

Unificationist Reflections on 'Bohemian Rhapsody'

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"Bohemian Rhapsody" -- the all-time highest-grossing music biographical film in just two months since release, a huge success in Korea, and likely 2019 Oscar nominee for Best Picture -- has prompted me as a Unificationist to reflect on the life of singer-songwriter Freddie Mercury (1946-91).

Directed by Bryan Singer, the movie focuses on a critical period of Mercury's life, 1970-85 (portrayed on screen by Rami Malek). We watch movies with various glasses, and among Unificationists, each of us may see "Bohemian Rhapsody" very differently.



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Rather than comment in the light of the Principle, I focus in this review on a few themes from the biopic to shed light on several aspects of our teaching.

The film, for example, depicts an artist imitating the three blessings, then trying to separate from his antichrist demons. In a sense, "Bohemian Rhapsody" features Adam, Eve and the Archangel in a garden. Their behavior is quite reminiscent of our teaching on the Fall, but reveals other dimensions of sexual disorder than the typical kind of adultery. The movie helps us understand what kingship and a coronation entail.

This film also causes us to reflect on notions such as symbol, image and substance. It helps us understand the path to becoming a false idol, to becoming an iconic figure, and leaves the door open to the path of substantializing true love.

Creation, fall and redemption of an idol

"Bohemian Rhapsody" depicts the growth and ascension of one of the greatest voices in rock music (the Rock God, according to Britain's OnePoll), and how the stage persona of Freddie Mercury was created gradually, mostly by himself, so that he became idolized by millions. In this ascent, Mercury was driven by the power of an absolute narcissism, which brought him to the summit.

We then see his spiritual and physical fall, and descent into hell. The narcissistic idol is transformed into a puppet driven into hell by sexual passion, until a ridiculous man is disguised as a king enjoying evil joy in the kingdom of loneliness.

The film ends with the consequences of his physical fall and early steps toward what can be seen as a form of human redemption. The person who has suffered so much because of sin begins the suffering course of redeeming his mistakes.

Adam, Eve and the Archangel open their eyes in the Garden

The most critical scene is when Mercury is at the rock bottom of hell, about two-thirds through the movie.

The fallen star, now living in Munich, Germany, with his boyfriend, Paul, and dozens of creatures who are their sexual toys, is on his living room couch. A heavy rain falls outside. Suddenly, Mercury opens his eyes, and his former fiancé, Mary (played by Lucy Boynton), is there. She has come from England to see her former lover, who had offered her a diamond and promised to marry her. Upon seeing Mary, who is good, Freddie feels some desire and would like to possess her, but she reveals to him that she is pregnant. She will have a child, whose father will not be him.

At that moment, we can see his grief and sadness, but also his moral weakness. Disgusted by what he has become, Mary, quickly leaves the house and goes straight to the taxi. Freddie follows her. The rain is torrential. The whole cosmos seems to have liquefied. While Mary sits inside the taxi, Freddie is streaming tears, his whole self just watery. Quietly and strongly, she tells the whole truth to him. She tells him exactly where he is, who he is, how he has become like this. But she leaves the door open for some hope. He cannot say anything. We then realize he has lost all dignity, and become what F.W. Murnau called *Der letzte Mann* ("The Last Man") in his 1924 film. The topic of the first man and last man is a distinctive preoccupation of German culture, which we find with Hegel, Nietzsche, Murnau, and many others.

Freddie Mercury, who could never become an ordinary person, had taken the wrong way to become extraordinary. Mary has come to tell him that his splendor has turned into an extraordinary ugliness. She hates that, but still loves the real man in him. After receiving this revelation, the weak Freddie suddenly becomes as strong as iron and tells the naked truth to his boyfriend, Paul, who has seen the interaction from a distance. Freddie shouts that their relationship ends there, and that he has to quit his life immediately. Mary has opened his eyes, in the garden, and he opens the eyes of Paul.

Did this actually happen? Or was it simply the vision of director Bryan Singer? It takes place in Germany, where the myth of Faust is powerful. Ever since Goethe, German modern culture, like no other in Europe, has constantly debated about Faust, most often by wondering if he can be redeemed. Will Faust remain in a pact with Mephistopheles (the Archangel) and his servant Famulus, or will he be redeemed by Gretchen (an archetype of Eve)? Mercury has been called a Faustian artist because of his capacity to transform himself into almost everything, his exceptional talent (most critics recognize that he had one of the best voices ever), and his moral weakness in the process of fulfilling his ambitions.

Why Mercury became a sexual idol and then Faustian bisexual artist

What is the difference between an icon, an idol, and substance? In the Bible, we read that God created humankind as man and woman, in His image. It is absolute sex that makes a mature man and mature woman resemble God. Reverend Moon used to say that the marriage of Adam and Eve is the marriage of God, as well as His coronation. Man and woman become the King and Queen of Love. Through love, they become the holy living icon of God, but in a sense, they become like God appearing as king and queen. The consummation of absolute sex transforms the icon into substance.

In man and woman, the sexual organs, at the center of the anatomy, are the palace of love, life, lineage, and conscience. Conscience means that man and woman have a strong sexual curiosity; they want to know God, live with God, and be owned by God. This means to have sex -- absolute sex. Absolute sex is the way to kingship, to the coronation.

The fall takes place because the Archangel says to Eve that she can be like God. He wants to turn her into his idol, his queen, his sex symbol. He promises that her consummating love with him will make her the greatest.

Mercury named his band Queen and designed the group's logo as a coat of arms. As a normal man, Mercury was able to love Mary, but he could not have an ordinary attachment to her. Mary was a simple woman, and although Mercury loved her and wanted to marry her, part of him could not. There are many reasons for that, and the movie suggests that Mercury was weak, irresponsible, insecure, but most of all, utterly narcissistic. Plus, he was an artist, a composer, a creator, an extremely gifted person. He may have viewed sex as something extremely huge and powerful, and probably thought that marriage with a simple woman would not fulfill all of him. This character often is found among artists.

But why did Mercury become bisexual? I already mentioned his band's name. In "Bohemian Rhapsody," Mercury is depicted becoming more and more distant from Mary. He is always on tour, and though he keeps in touch with her, his real family is his band, Queen's three fellow musicians. One night, he phones her from a motel, and on the call, a man going to the toilet starts to look at him lecherously. The movie then tries to imagine what takes place in the mind of Mercury. The lecherous desire triggers a fantasy, where he sees himself, half naked, lying and carried by a crowd of worshippers as their idol. Mercury was often seen as the most iconoclastic rocker of all times. He had a passion to destroy all icons and make himself the only idol.

Indeed, he sees himself as the idol of the crowd, carried in triumph, touched by many hands, adored as a

god, desired and adored, almost sexually, by all. Mercury may have felt that he could become a new type of sex symbol, some form of *homme fatal*, instead of *femme fatale*. This is because, being extremely narcissistic, he enjoyed the possibility of being in a passive sexual role, where being seduced brings the acme of joy. He was famous for playing with many sexual symbols on stage, and his persona was definitely that of a queen of sex. He thus contemplated his coronation as an artist and human being by becoming an idol. However, other factors were at play: low self-esteem (despite his narcissism), a feeling of lack of love, boredom, and thus the taste for transgression.

Mercury was a Faustian artist struggling to renew his inspiration and offer something unique, magical. The scene where he is seduced and falls into homosexual love is a scene which starts with his struggle to find inspiration. He seems to be alone in the room, with his piano and a piece of paper, and obviously the inspiration is lacking that day. Then, Paul, the band's manager, appears, approaches him and we already know what is going to happen. Yet, Freddie first does not want this relationship, and resists, but without conviction.

The first steps of his homosexual spiritual fall seem to have brought Freddie on top of the world. On stage, he could achieve a mesmerizing mind-body unity, becoming a captivating idol full of energy. He seemed to have found himself, to have revealed his real nature. He became very popular, with many friends and his band indeed composed some of its greatest hits. So, in a certain way, Mercury seemed to perfectly imitate the three blessings. Quite likely, his becoming what was later called the Ultimate Rock God coincides with his spiritual fall. Interestingly, "Bohemian Rhapsody" tries to see what happened to the man behind the legend.



The official trailer for "Bohemian Rhapsody" (courtesy 20th Century Fox).

The 1958 film, "The Goddess," suggests that a fictional starlet, loosely based on Marilyn Monroe, never felt so depressed and suicidal than at the peak of her fame, when millions of men in America and worldwide wanted to have her. The real life of idols is sometimes one of the last man, the most miserable person.

Freddie's coronation is another great moment of "Bohemian Rhapsody." At a huge party in his London apartments, Freddie wears a mantle over his naked torso, and a strange crown. It is also at this moment that his relationship with Paul is kind of made official. Apparently so sure of himself, adored by his fans, having become so wealthy and famous, Freddie seems to have everything to be happy.

The coronation scene is followed by scenes where the true destiny of the man is revealed behind the mask. He completely loses control of his life, quits his band, attempts a solo career, and is fundamentally destroying his kingdom of illusions.

The physical fall and the paths of redemption

The Principle says that the Fall consisted of two acts of love. The adultery between the Archangel and Eve (spiritual fall) was followed by the physical fall between fallen Eve and Adam. On the one hand, if Eve had not seduced Adam, her fall could have been restored more easily. However, in the Principle of Restoration, we also say that the physical fall was more forgivable than the spiritual fall, though it was also a crime. It is also suggested that Abel represented the (misguided) desire of Eve to return to God.

"Bohemian Rhapsody" ends with the bittersweet triumph of Queen at the 1985 Live Aid concert, supposedly the best 20 minutes of a rock concert ever. Bryan Singer does a commendable job recreating the atmosphere, but fans will prefer the video of the actual concert.

Personally, I preferred Singer's portrayal of Freddie's life before Live Aid. First, after Mary's visit to Munich, Freddie decides to return to a more "normal" (Principled?) life. He does this by reconciling with his "families":

- The film becomes a humorous comedy of characters and situations, a real *commedia dell'arte* (from where comes the famous Scaramouche of "Bohemian Rhapsody"), when Freddie returns to his Queen bandmates and confesses his mistakes. It is very well-filmed, and is probably the scene where all the actors display their best talents. We then have a few scenes of feel-good movie where the band is on the road again.
- Freddie enters into a bourgeois and stable relationship with Jim, a gentle and caring homosexual with whom he will live the rest of his life (Mercury would die of AIDS). We don't avoid the melodrama here
- Freddie and Jim then visit Freddie's physical family. The mixture of comedy, feel-good and melodrama is not convincing, but we have some sort of prodigal son scene where Freddie's austere father hugs him. I found it rather far-fetched, but it may also reflect some aspect of the merciful True God for a once-false god returning to good boy attitude.

Freddie Mercury was born Farrokh Bulsara in Zanzibar (now part of Tanzania) to a Zoroastrian family. Zarathustra, the founder of this religion, inspired Nietzsche, who also had the concept of *Übermensch*, the superman. The idea of the *Übermensch* inspired Goethe, Nietzsche and many German writers.

In his Live Aid performance at Wembley Stadium, Freddie has the moustache of Nietzsche and a commanding attitude of a prophet, a superman. He may also look like a *führer* before a mesmerized crowd. The man who wanted to be touched and carried in triumph is on a huge stage beyond reach of the crowd. However, Freddie's tears, mingled with his sweat, tell us he has become a real man, with real courage. Freddie the iconoclast has broken his idol internally.

I would have preferred this film to have ended very differently. In 1988, Freddie Mercury composed "Barcelona" and performed it as a duet with Spanish soprano Montserrat Caballé. In their live performances, the King of Rock and Queen of Opera created a very moving harmony.

It is perhaps at this moment that Mercury was closest to the true meaning of the three blessings. His mind-body unity on stage, his precise body language, and elegance showed a man who had become iconic, had real presence and an aura, but who had stopped trying to be an idol, puppet or god. His loving manner with Caballé showed he could have been the best husband -- and, why not -- a good father. That couple, in a beautiful setting, singing splendid music, embodied something truly royal and divine.

"Bohemian Rhapsody" could have ended with such a scene. But Bryan Singer made the movie he wanted, and there is already so much to see and hear in it for all fans of music.

"Bohemian Rhapsody" (rated PG-13) is still in theaters; digital and disc release expected in February 2019. Running time: 134 minutes. Directed by Bryan Singer; written by Anthony McCarten and Peter Morgan. Main cast: Rami Malek, Lucy Boynton, Ben Hardy, Joseph Mazzello, and Mike Myers. See IMDB for full details.

Laurent Ladouce is a French Unificationist who was awarded an honorary doctorate by Unification Theological Seminary in 2017. A prolific author of Unificationist publications, he also published the book, Le Projet Pakxe: une contribution du Laos à l'unité de l'Asie du Sud Est et à la Paix Mondiale, describing the rising role of city diplomacy and proposing a plan to make Pakxe, Laos, an international city of peace. He currently works for Unificationist media in Korea.

Photo at top: A depiction in "Bohemian Rhapsody" of the band, Queen, playing at Wembley Stadium in 1985 (film still courtesy of 20th Century Fox).