

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

Symbols of Religion and Sexuality on MTV

CAROL J. PARDUN

Kansas State University

KATHY B. McKEE

Berry College

This study used content analysis to examine the use of religious and sexual imagery in rock music videos to determine how frequently such images were used and how frequently they were combined within the same video. A total of 160 videos were analyzed for presence or absence of religious or sexual imagery. The results of this study argue that religious imagery is present in videos in significant, nonrandom fashion. In addition, the study contends that religious images were more likely to occur with sexual imagery than without them.

From Black Sabbath and Judas Priest to Madonna, Ministry, The Church, The Cult, Arc Angels, Stone Temple Pilots, Temple of the Dog, Nirvana, and The Sundays, rock groups have increasingly embraced religious imagery and symbols in a seemingly ironic attempt to identify themselves, to defy convention, and perhaps to shock traditionalists by placing what have been regarded as sacred symbols into an overwhelmingly secular arena. The advent of the music video has made it possible for the use of religious imagery and symbols to function as an implicit or overt part of the music video landscape and setting. However, rarely do these religious symbols stand alone within the video. As this study will indicate, often they are juxtaposed with sexual images in what could be described as a secular framing of these traditionally sacred symbols.

The purpose of this study was to examine the use of religious and sexual imagery in rock music videos to determine how frequently such images were used and how frequently they were used together in the same video. As researchers have noted (see, e.g., Lewis, 1990;

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Schwichtenberg, 1992; Walker, 1987), the content of music videos is important to the young adult market. MTV, the first 24-hour music video network, has been structured around youths. MTV attempts to reach the 12- to 34-year-old market ("Cable Network Profiles," 1993). In fact, 28% of their viewership is under 18 years of age. From 3:00 to 7:00 p.m. each weekday, that percentage rises to 37% ("Cable Network Profiles," 1993).

SACRED SYMBOLISM WITHIN POPULAR CULTURE

Researchers from myriad disciplines—psychology, anthropology, religion, philosophy, sociology, to name a few—have explored the use and meanings of religious/sacred symbols within cultures. Although approaches have varied, most tend to agree at one level: Sacred symbol and rituals are used to establish meaning and order. Eliade (1957/1959), in his pivotal work *The Sacred and the Profane*, put it this way: "Symbols awaken individual experience and transmute it into a spiritual act, into metaphysical comprehension of the world" (p. 211). Eliade's work traced the use of sacred/religious symbols through various cultures, showing ways that the cultures used images of trees, towers, temples, and divine models as reminders of what he called the sacred, the parts of life above and beyond individual persons. Understanding those symbols enabled one to participate in the sacred experiences of life; "for by understanding the symbol, he succeeds in living the universal" (p. 212).

Modern research has suggested that television has assumed a primary role as the purveyor of such cultural symbols to the mass audience. Fiske and Hartley (1978) have argued that television provides a "ritual condensation" function (p. 89) by projecting ideological conventions and ideas on to the external world. It does this through what he called its "bardic role," sharing the mythologies of the culture in an oral fashion designed to fit the conventions of the culture and to expose any inadequacies within the culture (pp. 85-89). Other critical researchers have begun to examine television viewing as part of the symbolic ritualization carried out by modern cultures. Harvey (1990) provided an overview of such research, citing the work of Hall (cited in Grossberg, 1986), Aufderheide (1986), and Cantor (1987), among

others. Using a psychoanalytical approach, Harvey focused on the viewing of music videos as one such symbolic ritual, likening it to the "ecstasy ritual" of community celebration such as Mardi Gras (p. 43).

This study sought to identify the sacred/religious symbols used as visuals within the context of contemporary music videos and the contexts in which they were presented. After doing so, it was apparent that rarely do sacred/religious symbols stand alone; they are most often placed with sexual images within the videos. The juxtaposition of these symbols suggests a tension between modern understandings of the sacred/religious and the secular/sensual, a tension that may be designed to point out the weaknesses of modern culture's understandings of both arenas, as Fiske and Hartley (1978) might suggest, or which may just be designed to evoke a response of shock or irony from viewers by challenging the hegemonic view of these symbols, as the critical scholars would suggest. This article will present the results of this initial analysis and suggest implications of the findings.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The study of rock music videos tended to center around analysis of symbolic content but has generally concentrated on gender portrayals or studies of sexual or violent content. Vincent, Davis, and Boruszkowski (1987), Vincent (1989), and Seidman (1992) have analyzed music videos to determine their portrayal of women. These studies generally have concluded that women tended to be portrayed as passive characters or as sexual objects.

The interaction of sexuality and violence has also been studied. Sherman and Dominick (1986) analyzed 166 videos and found that 81% of the videos that contained violence also included sexual imagery. Hansen and Hansen's 1990 experiment tested the effects of sex and violence on the audience's enjoyment of rock videos. They found that although sexual imagery increased the appeal of the music videos, violent imagery did not. Jeffres (1986), in his review of music video studies, concluded that "these studies suggest that the world of music videos, while probably not as violent as critics charge, is a strange world indeed. When violence occurs, it is most likely directed against teenagers and will probably happen in a context heavily laden with

sexual overtones" (p. 217). Yet Walker (1987) surveyed 223 seventh-grade students and found evidence that "concern about the high levels of violence in music videos may be exaggerated" (p. 761). In a 1991 study, Bleich, Zillmann, and Weaver studied the link between adolescent rebelliousness and the use and enjoyment of music videos. They concluded that rebellious teens were more likely to enjoy music with a defiant theme than did nonrebellious teens.

Very few studies have ventured beyond study of the pairing of sex and violence. The literature has reported the presence of religious imagery in rock music, but not surprisingly, it has centered almost exclusively on Madonna. Brown and Schulze (1990) contend that Madonna "provokes multiple and contradictory meaning" (p. 90), of which the interplay of sex and religion is certainly one. Sculatti (1990), in an essay included in Madonna's "Immaculate Collection" CD argued that her song "Like a Prayer" moved beyond mere religious images to ones that spoke of the redemptive power of sexual love (p. 4). Masters (1990) reported what Madonna's audiences have to say about her. Said one of the respondents in Masters's study: "She's unabashedly fascinated by power, whether it's sexual power, physical power with her vigorous dancing, or spiritual power in her gropings with her Catholic faith" (p. G-5). Larson (1988) described Madonna this way: "Madonna wears a crucifix around her neck, see-through blouses, and fingerless gloves. She admitted the crucifix was because of her affinity for 'a sexy man on a cross' " (p. 169).

It is important to note, however, that Madonna does not hold the lone spot of religious and sexual icon. The metaphysical poets of the 17th century often used this technique to shatter readers' conventional thinking. John Donne often wrote about sex in religious terms and religion in sexual terms. For example, in one of Donne's most famous sonnets, "Batter My Heart," he writes about being consumed by God. The poem ends: "Take me to you, imprison me, for I/Except you enthrall me, never shall be free/Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me." His poetry was considered extremely radical, coming from a man who was ordained into the Church of England in 1615, appointed a royal chaplain, and given an honorary doctorate of divinity by Cambridge (Craik & Craik, 1986). It is also important to note that this article is not specifically concerned with Madonna. Her videos emerged only

four times from the random sample of this study. Clearly, this phenomenon transcends any particular artist.

In one study that coded for the presence of religious images in videos without referring to Madonna, Baxter, DeReimer, Landina, Leslie, and Singletary (1985), in their content analysis of videos, coded for use of 23 categories of images, including the "portrayal of belief in a superhuman, controlling power" (p. 337). They found that 17.7% of the videos contained an element of religion. They also found that 59.7% of the videos contained sexual imagery. What they failed to do, however, was code for any interactions between sexual imagery and the other 22 coded categories.

Bennett and Ferrell (1987) discuss the use of what they termed the "conversion" theme in music videos, arguing that such ironic use of images should not be surprising:

After all, in depicting conversion, video makers draw on a body of common cultural knowledge as to the nature of faith, salvation, and conversion. When they depict rock 'n' roll as a liberating alternative to everyday life, to which all who would believe are welcome, they make reference to religious tradition and imagery indigenous to Western culture. (p. 357)

The researchers argued that music videos play an active role in what they termed "epistemic socialization" (p. 346), the process of establishing primary principles for individuals. This epistemic socialization is an important concept, particularly in light of the concentration of under-18-year-olds, who may construct their social meaning, in part, from music videos.

METHODOLOGY

The research sought to investigate the following questions:

Q1: How often is religious imagery used in rock videos?

Q2: When religious imagery is used, is it used alone or is it combined with the use of sexual imagery?

The study employed a content analysis of rock music videos taped for analysis purposes from MTV during 3-hour blocks selected from

daytime, evening, and late-night broadcasts during November and December 1992. A total of 30 hours of programming was recorded. The unit for analysis was the individual video; time length of individual videos varied. Programming of live performance of dance hours with clips of videos was excluded from analysis, yielding a sample of 160 videos for analysis.¹ Multiple occurrences of the same video were coded separately because the emphasis of the study was on recording the number of events of religious and sexual imagery seen from the screen rather than differentiating between specific videos; it should be noted, however, that multiple occurrences make up only a small number of the total videos coded.

Individual videos were coded for presence or absence of sexual or religious reference within each. Only the visual images of the videos were coded; the audio portion was not coded for this study. Much has been written on the meaning of lyrics and the potential harm they can impose on youths (e.g., Gore, 1987), but that was not the concern of this study. Presence of sexual reference was coded following the typology used by Baxter et al. (1985), which included the following: "provocative clothing; embrace or other physical contact; dance movements of sexually suggestive nature; nondance movements of sexually suggestive nature; date or courtship (male and female); kissing; male chasing female or vice versa; use of musical instrument in sexually suggestive manner; sadomasochism; date or courtship (homosexual or lesbian); sexual bondage" (p. 338).

Presence of religious reference was coded as presence of a visible symbol that stands for or suggests the practice of an organized religion, including such elements as a cross or star; dove; church or temple building; altar or shrine; clothing such as a clerical or monastic robe, cowl, habit, collar, or veil; angel or heavenly being; references to sacred writing such as the Bible or the Koran; ritual activities such as praying, and so on.

Intercoder reliability between the two primary coders was calculated using Scott's pi (Wimmer & Dominick, 1991, p. 173). The reliability coefficient obtained equaled 96.66%.

The categorical data were analyzed using frequencies and chi-square analysis to determine if the use of sexual and religious imagery was statistically significant.

TABLE 1
Numbers and Percentages of the
Presence/Absence of Sexual and/or Religious Imagery

	<i>Sexual Present</i>	<i>Sexual Absent</i>	<i>Total</i>
Religious present	44 27.50%	17 10.63%	61 38.13%
Religious absent	56 35.00%	43 26.88%	99 61.88%
Total	100 62.50%	60 37.51%	160 100%

RESULTS

A total of 160 videos were analyzed for presence or absence of religious or sexual imagery. Coding revealed four patterns: videos with both sexual and religious imagery present, videos with neither sexual or religious imagery present, videos with sexual imagery alone, and videos with religious imagery alone. Overall percentages of occurrence are found in Table 1. Religious imagery was present in more than one third of the videos coded.

In addressing Research Question 2, religious imagery was frequently combined with sexual imagery. The combination of religious imagery with sexual imagery in music videos does not appear to be random; religious imagery is twice as likely to be found in videos that also use sexual imagery than those without. Religious imagery without sexual imagery present was found in only 10.6% of the videos coded; however, the combination of sexual imagery and religious imagery was present in more than one fourth of the videos analyzed.

The chi-square goodness-of-fit test indicated that the use and combination of the imagery exceeded that which would have occurred randomly ($\chi^2 = 20.25$, $df = 3$, $p < .0001$).

DISCUSSION

The results of this study argue that religious imagery is present in videos in a significant, nonrandom fashion. Additionally, the study

contends that religious images are more likely to occur with sexual imagery than without them. The prevalence of religious images has apparently increased since the Baxter et al. analysis; however, the incidence of sexual imagery within videos reported by this study is slightly smaller than the Baxter study suggested.

It should be noted that of the 160 videos analyzed, only 4 were of Madonna. Of those four videos, only one contained religious imagery. It is also important to note that none of the videos analyzed contained any alternative religious imagery, such as Satanic images or symbols. Rather, the images used were highly recognizable Judeo-Christian symbols. For example, in a video by Pearl Jam, a Bible verse (Genesis 3:16) that had no apparent connection to the music in the video was flashed on the screen.

Although this study did not address the lyrics of songs depicted in the videos, the coding process indicated that use of both sexual and religious images did not necessarily correspond with the titles or the lyrics of those songs. In some videos, the religious imagery was to be expected. For example, REM's "Losing My Religion" had a wealth of religious imagery as well as some sexual imagery. This video depicts someone who has had a dream expressing his doubts about the reality of religion. The lyrics highlight the subject's feeling of being cornered and losing his religion. It makes sense with the dream shown on the video. In other words, the song is about religious doubt, and the visual shows that concept. Arrested Development's video "Revolution" also shows "logical" religious symbolism. The song is about searching for a better life, joining the struggle and revolution. The video shows scenes of people praying as well as many clips from the movie *Malcolm X*. But these kinds of video were more the exception than the rule. The majority of the videos used religious images as did Pearl Jam, that is, with no apparent connection to the story line of the music video.

For example, the Shakespeare's Sister video, "I Don't Care," includes a scene featuring a Salvation Army Band. There seems to be little connection between the music and the band. The song seems to be about two people who are angry at each other and don't care about what hurt they exert on each other. However, in a bizarre ending of the video, the singer is on the stage in a "Little Bo Peep" type costume as the Salvation Army Band plays. Interesting to note is that the audio

itself does not relate to the Salvation Army Band, which is mostly brass instruments; they are clearly just making the motion of playing rather than providing any kind of backup music to Shakespeare's Sister.

Finally, the Guns N' Roses' video, "November Rain," is perhaps the best example of the blatant use of religious imagery that is unrelated to the song itself. The video is interspersed with cut shots of an old Norman Rockwell-type church, several close shots of crosses, a close up of Christ's head with the Crown of Thorns and blood trickling down his face, as well as many other religious images. "November Rain" has many sexual images as well, including a bride in low-cut, miniskirted wedding gown, and back-up singers in slinky, tight, black dresses sporting oversized crucifixes. The song is not about religion, however. Rather, the main thrust seems to be that love is only temporary so there's no point in holding back sexually.

Some researchers have begun to address the issue of why the images in music videos often do not closely relate to the meaning of the song. Perhaps in this youth-oriented market, where viewers are used to quick clips, shorter advertisements with more cuts, riding the remote control, and watching several programs simultaneously, it is not unusual to watch a video story and a different audio story at the same time.

Goldberg, Chattopadhyay, Gorn, and Rosenblatt (1993) investigated the reasons why people tired or did not tire of seeing the same rock video many times. They report that "repeated exposure to a music video was found to forestall wear out relative to repetitive exposure to music only" (p. 1). Their reasoning for this phenomenon was that music videos tended to lack closure (perhaps because the lyrics did not match the images). They reported that "as long as subjects sought the meaning of a stimulus, it would hold their interest" (p. 11). If what the researchers argue has merit, then perhaps as audience members recognize the religious images and connect them with organized religion (and not with music videos), the viewers are involved in trying to figure out why the images are used, thereby keeping the viewer involved longer than if the images were absent. On the other hand, the messages may be uncertain and ambiguous and simply confuse viewers (Sherman & Etling, 1991, p. 385).

An appropriate follow-up to this study would be research to explore how young adults read the images and symbols of rock videos. Are the more displaced symbols more involving? Are they confusing? How do young adults interpret the juxtaposition of religious and sexual images? Do they even notice the symbols? Indeed, does the use of religious symbolism within the secular frame of the video change the meaning of the symbol for the viewer? How does this affect the epistemic socialization process of the viewers? Because members of the 12- to 18-year-old age group spend a great deal of time formulating their worldview, it may be important to explore how this kind of video affects their view of religion.

Research into the creation of music videos would also be profitable. How do producers choose the imagery of the video? How do they read the images and symbols they choose? Are they deliberately creating an ironic framing or is it an inadvertent mixture? Has the choice and use of religious imagery within videos increased over time, and is it tied to a certain genre of music video? Has the combination of sexual and religious imagery varied or increased over time?

Certainly, the language of music video includes a variety of symbols and images. Analysis of that language and further analysis of how viewers interpret it will offer insights into the newly derived medium of music television, the environment of its viewers, and the symbolic creation and sharing of cultural meanings through this medium.

NOTE

1. A complete list of the titles of the videos used for this study is available from the authors.

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Carol J. Pardun (Ph.D., 1992, University of Georgia) is Assistant Professor of Advertising at Kansas State University. She has recently published with coauthor Dean M. Krugman "How the Architectural Style of the Home Relates to Family Television Viewing," in the spring 1994 issue of Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media. Her research interests include television audience analysis and architectural impact on media behavior.

Kathy B. McKee (Ph.D., 1992, University of Georgia) is Assistant Professor of Journalism and acting coordinator of the School of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences at Berry College. She has recently published with coauthor Eric Haley "Regulating Channel One Within Public Schools: Precedents and Parameters," in the August 1994 issue of Communications and the Law. Her research interests include media sociology, ethics, and law.