

U2 and the Religious Impulse: take me higher, ed Scott Calhoun
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It's easy to forget in 2019 that stadium rock band U2 were once regarded as post-punk. I saw them in London on their first trip over from Dublin, accompanying a friend with Irish connections. The scrappy poster in the pub window suggested they were called V2, the singer wore a 'punk' t-shirt with (shock horror!) a bit of cut-out netting over one of his nipples, and the band were awful, a disorganised stew of aggression, polemic, and amateur discord.

Next time I saw them they were tight and together, as good as Talking Heads who they were supporting. The band's trademark echoing guitar chimes were in place and Bono exuded charisma and blarney from the stage. They still tended towards big statements and atmospherics, but there was an edge to them, one that by the time of the *War* album tour, when I saw them in Stoke-on-Trent, had turned into more mainstream anthemic rock. Their previous album, *October*, had surprised the critics and their fans by containing several songs with openly Christian lyrics, and in 1981 they turned up without warning at the Greenbelt Festival (a Christian arts event) and played a sprightly 20 minute mainstage set to surprised punters. (Halsall, 1981)

In interviews at the time Bono & Edge discussed the religious connotations of songs like 'Gloria' and 'Tomorrow' (Sutcliffe, 1981), and the fact that three of the band had been involved in an evangelical church and had seriously considered abandoning their music career because of their beliefs. But they didn't and soon the spiritual statements got less obvious, and by the 2000s, when I often used U2 lyrics on my Writing Lyrics module in a seminar about spirituality and music, U2 were not of interest to my students, or even on their musical radar, although they were vitriolic towards Bono and what they saw as his messianic saving-the world complex. None, however, had any knowledge of religious impulse or content in the band's music.

It's quite a shock therefore to read this new book and find that the mostly American authors are rooted in a culture of religion and belief that simply does not exist in the UK. A culture where U2 can be discussed mostly in religious terms, in chapters that discuss topics such as 'medieval mysticism in the music of U2', 'Jewish thought and U2', 'U2 and the theist/non-theist dialogue', not to mention the journey 'from crippling stigmas to infectious joy in the songs of U2'. Elsewhere, Nicola Allen and Gerry Carlin consider what they call 'U2's bespoke exorcism of the 1960s', whilst Calhoun's introduction discusses 'U2's Sacrament of Sound' and W. David O. Taylor's 'Foreword' posits 'Bono as the Religious Everyman'.

It's a long way from Steve Turner's contention that 'Because they were raised in Ireland rather than the UK, the guys in U2 weren't faced with the temptation of becoming part of a Christian subculture.' (Loydell, 2018) U2 weren't involved in what Turner described as 'a feeling of Christians trying to catch up' (ibid) because they simply didn't have to escape any Christian subculture they weren't in and also because they were well ahead of the likes of

Writz, After the Fire and other bands of Christians who had previously created a space that allowed them to discuss their faith in the secular market. (cf Loydell 2018 and 2019) Other artists' albums such as Van Morrison's *Common One* (1980) and *Beautiful Vision* (1982) and Bob Dylan's 'born again trilogy' *Slow Train Coming* (1979), *Saved* (1980), and *Shot of Love* (1981) had also brought different versions of Christianity into mainstream rock. There's a kind of reverse effect taking place in this book, and I am tempted to adapt the title of one of the best chapters, Neil Coulter's "'Finding What They're Looking For": Evangelical Teen Fans and their Desire for U2 to be a Christian Band', to read 'American Academics and their Desire for U2 to be a Christian Band'.

There's generally a lack of theoretical or cultural perspective underpinning these writings about the complex relationship of U2 to established belief systems, despite the band members' constant declarations of doubt (in their songs and in interviews) and their refusal to be regarded as part of any mainstream church or religion. It seems self-evident that it is the doubt and confusion in U2's songs that is most interesting: the huge problem and effort of any kind of belief in a deity or sense of good when one is surrounded by poverty, war and other atrocities. Regarding the band as slightly eccentric Christians or wayward churchgoers doesn't work for me, any more than turning Christianity into (Gregory Wolfe's) 'religious humanism' does in Mark Peters' closing chapter, although he writes well of 'Mystery, Paradox and Ambiguity', concepts which seem to have eluded most of the contributors here.

The back cover blurb claims this is a book which 'examines indications that U2's band members work at conscious and subconscious levels as artists who focus on matters of the spirit, religious traditions, and a life guided by both belief and doubt', which for me highlights the major problem of this volume: no-one can know anything of the band members' subconscious! And shouldn't the focus of any academic consideration be the music U2, the 'texts' they have produced? Be it live or in the studio, U2 have produced a large body of work, with lyrics, stage visuals and extra-curricular activities that are well documented and already critically discussed.

To conjecture about motive, inspiration or ideas without evidence, to infer a traditional Christianity (or Jewish) belief system where there is none evidenced, to shoehorn a band into cultural and religious constraints in the way many in this book do, seems not only academically unsound, but also ethically suspect. For many (I suspect mostly over 50s here in the UK), U2 are perhaps perceived as not only a thorn in the side of capitalism, neo-liberalism and the music industry, but also an annoying musical presence who won't go away. Instead, they linger in music collections as a terminally unhip, finger-wagging presence at the edge of things, a band who occasionally intrigue enough to be listened to or seen in spectacularly-designed concert, a band still prone to beating their chests and pronouncing, a band who try not to be pigeonholed, whilst offering lyrical paeans to an unknowable deity who can never be known.

The 'religious impulse' this book's contributors write about it is neither complex nor unsettling, it is simplistic, non-confrontational and dull, as is most of this book. It is the establishment swallowing U2 whole and spitting them out again as neutered believers or disciples, writing songs of praise and hymns of redemption. Whatever I may think of U2, I would not wish this put upon them. Their music is far more interesting and complex.

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