

Theologian offers key to understanding U2's 'Atomic Bomb'_12405

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By Steven Harmon

I recently did something many folks might not expect a minister and theologian to do. I drove to the nearest music store and bought the latest CD by the world's most popular rock group-U2's *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb*-on its release day.

In the early 1980s, I-along with many other Christian young people-started listening to the music of this up-and-coming band from Dublin, Ireland. We were attracted to the overtones of Christian spirituality and the prophetic passion for social justice around the world that pervaded their music.



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During the 1990s, some wondered whether lead singer Bono and the other two self-identified Christians in the band (guitarist "The Edge" and drummer Larry Mullen Jr.) were de-emphasizing in their art the convictions

that had resonated with us. Faith was not absent from their music in those years, however, and their 2000 album, *All That You Can't Leave Behind*, was more explicitly rooted in such biblical themes as grace and the economic justice of the Year of Jubilee. Eager to find out what their next project held in store, I looked forward to the release of *Atomic Bomb* almost as if I were a child awaiting Christmas.

My first listen through *Atomic Bomb* left me with two initial impressions. First, this album is going to be a hit. Musically, it's their best overall album ever, and four or five of the tracks are naturals for release as singles that should get good airplay. Second, the majority of the people who buy and listen to this music may not fully grasp its deepest significance. Of all the albums U2 has recorded over the past 25 years, this one is the most overtly Christian in its rendering of the world. But this is obvious only to those who already are being formed by the biblical story and thus look at the world through the same set of lenses worn by the creators of this music.

"Vertigo," the album's lead track featured in the ubiquitous iPod/iTunes commercials during the last few weeks, is rich in allusions to Jesus' wilderness temptations. The video now playing on MTV underscores these connections through its desert-like setting and the band's descent into a dark abyss as Bono intones, "All of this, all of this can be yours/Just give me what I want, and no one gets hurt." The song concludes with the lyric, "Your love is teaching me how to kneel" (kneeling imagery appears in several songs). The referent of "your" might be unclear, but at the end of a performance of "Vertigo" on NBC's "Saturday Night Live," Bono called out, "Yeah, he loves you!"

The next track, "Miracle Drug," simultaneously reflects Bono's participation in the DATA (Debt, AIDS, Trade and Africa) campaign and more generally the world of broken human relationships, both in need of God's help. The recipients of this help respond: "I was a stranger/You took me in." The post-9/11 tribute to New York, "City of Blinding Lights," closes

with a reminder that “blessings are not just for those who kneel.” In other words, God “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45). Disaster does not strike only those who are evil, and recovery from disaster is not only for those who are good.

Like the Song of Solomon in early Christian interpretation, several songs may be heard as explorations of either human or divine love. “Sometimes You Can't Make It on Your Own” and “All Because of You,” for example, are most meaningful when heard in light of a relational theology centered in the Christian understandings of God as Trinity and humans as the image of the relational God. “A Man and a Woman” challenges romanticized understandings of love and points the listener toward a deeper sort of relational commitment. Love deeper than romance is a repeated theme in the album.

U2's prophetic streak is not missing on *Atomic Bomb*. The hard-edged blues number “Love and Peace or Else” addresses the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and violence in general, exhorting the “daughters of Zion” and “Abraham's sons” to “Lay down your guns,” with “a brand new heart” as a prerequisite. The biblically allusive “Crumbs from Your Table” indicts Christians who turn a blind eye to need and injustice.

The concluding song, “Yahweh”, would come across as oddly disconnected from the rest of the album to anyone who missed the biblical motifs in the preceding 10 tracks. It could easily function as “praise and worship” music, yet it avoids the egocentricity and overly realized eschatology to which many songs of that genre fall prey.

After stanzas that plead for divine transformation of sinful human life, the chorus praises Yahweh (no generic deity here) while acknowledging the pain and darkness that belong to the already/not yet tension of life between the two advents.

In a voice breaking with raw emotion, Bono begs, “Yahweh, tell me now/Why the dark before the dawn?” before praying: “Take this city/A city should be shining on a hill/Take this city/If it be your will Take this heart/And make it break.”

It's not every day that Christians steeped in Scripture innately possess the key that unlocks the meaning of top-selling rock albums.

We may have an opportunity to explain this aspect of popular culture to some of its unchurched consumers. Let's not miss it.

The uninitiated may be interested in a couple of resources: *Walk On: The Spiritual Journey of U2* by Steve Stockman, a Presbyterian minister in Ireland and chaplain at Queen's University in Belfast (Relevant Books, 2001), and *Get Up off Your Knees: Preaching the U2 Catalog*, a collection of sermons edited by Episcopal priests Raewynne J. Whitely and Beth Maynard (Cowley Publications, 2003). As Stockman acknowledges, Bono's unfortunate occasional public lapses into the language of the streets of Dublin do not provide the best model for Christian speech. Nevertheless, we should welcome the seriousness with which U2's music takes the language of Zion and its relation to our world.

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