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# Madonna: Icon of Postmodernity

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A number of people may be surprised at the subject of this paper. Indeed, many Christians would question the value of investigating a mere popstar - what could one possibly find that would be edifying? However, Madonna is a significant and representative child of her times. By looking at her life and what she symbolizes we can learn much about the values and weaknesses of our culture. We may even learn something about ourselves.

Madonna has become one of the most successful and notorious female singers the world has ever seen. The Times spoke in these terms in 1991 "The news that Madonna has just clinched a deal making her the highest-paid performer in the history of the pop industry only confirms what we already knew, which is that she is now the biggest star on the planet." Even the rather staid Sunday Telegraph recognised her as the "female Icon of the age".

She arrived in New York City in 1976 at the age of eighteen, with \$35 in her pocket. Just eight years later she broke the box office record at the Radio City Music Hall in New York, with the fastest sell-out of any concert ever - 17,622 tickets sold out in 34 minutes. The entire tour, promoting her album 'Like a Virgin' and covering 27 cities throughout the US, sold out in two hours. She has had seven number one singles, 26 top fives, seven number-one albums. Her run of sixteen consecutive top fives in the American charts broke the record held previously by the Beatles. She has sold over 85 million albums worldwide, more than any other female singer in history. Her personal fortune is well over \$70 million. She was paid \$5 million for a single advert by Pepsi. At present she is under contract to Tune Warner and the value of that contract is estimated at around \$60 million. It is true that her popularity has waned in the past year, but she dominated the eighties and the early part of the nineties and there can be no doubt that she is a phenomenally successful megastar.

But she has been as controversial as she has been successful. The New York Post columnist Ray Kerrison said this about her: "She will do anything, say anything, wear anything, mock anything, degrade anything to draw attention to herself and make a buck. She is the quintessential symbol of the age; self-indulgent, sacrilegious, shameless, hollow". Michael Ignatieff says this: "I don't mind that I see her face on every magazine cover; I certainly don't mind that she is obscene; I don't even mind that she can't sing, can't dance, can't act and is nonetheless the most famous person on the planet. What I can't stand about Madonna is that she thinks she's an artist". Cindy Crawford said: "I don't want to see another nude picture of her. If you have issues to work out with your dad, don't do it in front of the world". Charles Brenner of The Times says she "has an uncanny ability to match the voyeuristic urge of her countrymen with her own drive for exhibitionism". And Dr Sam Jones of the New York Medical College said: "Madonna is a corrupting pied piper, leading

impressionable young girls down the primrose path to a depraved and degrading lifestyle”.

The sector of society most offended by Madonna, however, has been the Christian community. Her blatant use and abuse of Christian symbols and her constant depiction of the most depraved sexual practises have made her a pariah among many Christians. Her video ‘Like a Prayer’ was condemned by the Moral Majority as blasphemous and the American Family Association considered it offensive. As a result, many US television companies actually refused to show it. Her ‘Blond Ambition’ tour was opposed by the Vatican in Italy, and her video ‘Justify my Love’ was so offensive that the BBC and even MTV in the United States banned it (which is saying something!). But not all Christians have been hostile. Music critic Karl Dallas says “. . . what came over to me was her powerful professionalism, her respect for the images she was taking apart and reconstructing before our very eyes, and her deep integrity. And what is blasphemy, anyway? It always seems strange to me to hear this charge leap so readily to the lips of those who claim to follow one who was executed for just such a crime ... So far she has done little more than to use the talents God gave her, and challenged a few sensibilities with them. For a good Catholic girl, this is remarkable in itself, and to be welcomed, not denigrated” However even those voices that bent over backwards to see what one could appreciate in the material were silenced by the publication of her book last Christmas. Titled ‘Sex’ and launched with a massive media event, it contains some of the most graphic depictions of some of the most degrading sexual practices that one could imagine. The fact that such a pornographic book could be published by Time Warner and sold and promoted over Christmas as a coffee table book quite rightly prompted James Dobson to say that it was “the most outrageous single event that has occurred in my lifetime”.

So who is this remarkable woman, this controversial woman? She was born to an Italian immigrant family, Silvio and Madonna Ciccone, in 1958 in Michigan. She took her name from her mother; it was not a stage name. She was the eldest daughter and the tragic death of her mother when she was only six years old, from breast cancer, was to have a profound effect on her life. Madonna was thrown into an adult role of helping to keep the home and the family of eight children. Her father, a hard-working engineer, struggled to look after them and keep them together, but it was almost inevitable that he would remarry, which he did a few years later, and Madonna has admitted that she was bitterly resentful towards her step-mother, Joan. The family were very strict Catholics, the children attending church every day at the Catholic school they went to. The rigidity of her Catholic upbringing dominated her early life and it was not surprising that she began to rebel against this background, although it has to be said that when she was a little girl she was very deeply religious and wanted to become a nun. Whilst Madonna was remembered as a popular girl at her high school, having plenty of friends, she admits to having always felt something of an outsider in her home town. Her ambitions to dance had been apparent from an early age, and after pressure her father relented and allowed her to take ballet classes. Her talent was immediately recognised by her instructors and she went on to win a place at the University of Michigan. But she did not complete the course because New York City beckoned, and with little more than a one way air ticket and \$35 in her pocket she headed for the Big Apple with dreams of stardom. She found part-time work in a hamburger joint, some occasional nude modelling, and did the circuit of the New York dance clubs where eventually she met up with a string of very talented and influential DJs and musicians - and so her musical career took off.

However, this paper is not intended to be an analysis of her music or musical career. I am

not really in a position to offer such as I do not listen to her music and I am certainly not a fan. So I will not try to assess her artistic gifts or credibility. I am also not really interested in the 'real' Madonna. Very often people try to look behind all the hype to find out who the real person is. Actually, as will become clear in a moment, it is precisely the hype, the Madonna Myth that interests me. Finally, I do not want to simply catalogue all the unchristian and immoral things she believes or does ... I think those are fairly obvious.

My interest stems from a survey I read a couple of years ago in a magazine which rated Madonna as the number one female hero amongst young people. And then a little while later I read another survey that asked young girls who they modelled themselves on. The two at the top of the list were Madonna and Princess Di - a remarkable contrast of images. This stirred my interest in this woman as a cultural icon; a product of our age and a symbol of our age. Icons are religious images set up for people's devotion and as such they represent that which we are devoted to, our highest ideals and values. When Madonna put out her single 'Material Girl' in the mid-80s, many commented on the fact that she was epitomising the spirit of the decade - the materialism of that time. I actually think that Madonna is more representative even than that. What I want to look at then is the mythology of Madonna, some of its major features, and to show how they act as a mirror for ourselves; a mirror for our generation and for our culture.

The first aspect of Madonna that strikes one is her use of image. Madonna lives out the cliché that the medium is the message. Because of her success and because of her hard work, she has total control over her shows. She does all the writing of the songs, producing the music, choreographing and dancing herself, designs the stage sets and even does her own make up and costume design. She is absolutely, obsessively controlling of all these aspects of her show. And not just her shows, but all the things she does, even her films that she acts in - they all reflect a calculated image. She is also exceptionally clever at using publicity, advertising and the media to sell her image. Martin Amis commented on her in this way: "She is the self-sufficient postmodern phenomenon. Even her publicity gets publicity. A masterpiece of controlled illusion". Richard Morrison, of the Times, says this about her: "The likes of Madonna and Jackson aim to offer what can only be called the total egocentric experience: they control every aspect of their acts, and are willing to dissolve the line where art ends and reality begins. Their acts incorporate their private lives and vice versa". Now this is central not just to Madonna, but to our culture - this blurring of image and reality. The fusing of the public and private persona, the dissolving of the differences, so that everything becomes image and reality disappears in the midst of it. Madonna's whole life revolves around the presentation of her image.

A clip from her tour documentary 'In bed with Madonna' shows her going to a doctor to get her voice checked. The movie camera is there with her the whole time, documenting every aspect of what is going on. Warren Beatty, her boyfriend at the time, comments with real insight on the situation. When the doctor asks "Do you want to talk at all off camera?" and she declines, Beatty says "Why would you want to say anything off camera? What point is there in existing? She does not want to say anything off camera; she does not want to live off camera".

In many ways Madonna is a victim of her own image. She lives totally within the artificially constructed reality of the image. This is another reason why I am not interested in the real Madonna behind the myth, because I do not think there is one. I think she has so lost herself in the image, that the difference is immaterial. And she is not alone in that. Think of the tremendous developments of our technological age and the impact of the media in that; image is dominating more and more of our lives. In politics style replaces

substance, in commerce packaging and promotion replace quality, in society how you look replaces who you are, form replaces content, the outer presentation replaces the inner reality. So many people live out their lives via TV, through soap operas, through following sport. Many join various subcultural units where they take on the image of that group. Gangs are perceived as an extreme, but there are other kinds of subcultural units where the individual is submerged in the collective image. The things that you say and do are all external, but the real you is lost. Like Madonna, you just live in the image.

But there is another important aspect to Madonna's use of image and that is the constant change. She is always changing her image, whether it is from the good girl gone bad to the virgin in white; from Marilyn Monroe to the 1920's gangster moll; from neo-hippy to glamour queen; from androgynous, cold robot to naked sex symbol. Her ability to change images every couple of years has fascinated the world, and this has been part of her success. Jeffrey Katzenberg, who is the Chairman of Walt Disney Studios, has this to say: "She is always evolving: she never stands still. Every two years she comes up with a new look, a new way of presenting herself, a new attitude, a new act, a new design: And every time it is successful There is this constant genesis. When something like that happens once, OK, maybe it's luck. Twice is a coincidence. Three times is just remarkable talent. A kind of genius. And Madonna is on her fifth or sixth time". And of course this again reflects our culture. We are always looking for the new, always moving from one image to the next, changing to meet the pragmatic needs of the moment or discarding the old when it becomes boring, demanding or problematic.

Madonna's use of image is complicated in yet a third and further way, because whilst she lives in her images, she refuses to fully identify with them. She says "I do everything with a wink" and you notice at the end of the song 'Holiday' on the video clip that she stops to face the audience and give them a wink. This type of playfulness comes through in all that she does - the self-parody in her films and in her lyrics the double entendres, the different levels of meanings and ironies that she uses again and again. Whenever people accuse her of something she responds "Well you don't understand, it's all ironic ... don't take it too seriously". On the other hand, however, she wants us to believe that the image is real - she says "What you see is what you get, I'm not hiding anything". So she does this video 'In Bed With Madonna', a reveal-all documentary. The attitude is: 'Let the camera roll, I don't have anything to hide'.

Again, this playfulness, this playing with images, on the one hand almost living in an image world, but on the other hand never quite committing to it, is very reflective of our culture. It is particularly so of what has come to be called postmodern society: where we have lost faith in objective truth and absolutes. We have lost our belief that there is any overarching story about life, any overarching meaning to life, which is true absolutely for all time, for all people. Everything is just a matter of subjective perspective, depending on where you stand. Everything revolves around the world we create for ourselves. There is no objective reality; there are only images, different images. Now if there is no objective reality and there is no absolute, then we are in a sense trapped in this situation of only being able to live an image. We can only live from wherever we stand; we can never know anything outside. We can only see the world from where we stand, from that context, that subculture, that language-game, that constructed reality, that image.

And so Madonna stands in one place, one image, but she can never commit to that place of course, since she realises that with time she will be standing in another place. So there is no commitment But on the other hand she cannot ever escape the image because there is no objective reality. This is the dilemma of postmodernity. The dilemma is that there is no one

place we can all stand and say this is real, this is the real meaning, this is what is, this is who I am. Because you are always trapped in your subjectivity, you are always trapped in the images. However, you can change them ... indeed you cannot stop changing them and why commit to something that is going to change, that is not absolute. So you have this ambivalence - on the one hand never being able to escape the image, but on the other hand never committing yourself to it

Graham Cray, a popular Christian writer, has said perceptively: "Madonna is perhaps the most visible example of what is called Post-Modernism. This term, much used but rarely defined, relates to a loss of trust of the modern and of future progress, and a resulting search of the past and of other cultures for the basis of a new set of values and a pattern of life. One commentator on Madonna has said that Post-Modernism should better be called 'shopping' ... 'the world and all of history is a vast supermarket, and you can just pick out the ingredients you like, and assemble them into your own version of something'".

So you see there is no overarching truth, no single narrative. There are just people living in separate subcultures, and you can just go along and plunder them, pick them out and create your own one. Cray continues "This is precisely what Madonna has done and; of course, Christian imagery was high on her shopping list. The Madonna phenomenon can be understood only as a logical development in a society which has lost one set of values and has as yet not found another". We have lost touch with objective reality and we are adrift in the images.

Let me turn now to some of the other things we can learn by looking at Madonna. The second thing to note is the fact that she presents herself very much as a rebel and iconoclast with a need to shock and shock again. She is always rebelling against any form of authority, whether it is her father, the church or middle class society. She describes herself very much as a sexual revolutionary. Here again you see the prevalence in our culture of the anti-hero. The modern hero is always the rebel, always the anarchist, always the one tearing down the large framework, breaking it down, deconstructing it In postmodern society any authority, any framework, any dogma, that claims a base in absolutes is automatically subject to ridicule and subversion.

Thirdly, the tone for Madonna is always upbeat and fun loving. Her music is dance music, it is energetic, vibrant. She excuses everything she does with not only a wink 'I'm not really serious' - but also with -'Hey, come on, don't get too serious about things, let's have fun'. And why not, because you only have two choices when you get trapped in images: you either despair, which is what people did in the 60s and 70s as they looked at meaninglessness; or you say 'well there is no absolute truth, no way out of the image trap, so why not relax and enjoy it. Pick an image, have fun in it, and then when it gets boring and it's not working for you any more, jump into another image'. All the while having fun - a desperate gaiety. Madonna says of her book 'Sex' which shocked so many people: "It's a fantasy. It's pretend, OK? So when I write this book I invite people to get lost in a dream world, and to have a good time, to have fun with it". This is what she says about these awful pictures - "have fun with it".

Fourthly, what flows also from this postmodernist perspective is a radical individualism. You only have yourself, your own little world from which you can look. You do not have a reality out there where you can find common ground with other people. It is all about yourself; it is about self-realisation. You create the image, you create your life and your world around You. By your choices and your effort you can succeed. Madonna has been phenomenally successful because of her tremendously ambitious drive. A complete workaholic, she works exhaustingly hard at everything she does. Building her life, building

her image, building her career ... ambition and careerism taken to its ultimate. But what other choice has she? There is only her chosen reality, there is no common reality 'out there' to become a part of. You just have your choices and the self that you create – self-realisation, individualism.

Along with this one gets the cynical manipulation of people, and the stories surrounding Madonna about the way she uses people to get what she wants are just awful. But since everything revolves around herself there is no reason to consider others. They are just there to feed off, to help create her own image. Boy George says: "She's obsessed with sexuality because it is her most powerful weapon". She is not simply depraved and besotted with sex; for her it is a weapon to achieve what she wants. When she first started her work the feminists hated her. They were saying you must get rid of the old femininity which men use against women but she was promoting coquettishness and teasing and flirting and playing the sex object. Now, however, she has won over the feminists because what she is saying is: 'Let's be feminine, let's flirt, and let's use it to get what we want. Don't be used, but be a user'. She says this: "Beauty is just a means to an end ... I want to rule the world. Marilyn Monroe was a victim, I am not". So she is taking the same assets that Marilyn Monroe had - sexuality, femininity - but she is using them now, manipulating them to her own ends. And I think this very much reflects what is going on in our society as well, a cynical manipulation of the wonderful attributes that God has given us, whether our sexuality, beauty, strength, skills or intellect. We exploit them to pursue our own individualistic goals. Madonna has had a great deal of negative press for the way she has used people, but she shakes it all off - the career is everything. Relationships are just something subsumed under this driven passion to self-realise. And the feminists love her now; she is a woman taking power.

Fifthly, along with the individualism, one sees a number of obsessions in Madonna, which reflect obsessions we find in our culture. There is her physical obsession, which is partly reflective of her image orientation, because image is about the externals. In many ways she is a good role model- she does not take drugs, she never drinks alcohol, she jogs five miles a day, she works extremely hard, she diets very carefully. In fact she is obsessed with keeping herself in tone. When she did her book 'Sex' she waited until her body was just right, so she could use herself as the model This again reflects our culture. We are a physically obsessed culture. Think of the constant concerns for body-shape, for dieting, for aerobics, and some of the unhealthy things like eating disorders. These things bubble up because people in our culture are obsessed with the physical image.

Madonna is sexually obsessed as well. She says: "Just about everything in the world is centred around sexual attraction and sexual power". Sex is a means to power and power is a means to self-realisation. It is an unashamed approach to sexual obsession, a kind of designer decadence. Not something that is hidden but something that is brazenly explored and exploited. Her only boundaries, when it comes to sex, are 'rape is wrong' and 'wear a condom'. Otherwise, absolutely anything goes. This has been a constant theme through all her music, her film; and everything else. Again, it represents our culture very effectively.

In the 1960s we had the sexual revolution. We threw off the shackles of Victorian sensibility and became honest and open about ourselves. We had the idea that once everything was out in the open we would all be satisfied with our sexuality and it would just become matter-of-fact and natural That was the dream But what has actually happened? The pornography industry in the United States is a billion dollar industry, whose annual turnover is greater than all the car manufacturers in America combined. Sex video rentals exceed all other video rentals. We have not become normalised in our sexuality. We have

become more and more obsessed. The so-called freedom has led to a kind of decadent bondage.

Sixthly, Madonna reveals a loss of identity. Behind all this drive, ambition, success, career, fame, she has lost herself. She is empty and lost. As she admits in her documentary, she surrounds herself with emotionally needy people: "I made it my goal in life to be loved by many people". Graham Cray again comments: "Certain things, however, are dear about the person behind the image. First, as we have already stated, she lives out of reaction to her childhood and religious upbringing. Second, she is clearly driven, or self-driven. She relates this not to her rebellion against her father, but to the loss of her mother. "When my mother died, all of a sudden I was going to become the best student, get the best grades; I was going to become the best singer, the best dancer, the most famous singer in the world. Everybody was going to love me" "I'm a very tormented person. I have a lot of demons I am wrestling with, but I want to be happy". It's very moving when you look at this woman in all her decadence, in all her success and find beneath it all such a lost, sad and lonely person. That really reflects our culture. We see people lost in the image. Stridently, aggressively, demandingly using and abusing, pushing and shoving - yet underneath...they are lost.

The seventh and final area to look at is perhaps the least obvious one, and that is the area of guilt. Madonna clearly has something of a religious obsession. All the way through her music and so on, certain religious themes come up again and again. She has said: "My Catholic upbringing is probably the foundation of everything I do". "Once you're a Catholic you're always a Catholic in terms of your feelings of guilt and remorse, and whether I've sinned or not. Sometimes I'm racked with guilt.- You're always striving to be good". Now this may seem very far from our strident immoral culture; guilt is not a word one finds often in the editorials. But I think we are a culture that is racked by guilt. Not in the sense that we think we have failed to live up to God's standards, but rather we have failed to live up to our own standards. No matter how hard we have worked, no matter how carefully we have controlled the images we live by and that give us meaning, we feel and we know that we have failed; we have not lived up to our own expectations. And Madonna certainly is driven by this guilt: "You're always striving to be good".

What ties all these comments that I have made about Madonna and about our culture together? I think firstly it is the ideology of postmodernism. Having abandoned absolute truth, a sense of one narrative that gives meaning to all of life, we have become lost in what someone has described as a 'playful indeterminacy'. It is indeterminate in the sense that no one really knows Truth, each is resigned to living in his or her own image subculture, but it remains nonetheless playful. But what a desperate, despairing sort of playfulness, what a laughing in the face of emptiness. Someone has rightly called it 'Nihilism with a smile'. In this Madonna clearly serves as an Icon of Postmodernity. Martin Amis has said she is perhaps the most postmodern personage on the planet.

The second thing that ties these comments together is the psychology of adolescence. Consider those characteristics we all understand to be a part of adolescence. Rebellion: working through relationships with your parents and authority. The pursuit of fun: immediate gratification. Fickleness and lack of commitment. Idealism. Now these are not negative things, they are not wrong, and neither is adolescence. I am not suggesting it is somehow inappropriate to be an adolescent, but the goal has always been to move through adolescence to maturity has it not? At least in the past that was the goal. In Madonna, however, we find someone who in many ways is trapped in adolescence, unable to move beyond it to maturity - trapped in rebellion; trapped in working through her relationship

with her parents; trapped in a relentless pursuit of fun and immediate gratification; trapped in fickleness and lack of commitment; trapped in a naive idealism about being a sexual revolutionary and changing the world. Sadly, our culture follows suit.

The adolescence of our culture is not just tied to the spending power of teenagers. People are not growing up because they have nothing to grow up into. They have no singular image of what a grown-up is. They have no singular image of truth, an overarching truth that they can grow into. So they stay in the games, make-believe games, image games, games that children play. There is no singular image now to grow up into. There is no singular reality which can give us a framework we can aim at and use to work through our rebellious phase, our fickleness and so on, and then make a commitment to. That is what growing up is all about: Commitment to something, to a pattern of life, to a relationship, to responsibilities, to Truth. But how can we do that in a postmodern reality. We all remain children, playing different games.

In Christ, of course, we have an image we can all grow up into. In Christianity we have truth that sets a framework that is absolute, so it does not change. It is not about image, it is about reality, and that is something we can grow up into and become real people in. Of course there will always be images and we can have fun in that. We watch the movies and play charades, go to the theatre and read good literature. There is nothing wrong with that. But when it is only image and there is no reality, then we are lost and *we* are hollow.

But we can reclaim the reality; the reality that is bedded in the truth of the existence of God, His Word to us, the Person of Christ. these things can root us, give us reality in this life. Deliverance from the hollowness and emptiness of all this image culture- that is what we want to offer our culture, that is what we Want to offer our non-Christian friends and that is what we want to live out ourselves.