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Dylan: Annotated Bibliography (First Place)

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Abstract:

Dylan may come off as if he has all the answers in some of his music, but when it comes to religion he is as clueless as anyone. Although he would always keep his Jewish culture and education that his parents gave him, Dylan would wonder from Judaism into mysticism, the belief in some holy entity, and evangelical Christianity. His seemingly always cynical views of the world around him would lead him to be a mystic for most of his musical career. The influence of friends, love interests, possible born-again experience, and a need for new inspiration would lead him to his evangelical years. Although he would return to Judaism briefly, Dylan would eventually settle back into a culturally Jewish mystic.


Duke Divinity School, one of Duke University’s graduate schools held a presentation comprised of musical performances and lectures exploring Dylan’s place in the cultural and religious landscape of American life. The event is held yearly focusing on a different music legend and hosted by Shalom Goldman, a professor of religion and Middle Eastern studies. The talk focused heavily on giving Dylan’s religious biography. Dylan had a large bar mitzvah of 400 people in a synagogue, was taught to read Hebrew for it by an Orthodox Rabbi that his parents brought in from Minneapolis, and his parents even headed Jewish social institutions for males and females respectively. Dylan obscured his religious ties, but never denied them until he publicly converted to Christianity in 1979. He eventually grew away from evangelical Christianity and returned to his Jewish roots, visiting Israel a number of times. Yet, to this day he has tried to stop photos of him in a Yakama from circulating.

The video was a great entry point to learning about Dylan and his relationship to religion. It gave essential facts of his childhood that enables me to see how he treats religion as part of his self-creation myth from Robert Zimmerman to Bob Dylan. I learned how the Dylan fans saw and responded to his views on religion throughout his career. The presentation was respectful but did not venerate him. It was also interesting because Shalom Goldman actually met Dylan by chance in Israel and, although their time together was neither deep in nature nor long, I appreciated his first-hand experience.


In this article of The Contemporary Review, a biannual British magazine, Karwowski argues that, “Dylan’s history as a songwriter can perhaps best be interpreted as a constant debate between, on one hand mysticism, and, on the other, religious belief, whether represented by Judaism… or Christianity.” (167) He specifically breaks down Blonde on Blonde to prove his point with the rationale that the two blondes stand for two horses in the book of revelations- one for mysticism and one for organized religion respectively. He links almost all of the album’s tracks to this struggle despite the common perception that they relate to Dylan’s relationship to a woman. For instance, “Visions of Johanna” he attributes more to Joan of Arc as a figurehead for religion than his once love interest Joan Baez. He sees “Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlords” as the keystone to his case as it again references the “French girl.”

This article was important for a number of reasons. The argument that Karwowski took was definitely interesting because of its uniqueness. It highlighted his struggle with religion in general as opposed to any particular one. He builds a strong case, breaking down the single album as evidence
specifically. Other sources I found were not as detailed and specific in aim. His argument does make sense of the enigmatic Blonde on Blonde title, but lacks to take into account any of Dylan’s personal life at the time. His case would be easier to stomach if he were able to synthesize the two, whether through his religious tendencies at the time or his love life.


Seth Rogovoy is an award winning critic known for linking music to its Jewish roots. He has done this to artists ranging from Led Zeppelin to James Taylor to Patti Smith and Public Enemy. He follows a chronological approach following Jewish influences in Dylan’s life and music. He pays close attention to any references of the Torah or more specifically the first five books of the Torah, the Tanakh, which holds authority in Jewish Culture. Rogovoy asserts that Dylan’s Jewish upbringing influences his music throughout his career, even when he comes off being as being against organized religion and during his conversion to Evangelical Christianity. He attributes his conversion as appeal to please his background singer and love interest Mary Alice Artes who was Christian. He also makes sure to point out the lack of directly saying “Jesus” in his three Christian albums Slow Train Coming (1979), Saved (1980), and Shot of Love (1981). He closes his book by focusing on his sliding return to Judaism. During the late 80’s and 90’s Dylan would travel to Israel to perform and study, he would surround himself with Hasidic Rabbis, wrote songs like “Neighborhood Bully” to defend Israel, had his sons late bar mitzvahs in Israel, and involved himself with the super Synagogue of Chabad and its telethons.

It was baffling to hear Dylan’s radical and public conversion to be looked over and dismissed. It seemed clear that Rogovoy was partial, and intent on emphasizing the Jewish Side of Dylan. Nevertheless, Rogovoy presents a strong case, citing an abundance of parallels between Dylan’s lyrics and religious passages vitally linked to Judaism. Bob Dylan: Prophet, Mystic, Poet taught me that Dylan, even at his most distanced from religion or as an evangelical Christian, remained at least culturally Jewish and drew inspiration from the holy passages he was taught in his youth and continually returned to. This makes sense because Dylan’s family was religious leaders in their small town and since both sides of his family were intensely Jewish even before they came to America


As opposed to being turned onto Christianity by friends or love interests, this blog attributes his conversion to an instance where Dylan kept a silver cross thrown on stage at him during a concert. “The following day in a Tuscon hotel room he had what he described as "...a born-again experience" and told of how ‘Jesus put his hand on me. It was a physical thing. I felt it...The glory of the Lord knocked me down and picked me up.’” The blog notes that Dylan was desperate for inspiration and it really wasn’t too peculiar that he found one rooted in scripture that he was already well versed in. Before breaking down each track individually the blog also notes Dylan humorously trying to convert Wexler, his 62 year old “admitted Jewish Atheist” producer to no avail.

The cross incident is obviously important regardless, but most sources attribute the conversion as nearly inevitable with the relations he, not a random occurrence, so this research was interesting. A clearer explanation for his evangelical fervor is given. This article was also important because it emphasized the better sound from Slow Train Coming often overlooked because of the album’s subject matter.

In *Dylan Redemed: Highway 61 to Saved*, Webb, a retired theology professor at Wabash College, focuses on Dylan’s conversion and American society at the time. Like Rogovoy, Webb notes that his conversion in 1979 was inspired by Artes while on they were together on the 1976 Rolling Thunder Revue tour and that she was ultimately the one who connected him with the Born-Again Vineyard Christian Fellowship church. Webb also asserts the influence other lovers and background Christian singers Helene Spring and Carolyn Dennis as well as the conversion of his dear friend “T Bone” Burnett. Dylan channeled what he was learning from the Vineyard Christian Fellowship into his song writing. The public sentiment was shifting to the right and normalizing as the Reagan era was dawning and Dylan’s music let conservatives craft a more livable culture for themselves. His leftist supporters were furious at him; again they would appear at his shows just to protest and boo him. Dylan would even preach to his audience in-between songs. Still Webb contends that Dylan was not as changed as his persona portrayed. He argues that the music on his three Christian albums hardly stands out since his past work often conjured apocalyptic images as well with tracks such as “Desolation Row”, “All Along the Watchtower”, and “When the Ship Comes In”. He also asserts Dylan’s church was not the evangelical cult that left leaning fans would associate it as and that it actually hardly would change Dylan claiming, “Many people attracted to the Vineyard Fellowship were Jewish and they actually became more Jewish when they became Christian.” (81)

I found it insightful to have this source as a foil to Rogovoy’s book. Webb embraced the Christian aspects of Dylan while realizing their limitations. I learned that Dylan could have gained almost as many fans as he lost as the result of his conversion, and that many of the ones he lost would eventually come back to him. He won his first Grammy for Best Male Vocal Performance for “Gotta Sere Somebody” off *Slow Train Coming*. Webb admitting that Dylan’s conversion to Christianity did not change his song writing too much gives more validity to Rogovoy’s notion of Dylan not being totally “brainwashed” by Vineyard Fellowship because of the more Christian focused perspective it comes from.