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FIVE THESES ON THE
GLOBALIZATION OF THUG LIFE
AND 21ST CENTURY MISSIONS

Kenneth D. Johnson

Introduction

Contemporary missions to youth of African descent in the Global City face an alternative and oppositional culture that is hostile to the Gospel witness.¹ That culture is now embedded in the ideology and style of Thug Life, a subcategory of Hip-Hop music and lifestyle that first developed among impoverished and alienated inner city African American and Puerto Rican youths in the 1970s.

The use of new media, communications technologies, and new methods and systems of influence, psychographic marketing, etc. has packaged, disseminated and globalized Thug Life as an alternative and oppositional cultural system that has morphed into a way of life that has some of the characteristics of a *religio-cultural system* with its own *weltanschauung*.² Contemporary missions must develop a credible and stylistically up-to-date Christian apologetic to engage the world-and-life view of Thug Life held by youths of African descent in the inner cities of the First and Third Worlds in order to reach them with the Gospel *kerygma*.

This essay is meant as a start of a more extensive discussion within the missions community as to how the Globalization of Thug Life in youth culture occurred, and why it is important to understand this phenomenon's

implications for 21st Century Missions.³ We begin with a brief overview of the rise of Thug Life in its origins as a variant of Hip-Hop music in the United States, and then present five theses about modern media and communications and the presence of Thug Life in the context of global youth culture, and how missions can address this cultural challenge to its Gospel witness.

Origins of Hip-Hop Music

The musical form known as Hip-Hop developed among African American and Puerto Rican youths in the impoverished neighborhoods of New York City in the 1970s. It drew upon the contemporary Black American musical forms such as R&B (Rhythm & Blues) and the various Soul music genres that had their expressions located in particular cities such as Philadelphia, Memphis, Detroit, Minneapolis, and Chicago. Also, new forms of spoken word poetry with musical accompaniment that arose during the Black Arts Movement and the Puerto Rican Movement of the 1970s influenced Hip-Hop's use of rhyming phrases called "rap" that were set to background music provided by portable phonograph turntables. Athletic urban dance forms known as "break-dancing" also developed concurrently with the music. The use of rhythm and syncopated percussion beats, and the minimizing of melody, along with the insertion of snippets of earlier R&B and Soul music tracks and other ambient sounds completed the basic structure of Hip-Hop music.⁴

Hip-Hop's Malevolent Turn

Hip-Hop music evolved into more sophisticated musicianship in the 1980s as it grew from a localized New York urban youth phenomenon to a national music form among African American and some Latino youths, all in the inner cities of the United States. Other racial and ethnic groups such as Asian Americans and Euro Americans, often from middle class suburbs, joined the new musical movement. Most Hip-Hop music was party music, with some of it also containing social messages protesting against the drug trade, police brutality, poverty and generalized government injustice.

In 1988, the Los Angeles group N.W.A. released its album *Straight Outta Compton* that is generally regarded as the turn towards a more malevolent social vision in Hip-Hop music known as *gangsta rap*. This variant of Hip-Hop had lyrics paying tribute to the glories of gang life among youths who were engaged in criminally violent and predatory responses to per-

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ceived injustices on the part of the white American power structure, although many victims of this gangs violence were in fact fellow residents in African American neighborhoods. In the music, the prime targets were gang rivals, and the agents of state authority in Los Angeles such as local police, who were despised due to their numerous documented incidents of police brutality, corruption, collusion with the crack cocaine drug addiction epidemic, and general disrespect for residents in African American neighborhoods.

Other Hip-Hop artists soon followed with lyrics of withering social criticism mixed with a lionization of Black male criminality, especially as expressed in the form of gang affiliation, attempts to affirm manhood in the guise of misogyny, and the frequent recourse to gun violence to express a will-to-power over others in the neighborhoods, whether the residents were part of the despised white power structure or not. As the music began to be identified by and its artists signed up with the major record labels and distributors in Hollywood and New York City, the emphasis shifted towards portraying gang members (and in real life, the Hip-Hop artists imitating them) seeking wealth, power, and the sexual favors of women by any means necessary, including violence, even if this contributed to neighborhood decline.⁵

Tupac Shakur and “Thug Life”

The artists who followed this lifestyle amassed conspicuous wealth in the form of expensive cars, clothing, and jewelry (“bling-bling”) and saw this as their just reward for entrepreneurship, and had little or no regard for the negative social messaging that this new malevolent type of Hip-Hop music delivered to impressionable inner city youths. Tupac Shakur (b. 1971 – d. 1996) was a Hip-Hop artist who at various times was literate and socially conscious in his rap lyrics, but was also willing to excuse and glorify the criminal lifestyles of gang and inner city street culture. He became and remains a sympathetic figure to millions of youths nationally and worldwide. Shakur was an early casualty to the fatal street-inspired murders that occurred among some rap artists in the 1990s.

It was Tupac Shakur who aptly described the world-view and lifestyle of this newer Hip-Hop music as “Thug Life.” He recorded a record album and formed a rap group of the same name, and had the phrase tattooed prominently on his body in allegiance to its moral system and ideals.⁶

Transmission of Thug Life

Many other Hip-Hop artists now embrace Thug Life as their personal world-and-life view as well as their form of artistic expression in music and music videos. With the help of the mostly white-owned multinational media conglomerates, this music, visual culture and material fashions have been transmitted to youths of all social classes in the United States and in many nations across the globe, who often see these musical forms as a means to create their own local oppositional cultures and give vent to both adolescent rebellion as well as legitimate sociopolitical protest.

A notable factor is the rise of an oppositional culture of Thug Life among youths in African descent in the impoverished inner cities of the developed First World, including the inner cities of Toronto, London, and Paris. In addition, youths of different racial or ethnic backgrounds have adopted elements of the Hip-Hop/Thug Life musical forms for protest purposes, such as those in Romania, Palestine, Egypt, Bolivia, and Jamaica (concurrent with its own indigenous protest music) among other places in the Third World.

Globalization of Thug Life

We assert that Thug Life is becoming globalized as part of a new global youth culture. This global youth culture is simultaneously driven by the financial lusts of multinational capitalism and the yearnings of youths in various parts of the world for a new mode of expressing their protests against injustice, as well as these youths' enthrallment with the crass materialist culture and narcissism of the developed West represented in this form of entertainment.⁷ There is deep irony in the notion that while America has become the primary engine of global youth culture, Black American music in the form of Hip-Hop serves as the cultural rocket fuel for that engine. This growing oppositional culture of Thug Life contains a vision of reality and life that is in many ways hostile to the values of the Gospel, and contains elements that resist the *kerygmatic* command leading to repentance, *metanoia*, faith, divine reconciliation, and the fruits of repentance in the living of a righteous life that God approves of.

THE FIVE THESES

We now set forth the following *Five Theses on the Globalization of Thug Life* for consideration by contemporary missionaries hoping they might create a credible, morally compelling and culturally engaging apologetic for affected youths, so that barriers to the reception of the Gospel witness might be removed, and that upon the delivery of the *kerygma*, some of these youths might respond in a salvific manner.

THESIS ONE

The rise of globalization, new communications technologies, and cultural transmission through media and marketing systems has created a new set of “Roman Roads” to deliver the message of the Gospel.

Unlike in the late 19th Century during the renewal of the modern missions movement, today the presence of new communications technologies such as the Internet, new methods of media data storage like compact disks (CDs), iPods and other ways of transmitting both music and visual images accompanying it have accelerated the transmission of contemporary Western entertainment forms to inner city youths in the First World, and among youths in some cities of the Third World. The new entertainment forms are sometimes controversial, as witnessed by the reactions of many in the Islamic world and Muslims in the developed world who object to the overthrow of traditional moral norms by the new entertainment with what they see as subversive cultural values of Western cultural imperialism and its moral degeneracy.

Like the world of the Apostle Paul in Christianity's first century, contemporary media forms, like the message of early Christianity, are primarily delivered to people in cities. The strategic location of urban environments, with many peoples, cultures and value systems rubbing up against each other, create cultural interactions and sometimes cultural borrowings that can later result in changes to individuals' self awareness and functioning in their own life-worlds. This occurred when the Apostle Paul and others carried the Gospel message to the cities of Asia Minor in the Roman Empire. Similar venues exist today in cities throughout the globe as populations previously isolated in the countryside or separated by national boundaries, are now pushed together as a result of internal displacement, natural catastrophes, war refugee status, or simple economic necessity as people

search for safety, work and wealth in cities.⁸

The opening of new economic markets and the use of electronic communications are now the equivalent of the “Roman roads” that the Apostles used to spread the Gospel. In a way, this is an old phenomenon in that at various times in history there have been episodes of “local globalization” that connected the then-known societies in various places and eras into local imperial systems.⁹ The distinctive opportunity today is the soon-to-be prospect of a total integration of and connection with nearly all the world’s cultures for the first time, with these cultures linked in two-way communication, giving and receiving worldviews and material culture among them, linked together by modern communications technology and consuming a common media diet.

In the context of modern media communication, contemporary methods of consumer marketing, including some that have been adapted from psychological influence and propaganda techniques, have been fused to entertainment production methods in order to create an entire worldview and lifestyle experience packaged as part of the consumption process of the new entertainment products. Western societies, especially the United States, were the experimental sites where these techniques were developed, deployed, and further refined as a profit-making tool for the culture industry, as represented by the large multinational media entertainment corporations.¹⁰

The new avenues of cultural communication are not restricted to corporate-produced media. These avenues are also open to the communication of the Gospel. Early media missionary efforts in the use of radio, and current use of television satellite technology can now yield to “narrowcasting” using the Internet to deliver podcasts and video streams to reach specific populations with the Gospel message. However, as the secular entertainment forms have already reached many target populations with their messages, missionaries must run harder and faster to craft alternative and culturally aware messages that utilize the idioms and styles of various global youth cultures, and that directly and indirectly engage with and confront the ideology of Thug Life, even while preserving the Gospel’s essential content. This requires acknowledging that Thug Life now serves for many youths as a world-and-life view akin to a religious system that now stands as a barrier against the life transforming power of the Gospel. Further delay by missionaries will only strengthen Thug Life’s grip on the hearts and minds of youths whom are looking for ways to meet their needs for justice and material security, even while their spiritual hungers go unmet.

THESIS TWO

Youth Culture increasingly drives the world's consumer consumption and will continue to do so, and American culture is youth culture's dominant form today.

A new phenomenon is present in the developed Western nations with the rise of a consumer cohort among youths who wield billions of dollars in spending power. This fact has not been lost on the corporate sector who each day continues to test and refine new ways to sell consumer goods and services to a cohort of youths aged 5 to 18. The marketing techniques not only sell things, but also subtly acclimate and develop notions of taste and consumer preferences that often conform to the corporate manufactured youth-targeted consumer products and services.¹¹

This relation between Western youths flush with cash and the corporations chasing after them is a process held in tension similar to that of a Hellenistic dialectic, in that youths often change their consumer preferences without regard to the previous psychological conditioning deployed by the corporate marketers. To keep up, modern corporations hire consumer research firms to be on a continuous search for new social and cultural trends developed by youths, in order to be the first to align themselves with new youth preferences in clothing, music, language and style in order to secure profitable production of new consumer products and services and to quickly discard those that youths have rendered obsolete and "uncool."¹²

There are important exceptions to the Western domination of the production and dissemination drive in youth culture. For example, in much of Asia, Japan (which could also arguably be considered Western) wields great influence through its export of youth-oriented media products such as music, video and animation, and clothing styles in countries like China, South Korea and Singapore. The Arab world, while deeply infiltrated by Western youth media, also partakes of media aimed towards adolescents developed in the more technologically advanced Gulf states, as well as Egypt which has long been the standard setter of media products produced in the Arabic language. Iran, whose culture is Islamic with roots in Persian, not Arab culture, has a rising cohort of adolescents and young adults who chafe at the cultural restrictions of their Islamic regime and who in secret eagerly consume Western media.

The high proportion of youths under the age of 18 in the Third World, with continued high birth rates exceeding replacement needs in some places like sub-Saharan Africa, clearly reveal future consumer markets for global

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capital. It is the hope of corporations that these youths and their nations will eventually experience modernization and economic growth, and open markets and openness to Western media. These businesses know that brand loyalty is often developed early in life, and that modest investments now can reap a continuous flow of profit from a loyal customer base as it matures into adulthood and continues along the human lifecycle. More sophisticated media producers, such as MTV, Inc., have gone beyond exporting Western media products and have instead created media production units that are specific to local and national youth cultures in order to fuse the best of Western technological and media production and marketing techniques with the national youth cultures' music and style in order to capture the attention and brand loyalty of these Third World youths.¹³

The products of American youth culture, and especially its musical forms, are the currently dominant cultural exports to those youth in the Third World who can afford to partake of them. Now that a majority of the world's population, including the world's young people, lives in cities, they constitute a perfect captive audience that are easily and efficiently reached at low cost by corporate producers.¹⁴ As these costs continue to plummet, and as barriers to entry in the media marketplace are reduced further, similar opportunities for cultural production and dissemination exist for Gospel missionaries to repackage and proclaim the Gospel in media forms that engage the new grammar of the media-savvy youths in the cities of the Third World.

THESIS THREE

The increasing spread and reception of a variant of American Hip-Hop culture, "Thug Life," has now become globalized, especially among youths of African descent, and has thereby become a global driver of youth culture.

The music, style, and lifestyle/ideology of Thug Life has now left American shores and arrived among youths of African descent elsewhere in the globe. It has begun to shape these youths' identity and motivate them to develop an oppositional culture in their own societies.

Unlike traditional societies which gave deference to adult authority and adopted strong group social controls upon personal behavior, the new society of cities that afford residents more anonymity and dilute the tight group cohesion of village and small kin groups, now give space for youths to create their own social identity in defiance of parents' and guardians' previous ways of living.

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This phenomenon is less pronounced in Third World cities due to the recent nature of internal migrations from countryside to city and the lingering retention of traditional notions of adult authority. However, in the inner cities of developed countries outside the United States, youths of African descent, whether born in those countries or of recent immigrant heritage, are adopting the habits of Thug Life with its associated harms.

During 2005 in Toronto, Canada, several Afro-Caribbean communities experienced a rolling series of murders and gun attacks perpetrated by youth gangs. These gangs were composed largely of Black youths, with a mixture of Canadian-born and recent immigrant Caribbean youths. This was shocking to the adults in the community because the families of the delinquent youth, while perhaps experiencing elements of racial discrimination, had not experienced poverty comparable to that of gang-infested neighborhoods in the United States.

Furthermore, the married mother-father family unit is present to a much greater degree among Afro-Canadians, many of whom are in the middle class. Finally, Canadians of all classes and racial groups tend to be quite law-abiding and gun violence in that country has been extremely low. What was the change that led to the violence?

It was discerned by external experts as well as local pastoral leaders that the lack of effective parental guidance, especially on the part of fathers who were otherwise present in the home but ineffective in parenting, and the rise of attitudes and lifestyles associated with Thug Life created the atmosphere for gang activity and the subsequent violence. Of this situation, Boston youth violence expert the Reverend Eugene F. Rivers 3rd noted in public remarks in Toronto that "You can reduce crime by making sound investments on the prevention side so you're not paying disproportionately on the law enforcement side."¹⁵ He also held Christian churches to account for their retreat from engagement with youth culture, stating, "The black churches have failed. We failed to take the message into the streets. Now the streets have come and brought their messages into the church. The churches must now mobilize to engage this generation of young people, which heretofore we had ignored."¹⁶

As the role of responsible adults with conventional values diminishes in the daily lives of youths, the vacuum is replaced by the new ethical system of Thug Life. This system lionizes a consumerist lifestyle, displaces older value systems and resists Gospel values of peace and an attitude of moderation toward material possessions. Some theologians like Cornel West in the American context, believe that Thug Life and a culture of violence indicates the presence of nihilism in communities of African descent, at

least in developed countries. As West notes, this “[n]ihilism is to be understood here not as a philosophic doctrine that there are no rational grounds for legitimate standards or authority; it is far more, the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness. The frightening result is a numbing detachment from others and a self-destructive disposition toward the world. Life without meaning, hope, and love breeds a coldhearted, mean-spirited outlook that destroys both the individual and others.”¹⁷ While Cornel West was discussing the plight of inner city African American communities and the saturation of violence that characterized them in the 1990s, his statement could easily apply to the ideology of Thug Life as practiced by inner city Black youths in other developed countries today.

Yet another example of Thug Life and Black-on-Black crime exists in England. Significant numbers of Afro-British youths, whether born in Britain or to recent immigrants from the Caribbean, have been enticed to enter a gang culture of hedonism and violence in a number of tough cities such as London, Brixton, and Birmingham. Gun trafficking of weapons obtained through middlemen who in turn obtained the firearms from the conflicts in Eastern Europe is now pervasive among certain Black youths who use them for intimidation and crime and as part of a preexisting illegal drug trade. Many of these youths are disproportionately represented among those who receive Anti-Social Behavior Orders (ASBOs) that curtail their neighborhood movements and associations with other suspected gang members. While meant by the government as a more humane alternative than jail time for juvenile offenders, it has now become a badge of honor to accumulate numerous ASBOs as a way of gaining higher street credibility as a rebel against state authority.¹⁸ Black Britons certainly endure some racial discrimination, and their children suffer from poor schools and diminished employment opportunity. Poverty and its harmful fruits, such as drug abuse, are present, although not as severely as in African American communities. The music of Thug Life speaks to Afro-British youths’ alienation and soothes the wounded manhood of adolescent Black males, even while still failing to galvanize these youths into a movement for effective political action within the British system. Their parents seem to be unaware of their young people’s new norms, and otherwise have few answers for them. As in the United States, the breakdown of the married nuclear family or failure of such families to form at all result in many Afro-British boys lacking positive male role models while their single mothers struggle to rear them alone. In 2002, fifty percent of Afro- Caribbean mothers in Britain under age 35 had never married, five times the non-marriage rate of white Britons.¹⁹

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Space does not permit a detailed discussion of the uprisings of youths and young adults of Black African, North African/Arab and other racial origins in the *banlieues* of Paris in 2005 to protest racial and ethnic discrimination, anti-Muslim bigotry and persistent poverty, and educational exclusion and joblessness engendered by the French state and tolerated in French society. Television coverage included a few individuals who were creating French variants of gangsta rap that expressed youth rage. However, it seems Thug Life, even without a direct and linear importation from America, still dwells among some impoverished French youths of color. On this point, Sorbonne professor and Bank of France economist Guy Milliere noted that

Twenty years ago, there were much less Muslims in France, and they were doing their best to become French Muslims. It is not the case anymore. Muslims in France now are regarded with fear and suspicion because many young Muslims choose to live a thug life (fifty per cent of the inmates in the French jails are Muslim). Fear and suspicion have a basis in reality. The young Muslims that do not choose to live a thug life consider themselves members of the Arab-Muslim community more than they consider themselves as French citizens. Or when they say they are French citizens, they add very often: 'we are French citizens, so the French government has to show more respect for Islam and the Arab world.'²⁰

The foregoing examples demonstrate the influence of Thug Life among youths of African descent in some of the developed nations as they challenge both prevailing forms of civil society as well as government authority. Can an alternative cultural apologetic provide credible and engaging alternatives for these young people?

THESIS FOUR

The cultural production called Thug Life must not only be considered as a mere fad, nor as just another musical genre, or an object for analysis by Cultural Studies, but must also be examined as a religious system with its own Weltanschauung, and which must be approached as an alternative religio-cultural system for the purpose of contemporary mission efforts.

Could missiology's analytic tools applicable to other religions have any value in analyzing the claims of Thug Life? It depends on the definition of religion. Some scholars prefer a rigorous definition of religion crafted to clearly distinguish it from worldview.²¹ However, if we view Thug Life as an emergent

religio-cultural phenomenon, we can use a more flexible definition. University of Chicago theologian Dwight N. Hopkins has offered the following criteria of a religion:

Religion is a system of beliefs and practices comprised of a god (which is the object of one's faith), a faith (which is a belief in a desired power greater than oneself), a religious leadership (which determines the path of belief), religious institutions (which facilitate the ongoing organization of the religion). Religion also has a theological anthropology (which defines what it means to be human), values (which set the standards to which the religion subscribes), a theology (which is the theoretical justification of the faith), and revelation (which is the diverse ways that the god manifests itself in and to the world).²²

Thug Life has some of Hopkins' elements, although these are not grounded in a notion of sacrality. Some rap artists maintain a generic belief in God, as do the youths who listen to the music produced. Likewise, the notion of a higher power is ambiguously present to provide support in time of extreme life-and-death peril, but at other times remote enough so that the higher power does not criticize or get involved with the Thug Life adherent's daily living. The dance clubs provide the secular temples for the new faith, and the gangs provide the hierarchical social organization that provides an alternative to both faith communities and the nuclear family. Hedonism and the nihilism that Cornel West described is the basis for its theological anthropology, and its values include gang loyalty and solidarity, and a "no snitchin'" policy that intimidates witnesses from testifying in court to assist police or crime victims. Thug Life does not have a theology, but it does offer the "is" of hostile street life over the "ought" of society's morality as its theoretical self-justification for its own belief system.²³ Finally, revelation would be the one area that Thug Life is lacking, since in the end it has a materialist ideology with no active role for a God, even though some of its artists do make appeals to God or Allah in order to justify some of the choices that people make for their own survival against their rivals. A God-concept is sometimes present but underdeveloped as a source of revelation in gangsta rap or in the lifestyle of Thug Life.

Thug Life also has its own ethical code, analogous to what sociologist Elijah Anderson has described as the "code of the street" instead of society's "code of the citizen."²⁴ Thug Life's street ethics permit and even encourage interpersonal violence as a first resort to conflict resolution, and the strong male assertiveness in street life carries over into highly structured gender relations with an ever-present misogyny indifferent to the needs of women and girls. The worldview of Thug Life is not entirely amoral; its advocates still use the moral notions of rightness and wrongness, even

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though they disagree about the specific content of just and unjust acts. In this way, those that engage in the lifestyle are well aware of but suppress their self awareness of the moral paradox of those who protest wrong acts done against them but whom nevertheless are not morally clean themselves in that they also commit harm against others. Or as the Apostle Paul in Romans 2:1 notes, “Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgement on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things.”²⁵

But as a cultural system or worldview, Thug Life does provide some psychic benefits to its adherents. It affords its young followers the opportunity to be heard, and to gain a sense of personal identity, racial and ethnic identity formation, and a sense of family solidarity that is often lacking in their own households and natural families. The street norms that Thug Life propagates claim to help its devotees avoid victimization on the street, or at least the feeling of being a potential victim. Finally, the musical medium of rap performances can be enacted anywhere like a secular liturgy by youths even at the most basic economic levels using simple, low cost, improvised musical instruments and the human voice, affording them the opportunity to tell their personal stories and thereby gain personal significance and a feeling of personal efficacy, even if their music never reaches beyond their own neighborhoods. Nearly all the basic things that religion provides in the non-supernatural realm, Thug Life offers, packaged in a readily understood and culturally engaging idiom, without any accountability to a divine being.

THESIS FIVE

Thug Life dwells primarily in cities, and provides an operating life script for urban youths in global cities of immense size and diversity. Mission’s efforts to engage urban youths must include an apologetic that confronts the claims of Thug Life with credible alternatives, even while using some of Thug Life’s stylistic forms as a medium to transmit the salvific content and lifestyle options of the Gospel.

Thug Life today is primarily an urban youth phenomenon. It began with Black and Brown youths in the United States, and has migrated to various nations across the globe and has been utilized by other racial and ethnic youths to advance their own local concerns for justice, and as a lifestyle alternative to that of their own traditional societies. While space does not permit a rigorous cross-national comparative study of Thug Life’s migration to countries like Romania in the former Soviet Bloc, or in the Muslim world

among Asians or Arabs, or even in other Third World countries in Africa or Latin America, the initial effects among excluded urban youths of African descent in other Western developed countries points a future research path to trace the global evolution of the Thug Life religio-cultural phenomenon.

In the meantime, as missionaries attempt re-evangelization of youths in the West, they run the risk of a head-on collision with the cultural dominance of the Thug Life ideology and its daily practices among alienated young people resulting in a failure of successful evangelization. There is an opportunity to do a trial run of sorts to find new ways to formulate an apologetics for urban youth evangelization in the developed world that if successful, could later be used in the cities of the Third World with appropriate modifications to counter and defeat the religio-cultural influence of Thug Life when it arrives.

How to begin? Missioners' first step should be to acknowledge that Thug Life accurately identifies areas of real need, even though its responses might be unacceptable from a Gospel perspective. For example, the displacement and overthrow of male dominance in these societies might have been a just response to the claims of women. But the liquidation of the male role has led to an infantilization of men and a revolt of males against adult maturity and responsible behavior towards women, especially in the establishment of monogamous and healthy marriages and development of married family life as the environment for child rearing and socialization.²⁶

Structural changes in the economy demanding higher levels of education as the minimum passport for entry to gainful employment has left a generation of youths and young male adults behind, unable to join in the rest of society's material gains and to fulfill at least part of the male provider role that many women in the inner city still expect. Due to broken families and lack of effective socialization by fathers as authority figures working in concert with their mothers, young urban males, and increasingly young urban females, yield themselves to negative male peer influences in a desperate search for identity, security, and instruction on how to survive and get one's needs met in a hostile society. The previous buffering effects of the trinity of home, school and church have been dissolved, with none of these institutions offering credible and engaging alternative lifestyles on a consistent basis that meet youths' needs for material security and advancement and to satisfy their need to belong to something greater than themselves. Thug Life offers youths a seductive, but ultimately self-defeating set of choices that eventually result in harm. Bold evangelization can expose these inadequate choices in favor of alternatives rooted in the Gospel.

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The second step for missionaries to break the hold of Thug Life is to openly acknowledge the truth of Thug Life's social criticism, confess the Church's indifference and lack of prophetic witness and action, and begin to show how the Gospel themes speak directly to the need for personal salvation and transformation, and the prophetic confrontation that the Gospel demands against the powers and principalities of the age in the social realm. Thug Life offers a radical critique of the exclusion and injustice that youths perceive regarding institutions of civil society and government, especially police misconduct. However, this critique is internally flawed in that it rarely extends to the underlying secular materialism that is a product of capitalism as we know it today, and which has exacerbated the state of economic exclusion and amorality that dominates the life of the inner cities of the developed world. Thug Life's young adherents are complicit in this problem, since they deeply value a sensate and materialist culture and the prospect of becoming rich, by any means necessary. This also explains why the Cultural Left in the developed world, especially in the United States, has been unable despite years of effort, to effectively mobilize in any sustained way the millions of young people and their consumer power toward serious political action.²⁷ Somehow, the Left has been unable to capture the hearts and minds of this generation for its agenda, much less fight effectively the corporate media and culture industries and their hold on the minds and identities of affected youths.²⁸

Mission efforts could harness the rap music idiom itself by supporting skilled youths to provide their artistic visions of an alternate social reality in the inner cities based on the predisposition to peace that characterizes the person and work of Jesus Christ. Any number of themes that rap music discusses today can be addressed from a Gospel perspective, and missionaries and the churches that send them must find ways to financially support the development of alternative cultural and musical products that can compete on their technical merits with anything that secular media can produce. Such an approach is no different from the work of the Apostles as they inculturated the Gospel *kerygma* and post-conversion lifestyle teachings into the idioms of the various ethnocultural groups they reached throughout the Roman Empire. Since then, at its best, mission has found ways to use existing cultural forms as vehicles for the Gospel, even while guarding against syncretism or subversion of the core Christian message. Suitably updated for our century, missionaries can use similar approaches to reach urban youths in the grip of Thug Life.

The third step for missionaries to reach affected urban youth is to personally model the behavior and lifestyle associated with the Gospel in

ways that are culturally engaging to the youths, and engage in the daily personal life coach mentoring of young people. Thug Life thrives in the absence of responsible, mature adults in the neighborhoods. Few missionaries would think of going on the mission field without learning the customs and folkways of the people groups they intend to serve. Yet too many existing youth ministries in the developed world use worn-out methods and culturally unattractive modes of interaction with young people, and fail to maintain a daily adult presence in the roughest neighborhoods where they can be seen and heard.

As noted earlier, young people are highly attuned and acclimated to modern media consumer culture, with its emphasis on the visual, the aural, high concept design and function, and the continuous excitement of the new. This is a challenge that some churches and parachurch agencies have attempted to meet in the form of more contemporary worship and narrative expositions of the Gospel's teaching. That is good, but still insufficient. Missioners must not only master the current cultural forms that youths partake of, but must also begin to find ways to influence and reshape the youths' taste and lifestyle preferences, with the same or greater level of determination and precision of the corporate conglomerates' marketing teams. Christian mission, whether using its own methods or selectively borrowing from contemporary secular techniques, must approach urban youth culture with a high level of analytical rigor, so that with the empowerment of the Holy Spirit in the salvation and ongoing sanctification of urban youths, these young people can have their minds and cultural preferences and lifestyles renewed steadily on a daily basis, in order to counter the Thug Life culture.

Finally, as a fourth step, missioners must find ways through narrative as well as Socratic reasoning to engage youths' own natural reason to test and falsify the value claims of Thug Life. The internal contradictions of the Thug Life worldview can be logically discerned, and through the use of narrative and youths' recounting of and reflection upon their own personal experiences, young people can reason for themselves, and even apply retroactive empirical tests to discern whether the claims of Thug Life are consistently true as a coherent system of thought and way of life.

Sophisticated apologetic methods are routinely used to defend the truth claims of the Gospel and used in evangelization work and in imparting the implications of the Gospel to new adherents to anchor their understanding and practice of their new faith. A similar rigorous approach that is youth friendly and packaged in an appropriate way can be used with young people for evangelization and post-conversion catechesis. The common doctrinal

emphases of orthodox Christian teaching can be shown to relate to youths' own lived experiences, if we are willing to do the hard work of cultural translation to engage young people's emotions and thinking.

Conclusion

It is time for missionaries to reconsider how they will retool themselves and their presentation of the enduring content of the Gospel to a new generation shaped by a global and secular media culture.

This discussion has begun in the inner cities in the United States among some African American churches as they consider the plight of Black young people ensnared in the deadly coils of the Thug Life ideology and lifestyle, even while these churches continue to slip into irrelevancy and ineffective witness among these inner city youths. This situation is also ironic in that many of the affected youths would be happy to embrace alternatives to Thug Life, but find the churches indifferent to their condition, or lacking any morally or culturally credible alternatives or leadership that provide life affirming messages while delivering prophetic condemnation of the hypocrisy and continuing acts of systemic racism, poverty, and corrupt social institutions. Without the bold honesty that characterized the ancient Gospel witness of the first Christians, these youths will not transfer their allegiance to the risen Christ in a manner that leads to salvation.

The situation with the youths outside of the United States who have adopted Thug Life is no different. This youth population constitutes the base of most future adherents to Christianity.²⁹ If the New Testament is to be taken at its word, many of these youths may experience a Christ-less eternity with all the implied harms that arise as a consequence. Modern missionaries empowered by and in obedience to the Triune God, will need to embrace the risks of serious cultural work to develop new methods of evangelization of these young people. As part of this task, missionaries must exercise the courage to preach and teach the whole truth of the Gospel and its implications for individual morality and lifestyles and the just and right ordering of society. These ministers of the Gospel have the high privilege in the 21st Century of being God's co-laborers in a search-and-rescue mission to find, engage, and save these lost youth in the name of Jesus Christ.

End Notes

¹ The term "oppositional culture" seems to have first entered the academic litera-

ture in education studies about African American student underachievement, particularly by the education scholar John Ogbu in his *Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb: A Study of Academic Disengagement* (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc., 2003). While his specific conclusions about Black underachievers rejecting educational attainment due to “acting white” have largely been disproved, the term has been expanded for use to describe any set of behaviors or worldviews that deviate from the cultural mainstream. This is the sense in which sociologist Elijah Anderson uses the term in his ethnographic study of a Black Philadelphia inner city neighborhood, *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City* (W.W. Norton & Company; 1st edition, 1999). The idea of group deviation from society’s norms as a form of cultural resistance, was theorized earlier by structural-functionalist sociologist Robert K. Merton in his *Social Theory and Social Structure* (The Free Press, 1956).

- ² Philosophical theologian Paul Tillich had a very expansive definition of “religion as the heart of culture” that seemed to include the notion of worldview in his *Theology of Culture* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1959). We can begin with this as a working definition of religion and then further sharpen our definition when we examine this question in detail under Thesis Four.
- ³ The phrase “Globalization of Thug Life” was coined by Kenneth D. Johnson and first appeared in print in an interview with this author in the article “Hip-Hop Martyrs: Youth, Violence and Transformation” by Episcopal priest Pat McCaughan in *The Witness* (Volume 86, Number 5/6, May-June 2003, online at <http://www.thewitness.org/archive/mayjune2003/hiphop.html>).
- ⁴ Of necessity this description of Hip-Hop’s origins is compressed. For a comprehensive discussion, see Nelson George’s *Hip Hop America* (Penguin Books, 2005).
- ⁵ Cultural critic Norman Kelley noted in his *The Head Negro in Charge Syndrome* (Nation Books, 2004) that as of 2004, “Most independent rap record labels are partially owned by one of the five major labels – Time Warner, Sony Music, Bertelsmann Music Group, Vivendi/Universal, [and] EMI . . .” (p. 141).
- ⁶ Tupac Shakur’s album on his own record label was *Thug Life: Volume 1*, Out Da Gutta Records, released on September 26, 1994. It was later re-released by Interscope Records, a subsidiary of Time Warner, with many of its songs removed due to the rising public criticism of gangsta rap music.
- ⁷ Narcissism here is not only excessive self-love (egoism), but also the inability of persons to distinguish between their own personal identity and the social status and consumer products they constantly seek to acquire. See Christopher Lasch, *Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (W.W. Norton, 1979), especially p. 31-50.
- ⁸ Trends in cross-border migration for economic reasons affect youths in the Third World directly. See the United Nations Population Fund’s report *Moving Young: State of World Population 2006: Youth Supplement* (United Nations

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Population Fund, 2006) that tells the individual stories of migrating youths and relate these to the underlying social conditions that led to this.

- ⁹ The Egyptian, Babylonian, Assyrian, Persian, Greek and Roman empires served in this way. Islamic empires such as the Mughal dynasties in India, the Caliphate in Iran and surrounding countries, and the Ottoman Empire are other examples. The various kingdoms and imperial systems in Europe from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment, and the imperial expansion of Britain, France, and Belgium among other powers in the “scramble for Africa” from the 1880s to 1914 (the start of World War I) also created new communications links and cultural exposures.
- ¹⁰ Cultural historian Stuart Ewen describes this marketing process in *All Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture* (Harper, 1990). Rebecca Piirto describes the new field of psychographics for consumer marketing in *Beyond Mind Games: The Marketing Power of Psychographics* (American Demographics Books, 1991).
- ¹¹ We are indebted to lay media critic and Bible teacher Matthew D. LeBlanc of the First Baptist Church of Los Altos, California, for the rudiments of a yet-to-be-published media theory to explain how youths’ tastes for sordid media products are developed. Media companies selling Thug Life products say they are not responsible for their debased moral content and that it is simply what the youths want to buy. But these companies are too modest, since they do not acknowledge their role in the initial production, marketing and distribution of these products to youths who initially did not request them, thereby shaping and directing the youths’ new notions of artistic taste and style. This in turn motivated youths to buy more of the companies’ records and music videos with the negative content, which then reinforced the youths’ tastes that the companies previously developed. Thus, *a reinforcing and reciprocal exchange process is established between youth consumers and corporate producers*, to be broken only when youths tire of the current media products and shift to new musical and lifestyle choices outside the gaze of the corporate marketing experts.
- ¹² On January 21, 2001, the Public Broadcasting System’s *Frontline* documentary program produced “The Merchants of Cool” that documented corporate American’s efforts to market consumer products to teenagers. The show is available online along with interview transcripts at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/>
- ¹³ MTV International Networks, Inc. foreign divisions include MTV India, MTV Brazil, and MTV China. MTV also delivers programs to immigrant populations in the United States, and has recently formed MTV Desi (www.mtvDesi.com) to market its programs to the Indian diaspora in America. MTV is owned by another large media conglomerate, Viacom, Inc.
- ¹⁴ According to the United Nations Population Fund report *Urbanization: A Majority in Cities* (United Nations Population Fund, 15 December 2005, accessed on January 24, 2007 at <http://www.unfpa.org/pds/urbanization.htm>), “In

2007, for the first time in history, more than 50 per cent of the world's population will be living in cities. By 2030 this percentage will go beyond two thirds, with more than 90 per cent of urban population growth taking place in developing countries. During the next 25 years, the UN Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) estimates that the number of urban residents will increase by more than 2 billion people, while the rural population will decline by about 20 million, and by 2030, all regions of the world will have urban majorities."

- ¹⁵ From the *CTV News with Lloyd Robertson* website, "'Boston Miracle' pioneer offers Toronto help," January 9, 2006, accessed on January 24, 2007 at http://www.ctv.ca/servlet/ArticleNews/story/CTVNews/20060108/eugene_rivers_060108/20060109?hub=CTVNewsAt1
- ¹⁶ From the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's reporter Mary Wiens, "Reporter's Notebook: 'The Black Community has a Special Responsibility,'" January 20, 2006, accessed on January 24, 2007 at <http://www.cbc.ca/toronto/features/marywiens/tenpoint.html>
- ¹⁷ Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Beacon Press, 1993), p. 14-15.
- ¹⁸ A London newspaper reported that a British Government study "... did confirm that Asbos were being used disproportionately against ethnic minority groups. More than 20% of those given an Asbo were black or Asian [South Indians or Pakistanis] - two and half times more than their representation in the general population." Alan Travis, "Teenagers see Asbos as Badge of Honour," *The Guardian*, November 2, 2006. Accessed on January 24, 2007 at <http://society.guardian.co.uk/youthjustice/story/0,,1937746,00.html>
- ¹⁹ Data quoted by commentator Joseph Harker, "Rap culture has hijacked our identity," *The Guardian*, March 6, 2002, accessed on January 24, 2007 at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,,662599,00.htm> Harker in the same article notes Afro-Britons' changed perceptions as to the greatest source of danger in their communities: "If, 10 years ago, you asked black people in inner-city areas what they most feared when walking the streets, they would probably have said it was police officers; today they'd reply that it's loud, aggressive gangs of young black boys - who may or may not be criminals, but are deliberately trying to strike terror into those around them, living up to the gangsta-rap culture which has been imported from the US since the late 1980s. "We're from the street," they grunt, "we want respect" (expletives deleted)." Thug Life has now colonized inner city Black neighborhoods in Britain.
- ²⁰ Milliere's remarks were given during an online symposium, "The Death of France?" moderated by Jamie Glazov at FrontPageMag.com, June 9, 2003 and accessed on January 24, 2007 at <http://www.frontpagemag.com/Articles/ReadArticle.asp?ID=8268>. These remarks were made well before the 2005 youth uprisings in France.
- ²¹ Missiologist Charles H. Kraft in *Anthropology for Christian Witness* (Orbis, 1996) believes that should be a rigorous distinction between "worldview" and "re-

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ligion” because of the difficulties in using the terms to describe Western societies, as he notes, “... we need to decide whether it would be best to redefine religion in such a way that western science is considered a religion or to approach the matter in a different way” (p. 198). But he then says, “If we call science a religion because it functions as the core of western societies much as supernaturalism functions as the core of most other societies, we end up with a naturalistic, atheistic religion” (p.198). Kraft believes that religion should relate to the supernatural and is but one of the “surface-level subsystems, along with politics, economics, and the rest” (p. 199) but worldview “includes no behavior at all, only the underlying assumptions on which all of a society’s behavior is based” (p.199). While useful for conventional missiology, we believe a more flexible definition is needed that can better capture the dynamic nature of religio-cultural phenomena like Thug Life.

- ²² Dwight N. Hopkins, “The Religion of Globalization” (*The Other Journal*, Issue #5, Capitalism, January 2005, accessed on January 24, 2007 at <http://www.theotherjournal.com/article.php?id=53>). This definition of religion is more conducive to our efforts to analyze Thug Life.
- ²³ Hip-Hop music as the overall genre of which Thug Life and gangsta rap is a part, does seem to have ethical and philosophical content embedded in its lyrics and lifestyle. Two philosophers, Derrick Darby (Texas A&M University) and Tommy Shelby (Harvard) have teased out these elements in their edited volume, *Hip Hop and Philosophy* (Open Court, 2005) whose essays discuss God, language and meaning, justice, power, and knowledge, among other themes.
- ²⁴ Elijah Anderson, *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City* (W. W. Norton & Company; 1st edition, 1999).
- ²⁵ Romans 2:1, *The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version*.
- ²⁶ Much of the current debate in Western societies about the nature of marriage and family life is a direct consequence of the changes in women’s status beginning in the 1970s. For a study of and philosophical statement on current trends in marriage and family life among African Americans from a Christian perspective, see Kenneth D. Johnson and Eugene F. Rivers 3d, *God’s Gift: A Christian Vision of Marriage and the Black Family* (Seymour Institute, 2005, and available online at http://www.amazon.com/Gods-Gift-Christian-Vision-Marriage/dp/0976571706/sr=8-1/qid=1169701872/ref=sr_1_1/105-2092392-4714055?ie=UTF8&s=books).
- ²⁷ See Angela Ards, “Rhyme and Resist: Organizing the Hip-Hop Generation,” *The Nation*, July 26, 1999, also online as of 24 January 2007 at <http://www.thenation.com/doc/19990726/19990726ards> that documents how the internal contradictions of the Hip-Hop culture has frustrated the American Left’s efforts to redirect Hip-Hop youths toward radical social change.
- ²⁸ However, the American Left has not given up on trying to turn Hip-Hop culture into a leftwing social change agent. A special issue of the journal *Social-*

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ism and Democracy in 2004 was devoted to essays assessing the capacity for such a cultural transformation, and discussed the implications of the age generational shift within the leadership of the African American Left for the rise of a new generation of Black activists to fuse Hip-Hop with social change. It also reviewed the factors that have led to the increasing homogenization of the Hip-Hop genre as a function of corporate media control. See Yusuf Nuruddin and Victor Wallis, eds. *Socialism and Democracy*, Vol. 18, No. 2, July-December 2004.

- ²⁹ Philip Jenkins' recent article, "Believing in the Global South," *First Things*, December 2006, reviews the statistical data in support of continued explosive growth of Christianity in the Third World.