead it reflects a range of forms from gangsta rap to gospel rap.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, the critics of rap music who insist that it only reflects a culture of depravity overlook the social and political contexts from which rap music and hip-hop culture emerged.<sup>15</sup> I think something good comes from rap music, and what deserve our attention are the existential concerns and material conditions expressed in this popular musical genre, which in part provides a voice of social criticism to young people.<sup>16</sup>

Rap music is a powerful cultural practice that came forth from the experience of Puerto Rican and African American youth in their early teens and twenties.<sup>17</sup> As popular culture, the history of rap reflects a social practice of boundary-crossing to produce conversation among different classes of people and to function as a powerful pedagogical text that enables youth to raise questions about themselves and society. Although rappers began their cultural practice excluded from the White, middle-class world, White youth eventually embraced and grew up on rap like “kids grow up on Similac.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, this popular cultural form builds interethnic and multiracial bridges that have implications for how adults in congregations identify theological

resources and raise questions from a youth perspective about the present condition of society.<sup>19</sup>

Rap music has been closely examined from an African American perspective by Anthony Pinn, Evelyn Parker, Cornel West, and Michael Dyson, among others. These academics reject the idea that rap music lacks social importance and is best understood as a macho, misogynist, homophobic, violent expression of thug culture. For instance, West describes early rap as the expression of Black youths disgusted with the “selfishness, capitalist callousness, and xenophobia of the culture of adults, both within the hood and society at large.”<sup>20</sup> Dyson’s important book on rapper Tupac Shakur—*Holler If You Hear Me: Searching for Tupac Shakur*—situates Tupac’s music in the wider context of post-civil rights social and political culture and the concern to claim a cultural space to express a sense of injustice.<sup>21</sup> Parker considers the musical genre to be a way for African American youth to embrace a wisdom tradition for humanizing Black identity;<sup>22</sup> meanwhile, Pinn argues for the need to understand the theological and spiritual importance of rap musical forms. These researchers do, however, overlook in their discussion the rich history of African American and Latino crosscultural exchange that first gave rise to rap music.<sup>23</sup>

Rap is not simply a form of Black youth genius, but a genre of music born in a fluid multiracial and multicultural space. As a product of youth cultural practices, rap music began in the slums and barrios of New York where African American and Puerto Rican youth gave expression to their collective historical experience. In the post-civil rights era, rap music developed first as an African American and Puerto Rican popular musical genre responding to the conditions of life created by dehumanizing Reaganomics; the crack epidemic in the inner city; capital flight and jobs exportation; the decline of public and low-income housing stock and gentrification passed off as urban renewal; the disintegration of inner-city schools and mainline religious life; and the growth of refugee and immigrant communities from Central America and the Caribbean due to U.S. economic policy and support of military regimes. I think early Black and Latino rappers were street prophets who angrily contested the U.S. racial, economic, and global order.

In many ways, rap music is a way to challenge dominant forms of thinking and more established narratives about the self in the prevailing system of power and privilege. Rap music contributes critical forms of emancipatory discourse that “keeps it real” by speaking about racism, sexism, broken families, economic injustice, failing public education, police brutality, and the

search for God. As the gains of the civil rights movement were being obviously rolled back some fifteen years ago, Black political rappers like Queen Latifah, Public Enemy, and KRS delivered messages of resistance, not survival. Indeed, Lawrence Parker or KRS-One, the Brooklyn-born rapper, in "Take It to God," sings a gospel rap telling listeners, "Change is gonna come, where you goin' to run, but to God?"<sup>24</sup> In the 1980s, Afrika Bambaataa and the Soul Sonic Force, Run-DMC, and others also rapped about topics like racism, nuclear proliferation, and apartheid.<sup>25</sup>

Although the Latino influence on rap music is ignored by established African American scholarship and overshadowed in the public eye by the African American role in hip-hop, the social facts disclose that rap music and hip-hop culture cannot be limited to the creative-force Black youth and their claims on public life. Rap (hip-hop) is part of a more extensive multiracial and crosscultural field of social practice pushing life beyond the boundaries of any singular racial reading of society. As Juan Flores notes, "Latin rap lends volatile fuel to the cause of multiculturalism in our society, at least in the challenging, inclusionary sense."<sup>26</sup> The Latino rappers in earliest groups like Mean Machine, Cold Crush Brothers, Fearless Four, or individuals like Kid Frost, Fat Joe, Big Pun, and Mellow Man Ace offered "an ensemble of alternative perspectives and an often divergent cultural ethos into the mainstream of U.S. social life."<sup>27</sup> Latino rappers tell us that this musical form is not Black cultural property each time they assert their genius to enunciate a way of life and thought for youth rendered invisible by society's Black/White normative gaze.<sup>28</sup>

The first Latino rapper to go platinum was the late Christopher Rios—known to hip-hop audiences as Big Pun, who died at the age of twenty-eight in February 2000 of a heart attack. Big Pun is a major hip-hop figure who drew between 40,000 to 60,000 people to the Ortiz Funeral Home on Westchester Avenue in the South Bronx to pay their last respects. The journalist Raquel Rivera observed that those who came to his funeral included such figures as "Fat Joe, LLCool J, Lil'Kim, Puff Daddy, Exhibit, Mack 10, and Members of MOP...[and]...an impromptu funeral party erupted outside the funeral home, with hundreds of people dancing and singing to Pun's music blaring from a car."<sup>29</sup> On a street just a few blocks away from where I grew up, you can find a mural of Big Pun on the half block of Rogers Place between 163rd Street and Westchester Avenue. Big Pun knew what it was like to be a homeless kid. He worked as a doorman and loaded boxes onto trucks in the South Bronx. Although he overcame many barriers and acquired material

success, he continued to live in the South Bronx and produce rap music that refused to accept any kind of marginality in the hip-hop zone.<sup>30</sup>

Unlike African American rappers such as KRS-One, Tupac, or Ice Cube, Latino rappers do not always consciously engage in a religiously informed exploration of life at the edges of society; yet the lyrics of artists like Prince Whipple Whip, Mellow Man Ace, Kid Frost, Terror Squad, Fat Joe, and Big Pun challenge religious communities that fail to address the bad-news situations and the despair faced by the forgotten working poor each day in American society. Big Pun lyrics may not give listeners an explicit gospel rap message, but the crucified reality from which he sings and the values individuals in his lyrics embody to survive raise theological questions about how to talk of a loving God in a world where street thugs and a thuggish economic system crush people daily. The MexikinZ, however, explicitly sing about forgiveness in a tune called “Confessions” (Hell Don’ Pay):

Oh lord, all I ask is for forgiveness  
though I live the sinful lifestyle  
hopin’ that you hear me out right now...  
To live it’s kinda hard, in this land of temptation  
Takin’ it day by day but I still pray for my salvation  
or am I facin’ total darkness I’m guessin’  
Stuck between heaven and earth, still stressin’<sup>31</sup>

The mainstream media largely represents rap music as the product of dangerous “Black youths,” rather than as the cultural construction of the lived experience of youth from various racial and ethnic backgrounds who decline to excuse the violent, dehumanizing, and life-denying conditions found in their social reality. I applaud universities around the country that are offering courses now on rap music, including Berkeley, Harvard, the University of Pennsylvania, and the University of Washington; some even offer courses devoted exclusively to Tupac Shakur.<sup>32</sup> By studying rap and hip-hop culture, theological leaders will find a way to understand the social and political issues on the minds of youth, which will enable them to take seriously how youth cultural production reflects shifts in the social, economic, and political environment.

Mainstream reporting keeps the larger public from knowing that in the last few years a hip-hop conference held at York College in Queens, New

York, and a West Coast hip-hop summit gathered African American and Latino rappers, grassroots activists, and public leaders to articulate a hip-hop political agenda: literacy campaigns in the public schools; antidrug and antiviolence campaigns; voter registration projects; and projects focused on justice issues related to the prison industrial complex, capital punishment, and music censorship.<sup>33</sup>

As a popular cultural form of significance to young people, rap music imagines the inclusive reign of God by giving shape to a visibly linguistic, racial, ethnic, and cultural hip-hop community. As the vernacular language of young people, rap music can serve to help adults keep it real with youth on issues of sex, AIDS, violence, poverty, racism, sexism, multiculturalism, war, politics, and spirituality. As popular culture, rap urges theological leaders to reexamine the context of liturgy and the worship experience of monolingual and ethnically homogenous congregations from the viewpoint of interethnic relations. Because rap music is a way to “sing to [God] a new song...with loud shouts” (Psalms 33:3), theologians, pastors, educators, and parents will find that by engaging this cultural production of youth, good news can spring forth from unexpected places.

I am aware that there are many who are asking whether or not rap and gospel, noise and the Word go together. Mark Lewis Taylor reminds us that “when rappers tell alternative stories while facing police brutality or prison warehousing of the racially stigmatized poor, depicting the struggle, survival, and flourishing of oppressed communities, they conjure spiritual practices for these communities.”<sup>34</sup> The spirituality of rap folded into the notion of keeping it real for young people in “da world” fosters a spiritual practice not afraid to name the idols of death in the structures of society. Rap conjures the young person’s theological vision of life rooted in the age-old promises of God’s good news for all. I conclude now with a brief scriptural reflection to show how deeply biblical is the idea that something good comes from unexpected places.

### **Nothing Good Comes from Nazareth (John 1:43–46)**

In the early twentieth century, the blues were viewed by “good” church folk as “music taken from the devil,” and in the 1950s the counterculture that evolved around rock and roll would also be demonized. Tipper Gore’s *Washington Post* editorial “Hate, Rape, and Rap”<sup>35</sup> suggests few redeeming qualities are to be found in rap music. In short, the mainstream cultural discourse consistently tells us that nothing good comes from the margins. Yet,

these indictments of popular culture and the refusal to entertain how they can energize spirituality in the church and among young people reflects a kind of blindness to the insights about life found among unexpected people. Although not all forms of rap music fall into this category, much of rap music can be seen as a current answer to a question posed by a young man named Nathaniel who was invited by Philip to follow Christ: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46).

I like to remember that Jesus came from a place that nobody looked to for leadership in society. The Galilean region where Nazareth is located was largely populated by a hard-working, exploited class of people with no obvious contribution to make to intellectual and spiritual centers of power; yet, from this surprising and restless place something good did come into the world, and the world has never since been the same. Theologian Virgilio Elizondo observes, “That God had chosen to become a Galilean underscores the paradox of the incarnation, in which God becomes the despised and lowly of the world.... God becomes the fool of the world for the sake of the world’s salvation.”<sup>36</sup> The barrios and inner cities that gave birth to rap music still reveal wisdom coming from the margins, as well as the ongoing incarnation of God among rejected persons.

Jesus of Nazareth disclosed a God of life outside of institutional structures; he broke laws on behalf of rejected people; he shared a vision of what people should expect and achieve in life grounded in God; he grappled with inequality, worsening economic conditions, the illness of others, interethnic alienation, the silencing of the poor, foreigners, children, women, and youth. Jesus is remembered in Scripture as the “poor, humble, enigmatic, lonely Jewish preacher who fearlessly defended the cause of the hurt of his society.”<sup>37</sup> As Karl Barth observed generations ago, “We do not really know Jesus (the Jesus of the New Testament) if we do not know Him as this poor man, as... (if we may risk the dangerous word) partisan of the poor....”<sup>38</sup> This Jesus who comes from a lousy neighborhood would not be displeased with rappers who use city streets as performance sites to name reality and claim a voice for youth who desire just social change.

I find it remarkable that many of the materially deprived and culturally despised youth who came up with rap music share biographical details with Christ. What do I mean? Well, they, like Jesus, were born to poor women, raised in valueless neighborhoods, and lacked institutional credentials for speaking about God in social reality. We should also remember that Jesus was maligned, falsely charged, arrested, and killed by the politicians and spiritual

leaders of his day. In the course of his public ministry, theologians said his healing ministry came from the ruler of demons: Beelzebul. Some of the details may change for present-day rappers, but the experiences of Jesus are not too unlike those known by Black and Latino/a youth of the inner-city communities that gave the world rap music and hip-hop culture.

I think the church can more deeply recognize the One who comes from Nazareth by walking the streets of lousy neighborhoods to shout out good news for young people and others who are denied a space to be human. In unexpected places, we can shout about how Jesus dropped lyrical bombshells to shape an alternative perception of society and to confront situations of suffering, alienation, and exploitation. I can imagine Jesus the rapper shaping a countercultural community around new social values with ethical teachings conjured by words like these:

- 1) Love your enemies (Matthew 5:44, Luke 6:27).
- 2) If struck on one cheek, offer the other (Matthew 5:39, Luke 6:29).
- 3) Give to everyone who begs (Matthew 5:42, Luke 6:30).
- 4) Judge not and you won't be judged (Matthew 7:1, Luke 6:37).
- 5) First remove the log from your own eye (Matthew 7:5, Luke 6:42).
- 6) Go out as lambs among wolves (Matthew. 10:16, Luke 10:3).
- 7) The kingdom of God has come near to you (Matthew 10:7, Luke 10:9).

In short, Jesus not only taught about the truth, but from the moment he left his forsaken neighborhood to begin a public ministry his behavior challenged the world ruled by oppressive power, and he spoke passionately against it.<sup>39</sup> Perhaps, you will agree that there is a great deal for the church to rap about once it fully grasps what kind of good news comes out of Jesus' lousy neighborhood and the lousy neighborhoods now surrounding us. It may very well be that our youth's cultural production can help us to see that the historical Jesus was "not just a thinker with ideas but a rebel with a cause....the embodied Galilean who lived a life of divine justice in an unjust world."<sup>40</sup> Youth ministry leaders who listen to and learn from rap music will better understand how youth manage the painful social alienation they experience in society, and the prophetic vision in them that sings.<sup>41</sup>

## Notes

1. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 45.
2. Henry A Giroux, *The Abandoned Generation: Democracy Beyond the Culture of Fear* (New York: Palgrave, 2003).
3. *Ibid.*, xiv.
4. Peter Berger, "The Desecularization of the World" in *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, ed. Peter Berger (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 2.
5. Stephen Hunt, *Religion in Western Society* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 23.
6. See especially Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) and Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).
7. See especially Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy, eds. *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2001).
8. Lynn Schofield Clark, *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 228.
9. Henry Giroux, *The Abandoned Generation*, xvii.
10. Children's Defense Fund, *The State of Children in America's Union: A 2002 Action Guide to Leave No Child Behind* (Washington DC: Children's Defense Fund Publication, 2002), v.
11. Giroux, *Abandoned Generation*, 4.
12. Mary Bucholtz, "Youth and Cultural Practice" in *Annual Review of Anthropology* 3 (2002): 525–52.
13. Heidi A. Hendershott, *School of Rap: The Politics and Pedagogies of Rap Music* (Ph.D. diss., Pennsylvania State University, 2004), 22.
14. See Anthony Pinn, ed. *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).
15. *Ibid.*, 25.
16. Early rap music provided a commentary on inner-city life such as growing unemployment, drugs and violence, poverty, and the disintegration of social relationships among the people who daily faced hard conditions in life. The observational rap music that initially came out of the South Bronx made it clear that the barrios and slums were nothing less than an "ethno-racial prison" where structural conditions of life in a racist society assured diminished life chances for making it.
17. Rap music is part of a wider so-called hip-hop culture that includes dancing, graffiti, fashion, and stylized speech.
18. Raquel Z. Rivera, *New York Ricans from the Hip Hop Zone* (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 171.
19. Although a great deal of ink has been used to explain rap music as an exclusively Black American ethno-musical innovation, not only was it the product of Black and Puerto Rican youths, but I think it is best understood as the expression of the "cultural hybridity" of the post-industrial urban world. In other words, it is neither, strictly speaking, Black music nor Puerto Rican music; rather it is the sounds of a multiracial, multicultural, and multilinguistic world.
20. Cornel West, *Democracy Matters*, 179.
21. Michael Dyson, *Holler If You Hear Me: Searching for Tupac Shakur* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).
22. Evelyn Parker, "Singing Hope in the Key of Wisdom: Wisdom Formation of Youth" in *In Search*

of *Wisdom: Faith Formation in the Black Church*, ed. Anne Streaty Wimberly and Evelyn L. Parker (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), and Anthony Pinn, *The Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002).

23. See especially Wimberly and Parker, *In Search of Wisdom*, Anthony Pinn, ed. *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music* (New York University Press, 2003).

24. KRS-One not only innovates gospel rap, but he understands that being a Christian also means questioning the Bible, the church, and the system of discourse that legitimates life-denying conditions.

25. See Jeff Chang, "Stakes Is High," in *Nation*, 276, no. 2 (January 13, 2003).

26. Juan Flores, *From Bomba to Hip-Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 137.

27. *Ibid.*, 137.

28. Today, rap musicians are not simply Puerto Rican and African American as in the mostly South Bronx-based days; now you will find White middle-class rappers, working-class rappers, and rappers in other countries as well.

29. Rivera, *New York Ricans from the Hip Hop Zone*, 174.

30. *Ibid.*, 175–76.

31. "Confessions (Hell Don't Pay)" in *The Mexakins Album* (1996), <http://www.lyricsbox.com/thamexakinz-lyrics-confessions-hell-dont-pay-1nd2pd2.html>.

32. Heidi A. Hensershott, *The School of Rap: The Politics and Pedagogies of Rap Music* (Ph.D. diss., Pennsylvania State University, 2004), 106.

33. Manning Marable, "The Politics of Hip-Hop" in *Worker BRC News*, <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/45a/594.html>.

34. Mark Lewis Taylor, "Bringing Noise, Conjuring Spirit" in *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap*, ed. Anthony Pinn (New York University, 2003), 119.

35. Tipper Gore, "Hate, Rape, and Rap," *The Washington Post* (January 8, 1990).

36. Virgilio Elizondo, *Galilean Journey* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990), 53.

37. Orlando Costas, *Christ Outside the Gate* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1984), 4.

38. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1958), 180. The German original was published in 1955.

39. Marcu Borg, *The God We Never Knew* (San Francisco: Harper, 1997), 142.

40. John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened in the Years Immediately after the Execution of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), xxx.

41. Reggaton is the latest and hottest musical genre to come from the streets and clubs of the Puerto Rican community. Reggaton blends hip-hop, reggae, and salsa dance music into a unique musical and dance genre that reflects the creative genius of Latin American youth.