

The Contemporary Text: Media and Preaching

Madonna—Our Lady of Desire

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A friend of mine went to high school with Madonna. They sat next to each other in choir practice. He still has a signed photograph of her that she gave him in their senior year. She was a lot of fun, but not, he thought, particularly talented.

This is a simple story, and there must be thousands of people who knew Madonna before she was famous and can tell similar tales about her. But when he told me of his personal involvement with this megastar I was amazed and not a little awestruck. A *friend of mine went to school with Madonna!* Suddenly, his life takes on a different aspect: he has been granted an encounter denied to most of us mortals. He is privileged, special, and maybe even I am, too. How many friends do you have who know Madonna?

It shouldn't be remarkable to discover that she had an ordinary human upbringing, but it is. It shouldn't make a difference that my ordinary friend once cracked jokes with her at break time, but it does. Whatever her life may once have been like, Madonna as we know her is certainly not ordinary. She is, quite literally, extraordinary, a being outside of, and beyond, everyday human experience. Nevertheless, where we are, there she is also.

Madonna is a complex and disturbing icon of popular culture. She is one of the great "signs" of our times, a sign formed by her records, videos, books, and films, by PR agencies, radio and tv chat shows, by newspapers, magazines and the word on the street. Since she shot to international stardom in the mid-1980s her albums have sold an average of 9.5 million copies each. The publication last year of *Sex*—a collection of photographs in which Madonna acts out her sexual fantasies, and which *Vanity Fair* described as "perhaps the dirtiest coffee-table book ever"—was a massive international event. It went on sale simultaneously across the world in four different languages. Many stores sold out early on the first day despite the book's retail price of \$49.95. Madonna is a sign we cannot ignore. But what, if anything, does she signify?

At one level it is possible to see Madonna simply as a crusader for sexual liberation, a kind of civil rights campaigner in the area of genital gratification. In an interview with *Newsweek* she explained that *Sex* was her attempt to open people's minds to the breadth of human sexuality: "It's about tolerance, acceptance and saying, 'Look, everybody has different needs and wants and preferences and desires and fantasies. And we should not damn somebody or judge somebody because it's different than yours.'"¹

And so Madonna bombards us in the book and in many of her videos with all kinds of sexual imagery: auto-eroticism, public nudity, group sex, homosexuality, lesbianism, voyeurism, and, increasingly, sadomasochism. In her latest film, *Body of Evidence* (1993) she plays a dominatrix who is accused of killing men by having sex with them. The highly explicit sadomasochistic scenes shocked even some Hollywood insiders who did not expect to see a major star involved in this kind of movie. One observer suggests that Madonna's intention in all of her latest work is "to desensitize us and demystify sex."²

But has Madonna succeeded in demystifying sex? Is that really what she's up to? I think not. Quite the opposite is happening: Madonna is busily giving sacred significance to the erotic potential of the human body. Alongside of the sexual exhibitionism, there is in Madonna's work religious and mythological imagery of the most overt kind. If we want to understand the Madonna phenomenon, we dare not ignore this religious dimension.

It's rather surprising to discover that Madonna—My Lady, a title packed with religious significance—is, in fact, her real name, and not one adopted merely for shock value. Madonna Louise Veronica Ciccone was raised in Michigan, the child of an Italian Catholic family. When she was growing up she went to a Catholic elementary school and wanted to be a nun: “the nuns, to me, were these superhuman, beautiful, fantastic people. To me, that was as close as I was going to get to celebrities. I thought they were really elegant.”³ Throughout her career she has played on the religious suggestiveness of her name: her first really big hit was *Like A Virgin* (1984), a 1990 retrospective of her videos was entitled *The Immaculate Collection*, and she is recently reported to have been in negotiations with a major cosmetics producer to market a perfume of her own called “Holy Water.”

Religious imagery permeates her work. The cross, in particular, is an abiding presence, as jewellery about her person, as a crucifix she is fingering, as a disconcerting stage prop, or simply as an image flashed onto the screen seemingly at random. The action in two of her most sensuous and memorable videos takes place within a clearly recognizable sacred space. In *La Isla Bonita* (1986) Madonna dances among the candles before the altar of a shrine; as she fondles herself, caresses a crucifix and raises her eyes imploringly to the altar, the video mixes through to an image of her guitarist, who bears a striking resemblance to popular representations of Jesus.⁴ In *Like a Prayer* (1989)—a video which created a great deal of controversy, and lost her a lucrative sponsorship deal with Pepsi-Cola—Madonna sings amidst a field of burning crosses; she enters a church and brings to life the statue of an African American saint; she receives the stigmata from him; they make love in the sanctuary as a gospel choir celebrates in the background.

What is the meaning of this juxtaposition of the sacred and the sexual in Madonna's work?

In a book written in the late 1980s the sociologist and pulp novelist, Father Andrew Greeley, goes so far as to claim Madonna as a good Catholic. “She's one of us,” he maintains, “one of our own who is preaching effectively a component of our tradition of which we are afraid—the sacramentality of human eroticism.”⁵ As an example of her “brilliant catechetical presentation”⁶ Greeley points to *Like A Virgin* (1984), the video in which Madonna vamps it up around Venice, appearing in some shots as a skimpily clad temptress, enthusiastically seducing the gondolier and anyone else who might be passing by, and in others as a bride adorned for her groom, waiting to be “kissed for the very first time.” He argues that the song puts forward “the traditional Catholic teaching that spiritual virginity is important, not physical virginity”; it proclaims that women have the right to be, at one and the same time, both virgin and siren; and, in the lover who makes Madonna feel “shiny and new,” it hints at what God is like.⁷ For Greeley, “the message of the crucifix in her cleavage” is the most powerful symbol of the Catholic analogical imagination currently available in the popular culture.⁸

This is not the place for a debate about the *sogia entis*, or of Greeley's idiosyncratic understanding of what constitutes “traditional Catholic teaching.”

Barthians may want to take him to task on the former, and I'm sure John Paul II has a thing or two to say about the latter. I think Greeley is wrong, both in his theological understanding of the revelatory nature of eroticism, and in his interpretation of this particular video. In the light of Madonna's recent pornographic exploits, his claim that she is a great Christian apologist becomes increasingly questionable, not to say laughable. But he does draw attention quite properly to the close and *deliberate* link between sex and religion in Madonna's work.

For other interpreters such as John Fiske, Madonna's use of sexual and religious imagery has a primarily political meaning. Fiske sees Madonna as a heroine of postmodernism and feminism who is removing these signs and images from their patriarchal setting in order to assert her independence from men and from male approval.⁹ "The crucifix," for her, "is a shape, not a meaning." She asserts her right to use it in whatever way she pleases for the construction of her identity.¹⁰ Similarly, Fiske claims, "she demonstrates her control over the 'language' of pornography (flesh, flimsy underwear, black leather), by using it nonpornographically for her pleasure, *her* identity, not those of men."¹¹ Thus Madonna escapes the voyeuristic, patriarchal gaze: she is her own woman. But as Sean Cubitt comments, "this is a wonderfully cheerful analysis which misses entirely the production of visibility, the signification for someone which her display, lyrics, marketing and photography clearly involves."¹²

It is simply naive to suggest that Madonna subverts the pornographic impulse through images of herself as a peep show artist (*Open Your Heart*, 1986), or chained up like a wild animal (*Express Yourself*, 1989). When she writhes in the surf in *Cherish* (1989) there is nothing remotely postmodern about it. The story is as old as the hills. She is Aphrodite—"born of the foam"—the goddess of sex. We watch, we desire, and we pay homage. Fiske is also wrong about Madonna's use of religious imagery. She does not wrench them out of their "original discourse" and give them an entirely different significance. On the contrary, they remain as recognizable signs of the sacred, sometimes within the sacred space. It is the nature of the sacred that has changed in Madonna's world, and perhaps in ours, too.

A rather more convincing interpretation of the Madonna phenomenon comes from Camille Paglia, one of the most interesting cultural commentators around today. She has infuriated leading feminists because of her "unorthodox" views on matters such as date rape¹³; and she made a lot of enemies—and not a few friends!—in Presbyterian circles after her comprehensive rubbishing of the 1991 PC(U.S.A.) report on human sexuality.¹⁴ Paglia could be described in many ways. But, as she herself would acknowledge, she is, in the final analysis, a pagan apologist.

Paglia's remarkable book, *Sexual Personae*, opens with a bold pagan challenge to the biblical understanding of creation: "In the beginning was nature. The background from which and against which which our ideas of God were formed, nature remains the supreme moral problem."¹⁵ It is the awesome and inexorable forces of nature with which humanity has to deal: it is nature that dominates each and every human life, and which societies from time immemorial have celebrated and sought both to placate and control; it is to nature that we must all ultimately bow down. In the final analysis, it is nature that is divine; even the gods of heaven are helpless before the earthly powers. Paglia goes on to argue that paganism has never been far from the surface of Western culture, even in the era of Christendom. But today, she claims, a critical point has been reached. We are witnessing an eruption of sex and violence in every corner of the popular culture, and a rebirth of the pagan gods. The Judaeo-

Christian tradition is facing its greatest challenge since its confrontation with Islam in the Middle Ages, for “the latent paganism of Western culture has burst forth again in all its demonic vitality.”¹⁶

Paglia loves Madonna because she sees her as the embodiment of this process of pagan eruption. Madonna has grasped “both the animality and the artifice”¹⁷ of human existence and this is reflected brilliantly in the sexual exhibitionism of her videos; her work is a serious expression of the mythic power of sex. Like Greeley, Paglia too thinks that Catholicism is of the utmost importance in the development of Madonna’s artistic vision, but she puts rather a different gloss on it. Madonna, she believes, has discovered the latent paganism of the Italian church. The lurid portrayals of Christ’s suffering and death, and the martyrdom of the saints dramatize “the passions of the body.”¹⁸

“I interpret the ravishing sadomasochistic sensuality of such iconography as evidence of the ancient, buried paganism of Roman Catholicism. Catholic crucifixes and gory depictions of the martyrdom of ecstatic saints preserve the pagan intuition that our lives in the body are submerged in the Dionysian continuum of pleasure-pain.”¹⁹ For Paglia, then, Madonna is a good Catholic to the extent that she is a good Italian Catholic, which in her opinion is synonymous with being a pagan.²⁰

What Paglia refers to as an eruption of paganism has been described by others as “a metamorphosis of the sacred.”²¹ For the past two centuries, through its philosophy, technology and science, the West has been obsessed with the notion of the desacralization of the world, its opening up to question, scrutiny and exploitation. Much has been talked about alienation, secularization, the loss of transcendence, and so on. The contemporary “crisis” of the church is often seen in these terms: the problem is how to speak the gospel in a rationalistic, secular environment. But this is largely an illusion.

The truth is, as Jacques Ellul has long contended, that we are witnessing a massive invasion by the sacred into the modern world: human beings are unable to live without participation in the sacred, and as a result “the sacred is proliferating all around us.”²² But he argues that the sacred has moved its location, and taken different forms to those recognized in previous eras. Today it is to be found precisely in those areas we deem most secular—technology, commerce, advertising and the popular culture. In particular, the sacred is now attached in great measure to an institution that had been regarded as a bastion of secularity and materialism—the body. In modern times the body has been pitted against the soul as an agent of desacralization and demystification: the physical has taken center stage explaining and displacing the spiritual. What has happened, however, is that the body itself has taken on sacred significance: it has “simply taken the place of the soul as a mythical court of appeals, as a dogma and a plan of salvation. Its ‘discovery,’ which for a long time was a criticism of the sacred and a struggle of man against God, takes place today under the sign of resacralization. The cult of the body is no longer in conflict with that of the soul. It follows upon it and inherits its ideological function.”²³ The vast industries connected with health, fitness, beauty, and entertainment all testify to the preeminence of the body in contemporary culture.

For Madonna, traditional religious images such as crucifixes, statues, shrines and altars, point to “the passions of the body.” Their presence add sacred significance to her sexual exhibitionism.

The sign that dominates our time is the human body. Sometimes it belongs to Madonna. But it can be male or female, or both at the same time: pansexualism and

hermaphroditism have a long pagan history. This sign promises much, but can it deliver?

It's fascinating to chart the direction in which Madonna's sexual revolution has gone, a revolution that she now epitomizes, but which has been gathering momentum for the last three decades. Probably her greatest achievement—if it can be called that—is to have popularized the language and conventions of sadomasochism. In the name of freedom she has introduced us to chains; promising greater equality she has provided ever more images of domination and hierarchy; praising toleration and peaceful coexistence she has presented us with disturbing portrayals of violence and degradation. Finally, in Madonna's vision, we are left with bodies—hard, magnificent, demanding, pitiless bodies that desire, dominate, and sometimes kill. Far from delivering freedom, her sexual revolution leads to the triumph of power. It's no surprise to find echoes of fascist imagery in such videos as *Express Yourself* and *Justify My Love*. The Nazis were pagans. They had a thing about bodies, too.

The sign that is Madonna signifies a profound crisis of the human person in Western culture. We have discovered our bodies and lost our souls. In the midst of the crisis the mainline Protestant churches have nothing to say. It's no good smugly pointing the finger at popular Catholicism. We, too, are part of the problem, rather than the solution. We have lost touch with the biblical vision of women and men together made in the image of God, and we have largely abandoned a coherent Christian sexual ethic. We are as confused and divided as everybody else.

Madonna drives us back to basics. What is our doctrine of creation? Do we still have one, or have we been overwhelmed by the pagan myths? From where do we derive our understanding of sexuality and gender? How do we view marriage? What are the boundaries of creaturely existence before God? What does it mean to live as though our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit?

Madonna's sign embraces the church. And it will continue to do so until we are willing to say with that other, forgotten, madonna, "I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word."

NOTES

¹ "The Selling of Sex," *Newsweek*, 2 Nov. 1992.

² "Hot Madonna," *Vanity Fair*, Oct. 1992.

³ Interview with Madonna, *Rolling Stone*, 15 Oct. 1992.

⁴ With respect to the religious focus of Madonna's erotic fantasies, is it purely coincidence that Willem Dafoe, the actor who plays her lover in *Body of Evidence*, also starred as Jesus in Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*?

⁵ Andrew M. Greeley, *God in Popular Culture* (Chicago, 1988), 168.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁹ J. Fiske, *Television Culture* (London, 1990), 232.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 233.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 252.

¹² S. Cubitt, *Timeshift: On Video Culture* (London, 1991), 55.

¹³ See "Rape and Modern Sex War" in C. Paglia, *Sex, Art and American Culture* (New York, 1992), 28-74.

¹⁴ "The Joy of Presbyterian Sex" originally appeared in *The New Republic*, 2 Dec. 1991, and is reprinted in Paglia, *Sex, Art and American Culture*, 26-37.

¹⁵ C. Paglia, *Sexual Personae* (New York, 1991), 1.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁷ Paglia, *Sex, Art and American Culture*, 5.

¹⁸ Ibid., 11.

¹⁹ Ibid., 29. Asked about her fascination with sadomasochism, Madonna herself explained it in terms of her religious background: "Maybe it's my Catholic upbringing. When I was growing up, there were certain things people did for penance....And the whole thing of crucifixion...the idea of being tied up. It's surrendering yourself to someone. I'm fascinated by it. I mean, there's a lot of pain-equals-pleasure in the Catholic church. And that is also associated with bondage and S&M" (*Newsweek*, 2 Nov. 1992).

²⁰ Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 33: "Paganism is eye-intense. It is based on cultic exhibitionism, in which sex and sadomasochism are joined. The ancient chthonian mysteries have never disappeared from the Italian church. Waxed saints' corpses under glass. Tattered armbones in gold reliquaries. Half-nude St. Sebastian pierced by arrows. St. Lucy holding her eyeballs out on a platter. Blood, torture, ecstasy and tears. Its lurid sensationalism makes Italian Catholicism the emotionally most complete cosmology in religious history. Italy added pagan sex and violence to the ascetic Palestinian creed."

²¹ Norman O. Brown, quoted by Jacques Ellul, *The New Demons* (Oxford, 1975), 64.

²² Ellul, *The New Demons*, 65.

²³ J. Baudrillard, quoted in Ellul, *The New Demons*, 59.