

THE CONVERGENCE OF THE SEXUAL AND SPIRITUAL IN THE ARTISTRY OF PRINCE

Michael Lindsay, PhD
Assistant Professor of English
and African American Studies
Clayton State University
2000 Clayton State Boulevard
Morrow, Georgia 30260
michaellindsay@clayton.edu

Abstract

At the core of most religions, especially the three Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), is the fundamental belief that the body and soul are at constant battle. The antagonistic relationship between the flesh of the believer and the spirit of the believer is what has often times shaped ideas about right and wrong, moral and immoral, and sinful and sacred for individuals, groups, and governments. The religious fixation over the insidious nature of fleshly desires becomes particularly interesting when an individual can become the embodiment of both the sexual and spiritual nature of man without engaging the moral dilemma that such a pairing warrants. This paper focuses on Prince as a sex god and as a man of God by examining the music and iconography of one of the most celebrated musicians in recent history.

When a musical icon dies people have come to expect to be inundated with his music, movies, celebrity interviews with his friends and radio and television shows dedicated to contextualizing his life and work. And, as the days and weeks rolled on after Prince Roger Nelson's death, audiences had every opportunity to be submerged in, reacquainted with, and introduced to his music, the impact of his music on contemporary musicians and society generally, and details about his personal life. One detail about his personal life that was repeated by those closest to him was that Prince was a deeply religious man.

To a casual fan of Prince's music, the revelation that he was a religious man may come as a surprise. However, to those close to him, and to those who are serious fans of his music, the

relationship between Prince's sexuality and his spirituality was a staple of his personal beliefs and his musical aesthetic. His friend and fellow musician, Larry Graham, said, "Prince is a spiritual man. Sometimes we study for six, eight hours a day. We sit down and get into the scriptures" (*The Daily Record*). Cultural critic and Prince biographer, Touré, says, "You can remember Prince as one of the most sexual artists of all time, and you would be right, but he was also one of the most important religious artists of all time." The merging of Prince's sexual exploration through music and his spiritual exploration through music presents a paradox in the traditional Judeo-Christian sense. Early in his career Prince was commonly referred to as a sex god by critics. It is this type of designation that appears to portray him as the antithesis of religious. Traditionally, to equate sex with divinity is sacrilegious; however, the paradox created by Prince's convergence of sex and spirit aligns his artistry with another Christological paradox that establishes Jesus as both wholly flesh and wholly divine, and makes Prince's ideology about the body and the flesh not as revolutionary as dissenters may assume.

Part of what makes Prince's musical preoccupation with sex and God seemingly contradictory is the idea that the soul and body are at battle with one another is the convergence of Platonic and Stoic philosophies on Christian thought. According to Kelly Brown Douglas, in Platonic philosophy there were two different spheres of existence, one physical and the other spiritual (25). Moreover, this philosophy privileged the spirit over the flesh. Douglas further explains that Stoicism espoused that the "highest state of living is one epitomized by reason and released from bodily desires" (27). The influence of these combined philosophies into Christian thought helped produce a dualistic thinking into the religious tradition that determined "divinity was esteemed and humanity was devalued" (Douglas 27). Because passion is equated with sexual desire and lust, these urges, in the Judeo-Christian context, must be controlled in order for a person to reach true spiritual alignment. Prince's music challenges these typical and long-established notions of the role of sensuality in concert with spirituality. Prince intertwined the erotic with the divine; his lyrics blurred the lines between the sacred and secular, and the title of sex god represents a harmonic coexistence.

Throughout his career Prince has written countless lyrics about sexuality and sexual freedom and his performances, especially early in his career, were controversial because of the overtly sexualized movements and reenactments. The content of his artistry, by many standards, would place Prince as outside of the norm of proper religious behavior. However, although his raw and unadulterated sexuality is what partially brought him his early notoriety, Prince has always had a spiritual dynamic to his music. Early in his career, this spiritual side existed alongside his sexual side; not in contradiction to one another, but in concert with each other. His later work seemed to elevate the obsession with physical love and pleasure to a spiritual level and place more importance on a transcendent love experience that would out last and was more important than sexual desire and pleasure. So, the matter is, how could Prince occupy a sacred and sexual space while most religious teachings inform followers that the flesh and spirit are in constant battle for supremacy over the individual's soul?

Prince Rogers Nelson was born Seventh Day Adventist. This protestant denomination is best known by outsiders for their observance of the Sabbath on Saturday instead of Sunday. They also believe that Christ will return to collect his believers, both living and dead, to take them to Heaven to reign for 1,000 years. During this millennium, Satan and his angels will reign on Earth until Christ returns to consume with fire Satan, his angels, and nonbelievers – ridding the universe of sin forever, leaving God and his followers to live on a New Earth without pain, sorrow, or suffering. In addition, Seventh Day Adventist believe in modest dress, absentia from

unclean foods, alcohol, tobacco, the irresponsible use of drugs and narcotics, and all forms of entertainment and amusement that does not meet high Christian standards.

In 2001, by the urging of his friend and fellow musician, Larry Graham, Prince converted to the Jehovah Witness faith. Like Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah Witnesses believe that the Earth will be cleansed of all sin and be occupied by the followers of God forever. However, Jehovah Witnesses are not Protestants (or Catholics) as there are fundamental differences between the two such as the belief in the Trinity and the mortality or immortality of the soul – just to name a couple. To people outside of the faith, Jehovah Witnesses are known for going door to door, witnessing to their neighbors about their beliefs and distributing their church’s publication, *The Watchtower*. Most notably as of late the myth that Jehovah Witnesses don’t believe in medicine or accept medical treatment, and the fact that their followers do not accept blood transfusions has fueled rumors that Prince’s death was precipitated by his unwillingness to get a much-needed hip replacement surgery. In a 2001 interview with *The New Yorker*, Prince said about his religious conversion, “I don’t see it really as a conversion. More, you know, it’s a realization. It’s like Morpheus and Neo in ‘The Matrix’” (qtd. in Vogel 164).

Indeed, Prince’s religious experience does not begin with a conversion; it is evident that the artist, from a young age, had a deep connection to his own spirituality. In a 2009 interview Prince explains to Tavis Smiley that according to the words of his mother, an angel told him that he had been cured from epilepsy, a condition he suffered with as a child. In a 1999 interview with Larry King, he said, “My inspiration comes from God.” Prince’s sensitivity to the presence of God is, according to him, present since his beginnings, and his sensitivity to sexuality is evident since the infancy of his music. It is apparent that he did not allow the tension between the sacred and the sexual to push him into ignoring one or the other. In a 2013 interview with V Magazine, when asked, “How do you, a religious person, reconcile the religious impulse with what most of your songs are about, which is the sexual one?”, Prince explained, before changing the topic, “We are sensual being, the way God created us, when you take the shame and taboo away from it.” To Prince, sexuality and spirituality are natural, both gifts from God.

In some cases, in Prince’s music, his religious influence and message are overt. For example, the song, “I Will Die 4 U,” is basically gospel music. Even though the sound and deliverance of the message steps out of bounds to how tradition gospel music is delivered, his message of strictly expressing God’s love for humanity is consistent with the message from any of his gospel musician contemporaries. “I Would Die 4 U,” expresses the extent of the love of God –volunteering to make the ultimate sacrifice for mankind in the name of love. Lyrics like, “I’m not your lover/I’m not your friend/I am something that you’ll never comprehend/No need to worry/ No need to cry/I’m your messiah and you’re the reason why/’Cause you, I would die for you. . .” show that his artistry was not completely consumed by sexual desire, but that he at least partially concerned with spiritual acknowledgment and acceptance.

Songs like “Purple Rain” and “When Doves Cry,” though religious in nature, present a more abstract message that merges the physical and spiritual. In “Purple Rain,” the real intent of the lyrics can be best examined by first considering the religious significance of the color purple. In the Bible, because purple was the most expensive dye known to the ancient Israelites, the color purple represents royalty, wealth, and prosperity. In Judges 8:26 and Esther 8:15, the color is worn by royalty and represents the majesty of the wearer. In Ezekiel 27:7, Song of Solomon 3:10, or in Revelation 17:4, purple is descriptive of wealth. The song, upon first impressions, sounds like an ode to a love gone wrong. Even though lyrics like, “I never meant to cause you any sorrow/I never meant to cause you any pain. . .” echo the lamentations of a love lost, when

Prince says that he only wants to see his lover laughing, dancing, bathing, and underneath the purple rain, what is being suggested is that he wants to elevate his lover to a position of majesty. Even though the relationship is apparently over, Prince sings, “Let me guide you to the Purple Rain.” Essentially, what he is more concerned with his lover’s spiritual development than anything else.

Like “Purple Rain,” it’s important to understand the religious significance of doves to examine the religious connotations of “When Doves Cry.” In some ancient faiths, the dove was representative of feminine fertility. For example, the Canaanites worshiped the goddess Asherah, whose primary goal was that of mother goddess. It has been well established that some ancient Israelites believed that Asherah was consort to Yahweh. And, since the dove is a well recognized symbol of Asherah, it should be no surprise that the dove came to represent the spirit of God. In the biblical narrative, doves are considered clean animals according to Mosaic law (Gen. 15:9. Lev. 5:7), harbingers of peace (Gen. 8:8, Gen. 8:19), emblems of purity (Ps. 68:13), and symbols of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 3:16, Mark 1:10). In the song, Prince reveals that he is not a perfect mate. He sings, “Maybe I’m just too demanding/Maybe I’m just like my father too bold/Maybe you’re just like my mother/She’s never satisfied (She’s never satisfied).” However, even though he admits to being deeply flawed, by invoking the iconography of the dove, he suggests that his love is pure, spiritual, and hovering.

“I Will Die 4 U,” “Purple Rain,” and “When Doves Cry” are overtly and covertly religious while still keeping the object of affection a person of the opposite sex; however, Prince was not only consistent in describing a spiritual love that is intertwined with the complexities of human relationships, he also consistently described a lustful, polymorphous, sexual desire that intertwined with spirituality as well. During his time with his band, The Revolution (1981), Prince is noted as saying that he wanted to portray pure sex. The raw sexuality of his music and live performances is backed up by lyrics like, “Sexuality is all I’ll ever need. Sexuality, let your mind be free.” This attitude is further explored in the song “Darling Nikki.” In the song, Prince talks about running into Nikki, who can only be described as a sex god, while she is “masturbating to a magazine.” He then, agrees to a sexual experience when she instructs him to “sign your name on the dotted line.” After having what is described as a life changing sexual experience, the final lines of the song take a turn toward the spiritual. The song ends with the lines, “Hello, how are you? I’m fine, ‘Cause I know that the Lord is coming soon, coming, coming soon.” Now, quiet frankly, the end of the song leaves me with more questions than answers. And I am not alone in this respect. Some have theorized that “Darling Nikki” is about the songwriter signing his soul over to Satan, and the last lines – which are song backwards – are referring to lord Satan. However, considering that even when the song was recorded, Prince had an established record of believing in Satan’s creator. Moreover, the song represents Prince’s equitable relationship between the flesh and the spirit. To Prince, this sexual encounter is tantamount to a spiritual awakening of sorts. The experience with Nikki, in very crude terms, equates to the unburdening of a heavy soul to a priest that releases in the confessor of sins unwanted guilt and shame. And here, the sexual encounter with Nikki is not met with taboo, but contains a similar mystery to that of religious devotion – that it takes a certain amount of faith to believe (or sign on the dotted line), and that after the experience one is left changed.

The question of true freedom, even from religious dictates and conventions, is the subject of his song “Controversy.” In response to the heavy criticism that he and other artist like Madonna had received for their sexually (and violent in other cases) lyrics, in “Controversy” Prince questions why people can’t be free to do what they want, why does everything, including

sexual desire, have to be a matter of controversy. Perhaps, most interesting about this song, at least for this study, is that while he is proclaiming that people should be allowed to be themselves without restriction, he sings the Lord's Prayer. In an ironic twist, he, who is being demonized for normalizing polymorphous sexual behavior, prays for the religious conservative prudes that that would censure sexual desire and behavior, making the point that there is a fine line between the sacred and the profane. In one sense, he is throwing religious conservatism back in the face of those who marginalize sexual behavior, in another sense, Prince is also, even ever so slightly, reminding listeners of the controversy surrounding Christ as he spent his time with the undesirables of his day – those who some would call derelict today.

The line between the sacred and profane, which essentially translates into a line between the spiritual and the physical, is what he explores in Anna Stesia. In the song, Prince sings, "Have you ever been so lonely that you felt like you were the only one in the world?" Then he asks, "Anna Stesia come to me, talk to me, ravish me, liberate my mind." This liberation that he seeks from Anna Stesia he hopes will show him true salvation – that maybe, she can teach him true love. He says that if she comes to him, talks to him, and ravishes him, that maybe, "Maybe I can someday learn to love, the right way, I mean, the only way." Here, for Prince, the way to spiritual nirvana is through sexual nirvana. Because, even though this song is about the longings of a sexually repressed person and starts off by calling a lover to liberate him, halfway through the song Anna Stesia changes from a woman to Jesus. Prince sings, "Save me Jesus, I've been a fool. How could I forget that you are the rule? You are my God; I am Your child. From now on, for you I shall be wild..." And, as he is asking Anna Stesia to teach how to love at the beginning, by the end of the song he sings, "Love is God, God is Love, girls and boys love God above. One could take the opinion that he there are almost two themes here – one sexual and the other spiritual. However, Prince does not separate the two. The lyrics, "Love is God, God is Love, girls and boys love God above" are played over "Anna Stesia come to me, talk to me, ravish me, liberate my mind." By doing this, Prince is suggesting that sexual and physical are inextricable. To Prince, love is the gospel.

One could extract this type of meaning from Prince's artistry for a lifetime. His music is replete with sexual innuendo, and with spiritual innuendo. His music articulates the battle between the flesh and the soul that has been waged since the advent of religious behavior and stricture. What may be at the core of the discussion of the sexual versus the spiritual side of his music is one's understanding of the symbolic interpretation of the Crucifixion, because therein lies the basis of Christian behavior. As Orlando Patterson, in his book *Slavery and Social Death*, explains:

One explanation, which has profoundly conservative spiritual and social implications, held that Christ saved his followers by paying his own life for the sin that led to their spiritual enslavement. The sinner, strictly speaking, was not emancipated, but died anew in Christ, who became his new master. Spiritual freedom was divine emancipation. (71)

This view of the Crucifixion can perhaps, at least partially, explain the conservative social ideas that exists about subjects such as sex. The believers' new master, God in this case, has restrictive ideas about the appropriateness thereof. Another, more liberal interpretation of the Crucifixion is that:

. . . Jesus did not redeem mankind by making mankind his slave. . . Rather, he annulled the condition of slavery in which man existed by returning to the original

point of enslavement and, on behalf of the sinner about to fall, gave his own life so that the sinner might live and be free. (71)

“Live and be free” are the operative words here. Prince’s music is about freedom – true freedom. He did not see the love of God as restrictive, but as liberating. To Prince, the love of God, takes man to his natural state and liberates him from the enslavement (be it physical, social, or spiritual) of man. To restate his claim, “We are sensual being, the way God created us, when you take the shame and taboo away from it.” In his essay, “White Racism or World Community,” James Baldwin says, “From my point of view, it seems to me that the flesh and the spirit are one; it seems to me that when you mortify the one, you have to mortify the other.” Prince would agree with this statement. His legacy is a testament to the thin line that exists between the body and soul, and his music represents the bridge by which they cross each other. For Prince, the flesh and the spirit exist on the same plain; therefore, according to Michaela Angela Davis, “Every song was either a prayer or foreplay” (qtd. in France).

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