

Popular Culture and Philosophy™

Bob Dylan and Philosophy

It's Alright, Ma
(I'm Only Thinking)

Edited by
PETER VERNEZZE
and
CARL J. PORTER



OPEN COURT
Chicago and La Salle, Illinois

13

Busy Being Born Again: Bob Dylan's Christian Philosophy

FRANCIS J. BECKWITH

Mary wore three links of chain
Every link was Jesus name
Keep your hand on that plow, hold on
Oh Lord, Oh Lord, keep your hand on that plow, hold on
(Bob Dylan, *Gospel Plow*)

These lyrics are from “Gospel Plow,” a traditional folk song that Bob Dylan sang on his first album, *Bob Dylan*. Although released in 1962, this song would be, by most accounts of Dylan’s life and work, better suited for his so-called “Christian albums,” issued between 1979 and 1981. But I think there is reason to reject that judgment, and to view these latter albums—*Slow Train Coming*, *Saved*, and *Shot of Love*—and the theological instruction Dylan offers his listeners in them, not as isolated from his larger body of work, but part of a lifelong project to come to grips with the deeper moral and metaphysical questions that have always found a place in Dylan’s art, both before and after his Christian conversion.

Strengthen the Things that Remain

Bob Dylan’s conversion to Christianity was, to say the least, controversial for several reasons.¹ Dylan was born into a Jewish

¹ See Howard Sounes, *Down the Highway: The Life of Bob Dylan* (New York: Grove Press, 2001), pp. 306–351.

family, and as is well known, conversions from Judaism to Christianity are extremely rare. Dylan's conversion to *evangelical* Christianity, known for its political conservatism and its view of the Bible as an inerrant guide to history, theological truth, and ethics, was particularly shocking because of Dylan's place in the cultural revolution of the 1960s. With the exception of the civil rights movement² and to a lesser extent the anti-war movement, the components of the sixties revolution can trace their philosophical roots and activist inspiration to the writings of non-religious, secular intellectuals.

Yet, if one carefully inspects Dylan's Christian albums, one will find an individual who found in the Christian faith an account of the deep moral and social principles that had been lurking behind his pre-Christian work for quite some time. I believe there are four aspects of Dylan's pre-Christian work that support this conclusion.

Dylan's Assimilation of the Christian Narrative

In his autobiography, *Chronicles: Volume One*, Dylan tells his readers about his own intellectual development and the books and writers he had read in the early stages of his career in Greenwich Village.³ These books, though not treatises on theology, and their writers, not always Christians or sympathetic to the cause of Christ, are works and thinkers that were immersed in, shaped by, reacting to, or influenced the formation of the Christian narrative.

What is the Christian narrative? It is, in its broadest terms, a story of betrayal, separation, and redemption that has a beginning, a middle, and an end. It is a linear history that began at some finite point in the past and is destined to end at some point in the future, the eschaton. Specifically, the Christian narrative is the story of humanity's relationship to God, humanity's separation from God, the reconciliation of one with the other by means of the death and resurrection of God's Son, and His eventual return and the establishment of his Kingdom on earth.

² See Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice, from the Civil Rights Movement to Today* (New York: Basic Books, 2005).

³ Bob Dylan, *Chronicles: Volume One* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), pp. 36–39.

Dylan's fascination with and interest in the American Civil War and the years surrounding it, which he conveys in his autobiography, is illustrative of his assimilation of the Christian narrative.⁴ Comparing America of the early 1960s with America between 1855 and 1865, Dylan writes:

The age that I was living in didn't resemble that age, but yet it did in some mysterious and traditional way. Not just a little bit, but a lot. There was a broad spectrum and commonwealth that I was living upon, and the basic psychology of that life was every bit a part of it. If you turned the light towards it, you could see the full complexity of human nature. *Back there, America was put on the cross, died, and was resurrected.* There was nothing synthetic about it. *The godawful truth of that would be the all-encompassing template behind everything that I would write.*⁵

Dylan's prolific employment of the Hebrew-Christian Scriptures in his pre-Christian work is well-known and well-documented.⁶ But what is not often appreciated is that Dylan's use of these sacred writings is the result of how deeply the Christian narrative is embedded in his worldview, as the above quote indicates, for these writings have within them stories, characters, moral lessons, and principles that convey truths about human nature, society, justice, loss, and redemption that resonate with Dylan's intuitions. His use of Scripture clearly was not gratuitous.

Unlike other artists who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s but have not really grown up, Dylan has matured as both an artist and a thinker, but with his philosophical worldview firmly intact. For example, if his first two Christian albums—*Slow Train* and *Saved*—are Dylan's affirmation of New Testament faith and hope, then his Book of Ecclesiastes is *Time Out of Mind*, an album for which Dylan won the 1998 Grammy Award for album of the year. It is the reflections of a man who still trusts in God ("I know God is my shield, and he won't lead me astray" ["Til I Fell in Love with You"]), but at the same time longs for lost love and fleeting youth ("All the young men with the young women lookin' so good / Well, I'd trade places with any of them

⁴ Dylan, pp. 84–86.

⁵ Dylan, p. 86 (emphasis added).

⁶ See Michael J. Gilmour, *Tangled Up in the Bible: Bob Dylan and Scripture* (New York: Continuum, 2004).

/ In a minute, if I could" ["Highlands"]). The man who asked us to "[j]ust remember that death is not the end" ("Death Is Not the End"), now tells of his reluctance to leave this mortal realm ("I was born here and I'll die here against my will" ["Not Dark Yet"]) as well as the difficulty of remaining ("Sometimes my burden seems more than I can bear / It's not dark yet, but it's getting there" ["Not Dark Yet"]). *Time* concludes with the twelve minute "Highlands," a foreboding folk-rock ballad of disconnected reflections of an aging rock star at the height of his creative powers, daring to answer the question he asked a jilted lover in 1965, "How does it feel?" ("Like a Rolling Stone"). The answer then was: "When you ain't got nothing, you got nothing to lose." The answer now, from the song "Tryin' To Get to Heaven," is: "When you think you've lost everything / You find out you can always lose a little more."

In 2003, Dylan accepted an invitation from Mel Gibson to view his movie *The Passion of the Christ* prior to its release in the hopes that Dylan would write an original song for the soundtrack.⁷ Because of time constraints, Dylan was not able to view the movie until after it was released in February 2004. Nevertheless, Dylan did offer to cover the hymn "Rock of Ages" for the CD *Passion of The Christ: Songs* (Lost Keyword, 2004). But the record label rejected Dylan's offer. So, he suggested the song "Not Dark Yet," a piece that appeared on *Time Out of Mind*. It appeared on a 2004 CD, *The Passion of the Christ: Songs Inspired By* (Universal South, 2004).

We Live in a Moral Universe.

Dylan's lyrics—especially those with which he issues moral judgments or makes moral claims—presuppose that we live in a moral universe, one in which moral law is part of the infrastructure of reality. According to this view, which philosophers sometimes call "moral realism," the universe is not simply a complex collection of material parts, but one that is the home

⁷ I learned this in personal conversation and correspondence with popular music writer and president of MJM Entertainment Group, Mark Joseph, who is author of the book, *Faith, God, and Rock + Roll: From Bono to Jars of Clay: How People of Faith Are Transforming American Popular Music* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2003).

of creatures who have immaterial moral properties that are acquired and developed by the exercise of virtue in obedience to the directives of a moral law. What does this mean? To employ an illustration, when we cite Mother Teresa as an exemplar of virtue, we are saying that she possesses certain moral properties that we detect in her actions, such as patience, kindness, mercy, love, and good judgment, and from which we draw the conclusion “Mother Teresa is good.” Goodness is neither a material property, like height or weight, nor an empirical description, like hair color or tone of voice. It is an immaterial property that we can “see” in certain people as a result of the example of personal virtue they set for us. Because human beings have an intrinsic moral purpose that may be directed by the will of each agent, one’s virtue, one’s moral excellence, is dependent upon the choices one makes because those choices shape the direction and quality of one’s character.

Dylan’s pre-Christian work embodies this understanding. In “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll,” Dylan scolds those “who philosophize disgrace and criticize all fears.” He seems to be passing judgment on those who are incapable of seeing clear cases of virtue and vice because they have incorporated into their moral sense an interpretative grid of complex rationalizations that suppress the knowledge of this moral reality, exemplified by their philosophizing of disgrace and criticizing of all fears. It’s as if Dylan had in mind the same understanding St. Paul had when he issued this judgment in his letter to the Romans: “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them” (Romans 1:18–19, NIV).

In one of his post-conversion compositions not connected to his 1979–81 Christian period, “Dignity” (released on *Greatest Hits Vol. III*) Dylan sings, “Someone showed me a picture and I just laughed / Dignity never been photographed.” This means that “dignity,” unlike a physical or an empirical entity, cannot be measured or observed by our instruments or sense organs. This seems to indicate that Dylan thinks of “dignity” as a real irreducible moral property, something that connects well with a Christian worldview, one in which immaterial properties and

beings (goodness, virtue, God, souls) are plentiful.⁸ Dignity cannot take up space, be heard, be seen, or make you fat if you ingest too much of it. And yet, we are more certain and more sure of our dignity and its properties than we are of whether quarks exist or whether Pluto is a lifeless world at the far end of the solar system. You can't "find" dignity, Dylan deftly explains, if you're looking for it with the wrong senses: "Somebody got murdered on New Year's Eve / Somebody said dignity was the first to leave."

The Moral Law Is Objectively True

Given the fact that we live in a moral universe, there exist fundamental principles of justice and morality that are unchanging and forever true. This is in contrast to moral relativism, the view that moral principles are relative to either the individual or his or her culture.⁹

Take, for example, "With God on Our Side," a song in which Dylan presents the history of modern warfare and conflict between peoples (from the Old American West through the Cold War era) and shows that appeal to God's favor on the part of one side has been employed to justify all sorts of atrocities against human beings. He even raises the question of why Judas Iscariot could not offer the same sort of argument to justify his betrayal of Jesus of Nazareth:

Through many a dark hour
I've been thinkin' about this
That Jesus Christ
Was betrayed by a kiss
But I can't think for you
You'll have to decide
Whether Judas Iscariot
Had God on his side

⁸ See Francis J. Beckwith, William Lane Craig, and J.P. Moreland, eds., *To Everyone an Answer: A Case for the Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

⁹ For a popular presentation and critique of moral relativism, see Francis J. Beckwith and Gregory P. Koukl, *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air*

It would be a mistake to understand this song as a general indictment against American Christianity. Rather, it is an indictment against religious people, especially Christians, who have drifted from the absolute moral principles that they claim to accept. This is why the ironic question about Judas in this stanza is so biting. Only if his audience, and Dylan himself, had embraced the Christian narrative and its moral foundation would this song and this stanza have the meaning and impact that they do. In his first Christian album, *Slow Train Coming*, Dylan employs the same type of ironic reasoning to issue judgments similar to those made in “With God on Our Side”:

Adulterers in churches and pornography in the schools
 You got gangsters in power and lawbreakers making rules
 . . .
 Spiritual advisors and gurus to guide your every move
 Instant inner peace and every step you take has got to be
 approved (“When You Gonna Wake Up?”)

Big-time negotiators, false healers and woman haters
 Masters of the bluff and masters of the proposition
 But the enemy I see
 Wears a cloak of decency
 All non-believers and men stealers talkin’ in the name of
 religion

. . .
 People starving and thirsting, grain elevators are bursting
 Oh, you know it costs more to store the food than it do to
 give it
 They say lose your inhibitions
 Follow your own ambitions
 They talk about a life of brotherly love show me someone
 who knows
 how to live it (*Slow Train*)

If morality were merely relative to time, place, or individual, it’s not clear on what grounds Dylan could make these judgments about past injustices and theological illegitimacy. Only if Dylan believes that there is an unchanging standard of right and wrong can one make sense of Dylan’s moral judgments in both his pre- and post-conversion songs and why

these pieces, though separated by many years and circumstances, appear to be seamlessly connected to a similar, if not the same, moral tradition.

Even in “The Times They Are A-Changin’” it’s the *times*, not the moral principles, that are changing. We know this because Dylan appeals to an ancient understanding of the last judgment found in the Christian Bible: “And the first one now will later be last.”¹⁰ Apparently, for Dylan, the times were changing because there was a hearkening back to first principles that should have been but were not applied to those who were oppressed and for whose cause in the American civil rights movement Dylan offered support. Not coincidentally, these are the same sort of principles that animated Abraham Lincoln, the American president who dominated the era that fascinated Dylan as a young folksinger:

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal . . . It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.¹¹

For Lincoln, the “new birth of freedom” was the consummation of the promise of liberty and equality found in the principles of the American founding. The times, for Lincoln, were a-changin’ because the times were finally catching up to the moral truths, promised at the nation’s genesis though eternal in their patrimony. In “Blowin’ in the Wind” injustices that stretch across space and time are picked out, and a question is asked as to when they will end:

¹⁰ Jesus said, “But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first” (Matthew 19:30, KJV).

¹¹ Abraham Lincoln, “Gettysburg Address” (19th November, 1863), <http://showcase.netins.net/web/creative/lincoln/speeches/gettysburg.htm> (accessed December 2nd, 2004).

How many years can a mountain exist
Before it's washed to the sea?
Yes, 'n' how many years can some people exist
Before they're allowed to be free?
Yes, 'n' how many times can a man turn his head
Pretending he just doesn't see?

...

How many times must a man look up
Before he can see the sky?
Yes, 'n' how many ears must one man have
Before he can hear people cry?
Yes, 'n' how many deaths will it take till he knows
That too many people have died?

The moral judgments that Dylan issues in his songs span cultures and eras and thus do not make any sense unless Dylan believes there is an objective moral law, one that is universal, unchanging, and applies to all persons in all times and in all places. Perhaps this is why in his 2001 song "High Water (for Charlie Patton)" Dylan offers this assessment of the "open-mindedness" associated with naive relativism:

Well, George Lewis told the Englishman, the Italian and the
Jew
"You can't open your mind, boys
To every conceivable point of view"

It Is Important that We Practice Virtue

According to Dylan, one should live justly for its own sake. He writes in "Forever Young," a song that reads like a prayer to a young person, perhaps one of Dylan's own children:

May God bless and keep you always
May your wishes all come true
May you always do for others
And let others do for you

...

May you grow up to be righteous
May you grow up to be true

And see the lights surrounding you
 May you always be courageous
 Stand upright and be strong

In the “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll,” Dylan describes the negligent homicide of a kitchen maid, Hattie Carroll, at the hands of the son of a Baltimore aristocrat, William Zanzinger, who killed Ms. Carroll “[w]ith a cane that he twirled around his diamond ring finger / At a Baltimore hotel society gath’rin’.” Dylan insists that the aristocrat’s penalty—six months in jail—does not fit the crime:

In the courtroom of honor, the judge pounded his gavel
 To show that all’s equal and that the courts are on the level
 And that the strings in the books ain’t pulled and persuaded
 And that even the nobles get properly handled
 Once that the cops have chased after and caught ‘em
 And that the ladder of law has no top and no bottom
 Stared at the person who killed for no reason
 Who just happened to be feelin’ that way without warnin’
 And he spoke through his cloak, most deep and distinguished
 And handed out strongly, for penalty and repentance
 William Zanzinger with a six-month sentence

There’s no utilitarian calculus here. The penalty, according to Dylan, was wrong regardless of the “consequences.” What concerned Dylan was not whether the victim’s family received a just remedy for its loss, but whether just retribution was provided to the assailant. The Biblical *lex talionis*, the law of retribution,¹² was what Dylan seemed to have in mind.

In “What Good Am I?” a song that appeared on the album *Oh Mercy*, Dylan offers some personal reflections on the importance of virtue, almost reversing the questions asked in “Blowin’ in the Wind” and turning them on himself:

¹²“The law of retaliation an example of which is given in the law of Moses, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, etc.” (“Lex Talionis,” in Legal Law Terms, <http://www.legallawterms.com/Legal.asp-Definition-LEX%20TALIONIS> [accessed December 30th, 2004]).

What good am I if I'm like all the rest
If I just turn away, when I see how you're dressed
If I shut myself off so I can't hear you cry
What good am I?
What good am I if I know and don't do
If I see and don't say, if I look right through you
If I turn a deaf ear to the thunderin' sky
What good am I?

One hears in these philosophical reflections echoes from the Book of James: "What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (James 2:14–17, RSV).

A Call to Unchanging Truths

Bob Dylan's conversion to Christianity is consistent with the deeper metaphysical and moral commitments that have always percolated beneath the surface of his art. Unlike the nihilism and historicism that one finds in other artists both in rock and folk, Dylan's call to moral or spiritual reformation is a call back to those unchanging truths—those first principles—that we have forgotten, either out of negligence, human weakness, or a willful disdain for the good, the true, and the beautiful. But alas, everything must end, and repentance and redemption is possible, if you look in the right place: "Just as sure as we're living, just as sure as you're born / Look up, look up—seek your Maker—'fore Gabriel blows his horn" (*Sugar Baby*).¹³

¹³This essay is dedicated to my colleague, Marc H. Ellis, University Professor of American and Jewish Studies, and Director of the Center for American and Jewish Studies, Baylor University. Although we are separated by politics and faith, we are united by Baylor and Dylan.