

CHAPTER 6

Bob Dylan's Conversions: The "Gospel Years" as Symptom and Transition

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Abstract: This contribution analyzes Bob Dylan's evangelic conversion in light of other conversions throughout his oeuvre, emphasizing the theological moment of the event of conversion as such. Two important aspects of conversion inaugurate Dylan's born-again output: on the one hand, the isolation and purification of the figure of Christ as the all-pervading "object" of his quest; on the other, the "re-coding" of a series of figures and motifs from his earlier work, most of them derived, of course, from the proverbial American songbook. Before and after Dylan's evangelical ruse, the legacy of 18th Century American Transcendentalism as well as Christ as an emblem of the rebel and/or artist constitute two relatively stable religious aspects of his art.

Keywords: conversions, Dylan's born-again period, gospel, the Christ Event, Saint Paul, transcendentalism

Sammendrag: Dette bidraget analyserer Bob Dylans evangeliske omvendelse i lys av andre vendinger i forfatterskapet, med hovedvekt på det religiøse momentet ved omvendelsen som sådan. To aspekter ved den evangeliske perioden fremheves: isoleringen av Jesu kroppslige nærvær som absolutt mål for eksistensiell og kunstnerisk søken – og omkodingen av figurer og topoi fra den store amerikanske sangtradisjonen slik at de får en udiskutabel kristologisk valør. På begge sider av Dylans evangeliske raptus undersøkes arven etter den amerikanske transcendentalismen og Kristus som opprørs- og kunstnerskikkelse som to relativt stabile religiøse uttrykksformer.

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We're hearing about God all the time, so we better learn how to deal with it.
But if we know anything about God, God is arbitrary. So people better be
able to deal with that, too

Dylan to Rolling Stone in 2001 (Cott, 2006, p. 419)

1.

When the topic is Dylan and religion, or even Dylan and Christianity, there has been a curious tendency among critics and commentators to downplay the importance of the genuinely evangelical gospel period between 1979 and 1981. In part, this might be an effect of the fluctuations on the cultural “stock market” (to adopt Eliot’s phrase), where the value of Dylan’s gospel output until quite recently was relatively low, even among his most dedicated fans and exegetes. As is well known, Dylan’s sudden embrace of the profoundly conservative, if not downright reactionary, ideology of the West Coast Vineyard Church, where then future president Ronald Reagan found his most attentive audience, came as a shock to those who had lived with Dylan’s different avatars of troubadour & rock rebel personae since the mid 1960s. Indeed, the “Judas” that notoriously resounded in Manchester Trade Hall on May 17, 1966 was echoed at the Warfield in San Francisco 13 years later.

Yet, as always when it comes to Dylan, everything changes, everything passes ... Retrospectively, even the most scandalous of his “anti-career moves” is likely to be hailed as a stroke of genius or accepted as the workings of destiny; even the most disparaged album may suddenly rise to the position of an erstwhile misrecognized masterpiece. In the words of one anonymous Dylan critic, the ice on the surface of almost any “minor” Dylan song may suddenly crack open, revealing astonishing depths where one least expected them. Such miracles happen more or less regularly, for the last couple of decades aided by the Official Bootleg Series (OBS) of rare and unpublished material. Thus, the issuing of *Another Self Portrait* in 2012 disclosed another, calmer and more lyrical, album underneath the original *Self Portrait* (1970) – “the only Dylan album that has not been

underestimated ... enough,” in the words of Eyolf Østrem¹ – after stripping it of several layers of pointless overdubbing.

In 2017, the OBS wheel had stopped at Dylan's Gospel Years, finally allowing us the awe-inspiring experience of listening through the extant catalog of outtakes and live performances, the latter of which in almost every way rise above the versions found on the studio albums. With the exception of *Slow Train Coming* (1979) – which, if anything, sounds too slick for its fiery message – the gospel albums (*Saved* [1980], *Shot of Love* [1981]) come across as rather unruly, imprecise, almost hasty, as compared with what emerged from the stage.

Even though the reevaluation of Dylan's gospel years had been underway for quite a few years, making the case for a singularly Christian conception of “Bob Dylan's conversion”, there is still plenty of reason to treat the concept and the event of “conversion” in the plural. “Dylan is preeminently an American artist,” Greil Marcus wrote after the release of *Slow Train Coming*, “and conversion [...] is a preeminently American way of continuing one's quest” (Marcus, 2010, p. 96). Yes, indeed: Bob Dylan's oeuvre is fraught with conversions, so much so that his embrace of evangelical Christianity in the late 1970s might appear as just another transfiguration in a series of similar events. Dylan's born-again *persona* could be seen as a symptom of (or even a clue to) his overarching poetics of conversion, in so far as radical occurrences like this one are still “spontaneously” cast in a religious language as “revelations,” “apocalypses,” or “miracles” – Saint Paul's experience on the road to Damascus being the proverbial conversion, at least in a Western context.

As Alain Badiou claims in the study *Saint Paul and the Foundation of Universalism*, Paul is “the poet-thinker of the event,” that is, the person who “brings forth the entirely human connection [...] between the general idea of a rupture, an overturning, and that of a thought-practice that is this rupture's subjective materiality” (Badiou, 1998, p. 2). Even from a non-religious perspective, probably the most quintessential event in

¹ Østrem, Eyolf. *Self Portrait* (1970) – introductory remarks, from [dylanchords.info](http://dylanchords.info/10_selfportrait/index.htm); http://dylanchords.info/10_selfportrait/index.htm (downloaded 28.06.19).

world history is that envisioned by the founder of Christianity – even more so than that of the “Anti-Christian” prophet, Nietzsche, whom Dylan as well as Badiou more or less respectfully denigrate. Not only did Paul go through the paradigmatic conversion from the powerful Jew Saul (the great) to the apostle Paul (the small); he also *thought* through the conditions of possibility for this event and how to implement it in the existing order of the Roman Empire: for such a revolution to become possible, a new subjective position (that of the apostle) as well as a new discourse (that of faith, or declaration) had to be invented. This is also what preoccupies Dylan’s born-again persona, although his reflection on the process is of a less systematic, and of course more artistic, kind.

2.

Religion permeates Dylan’s oeuvre, on several levels, and many attempts have been made to map “the gospel according to Dylan” – or Dylan’s uses of the Scripture – as well as Dylan’s more “ecumenical” religiosity throughout his career as a songwriter. As every reader of these lines probably knows, Dylan’s early repertoire included several gospel blues songs. After a couple of conversions, in 1967 he released “the first Biblical rock album,” *John Wesley Harding*, and every since a certain “American” mysticism runs along the shifts and turns of Dylan’s musical and poetic work. What makes the gospel years albums stand out with respect to the bulk of Dylan’s proto-religious work is their stark reliance on a personal, soteriological Christology – that is, on the radical effects of what Badiou refers to (after Saint Paul) as “the Christ-event”: the incarnated God, Jesus Christ, was sacrificed in order to save mankind from sin; and by defeating death, He has also relieved man from the fatality of his earthly existence. This event changed everything – love, hope and faith are the new gospel, replacing the cosmic mythology of pagan religion as well as the law-regulated discourse of Jewish civilization.

There are two important sides to the conversion that inaugurates Dylan’s born-again output: on the one hand, the isolation and purification – sublimation – of the figure of Christ as the all-pervading “object” of his artistic and existential quest; on the other, the re-charging or re-coding of

a series of figures and motifs from his earlier work, most of them derived from the proverbial American songbook.

The first of these aspects is important in so far as there are several avatars of Jesus haunting Dylan's songs at different points in his career. There is, for instance, Jesus the proto-Socialist rebel of Dylan's Guthriesque period, most forcefully expressed in Woody Guthrie's own "Jesus Christ (They Laid Jesus Christ in His Grave)," echoes of which are heard in early Dylan songs such as "Long Ago, Far Away" (1962). The other main avatar is Christ as the suffering artist, reminiscent of Gérard de Nerval's post-romantic "Christ aux Oliviers" raising his meager arms towards the sky "comme font les poètes" (like the poets do). In Dylan's work, this is the Christ who dominates his mid-1970 output – most notably *Blood on the Tracks* (1975), where "Shelter from the Storm" and "Idiot Wind" are telling examples, but this avatar also looms large on his next albums, *Desire* (1976) and *Street-Legal* (1978), the immediate precursor of his evangelical trilogy.

Dylan's eventful encounter with a living Christ could thus be cast as yet another incarnation of an already familiar figure. In a Tuscon hotel room, in late 1978, "Jesus put his hand on me," Dylan recalls; "It was a physical thing. I felt it. I felt it all over me. I felt my whole body tremble. The glory of the Lord knocked me down and picked me up" (Hughes, p. 276). However, this time Jesus goes from being a poetic symbol or cultural "role model" to a living presence: His most prominent characteristic, according to the Pauline doctrine. Whereas, earlier, Christ had been one figure among a host of other inhabitants of "the invisible republic", from now on He stands forth as the gravitating and organizing center of Dylan's artistic universe. Roughly three quarters of the songs written between 1979 and 1981 are concerned with, or name, Jesus Christ.

Moreover, the Americana props and *dramatis personae* of Dylan's earlier songs are transfigured by his personal Christ-event. Take, for instance, the train motif, so characteristic of blues and folk music, and a hallmark in Dylan's repertoire from the early 1960s and right up to *Street-Legal's* "Where Are You Tonight? (Journey Through Dark Heat)" and "Señor (Tales of Yankee Power)." From the latter song's apocalyptic/eschatological intimations only a small step is needed for a full-fledged Christian/Evangelical scenario to emerge. In the words of Alan Lomax:

Ever since the first locomotive whistle split the quiet air of the South and the black engine thundered down the rails, snorting steam and fire like the horses of the Apocalypse, the righteous have been “buying tickets on the snow-white heavenly express for glory.” For the gambler, the back-biter, the crap-shooter, and other back sliding sinners, the Black Diamond Express, manned by Satan, was booked and bound for the lower regions. (Lomax, 1960, p. 467)

Examples are too abundant to warrant enumeration. Suffice it to say that Lomax Jr.’s paraphrase is clearly indebted to “This Train” (or “Dis Train”), a traditional gospel blues turned into a hit by Sister Rosetta Tharpe, among others, and performed – somewhat half-heartedly – by Bob Dylan on the so-called *Minneapolis Party Tape* (1961); the song also appears in what allegedly was Dylan’s “Bible” in the earliest phase of his artistic career, namely Woody Guthrie’s *Bound for Glory* (1943).

Tellingly enough, the first album in Dylan’s “holy” trilogy, *Slow Train Coming* (1979), indulges in railway symbolism, starting with the quasi-allegorical drawing on the album cover, and culminating with the title song, “Slow Train.” Whereas Lomax Jr.’s matrix, “This Train,” is an upbeat, joyous celebration of imminent redemption, Dylan’s “Slow Train” is – as the title indicates – a much slower, and gloomier, song. At least in part, this effect may be traced back through its echoes from Sam Cooke’s “A Change Is Gonna Come” (1963), to Dylan’s own “Blowin’ in the Wind” (1962), to which Cooke’s song was presumably written as a response. Both of these songs envision a measured process of alteration of the present situation, worn down by injustice and (racial) oppression, thus making the case for an appropriate genealogy – even more so since Cooke’s lyrical anthem takes its cue from the other great symbol of destiny and existence, namely the river.

Still, “Slow Train” lingers on the threshold between the old and the newborn Dylan. Describing the looming change just ahead, it avoids to name the Christ event, concentrating instead on the socio-political diagnosis professed by the Vineyard Church and its benefactors, such as the ultra-reactionary theologian-cum-broadcaster Hal Lindsey, from whom there are several echoes on the album. Does this explain, one might ask, Dylan’s need to extrapolate this particular song, “Christening” it by

fitting it into the interpretational context of the album, drawing on the laden symbolism of the “Gospel train”?

3.

Framed by the trilogy of gospel albums released between 1979 and 1981 – and now supplemented by the amazing *Trouble No More* 10 CD box – Dylan’s born-again output stands out as an eruption of creative energy. In addition to the more than fair amount of voices complaining that Dylan had sold out to the smug gang of Californian right-wing evangelists, there are also those who celebrate that Dylan, despite ideological short-sightedness, once again “got his mojo back”. Paul Williams, who made the Fox Warfield Theater Concerts in San Francisco early November 1979 a starting point for his three-volume study *Bob Dylan: Performing Artist* (1992–2004), is a case in point: “Dylan’s energy has been reborn too, and that’s the good news as far as I’m concerned” (Williams, 1980, p. 22). In this sense, Dylan’s conversion to evangelical Christianity fits perfectly the overall pattern of his idiosyncratic development as an artist: having exhausted creatively a particular genre or tradition, he moves on, seeking out other chapters of “The American Songbook” to draw inspiration from and make his amends in. As a rule (though not without exceptions), three albums are the average output “per conversion”. One might claim that Dylan’s latest turn to vintage, jazzy Tin Pan Alley pop amounts to an insistent manifestation of this pattern, the third album of the trilogy being a triple album: *Triplicate* (2017) – whereas the born-again trilogy would be the purest “post-evental” outburst of refueled creativity, perhaps only comparable to the revolutionary electric trilogy from the mid-1960s, when Dylan reinvented himself as a hip modernist rock poet.

What makes the evangelical albums into a special case is the downward spiral of Dylan’s career after *Desire* (1976) – a decline that, in my view, includes *Street-Legal*, a relative artistic failure. This is still a bone of contention among Dylan scholars and fans, though, *Street-Legal* probably being the most controversial of his entire oeuvre when it comes to the question of quality: it has been hailed as a masterpiece and condemned as a pretentious flop by different, and equally renowned, scholars. “Most of

the stuff here is dead air, or close to it,” Greil Marcus wrote in 1978 (Marcus, 2010, p. 88), a verdict with which I personally sympathize. With a few honest exceptions, most notably “Señor (Tales of Yankee Power),” the material is rather nondescript; Dylan’s voice sounds little less than worn-out, and the lyrics are either too banal or too contrived for his own good. Yet, for that very reason, the spiritual and musical regeneration after his evangelical conversion stands out as a Pauline event of sorts, an artistic miracle even in the eyes of a non-believer: an artist capable of making great music, and perfectly adjusted, even though profoundly disturbing, lyrics, within such narrow ideological frames, is truly worthy of both Grammys and Nobel prizes ... At the other end of the gospel sequence, Dylan’s creative genius starts to dwindle, and despite occasional masterpieces such as “Blind Willie McTell” and “Brownsville Girl,” he will not get back on track until the 1990s – after yet another prolonged return to acoustic folk and blues standards.

Thus one might risk the hypothesis – as has been done for example by Norwegian critic Kaja Schjerven Mollerin (Mollerin, 2007, p. 132) – that Dylan’s evangelical conversion was most forcefully motivated by artistic rather than by genuinely religious concerns. With *Slow Train Coming* Dylan enters a musical (and lyrical) terrain he had never really visited before, namely the electric gospel/soul tradition that did not form part of the middle-class bohemian and/or political folk and blues revival, and that was equally foreign to the hip rock ‘n’ roll scene. This does not amount to claiming that his conversion was “calculated” or “fake” in any way, only that for a consummate artistic nature like Dylan’s any truly existential “inner experience” would probably be mediated, or at least accompanied, by a musical conviction. It is unthinkable that Dylan would be able to capture the essence of that place and moment had he not been a genuinely converted and convinced member of the congregation. Just like he picked up the radical – and perhaps revolutionary – spirit of the times when he wrote songs like “Blowin’ in the Wind,” “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall” and “The Times They Are A-Changin’”, around 1980 he seized and transformed a conservative, if not downright reactionary, version of Christianity that was only just beginning to emerge as a significant ideological force. In the words of Dylan himself, “That spirit was in the air, and I picked it up” (Cott, 2006, p. 276).

Attempts have been made to elevate Dylan into an autodidactic theological genius of sorts. Thus, Stephen H. Webb, in his highly recommendable *Dylan Redeemed* (2006), praises Dylan's art as a kind of "theo-acoustics" and hails Dylan himself as "one of the greatest American theologians of the latter half of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century" (Webb, 2006, p. 16). Webb's analysis of the proto-religious nature of Dylan's *sound* is illuminating, as is his inside view of the evangelical movement and his take on Dylan's gospel songs as the origin of "Christian rock" as a genre in its own right. Yet when it comes to the evaluation of Dylan's theological originality, Webb seems to lose control over his own enthusiasm for the Gospel according to Dylan. Asked by Charles M. Young – in the 1985 MTV interview – whether he agrees that there is an element of self-righteousness on the born-again albums, Dylan answers affirmatively:

Yes, that's a fair perception. [...] Self-righteousness would be to repeat what you know has been written down scripturally someplace else. It's not like you're trying to convince everybody of anything. You're just saying what the original rule is. It's just coming through you. But if someone can get past you saying it, and just hear what the message is – knowing that it's not coming *from* you but *through* you – I don't see anything wrong in that. (<https://invidiou.sh/watch?v=x1iBjqn1lJQ>)

Such, I believe, is the (perhaps deceptively simple) truth about Dylan's theology: it does not stem from Dylan, but from the Scriptures ... as taught by the charismatic evangelical preachers of the early 1980s. In no way does he try to be "original" or "inventive". His approach is dogmatic, self-righteous, in accordance with the teaching of the Vineyard Church that ignited his spiritual enthusiasm. Still, the enthusiasm is unmistakably real, and originality is no doubt a spurious criterion when it comes to the lyrical content of gospel music.

Thus Greil Marcus is perfectly entitled to speak, in the above-mentioned review of *Slow Train Coming*, of the evangelical Dylan's "Amazing Chutzpah" – i.e., not the "amazing grace" of redemption but the contempt and condemnation of a self-righteous preacher – and to claim that "[t]his is not the music of a man who's thinking something through, but of a man who's plugging in" (Marcus, 2010, p. 93). However,

Marcus' implicit negative judgment is unwarranted, and he blatantly errs when trying to isolate Dylan's spiritual chutzpah as an anomaly within the context of (traditional) American religious music, contrasting it with a more patient, empathic and meditating version of Christianity – as if the latter were the “authentic” vein from which the former deviates. In the liner notes to his superb anthology of pre-war gospel, John Fahey highlights the more than palpable tendency “to communicate “cheap Grace” [...] through emotional, exciting, provocative and stimulating entertainment, especially through the twin talismans of noise and rhythm” (Fahey, 1997, p. 13). This is the immediate context of Dylan's gospel music: rhythm, voice and other musical effects are used so as to attune the artist and his audience to a long-since established set of religious rules and truths, interspersed with brutal *memento mori* and (often complacent) eruptions of evangelical joy: “Sinner, You'll Need King Jesus”; “You Better Quit Drinking Shine”; “Are You Bound for Heaven or Hell?”; “Death's Black Train is Coming”; “I'm on My Way to the Kingdom”; “Lord, I'm the True Vine” – and so on and so forth. In such a frame, Dylan's chutzpah comes across as far less amazing than Greil Marcus would have it.

To return to Stephen H. Webb's judgement: despite his hyperbolic attempt to turn Dylan into a master theologian, Webb inevitably realizes that musical rage and lyrical self-righteousness – rather than theological subtleties – are the stuff that Dylan's evangelical songs are made of. Halfway through *Dylan Redeemed*, he quite appropriately observes that “[o]ne of the reasons *Slow Train Coming* was so musically effective is that it brought the apocalyptic rage that fueled much of his best early work to a fulsome culmination” (Webb, 2006, p. 65). With that position I totally agree.

4.

Incarnation and apocalypse loom large in Dylan's evangelical universe. In a sense, they are two sides of the same coin: the apocalypse effectively starts with the divine act of *kenosis*, i.e. the emptying out of God's transcendental potency into His own creation through the birth of Jesus. This “conflation” of transcendence and worldliness makes all the difference in the world – quite literally the only truly significant difference there

is: “Now there’s spiritual warfare and flesh and blood breaking down / Ya either got faith or ya got unbelief and there ain’t no neutral ground,” as Dylan has it in “Precious Angel.” Incarnation introduces a “universal exception” to the way of all flesh – a principle of hope, faith and love – while doing away with old cultural categories: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). To this rather straightforward Pauline theology, Dylan adds the defiant words of Christ from Matthew 10:34 (“I came not to send peace, but a sword”), sundry scenarios from The Book of Revelation and the Old Testament prophets, most notably Jeremiah, whose prediction appears on the album sleeve of *Shot of Love*: “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” (31:31) – a text often used by Jewish Christians, of whom Dylan certainly is one, “to emphasize continuity with their ancestral faith” (Webb, 2006, p. 163).

Such is the basic set-up that calls for immediate conversion: “You Changed My Life”; “Gonna Change My Way of Thinking”; “When You Gonna wake Up?”; “Gotta Serve Somebody” (“it may be the devil or it may be the Lord”); “Are You Ready?”; “Ye Shall Be Changed” – to quote only a few titles and phrases that underscore Dylan’s polarizing interpretation of the new covenant. Even if the Gospel primarily concerns spiritual reinvigoration, Dylan has a particular affinity for the physical side of the incarnation/apocalyptic scenarios, be it in the form of the “erotici-zation” of redemptive love or of violent anticipations of the last judgment – if not in a curious mix of the two, as in the chorus from “Saved”: “I’ve been saved / By the blood of the lamb.”

Several of Dylan’s gospel songs spell out the elementary difference between the old and the new covenant, highlighting the (again: Pauline) opposition between the letter of the law – written in the flesh – and the saving grace of spiritual life. “Pressing on” is an unambiguous case in point:

Many try to stop me, shake me up in my mind
 Say, “Prove to me that He is Lord, show me a sign”
 What kind of sign they need when it all come from within
 When what’s lost has been found, what’s to come has already been?

Perhaps one should hear these questions as being addressed to the phantoms of Dylan's Jewish past – i.e. the Messianic, “sign-seeking” version of the proto-Christian religion – to which the singer opposes the Pauline dogma that revelation has already occurred, only that the new covenant is of a spiritual rather than of a law-regulated kind. Somewhat more subtly, in “Precious Angel,” the female “you” is seen as “suffering under the law,” after which the singer conjures up a scenario where they are both sharing the same dismal past: “We are covered in blood, girl, you know our forefathers were slaves / Let us hope they’ve found mercy in their bone-filled graves.” It does not take an undue amount of hermeneutic acuity to figure out the conjunction of literal and spiritual slavery, she (“you”) being the descendant of black slaves, while he (“I”) is a converted Jew. Whereas their forefathers’ physical remains are evoked in all their material horridness, the beloved Precious Angel lightens up the night and shows him the way out of Egypt “to the judgment hall of Christ.”

In a far more brutal vein, an earlier verse of “Precious Angel” imagines the destiny of those who do not partake in the bliss of the chosen few:

My so-called friends have fallen under a spell.
They look me squarely in the eye and they say, “Well, all is well.”
Can they imagine the darkness that will fall from on high
When men will beg God to kill them and they won’t be able to die?

Such “phantasmatic” scenarios of divine violence abound in Dylan's Gospel albums: “Are you ready for the judgment? / Are you ready for that terrible swift sword? / Are you ready for Armageddon? / Are you ready for the day of the Lord?” (“Are You Ready?”); “The iron hand it ain't no match for the iron rod / The strongest wall will crumble and fall to a mighty God” (“When He Returns”); etc. Taken together, they testify to the limits of Dylan's Paulism: here we are clearly dealing with a version of the dogma of “premillennialism” – which was foreign to Saint Paul, commonly traced back to Saint John's more fanciful Revelation (20:1–6) – according to which Christ will return before the end of historical time to inaugurate the Millennium of Paradise on earth. This is also the teaching of modern evangelical churches. “In his first coming, Messiah defeated the enemies of God”, writes Ken Wilson, one of the gurus of Dylan's own Vineyard Church:

In his second coming, Messiah will destroy the enemies of God. In Jesus' first coming, Satan, sin, and death were judged and condemned at the cross [...]. In Jesus' second coming, Satan, sin, and death will be removed from the new heavens and the new earth and be thrown into the lake of fire. (Wilson, 2009, p. 50)

Dylan is far from the only acolyte to give these eschatological visions another turn of the screw, fantasizing about the twinges and torments of desperate sinners on the Day of Wrath.

Nevertheless, in their own roundabout way, these admittedly perverse scenarios illustrate the theological insight into the complexities of God's nature. Despite the new gospel's insistence that Love has rendered the Law obsolete, there is a remnant of violent arbitrariness that cannot be expelled without throwing grace into the bargain. "[L]ove which suspends the Law is necessarily accompanied by the arbitrary cruelty which also suspends the Law," writes Slavoj Žižek in one of his theological musings: "This is also why it is wrong to oppose the Christian God of Love to the Jewish God of cruel justice: excessive cruelty is the necessary obverse of Christian Love" (Žižek, 2006, p. 187).

It is as if Dylan needs these pangs of real – physical – pain and bliss to remind or convince himself of the reality of Christ's incarnation and sacrifice ("the blood of the lamb") and of His presence on the scene of conversion as well as on that of the Final Judgment. In want of readable "signs" of grace, as it were, Dylan conjures up all kinds of scenarios involving palpable evidence that salvation and condemnation are real. This also goes for the here-and-now of the converted singer: in several of his gospel songs, Dylan stages a martyr-like apostolic persona, scorned and virtually ostracized from (secular) social contexts because of his Christian belief: "They show me to the door / They say don't come back no more" ("I Believe in You"); "Stop your conversation when he passes on the street / Hope he falls upon himself, oh, won't that be sweet" ("Property of Jesus"); etc. The presence of Jesus becomes manifest through the schisms that open between the true Christian and the non-believer.

Up to a point, the same holds for the converted/apostolic persona's relation to his own (spiritual) kin. There is hardly any sense of ecclesiastic collectivity in Dylan's gospel songs; for the most part, they address the non-Christian "other" *or* God/Christ – if not an eroticized female figure,

which in some way represents divine grace. Even in the latter case, Dylan seems to presuppose an “agonism” of sorts, in that the singer requires a “sign” or “sacrifice” from the other before compromising himself to him or her. This is clearly seen in the remarkable chorus of “Do Right to Me Baby (Do unto Others)”: “But if you do right to me, baby / I’ll do right to you, too / Ya got to do unto others / Like you’d have them, like you’d have them, do unto you.” Again, Dylan’s rather willful theology is working hermeneutic miracles. Quite obviously, “Do Right to Me Baby” is Dylan’s take on the so-called Golden Rule: “Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you: do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets” (Matt. 7:12). Yet by adding a conditional “if” (“if you do right to me, baby / I’ll do right to you, too”), the very idea of Christian love (χάρις, ἀγάπη) is thwarted, its point being precisely that one should love unconditionally, even one’s enemies, without expecting anything in return. You have been told that you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy, Jesus says in His Sermon on the Mount: “But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you” (Matt. 5:43–44). This, of course, is a far cry from the bargain implied by Dylan’s evangelic persona. (It might be a fair guess that Dylan’s “creative” misreading echoes the non-religious stock blues line “How can I do right to you baby when you won’t do right yourself?” – as sung for example by Kokomo Arnold in “Milk Cow Blues” and by Josh White’s in his version of “Good Morning Blues.”)

To this we may add Dylan’s idiosyncratic communication with his audience, from the stage as well as in interviews. A certain “passion of the real” – a desire to touch, however obliquely or unconsciously, the explosive core of ideological antagonism – is clearly involved in the interaction between the artist and the crowd. Even though Dylan, towards the end of the Gospel Tour, makes some amusing attempts to engage the audience in singalongs and handclapping – as if he were the minister of a gleeful congregation – for the most part he seeks confrontation, like an evangelist acting out his possession by the Lord. In the words of Sean Wilentz, “Dylan reinvented the southern tent-show revival, starring himself as the singer and hellfire preacher” (Wilentz, 2010, p. 182). Yet if anybody should still warrant the claim that Dylan ought to be counted as one of the great

American theologians, let him or her lend an attentive ear to his so-called “gospel raps”; they are the words of a rambling, yet inspired, layman, not those of a theologian. The main purpose of these raps or rants is precisely to stage the “enthusiastic” disciple – touched by Christ or filled with the Holy Spirit – entirely and dogmatically faithful to the Christ event.

5.

“Slow Train,” the eponymous song from Dylan’s first evangelical album, marks the threshold between the secular and the confessional part of his oeuvre. At the other end of the gospel sequence, *Shot of Love* (1981) appears as a transitional album, including several songs that hover in a “re-conversional” zone between the engaged evangelism and a more detached transcendental symbolism. Arguably, there are only two properly evangelical tracks on the latter album: “Property of Jesus” and “Dead Man, Dead Man”. The remaining songs – with the exception of the wholly non-religious “Lenny Bruce”, probably the weakest track on the album – tarry with Christian ideas and concepts, yet without relating them to the Gospel of Jesus. This goes for the title song, which never clarifies what kind of love is wielded as a panacea against all kinds of evil, as well as for “The Groom Still Waiting at the Altar”, in which the Biblical images of bride and groom remain equally ambiguous. The same goes for the pious eroticism of “Heart of Mine” and the decadent, dystopic scenarios of “Trouble”.

To my mind, however, “In the Summertime” and “Every Grain of Sand” stand out as the album’s most emblematically transitional songs. Each in its own way, they seem to wave goodbye to the life-changing intimacy with a “personal Jesus”, opening up a more complex and less self-righteous, yet still somehow transcendental, artistic and existential horizon.

An emphatically retrospective atmosphere characterizes “In the Summertime”. Yet the true nature of the narrated event, as well as its addressee, remain undisclosed:

I was in your presence for an hour or so
 Or was it a day? I truly don't know.
 Where the sun never set, where the trees hung low
 By that soft and shining sea.

Several of Dylan's gospel songs mix eroticism and religious experience in a way reminiscent of the poetic tradition stretching from the Song of Songs through baroque "mystical" poetry and up to modern (post-romantic) poets like Hopkins, Auden and others. Here, however, it's not even clear whether there is a religious moment involved at all. Only two things remain certain: a momentous meeting has taken place, and the "affair" is irrevocably over. Summer is gone; autumn has come; winter is at the door – yet the event has marked the singer, lastingly:

I'm still carrying the gift you gave,
 It's a part of me now, it's been cherished and saved,
 It'll be with me unto the grave
 And then unto eternity.

Even though physical and emotional intimacy is a thing of the past, love remains an invaluable gift; it has affected the singer in a profound way, restoring his belief in the future.

Broadly speaking, with *Shot of Love* Dylan seems to return to a less fiery religious outlook, at best to an "interiorization" or "privatization" of the apocalyptic gist. I say that Dylan "returns" to such an outlook, since this is a stance that also qualifies his first artistic conversions: Dylan's visionary poetics is heard most distinctly, perhaps, in songs like "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" (1962), "Lay Down Your Weary Tune" (1963), "Mr. Tambourine Man" (1964), and "Visions of Johanna" (1966). It is a kind of poetic religiosity, lingering somewhere between traditional American Transcendentalism and Poe's "Dark Romanticism", akin to what Harold Bloom (and others) have referred to as "The American Sublime" (e.g. Bloom, 2016). "A leaf, a drop, a crystal, a moment of time, is related to the whole, and partakes of the perfection of the whole", writes Emerson, the American Transcendentalist *par excellence*, in his powerful essay *Nature* (1836): "Each particle is a microcosm, and faithfully renders the likeness of the world" (Emerson, 1971, p. 27). "I can see God in a daisy," echoes Dylan in a 1975 interview: "I can see God at night in the wind and rain. I see creation just about everywhere. The highest form of song is prayer" (Ellison, 2004, p. 104).

"Every Grain of Sand" is probably the Dylan song that most effectively gives voice to this vision. ("Ring Them Bells" might be another

candidate.) The rejoicing of the born-again proselytizer has blown over; the singer is weighed down by grief and remorse, feeling trapped by an inexorable causal chain harking all the way back to Cain's fratricide. Yet, rather than paralyzing, these are circumstances that enable him to put himself and his environs in a broader perspective – *sub specie aeternitatis*, as it were – as is eloquently expressed in the changing refrain: "In the fury of the moment I can see the Master's hand / In every leaf that trembles, in every grain of sand." Throughout the song's six verses, the singer appears as a repentant sinner, a dreamer, and a quasi-allegorical everyman on his journey through life. Yet after each bitter retro- or introspection, he manages to lift his eyes and recognize a divine purpose behind the shifting winds of fortune – "every hair is numbered like every grain of sand." As Stephen Webb writes, in Dylan's poetic vision, "[t]he sacred is found in everyday details rather than in the highs of peak experiences, because God has designed it all" (Webb, 2006, p. 165).

Webb, who knows way more about these things than the average Dylan critic, also suggests that "Every Grain of Sand" reads as Dylan's leave-taking with charismatic revivalism – i.e., belief in the necessity of being born again to a life in communion with Christ – and the budding embrace of a quasi-Calvinistic providentialism – belief in the pre-arrangement of all that is by a *deus absconditus* (Lucien Goldman's "dieu caché"). There is a hidden purpose behind everything; serenely, the "Master's hand" unfolds a meaningful pattern. Yet this is a laborious, meticulous process which it takes time to experience; it cannot be deciphered in an ecstatic encounter with the Son of Man. In a sense, Dylan has returned to a more genuinely visionary experience of "the great chain of being," a kind of "immanent" transcendentalism that is not foreign to the idea of God: *deus sive natura*, as in the Spinozian formula.

To my mind however, rather than an ultra-Protestant stance, as Webb would have it, Dylan adopts a "pagan" theism reminiscent of the Orphic poetics that informs his early visionary songs. Traces of this mythology are clearly present in Old Testament texts, most notably in the Books of Wisdom, like Ecclesiastes, from which Dylan borrows (or steals) a phrase or two. The song's last verse unfolds a scenario in which an ocean-like cosmic harmony is punctured by a certain "modernist" irony:

I hear the ancient footsteps like the motion of the sea
 Sometimes I turn, there's someone there, other times it's only me
 I am hanging in the balance of the reality of man
 Like every sparrow falling, like every grain of sand

Despite echoes from Matthew – from whom the sparrow, as well as the hair in verse six, probably originate – “Every Grain of Sand” is definitely not an evangelical song. Dylan has stepped out of the magic circle of charismatic Christology, reaching out for new inspirational zones. “[Y]ou’d swear it was a hymn passed down through the ages,” writes Tim Riley (1992, p. 270). It reads like a psalm, a prayer, addressed not to a personal Jesus, but to the creative spirit that supports all that there is.

Thus, “Every Grain of Sand” reminds us of the fact that Dylan frequently places a seminal song as the last one on his albums. Again, he is on the move, looking for unexplored musical territories – always converting, always converted, as in the title of Rob Wilson’s study, which also includes a chapter on “the Born-Again Refigurations of Bob Dylan” (Wilson, 2009, p. 166 ff). The intransience, or inevitability, of conversion is one of the stockpile topics of Dylan’s musical ethos – “the rising tide that lifts all ships” – that is, the great American song tradition.

It is hard to tell if this should be regarded as a step forward or backwards. A conversion is, etymologically speaking, a turn (from Latin “con-vertere,” to turn around or transform); Bob Dylan’s conversions are turning points in his dealings with a tradition that appears, Eliot-like, as a “simultaneous order,” a kind of historical timelessness. In this particular case, the turn is even more emphatically “pluridirectional”. Ecclesiastes – parts of which were set to music by Pete Seeger, and appropriately titled “Turn, Turn, Turn” – famously speaks about the eternal recurrence of God’s creation: “The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun” (1:9). Dylan has gone through a spiritual conversion in full view of the audience: he has met Jesus; he has been saved, changed, born again. Now he (re)turns to a more “primordial” kind of religiosity – a mix of Orphism and Stoic Christianity, with echoes from Old Testament wisdom and a hint of Calvinism – while moving towards new artistic hunting grounds. “I made my statement”, Dylan told Robert Hilburn in

November 1980, “and I don’t think I can make it any better than in some of those songs. Once I’ve said what I need to say in a song, that’s it. I don’t want to repeat myself” (Cott, 2006, p. 284). Thus speaks the relentless poetics of conversion at work in Dylan’s art, making it imperative to turn even from the “Saving Grace” of Christ.

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Gisle Selnes er professor i allmenn litteraturvitenskap ved Universitetet i Bergen, der han også leder en forskergruppe for Radikal filosofi og litteratur (RFL). Selnes har skrevet en rekke artikler om litterære, filosofiske og kulturhistoriske emner, som spenner fra latinamerikanske kolonitexter til lacaniansk psykoanalyse. I bokform har han blant annet gitt ut *Det fjerde kontinentet. Essays om America og andre fremmede fenomener* (Vigmostad & Bjørke, 2010), om forholdet mellom essaysjangeren, kritisk teori og oppdagelsen av Amerika; en fyldig kommentert oversettelse av César Vallejos *Trilce* (Kolon, 2018), og den bredt anlagte *Den store sangen. Kapitler av en bok om Bob Dylan* (Vidarforlaget, 2016). I tillegg har han publisert mange populærvitenskapelige artikler om Bob Dylan og holdt er rekke foredrag om Dylans sanglyriske poetikk, både for et akademisk og for et bredere publikum.