

# The Gospel According to the Boss

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BOSTON (RNS)—To millions of fans, he's "the Boss," the blue-jeaned troubadour of the American heartland who finds nobility in the grind of daily life.

Across 35 years in dozens of rock anthems, from *Born to Run* to *Glory Days* to *Born in the U.S.A.*, Bruce Springsteen has chronicled lost souls, haunted war veterans, gritty factory workers and highways jammed with broken heroes. But he also advanced themes of redemption, hope and keeping the faith.

Rock icon Bruce Springsteen, seen here in a 2007 concert in Hartford, Conn., is the subject of a new book, *The Gospel According to Bruce Springsteen*.  
(RNS file photo by David Molnar/*The Star-Ledger* of Newark, N.J.)

It's been a rich vein of spiritual motifs, and the politically progressive 58-year-old singer/songwriter has given voice to society's dispossessed. His work of late has been bleak, brooding and introspective, even grieving.

But the Boss as spiritual guidepost?

Jeffrey Symynkywicz, a minister on Boston's South Shore and dedicated

Springsteen fan, has pored over the singer's rich, multi-layered lyrics and viewed them through a theological lens.

The result is the new *The Gospel According to Bruce Springsteen*, the latest addition to a crowded genre that mines the spiritual in pop culture.

A Harvard Divinity School graduate, Symynkywicz stresses he's not out to peddle the First Church of Bruce. His admiration for Springsteen is rooted more in the inspirational and empathetic than the theological.

"What's inspiring about him is that he has so much to say about different life stages that we all go through," Symynkywicz said from his church in suburban Stoughton, Mass. "The thing I really like about his music as I've gotten older is that he gets older too. His music deepens and matures, and he sings like a grown-up."

It's been a frenzied, often frightening time—one Springsteen has faced unflinchingly—and he's brought the rest of us along for the ride.

"When we discern that Springsteen is there for us—when we feel as though he is addressing us directly and personally in his songs," Symynkywicz writes, "his work seems to put down strong roots in our own experience. His music helps us to make sense of the sometimes tangled, often disparate threads of our lives."

At its foundation, Symynkywicz adds, it's a religious undertaking, a ministry of healing—a task that gets to the very meaning of the word "religion." But Springsteen's canon is neither sufficiently creedal nor doctrinaire to stand up as theology, Symynkywicz emphasizes.

"What he does for me is help me discern my own traditions, my own personal theology and faith—but more deeply."

So it's more like good news—"the affirmation that no principality or

power—no forces seen or unseen, no terror-mad souls or devilish plots—can ever separate us from the love that is in our souls.”

## **Religious imagery**

The Boss himself does not shy away from overt religious imagery.

“Jesus was an only son as he walked up Calvary Hill,” he sang on 2005’s *Devils & Dust*. Springsteen was raised a Roman Catholic in New Jersey and attended a parochial school where, according to one biography, he clashed with both the nuns and other students.

He told the *New York Times* a couple of years ago that he isn’t a churchgoer.

But it’s not so much Springsteen’s personal faith in which Symynkywicz finds comfort; it’s in the singer’s working-class roots.

“It was very much like the working class family I grew up in ... the same kinds of fights with my father,” the author said. “That’s why I recognize in him the reality of when he sings about working people and (their) limited horizons, but also the palpable reality of real life. It’s authentic.”

Symynkywicz, 53, chuckles when asked whether his church members are accustomed to Springsteen-infused sermons.

“They’re probably sick of hearing it,” he said. He’s seen the Boss in concert seven times, which makes him a far cry from being a “Tramp”—diehards who follow the singer around everywhere.

Still, the author does what few fans have accomplished: dissect Springsteen’s 250-song catalogue over 14 studio albums, starting with 1973’s *Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J.* to last year’s *Magic*. He unearths a treasure-trove of hard-knock life lessons, analogues to biblical passages and other spiritual writings, and examples of redemption, courage, hope

and love.

## **Finding the spiritual in pop culture**

Symynkywicz's book is the latest in a niche that looks for, and sometimes finds, the spiritual in the pop landscape, ranging from Peanuts to *The Simpsons*, Harry Potter, *Seinfeld* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

"Writers, singers, filmmakers and TV producers are the mythmakers for our times," the author explained. "People don't just want to consume popular culture—though some people do—they want to discern what's deeper in there and what meaning it gives their lives."

Ultimately, Symynkywicz sees a kind of rough, defiant hope in Springsteen's songs.

"He's hopeful rather than optimistic. 'Everybody has a reason to begin again,' he sings in *Long Walk Home*. There's always a reason to go on.

"But it's a tough hope in a tough world—a world that isn't, on the surface, getting better. There is a hopefulness there—that we can turn things around and move in a more progressive direction."