

Feature Article: JAF2346

## DISCERNING AND RESPONDING TO GAGA'S WORLDVIEW

by Douglas Groothuis

This article first appeared in CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, volume 34, number 06 (2011). For further information or to subscribe to the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL go to: <http://www.equip.org/christian-research-journal/>

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Sorting out Lady Gaga's worldview is like working through a thick maze of hype, spectacle, and fabrication. It is difficult to know when she is serious and when she is projecting an image. (She refers to her music as "a lie.") Further, her ever-changing persona makes her hard to pin down, since she is "the manic new queen of reinvention."<sup>1</sup> She is a shape-shifting, eyebrow-raising enigma of endless energy, who has neither written a manifesto nor an autobiography (but give that a little time). Her lyrics revel in hedonism, nihilistic (bi)sexual abandon, and bombastic affirmations of an empty but hyperactive and boisterous self. Consider the lyrics of her song, "Hair": "I just wanna be myself / And I want you to love me for who I am / I just wanna be myself / And I want you to know / I am my hair. / I have had enough, this is my prayer. / That I'll die living just as free as my hair."

Gaga performed this number on *Good Morning America* while changing her wigs three or four times—all to thunderous acclaim of her outdoor audience. Freedom, for Gaga, is little more than engaging in random acts of kinkiness, yet she preaches this message with wild ferocity.

Remarkably, Gaga says she does not want to appear to be a human being on stage. She will not even drink water in front of her audience. She claims that her art is a lie that she wants people to believe. Yet Gaga is consumed with making art and asserts that she only feels alive while she is performing. Her brand of art-making, apparently, is her chosen vehicle for salvation, given that her life seems to be in tatters otherwise. She projects a nonhuman persona to escape her very human laments. Gaga has a pre-lupus condition and sometimes passes out or takes tumbles on stage. She admits to illegal drug use in the past and present. Without any sense of secrecy or shame, she divulges numerous sexual escapades with both men and women and expresses pain over a broken heterosexual relationship.<sup>2</sup>

Pop culture has come a long way (down) in recent years. Lady Gaga is pornographic in lyric and appearance much of the time. In one video, she kills a former lover with sparks flying out of her breasts. Her lyrics are often perverse and sordid. Yet

she is a teen (and post-teen) idol, whose recordings are bestsellers and whose videos are watched by tens of millions.

Amidst it all, Gaga proclaims her total devotion to her multitude of fans, who she dubs her “monsters” — even claiming that no other performer is as committed to her or his followers. She tells them that they are all born “superstars” in “Born This Way.” (This statement is a logical contradiction, since everyone cannot be superlative in relation to everyone else. A superstar, by definition, is greater than a lesser light.) Gaga says she is concerned about her effect on her fans, recognizing that nine-year-old girls adore her. But the altruism is twisted, since her music is laced with obscenity, describing lurid lives with no sense of restraint or traditional virtue. There is nothing of objective moral worth to offer her dotting and often fanatical audience, nine-year-olds included.

Lady Gaga makes Madonna look shy and modest. However, like Madonna (whom Gaga cites as a major influence), Gaga reveals some memory of her Catholic upbringing. She sometimes sings about sin and mentions Jesus Christ with appreciation. In “You and I,” she sings: “We got a whole lot of money, but we still pay rent / ‘Cause you can’t buy a house in heaven. / There’s only three men that I am a certain my whole life / It’s my daddy, and Nebraska and Jesus Christ.”

One wonders what “you can’t buy a house in heaven” means. I wish she were referring to the gospel of God’s grace through Jesus Christ (see Eph. 2:8), but that is not borne out in the rest of her lyrics or way of life. (“Nebraska” is a reference to her on-again, off-again boyfriend.)

In her controversial song and video “Judas,” she sings: “In the most biblical sense, / I am beyond repentance. / Fame hooker, prostitute wench, vomits her mind. / But in the cultural sense / I just speak in future tense. / Judas kiss me if offended [sic]...I wanna love you, / But something’s pulling me away from you / Jesus is my virtue, / Judas is the demon I cling to / I cling to.” Gaga may be exposing the moral struggle of her sad soul. She is erotically drawn to evil, but somehow knows better — knows that Jesus is “her virtue.” Biblically speaking, Christ is our righteousness if we are “in Christ” — that is, if we know Jesus as Lord and Savior (1 Cor. 1:30). But this is not Gaga’s message.

She speaks of sin again in “Electric Chapel”: “Pray for your sins / Right under the glass disco ball.” Yet in “Bloody Mary,” she repeats this vacuous reference to Jesus twice: “I’ll dance, dance, dance / With my hands, hands, hands, / Above my head, / Like Jesus said.” In a song sprinkled with Spanish, “Americano,” we hear the strange line, “I don’t speak your Jesus Christo” — whatever that means.

But perhaps this Jesus talk is just another outrageous act for Gaga, another drama staged to win her yet more fame. Gaga says, “The objective is to always be making something that belongs in a museum. Even what I’m wearing right now.”<sup>3</sup> In a *60 Minutes* interview, she called herself “a sociologist of fame.” Appearing mysterious and inscrutable is part of the global spectacle that is Lady Gaga, aka “Fame Monster” (the title of one her recordings).

Gaga says she believes that God “watches out for her.” Her band and entire entourage of dancers and special effects personnel even pray before their concerts. This is quite American. The vast majority of Americans are theists, however little they adhere to a biblical worldview or pattern of godly behavior. A comparable European performer would likely have no such sentiments.

Gaga invokes theology in “Born This Way,” her most recent chart-topping release. An anthem to nonheterosexual sexuality, the lyrics begin by narrating what “my mama told me when I was young”: “We are all born superstars” and there is “nothin’ wrong in lovin’ who you are.” This is because “he made you perfect, babe.” The chorus then intones, “I’m beautiful in my way / ‘Cause God makes no mistakes / I’m on the right track baby / I was born this way. / Don’t hide yourself in regret / Just love yourself and you’re set.” This lesson of original innocence is then universalized to sexual orientation: “No matter gay, straight, bi / Lesbian, transgendered life / I’m on the right track baby.” She then gets specific: “Don’t be a drag—just be a queen.”

Gaga is an outspoken advocate for homosexual acceptance and same-sex marriage. Some of her most enthusiastic fans are homosexual men. But Gaga is stalked by a philosophical conundrum. On the one hand, she avows the inevitability of sexual orientation—we were “born that way.” That is immutable—and good, she avers. On the other hand, she proclaims that we possess a radical freedom that allows one to invent and reinvent oneself at will, just as Lady Gaga does on a regular—and it seems hourly—basis. She told British actor Stephen Fry in the *Financial Times* that the album *Born This Way* “is about being reborn again and again until you find the identity inside yourself that defines you best for who you are and that makes you most feel like a champion of life.”<sup>4</sup> But one cannot be “born again and again”—in Gaga’s postmodern sense of perpetual reinvention—if one’s identity is *irrevocably* determined at birth (by God or nature). The problem can be summarized:

1. If we are free to reinvent ourselves, our identity is not sealed at birth.
2. If our identity is sealed at birth, we are not free to reinvent ourselves.

Since (1) contradicts (2), they cannot both be true. Gaga, however, illogically affirms both. Gaga was faced with this issue by Fry. Her response was hardly lucid or convincing. She said that sexual identity is only a small part of her message.<sup>5</sup> But on the contrary, Gaga exudes (a bizarre) sexuality and harps on it repeatedly in her music, videos, and interviews. Thus, if one is not free to reinvent one’s sexuality, according to Gaga, one is not very free at all.

But there is another problem with Gaga’s worldview: her sense of morality.

We are all *naturally good*, according to Gaga, “because we were born that way.” Gaga is speaking of gender identity. When she sings of heterosexuals, homosexuals, lesbians, transgendered, and bisexuals as being good, she is probably thinking of adults who engage in consensual sex, whatever their orientation may be. But why limit it to those sexual identities? Why not claim that pedophiles are “born that way,” as well as those who commit rape and incest? If so, they are all justified in being

what they are and doing what they do, “‘cause God don’t make no mistakes.” Although Gaga would not likely rise to the level of a formal argument, here it is:

1. If all sexual identity is given immutably at birth, then all sexual activity is justified.<sup>6</sup>
2. All sexual identity is given immutably at birth (Gaga’s claim).
3. Therefore (a): all sexual activity is justified. (By *modus ponens*.)
4. But statement (3) is false, since pedophilia, rape, incest, and so on, are morally wrong (and Gaga would likely agree).
5. Therefore (b): statement (2) is false and Gaga is refuted.

In other words, Gaga’s beliefs entail an obviously false claim: “all sexual activity is justified.” Consequently, her viewpoint is false.

Not surprisingly, Gaga also taps into the celebrity zeitgeist and hawks what Spencer Kornhaber calls “a guilt-free gospel.” He insightfully explains how religion plays out in Gaga-land in the recording, “Born This Way”:

*“Marry the Night,” and most of the tracks that follow, posit that salvation comes by taking charge of one’s own identity and remaining unapologetic. The references are often biblical, yet the message plays as new-agey. This is why Born Your [sic] Way may end up being as culturally significant as Gaga—never coy about her ambitions of importance—wants it to be. Through her lyrics, she promotes living with religion in the same way that kids-these-days increasingly seem to live: holding onto the trappings of how she was raised, but embracing a philosophy of unquestioning acceptance and strident self-determination.<sup>7</sup>*

Kornhaber adds that Gaga “is certain of her own righteousness; her emotional enemy is not shame but insecurity.”<sup>8</sup> So, despite references to Jesus and God, Gaga opposes the gospel. She denies that we are morally flawed beings who are in desperate need for forgiveness and new life that comes from God, who is beyond ourselves (John 3:16; Rom. 5:1–8).

Of course, many will defend Gaga as energetic, transgressive, talented, dynamic, and more. But this only indicates that art (or at least spectacular showmanship) has been separated from goodness in the contemporary mind—alienated from any pattern of life that conduces to virtue. Lady Gaga shows us the sordid side of life (in larger-than-life ways); and in so doing she may invoke our compassion for the abused, tormented, and demented. Nevertheless, I take her to be a tragic figure. I fear she may be headed in the same direction as Jimi Hendrix was moving when he was her age. Hendrix, fantastically popular, outrageous (for his day), and energetic, died at twenty-seven in 1970 from an accidental drug overdose. More recently, the wild-living pop singer Amy Winehouse shot briefly into the limelight only to perish at age twenty-seven after a life plagued with drug and alcohol abuse.

I hope Christians will exhibit the same concern for Lady Gaga and her followers as modeled by Francis Schaeffer in 1968 in his classic work, *The God Who Is There*. While exposing the despair and meaninglessness of so much of the culture of his day,

Schaeffer challenged his readers with this: *These paintings, these poems and these demonstrations which we have been talking about are the expression of men who are struggling with their appalling lostness. Dare we laugh at such things? Dare we feel superior when we view their tortured expressions in their art? Christians should stop laughing and take such men seriously. Then we shall have the right to speak again to our generation. These men are dying while they live, yet where is our compassion for them? There is nothing more ugly than an orthodoxy without understanding or without compassion.*<sup>9</sup>

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## NOTES

- 1 Frank Furedi, "Is That Biological Determinism in Your Genes, or Are You Gaga about Free Will?" *The Australian*, February 19, 2011. <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/opinion/is-that-biological-determinism-in-your-genes-or-are-you-gaga-about-free-will/story-e6frg6zo-1226008077137>.
- 2 Gaga also claims she is a "feminist," but it is not clear how acting like a hyperactive zombie prostitute or sex monster in any way advances the cause of women's dignity or abilities.
- 3 *New Yorker*, *Talk of the Town*, *Special Edition*, August 2011, 60.
- 4 Stephen Fry, "Lady Gaga Takes Tea with Mr. Fry," *Financial Times*, May 14, 2011. <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/0cca76f0-873a-11e0-b983-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1Xu0y2Mqt>.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 I am explaining Gaga's rationale in order to show its fallacy. However, one could be born with strong sinful sexual tendencies and still be held morally accountable for one's actions. In fact, Christianity claims that all people (save Jesus Christ) are born sinners (because of original sin), yet we are morally responsible for our lives before God. See Romans 1–5.
- 7 Spencer Kornhaber, "Lady Gaga's Guilt-Free Gospel," *The Atlantic*, June 1, 2011. <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2011/06/lady-gagas-guilt-free-gospel/239661/>.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, 30th anniv. ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 54.