

## The crucifix of the matter

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Why Madonna's latest religious performance means nothing.

When it comes to raising religious ire, the Pope has nothing on Madonna. Madonna has made a career out of musing the collars of the clergy and horrifying the holy. Given her long career, seeing Madonna on a cross might seem almost hackneyed at this point. Her use of a Christian symbol is like George Foreman naming one of his children George — it comes with the hubris. However, her latest stunt consists of donning a crown of thorns, lowering herself onto a sparkly cross, and singing —Live to Tell— as pictures of impoverished children appear on a screen behind her. The performance has prompted Christians to denounce her as a —blasphemer.— Madonna claims the imagery is intended to encourage concertgoers to donate to AIDS charities.

NBC has decided to air the concert on November 22, 2006 — without the crucifixion scene.

As humans, we are driven to find meaning and significance; literary critic Roland Barthes deems us Homo significans, or meaning-makers. In the death of Steve Irwin, the famed —Crocodile Hunter,— we see the revenge of the animal kingdom. In Madonna's performance on a cross of Swarovski crystals, we see a sinner or a saint. In truth, she is neither. By putting herself on a cross (a move that has been so overdone that future generations are in danger of thinking that Jesus is Kanye West), Madonna is no more impious than she is a benefactor of the needy.

To be a blasphemer one must, through word or actions, deny the divinity of God or exhibit gross irreverence toward an object worthy of esteem. Madonna's antics, though they may seem to invoke the holy, are anything but blasphemous. Her use of the cross is not intended to replace God or to deny his divinity, but rather to express unjust pain and suffering through a universal symbol. This interpretation is reinforced by the synchronous use of footage showing unjust suffering in developing nations. Instead of being flattered by the use of such imagery, which acknowledges the importance and predominance of Christian symbols in our culture, the Christian community responds with anger, under the reasoning that the use of a Christian symbol by someone who does not profess to be a Christian is an insult. But, if that logic holds, Confucianism could have a great case against Winnie the Pooh (that unrepentant blasphemer) for his work, The Tao of Pooh. The use of a common symbol comes nowhere close to blasphemy, even in the loosest sense of the word.

Madonna's excuse for the symbolism is weak at best. While the song is reportedly about abuse, the song's meaning is lost in the shadow of the Madonna media machine. At the end of the day, it's not about the children on the cross. The show is Madonna herself, in a mixed message of self-promotion. The media spin is further reinforced by Madonna coming down with a wicked case of the Angelinas in adopting a child from an impoverished nation.

In Sartor Resartus, Scottish essayist Thomas Carlyle tells us that symbols are evocative of the infinite, and that —by symbols, accordingly, is man guided and commanded, made happy, made wretched.— While Madonna's crucifixion certainly makes Christians wretched and Madonna happily rich, it does not guide, command, or even evoke the infinite. It is simply another tale told by a marketing machine, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.