

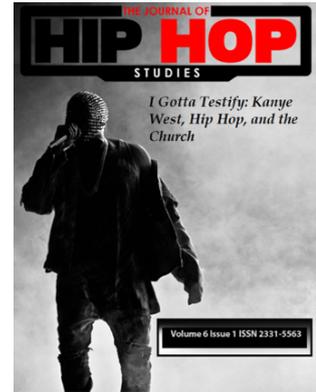
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## Meditation - Kanye West's "Jesus Walks," Black Suffering, and the Problem of Evil

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Journal of Hip Hop Studies, Special Issue *I Gotta Testify:  
Kanye West, Hip Hop, and the Church*  
Volume 6, Issue 1, Summer 2019, pp. 78–79  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34718/w73h-rd55>

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The hook in Kanye West's 2004 Hip Hop song "Jesus Walks" touches on black suffering and the problem of evil. The problem of evil, or theodicy, is a Christian theological explanation that vindicates God from having any responsibility for the nature and cause of the presence of evil and suffering in human lives. In other words, the problem of evil is expressed through rhetoric, language, and aphoristic phrases that do not "blame" God—a perfectly good, unlimitedly powerful, benevolent, and just God—for the suffering and evil in human lives. If Christians did not vindicate God, then that would mean that either God is not perfectly good or that His power is limited. Anthony Pinn in *Why Lord?: Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* (1995) argues that the "theodic issue is the foundation (recognized or not) of Black theological thought" and that "the centrality of oppression within Black theology combined with talk of a sovereign God makes Black theology an extended Black 'theodicy'" (91-92).

"Jesus Walks" is representative of the perpetual comment on Black suffering and oppression and conceptions of God and Satan (or the Devil) in Hip Hop music in general. West opens the song stating that we are at "war." Terrorism, racism, and "ourselves" are the war zones. Perhaps, West uses "we" on three levels: global citizens worldwide, the citizens of the United States of America, and/or African Americans in particular. Although it is not entirely clear, many of the scenarios and episodes mentioned in the song point to situations in which African Americans could relate. Some of these issues are "restless niggas," detectives "choking" them, drug dealing, personal concern about talking to God, and "victims of welfare."

In the hook, West states that the "Devil" is attempting to "break" him "down." The hook repeats four times and it serves as a petition to God. At the same time, the hook informs God of two things: why West needs God to "show" him the "way" and why West needs Jesus to "walk" with him. However, at the same time, West expresses apprehension in talking to God because West has not talked to God in "so long." In mentioning the Devil, West is speaking of a major figure in Christianity who is the chief antagonist and adversary of God, Jesus, and His people. West's petition to God implies that the Devil is not a "good" and benevolent persona. As Jon Michael Spencer shows in *Blues and Evil*

(1993) since moral evil (sin) and not natural evil (environmental cataclysms) was of paramount concern to bluesmen and blueswomen, the Devil was a convenient and customary means for them to explain the existence of certain kinds of travail in their lives (76). West, too, is commenting on moral sin, e.g., the "wrongs" in his life, police choking Black men, and "restless niggas" stealing jewelry and expensive cars.

West lays the blame of this oppression and suffering at the feet of Blacks and Whites. In "'God's Smiling on You and He's Frowning Too': Rap and the Problem of Evil" (Call Me the Seeker, 2005), I describe two types of humanocentric theodicies: "white supremacy" theodicy and "slave mentality" theodicy. Humanocentric theism, or secular humanism, puts the responsibility for human actions and evil upon human beings. The white supremacy theodicy says the choices, values, and resulting actions of African Americans are the direct cause of the oppression and suffering of African Americans (179). The "slave mentality" theodicy puts the responsibility for continued Black oppression and suffering upon African Americans who are unable to realize that they carry the "scars" of the slavery experience in both their social and mental lives (180).

What is not as clear is which group of people are "breaking" West "down." Whites are actively involved in the "breaking down" that the Devil is attempting to do, but so are Blacks (for hurting other Blacks), corporate media (for not playing West's song on the radio because West raps about Jesus), the police (for their brutality against Black men), and the United States government (for perpetrating racism and supporting terrorism). West in particular and (Black) rappers in general are well aware that African Americans are oppressed and suffering from evil. Throughout his commentary and as is the case with the music of bluesmen and blueswomen, West does not propose a heavenly solution to the pain and suffering. Heaven is not an option; it is Earth or nothing.