

The Religion and Anti Religion of Bob Dylan in 'Born Again'

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Abstract : Dylan's The Philosophy of Modern Song reflects him as fan of *Royal Blood*, *Celeste*, *Rag and Bone Man*, *Eminem* and *Nick Cave* insisting the eclectic musical talent seems to find him. In an interview in the 80s Dylan responded that it is destiny putting him on the path of success, a religious person's comment rather and finally stating that he loves sacred music, church music and ensemble singing. The paper attempts to throw light upon Dylan's viewpoints on religion and his religious outlook as reflected through his songs and lyrical compositions.

Keywords - lyrics, divinity, dogmatism, religious outlook

Bob Dylan is known for his religious music, protest songs and his 'born again' Christian period with some of the well known albums like *Slow Train Coming* and less he is associated with anti religious outlook, however some of his earlier works particularly the protest songs have been comprehended to question and criticize the aspects of organized religion and religious thoughts impacting the societal issues.

In the 'Born Again' era the religious aspects of the songs and lyrics composed by Dylan came out with *Slow Train Coming* where he seems to embrace Christianity and its beliefs very openly and so the song was even dedicated to reflect his immense faith in the Christian beliefs. However some of his early songs particularly the protest songs have been seen in the light of anti religion which include *With God on Our Side* and *Masters of War*, though not directly but with an eye of critiquing how religion is used efficiently to justify war and bloodshed along with violence and this of course aligned with the protest themes of Dylan and his lyrical composition. However many of the songs written by Dylan are open to interpretation and it totally depends upon the listener how he interprets the song but some may perceive a critique of religion and personal reflection on faith and spirituality.

Presently Dylan's octogenarian status getting 84 on MAY 24, 2025 he contends that age is not he main factor as he explains :

I never watch anything foul smelling or evil. Nothing disgusting; nothing dog ass. I'm a religious person. I read the scriptures a lot, meditate and pray, light candles in church. I believe in damnation and salvation, as well as predestination. The Five Books of Moses, Pauline Epistles, Invocation of the Saints, all of it.

The song *Trouble* by Bob Dylan explains his turmoil during the years of his three religious albums one after the other. A review of Dylan's religious albums and his song *Trouble* by Clinton Heylin created all confusion and dilemma which stated - "*One supposes a song like this came easily enough – after all, it has no tune, doggerel for the lyric and the most basic blues structure. How hard can it have been?*" The dismissive paragraph led to a misunderstanding of Dylan, his emotions and his journey, his music all wrapped up in one confusing paragraph.

The musical roots from where the songs of Bob Dylan sprout are two arenas - The Blues and the Folk - and Dylan has paid tribute to the blues in almost every album and song he has recorded. The Blues is a specific style and a different approach to music and its expression which allows variations but within set formats. However to some who are non musical outsiders Blues can sound to be a simple repetition still why some musicians and singers still love to return to the blues is a million dollar question.

Bob Dylan's *Trouble No More* has chronicled all those years of his career when he was a most controversial figure to the critics. Those were the beginning three years of the late 70s when he made

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exclusively Christian music and to anger the secular listeners with great severity, Dylan's gospel was not of *Jesus is just alright* hippie variety, but it was fire and brimstone 'sinners in the hands of an angry God' exhortation. During the live performances with some of his songs which he introduced like *Ain't Gonna Go to Hell for Anybody* and *Are You Ready* included end of days prophecy and the warnings of hellfire for the non believers. Dylan's religion is brilliantly humanized as he speaks directly in the heat of an emotional moment and makes a shift into devotional music more profound and effectual. *I Believe in You* is a love song more than anything and here he tells God that they or the sceptics are full of doubt and scorn even then they cannot break his faith and he sings- "*I believe in you even through the tears and the laughter / I believe in you even though we be apart...*" It cannot be denied that some of Dylan's unfortunate lyrics and his apocalyptic preaching bust through the barrier separating insanity from sanity. In *Precious Angel* Dylan celebrates the coming of a time when men will beg God to kill them and they won't be able to die.

Dylan has never fully elaborated his Christian conversion saying only that a fan threw him a cross on the stage and a miracle through the intercession of the cross happened in his presence. If it were to be claimed that a miracle happened due to drumstick, few people will assume that here the use of narcotics played a larger role than divine. Much of Dylan's fundamental ideology is simultaneous with the Religious Rights, something that he expressed in the 1980s. He claimed that Religious Rights is hideous in theory and practice and while many of the beliefs that inspire it are imbecilic. Dylan's most popular and magnificent composition of Christian music *Every Grain of Sand* the songwriter takes measure of his entire life and searches for some semblance of meaning and source of purpose:

Oh, the flowers of indulgence and the weeds of yesteryear

Like criminals, they have choked the breath of conscience and good cheer

The sun beat down upon the steps of time to light the way

To ease the pain of idleness and the memory of decay

I gaze into the doorway of temptation's angry flame

And every time I pass that way I always hear my name

Then onward in my journey I come to understand

That every hair is numbered like every grain of sand

In this composition Dylan struggles with those questions of human life that haunt it and how one can prevent his regrets from disabling their ambition and how one faces his or her imminent extinction with pride and strength, how one gains the confidence to behave as if the lives matter for more than what is empirically verifiable. In this context :

The ideology of Bob Dylan collides with his own art on "*Precious Angel*." He sings, "Ya either got faith or ya got unbelief and there ain't no neutral ground." Art, contrary to the insipid dogmas of those with the totalitarian impulse, is the neutral ground. For the growth of the intellect and the enlargement of the soul, it is also fertile ground. (*Masciotra David. The American Conservative January 30, 2018*)

False Prophet by Dylan is great song on Messianism. The man who was hailed as a prophet right from his young age and was labelled against his will the spokesman of his generation. On September 11, 2012 Dylan released his thirty fifth studio album *Tempest* which exemplifies his Christian engagement with popular culture that is mostly antithetical in nature. While in early 60s when Dylan greatly influenced the pop culture and made a name of himself as a talented and perceptive creator of the Protest songs he slowly moved from sociological finger pointing material to psychedelic folk rock music and retained his status amidst the dominant trends of the society.

Dylan's theology is based on three sources; the Jewish prophetic tradition, the Jesus movement and the Christian tradition in folk country and blues music. Dylan's antithesis is not the whole story for a Christian world and life view and his own story began in Minnesota as a grandchild of Russian immigrant after which Dylan became one of the most influential figure for more than half a century. The most significant thing about Dylan in his 70s is

his conversion to evangelical Christianity that marked a new turning point in his life.

However majority of his fans reflected their anger and aggression on his conversion in 1978 but at the same time his albums *Slow Train Coming*, and *Gotta Serve Somebody* topped the music charts and acclaimed him Grammy Award. In the 1980s two set of rumours suggested that Dylan's Christian phase was over and either he had lost is interest in politics and returned back to his worldly life style of heavy drinking and carousing or also that he might have embraced the orthodox Judaism as an alternative to Christianity.

Dylan's personal life was much in discussion at that time and talk of the day inviting criticism from a Christian moral perspective, still it could not prove his faith commitments or his status relevant to God. As far as the rumours related to his return to the Jewish roots is concerned the perception was sparked by events like attending the mitzvah of one of his sons in Israel and studying with some rabbis in Brooklyn. These actions are insufficient to prove or disapprove his Christian faith but Dylan did not reject his Jewishness when he knelt before the Yeshua, The Jewish Messiah and in his Gospel Album *Saved* he featured 31:31 on the inner sleeve :

“Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah.” A year after the Orthodox Judaism rumours began, Dylan continued to sing his Christian songs in concert. When a Rolling Stone interviewer asked him, in 1984, “Are the Old and New Testaments equally valid?” he answered, “To me.” Dylan also said, “I believe in the Book of Revelation,” and referred to the coming Antichrist. Twenty-eight years later, he repeated the line about Revelation word for word to a different interviewer for the same magazine.²²

When Dylan introduced the song *In the Garden* from his album *Saved* an said that he wished to sing a song about his hero, it was not an act of an Orthodox Jew. Both his songs *Go Down Moses* and *In the Garden* are about Jesus Christ and when he performed in Tel Aviv Israel 1987 the set of songs he sand included and showcased his biblical language that illuminated in his interviews then.

New Testament words, in his songs all attest to his continued Christianity. In 2012, he told Rolling Stone, “No kind of life is fulfilling if your soul

hasn't been redeemed.” Church Out of World, Christ Against Culture If Bob Dylan were an isolated example of an artistic, intelligent Christian dabbling in theology, his perspective would hold limited value for the wider Christian community. But we can place Dylan in the wider context of a distinct, important tending New Testament words, in his songs all attest to his continued Christianity.

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He “uncompromisingly affirms the sole authority of Christ over the Christian and resolutely rejects culture's claims to loyalty.” This is not to say that Dylan's stance in relation to culture and non-Christians is one of utter negativity or complete rejection. Being in opposition to the world as an organized system does not mean opposition to every aspect of life in the world; it means rejection of the world's dominant spirit and direction—specifically, rejection of the “‘arrangement’ under which Satan has organized the world of unbelieving mankind upon his cosmic principles of force, greed, selfishness, ambition, and pleasure.” Yet God is not absent, even in such a spiritually benighted milieu.

In a recent interview, Dylan remarked, “I see God's hand in everything. Every person, place and thing, every situation.” After acknowledge his use of biblical imagery and reiterating his belief in the Book of Revelation, Dylan went on to say, “There's truth in all books. In some kind of way. Confucius, Sun Tzu, Marcus Aurelius, the Koran, the Torah, the New Testament, the Buddhist sutras, the Bhagavad-Gita, the Egyptian Book of the Dead, and many thousands more. You can't go through life without reading some kind of book.” Even though this statement could be one of Dylan's characteristic interview dodges, his underlying point remains: Dylan sees God's hand in everything—or at least the potential in everything—as well as the existence of sin, falsehood, and evil. In other words, Dylan believes

in what Kuyper called common grace. Kuyper asked, “Does Christ have significance only for the spiritual realm or also for the natural and visible domain? Does the fact that he has overcome the world mean that he will one day toss the world back into nothingness in order to keep alive only the souls of the elect, or does it mean that the world too will be his conquest, the trophy of his glory?”

Kuyper argued for the second answer to each question. However, he did not sugar-coat reality or lapse into syncretistic humanism. His conception of common grace included acknowledgment of sin, the Fall, Babylon, and Antichrist. Kuyper also distinguished between interior and exterior manifestations of common grace: “The former is operative wherever civic virtue, a sense of domesticity, natural love, the practice of human virtue, the improvement of the public conscience, integrity, mutual loyalty among people, and a feeling for piety leaven life.

The latter is in evidence when human power over nature increases, when invention upon invention enriches life, when international communication is improved, the arts flourish, the sciences increase our understanding.” Kuyper’s view of common grace, echoed in Dylan’s words, is summarized by Richard Mouw’s statement “God mysteriously works in positive ways in sinful humankind. This is how we are to understand the works of beauty that might be produced by a promiscuous, blaspheming artist, or the acts of justice committed by a person who speaks disdainfully about religious allegiances.”

The same might be said for truth-telling by someone ignorant of, or hostile toward, God. A song on Dylan’s new CD— “Roll on John”—is an example of Dylan’s appreciation for art, justice, and truth flowing through humanity, regardless of individual spiritual allegiance. Bob Dylan is a Christian; John Lennon was not. Yet Dylan can pay tribute to Lennon because he appreciates Lennon’s positive contribution of shining a light in a dark world. With his keen sense of justice and great artistic ability, Dylan himself was a conduit of common grace in his pre-Christian years of the 1960s and 1970s.

With his conversion to Christianity in 1978, in the context of the southern California-based Jesus People Movement of the late ‘60s and early ‘70s, Dylan turned to the biblical book of Revelation, which is “radical in its rejection of ‘the world.’” As

the so-called Jesus Freaks and their allies sought a restoration of the purity and simplicity of thence within Christianity. In Richard Niebuhr’s five types of Christian response to culture, Dylan is clearly in the “Christ Against Culture” camp.

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[6] *Ibid.*, 152.

[7] *Ibid.*, 154.

[8] *Ibid.*, 157-61.

[9] Margotin and Guesdon, *Dylan: All the Songs*, 588.

[10] *Ibid.*, 614, 632.

[11] Sean Wilentz, *Bob Dylan in America* (New York: Anchor Books, 2011), 321. Nevertheless, I agree with Wilentz that comparisons to the *Lives of the Poets* is “a little too high-minded” (*ibid.*).

[12] *Ibid.*

[13] *Ibid.*, 322.

[14] *Ibid.*, 332.

[15] *Ibid.*

[16] Michael Gray, *The Bob Dylan Encyclopedia: Updated and Revised Edition* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 624.

[17] Margotin and Guesdon, *Dylan: All the Songs*, 693.

[18] Gray, *Dylan Encyclopedia*, 624.

[19] Dylan, *Chronicles*, 80-81.

[20] *Ibid.*, 81.

[21] In 2007, Dylan was asked about the use of “religious imagery” in his songs. He replied, “That kind of imagery is just as natural to me as breathing, because the world of folk songs has enveloped me for so long. . . . It doesn’t come from the radio or TV or computers or any of that stuff. It’s embedded in the folk music of the English language” (Cott, ed., *The Essential Interviews*, 488).

[22] Quoted in Scott M. Marshall, *Dylan: A Spiritual Life* (Washington, D.C.: BP Books, 2017), 218.

[23] Quoted in *ibid.* *The Bootleg Series Vol. 8: Tell Tale Signs: Rare and Unreleased 1989–2006* (2008) is a compilation album, gathering alternate versions, demos, live cuts, and outtakes

from a variety of late-period contexts. “Marchin’ to the City” is a previously unreleased track from the *Time Out of Mind* sessions.

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[28] Marshall, *Dylan: A Spiritual Life*, 254: “When Bob Dylan penned [the gospel song] ‘Saving Grace’ in 1979, he plainly wrote that after the death of life comes the resurrection—and wherever he is welcome is where he will be. Why bet against Dylan having a place at that heavenly welcome table? He’s been hungry as a horse for a good long while.”

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[35] *Ibid.*, 181.

[36] *Ibid.*, 245.

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