

INTRODUCTION

Bob Dylan and Religion: New Perspectives from the North Country

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Dylan: “If I had to do it all over again, I’d be a schoolteacher – probably teach Roman history or theology.”

— Love (2015, p. 52)

The present volume is a collection of essays aiming to shed new light on different aspects of the role of religion in Bob Dylan’s artistic output. The eight authors are all from Scandinavia, seven from Norway and one from Denmark. Norwegian Dylan-scholars will always remember when Dylan, at a concert in Oslo in 1998, compared Norway to where he grew up in Minnesota: “Well, I feel quite at home here, actually. I was born and raised in Minnesota, where the Vikings landed long before Columbus did” (Botvar, 2011, p. 166). In *Chronicles* Dylan remembers when his parents brought him to a political rally in Duluth’s Leif Erickson Park: “Leif Erickson was a Viking who was supposed to have come to this part of the country [Minnesota] way before the Pilgrims had ever landed in Plymouth Rock” (Dylan, 2004, p. 230).

Few would dispute the fact that religion or religious traditions and the use of religious imagery have always played an important role in Dylan’s artistry. However, the term “religion” is ambiguous and not easy to define. This

ambiguity comes across in interviews with Dylan, where he uses the word in different ways, often with negative connotations. A critical attitude to the term and the whole concept of religion is also traceable in Dylan's lyrics. The word appears in three of his own compositions. Two of these occurrences are from the mid-sixties, and one is from his gospel period in the late seventies.

The word religion first appears in "Desolation Row" (1965), a song in which Dylan imagines modern Western culture as a ship of fools about to go down. He presents the listener with a variety of figures from Western literature, folklore and history. Among the many characters in this song is Shakespeare's Ophelia, and she is as tragic a figure in Dylan's lyrics as she is in *Hamlet*. She is looking for a sign of deliverance and fixes her hope upon the sign that in Genesis (9:13-17) indicates both the end of the flood sent to purge humankind and the beginning of a new covenant between God and humanity.

What is the matter with Dylan's Ophelia?

Her profession's her religion
 Her sin is her lifelessness
 And though her eyes are fixed upon
 Noah's great rainbow
 She spends her time peeking
 Into Desolation Row

For Ophelia religion is a profession, but not one that provides her with the answers she seeks. Her problem, or "sin", is "her lifelessness", which in Dylan's text is paralleled by "her religion" in the preceding line. In other words, religion seems to be synonymous with death, and hinders Ophelia's ability to see the symbol of hope, the great rainbow. Here "religion" represents the opposite of deliverance and redemption; it will not save Ophelia from drowning. Using words from "It's all right ma (I'm only bleeding)" one can say that Ophelia's religion is not about busy being born, but rather busy dying.

The second appearance of the word religion in Dylan's song work is in "Can You Please Crawl out of Your Window" (1965), released as a single late in 1965. In Louis A. Renza's recent interpretation, this "put-down" song has Dylan imagining someone quite literally listening to his song:

While his genocide fools and his friends rearrange
 Their religion of the little ten [tin?] women
 That backs up their views but your face is so bruised
 Come out the dark is beginning

According to Renza's autobiographical reading it is Dylan who "disdains 'his genocide fools', those uncritical and non-anxious listeners who would adopt his hip vision of life and exclude anyone else who follows a different one". There is a close connection between "religion" and "the little ten women" (bobdylan.com has "tin"); "a trope for any number of superficial or small-minded admirers" (Renza, 2017, p. 39–40).

In other words, religion belongs to the shallow world of those who listen to his songs with no real understanding of what they are about. The line "Come out the dark is beginning" might be a reference to some kind of apocalyptic scenario. In any case, religion will not be of any help if you are trying to escape from what is fake in order to face the real world. Three days before recording "Can You Please Crawl out Your Window", on November 27 1965, Dylan did an interview with Joseph Haas (JH):

JH: What about religion or philosophy?

BD: I just don't have any religion or philosophy. I can't say much about any of them [...]. Philosophy can't give me anything that I don't already have. The biggest thing of all, that encompasses it all, is kept back in this country. It's an old Chinese philosophy and religion, it really was one ... There is a book called the *I-Ching*. I'm not trying to push it, I don't want to talk about it, but it is the only thing that is amazingly true, period, not just for me. (Cott, 2017, p. 62–63)

Dylan flatly denies having any religion or philosophy. Then he apparently changes his mind and answers in the affirmative: There is a philosophy and a religion that is *amazingly* true, not just for him, but probably for everyone. It is to be found in the ancient Chinese divination text, the *I-Ching*, also known as the *Book of Changes*. The *I Ching* introduces the doctrine of the balance of opposing but complementary forces of Yin and Yang. It became popular in the sixties' counterculture, and in 1966, Dylan's close friend Allen Ginsberg wrote a widely distributed poem titled "Consulting *I-Ching* Smoking Pot Listening to the Fugs Sing Blake".

The third time Dylan uses the word religion is in the song “Slow Train” (1978). Here Dylan describes what he believes is wrong with the world, including himself, the people around him, the OPEC cartel, inflated egos of humankind, phony leaders and even his loved ones. Dylan does not spare religious hypocrites either:

But the enemy I see
Wears a cloak of decency
All nonbelievers and men stealers talkin’ in the name of religion
And there’s a slow, slow train comin’ up around the bend

Someone uses religious language to make something profane sound like it is sacred. Dylan places his “Slow Train” narrative in the context of man’s relationship with God. He warns that the day of reckoning is approaching: “There’s a slow, slow train comin’ up around the bend”. The train could be the second coming of Jesus, or a harbinger of the apocalypse, as predicted in the Book of Revelation. However, the slow train does not represent religion; on the contrary, religion is associated with people who do not belong on the train: “nonbelievers and men stealers talkin’ in the name of religion”.

In December 1979 Dylan did an interview (a conversation with Bruce Heiman from KMEX radio in Tucson) in which he was very outspoken as far as the subject of religion is concerned. Dylan explained what had recently happened to him in the following terms:

Christ is no religion. We’re not talking about religion ... Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life [...]. Religion is repressive to a degree. Religion is another form of bondage which man invents to get himself to God [...]. Christ didn’t preach religion [...]. He talked about life, not necessarily religion [...].
(Cott 2017, p. 289–290)

The years from 1979 to 1981 are characterized by some critics as “Dylan’s religious period” (e.g. Trager, 2004, p. 186). By his own account, Dylan had not become religious or a follower of religion; in fact he rejected the whole idea: “Religion is a dirty word” (Williams, 1985, p. 22). Instead he described what had happened to him as a born-again experience, an encounter with Jesus.

In an interview from May 2007, Jann S. Wenner (JW) from *Rolling Stone Magazine* asked Dylan (BD) several questions dealing with the subject of religion:

JW: At one point, you took on Christianity in a very serious way, and then Judaism. Where are you now with all that?

BD: Religion is something that is mostly outward appearance. Faith is a different thing. How many religions are there in the world? Quite a few, actually.

JW: What is your faith these days?

BD: Faith doesn't have a name. It doesn't have a category. It's oblique. So it's unspeakable. We degrade faith by talking about religion. (Cott, 2017, p. 488)

Here Dylan makes an important distinction between faith on the one hand and religion on the other. Like many others living in a post-secular world who believe in a God or some kind of higher power, Dylan clearly does not identify with “religion”. On the contrary, he claims that religion is mainly concerned with appearances. He instead introduces the concept of faith, as something radically different from religion. While religion has a name (e.g. Christianity or Judaism), faith does not. It does not belong to a fixed category; it is oblique and unspeakable.

This is similar to what Dylan said to Jon Pareles in 1997 after the release of *Time Out of Mind*. Dylan told Pareles that he does not subscribe to any organized religion, but the source of his faith is old, traditional songs:

Those old songs are my lexicon and prayer book. All my beliefs come out of those old songs, literally, anything from ‘Let Me Rest on That Peaceful Mountain’ to ‘Keep on the Sunny Side’. You can find all my philosophy in those old songs. *I believe in a God of time and space*, but if people ask me about that, my impulse is to point them back toward those songs. I believe in Hank Williams singing ‘I Saw the Light’. I’ve seen the light too. (Cott, 2017, p. 419–420, our italics)

In the first chapter of *A God of Time and Space*, Reidar Aasgaard provides a detailed analysis of the song “Señor (Tales of Yankee Power)”.

He shows that “Señor” is a polyphonic text, which – like many other Dylan songs – evades one single interpretation. It can be heard as a historical song, a story about migration and ethnic tension, a description of love lost, of human uprooting, of existential crisis, or even as an autobiographical account of Dylan himself. Aasgaard argues, however, that religion, and Christianity in particular, plays a central and integral part in the various interpretations. The song reflects Dylan’s artistic and personal situation at the time, but also fits well in a long trajectory of Dylan songs, from the 1960s to the present, that deal with fundamental human themes related to history, society, social relations, religion, and life in general.

At the core of Robert W. Kvalvaag’s long analysis of the song “Tempest” is an attempt to discover how the song is structured, the relationship between text and music, the role of Dylan’s voice, and the influence of the *Titanic*-movie upon Dylan’s nearly quarter-hour epic ballad. The religious aspect manifests itself through the biblical material, and especially in the apocalyptic scenery, which is very vividly present in the song. In an interview, Dylan said *Tempest* is not the album he wanted to make; he wanted to make something more religious. Kvalvaag argues that Dylan in a subtle way achieved this goal with the “Tempest” song.

Erling Aadland maintains that Dylan’s embrace of evangelical Christianity to a large extent is prefigured in much of his earlier work. Although his highly valued criticism of modern life and contemporary society in his earlier songs is taken further and extended in his gospel songs, this extension and deepening of thought has not received much appraisal. Indeed, the reverse seems to be the case. Many critics sidestep Dylan’s Christian songs. Instead, they are “explained” by all sorts of evasions of the main issue: Dylan’s songs have been imbued with Christianity ever since the early 1980s.

In Pål Ketil Botvar’s chapter, the use of Bob Dylan’s music in church services is analysed. Special attention is given to cases where Dylan’s music and lyrics are integrated into the liturgy of the mass. The Nordic Lutheran churches offer good examples of how Dylan’s work is used as liturgy. Songs from Dylan’s gospel period, as well as other Dylan songs, are used as part of the so-called Dylan mass. Botvar’s chapter

provides new insight into the internal discourse within the church about the use of Dylan's music. Arguments forwarded by those opposing such use and by those who embrace it are analysed on the basis of a sociological model about the relationship between religion and popular culture.

Geir Winje's essay is an attempt to study Bob Dylan's contribution to global culture from another and neglected angle, namely with the album cover art as a starting point. The cover images are not only seen as illustrations supporting verbal texts, but rather, verbal texts and images are treated as equivalent languages or modes of expression. In accordance with social semiotic theory, the album covers are read as meaningful texts on their own. In addition, portraits on the album covers are compared to portraits of Christ and saints in early Christian art. The main reason for this approach is to explore how religious, premodern language (including images) continues in our time, not because human beings today are religious, but because religious structure categories, symbols and signs still work.

Gisle Selnes analyzes Dylan's three evangelical albums as the manifestation of Dylan's proverbial poetics of transformation. Contrary to the common approach to Dylan's religiosity, Selnes underscores the exemplarity of the three albums' adherence to the "general rule" of successive investigations of different genres in the great American song tradition, which Dylan, as the Swedish Academy put it in 2016, enriches with "new poetic expressions". Thus, even more than a heartfelt religious experience, Dylan's conversion bespeaks an artistic urge to probe into a previously unexplored vein in American gospel music. Selnes argues that what characterizes Dylan's evangelical albums is their stark insistence on the "real presence" of Christ's transfigured body, before and after which Dylan maintains a more transcendental, almost pantheistic religious stance. In Selnes' reading, the very last song on Dylan's final gospel album, "Every Grain of Sand," represents a return to the more downplayed, "un-charismatic" or immanent vein of Dylan's religiosity.

Anders Thyrring Andersen sees Dylan as a Christian modernist. He stresses the importance of viewing Dylan's work as a whole, instead of

dividing it into many phases. Andersen thus emphasizes the unity of Dylan's artistic output, and one of the constants he discovers is Dylan's critique of secular modernity. This criticism comes, on the one hand, with images of flooding waters and judgment day, and on the other hand it is paralleled by the notion of paradise, expressed through images of mountains. Further, Andersen argues, the way Dylan approaches the listener, using an indirect, dialogical and dialectical method, is reminiscent of T. S. Eliot and Søren Kierkegaard. (This chapter has not been peer reviewed.)

The volume closes with Petter Myhr's personal reflections upon Dylan's "ten commandments". After studying Bob Dylan's life and art for many decades, Myhr has found ten rules – ten commandments – that he finds crucial to Bob Dylan's extreme ability to transform himself over the course of his long career. Those commandments are not only ten rules for a creative life; they are also a great roadmap for a flexible religious life and an antidote to all sorts of fundamentalism. Myhr argues that we not only need art to disrupt religion; we also need art to disrupt science and politics as well as our everyday lives – not to mention art. Obviously, we need art to disrupt art, and to Myhr, this seems to be Bob Dylan's main project throughout his long career. (This chapter has not been peer reviewed.)

In a 1997 interview with David Gates from *Newsweek*, Dylan used the words "religious", "religiosity" and "religion" in a positive way. He explained the source of his religiosity and stated "*that's my religion*":

Here's the thing with me and the religious thing. This is the flat-out truth: I find the religiosity and philosophy in the music. I don't find it anywhere else. Songs like 'Let Me Rest on a Peaceful Mountain' or 'I Saw the Light' – *that's my religion*.

I don't adhere to rabbis, preachers, evangelists, all of that. I've learned more from the songs than I've learned from any of this kind of entity. The songs are my lexicon. I believe the songs. (<https://www.newsweek.com/dylan-revisited-174056>, our italics)

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