

The Gospel According to Dylan

Bob Dylan, the great poet/songwriter, turned 70 this week, prompting remembrances of how his words, music and anti-authoritarian vision helped shape generations of Americans, especially the one that came of age during the Vietnam War in the 1960s, as Gary G. Kohls notes in this guest essay.

By Gary G. Kohls

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The week of Bob Dylan's 70th birthday he was born on May 24, 1941 is being celebrated across the nation, especially in Duluth and Hibbing, Minnesota, where Bob Zimmerman was born and raised.

A four-hour radio documentary was broadcast on Minnesota public radio last weekend, and Democracy Now's "War and Peace Report" on Tuesday was entirely devoted to Dylan's tremendous impact on our culture.

Bob Dylan was the voice of conscience of my era (the 1960s and beyond). He obviously was a poet/prophet who felt an obligation to warn his listeners about the dangers he saw coming.

Just listen closely to his "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" and his calls for peace and justice in his familiar folk anthems "Blowing in the Wind" and "The Times They Are A-Changing".

He was, as were many other 1960s-era folk-singers in and around the time of the war crimes that were being perpetrated by the U.S. military in Vietnam, an influence in the development of the political thinking of millions, including me; and I'm happy to say that his messages also influenced my children and hopefully also my grandchildren who are coming of age.

I have been trying to introduce them to Dylan's music, including his powerful plea to always question authority.

Anybody who has studied Dylan's songs, even from the earliest phases of his 50-year career, has noticed the amazing number of lyrics and themes that relate to the Bible. But one thing that I have noticed is that Dylan uses as many New Testament quotes and themes as he uses from the Hebrew scriptures.

Dylan was raised in the Jewish faith, of course, but I have always been impressed at his knowledge of stories and themes from the New Testament.

Dylan fans are aware of the consternation he elicited from fans concerning his short-lived "born-again Christian" period that started in 1979. He was accused

of heresy almost as vociferously as when he went electric in the early 1960s.

But during those few years he wrote dozens of (mostly theologically conservative) Christian-themed songs, which he recorded in three albums, "Slow Train Coming," "Saved" and "Shot of Love." Judging from the lyrics in those albums, Dylan understood conservative Christian dogma quite well.

Judging from many of his songs, Dylan was most comfortable with the precepts of progressive Judaism. His deeply-embedded, open-minded concerns about peace, justice, empathy, love, forgiveness, nonviolence and his criticisms of hatred, prejudice, war, militarism, economic oppression, empire and racism were themes that pre-dated – and then post-dated – his born-again period.

He soon became estranged from the more intolerant, punitive and conservative form of Christianity. Dylan then returned to Judaism long enough to explore his Jewish roots and subsequently wrote a powerful affirmation of the nation of Israel with his "Neighborhood Bully."

I understand that Dylan now belongs to no organized religious group.

But Dylan's progressive political and theological ideals didn't disappear with his "loss of Christian faith." His songs protesting against the insanity of war reflected the pacifism of the original form of Christianity 2,000 years ago and include the anti-war classics "Masters of War" (which he said he wrote as a pacifist song), "With God on Our Side," and "John Brown," all of which he still sings in concerts.

But what I always heard in Dylan's music was his frequent expression of lyrics that seemed to echo Christ-like concern for the down-trodden, the persecuted, the colonized, the impoverished, the war-torn, the hungry, the huddled masses and other victims of the ruthless institutions, tyrants, the wealthy, the war profiteers and other assorted predators of the world.

He spoke out courageously for truth, liberty and freedom, a reality that inspired multitudes of other truth-seekers, healers and selfless peacemakers.

Listen to some of the following lyrics of Dylan and note how similar they are to the gospel (which means "good news") message that Jesus taught, especially Jesus's warnings to help potential victims to defend themselves nonviolently against institutions that perpetrate violence.

The first excerpt below is from "Clean-Cut Kid" a song critical of America's wars and the psychological consequences of engaging in war which helped me, back in 1984, to better understand the American plague called combat-induced Posttraumatic Stress Disorder:

"Everybody wants to know why he couldn't adjust. Adjust to what, a dream that bust?

He was a clean-cut kid but they made a killer out of him. That's what they did.

They said what's up is down, they said what isn't is. They put ideas in his head he thought were his.

He went to church on Sunday; he was a Boy Scout. For his friends he would turn his pockets inside out.

They said, 'Listen boy, you're just a pup' and they sent him to a napalm health spa to shape up.

They gave him dope to smoke, drinks and pills, a Jeep to drive, blood to spill.

They said 'Congratulations, you got what it takes' and they sent him back into the rat race without any brakes.

He bought the American dream but it put him in debt; the only game he could play was Russian roulette.

He drank Coca-Cola, he was eating Wonder Bread, ate Burger Kings; he was well fed. He could've sold insurance, owned a restaurant or bar; could've been an accountant or a tennis star.

He was wearing boxing gloves, took a dive one day off the Golden Gate Bridge into China Bay.

His mama walks the floor, his daddy weeps and moans. They gotta sleep together in a home they don't own.

Well, everybody's asking why he couldn't adjust. All he ever wanted was somebody to trust.

He had a steady job, he joined the choir. He never did plan to walk the high wire.

They took a clean-cut kid and they made a killer out of him, that's what they did."

And Dylan is equally hard on other often hypocritical authoritarian institutions, including the judiciary, the clergy, physicians, lawmakers, racists, anti-Semites, the rich, the fascist-leaning, the militarists, the greedy corporations, the punitive police state agencies such as the Gestapo, the CIA and the FBI, as one would expect of the prophetic peacemaker Jesus.

Read these lyrics for a small sampling of the "Gospel According to Dylan":

"You're a man of the mountains, you can walk on the clouds; Manipulator of crowds, you're a dream twister.

You're going to Sodom and Gomorrah but what do you care? Ain't nobody there would want to marry your sister.

Friend to the martyr, friend to the woman of shame. You look into the fiery furnace, see the rich man without any name.

Well, the Book of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, the law of the jungle and the sea are your only teachers.

Well, the rifleman's stalking the sick and the lame. Preacherman seeks the same, who'll get there first is uncertain.

Nightsticks and water cannons, tear gas, padlocks, Molotov cocktails and rocks behind every curtain. False-hearted judges dying in the webs that they spin. Only a matter of time 'til night comes stepping in." (From "Jokerman" a song about various satanic realities that are all around us.)

"Democracy don't rule the world, you'd better get that through your head. This world is ruled by violence, but I guess that's better left unsaid.

From Broadway to the Milky Way, that's a lot of territory indeed and a man's gonna do what he has to do when he's got a hungry mouth to feed." (From "Union Sundown")

"I saw thousands who could have overcome the darkness. For the love of a lousy buck, I've watched them die." (From "When the Night Comes Falling From the Sky")

"All that foreign oil controlling American soil. Look around you, it's just bound to make you embarrassed. Sheiks walking around like kings, wearing fancy jewels and nose rings. Deciding American's future from Amsterdam and to Paris.

Man's ego's inflated, his laws are outdated, they don't apply no more.

You can't rely no more to be standing around waiting. In the home of the brave, Jefferson turning over in his grave. Fools glorifying themselves, trying to manipulate Satan.

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 nonbelievers and men stealers
talking 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 does 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. There's a slow, slow train coming up around the bend." (From "Slow Train
Comin'")*

*"Counterfeit philosophies have polluted all of your thoughts. Karl Marx has got
you by the throat, and Henry Kissinger's got you tied up in knots.*

You got innocent men in jail; your insane asylums are filled.

You got unrighteous doctors dealing drugs that'll never cure your ills.

*You got men who can't hold their peace and women who can't control their
tongues.*

The rich seduce the poor and the old are seduced by the young.

Adulterers in churches and pornography in the schools.

You got gangsters in power and lawbreakers making the rules.

Spiritual advisors and gurus to guide you every move.

Instant inner peace and every step you take has got to be approved.

You can't take it with you and you know that it's too worthless to be sold.

They tell you, 'Time is money' as if your life was worth its weight in gold.

*When you gonna wake up and strengthen the things that remain." (From "When You
Gonna Wake Up?")*

"Well you're on your own, you always were in a land of wolves and thieves.

*Don't put your hope in ungodly man or be a slave to what somebody else
believes." (From "Trust Yourself")*

*"Oh, ye playboys and playgirls ain't a-gonna run my world. You fallout shelter
sellers can't get in my door. Your Jim Crow ground can't turn me around.*

The laughter in the lynch mob ain't a-gonna do no more. You insane tongues of war talk ain't a-gonna guide my road.

You red baiters and race haters ain't a-gonna hang around here." (From "Playboys and Playgirls")

"Disillusioned words like bullets bark as human gods aim for their mark .

Made everything from toy guns that spark to flesh-colored Christs that glow in the dark. It's easy to see without looking too far that not much is really sacred.

Old lady judges watch people in pairs limited in sex, they dare to push fake morals, insult and stare while money doesn't talk, it swears. Obscenity, who really cares.

Propaganda, all is phony. (From "It's Alright, Ma, I'm Only Bleeding")

"Now, I'm liberal, but to a degree I want everybody to be free. But if you think that I'll let Barry Goldwater move in next door and marry my daughter you must think I'm crazy! I wouldn't let him do it for all the farms in Cuba." (From "I Shall Be Free No. 10")

"I'm monstrously against the House Un-American Activities Committee and also the CIA; and I beg her please not to ask me why for it would take too long to tell." (From the jacket notes to "Some Other Kinds of Songs")

"And suddenly a middle-aged druggist, up for district attorney, starts screaming at me: you're the one that's been causing all them riots over in Vietnam. Immediately turns to a bunch of people and says if elected, he'll have me electrocuted publicly on the next Fourth of July. I look around and all these people he's talking to are carrying blowtorches." (From the liner notes to "Bringing It All Back Home")

"Half-racked prejudice leaped forth. 'Rip down all hate, I screamed.' Lies that life is black and white spoke from my skull. I dreamed romantic facts of musketeers foundationed deep, somehow. Ah, but I was so much older then, I'm younger than that now. " (From "My Back Pages")

"Man thinks 'cause he rules the earth he can do with it as he please and if things don't change son, he will.

Man has invented his doom; first step was touching the moon.

Now he's hell-bent for destruction, he's afraid and confused, and his brain has been mismanaged with great skill. All he believes are his eyes and his eyes, they just tell him lies.

Now he worships at an altar of a stagnant pool and when he sees his reflection, he's fulfilled.

Oh, man is opposed to fair play; He wants it all and he wants it his way.” (From “License to Kill”)

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