

No Church in the Wild: A Eulogy to God's Death

1. The greatest hip-hop track of all time, a valuation that is predicated on subjective context - that a certain X is valued, then what tracks are the best? “No Church in the Wild”, the Jay-Z and Kanye collaboration, would be mine. The X of evaluation pertains to philosophy, in particular the Death of God. Singular in its encapsulation of the calamitous event, and the aftermath - the lack that presents itself, alternatives that emerge.

Chorus. As to pack a punch with little complexity, Frank has been successful in that regard.

Human beings in a mob
What's a mob to a king?
What's a king to a god?
What's a god to a non-believer
Who don't believe in anything?
- Frank Ocean

God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?

- The Gay Science, Friedrich Nietzsche

The verse portrays the hierarchy of valuation that existed in the religious world. Individuals overpowered by the Mob, while the King reigns over them but all deferring to the Supreme Being: God. Such a relation sustains itself on the

believed truth of God's existence and the non-existent abstract chain of power relations that follow. God as that apparent objectivity which necessitates the chain of command beneath him.

Individual < Herd (Mob) < State (King) < God

Will he make it out alive?

Alright, alright

No church in the wild

- Frank Ocean

Now, the great wake. As originally conceived by Nietzsche, the Death of God wasn't a joyous proclamation. Rather a catastrophe, albeit a necessary one. As the "holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives", a lack is left behind in culture. What would an answer be, if any?

Culturally, religion has provided the answer to two important concerns of mankind: Morality and Meaning. Morality as inscribed in scriptures, the written word of God. Meaning as a true world, the limitless pleasures of heaven, a return to the Atman, or the permanent escape from the cycle of birth-death. Prescription of morality as means of attaining the mode of meaning.

However, the advent of Enlightenment overpowered the emergent grounds of God. Suddenly, mankind was capable of feats by the likes of Thor and the Ashvins. Unexplainable events, natural calamities, all bowed to our reason. Slowly, the word spread: that humans required no God. Thus, we dealt the final blow.

Will he make it out alive - the hook pertains to both morality and meaning. Morally, surviving in a godless morally nihilistic world poses challenges. There are no reasons not to kill, to rape and pillage one another. Then, the question of meaning, isn't the weight of existential nihilism too much? As Nietzsche asks - Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Killing oneself is the easier choice, compared to getting coffee¹.

2. Through a direct philosophical reference, Jay-Z invokes the Socratic dialectic to close the casket-lid in his verse.

Is Pious pious cause God loves pious?
Socrates asked whose bias do y'all seek?

- Jay-Z

An ode to Euthyphro, the Platonic Dialogue. A conversation between Euthyphro, a man who convicted his Father of murder, and Socrates, who wants to learn from the former, to help his trial. Euthyphro claims his controversial decision, regarding his Father, is one of piety - that he knows of the desire of Gods, and thus, the pious and the non-pious. Socrates, in all dialectical skepticism, asks Euthyphro - Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?

On the one hand, Gods desiring the pious for piety confronts the idea of a deity with limited omnipotence. On the other hand, the desires of God as the source of piety invokes the arbitrariness of ethics. Thus, Jay notes the arbitrariness, opening up the subjective utilization of ethics, or the incoherence of 'God'.

3. As mentioned before, the aftermath of God's death is not merely the existential void. It also involves human-developed replacements for God, our answers to "what festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent". God's shadows, so to speak.

God is dead, but considering the state the species man is in, there will perhaps be caves, for ages yet, in which his shadow will be shown.

- The Gay Science, Friedrich Nietzsche

Both Jay and Kanye talk about their excursions in the shadows, however without any realization. Drugs, a prominent shadow that has appearances throughout.

Cocaine seats
All white like I got the whole thing bleached

- Jay Z

Coke on her Black skin made it stripe like a zebra
I call that jungle fever
- Kanye

Narcotics as replacement, an osmotic process filling the void, a reaction to the nihilistic uncertainty and suffering it poses. As Kanye explains -

When we die, the money, we can't keep
But we'll probably spend it all 'cause the pain ain't cheap
- Kanye

A lack of an afterlife, a true world, is a cause for the nihilistic sentiment. In the face of great ruin, the conclusion becomes visible - to alleviate the pain, which turns out, is expensive. A double entendre too, pain also standing for champagne. Moreover, the verse also refers to another shadow: Capitalism. One shadow as means to indulge in another, a cyclical freeflow between capital and drugs.

I live by you, desire
I stand by you, walk through the fire
Your love is my scripture
Let me in through your encryption
- The-Dream

Love, the third shadow. It replaces the scripture, vague and riddled in nature, hard to figure out, much like the encrypted-like nature of religious commandments. However, love has multiple forms. While The-Dream explores a kind that leans monogamous, one that provides life its complete purpose, Kanye has other thoughts on it.

We formed a new religion
No sins as long as there's permission
And deception is the only felony
So never fuck nobody without telling me
- Kanye

Thus, Kanye introduces the final shadow - Ethical Liberalism. Love as founded in liberal ethics has no reasons for strict monogamy. Consent, no sins as long as there's permission. Casual affairs, one night stands, are acceptable given the mutual agreement, the willingness to engage. Polyamory is permitted as long as it's communicated, deception being the only felony.

4. Interestingly, no performers themselves realize the ideological predicament despite its adept contemporary portrayal. They are merely alternatives to a falsehood (God), not also falsehoods mirroring the fallen one. Perhaps that is the predicament of modern, post-enlightenment, man. Shadows aren't recognized as shadows, for they are sustained by their non-religiosity. However, in reality, they are still contemporary copies, although ineffective ones, of religion.

And sometimes, the awareness of shadows is no deterrent to exploring the dark.

Foot-Notes

1. Should I kill myself, or have a cup of coffee? - A Happy Death, Albert Camus

References

No Church in the Wild. 2012. Jay-Z. Kanye West. ft. Frank Ocean, The-Dream

The Gay Science, 1882, Friedrich Nietzsche

Euthyphro, Plato